SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE REIGN OF THE
‘ABBĀSID CALIPH AL-MAHDI 185/775-169/785*

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In the history of Islam, it is a common place, that religion and politics are inseparable. The religious policy of a caliph should, therefore, be studied in the context of the political trends dominant at the time.

Al-Mahdi’s religious policy includes, his adoption of Orthodoxy, his persecution of the heretics and his attitude towards the non-Muslims.

a. Al-Mahdi and Orthodoxy

From the very beginning of their régime the ‘Abbāsids posed as the exponents of the Sunna and restorers of Orthodoxy from which the Umayyads had « deviated ». Al-Mahdi’s religious policy was a natural development of that of his predecessor, al-Manṣūr 1. This policy could be described as less a religious policy than a political weapon. The promotion of Sunna by the ‘Abbāsids was, in fact, a means in the struggle against the religio-political enemies or opposition movements.

The ‘Abbāsid Caliph, laid increasing stress on Islamic piety and conformity, and emphasized the religious element in the function of the Caliphate 2. In pursuance of this policy, al-Mahdi promoted a number of religious works. A big mosque was built in al-Ruṣūfa. The holy places in Mecca and Medina were rebuilt and enlarged. The mosque of Baṣra was restored. Roads between Iraq and the Ḥiḡāz were made more practicable by building landmarks and wells 3.

Another indication of his religious orthodox policy is the great

* This article is only concerned with two aspects of al-Mahdi’s reign, the first is his religious policy and the second is the role of his Viziers (ministers) in politics.
interest he took in the people of the Ḥijāz. He resumed the ‘atā’, seemingly discontinued after Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya’s revolt of 145/762-3. He appointed an official supervisor to look after the pilgrimage route between Baghdad and Mecca. He even appointed a Qādi of the Medina who was the first Qādi of the city to be appointed directly by the Caliph himself, and also selected 500 Anṣārs (the people of Medina) and brought them to Iraq to guard and support him. The Anṣārs enjoyed special status with regular pay eeked out by frequent gifts and were allotted a qaṭi‘a in Baghdad. On occasion of the pilgrimage to Mecca, al-Mahdi showed his generous nature by presenting the people of Mecca and Medina with large sums of money, garments and gifts. He also returned to some members of the ‘Alids and other opponents lots of land which had been previously confiscated by al-Manṣūr 1.

The Caliph also patronized and encouraged Āṣḥāb al-Ḥadīt such as Šu‘ba, Ibn Abi Ḍi'b, Sufyān al-Ṭawrī and Ibrāhīm b. Adham. He also presided over dīwān al-maẓālim and looked into the cases brought to it by the subjects 2.

b. The persecution of the Zindiqs

Al-Mahdi’s reign was the period of the great persecution of the Zindiqs. It was a struggle between the muslim authority on one hand and certain groups who tried to revive the old gnostic and Manichian cults on the other. This struggle manifested itself in an official measure as the ‘Abbāsid authority established a kind of inquisitorial persecution by which it crushed various heretical activities, and it was also obvious in polemic literature 3 which influenced, to some extent, Muslim theology.

Zandaqa became identified with the political ambition of the ‘Alid and Persian rebels, the caliphs felt obliged to take suitable measures against the growth of heresy if only for the sake of their own political security 4.

The term Zandaqa 5 was a vague term of wide applicability which comprised almost all the religious tendencies that did not conform to

2. TAB., III, pp. 581-582.
5. See E.I.1 (Zandaqa).