ORTHODOXY AND HANBALITE FIDEISM*

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ORTHODOXY is an intangible quality. It is not, from the viewpoint of the historian, a substance which inheres in different situations and practices, but is rather an attribute of all religious authority, an attribute which acquires veracity to the extent to which it can be made binding and paradigmatic and to the degree to which it can be consolidated, enforced, and endowed with the capacity for dissemination and continuity. Just as orthodoxy, from the historical point of view, is not merely a dogmatic fact but a situation which has a precise dogmatic expression, heterodoxy in its turn betokens a dispute over religious authority—one which involves dispute over social and political territories where religion is practiced and spread, and conflict over the sources for the determination and distribution of religion (dogma, observance, rituals of life-cycle, and other components). It is rare for a religion to achieve the evenness of belief and practice required by an orthodoxy, and this evenness, when approached, would normally be restricted to limited geographical areas (in Islamic history, largely to cities) on which is directly exercised the control of a temporal authority (which could be coterminous with the religious authority, as in certain forms of imāmism or in patches in the history of the papacy, among other historical phenomena).

In Islam, as in other religions, there exist a variety of mechanisms for assimilating the unevenness of societies, polities, and cultures made inevitable by conditions prevalent before the homogenizing possibilities of the present era. Some of these mechanisms were of what we might term a Jacobin nature, involving the destruction of tokens of unevenness. But such were usually of a temporary or otherwise limited nature, and constitute the implementation of a fundamentalist programme latent in every


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religion, a program which interjects a rigorist interlude in the natural course of things. Islam covered vast geographical areas, civilizations and cultural units, societies, polities, and economies over a millennium and a half. Like Christianity and Buddhism, the other world-religions, it has proved capable of assimilating a bewildering variety of forms, some of which might well appear antithetical. It has, as might be expected and like these other equally catholic religions, shown an omnivorous capacity for acquiring and ratifying popular practices, political requirements, social exigencies, cultural modes, mythological motifs, and other matters which were not present in the original writ of the religion and in its pristine condition. This is only natural, as the pristine order of a religion is, in religious terms albeit non in those of historical reason, recoverable only in terms of the scriptures that express it and of such commentaries on these scriptures as are deemed legitimate; and such material is less the authentic condition of a religion than the ratifying charter of its various orthodoxies. Ultimately, therefore, the unity of a religion is the unity of a genealogy. Like all genealogies, this one is constructed by a spurious history which has the task of eliminating unevenness in the genealogical relation. In the world of scriptural religions, such a task is undertaken by interpretation whose task it is to establish the concordance of the present (dogma, ritual, political and social order, etc.) with the original event, invariably in the form of showing the present as an ineluctable result of this absolute rectitude which is the past in question. In this context, orthodoxy would come to stand for a specific scripturalist genealogy, the general form of all scripturalist orthodoxies. Such fundamentalist myths of origin seem to be written into all religious phenomena.

The ratification of mundane matters by a religion thus appears to be largely nominal. This does not detract from the momentousness of this matter, as the act of naming is a matter of great consequence in culture and ideology, and religions, as components of both ideology and of culture, have always deployed the resources of rhetoric. The hermeneutical and exegetical notions at the

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1 These matters have been discussed with respect to Islamic thought in A. Al-Azmeh, *Arabic Thought and Islamic Societies*, London, 1986, pp. 166 ff., 228 ff., 260 ff.