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John Voll

THE SUDANESE MAHDĪ: FRONTIER FUNDAMENTALIST

The Sudanese Mahdī has been pictured as a villain, as a hero, as a reactionary, as an anti-imperialist revolutionary, and in many other ways. The romance and excitement of the nineteenth-century Mahdiyya has inspired novels and movies, while the many faceted reality of the movement has caught the attention of a wide range of scholars in search of case studies of specific phenomena. In recent years the Mahdī has been used as an example of a 'charismatic' leader,¹ the founder of a religiopolitical party in the 'third world,'² the leader of a millenarian revolt,³ an African rebel against alien rule,⁴ and a Semitic messiah in an African context. Many of these analyses are the constructive products of the changing situation in the world of contemporary historical studies. Each tends to reflect a broader analytical concern aroused by modern developments.

It has become necessary to reexamine the significance of many movements in light of recent events. This has become an activity of special import. Geoffrey Barraclough has suggested a reason for this: 'Today it is evident that much we have been taught to regard as central is really peripheral and much that is usually brushed aside as peripheral had in it the seeds of the future. Looked at from the vantage-point of Dien Bien Phu, for example, Amritsar stands out with new and unaccustomed prominence among the events of 1919.'⁵

One can say with equal validity that viewed from the vantage point of the revival of Muslim self-confidence, the visibility of a leader like Qaddafi in Libya, and the importance of the Wahhabi monarchy in the modern world, it is with a renewed interest that we look at the fundamentalist reformers in the Islamic tradition. These reformers certainly can no longer be seen as the last

¹ Richard H. Dekmejian and Margaret J. Wyszomirski, 'Charismatic Leadership in Islam: The Mahdi of the Sudan,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 14 (1972), 193–214.

² Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion, Politics, and Social Change in the Third World* (New York: The Free Press, 1971), pp. 155–161.

³ Guenter Lewy, *Religion and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 176–193.

⁴ These last two refer to L. Carl Brown, 'The Sudanese Mahdiya,' in Robert I. Rotberg and Ali A. Mazrui, eds., *Protest and Power in Black Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 145–168. The editors put the chapter in the section entitled 'Rebellions against Alien Rule,' but L. Carl Brown presents the Mahdī in the broader context of Semitic messianism.

⁵ Geoffrey Barraclough, *An Introduction to Contemporary History* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 35.

gasp of a dying civilization in light of the current vigor of the fundamentalist viewpoint in at least some areas of Islam.

To some extent this may be a source for the continuing interest in the Sudanese Mahdī. He has often been mentioned in discussions of Islamic fundamentalism, or has been described as a puritanical reformer.⁶ His actual place in the fundamentalist part of the Islamic experience, however, has not been fully explored. L. C. Brown's discussion of his position as a Semitic messiah-reformer in the context of African Islam is perhaps the most thorough exploration of this aspect of the life and work of Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī.⁷

The resurgence of Islamic activism in recent years gives added importance to efforts to understand the fundamentalist tradition in Islam. An analysis of the Sudanese Mahdiyya and its place in that tradition can provide insight into both the dynamics of the Mahdiyya itself and some aspects of Islamic fundamentalism. This requires that the Mahdiyya be examined in the broader context of the whole Islamic experience. Many scholars have made efforts at this but have produced a kind of paradox. While most writers see Muḥammad Aḥmad as a puritanical reformer, many use the title 'al-Mahdī' as the starting point for their analysis of his place in Islamic history. In this way, rather than starting with or discussing the long-standing tradition of fundamentalism, they start with and describe the Shi'a concept of the Mahdī.⁸ This Shi'a context points the analysis away from Islamic fundamentalism which usually was opposed to Shi'a tendencies. As a result, some authors have found themselves involved in a search for Shi'a elements in Sudanese Islam and finding in them an explanation for the Mahdī's teachings.⁹ However, it is clear that the distinction between the Sunni and Shi'a concepts of the Mahdī must be kept in mind in analyzing the Sudanese Mahdiyya and that the concept utilized there was clearly within the Sunni and not the Shi'a tradition.¹⁰

This analysis involves three interlocking assumptions which must be clarified in applying it to the Sudanese Mahdiyya. First, it assumes that there is such an

⁶ See, for example, Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), III, 247; Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 58-59; Mandour El Mahdi, *A Short History of the Sudan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 96-97.

⁷ Brown, 'The Sudanese Mahdiyya.'

⁸ In this way, in a general survey of modern Middle Eastern history, the Sudanese Mahdi is given as an example of the Shi'a mahdist concept. See William Spencer, *Political Evolution in the Middle East* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962), p. 17.

⁹ This is especially true of some of the older Western descriptions of the Mahdi. See F. R. Wingate, *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan* (2d ed.; London: Cass, 1968), pp. 5-6; Richard A. Bermann, *The Mahdi of Allah* (New York: Macmillan, 1932), pp. 73-74; D. S. Margoliouth, 'Mahdi,' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, VIII, 339. More recently this approach was followed to some extent in Soad el Fatih, 'The Teachings of Muhammad Ahmad the Sudanese Mahdi' (unpublished M.A. thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1961).

¹⁰ See, for example, the conclusions drawn in P. M. Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1881-1898* (2d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 31, and Brown, 'The Sudanese Mahdiyya,' pp. 145-147.

analytical entity as the 'Islamic fundamentalist tradition.' Second, it asserts that at least one kind of mahdism fits within the framework of that tradition, and finally, that Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī in the Sudan was 'that kind of Mahdī.'

THE FUNDAMENTALIST TRADITION

A useful way of characterizing the fundamentalist tradition in Islam is to observe its relationship to a series of creative tensions that are basic within the Islamic experience. For analysis here three pairs of alternatives provide the end-points of three spectra of Islamic experience, and the parameters for these creative tensions. They are the tensions and alternatives of immanence–transcendence, diversity–unity, and openness–authenticity.

For analytical purposes these pairs will not be treated as exclusive alternatives. They represent, rather, differing emphases in belief, experience, and action. At no time is either alternative totally absent from the experience of a particular Islamic group or society. It is possible, though, to describe any movement within the Islamic experience in terms of which alternatives it is closer to. One of the major dynamics of Islamic history is that as the general public consensus would move in one direction in any of the spectra defined by the pairs, there would arise a reaction which would attempt to reestablish a balance along the midpoint of the spectrum or even try to move society to the other alternative extreme. Thus, in identifying a sentiment, movement, or development in terms of these pairs, it is useful not only to place it on the defined spectrum, but also to note which way the group is trying to move society along that spectrum. It is in this way that it is proposed to define the meaning of the fundamentalist tradition within Islam.

The first of these pairs is the immanence–transcendence tension that is found within the major traditions of Middle Eastern monotheism. In general terms the definition of divinity that emerged in the form of monotheism in the Middle East involved a god that was 'personal, transcendental, and ethical.'¹¹ This provided the basis for dynamic religious traditions but continued an inner tension between the personal and transcendental aspects of the deity. The religion 'asserts the otherness of God. But, at the same time, the worshiper is conscious of the nearness of God.'¹² While no group loses all sense of either the immanent or transcendent God, there is a tendency to resolve the tension by emphasizing one or the other aspect of the divinity. When the emphasis shifts too far, there is a reaction which frequently arises to try to restore a balance or even shift to the other pole. This dynamic tension was at the heart of much of Islamic religious creativity and scholars like Gibb, MacDonald, and Goldziher have outlined

¹¹ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 56.

¹² H. A. R. Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), p. 17.

the intellectual and emotional aspects of how the tension has unfolded within the Islamic tradition.¹³

In the early Islamic message the transcendence of God was emphasized, in contrast to the earlier naturalist animism. But the immanence of God also found its place and 'the gap between the divine and the human was bridged' by the Islamic concept of the man close to God by virtue of his piety and God's mercy, the walī.¹⁴ The two emphases came to be institutionalized in the schools of Islamic law and their learned scholars (the 'ulamā') on the one hand, and the Ṣūfī orders with their walīs on the other. There thus emerged a tension between 'ulamā' and Ṣūfī that was a tolerable balance within the experience of the Islamic community.

While the majority of the community, 'ulamā' and Ṣūfī alike, accepted the balanced compromise, especially after the work of al-Ghazālī in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, there remained a small minority who were fearful of the consequences of compromising the doctrines of transcendence. They worked diligently to oppose beliefs and teachings that would lead to pantheistic or monistic expressions. In this group of defenders of transcendence one finds the major figures commonly associated with fundamentalist Islam – Ibn Taymiyya the Wahhabis, and others. It becomes possible to utilize this situation in providing a beginning for the definition of the Islamic fundamentalist impulse: in the creative tension between awareness of divine transcendence and divine immanence, the fundamentalist is trying to move society in the direction of a greater emphasis on transcendence. He is not satisfied with a balance and works diligently to move society and social practice away from the institutionalized manifestations of immanence.

Commonly this means that the fundamentalists have opposed the Ṣūfī orders and popular mystic practices. It should be noted, however, that this did not involve a total rejection of Islamic mysticism itself. As vigorous an opponent of institutionalized Sufism as Ibn Taymiyya 'was not only not inimical to Sufism as such, but considered it as necessary a part of religion as law.'¹⁵ What was opposed was pantheistic and monistic excesses which would dilute the absolute transcendence of God.

In concrete terms the first element of the definition of Islamic fundamentalism is an emphasis on the transcendence of God and a constant pressure to move society away from any institutionalization of the opposite religious experience. Commonly this has put the fundamentalists into a position of opposition to Sufism, especially as it expressed itself in the Ṣūfī orders and in pantheistic theologies.

¹³ See *ibid.*, Duncan Black Macdonald, *The Religious Attitude and Life in Islam* (Beirut: Khayats, 1965); Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, ed. S. M. Stern (London: Allen & Unwin, 1971), II, 255–344.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 262, and *passim*.

¹⁵ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), p. 132. See also the vigorous discussion in George Makdisi, 'Ibn Taimiya: A Sufi of the Qadiriya Order,' *American Journal of Arabic Studies*, I (1973), 118–129.

The second great creative tension in the Islamic experience is between elements of diversity and unity in the cultural expressions of peoples within the Islamic community (the 'ummah). As Islam expanded, the community of believers came to include a wide variety of peoples and cultures. In some way Islam was forced to come to terms with the diversity found within the 'ummah. At times expanding Islam was able to break down distinctive local characteristics and replace them by more universalized Islamic ones. Islam, however, was not militantly exclusivist and, in terms of cultural content, was able to integrate rather than destroy the conquered or converted cultures. Thus it is possible to describe the cultural development of Islamic civilization as a series of great integrations to syntheses of diverse cultures.¹⁶ Eventually local cultural traditions and differences came to be accepted, even by the 'ulamā' themselves. The benign tolerance and gentle correction of a wandering judge like the medieval traveler Ibn Baṭṭūṭa was not untypical of the more general attitude. Such an acceptance of diversity made possible the major expansion of Islam in areas like West Africa¹⁷ with a degree of ease that was not to be found in the expansion of the less flexible Christianity of the early Western missionaries.

The learned men of Islam could not and would not allow this process to continue to the point of destroying all common elements which made a definition of the 'ummah possible. There was thus at the same time both a 'latitudinarian' attitude toward much of the local cultures and also a determination on the part of the 'ulamā' to maintain the foundations for unity in a commonly held definition of the Islamic ideal, especially as it came to be expressed in the Islamic law (sharī'ah). In this way there was a continuous tension within the 'ummah between the tendency toward flexibility and tolerance of popular custom on the one hand, and a striving to bring all practice into accord with the common Islamic ideal on the other. The general solution was to work for some relatively flexible balance between elements of unity and diversity.

On this issue, too, there was a minority that was always conscious that any deviation from the Word of God was wrong and was a potential threat to the 'ummah. A literal interpretation and application of the revelation in the Qur'ān and the customs (Sunna) of the Prophet were, for this group, the only possible manner for fulfilling the requirements of the faith. To these people any compromise with local custom became a form of polytheism (shirk) and a reversion to the paganism of pre-Islamic times. The latitudinarian habits of 'ulamā' even in areas where Islam had long been established became the object of vigorous opposition on the part of people like Ibn Taymiyya and Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb. In newer Islamic areas or in areas on the frontier of Islam, there was a rather different evolution which saw the gradual Islamization of

¹⁶ G. E. von Grunebaum, 'The Problem: Unity in Diversity,' *Unity and Variety in Muslim Civilization*, ed. Gustave E. von Grunebaum (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 23.

¹⁷ See, for example, the introductory essay by I. M. Lewis and the essay by J. S. Trimingham in *Islam in Tropical Africa*, ed. I. M. Lewis (London: Oxford University Press, 1966).

society producing leaders who, at some point, would demand that the society adhere to the universal ideal to which it was being converted.

A second element in the definition of Islamic fundamentalism is thus provided by the tension between elements of unity and diversity in Muslim civilization. The fundamentalist is one who rejects latitudinarian compromise with local custom as polytheism and insists upon a literal application of the Qur'ān and Sunna to all local conditions, regardless of how differing they may be. There is strong support for unification and for standardization of interpretation. The primary unit of identification should be the community of Muslims rather than any ethnic, kin, or regional grouping. The possibility of utilizing the concept of community consensus as a verifying authority tends to be limited. In short, the fundamentalist is vigorously trying to move Islamic society from a latitudinarian recognition of diversity to a greater degree of unity as defined by a strict interpretation and application of the Qur'ān and Sunna.

The third tension that helps to provide a definition of Islamic fundamentalism is that between openness and authenticity. This involves the attitudes toward other cultures, with the concern for authenticity being the striving to be 'faithful to one's own culture' and openness being the acceptance of 'the achievements of other cultures.'¹⁸

Throughout Islamic history one of the great issues has been the relationship between the community of the revelation and the cultures with which it came into contact. Islam had to deal with more than the remnants of local popular cults. It had also to decide what role, if any, the great traditions of other civilizations would play in the expression of the Islamic tradition. Among the earliest and most profound of these interactions was the contact between Islam and the Hellenistic tradition. The early contacts between Arab Muslim and Hellenistic non-Muslim thinkers led to polemical arguments which provided 'a stimulus to rational thinking in Islamic theology.'¹⁹ The shape of medieval Islamic theology and philosophy was largely determined by the resolution of issues that arose in trying to cope with the impact of Greek thought.

The basic line of conflict was in defining how literally Muslims should interpret their authentic tradition and how free they were to utilize elements of other cultures which were not explicitly sanctioned within the early revelation. Medieval Islamic civilization emerged as a vitally open society. New techniques, both spiritual or intellectual and technological, were readily adopted and adapted by the majority of Muslims with little difficulty. Imperial administrative techniques were utilized in the transformation of the 'ummah from a tribal and provincial confederation into a cosmopolitan world empire.²⁰ Greek philosoph-

¹⁸ The terminology 'authenticity' and 'openness' and the definitions are taken from the Center for the Study of the Modern Arab World, St. Joseph's University, Beirut, 'Thematic Content Analysis of Arab Writings on Acculturation,' March, 1973, mimeographed.

¹⁹ W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1973), p. 184.

²⁰ Hamilton A. R. Gibb, *Studies on the Civilization of Islam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), pp. 34-46.

ical modes of analysis were incorporated into the style of theological explanation.²¹ Expressions and definitions of Islamic mystical experience utilized Greek and Indian and Christian forms and precedents.²² In none of these cases were elements simply 'borrowed' and attached as alien growths. They were, rather, an open way of building upon and shaping already existing elements. Islamic political theory never was so 'Persian' or 'Greek' that it lost contact with the foundations of the authentic tradition of the early community. In Sufism the foundations for the mystic experience were already within the Quranic revelation, and outside factors only helped to give shape to the already existing impulse.

Islam thus developed and maintained a willingness to accept new ideas and an awareness of the authentic tradition on which the Islamic identity was grounded. At times, however, there would be a tendency to move too far in one direction or another between authenticity and openness. In the intellectual and social ferment of the ninth and tenth centuries, the fluidity of Islamic expression threatened the radical dilution of the Islamic tradition. The defenders of authenticity and the traditions of the Prophet developed a set of guidelines by which changes and innovations could be judged.²³ The fear that innovation (*bid'a*) would undermine the faith was strong among some teachers and they came to insist upon a more literal interpretation and application of the Qur'ān and Sunna. This meant that there was a vigorous opposition to 'foreign' elements and an effort to eliminate them where possible. Over the centuries this reaction has been associated most distinctively with the Ḥanbalī school of law but it was not confined to those scholars. Opposition to innovations at times reached the point where 'ulamā' would reject as harmful *bid'a* things that would have provided some element of increased strength for Islam. In contemporary times the tension between openness and authenticity continues and has new importance in a day when there is a revival of pride in the traditional culture. President Nasser in Egypt outlined the issue when he observed that the great issue facing the people of the Middle East is how to reconcile the authentic foundation (*iṣāla*) with the requirements of renewal (*tajdīd*).²⁴ Nasser and others firmly believed that modernization without keeping the society firmly grounded in its heritage would create basic problems.

In this way a third element defining Islamic fundamentalism can be seen. The fundamentalists in the Islamic tradition insisted that the emphasis be upon authenticity and, rather than accept a compromise balance, tried to move society in the direction of rejection of foreign elements and rigorous opposition to innovation. The program of the fundamentalists in this regard was to attempt to restore or re-create as closely as possible the conditions that existed in the days of the Prophet and the early Companions. Although fundamentalists

²¹ Watt, *The Formative Period*, passim.

²² Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (Beirut: Khayats, 1966), Introduction.

²³ J. Robson, 'Bid'a,' *Encyclopaedia of Islam*², I, 1199.

²⁴ American University of Beirut, *al-Wathā'iq al-'Arabiyyah 1969*, p. 292.

throughout Islamic history have been willing to accept certain new elements, their major effort was aimed in the opposite direction.

These three tensions within Islam provide a paradigm for defining the fundamentalist tradition. It is that mode of Islam which: (1) emphasizes the transcendence of God and strives to move social institutionalization of religion in the direction of that end of the immanence–transcendence spectrum; (2) emphasizes standardization and unity within the 'ummah, rejecting and, where possible, eliminating cultural elements of diversity within the Islamic world; (3) emphasizes the importance of authenticity of tradition and adherence to the early customs of Islam, opposing outside influences as innovations as vigorously as possible. It should be noted that these defining elements have a directional component. The fundamentalist, in contrast with the conservative, insists on change rather than accepting any balanced or compromise institutionalization. The fundamentalist seeks to move society in the direction of greater emphasis on transcendence, 'ummah unity and uniformity, and authenticity, regardless of how great the emphasis might already be in that direction.

This definition of Islamic fundamentalism seems workable. Those groups normally recognized as being fundamentalist fit within the paradigm. This is true for Ibn Taymiyya in the medieval era, the Wahhabis in the early modern and the Muslim Brotherhood in the recent period. The paradigm also suggests ways of distinguishing fundamentalism from other approaches within the Islamic experience. Thus Ibn Taymiyya can be contrasted with his famous near contemporary, Ibn 'Arabī, by noting that whereas Ibn 'Arabī supported 'ummah unity (even to the extent of adhering to the most literalist law school of his time, the Zahiri school), he was a monist in theology, emphasizing the immanence of God and was open to the forms of outside origin. Thus, he differed from Ibn Taymiyya in the first and third pair, while being similar in the second.

MAHDISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM

For purposes of this study the definition is to be used to see if there is a form of Mahdism that can be considered within the fundamentalist tradition. If one starts with the Shi'a concept of the mahdī, the effort would produce a negative answer. This is true in the general terms of Shi'a theology and in the historical reality of Shi'a mahdist movements. The Shi'a position was that the early Companions of the Prophet had disobeyed Muḥammad and were thus not fit to transmit traditions. In this way the Shi'a position undermined the whole structure and definition of traditions (the Sunna) as they had developed in early Sunnī Islam.²⁵ Their political philosophy was more open to the Persian ideas of imperial structure and there was a greater willingness to accept pre-Islamic formulations of the faith as expressed in a vigorous messianism. For the Shi'a the Mahdī was to be an infallible leader who would be guided by a

²⁵ W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1962), p. 53.

special illumination from God. In Shi'a terms, he 'is an ever-living spiritual being who guides in the spiritual path those who ask him.'²⁶ Thus the Shi'a mahdī concept is far removed from Islamic fundamentalism: while it worked for Islamic unification, it adopted a concept that tended to emphasize the immanence of God in the affairs of men (to the point at times of preaching incarnation) and utilized new forms and concepts that would be considered harmful innovations by more orthodox Muslims. This contrast with fundamentalist Islam can be seen in Shi'a practice as in the Fatimid state. When the Fatimid mahdī appeared, the expectations of the Shi'a faithful, indicating what they believed a mahdī was, was for a leader who would abrogate the law of Muḥammad, reveal the hidden meanings of the Qur'ān, and promulgate a new and more perfect law.²⁷

The meaning of 'mahdī' took on a different form within Sunnī Islam. As the Sunnī believers, especially among the common people, began to adopt some of the messianic themes, a distinctive concept of the mahdī began to emerge. The Sunnī mahdī was believed to be a divinely guided and appointed agent for renewal (mujaddid), in contrast with the more illuminationist and incarnationist Shi'a ideas.²⁸ The Sunnīs place greater emphasis upon the revivalist aspects of the mahdī's mission, expecting more of a restoration of a past Golden Age than the initiation of some New Age. The Sunnī mahdī's function is to support and restore the Sunna of the community, not to transcend or destroy it. This represents a distinctive style within the broader category of Semitic and Middle Eastern messianism. Using terms of Ernest Gellner, the Sunnī mahdī is a 'fusion of a cult of the Book with a cult . . . of Leadership' which stays within the bounds set by the tradition and scriptural religion.²⁹ In a Sunnī mahdist movement it is the spiritual leadership that provides articulation for the Book, which is the 'trans-social standard which judges the social.'³⁰ Seen in this light Sunnī mahdism is a special leadership style within the broader framework of the Islamic fundamentalist tradition.

SUDANESE MAHDĪ AS FUNDAMENTALIST

It may be possible in principle to argue that Sunnī mahdism is fundamentalist but it is worthwhile examining a specific case to see if this can be true in practice. Muḥammad Aḥmad, the mahdī in the nineteenth-century Sudan, provides an excellent vehicle for this. In the process of applying the model of fundamentalism it is possible that something will be learned about both fundamentalism and about the Sudanese Mahdiyya.

²⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), p. 166.

²⁷ M. Canard, 'Fātimids,' *Encyclopaedia of Islam*², II, 859.

²⁸ See D. S. Margoliouth, 'Mahdi,' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, VIII, 336-340; D. B. Macdonald, 'Al-Mahdi,' *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, pp. 310-313.

²⁹ Ernest Gellner, 'Post-Traditional Forms in Islam: The Turf and Trade, and Votes and Peanuts,' *Daedalus*, 102, 1 (Winter 1973), 194.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 193.

His Position in the Transcendence–Immanence Tension

The background and education of Muḥammad Aḥmad is firmly rooted in the Sufism of his land and times. As a result his position in the transcendence–immanence spectrum must be carefully examined. It is clear that in many ways Muḥammad Aḥmad never rejected his Ṣūfī background. This is most vividly illustrated in the visions that he cited as authenticating his mission as the Mahdī. In a letter sent not long after he had announced his mission, he cited a vision of Ṣūfī saints who had submitted to his Mahdiship. These included the medieval Ṣūfī, ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jaylānī, and a series of well-known earlier Sudanese walīs, included his own recently deceased shaykh, Shaykh al-Qurayshi.³¹ In the account of this vision there is no attempt to picture these Ṣūfī leaders as renouncing their teachings. Rather, Muḥammad Aḥmad is utilizing the prestige of these Ṣūfī leaders to convince others and appears to be explicitly associating his mission with the Ṣūfī tradition in which he participated in the Sudan.

The message that comes through, however, in the writings of this Sudanese Ṣūfī is not a message of pantheism or monism. There are occasional terminological usages that recall the pantheistic theology of a medieval mystic like Ibn ‘Arabī. The Mahdī speaks, for example, of the Prophet telling him in a vision that he was ‘created from the light of the core of my heart,’³² reflecting the Nūr Muḥammadī (light of Muḥammad) concept in this mystic tradition. The real weight of the Mahdī’s message is not in illuminationist or pantheistic terms. It lay on the side of an emphasis on the transcendence of God.

The Rātīb of the Mahdī is a set of devotional exercises that the Mahdī prescribed for his followers. It is this that is recited regularly by those who believe in the Mahdī. In the Rātīb the spirit is one of emphasis on the power and majesty (and distance) of God. Even the Mahdī emphasizes his subordinate place in these prayers: ‘I ask of you, oh Lord, God, Master, and my Refuge, oh you who established the heavens and the earth by your command . . . I ask of you, by the right of your chosen one, your faithful prophet, to place in my heart your majesty and glory . . . so that fear and reverence for your word will be flung into my heart by the recitation of your word.’³³

The order of priority is clearly set out in a letter from the Mahdī to Muḥammad ‘Alī Qarāfī, where Muḥammad Aḥmad says: ‘Know that I call people to God, not to myself nor to anything other than God. God is sufficient for him who hears my guidance. He will find God in both worlds.’³⁴ The Mahdī emphasized the transcendence of God even in commenting on being called to the Mahdiship:

³¹ Na‘ūm Shuqayr, *Tārīkh al-Sūdān al-Qadīm wa al-Hadīth wa Juḡhrāfiyatuh* (Cairo: n.p., 1903), III, 125–126.

³² Holt, *The Mahdist State*, p. 106.

³³ Muḥammad ‘Alī b. al-Bashīr, *‘Uqūd al-Durur fī Sharḥ Rātīb al-’Imām al-Mahdī al-Muntazhẓhar* (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Maḥmūdiyyah, n.d.), pp. 65–66.

³⁴ *Manshūrāt Sayyidnā al-’Imām al-Mahdī* (Khartoum: Sudan Government – Central Archives, 1963–1964), II, 154–155.

'I knew nothing of this matter until it was forced upon me by God and His messenger, without any worthiness on my part. However, His command is obeyed since He does what He wants and chooses.'³⁵ In arguing his claim to be the Mahdī with one of the Sudanese 'ulamā' who opposed him, he also emphasized this position of God: 'Surely it is not concealed from the glory of your knowledge and the excellence of your understanding that explanation does not give guidance and that the only guide is God Almighty.'³⁶

In this way the Sudanese Mahdiyya became a movement vigorously affirming the tawhīd (unity or singleness) of God. This was a rallying cry of fundamentalism throughout the history of Islam. Both the medieval followers of Muḥammad ibn Tumart and the modern followers of Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb identified themselves as the 'asserters of the singleness of God', or al-muwaḥḥidūn. The oath of allegiance to Muḥammad Aḥmad began, 'We swear allegiance to God and His messenger, and we swear allegiance to you in accord with the tawhīd of God, with whom we will associate no one.'³⁷

Thus, although Muḥammad Aḥmad emerged out of a Ṣūfī background which he did not reject, he moved in the direction of an assertion of the transcendence of God. This was even reflected in the style of mystic experience which he maintained. In traditional Sufism the ultimate goal of the mystic seeker was unity with God. Adherence to a more rigorously transcendent description of God, however, would make this goal unacceptable. As a result, the more fundamentalistically inclined Muslims within the Ṣūfī tradition gradually developed a different definition of the goal of mystic experience. This was what was called the Muhammadiyya Tariqa, which rejected 'the Ṣūfī doctrine of union with God, substituting for it, as the goal of the mystical life, a mystical union with the spirit of the Prophet.'³⁸ The development of the Muhammadiyya in Islamic history is unclear but a wide range of fundamentalists utilized the name and/or the concept. Mehmed Birgevi in the Ottoman Empire, Aḥmad Brelwi in India, Aḥmad ibn Idrīs and the Sanūsī order in the Hijaz and Africa, and the Wahhabis all utilized the concept in one form or another in the development of their teachings. Muḥammad Aḥmad in the Sudan also followed the Prophet-oriented mysticism which was more in accord with the transcendence emphasis of the fundamentalist tradition. In a general letter to his followers, for example, the Mahdī stated: 'The worshiper will not find any of that abundant good fortune except through contact with the messenger of God and absorption in him.'³⁹ It is worth noting that the word used for 'absorption' in this proclamation is *fanā'*, the same term used by traditional Ṣūfīs for absorption into God. Thus, Muḥammad Aḥmad's emphasis on the transcendence of God led him to the same Muhammadiyya type tariqa as is found in many Islamic fundamentalists.

From this it would appear that the Sudanese Mahdī's teachings place him in a fundamentalist position regarding the transcendence-immanence tension in

³⁵ Shuqayr, III, 121. ³⁶ *Manshūrāt*, II, 22. ³⁷ Shuqayr, III, 139.

³⁸ H. A. R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 171.

³⁹ *Manshūrāt*, I, 129.

Islam. He is, in this theological area, a mahdī in the Sunnī rather than the Shi'a pattern.

The Mahdī's Position in the Unity–Diversity Tension

The basic question in this aspect of the Mahdī's activities is what his attitudes and teachings were with respect to localized customs. Was he tolerant of local non-Islamic but distinctively Sudanese elements that would have provided diversity within the 'ummah? Conversely, was he a supporter of 'ummah unity and standardization of practice within Islam? In general terms, it appears that Muḥammad Aḥmad adopted a fundamentalist position on these matters as well.

A look at the proclamations and letters of the Mahdī make it clear that he was not 'latitudinarian' in his approach to the customs of the people in the Sudan. He attacks a wide range of activities. Some of the things that he attacks are the standard objects of fundamentalism revulsion, regardless of time or place. He was upset, for example, by having been approached by a prostitute in a city. He vowed to purify the towns from such things and the incident is given as one of the reasons why he moved his center of devotional life to the isolated, rural Aba Island.⁴⁰ He was also outraged by a 'marriage ceremony' between a man and a young boy and vigorously protested about it to local officials.⁴¹ He strongly opposed smoking tobacco and drinking alcohol in any form. As a punishment for smoking, for example, he commanded that the smoker receive eighty lashes and seven days in jail.⁴² He also forbade various forms of music, especially at celebrations, prohibiting the beating of drums or the playing of horns for 'vain amusement.'⁴³ He was also concerned with the correct behavior of women, forbidding them from going into the markets, or being unveiled in public.⁴⁴ He insisted that they not wear jewelry, suggesting as a punishment that their hair be plucked out if they were caught.⁴⁵ Even before the announcement of his mission as the Mahdī, he had gotten into a dispute with one of his earlier teachers, Muḥammad Sharīf, because he admitted women into his sessions.⁴⁶

The Mahdī also worked to prohibit more specifically Sudanese customs. Some of his rules regarding the conduct of women were the product of the more unrestricted life-style of Sudanese women in the nomadic tribes, especially among the Baqqāra of the West.⁴⁷ In addition, he prohibited lavish expenditure for weddings, tried to abolish the wearing of amulets, and objected to the wailing of women at funerals. These were all deeply embedded in the popular customs

⁴⁰ 'Summary Translation of the Mahadi's Book,' in Khartoum University Library, Sudan Collection, 1677/48CM, typescript, 25 August 1936.

⁴¹ Ibrāhīm Fawzī, *Kitāb al-Sūdān bayn yaday Churdūn wa Kitshinir* (Cairo: Jaridah al-Mu'ayyid, 1319/1901), I, 73–74.

⁴² *Manshūrāt*, III, 30. Holt (*The Mahdist State*, p. 131) gives the punishment prescribed for smoking as being one hundred lashes. He cites the Nujūmī notebook as the source of the legislation. It could be that the Mahdi changed the punishment.

⁴³ Wingate, *Mahdīism*, p. 59. ⁴⁴ Holt, *The Mahdist State*, pp. 130–131.

⁴⁵ Shuqayr, III, 371. ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁴⁷ Holt, *The Mahdist State*, pp. 130–131.

of his day and gave a distinctive flavor to local religious practice. In a way similar to other fundamentalists, Muḥammad Aḥmad worked vigorously to bring local habits and traditions into line with the ideal described in the Qur'ān and the Sunna of the Prophet.

The list of specific rulings could be extended, but sufficient has been presented here to indicate the general tone of the Mahdī's legislation. He definitely was not 'latitudinarian' in his general approach, insisting rather on a rigorously puritanical life-style. This particular style contained elements that are common in the rulings of Islamic fundamentalists. The Mahdī himself summarized what the Mahdist way of life should be in an early letter which contained 'all the principal elements' of his basic propaganda.⁴⁸ In a vision the path is said to comprise 'meekness, contrition, meagerness of food and of drink, patience, and visitation of the holy ones,' and the Mahdiyya is said to contain 'combat, determination, resolution, trust in and reliance upon God Almighty, and agreement in doctrine.'⁴⁹

In the 'agreement in doctrine' ('ittifāq al-qawl) it can also be seen that the Mahdī, similar to other fundamentalists, worked to accomplish a standardization and a unification within the Islamic community. His opposition to local customs is one example of this. Even in terms of more generally Islamic teachings, Muḥammad Aḥmad was not tolerant of diversity. He abolished the recognition of four separate law schools, saying that the discipline of jurisprudence (fiqh) had been obliterated by the Mahdī's manifestation,⁵⁰ and established a new legal regime. It was his teaching that he (the Mahdī) provided the direct link between his followers and the Prophet in the transmission of Islamic regulations.⁵¹ It should be noted, however, that this did not mean that Muḥammad Aḥmad claimed the position of being able to change, transform, or transcend the basic Islamic revelation as it was presented in the Qur'ān and the Sunna of the Prophet. Consistently in his proclamations and letters the Mahdī describes himself not as the initiator of a new dispensation but rather, as 'the one who revives what has died in religion, and the one who exposes what has become buried of the Sunna of the Prophets and Messengers.'⁵² In the context of his proclamations, it seems clear that Muḥammad Aḥmad believed that what had buried the Sunna and the Book was the accretions to the faith that had accumulated over the centuries.

In this regard it should be added that Muḥammad Aḥmad did not regard the works of the 'ulamā' as being totally negative. His letters even to his opponents among the 'ulamā' ranks show a respect for Islamic learning in the formal tradition. One source suggests that as a young scholar he seriously considered studying at al-Azhār in Egypt.⁵³ The first man that the Mahdī appointed to be the state qāḍī was a man who had studied at al-Azhār,⁵⁴ and other religious

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 105.

⁴⁹ Shuqayr, III, 125.

⁵⁰ Holt, *The Mahdist State*, p. 132.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 128, and Shuqayr, III, 364.

⁵² *Manshūrāt*, II, 155.

⁵³ 'Summary Translation of the Mahadi's Book', p. 1.

⁵⁴ Holt, *The Mahdist State*, p. 131.

officials from the earlier regime were appointed to posts if they joined the Mahdiyya.

It becomes clear that Muḥammad Aḥmad's stance in terms of the unity-diversity tension within Islam was the same as that of the fundamentalist tradition in general. He was vigorously opposed to any toleration of customs that were counter to the basic teachings of Islam. He worked to force close adherence to these rules and strove to eliminate elements of diversity within the community of the faithful.

The Mahdī's Position in the Authenticity–Openness Tension

It is possible that the best-known aspects of the Mahdī's teachings were his vigorous 'anti-foreign' positions. Arnold Toynbee lists him among those in Islam who adopted the 'Zealot' position when faced with the challenge of modern Western culture.⁵⁵ In this context, Zealotism is defined as 'archaism evoked by foreign pressure' and the Zealot is one who responds to foreign cultural attack by affirming his own tradition 'with abnormally scrupulous exactitude.'⁵⁶ The Mahdiyya is cited in terms of being 'armed religious resistance to the domination of the West or of Westernized regimes.'⁵⁷ It is thus placed in the context of Islamic reaction against contact with modern or Western civilization. In many ways this is a useful perspective but the more general fundamentalist tradition provides a broader and usually more meaningful context for analysis.

Certain reformist groups in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Islamic world developed a preoccupation with the 'threat of Europe' and this colored their analysis and style of action.⁵⁸ Whereas the threat of the West gave a distinctive character to the Islamic interaction with foreign elements in the modern era, there was and remained a continuing tradition of revivalism and reform within the traditional Islamic framework.⁵⁹ It is in this manner that the anti-foreign position of the Mahdiyya must be viewed. In contrast with leaders like al-Afghānī or the later fundamentalist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, Muḥammad Aḥmad was not aware of any challenge to Islam itself. He was only aware that corruption and departure from the faith had taken place and that this needed to be corrected. It is not at all certain that the Mahdī had any feeling that Islamic society was weaker than any other major society of his time and thus he escaped what has been termed the 'fundamental malaise of modern Islam,' that is, 'a sense that something has gone wrong with Islamic history.'⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Arnold Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial and the World and the West* (New York: Meridian, 1958), p. 167.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East and the West* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), p. 105.

⁵⁸ Hisham Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West, The Formative Years, 1875–1914* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), p. 31.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 31–32.

⁶⁰ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton, 1957), p. 41.

The Mahdī operated within the frame of reference of traditional rather than apologetic confidence in Islam, and his program, as a result, was the simple fundamentalist one of restoring the condition of the community to what it had been in the days of the Prophetic revelation. It is in this lack of compulsion to provide an apologetic for Islam that the Mahdī provides an interesting background for the contemporary, nonapologist Islamic activists.

Muḥammad Aḥmad was insistent in his opposition to new elements that had been introduced into Islam by 'foreigners.' Within the Sudan, this meant innovations introduced by 'the Turks,' a term that in Sudanese Arabic came to include everyone from Ottoman officials and Egyptian soldiers to the British rulers of the twentieth century. The 'Turks' were attacked for their corruption and sinfulness. Many of the customs that Muḥammad Aḥmad forbids or condemns are identified in his letters as being the practices of the Turks: do not imitate the handwriting of the Turks,⁶¹ do not dress like the Turks,⁶² do not be ungrateful to God or disobedient like the Turks.⁶³ In short, 'put aside everything which has the slightest resemblance to the manners and customs of 'Turks and infidels.'⁶⁴ The justification for this and for fighting the Turks was a basic, fundamentalist reason: after God had been good to them, 'they disobeyed the command of His messenger and his prophets . . . they ruled in a manner not in accord with what God had sent, and they altered the Shari'a of our master, Muḥammad, the messenger of God, and they blasphemed against the faith of God.'⁶⁵

On this basis the Mahdī called his followers to engage vigorously in the holy war to oppose these unfaithful people and to win the world for the purified Islamic community. In the vigor and insistence on the call to militant jihād (holy war), Muḥammad Aḥmad also finds a place in the fundamentalist tradition. 'One effect of the renewed emphasis upon Koran and Sunna in Muslim fundamentalism is to restore to *jihad* "in the path of God" much of the prominence which . . . it held in the primitive Community; whereas in the historic Community the concept of *jihad* had gradually weakened and at length been largely reinterpreted in terms of Sufi ethics.'⁶⁶

In the authenticity–openness tension, the Mahdī was vigorously opposed in principle to the idea of being 'open' to non-Islamic elements introduced from the outside. His openly stated goal was to re-create a Muslim community that would be a duplicate of the Prophet's. He went to great lengths to point out and even to create parallels with conditions of the time of Muḥammad. In this he was within the tradition of Islamic fundamentalism.

The movement of the Mahdiyya in the Sudan thus fits clearly within the fundamentalist tradition of Islam, especially if that tradition is defined in terms of the paradigm of tensions outlined in this analysis. The difference among the various fundamentalist movements becomes primarily a difference in leadership

⁶¹ Wingate, *Mahdiyyism*, p. 42.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁶³ *Manshūrāt*, II, 57.

⁶⁴ Wingate, *Mahdiyyism*, p. 59.

⁶⁵ *Manshūrāt*, II, 57.

⁶⁶ Gibb, *Mohammedanism*, p. 172.

styles or in local contexts in which the movements develop. One may conclude, then, that there is a fundamentalist style of Islamic experience that can be defined in terms of immanence–transcendence, unity–diversity, and openness–authenticity tensions within Islam; that such an experience has manifested itself in movements that have been led by people called Mahdīs; and that the movement of Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī in the Sudan was such a mahdist–fundamentalist movement.

CONCLUSIONS

Unless one is satisfied with creating a typology and then putting labels onto various peoples and groups in a new way, there is a desire to ask whether or not this analysis adds anything to our understanding of either the fundamentalist tradition or of Muḥammad Aḥmad and the Mahdist movement in the Sudan. It is possible that the analysis does provide further insight into these two things.

The Fundamentalist Tradition

The definition of the fundamentalist tradition provided in the first part of this study is one that can include most of those movements that have normally been described as being within that tradition. What the definition does not prescribe, however, is a label for the leader of the movement. That is, perhaps, necessary because of the wide diversity of organizational styles within the framework of the fundamentalist experience. No listing of such movements would be complete without the Wahhabis or Ibn Taymiyya, but one is the well-organized movement of a militant activist and the second is an individual scholar who inspired others. Thus the label given to the leadership style does not seem to be as crucial as other elements in the definition of Islamic fundamentalism. Certain leadership styles in Islam, however, are not usually associated with the reformism–revivalism of the fundamentalists. Thus, the title ‘mahdī’ is frequently identified with the messianic figures of the Shi‘a tradition and is not seen as a leader supporting a revival of the early community. It is possible that someone who has assumed the title and call of the mahdī may in fact be closer to the fundamentalist mode of Islam than any other. This analysis suggests a way in which the intuitive perception of mahdīs like Ibn Tumart and Muḥammad Aḥmad as being fundamentalists may be more carefully and fully defined. The analysis offers a way of explaining or identifying the fundamentalist similarities among such disparate groups and individuals as the Mahdiyya in the Sudan, Ibn Taymiyya, the Wahhabis, the Muwahḥidūn of North Africa, and, possibly, Aḥmad ibn Idrīs al-Fāsi.

The Mahdī in the Sudan

In providing a firm vehicle for identifying Muḥammad Aḥmad as a part of

the fundamentalist tradition in Islam, this analysis suggests a number of conclusions about the Sudanese Mahdī.

In the first place, it suggests an alternative perception of the basis for his authority. The argument that Muḥammad Aḥmad was a 'charismatic' leader is persuasive.⁶⁷ Some of the persuasiveness rests on the fact that 'charismatic' has come to describe any person with dramatic leadership qualities, a popular message, and a mass following. In more formal terms, however, utilizing the definitions provided by Max Weber, who developed the concept of charismatic authority, one must do some re-evaluation of Muḥammad Aḥmad if he is seen as a part of the fundamentalist tradition.

Weber defines charismatic authority as 'resting on devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him.'⁶⁸ In explaining how this authority operates, Weber says, 'every charismatic authority would have to subscribe to the proposition, "It is written . . . but I say unto you. . . ." The genuine prophet . . . preaches, creates, or demands *new* obligations. In the pure type of charisma, these are imposed on the authority of revelation by oracles, or of the leader's own will, and are recognized by the members of the religious, military, or party group, because they come from such a source. . . . Traditional authority is bound to the precedents handed down from the past and to this extent is also oriented to rules. Within the sphere of its claims, charismatic authority repudiates the past.'⁶⁹

This definition of charismatic authority does not apply to the Mahdī as clearly as would be desirable to accept him as a 'charismatic leader' in the formal sense of the term. Muḥammad Aḥmad did not claim to bring a new revelation nor to supersede the revelation to Muḥammad the Prophet. When Muḥammad Aḥmad said 'It is written . . .' there was no 'but.' He would follow the first phrase with a call to restore full obedience to what had been written. Thus the Sudanese Mahdī made or created no new obligations. Rather, he was followed because he insisted upon the validity of the obligations already existing in the ideal defined by the Qur'ān and the Sunna of the Prophet. Far from repudiating the past, he attempted to re-create the past which Sudanese Muslims believed to have been repudiated by the Turk-Egyptian rulers. There was, in this way, a very strong component of some form of 'traditional' as opposed to 'charismatic' authority in the position of the Sudanese Mahdī. As a participant in the fundamentalist tradition this is bound to have been the case. The appeal of the fundamentalist movement is to traditionally sanctioned rules and authority, no matter how dramatic the leadership qualities of the individuals involved might be.

Second, placing Muḥammad Aḥmad firmly within the Islamic fundamentalist tradition suggests reasons for caution in identifying the Mahdiyya as messianism. It provides a way for noting that the movement of Muḥammad Aḥmad was a specific kind of messianism, associated with the term mujaddid (renewer) and

⁶⁷ This is certainly true of Dekmejian and Wyzsomiński, *Comparative Studies*.

the Sunnī traditions of the Mahdī. This is important because of what it tells us about Sudanese society at the end of the nineteenth century as well as about the leader himself.

It is not that the Sudanese Mahdiyya was not a messianic movement within the Semitic tradition.⁷⁰ It was, however, a very specific type of movement that required special conditions, since it was an Islamic fundamentalist movement. For such a movement more is required than the existence of 'people who feel themselves to be oppressed and who are longing for deliverance.'⁷¹ Also, although it is necessary, it is not sufficient to have a 'society where traditional norms and relationships are disintegrating.'⁷² A fundamentalist Islamic movement with a mahdī as a leader implies a reasonably high degree of acceptance within the society of the Islamic tradition and a certain stage in the long process of Islamization of the society.

In this there are a number of features that are noteworthy. The fundamentalist movements that were not Mahdī led tended to be in areas where Islam was long established, that is, in the Islamic heartland. Thus, Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb had his success in the Arabian Peninsula itself, Ibn Taymiyya taught in Cairo and Damascus, and the Muslim Brotherhood had its early centers in the eastern Arab world. On the other hand, the mahdī-type fundamentalists – Ibn Tumart, the Mullah of Somaliland, and Muḥammad Aḥmad in the Sudan – arose in the borderlands of Islam. In Africa it might be possible to describe a spectrum of charismatic and messianic movements. Outside the world of Islam the prophetic-charismatic movements that assumed a millenarian and messianic form when traditional society began to break down are numerous. In Islamic Africa messianic movements tend to be most common in the areas on the border of the Islamic world. The style of these movements seems to be related to the stage of Islamization of the society.

In the usual pattern of Islamization, societies went through a long phase of Islamic latitudinarianism and a toleration of local customs. When a substantial proportion of the population adopted Islam at least nominally, however, a new stage was entered. The way was open, at that point, for a leader to appeal to the Islamic ideal and lead a revolutionary reformist movement in opposition to the semi-Islamized social and political establishment.⁷³ The leader of such a movement assumed messianic proportions in the eyes of his followers, but 'messianic

⁶⁸ Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 46.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁷⁰ This tradition is usefully defined in Brown, 'The Sudanese Mahdiyya,' pp. 147–148.

⁷¹ Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 225.

⁷² Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York: Harper, 1961), p. 319.

⁷³ The definition of this pattern has been made in a number of ways. Some of the best are Brown, 'The Sudanese Mahdiyya,' pp. 159–168; J. S. Trimingham, 'The Phases of Islamic Expansion and Islamic Culture Zones in Africa,' *Islam in Tropical Africa*, ed. I. M. Lewis (London: Oxford University Press, 1966); Mervyn Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth: The Life and Times of the Shehu Usuman Dan Fodio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), Introduction.

expectations require special conditions for their manifestation. They played no part in the history of the Sudanese states when Islam was the cult of certain lineages and occupational groups and the soil unfavorable to the propagation of universalist ideas.⁷⁴

If one accepts the assumptions of this model of Islamic expansion, then one is drawn to the conclusion that the Sudanese Mahdī represents a particular phase in the Islamization of the Nilotic Sudan. If he was the fundamentalist messiah that has been pictured here, then the late nineteenth century represents a key point of transition in Sudanese Islam: that time when Islam passes from being a localized cult in a largely pagan society to a society in which the universalized Islamic ideal is widely accepted by masses and leaders. In a less Islamized society, if the conditions of unrest called forth a messianic movement, it would have been of a more charismatic, prophetic style. In a more fully Islamized society, the movement would not normally have evoked the messianic title of 'mahdī' as a support for fulfilling the function of a mujaddid. In the heartlands of Islam the mujaddid can be believed to be truly a reviver of what existed previously in that very society, and he may not need as much messianic sanction. What we find in the Sudan is a fundamentalist mahdī.

This analysis suggests a line for reassessing the development of Islam in the Sudan. Despite the long-standing contact of the Nilotic Sudan with Islam and despite the long period in which a significant proportion of Sudanese were identified as Muslim, it may be that the strength of Islam for much of this period has been overestimated. For many scholars 'it was the Funj who, with the zeal of new converts, promoted the spread of Muslim learning and who thus set the seal on the Muslim character of the country.'⁷⁵ It was during the Funj era, lasting from the sixteenth into the nineteenth century, they believe, that 'the true islamization of the region' was brought about.⁷⁶ One result of this is the conclusion made by some that 'the Sudan in the 17th century was in closer touch with the outside world of Islam than at any time before or since. Its learning was more real, its reputation abroad higher, its roads safer, its administration stronger.'⁷⁷

If the Sudan had only reached the point of its militant Islamic reformer at the end of the nineteenth century, this early Islamization must be somehow overstated. Recent scholarship dealing with the Funj period supports this suggestion. It has been said that the Funj state was, in fact, not an Islamic state and that one of the reasons for its decline was the conversion to Islam of its leadership. 'The acceptance of Islam by the ruling elite gradually destroyed the system of marriage

⁷⁴ J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Influence of Islam upon Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1968), p. 77.

⁷⁵ S. Hillelson, 'The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan,' *Islam Today*, ed. A. J. Arberry and Rom Landau (London: Faber & Faber, 1943), p. 100.

⁷⁶ P. M. Holt, *A Modern History of the Sudan* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 28.

⁷⁷ This is a statement made by K. D. D. Henderson and cited in J. A. Reid, 'The Fung Kingdom and Its Religious Background,' *Notes on the Tribes and Prominent Families in the Blue Nile Province* (Khartoum, 1935), p. 7.

alliances and princely hostages upon which the coherence of the Funj state depended. . . . To the degree that a ruler succeeded in projecting the image of (Islamic) orthodoxy, he not only lost the aura of sanctity surrounding traditional monarchs but also became associated in the popular mind with the cult of the merchants.⁷⁸ What the Funj era becomes, in this perspective, is an era when Islam is largely the cult of certain lineages and occupational groups. It is open to compromise with local customs and latitudinarian in its style.

This phase of Islamization in the Nilotic Sudan, however, took a relatively distinctive form. For a number of reasons the pre-Islamic religious traditions rapidly lost their overt identity in the northern Nilotic Sudan, so that even the non-Islamic traditions assumed at least the names of Islam. Thus, even though the Funj state may have been an example of Sudanic divine kingship, in name and in self-identity the state was an Islamic sultanate. In more general terms, what appears to have taken place was the emergence of a relatively distinctive culture in the northern Nilotic Sudan in the period between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. Despite the distinctiveness of the patterns that developed, the society increasingly identified itself in Arab and Islamic terms.⁷⁹ As Funj control declined, the Arab-Islamic ideals came to play an increasingly important role in social self-definition. This reached an important point when, at the end of the eighteenth century new Muslim religious orders of a more reformist style began to move into the Sudan.⁸⁰

This was the point where, in the normal pattern of this style of Islamization, a vigorous reformer would have or could have emerged, calling for a purification of the faith and a more strict adherence to the Islamic tradition. At this time there was a general messianic expectation in the Sudanic areas of Africa.⁸¹ It would appear that this almost happened in the Nile valley area, but the development was forestalled by two factors.

The first of these factors is the strength of the local Islamic adaptation and the resulting Sudanese Arab-Islamic social synthesis. In contrast with other areas in the Sudanic belt, many of the practices that might clearly be labeled as pagan had, in the Nilotic Sudan, long been sanctioned explicitly as Islamic and had become justified in some way by the consensus of the community. Thus, some of the early teachers with reformist potential allowed their movements to become Sudanized rather than forwarding the Islamization of the Sudan in a fundamentalist direction. One can see this in the early development of the *Sammāniyya Tariqa* in the Sudan. The order was founded in the Hijaz by a

⁷⁸ R. S. O'Fahey and J. L. Spaulding, *Kingdoms of the Sudan* (London: Methuen, 1974), p. 87.

⁷⁹ John Voll, 'Effects of Islamic Structures on Modern Islamic Expansion in the Eastern Sudan,' *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, VII, No. 1 (1974), 85-98.

⁸⁰ J. S. Trimingham, *Islam in the Sudan* (London: Cass, 1965), pp. 198-202.

⁸¹ Saburi Biobaku and Muhammad al-Hajj, 'The Sudanese Mahdiyya and the Niger-Chad Region,' *Islam in Tropical Africa*, ed. I. M. Lewis (London: Oxford University Press, 1966).

reform-oriented teacher, 'Abd al-Karīm al-Sammān, and was brought to the Sudan by Shaykh Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib. When he first started to preach as a Sammāniyya leader in the Sudan he appears to have caused some trouble and aroused the opposition of the older, established religious leaders. He soon, however, appears to have been content to settle down and become a saintly leader in the older Sudanese Islamic pattern.⁸² Another order, the Khatmiyya, was introduced at this time and it also tended to become Sudanized rather than continuing the more rigorous reformism of its founder who had taught in the Hijaz.⁸³ Thus the unique strength of the Sudanese Islamic synthesis was one factor in postponing the emergence of a rigorous fundamentalist leader.

The second factor in the timing of the sequence was that the Sudan was disrupted by the Turko-Egyptian conquest beginning in 1821. This produced a dramatic interruption of developments in Sudanese history. It brought an end to the Funj system before the fundamentalist style movement could bring that about. As a result, the religious leadership became involved in a major reorientation of its efforts. However secularized or non-Islamic the Turko-Egyptian regime might ultimately have become in practice, it came into the Sudan with sound Islamic credentials. It introduced on a more extensive scale than before legal and educational structures based on what were, from the Sudanese perspective, undeniably sound Islamic traditions. Thus the local Sudanese religious leadership, reformist and latitudinarian alike, had to come to grips with the new context and make its judgments of the new regime. Some of the reformers, like the leaders of the Khatmiyya, opted for full cooperation with the Turko-Egyptian rulers, while others of both reformist and localist tendencies maintained reservations. Finally, after sixty years, the interrupted sequence was resumed and a fundamentalist leader emerged to try to establish a purified Islamic community in the Sudan. In contrast to other Sudanic fundamentalists, Muḥammad Aḥmad had to fight on two fronts at the same time: he had to oppose the remaining non-Islamic practices of local popular culture, but in contrast with other Sudanic fundamentalists he also had to oppose a government that was undeniably Islamic in name and tradition. Thus Muḥammad Aḥmad had, on the one hand, the kind of struggle in which West African Islamic reformers engaged and, at the same time, he had to fight a battle similar to those undertaken by fundamentalists in the Islamic heartland. It may be this that made the assumption of the title of 'mahdī' necessary in the case of the Sudanese fundamentalist movement.

Muḥammad Aḥmad provided the Sudan with its fundamentalist reformer stage in the long process of Islamization in the African model. In this he was in the tradition of Islamic frontier puritans. At the same time, he also reflects the basic concerns of fundamentalism in the central lands of Islam. Thus, both in his position in history and in the general definition of his movement, Muḥammad

⁸² Trimmingham, *Islam in the Sudan*, pp. 226–228.

⁸³ John O. Voll, 'A History of the Khatmiyyah Tariqah in the Sudan,' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1969), chapter 3.

Aḥmad illustrates that one can be both a mahdī and a fundamentalist in the world of Islam. It may be that this is the new perspective that a study of the Sudanese Mahdiyya provides for an understanding of contemporary Islamic activism. In light of the Sudanese Mahdiyya, contemporary efforts to be both radical and fundamentalist certainly have precedent. The messianic fundamentalist is a feature of the Islamic experience.

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