

THE PREACHING OF ŠAYH AŠ-ŠA^cRĀWĪ: ITS POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

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Few people produce as many articles, read as many sermons and grant as many interviews as the Egyptian preacher Šayh aš-Ša^crāwī (*1911). It is amazing that in spite of his enormous output it is hard to pin him down within the spectrum of Egyptian religious politics. Recently, in May 1988, even *The Economist*¹ paid attention to the Šayh's religious fervor, saying: "He does not advocate violence. But his declarations encourage ... the militants".

There are, however, different sorts of Islamic militants in Egypt. According to Dr. Farag Fōda (*1945), an informed Egyptian observer of militant Islam, we have to discern three main tendencies² within militant Islam³: the traditional tendency, the revolutionary tendency and the affluent tendency. The word-play on 'revolutionary' in Arabic *ṭawrī*, and 'affluent' *ṭarwī*, should be noted, but the pun does not imply that Dr. Farag Fōda is not serious in proposing this threefold division.

The first group he wants to identify, the traditional islamists, are generally moderate, even though this group may have radical wings or occasionally produce secret terrorist cells. This group of traditional islamists, *al-ittiğāb al-islāmī at-taqlīdī*, is the continuation of Ḥasan al-Bannā's Muslim Brotherhood. In Dr. Farag Fōda's own words⁴:

¹ *The Economist*, May 21, 1988, p. 60.

² Dr. Farag Fōda, *Qabla s-suqūt*, Cairo 1985, pp. 159-166.

³ Apart from militant Islam the existence of two other elements within modern Islam has to be recognized: the quietist mystic Šūfī element and the orthodox legalist Azhar influence. The state usually supports and encourages its own mixture of these two factors.

⁴ Farag Fōda, *op. cit.*, 159.

“They always keep a delicate balance between their claim to be an organization that does not attempt to come into power and their being occupied with political activities that have coming into power as their only goal”.

Due to the particular circumstances of Egypt's political life since 1952 and due to the role of political parties in pre-revolutionary Egypt, the Organization of Muslim Brothers could not develop into a political party, so Dr. Farag Fōda thinks. He predicts, however, that the entry of representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood into the Egyptian parliament, for the first time in 1984, will have a positive effect on the gradual development of the traditional Islamists into a political party.

Dr. Farag Fōda calls the second tendency the revolutionary tendency. The main ideological characteristic of the different groups that constitute this tendency is their belief that modern society is *ġābilī*, ‘pre-Islamic’, or ‘pagan’, and should hence be fought by true Muslims the way the Prophet fought the Meccans in the years 622-630 AD.

Often this tendency is referred to as the *ġibād* movement. It achieved one of its most spectacular successes when some of its sympathizers assassinated President Sadat in 1981. The representatives of this tendency sincerely believe that God wants them to come into power. In order to obey God's special command to them they are willing to make use of force.

Most Western observers will agree with Dr. Farag Fōda's examination of these two component parts of contemporary Muslim radicalism in Egypt. His description of the third militant tendency which he assumes to be present, the affluent tendency, *al-ittiġāh at-tarwī*, will be less readily accepted. Nevertheless, Dr. Fōda's analysis may well be right.

The third tendency (*ittiġāh*) within contemporary Egyptian radical Islam, so Dr. Farag Fōda writes, is led by people who amassed their fortunes in Saudi Arabia or in Sadat's Egypt of unlimited economic possibilities during the good old days of the *infītāh*.

The people in this group believe that it is possible to establish a Saudi style regime in Egypt. They are in favor of freedom of trade, they

are against governmental price fixing (*tasʿīr*), they want to limit all taxation to the Islamic *zakāt*-tax, and they regard opposition against their own views as an un-Islamic activity. They think they can keep the populace amused with the spectacles which public execution of the *ḥadd* punishments offer (flagellations and stonings for sexual offences, and amputations for theft). Under such a system, the poor should concentrate on the blessing they will receive in the hereafter. As the affluent faction sees it, it is an important duty of the State to distribute small gifts of sweets and fruits to the poor at the occasion of religious holidays.

To the partisans of this tendency, so Dr. Fōda writes, the Islamic state is nothing but an efficient instrument to increase their wealth. It is an instrument that is, more-over, well-equipped to guarantee political stability in the Middle East since its Islamic ideology puts it in a position which will supply it with a popular base, *qāʿida šaʿbiyya*, from where it may confidently attempt to quell all forms of political opposition. Since, especially in the Middle East, political stability is a commodity much sought after, it would be interesting to know whether certain agencies of certain super powers hold the same or similar views. Dr. Fōda is a professional consultant engaged in international consultancy concerning agricultural development projects. Hence he does not hesitate to give a sober evaluation of the strength and methods of each of the three tendencies which he assumes to be present. A theologian or an orientalist is trained to postpone giving value judgements, but such luxuries are alien to a professional consultant like Dr. Fōda.

The traditionalist tendency, Dr. Fōda explains, may be weak at this moment, but of the three existing tendencies it is the tendency that is best equipped for political action in an open democracy. In free elections they may easily get a majority, he believes. According to Dr. Fōda, the absence of any intellectual opposition to their views is one of their greatest assets.

The revolutionary tendency he regards, first of all, as dangerous. As Dr. Fōda sees it, their partisans are all between 15 and 35 years of age, they have ample opportunity to meet and organize, they have no responsibilities, they have no hope that even modest material ambitions

can ever be realized within present day society, they have no interest in discussing or analyzing the revolting details of a society they regard as corrupt all over, they believe that only armed struggle can put things right and make the world Islamic. Dr. Fōda calls them weak, but by the very nature of their methods and their aspirations it is impossible to assess their real strength.

According to Dr. Fōda, the strength of the third tendency is found in its low visibility. The militants of the affluent faction are strong and they work according to modern techniques. At present, they are the only effective lobby within Egyptian society, Dr. Fōda asserts.

The activities of the traditionalists do not bother them: these can only be helpful to their aims. Islamic revolutionary activities they regard with suspicion and hostility.

In the days of Sadat's *infitāḥ* the representatives of this faction with militant Islam build a financial empire which becomes stronger daily by the foundation of Islamic investment companies. These pious Islamic projects usually get much favorable publicity.

The militants of the affluent faction do not have to fear the traditional financial institutions, on the contrary, the traditional financial institutions fear them. They, moreover, engage in a wide variety of activities in the field of publishing and printing.

If Dr. Fōda's analysis is correct, we can easily place Šayḥ aš-Šaʿrāwī within the spectrum of Egyptian Islamic militancy. The available evidence can only be circumstantial but it all points the same direction.

First, the Šayḥ's biography: the Šayḥ spent many years in Saudi Arabia. He came back to Egypt during Sadat's *infitāḥ*-period, and in this period he even became the Cabinet Minister for Religious Affairs from November 1976 to October 1978. These two circumstances both point to his being closest to *al-ittiḡāḥ at-tarwī*, the affluent tendency.

Šayḥ aš-Šaʿrāwī cannot be close to the traditionalist or the revolutionary tendencies. Several times he was attacked in the magazines and

books published by the traditionalist Muslim Brothers. Two examples⁵: the traditionalist monthly *ad-Da'wa* attacked him in 1978 when he still was a Cabinet Minister, and Dr. Yūsuf al-Qarḏāwī, a prominent Muslim Brother traditionalist, attacked him – without, however, mentioning his name – in a book published in 1984.

Such attacks are reliable, circumstantial evidence that the Muslim Brother traditionalists do not think that Šayh aš-Ša'rāwī is one of them.

Šayh aš-Ša'rāwī in turn attacked representatives of the revolutionary tendency. In November 1981 he gave a long interview about Sadat's assassination to *al-Abrām*. About the assassins who at that point in time awaited trial and execution in a Cairo prison the Šayh said at this occasion: "If these people had been real *ansār*, helpers, of Islam, nothing could have stopped them". Since – as everybody knows – nothing stopped these people from killing President Sadat, what does the Šayh mean? In the Šayh's own words: "Their aim was not only to assassinate [Sadat]. Wasn't the real aim of [their] whole operation that they wanted to seize power in Egypt?"

The general tone of this interview suggests that the Šayh feels himself to be very much above these revolutionaries who use such primitive and ineffective methods in order to serve the cause of Islam.

These are all circumstantial proofs indicating that the Šayh does not belong to the traditionalist or the revolutionary factions. But can he be connected to the affluent faction by other, more direct evidence? There may be much better material in the thousands of printed pages which the Šayh has published, but a letter written by the well-known Egyptian novelist Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm to the weekly *al-Liwā' al-islāmī*⁶, early in 1985, contains a surprising juxtaposition of Šayh aš-Ša'rāwī and one of the ideological shibboleths of the affluent faction, viz. the much neglected Islamic duty of paying *zakāt*.

⁵ See my *The Neglected Duty: The Creed of Sadat's Assassins*, New York (Macmillan) 1986, pp. 128 & 145.

⁶ *al-Liwā' al-islāmī*, 170, April 25, 1985, p. 3.

In the letter, Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm complains that contemporary Muslim activists so often talk about *ḡihād* and the application of the Islamic *ḥadd*-punishments: should they not, so he asks, pay more attention to the possibility that paying *zakāt*, this strangely neglected Islamic duty, could automatically put things right in this world?

From where did Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm suddenly get this idea? In his earlier writings on the rigidity⁷ of Islam, he did not discuss *zakāt*. Did Šayḥ aš-Šaʿrāwī prompt him? At the end of the *zakāt*-letter Šayḥ aš-Šaʿrāwī is abundantly present: when Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm was in hospital, the letter informs us, the Šayḥ visited him, prayed in his room, and Tawfīq was cured⁸. Tawfīq thanks God for the existence of men of religion like Šayḥ aš-Šaʿrāwī – and then at once rambles on about the duty of the state to establish *zakāt*-committees that have to take care of the poor.

Finally, Šayḥ aš-Šaʿrāwī's name does indeed every now and then crop up in the newspaper reports on Islamic banking, a profitable sideline of the affluent faction of truly modern militant Muslims.

In February 1986, Šayḥ aš-Šaʿrāwī is reported to have been elected president of a consultative committee appointed by the Governor of the Egyptian Central Bank. The objective of this committee is reported to have been to solve the problems that existed within a financial institution called *al-Maṣrif al-Islāmī ad-Duwalī*⁹. According to the fundamentalist periodical *an-Nūr*¹⁰ Šayḥ aš-Šaʿrāwī's duties in this committee involved mediating in a conflict within the board of directors of *al-Maṣrif al-Islāmī ad-Duwalī*, and supervising the Islamic character of future dealings of this financial institution.

⁷ See my "Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm on the Rigidity of Moslem Law", *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, xxxviii (1981), pp. 13-16.

⁸ *zāranī fi l-mustašfa wa-šallā fi ḡugratī fa-šafānī llāh.*

⁹ *al-Ġumhūrīyya*, February 17, 1986.

¹⁰ *an-Nūr*, February 19, 1986.

Furthermore, Šayḥ aš-Šaʿrāwī is reported to have founded an Islamic Bank in Austria¹¹. Finally, the Secretary-General of the International Union of Islamic Banks, Dr. Aḥmad ʿAbdalʿazīz an-Naḡḡār, is reported to have declared¹², early 1987, that “without Šayḥ aš-Šaʿrāwī the Islamic Fayṣal Bank in Egypt (*Bank Fayṣal al-Islāmī fī Miṣr*) could not have been founded in the days when [Šayḥ aš-Šaʿrāwī] was Cabinet Minister for Religious Affairs..”.

It is, I think, almost certain that Šayḥ aš-Šaʿrāwī is a representative of the affluent faction of militant modern Muslims in Egypt.

The Egyptian philosopher Dr. Fuʿād Zakariyyā¹³ sees a connection between the Šayḥ’s political attitude and the anti-rational anti-scientific ideology which the Šayḥ preaches in his televised sermons.

In some of these sermons, the Šayḥ equates the Byzantine and Sasanid Empires, both defeated by the Muslim armies of the early seventh century AD, with respectively the United States and the Soviet Union, and then concludes that both Christian capitalism and atheist communism will eventually be defeated by Islam. In the meantime, so the Šayḥ preaches, the proper attitude to the Soviet Union should be one of ʿadāwa, enmity. The proper attitude towards the United States should, on the other hand, be one of *muwāḡaba*, confrontation: after all the Americans, like the rulers of the Byzantine Empire, believe in God.

Such preaching, Fuʿād Zakariyyā writes, is simply a call for stepping up Arab enmity against the Soviet Bloc and for detente in the relations of the Arab world with the capitalist world. Why does Šayḥ aš-Šaʿrāwī, so he asks, present this purely political viewpoint as if it were an important religious lesson? Fuʿād Zakariyyā confesses that he fails to see why international relations between independent states have to be

¹¹ *al-Ġumhūriyya*, April 1, 1986.

¹² *Šabāb Bilādī*, January 3, 1987, p. 5. I am indebted to Mirjam Ietswaart (Leiden) for supplying me with these newspaper clippings.

¹³ Fuʿād Zakariyyā, *al-Ḥaqīqa wa-l-waḥm fī l-ḥaraka al-islāmīyya al-muʿāṣira*, Cairo 1986², 31 ff.

reduced to a comparison of creeds, *hākadā tuhtazal as-sirāʿāt ad-duwāliyya ilā muğarrad muqārana bayna muhtawā al-ʿaḡāʿid ad-dīniyya* (p. 36).

The Šayḥ, so Fuʿād Zakariyyā concludes (p. 39), is someone who defends capitalism and free enterprise in their crudest forms, and he embellishes this defence with pious Islamic formulas like *al-māl al-ḥalāl*, even though he, too, must know how difficult it is to determine the borderline between *ḥarām* and *ḥalāl* in matters of trade.

In a further analysis of Šayḥ aš-Šaʿrāwī's sermons Fuʿād Zakariyyā detects a "constant desire to belittle human reason and human science" (p. 31). The best example is perhaps the sermon in which the Šayḥ argues that paper tissues, *waraqat klīneks*, are of more use to humanity than space technology and satellites.

Egypt, Fuʿād Zakariyyā warns, is desperately in need of modern science and technology to be able to feed its population and to supply it with electricity and drinking water. Why, under such circumstances, should one ridicule science and technology?

Does the Šayḥ represent a tendency that wants to keep Egypt's population backward, illiterate, superstitious, obsessed with theological riddles, incapable of participating in the 20th century, an easy victim of the commercial dealings of the economic elite, kept happy with the luxury of Kleenex paper tissues, thus contributing to political stability in the Middle East?

At least two Egyptian intellectuals, Dr. Farag Fōda and Professor Fuʿād Zakariyyā, understand the verbose message of Šayḥ aš-Šaʿrāwī in this way.

Although it is difficult not to agree with these two articulate observers of militant Islam in Egypt there may be another possible explanation for the phenomenon which we in the West have named "fundamentalism".

It is well-known that Islam has absorbed the system of law which existed in the Middle East before the advent of the Muslim invaders. The Islamic *šarīʿa* represents the successful islamization of the legal system of the pre-Islamic Middle East.

The same is true of Islamic philosophy: Muslim philosophers have islamized the Greek Hellenistic philosophical tradition. Even today, Aristotle cannot be studied without Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rušd, Avicenna and Averroes. The same is true of pre-Islamic religious phenomena: these, too, were successfully islamized by generations of Islamic thinkers.

Could it not be true that modern "fundamentalism" represents an heroic attempt by Muslims to make Islamic the modern State? The omniscient omnipotent omnipresent states, and their power, were left to the Muslim world by the colonial rulers who in the course of this century had to give up their political domination of the Muslim world.

Even in countries with a tradition of separation between religion and politics, the limitless power of the modern state creates problems. How much more this may be true of territories in which the modern state has not evolved gradually and in which there is, at least in the theory of the dominant religion, little or no separation between religion and politics?

Contemporary Muslims, confronted with the omnipotent omniscient omnipresent modern state, cannot but desire to make this state more Islamic than it is today. This desire may take two forms: [1] revolutionary Islamic activism may attempt to replace the existing secular governments by Muslim regimes, or [2] the existing governments which in principle are not religious may attempt to take the very measures that are called for by the Islamic opposition with which they are confronted. In this way, they can remain in power, and the Islamic opposition will be frustrated and may eventually disappear.

The final result of these two developments may be identical: the emergence of truly Islamic states. The enigma of the Egyptian preacher ŠayḤ aš-Šaʿrāwī is possibly found in that he understands this dilemma, and does not really care which of these two roads Egypt will go, as long as the final result is God's will.