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*THE ALEVIS, OR DEIFIERS OF ALI*

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AINTAB, TURKEY

A religion different from Islam, centring about the person and teaching of Ali, the adopted son of Muhammed, is steadily gaining ground in certain sections of the Turkish Empire. The believers are called Alevis both by themselves and by the Muslims. The name Kuzul Bash (*u* as in "cut"), which means "Red Head" and is often used as a term of reproach, is said to have originated at the battle of Siffin. Ali said, "Tie red upon your heads, so that ye slay not your own comrades in the thick of the battle." In Persia the community is known by the name of Ali Ilāhi, and has commonly been regarded as a sect of Muhammedanism.

The object of this study is to investigate the true nature of this faith with as much accuracy as an oriental religion permits, and to consider the relations of the Alevi brotherhood with Islam and Christianity. The information has been gathered through a long series of conversations with a well-known teacher. For verification most of these statements have been independently referred to other Alevi believers, with the result that the significant features have been confirmed. The extreme reticence of most Alevis makes a free conversation possible only after long acquaintance. But the estimates of Alevi population have tallied closely with those made by a Christian physician of wide experience. This community began during the life of Ali, but has not grown to large dimensions until recent years. The teachings have always been secret, and there has been no inspired book to make known in written form what is handed on from believer to believer.

Let us then inquire as to the *Person and Mission of Ali*. There are four kinds of men in relation to him. First, those people who think Ali the worst sort of a tyrant, especially the Jews of these regions, who curse one another by him and regard him about as Muslims do Satan. Second, the orthodox Muslims, or

Ehl-i-Sunnat, who call him the fourth caliph. "Ali, the wise and virtuous among men," they say. Third, the Shi'is, who believe that Ali performed all miracles, thousands of which are narrated, and that he was appointed successor and executor to the prophet. Fourth, the Alevis, who regard Ali as the spirit existing in all prophecy and as the incarnation of God.

"Do the Alevis believe in atonement?"

"Yes, in the sense of intercession through Ali."

"Not through Jesus?"

"Yes; because Ali is essentially the same as Jesus."

"Were Hasan and Husein martyrs?"

"The Shi'is believe that atonement may be hoped for through these martyrs, especially through Husein. But the Alevis believe, directly through Ali's life. Not by his life so much, nor by his death, nor by his testimony, but by his person, his spirit. He also died a martyr's death. He had a great truth and a great hope, for which he died. There was no desire for personal renown. He was the holy incarnation of the Spirit of God."

"Have you no written life of Ali?"

"We have manuscripts of great value, which are cherished like gems, seldom sold, and are not given to any but Alevis."

"How are these procurable?"

"Only by becoming an Alevi. There are about fifteen different books, all in manuscript. The first group gives Ali's teaching, and is wholly made up of his own words. The second narrates his life as lived among his disciples. The third is composed of the praises and honors of those who came after him and loved him. These books are not trusted to every disciple. They are for the *Ureja*, those who are thoroughly acquainted with the mysteries of our religion. The books are never trusted to the publicity of any printing-press. You will understand that Ali established a new religion if you consider his definition of a Muslim: 'A Muslim is he who by his hand and tongue is true.'"<sup>1</sup>

The genesis of this religion was with Ali, thirty years after the commencement of Islam. He did battle to defend his rights. He chose from the people the most able and suitable men. These

<sup>1</sup> Almuslimu man salima-l-nāsu 'an yadihi walisānihi. [The Muslim is one from whose hand and tongue men are safe.—A well-known tradition of Muhammed.]

he formed into the Special Council. Later he formed the General Council, consisting of all the men who followed him. There is a section of the Alevi known as Nuseiri. They are chiefly in Persia, but a great many are in the villages of Antioch. Nuseir, one of Ali's pupils, said to him, "Thou art God," and Ali accepted this avowal.

In the course of history three men rendered conspicuous service in the spread of the faith. Seyyid Jelal-ed-din, being Veli-Ullah, was of the descendants of Ali. He lived about A.H. 660 (A.D. 1262/62), and during his lifetime converted a great proportion of the Magians and many of the Shi'is. He was the founder of the order of Jelali dervishes, which has ever since continued to teach and promote his convictions.

Haji Bektash Veli was born about A.H. 730 (A.D. 1329/30) in the city of Nishabur. He was the son of Imam Riza, and a direct descendant of Ali. When he journeyed into Ottoman territory, he brought the Alevi faith for the first time into Asia Minor. He lived to see five hundred converts; and before his death, near the city of Angora, instituted the order of dervishes which is known as Bektashi. The members of this order are all of his faith, and they earnestly preach this teaching as they go about the country. Celibacy is the rule of this order.

The third historic character was neither ascetic nor preacher, but a king. Shah Sefi Sultan was the first Alevi to sit upon the throne of Persia. He brought about a renaissance of the faith after the cruel persecution by the Afghan conquerors. Four Alevi Shahs followed him, among them Shah Abbas. But since then Sunnis and Shi'is have been upon the throne. Shah Sefi Sultan sent criers out upon the highways to witness for Ali and to redeem the down-trodden cause. He succeeded in bringing great honor to the name of Ali, and throughout his reign proved himself a just and noble shah.

*The Geographical Centre* of this religion is in the town of Kirind, Kermanshah province, Persia. Four of Ali's male descendants now reside in Kirind. They are by name, Seyyid Berake, Seyyid Rustem, Seyyid Essed Ullah, Seyyid Farraj Ullah. Seyyid is correctly said only of Ali's descendants. These men send representatives throughout Asia Minor and northern Syria for preach-

ing and for the moral training of their followers. All gatherings are very secret, no inquirers being admitted except by the most reliable introductions.

In Arabia and Egypt this faith has scarcely made any progress. But in Persia and Mesopotamia there are from two to three million Alevis. There are about fifty thousand in the province of Aleppo, but none south of the city of Aleppo. In the Adana, Diarbekir, Smyrna, Salonica, and Caesarea provinces there are tens of thousands. Haji Bektash, where descendants of Ali live, eighteen hours from Caesarea, is an important point. Constantinople is not a centre, but in Macedonia a large portion of the population have become disciples. In the city of Aintab there are about five hundred Alevi homes and two thousand individual believers. In Antioch there are scarcely any, except for the Nuseiri villages. The villages of Marash and the town and region of Albustan should be specially mentioned. In the Surūj plain the people are Sunnis. Most of the Aintab villages are Sunni, as Burj and Kuzul Hissar. Kuchdam is chiefly Yezid. But beyond Sazghun to the south are many Alevi villages centring around Kharar. The population of the Kilis country is chiefly Arab and unfriendly to outsiders. But the tent-dwellers are Alevi. In Birejik about one hundred and fifty of the Turkish people belong to this faith. In the city and villages of Urfa there are few; in Aleppo few; in Antioch perhaps two hundred houses. The most thoroughly converted district is that of Dersim, in the Erzingan vilayet. The length of this district is fifteen days' horseback ride.

*Essential Teaching concerning Prophecy.* In the world there is one Truth. This Truth possesses great power. There is no power existing greater than this. The Power is in itself, not dependent upon any person. All other existing things get their light and might from this one truth. This Power "doeth what it wisheth and judgeth what it willeth."

Nothing can attack and overturn this Power. In the process of time the Power brought to light the charges and commandments that were necessary for that period. For instance, in the time of Moses what was necessary for the people was said by Ali by means of Moses.

"Then you believe in the pre-existence of Ali?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Have you considered the statements in the Gospel of John, in the first chapter, regarding the pre-existence of Christ?"

"We are aware of the similarity. Since the world began until the present day, however many prophets have invited the people to the truth, all these have taken their office from Ali, every one inviting separately, in form to himself but in meaning to Ali. The commander being one, however much the officers differ in degree, their meaning and duty<sup>2</sup> is one. Because all the prophets invite to one truth, they cannot be differentiated essentially. From the time of Adam to the time of Muhammed all the prophets must be one, though in name they are different. Each prophet teaches a new lesson by a new method, and each prophet is higher than the preceding ones. As Ali is pre-existent, so he is even now existing and manifested and known<sup>3</sup> to his people. To those not his people he is veiled, covered.<sup>4</sup>

"How is he manifested to his own people?"

"By the Holy Spirit's influence. So much for the present as to the means of manifestation."

"Do the Alevis accept the Holy Spirit's personal influence?"

"Yes. But this needs a free and full discussion. If we understood the question of the Holy Spirit, other difficulties would naturally solve themselves."

The teacher illustrated his own conviction about the Holy Spirit as follows: "The Holy Spirit is as the light which shines into a room, the sun itself not being visible. But you cannot say that the light which we enjoy is the sun itself; it is only a result."

*The Pre-existence and Survival of Human Personalities.*  
"At every time that the First Point appeared, we like a circle came around him."

The true servants of Jesus are identical with those who came faithfully to Moses' call. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees because they had disobeyed Moses. By this rebuke he meant that they had also lived in Moses' time and had disobeyed Moses then. There is in this connection a term used only among Alevis: Active Return.<sup>5</sup> If you live the life of Paul, never mind your distinct

<sup>2</sup> wazīfah.

<sup>3</sup> makshūf, ma'lūm.

<sup>4</sup> mastūr.

<sup>5</sup> raj'at fi'lī.



name, you are none other than Paul. You continue his life. There are, then, hundreds of Pauls. His life has multiplied. He has many spiritual children. Observe what he says regarding Onesimus in the letter to Philemon, "I beseech thee for my son Onesimus whom I have begotten in my bonds." You are finishing the actions that others began. The action never dies. Therefore the man cannot die. Your true nature is not your bones and flesh, but the good action which is immortal.

*Concerning Immortality.* This world has another. This life is to the next as a drop to the ocean. But in this world whatever is gained in good deeds is not gained for this world, but for the next. Here is only the planting; there is the harvest. Man suffers no death. There is only a change of life. Heaven is not a particular place. But wherever believers live is heaven, even on this earth. And wherever godless men live is hell, here or hereafter. What mean the good deeds done in this life? As the child in his mother's womb knows not the use of eyes, ears, and mouth, but is growing stronger all the time, so there will be a use, made clear to us later, of all good actions done.

*The Manifestation of God.* The Muslims describe Allah by negatives, by denial of members and all human notions. Alevis describe God by positive attributes and by the great teaching of incarnation. God exists in his sovereignty (*mulk*). For this a body (*jasad*) is necessary. At no time has the face of the earth been empty of God. So now he is existent. And he will always be in the world, not in any imaginary sense, but in a literal sense. Every Alevi has seen the incarnate Ali, has talked with him in question and answer regarding the so-called "unanswerable" questions of life; has touched him, seen him, and with his every sense realized Ali's existence and presence. The object of this manifestation is to bring all men into the truth of God.

"What is the condition of thus interviewing the divine Incarnation?"

"The condition is hard, and the process of preparation takes a long time—seven or eight years of regular service and learning of the essentials. Then, if the seeker proves himself fit, he may be received as a member by the Dede from Dersim and hence by all Alevis. In this probation time he cannot have any direct

relation with Ali, that is he can never see him or learn from him."

"Can the believer meet with Ali when he wills?"

"No. Not at his own pleasure but at Ali's. The time and place are never known beforehand. The experience is sensible and self-controlled. It is not a condition of trance. It may be when a believer is alone or when he is with other disciples, but never when strangers are present. No Alevi can bring about such a vision, but Ali may will it at any time."

"Tell me more about this."

"Beyond this they would beat me if I told you."

"What is the difference between the doctrine of the Hidden Mahdi and this?"

"We believe that, although the Mahdi, Muhammed, and Messiah are different in name and body, they are one in light and truth. But we have no faith in those who, during the past century, have claimed to be the Mahdi."

*Private and Public Worship.* Among the Alevis prayer forms a part of both private and public worship. The prayers are not formal, nor appointed to be said at fixed times and at fixed places. Nor must they be preceded with preliminary washings.

"In the Koran are not all believers bidden to wash hands and arms to the elbows, and to anoint the head and wash the feet?"

"All Alevis are aware of that command, but it is not binding for them. Our prayer is spontaneous; we believe in intercessory prayer, and we have no ceremonial or formula."

"Does the reading of any holy book form a part of your worship?"

"We respect and study the five sacred books of Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and Muhammed. But we do not depend upon them. Our teaching is from believer to believer and from father to father."

"Do you believe in the confession of sin?"

"To God Most High."

"Do you believe in sacrifice?"

"Not like the sacrifice of the Month of Pilgrimage, when all Sunni Muslims must offer one animal. Our duty is once in a

lifetime, when the Dede comes on his circuit. The Pirs, or Dedes, are our honored teachers. The throat of the lamb or of the kid must be cut by the Pir himself."

"What is the object of this single sacrifice?"

"First, a remembrance of the offering of Ishmael [*sic*] by Abraham when God provided the ram. Second, to feed the poor, to whom portions are always given."

"What do you understand by self-sacrifice?"

"Suppose we are four hundred Alevis in a town. Any one will suffer, even to the death, for any other of the brotherhood or for confession of his faith. In the early days of our faith there were hundreds who suffered martyrdom."

"Do you have places of congregation corresponding to mosques and churches?"

"We have no such buildings, but groups of believers meet for worship regularly in private homes. God is more holy than the temple. He lives in the inner life of man. It is better to spend for persons in need the moneys that would go for mortar and stone. We have congregations, however, to the membership of which only those approved by the Dede from Kirind may be received."

"Who are your leaders and teachers?"

"Our Khojas have no religious function. They are the teachers of day-schools. There are local Dedes and those who travel from Kirind throughout all these countries."

"What is the form of service?"

"We gather in councils for the remembrance of Ali's teachings, for reading from the Law, the Psalms, the Gospel, and the Koran, for interpretation and prayer, and for conversation about the love of God and about brotherly love. There are no public sacrifices like those of the ancient Hebrews, but at the private sacrifice many believers are naturally present. We observe the fast of Muharram 'Āshūra, which lasts ten days. During that time one may eat lightly once in three days; if that is impossible, once in twenty-four hours; if that again proves impossible, once in twelve hours. The object of the fast is meditation and purification."

*Social Conditions.* "Do you differ essentially from the Sunnis regarding marriage?"

"There is no command concerning polygamy in Ali's teaching. Our custom is that a man shall have one wife. In case of a wife's becoming insane or incapable of taking care of the household, a second wife may be taken. But never more than two. We hold no slaves, and believe that that unjust practice will finally be done away with."

"Do you believe that the system of polygamy is coming to an end in Islam?"

"That would require another Muhammed."

"What is woman's position among the Alevis?"

"In spirit and love there is no distinction between man and woman. They are equal in that sense. In intellect and management, which ever is uppermost and best, the command is his or hers. For instance, it may be that a ruthless, good-for-nothing man marries a capable, noble woman. Mind manages the world today. Alevis have no purchased slaves. That is accounted wrong. But slaves that have been taken in war or raid may be so used, though this has not happened often in modern times. We believe in educating our daughters. We have not any right to command our wives, for example, about veiling. The right is wholly left to the women. But the strict usage of this country compels them to veil like other women. Ali said to Husein, 'When abroad, respect and obey the customs of the country.'"

"Do you believe in the paradise taught by the Sunnis?"

"No."

"Is that a sensual paradise, and are the houris promised to the believers by the Imams today?"

"That sort of heaven is sometimes shamelessly proclaimed by the Imams in the mosques."

"How are you taught to deal with those who rob and deceive you?"

"Forbear as far as you can, but finally retaliate rather than be crushed by your enemies."

"What shall be your answer if you are cross-questioned as to your faith?"

"If by an intelligent assembly or in the presence of a governor, confess your faith. But if by an ignorant assembly or by a small one, whose intention is mockery or despite, you may deny your

connection, because your conviction would not be respected or appreciated."

"Then is it ever right to lie, as suggested in one of the traditions of the Prophet?"

"The tradition is false, as are many others. A father once taught his son ten thousand traditions, and when the young man with infinite patience had memorized them all, the father said: 'Now these are the false ones, believe anything else you please!' But to deny among ignorant or mocking people our being Alevis is not falsehood."

"Do the Alevis ever persecute for religious reasons?"

"There is no slavery in our faith. I may become a Magian or a Christian as I please. This is natural. We have left Islam; why should we not be free?"

"How are the orphans, the sick, and the poor cared for?"

"Privately in our homes."

"Do you believe in Jihad or in any war?"

"We believe in the inner war with the kafirs (infidels) that are in our hearts. Ali said: 'It is better for you to die in trying to do my will than for you to kill any one in the attempt at coercion.' We believe in actual war only as self-defence. But we believe thoroughly in self-defence rather than in turning the cheek to him who strikes."

*Relations with the Shi'is, the Babis, and the Behais.* Between the Alevis and the Shi'is there is this fundamental difference. The latter know Ali as the vicegerent of Muhammed. No other caliph is to be recognized. He is the successor, the executor. The Alevis know Ali as the incarnation of God. They are agreed with the Shi'is in the following respects: they do not recognize the Sultan of Turkey as Khalifa; they do not recognize the Sheikh-ul-Islam; they do not recognize the Ulemas nor the Khojas. Again, the Alevis are entirely separate from the Babis and Behais. None of them have gone over to follow Mirza Muhammed Ali or Beha Ullah. They do not believe the claims and pretensions of these men, nor have they the notion of a hidden Imam.

*Relations to Jesus Christ and the New Testament.* "Do the Alevis accept the incarnation of Jesus?"

"Not in the sense that he is the only incarnation, nor in the

sense that he fully succeeded in showing forth the character and nature of God. He had this divinity, but men could not perfectly appreciate it, and cannot to this day. In the sense that the Son of God or God himself entered human life as Jesus of Nazareth and lived his divine life in Palestine, we do believe in the Christian incarnation. We frequently speak of Jesus as the Son of Man, or the perfect man; we also speak of him as the Son of God."

"Do you accept the crucifixion and the death of Christ?"

"No. Because Jesus was an immortal spirit and could never be put to death."

"But his body?"

"Yes. But that did not contain his personality. The oppression of Jesus was greater than that of the other prophets, and his humility was greater than theirs. God loves self-sacrifice, and therefore the intercession of Jesus is reckoned by God more worthy than that of the other prophets. Jesus is preferred above all who came before him, because those who preceded him could not declare the word which he declared. But in their surrender to the will of God each in some way suffered by the people. For example, Hud, Salih, and Noah."

"Do you believe in the resurrection of Jesus?"

"This is a point of great difficulty among us. The spirit after it has separated from the earthly body cannot reunite. We do not feel obliged to accept what we do not understand; but we do not deliberately deny the resurrection."

"Do you regard the New Testament as inspired of God?"

"Yes."

"Equally with the Koran?"

"We believe in five equally inspired books: Şuhuf (revealed to Abraham, and now extant in Mesopotamia), Tevrat, Zabur, Injil, Qur'an.<sup>6</sup> We regard the books of Job, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and so forth, as of a lower order."

"Do you believe in the annulling of previous revelations?"

"In fundamentals, no. In ramifications, yes."

"What is your expectation regarding Christianity? Will it yield and become Alevi?"

<sup>6</sup>[I.e. The Books of Abraham (Koran 87, end), the Law (Torah), Psalms, Gospels (Euangelion), Koran.]

"The two faiths will unite at the point of justice, each relinquishing extreme positions."

"What about the Sunnis?"

"They are far behind! Their affair is certainly hard. They are very far off from such a union."

"What do you understand by the words of Jesus, 'There shall be one flock and one shepherd'?"

"These words are the essence of civilization. Unity is the final desire of God for us. The world is in childhood and has not yet self-control. The world does not yet comprehend the will of God."

*Regarding the System of Islam.* "Do the Alevis regard the Hajj (the pilgrimage) as binding?"

"Not at all."

"Do they feel bound to give the Zekyat (the legal alms)?"

"No."

"Do they perform the Namaz (the prostration)?"

"No."

"Do they keep the fast of Ramazan?"

"No."

"Do they make the saying of the Creed a condition to faith?"

"No."

"Do not the Shi'is keep these 'five pillars' of Islam?"

"Yes, with certain modifications."

*Regarding Muhammed Himself.* "Do you accept any one book like the *Siyer-en-Nebi* as a standard for the biography of Muhammed?"

"No. But we have our own accounts of his career and prophethood. We believe in him as the last of the five great prophets. We look upon him as intercessor. And in the same way we regard all the holy prophets. But the real wisdom and justice of decision is with God."

"Is Muhammed final?"

"Yes, in the sense that he is the seal of the prophets."

"Did he predict or appoint Ali?"

"Yes, in the desert at a great assembly. After Muhammed's death, for practical reasons, the Muslim convocation agreed 'to

set aside the impetuous and high-spirited Ali for the mild and conservative Abu Bekr.'"

"What do you consider the historical relations of Ali and Muhammed?"

"Their fathers were brothers. Afterwards Ali became Muhammed's son-in-law. He was the first believer. He was appointed to become the first caliph."

"Do you regard the revelation through Ali as the last word of God to men?"

"You should not say 'first and last.' The same spirit is through all, just as in the days of the week there is really only one day, but the names are different. If you unite the lives of the prophets, then the Alevis agree with you. If you disintegrate and differentiate, then you will fall out of sympathy with us."

*Conclusions.* 1. Here is a religion other than Islam, recognizing and accepting Muhammed.

2. The religion has for a centre, not a shrine, but a missionary movement. And the movement is not declining but growing.

3. The intimate relation with Persian and Turkish classic poetry, especially with the Mesnevi of Mevlana Jelal-ed-din-i-Rumi, should not be overlooked. In other words, the mysticism and pantheism of the Orient are here found, not as literary theories or philosophies, but as the elements of a religion with which increasing multitudes are seeking to satisfy the yearnings and instincts of the soul.

4. A fundamental difference and separation from Islam exists in the belief in incarnation. Turkey is being stirred, notwithstanding monarchy and caliphate and Sunni traditions, by as radical a movement as Indian Islam has known.

5. The exaltation of ethics over formalism is proved by the abrogation of "the five pillars."

6. The respect and liberty which are to be accorded to women among Alevis are largely unrealized because of the powerful environment of Muhammedan law and custom. But this ideal of a wife's equal share with her husband in life and in eternal life is prophetic of the day when there shall be true homes and a pure basis for society in the Orient.



7. By their own confession Alevis are closer to Christianity than to Islam. They expect an eventual compact with Christianity but not with Sunni Muhammedanism.

8. They accept the entire present New Testament. But how can they do this and consistently hold to the Koran as equally inspired?

9. The words of our Saviour, "There shall be one flock and one shepherd," are in truth "the essence of civilization," for He is indeed "drawing all men unto Himself."

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