

The Kharijites and their impact on Contemporary Islam (Part 3)

By Shaykh Seraj Hendricks

The battle against the Kharajites at Nahrawan, it must be noted, marked an exception to Sayyidina Ali's approach to them, not a rule. In fact his general position vis-à-vis the Kharajites acted as the standard for Imam Abu Hanifa, Imam Malik, Imam Shafiie, and Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal - with Abu Hanifa adopting the severest line of the four.

Sayyidina Ali's position becomes even more commendable when we consider the fact that he, along with those who joined him in the arbitration, was possibly the first victim of the charge of *kufr* (unbelief) and *shirk* (associating partners with Allah) in this nascent Muslim community. By introducing arbitrators with a view to resolving the conflict, they were now [accused of] setting themselves up as gods in place of Allah. Hence the charges of *shirk* against them by the Kharajites.

The other obvious implication of the misuse of the Qur'anic verse

“The prerogative of command belongs to Allah alone”¹ is the implied assertion that there can be absolutely no mediation in the affairs concerning people and Allah.”

In terms of their reading of the verse the necessary and logical conclusion ought to be that there should be no governments, organisations, learned and informed interpreters of the Qur'an etc. These are, after all, institutions and instruments of mediation. The Kharajite vision of an Islamic state appeared to display the contours of what might be called a sacred state of ordered chaos. Of things sacred, unfortunately, they had no idea; of chaos, on the other hand, they left behind a legacy of carnage that constitutes much more than just a bad memory for the broader Muslim ummah.

Nevertheless, despite the gravity of the charge laid against Sayyidina Ali and many of the Sahaba, and despite the suicidal implications of the Kharajite vision, he refused to excommunicate them from the fold of Islam.

Recounting the story from Imam Sarakhsi's *al-Mabsut*, Hashim Kamali, in his "Freedom of Expression in Islam", relates the following incident, "...we read in a report from Kathir b. Tamar al-Hadrami who said:

I entered the mosque of Kufa...where I met five men cursing the caliph Ali. One of them, dressed in a burnoose, said: 'I have made a covenant with God that I shall kill him.' I then took the man to Ali and reported to him what I heard. 'Bring him nearer,' said Ali, and added, 'Woe to you. Who are you?' 'I am Sawwar al-

Manquri,' replied the man. 'Let him go,' said the Caliph, to which al-Hadrami responded, 'Should I let him go even though he has made a covenant with God to kill you?' 'Shall I kill him even though he has not killed me?' replied Ali. 'He has cursed you,' said I. 'You should then curse him or leave him,' said Ali."

In the *Nail al-Awtar* of Imam Shawkani we find similar instances of tolerance towards them. Amongst the many incidents reported in the *Nail al-Awtar* are the following:

'Sayyidina Ali sent them (the Kharajites) a message stating: 'You are at liberty to live wherever you want. However, it is resolved between both of us that you will not shed the blood of people in the land, nor create disorder, nor tyrannise anyone. On the other hand, if you do resort to these crimes then I shall declare war against you.'

He is also reported as having said to them:

"If you do not create disorder then we shall not be the first to declare war against you."

In line with the attitude and standards set by Sayyidina Ali, Imam Shawkani observes:

"If any sect openly express their beliefs and convictions similar to that of the Kharajites, then they would not merit execution purely on that basis. Their execution would be justified if they grew in numbers, started to organise themselves, and posed a threat to the life and property of others."

Recounting Imam al-Khatibi's opinion he records:

"Imam Khatibi has observed that the Muslims are unanimous on the point that despite their deviation from the truth, the Kharajite sect would, nonetheless, be regarded as a sect of the Muslims, and that there should be no bar on intermarriages with them, nor on eating their slaughtered animals. Nor would they be declared as unbelievers so long as they adhere to the fundamental tenets of Islam."

The above approaches adequately reflect what we, of late, are forced to call "mainstream" Islam.

Nevertheless, in the year 41AH Sayyidina Ali fell victim to the murderous designs of a Kharaji called Abdurahman ibn Muljam al-Muradi. The murder was further inspired and instigated by his wife, Quttam bint as-Shajna, whose father and brother were killed in the Battle of Nahrawan. It is also reported that the said ibn Muljam, along with two other Kharajites, stood in front of the Ka'ba and swore

that they would rid the Ummah of the three - according to them - vilest figures known to Islam: Sayyidina Ali, Muawiyah, and Amr ibn al-`As.

These pious marauders, unfortunately, proceeded to establish themselves in three important Muslim centres. The fanatical Azariqa held the first two, namely Iraq and Southern Iran. The Najadat held the third, namely the Arabian Peninsula. The Azariqa, founded by Nafi` ibn al-Azraq al-Hanafi and the Najadat, founded by Najda ibn Amir al-Hanafi, were amongst the first and most influential offshoots of the original Muhakkima mentioned in the first part of this series. The modern day tendencies of certain Islamic "movements" and groupings - influenced by the spirit of Kharijism - to implode upon themselves and eventually fragment into myriads of belligerent sub-groups, are merely reminiscent of what eventually happened to the original movement called the Kharijīs.

Extremism and integrity can never co-exist in a single heart - let alone the heart of Islam. Any Islamic tendency, movement, or grouping, founded on other than the compassionate foundations of Islam will necessarily come to experience a state of spiritual entropy. But it is in the nature of "energy" to find work to do. And if that "energy" finds itself without a compassionate basis then chaos - particularly in its worst form of demented violence - is a natural consequence.

In the next article - and before we link this discussion to the contemporary Muslim world - we shall explore the principles and practices that informed some of the most important offshoots of the original Kharijīs.