

## Introduction [to Mubahisa-yi-Alamgiri]

"The Aurangzeb Debate" is the second major text to record the disputations which raged between Mahdawi and Sunni scholars during the Mughal period. These debate texts are very important sources that reveal how Mahdawi scholars of a particular age understood their faith, and how they expressed it in the potentially threatening context of inquisitions instigated by the scholars of the Mughal court. It could be argued that the tradition of disputations and debates started with Sayyid Muhammad Jaunpuri himself. It is recorded that he encountered his first systematic opposition after he announced his mission as the Mahdi at the town of Barhli Gujarat in the year 905H/1499 AD. Sayyid Muhammad wrote a letter to the Sultan in his own defence and to further explain his mission and delayed his departure from Barhli in order to receive a reply, while waiting, he received a contingent of scholars from Ahmadabad and Patan who came to pry him with questions. This may be said to be the first Mahdawi debate and it is recorded in the classic Mahdawi records of *Sirat Imam Mahdi Maw'ud* and *Shawahid al-Wilayat*. A second major debate took place when Sayyid Muhammad arrived in Farah (Afghanistan). The chief scholar of the court of Herat (which ruled Farah at that time) deputed some scholars for the purpose of questioning the Sayyid, with the implicit threat that failure to pass the inquisition would result in imprisonment and perhaps punishment. The contents of this debate were recorded in *Sirat*, as well as in the non-Mahdawi source, *Nijat al-Rashid* by Abd al-Qadir al-Badauni.

However, the formation of debate literature as a distinct genre came only after the death of Sayyid Muhammad himself and the growth of the Mahdawi community under his first generation of followers. The first of these texts, and by far the most substantial of them, is *Majalis-i-Khamsah*, "Five Debates in the Court of the Emperor Akbar" by Shaykh Mustafa Gujarati. This text set the precedent for all subsequent records in the genre of Mahdawi debates. Shaykh Mustafa displayed his brilliance as an orator and his keenness as a politician, as he answered the questions of the Sunni scholars and turned the Emperor himself against them. The arguments and examples put forth by Mustafa Gujarati in the records of these debates were repeated again and again by later scholars in later disputes. He argued that the followers of the Mahdi are like Sufis but qualitatively different from them and superior to them. He also argued that the followers of the Mahdi were the true moral leaders of the *Ahl-i-Sunnat o Jama'at* community. Each argument he presented was designed to prove that the Mahdawi community was not liable to punishment under the terms of the *shari'at*, and further that other Sufis and scholars who had not joined the Mahdawi community were hypocritical, corrupt or misled by their pride. In his argument, the true followers of any Prophet are always a minority, and their unwavering insistence on the truth always leads them to be persecuted and oppressed by others.

The debate of Shaykh Ibrahim that is recorded in this text, *Mubahisa-yi-Alamgiri*, is both concise and tranquil when compared with the debate that was recorded about one century earlier. Shaykh Mustafa's debates were in many sessions spread over the course of his eighteen month imprisonment at Akbar's

court. In contrast, Shaykh Ibrahim's debate lasted only one day. While Shaykh Mustafa was physically threatened with summary punishment on the spot, Shaykh Ibrahim was treated respectfully and came to the debate on his own power. While Shaykh Mustafa had to deal with over one-hundred antagonistic scholars and courtiers as well as the vacillating Emperor Akbar himself: Shaykh Ibrahim had only to face the judge, Qazi Abu Sa'id, who had been deputed by Aurangzeb to question the Mahdawi scholars and ascertain what their beliefs might be. But let this contrast not place Shaykh Ibrahim in a bad light! He well knew that in being called to a debate, his community's future in Ahmadnagar was in jeopardy and that if he did not impress the judge with his interpretation of Qur'an and Hadith sources, his community might become vulnerable to execution, imprisonment or exile. The background of each of these Mahdawi debates is the potential use of state violence against them, no matter how calm and tranquil the debater may appear.

Furthermore, this contrast between the long series of debates which raged in Akbar's court and the single debate ordered by Aurangzeb should not be understood as a judgment on the capabilities of the two protagonists, Mustafa Gujarati and Shaykh Ibrahim. Rather, the contrast shows the marked change in the social position and aspirations of the Mahdawi community in the hundred years which had lapsed between these two debates.

In the first instance, resistance to the Mahdawi movement was fierce. Although the movement's arch-opponent, Shaykh Ali Muttaqi had died (in 975 Hijri /1568 CE), one of his primary students was alive and actively opposing the Mahdawi community's growth in Gujarat. He is Miyan Muhammad ibn Tahir of Patan (also known as Nahrnwala) who was a hadith specialist. He continued his teacher's opposition to the Mahdawi community by contending that they disrespected the Prophet by disregarding or misinterpreting the Prophet's sayings about the coming of the Mahdi. So vociferously did he make this claim that he demanded a personal interview with the Emperor Akbar when he invaded Gujarat, and tried to steer the invading Emperor toward a full state persecution of the Mahdawi community. Miyan Muhammad ibn Tahir must have come into acute conflict with Shaykh Mustafa Gujarati himself, for both were resident at Patan; in addition the hadith scholar was from the Bohra community, and is known to have focused his efforts on trying to keep the Bohra community from joining the Mahdawi circles, while Shaykh Mustafa's own father had come from the Bohra community and joined the Mahdawi community<sup>1</sup>. In addition to resistance by a network of hadith scholars and Sufis in Gujarat, the Mahdawi community faced persecution by the chief scholar of the court in Delhi, Abdullah Sultanpuri, who was just as active in the Mughal court as he had been in the Suri court. He seemed to engage in inquisitions and persecutions in order to reinforce his own power at court, and attacked not only Mahdawi leaders but Sufi shaykhs as well. All these factors meant that the Emperor Akbar was

<sup>1</sup> In *Majalis-i Khamsa*, the court scholars were noted to have said, "The trouble that you Mahdawis have caused is confined to the town of Patan in Gujarat." This is a reference to the work of Muhammad ibn Tahir and his pressuring the Mughal governor, Mirza Aziz Khokha, to suppress Mahdawis by breaking up their da'irahs. In a military attack on one such da'irah, in 890. Hijri / 573 CE, Shaykh Mustafa Gujarati was imprisoned and his father was killed.

personally involved in the debates, and that accentuated their importance. The Mahdawi community at that time was in grave danger of punishment or exile. In response, the Mahdawi scholar's counter attack on the leaders of the Sunni community was absolute and unwavering. Before the Emperor, Shaykh Mustafa boldly claimed that anyone, even an Emperor, who denied that Sayyid Muhammad was the promised Mahdi was thereby an infidel<sup>2</sup>. He ridiculed the court scholars and questioned not only their morality, but even their masculinity<sup>3</sup>.

The situation surrounding the debate of Shaykh Ibrahim was hardly as heated and did not call for such absolute claims and belligerent rhetoric. The Emperor Aurangzeb called for the inquisition when he was staying in the region of Ahmadnagar. This province had, by that time, a long history of Mahdawi activity and a strong local community. In regions like Ahmadnagar, Mahdawis found a haven and had turned from trying to convert the whole of the Muslim community to their own doctrine and redirected their energies into building a stable local community. Thus they did not openly accuse those who rejected the claims of Sayyid Muhammad to be infidels, and they lived more or less at peace with their Sunni and Shi'ah neighbors. This distinct local history accounts for the civility of the debate recorded in *Mubahisah-yi-Alamgiri*. Although the judge asked pointed questions, he readily accepted Shaykh Ibrahim's answers without interrupting or contradicting him. The judge never accused the Mahdawi leader of calling other Muslims infidels, while the Shaykh never launched such a claim in his presence. The topic only came up once in the form of a rhetorical question, when Shaykh Ibrahim asked that, if Sayyid Muhammad were as trustworthy a person as the Prophet Mohammad, then wouldn't a person who reject Sayyid Muhammad's claims be just as bad as an infidel who rejected the claims of the Prophet himself? This single instance of *takfir* was not directed at any person in particular, nor at a specific class of people, as it had been in the case of the debates at Akbar's court.

The central issue in the debates ordered by Aurangzeb is not who was true Muslim, thereby proving that the opponent in the debate must be a complete hypocrite. Rather, Shaykh Ibrahim argued that the Mahdawis were simply one distinct group within the wide spectrum of the *Ahl-i-Sunnat o Jama'at* community; therefore they should not be subject to any persecution or punishment. In the end, the judge reportedly explained his findings to the Emperor in this way:

---

<sup>2</sup> However, he was very careful to note that he made this claim not on his own authority, but in accordance with the tradition ascribed to the Prophet, that he said "Whoever refuses to accept he Mahdi as his leader is surely an infidel." *Majalis-i Khamsa*, session five. This rhetoric of *takfir*, of declaring another Muslim to be an infidel, was really what drove the conflict between Mahdawi and Sunni scholars. Akbar noted that "It is possible that your claim that the Mahdi has come and gone might be correct. Hence, you are not liable to be executed simply for delivering this doctrine. You would have never landed in trouble and conflict if you had simply been steadfast in this belief without proselytizing and inviting others to accept it as true.... You hypocrites." *Majalis-i Khamsa*, session one.

<sup>3</sup> See Darryl MacLean, "Real Men and False Men in the court of Akbar." To be published in the proceedings of the Conference, *South Asian Muslims and the Greater Muslim World*, Duke University, 1995, sponsored the Rockefeller foundation. Publication forthcoming.

*The Mahdawis bear witness to oneness of Allah who sent the Prophet on a mission. They cherish the memory of all four of the Prophet's close companions, and believe that all four legal methods are validly based on the truth. They are certainly members of our Sunni community. They say that tile 'Mahdi of the end of time (Mehdi Akhir-u-zaman) is their leader who has come and gone.... .They are not liable to any Qur'anic punishment, nor to summary execution, nor to imprisonment or exile. I have found no cause for punishing them in any way*

This shows that by the time of this second debate, tensions had abated between the two formerly rival groups. The Sunnis on the one hand, though suspicious of Mahdawi doctrines, did not openly accuse them of infidelity, ignorance and rebellion as they had before. The Mahdawis on the other hand had learned to check their claims to absolute moral leadership of the whole Muslim *ummah*, in the interest of building up viable and vibrant regional communities in which to practice their religious convictions.

After noting the content of the debates and the social background which called them into being, one must look carefully at the genre of debate literature itself. These texts are not simply the records of a debate that happened; rather, recording them is a strategy for the community to protect itself in further debates in the future. Arguments and illustrations from early debate texts are reused in later debates and are refined for new audiences. By writing and reading these debate texts, scholars in the Mahdawi community prepared themselves to defend their community against subsequent accusations or potential persecution. In *Mubahisah-yi-Alamgiri*, the judge complained to Shaykh Ibrahim that the Shaykh always had the upper hand in debating, for he had studied the controversial points and had already memorized useful quotes, traditions and examples. Shaykh Ibrahim replied that debating was his job, and that he naturally studied in advance all the possible accusations and their appropriate rebuttals, as well as combing earlier scholarly works for points to support his argument. These debate texts are not only evidence of this scholarly preparation for community defense, but are also a primary tool to achieve such preparation. The fact that Mahdawis have been constantly challenged to debate and dispute, usually under the implicit or explicit threat of persecution, explains why this genre of debate literature features so prominently in the body of extant Mahdawi literature.

It is said that history is always written by the winner. Debate texts as a genre are even more complicated than historical texts. Debate texts are always written by those who portray themselves as the winner, whereas in any actual debate it may be very hard to decide who had actually won. It should not be surprising, then, that in both of these debate records, the Mahdawi scholar appear to score a clear victory. In the case of Shaykh Mustafa, he shames the court scholars into an awkward silence, while in the case of Shaykh Ibrahim, he wins from the inquisition judge the admission that Mahd'awis are stalwart members of the *Ahl-i Sunat o Jama'at* community.

Debate texts as a genre are also always written in the form of a dialogue,

with each side giving its question, answer and counter-question in the form of an argument. In a debate, answers have to not only be right, but they have to be quick and sharp as well. This gives the debate text an immediacy and drama which a scholarly tract lacks. To highlight this feature, *Mubahisah-yi Alamgiri* has been translated with all the grammatical framework of a dialogue, including quotation marks which the original Persian does not feature. However, this style of writing the debate in the form of a dialogue should not mislead the reader into assuming that the debate text records the dialogue as it actually happened, word for word. Rather, the dialogue was most likely reconstructed by the writer from memory, after the actual event had already passed. In the case of *Majalis-i Khamsah*, Mustafa Gujarati was a prisoner in chains during the course of the debates, and was most likely physically unable to write the content of his debates during or immediately after the event. He most likely composed the debate records after his release from the court, while preparing to travel back to Gujarat. Yet at least in the case of *Majalis-i Khamsah*, the writer of the debate text was also the primary debater, and this accounts for the vividness of his account and the dramatic tone of his record.

The case of composition of *Mubahisah-yi Alamgiri* is even more complicated. The writer of the text, Abu al-Qasim, is not one of the primary debaters. Furthermore, the writer may not have been directly present during the debates as a witness to what was actually said. Abu al-Qasim notes that he accompanied Shaykh Ibrahim along with other Mahdawi leaders to the official court building in the town of Ahmadnagar; however, he then says that only Shaykh Ibrahim and Shaykh A'zam entered into the judge's private chamber where the debate ensued. It may be possible that the other Mahdawi leaders (including the writer) could have overheard the debate inside, but most likely they learned of the content of the debate after the actual event as Shaykh Ibrahim recreated the dialogue verbally for his companions who had not been present<sup>4</sup>. This should not cause the reader to dismiss this debate text as inauthentic, for all debate texts depict only one side of the argument in an idealized manner. Rather the reader should simply bear in mind that the distance between the writer and the events that he "records" accounts for lack of vivid conflict in the record itself. Shaykh Ibrahim is portrayed as giving long lectures in place of an answer for each question. Whereas in reality he was most likely interrupted and challenged more frequently. These elements of dialogue have been erased from the form of the debate which was finally recorded and passed down within the Mahdawi community.

The translator has tried to render the text of this debate in clear, modern English from the Persian text of the original that had been published by the Markazi Anjuman-e-Mahdavia in Chanchalguda, Hyderabad in 1994. The Persian text had been published face to face with an Urdu translation; however, this English translation makes no reference to the Urdu and derives directly from the Persian

---

<sup>4</sup> This hypothesis is substantiated by the fact that the writer, Abu al-Qasim reports the discussion of the judge with the Emperor Aurangzeb as a verbal dialogue, whereas he could not have possibly overheard this dialogue that happened in the Emperor's court after the Mahdawi leaders had been released to return to their lodging.

original. If there is discrepancy between the previously published Urdu translation and this English translation, that is due simply the natural diversity between the perception of different translators and different target languages. For fluency and easy readability, full effort was made to translate even technical religious and juridical terms into English; where necessary for clarification, the original terms in Persian or Arabic have been left in the text in brackets. Where the translation of such terms might have doctrinal ramifications, these have been discussed in footnotes. As for the text of the earlier debate, *Majalis-i Khamsah*, it has received the prior attention of scholars. The Idarah-yi-Shamsiyyah has published an English translation in 1997, rendered by Syed Ziaullah as "Five Sessions of the Emperor Akbar's Court." In addition, Dr. Darryl MacLean (of Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada) has prepared a scholarly translation based on a detailed comparison of different lithograph and manuscript version of this same text. It is hoped that he will publish this full translation as part of his monograph on the life work of Shaykh Mustafa Gujarati, which is currently in progress.

- Scott A. Kugle