The Muslim WORLD

Introduction: *The Muslim World*: special issue on Ibāḍī Islam

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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

Dear Readers,

In this special issue of *The Muslim World*, editor Revd. Douglas Leonard[1] has invited leading scholars in the field of Ibāḍī studies to present articles introducing this unique, little known and often misunderstood branch of Islam. Ibāḍīs today make up less than one percent of the world's Muslim population, explaining why this branch of Islam which began in the decades after the *Hijra* during the first *fitna* is not well known or understood. Ibāḍīs can be found today in the Sultanate of Oman where we are the majority of the population. Small communities of Ibāḍīs also live in Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Zanzibar and along the East African Coast.

Douglas and I have discussed the need for an introduction to Ibāḍī studies in the English language. Over the past decade there has been a growing interest in Ibāḍism among scholars and students from Western nations, and yet there is no one place where students can go for a comprehensive introduction to the school. We hope that this volume accomplishes three things: first, that it represents a modest beginning to the project of providing a much-needed introduction to Ibāḍī studies in the English language. Secondly, that it begins to correct some of the common misunderstandings about the school which have persisted within both mainstream Islamic scholarship and some Western scholarship, and third that it serves to pique the interest of a new generation of students to the study of Ibāḍism.

Ibāḍism as it is practiced today in Oman seeks unity within the ummah and peaceful coexistence with non-Muslim religions. We seek the pure and righteous practice of Islam, and in that sense we are not unlike any of the branches or schools of Islam. In Oman Sunnis, Shias and Ibāḍis coexist in peace and pray together in the same mosques. Ibāḍism provides the theological and legal foundation for the state protection of the freedom

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of belief, worship, and observance of one's own religious law for adherents from all schools of Islam and all non-Muslim religions.

Perhaps the greatest misunderstanding of the Ibāḍīs that has persisted in much scholarship is that they are simplistically categorized as Muhakkima, later known as Khawārij, part of the separatist movement that formed during the Battle of Siffin (36/656), and are therefore associated with the extremism of that movement within early Islam. Ibāḍism does indeed have its historical origins in the Khawārij as one group among several subgroups of Muhakkima who separated from Ali b. Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed when he agreed to arbitration with Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan, the governor of the region of Syria and potential contender for the Khalifate after Uthman's assassination.

Many Muslims in the first century after the Prophet's death believed that Uthman had diverted from the path of his predecessors in his last six years of reign, abusing the authority of his position, lacking accountability to the ummah, misappropriating the zakat, committing nepotism and showing undue deference to and influence by the Umayyads. The purity and therefore the very survival of Islam was at stake for the early community of Muslims who opposed the perceived corruptions under Uthman's Khalifate. When Ali b. Abi Talib had agreed to negotiate with Muawiya, at the Battle of Siffin, the Khawārij believed that he had relinquished his right to the Khalifate. They found themselves in a position of not being able to join with either Muawiya, as he was associated with the oppressive rule of the Umayyads, or Ali. The Muslims who separated (Khawārij), did so to protect and preserve the purity of Islam.

According to numerous early letters and texts of the Khawārij, after the secession of the Khawārij from Ali and Muawiya, a disagreement formed between the sub-groups of the Khawārij about how to rid Islam of corruption, namely how to oppose Muslims who had either become unrighteous or were dangerously associated with oppressive rulers. Nearly all of the sub-groups of the Khawārij took an extreme view, defined corrupt Muslims as unbelievers and so applied laws demanding repentance or execution. This is the quality that is most remembered about the Khawārij in major religious circles today. The Ibāḍī sect does not inherit any of these defining ideological features. It does however originate from one of the leaders of a Khawārij sub-group, Abu Bilal Mirdas ibn Udayyah (died in 681); He opposed this extremist approach. Abu Bilal agreed that righteous Muslims must resist corruption, but he did not believe that he or his followers had the permission of Allah to kill or to take other Muslims as captives. The early Ibāḍis adopted the ideology of Abu Bilal and opposed extremism even as they sought to remain committed to a form of Islam purified of all corruption, a straight path. In fact, the Ibāḍis called themselves *ahl al istiqama*, 'the people of straightness', but were soon named for an early scholar of the school in Basra, Abdullah ibn Ibāḍ. Ibāḍis sought to live peacefully with those whom they disagreed. In this early distinction between the Ibāḍis and the Khawārij, we can begin to see the roots of peaceful inter-Islamic and inter-religious coexistence that are practiced in Oman to this day. His Excellency, Sheikh Ahmed Al Khalili, the Grand Mufti of Oman said, "We have never presumed to exclude anyone from the

community of Muslims."[2] One corrective that we hope this special issue will contribute, is a more complex understanding of the way in which the Ibāḍis evolved out of the Khawārij movement. It needs to be understood that the association of the Ibāḍīs with the Khawārij is only historical and incidental. The exclusionary principles that are associated with the Khawārij were never adopted by the Ibāḍis.

In this volume, Douglas Leonard has invited leading scholars of Ibāḍī studies to contribute articles that survey and exemplify key areas of contemporary Ibāḍī studies: theology, history, Qur'anic exegesis, jurisprudence, relation to modernity, and approaches to peaceful inter-religious coexistence.

The volume begins appropriately with an examination of Ibāḍī identity. The article by Professor John C. Wilkinson, a leading scholar of Ibāḍism from Oxford University, seeks to answer the question, "what does it mean to be an Ibāḍī?" This is followed by Professor Adam Gaiser's article exploring Medieval Ibāḍī identity in relation to the succession of a teacher line. Professor İsmail Albayrak and Sulayman al-Shueili discuss the Ibāḍī approach to Qur'anic exegesis including Qur'anic revelation, compilation, abrogation and an area of much interest to western scholars, the historical context in which particular passages were revealed. Dr. Abdulrahman Al Salimi's article presents the early formation of Ibāḍī theology as it developed in Basra (present day Iraq) where the school began. Professor Ersilia Francesca in her article discusses the early emergence of Ibāḍī jurisprudence and law and presents the school's legal method and sources. Professor Yohei Kondo from the University of Tokyo suggests a sociological definition for group cohesion and examines the early Ibāḍī concepts of association and dissassociation. Professor Amal Ghazal reviews the *fatawa* (religious opinion) of Ibāḍī jurists to in relation to the modernization taking place on the Island of Zanzibar, a colony of Oman, in the 19th and 20th centuries. Professor Valerie Hoffman's article provides another important corrective, distinguishing Ibāḍism from Wahhābism. Professor Hoffman also provides a survey of modern Ibāḍī practice and theology reviewing the doctrines of predestination, the metaphorical interpretation of anthropomorphic references to God in the Qur'an, the centrality of reason in the Ibāḍī school and the Ibāḍī relationship to the Mu'tazila theology, God's *tawhid* or unity, the essence and attributes of God and a discussion of Ibāḍī poetry. The issue closes with Douglas Leonard's article, *The Origins and Contemporary Approaches to Intra-Islamic and Inter-religious Coexistence and Dialogue in Oman*. Leonard offers a presentation and thoughtful analysis of the various roots and reasons for religious pluralism found in Oman and asks if these state policies are transferable to other Muslim-majority contexts.

In the 105 years since the inception of *The Muslim World*, I understand that this is the first issue dedicated to the topic of Ibāḍism. We thank and congratuate each of the scholars who contributed to this excellent volume.

[2] His Eminence Shaykh Ahmad ibn Hamad al-Khalili, Grand Mufti of the Sultanate of Oman, The Overwhelming Truth: A Discussion of Some Key Concepts in Islamic Theology, Oman: Ministry of Awqaf & Religious Affairs 2002, p. 9.