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On the Nature of the Khawârij Ethics (I)

Toshio Kuroda

The Khawârij, members of the first religious opposition party in Islam, were famous for their strong adherence to the noble examples (al-muthul-l'ulyâ) of Muhammad and the two first right caliphs. On the one hand, they can be cited for their ignorance of the rapid development and structural change of the Islamic community which followed immediately after its sudden expansion. But, on the other hand, it is also obvious that in the course of time the religious quality of the rulers and their reign had been steadily degenerating. Confronted with this kind of situation the Khawârij could not help but resist the official rulers in the most vehement way.

In the first part of this article, the aim of which is to clarify the fundamental structure of the Khawârij ethics, we analyse the particular Khawârij concept of holy war (jihâd) since for them it is one of the most important factors in separating good from evil. The result of this analysis shows clearly that they valued praxis (fi'l) higher than theory (ra'y), although they did pay due esteem to the importance of correct principles. For such bedouin-type religious idealists as the Khawârij, theory without praxis, or religious belief without performance of holy war, was of no value at all, and we illustrate this in detail with some quotations from their own poetry and that of the Jâhiliyya period. In this way we endeavor to clarify the basic structure of Khawârij ethics.

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