

William F. Tucker. *Mahdis and Millenarians: Shi'ite Extremists in Early Muslim Iraq*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xxv + 176 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-88384-9.

Reviewed by Najam Haider (Georgetown University)

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MAHDIS AND
MILLENARIANS



WILLIAM F. TUCKER

The Quest for a Theologically Coherent History of Sectarianism

In *Mahdis and Millenarians*, William F. Tucker examines the origins and theological doctrines of four early sectarian groups connected to the southern Iraqi city of Kūfa during the Umayyad caliphate (661-750). He characterizes these sects as “millenarian,” a term he applies to groups “expecting total, imminent, and collective salvation *in this world*” (p. xvii). Fleshing out this definition, he notes that members of such movements expect “a complete transformation” of society under the leadership of a “Mahdī” figure or “savior” (p. 121). The upheaval is imminent with a troubled and oppressive society on the cusp of a transformation into a just and equitable earthly “paradise.” These groups are also marked by a strong collective identity with sharp lines drawn between believers (in a state of grace) and outsiders (subject to violence without consequence). Tucker attributes a number of additional characteristics to these groups, including antinomian proclivities, allegorical interpretations of the Qur’ān, and the union of disempowered cultural and ethnic groups under a single religious banner.

In his introduction, Tucker offers a summary of early Umayyad history that highlights Kūfan political and religious opposition that rested on regional, economic, and ethnic grievances. He places particular emphasis on the end of territorial expansion that resulted in both tribal stratification and *mawālī* (non-Arab clients) discontent. According to Tucker, these disgruntled elements became the primary constituents of subsequent sectarian movements.

In chapter 1, Tucker discusses two of the earliest sectarian groups, the Saba’iyya and the Kaysaniyya. The latter, associated with ‘Abd Allāh b. Saba’, are identified as the pioneers of such important theological doctrines as occultation (i.e., the denial of ‘Alī’s death) and return (i.e., the return of a messianic figure heralding the end of the world). The former, linked to al-Mukhtār b. Abī ‘Ubayd al-Thaqafī and associated with a belief in the imāmate of Muhammad b. al-Hanafīyya, were the first to articulate *badā’*, or the belief that “through the intervention of special circumstances, God changes his will” (p. 27); develop a clear theory of the Mahdī (savior); emphasize the importance of *nass* or the designation of an Imām by his predecessor and claim prophecy for the individual leaders of the group.

Chapters 2 through 5 focus on four important sectarian groups based in Kufa: the Bayāniyya, Mughiriyya, Mansūriyya, and Janāhiyya. The structure of these chapters is uniform, beginning with historical origins and proceeding to group demographics and theology. Along the way, Tucker emphasizes similarities with and possible links to non-Islamic millenary movements, including (among others) the Taborites of fifteenth-century Bohemia, the Hussites of sixteenth-century Germany, and cults in 1940s Fiji. Each chapter closes with a discussion of those doctrines adopted by later (and often more moderate) Shi’i groups. The Bayāniyya, for example, pioneered symbolic Qur’ānic exegesis (*ta’wīl*) and believed that Imāms were endowed “a divine particle,” while the Mughiriyya adhered to a form of religious elitism and

proposed radical allegorical interpretations of the Qur'ān (p. 49). The Mansūriyya advocated a continuation of prophecy and endorsed both "terrorism" and antinomian Qur'ānic interpretations (p. 84). Finally, the Janāhiyya were linked to a belief in the transmigration of souls.

In chapter 6, Tucker posits some broad conclusions about the intellectual origins and long-term contributions of these four sects. He is especially concerned with highlighting the sources of theological doctrines, placing particular emphasis on the influence of non-Islamic intellectual currents in the larger political and social milieu of early Kūfa. Specifically, he notes that "the ideology of the four groups was ... a synthesis of non-Islamic and Islamic ideas" that served to attract the non-Arab *mawālīs* that would come to constitute their demographic base (p. 109). The chapter ends with a summary of the basic characteristics of Muslim millenary movements. Finally, Tucker notes that the groups in question arose from an "unsettled political and psychological atmosphere" in a region of "potentially conflicting cultures," conditions he deems vital to the growth of millenary ideas (pp. 126-127).

The central contribution of *Mahdis and Millenarians* lies in its careful and comprehensive survey of the historical and heresiographical sources. Tucker works through this difficult material to provide a plausible narrative for the emergence of religio-political opposition to the Umayyads. Tucker also presents a valuable and oft-neglected comparative dimension, drawing links between similar movements in a variety of disparate historical and geographical contexts.

Questions arise, however, when Tucker ascribes the

origins of theological beliefs to specific groups. Such connections are based almost exclusively on heresiographical texts that often treat sectarian groups as theologically coherent entities. Moreover, these works are prone to theological anachronisms, offering a polemical narrative designed to explain subsequent developments. In most instances, Tucker's theological source criticism is limited to ruling out blatantly polemical claims while accepting more "believable" assertions as accurate. As a whole, this analysis must be approached with caution, as it is far more likely that sectarian groups were drawing on a common pool of theological ideas in circulation at the time. Thus, the claim that the four groups contributed theological ideas that were integrated into more moderate Shī'i groups, while nominally plausible, is both tentative and highly suspect.

The book ends with a short concluding chapter that analyzes the 1979 Iranian revolution as a modern manifestation of millenarianism. The stated purpose here is to "point out the role of millenarian groups or tendencies present in the Muslim world today" (p. 134). Unfortunately, Tucker's discussion lacks depth, reducing the complex and layered causes of the Iranian revolution and subsequent state to a staple of millenary characteristics including a sense of victimhood, messianic proclivities, and a veneration of lineage. This essentializing of the revolution as a product of theological currents within Shī'ism overlooks the vast corpus of modern scholarship on Iran in the 1970s and 1980s that has clearly demonstrated the centrality of Marxist and Third World discourse to the revolutionary process. This is an unfortunate conclusion to a book that otherwise contributes significantly to our understanding of the nuance of sectarianism in the medieval Muslim world.

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