

The Politics of Orthodoxy: Illustrations from a Case of *Takfir* in a South Indian Muslim Community

The field of Islamic Studies, according to **Brian Didier**, head of the history department at Boston's prestigious Winsor School, lags behind the academic study of Christianity in at least one significant domain: there is too much attention to the "what", and not enough to the "how", in discussions of Islam and social phenomena. Research on heresy in Islam has tended to obscure how *takfir* – a Muslim individual or group being declared an unbeliever by other Muslims – as an instrument has been employed in a variety of ways across geography and time. Heresy is a charged but complex topic with attendant consequences that differ based on the context of specific regimes of religious authority.

In a marathon presentation encompassing ideas that will also be included in the upcoming edited volume *Accusations of Unbelief in Islam: A Diachronic Perspective on Takfir* (Leiden: Brill), Didier brought to the audience his effort at a corrective, an exploration of the inner dynamics of a Lakshadweep Island community of about 10,000 off the coast of Kerala. South Indian Islam, with some roots in Omani and Yemeni coastal communities, is relatively understudied, and the Lakshadweep, or Laccadive, Islands, have particularly been cut off for outsiders based on Indian government regulations around who can visit. A community that faces a collective threat around water supplies and global warming, its vulnerability to social disruption was also highlighted by the aftermath of an intra-religious conflict that split families and marriages, and separated mosque congregations.

This dispute centered on the perceived faults of a Sufi group, the *Shamsiyya*, which is first documented in the sixties. While self-identified adherents of Wahhabism are a very recent arrival on the scene, the majority of the islanders, including all parties in the *Shamsiyya*-cleric struggle described here, identify as Sunni Muslims and as Sufis, embracing intercessionary practices. One sticking-point was use by some of the new sect's members of sun-staring rituals as an idolatrous practice, which had incited some contention in the seventies, but became a flashpoint ostensibly only after a controversial public debate between local non-*Shamsiyya* and *Shamsiyya* ulema (scholars, clerics) with ties to Kerala. This led to the issuance of a condemnatory fatwa in 1986. Ironically one contention listed was that the *Shamsiyya* themselves had declared the other *ulema* to be kafirs.

Didier, who obtained his doctorate at Cambridge University, argued that the "repertoire of contention" is more heterogenous than media accounts of heresy might indicate, and includes various turns of behavior such as accommodation, persuasion, private admonishment, public debate, vilification, ridicule, formalization of a shari'a protection committee, clerical outsourcing, formal condemnation through *takfir*, civil courts litigation, coercive or murderous violence, and even accusations of pedophilia. Through this multi-faceted process, the *Shamsiyya* became "heretics" over the course of decades, but not in fact because their practices had changed. Rather, Didier's research points to how declarations of heresy tend to most directly lead to an expansion of ecclesiastical authority, an authority that has been increasingly politicized even under the auspices of the nation-state. This has implications for understanding the vulnerability of both those who mark themselves as different as well as those who are called to become guardians of norms and traditions under novel threats to the *status quo*. Consideration of the history of a specific instance of conflict and attention to people's stories and not just official documentation, as with Didier's work, is indispensable for understanding contemporary

tensions within Pakistan and Afghanistan around religious orthodoxy, and to expanding the literature on religious conflict in South Asia beyond Hindu-Muslim relations and the complicity of states in promoting social violence.

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