

HAJJI BEKTASH VALI AND THE BEKTASHIS

D. Isfahanianfar

The doctrine of the Bektāshī Order of Dervishes was established in the eighth/fourteenth century, and spread a great deal during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The sect derives its name from Ḥājji Bektāsh Valī, the founder of the Order. He was originally from Nīshābūr, Khurāsān, but early in the eighth/fourteenth century he migrated to Anatolia.¹ He first settled in Sīvās and then went to Kirshehir where he found some disciples. The sect owes its quick spread to its association with other sects such as Bābāʾīs and Ḥaydarīs, and especially the Ḥurūfīs.² The development of the sect was also due to the political and social conditions in Anatolia and the Balkans, especially in Albania, where Bektāshī doctrines rapidly spread; there were even a few disciples in Egypt and Iraq too. As a result of the fact that this sect maintained an attitude of respect towards other great religions of the world, and also owing to the fact that it appreciated man as a human being, its doctrine was effective in some Christian communities as well.³

The Bektāshīs are great admirers of the Imam ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and his sons Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. The twelve Imams of the Ithnā’ ‘Asharī Shī’ah, who are the descendants of ‘Alī, also have an honour-able position in this sect.

According to the Bektāshī tradition, any person who accepts their beliefs is accepted as a true Bektāshī; such a person has then no need of anything except goodness, virtue and love of God. These true Bektāshīs are considered as brethren, and they are called Dervishes after they have taken part in the Bektāshī ceremonies. These Dervishes must be servants of humanity and symbols of generosity. Those who are married at the time of joining the sect keep their wives and homes. But single people who want to be counted as Dervishes are not allowed to marry.

The single Dervishes live in a *Tak̄yeh* or *Dargāh* (monastery). This monastic way of living was derived from Christianity and had its influence on

¹ Shams al-dīn Simi, *Qāmūs al-i’lām* (Istanbul, 1889), II, 1332.

² Saʿīd Nafīsī, *Taʾrīkh i nazm ū natr dar Irān* (Tehran, 1344), II, 765.

³ Ibrahim Agah, Mezhepler, *Ahlak ve Islam Felsefesi* . . . (Ankara, 1967), S. 65,

the Bektāshīs' customs, but later it was abolished altogether.⁴

The Dervishes' leaders, are called Bābās ("Fathers") and generally the oldest of them has the privilege of having this title. If there are several Bābās, one of them is chosen to be called "Grandfather" (*Dede*) and sometimes even a "Great-Grandfather" is elected. The position of the "Great-Grandfather" (and in his absence that of the "Grandfather") is of great importance, and he is considered as the Spiritual Head of the sect.

There are three classes of Disciples: (1) totally committed; (2) false ones; (3) apostates. The totally committed disciples are those who have not the least doubt about the competence and authority of the "Grandfather" and have accepted the Order unconditionally. The false disciples are those who have declared their attachment to the spiritual director, but their attachment is superficial and not based on esoteric truths. The apostates are those who have doubted the deeds and behaviours of the "Grandfather" and have rejected him.⁵

The Bektāshī Ceremonies. For the Bektāshīs the first ten days of Muḥarram (the first month of the Islamic lunar year) are fast days. There are services and prayers peculiar to these days which are called Niyāz. These services are held in mosques. The Bektāshīs do not have any objection to fasting in Ramḍān, and believe that all religious services are useful for the salvation of human beings. They love and respect everybody who believes in a system of morals, irrespective of his religion.

The first day of Shawwāl (tenth month of the Islamic lunar year) is the Bektāshīs' Holy Feast. The first ten days of Dhu'l-Ḥijjah (twelfth month), the first eleven days of Muḥarram, and Naw-Rūz are considered holy as well.⁶

Every faithful and true Bektāshī considers any young women in his neighbourhood as his sisters and any old woman as his mother. Women too have similar feeling towards men in their neighbourhood. Bektāshīs believe that the essence of their order is derived from the light of the Prophet. From their point of view, the "Grandfather" who is the spiritual head of the sect is one who has given up the transient joys of this life and has attained eternal joy and happiness, and in the end he has been granted the blessing of God. That is why it is obligatory for every Bektāshī to maintain a great respect

⁴ Islam *Ansiklopedisi*, cilt 2, S. 451.

⁵ Ibrahim Agah, op. cit., S. 66.

⁶ John Kingsley Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*, London, 1937.

towards the “Grandfather”.

The members of the sect cut their hair short and in this they obey a certain *Āyah* (verse) of the Qur’ān. They should ask the great men of the Order, preferably the *Ahl-i Dhikr*, to help them in solving the problems which may confront them. A basic principle of their beliefs is *Mujāhidah*, that is, to endeavour to be far from all that is unclean in the everyday affairs of life; in this they support themselves by another *Āyah* from the Qur’ān. To serve the Order, to fear God and to be hopeful are other important virtues to be possessed by a disciple. Love, enthusiasm, sincerity and freedom from want are important to them and there are a series of deeds and qualities such as politeness, fear of God, abstinence, patience, thankfulness, modesty, generosity, knowledge, enduring want and poverty, gnosis and self-knowledge, to mention but a few, which are cherished by Bektāshīs. They believe that he who knows his own self knows God. They believe in moral standards as well: humility; not finding fault with others; meekness, optimism, a love of human society, and faithfulness are among the moral laws in the sect.

The sect has been influenced by other sects and religions such as the Bāṭinīs⁷ and the Ḥurūfīs. There are differences of opinion between various branches of the sect itself.⁸

Sultān Maḥmūd II (1808-1839) abolished the janissary (Yeni Cheri) army in 1826 because of the widespread incidence of Bektāshī beliefs among the members of the army. The sect was proscribed by the said Sultān and consequently its beliefs were propagated secretly during this era. But the sect operated openly again during the reign of Sultān ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (1861-1874). In the early years of the Turkish Republic, the Bektāshīs activities were banned together with those of other Sufi sects.

The tomb of Ḥājī Bektāsh Vail in Kirshehir, Turkey, is now a shrine for the followers of this sect, and people consider the Bektāshīs as congenial companions. Turkish literature has been affected by their ideas and beliefs,

⁷ Bāṭinīs are the people who believe that there are inward and outward aspects of everything such as the Qur’an and the Traditions. They liken the outward to a shell and compare the inward with a kernel (Dr. Reza Khosrow Shahi, *The Causes of Appearance of Islamic Religions and Sects* [Tehran, 1341], p. 112).

⁸ Ibrahim Agah, op. cit., S. 67.

and such poets as ‘Atīqī Shīrvānī was one of the Bektāshī qalandars and wrote odes both in Turkish and Persian.⁹

Today, there are Bektāshīs in Albania and in Egypt also, where they are said to live in a big Takyeh in an area called Moqattam neat Cairo.¹⁰

⁹ Saʿīd Nafīsī, op. cit., I, 522.

¹⁰ Mossaheb, *Dāʾirat al-Maʾārif Fārsī* (Tehran, 1350), I, 436.