The SAGE Encyclopedia of the SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

Editors

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Western Sydney University

Anthony J. Blasi
Tennessee State University (Retired)
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Highly Influential Books

*Economy and Society*, by Max Weber
*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, by Émile Durkheim
*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, by Max Weber

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He reported that they told him Mother Mary was an extra-terrestrial sent to Earth pregnant with the baby Jesus.

Where contactees differed was in the nature of the claimed communication with the aliens. Adamski and others reported that their contacts took place as in-person, face-to-face meetings with the aliens. Others claimed to be able to channel extra-terrestrial entities to speak through their bodies or otherwise engage in telepathic communication with them. Still others claimed to be the present incarnations of beings that had lived previous lives on other planets.

Modern UFO cults developed the themes of the contactee movement into organized religious forms. For example, London taxi driver George King claimed to have received a telepathic message from extra-terrestrials in 1954. He eventually established regular mental contact with a Venusian named Aetherius, which, according to King, led to an in-person meeting with Jesus on a hilltop in Devonshire. King founded the Aetherius Society as a religious organization in the mid-1950s. The theology of the Aetherius Society merges concepts from Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Yoga with beliefs about benevolent aliens. Although King died in 1997, the Society remains in operation, with its American headquarters in Los Angeles.

Also currently active is Unarius, whose members believe that they have led previous lives on other planets and sometimes as key figures in Earth’s history. Cofounder Ruth Norman (1900–1993) believed herself to be the reincarnation of Mary of Bethany, Socrates, Peter the Great, Charlemagne, Quetzalcoatl, and a host of alien beings. Her husband Ernest was the reincarnated Jesus among others. The group managed to survive the death of its founders with its headquarters in El Cajon, CA. The Raëlian Movement was founded by French sports car journalist Claude Vorilhon (1946–), who claimed to have met an alien near a volcanic crater in France, where Vorilhon learned that Buddha, Jesus, Muhammed, and other key religious figures were alien emissaries.

UFO cults have shown a tendency toward prophecy. The classic social psychological study When Prophecy Fails focuses upon the failed prophecies of a Chicago-based UFO cult in the 1950s. Unarius survived a failed prophecy that the space brothers would land 33 gigantic starships on a group-owned property outside El Cajon. In March of 1997, Marshal Applewhite and 38 members of the UFO cult he founded, Heaven’s Gate, committed mass suicide in Rancho Santa Fe, CA. Applewhite claimed to be an extra-terrestrial being that had once taken the form of Jesus Christ. The group believed that the passing of the Hale-Bopp comet signified that it was time for them to leave their Earthly bodies and ascend to the Next Level to board a spaceship traveling in the comet’s wake.

The contactee movement began to wane in the late 1960s and has been eclipsed in popularity by tales of abductions by evil or amoral, inhuman Greys. It remains to be seen whether or not UFO abduction tales will prove as fertile a spawning ground for new religions as the contactee movement of the 1950s.

Christopher David Bader

See also New Age Movement; Paranormal; Prophecy; Raëlians; Theosophy

Further Readings


Ulama (Muslim clerics, religious experts, and academics) are generally defined as those who have extensive knowledge of Islam. The Arabic word ulama means “people who are knowledgeable,” and this is the plural form of the word lim. Although ulama can also be understood in a general way to mean researchers or scientists, the
most common usage refers to religious scholars in Islam. Therefore, this entry will explain the importance of the term ulama in Islam and then discuss the diverse roles of the ulama as religious scholars in a social context. Because of the changing role of the ulama in society, it is important to understand this term in the context of the sociology of religion.

The Ulama in the Qur’an and Hadith

In the Qur’an, the word lim (a knowledgeable person) and its derivatives are mentioned 823 times. This number does not include related words like al-‘aql (knowledge), al-fikr (intellect), and ulil al-bāb (intellectual people). From the repeated use of lim, ulama, and other related words in the Qur’an, we can see clear evidence that the concept of the ulama as holders of knowledge is an important theme in Islamic studies.

The Qur’an is the Muslim holy book, which is the main source of Islamic knowledge. The hadith are the narrations that contain the recorded words of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, as the secondary source of Islamic knowledge. Both of these sources clearly state the pivotal role and significant position of the ulama in the Muslim community. One verse in the Qur’an (Fāthir: 28) reveals the closeness between the ulama and Almighty God. The ulama are highly educated in the science and practice of religion, and so the ulama are among the closest people to God, and they will be rewarded in this world and the afterlife. In the Hadith (narrations), the ulama are also mentioned as having a special position. For example, one hadith narrated by At-Tirmidzi says, “The scholars (ulama) are the heirs of the prophets. The prophets have not left gold or silver coins as a legacy, but knowledge (‘ilm). Whoever seizes it has taken a bountiful share.” So the ulama are clearly mentioned both in the Qur’an and the Hadith as having a noble position among Muslims.

The Ulama in Islamic History

The ulama are knowledgeable in various Islamic sciences, ranging from the Qur’an, Hadith, Islamic jurisprudence, theology, and Sufism, and they also have faith in Allah as well as a fear of Allah. These are the true examples of the ulama from an Islamic perspective, and they are called al-ulama al-khair (the true ulama). However, there are other people who also have deep knowledge of Islamic teachings, but they do not put that knowledge into practice. In fact, they utilize the status of ulama for their own personal benefit and interests, and so they are called al-ulama al-su’u (the false ulama).

In Islam, there are two terms used for two separate groups of the ulama, namely, al-ulamaal-salaf al-shālih (the ulama who are the righteous predecessors) and al-ulama al-khalaf (the ulama who are the successors). Al-ulama al-salaf al-shālih were the first three generations of the early Muslims. They were the generations of the Sahabah (the Companions of the Prophet), the Tābi’in (the Followers), and the Tābi’utTābi’in (the Generation after the Followers). The terminology “al-ulama al-salaf al-shālih” is sourced from the Hadith narrated by Al-Bukhari and Muslim, where the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, says, “The best people are my generation (Sahabah), then the next generation (Tābi’in), then the next generation (Tābi’utTābi’in).”

The distinguished position of al-ulama al-salaf al-shālih has been preserved in Islamic history. They were the first generation of people who accepted Islam and maintained the purity of Islam, as shown in the Qur’an (At-Tawbah: 100): And the first forerunners [in the faith] among the Mubajirūn and the Anshār and those who followed them with good conduct—Allah is pleased with them and they are pleased with Him, and He has prepared for them gardens beneath which rivers flow, wherein they will abide forever. That is the great attainment.

The later generations of the ulama are known as the al-ulama al-khalaf, which refers to all of the ulama who came after the first three generations of scholars in Islamic history. The al-ulama al-khalaf are distinctive when compared to the salaf scholars because they are often more flexible in interpreting Islamic texts. This is because the numerous situations that developed after the third generation had passed away might have required more ijtihad (independent reasoning). In contrast, al-ulama al-salaf al-shālih tended to be very cautious and strict when interpreting Islamic texts.
Authority of the Ulama

The ulama have social charisma and legitimacy as they are knowledgeable and pious Muslims, and people consulted with them after the death of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him. The ulama have a clear religious authority that has been established for a long time. As Marc Gaborieau noted, the religious authority of the ulama is understood as the right to impose religious rules based on what is associated with the will of God. He further mentioned that there are different methods by which religious authority can be obtained by the ulama or Sufi sheikh. The first is through the exoteric (zahiri) pathway, and the second is the esoteric (bathini). The first method requires studying Islamic sciences at Islamic educational institutions to become an Islamic cleric. The people who become scholars in this way must make a great personal effort, and they are accepted as the ulama of Islamic laws. In the second method, Allah reveals knowledge directly from Himself to a chosen person by way of kashf (unveiling) or ilham (divine inspiration). This person is then conferred with religious authority because of their ability to explain Islamic teachings. This method is usually pursued and practiced by the Sufis.

Modern Role of the Ulama

In modern times, the ulama play diverse roles in society. Many of them are educators and scientists who create knowledge in numerous fields. Some of them are well-known politicians who change the condition of their society. And others focus on Islamic education and Islamic law, which includes the study, implementation, and enforcement of Islamic ideology and rules in society. So these modern ulama understand Islamic law, which they use in many different forms and occupations, and they often have prestigious positions in society because of their status as ulama. They are a collection of religious experts and leaders, and ordinary Muslims seek their opinions and rulings in religious affairs. The role of the ulama is significant in the field of religion, but also in other areas that relate to the Muslim community.

Firdaus Wajdi

See also Authority; Clergy; Islam; Shari’a; Sunni Islam

Further Readings


UMBANDA

Umbanda is one of the most popular variants of Afro-Brazilian religions. It developed in the first decades of the 20th century in the Rio de Janeiro area and has been read, sociologically, as an attempt by White, middle-class spiritists to adapt the Afro-Brazilian religions to their habitus and morality. They did this by discarding those African characteristics that they found most offensive: animal sacrifices, drumming, and possession trance dancing. In addition, they distanced the religion from its African origins and instead postulated India or Lemuria as more appropriate locales of birth.

According to what most scholars have considered the Umbanda foundation myth, the religion was born on November 15, 1908, when an Indian spirit, the Caboclo das Sete Encruzilhadas, arrived at a Kardecist session and announced that he was going to start a new religion, in which the spirits of wise Indians (caboclos) and Old Blacks (pretovelhos) would arrive to bring comfort to those who suffered. These spirits were previously discouraged or forbidden from arriving at Kardecist sessions because they were thought to be spiritually unevolved due to their ethno-racial origins. As