

Genesis of the Work

As a result of the popularity of *Shi'ite Islam: Orthodoxy or Heterodoxy*, many readers have inquired about its genesis. In light of such interest, we decided that it would be worthwhile to contextualize the historical moment in which the work was created as well as its ultimate objective. As a close friend and colleague of the author, it is our privilege to share our inner knowledge of the work's origin.

Although some rough drafts had been presented in the course of classes and conferences, it was not until 1994 that Luis Alberto Vittor felt the need to complete *Shi'ite Islam: Orthodoxy or Heterodoxy*. The author's desire to finish the work was motivated by two violent events: the explosions of the Israeli Embassy and the *Asociación Mutual Israeli-Argentina* or AMIA which occurred in Buenos Aires, Argentina on March 17th and July 18th, 1994, terrorist attacks which were both attributed arbitrarily to Shi'ite Muslims.

Due to the circumstances in which it was written, the work was redacted rapidly in response to an urgent need to confront journalists, specialists, and international observers who joined together to label Shi'ite Islam as a "sect" which was "heterodox" with respect to "orthodox" Sunni Islam. The author was also responding to seditious attempts to separate the Sunni and Shi'ite schools of thought, labeling Shi'ites a minority of hard-core religious fanatics with a history of violence.

The enemies of Islam rallied around the tragic events in Argentina denouncing Shi'ites as "fundamentalists" and "terrorists." Their objective was clear: a callous attempt to isolate Shi'ite Muslims from the Islamic Ummah as an unorthodox faction composed of radical extremists.

In an unparalleled fashion, many Argentinean and American Orientalists, made *tabula rasa* with everything written about Shi'ite Islam from Corbin to the present, and started to echo the most hostile attitudes towards Islam expressed by early Orientalists and which had long been rejected. It was evident from the onset that certain academics were benefiting from the terrorist attacks in Argentina to launch an ideological assault against Shi'ite Muslims.

In their zeal to prove that Shi'ite Muslims had been the instigators or perpetrators of the most serious criminal attacks ever suffered by Argentineans, Argentinean and American academics stressed the

minority character of Shī'ite Muslims, characterizing them as a group of sectarian zealots who stood in clear contrast to the moderation and orthodoxy of the Sunnī majority. Academic specialists, journalists, international observers, so-called “experts” on the Middle East, along with ex-intelligence officers, and military envoys, stressed the minority status of Shī'ites in order to accentuate their sectarianism.

Like cockroaches crawling from the under the wood-work in the dark hours of night, these “experts” on Islām attempted to give the Shī'ah Ithnā 'Asharī traits which belonged to other Shī'ite schools like the Ismā'īliyyah or the Zaydiyyah. They associated Twelver Shī'ites with Zaydī revolutionaries, and the Ismā'īlī *Hashashīn* or Assassins, in order to establish that Shī'ites were historically a group of extremist rebels who never hesitated to use radically violent methods against their enemies. The enemies of Islām employed Iblīsī analogies to say that Shī'ite Muslims were all murderers. They argued that since the *Hashashīn* or Assassins were Ismā'īlīs, and the Ismā'īlīs were Shī'ites, then every Shī'ite was a potential assassin.

Evidently, both the premises and the conclusion were false. Nevertheless, this syllogism had the expected effect. The press and the airwaves were soon speaking about Shī'ite terrorism, Shī'ite fundamentalism, Shī'ite extremism, as if they were all synonyms. It was imperative for someone to come forward to demonstrate that these terms were the result of false logic or a false logical construct whose sole objective was to demean Shī'ite Muslims.

In an attempt to give credence to accusations against Shī'ite Muslims, there are those who continue to insist that the terrorist attacks which took place in 1992 and 1994 in the city of Buenos Aires were the work of Shī'ite Muslims. In effect, the majority of encyclopedias continue to attribute these crimes to Hizballāh or the Islāmic Republic of Iran. Despite such stubbornness, nobody in Argentina believes in these accusations and Argentinean authorities are now exploring an Israeli trail. As a result, Washington is putting pressure on the Argentine government to put an end to its investigation which is starting to annoy the United States and Israel.

The Argentinean people, however, want the guilty parties brought to justice as the events were not without deadly consequence for Argentine society. On the 17th of March of 1992, a violent explosion destroyed the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires and seriously damaged the adjacent Catholic Church and school. Twenty-nine people were killed and 242 were injured. The deaths were gruesome. Argentine television broadcasted streets littered with human remains and rubble, pieces of mutilated corpses, like the leg of a woman with a sock and shoe which was severed from her body.

In the early days of the investigation, efforts were directed towards the Islāmīst trail. It was believed that the attack had been committed by a Palestinian suicide bomber who drove a mini-van full of explosives. It was suggested that he was a member of Islāmic Jihād who wanted to avenge the death of 'Abbās al-Mūsawī, the head of the Lebanese Hizballāh, and his family. According to this version, the Buenos Aires operation had been prepared by a group of Pakistanis and coordinated by Mohsen Rabbanī, the Cultural Attaché from the Iranian Embassy. This later was even detained, one year later, while he was in

Germany, only to be liberated later due to lack of evidence.

On July 18th, 1994, another explosion devastated the Buenos Aires building of the *Asociación Mutual Israelita-Argentina* (AMIA) resulting in 85 deaths and 300 injured. The investigation into this new terrorist bombing also attempted to uncover an Islamist trail. The attack was attributed to a so-called Islamic “kamikazi:” 29 year old Ibrahim Husein Berro who supposedly drove a vehicle full of explosives.

While it is true that Ibrahim Husein Berro existed, his brother demonstrated that he died in Lebanon several years before and not in the attack in Buenos Aires. Whoever drove the vehicle full of explosives, it could not have been Ibrahim Berro. Years later a warrant was released for the arrest of Imad Mughniyyah, a member of the Lebanese Hizbullah. Later, the ex-Ambassador of Iran in Argentina, Hade Soleimanpur, was detained in the United Kingdom but had to be released due to lack of evidence.

All of these elements, which seem to be definitive conclusions, have been reflected for years in various encyclopedias, books, and journalistic articles, although nothing can confirm them. The most interesting thing is that with the passing of time some Argentinean investigative journalists have debunked the versions of events proposed by the Israelis and the Americans, developing their own hypothesis which is the exact opposite. According to investigations conducted in Argentina, the two attacks were committed by Israeli agents in order to counter the growing anti-Zionism of the Jewish community in Argentina. This discovery, however, took place after Vittor published his article in *Epimelia*.

At present, the supposed intellectual or material connection of Islamists to the Buenos Aires attacks has largely lost credibility. The Islamist trail is simply inconsistent with the facts and it is for this reason that the American and Israeli government are pressuring the Argentinians to put an end to their investigation. While it is presently possible to speak about these events with hindsight and tranquility, the only individual who dared speak about such events, and defend Shiite Islam when it was being attacked by international public opinion, was Luis Alberto Vittor.

Like Prophet Yahya, Luis Alberto Vittor was a voice in the wilderness, exposing himself to criticism, threats, and physical danger. Unlike some of the official Islamic authorities who stood still, making themselves complicit through their silence, Vittor raised his voice and pen in defense of Shiite Islam at a time when doing so was associating oneself, explicitly or implicitly, to a Muslim minority of “extremists” and “terrorists.”

Putting his trust in Almighty Allah and the solidarity of his fellow Muslims, all of whom were simple believers with no power or political influence, Vittor produced the present work which was viewed as a moral and intellectual duty. Surely, in this lies the greatest value of his work. *Shiite Islam: Orthodoxy or Heterodoxy* must be viewed as a work of service in defense of the followers of *Ahlul Bayt*. At the time it was written, there was not a single Orientalist, Arabist or Islamologist, in Argentina or abroad, who was willing or capable of defending Shiite Islam.

While the Shiite community was being attacked from all sides, some Sunni Muslims sought to separate

themselves from the Shī'ites, echoing the arguments of the enemies of Islam who claimed that the followers of *Ahlul Bayt* were sectarian extremists (*ghulāt*).

As if that were not enough, Shī'ite converts were accused of having links to so-called "Iranian-inspired Islamic terrorism." In order to divert attention from themselves, some sectors of the Sunnī community insisted on proving the Orientalists thesis correct, accusing the Shī'ite community of committing the terrorist bombings when the real perpetrators of the atrocities were not even Muslims.

As a result of these actions, many Shī'ites, both Iranians and Latinos, suffered from severe social discrimination. Many *mu'minīn* [believers] lost their jobs. Many *mu'minīn* [believers] were forced out of university, including a group of Iranian medical students. Being both Shī'ite and Iranian was seen as synonymous with terrorism and criminality. Fear ran so high during those days that, out of the entire community, only six or seven brothers, two of them converts, dared to attend the sole Shī'ite mosque in the city.

Rather than coming to the rescue of Shī'ite Muslims who were falsely accused of being violent sectarian terrorists, Orientalists like Bernard Lewis came forth to add fuel to the fire, arguing that there was a historic continuity and an ideological bond between medieval Muslims assassins, who were *Ismā'īlīs*, and contemporary Shī'ite fundamentalists or extremists, who were *Ja'farīs*. For those who dabble in academic dishonesty, they were one and the same: socially maladjusted minorities who resorted to violence and terrorism as their only means of expression.

When one reads *Shī'ite Islam: Orthodoxy or Heterodoxy*, it is important to remember the context in which it was created. At a moment in which the enemies of Islam were attempting to divide the Ummah, Luis Alberto Vittor pulled up his sleeves and pulled out his pen to demonstrate that Shī'ite Islam, despite being a minority, was as orthodox as the majority Sunnī Islam.

And not only that, the author demonstrated that Shī'ite Islam was the only group which remained faithful to the will of Allāh and the Prophet Muhammad: to hold fast to the Two Treasures, the Qur'ān and the Household of the Prophet.

Besides presenting the Shī'ite position, the author's goal was to reestablish the balance between Sunnism and Shī'ism which some sectors were attempting to destabilize, labeling one group as orthodox and another as sectarian, heterodox, extremist, and heretical. It is for this reason that the author devotes so much time to explaining why it is improper to label Muslims as "fundamentalists."

Considering the context and extraordinary circumstances in which the book was written, completely changes one's critical appreciation of the work. *Shī'ite Islam: Orthodoxy or Heterodoxy* was a lone voice denouncing despots in the desert, a strident voice denouncing the indifference of academia and the vested interests of those who sought to define Shī'ite Islam as a radical, sectarian, heterodox form of Islam rather than a traditional expression of its orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

Although the author has accepted that his work to be annotated, he has always insisted that it remain intact as a reflection of the socio–historical context in which it was created. Attempting to modify certain concepts would undermine the very objective of the work, reducing it to a vain theoretical discussion. The author's goal, of course, was other: to demonstrate that the claims made by the detractors of Shī'ite Islām were false and illogical and that the fact that Shī'ite Islām has a minority status does not imply, from an Islāmic point of view, that it represents a sect in the sense in the Western Christian sense of the term.

The events of 1992 and 1994 which occurred in the city of Buenos Aires are not a thing of the past. Attempts to support the allegations made against the Shī'ite Muslims of Argentina continue to be made, accusing them of implication in the terrorist bombings. Despite the fact that thirteen years have passed since this work was originally published, it continues to be current. The enemies of Islām never sleep and nor do we.

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