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## **Exordium**

Luis Alberto Vittor's Sheite Islem: Orthodoxy or Heterodoxy addresses many essential issues concerning the split between the followers of ahl al-bayt and the followers of ahl al-sunnah. Transcending the historical, the author focuses on ahistorical aspects in the genesis of adherence, stressing the esoteric foundation of Sheit Islem, as opposed to the exoteric foundation of Sunne Islem which forces its followers to find spirituality in various energy orders.

Vittor's book challenges the prevailing view among Western academics, namely, the contention that She'ite Islem is "heterodox" while Sunne Islem is "orthodox." He contends that **there is nothing non-orthodox or un-orthodox in She'ite Islem**, since the very principles that give life and identity to She'ite Muslims are deeply rooted in the Sunnah of the Prophet and the Twelve Imems.

According to Vittor, definitions such as "orthodox" and "heterodox" are misnomers when applied to Isl®m: they are Western impositions on an Islamic construct that are entirely false. As the author explains, if one respects the meaning of the word "orthodox," which implies adherence to a specific set of beliefs and instructions, Sh®'ite Muslims are as orthodox as Sunn® Muslims.¹ The book challenges the common misconceptions of Western academics, their bias towards Isl®m, and their tendency to interpret Sh®'ite Isl®m through Sunn® lenses.

Unlike polemical publications dealing with the Sunn®-Sh®® debate, the work does not belittle or put down the followers of *ahl al-sunnah*. The author explores Sh®® ite Isl®m from within and examines the religious tradition on its own terms. As a result, he has produced a work of great critical importance, revealing the spiritual depth of Sh®® ism to which many Sh®® ites are oblivious.

As one reads the work, one develops a greater understanding of the inner meaning of essential elements of Shefite faith and religious practice. The work is sure to have great resonance during the month of *Mu®arram*, a time when Shefism is more or less viewed through Sunn® lenses. When Shefites commemorate the martyrdom of Im®m ®usayn, they are often assaulted with questions and criticism. Unless the spiritual foundations of Shefism are fully understood, Shefite efforts are expended to rebuttal at best or attack of *ahl al-sunnah* at worst. Both a defensive and an aggressive approach to interlislamic understanding are futile and reinforce the status quo. The solution to any Sunn® confusion

regarding 'Ish Ir will not be resolved in the realm of the political, but in the sphere of the spiritual. As Vittor's work reveals, the sweetness of Shu'ite Islum is to be found in the inner meanings of the outer rituals.

The chapter on Mukht al-Thaq is particularly revealing. Although I.K.A. Howard has provided a good historical rendition of Mukht in al-Serat, Vittor captures the sense of spirituality emanating from his uprising. In the words of Howard Zinns, time has a way of nurting a certain moral and spiritual outrage: a sense of indignation that is missing at least today. As one reads Vittor's work, one senses the deep suffering and empathy that Shi ites feel for the suffering of ahl al-bayt.

Although not a survey of the Shefite faith, Vittor's work covers the spiritual foundation of the Imemate to a sufficient degree. His work also touches upon the treatment of the Shefite minority in the face of oppression, and the role of silent and quietist revolution as a means of protest, an approach which stands in stark contrast to the violent modes of expression and opposition seen in the Muslim world today.

Rather than radicalize, Vittor's work helps to sensitize Shefites, an achievement of incalculable importance in the aftermath of the Iraqi quagmire. These are times of reconciliation, not revenge.

These are times of unity and not division. Despite the dark moments that Shefites have suffered, and continue to suffer, the tide of time is changing in the right direction, and many people are realizing the spiritual force of Shefite Islem, made obvious through its supplications, prayers, and salutations, as well as its Qur'enic commentaries and scholarly works, all of which are grounded in spirituality.

Luis Alberto Vittor's *Sh* ite *Isl* : Orthodoxy or Heterodoxy is a very concise book, and the greater portion of the work consists of highly informational scholarly notes making it an easy read for the novice or even the beginner. Due to its academic value and accessibility, its intellectual integrity, and its call for Islamic unity, we tremendously recommend this book, and hope to see it widely disseminated for the purpose of da'wah and tablegh.

1. Editor's Note: The word "orthodoxy" refers to "the traditional beliefs of a religious group which are considered normal and acceptable by most people." When we say that most Muslim groups are "orthodox," it means that they form part of mainstream Islem. It does not necessarily mean that the path they follow is perfectly straight. It merely means that they are within the main body of Islem as opposed to outside of it.

When the author and editor say that Sunnis are orthodox Muslims, they refer to those Muslims who followed the four first Caliphs and who always maintained their love and respect for ahl al-bayt. The author and editor do not consider the followers of Mu'swiyyah, Yazsd, and other despotic figures as ahl al-sunnah.

When the author and editor say that end are orthodox, they refer to authentic Islemic 'irfen and not Pseudo-endism. The author and the editor are strongly opposed to the Pseudo-endism which is currently spreading throughout the West and which operates as a type of fifth column within Islem.

The author's fieldwork has shown that some Bah®'® groups cultivate a typo of Pseudo-®®fism or Pseudo-'irf®n which is dangerous because they do not present themselves as a ®ar®qah al-'irf®niyyah al-bah®'iyyah, but rather as a ®ar®qah al-'irf®niyyah sh®'iyyah. The purpose of such deception is to cause confusion in the minds of Westerners who seek to spiritually connect themselves with Sh®'ite 'irf®n.

Neither the author nor the editor make any references to contemporary Tofism, but rather to the traditional 'irfon of Ibn al-

'Arabe, Sa'de of Shirez, eefie, Mulle eadre, and so forth.

2. Author's Note: For an insight into the crimes committed by Western mercenaries in Iraq, see the anonymously published review of Jeremy Scahill's Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army, which appeared in Crescent International in October of 2007.

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