

The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT: Not to be confused with the Sunni-derivative Ahmadiyya community, the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light (AROPL) is a Shia-derivative new religious movement that emerged in the chaotic post-Saddam-Hussein Iraq. In 1999, Ahmed al-Hassan, a civil engineer born in 1968 in Basra, claimed to have physically met the Twelfth Imam, who had entrusted him with a special mission. Severely persecuted, his followers divided into various rival groups. The one with the largest international following, despite persecution and discrimination in various countries, is the AROPL, which recognizes al-Hassan as the Yamani, the first Mahdi and the precursor of the Qaim/Riser from the Family of Muhammad, or the second Mahdi, an eschatological figure mentioned in Islamic prophecies as the one who rises and restores justice in the world during the end times. The AROPL identifies its leader, the Egyptian American Abdullah Hashem, as the Qaim/Riser. Headquartered in the United Kingdom, the AROPL is sometimes referred to as the “Black Banners,” in opposition to its main competitor among those who recognize the prophetic mission of al-Hassan, the “White Banners” whose headquarters are in Najaf, Iraq.

KEYWORDS: Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light, AROPL, Ahmed al-Hassan. Abdullah Hashem, Black Banners.

Introduction

The date was May 24, 2023. At the usually quiet border of Kapikule between Türkiye and Bulgaria screams were heard, as the Turkish police was threatening and beating 104 women, men, and children standing in line to cross the Bulgarian frontier. They were not Turkish citizens. They had reached Türkiye

fleeing different Muslim majority countries where they had been persecuted for their religious beliefs. They hoped to find salvation in the European Union, of which Bulgaria is a member state (Fautré 2023).

Gunshots were fired. People protested police brutality, some showing their bloody faces after the beatings. Happily, some reporters, alerted by the refugees' co-religionists in the West, were able to get there. The story spread throughout the world, reaching the United Nations in New York (United Nations 2023).

Who were these desperate people? Why was their life in danger? It took time even for the international human rights organizations that received their appeals for help to understand. The fact was, they were part of a religious organization called the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light. All human rights organizations throughout the world were familiar with the Ahmadiyya community, which is heavily discriminated against and persecuted in Pakistan. The similarity in the names caused some confusion. In fact, the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light (AROPL) has nothing to do with the Ahmadiyya community. The latter is a Sunni-derivative religious movement, while the AROPL is a Shia-derivative group. Their theology and history are different.

Nor can the AROPL be considered a sect of Islam. Scholars of religion distinguish between the “emic” point of view of the devotees and the “etic” (not to be confused with “ethic”) perspective of the outside scholarly observers (Harris 1983; Pike 1999). The emic point of view of the AROPL members is that they represent the true Islam, in fact the true universal religion. From the etic perspective of scholars, they are part of a new religion, as different from what is normally called Islam as Christianity is different from Judaism. There would be no Christianity without Judaism, yet Christianity is a different religion from Judaism. There would be no AROPL without Shia Islam, yet the AROPL is a different and autonomous religion.

In March 2024 we, together with other scholars from different countries, from Australia to Lithuania, were invited to a conference and field trip in the United Kingdom, where the AROPL has its universal headquarters, to listen to presentations by devotees and discuss with them. We then had a meeting with the leader of the religion. In this article, we present the history and main beliefs of the AROPL and try to explain why it has been persecuted, not only in regions with a Muslim majority but even in such an unlikely country as Sweden.

Ahmed al-Hassan's Movement

The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light finds its roots in Twelver Shia Islam. Twelver Shiites (which include more than 80% of present-day Shiites) believe that the legitimate successors of Prophet Muhammad (570–632), whose authority was denied and bloodily suppressed by the Sunnis, were the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law Ali (600–661) and his descendants who, with him, are honored as the Twelve Imams. They also believe that the Twelfth Imam, Mohammed ibn al-Hassan al-Askari (b. 868), who “disappeared” as a child in the year 874, was not killed by the Sunnis as some secular historians claim but went into a state of “occultation” from which he will emerge in the end times. Many Muslims also expect that, when the appropriate time will come, the world will be ruled on behalf of God by an eschatological figure known as the Imam al-Mahdi, in short, the Mahdi. Some believe he will be preceded by yet another eschatological figure, the Yamani, just as Jesus was preceded by John the Baptist.

During the history of the Shia, several individuals claimed they had met the Twelfth Imam and had been appointed by him as his vicegerents or envoys, thus generating a variety of new religious movements. Several claimants to the role of the Mahdi, both Shia and Sunni, also appeared (see e.g., Clarke 1995; Warburg 2003). Scholars assume that in times and places of political crisis and chaos new religions are more likely to emerge. In 1999, in the chaotic post-Saddam-Hussein (1937–2006) Iraq, Ahmed al-Hassan, a civil engineer born in 1968 in Basra, claimed to have physically met the Twelfth Imam, who had entrusted him with the special mission to proclaim publicly that he, al-Hassan, was the prophesied Yamani and to call people to pledge allegiance to the Imam al-Mahdi (Hashem 2022; we also rely on interviews with members of the AROPL conducted in the UK in March 2024).

For al-Hassan's followers, the main evidence that he really received a mission from the Twelfth Imam is in his teachings and in the fact that his role and even his name can be found in Prophet Muhammad's last Will, a text whose very existence is denied by (most) Sunnis but is attested and discussed in several traditional Shiite sources. Both Sunni and Shia sources confirm the intent of the Prophet Muhammad to write a will on a night referred to as “the calamity of Thursday” that would be a safety from misguidance before he died the subsequent Monday. While other Muslims dispute its authenticity, for the AROPL Muhammad's will as

preserved in Shiite sources is both genuine and all-important (The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light 2024). It is the only recorded will by Muhammad in all Islamic sources.

Since 2002, al-Hassan publicly denounced the Shia establishment in both Iran and Iraq led by scholars and Great Ayatollahs such as Ali Khamenei and Ali al-Sistani as morally and politically corrupt. For al-Hassan, these were “non-working scholars,” leading the Muslims astray. As a result, al-Hassan and his disciples were severely persecuted (Human Rights Without Frontiers 2023a). The Shia establishment pushed the Iraqi security forces to raid the homes, arrest and attack the followers of al-Hassan and accused them of being involved in riots, including (under the name “Soldiers of Heaven”) in the so-called “Battle of Najaf” of 2007, with which al-Hassan himself denied any connection.

Many of al-Hassan’s followers were innocently killed, arrested without just cause, and jailed without due process. The Shia militias and those representing the Shia establishment were looking for al-Hassan, wanting to kill him as a heretic. Al-Hassan was lastly seen and photographed in Iraq in 2007, after which he went into hiding. Reportedly, he visited several countries and lived for a time in Sudan, while his followers in Iraq and internationally divided into different conflicting factions.

The early teachings of al-Hassan were somewhat enigmatic and open to different interpretations by his disciples. Some, with basis in al-Hassan’s own early texts, believed he was himself the Qaim, the “Riser from the Family of Muhammad,” an eschatological figure mentioned in Islamic prophecies as the one who rises and restores justice in the world during the end times and is the first in a series of Mahdis (divinely appointed guides) who rule an end-times Divine Just State. On the other hand, there are followers who testify that from the beginning of his public ministry, al-Hassan declared himself to be the prophesied Yamani. The Yamani, which means the “right-hand,” is a major prophesied eschatological figure whose role is to pave the way for the Qaim/Riser. The Yamani can also be called “the first Mahdi” and the Qaim “the second Mahdi,” but it is the Qaim who is the center of the new covenant with God.

After al-Hassan went into hiding in 2007, an Iraqi faction known as “the White Banners” or “the Office of Najaf,” started transmitting, including via a Facebook page, messages allegedly coming from him that were suspiciously different from his previous teachings. A split happened in the movement between

those who maintained that the White Banners were still “authentic,” and that al-Hassan was communicating with them, and those who denounced the post-2007 messages as forged. The latter believed that the White Banners had no genuine communication with al-Hassan. They were led by Abdullah Hashem, an Egyptian American disciple of al-Hassan. Hashem claimed that the White Banners / Office of Najaf was controlled and manipulated by the Iraqi government, that al-Hassan was not with them, and that they had fabricated his voice and the Facebook page.

In contrast with the White Banners, headquartered in Iraq, the group led by Hashem and currently headquartered in the UK, is known as the “Black Banners.” This creates another possible confusion, as both the “White Banners” and the “Black Banners,” i.e., the AROPL, recognize and venerate the figure of al-Hassan, although they interpret his role and mission differently. To complicate the situation even further, there are other minor groups claiming a relationship with the teachings of al-Hassan as well. The White Banners / Office of Najaf “excommunicated” Hashem in 2015 and again through a “Declaration of Disassociation” on April 18, 2023, which also targeted other groups (Najaf Office 2023). The AROPL is distinguished by the fact that it has the largest international following, while the White Banners are mostly Iraqis.

It is also important, when one hears of riots, political statements, and other problems in Iraq that involve “followers of Ahmed al-Hassan” to understand from whose group they originate. Unfortunately, Wikipedia and other generalist (and easily manipulated) sources do not help in this respect.

The Mission of Abdullah Hashem

The AROPL’s *raison-d’être* is to proclaim to the world the teaching and mission of one of al-Hassan’s followers, Abdullah Hashem, “Aba al-Sadiq,” a U.S. citizen with an Egyptian father and an American mother. In 2015, at age 32, Abdullah Hashem revealed that Ahmed al-Hassan had instructed him to “raise the Black Banners of the East” and inform the world about the appearance of Imam al-Mahdi, the eschatological figure announced in Islamic prophecies who will rule the world in the end times. He claimed that he, Hashem, was the promised Qaim or Riser of the Family of Muhammad.

The date, 2015, was important. Hashem and his followers referred to an old prophecy that they applied to the death of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia (1924–2015). This prophecy, which circulated widely amongst the Shiites, indicated that the Imam al-Mahdi should appear after the death of a King of Hejaz (i.e., Saudi Arabia) called Abdullah, identified by certain signs. According to Shia sources, Prophet Muhammad prophesied that

Hejaz will be ruled by a man whose name is the name of an animal, if you see him from far, you will think he is cross-eyed, and if you come close to him, you do not see anything (wrong) in his eyes. He will be succeeded by a brother of his, named Abdullah... Whoever guarantees for me the death of Abdullah, I guarantee for him the Riser/Qaim (see Hashem 2022, 498).

The AROPL notes that King Fahd of Saudi Arabia (1921–2005) had both the name of an animal (Fahd meaning “leopard”) and the eye problem described in the prophecy. He died in 2005 and was succeeded by his brother Abdullah, who died in turn on January 23, 2015. Abdullah Hashem advanced his claims immediately after this event (Hashem 2022, 498–99).

Other prophecies indicated that the Mahdi will be from Egypt and will reveal himself at age 32. Abdullah Hashem was 32 in 2015 and his father is Egyptian. This is connected with early Muslim texts about a “Companion of Egypt,” similarities between the early Egyptian religion (which later, the AROPL believes, became corrupted) and Islamic monotheism, and references to Egypt in different prophecies (Hashem 2022, 536). When we visited the headquarters of AROPL, we noted the presence of symbols of the ancient Egyptian religion.

The already mentioned “Will of Prophet Muhammad” names both “Ahmed” and “Abdullah” as rulers in the end times, which the AROPL believe are references to Ahmed al-Hassan and Abdullah Hashem.

The AROPL claims that al-Hassan himself told Hashem that the latter was the Riser, the Qaim of the Family of Muhammad. He fulfilled the three criteria to be recognized as a divinely appointed messenger. The first is being mentioned in the previous messenger’s will, in this case Muhammad’s last will. The second is demonstrating God-given knowledge in all the great matters pertaining to salvation. The third is calling for a return to the original order based on the supremacy of God rather than the supremacy of people (The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light 2024, 6). These criteria, it is claimed, also authenticated al-Hassan’s role as the Yamani.

Hashem reports he has met and has been taught by al-Hassan for years through personal, physical encounters, although they also occasionally came together in dreams and visions. Dreams are important in Hashem's worldview, although they require discernment as they are of diverse types and not all of them come from good spirits (Hashem 2022, 284–95). Hashem states that he originally believed that the Riser/Qaim was al-Hassan. When we met him in the UK, he told us how he was surprised when al-Hassan told and demonstrated to him that he, Hashem, was the Riser/Qaim and al-Hassan was the Yamani. At this stage, Hashem said, he could no longer deny his own call without denying al-Hassan at the same time, which would of course have been unconceivable.

The Main Teachings of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light

Hashem's claims and revelations are collected in the book *The Goal of the Wise*, translated into English in 2022. An outside observer would discern here diverse sources: Twelver Shiism, various esoteric "hyper-Shiite" traditions of Islam including Alawism, Christian Gnosticism, Western esotericism, and what scholars of the latter refer to as "conspirituality" (Ward and Voas 2011; Aspren and Dyrendal 2015), the meeting of esoteric ideas and what are commonly called conspiracy theories.

Hashem's theology follows a scheme that some scholars would call "dispensationalist." God entered into six covenants with humanity, centered respectively on Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed. Al-Hassan as the Yamani inaugurated the seventh covenant leading to the rise of the Riser/Qaim. With a typical dispensationalist twist, the book explains that the rules of each covenant were God-given and valid at that time but were superseded by the following covenant and not all of them remained in force. Each covenant was breached by humans, thus causing a punishment by God, and ultimately requiring a new covenant.

Hashem also reveals esoteric interpretations of the previous covenants, with precedents both in Islamic and Western esotericism. We learn for example that the tree in the Garden of Eden whose forbidden fruit Adam (not Eve) tried to eat was not a physical tree but Fatimah (ca. 605–632), the daughter of Muhammad and wife of Ali, in a precedent incarnation. Her beauty attracted Adam who tried,

unsuccessfully, to have a sexual relation with her: this was the “original sin” (Hashem 2022, 4).

We also learn that when Jesus distributed his “body” to his disciples in the Holy Communion what he really gave to them was his semen, a theory with several precedents in Western esotericism (Pasi 2008) but rejected as offensive and scandalous by many Muslims and Christians. Hashem does not in any way suggest that these rituals should be practiced today; in fact, he categorically denies that this should be the case. They are just part of his reconstruction of the history of Christianity, as is his theory that Christians, who insist Jesus was crucified, and Muslims, who believe he was not, are both right. The crucified body was Jesus’, but the soul was of Simon of Cyrene, with whom Jesus had exchanged souls, “jumping” to other bodies in which the disciples met him and marrying Mary Magdalene before the attempted crucifixion. Prophet Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, was their son (implying that the dates of his birth and death were much earlier than historians, who mention the years 216–274, believe: Hashem 2022, 402).

From this, we can understand that Hashem—who, we should remember, always presents his teachings as coming from lengthy dialogues with al-Hassan—is part of the esoteric tradition of Islam believing in reincarnation (including of humans into animals and even rocks and stones) and karma, and also in the possible transmigration of souls either before or after death from one body to another. This means that a soul can enter the body of an adult who is alive, not only of an infant at birth. Some souls can also be present in two bodies at the same time.

Islamic traditions indicate that in human history the number of prophets is 124,000 and the number of “messengers” (a higher function) is 313. Ahmed al-Hassan revealed that many of the 124,000 are unknown prophets who carried divine messages to their nations and others are well-known names such as Zeus, Socrates (470–399 BCE), Aristotle (384–322 BCE), King Cyrus II of Persia (600–530 BCE), Krishna, Buddha (6th–5th century BCE), Confucius (ca. 551–479 BCE), Lao-Tze (6th–5th century BCE), and Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE). In the present new dispensation, many believers are the reincarnations of prophets, messengers, and even angels, whose souls entered them after their conversion, which means that some of the 313 are now with the Riser/Qaim and others will come. This is the phenomenon of the Raj’a, the Great Return (Hashem

2022, 142), and the headquarters in the UK display the portraits of many current believers represented as the reincarnations of previous prophets and messengers. It is also true, however, that “good souls” can leave a person in case of unruly behavior or apostasy. We normally do not remember our previous incarnations, although these memories are stored in the soul and there are ways of retrieving them.

Between one incarnation and the next, the souls dwell in a Purgatory-like space called Samarat. When the number of their incarnations is completed, they are judged and go to Heaven, which is in an inaccessible location on Earth, or Hell, which is in the Sun, although there is also a worse possible destination for the vilest souls. It is known as the Great Terror (Hashem 2022, 253).

A significant role in the sacred history presented by Hashem is played by Iblis, the devil, who according to the gnostic theology of the AROPL created the physical bodies of humans (hence their imperfections) while relatives of Prophet Muhammad, including Ali, created their souls, acting as the “hands” of God. Hashem’s system is creationist, in the sense that he regards Charles Darwin’s (1809–1882) theory of evolution as false. However, he believes that there were numerous races before Adam, which came to earth from other planets and were not fully human. Some of their descendants are still on earth, and this is also the truth behind stories about Bigfoot or the Yeti.

Iblis’ sexual relationship with Eve generated Cain. From that time, the descendants of Iblis and Cain continuously opposed in history the mission of the prophets. The “conspirituality” of Hashem’s teachings emerge in his discussion of the Freemasons and the Illuminati, a theme he has in common with several contemporary Western and non-Western esoteric movements. While it expresses sympathy for the American people, *The Goal of the Wise* denounces the evil U.S. government controlled by the Illuminati. Again with precedents in other forms of “conspirituality,” *The Goal of the Wise* claims that George Washington (1732–1799) was in reality Adam Weishaupt (1748–1830, but the dates are disputed by the AROPL), the Bavarian founder of the Illuminati who had moved to the United States (the two shared a certain physical likelihood: Hashem 2022, 414–15). He also claims that the second President Bush, George W., is the grandson of the British magus Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), who was the (unacknowledged) real father of the president’s mother, and wife of another president, Barbara Bush (1925–2018: Hashem 2022, 422–23).

The typical “conspiratoriality” theme of the evil extraterrestrials and of children of human beings and aliens active on Earth is also present in *The Goal of the Wise*. There are, however, also extraterrestrials, and spirits from other dimensions such as the jinn of the Muslim tradition, who are not evil—or not entirely. Controlling the jinn is connected with magic, a science in which King Solomon (10th century BCE) once excelled. The Qaim today is the owner of Solomon’s ring and controls legions of jinn (Hashem 2022, 221). Some jinn appear as stones that are in fact living beings, such as the Sulaimani stones, found in the bellies of serpents according to Islamic esoteric traditions (Hashem 2022, 226). Magic is a science like others and is not forbidden; only black magic is.

In accordance with Alawite and other forms of Muslim esotericism (Bar-Asher and Kofsky 2002, 192), a theory is presented that the stars “are people” and are related to certain persons on earth, each of whom both “is” and “has” a star. The Riser/Qaim “is,” in this sense, Planet Mars, while Iblis “is” Sirius, a star Hashem claims is worshiped by Freemasons (Hashem 2022, 137).

The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light and Esotericism

What kind of religion is this? Once again, scholars have an etic outsider view, which complements (and respects) the emic insider view of the believers. For them, the AROPL is simply the truth revealed by God in the new covenant. The scholars’ method, however, is normally comparative.

That it uses this word or not, the AROPL is an esoteric religion, where themes of both esoteric Islam and Western esotericism are present. *The Goal of the Wise* reveals many hidden mysteries that only those in touch with higher powers can know and unveil, and alludes to others, which is typical of esotericism.

It is also a millenarian religion. It believes that wars and rumors of wars, natural disasters, epidemics, and the climate change confirm that we are living in the end times. AROPL devotees also claim that al-Hassan, Hashem’s mentor, had predicted several of the most recent disasters, including COVID-19, for which he also offered a remedy he would have made public, if just the Shiite ayatollahs in Iraq and Iran had publicly asked for it. We met a medical doctor (and son of an eminent British cardiologist) who is a member of the community and claims to have used the “Imam’s remedy” for COVID-19 with success.

American scholar Catherine Wessinger distinguishes between “catastrophic” and “progressive” forms of millennialism (Wessinger 1988). While catastrophic millennialism waits for a final disaster that would end the world as we know it, progressive millennialism examines the signs of the times and expects a great transformation that will not necessarily be the end of everything. Also, progressive millennialism does not believe that the transformation will be the simple consequence of cosmic forces humans cannot control. We have a role to play in preparing it.

A good example of a movement that was both esoteric and believed in a progressive form of millennialism is the Theosophical Society, established in New York in 1875 around the charismatic figure of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891). There are certain similarities between the Theosophical Society and the AROPL. Both believe that a teacher appointed by higher powers will appear at the appropriate time. Both reinterpret the teachings of existing religions and believe in reincarnation. Both see the evolution of humanity as an upward spiral. Both include in their history of human evolutions “unknown prophets” and accept messengers of God from many different traditions. Both believe that a new call to enlightenment will appear “in the West.” And both share the idea that seven is an important number (for the AROPL, its Call is the seventh covenant) and even the respective six-pointed star symbols are somewhat similar.

Obviously, there are also significant differences. The AROPL is firmly rooted in the monotheism of the Abrahamic faiths, while the Theosophical Society is pantheistic and privileges the approach of the East Asian religions where there is no concept of a personal God. Since we are all part of a fundamental unity, for the Theosophical Society there is no punishment for breaking the covenants with God, although individuals will pay for their mistakes through the law of karma and reincarnation.

We are not arguing that the AROPL is part of the larger family of religious movements with roots in the Theosophical Society. It is not. We are suggesting, however, two interpretive tools that may be useful to study the AROPL from the point of view of outsider scholars: esotericism and progressive millennialism. Although there have been historical exceptions, it is also the case that progressive millennialists, including those esoterically oriented such as the Theosophists, build peaceful movements that regard the theme of promoting justice and world peace as crucial—and work for it (Wessinger 1998, 2011).

The Divine Just State

To his devotees, Abdullah Hashem is the Qaim, the “Riser of the Family of Muhammad,” the figure prophesied to emerge in the end times to bring peace and justice to the world. Some of his claims are indeed bold, and may be controversial, including “earned infallibility,” especially as it relates to guiding other human beings toward God.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the Pope is infallible, a theory non-Catholic Christians tend to find provocative and offensive. Yet, in fact Catholic theology maintains that the Popes’ statements are infallible in such a limited number of matters that infallibility is attributed to their declarations only a few times each century. As we read in its sacred scripture, *The Goal of the Wise*, the AROPL does appreciate the Catholic idea that God operates through an “infallible” vicegerent, as Simon Peter was when he was appointed by Jesus. However, the AROPL also maintains that, just as Shia Islam, Roman Catholicism “got infiltrated” and “appointed vicegerents that are not infallible and not from God” (Hashem 2022, 407–8). Hashem, however, as the Qaim/Riser is from God, and is infallible.

Hashem teaches that even prophets made mistakes, as only God is infallible by nature. However, Jesus and Muhammad made only minor occasional mistakes and Muhammad, his daughter Fatimah, and the Twelve Imams can be called inherently infallible, while the Twelve Mahdis, including the Qaim/Riser, are in the category of “earned infallibility” (Hashem 2022, 332–33). This does not mean that the covenant of Muhammad is still in force, and at any rate we do not know the integrality of his teachings, as the Quran that we have today is incomplete and corrupted. Hashem even refers to the traditional story according to which Muhammad’s wife Aisha (614–678) reported that part of the Quran manuscript was accidentally eaten by a goat and lost forever (Hashem 2022, 367).

As a result, ninety-nine per cent of what Islam currently teaches is wrong: “Ninety-nine percent of religion is wrong, not ninety-nine percent of all religions, ninety-nine percent of each religion, even Islam” (Hashem 2022, 110). *The Goal of the Wise* proclaims that

The Islam that the Riser/Qaim brings shall be almost entirely different from the Islam that Mohammed... came with and the Islam that is currently practiced today. Essentially, it is a new religion (Hashem 2022, 113).

Today's mosques and mausoleums are lavishly constructed and are empty of guidance and will therefore one day be destroyed, including Mecca's Great Mosque—which, at any rate, hosts a false Kaaba: the genuine Kaaba is in Petra, Jordan (Hashem 2022, 114).

The use of the lunar calendar, Friday prayers, the prohibition of alcohol, and the mandatory hijab for women, which was never a divine commandment in any of God's covenants, are believed to be teachings that have been distorted, all of which will be corrected in the seventh covenant. Ramadan will be observed in December, according to a revelation of al-Hassan. Homosexuality is not encouraged but, unlike in the current Islamic societies, the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light welcomes LGBT people and asks that they be treated with respect. Understandably, these positions do not endear Hashem's movement to other branches of Islam, both Sunni and Shia.

As a progressive millenarian movement, the AROPL announces the future institution of the Divine Just State, which will not be a Western-style democracy but will be ruled by twelve Mahdis (whose succession will not necessarily follow a family lineage), of which the Qaim/Riser is the second, based on their appointment by God rather than of their popular election. It will be more similar to Plato's (427–348 BCE) ideal political order ruled by a philosopher-king.

While realizing that this may open them to criticism, AROPL devotees do not hide their criticism of democracy, which goes back to Plato. They only insist that as part of a peaceful movement they respect the existing governments and do not call for the overthrow of them. However, as Plato, they believe that democracy leads to the emergence of demagogues and “poets,” whom they regard as idle false prophets incarnated today in the “non-working scholars” who rule Shia Islam and persecute the AROPL. They insist that, while non-democratic, the Divine Just State will guarantee freedom of religion, as people of different faiths will be allowed to live there, practice their faiths, and follow their religions' rules. The twelve Mahdis will progressively expand and consolidate the Divine Just State, which originally will not encompass the whole Planet Earth. It will be a millennial kingdom where there will be no death due to illness or old age, although life will still end in some cases due to accidents or murders.

Today, believers in the UK have gathered around the Qaim/Riser and form a community that is a germ and an announcement of the Divine Just State. As the first Christians and the first Muslims did, the believers share all their properties in common under the stewardship of the Qaim/Riser, keeping only what is needed for subsistence as private property, and follow his directions. This utopian community plans to give testimony to the truth through its high morals and good manners. “Religion is good treatment of others, and whoever doesn’t treat others well has no religion” (Hashem 2022, 362). We saw no evidence that this precept is not sincerely believed and practiced.

*Persecution and Discrimination**

[*Note: Rosita Šorytė contributed to this session of the article.]

AROPL members have stories of persecution to tell about Iraq, Iran, Malaysia, Algeria, Jordan. The group was even harassed and compelled to leave Sweden, a country normally reputed for its friendly attitude to religious liberty.

That the AROPL devotees are persecuted in Muslim countries is tragic but, unfortunately, predictable. As mentioned earlier, they teach that all religions, including Islam, although originally admirable, have been corrupted and are today “99% wrong.” They insist that the real Kaaba is not in Mecca, fixed times for prayer are not necessary, Ramadan is in December, headscarves are not mandatory for women, alcohol can be freely if moderately drunk, LGBTQ people should not be judged or persecuted, and all prophets made mistakes. In short, they believe that we have entered a seventh and final covenant between humanity and God, where the teachings and jurisprudence of the sixth covenant, stipulated with Muhammad, are no longer in force. Their movement was born in a Shiite context, yet they teach that the present Shia leadership in both Iraq and Iran is made up of “non-working scholars” who lead believers astray with false doctrines.

For much less, people are executed in several Islamic countries, and the situation only got worse when the AROPL’s sacred text, *The Goal of the Wise*, was released in 2022, with all the claims mainline Islam regards as heretic presented boldly and explicitly. In Iran, the AROPL is regarded as a “deviant religion” and is accused of “denigrating Islam,” an offense punishable with the death penalty (Human Rights Without Frontiers 2023a). The Iranian government has even produced a slanderous documentary about them, and

dozens of devotees have been arrested. Some were taken to the notorious Evin Prison, and two were forcibly sent to mental institutions.

There are similar problems in Iraq and Azerbaijan, but the situation is not better in countries with a Sunni majority. In Malaysia, the main problem was the AROPL's support of the movement for LGBTQ rights. In fact, the AROPL was the only religious group brave enough to organize a public protest in solidarity with the repressed LGBTQ community in Malaysia. It happened in Kuala Lumpur in July 2023. Eight AROPL devotees were arrested and badly mistreated by the police, as two of them who had escaped to the UK told us during our visit to their community in the UK (personal interviews, March 2024).

In Algeria, the local AROPL community, where twenty-two persons lived communally, was raided. Three members were imprisoned and fifteen put under house arrest. The women were falsely accused of prostitution. Eighteen members were charged with “denigrating Islam.” In 2022, three received one-year prison sentences, while the remaining defendants were sentenced to six months in prison (Human Rights Without Frontiers 2023b).

The AROPL case in Algeria, however, also proves that international protests on behalf of religious liberty are not always in vain. After international human rights watchdogs publicly complained, charges were dropped, although AROPL believers in Algeria remain under a fatwa declaring them heretic and are not allowed to gather or worship together.

We have already mentioned the dramatic story of 104 AROPL refugees—women, men, children, elderly devotees—blocked and beaten by the Turkish police at the Kapikule border with Bulgaria that they were trying to cross to seek asylum in the European Union. They were put under threat of being deported to their countries of origin, where they would have been at risk of being arrested, tortured, and even killed. The fact that Türkiye itself considers the AROPL members heretic, particularly because of their theory that even prophets committed mistakes, certainly played a role in the incident.

Here again an international mobilization saved them. Thanks in particular to Willy Fautré of Human Rights Without Frontiers, who also mobilized the United Nations ECOSOC-accredited NGO CAP-Liberté de conscience and its President, Thierry Valle, the case was picked up by some Western media. United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of association and peaceful assembly,

Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, met with AROPL members during his official visit to Algeria, on September 24, 2023 (Human Rights Without Frontiers 2023c).

On July 4, 2023, three United Nations Special Rapporteurs, together with other United Nations officials, had already published a joint statement where they stated that the AROPL refugees faced serious risks if deported and that the obligation not to send back asylum seekers to countries where they may be persecuted or killed is “absolute and non-derogable.” The Rapporteurs were Nazila Ghanea, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; Felipe González Morales, Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants; and Fernand de Varennes, Special Rapporteur on minority issues. Priya Gopalan, Chair-Rapporteur of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, also signed the statement (United Nations 2023).

Less understandable is why the AROPL was harassed in Sweden, where some seventy members, including the leader of the religion, had settled in a farm called Bergslagsgården in Sävsjön near Hällefors, after they had spent some time in Germany. Between 2019 and 2022 a series of raids and inspections under various pretexts targeted the community. Some AROPL devotees were British citizens, but after Brexit they were denied a residence permit. The police raids instilled fear in the peaceful community, and the businesses they legally operated were disrupted. The police authorities explicitly said that the aim of their action was to get rid of the AROPL (*Sverige S Radio* 2023), a result they eventually achieved as by 2023 all members had left Sweden (Fautré 2024).

Why this happened in a country generally respectful of human rights remains somewhat mysterious. As all religions, the AROPL does have disgruntled ex-members and the word “cult” was used by the police and the media. It is possible that the usual anti-cult organizations were at work, but there is no evidence that this was the case. Iraqi immigrants to Sweden who adhere to a conservative brand of Islam and other Islamic radicals certainly bad-mouthed the AROPL, but the local police are not supposed to crack down on heretics.

Unless they received false information from foreign countries, perhaps the police were just concerned about possible trouble between the AROPL and Muslim fundamentalists in Sweden. They believed the easiest solution was to compel the AROPL believers to leave the country. However, this would hardly be compatible with Sweden’s human rights tradition. In democratic countries, those

persecuted by radicals who accuse them of heresy should be protected, not harassed by the police.

Another strange story happened in Thailand. AROPL believer Hadee Laepankaeo, his wife Sunee Satanga, and their daughter Nadia were among the 104 blocked when they tried to cross the border from Türkiye into Bulgaria. They are now in Poland. Since the AROPL believes in a Divine Just State and proclaims that the allegiance should be ultimately directed to God and his vicegerent only, in Thailand its members are accused of *lèse-majesté* and of denying the authority of the King. The fact that before joining the AROPL Laepankaeo was politically active in a movement criticizing the prerogatives and power of the King of Thailand probably played against him as well (Fautré and Foreman 2024).

On December 30, 2022, after he had given a speech promoting the newly released *The Goal of the Wise*, Laepankaeo was taken outside of his home by security agents and beaten, resulting in injuries including the loss of a tooth. He was subsequently detained for two days, and on January 23, 2023, escaped to Türkiye. Thirteen other members who had remained in Thailand were arrested while participating in a peaceful march of protest in Had Yai, Songkhla Province, South Thailand, on May 14, 2023. While the strict application of *lèse-majesté* laws offers the legal ground to persecute the AROPL in Thailand, in fact conservative Shia clerics are those who incite the government to crack down on the group (Fautré and Foreman 2024).

It is not surprising that a religion that makes claims mainline Islam regards as heretic and openly criticizes the Islamic authorities and scholars is persecuted in Muslim countries, although one would expect a different treatment in Sweden and perhaps in Thailand as well. However, the recent story of the AROPL is one of persecution but also of resilience. All those we interviewed are not giving up. The AROPL mostly spreads its religion through the Internet with state-of-the-art equipment. They also have among their members professional journalists. In the Turkish case, they were dispatched to where the incident was happening and were able to report firsthand. News and images were then distributed through the satellite TV, YouTube, and social media channels of the AROPL, which reached a global audience. Human rights organizations and, as we have seen, the United Nations themselves, were also able to help. Despite attempts to suppress it, and

severe persecution in some countries, AROPL has proved capable of resisting and even growing, particularly through its skilled use of new technologies.

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