TIMESONLINE

From The Times

June 14, 2008

Preaching peace and tolerance in the face of persecution

The leader of a pacific but controversial branch of Islam explains why his sect continues to grow

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Hadhrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad: based in London, persecuted in Pakistan

On the day that Hadhrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad was made caliph of the Ahmadiyya Muslims he was terrified. “That day made me very embarrassed,” he says, recalling the moment five years ago when the sect elected him Khalifa, leader of the worldwide community. Trained as an agricultural economist in his native Pakistan, and only 53 at the time, he admits that his nerves showed. “When you see the video, you will see me crying . . . If you realise the importance of your work, and your obligations, and that you’re going to be answerable to one God . . . that makes you so scared it’s unbelievable.”

Allah gave him strength, he says. By the next morning the fear had subsided and he set to work from his London base, leading the estimated 70 million Ahmadiyya Muslims in more than 180 countries. The challenge was huge, not least because the sect, which celebrates the centenary of its founder’s death this year, is controversial.

Founded in 1889 by an Indian Muslim, Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the Ahmadiyya movement believes its founder to be the Messiah awaited not only by Muslims, but by Christians, Jews and other faiths. Jesus survived the Crucifixion, Ahmadis believe, eventually dying in Kashmir. For many mainstream Muslims, Ahmadiyya belief contravenes the Prophet Muhammad’s status as the final prophet. Some go so far as to call them non-Muslims.

With controversy has come persecution. In Pakistan, Ahmadis are legally a non-Muslim minority, which means blasphemy laws ban them from engaging in Muslim practices, from using mosques and attending Haj to using the Muslim greeting “Salaam”.

Worse than discrimination is the physical danger. In the town of Rabwah, the Ahmadi administrative centre in Pakistan, one mosque exhorts followers over minaret loudspeakers to kill Ahmadis. In Indonesia, after a government-appointed panel recommended banning the sect, hundreds of Muslims in western Java set fire to an Ahmadi mosque.

For a movement whose motto is “Love for All, Hatred for None”, such venom should shock. But Hadrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad, who has the calmness of a Foreign Office mandarin, greets such developments with equanimity. “All the prophets were persecuted,” he points out, sitting in a conservatory at the sect’s London mosque, elegant in his customary white turban and a dove-grey sherwani. “Other Muslims cannot tolerate \ claim to be a prophet. They see him as a reformer, but as to the claim of prophethood, these mullahs are deadly against it. That is why we are being persecuted.”

Persecution has not stopped the sect from growing — by hundreds of thousands of converts a year, claims His Holiness — most notably in Africa. The growth is in part the result of a growing disillusionment with mainstream Islam. “Now \ know the nature of these so-called religious leaders,” he says. “They can no longer deceive the Muslim umma.”

The Khalifa’s emphasis on peace and tolerance stands in striking contrast to the firebrand radicals that make the news pages. In a recent Friday khutba in the marble-and-carpeted elegance of the Baitul Futuh Mosque, he speaks the importance of the path of mercy, asking that Allah grant wisdom to those who might not follow it. The audience — well-dressed men in suits and karakul caps, in turbans and bright African robes, in jeans, with the odd baseball cap worn backwards — is reverent, listening, hushed, to his Urdu, or the English translation on headphones. (The women listen from a separate room, below.) From a booth above the mosque, a sound technician captures the recitation, for broadcast on MTA, a satellite television station for the Ahmadiyya community.

During the sermon, the only hint of danger comes from the young men in dark suits and flat Peshawari caps, flanking the caliph and dotting the mosque. Since an earlier caliph was stabbed during prayers in Pakistan, volunteers have guarded the movement’s leaders. “If I were to go back to Pakistan, you would not see me any more,” His Holiness says with a rueful smile.

The mosque gives a sense of peace — and striking prosperity. Outside the mosque’s homoeopathic clinic — free to all — well-heeled Muslims mingle in a parking lot dotted with Mercedes. Ahmadi Muslims have done well, largely because the movement has emphasised education for both men and women. “The Koran tells us that every nation, every person, has goals to achieve,” Hadhrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad says. “Without education, you cannot achieve. And you cannot have true knowledge of the Creator, either.”

In Britain, the community has produced a clutch of professionals. In Pakistan, despite discrimination, Ahmadi Muslims have studded the top tiers of civil service and the Army. They are active in charity works — schools and wells for Africa, help for disaster victims from Pakistan to New Orleans, and donations for mainstream causes, from Save the Children to the Great Ormond Street Hospital. The essence of being an Ahmadi Muslim, their spiritual leader suggests, is relatively simple. “It’s about honesty,” he says. “Loving peace. Hard work. And being true to the Creator.”

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