



Extended Meaning of Prophet and Prophecy: Reviewing “New Shelter” of Ahmadiyyah and Mormonism

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Abstract

This study looks at the contemporary phenomena of the birth of two religions within Islam and Christianity, namely Ahmadiyyah and Mormonism. Through the frame of world religion classification, this study emphasizes what makes these sects become and classified by many scholars as ‘New Religions’ while other sects are not. This study re-looks at how hybrid religions have been crafted, developed and classified based on the age of the religion and where those religions first appeared, this study also looks at the historical process of how these hybrid religions became new religions. By considering the historical process, understanding prophecy, religious teaching, believe and particular interpretation over the main religions, this study aims to understand the emergent process of ‘new religions’ as temporary shelters for illegitimate sects. By comparing two sects, I conclude that these new religions have some common grounds which can be seen through interpreting the meaning of ‘prophet’ and ‘prophecy’, religious entities that make these sects excluded from the big umbrellas they are under Islam and Christianity.

Keywords:

Religion, Sect, Prophet, Prophecy

Introduction

The development of world religion is fast and quite unpredictable. Their popularity has toned down the faces of primal religions. The development of world religions can’t be separated from globalization issues and the spirit of proselytizer (*Da’I* - Missionaries) in spreading

their religions. If we look at the big picture of world religions, we can only find Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism as well as many other religions that have big number of adherents. While religions with small number of adherents such as Taizu in China, Slavic in Russia, Kejawen in Indonesia are classified as folk religions or even as primal religions which are considered illegitimate by the state. To put it simply, local and primal religions are considered as second class religions in the religious contestation.

Similarly, if we look at the historical process of world religions, we will see how these world religions have begun with small number of followers called small sect-group. Christianity in Jerusalem was only a small sect group in Jewish tradition as the adherent of Christ from Nazareth. Muslims, as Muhammad's followers were coming from suburban area in Arabic peninsula, in the land of *Hijaz*, the heritage land of Kinanah¹. Hinduism started in the sub-Indian continental. This religion in the beginning was portrayed as endemic religion called as Sanata Dharma and only belonged to black people from Indus valley communities (Armstrong 1994:43). Nowadays, through migration and missionary, Christian has the largest number of followers in the world, Islam has the widest distribution across continents and Hinduism becomes popular in both western and eastern. Judaism is the most admirable since it came from small and sporadic groups, but they stick together in building their nation and now they became one of the most populous religions. I assume that all world religions also did the same.

In seeing the emergence of world religions which are coming from small sects, it is also interesting to talk about small sects from world religions. Surely, world religions were not crafted with single voice identity. There are many voice identities as denomination of these religions. These

1 Kinanah is a great ancestor of Arabian tribes in the Hijaz land (Jabbar, 1996:3)

denominations are also called as sects. Interestingly, although these sects have different interpretations about the main religions and different way to practice their believes, these sects are still recognized under the umbrella of the main religions.

The emergence of new sects in the main religions is a common phenomenon and is accepted as a part of religion dynamics. Here I see main religions as great mansions in which big loyal family members live. Yet, each family member in the house has a fundamental agreement about their Meta narrative and cosmological belief.

A sibling rivalry in a big family is natural, although they are also able to detach from each other. It is similar with the contestation between Sunni and Shia in Islamic body, a competition between Catholicism and Protestant in the big house of Christianity and so on. While in the classification of family, there is also family member that are exiled from their own house and imposed to build their own new house (new religion). Here it is fascinating to see whether the sect expulsion was purely ideological matter, or there is historical problem behind.

With these cases, I try to understand religious teaching from Ahmadiyyah and Mormonism that were ostracized from their own family. Ahmadiyyah in the beginning was no more than an Islamic sect. It was founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in India, now Pakistan. Ahmad claimed that he was a *Mujaddid* (a reformer) in terms of prophecies (Lavan 1974:4). Ahmad also recognized himself as the promised leader, Imam Mahdi, who was waited by Muslims on the Judgment Day (*yaum al-qiyamah*). Ahmadiyyah also has its own holy book, namely *Tadzkirah*.

The pin-point controversy about Ahmadiyyah and other Islamic groups is about the interpretative meaning of prophet (*nabi*) and prophecy (*nubunwah*). To put it simply, Ahmadiyyah reinterpreted the meaning of Muhammad's prophet-hood and recognized Ahmad as a prophet as well. Ahmad is recognized as the promised Messiah (*Al Masih al Maw'ud*), or as

Al-Mahdi (the promised imam in Islamic prophecy). This interpretation could not be accepted by the major groups of Islam (Sunni-Syiah). They argue that the prophet Muhammad is the seal of prophet hood (*Khatam an-nubumwah*). As the impact of this interpretation, Ahmadiyyah was ostracized from the big house of Islam and demanded to build their own house. Indeed, in their own homeland, Pakistan, this movement has been banned and called as a part of religious heresy.

Similar to this case happened as well with Mormonism. Mormonism was founded by Joseph Smith. Smith was claimed to receive divine revelation from God, the Father and Christ. Smith was also claimed to have been revealed by an angel called Moroni that leads him into the golden plate, a buried book which reveals about Judeo-Christian. Through his book, the Book of Mormon, he got a lot of followers and build Mormonism and Latter Day Saint Movement (LDSM).

The most significant point in the Mormonism is about the cosmological belief about God/s, family structure and religious collectivism. The follower of Mormon also recognized him as the prophet who is at the same level as other prophets, such as Moses, Elijah (Arabic: *Ilyas*), etc. Esposito narrated a fascinating point about Mormonism. It is how Mormon interprets Christianity through their perspective about America as the descendent of the lost tribe of ancient Israel.

The controversy about Mormonism is about Smith's first revelation. In his revelation, the Lord gave him an instruction to not follow churches, and to use the Book of Mormon as canonical book. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was based on direct revelation and correct doctrine. Furthermore, Mormon's belief about the concept of trinity, marriage and others were also contradicting with most churches. The climax of the conflict was when Smith was murdered by a non-Mormon in 1841 (Davies 2003:14).

In seeing both of these sects, they are facing a bunch of rejections. In terms of sect or denomination of main religion, the existences of these sects were rejected by the majority of their main religions. They are recognized as subversive groups, as defiant, unoriginal and heretic from their main religions. The resistance from the main religions regarding these sects can be seen from how these sects are often called as deviant or false groups.

In terms of new religions, these sects are facing numerous dilemmas, because these religions are having strong relation with their main religion. In building new religion, the problem will be complex, because religion is far matter about identity, than it is just matter of belief and practice, more over just a matter of interpretation. In this point, I would like to point out that, although Ahmad and Smith were claimed as theophanies², their claims were hardly accepted by the major religions.

In seeing these phenomena, it is interesting to analyze what makes them different from any other sects, what makes them to be classified as new religions, and the reasons behind these phenomena. Since I am looking at these sects from their religious teachings, it is relevant to reexamine and relook the appropriateness of these sects for being new religions, as the result of 'failure' for being 'true Muslim' or 'true Christian'. In 'finding the truth', the meaning of prophet and prophecy will be contested in the theological spectrum.

Ahmadiyyah: Its Historical Context and Movement

Ahmadiyyah was founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908) during British colony in India. Ahmad was born in Qadian, a village in the Punjab district. He came from a middle class family, and his ancestor is *Qadi* (judge), thus it is called as Qadian. His close relation with British

² Theophany, a term from Eliade for the revelation of the sacred over the profane.

colony made him possible to learn Qur'an from several tutors and also. He was able to learn Christianity as well. He then moved to Sialkot, a place where he knew what missionary was all about. After the death of his father, he came back to Punjab. He found that Arya Samaj, a Hindu priest, was actively teaching Hindu's consciousness. Seeing these phenomena, Ahmad proposed an open debate with Hindus and Christians based on the scriptures and religious traditions (Lavan 1974; Adamson 2010; Smith 1946; Ahmad 1978).

In the beginning, Ahmad used debates to defend Islamic territory from Hindus, Sikhs, and Evangelical Christians. After the birth of his son from his second wife, Ahmad, in 1889, announced Ahmadiyyah as a community organization. He claimed that he received revelation from a divine being and commanded as *mujaddid* (reformer). Lavan explained interestingly that Ahmad argued that Jesus, based on Moses prophecy, had come after 1400 years, and now the promised Messiah must appear after 1400 years (1976;18).

The reason Ahmad established Ahmadiyyah movement was to build allegiance of Muslims across the world in responding to the issues regarding Ottoman Empire. Ahmad argued that Islam should have a caliphate and sultan is essential to keep the unity of Muslims (Adamson 2010:33). Thus, in establishing Ahmadiyyah, Ahmad did not refer to himself, but to Muhammad the prophet from Arabic peninsula.

Another reason was to respond the stagnancy of Muslims in Punjab. As his claim that he was a *Mujaddid*, Ahmad reopened the stagnant interpretation over Islamic believe and reappraisal of peacefulness. Ahmad wrote many books to spread out his ideas about reinterpretation of religious texts from both Christianity and Islam. With various books written by Ahmad, he was famous then as a thinker, leader, reformer and writer.

Ahmadiyyah's Teaching and Controversy

Lavan explained that 1880 becomes the turning point of Ahmad. In this year, he published a book called *Barahin Ahmadiyyah* (The Proof of Ahmadiyyah) as a response to Arya Samaj's book, *Satyarth Prakash* (The Light of Truth). Ahmad also wrote *Masih Hindustan Mein* translated in English as Jesus in India. In this book, Ahmad stated that "Jesus deliverance from death on the cross and his subsequent journey to India in subsequent the lost tribe of Israel" (Ahmad 1978:3). In this book, Ahmad also explained that Jesus was set free from crucifixion and went across Nabirus and Iran. Then, Jesus came to Srinagar-Kashmir, a place where the lost tribe of Israel was settled.

After Ahmad's claim regarding the revelation, he announced that he was the reformer of the Ten Commandments. Lavan explained that the teaching is similar to Islam such as *sholat* (pray), *shahadah* (testimony) and so on, except the point of *zakat* (almsgiving) and *hajj* (pilgrim to Mecca) (Lavan 1976:45). As far as it has been traced in the biography of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, I learned that Ahmad never went on a pilgrimage to Mecca. Before converting to Ahmadiyyah, his followers should make allegiance (*bay'ah*) with Ahmad.

In his statement that he was a descendent of Jesus, Ahmad wrote in his book *Tazkiratush Shahadatain* (Remembering the two Testimonies);

"The fourteenth specialty of Jesus Christ was that because of a father, he was not part of the Bani Israel (i.e., Children of Israel). He was, nevertheless, the last Prophet of the chain of Moses, and came fourteen centuries after Moses. Similarly, even though I do not belong to a family of Quraish, I have been deputed (by Allah) in the fourteenth century (after the Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H), and am the last of all". (Ahmad 2008:14)

Through a brief statement above, we can see how Ahmad saw himself as the promised Messiah. Lavan cited the important point about the meaning of prophet (*nabi*) and prophecy (*nubuwwah*), as Ahmad said the word '*nabi*' or the prophet as "one who receives tiding from Allah and announces the same" (Lavan 1976:23). With this definition, I understand that the prophecy in Ahmadiyyah context has a broad definition, either someone who brings a new religion or is a reformer of the previous religion which can be called as a prophet (*nabi*) in the religious term.

Valentine wrote that Ahmad continued his claim a promised Messiah with his teaching of love, peace, sympathy and tolerance (Valentine 2008:127). His followers respect him by calling him as '*hadzratul Messiah*' (The Grand Messiah).

The prominent part of Ahmadiyyah teaching is about tolerance, peace across religions and reinterpreting of religious texts. Esposito mentions that Ahmadiyyah's followers became modern and educated Muslim reformers and already propagated their ideology across Asia, Africa and Europe. However, these days Ahmadiyyah community is ostracized from their Muslim family, because of the interpretation of prophet and prophecy. Thus, they have to rebuild their home which suits their ideology. If it must, the temporary shelter can be called as a 'New Religion'.

The Rejection of Ahmadiyyah

In seeing the rejection, new religions are typically has limitation to practice their religions freely. With several important exceptions also these new religions are cannot openly promote their faith. There are some important points that made Ahmad become a controversy in Islam. It is about his claim for being Messiah or the promised prophet. It is why Ahmadiyyah is denied in most of Islamic countries. Here I argue that in majority of Islamic perspectives, there are some reasons for Ahmadiyyah rejections.

First, Ahmadiyyah is recognized as a heretical practice of Islam, therefore it was excluded from its big family and demanded to build their own shelter. Although the founder of Ahmadiyyah claimed to get a divine revelation, his claim was not recognized by the majority of Muslims. Second, the Ahmadiyyah faith is a post-Islamic religion — which is theoretically and solidly considering Muhammad’s ontological status as the “Seal of the Prophets” (Qur’an 33:40). Apart from the prophecy of *Almahdi al maumud* (Promised Imam) in the time of the Judgment Day, Islam cannot conceive of a post-Islamic act of revelation (*nubuwwah*), or theologially tolerate a post-Islamic claim to revelation.

In terms of new religion, historically, politically and theologially, of course some Ahmadiyyah practices are failed to contain new religion. Although nowadays Ahmadiyyah, in terms of movement and religion, have been established its administrative capital, in England, and being transmuted into a “new religion” in the West, but legally it is still a big question, whether it is a sect in a religion or a religion in the global contestation.

Mormonism: Its Historical Context

Mormonism was founded by Joseph Smith in the Victorian period, in the spirit of The Great Awakening, in 1830s in New York. Smith (1805-1844) claimed that he got a divine revelation to restore Christian churches on earth. Smith came from a middle class family. His father was an unsuccessful migrant who lived in Palmyra, New York. Living in the Evangelical Christian family made young Smith asked about denomination in Christianity and which churches he should follow.

Shipp explained that in 1820, when Smith was 14 years old, he faced a heavenly divine experience. He claimed that the sacred (divine) entity had come to him in a direct present (1987; ix). According to Taysom, in Mormonism website, when Smith was facing God, he asked which church

he should join, and Jesus told him that the true Christian church was no longer on earth and advised him not to join any of the sects (Taysom 2010)

Three years after his direct communication with the divine (theophany), Smith revealed with the appearance of angel Moroni. With the angel's direction, Smith found the golden plate which reveals the history of ancient America. According to Esposito, the revelation of Mormonism says that the Native Americans are the descendents of the lost tribe of Israel. Yet, the book was buried because Mormon was killed by tribesmen (Esposito 2006:500).

After the book of Mormon revealed upon Smith, he wrote *The Book of Mormon* in English with a divine guide. The sect was then called Mormonism. Together with his family and his followers, Smith moved to Ohio. Smith called his followers as Saints and the worship place as temple. In the new place, Mormonism was not really welcomed; there were conflicts and persecutions between Mormons and non-Mormons. In searching of the save land, they moved to Missouri, a place imagined by Mormons as the Jerusalem in America and established the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Through this, Mormonism has enriched religious sectarian in the American religious history.

Mormonism's Teaching and Controversy

Esposito mentioned that Mormonism contributes to the incredible sectarian diversity of Christianity in the last nineteenth century (Esposito 2006:500). It is interesting when Esposito also classified Mormonism as a new religion. Taysom explained that the scripture within Mormonism is never final or complete, the corpus then becomes extended into four canonical books; *The Bible*, *The Book of Mormon*, the *Doctrin and Covenant*, and the *Pearl of Great Price* (Taysom 2010). Here I argue that Mormonism is not completely sectarian or a new religion. Neither

is Ahmadiyyah. Both of them still recognize the holy books of the main religions as their books.

The Book of Mormon as an additional book in Mormonism is mainly talking about Lehi and his Family. Lehi walked from Jerusalem around 600.B.C.E across Arabian land, and then he built a boat for sailing to look for other promised land. Lehi had two opposite descendents, namely Nephite and Lamanite. The conflict ended with the resurrection (*bi'tsah*) of Christ to Lehi's descendent.

Like many other Christians, Mormons are also baptized, have communions, sacraments and many other rituals. The difference is that Mormonism's ritual is based on Joseph Smith revelation in 1830s. In terms of baptism, it is possible in Mormonism to do baptize over a dead person. It will give the possibilities for the deceased to learn gospel in the afterlife. In terms of marriage, Mormons are allowed to conduct polygamy. As written in "The Family: A Proclamation to The World" published by Mormonism. There are twelve interesting points, some of them are; first, all human beings are created in the image of God. Second, God created Adam and Eve pertained for potential parenthood as husband and wife. Third, husband and wife have a solemn responsibility to love and care for each other and for their children. "Children are heritage of the Lord" (Psalm 127:3). Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs, to teach them to love and serve one another and to observe the commandments of God ("The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Proclamation" 1995).

Only from the three points above, I understand and argue how Mormonism perceived the image of God as a personal image, and how family, righteousness, love and respect towards each other are very important for them. Seeing the diverse teaching, it is relevant to ask what make this sect rejected in its own family. In this point, I argue that the

basic rejection is about fundamental belief between Mormonism and non-Mormonism, such as cosmological belief, the meaning of prophet and prophecy and prophetic treatise (*risalah nubunwah*).

Common Ground: Reviewing the Meaning of Prophet and Prophecy

Both of Ahmadiyyah and Mormonism are facing similar cases. They are recognized as great apostasy and as great deviant sects from their religious families. Running from debatable idea, it is safe to call them as new religions, but it is also complicated in the different ways. Constructing 'new religion' is much more complex than just moving mountain even building a new nation-state. However it is, I would argue that the basic rejections of these sects are their differences over their main religions in fundamental ways.

Here I noted that both Ahmadiyyah and Mormonism have some aspects in common. First is about interpretation of the lost tribe of ancient Israel. When Ahmadiyyah interprets that the lost tribe was in Kashmir, Mormonism argues that the lost tribe was from America. It is interesting to see that both of these sects consider the lost tribe very important. These new prophets, Ahmad and Smith, struggled for saving the lost tribe of Israel. Regardless about prophecy, understanding this claim is very important. I think that interpreting the lost tribe is the main gate to enter another interpretation about prophet and prophecy. The lost tribe was based on the verses in the Bible "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mathew 15; 24). Here, historically, Jesus was sent for the lost tribe of Israel. Thus it is understandable that how both Ahmad and Smith believed about the lost tribe and that Jesus came to their lands

The second similarity is about teaching characteristic. Both of Ahmadiyyah and Mormonism are emphasizing love, respect and care for each other. The lesson that is similar with the main teaching of Jesus from

Nazareth is in giving compassion and affection to others. In seeing these phenomena, I see how these hybrid religions were not coming from a blank space. They have 'Role Model' in how the prophet in the latter-day (*yaum al akhir*) should look like.

The third is about the main points of their common ground. Here I see the most important point that should be highlighted. It is about the meaning of prophet and prophecy. It is fundamental to see if these sects are either accepted or rejected by their religious family and that is the most complex problem. In understanding historical context of both of these sects, I see that the meaning of prophet and prophecy in Ahmadiyyah and Mormonism are not sealed and it does not stop in just one interpretation. God was continuously talking to human beings through his prophets and also continuously giving good tidings from heaven (*an-naba' al Adzim*). The text of God's revelation from sacred canopy was not really closed with the death of Muhammad and Jesus, but it continues from generation to generation.

Some points can be drawn from this. First is about the nature of prophecy itself, either Christianity or Islam have prophecy about the descent of Jesus for the second time. The prophecy also said that the leader in the doomsday (*Imam*) is called The Messiah or Imam Mahdi (*Al-Mahdi al-Man'ud*). By the nature of prophecy, it is possible to review about how this prophet will look like. Both Mirza Ahmad and Smith were standing on the interpretation that the last prophet will appear in chaotic days and in the time where religions need a reformer.

The second point is about the meaning of prophet itself. Prophet (*nabi*) has multi interpretative meanings. In Arabic term, prophet (*nabi*) literally means a story teller. It is derived from the word *naba* which means 'telling'. Culturally, it is also used for someone who delivers a message from far distance even from "another world", from the place that is beyond reality. Generally writing, based on culture, a poet, a writer,

a singer or even a prophet who has the ability to tell ancient-archaic or mythologist story will be called as '*nabi*'. This term then evolved and became the term for those who got revelation and mission from God.

It is undeniable that the appearance of the sacred was not monophonic. In terms of Islam and Christianity, everyday there are a bunch of men saying that they got '*mysterious tremendum*' due to the appearance of the sacred, the divine. The miracle of God does not stop, it continues. Through this, I argue that the nature of prophet and prophecy has also giving possibilities to open and to understand the nature of these sects.

Conclusion

Ahmadiyyah and Mormonism are complicated phenomena, not only based on their teaching, but also their affiliation with big religions, Islam and Christianity. Ahmadiyyah, founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in Qadian, was neither welcomed nor accepted by Muslim majority. Indeed, Ahmadiyyah followers should leave their enclave due to persecution issues. Similar with Ahmadiyyah, Mormonism should move from one place to another due to conflict issues. Joseph Smith as the prophet of Mormonism was killed by non-Mormon mob.

If we relook at the historical context and teachings from both of these sects, we can understand that these sects actually promote respect towards others, live in diversity and many other teachings which are full of love and compassion. Both Ahmad and Smith were inspired by Jesus teachings for his community. Both of them also declared themselves as prophets who got revelation from God.

After reviewing the common ground between the two, I argue that the nature of prophet and prophecy has a lot of interpretation. Thus, although both of these groups have their own prophets, they are still in affiliation with the main religions. In categorizing these groups as a

sectarian or as ‘new religion’ was much complicated. Generally, I agree with Esposito in seeing these groups as ‘new religions’ in modern days, because they were neither accepted nor welcomed by their original religions.

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