

## Sufi is a danger for Ayatollahs

Often a lot of theology is involved but sometimes conflicts in Iran have a plain, material background. Like the difficulties in the holy city of Qom between a number of high ayatollahs and the mystical Sufis of the Nematollah Gonabadi Order. At the background there is the question to whom the Iranians will by their voluntary religious contribution, to the ayatollah of their choice or, and this is happening more and more, to charity organisations of different Sufi orders.

This is said by Seyed Mostafa Azmayesh, representative of the Nematollah Gonabadi Order in Europe.

Last week in Iran 52 followers of this Sufi Order were sentenced to a year in prison, 74 flagellations by a whip and a sum of money. On top of this, two lawyers are not allowed to practice their profession for 5 years.

For now this is the outcome of a big disagreement, which disturbed last year in Qom the month of the Ramadan and that led in the end of January this year to two big outbursts.

Followers of the Basiji militia destroyed a gathering place of the Sufis. Afterwards they raised a tent in which they displayed prohibited goods like weapons and drugs, pretended to have been found in this destroyed gathering place.

The school children of Qom were forced to take a look at this as a warning against the pernicious Sufis.

Seyed Mostafa Azmayesh lives in Paris and regularly he travels to the Netherlands in order to be in contact with followers of the Order.

‘The Sufis are a strategically danger for the ayatollahs’ he explains in a hotel in Schagen in the North of Holland.

Azmayez speaks English and French fluently. At the Sorbonne University in Paris he studied laws and Islam. From the early eighties he lives in the French capital.

When the gathering place in Qom became the prey of the Basiji militia by mobile phone he was informed minute by minute of the situation.

In the past this was different. Azmayesh; “In 1978 they burned a gathering place of the Sufis in Teheran but the news about this reached the rest of the world much later”.

In a few lines Azmayesh sketches the difficult relation between the Sufis and the Sji istic main current in Iran. The Sufis are tolerated in a certain way if they live up to their place in society.

The Sufis acknowledge the holy books, the Koran and the sayings of the Prophet but at the same time they value very much the personal contact with the divine, by a spiritual leader, in Farsi and Arabic a Hadi.

Azmayesh: “I know the Koran and the traditions. But the source of inspiration is the direct contact. A theologian” he says; “looks constantly at the past because he is continuously busy by old scriptures. Our vision is more oriented towards the future, on the ongoing evolution”.

This direct spiritual contact is also possible outside the frame of Islam. “Sufism was there before Islam” says Azmayesh, who thinks that Mohammed, before he was called to be a prophet, was a mystic. Once also was told of ayatollah Khomeini that he was attracted to Sufi mysticism.

Therefore other religious people did not want to touch this cup by which Khomeini had quenched his thirst. When Khomeini started to become active in politics his interest in Sufi mysticism ended. The Sufis mainly draw on older, Meccan chapters of the Koran. Here they recognize much mystical elements. The orthodox Islam and the theologians often have more interest in the younger Medicin parts of the Koran, because they supply them more material for religious laws.

The last years Sufism attract many new followers in Iran. Azmayesh distinguishes two groups.

“There are people who have the need for the real, direct spiritual contact and there are people who become Sufi because they reject the ayatollahs. Almost 30 years of Islamic Republic has caused an aversion of traditional Islam by a lot of people. The Sufis offer a way out, with them people are in another atmosphere without having to abandon their own religion. The spiritual experience may differ but the Sufis are within the Islamic tradition.

However, their number increases continuously and this makes some of the ayatollahs nervous. It is a threat to their base of power. The esteem of an ayatollah is measured by the amount of followers he has. Their students support them by the income out of the religious Khomstaxes. Believers give this to the ayatollah of their choice. Commonly this is collective.

Sometimes a whole province chooses a certain ayatollah, sometimes it is a clan or another group of people. Due to the dissatisfaction with the rulers since 1978 more and more people choose to offer their money to Sufi charity organisations instead of an ayatollah.

The campaign against the Sufis in the city of Qom was led by five ayatollahs: Shirazi, Hamadani and Golpeyegani, Lankearani, Yazdi.

Up to four years ago there were little problems in Qom. The Sufis gathered in what they call a Khanega, a modest gathering place. It reminds a little bit of the times of the Dutch republic in which the not Reformed Dutch believers gathered in shelter churches.

16 years ago Mohammed Shariat died, the sheikh of the Nematollah Gonabadi Sufis in Qom. A son of him became the new sheikh. He no longer bothered about the unwritten law that the Sufis had to know their place and he enlarged the house of his father to a so-called Hosseinije.

For the Sufi Muslims the Hosseinije is the second largest gathering place, next to the Mosque.

The Hosseinije is named after the famous grandson of Mohammed; Hussain, who died fighting against a superior power 14 centuries ago. There were ayatollahs who approved that the Sufis had built a Hosseinije but this they regarded as a provocation.

The authorities first came up with formal arguments, the building had to be regarded as a personal house but in fact it functioned as a gathering place, without a written permission. Lawyers of the Sufis found an answer by having the building owned by a religious organisation.

The authorities came with a counter move by appointing a manager for the building. The last Mohrram it came to a confrontation. First, what Azmayesh calls extremists, occupied the building. The sheikh called on young followers of the Order who drove out the extremists. This was the cause for the important ayatollah Shirazi (who by the way condemned the murder in 2004 on Theo van Gogh in a Fatwa) to undertake action. He called the dervishes impure, they make the city dirty according to him.

He put an ultimatum to the government: or you remove the dervishes or we do it ourselves. Tensions raised high. The authorities wanted both parties to talk with each other. A decision was taken that the dervishes were allowed to stay for some months in the building, until the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month of Moaharram, 31<sup>st</sup> of January. The tensions raised for Sufis in the whole of Iran. They saw a dangerous precedent, because in many more cities there are Hosseinije buildings. They did not want to accept the happenings in Qom as such. A Sufi sheikh even compared the situation in Qom with the historic battle of Kerbela in which the holy Hussain was killed. This charged the confrontation with a heavy religious load.

The Basidji's won and with a bulldozer they demolished the Hosseinije and the house of the sheikh. After this event the ayatollahs have been divided in three camps. On the one hand Shirazi and his followers. He is strongly against ayatollah Montazeri, an aged religious man who was for years the second man behind Khomeini and destined to be his successor before he fell from grace. Montazeri had publicly argued against the terrible violation of human rights and mass executions and therefore was not allowed to leave his home any more.

Azmayesh praises the old Montazeri, who was supported by other reformative ayatollahs as a courageous man. And then there is the 3<sup>rd</sup> camp of ayatollahs, by far the largest and this is the silent camp. They represent the government who did not know how to deal with the situation. They were, with the threat of a war at the background, not waiting for a conflict like this.

Neither the religious leader Ali Khamenei nor president Ahmedinejad said much about the affair. In the end, as shown by the sentences against the dervishes, they took their point of view.