

SHU'UBIA MOVEMENT AS A DEFENSE AGAINST ISLAM

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The word *Shu'ubiyya* is derived from the forty-ninth Sura of the Qor'an, where Allah demands mutual respect between different peoples (*shu'ub*). It was primarily a movement among Persian scribes and officials and their opponents which included some Persians were mostly scholars and philologists. But as Michael Axworthy observes:

Shu'ubiyya sometimes went beyond asserting equality or parity in favor of the superiority of Persian culture, and especially literature. Given the religious history of Persia and the lingering attachment of many Persians to Mazdaean or sub-Mazdaean beliefs, Shu'ubiyya also implied a challenge to Islam, or at least to the form of Islam practised by the Arabs. A satirical contemporary recorded the attitude of a typical young scribe, steeped in the texts that recorded the history and the procedures of the Sassanid monarchy:

The first task is to attack the composition of the Qor'an and denounce its inconsistencies.... If anyone in his presence acknowledges the pre-eminence of the Companions of the Prophet he pulls a grimace, and turns his back when their merits are extolled.... And then he straight away interrupts the conversation to speak of the policies of Ardashir Papagan, the administration of Anushirvan, and the admirable way the country was run under the Sasanians.... (*Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran*, Hurst & Company, London, 2007, (p. 82).

The ultimate solution to such conflicts was synthesis, but the Shu'ubiyya provided the Persians a sense of self-confidence and tried to preserve the pre-Islamic culture as leading to a synthesis.

Like the religious controversies of the time, such as about free will and about the nature of the Qor'an the Shu'ubiyya was a sign of conflict, change and self-assertion.

Even though Pahlavi "had been becoming a rich cultural language in all dimensions at the hands of the Sasanian ruling classes," Marshall Dodgson notes, "the communally religious books of the Mazdeans were despised and shunned even more readily than those of Christians and

Jews (though even this condemnation was not made inevitable by the Qur'an); they were felt to be obviously false and he who even looked at them was suspected of betraying Islam. But the works of history and of belles-lettres, as well as of natural science, could not be so readily condemned. Moreover, it was this secular Pahlavi tradition that had embodied the cultural support and legitimization for the absolutism of the past. In the name of the caliphal state itself, some Muslims had appealed to its cultural standards as socially indispensable as well as humanly insurpassable. Here the Muslim exclusivity worked more subtly." *The Venture of Islam*, The University of Chicago Press, 1974, (p. 449).