

Foreword

IN HIS CONCLUDING REMARKS to this book, Dr. Anis Obeid has clearly stated his twofold purpose in writing it: "to lay out the core concepts of the Tawhid faith of the Druze within the historical context of its emergence from . . . Islam in the era of the sixth Fatamid caliph, al-Hakim bi Amr Allah" and "to stimulate the Druze community to take a close look at what they have and initiate a process of dialogue with reform in mind." Dr. Obeid's thorough, scholarly narrative succeeds admirably in this double aim, informed by his sincere concern and his deep understanding of both the Druze faith and Western culture. Not only does he logically explore the origins and development of his Druze faith in lucid prose, but he sets out the challenges its followers currently face.

Demonstrating his profound comprehension of the problems facing both the Druze faith and the Druze themselves in the West and Middle East alike, Dr. Obeid rightly identifies the key to the survival of both: how the Druze are to deal with modernity. The Druze, Dr. Obeid explains, should neither lose the identity of their religious faith for the sake of modernity nor lose modernity for the sake of traditional religion, especially when the Druze faith developed as an intellectual revolution within Islam against traditions its adherents saw as contravening the essential spirit of Islam.

By tracing the evolution of the Druze faith over its long history, Dr. Obeid illuminates its nature, allowing the Druze to seek a true understanding of their faith while keeping abreast of modernity in its essential rather than its superficial sense. Very few studies of the Druze have displayed such farsightedness. Thank you, Dr. Obeid, for this most interesting and needed book.

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Open Letter to Dr. Sami Makarem

Regarding his Commentary on Dr. Obeid's Book "The Druze and Their Faith in Tawhid". The Commentary was made public on Dr. Makarem's Web site in December of 2007.

Dear Professor Makarem:

During the symposium on the Druze at the Library of Congress in Washington DC in February 2008, you alluded to me in a brief passing remark that you were planning to share with me some of your thoughts on my book on the Druze; and I expressed my appreciation for any constructive comments from a man of your intellectual caliber. After all you had written a full page Foreward for the book. In that foreward you praised the work in style and substance describing it as thorough, scholarly, sincere, profound etc. and concluded with this statement: *"By tracing the evolution of the Druze faith over its long history, Dr. Obeid illuminates its nature, allowing the Druze to seek a true understanding of their faith while keeping abreast of modernity in its essential rather than its superficial sense. Very few studies on the Druze have displayed such farsightedness. Thank you, Dr. Obeid, for this most interesting and needed book"*.

Later on, towards the middle of March 2008, I began receiving calls from many of my friends pointing to my attention that Dr. Sami Makarem had published on his website comments on my book in Arabic and in English. I was surprised to hear about these comments in this round about way instead of hearing directly from you. I received the Arabic version from a friend who was able to down load it from the Web, and I have just received the English version also.

I was surprised to find a long and tortuous manifesto of over 55 pages the main theme of which is your qualifications as the ultimate authority in this field. You then proceeded to claim that this gave you the right to be the judge and the jury to protect the faith and intimidate the faithful. The commentary seemed to me to reflect more emotionality than a balanced approach based on meaningful dialogue that I hoped my book will help to initiate. Page after page were devoted to the infallibility of your personal assertions, self righteousness, evasive digressions, accusations and slander. While I know as well as you do that we may not see eye to eye on all aspects of the Tawhid Faith, we have always interacted over a long period of time in an atmosphere of respect and brotherhood of shared roots. In fact you had voiced encouragement and support for the efforts of American Druze myself included, in promoting education and encouraging involvement among the Druze in America who do not have the background or the exposure to learn something about their Tawhid faith in a manner that appeals to the western mind. This includes a necessary measure of openness and candor that are hard to implement in the East because of the lack of freedom and tolerance in our native lands. It was for that very reason that I ventured to write my book in which I expressed my own understanding of the Faith, and what I have painstakingly gathered over the years to deal with the challenges that members of the Druze community face when it comes to religion. It took

more than five years of research and encouragement from esteemed members in our community to produce the work, for which I assume full responsibility.

Upon completion of the manuscript I asked the publishers (Syracuse University Press) to send you a copy of my book prior to publication, to have a man of your caliber point to my attention areas that need editing particularly on technical questions such as dates, names and events. I only wish that you had returned the courtesy when you decided to reevaluate the work post facto and at least send me directly your comments prior to publication on the web, or at a minimum after publication.. Regrettably you did not see fit to do that for whatever reasons you may have and I had to discover what you wrote from the Web. That is of course your prerogative but most people would find it underhanded and unethical, certainly not in keeping with (Sidq Allisan wa Hifz al-Ikhwan). In any event I will not indulge in a long tit-for-tat diatribe along the lines you chose to pursue in your commentary. I have neither the time nor the inclination to debase the topic of discussion by dragging it into the emotionality of personal disappointments. I will present some remarks on your commentary in a few paragraphs mainly to set the record straight.

1). I did ask the Syracuse University Press to send you a copy of the manuscript before publication and confirmed receipt through a telephone conversation. During that conversation I also gave you the option to write or not to write a forward to the book based solely on your personal judgment and decision to do so. I also requested your permission to use one of your calligraphy plates for the cover picture. I had bought that plate from one of your past exhibits, and you kindly gave consent in writing. You also volunteered to write a foreward to the book in which, as mentioned earlier, you expressed support and endorsement. If you now feel that you would like to retract what you wrote in the foreward to my book you should feel free to do so, and I will respect that decision and honor it within the legal framework of the publishers. But I would respectfully ask that you do not add insult to injury by resorting to the lame excuses and alibis that you resorted to at the beginning of your extensive commentary. You were neither rushed nor coerced to write what you wrote anymore than you were coerced or rushed in the turn about posture that you adopted in writing your commentary.

2). The theme of your long dissertation is that you and only you are the sole interpreter of what is written in the record, not only because of your expertise in the fields of Islamic philosophy and religion (which I among others publicly recognize) but also because you are uniquely suffused with the spirit of the faith to such an extent that gives you what amounts to be close to infallibility. Bravo. But many of us who like to travel this road could use a little bit of love and compassion from those who have reached the level of exaltation that you seem to have achieved. Further, there are implicit and explicit remarks such as “delusive thinking”, “superficiality”, “suspicious motives” and the like throughout your commentary on what I have written in my book. These are not comments of a scholar who wishes to contribute of his fund of knowledge or even his feelings on the subject, but those of an angry disciplinarian who went well beyond the accepted norms of discourse among peers, friends, and people with shared heritage.

3). While I agree with some of the points that you raised in relation to nuances of the faith, I disagree with much of what you wrote in style and in substance when your message was more a threatening sermon than an enlightened dialogue. You certainly did not address any of the substantive challenges that we all face in daily life in the West, preferring instead the convoluted style that leads to layers upon layers of fog and evasion. Medieval thinking was the norm in medieval times. It is unfortunate that we cannot at least examine some of the assumptions that are imbedded in our traditions and modes of processing the religious questions that impact our lives with clarity and candor and without fear or trepidation. Treachery in politics and apostasy in religion are swords that continue to be pointed at the neck of any body who dares think beyond the veil. It is doubly unfortunate when a member of the educated elite condemns that vital segment of our society to irrelevance in religious matters. You do not need to be reminded that evolution is at the epicenter of our faith and it should be at the epicenter of our practices precisely because that ensures the survival, growth, and safety of what is noble and enduring in our traditions. And that should include all segments of our society. I am not asking to rewrite history, but for a more enlightened reinterpretation in the context of the era in which we live. We have every reason to be indebted to the men and women in our religious establishment, but that should not lead to de facto marginalizing the intelligentsia.

4). During and since the Lebanese civil war several publications appeared that are extremely derogatory to the Druze and their beliefs. Our Books of Wisdom have been published under assumed names and are available to the public along with hostile commentary. I am sure that you and others have read (Bayn al-Akl wa Annabi) and (Masader al-Akeedah Addurziyyah) along with numerous unfavorable edicts and slanderous opinions in Islamic publications including the noted Moroccan social scientist Fatima Mernisi (The Forgotten Queens of Islam). I along with many others am perplexed by the lack of response from you or from others in leadership position in the Druze secular and religious establishments to such slander and accusations. My attempt was in part related to portray to those outside the faith the nobility of our doctrine as I understood that doctrine to be, and to refute the slander and accusations that are heaped upon us by many who wish us harm. It was not and it will never be to upstage any one or to create more confusion than we already have. It is regrettable that you did not even consider this theme with some credit, but chose instead to heap your frustration and anger on my personal effort, and to contradict yourself in the process. Education would not be the antithesis of faith when the threat of punishment is no longer at the forefront of the curriculum. We look with anticipation and hope to the new steps that have begun in Lebanon that we may finally have our libraries, archives, institutions of higher learning, deliberative councils and the like as other faith based communities have.

5). We have something that we can be proud of and yet we are afraid to even discuss how to present it with openness and intellectual honesty. We have had enough persecution and wars that impoverished us and contributed to the lack of progress in education and development as you indicated in your commentary. Thus instead of responding to overtures of candor to the genuine concerns and tribulations that our people face with hardly any education in their faith, we are admonished that we are committing a mortal

sin. Your long commentary is peppered with phrases like “you are not to say...” “frightening scarcity in profound intellectual consciousness...” “Destructive and morbid elements...” I wished that you had exercised the necessary self restraint and refrained from issuing such orders or leveling such accusations that detract from what you could have otherwise offered from your vast fund of knowledge.

6). It is somewhat presumptuous on your part to know what is in a person’s heart unless you are ordained by some divine wisdom to do so. Additionally if you have been invested with the edict of upholding the faith and acting as the sole and incontrovertible authority, we would take that into consideration provided that you disclose the source of your investiture. If not, then perhaps a dose of modesty, along with love and compassion will be more in keeping with a state of mystical bliss that you claim to enjoy. Despite it all I do not begrudge you and I thank you for past support and encouragement, and if you choose to maintain it, your friendship.

I was born and raised in a Druze Muwahhid home with extensive exposure to the religious Ajaweed (including both of my grandfathers), the simplicity of their lives, the self discipline of their demeanor and their adherence to humility and moderation in all aspects of life. Truthfulness (Sidq al-Lisan) and Compassion (Hifz al-Ikhwan) central to the core values were constantly stressed and I tried never to lose sight of them in the wider stage of life. The appellation of Bani Ma’arouf (Ahl al-I’rfan) meant little to me as a child but much more as I began to integrate what I learned in life into the paradigms of truthfulness, seeking enlightenment and compassion that are among the core values of the Tawhid Faith. Enlightenment was what my colleagues and I felt a pressing need for when we were confronted by a large number of the Druze appealing for help, particularly those who had migrated from the homes of their ancestors with virtually no education to sustain their faith or guide their children. My book was one of the attempts in response to the need of the western educated mind. It was in a sense the fruit of numerous discussions and dialogues over the years with Druze men and women of high intellectual caliber and impeccable honesty in America, many of whom paved the way with their courage and sacrifice in numerous lectures and seminars on all aspects of Tawhid. Religious discussions were instituted into the programs of the American Druze Society and a committee on religious affairs was created by Dr. Abdallah Najjar and it developed into a major function under his leadership. The committee was subsequently chaired for many years by the late Dr. Whabah Sayegh, and included Dr. Abdallah Najjar, Dr. Nadim Kassem, Mr Samah Helal, Mr. Hassan Izzeddine and myself.

The American Druze Foundation of which I had the honor to be a founding member developed into a major organization under the leadership of Mr. Ghassan Saab. The chairmanship then passed to Dr. Melhem Salman who organized a prestigious symposium on the Gnostic roots of the Tawhid Faith at the Library of Congress in Washington DC, in February 2008. We could have never dreamed of such an event if we had stayed cloistered in a shell of fear. These activities are driven by people who care about the sanctity of the Faith and the future of the Druze. They feel as I do that the future lies in espousing learning, seeking and searching with honesty and candor without accusations and slander. My book was written with that spirit, in which I sought comments,

criticisms, and guidance from those who have engaged in similar attempts to benefit from their views and refine mine. I always have and will continue to be open to constructive criticisms and to genuine dialogue for the betterment of our people and sanctity of our core values.

In the final analysis it is for the Druze to decide whether their interests are best served by maintaining a status quo which led to their physical and intellectual impoverishment in the first place, or try to lift the heavy hand of fear that stifles the process of spiritual development and intellectual discourse with honesty and compassion. After all spirituality is a personal quest and no one but the almighty God knows what is in the heart of a person.

Anis Obeid MD, April 29, 2008