

Introduction: the prism of modernity

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, Muslim thinkers have faced numerous and repeated challenges to classical Islamic ideas about religious authority. Upheavals in the Muslim world have stimulated widespread reexamination of the classical sources of Islamic law as Muslims have struggled to preserve, adapt, or redefine their social and legal norms in the face of changed conditions. A central issue in this ongoing struggle has been the question of the nature, status, and authority of the sunna, the normative example of the Prophet Muḥammad. Because of Muḥammad's status as messenger of God, his words and actions are accepted by most Muslims as a source of religious and legal authority second only to the Qur'ān. Indeed, the Qur'ān itself repeatedly commands its readers to obey Allāh *and* His messenger. The *imitatio Muḥammadi* thus became the standard for ethical behavior among Muslims, forming the basis for Islamic law and setting the standard for even the most mundane activities – the order in which fingernails should be cut or the proper length of the beard. During the twentieth century, however, the position of sunna has been threatened in a variety of ways as Muslim thinkers have searched for a solid basis for the revival of Islam. The problem of sunna has become the most important dimension of a modern Muslim crisis of religious authority, occupying a central place in Muslim religious discourse.

Understanding the Muslim struggle to define the position of sunna is critical if we are to understand fully the experience of modern Muslims, but the topic also has universal relevance for our understanding of how adherents to the great religious traditions have faced the challenges posed by modernity. The way that modern Muslims have faced their own crisis of religious authority, centered on sunna, suggests insights into a larger problem in the study of religion, that is, the relationship between tradition and modernity and the related question of how participants in a great tradition deal with change. Our central subject, then, is tradition – not tradition according to current scholarly fashion, but tradition in an old-fashioned sense: a deposit of knowledge or truth, originating with a

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past authority, and handed down within a religious community.¹ In Islamic thought, tradition in this sense is embodied in the sunna of the Prophet, preserved by his followers and faithfully handed down within the Muslim community. For most Muslims, sunna is a symbol of the link with the Prophetic era, the representation of the Prophet in the here and now, a concrete embodiment of the need that Muslims have felt in every generation for continuity with an ideal past.

In seeking to understand modern Muslim discussions of sunna and what they tell us about tradition and modernity, we must take on a tendency, evident in many treatments of modern Muslim intellectual history, to view the development of Muslim ideas in heuristic terms. Modern Islamic thought, according to the paradigm adopted by many orientalists, is in a transitional phase in which Muslim thinkers must come to terms with the inexorable forces of modernity, rationalism, and liberalism emanating from the West. According to this paradigm, exemplified in Wilfred Cantwell Smith's classic *Islam in Modern History*, modern controversies among Muslims, such as the debates over sunna described in this study, should be viewed as skirmishes in an ongoing battle between tradition and modernity, revelation and reason, liberalism and reaction.

Such an approach presumes a clearcut dichotomy between tradition and modernity, a presumption which is deeply rooted in Enlightenment thought, but which deserves reexamination. For Enlightenment thinkers, reason was a searchlight, piercing the darkness of tradition, breaking through a fog of ignorance to illuminate the truth. The pioneers of the Enlightenment might be excused for dramatizing the clash of reason and tradition or reason and revelation so starkly: they were engaged in a battle for liberty of thought, in which their lives were sometimes at stake. But in so portraying the conflict of reason and tradition, Enlightenment thinkers perhaps failed to recognize the degree to which they were, themselves, rooted in the traditions from which they claimed to have escaped.

Against the Enlightenment tradition, which is still pervasive in western academic culture, I would suggest that tradition is not an enemy of change, but the very stuff that is subject to change. Tradition both changes and may be used to justify change; it can, in fact, be revolutionary.² The history of Islamic thought provides numerous examples of how the intellectual tradition of Islam has provided the underpinnings for adaptation, reform, and revolution. The early Kharijite movement, the 'Abbāsid "revolution," and the reformism of Ibn Taymiyya are early examples of the dynamism of tradition. The "Islamic" revolution in Iran, the strength of Sunni revivalism in the Arab world, and the emergence of

Islamic feminism are some widely divergent examples of more recent movements that look to tradition to justify change.

At the same time, it is also evident that tradition is frequently appealed to as a way of defending against perceived innovation, as a way of preserving threatened values. Alternative uses of tradition are thus a major battleground; there is fierce competition to control the process by which the content of tradition is defined, and for modern Muslims, sunna has become the bitterest point of conflict. Thus, the modern problem of sunna arises out of conflict among Muslims over the definition and content of the authentic tradition, and over the method by which that tradition is to be defined.

If modernity and tradition should not be viewed as diametrically opposed to one another, how are we to understand their relationship? I would suggest a reversal of the Enlightenment metaphor. Rather than viewing modernity as a source of light, dispelling the darkness of tradition, we should instead imagine tradition as a beam of light, refracted by the prism of modernity. A tradition emerges from the prism of modernity as a multi-colored spectrum of responses. Some responses will show the effects of modernity much more dramatically than others, but none will be entirely untouched. At the same time, each color of the spectrum, each different response, is clearly rooted in the tradition. All responses to modernity from a religious tradition, and even those that seem to have left the tradition altogether behind, maintain a certain continuity with the tradition, just as each band of the spectrum is present in the light entering a prism.

Numerous issues of concern to modern Muslims might be used to illustrate this pattern. Modern debates over women's rights and status, for example, provide a vivid illustration of the dramatically divergent uses to which the tradition can be put. So-called neo-mu'tazilism, the revival of certain aspects of Mu'tazilite theology to justify a rationalist method, offers another example. But no case can provide a better illustration of the relationship of tradition and modernity in Islam than the very symbol and anchor of the tradition, the sunna itself, for as I will argue here, sunna is the fulcrum on which the central debates over religious authority turn.

The major contention of this work, then, is that modern Muslims, along with participants in all great human traditions, are engaged in an ongoing process of *rethinking* the traditions in which they participate. Some, of course, deny any connection with the tradition, and others deny that their activity can be called "rethinking," preferring to see it as the revival or preservation of some ideal and unchanging model. Nonetheless, even the most radical opponents of tradition are not departing from the tradition, but molding it and seeking to lay claim to the

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authenticity it bestows. Likewise, even the most conservative defenders of tradition cannot help but reshape the very tradition that they seek to preserve unchanged.

Methodology

The understanding of the relationship of tradition and modernity that I have proposed has important implications for our approach to the history of ideas. In the study of modern Muslim intellectual history – indeed, all intellectual history – the attention of scholars is quite naturally drawn to currents of thought that would seem to be new, innovative, holding promise for change. Our attention is riveted especially on ideas that may seem to be the peculiar product of modernity and seem to arise from a struggle to reconcile tradition with the pressures of the modern world. But this tendency is both a product of our own cultural biases and a vestige of the Enlightenment idea of progress. Too often such an approach projects the wishful thinking of the scholar onto his subject; we tend to focus upon ideas and figures that meet with our approval, neglecting broader, but less attractive, currents of thought. Change is not always uni-directional, nor does it always come in packages that seem attractive to academics. The Iranian revolution and the resurgence of fundamentalist and evangelical Protestantism in the United States are cases in point. Both developments came as a surprise to many scholars, and some continue to believe, or hope, that these are merely potholes on the otherwise smooth highway of secularization.

The danger of emphasizing the attractive, the new, or the progressive correlates closely with certain difficult methodological choices faced by anyone engaged in tracing the history of ideas. Among the most important of these is the choice between emphasizing outstanding individuals and emphasizing general trends or “schools of thought.” Albert Hourani astutely identified the dangers in both approaches.³ If we stress the impact of outstanding individuals, we must be certain that the figures chosen are truly influential and truly representative of significant trends in thought. Perhaps the greatest danger inherent in such an approach is of focusing on thinkers whose ideas meet with our approval; we judge someone significant because his or her ideas are attractive. Yet the second method, emphasizing schools of thought rather than individuals, risks a blurring of distinctions between individuals and the false imposition of unity on diverse ideas.

In this work I have chosen the second approach. If we are concerned, as we must be, with the *influence* of ideas and not just with the ideas themselves, then we risk less by choosing to analyze general trends in thought

rather than individuals. Indeed, the problem of sunna cannot, in my judgment, be adequately addressed by viewing a few outstanding writers in isolation. Although individual thinkers figure prominently in my analysis, I take them as representative of broader trends or viewpoints. Our concern must be not merely to understand the work of such individuals, but to examine the intellectual climate out of which their ideas grew and the responses their ideas have elicited. In other words, we must heed the reactions of those who may be far from first-rate thinkers, but whose opinions are nevertheless important indicators of the spread of ideas.

In choosing my sources, I have applied a simple test: if a published statement draws a measurable response, it is important; if it passes largely unnoticed, it is not. In effect, then, I have gauged the importance of a work in proportion to the level of controversy it has elicited. Consequently, the major sources for this study are mostly connected with a handful of controversies over sunna in Egypt and Pakistan.

The method I have adopted to analyze modern writings on sunna and the controversial literature that has grown up around them has been to extract from these writings the most important (i.e., most frequently recurring) themes, to establish the context and background of these themes in classical Islamic scholarship, and to analyze modern positions on the topic. In other words, I have attempted to map out the most prominent issues, the *topoi*, around which discussions of sunna have been concentrated, and to analyze the main positions established on these issues by modern Muslims. This approach holds certain disadvantages. It cannot, for instance, do justice to the historical or social context in which each approach to sunna has emerged. Moreover, by isolating sunna as an independent issue it may obscure the interconnectedness of the ideas of an individual or group. A topical approach also has great advantages, however. Such an approach closely reflects the way that Muslims themselves have approached the problem of sunna and it accurately mirrors the structure of their own discussions. In this way it has been my intent to portray modern discussions of sunna as part of an ongoing conversation among Muslim intellectuals centered on a common quest for a vision of society which is at once true to the tradition and relevant to the contemporary situation.

1 The relevance of the past: classical conceptions of Prophetic authority

Modern debates about religious authority are shaped by what Muslims see when they look back at the early history of Islam. Consequently, these modern debates must not be approached in a historical vacuum, as if they represent completely new and unprecedented challenges to traditional ideas about religious authority. In some respects the discussions I will describe are indeed new and a product of modern circumstances, but in other respects they look surprisingly like discussions that took place during the formative phase of Islamic legal thought. The content of Muslim tradition was a matter of controversy long before the reemergence of these questions in the nineteenth century. In fact, hardly an element of the classical consensus about Prophetic authority became established without serious contest.

Controversies over sunna, both ancient and modern, should be viewed as an essential corollary of efforts by Muslims to adapt doctrine to changed circumstances. Because of the stature of sunna as a symbol of the authority of Muḥammad and as a source of continuity with the past, no doctrinal dispute, no legal controversy, no exegetical discussion can be carried on without reference to it. Even for those who seek to reject its authority, sunna has proved too important to ignore. Consequently, early Muslims produced their own spectrum of approaches to sunna, a spectrum remarkably similar to the modern one. Herein lies the connection between ancient and modern debates over sunna, and the significance of the ancient debates to this study.

The classical consensus

Most classical theories of sunna incorporated three essential elements. In classical manuals of Islamic law, the term sunna refers to the authoritative example set by Muḥammad and recorded in traditions (*ḥadīth*; *akhbār*) about his words, his actions, his acquiescence to the words or actions of others, and his personal characteristics (*ṣifāt*).¹ Thus the first defining element of the doctrine of sunna in its mature form is the exclusive identi-

fication of the term with Muḥammad; sunna is by definition *sunnat al-nabī*, the sunna of the Prophet. The second element of the classical theory of sunna is the complete identification of sunna with ḥadīth reports traced to Muḥammad and judged to be authentic; sunna is coextensive with the set of authenticated traditions.² A third and final defining characteristic of sunna is its status as revelation (*wahy*). Sunna, according to classical doctrine, was revealed by God through the agency of the Prophet just as was the Qurʾān.³ Both sunna and Qurʾān spring from a single source, and the distinction between them is of form only, not of substance. The difference between the two classes of revelations is in how they are used and in the certainty with which they are known. The Qurʾān is revelation that is used in ritual recitation (*tilāwa*), while the sunna is not recited (*ghayr matlū*). In the case of the Qurʾān both text and meaning are of divine origin and can be relied upon with complete certainty, but for sunna the wording of the text is merely conjectural and only the reliability of the sense is guaranteed.

The main building blocks of a classical consensus on sunna were in place during the career of Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204 A.H.). Moreover, it seems that al-Shāfiʿī was himself chiefly responsible for integrating these building blocks into a coherent system of jurisprudence by effectively championing the adoption of his method as the only legitimate approach to sunna. His great effort, and one in which he was largely successful, was to argue for the exclusive identification of “sunna” with specific precedents set by Muḥammad, that is, with authentic traditions traced back to the Prophet himself. Those who opposed him on this point were the adherents of the early regional “schools” of jurisprudence – in the Ḥijāz, in Iraq, and in Syria – who held to less rigorous definitions of sunna. They incorporated in their definition of sunna not only Prophetic ḥadīth, but also various other sources of precedent, including the example of the Prophet’s Companions, the rulings of the Caliphs, and the practice that had gained general acceptance among the jurists of that school. It was against this flexible notion of sunna as the cumulative *accepted practice* of the early schools of jurisprudence, what Schacht calls the “living tradition” of the schools, that al-Shāfiʿī directed the greater part of his polemics.⁴

Evidence of al-Shāfiʿī’s success in championing the identification of sunna with Prophetic ḥadīth and in establishing the superiority of this sunna over other sources of precedent is clear: after Shāfiʿī we seldom find the term sunna used for anything other than the sunna of the Prophet.⁵ But al-Shāfiʿī’s defense of the position of authentic Prophetic ḥadīth as the sole legitimate source of sunna was only a part of his effort to create a system of jurisprudence centered on a coherent approach to the sources

of Islamic law. Delineating the relationship between the various sources, especially the relationship of Qurʾān and sunna, was central to his project. On this question al-Shāfiʿī forcefully argued the thesis that the sunna stands on an equal footing with the Qurʾān in authority for “the command of the Prophet is the command of God.”⁶

The fact that al-Shāfiʿī had to engage in polemics on such issues – the exclusive identification of sunna with specific precedents of Muḥammad or the revealed nature of sunna – provides sufficient evidence of the existence of a spectrum of approaches to sunna prior to and during his career. At least two approaches to sunna were represented among al-Shāfiʿī’s contemporaries: one was the approach of the early legal schools with their “living tradition”; another was that of the speculative theologians, the *ahl al-kalām*, who rejected ḥadīth altogether in favor of reliance on the Qurʾān alone. Shāfiʿī engaged in extended polemics with both of these groups.⁷ Consequently, we know that a variety of different attitudes to sunna existed and were debated during the career of al-Shāfiʿī. But it is less clear when and how these attitudes emerged in the two centuries separating his career from that of Muḥammad.

Sunna before al-Shāfiʿī

The word sunna predates the rise of Islam and is well attested in pre-Islamic sources. Sunna is derived from a root meaning of the verb *sanna*, “to form, fashion, or shape” and by extension, “to institute, establish, or prescribe.” Bravmann has shown that the concrete meaning of *sanna*, “to assign a certain amount of money or goods to someone,” was extended in specialized usage to refer to the action by which an individual decrees or establishes something.⁸ Consequently, sunna must of necessity refer to a practice decreed or instituted by a particular person or a group of definite persons.⁹ Sunna cannot refer simply to the customs of a tribe or group, but must be associated with a specific individual who instituted it.¹⁰

The pre-Islamic notion of sunna was almost certainly applied to Muḥammad even during his lifetime.¹¹ It is improbable that a religious and political figure of the reputation and stature of Muḥammad was not consciously emulated by his followers.¹² Moreover the Qurʾān, although it never mentions *sunnat al-nabī*, certainly gives the Prophet special status and authority among Muslims by the oft-repeated command to obey God and His Prophet.¹³ “When the Word of God calls the Prophet’s character ‘exemplary’ and ‘great,’” argues Rahman, “is it conceivable that the Muslims from the very beginning, should not have accepted [sunna] as a concept?”¹⁴ The absence in the Qurʾān of specific references to the sunna of Muḥammad does suggest that the application of the term sunna to the

Prophet is post-Qur'ānic, but it does not justify the conclusion that the *idea* of the Prophet as exemplar was a late development.¹⁵

We may conclude, then, that some notion of sunna was applied to Muḥammad and was in circulation at a very early stage, perhaps during his lifetime. But there is none of the rigidity about early understandings of sunna that we find in the classical discussion. Ideas about sunna developed in a context of rapid social and political change, when notions of religious authority were fluid. From the beginning Muḥammad, as messenger of God, was the focus of religious authority. But when the Prophet was no longer with them, Muslims were not of one mind about how Prophetic authority should be mediated. In the early years after Muḥammad's death it is likely that the dominant assumption, which was preserved in Shī'ite ideas of religious authority, was that Muḥammad's authority would be taken up and wielded by charismatic successors. Such a notion of religious authority would render sunna, in its classical formulation, more or less irrelevant. What need is there to preserve the normative example of the Prophet when you have a living embodiment of Prophetic authority? Later Shī'ī theologians did not reject the notion of sunna, but for them the locus of authority and the source of sunna was with the Shī'ī imāms. But for those Muslims who had no charismatic leader to stand in the place of the Prophet, appeals to the practice of the Prophet became decisive. Nevertheless, until after al-Shāfi'ī there was no clear Sunni consensus about how Muḥammad's authority was to be preserved, passed on, and interpreted.

Consequently, early Muslim ideas about sunna differed from classical definitions of sunna in important ways: first, early Muslims did not give Muḥammad's sunna precedence over the sunnas of other prominent Muslims, notably the early Caliphs and his other Companions; second, at this early stage Muslims did not always identify sunna with specific reports about Muḥammad, i.e., ḥadīth reports did not serve as the exclusive vehicle for sunna as they later would; and, finally, early Muslims did not draw the rigid distinctions between the various sources of religious authority, especially between sunna and Qur'ān, that are so carefully delineated by later scholars.

Prophetic sunna and other "sunnas"

The most obvious point of difference between pre- and post-Shāfi'ī notions of sunna has to do with the relationship between the sunna of the Prophet and other "sunnas." Central to al-Shāfi'ī's system was the uniqueness of Muḥammad's sunna over all other sources of authority. For al-Shāfi'ī the only true sunna was Prophetic sunna, *al-sunna*

al-nabawiyya, and this he exclusively identified with authenticated Prophetic ḥadīth. In his view traditions from any source other than the Prophet are of no account and carry no weight when measured against Prophetic precedent.¹⁶ The success of al-Shāfi‘ī’s thesis is well attested in subsequent legal writings; as Juynboll points out, later writers “hardly ever thought of sunna as comprising anything but that of the Prophet.”¹⁷

There is abundant evidence, however, even from al-Shāfi‘ī’s own writings, that this elevation of the Prophet’s sunna was slow to develop, and that in the minds of earlier Muslims the sunna of the Prophet was simply one among several potential sources of religious authority, including the Qur’ān, the sunnas of the Companions, and the sunna of the early Caliphs.¹⁸ The equality of other “sunnas” with the sunna of the Prophet is reflected in traditions used to defend the existing legal doctrines of the early schools of law against attacks from proponents of Prophetic tradition. It is reported, for example, that ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, when asked about appointing a successor, replied that he could either follow the Prophet and leave the matter open or follow Abū Bakr and make an appointment; either course of action would be sunna.¹⁹ In another case, ‘Alī reports that Muḥammad and Abū Bakr both applied forty lashes as a penalty for drinking while ‘Umar applied eighty; in the words of the tradition, “All this is sunna.”²⁰ Abū Yūsuf adds: “Our companions are agreed that the punishment for drinking wine is 80 stripes.”²¹ Yet again ‘Umar, on his deathbed, instructs the Muslims on the sources from which they should seek guidance when he is gone: the Qur’ān, the Muslims who emigrated to Medina with Muḥammad (*muhājirūn*), those in Medina who welcomed the Muslims (*ansār*), the people of the desert, and finally the protected communities of Jews and Christians (*ahl al-dhimma*).²² After the formalization of Islamic jurisprudence, the absence of sunna from this listing would have been unthinkable; its absence here tells us that even though the idea of Prophetic sunna may have existed from the earliest years of Islam, it had not yet achieved universal acceptance as an indispensable source of religious authority.²³ Whatever the provenance of such traditions, those who circulated and cited them did so in order to assert the equality in theory and, in some instances, the superiority in practice of other sources of authority over traditions from the Prophet.

Prophetic sunna and Prophetic ḥadīth

A second important difference between early Muslim ideas about sunna and those of the classical period concerns the link between the sunna of the Prophet and ḥadīth. The content of sunna in its classical usage is specific: sunna is coextensive with the set of authenticated ḥadīth traced to