Islam and Tradition

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A tradition is a belief or behavior passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past.

A tradition is also said to be the passing down of elements of a culture from generation to generation, especially by oral communication. Elements of a culture passed down as traditions are normally institutionalized customs, beliefs, precepts and practices. They signify modes of thought and behavior followed by a particular people continuously from generation to generation.

Tradition could likewise be bound to rituals, where rituals guarantee the continuation of tradition. The concept is often seen as a polar opposite of modernity in a linear theory of social change in which societies progress from being traditional to being modern.

Tradition is also found in political, philosophical, religious and artistic discourse where the idea is increasingly being projected as more dynamic and flexible, heterogeneous and subject to innovation and change than what some oversimplifying viewpoints and theories presuppose.

The word tradition is derived from the Latin *tradere* or *traderer* literally meaning to transmit, to hand over, to deliver and to entrust for safekeeping. Tradition is customarily translated into Arabic as *taqlid.*

However, when juxtaposed with the true meaning of the Islamic message, neither tradition – above all the one based on the conventional Western interpretation of the concept - nor *taqlid* is fully qualified to be employed for the purpose of signifying the act of implementing and following it continuously as a heavenly-sanctioned life paradigm. Both of them fall short considerably of the required qualifications. This could be explained as follows.

Following Islam means following divine revelation (*wahy*) in the form of the Holy Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad's authentic *Sunnah*. The two stand for the revelation of the ultimate truths with respect to God, man, angels, the Jinn, life, death, *Akhirah* or the Hereafter, and many

other absolute ontological verities pertaining to the physical and metaphysical tiers of existence.

Numerous ethical values, standards and norms, as well as definite injunctions and sets of laws, regulating a man's relationship with his Creator and Master, his self, other people and the rest of animate and inanimate beings, also fall in this category. These are transcendent existential realities, ideas, beings and experiences. They are not affected, nor bound, by the confines and limitations of time and space factors, nor are they thus to be subjected to the relative criteria and standards dictated by such factors.

It goes without saying that Islam, by definition, can never become antique, archaic or obsolete. Nor can it become a mere tradition or a set of traditional or evolved beliefs, rituals and customs, in that it was not people who created or generated it in a space and in a moment of time, and as such transmitted and handed it over from generation to generation.

This is so because as transcendent and absolute truth, Islam is ever-fresh, dynamic, original and inspiring. It always spurs a productive pursuit and spawns a cultural and civilizational legacy. Islam itself has never been generated or evolved either as a legacy or a tradition.

As far as Islam as a comprehensive and global religion that covers every aspect of life is concerned, the only thing that is eligible to be to some extent called a tradition and traditional is Muslims' internalization and implementation of certain aspects of the perpetual Islamic message within their diverse terrestrial contexts where, nevertheless, qualified changeability, impermanence and diversity of styles and methods in relation to answering the pressing exigencies of time and space are not only expected, but also invited and appreciated.

It is here that blind following is categorically rebuffed, and innovation and creativity anticipated and highly valued. It is here, furthermore, that Muslim customs morph into Muslim traditions, and the latter matures and subtly amalgamates itself with Islamic culture.

As components of Islamic culture, conventions and traditions are still deemed only accidental rather than essential or substantial to the former's being both a product and reflection of Islam as a total way of life embodied in the behavioral patterns of its adherents.

Hence, Islam has a distinct culture and civilization. The culture and civilization in Islam are not Arabic or eastern or Middle Eastern. They are also not monolithic. They have varieties and a rich diversity.

There are elements in Islamic culture and civilization that are universal and constant, and that are collectively accepted by all Muslims. But there are also elements that are diverse and different from country to country and people to people.

The universals are based on the Qur'an and *Sunnah* while the variables are based on local customs and traditions of various people. The latter has been acquired on account of actualizing certain dimensions of the Qur'an and *Sunnah* in localized milieus under their prevalent inherent and man-generated circumstances.

The particulars of Islamic culture, though legitimate and deeply embedded in the very fabric of Muslim societies, are by no means to be considered sacred, unqualified and immutable. Their meaning and significance are inexorably tied to Islamic revelation, and their appropriateness and functioning conditioned mainly by it.

This existential paradigm could also be identified as a principle of following religion and innovating cultures and civilization.

Without a doubt, following religion without innovating, and innovating in sheer worldly cultural and civilizational matters, which from time to time was ingeniously combined with borrowing from others, was a Muslim rule since the early days of Islam and its nascent civilization.

Since customs and traditions are rather generic terms that encompass a wide variety of things and concepts that are a part of the complex culture, such an approach surely was a sign of Muslim religious fervor, enthusiasm and maturity, as well as a sign of their cultural and civilizational predisposition, potency and astuteness.

Hence, it could be suggested that the opposite of this tenet, that is, the unreserved holding on to and blind following of worldly and even some inconsequential religion-inspired customs and traditions – irrespective of whether they have been engendered my Muslims or non-Muslims - together with irresponsibly questioning and innovating established religious matters, was one of the root-causes of the Muslim dramatic cultural and civilizational decline, and still constitutes a major reason behind the inability of today's Muslims to pick themselves up, make their voice heard and start making a notable civilizational headway of their own.

With reference to these concerns, God says, for example:

{…This day have I perfected for you your religion and completed My favor on you and chosen for you Islam as a religion} (Al-Tawbah, 3).

The Prophet (pbuh) also said that there is nothing that brings people closer to the bliss of Paradise (*Jannah*) and keeps them away from Hellfire but that he did not inform and teach them about. There will never emerge a need for any religious addition or innovation.

Similarly, he also said that whatever God has made lawful in His Book (the Qur'an), it is lawful (*halal*), and whatever He prohibited, it is prohibited (*haram*).

However, whatever God did not refer to as either lawful or prohibited, such is to be regarded as a gift or a sign of God's clemency ('*afiyah*) towards men. "So, accept Allah's '*afiyah* because it is not that Allah ever forgets or overlooks anything", was the Prophet's inference.

Finally, the Prophet (pbuh) is also reported to have said:

"Verily I have left you upon a white plain (i.e., clear guidance), its night is like its day, and none deviates from it except that he is destroyed… I counsel you to have *taqwa* (fear of Allah or God-consciousness), and to listen and obey (your leader), even if a slave were to become your *Amir* (leader). Verily he among you who lives long will see great controversy, so you must keep to my *Sunnah* and to the *Sunnah* of the *Khulafa' al-Rashidin* (the rightly guided Caliphs), those who guide to the right way. Cling to it stubbornly (literally: with your molar teeth).

Beware of newly invented matters (in the religion), for verily every *bid`ah* (innovation) is misguidance."

Thus, to closely associate the concept of tradition, which is the making of people, with the worldview and message of Islam, which is God's revelation to humankind to serve as eternal transcendent guidance, is grossly inappropriate.

It is on account of this that unqualified tradition and *taqlid* are regularly articulated with some disapproving connotations, in terms of people's blind and besotted following of certain genres of thought and behavior even though such genres have been anchored in little or no truth whatsoever.

By and large, the authenticity of most traditions is founded either on anonymous or questionable sources.

Considered true and binding by the masses, they are thus transmitted especially by oral communication.

Accordingly, a segment of Jewish tradition is a body of laws regarded as having been handed down from Moses orally and only committed to writing in the 2nd century.

Similarly, a segment of Christian tradition is a doctrine or body of doctrines regarded as having been established by Christ or the apostles, though not contained in Scripture, but is considered holy and true.

By way of analogy, the beliefs and customs of Islam supplementing the Qur'an, especially those embodied in the Prophet's *Sunnah,* are regularly also called inside the English-speaking intellectual circles (Islamic) tradition.

The reason for this could be the fact that the *Sunnah* was firstly handed down orally from the Prophet (pbuh) before it became committed to writing and preserved.

However, given that the term *sunnah* predated the term tradition by more or less seven centuries, employing the former in the context of the latter should in no way be regarded as an attempt towards its exact and official translation as well as ideological association, but rather as an approximate construal only, which nonetheless entails a wide range of both conceptual and applied undertones, many of which remain contentious.

Many traditions have been concocted on purpose. A tradition may be intentionally invented and proliferated for personal, business, religious, political or national self-interest.

In consequence, some of the chief meanings of the words *qallada* and *taqlid* in Arabic, which are normally translated in English as following tradition and tradition respectively, revolve around not only imitating, aping and handing down old sayings and customs, but also winding round, girding with a sword, adorning with a necklace, putting on a necktie, parroting, copying, mimicking, investiture, inauguration and vesting with power and authority. In the etymology of the word, a clear hint is given at a potential intellectual and spiritual deceleration and even suffocation that the notion of *taqlid* or tradition often entails.

While the Qur'an and *Sunnah* ardently propagate following religion and inventing in mundane matters, they in the most emphatic terms repudiate the erroneous modes of tradition and its following, especially if such stands in the way of the former, as seen earlier.

Additionally, the Qur'an says:

{And recite to them the news of (Prophet) Ibrahim when he said to his father and his people: "What do you worship?" They said: "We worship idols and remain to them devoted." He said: "Do they hear

you when you supplicate, or do they benefit you, or do they harm?" They said: "But we found our fathers doing thus." He said: "Then do you see what you have been worshipping, you and your ancient forefathers? Indeed, they are enemies to me, except the Lord of the worlds…} (Al-Shu'ara', 69-77).

{They said: "We found our fathers worshippers of them." He (Ibrahim) said: "Indeed you and your fathers have been in manifest error." They said: "Have you brought us the truth, or are you one of those who play about?" He said: "Nay, your Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, Who created them and of that I am one of the witnesses. And by Allah, I shall plot a plan (to destroy) your idols after you have gone away and turned your backs." So he broke them to pieces, (all) except the biggest of them, that they might turn to it} (Al-Anbiya', 53-58).

{And similarly, We did not send before you any warner into a city except that its affluent said: "Indeed, we found our fathers upon a religion, and we are, in their footsteps, following." (Each warner) said: "Even if I brought you better guidance than that (religion) upon which you found your fathers?" They said: "Indeed we, in that with which you were sent, are disbelievers." So we took

retribution from them; then see how was the end of the deniers} **(Al-Zukhruf, 23-25).**

{And when it is said to them: "Come to what Allah has revealed and to the Messenger," they say: "Sufficient for us is that upon which we found our fathers." Even though their fathers knew nothing, nor were they guided?} (Al-Ma'idah, 104).

At any rate, as the notion of holding on to a previous time, the concept of tradition in Islam is tricky and contentious. The matter, diffuse and complex as it is, is further compounded by the verity that the proponents of some present-day socio-political and economic realities, worldviews, systems and ideologies, flavored with diverse philosophical proclivities and nuances, further interpreted and applied the idea of tradition along the lines of the recent intellectual currents and directions.

Inasmuch as most of those systems and schools of thought were solely future and modernity oriented, relegating the active roles of religions and traditions to the backseat for the reason that they were seen as de-intellectualizing as well as anti-modernizing, owing to their crucial contributions to rendering the entire Europe-dominated Middle Ages, or the early part of the Medieval period, the age(s) of cultural and

civilizational regressions and darkness, the presupposed downsides and snags inherent in the orb of tradition were exacerbated.

Consequently, tradition became viewed and assessed merely through the prism of the modern-day systems and schools of thought, progressively gaining a reputation of the latter's antithesis as well as a main obstacle for its ultimate realization. One could even say that the idea of tradition was thus greatly manipulated and victimized.

Clearly, it was not a coincidence that the word tradition started to be used from the 14th century onwards, a phase that represented roughly the twilight of the European Middle Ages, or Medieval period, sandwiched between Late Antiquity and Modern period.

Moreover, the 14th century belongs to the Late Middle Age, or Late Medieval period, which, by and large, was characterized by the gradual waning of an epoch of ubiquitous ignorance and superstition in Europe that was placing the word of religious authorities over personal experience and rational activity.

European Middle Ages were followed by the early Modern period of modern history which was marked by the Renaissance, or rebirth, and the Age of Discovery during which cultural and intellectual forces gave emphasis to reason, analysis and individualism rather than traditional

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lines of authority. Such was a process that witnessed a surge of interest in Classical (ancient Greece and Rome) scholarship and values, culminating in the Age of reason which is the 17th century philosophy that served as a successor of the Renaissance and a predecessor to the Age of Enlightenment as a European intellectual movement of the late 17th and 18th centuries when favoring reason and individualism over tradition became a central tenet of modernity.

In Islam, therefore, tradition would provisionally and loosely imply following the Qur'an, the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (pbuh), the *sunnah* of *Khulafa' al-Rashidun* or the rightly guided caliphs and leaders, the life examples of the *Salaf* or early Muslims, of the members of the Prophet's family (*Ahl al-Bayt*), of the honorable and upright scholars and the righteous and devout men and women wherever they may be and whenever they may live, as well as following those elements of culture as have been formed and transmitted as a result of strictly adhering to and following the former under the aegis of dissimilar eras, regions and environments. This by no means is the conventional Western interpretation of tradition that pits it against modernity, and where rationalism, material progress and individualism with free will and choice take precedence over traditional lines of authority.

What could be dubbed tradition in Islam, therefore, is not a world of antiquities, folklore, anachronisms, and some old-fashioned and obsolete elements of culture.

Rather, it is a vibrant, enriching and heterogeneous supplement from the past to the successful charting and constructing of a meaningful and consequential present as well as future.

In this fashion, tradition and modernity can effectively coexist and support each other, both within individuals and on the level of institutions. They make up different, albeit closely interrelated, segments of one and the same process, mission and purpose.

The relations between the traditional and the modern should not necessarily involve displacement, conflict, dichotomy or exclusiveness, and their stark contrasts need to be finely converted into rewarding opportunities and aspirations that will affect the affirmation of both of them as part of a continuous cultural and civilizational integrated development.

No wonder then, that the word tradition has no exact equivalent in the Arabic language. Apart from the word *taqlid*, the other Arabic words that are frequently resorted to in order to provide no more than approximate translations are: *turath* which means heritage, legacy and

"tradition", *'urf* which means custom, mores, customary usage and "tradition", *sunnah* which means norm, mores, method, life-path and "tradition", *namus* which means code, law and "tradition", and *'adah* which means custom, practice and "tradition".

Undeniably, because of this nature of Islam and its attitude towards human culture and civilization in general, certain conventional customs or practices (*'adat*) and customary usage (*'urf*) are regarded as a source of the rulings of the Islamic law (*Shari'ah*) where there are no explicit texts from neither the Qur'an nor the Prophet's *Sunnah* specifying the rulings. It is also a requirement in making customs (*'adat*) and customary usage (*'urf*) a source of *Shari'ah* rulings that there are no contradictions between them and the contents of the Qur'an and *Sunnah*.

About the meaning of customs and customary usage Muhammad Abu Zahrah said: "Custom is a matter on which a community of people agree in the course of their daily life, and common usage is an action which is repeatedly performed by individuals and communities. When a community makes a habit of doing something, it becomes its common usage. So the custom and common usage of a community share the same underlying idea even if what is understood by them differs slightly."

And about the reasons why 'adat and 'urf are deemed the appropriate sources of *Shari'ah*, in absence of explicit texts from the Qur'an and *Sunnah* and when there are no conflicts between the 'adat and 'urf and the latter, Muhammad Abu Zahrah said: "Many judgments are based on 'urf because in many cases it coincides with public interest... Another reason is that custom necessarily entails people's familiarity with a matter, and so any judgment based on it will receive general acceptance whereas divergence from it will be liable to cause distress, which is disliked in the judgment of Islam because Allah Almighty has not imposed any hardship on people in His *deen* (religion). Allah Almighty prescribes what normal people deem proper and are accustomed to, not what they dislike and hate. So when a custom is not a vice and is respected by people, honoring it will strengthen the bond which draws people together because it is connected to their traditions and social transactions whereas opposition to it will destroy that cohesion and bring about disunity."

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