

# Islam and Muslim Societies

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### Conceptualizing Islamic Tradition

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What is tradition? What is to be traditional? What makes or unmakes a tradition? How does a traditional society differ from a modern one? Whether a tradition can change; and if it does to what extent it is possible?

These are some of the fundamental questions that the theorists of tradition confront with at the very beginning of conceptualizing tradition. An examination of different usages may not yield a fixed definition for tradition but it does complicate our understanding of the dimensions of social life that are of interest to historical anthropologists/sociologists of culture and religion. In this paper, the objective is to deal with the concept of tradition to reach at a better understanding of the term as a more generative analytical category.

It could be noted that it was after the theories of evolution came to dominate the social sciences that 'tradition' started to be treated as a stage before reaching to a progressive and developed 'modernity' and since then the developmental modernist theories established the backward and 'anti-developmental' face of 'tradition'. Hence there came a general assumption that 'whatever traditional should be eradicated in order to achieve development' and so the European countries were equated to modern and the non-European were labeled as 'traditional' (Liod Falleres 1963: 158-220). To this view 'what is tradition' was 'what is not modernity'. So the 'absence of modernity' was defined as the 'presence of tradition'.

Another important point to note from the discussion of tradition is that they start with a preoccupied notion of a rupture within the tradition, which in turn

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implies a crisis situation. So there is always the discussion of crisis in the 'traditional societies' of Asia and Africa. Colonialism and supportive discourses brought many such ideas to replace many native traditions with their own culture. As a result many of traditional societies lost their identities and they changed themselves in to a newborn society, sharing certain universal values, which the earlier modernists proclaimed.

After 1970s, however, there were revisionist attempts to redefine modernity which in turn resulted in exposing the power structure behind the production of knowledge and various developmental concepts. In addition to these, the various socio-cultural movements that started appearing on the political scenes of various countries, also attracted the attention of social scientists to revisit the concept of tradition.

It was in this context, subverting the binary opposition of tradition and modernity, there began the efforts exploring the invention of tradition, or analysing the ideological uses of tradition to dominate the discussion of tradition in social sciences. The idea that so-called traditional societies have not undergone significant changes in contrast to modern societies is now dismissed as a dated and a historical claim, although traces of it persist in contemporary scholarship. Instead, the focus has shifted to demonstrating the ways tradition-claims are ideological and often historically baseless. This type of constructivist argument was first made famous by Eric Hobsbawm's collection *The Invention of Tradition* where he argues that traditions "which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented" (Hobsbawm 1984: 1).

All these point to the need for conceptualizing tradition in a more meaningful way so that it can stand for an inclusive category to explain various socio-cultural realities of different societies.

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### The Meaning of Tradition

The English word “tradition” is derived from the Latin verb *tradere* which literally means to transform, to deliver (Charl J Froedrocj 1972: 14). In its literal sense, tradition indicates “the handing down from generation to generation of opinions, beliefs, customs, and so on” (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary 1984). In other words, whatever that is transformed to us from the previous generations constitutes tradition.

According to J.G.A Pocock, ‘tradition’ has the meaning of handling on, or handing over, and is nearly synonymous with “transmission”, the “transmission” can be used neutrally and universally to denote any mode of transmission at all, operating under any set of conditions. The term “tradition” on the other hand, may be used either more specifically or with a greater load of unstated implications. It can be and often is used in ways which suggest that the mode of transmission is a blend of oral instruction and inherited habit and that the norms and patterns transmitted are highly authoritative and do not permit much criticism or controversy” (J.G.A Pocock 1987: 47). He has further elaborated the concept of tradition as follows:

“A tradition in its simplest form, may be thought of as an indefinite series of repetitions of an action, which on each occasion performed on the assumption that it ha been performed before, its performances authorised-by the knowledge, or the assumption, of previous performance. In the pure state, such a tradition is without a conceivable beginning each performance presupposes a previous performance, in infinite regress. Furthermore it may well be that it is the assumptions rather than the factual information of the previous performance that is operative: each action provides the ground for assuming that it had a predecessor. Traditions of the kind then are immemorial, and they are prescriptive.” (Pocock 1999: 186-87).

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Thus the etymological sense and Pocock's reading of it, suggests that as tradition denotes transmission, which is a continuous process going on through generations, it is not difficult to see the significance of a set of languages which serves the purpose.

Marshal G.S Hodgson has attempted to explain the processes that are going on in the transmission of a cultural tradition. According to him generation by generation, within each tradition, there was a conscious individual cultural initiative responding to the ever-new needs or opportunities of the time. He writes: "In general, we may describe the process of cultural tradition as a movement composed of three moments: a creative action, group commitment thereto, and cumulative interaction within the group. A tradition originates in a creative action, an occasion of inventive or revelatory, even charismatic, encounter: for instance, the discovery of a new aesthetic value; the launching of a new technique of craftsmanship; a rise to a new level of social expectation, one man of another; the assertion of a new ruling stock or even the working out of new patterns of governing; or, in the case of religion, an occasion of fresh awareness of something ultimate in the relation between ourselves and the cosmos- that is, and occasion of spiritual revelation, bringing a new vision (Hodgson 1974: 80-81)".

The second moment of cultural tradition is *group commitment* arising out of the creative action: the immediate public of the event is in some way, institutionalized and perpetuated; that is the creative action becomes a point of departure for a continuing body of people who share a common awareness of its importance and must take it into account in whatever they do next, whether in pursuance of its implications or in rebellion against them... this group commitment retains its vitality through *cumulative interaction* among these sharing the commitment; above all, through debate and dialogue as people work

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out the implications and potentialities latent in the creative event to which they are bound (Hodgson 1974 81).

The dynamic aspect of any cultural tradition, which Hodgson has stressed throughout this study of Islamic civilization, is shared by many scholars. For example Daniel W. Brown in his *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* points out that tradition is not an enemy of change, but the very stuff that is subject to change. He gives the examples from the tradition of Islam. He observes that 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 looked to tradition to justify change (Brown 1996: 2-3).

While conceptualising tradition it is also important to note that traditions are forged from a given complex of ideas and goals, material interests and institutional strategies as well as divergent styles and constituencies. Each has its normative features and practical interests. Each also retains an existential dimension and thereby provides a mode of self-definition in relation to others. Tradition is, in short, different from what metaphysicians, positivists and phenomenologists conceive it. It can evidence various conflicting tendencies or subtractions. But it is inherently informed by a project an expressly political commitment to transform its ideas into reality (Broner 1999: 9).

Thus, tradition is more than a mere historicity of a certain customs and practices. Every tradition carries a mechanism to keep itself along with varying time and space. The role of agency which does the function of transmission makes the process something different from ‘inheriting’ tradition like property. To be precise, tradition though historically embedded, is socially present.

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In whatever way we conceive tradition as transmitted wisdom(s), it is not reducible to a single form of knowledge: it cannot be given out in a propositional form as knowledge can be. It is because of this feature, it has been suggested that tradition is intellectually unanalysable (Javed Alam 1999: 171). "In primitive societies concepts of tradition have an unquestionable standing and are self-validating. Tradition for an insider is like an unconditional binding force in whichever form it takes: as custom, ritual practices, social precepts, rules of conduct, beliefs about the self and others and about social space." (ibid).

Apart from the literal meaning and the diverse usages of tradition, various sociological and anthropological considerations in the concept can give a useful background for conceptualizing tradition.

### **The Approaches to the Tradition**

The major approaches that can serve our purpose are explained below. These are 1) Evolutionary approach 2) Great and Little Tradition approach and 3) Discursive tradition approach.

#### **I. Evolutionary Approach**

Most of the early sociological studies of culture and tradition were rooted in the evolutionary theory of nineteenth century which proposed that human society is going through definite stages of progress starting from the simple, homogeneous, static state to a complex, heterogeneous and dynamic state. Thus for August Comte it was through theological, metaphysical and positivistic, and for Herbert Spencer, 'Militant' and 'Industrial'. Emile Durkheim also followed this tradition by his concepts of 'mechanic' and 'organic' states of societies.

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This idea is further explained in the works of Max Weber and Karl Marx through their analysis of rationalisation process in the modern society and the evolution to the capitalist mode of production. According to this approach, 'tradition' is something vanishing and the society in the process of getting rid of it. It treated the western society as marching towards a state of a highly rational and progressive modernity while the rest remained traditional and backward.

The very basis of this approach was the nineteenth century Orientalism which until Edward Said's pioneering critique was simply an academic label for the disciplines that studied 'Eastern' societies, histories and language & Said's criticism of Orientalism, exposed the exercise in power/knowledge by which 'non-western' world is dominated. Said explained that Orientalism is a body of theory about the Orient and about Islam based on power differentials between the European scholars and their subjects (Edward Said 1978: 31-34). The entire academic exercise by the orientalist scholars was based on the early European experiences of the Arab world coloured by the historical opposition between Christianity and Islam.

### **II. Great Tradition and Little Tradition Approach**

Another important approach to understand the organisation of the cultural tradition is the one proposed by Robert Redfield. He suggested that all religions could be divided into a 'Great Tradition' and 'Little Tradition.' The Great Tradition, denotes the orthodoxy of any cultural / religious tradition. This is represented by the urban elite and is cultivated in schools and temples through its own texts (Robert Redfield 1956). It is because of this aspect that the 'Great Tradition' has also been called "textual tradition", 'orthodoxy', 'philosophical religions', 'high tradition' and 'universal tradition.'

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The Little tradition on the other hand, stands for the non-textual practices which have been considered by the elites as 'the heterodox form of culture or religious periphery'. Little Traditions are also referred to by the terms 'local traditions,' 'low traditions' and 'popular religion.'

'Great and Little Tradition' model is very influential in the understanding of the social organisation of traditions. Many sociologists have followed this approach, McKim Marriot for example, has studied Indian tradition through this perspective. Further, through the 'universalization' and 'parochialization, Marriot has explained the process of communication and transformation in the Little and Great Traditions. Yogindra Singh in his study of modernization of Indian tradition also made use of these concepts to analyze the social organization of both Hindu and Muslim Traditions.

However, the problem with this approach is that anthropologists and other scholars concerned with local form of culture looked for rites, myths or ideas that made the group they were studying distinctive rather than those they shared with others (John R Bowen 1993). The problem with this approach is that it gives an impression that tradition is losing in between the distinction between the two. This also suggests that sociologists and anthropologists have either to study local forms of a religious tradition and/or the religious texts.

### III. Discursive Tradition Approach

Mac Intyre and Talal Asad have suggested an alternative to both the approaches mentioned above. It is to treat tradition in terms of the discourses, which make or unmake the elements or themes of that particular tradition. So to MacIntyre, tradition is, "an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or



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at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.(Qazim Zaman 200)” In this respect tradition is a continuing discourse with arguments and counter arguments engaging past present and future.

This enables the traditions to ask new questions or answer old ones while making arrangements for changing the conditions. Drawing on the work of MacIntyre, Talal Asad has emphasized the relevance of conceptualizing tradition in terms of its discursive forms. He states that a tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. Thus, what remains key element to their constitution as traditions is a history of argument and debate over certain fundamental doctrines in shared languages and styles of discourse (Zaman 2000).

Approaching tradition in terms of the discourses also gives us a chance to look to in the cultural dynamics of a given society. Such an approach also prompts the scholars to look into the constituencies of the discourses which can also expose the relations of power and other forms of contestation and conflict impinge on any definition of what it is to be adherent to a tradition.

After this brief survey of various approaches and debates on the concept of tradition we can broadly define tradition, as whatever transmitted from the preceding generation of customs, rituals, knowledge, systems of polity, economy, etc, which were in the continuous process of changing but continuing, shaping and reshaping yet based on a past with a broader authoritative discourse with its own language.

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Therefore, the question why a certain tradition is followed by a certain group could be answered by the language that adherents of that tradition follow in their socio-cultural contexts. There are no texts, theses, or conceptions- of justice and rationality, for instance-in themselves, they exist, and can be evaluated, only as part of this or that tradition, and so far as their criteria for evaluation are concerned, the different traditions are “incommensurable”. Despite all the disagreements within a particular tradition, there remains a broad agreement on what differences are the critical ones and how, or within what limits, to argue over them (Zaman 2000).

Every tradition has always a language of its own which both builds and sustains it (Alam 1999: 173). Therefore, to make a distinction between intellectually ‘making’ a tradition and people ‘being in the making’ of it is philosophically vital in understanding the changing modes of perception both of the ‘social’ sphere and of the social activity in which people are engaged. This distinction is of vital importance to understand the way traditions change their inner content.

### **Characterizing Islamic Tradition**

While concentrating on the issue of the impact of modernization on the diverse aspects of socio-cultural life, analysts sometimes attempt to fit the Islamic experience into a model that is based on the experience of western society rather than Islamic Society. For example, it is often noted that Islam has not experienced a drastic change similar to the Protestant Reformation in Europe, and some feel that such a change is needed if Islam is to adapt successfully to the challenges of modernity (Voll 1982: 3-4). This kind of generalization is not confined to the Eurocentric Orientalists but is also shared by the leftist intellectuals, western or otherwise. (Omar Caha 2003: 61). Orientalist sees the problem in a broader

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context of how “it has become formalistic to label oriental cultures as merely being of a spiritual nature and lacking any materialist basis at all with respect of philosophy. Thus the people of the Orient are branded as emotional fanatics, devoid of any rational thinking or cognitive analysis (ibid).”

However, with the passage of time there has been an increasing realization that cultural traditions can be best understood only through a relativistic approach. This has resulted in a comparatively unbiased and better understanding of the numerous traditional societies. Thus the relativistic approach to the understanding of the tradition of Islam focuses on the specificities it characterizes and the worldview it represents. So if we are to look at Islam as a discursive tradition we must take the self-identification of Muslims into consideration, how they perceive the world and how they do in it as they do.

In the following section, we will undertake a brief overview of the world view and belief system of Islam which forms the basis of Islamic tradition.

### **I. Belief System and World View**

Every society rests on a set of premises or presuppositions relating to human nature, the universe, ultimate reality, the structure and source of knowledge and guiding norms of behaviour. These premises relating to ontology, epistemology and ethics, constitute a society's ethos and world-view. The Islamic model of society is guided and inspired by certain fundamental principles which are outlined in the following:

**a. God and Man:** For a Muslim, Allah (God) is the central fact of reality, Man is God's vicergent or representative (*Khalifa*) on earth (Qur'an: 5:55; 6:166). God has given creation to man as a divine trust (*amanah*) (Quran: 33:72) and it is on the basis of how man carries out his vicergency that he is to be either rewarded or punished (Qur'an: 17:14). Allah communicates with men through verbal signs

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(revelation or *wahy*) and through natural sign. Allah continuously reveals himself through natural phenomena which are signs (*ayat*) of different aspects of his nature-compassion, justice, power. However it is the verbal communication, which is central, since the most important fact about Allah is that he speaks to men in intelligible language (B.S. Turner 1994: 53).

Thus the relationship between God and man in Islam is direct and personal. He is “closer to man than the artery of his neck” (Hadeeth). He is not visible, but present everywhere. Nothing can be hidden from his surveillance, “he knows even what is in the mind.”(Qur’an). This vigilance or the gaze of Allah is very important for a Muslim while doing any action. So, “in the Qur’anic vision of man, man is neither absolutely free nor are his liberty and dignity drowned in the ocean of divine omnipotence. He is free to act within the limits set by God, which means that the entire world is his stage of activity and he has to fix his gaze towards God”(Alam Kundmiri 2001: 102). Richard Khuri finds that the many mundane reflections of God’s *Gaze* in Arab Muslim life form a large segment of the background for communal consensus and argumentative or other discursive procedure. He writes: “the divine presence has realized and continues to realize itself as a communal paradigm, embodied in rules that at certain points are prosaic and quite specific (Khuri 1998: 157)”

**b. Reason and Revelation:** Islam views man as essentially a rational being. The *Qur’an* repeatedly urges to exercise his rational and imaginative faculties and to ponder over the mysteries of nature, historical events and the complexities of human psyche. It invites man to reaffirm its primordial covenant with god, not through blind faith or the dead weight of tradition, but through observation and reflection. (A. R Momin 1989). According to Shah Waliyullahi Al-Dahlawi reason is the superior quality of human being which distinguishes him from other creatures.(Farooqui 2003: 178)

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Discussing the aspects of freedom and unfreedom in the Islamic tradition Richard K. Khuri observes that 'reason' in Islam is a reality at times remarkably complex and sophisticated. Looking through Habermasian concepts, he finds that if we take reason in the sense of *consensus* formation in a *communication community* then the 'Sharia' is eminently rational, for it is drawn at consensus of every large community indeed. It has symbolized that consensus for more than a millennium (Khuri 1998: 164). He also identifies the reason in Islam with the reason in Kantian philosophy. He writes: "If Kant singled out three eternal ideals in which 'reason' takes an interest" the Islamic outlook turns, over and above discrete ideals, to a paradigmatic totality, in which reason continuously takes an interest and within which it finds its bearings. The difference between Islam and the Kantian philosophy, however, is enormous on one crucial point: Kant didn't ascribe a revelatory status to the ideals of reason" (ibid). Richard K. Khuri also stresses the aspect of morality and spirituality in Kantian conception of reason. He observes that our rational pursuit of knowledge and our moral lives becomes united in the sources of all that exists. Reason is hence integrally tied to our moral ideas and spiritual being. The constraints that by now seem external to reason, such as our habit of separating its use from social, moral and cultural consequences, are really part of the correct employment of reason. For Kant to reason correctly is to act so that the moral good is promoted as well as, to expand knowledge and seek the systematic unity of all things (Ibid: 72 ).

So reason is not absolute as it is for the radical empiricists and modern positivists (Khuri 1998: 72). "It is a means to understand the real meaning and spirit of the revelation, which is the 'perfect knowledge'" (J Farooqui 2003: 181). In the Islamic philosophical tradition, Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina treat reason and revelation as complementary; according to them, the function of reason is to reveal

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the meaning of revelation, which means that reason itself has a revelatory function (Khundmiri 2001: 112).

Revelation in the form of Book, i.e. the spoken word, is only one form of revelation. This view is expressed in the doctrine of essential unity or reason and revelation (Khundmir 2001: 112). Revelation is the Absolute Frame of Reference of Islamic civilization (Sardar 2003: 23). Both Qur`an and Sunnah form the basis of the Islamic tradition. Alam Khundmiri has characterised the metaphysics found in the revelation as follows:

1. The *Qur`an* treats the invisible and visible world as a continuum and not as two separate realms.
2. The *Qur`an* does not regard the visible world or the world of sense-experience as an illusion, nor as an evil, but regards it as true and real. The world of matter is treated as a challenge to be accepted by the faithful and as a stage of human activity. The *Qur`an* also regards sense-experience as a valid source of knowledge.
3. Similarly the world of events and the hereafter are regarded as a continuum. The world of events itself leads to the hereafter, and both provide stages, although in different manners, for the spiritual development.
4. The *Qur`an* regards time and history as real and believes in the irreversibility of time. Unlike some religions, it does not encourage the idea of rebirth or the possibility of man's re-entry in the world of events.
5. It believes in the law of causality so far as the world of events is concerned, which includes the human world and thus does not leave a gap between destiny and causality.

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6. It encourages, even makes obligatory, the study of the physical world and the past history of mankind
7. It discourages the pseudo-sciences like astrology and regards the universe as indifferent to human destiny.
8. It denies that there are intermediaries between God and the Universe and thus makes possible a scientific study of the universe (Kundmiri 2001: 102).

Within these boundaries reason and intellect are not raised to the level of tyranny where they become the sole approach to knowledge. Freedom, in the absolute sense, belongs only to the arena of pure idea. It cannot be operationalized in the sense that it is understood in Occidental philosophies (Sardar 1987: 28). As the Absolute source of knowledge becomes the revelation, the epistemology thus formed deserves special attention. Al-Gazzali in his *Alchemy of Happiness* divides knowledge into four categories: 1) the knowledge of Self. 2) The knowledge of God. 3) The knowledge of this world and the knowledge of the Next world. In his *Ihya Ulumiddeen*, he has explained three criteria of the knowledge, one is the source, which gives two types of knowledge a) based on revelation and b) based on non-revelation; acquisition and reason.

Second on the level of Obligatoriness, which he further divides into a) *Fard-ul-Ayn*, Individually Requisite Knowledge and b) *Fard-ul-kifaya*, what is essential for the survival of the whole community.

Finally on the basis of Social Function: which are analysed in terms of usefulness and so form a) Praiseworthy sciences which are useful and indispensable sciences and b) Blameworthy or pseudo- science these would include astrology, magic, etc.

**c. Finality and Universality:** For a Muslim, Islam is the final religion, and that it contains in the *Qur'an* and the Sunnah, all the essential religious and moral truth

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required by the whole human race from now until the end of time (WW Montegeri 1980: 6). And “from the Islamic point of view there is no domain that lies outside of it, even if such an ideal be not easy to realize completely in human society” (Nasr 1997: 99). “In any given time, in any pious mind, Islam could thus, seem a timelessly integral ideal whole” (Hodgson 1977: 78). That is why, Robert Hefner argues, most Muslim continue to look to their religious traditions for principles of public order as well as personal spirituality (Robert Hefner 2001: 12).

The concept of finality is rooted in the belief that Muhammad is the last prophet, *Qur'an* is the last Divine Book, and Muslims are the last Ummah. The Book (*Qur'an*) communicates the system of beliefs and the law, the Prophet presents a living example, and the community a way of life. Thus ‘finality’ also reflects the infallibility of revelation, the Prophet, and the community as a whole.

The concept of universality is drawn on the very fundamental notion of *tawhid* (unity). Since the Unity is in addition to a metaphysical assertion about the Absolute, a method of integration, a means of becoming whole and realizing the profound oneness of all existence, every aspect of Islam revolve around the doctrine of Unity. It unifies the here and hereafter worlds, life and death. And so it never gives unto Caesar what was Caesar’s (E Gellner 1981: 1). Rather it tries to integrate the domain of Caesar itself, namely political, social and economic life into an encompassing religious world view which also stresses the equality before the Sacred Law.

As the sacred law is available to every Muslim in the form of *Qur'an* and Sunnah there could be no question of Church ministering God’s grace to human, not of priest whose ritual acts mediated between a group of worshippers and God. It was symbolically correct that in public worship the leader, the Imam (who



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might be any one of the faithful) performed the same acts as anyone else, only standing in front of the others. Outside Salah, in other form of compulsory worships, *Hajj* (Pilgrimage to Makkah), *Zakat* (obligation of wealth), Fasting, even this form also is missing.

This holism and integrality form the basis of the *Ummah* (Universal community) and a particular concept of state and society. The unity based on the Sacred Law, transcends the boundaries of territory and nations ordaining only one ruler and one government (Nasr 1997: 18-20). The function of government is not to legislate (as it is already final), but to execute God's laws (Ibid: 100). So "the entire corpus of the law and just the constitution stands above the ruler. Since only can have the literates have access to the Law, the *Ulema* command natural authority in society. They have access to a set of norms which in principle, the ruler can't manipulate" (E.Gellner 1981: 42). Though *Ulema* lost the power to determine the identity of the ruler in the various Caliphates, they could remain most influential in determining the general nature of the society (ibid: 115) maintaining certain universal values up to this day.

**d. Continuity and Change:** Every cultural tradition, as Hodgson observed, is in a continuous process of development. It keeps on changing without changing its basic identity. The dynamic aspect of Islamic tradition has engaged many contemporary scholars of Islam both western and others. John O Voll's continuity and Change is one of the major studies in this field. Daniel W. Brown in his *Rethinking tradition in Modern Islamic thought* also explores this dynamic aspect as he states that 'tradition is not an enemy of change, but the very stuff that is subject to change. Tradition changes and may be used to justify change; it can, in fact, be revolutionary, he gives examples from the tradition of Islam. He observes that 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

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of more recent movements that looked to tradition to justify change (Brown 1996: 2).

John O. Voll in his study of reforms and renewal among Muslims finds out the sources of change in the tradition, which can work in harmony with the concept of *finality*. This throws light into the very basis and power of the call for the changes in the tradition, as he views: two of the great concepts in the Islamic vocabulary of resurgence are *Tajdid* and *Islah*; *Tajdid* is usually translated as “renewal” and *Islah* as “reform”. Together they reflect a continuing tradition of revitalization of Islamic faith and practice within the historic communities of Muslims... In changing circumstances and with different implication, *Islah* and *Tajdid* have always involved a call for a return to the basic fundamentals of Islam as presented in the *Qur’an* and *Sunnah* of Prophet (J O Voll 1983: 32-37)”.

“*Islah* is directly related to the task of the long line of God’s messengers whose works are described in the *Qur’an*... It is the effort to increase the righteousness of the people”. “*Tajdid*” has similar connotations of faithfulness to God’s revelation. The basis of *Tajdid* is a tradition from the prophet Muhammad:” God will send to this *Ummah* at the head of each century there who will renew its faith for it. .. The renewer and reformer is not compelled to re-create the exact conditions of the first Islamic century, but the processes of *Tajdid* and *Islah* are inspired by the example of a past experience rather than impelled by a hope for future Utopia The renewalist tradition in Islam is special style or mode of dealing with the faith, particularly as it involves the life of the believer within the Muslim community (Voll 1983: 32-37)”.

Voll concludes that “the long-term continuity of this mode of Islam can be seen by examining three themes, which appear in the manifestation of *Tajdid-Islah* in the major eras of Islamic history; both pre-modern and modern. They are 1) the

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call for a return to or a strict application of, the *Qur'an* and the Sunnah of the Prophet. 2) The assertion of the right of independent analysis (Ijtihad) of the *Qur'an* and Sunnah in this application, rather than having to rely upon and imitate the opinions of the preceding generation of the learned men of Islam, which is called taqlid. 3) The reaffirmation of the authenticity and uniqueness of the Qur'anic experience in contrast to other Islamic modes of synthesis and openness (ibid)."

e. **Historicity:** Islamic tradition has given great value to its historical nature. Wilfred Cantwell Smith in connection with the role assigned to history in various faiths finds, "the Hindu for whom ultimately History is not significant the Christian for whom it is significant but not decisive, the Muslim for whom it is decisive but not final, the Marxist, for whom it is all in all" (WC Smith 1957: 15). This continuity was ensured through the planned and systematic preservation of the original teachings of Islam and their faithful transmission from generation.

This preservation had far-reaching consequences for the continuity as well as the world-wide diffusion of the Islamic faith (Momin 1988). The belief that "the same God who revealed himself to all the Prophets (Adam, Moses Jesus) and finally, and most completely, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad" and "this revelation to Muhammad, the last of the Prophets, is contained in the Qur'an, the actual, literal living word of God" (Esposito 1983: 4) serves the claim of continuity of the tradition from the primordial time. Because from the Islamic perspective, every prophet preached the fundamental doctrine of Unity and every manifestation of human existence was organically related to the Shahadah, *La ilaha illallah* (Nasr 1997: 20) Hussein Nasr analyzing this concept of historicity writes:

"Islam considers itself as the primordial religion (al-din-hanif) because it is based on the doctrine of Unity which has always existed and which lies in the nature of

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things...The primordial religion based on Unity began with Adam himself. He was a “monotheist” (muwahhid) from the beginning. Mankind did not evolve gradually from polytheism to monotheism of the first man into polytheism and has to be remained periodically of the original doctrine of Unity. History consists of a series of cycles of decay and rejuvenation. Decay comes from the corrupting influences of the terrestrial environment, from the earth which pulls all things downwards and makes every spiritual force decays as it moves away gradually from its original source. Rejuvenation comes from Heaven through the prophets who, by means of successive revelations, renew the religious and spiritual life of man”(ibid: 21).

### **II. Organization of the Tradition: Sharia and Tariqah**

The complex nature of the organization of the Islamic tradition has been a major source of interest and enquiry for social science like Sociology social anthropology, history, and political philosophy. All have looked into the various aspects of the organization system; for sociologists, however, the interest was in analyzing it in terms of Islamic Great tradition and Little Tradition (Gellner) and for some civil and state Islam (Hefner: 2001) and for others (Weber, Turner, etc.) rural and urban Islam. However the converging point of these various explanations is their emphasis on the two aspects of esotericism and exotericism in Islam, to explain in its own terminology the Sharia and the Tariqah.

**Sharia:** The word Sharia is derived from a root meaning path (Nasr 1997: 100), which for a Muslim is the Divine code of conduct. It gives meaning and significance to to his daily life, which “provides the blueprint for Muslim Society- a comprehensive code of life which includes laws that regulate prayer and alms giving as well as, family, criminal, commercial and international law. (Esposito 1983: 4)” Sharia classifies entire human action into five namely, *wajib* (obligatory), *mandub* (meritorious), *haram* (forbidden), *makruh* (reprehensible) and *Mubah* (indifferent). This classification has been the central focus of almost all

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the legalist discourses, which forms the basis of the formal aspect of the Sharia tradition.

In general the sources of the Sharia tradition can be cited as following

a) *Qur'an*: *Qur'an* is believed to be the Divine Book which was revealed to Prophet Muhammad. It contains the general principles of Muslim social life. Next to *Qur'an* is *Sunnah* which deserves some explanation.

b) *Sunnah*: The word *Sunnah* originally meant 'a beaten track', to fashion a thing, or to produce it as a model. But it is used in a specific sense, which consists of what the Prophet said, what he did and what he approved of or allowed. *Hadith* is sometimes used in a specific connotation that denotes only what the prophet said. Thus both *Hadith* and *Sunnah* of the Prophet are regarded as a 'model' of Islam in operation (Sardar 1997: 24). In the operationalization of Qur'anic principles, the *Sunnah* plays a vital role. Together, the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* form the Absolute Frame of Reference of the Islamic Tradition.

c) *Ijma*: *Ijma* means the consensus of the Islamic community on some point of the law. *Ijma* enjoys some what divine status on the authority of the *Hadith*: My community shall never agree on error. This approach of *Ijma*, however, doesn't license the democratic aspect of legislation, because it is only allowed only when there is no clear and direct legislation on a specific issue in *Qur'an* and *Hadith*. 'The consent of Ummah was invoked only for the supplementing of divine truth by interpretation where interpretation was required, rather than independent and equally powerful source (Gellner 1981: 116).

d) *Quiyas*: It means to use human reason to compare an existing situation with one for which legislation already exists. However this also can not be

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equated to the 'modern rational legislation'. As rationality is rooted in the already available revealed laws.

In addition to these four sources there are contending sources like that of *Isthislah*, *Urf*, etc. The basic difference in these approaches is regarding the question of primacy and authenticity as basis of the diversities in the Islamic tradition throughout the history, which still remain.

The dominant pattern of this diversities can be found in the form of the different *Madhabs* (Schools of legal thought), namely, Maliki, Hanafi, Shafi, Hanbali. These schools were founded by the eighth and ninth century Ulema ; Malik bin Anas, Abu Haneefa, Muhammad bin Idrees Al-shafi'e. and Ahmad bin Hambal respectively. These different schools have different spheres of influence throughout the Muslim world. Maliki School, For example, is completely dominant in North Africa, and Hanafi School which was the official school of the Ottoman, is widespread in Turkey, eastern parts of Arab world and the Indo-Pakistan-sub-continent. While Shafi *madhab* has traditional followers in Egypt, Syria and in India among Kerala Muslims, Hanbali School had its centre in Egypt and Syria (Nasr 1997; Gellner 1981).

In all Madhabs, "however much they had at first varied in their stress in *Qur'an* and *Hadith* , this or that element in deriving the law, the spirit of law was much the same, and the same spirit pervaded all its branches" (Hodgson 1974: 336). This is the aspect of the legislation, which allows for the Unity among all the diversities. But this codification in the four schools represents a new shift in the intellectual paradigms. As Ziauddin Sardar observes: After the codification of Sharia in to four schools, a new paradigm enveloped the Muslim Scholars; the paradigm of *taqlid*. '*Taqlid*' means blind and unquestioning following and obedience"(Sardar 1979: 56) of any one of the four Imams of Madhabs. The

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practice of *Ijtihad*, the dynamic source of the tradition became dependent on the four schools or methodology of the Imams. By the tool of “Ijtihad Muslims were intellectually productive that the different challenges faced were resolved by a creative synthesis of the principles available in the texts. It was by their aid that different elements of culture, theology, law, politics philosophy and Sufism were unified into an organic whole (Alam Kundmiri 2001: 46)”. The processes of this development were very complex which deserve a separate study.

***Tariqah:*** *Tariqah*, which is often equated to Sufism in the academic discourses on the ‘Little Tradition’ of Islam, is the exoteric aspect of the Islamic culture. It is “most subtle and difficult to understand from the outside, at the same time its external effect is to be seen in manifestations of Islamic society and civilization” (Nasr 1997: 115). Sufism has been attracting the attentions of the scholars especially sociologists of religion, offering a wide range of study which are very important in the study of cultural accommodation and assimilation.

Just like Sharia was codified to protect the ‘Divine Law’, Tariqah was systematically formed to preserve the piety and devotion to the ‘Will of God’ to keep in a sense of the Divine Presence and orient towards the Gaze of Allah. Many Sufi Ulema have defined Sufism in terms of *the Ihsan* in the *Hadith* of Prophet in which he explains the differences between *Islam*, *Iman* and *Ihsan*; “*Ihsan* is to adore Allah as if you see him, and if though not see him he nonetheless sees you”.

Sufism gave emphasis to the internal meanings of *Qur’an* and *Hadith*. Their priority was to cultivate a piety-minded society. On this broader basis of piety it could accept any form of culture and give it an Islamic orientation. So it is not surprising that from Sufism there came different forms of customs, rituals, prayers and other religious practices, which are mostly rooted, in the local traditions. This in effect, has resulted in emergence of parochial traditions in

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Islam, which have inspired the sociologists of Islam to classify its tradition into mainly, African, South Asian, Central Asian and Persian (Ahmad 1992: 8).

Though Thariqah shows the features of accommodation, it will be a mistake to call it as heterodox culture in Islam (Jeremy Gunn 2003), because it draws its ideas from *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*, the difference from the *Sharia* form is its orientation. However, as the emphasis in both traditions of *Sharia* and *Tariqah* varied there had been sometimes differences on the issues raised by the *Sufi Shakes*. Imam Gazzali was one who reconciled such differences and brought the two discourses together in harmony. However, many Legalist *Fiqh Ulema* were suspicious of the nature of different Orders and many were judged even as unislamic.

Just like *Sharia* contains mainly four schools of legal thought, *Tariqah* contains different orders (Yousuf Hashim 2004: 10), like *Qadiriya*, *Chistiaya*, *Naqshabandiyya*, *Suhrawardiya*, *Shaduliyya*, etc. Each of these orders have their own sphere of influence. In different parts of the Muslim world Islam spread through these different Sufi Orders: In most regions of India, in South East Asia, in China and in much of Africa, Islam established itself through the Sufi Orders (Nasr 1997: 120).

To conclude, the complex organizational systems of *Sharia* and *Tariqah* represent a diverse and multiple discourses, which have been providing a powerful language of themes, signs and symbols to the changing conditions and so enabling Islam to operate as a master signifier. Gellner looks into this feature of the tradition: Islam survives as a serious faith pervading both folk and a Great Tradition. Its great Tradition is modernizable, and the operation can be presented not as an innovation or concession to outsiders, but rather as the continuation and completion of an old dialogue between knowledge and ignorance, political order



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and anarchy, civilization and barbarism, town and tribe, Holy Law and human custom (E. Gellner 1981: 4-5).

In the contemporary Muslim society owing to the sources and forces of globalization, the signifying process of many such themes in the tradition have been enlivened and renewed, and are the major concern and content of the contemporary discourses over the resurgence of Islam. Many sociologists and political scientist see the resurgence as a reaction to the European modernity and western model of developmental projects. The next chapter is, therefore, devoted to the 'themes in modernity' and 'how modernity has influences the Islamic Traditions'.

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