

# Anglo-American 'Traditional Islam' and Its Discourse of Orthodoxy

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## Abstract

Since the late 1980's a current or denomination that is often referred to as Traditional Islam has crystallised within the broader landscape of Sunni Islam in the English-speaking world. This analysis sheds light on Traditional Islam's discourses of orthodoxy and orthopraxis, its historical narratives, rhetoric regarding contemporary Islam and how it construes the metastructure of Islam and the Islamic sciences. It is mainly based on essays by Nuh Ha Mim KELLER and Abdul Hakim MURAD and carves out an overview of contemporary Traditional Islam and its central fields of discourse and scholarly contention. Contemporary Traditional Islam's understanding of Islam is established by reference to the famous *ḥadīṭ* Jibrīl that speaks of a tripartite structure of the religion consisting of *islām*, *īmān* and *iḥsān*. Through the specification of each of these subfields of revealed knowledge Traditional Islamic discourse instructs its adherents regarding the nature of orthodoxy and its understanding of the Islamic past, present and future. Traditional Islam's discursive bid for orthodoxy challenges other strands and conceptualisations of normative Islam, not least those predominant within groups and currents associated within salafism, revivalism and reformism.

## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to shed light on the discursive metastructure of a rising current or denomination within contemporary Islam that is too often neglected, namely *Traditional Islam*.<sup>1</sup> It is hoped that such light-shedding might encourage further research on this highly important topic. Studies on contemporary Islamic groups and currents tend to be focused either on the novel, the reformist, even the odd and *queer*, or on the threatening, alienating and the hostile currents and manifestations of Islam. Islam at its loudest one might say. Traditional Islam is neither. On the contrary, it is conservative, discreet and usually speaks with a lowered voice. Traditional Islam, however, is sociologically and numerically also one of the main paradigms and most influential currents within contemporary Islam. The article predominantly deals with Anglo-American expressions of Traditional Islamic discourse of orthodox authority, historical narrativity and the metastructure of knowledge and disciplines (*‘ulūm*) in Sunni Islam. The backdrop of the

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1 Throughout the article I use the name *Traditional Islam* to denote the current in question. In this I follow Ron Geaves' lead in using a term that is often used by adherents to this current themselves. I can think of no better alternative. Cf. GEAVES 2006. I have chosen to use a capital letter, Traditional Islam, to suggest that the current in question may be construed as a denomination within Sunni Islam, like Protestant Christianity.

contemporary discourse, as shall be shown, is transcontinental or trans-*umma* as well as transhistorical.

### Islamic discursive traditions: instruction and orthodoxy

I found Talal Asad's theoretical ideas regarding an anthropology of Islam especially useful in the analysis of Traditional Islam. He argues that any anthropology of Islam must have as its point of departure the concept of Islamic tradition as being a discursive tradition. This implies the following:

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. These discourses relate conceptually to *a past* (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and *a future* (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through *a present* (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions). An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present.<sup>2</sup>

Traditional Islam is understood in these anthropological terms as an entity of separate discourses that endeavour to establish the orthodoxy of specific practices and institutions as opposed to other versions of practices and institutions. Traditional Islamic discourse is didactic and instructional, as shall be shown, to the very metastructure or infrastructure of Islam, its practices and its branches of knowledge. In the following section I will unfold an analysis of Traditional Islamic discourses to find out (1) what traditions Traditional Islam is mainly concerned with, (2) how these traditions relate to specific conceptions of the past and the future, through an idea of the present, and (3) how these traditions are linked to other practices, institutions and social conditions. Traditional Islam carries within its very name the essence of an Islamic discursive tradition, namely that it alleges orthodoxy through its discourse of tradition. The first main focus of the analysis, then, is exactly the inner logic and structure of Traditional Islam's discourse of tradition, past and present. Asad's concept of orthodoxy is furthermore of central importance:

Wherever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust correct practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace incorrect ones, there is the domain of orthodoxy. The way these powers are exercised, the conditions that make them possible (social, political, economic, etc.), and the resistances they encounter (from Muslims and non-Muslims) are equally the concern of an anthropology of Islam, regardless of whether its direct object of research is in the city or in the countryside, in the present or in the past. Argument and conflict over

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2 ASAD 1986: 14.

the form and significance of practices are therefore a natural part of any Islamic tradition.<sup>3</sup>

Traditional Islam as a contemporary current is a bid for orthodoxy. Within the wider complex of contemporary Islam this current lays claim to a status as *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā'a*, the saved sect among all the sects of Islam.<sup>4</sup> On what grounds does this current justify such a claim, how is it theoretically, rhetorically and discursively defended and upheld and against whom? The second main focus, then, is Traditional Islam's exercise of discursive power over tradition and its argumentative strategy for drawing their specific picture of the practices in question.

### Meditations on tradition and traditional

The term 'tradition', like 'modernity', 'culture' or 'identity', is so vast and diffuse in its meanings that it is extremely tricky or perhaps even meaningless to use it. Since it is a key term in the self-representation of Traditional Islam, however, it is difficult to avoid and deserves elaboration.

The expression 'Traditional Islam' is easily translatable into most Western languages. Apart from the Arabic term *islām*, however, 'Traditional Islam' makes only limited sense in Arabic and is, indeed, not widely used. One searches almost in vain for *al-islām al-taqlīdī*, as a denomination, in Arabic Google.<sup>5</sup> It is a central notion in the context of this study that Traditional Islam is more clearly discernible as a Western Islamic category or denomination. The more recent and less rooted character of the Western Islamic context(s) in general is exactly what renders Traditional Islam more outspoken and visible as a discursive tradition that positions itself as orthodoxy in a landscape of alternative narratives of orthodoxy. The term *taqlīdī* is revealing nevertheless. Revealing because Traditional Islam, when thus translated, incorporates the essential antithesis or antidote to many manifestations and versions of reformist, modernist and even revivalist Islam in the modern period in its very name.<sup>6</sup> For the same reason contemporary Traditional Islam tends to

3 Ibid.: 15-16.

4 This refers to an oft-cited *ḥadīth* narrated in Abu Dā'ūd that tells of seventy-three Islamic sects of whom only one will avoid the punishment of Allah.

5 The category is used occasionally in Arabic in between inverted commas, "*al-Islām al-taqlīdī*", for instance when translations of news are made from foreign languages. Both the president of Tataristan, Rustam Minnikhanow, and the president of the Maldivian Islands, Mohamed Nasheed, are reported in Arabic news to endorse and support "*al-islām al-taqlīdī*" against "extremism" (*al-taṭarruf*). (<[http://arabic.rt.com/news\\_all\\_news/news/591330/](http://arabic.rt.com/news_all_news/news/591330/)> and <<http://ar.muslimvillage.com/2011/12/25/17527/maldivian-president-rejects-extremism-calls-for-traditional-islam/>>). Elsewhere, in indigenous Arabic usage online the two terms are used together to indicate a sociological state of things in different countries in contrast to the societal aspirations of salafists (*al-salafiyyūn*) (<<http://zawaya.magharebia.com/ar/zawaya/opinion/722>>) or political Islam (*al-islām al-siyāsī*) (<[http://www.almesbar.net/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=233:من\\_الإسلام\\_التقليدي\\_إلى\\_الإسلام\\_السياسي\\_في\\_الكويت\\_&Itemid=64](http://www.almesbar.net/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=233:من_الإسلام_التقليدي_إلى_الإسلام_السياسي_في_الكويت_&Itemid=64)>). Only in the first case, in translation, is it used to denote a specific Islamic category. (All sites accessed Jan. 21, 2013).

6 A central notion and ideological formula of reformist, modernist and revivalist scholars, currents and movements in the modern period has been a call for renewed *ijtihād* and an outspoken critical attitude towards what was discursively defined as its opposite, namely the principle of *taqlīd*.

revere al-Ġazālī (d. 1111) and Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 1355) more than Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350), ‘Abd al-Ġanī al-Nābulī (d. 1730) more than Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1792), Muḥammad ‘Illīš (d. 1882) and Abū l-Hudā al-Ṣayyādī (d. 1909) more than Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afgānī (d. 1897) and Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), Yūsuf al-Nab(a)hānī (d. 1932) and Aḥmad al-‘Alawī (d. 1934) more than Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (d. 1914) and Rašīd Riḍā (d. 1935), ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd (d. 1978) more than Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966), Nūr al-Dīn ‘Itr (b. 1937) and Muḥammad Sa‘īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī (b. 1929) more than Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (b. 1926) and Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999).

‘Traditional’ in Traditional Islam comprises what is considered authentically rooted in revelation, has crystallised under the banners of scholarly consensus (*ijmā‘*) and been passed on as Islamic knowledge (*‘ilm naqlī*) in chains of scholarly authority (*isnād*). ‘Traditional’, then, does not primarily refer to customs, folklore or the cultural practices and norms that characterise the lands and societies of Muslims.<sup>7</sup> Traditional Islam is ‘fundamentalist’ in the sense used by Stephen Humphrey who defines (Islamic) fundamentalism as “the reaffirmation, in a radically changed environment, of traditional modes of understanding and behaviour.”<sup>8</sup> The palette of widespread negative connotations of the term ‘fundamentalism’ should specifically not be read into its usage in this context since it is used only to shed light on Traditional Islam’s relation to the revealed sources and practices.

The category traditional Islam is used by Ron Geaves to denote contemporary Barelwi, off-shots thereof (like Idara Minhaj ul-Qur’an) and (activist) Sufi *ṭarīqas* from elsewhere in the world that operate in the West. Traditional Islam stands opposed to ‘Wahhabis’, ‘Deobandis’, ‘Jama’at-i Islami’ and other ‘neo-revivalist’, ‘orthodox’ or ‘neo-orthodox’ movements.<sup>9</sup> In his terminology traditional Islam “acknowledges 1400 years of tradition as authoritative alongside the teachings of Qur’an and Sunna and recognizes the contribution of Sufi spirituality, the legal interpretations of the *‘ulamā’* and the four schools of law.”<sup>10</sup> Unlike revivalists, modernists and reformists traditional Islam does not implicitly or explicitly acknowledge or presuppose that modernity necessitates a break with premodern scholarship, practices and institutions of religious knowledge and power. Geaves’ traditional Islam refers more or less to the same overall category or current that is dealt with in this article. Geaves’ main emphasis is on contemporary activist manifestations of sub-continental Barelwi derived traditional Islam in Britain and how movements related to traditional Islam are on the rise and catching up with more reformist movements in terms of organisation, education and youth appeal. This is an important context within which the following analysis should be read. He makes no real effort, however, to go into the theological, historical and ideational discourses that characterise this current. It is my hope that this article will help shed more light on these elements of global Traditional Islam. My

7 This is a common way of using the terms ‘traditional Islam’. See for instance POUWELS 1987, where ‘traditional’ refers to what is more indigenously African in tone and expression as opposed to what is more *sharī‘a* founded, more to Horn than to crescent so to speak.

8 HUMPHREY 1979: 3.

9 GEAVES 2006.

10 Ibid.: 157.

own emphasis is on Arabic and specifically Western Traditional Islamic discourses of orthodoxy, theology, jurisprudence, Sufism and history. The textual foundation for the analysis consists mainly of shorter essays or transcripts of speeches written by two Western Muslim scholars, Nuh Ha Mim Keller<sup>11</sup> and Abdul Hakim Murad<sup>12</sup>, published between 1995 and 2007. There are four reasons for the choice of this source material. (1) The first relates to the literary style of the essays. They are relatively short and concise and are written for didactic more than merely intellectual or academic purposes. They are eloquent, rich in historical narrativity, often polemical and clear-cut in their definitions and thus ideal for discursive analytical purposes. (2) The second relates to the centrality, usage and representativity of the essays to the current of Traditional Islam. The essays are widely distributed, referred to, discussed<sup>13</sup> and paraphrased within the current of Traditional Islam in the English speaking parts of the world. They are therefore important for the establishment of Traditional Islam and its discourses of tradition and orthodoxy as a specific and clearly discernible Islamic category in the landscape of global Islam since the early 1990's. The essays are accessible through the internet although several of them have been published in print as well. (3) The scholarly and spiritual credentials of the essayists constitute the third reason for the choice of their essays. Both are widely renowned, respected and acknowledged as Islamic authorities and leaders of congregations of Muslims, not merely as academics or theoreticians, both in the West and elsewhere. Furthermore, the essays are generally uncontested within the current that they represent and their narratives and definitions may thus be construed as consensual. (4) Finally, non-subcontinental sources have the advantage, on the one hand, of not being enmeshed in the Barelwi-Deobandi divide and, on the other, that they deal with the issue of Islamic practice beyond the Hanafi school of law that both Barelwis and Deobandis share.

Since the aim of this article is to map out the theology, historical narratives and ideational metastructure of the Traditional Islamic paradigm I have deliberately chosen not to elaborate at great length on the backgrounds, influences, teachers, affiliations, historical links and social networks of these two protagonists of Anglo-American Traditional Islam. Likewise, and for the same reasons, I have left out a detailed analysis of their impact on European, American and global Islam. Both issues are definitely interesting and deserve attention not least since there are no studies on either of the two scholars to the best of my knowledge.<sup>14</sup> In view of the aims of this article, however, such a shift of focus would be to take the eyes of the ball in order to look at the man instead.

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11 For a brief biography on Nuh Ha Mim Keller see <[http://shadhilitariqa.com/site/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=3](http://shadhilitariqa.com/site/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3)> (accessed Feb. 13, 2013).

12 For a very brief biography of Abdul Hakim Murad, see <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timothy\\_Winter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timothy_Winter)> (accessed Feb. 13, 2013).

13 Within the networks of Traditional Muslims where I have conducted my fieldwork from 2006 to 2013 in Denmark, Sweden, England, Syria, Jordan, Yemen, Singapore, Malaysia and Egypt the themes, discourses, categories, argumentation and theological and historical narratives of these essays were often discussed, referred to and clearly had an authoritative status.

14 STJERNHOLM 2011 and KOTB 2004 both mention them briefly without elaborating on either of the issues.

### Traditional Islam and the Traditionalist School

It is both necessary and illuminating to look for the roots of the category Traditional Islam as used within this current. The publication of Seyyed Hussein Nasr's *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* from 1987 seems to mark an important point in time where the category Traditional Islam begins to gain ascendancy in self-referential usage among Muslims and among scholars on Islam and the Muslim world.<sup>15</sup> It is almost impossible to do justice to Nasr's comprehensive and eloquent account within this context. He sets forth a holistic, inspiring and learned grand vision of the Islamic past, of traditional Islam as it was, is, should and could be. His compelling and highly idealised vision encompasses knowledge, science, spirituality, philosophy, ethics, gender, education, art, architecture, nature, politics - basically everything. The Islamic tradition is poetically described by using a tree-analogy: Islam is a tree that grows forth from Divine revelation. Its roots are the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīṭ* and its trunk and branches "that body of tradition that has grown from those roots over some fourteen centuries in nearly every inhabited quarter of the globe."<sup>16</sup> Nasr uses 'traditional Islam', 'the traditional school' and 'traditionalist' seemingly interchangeably to describe this attitude or mode of understanding Islam.<sup>17</sup> Traditional Islam, we are told, encompasses and acknowledges it all, Sunnism, Shi'ism, Sufism, Ismailism, etc., since it is all the unfolding of tradition and all transcendently linked to revelation. Traditional Islam is contrasted on the one hand with Western secularism and modernism, which is anti-traditional in its essence, and, on the other, with a non-delimited variety of contemporary manifestations of Islam that are 'counter-traditional', 'pseudo-traditional', 'modernist' or 'fundamentalist'.<sup>18</sup> These proclaim to represent Islam, sometimes look like Islam but are essentially perversions of traditional Islam. When one looks closer at Nasr's terminology and his references one discovers that the epithet traditional Islam is used specifically to describe the understanding of tradition that is predominant in Perennialism/the

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15 I thank Mark SEDGWICK for his statistical assistance on this specific issue and for illuminating comments, suggestions and the numerous hours of discussion on the topic of Traditional Islam and related issues we have had. A survey of article references in Google Scholar shows that until the late 1980's the usage of 'traditional Islam' was quite uncommon. From there onwards it becomes more and more common through the 1990's and by the year 2000 a remarkable surge in usage and popularity occurs, continues and is intensified throughout the 2000's. By 2003, if not earlier, the category is commonly used in public debates beyond academia and among policy makers in the West. In the among my interlocutors infamous Rand report (BENARD 2003) the term 'traditionalist' plays a central role. The report advises United States policy makers to actively promote and back the 'modernists', including the 'Sufis'. Meanwhile they should only "back the traditionalists enough to keep them viable against the fundamentalists (if and wherever those are our choices) and to prevent a closer alliance between these two groups.", *ibid.* 47. The US should not mistake the 'traditionalists' for a partner in their 'promotion of Democratic Islam', however, and "Accommodating traditionalists to an excessive degree can weaken our credibility and moral persuasiveness. An uncritical alliance with traditionalists can be misunderstood as appeasement and fear.", *ibid.* 36. The problem with 'traditionalists' in the RAND version of the world is that "traditionalism is antithetical to the basic requirements of a modern democratic mind-set: critical thinking, creative problem solving, individual liberty, secularism.", *ibid.* 33.

16 NASR 1987: 11-12.

17 *Ibid.*: 13-15.

18 *Ibid.*: 18-22. Interestingly, these neither include Deobandis and Wahhabis who are classified as revivalists but nevertheless "a truncated form of traditional Islam." *Ibid.*: 12.

Traditionalist School.<sup>19</sup> Nasr does not try to camouflage this fact<sup>20</sup> although he is not completely overt about it either. Thus, for instance, we learn that “the traditional school accepts the orthodox collection of the six *Ṣiḥāḥ* and the ‘Four Books’ of Shi‘ism”<sup>21</sup>, and that regarding theology and *kalām* “[t]he traditionalists do not defend only one school at the expense of others but insist on the value of the whole intellectual tradition of Islam in all of its manifestations, every one of which issued from the Islamic revelation.”<sup>22</sup> Although the Qur‘ān and Islamic theology do contain a version of the main theological idea of Perennialism, namely that the world’s religious traditions share a common source, classical Islamic theology, whether Sunni or Ṣ‘a, is something else than the Traditionalist School. Perennialism in some central ways represents a different creed and a different perspective on the Islamic tradition than that held by the most influential and normative Islamic scholars across history. In Nasr’s vision of traditional Islam the Islamic tradition is construed from a bird’s perspective, from above and not (only) from within. Nasr’s traditional Islam, then, becomes an argumentative or discursive position that establishes itself above and beyond the Islamic tradition. A perspective that identifies with, admires, respects and is struck by awe of the Islamic tradition but also one that seeks to establish itself academically, philosophically and spiritually beyond it. It assumes that hidden within the subtle folds of classical Islamic scholarship lies an esoteric position that does away with and transcends the divisive claims and dogmatism of exoteric scholarship within and even beyond the Islamic tradition. It ecumenically endeavours to transcend the age-old divergencies that are prevalent in Islamic scholarship across its different denominations in order to emphasise the esoteric transcendent unity of the world’s religions.<sup>23</sup>

By the year 1987 these ideas of the Traditionalist School are hardly new, even as parts of a specifically Islamic discourse.<sup>24</sup> What is new is the all-comprehensive nature of Nasr’s vision and the way in which the perennialist vision is linked specifically to the category traditional Islam. As we shall see exemplified in the writings of Keller and Murad, however, the category Traditional Islam from there onwards subtly takes on a more specifically Sunni Muslim meaning. Or at least a more specifically Sunni Muslim version of it arises parallel to it. Within this current the Traditionalist School’s claim for tradition is considered somewhat problematic since it represents a theological position that is not

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19 For more on this current see the works of people like Rene GUÉNON, Frithjof SCHOUN, Seyyed Hussein NASR and Titus BURCKHARDT. For a critical overview of the Traditionalist School see: SEDGWICK 2004.

20 Ibid.: 13. Furthermore the book is dedicated to Sayyidī Abū Bakr Sirāj al-Dīn al-Ṣāḍilī al-‘Alawī al-Maryamī, also known as Frithjof SCHOUN, a student of René GUÉNON who is considered the main founder of the Traditionalist School.

21 Ibid.: 14.

22 Ibid.: 16.

23 NASR, Preface to ṬABĀṬABĀṬ 1971 (1989): 4-9. In contrast to this see for instance al-ĠAZĀLĪ [ed. 1993]. Al-Ġazālī uses the term *ahl al-qibla* to denote the variety of Islamic creeds. He does not claim to share the views of all of them but nevertheless specifically warns against creedal bigotry (*ta‘aṣṣub*) and against calling any of them – any one who does not belie (*takḍīb*) either of the two *ṣahādas* - disbelievers (*kuffār*). Those that do belie either of them, however, are disbelievers.

24 For instance ibid.: 4-9. In it NASR gives a more elaborate introduction to the vision and terminology of perennialist theology, its understanding of ecumenism and its understanding of the Islamic tradition. See also NASR 1979.

directly traceable to any evident or nameable Islamic authority before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at least not without controversy.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, claiming in principle to equally respect and accept all traditional manifestations of Islam has problematic practical implications: what to follow in practice and what theological position to hold in cases where the living theological traditions do not agree or are in direct opposition. It is to this current of contemporary Sunni Muslim Traditional Islam that I shall now turn. Although an effort is sometimes made within the current to distance Traditional Islam from Nasr and the Traditionalist School's version of it, essential elements of Nasr's vision of history, reform, modernity, education, art and tradition continue to play a central role in Traditional Islamic discourse.<sup>26</sup> Most importantly, perhaps, the concept of tradition as such.

### The metastructure of the Traditional Islamic paradigm

The remainder of this article before the final conclusions is devoted to presenting an overview of the basic structure of the paradigm propounded by Traditional Islam. It then goes on to focus on the three main discursive fields of the paradigm, *fiqh*, *'aqīda* and *taṣawwuf*, the interplay between them and how contentions within them play a role in Traditional Islam's bid for orthodoxy against other similar bids in the contemporary landscape of Sunni Islamic currents and denominations. The vastness and importance of these issues considered, the article necessarily touches upon a variety of historical, theological and ideological subjects that have constituted key discussions in Islamic as well as Islamological scholarship throughout the last century and more. In order to maintain the overall focus of the article, namely the paradigm of contemporary Traditional Islam, references to these issues in other contexts and literary sources are only included to the extent deemed directly relevant to this focus.

Traditional Islam revolves around a specific interpretation of the tripartite division put down in the famous *ḥadīṭ Jibrīl*<sup>27</sup>; the *dīn* of Allah and his messenger structurally consists of *islām*, *īmān* and *iḥsān*.<sup>28</sup> Each of these basic components refers to a major field of knowledge within the Islamic intellectual tradition, *fiqh*, *'aqīda* and *taṣawwuf*, as well as to an anthropological aspect; *islām* (body/practice), *īmān* (mind) and *iḥsān* (spirit/soul). The correct and precise definition of each component is based on the expertise of recognised

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25 KELLER 1996.

26 KELLER mentions NASR's writings as one of the reasons he became a Muslim and specifically stresses the relevance of NASR's work on the interrelation between modernity and the traditional Islamic sciences. See: al-MIṢRĪ (transl. KELLER) 1991: 1095. For the theological differences between Perennialism and Traditional Islam, as construed by specifically Sunni Muslim traditional Muslims, see also KELLER 2011. Likewise, the influence of numerous elements of perennialist thought, as opposed to the differences in creed, is evident in Abdul Hakim MURAD's writings. For an influential example of a normative website that represents Traditional Islam in the specifically Sunni Muslim version of it and yet endorses the Traditionalist School's vision of concepts like tradition, modernity, progress and civilisation see <[http://www.livingislam.org/mmt\\_e.html#pstv](http://www.livingislam.org/mmt_e.html#pstv)> (accessed Jan. 28, 2013).

27 This paradigmatic *ḥadīṭ* is related in Muslim and in several others of the early collections of *ḥadīṭ*. Muḥyī al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-NAWAWĪ (d. 1277) includes it as the second *ḥadīṭ* in his collection of the forty-two most fundamental and important *ḥadīṭs*, *al-Arbaʿīn al-Nawawīyya*.

28 KELLER 1995a: par. 23.



scholars whose feet are firmly established within the following schools or circles of scholars:

Sunni Islam, or Ahl al-Sunna wa'l-Jama'ah, understands the Islamic religion as it has been passed down in an unbroken chain of transmission from teacher to student from the time of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) until today. The way of Sunni Islam is to take the branch of Islam from living jurists who follow one of the four Sunni schools of *fiqh*: the Hanafī, Maliki, Shafī'i, and Hanbali schools; the branch of Iman from living scholars belonging to one of the two Sunni schools of 'aqida: the Ash'ari and Maturidi schools<sup>29</sup>; and the branch of Ihsan from living masters of one of the many Sufi orders that have emerged over the centuries, such as the Qadiri, Naqshbandi, Shadhili, Chishti, and Rifa'i tariqas.<sup>30</sup>

This basic definition of the identity of Traditional Islam gives us a preliminary hint to whom it considers its adversaries within the broader landscape of contemporary Sunni Islam. Firstly, there is the aspect of passing down knowledge within unbroken chains of transmission from the time of revelation and onwards. Any current or scholar, past or present, who breaks with what is considered original, revealed and unaltered Islamic knowledge, as defined within the confines of the official institutions<sup>31</sup> of the tripartite structure, lies outside the boundaries of Traditional Islam. Evident reform movements like the *salafiyya* movement, critical historical or epistemological revisionists, secularists, declared modernists, liberals, most Islamist movements and popular folkloric Islam, all fall outside the defining boundaries of Traditional Islam. Secondly, and more specifically, Traditional Islam positions itself firmly in opposition to Wahhabism/contemporary Salafism<sup>32</sup>, because of its stern criticism of the authority of the four *madhabs* of *fiqh*, its denial of central doctrines of the Aš'arī and Māturīdī schools of 'aqida and, especially, because of its hostility towards *taṣawwuf*. Purist Salafism, with its somehow similar bid for the status as authentic Sunni Islam, is the inherent arch-opponent in Traditional Islamic discourse. Finally, all attempts to break with or redefine the methodology or canonised scholarly knowledge of any sub-genre of Islamic knowledge, whether in 'ulūm al-ḥadīth, *tafsīr* or *uṣūl al-fiqh*, is shunned in principle.

Traditional Islam sees itself as the contemporary inheritor of premodern majority Islam. It does not claim to represent the sociological majority position within the wider boundaries of contemporary Sunni Islam, rather its claim for the status as authentic Sunni

29 On some occasions certain branches of the Ḥanbalī 'aqida as well as Aš'arī 'aqida are included in Traditional Islamic discourse as legitimately Sunni.

30 N.N. (Sunni Path) [n.d.]: par. 11. In all the following quotations I have deliberately kept the original texts with the manner of transcribing Arabic terms employed by them. <SunniPath.com>, now <qibla.com>, is an online educational institution and a main site for the transmission and teaching of Traditional Islam in English. Its physical location is in Jordan in the neighbourhood of Nuh Ha Mim KELLER and it is founded and run mainly by his followers.

31 I.e. the above-mentioned *madhabs* of *fiqh* and 'aqida and *tariqas* of *taṣawwuf* on the one hand, and on the other within the scholarly disciplines ('ulūm).

32 The term Salafism is used in Traditional Islamic discourse mainly to indicate what Henri Lauzière has called purist Salafism. It does, however, also cover the modernist *salafiyya* movement pertaining to al-Afġānī and Muḥammad 'Abduh. LAUZIÈRE 2010: 370.

Islam, is built upon (1) the revealed textual basis of its teachings (*naṣṣ*)<sup>33</sup> and (2) its diachronic intellectual continuity; its documentable affiliation with and study of the teachings of an awe inspiring list of acclaimed premodern authorities through their most prominent descendants (*ijāza*).

Few would deny today that the millions of dollars spent worldwide on religious books, teachers, and schools in the last thirty years by oil-rich governments have brought about a sea change in the way Muslims view Islam. In whole regions of the Islamic world and Western countries where Muslims live, what was called Wahhabism in earlier times and termed Salafism in our own has supplanted much of traditional Islamic faith and practice. The very name Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama‘a or “Sunni orthodoxy and consensus” has been so completely derailed in our times that few Muslims even know it is rolling down another track. In most countries, Salafism is the new “default Islam,” defining all religious discourse, past and present, by the understanding of a few Hanbali scholars of the Middle Ages whose works historically affected the tribes and lands where the most oil has been found. Among the more prominent casualties of this “reform” are the Hanbalis’ ancient foes, the Ash‘ari and Maturidi schools of Sunni theology.<sup>34</sup>

Contemporary majority Islam, then, is not the Islam of the learned or of tradition. Rather, Islam has been hijacked unnoticeably by a minority of the otherwise respectable Ḥanbalī *maḏhab*, the Wahnābī-salafīs. This leap in the quality of Muslims’ faith, Traditional Islam often contends, was predicted by the Prophet himself. Within the intellectual confines of contemporary Traditional Islam one is likely to come across the following *ḥadīth*:

Perhaps the biggest challenge in learning Islam correctly today is the scarcity of traditional ‘ulama. In this meaning, Bukhari relates the sahih, rigorously authenticated hadith that the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said,

Truly, Allah does not remove Sacred Knowledge by taking it out of servants, but rather by taking back the souls of Islamic scholars [in death], until, when He has not left a single scholar, the people take the ignorant as leaders, who are asked for and who give Islamic legal opinion without knowledge, misguided and misguiding (Fath al-Bari, 1.194, hadith 100).

The process described by the hadith is not yet completed, but has certainly begun, and in our times, the lack of traditional scholars—whether in Islamic law, in hadith, in tafsir ‘Qur’anic exegesis’—has given rise to an understanding of the religion that is far from scholarly, and sometimes far from the truth. For example, in the course of my own studies in Islamic law, my first impression from orientalist and Muslim-reformer literature, was that the Imams of the maḏhabs or ‘schools of jurisprudence’ had brought a set of rules from completely outside the Islamic tradition and somehow imposed them upon the Muslims. But when I sat with traditional scholars

33 The concept of *naṣṣ*, revealed text, in Traditional Islam refers both to the Qur’ān (*al-waḥy al-matluww*) and the sunna (*al-waḥy al-ḡayr matluww*) in its textual form in the canonised corpus of prophetic *ḥadīth*, as this is defined by the pre-modern paradigm of ‘*ulūm al-ḥadīth*’.

34 KELLER 2005: par. 1.

in the Middle East and asked them about the details, I came away with a different point of view, having learned the bases for deriving the law from the Qur'an and sunna.<sup>35</sup>

As shown in the two previous quotes an important historical narrative of deterioration in the contemporary age is characteristic of Traditional Islam. Because of a process identifiably predetermined by Allah and foretold by the Prophet contemporary Islam is non-scholarly and has overwhelmingly been cut off from its classical roots. A somehow similar narrative characterises the Traditionalist School as mentioned above. In Traditional Islam, however, the narrative is not primarily anti-modern but is rooted in a more general Islamic conception of historical deterioration and restoration from the time of the Prophet and onwards.<sup>36</sup> Purist Salafism, furthermore, shares yet another version of the narrative of deterioration. In the *salafī* narrative, however, corruption is identified mainly in the period between the first generations (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) and the contemporary age and the solution proposed is summed up in the well-known *salafī* parole of going back to the Islam of the first generations. This specific conception of history seems to be inherited from the *salafīyya* movement. Restoration, in the *salafī* narrative, is possible only by questioning and challenging the established Islamic institutions of power and knowledge and by going beyond them to the roots of revelation. Traditional Islam's quest and strategy for restoration is very different. The solution, they hold, is not to dismiss more than a thousand years of Islamic knowledge, interpretation and religiosity. Instead they endeavour to revivify what reformists and Salafism tend to dismiss as irrelevant, thus reconnecting Muslims to their classical Islamic roots and saving them from the confusion of modernist deviations and 'movement Islam'.

#### **Discursive fields of contention: (1) Defending the *madhhab* and the necessity of *taqlīd***

*Popular taqlid sounds like four-part harmony. Popular ijihad is cacophony.*<sup>37</sup>

Within the last century the status and influence of the four Islamic *madhabs* of jurisprudence has deteriorated drastically.<sup>38</sup> After having been main institutions of knowledge and identity in the premodern period some researchers have now gone as far as declaring them disintegrated as social institutions and primary references of Muslim

35 KELLER 1995a: par. 1-3. The same tradition is printed on the back cover of another important and very polemical Traditional Islamic book on contemporary Salafism, namely HADDAD 2004.

36 This general conception of history is repeated in several important *ḥadīths* like the ones mentioned in the quotes above. Among them the *ḥadīth* found in al-Bukhārī that, "The best of you are my generation, then those that follow them and then those that follow them. Then there shall come after them a people who will betray and be untrustworthy, will give witness even though they have not been asked to, will make vows yet will not fulfil them and obesity will appear amongst them." An important element in this general narrative of deterioration is the concept of a renewers (*mujaddid*) that shall repeatedly restore Islam across history as foretold in the prophetic *ḥadīth* found in Abu Dā'ūd: "Surely, Allah will send for this *umma* at the beginning of every century a renewer of its religion."

37 MURAD, *Contentions 3* [n.d.].

38 MESSICK 2005: 159-174.

identity.<sup>39</sup> In Traditional Islamic discourse the modern developments within Islamic law and practice leading to the gradual downfall of the authority of the four *madhabs* has been disastrous. Dr. Muḥammad Saʿīd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī's book *al-Lā-maḍhabīyya aḥṭar bid'a tuḥaddid al-šarī'a al-islāmiyya* is a contemporary standard defence of the *madhab* against 'anti-*maḍhabism*'.<sup>40</sup> As such it sums up the basic position of Traditional Islam regarding Islamic law. In Traditional Islamic discourse the prototypical *lā-maḍhabī*, anti-*maḍhabist*, denies the validity, relevance and authority of traditional *fiqh* and *uṣūl al-fiqh* scholarship, which he considers prone to error unlike the Qur'ān and the authenticated *ḥadīṭ*.<sup>41</sup> Against this claim several lines of argument are launched in defence of the structure of the *madhabs*. (1) The first of these relates to the magnitude of the textual reservoir that forms the basis of *fiqh* and *uṣūl al-fiqh*. Especially *ḥadīṭ* and *ʿulūm al-ḥadīṭ* are emphasised as an ocean of knowledge and complexity that no commoner can possibly hope to, nor be supposed to, master all by himself.<sup>42</sup> (2) The second line of argument is based on methodological and exegetical requirements. Revelation is of course flawless, but human understanding of it is not. Everybody can, indeed must, obtain knowledge about the basics of faith and practice by studying the Qur'ān and the *sunna* by themselves, whereas seeking out the details of *fiqh* is not an obligation put upon commoners. *Uṣūl al-fiqh*, in Traditional Islamic discourse, is the highly specialised and highly necessary science of how to deduce the exact practical implications of revelation as developed across the centuries by the brightest Muslim minds, the four *imāms* being at their forefront and their *madhabs* constituting the institutional framework of this exegesis. What is confronted by this argument is a current within contemporary Salafism that identifies itself as the contemporary followers of *ahl al-ḥadīṭ*, i.e. the true experts and followers of the entire prophetic *sunna*, as opposed to the people of *maḍhab taqlīd* who, they hold, only follow the teachings of their own *imām mujtahid*. The late Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī is commonly acknowledged as the leading contemporary scholar of this particular trend and is often described as the *muhaddith* of the era by his followers.<sup>43</sup> In Traditional Islamic discourse contemporary Salafism, in its dismissal of the relevance of the methodologies

39 YILMAZ 2005: 191-206.

40 Damascus: Dār al-Farābī, 1970. As the title—*Anti-maḍhabism is the most dangerous bid'a threatening the Islamic šarī'a*—indicates, anti-*maḍhabism* is considered an unsanctioned and blameworthy type of *bid'a*.

41 KELLER 1995b.

42 Ibid.

43 Dr. Muḥammad bin ʿAbd al-Razzāq ASWAD from the Šarī'a Faculty at the University of Damascus in his very comprehensive 2007 study, *al-Ittijāhāt al-muʿāšira fī dirāsāt al-sunna al-nabawīyya fī Miṣr wa-bilād al-Šām* (Contemporary Currents in the Study of the *sunna* of the Prophet in Egypt and the Šām Area, Damascus: Dār al-kalim al-ṭayyib, 2007), classifies contemporary *ḥadīṭ* studies (1905-2004) in four main groups the first two of which are (1) "The current of majority *ḥadīṭ ʿulamā'* in the study of the *sunna* of the Prophet" (*Ittijāh jumhūr ʿulamā' al-ḥadīṭ fī dirāsāt al-sunna al-nabawīyya*) and (2) "The *salafī* current and its study of the *sunna* of the Prophet: exemplified by al-šayḥ Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī" (*al-Ittijāh al-salafī wa-dirāsatuḥu lil-sunna al-nabawīyya: al-šayḥ Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī namūḍajan*). A main subject of the study is an analysis of the numerous allegations against al-Albānī, his methodology and his work made by proponents of the first current and even at the hands of other *salafīs*. This is the background of the Traditional Islam/Salafism contentions in the field of *ḥadīṭ*. Dr. Aswad's own assessment seems to be a subtle yet conditional acknowledgement of al-Albānī's no less than 238 volumes in the field of *ḥadīṭ*, *ibid.*: 633.

developed within the confines of the classical *uṣūl al-fiqh* paradigm, actually opposes the major *muhaddithūn* (scholars of *ḥadīth*) whom they claim to represent;

It hardly needs remarking that although the Four Imams, Abu Hanifa, Malik ibn Anas, al-Shafi'i and Ibn Hanbal, are regarded as the founders of these four great traditions, which, if we were asked to define them, we might sum up as sophisticated techniques for avoiding innovation, their traditions were fully systematised only by later generations of scholars. The Sunni ulama rapidly recognised the brilliance of the Four Imams, and after the late third century of Islam we find that hardly any scholars adhered to any other approach. The great hadith specialists, including al-Bukhari and Muslim, were all loyal adherents of one or another of the madhhabs, particularly that of Imam al-Shafi'i. But within each madhhab, leading scholars continued to improve and refine the roots and branches of their school.<sup>44</sup>

The above passage furthermore points to a third line of argument. (3) The approach of the *madhhabs* is the only authentic and agreed upon scholarly approach of the Islamic tradition across history. Any break with this tradition radically implies that former generations of Muslims were in fact mistaken and (4) it opens the door further to an already immense Islamic chaos of individualist and unauthorised *ad hoc ijtihād* and *bid'a*. In Traditional Islamic discourse what is effectively at stake when *taqlīd* and the four *madhhabs* are abandoned is an already rapidly withering concept of intellectual coherence, scholarly integrity and Islamic unity, indeed the very main cultural achievement of the Sunni Islamic tradition since the fifth century.<sup>45</sup>

in order to build Muslim unity today, to take us back to the theme of the conference: the first condition has to be to re-establish a coherent system of interpretation in the Divine, of the Divine Lawgiver's messages to us along these lines. Unless we do so, we will have not four madhhabs in their usual, traditional condition of harmony. We will be going to have as many madhhabs as we have Muslim egos. For those wild and desperate Muslims who reject taqlid and reinterpret the religion in terms of their own time-bound preferences, and their own frustrations and resentments, are going to become so numerous and so aggressive that that principle, that precious thing called Muslim unity, is going to be lost forever, and the religion will slip ever more disastrously into the extreme and violent direction that the followers of the anti-madhhabist tendency have charted for it.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, a line of argument (5) revolves around the above mentioned principles of transmission of knowledge, the *ijāza* paradigm. Leading senior proponents of contemporary Salafism, like al-Albānī and 'Abd al-'Azīz bin Bāz (d. 2000) are accused of lacking scholarly credentials and of not holding *ijāzas* for their teachings:

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44 MURAD, *Understanding the four Madhhabs* [n.d.]: par. 23.

45 Ibid.: par. 1.

46 Ibid.

As for his *ijaza* or ‘warrant of learning,’ Sheikh Shu‘ayb<sup>47</sup> tells us that it came when a hadith scholar from Aleppo, Sheikh Raghīb al-Tabbakh, was visiting the Dhahiriyya Library in Damascus, and Sheikh Nasir was pointed out to him as a promising student of hadith. They met and spoke, the sheikh authorized him ‘in all the chains of transmission that I have been authorized to relate’—that is to say, a general *ijaza*, though Sheikh Nasir did not attend the lessons of the sheikh or read books of hadith with him. Sheikh Raghīb al-Tabbakh had chains of sheikhs reaching back to the main hadith works, such as *Sahih al-Bukhari*, the *Sunan of Abu Dawud*, and hence had a contiguous chain back to the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) for these books. But this was an authorization (*ijaza*) of *tabarruk*, or ‘for the blessing of it,’ not a ‘warrant of learning’—for Sheikh Nasir did not go to Aleppo to learn from him, and he did not come to Damascus to teach him<sup>48</sup>.

Leading proponents of contemporary Salafism are thus dismissed as dilettantes of Islamic knowledge. The Traditional Islamic educational paradigm emphasises the importance of specific Islamic patterns, manners and norms of attaining knowledge. This implies *suhba*, studying with and being in the presence of *ijāza*-holding scholars in order to absorb their spiritual *hāl* (state of heart or being). Attaining Islamic knowledge solely through reading is not considered sufficient since it does not generate the necessary processes of self-transformation and moral and spiritual purification that constitute the real crux of Islamic education and learning. In Traditional Islamic discourse the most detrimental crime of Salafism and other reformist, revivalist and modernist currents is their failure to acknowledge or grasp the importance, character and spiritual depth of Islamic knowledge and the Islamic *ijāza* paradigm. Within the rhetorical structure of this Traditional Islamic narrative, when seen as a whole, Salafism or anti-*madhabism* represents chaos, deception, arrogance and ignorance. It functions as a main direct explanatory cause to the distortion and deviation of contemporary Islam. *Madhabism* and continued adherence to the four *madhabs*, on the other hand, is construed as a crucial harmonising factor. It represents stability, coherence, integrity, spiritual depth, continuity and authentic Islamic knowledge.

## 2 - ‘*Aqīda* anthropomorphism and the *takfīr* epidemic

*To the extent that God is corporeal He is demonstrably absent.*<sup>49</sup>

The second major field of contention in Traditional Islamic discourse is that of ‘*aqīda*, Islamic creed. ‘*Aqīda* is often emphasised as the most important branch of all the Islamic sciences since it deals with the nature of Allah, revelation, life, afterlife, prophecy, man, etc. Upholding illusory creedal notions can be existentially detrimental and may ultimately lead to a life in eternal damnation. Theological contentions regarding the correct way of understanding revealed texts that mention Allah’s physical attributes have deep and vivid

47 Š. Šu‘ayb al-Arna‘ūt (b. 1928) is an internationally acclaimed leading scholar of *ḥadīṭ*, Ḥanafī *fiqh*, *tafsīr* and Arabic grammar.

48 KELLER 1995c: par. 3-5.

49 MURAD, *Contentions* 2 [n.d.].

roots in Islamic theological history.<sup>50</sup> Is it more appropriate to cautiously and mystically confirm the limitedness of human language and understanding as set forth in the Ḥanbalī'an doctrine of *bi-lā kayf wa-lā ma'nā*? Is it necessary to initially establish complete divine transcendence (*tanzīh*) as a guiding principle within the confines of which figurative interpretation (*ta'wīl*) that strictly respects the boundaries of Arabic grammar is necessary to avoid anthropomorphism and corporeal interpretations of the Divine? Finally, is the right approach to affirm corporeal *bi-lā kayf*, thus respecting the outward (*ẓāhir*) meaning of the text, and proclaim that the Divine attributes are real but beyond any resemblance to the created?

The issue of the Divine attributes is a core element in contemporary Traditional Islamic discourse. Through it it endeavours to promote a distinguishable Traditional Islamic creed in opposition to more Ibn Taymiyya influenced *'aqīda* formulations and currents in contemporary Islam. Traditional Islam adheres to a theology of complete Divine transcendence. This, it is believed, is implied in the general *tafwīd*<sup>51</sup> of the *salaf*<sup>52</sup>, and defended at the hands of the *ḥalaf*<sup>53</sup> by necessary recourse to *ta'wīl*. The attributes are not denied (*ta'īl*) but all corporeal interpretations are shunned.<sup>54</sup> Gibrīl Fu'ād Ḥaddād's annotated English translation of Ibn Jahbal al-Kilābī's classical *Aṣ'arī* refutation of anthropomorphism and the *'aqīda* of Ibn Taymiyya<sup>55</sup> is a landmark reflection of a fierce discussion about creed that has been rekindled between adherents to different currents of Sunni Islam in the West for at least a few decades now and elsewhere for longer.<sup>56</sup> The book addresses what is perceived as an unscholarly and dangerous contemporary tendency, especially within the ranks of Salafism, to literalist interpretation in general and especially in the field of *'aqīda*. The book is furthermore part of an ongoing Traditional Islamic effort to sideline the temporarily extremely influential *ṣayḥ al-Islām*. This is done by exposing and cataloguing his contentious positions whether in *fiqh* issues or in creed and by thus undermining his scholarly integrity and isolate him within the fraternal confines of historical Islamic expertise. In Traditional Islamic discourse Ibn Taymiyya is put forth as the real ideological father of contemporary *wahhābī* anthropomorphism. Simultaneously a scrupulous effort is made to counter any suggestion that Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Imām ahl al-sunna wa'l-jamā'a*, shared these theological views. This may be construed as an attempt to cut off the ideological roots of contemporary Salafism and its claim to represent the *salaf* of the *umma*:

50 See, for instance, ROSENTHAL 1970: 108 ff.

51 *Tafwīd* in its theological sense means consigning or submitting the meaning of a notion that our minds can not comprehend to the knowledge of Allah, while confirming belief in it nevertheless.

52 I.e., the earliest Muslims, usually the first three generations or centuries. See ĠĀWJĪ 2008: 107-110.

53 I.e., the later generations of Muslims, usually those living after the third Islamic century. Ibid.: 110-115.

54 This is the position of the *Aṣ'arī madhhab* according to al-ĠAZĀLĪ in *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* as quoted in al-MIṢRĪ (tr. KELLER) 1991: 854. See also ĠĀWJĪ 2008, who elaborates on the same position.

55 ḤADDĀD 2008.

56 The book in itself bears witness to the backdrop of the contemporary debate in the West for instance in its comprehensive introduction by Wabhī Sulaymān ĠĀWJĪ (b. 1932) with the subtitle *The salaf, the ḥalaf, ta'wīl and the correction of errors in 'aqīda*. For an example of a comprehensive website that promotes the opposing *salafī* position, see <<http://www.asharis.com/creed/>> (accessed Jan. 30, 2013).

Whether Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal was an anthropomorphist, this is something that has been asked since early times, particularly since someone forged an anthropomorphic tract called *Kitab al-sunna* (The book of the sunna) and put the name of Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal's son Abdullah on it. [...] I looked this book over with our teacher in hadith, Sheikh Shu'ayb al-Arna'ut, who had examined it one day, and said that at least 50 percent of the hadiths in it are weak or outright forgeries. [...] Ostensibly a "hadith" work, it contains some of the most hard-core anthropomorphism found anywhere, such as the hadith on page 301 of the first volume that "when He Most Blessed and Exalted sits on the Kursi a squeak is heard like the squeak of a new leather saddle."<sup>57</sup>

What has occurred, it is held, is an unwarranted appropriation of the intellectual heritage of Islamic theology transforming Allah, in the minds of some Muslims, into a kind of 'big man'. The above mentioned contentions have deep roots within Sunni Islamic theological history and the polemical tone and style proposed on either side of the Traditional Islam/Salafism fence underline the controversial nature of the discourse. Another issue of some importance in Traditional Islamic discursive positioning likewise come into sight from the above quotation, namely that of text-forging, historically and in the present age. Some proponents of the *wahhābī/salafī* current, supported by oil money, tamper with classical texts when these are republished in order to remove elements of criticism of their own doctrines and in order to falsely create the impression that their own beliefs are similar to those of the great scholars of the past.<sup>58</sup>

Ḥaddād's work is furthermore a paragon of the methodological ideals espoused by Traditional Islam. The translator/annotator can present an official *ijāza* and a *silsila*, even an all-Damascene one, going back to the author himself through scholars like al-Suyūfī (d. 1505) and Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 1566).<sup>59</sup> He does not attempt to bring forth anything original or new to the age-long theological controversy, except its crucial contemporary reframing. All view-points are meticulously ascribed to some former scholarly authority since Traditional Islam is always discursively a confirmation of prior scholarly positions. The Traditional Islamic point of the matter is that *wahhābī-salafī* anthropomorphism, backed mostly by rich and ignorant Saudis, is concurrently a modern theological deviation and an already refuted abominable mistake of the past. The orthodox *ʿaqīda* of classical Islam is unnecessarily being questioned in the present age, Traditional Islam holds, and the field of *ʿaqīda* has been divided into two opposing camps; those for and those against the Ašʿarī/Māturīdī theological schools.<sup>60</sup>

Another *ʿaqīda* related issue that plays a crucial role in Traditional Islamic discourse is the phenomenon of *takfīr*, making allegations of disbelief on creedal grounds against people who otherwise consider themselves Muslim. Generally *takfīr* is avoided or even shunned among adherents of this current but they are nevertheless prepared, as we have

57 KELLER 1995d: par. 26-28 and 34.

58 KELLER 1995e: par. 8. Among others the text mentions *kitāb al-aḍkār* by al-NAWAWĪ, a widespread edition of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Buḥārī* in English edited by Muhammad Muhsin KHAN, Aḥmad al-ŠAWĪ's (d. 1825) commentary on *tafsīr al-Jalālayn* as examples of this type of direct or indirect text forgery.

59 ḤADDĀD 2008: 149.

60 KELLER 1995c: par. 47-48.



seen above, to engage in discussions of a creedal character. *Wahhabism* is continuously reproached for initialising the spread of what is perceived as a worldwide epidemic of Islamic disunity, the *takfīr* epidemic: "But perhaps the most ill-starred 'aqida legacy of the historical Wahhabi movement is something now practiced from the Najd to the Indian Subcontinent, to the East and the West; namely, the ease with which Muslims call each other 'unbelievers'."<sup>61</sup> Within the confines of its own discourse and historical narratives Traditional Islam represents a return to the unity of the premodern era, a unity based on the respectful acceptance of differences and scholarly humility, something considered generally lacking in the modern age. What is hailed is a return to an idealised premodern version of Islamic morality and scholarly attitude only now consciously elucidated within the context of the present age. In that sense contemporary Traditional Islam is a search for an alternative Islamic modernity. One that reconnects with a tradition considered long-lost and one that is able to rejoin the tattered body of contemporary Islamic sectarianism and re-establish the *Ġazālī* intellectual grandeur and largesse of the past. Both the diagnosis and the analysis of the past and the present are strongly reminiscent of the Traditionalist School and the paradigmatic ecumenical echo of Nasr's vision of traditional Islam clearly reverberates in Traditional Islam. The contemporary phenomenon of *takfīr* is considered the symptom of a disease related to the loss of continuity of tradition. In Traditional Islamic discourse the process of *takfīr* is a highly specialised and very complicated subdiscipline of the *ṣarī'a*. One that requires a deep level of insight into many branches of knowledge and one that should never be trusted to the untrained or the bigoted. In a lengthy essay on the subject of *kufr* and *takfīr* Keller explains that none of the 'aqida issues related to the Deobandi/Barelwi-contentions<sup>62</sup> of the 19th/20th centuries are essentially relevant to *takfīr*. They all revolve around peripheral dogmatic details where divergent interpretations are allowed and not around central creedal principles.<sup>63</sup> Taking into account the sheer magnitude of this conflict and the numerous mutual allegations it has entailed this gives us an indication of the position adopted by Traditional Islam on this issue: *Takfīr* should be avoided whenever possible and is never a matter for the public to get involved in:

Judging anyone who regards himself a Muslim to be an unbeliever is a matter not taken lightly by anyone who understands its consequences. The Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) has said: "Whoever charges a believer with unbelief is as though he had killed him" (Bukhari, 8.32: 6105. S). [...] It is difficult to think of a direr warning, and its purpose is clearly to dissuade Muslims of religion and good sense from judging anyone who professes Islam to be an unbeliever unless there is irrefutable proof. [...] In Muslim society, such a judgement is the business of the qadi or Islamic judge alone, and only because he has to. [...] Ordinary Muslims

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61 Ibid.: par. 49-51.

62 Deobandis and Barelwis represent two schools of Islamic thought that stem from the Indian subcontinent. Their differences of opinion pertain mainly to the nature of the Prophet's knowledge while alive and in the *barzah*, to the nature of his intercession before Allah, whether Allah could lie and the hypothetical possibility of a messenger being sent after the Prophet.

63 According to one of Keller's British students, himself of subcontinental descent, the views expressed in the essay have caused condemnation of Keller and controversy among some groups of Barelwis in Britain and elsewhere.

other than the qadi are not required to judge the faith in the heart of anyone who has spoken the Shahada or Testification of Faith.<sup>64</sup>

The Muslim society referred to in the above quotation is not primarily a real or factual society in today's world. Rather, it is an abstract and timeless moral universe and a collective Traditional Islamic lifeworld, usually referred to in the past tense. It persists as an aspiration and a reality in and through the books and discourse of the scholars and is cultivated in the minds and lives of Muslims adhering to it. It would be wrong to dismissively disregard it as utopian. Its relation to the physical world and time is extremely complex and it can be manifest in the lives and societies of people if only not in its entirety, on all levels and at all times. Pivotal to all Traditional Islamic definitions, educational contexts, understandings and sociality it is the lifeworld, so to speak, of Traditional Islamic discursive traditions. Within it *takfīr* is a rarity handled with the utmost care and only by qualified scholars. Adherents to Wahhābī anthropomorphism are not referred to as unbelievers although their corporeal beliefs are considered wrong, incoherent and detrimental. Instead they are excused due to the circumstances and confusion of the contemporary age:

Allah mentions this attribute of ghina or 'freedom of need for anything whatsoever' in some seventeen verses in the Qur'an. It is a central point of Islamic 'aqida or faith, and is the reason why it is impossible that Allah could be Jesus (upon whom be peace) or be anyone else with a body and form: because bodies need space and time, while Allah has absolutely no need for anything. [...] But perhaps it is fitter today to say that Muslims who believe that Allah is somehow 'up there' are not unbelievers. For they have the shubha or 'extenuating circumstance' that moneyed quarters in our times are aggressively pushing the bid'a of anthropomorphism.<sup>65</sup>

Islamic theological history in the present age is narrated in the trope of deterioration and disharmony. The past on the other hand is construed as an ideal enlightened state of unity, tolerance and agreement. That is concurrently an aspiration for the future. The main explanatory factor for the disruption of harmony is the *salafī* other who stands for intolerance, arrogant exclusivity, falsehood, dishonesty and even disobedience to Allah. His confusion of the basic concepts of man and God is ultimately a satanic influence and his earthly ally is immoral and uncompromising capitalist power. Traditional Islam, on the other hand, discursively and rhetorically denotes tolerance, humbleness, inclusiveness, wisdom, justice, historical continuity and obedience to Allah. As a contemporary aspiration it functions as a necessary harmoniser and the sole means able to reestablish stability, justice and order in the Islamic universe.

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64 KELLER 2007: ch. II, par. 5-6 + 9 and 11.

65 KELLER 1995f: par. 3 and 25.

### 3 - *Taşawwuf*: *sunna* or *bid'a*? Revivification of the Islamic heart

Certain teachings, doctrines, practices and personalities within the broader confines of Sufism have had their Muslim critics at all times. On the whole, however, Sufism's status and connotative field of meaning in the hearts and minds of Muslims have arguably been altered more substantially in the modern period than in any other period of Islamic history. Criticism and calls for reform of Sufism in the premodern and medieval periods were not uncommon but were always related to specific concepts, practices or esoteric/mystical formulations pervasive within particular currents or scholarly circles of Sufism. An effort to sideline or even dismiss Sufism as altogether un-Islamic became more and more common following the rise of Wahhabism in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. It gained further momentum with the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of Arab nationalism, the *salafiyya* movement and the rising tide of modernist, reformist, nationalist and secularist currents of Islamic thought and religiosity in the twentieth century. Sufis never gave in, however, and the scholarly defence of Sufism's Islamic credentials as well as its reform from within was an important theme in twentieth century Islamic literature, not least since the 1950's.<sup>66</sup> This is an important precursor to contemporary Traditional Islam as dealt with in this article.

If *fiqh* and *'aqīda* are indispensable elements of Traditional Islamic discourse its real core issue arguably remains the revivification of Islamic Sufism, *taşawwuf*. Traditional Islam's main rhetorical effort is directed at placing Sufism at the very centre of all the Islamic disciplines and to establish firmly that this has always been its natural and scholarly acknowledged position. *Taşawwuf* in Traditional Islamic discourse is the very soul of Islam, its spirituality by which it survives and expands, indeed the very *raison d'être* of revelation and prophethood. Traditional Islam is aware that Islamic modes of religiosity that are positive towards the concept of Sufism do not dominate contemporary Islamic discourse as a whole. Sufism is often understood as a premodern, world denying deviation, an unwarranted religious import, a heterodox innovation far removed from or even opposing the Qur'an and the *sunna* or, at best, a marginal pacifist curiosity. Traditional Islam is therefore always cautious to emphasise its own orthodoxy and scholarly coherence in the above mentioned fields of *fiqh* and *'aqīda* in order to stress a natural link between these disciplines and that of *taşawwuf*. Legitimate Islamic Sufism, as defined by Traditional Islam, is in strict conformity with the exoteric demands of the *šarī'a* and never supersedes it. Indeed, Sufism is construed as the inner aspect of the *šarī'a*. *Fiqh*, on the other hand, represents the quantifiable and physical aspects of Muslim practice and thus the outer aspect of the *šarī'a*. The two are mutually complementary:

This close connection between Shari'a and Tasawwuf is expressed by the statement of Imam Malik, founder of the Maliki school, that 'he who practices Tasawwuf without learning Sacred Law corrupts his faith, while he who learns Sacred Law without practicing Tasawwuf corrupts himself. Only he who combines the two proves true.' This is why Tasawwuf was taught as part of the traditional curriculum in madrasas across the Muslim world from Malaysia to Morocco, why many of the greatest Shari'a scholars of this Umma have been Sufis, and why until the end of the

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<sup>66</sup> See, for instance, SIRRIYEH 1999 and CHRISTMAN 2008.

Islamic caliphate at the beginning of this century and the subsequent Western control and cultural dominance of Muslim lands, there were teachers of Tasawwuf in Islamic institutions of higher learning from Lucknow to Istanbul to Cairo.<sup>67</sup>

...virtually all the great luminaries of medieval Islam: al-Suyuti, Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, al-Ayni, Ibn Khaldun, al-Subki, Ibn Hajar al-Haytami; tafsir writers like Baydawi, al-Sawi, Abu'l-Su'ud, al-Baghawi, and Ibn Kathir; aqida writers such as Taftazani, al-Nasafi, al-Razi: all wrote in support of Sufism. Many, indeed, composed independent works of Sufi inspiration. The ulema of the great dynasties of Islamic history, including the Ottomans and the Moghuls, were deeply infused with the Sufi outlook, regarding it as one of the most central and indispensable of Islamic sciences.<sup>68</sup>

Islamic history, scholarship and tradition in the Traditional Islamic narrative are profoundly and inevitably infused with Sufism. Islam in its golden age, at its highest and noblest social, intellectual, economical and political standing in world history, owed its success to its Sufi leanings. Indeed, a direct cause for the contemporary decline and confusion of the Islamic world is its abandonment of its Sufi spirituality. Traditional Islam discursively positions itself as the flag-bearer of this classical and scholarly Islam that has recently been perverted and sidelined by the ethos of reform and modernity. Sufism, the obligatory 'science of the heart' or 'Islamic psychology'<sup>69</sup>, as Abdul Hakim Murad has called it, is neither above nor beyond the other *'ulūm*, rather they constitute perfect harmony:

The very first thing a Sufi, as a man of religious learning knows is that the Shari'a and 'Aqida of Islam are above every human being. Whoever does not know this will never be a Sufi.<sup>70</sup>

Formulations like this counter patterns of allegations against Sufism well known to any student of Islamic history and challenge the sceptic's perception of Sufism as unorthodox and antinomian. Traditional Islamic Sufism thus discursively espouse the two dominant modalities of conceptualising mainstream Islam, namely as orthopraxis and as orthodoxy. As an acclamation it furthermore implicitly serves to distance Traditional Islam from Perennialism. An effort is often made to avoid confusion of the conceptions of legitimate Sufism corroborated by Traditional Islam and those of at least some strands of Perennialism. This current is nevertheless generally seen in a positive light and its proponents are occasionally quoted as trustworthy sources in Traditional Islamic Sufi discourse. As mentioned earlier, however, one of their most fundamental beliefs is criticised as unprecedented and thus not in harmony with Traditional Islam, namely the perennialist belief in the continued validity of all religious traditions even after the revelations of the Prophet.<sup>71</sup>

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67 KELLER 1995a: par. 74.

68 MURAD, *Islamic spirituality* [n.d.]: part 2, par. 38.

69 Ibid.

70 KELLER 1995a: par. 15 from below.

71 KELLER 1996.

How is Sufism otherwise construed and understood in Traditional Islamic discourse? There is no simple answer to that question due to the many definitions of Sufism that exist in the Islamic tradition that Traditional Islam aspires to revitalise and represent. Each *ṭarīqa* let alone each sheikh represent their own unique modality, terminology and discourse of Sufism although the bulk of it is shared and common. A common basic instructive definition in the discursive universe of Traditional Islam is that whereas *fiqh* establishes a prophetic pattern of action and speech that Muslims imitate to comply with the Divine command of following the Prophet, Sufism is the discipline that teaches Muslims the dimension of how to imitate the inner being or the spirituality of the Prophet. This is necessary in order to accomplish spiritual self-transformation or wayfaring (*sulūk*) and to obtain experiential knowledge of/by the Divine (*maʿrifa billāh*) and unveiling of the Divine realities (*kašf*). Traditional Islamic Sufism is an aspiration (*irāda*) for spiritual development and change through self-discipline (*riyāḍat al-naḥs/mujāhada*), technologies of introspection, self-reflection, devotion and contemplation (*muḥāsabat al-naḥs, muḍā-kara, ḍikr, awrād, ḥalwa*), supererogatory acts of worship (*nawāfil*) and noble behaviour (*aḥlāq karīma/adab*) based on compassion, generosity, wisdom and humility. It implies purification of the heart and soul (*tazkiyat al-naḥs*) as well as bringing one's speech and acts into conformity with the Divine while thoroughly abolishing vices. It means establishing an ever evolving relationship of thankful (*šukr*) servanthood (*taḥqīq al-ʿubūdiyya*) to Allah and non-attachment to other than Allah (*zuhd*) as well as a conscious effort to overpower the whims of desire (*šahawāt*), caprice (*hawāʾ*) and the ego (*naḥs*). These terms and the discourses, practices and dynamics semantically related to them constitute some of the more central elements of the wider and more specialised Traditional Islamic Sufi discourse. On the more general and polemical level of discourse embodied in the essays dealt with here, however, what is aspired for is the establishment of the basic constructs, narratives, justification and discursive positioning of Traditional Islam as a contemporary current. Thus, a more general modality of Islamic language and terminology is employed.

Sufism exists for the good reason that the sunna we have been commanded to follow is not just the words and outward actions of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace), but also his states, such as reliance on Allah (tawakkul), sincerity (ikhlas), forbearance (hilm), patience (sabr), humility (tawaduʿ), perpetual remembrance of Allah, and so on. Many, many hadiths and Qurʾanic verses indicate the obligatory character of attaining these and hundreds of other states of the heart, such as the hadith related by Muslim that the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said, 'No one will enter paradise who has a particle of arrogance in his heart' (Muslim, 1.93).<sup>72</sup>

Sufism, from the perspective of Traditional Islam, is definitely not just a curiosity of the past or a heterodox deviation. It is arguably the most important and crucial of all the Islamic disciplines. The one that makes it possible to truly and deeply fulfil the divinely stipulated obligation to imitate and love the Prophet and thus make way for purification (*tazkiya*) of the *naḥs* and Allah's contentment (*riḍā*), forgiveness (*maḡfira*) and spiritual

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72 KELLER 1995c: par. 11 from below.

‘tasting’ (*dawq*). The controversial institution of the *ṭarīqa* and the sheikh-*murīd* relationship, both major issues of contentment in the Sufi-*salafī* conflict, are construed in Traditional Islamic discourse not only as exigencies for attaining to these obligatory states of the heart but as a fundamental element in the prophetic *sunna* that reflects the didactic nature of the relationship between the Prophet and the Companions.<sup>73</sup>

In the fields of *islām* (*fiqh*) and *īmān* (*‘aqīda*), as we have seen above, Traditional Islam argues in favour of loosely institutionalised scholarly authority in compliance with a premodern ideal as opposed to the decentralised individualism of modernity. Likewise, in the field of *ihsān* (*taṣawwuf*) a profound Islamic spiritual development is considered extremely rare outside the confines of the sheikh-*murīd* relationship of the *ṭarīqas*. In general, however, the *ṭarīqas* as institutions do not play a very central role in Traditional Islamic discourse. Rather, what is important is defining Sufism in positive terms and place it within the confines of orthodox Sunni Islam. The issue of *bid‘a*, unwarranted innovation in religion, is therefore crucial in Traditional Islamic discourse. Probably the main accusation made against Sufism on behalf of its opponents is that certain of its practices and beliefs do not stem from the Qur’ān and the *sunna* of the Prophet but are *bid‘a*. Widespread contemporary understandings of *bid‘a* are construed as too simplistic and primitive. Once again Traditional Islam’s discursive arch-opponent, the Wahhābī-*salafīs*, are held responsible for initialising the spread of a superficial and misleading understanding of the concept. One of the most frequently quoted *ḥadīṡs* on the issue of innovation, a *ḥadīṡ* that is often repeated during Friday sermons, goes as follows:

The one whom Allah gives guidance no one can lead astray and the one whom he leads astray no one can guide. The most trustworthy discourse is Allah’s book and the most excellent way is that of Muhammad. The most evil of matters in religion is that which is newly begun [*muḥḍaṭāṭihā*], for every matter newly begun is innovation [*bid‘a*], every innovation is misguidance [*ḍalāla*], and every misguidance is in Hell.<sup>74</sup>

The *ḥadīṡ* seems to suggest that anything foreign to the original formulations and practices of the Qur’ān and the *sunna* of the Prophet is reprehensible. In Traditional Islamic discourse, however, it does not stand alone but is qualified by other *ḥadīṡs* that touch upon the same issue. In fact, all *ḥadīṡs* constitute only one text. The matter is one of *taḥṣīs al-‘āmm*, specification of the general, a well-known principle in the classical *uṣūl al-fiqh* tradition that Traditional Islam often refers to and identifies with. The linguistic meaning of *bid‘a* is that which is new. But the leading scholars of the past and the four *maḏhabs* all agree that two kinds of *bid‘a* exist, namely the reprehensible kind referred to in the *ḥadīṡ* quoted above and the *bid‘a ḥasana*, the good innovation. Two peripheral groups of scholars of the past are mentioned in Traditional Islamic discourse among those who opposed this otherwise agreed upon (*ijmā‘*) understanding of the matter. The no longer existing Zāhirī *maḏhab* and a sub-branch of the Ḥanbalī *maḏhab* associated with Ibn Taymiyya.<sup>75</sup> The

73 KELLER 1995a: par. 45 and 62.

74 The *ḥadīṡ* appears in Muslim, Abu Dā‘ūd and other collections.

75 MURAD, *Islamic spirituality* [n.d.]: par. 40.

Wahhābī appropriation of Ibn Taymiyya's teachings in turn has led to the spread of an understanding of *bid'ā* that radically breaks with the majority position of the past:

Why is it, then, that so many Muslims now believe that innovation in any form is unacceptable in Islam? One factor has already been touched on: the mental complexes thrown up by insecurity, which incline people to find comfort in absolutist and literalist interpretations. Another lies in the influence of the well-financed neo-Hanbali madhhab called Wahhabism, whose leaders are famous for their rejection of all possibility of development.<sup>76</sup>

In Traditional Islam's narrative of the present the fall of the caliphate and the following breakdown of the authority of Sunni Muslim consensus combined with Wahhabism's notorious tendency to misunderstand the depth and detail of the Islamic intellectual heritage has created a false dichotomy between Islam and innovation in many Muslim and non-Muslim minds. In fact, new phenomena and practices, like all other issues touched upon by the *šarī'a*, fall under the five well-known categories of the Sacred Law, *al-aḥkām al-ḥamsa*, and are thus either 'obligatory' (*wājib*), 'unlawful' (*ḥarām*), 'recommended' (*muṣtaḥabb*), 'offensive' (*makrūh*) or 'permissible' (*mubāḥ*).<sup>77</sup> Indeed, in Traditional Islamic discourse the very basic justification for the continuous validity of the *šarī'a* lies in its ability to accommodate to changing situations and historical developments. A categorical rejection of all things new, as implied in the Wahhābī interpretation of the concept of *bid'ā*, is construed as absurd and unnecessarily reactionary. Furthermore, since the opposite of *bid'ā* is the concept of *sunna* understanding the meaning of *sunna* is necessary to understanding *bid'ā*. Keller distinguishes between three meanings of the concept of the *sunna* of the Prophet that must not be confused. (1) One meaning is the one prevalent among students of *ḥadīth* where *sunna* is equal to prophetic *ḥadīths*. (2) Another meaning is the one used in *fiqh* terminology where *sunna* is contrasted with obligatory. (3) In its most basic form, however, it simply refers to *the 'Prophet's way or custom'*.<sup>78</sup> In Traditional Islamic discourse *bid'ā* is the opposite of *sunna* but not in the sense of the scholars of *ḥadīth*. I.e not in the sense that everything not particularly formulated and practised by the Prophet and the Companions is a reprehensible innovation. A practise not initialised by the Prophet or the Rightly Guided Caliphs that does not violate the *sunna* or undermine it is not only potentially a *bid'ā ḥasana* but actually becomes an inferable *sunna* itself.<sup>79</sup> Typical examples of things or phenomena that were foreign to the early generations of Muslims and which thus in a strict sense constitute *bid'ā* are mentioned in Traditional Islamic discourse to make this point. Thus, the development of the *ḥadīth* sciences (*ʿulūm al-ḥadīth*) to distinguish between genuine and spurious Prophetic traditions and the philosophical refutations of the arguments advanced by the Mu'tazilites<sup>80</sup> are examples of *bid'ā* that is obligatory (*wājib*) in the legal sense of the word. Even acts of worship initialised after the time of the early Muslims can be considered *bid'ā ḥasana* which takes

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76 Ibid.: par. 41.

77 Ibid.: par. 34-40.

78 KELLER 1995g: par. 23.

79 Ibid.: par. 29.

80 Ibid.: par. 41-48.

us back to the accusations made against Sufism and Sufi practices. The concept of Sufism, as referring to the inner dimension of the *ṣarīʿa*, was unknown under that name among the early Muslims but that does not mean that it constitutes a reprehensible innovation as some tend to suggest. Rather, Sufism as a discipline (*ʿilm*) is concerned with the moral, ethical and spiritual states and qualities of the Prophet. Aspiring to reach these states and qualities is in itself obligatory in the Islamic legal sense. In Traditional Islam, *taṣawwuf* or Sufism, the general term given to this phenomenon, is therefore equally obligatory in Islam. Specific Sufi practices and conceptions must be evaluated individually according to the standards of the *sunna* and *uṣūl al-fiqh*. In Traditional Islamic discourse practices like prophetic or saintly *mawlid* commemorations and the recital of *wirds* are considered *mandūb* (recommended) innovations since they serve a purpose that is in concordance with the general principles of the *ṣarīʿa*. Likewise, practices like *tawassul* (seeking intercession with Allah through intermediaries), special kinds of *dīkr* and specific ways of organising and institutionalising Sufism are either defended by reference to the *sunna* of the Prophet, the Qurʾān or are considered recommended, permissible or obligatory innovations.

One question naturally poses itself after all this: If Sufism was a major factor in nearly all scholarly Islamic formulations just a few generations ago and such an essential issue to the prophetic *sunna*, how and why were things so radically inverted and why is Sufism today marginalised and generally viewed with suspicion among Muslims? Seemingly a paradox construing a historical narrative that explains these changes is crucial. Traditional Islamic discourse proposes a set of reasons to explain the altered status of Sufism. (1) One reason pertains to the rise and domination of Wahhabism/Salafism with its radical reformulations of Islam and its general anti-spiritual and anti-traditional ethos. Traditional Islam holds that their approach and critique of Sufism is primitive and unfounded and furthermore unprecedented in the history of Islamic thought. Ibn Taymiyya is central and holds a double function in this subfield of Traditional Islamic discourse. As we saw above he is generally marginalised as a scholar of *fiqh* and *ʿaqīda* because of his controversial opinions and the criticism he faced from the established *ʿulamāʾ* of his time. Nevertheless, he is also set forth as a Sufi and thus serves as a major argument against the Wahhābī appropriation of his teachings. In Traditional Islamic discourse Wahhabism/Salafism's violent hatred towards Sufism is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of Ibn Taymiyya's teachings, an issue that further underlines the primitive and unscholarly nature of this movement. Initially it was boosted by a hitherto exceptional violence against non-Wahhābī Muslims and the general weakness of the Islamic world and later it was funded by Saudi Arabian oil money. By these questionable means the Wahhābī ideology was able to spread its anti-Sufi teachings far and wide thus entailing a general distrust in the minds of Muslims towards Sufism.<sup>81</sup>

Likening Wahhabism to the long gone sect of the *ḥawārij* is a central rhetorical means employed in this aspect of Traditional Islamic discourse. Their Islamic other is thus put in a very disfiguring light while simultaneously maintaining that the basic mindset is nothing new or foreign to Islamic history. Rather it is the likely result of unscholarly ignorance combined with an aggressive and desperate attitude. The appalling nature of the *Najdī*

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81 MURAD, *Islamic Spirituality* [n.d.]: par. 7 from below.



*da'wā*<sup>82</sup>, furthermore, is really not that surprising since the Prophet specifically warned against its coming. Demonising Wahhabism/Salafism on the basis of the *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Buḥārī ḥadīṡ* quoted below is frequent in Traditional Islamic discourse and is likewise a very clear expression of the state increasingly large parts of the *umma* are in from the perspective of this Islamic current. The Devil is gaining the upper hand while Muslims are busy killing and fighting each other and following a violent, intolerant and simpleminded Bedouin puritanist ideology.<sup>83</sup>

Raised [i.e. Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab] in the wastelands of Najd in Central Arabia, he had little access to mainstream Muslim scholarship. In fact, when his *da'wa* appeared and became notorious, the scholars and muftis of the day applied to it the famous Hadith of Najd: Ibn Umar reported the Prophet (upon whom be blessings and peace) as saying: 'Oh God, bless us in our Syria; O God, bless us in our Yemen.' Those present said: 'And in our Najd, O Messenger of God!' but he said, 'O God, bless us in our Syria; O God, bless us in our Yemen.' Those present said, 'And in our Najd, O Messenger of God!'. Ibn Umar said that he thought that he said on the third occasion: 'Earthquakes and dissensions (fitna) are there, and there shall arise the horn of the devil.' And it is significant that almost uniquely among the lands of Islam, Najd has never produced scholars of any repute.<sup>84</sup>

As interesting as the detailed geography of Traditional Islam is it is also extremely complex and beyond the confines of this article. The quote, however, gives us a preliminary hint as to some of the major centres of orientation. Syria, or more specifically the *Ṣām* area, is sometimes referred to as the last contemporary bastion of Traditional Islam<sup>85</sup> and students are encouraged to go there to seek knowledge.<sup>86</sup> Likewise, Yemen and especially the transnational *Bā-'Alawiyya* tradition of scholarship stemming from Tarim in Ḥaḍramawt have a high status in Traditional Islamic discourse.<sup>87</sup>

(2) A second explanatory factor in the Traditional Islamic Sufism narrative pertains to the colonisation and intellectual occupation of the Muslim world by the West and the widespread feeling of inferiority that this entailed. Orientalist writers on Sufism portrayed it as a heterodox tradition within Islam and as something ultimately foreign to the teachings of the Qur'ān and the *sunna*. They furthermore construed Sufism as largely opposed to the established '*ulamā'*' and the *ṣarī'a*. Orientalist publications were translated and distributed throughout the Islamic world and their views were adopted by reform minded Muslims. This entailed a thorough marginalisation of Sufism and led to a gradual and radical transformation of how Islam was to be perceived among Muslims.<sup>88</sup>

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82 Najd is the area in Arabia where Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb comes from.

83 MURAD, *Bin Laden's violence* [n.d.]: par. 10.

84 MURAD, *Islamic Spirituality* [n.d.]: par. 6 from below.

85 KELLER, *Interpreter's Log*: 139-140.

86 Until the revolution broke out in Syria it was the main destination for Traditional Islamic seekers of knowledge. Like the Syrian refugees many of the students seem to increasingly seek out Jordan as their new preferred destination.

87 For more on this tradition see HO 2006.

88 MURAD, *Islamic spirituality* [n.d.]: par. 8 from below.

With the disappearance of traditional Islamic scholars from the Umma, two very different pictures of Tasawwuf emerge today. If we read books written after the dismantling of the traditional fabric of Islam by colonial powers in the last century, we find the big hoax: Islam without spirituality and Shari'a without Tasawwuf. But if we read the classical works of Islamic scholarship, we learn that Tasawwuf has been a Shari'a science like tafsir, hadith, or any other, throughout the history of Islam. The Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said, 'Truly, Allah does not look at your outward forms and wealth, but rather at your hearts and your works' (Sahih Muslim, 4.1389: hadith 2564).<sup>89</sup>

(3) Finally, Traditional Islamic discourse admits that certain tendencies and practices within the broader confines of Sufism are indeed criticisable. This, however, is not a legitimate reason to abandon Sufism altogether. These tendencies that proceed from nonadherence to the *ṣarī'a* and the correct *'aqīda* have contributed to misguidance and to painting a picture of Sufism as something strange and un-Islamic:

mistakes historically did occur in Sufism, most of them stemming from not recognizing the Shari'a and tenets of faith ('aqida) of Ahl al-Sunna as being above every human being. But these mistakes were not different in principle from, for example, the Isra'iliyyat (baseless tales of Bani Isra'il) that crept into Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir) literature, or the mawdu'at (hadith forgeries) that crept into the body of prophetic hadith. These were not taken as proof that tafsir was bad, or hadith was deviance, but rather, in each discipline, the errors were identified and warned against by the Imams of the field, because the Umma needed the rest. And such corrections are precisely what we find in books like Qushayri's *Risala*, Ghazali's *Ihya'* and other works of Sufism.<sup>90</sup>

### Concluding remarks

Traditional Islamic discourse has its scholarly Islamic roots in a pervasively normative scholarly marriage that dates back to the fourth and fifth Islamic centuries, in a holistic Islamic vision that intermarries sober Sufism, Sunni theological discourse as instigated by al-Aṣ'arī and al-Māturīdī and the by then well consolidated legal schools. The subsequently dominant Sunni Islamic paradigm that began taking form amongst the immediate predecessors of al-Ġazālī. I.e., al-Quṣayrī (d. 1072) and al-Hujwārī's (d. 1077) middle-ground Sufism that built scholarly bridges between Sufism and the leading legal-theological currents: Aṣ'arism/Ṣāfi'iyya in the case of al-Quṣayrī and Māturīdism/Ḥanafīyya in the case of al-Hujwārī.<sup>91</sup> The other major current of Sufism in that period<sup>92</sup>, namely that of the more anti-rationalist traditionists predominant within the two remaining

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89 KELLER 1995a: last paragraph.

90 Ibid.: par. 12 from below.

91 KARAMUSTAFA 2007: 96-108.

92 Ibid.

schools of law and also some circles of the Šāfi'ī *maḏhab*, is also part of Traditional Islam as a contemporary paradigm, although one that is marginal in this analysis.

The point of departure for this article is Talal Asad's theoretical terminology regarding an anthropology of Islam. Central in this is the concept of Islamic discursive traditions and Asad's understanding of the dynamics and the domain of orthodoxy. I have endeavoured to shed light on contemporary Traditional Islam construed as a current or denomination on the rise in the West and elsewhere beginning with the backdrop of the category 'Traditional Islam' itself and its roots in the Traditionalist School. The analysis initially outlines the metastructure of Traditional Islam's holistic vision of Islam and the Islamic sciences which I suggest revolves around a specific reading of the *ḥadīṭ Jibrīl* that divides the religion into *islām*, *īmān* and *iḥsān*. Each of these represent an anthropological aspect, *islām* (body/practice), *īmān* (mind) and *iḥsān* (spirit/soul), as well as subfields of revealed knowledge, traditions, practices and institutions. This tripartite structure furthermore contextualises Traditional Islam's discourse of orthodoxy in three major discursive fields of contention, *islām/fiqh*, *īmān/aqīda* and *iḥsān/taṣawwuf* (Sufism). A main trope in Traditional Islam's narrative of the Islamic past and present is one of deterioration, disruption and the urgent need for restoration. Within all three discursive fields of contention the contemporary state of Islamic scholarship, practice, authority and religiosity is construed as having been disrupted from its previous harmonious state. In the field of *fiqh* Traditional Islamic discourse defends and justifies the institution of the four *maḏhabs* against anti-*maḏhabism*, revivalism, reformism and especially Wahhabism/salafism, which is throughout demonised and construed as an Islamic enemy within. In the field of *aqīda* the creedal traditions of the Aš'arī and the Māturīdī *maḏhabs* are defended and upheld and are construed as legitimate Islamic orthodoxy again in opposition to Wahhabism/Salafism and creedal formulations inspired by Ibn Taymiyya. The third discursive field of contention is arguably the most central to Traditional Islamic discourse. Sufism is not only construed as legitimately Sunni Muslim but as the heart of Islam and the *raison d'être* of revelation. Traditional Islamic discourse holistically links the field of Sufism to the fields of orthodoxy and orthopraxis (*īmān* and *islām*). This is partly done by means of a narrative of historical deterioration where the rise of Wahhabism/Salafism and Western colonial dominance are construed as the central factors that have led to the mistaken conception among Muslims that Sufism is something else than or opposed to Islam.

Throughout the article and the analysis I have included numerous examples of Traditional Islamic discourse in order to give a taste of its tone, rhetorical strength, themes and eloquence. By focusing on the metastructure of Traditional Islamic discourse, its main discursive fields of contention and by introducing a wide variety of sub-themes, for instance its geography, personalities, historical background, social networks, modalities of religiosity, didactics, transnational character, spirituality, use of multimedia, conception of history and tradition, the issue of conversion, etc., I hope to inspire further research on contemporary Traditional Islam not least in its Anglo-Latin and Western modalities.

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