



## **Epistemological Crisis within the House of Traditional Islam**

### **KEYWORDS**

Herrmenutic, tradition, epistemology, modernism, interpretation, law

### **Introduction**

The fundamental sources of Islamic Law are the Qur'ān, which are the actual Words revealed by Allah to man via Prophet Muhammad and the Prophetic Traditions the *Hadīth*. However, the key question that arises is how should God's Words be interpreted by man, if at all? There are three general trends religious scholars have adopted when engaging in the study of Allah's Words; they can be comfortably divided into, Literalism, Liberalism and Traditionalism. The first requires no premises, principles or attitudes, as the scholars' input is kept to a bare minimum if not completely eradicated. In this model no interpretation is permitted as God's Words are not open to deliberation and conjecture but rather have to be accepted on face value or the One who has spoken them is the only being that can explain what it is that He meant by the Words He uttered; as the latter is no longer an option with the passing of the last Messenger, the first is the only valid case. The paper will investigate the remaining interpretive models in order to detail their foundations, their theoretical basis and how they are utilised to obtain the truth, which is to determine God's Intentions.

The paper will initially discuss the concept of truth related to my study and then detail the two dominant epistemological models whose methods are utilised in order to determine the truth; the paper is completed by the Conclusion, which summarises the key findings.

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6<sup>th</sup> April 2015/16<sup>th</sup> Jumada al-Thani 1436



### **The Search for Truth**

The two components, Modernism and Traditionalism, of this dichotomous approach to life continue to battle for what the advocates of each one believe is their right to be utilised as the correct interpretive model in order to determine the truth and answer questions like, “What actions are good to perform and what are bad?” In Islam the search for truth is based on what Allah requires from man, both as an individual and as a community, as man does not possess the intellectual or spiritual ability to ascertain the truth by pondering or looking at God’s creation; he requires knowledge of the truth from beyond him and can only acquire this knowledge from the Creator, *al-alīm* the All-knowing. Observations will give him an understanding of this world by utilising the natural sciences, and the intellect by utilising rationality will allow him to develop theories and build upon his observations. However the rationale and empirical observations cannot determine the difference between, for instance, usury and capitalism, the first being impermissible by Allah whilst the latter legal; this can only be ascertained by God making apparent His Desire. On a similar note, how should a person fast? Is bowing and prostrating good? Why, and how many times in a day? In what manner should an animal be killed for consumption? With the passing of the last Prophet in Islam, Prophet Muhammad, man has no direct link with God but is not left unguided as His Book the Qur’ān and the *Hadīth* are still in our presence and continue to be in the same form word-for-word from the time of revelation and the Prophet’s era.

### **Traditionalism and Modernism**

“No categories require more careful handling these days than *tradition* and *modernity*”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. Stout, (1998) Commitments and Traditions in the Study of Religious Ethics, *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 25(3): p. 49.



Traditionalism is perceived to be ‘back-ward’ a kind of elastic band holding back society not allowing it to progress and reach its highest destined potential, which arguably modernism can achieve.<sup>2</sup> Whereas on the other hand one can argue that a more traditional approach has the benefit that it is tried and tested and arguably more reliable and predictable; furthermore it is not dictated to by the fleeting whims and desires of societies. Religiously speaking, modernism opposes established religion as it relies on man’s rationality and code of justice for it to be upheld and developed, whereas the former is steeped in tradition, based on the premise that only a Higher Being knows what is best for man and all, and as some would argue not necessarily rational. Similar discussions have taken place in most ways of life and Islam is no exception, as the argument which rages is that Islam needs to ‘catch-up’ and ‘fit-in’ with the modern world in order to become more relevant which would lead to its greater effect on Muslims due to its resultant application. However, one must bear in mind that the modernist approach’s parameters do not extend beyond this life, whereas tradition, in this case established religion, takes into consideration this world, a Day of Reckoning and an afterlife that lasts for eternity; this will undoubtedly affect both their premises and conclusions in the form of positive law. Therefore, these two rival interpretive models confront one another; however there is no neutral method to determine their subject matter. This is due to the fact that each model has its own view of truth and knowledge and to search for a neutral independent model, which is acceptable to all and has the capability to bring about truth on those matters that the two models disagree is to “search for a chimera.”<sup>3</sup> In summary each claim to propose legal, social and political systems, which in the case of Modernists place man at the centre due to his liberal

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<sup>2</sup> L. Safi, (2004) *The Creative Mission of Muslim Minorities in the West – Synthesising the Ethos of Islam and Modernity*, Paper presented at Fiqh Today – Muslims as Minorities organised by AMSS UK, Westminster University, London, February 21<sup>st</sup> 2004. Y. al- Qaradāwī, (2001) *Fi Fiqh al-aqalliyāt al-muslima - Haya al-Muslimin wast al-mujtami’at al-ukbra*, Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq

<sup>3</sup> A. MacIntyre, (1988) *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, p. 166.



rationalism and the Traditionalists, centralise God due to his characteristics of All-knowing and All-Wise and his role as the Creator, the King and the Lord.

Alasdair MacIntyre, the moral philosopher, has written in detail regarding tradition and his definition will bring about an understanding of the concept. He defines it as,

“an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least part of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretive debates through which meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted”.<sup>4</sup>

He further states that a living tradition is a “historically extended socially embedded argument...through many generations;” when an individual searches for good, in our case what God requires, it is “conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual’s life is a part.”<sup>5</sup>

MacIntyre explains that the liberalists claimed to “provide a political, legal and economic framework” which was based on a set of “rationally justifiable principles” which would allow people of “incompatible conceptions of a good life” to live together peacefully enjoying equal rights.<sup>6</sup> This would come about due to the claim of inherent neutrality of this model; however if we were to interrogate this further by investigating the case where a number of groups reach opposing conclusions of what is good in a matter due to their different views MacIntyre argues that the only rational way would be to resolve these disagreements “by means of a philosophical enquiry aimed at deciding which out of the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> A. MacIntyre, (1985) *After Virtue – A Study in Moral Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, p. 222.

<sup>6</sup> A. MacIntyre, (1988) *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, pp. 335-6



conflicting sets of premises, if any, is true.”<sup>7</sup> However, the liberal approach does not set out to do that but rather proposes its own principles, attitudes and views. Therefore, the liberal model he argues is a tradition with its own “authoritative texts and its disputes over their interpretation” and is “no more and no less than the continued sustenance of the liberal social and political order”<sup>8</sup>; and therefore, cannot be positioned as a neutral tool which can be utilised to measure and assess other attitudes or in our case, as an overarching interpretive model.

Furthermore, MacIntyre asserts that the intellectual positions adopted by the adherents of a tradition can only be understood within its context. As he holds liberalism to be a tradition and since traditions are ‘incommensurable’ he believes that applying so-called universal principles of rationality and justice is a liberal myth, which he feels is a major characteristic of modernity.<sup>9</sup> Liberal critics have challenged MacIntyre’s view of liberalism as a tradition and his view of incommensurability and feel that, “MacIntyre is in the grip of a world view promulgated by authority rather than reason [and] ... is using this view to justify perpetuating authority at the heart of human life and, indeed at the heart of human reason.”<sup>10</sup> However, MacIntyre’s main argument, in relation to this paper, is against adopting liberalist rationalism as a neutral, independent process that allows an individual to determine the truth but rather it is a tradition like any other tradition with its own views and attitudes.

As has been discussed, aside from Traditionalism there are two other major intellectual and religio-political trends utilised in order to understand what God requires from man and are

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp. 342-3

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp. 345

<sup>9</sup> A. MacIntyre, (1990) *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, Tradition*, London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, p. 5. MacIntyre, A. (1994) A Partial Response to My Critics. In Horton, J. and Mendus, S. (eds) *After MacIntyre*, Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 294. P. Kelly, (1994) MacIntyre’s Critique of Utilitarianism. In Horton, J. and Mendus, S. (eds) *After MacIntyre*, Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 136-140. A. Mason, (1994) MacIntyre on Liberalism and its Critics: Tradition, Incommensurability and Disagreement. In Horton, J. and Mendus, S. (eds) *After MacIntyre*, Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 225-238.

<sup>10</sup> Nussbaum, 1989: 40 cited in J. Porter, (1993) Openness and Constraint: Moral Reflection as Tradition-Guided Inquiry in Alasdair MacIntyre’s Recent Works, *Journal Of Religion*, 73(4): 514-36



termed as Modernism or Liberalism, as previously mentioned and Islamism – both well connected to modern westernised institutions of education. The modernist or liberal approach aims to find ways of making Islam compatible with the challenges of the modern age. They claim to retrieve the ‘true’ teachings of Islam from the mist, dust and cobwebs that centuries of ‘sterile’ scholasticism and ‘blind’ imitation of earlier authorities has brought about. The aim is that a fresh but ‘authentic’ reading of the foundational texts, especially the Qur’ān as it is open to interpretation due to its inherent nature, would facilitate the teachings of Islam to become apparent and be in concordance with liberal rationalism. One could argue why do the modernists require Islam to justify their ambitions and not simply tackle issues on a social basis, however had that been the case they would lack the required authoritative clout as there is no divine law or hierarchical authority to justify their views.<sup>11</sup> But why would the Modernists want to move from traditionally accepted principles and methods to a process and model, which is alien to historical Islam to date? In answer the notion of an epistemological crisis has to exist for the Modernists to warrant the move from traditionalism towards liberal rationalism which “must furnish a solution to the problems which had previously proved intractable” due to the sterility or incoherence of the traditional model.<sup>12</sup> The question, which results, is whether this approach in interpreting religious texts is a legally sanctioned development or an innovation? In answer to the question, if only partially, is that those who advocate this view have no legal reason to turn towards another approach as they tend not to be traditionally trained scholars and so as a consequence are not versed in the dynamic nature of the traditional approach nor are they in a legal position to advocate a completely different model; putting it another way an epistemological crisis has not occurred as the experts within this field have not declared so as the model is still applicable. Likewise, if we

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<sup>11</sup> A. MacIntyre, (1985) *After Virtue – A Study in Moral Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, p. 68.

<sup>12</sup> A. MacIntyre, (1988) *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, p. 362.



adopt MacIntyre's concept of incommensurability then modernist scholars are not in a position to apply their view on a different means to ascertaining truth.

On the other hand the Islamists, typically from modern, secular educational institutions, aim to radically alter their societies and states through means, which are regarded as 'true' Islam,<sup>13</sup> whereas traditional scholars have been apolitical at best and in many cases not accepted positions in the various Caliphates throughout history.

Graham<sup>14</sup> disagrees with Modernists and instead argues that traditionalism is a key feature of Islam and holds that it is "not in some imagined atavism, regressivism, fatalism or rejection of change and challenge" but rather in his view it facilitates "a personally guaranteed connection with a model past, and especially model persons, offers the only sound basis...for forming and reforming one's society in any age."

Therefore, Islamic Traditionalism as Graham describes it, is a template or a model for a society to emulate; this can be utilised by the religious scholars of any time and place in order to compare and contrast the societies that they live in, in order to bring about the required *fiqh*. In other words tradition is "an inherited scholastic methodology and set of paradigms," a transmission of knowledge by individuals with "deep roots in scholarship"<sup>15</sup>; this transmission is connected together through individuals, referred to as *isnād* (chain of transmission), which leads to the Prophet Muhammad and ultimately God. Furthermore, with God no longer speaking direct to man and with the completion of the Prophets, man is not left unguided but possesses this blueprint in order to best live his life, individually and collectively.

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<sup>13</sup> M. Q. Zaman, (2002) *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 7-8

<sup>14</sup> W. A. Graham, (1993) Traditionalism in Islam: An Essay in Interpretation, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 23(3): p. 522

<sup>15</sup> A. A. Malik, (2006) *The State We Are In*. In Malik, A. A. (ed) *The State We Are In – Identity, Terror and the Law of Jihad*, Bristol: Amal Press, pp.27-8.



Asad, whilst drawing on MacIntyre's work defines the concept as a 'discursive tradition' with respect to the study of Islam, his definition is,

"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>16</sup>

Hence, Islam should be approached as a 'discursive tradition' with the *sharī'a* as the main example of a tradition and even more so a discursive tradition. Notwithstanding *sharī'a*'s translation as Islamic Law, Brinkley Messick refers to it as a 'total discourse', which has a set of institutions and practices that shaped many aspects of people's lives, particularly in premodern Muslim societies.<sup>17</sup>

Hallaq<sup>18</sup> when explaining the methodologies Islamic scholars have applied throughout the twentieth century reaches a slightly different conclusion and merits a mention as he divides the community with respect to the interpretive models they adopt into secularists and puritan traditionalists at the two extremes and those holding the middle ground he splits into two; religious utilitarians and religious liberals whose task is to develop legal theory in order to correlate the foundational values of Islam with substantive law so that

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<sup>16</sup> T. Asad, (1986) *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, Washington: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> M. Q. Zaman, (2002) *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> W. B. Hallaq, (1997) *A History of Islamic Legal Theories*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 213-4



the needs of the modern society can be addressed. He further explains the difference between the liberals and utilitarians in their use of developing new methodology whilst the latter propose slight modifications.<sup>19</sup> I would struggle to differentiate between religious liberals and secularists, as how would a religious secularist be described, or even more relevant is a secularist religious? Likewise it could be argued religious liberals is an oxymoron, in conclusion therefore I still adopt the three models detailed within this study.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 231.



## **Conclusion**

It was suggested that in terms of engaging with the Islamic religious sources three interpretive models have been and are applied, literalism, liberalism/modernism and traditionalism; a philosophical discussion on the latter two was the aim of the paper. Islam, or more accurately its sources, is a tradition and more specifically a discursive tradition, which must apply its historically tried and tested principles and methodologies in order to ascertain God's Will. The view that liberal rationalism is required as an interpretive model instead of traditionalism as it can no longer determine the truth in the modern world is flawed in at least three ways. Firstly, liberal rationalism is itself a tradition, hence cannot claim neutrality and therefore it is a tradition amongst traditions; secondly traditions are incommensurable which means that the premises and views within liberalism cannot be applied in religious traditionalism and neither can one determine accuracy and truthfulness; and thirdly based on this incommensurability modernist scholars are in no legal or philosophical position to assume and declare an epistemological crisis within traditionalism as they are not traditionally trained so therefore do not know the model except superficially, and similarly cannot declare the extinction of this school as they are not its adherents. Traditionalism has been applied throughout the history of Islam up to, and including, the present day by diverse ethnic groups in wide ranging situations. Arguably, Muslims have tended to live in Muslim-majority states, which has dramatically changed over the last century due to mass migration to Western Europe and North America, therefore it could be assumed that traditional methods will come short and hence a new model is required. However, that is only sound practice and acceptable if the experts within this School apply their model and reach that conclusion.



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