



TRADITION AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE WITHIN ISLAM AND THE ABRAHAMIC FAITHS

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Abstract

The present article looks into the position and significance of tradition within Islam and the Abrahamic Faiths. Tradition in its very theological sense is generally believed to have divine authority albeit not as part of the sacred scripture. The main interest here is to shed light on how different tradition in Islam in comparison to Judaism and Christianity is. Drawn upon examples and evidence, this article thus, studies the idea of tradition and underlines its notional and applied similarities and differences within the said three world religions. Further, this article also investigates and discusses the intricacies of the Islamic tradition.

Kata Kunci: Tradition, isnād, Ḥadīth, Islam, Gospels, Mishnah, Christianity, Judaism

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INTRODUCTION

The Abrahamic Faiths that is Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, despite their contrasts have some points in common as well. The focus of the present article is to look into the notion of *tradition* and to discuss its status and significance within Islam and the two other Abrahamic Faiths. *Tradition* in its very theological sense is, as a rule, believed to have divine authority albeit not as part of the sacred scripture. There are however, differences in the notion and application of *tradition* in Islam in comparison to Judaism and Christianity. Drawing upon examples, the present study attempts to shed light on the similarities and differences that the notion of *tradition* holds within these three of the world religions.

In order to fully understand and apprehend the sense and the importance of *tradition* in the framework of religion, it is essential to look into it etymologically and semantically first, and to find out whether or not there is any common bond for this term in the faiths referred to here. This would lead the way to a better gathering of its function and practical value in Islam and an encompassing display of its correlations and possible contrasts and similarities in Judaism and Christianity. It would also underline the idea that *tradition* does in fact, exist in other faiths as well, and reject the misapprehension that it is a new notion and belief belonging uniquely to Islam. It would further, clarify as whether or not the existing bonds and contrasts between the notion of *tradition* and the application of *traditions* in Islam, Judaism and Christianity are somewhat coincidental or indeed derived from their common theological foundation being the Religions of the Book or Abrahamic Faiths.

Tradition

Before making any comparison between the concept of *tradition* as it is semiologically established within the said faiths, it is rather essential to discuss the term *tradition* itself as a notion and look into its commonalities within various faiths.

The lexical or dictionary fundamental definitions given for the term *tradition*, as noticed by Netton in his *Islam, Christianity and Tradition*, are numerous. According to him *tradition* can well refer to:

1. Beliefs and opinions or customs and rituals handed down and passed down from ancestors to posterity and from generation to generation, in particular, orally or by means of practices.

2. Theologically speaking, *tradition* refers to doctrines or a particular doctrine and canon in which case it is entitled to have divine authority although with no documented evidence and data. This is especially related to:

- a. The oral teachings of Jesus Christ and the Apostles.
- b. The laws held by the Pharisees believed to have been sent by God to Moses.
- c. Those words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad which are not reflected in the *Holy Qur'ān*.

3. The artistic and literary landscapes introduce *tradition* as principles and values which are based upon experience and practice.

4. And in the law, *tradition* refers to formal delivery.¹

In an old-fashioned sense, *tradition* as observed by Daniel Brown, may also refer to a deposit of knowledge or truth, originating with a past authority and handed down within a religious community. (Brown, D., 1996)² Netton's definitions of the word and his emphasis specifically on, for instance, 'the unwritten words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad in the *Holy Qur'ān*,' (above mentioned definition 2.c.) however, underline his tendency to the theological aspect and standpoint of the word *tradition*. This clearly indicates his pointing out to the structure and composition of *traditions* as being built up of those words and deeds of Muhammad which are not written in the *Qur'ān* but found in the *Hadīth* or *Sunna*.

With respect to Brown's remarks, it could thus, be said that *tradition* is a deposit of knowledge or assumed truth interpretable in the framework of or in relation to such religions as Islam, Judaism and Christianity, like the knowledge that has emanated from Muhammad to his community after him or the insightful narratives which are passed on from Moses and Jesus to their communities, companions and followers. In this sense, the notion of *tradition* is a clear commonality between the Abrahamic Faiths in question.

In their analyses and arguments of and about the question of *tradition*, Netton and Brown both strongly suggest the existence of further revelations other than the very sacred texts also for the prophets who come before the Prophet Muhammad. In the case of Islam these further revelations are the *ahādīth*, the plural form of the *Hadīth*, otherwise known as the records and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, which are revered and received as a major source of religious law and moral guidance, and regarded as second only to the authority of the *Qur'ān*, the holy book of Islam, and considered a primary source of Islamic doctrines for its adherents.³ Within the framework of the Abrahamic Faiths, this *tradition* retains a distinct worth and import which will be looked into and discussed next.

The Concept of Tradition and its Religious Significance and Impact

The concept of *tradition* in its conventional sense and framework has already been discussed. For a thorough understanding of its impact on and its implementation in the Abrahamic Faiths, it is crucial to study the term itself semantically and etymologically, and to delineate its factual aspects also its imports in relation to the faiths referred to, in particular in regard to Islam.

The English noun *tradition* comes from the Latin *traditio* via French. It has Latin roots in the word *tradere*, which means hand over or hand down. It was originally used in Roman law to refer to the

¹ Netton, Ian, (2006), *Islam, Christianity and Tradition*, Edinburgh University Press, 106

² Brown, Daniel, (1996), *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, Cambridge University Press, 1-2.

³ Alexander and Rosner have defined *Tradition* as oral and written *traditions* which are distinct from a fixed canon of Holy Scriptures. Cf: T. Desmond, Alexander, Brian, Rosner, eds., (2000), *A new dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Clearway logistics phase 1A, 822-823.

concept of legal transfers and inheritance. The modern meaning of *tradition* has evolved during the Enlightenment period, in opposition to modernity and progress.⁴

The term *tradition* can be looked into from two perspectives of: one, theology and second, sociology. Theology introduces *tradition* as a doctrine or doctrines believed to have divine authority though not found in the holy scriptures. In Christianity, these doctrines are not explicit in the *Bible* but held to derive from the oral teachings of Jesus of Nazareth and the Apostles. In Judaism, they are the ordinances of the oral laws not in the *Torah* but held to have been given by God to Moses. And in Islam, *tradition* otherwise known as *Ḥadīth* or *Sunna* is the sayings or acts ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad but not recorded in the *Qur'ān*.

Sociology however, has it that *tradition* is a belief or behaviour and folk custom passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past. It is a component of folklore, and the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, In Islamic faith, it specifically refers to the cluster of many different daily customs found in all Muslim communities, which are known as *ʿĀdāt* and *ʿUrf* or local and domestic customs and habits of the community.

Tradition, as also noted by Jean Jacques Waardenburg, Dutch theologian and Islamic Studies scholar (d. 2015), has:

*- an inherent character of process since it consists of a transmission, conscious or unconscious, of social and cultural elements that are part of a particular way of life or a specific organization of it. In this process of transmission, those who are at the receiving end are not simply passive receptacles. In fact, the vitality and very survival of a tradition depends on people assimilating elements of it because of the orientation and style or "taste" they give to life and the appeal of the community that partakes in the tradition. Tradition as transmission is an operation that implies an appeal; certain elements of it have a symbolic value and the tradition itself may even acquire a mythical value.*⁵

This delineation of *tradition* strongly supports the idea that Islamic *tradition* or *the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad* is in fact, inherent in his community and that it is also transmitted, which is why it is assimilated by his very own Companions too. It furthermore, well explains why the concept of *tradition* or *Sunna* has lived in all Muslim communities from all backgrounds and how it has survived to this day.

In the continuation of his discussion on the essence and substance of *tradition*, Waardenburg displays further the importance of *Sunna* as a *tradition* underscoring that:

*The normative character of the Sunna is based in the fact that it covers thousands of reports or sayings / Ḥadīth that are ascribed to Muḥammad or his Companions. After the Qur'ān, which is considered revealed, the Sunna establishes an authoritative religious example for Muslim life. A pious Muslim tries to live as much as possible according to Qur'ān and Sunna. In fact, the total contents of the Sunna are known only to the muḥaddithūn, religious specialists in matters of religious tradition who have developed since the beginnings of Islam a whole religious science of tradition/ʿIlm al-Ḥadīth in Islam about the validity, weight, meaning, and implications of the different Ḥadīths.*⁶

⁴ Congar, Yves Marie-Joseph, (2004), *The meaning of tradition*. Ignatius Press, 9.

⁵ Waardenburg, Jean Jacques, (2002), *Islam: Historical, social and political perspectives*, Berlin, W.D. Gruyter, 191.

⁶ Ibid, 193.

Waardenburg approves of the idea that the *Sunna* is an authoritative guide for Muslims after the *Holy Qur'ān*. Daniel W. Brown the author of *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, being in agreement with Waardenburg in this respect, clearly indicates that:

*- for most Muslims, sunna is a symbol of the link with the Prophetic era, the representation of the Prophet in the here and now, a concrete embodiment of the need that Muslims have felt in every generation for continuity with an ideal past.*⁷

Thus, the *Sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad in the words of Waardenburg, is an authority after the *Holy Qur'ān* retaining a figurative and symbolic essence. And for Brown this notion is a perpetual reflection and representation of the Prophet Muhammad's ways and manners.

The next issue to reflect on in this domain is the probable contrasts and similarities between *tradition* or *hadīth* in parallel context in the framework of Islam, and the same phenomenon in the sacred writings and scriptures, also in the substance of the religions that come before Islam, in order to rule whether the whole idea of *tradition* is specifically and entirely related to Islamic faith or it is in one way or another, present in all Abrahamic religions.

The notion of *tradition* or *hadīth* is not quite found in Judaism and Christianity and appears to be a very Islamic issue. However, a similar phenomenon being the *Gospels*, does exist in the Christian faith. Nonetheless, it must be noted that the *Gospels* are different from the *Ahādīth* in the sense that the *Ahādīth* are regarded as supplementary explanations⁸ to the *Holy Qur'ān*. Not being actually written down as independent components of the *Qur'ān*, the *Ahādīth* do therefore, not belong to the holy scripture of the *Qur'ān* itself, whereas the *Gospels* in the Christian faith are included in the *New Testament* being the second division of the Christian biblical canon. The said nuances in the sense and status of *tradition* in various faiths are well displayed by F. E. Peters, the scholar of History, Religion and Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (d. 2020), in his comparative commentary where he indicates that:

*- the tradition, since we are not simply speaking here simply of longstanding or customary ways of thinking and behaving. In the three communities tradition has a precise technical meaning: it is the "unwritten scripture," the body of teaching issued from the same Divine source as the Scripture and passed down orally through known channels from generation to generation for the instruction and edification of the believers and, of course, as an authoritative guide for understanding the Scripture, whose Companion piece it is. Scripture and tradition are thus the joint parents not only of exegesis but also of doctrine. Out of them-Scripture as matrix, tradition as the eliciting agent-comes a great deal of the complex religious culture that we call simply Judaism or Christianity or Islam.*⁹

Power corroborates Peters' comments by stating that:

*To avoid misconception we may state here that, under the term tradition in Islam, we do not include the Koran, which was composed, if not compiled by Mohammed himself, but only the history of his life and teaching, handed down by his Companions, like the words and acts of Christ recorded in our Gospels.*¹⁰

⁷ Brown, Daniel W., (1996), *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, Cambridge University Press, 2

⁸ Al-Suyūfī (d. 911AH/1505CE) in his *Al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* has summarised the principles of Exegesis, he says: "The Scholars have said: whoever wishes to interpret to interpret the *Qur'ān*, he should first turn to the *Qur'ān* itself. This is because what has been narrated briefly in one place might be expounded upon in another place, and what is concise in one place might be explained in another... If he has done that, then he turns to the *Sunna*, for it is the explainer of the *Qur'ān* and its clarifier."cf: Jalal Uddīn Al-Suyūfī, (1991), *Al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, v.2, Beirut, Darul Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 387.

⁹ Peters, F. E., (1990), *Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Princeton University Press, 407.

¹⁰ Power, E., (1912), *Tradition in Islam, An Irish quarterly review*, v.1, 81.

It must be noted here that The *Canonical Gospels* have gone through four stages in their formation: The first stage being oral includes various stories about Jesus such as healing the sick, or debating with opponents, as well as parables and teachings. The *Gospels* or Good News originally meant the Christian message, but in the second century they come to be used also for the books in which the message is set out. In this sense a *gospel* can be defined as a loose-knit, episodic narrative of the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth, ending in his trial and death and concluding with various reports of his post-resurrection appearances. The *oral gospel traditions* is a theorized first stage in the formation of the *written gospels* as cultural information passed on from one generation to the next by word of mouth. These *oral traditions* include different types of stories about Jesus Christ.¹¹ *This obviously hints some similarities with the idea and function of tradition in Islam.*

In his book *The Monotheists*, Peters further looks into *the Prophetic Sunna* side by side *the Mishnah*, as the *oral tradition* of Jewish law forming the first part of the *Talmud*, and explains that:

*The Prophetic Sunna too was tradition, but somewhat in the manner of the Mishnah. The Mishnah possesses some very imperfect chains of authorities / isnāds.*¹²

Peters pays special attention to the term *isnād* in his discussing the notion of *tradition*. This is due to the crucial importance that this term retains in the Science of *Ḥadīth*, constituting a major component of the *Ahadīth* cooperatively with the text/*matn*. Muslim scholars of *Ḥadīth* have used different terminology for the classification of the *ahādīth* according to the relevant and missing links within the *isnād*. Based upon the quantity and quality of the missing links, they are therefore, categorised and named accordingly as, for instance, *Musnad Ḥadīth*, *Muttaṣil Ḥadīth*, *Mursal Ḥadīth*, *Munqatiʿ Ḥadīth*, *Muʿdal and Muʿallaq Ḥadīth*. From Peters' argument it can be assumed that the *Mishnayot* as the oldest authoritative post biblical collection and codification of Jewish oral laws, do indeed have chains of authorities but as Peters puts it, they are imperfect, a criterion which makes them somewhat comparable to certain chains in the *isnād* system of *Ḥadīth*.

Arent Jan Wensinck, the Dutch Semiticist, historian of Syriac mystical theology and Islamicist (d. 1939), argues that *Ḥadīth* in Islam is the form and *Sunna* is the substance, whereas in Judaism *tradition* is the form. Thus, in Jewish realization the law revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai has come in two pleats.¹³ According to Rabbinic Judaism, God has transmitted the Torah to Moses in two forms: the *Written Torah* which comprises the *Biblical Books of Genesis* through *Deuteronomy*, and the *Oral Torah* which is relayed orally, from Moses to his successors, to their successors, to the men of the Great Synagogue or Synod, and finally to the rabbis. The *Mishnah* is therefore, the first major redaction of the Jewish *oral traditions* known as *the Oral Torah*.¹⁴

The Islamic *traditions* however, are preserved and circulated both in oral and written forms. They comply with Peters' standpoint in the sense that they have and follow *isnād* or chain of narration. Their *isnāds* however, may well be both perfect and imperfect. Daniel Brown displays his beliefs in support of *Ḥadīth* by emphasizing that:

*For Muslims, this need for continuity with the time of revelation was formalised in Ḥadīth reports which were attested and transmitted by an unbroken chain /silsilas, isnād, of reliable and pious Muslims.*¹⁵

¹¹ Burkett, Delbert (2002), *An introduction to the New Testament and the origins of Christianity*. Cambridge University Press & Dunn, James D. G. (2013), *The Oral Gospel Tradition*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

¹² Peters, F. E., (2003), *The Monotheists, Jews, Christians and Muslims in Conflict and Competition*, v.2, Princeton University Press, 108-109.

¹³ Mishna, Avot 1:1.

¹⁴ Wensinck, A. J., (1921), The importance of Tradition for the Study of Islam, *The Muslim World*, v.2, issue 3, 239.

¹⁵ Brown, Daniel, (1996), *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, Cambridge University Press, 81.

Unlike the *traditions* in Judaism and Christianity as seen already, the Islamic *traditions* or *Sunna* are believed by all Muslims to have been preserved either orally and by word of mouth, or as transcribed and written down texts. From Francis Peters' argument it can well be assumed that *oral traditions* defined as *unwritten scriptures*, do in fact retain commonalities and bonds with earlier scriptures. His indication that *oral traditions* are just the complements to the main scriptures however, does not comply with the concept of preservation of *traditions* and its definition in Islam.

The question of *Hadīth* preservation by being written down or orally via word of mouth, has been frequently debated by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. Nabia Abbott, the American papyrologist, palaeographer and scholar of Islam (d. 1981) for instance, has it that *Ahadīth* are written down during the life of the Prophet Muhammad, and affirms her idea by pointing out that literacy amongst the Arabs is a fact belonging to the pre-Islamic period. As to the high volume of the disputed reports on the writing down of the *Hadīth*, she underlines that the number those who have been in favour of this idea outnumbers the opposition groups. (Abbott, 1967)¹⁶

Gregor Schoeler, the contemporary German scholar of Islamic Studies (b. 1944), agrees with Abbott however, he is more specific by saying that the *Ahadīth* are written down in the early period of Islam, but preserved in the form of private notes.¹⁷ Michael Cook disapproves of this idea insisting instead that Judaism and Jewish origins have had an influence on the Muslim attitude vis a vis the notion of *tradition*, and that the hostility towards the codification of religious *traditions* existed from the inception of Islam.¹⁸

Mustafa Azami, the Indian Hadith scholar (d. 2017), displays his approach in this connection by underlining that the general belief in the late recording of the *Ahadīth*, also their uniquely oral transmission for over a century, has in fact, been due to the information provided by the scholars of *Hadīth* themselves. The earliest compilers of *Hadīth* named and introduced by scholars of *Hadīth* belong approximately to the latter half of the second century of the Hijra.¹⁹

Azami also looks into the *Hadīth* investigation as well as the reports of those scholars who oppose the writing down of the *Ahadīth*. He notices that the said reports are all mainly derived from three *Hadīth* transmitted by Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī, Abū Hurayra and Zayd b. Thābit, the three companions of the Prophet. He further, establishes that from the Science of *Hadīth* perspective, these three reports either lack a trustworthy content and are therefore, weak or are wrongly attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. In order to strengthen his argument, he refers to a *Hadīth* as the testimony, in which the Prophet encourages writing.²⁰

As noticed, the notion of *Hadīth*, its authenticity and preservation as well as its sense and status in Islam has been the hub of incessant disputes and debates among various scholars of this discipline in different periods of time. Some such as Francis Peters, have tried to prove that the *traditions* of the Prophet have not just been passed down orally rather, also by means of writing during his lifetime, unlike earlier scriptures, and others have taken the opposite angle insisting on their oral aspect. The existing disagreement in this regard is however, created by certain *Hadīth* of the Prophet which forbid the writing down of the *Hadīth*, and other *Hadīth* which encourage the idea. Both views are adopted and circulated by Muslim as well as non-Muslim scholars. However, those scholars who argue that writing down of the *Hadīth* has been recommended provide their evidence from the *Hadīth* which endorse this assumption.

¹⁶ Abbott, Nabia, (1967), *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri II: Qur'anic Commentary and Tradition*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, Press, 5-32.

¹⁷ Schoeler, Gregor, (2006), trans. Uwe Vagenpohl, *The Oral and the written in Early Islam*, Routledge, 111-41.

¹⁸ Cook, Michael, (1997), The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam, *Arabica*, 44, No.4, 437-530.

¹⁹ Azami, Muhammad Mustafa, (2001), *Studies in Early Hadith Literature*, American Trust Publications, 19-21.

²⁰ Ibid.

The Division of the Traditions/Hadīth

The classical Muslim Hadīth institution, presents the *traditions* of the Prophet Muḥammad in two categories.²¹

- a. *Hadīth al-Nabawī*
- b. *Hadīth al-Qudsī*.

The *Hadīth al-Nabawī* or the *Traditions of the Prophet*, begin with: *So said the Messenger of God*. The *Hadīth al-Qudsī* or *Sacred Traditions* on the other hand, begin with the Prophet's attribution to God in the framework of such wordings as: *The Prophet says God has said that-----*.

There is however, a difference of opinion among the scholars of *Hadīth Studies* regarding the distinction between the two categories. Some scholars have said that the *Hadīth al-Nabawī* are the words of God expressed by the Prophet, and the *Hadīth al-Qudsī* are the words and messages from God revealed and transmitted directly and precisely to the Prophet through dreams and inspirations thus, their content is from God but their actual wording from Muhammad.²² And others have argued that there is no difference between the Qur'ānic revelation and the *Hadīth al-Qudsī* and that they should, therefore, be included in the *Qur'ān*. The explanation given by the scholars who oppose this idea is that the *Qur'ān* is regarded as *mutawātir*, that is reached through continuous narration, whereas *Hadīth al-Qudsī* is not so.²³ Furthermore, the *Qur'ān* is recited/*matluw* in the five daily prayers, and the *Hadīth al-Qudsī* is *ghayr matluw* being not recited. Nevertheless, the same classification and verification of authenticity applied to *Hadīth al-Nabawī* also apply to *Hadīth al-Qudsī*.²⁴

The distinction between the two concepts has been frequently disputed and discussed within the classical works of *Hadīth Literature*. Despite all controversies and differences of opinion however, *ahadīth* whether *al-Nabawī* or *al-Qudsī*, have been preserved and passed down in the classical works of *Hadīth Literature*. It is worthy of notice that such distinctions do not exist in either Christianity or Judaism.

CONCLUSION

As seen in the discussions here, the notion of tradition in Abrahamic Faiths does in fact retain some similarities and also some differences. The Islamic tradition, otherwise known as the *Hadīth*, which has been transmitted orally and saved and preserved in written forms, does exhibit its complexities when it comes to study the Science of *Hadīth* criticisms. To establish the authenticity of the reports, for instance, Muslim scholars need to get deeply engaged in the challenges of scrutinizing the text and the chain of narration as well as in evaluating the related reports, which often contradict one another

The idea of *tradition* does also exist within Judaism and Christianity, and Judaist and Christian *traditions* are saved and preserved via their devotees and followers in the form of the *Mishnah* and the *Gospels*. In this context the notion of *tradition* in Islam, Christianity and Judaism is comparable. However, it must be mentioned that within Islam, Muslims not only do have the *Hadīth* of the Prophet Muhammad, but also a separate science known as the *ʿilm al-ḥadīth* or the Science of *Hadīth*, which would allow them to determine the reliability of the transmitters of the reports and the transmitted reports, and to thoroughly authenticate the sayings which emanate from the Prophet. This bonus distinguishes Islam from Christianity and Judaism.

²¹ Graham, William A., (1977), *Divine Word and the Prophetic Word in Islam in Early Islam*, V.7, Religion and Society, Berlin: De Gruyter, 51 & Kamali, Muhammad Hashim, (2005), *A textbook of Hadīth Studies*, The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 60-62.

²²Graham, William A., (1977), *Divine Word and the Prophetic Word in Islam in Early Islam*, V.7, Religion and Society, Berlin: De Gruyter, 51. Cf. Madani, Muhammad, (1973), *Al-Itḥāfāt al-Sunniya bi l-aḥādīth al-Qudsiyya*, Hyderabad, Deccan, 1-2.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

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