



## Islam and the west: critical perspectives on the position of the sunnah

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received: 26 November 2012;

Received in revised form:

15 May 2013;

Accepted: 21 May 2013;

### Keywords

Quran,  
Sunnah,  
Prophet,  
Islamic epistemology,  
Western scholarship.

### ABSTRACT

This article examines the position of the Sunnah of the Prophet in both Islamic epistemology and Western scholarship. The purposes are to scrutinize the perspectives of Islam and the West on the issue of Sunnah's authenticity and to analyze its position in the Islamic epistemology and the Western scholarship. The method used to complete the writing is library study, which involve the collection of data and information, followed by their analysis to compare and contrast the differences. It is found that Islam firmly recognized the position of the Sunnah and the role that Prophet Muhammad played in bringing and teaching it. The West, however, are reluctant to acknowledge the position of the Sunnah and their denial is closely associated with their denial of Prophet Muhammad. The article implies that one needs to arm himself with a sound understanding of the Sunnah and to be well-versed in the knowledge to ensure that he is clear about the position of the sacred source of Islam, i.e the Sunnah.

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### Introduction

The Sunnah of the Prophet is one of the sources of the Islamic epistemology and it plays a key role in assisting the Muslims to understand the Islamic precepts. This is because the Sunnah gives explanation to the Qur'an, lays out legislation on which the Qur'an is silent or contains a general order of God, shows an example of how to perform God's commandment and the like. Without exemplary models demonstrated by the Prophet, known as Sunnah, the execution of Muslims' duties to God, like prayer, fasting and pilgrimage, can be in futile and vain. For the Hadith to be regarded as authentic, the Muslim jurists explained a principle that would differentiate the reliable Hadith from the unreliable.

Sunnah is derived from its root verb, *sanna*, which means to form, to fashion, or to shape, and by extension, to institute, establish, or prescribe. Sunnah cannot simply refer to the customs of a tribe or group, but must be associated with a specific individual who instituted it (Brown, 1996). The Sunnah comprises everything from the Prophet; whether his sayings, action, practice or tacit approval, to be an exemplary model in every aspect of human life. The Sunnah, as mentioned by Siddiqi (1993) was employed by the early Muslims for the accepted practice of the community, and, in later years, for the practice of the Prophet only. Azami (1977) further explains that at the end of second century, legal books referred to the term as either norms set by the Prophet or norms deduced from the Sunnah of the Prophet's norms. It is claimed that Shafi'i was the first to define Sunnah as the model behaviour of the Prophet.

Literally, Sunnah refers to a way (good or bad), course, rule, mode, manner of acting or conduct of life. It also bears the sense of precedent and custom. In the early Hadith-Fiqh books, it has been used with different meanings (Azami, 1977; Siddiqi, 1993; al-Salafi, 1989). The term is technically different from one scholar to another scholar due to their aim and field of study, but it does not imply a diversity of connotation to the meaning of

Sunnah. For the *usuliyin*, Sunnah is everything which comes from the Prophet, with exemption of the Qur'an, in terms of his sayings, deeds and tacit approval. The *muhaddithun* regards physical features, likewise Hadith, as Sunnah too as to them, Hadith and Sunnah are synonymous (al-Salafi, 1989). Although the terms can be used interchangeably, there is a slight difference between them (Azami, 1977). The action of Sunnah is in itself normative, hence forming the basis of legal codification afterwards and not vice versa (Yusuf, 1996).

### The Position of the Sunnah: An Islamic Outlook

According to al-Salafi (1989), the Sunnah of the Prophet has its great significance in Islam as it is regarded as one of the major sources of Islam. Muslim scholars unanimously agree on the reliability of the Sunnah, without any doubts, as there are several Qur'anic verses that ask the Muslims to obey the Prophet and to accept his teachings. As such, one's obedience to the Prophet is obligatory. His sayings, deeds and tacit approval should be acknowledged by the Muslims and this should be coupled with one's recognition of Him as the Messenger of Allah.

Brown (1996) maintained that for the adversaries of the Sunnah, one's obedience to the Prophet means the former is to imitate every single word and act that comes from the latter as the term *ita'at* that is used in the Qur'an entails a total obedience of man. He, as mentioned by al-Salafi (1989), is to uphold the Sunnah, to practice the Prophetic sayings and to regard it as the main source of the Islamic law. Having guided permanently and absolutely by Allah, Faridi (1996) further explained that the Prophet's task is not restricted to receiving and transmitting the Qur'an only but it is extended to several other responsibilities as Allah says in Surah Ali 'Imran, verse 164:

"Allah has been gracious to the believers, sending among them a Messenger from among themselves to recite them His Revelations, to purify them and to teach them the Book and the Wisdom"

From the above Qur'anic verse, it explains that there are four functions of the Prophet and they include reciting His revelations, purifying the people from bad to good, teaching the Book (Qur'an) and teaching Wisdom as well as knowledge. Apart from teaching his people the Qur'an, the Messenger is sent to purify man by the spiritual influence of the Prophet's personality and his consistent teachings in the light of the Qur'an. The Prophet's task also includes teaching men the Qur'an and this has to be through his explanation and demonstration of its precepts as well as its practice in the most excellent way. Besides, he teaches men the wisdom which is treated in general in the Qur'an and provides theoretical and practical guidance (Faridi, 1996). In this respect, Usmani (1991) concludes that obedience to the Prophet in Islam is as follows:

- a. It is to obey the Prophet as God's Messenger and not to obey him as a ruler or a head of the state of the Muslims.
- b. In the Qur'an, there is a clear distinction between obedience to the Messenger and obedience to the ruler as Allah says in Surah al-Nisa' verse 59, "obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you". The use of the word 'Messenger' in its singular form explains that obedience to the Prophet could not be shared with anyone. Unlike obedience to the Prophet, the plural form of the phrase 'those in authority' means that one's ruling power is subject to replacement from one person to another.
- c. Obedience to the Prophet is based on the 'unrecited revelation' that he received from Allah. His Prophetic and administrative instructions do not come from his personal whim but they are derived from the revelation or at least confirmed by it.

It is apparent from the above explanation that the obedience to the Prophet is not only because of his authority as God's Messenger who brings the Qur'an but it is also due to his authority to deliver his sayings to man to follow. The Sunnah, therefore, has the eternal validity to adhere to as one's obedience to the Prophet is in respect of his position as the Messenger of God instead of his status as a ruler.

The advocates of the Sunnah, as asserted by Brown (1996), further maintained that if the Prophetic authority is restricted to the time of Muhammad only and if the Qur'an today can be existence without any Prophetic affirmation that would corroborate or explain the former, it does not need any explanation from the Hadith or the Sunnah during the time of its revelation. Usmani (1991) contended that if the authority of the Qur'an is not bound to any period of time and the text is to be adhered by all generations in the past, at present and in the future, the authority of the Messenger should be at least lesser than that of the Qur'an. The position of the Sunnah as an interpreter and a legislator to the Qur'an would apparently show that the act of accepting the Prophet's authority in the early days of Islam while denying it in the later time is wrong.

In Islam, the authority of the Prophet is not associated with the community's act of accepting him as a person that has an authority but it is based on the Qur'anic instruction (Azami, 1977). As such, the Sunnah is always in line with the Qur'an. The Sunnah interprets what is vague and ambiguous in the Qur'an, emphasizes its content, specifies its generality, explains the Qur'anic laws and introduces laws which the Qur'an is silent on them (al-Salafi, 1989). It explicitly illustrates the authority of the Prophet and the position of his Sunnah as follows:

- a. The Prophet is an expounder of the Qur'an as Allah says in Surah al-Nahl verse 44, "We revealed to you (also) the Reminder, so that you may make clear to mankind what has been revealed to them". It follows from here that the Prophet is

given the authority to explain and to interpret the Qur'an. The message that he conveys to man is in fact the explanation of Allah through the unrecited revelation (Usmani, 1991).

- b. The Prophet is a law legislator as mentioned in Surah al-Hasya verse 7, "Whatever the Messenger gives you, take; but whatever he forbids, refrain from". The verse, according to al-Salafi (1989), shows the need of obeying any legislation that is brought by the Prophet whose words are based on the revelation and whose infallibility is guaranteed by Allah.

- c. The Prophet is a role model as Allah says in Surah al-Ahzab verse 21, "You have indeed in the Messenger of Allah an excellent exemplar". In the verse, it maintained that the Prophet had demonstrated a par excellent example to be followed by the Muslims. He is the role model in every aspect of man's daily life. The use of the expression "an excellent exemplar", as Faridi (1996) asserted, shows that Allah has placed the Sunnah and Hadith of the Prophet a permanent and significant position in Islam.

- d. The commandment to obey the Prophet is an evident to prove the necessity of obeying his Sunnah as mentioned in Surah al-Nisa' verse 64, "We sent forth not a Messenger, but that he may be obeyed, by Allah's leave." The verse, as maintained by al-Salafi (1989) does not specifically mention that obedience to the Prophet is a must especially because he brought the explanation of the Qur'an.

In his clarification of the position of the Sunnah, Rahman (1996) states that it is a model which the early Muslims sought to in order to interpret the Sunnah for any new cases. Such an interpretation of the Sunnah is closely related to *ijma'* and *ijtihad*, which should be based on both the Qur'an and the Sunnah. The latter is considered as an authoritative source in Islam and hence, adhering to and obeying the Sunnah are compulsion because its bearer is a Prophet and a Messenger whose sayings, instructions and acts reflect the pleasure of Allah (al-Salafi, 1989).

#### **The Position of the Sunnah in Western Scholarship**

In Western scholarship, the reliability of the Hadith is closely related to the authority of the Prophet who speaks the words of God. The authority of the Prophet to lay down religious legislation and to be the model example in every aspect of men's practical life is debated among the Western scholars as his Sunnah has no position in the Western scholarship. The detractors of the Sunnah reject the Prophet's authority to bring an "extra-Qur'anic teachings" while adhering to the doctrine of the Qur'an because they maintained that the Qur'an is sufficient to guide human's life.

According to Khalifa (1982), Prophet Muhammad is not given any authority to utter other words except the words of the Qur'an. Thus, Hadith and Sunnah do not necessarily need to give explanation and interpretation to the Qur'an because God is the teacher of the Qur'an. In his role as a Prophet, Muhammad is to transmit what God revealed to him without adding or subtracting anything from it. His task as a Messenger is to carry out the duty of calling people to render obedience to God's commands (Brown, 1996). Khalifa (1982) asserted that the acceptance of any other sources other than the Qur'an is equivalent to the setting up of other gods together with the Almighty God. Therefore, Muslims should adhere to the Qur'an alone as it is a complete scripture. It follows from here that the Western scholars maintained that the Hadith and the Sunnah should not perform the responsibility of the Qur'an because the latter is a complete book of rules and regulations for the Muslim. From the viewpoint of Hurgronje (1957), the Qur'an is the only reliable source because it contains authentic words of the

Prophet, who uttered them in the name of the Lord that sent him. The Qur'anic commandment to obey the Prophet is confined to the submission of the divine system that is established by him and that is based on the Qur'an alone. A similar opinion on the position of the Prophet is stated by Brown (1996) when he says that the Prophet has the authority of a ruler among his contemporaries only. Such an authority is not extended to his Prophethood. His political authority was similarly not related to his Prophethood (risalat). The Prophet shows the model of how an Islamic ruler should apply the Qur'anic verses and political discussion on how the Muslims should exercise their faculty of reason under the guidance of the Qur'an. It can be concluded from here that the Hadith and the Sunnah are not acknowledged in the Western scholarship even as the second source in Islam. The commandment of God to obey the prophet is on account of his position as a ruler, who should not act as a Messenger.

Khalifa (1982) further insisted that one's adherence to the Hadith and the Sunnah may distinguish him from the true Muslim as the Qur'an is the only authentic and legitimate "Hadith" to follow. All other ahadith (or Sunnah), as he stated, are misleading fabrications. To him, Hadith and Sunnah are satanic fabrications that aim at turning people away from the true path of God. Muhammad's task is confined to delivery of the message of the Qur'an. Other religious instructions are not accepted. The Sunnah is a fabrication of Muhammad and the Muslims who are concerned with the religious matters and worldly affairs. As such, the Qur'an is regarded as the only true "Hadith" to be obeyed and followed by man while Hadith is a fabrication that does not need any obedience.

It is indicated by Brown (1996) that the adherents of the Qur'an perceived it as God's eternal law while maintaining that the Sunnah is a temporary and provisional law. The word of the Prophet was for his Muslim contemporaries and is not binding on the present-day believers. Even if the practices of the Sunnah have come to us from the Prophet by mutawatir transmission, the Sunnah is not necessarily applicable in every age and every place. Brown believed that the ahl-i-Quran do not disagree with the Qur'anic emphasis on the need of obeying the Prophet and the divine message that he brought but they do not accept the authority of Hadith and the Sunnah.

Khalifa (1982) regarded the call to obey Prophet Muhammad is with the condition that the latter uttered the Qur'anic verses in his position as a Messenger of Allah. Such obedience is not necessarily needed if he speaks (Hadith) and acts (Sunnah) as an ordinary man who is vulnerable to errors and mistakes. He maintained that for the opponents of the Hadith, one's obedience of the the Messenger does not require him to follow the Hadith as the latter is written down 200 years after the demise of the Prophet.

In the Western scholarship, the Prophet is seen as a man who is responsible to bring the Qur'an and who has no authority to add any other teachings to complement the Qur'an. The development of the Hadith and Sunnah upon the Prophet's death, according to Brown, is a sign of its fabrication. It was executed by the Muslims especially in the later periods and their act of fabricating the Sunnah was associated with the political, social and economic circumstances at that time and their personal interest as well. From the viewpoint of the modern deniers of the Hadith and the Sunnah, both of these sources have three shortcomings: (i) the preservation of the Sunnah, with the exception of the Hadith qudsi, is not to represent the words of

God, (ii) the Sunnah bears the marks of Muhammad's personality that precludes the possibility that his command or statement is wahy, and (iii) the Sunnah was written down after numerous corruptions and hence, its transmission consists of flaws and mistakes (Brown, 1996).

### Conclusion

To conclude, it is almost apparent that the Western scholarship rejects the authority of the Prophet to bring Hadith and hence, denying the reliability of the Sunnah. This is evident from what Brown labels the defenders of the Sunnah as conservatives due to their tendency to shield the "orthodoxy Sunnah" (Brown, 1996). The deniers of the Hadith and the Sunnah maintained that the Prophet's responsibility is confined to bringing the Qur'an and delivering it to man without any addition to its content. None of his sayings, acts or approval is binding on the generations after his death, especially when the Sunnah is not free from shortcomings. Unlike the West, Islam considers the Sunnah as one of the two primary sources of its law. Such a position of the Sunnah is compatible with the instructions if the Qur'an that insist on obeying the Prophet as God's Messenger.

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