

## **CHAPTER III**

### **TRADITIONAL METHODOLOGY**

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### 1. Shortcomings

Through the Tartar invasion from the East and the Crusader invasions from the West, non-Muslims devastated the Ummah. These invasions caused the Ummah to disintegrate into a number of nation-states. This disintegration caused, in turn, disagreement among Muslims. Fearing that weak and self-centered rulers would manipulate religious matters and issues, Muslim 'ulamā became over-conservative and protective. They sought to preserve their most precious possession—Islam—as well as their own identity by proscribing all innovation and by advocating strict adherence to the letter of the Shari'ah.

The major source of creativity in the fiqh of the Shari'ah is *ijtihad*, i.e. creative self-exertion to derive laws from the legitimate sources. When a 'ālim can find no precedent within the Qur'an and the Sunnah for solving a given issue, he must recourse to *ijtihad*. However, and in their fear, the 'ulama abandoned *ijtihad* and declared that the Shari'ah was perfect in its present state as developed by the works of the ancestors. They, therefore, declared that any departure from it is an innovation, and that every innovation is undesirable and condemnable. Consequently, the Shari'ah—as elaborated by the schools of thought (*madhāhib*)—was to become frozen. This only, the 'ulama believed, could safeguard the survival of Islam.

These feeling, attitude and mentality behind the conservative measures prevailed from the eighth to the twelfth centuries. The survival of Islam, and indeed Muslim victories and expansion in Europe during this period, did nothing to undo these restrictive measures. In the absence of *ijtihad* by which Islam had earlier thrived, some Muslims tried to overcome the difficulties they faced in a changing world by adopting *taṣawwuf* (Sufism) and its *ṭuruq* or “ways” as a substitute for a more balanced practice of Islam.

By stifling individual creative thought, the scholars doomed the Shari'ah, and thus Islam, to stagnation and decline. The fiqh remained a closed system until modern times, even when modern science and technology provided the West with the power to confront and defeat the Muslims.

In modern times, the West undid the Ottoman conquests in Europe. They occupied, colonized, and fragmented the whole of the Muslim world except Turkey proper, from which the Western powers were driven by force, and Yemen and central and west Arabia, which provided little incentive for colonization at that time. The Western powers exploited Muslim weakness to the utmost and contributed to a great extent to the present malaise of the Muslim world described in the first pages of this book. In response to the defeats, tragedies, and crises that the West had imposed upon the Muslim world in the last two centuries, Muslim leaders in Turkey, Egypt, and India have tried to Westernize the Ummah in the hope of making it politically, economically, and militarily viable. Wherever such an attempt was made, it was a failure. Indeed, it continues to be a failure today, and one that is more striking the more consistently it is applied, as in Turkey and Egypt. In Turkey, it prepared the way for Mustafa Kamal Atatürk to abolish all Islamic institutions and to reject every traditional Islamic principle affecting public life. Western institutions were substituted for the whole Islamic system and its legislation. Today, after two generations (nearly sixty years) of Westernization, Turkey is just as weak and poor in all respects as other Muslim countries. Westernization did somewhat succeed in de-Islamizing the educated class of society and, additionally, caused weakness and retrogression, but it did nothing else. In Egypt, where Westernization was less consistently pursued, a Western system was implemented and the traditional Islamic system was permitted to function alongside it. The two systems competed with each other; and, despite the tremendous advantages the Western system enjoyed (such as public funds, government support, and favors), both failed to achieve excellence. Their competition, however, succeeded only in weakening each other as well as the Ummah.

## 2. Fiqh and *Fuqahā'* (Islamic Law and Jurists)

The term "fiqh" means, in the terminology of the *fuqahā'*, knowledge of the practical juristic judgements (*ahkām*) of the Shari'ah, which is attained by intellection of their detailed evidence. Its derivative, "*faqīh*", refers to the person endowed with such knowledge. However, *fiqh*, according to common contemporary usage, means possession of knowledge of all judgments of the Shari'ah. Such knowledge presupposes command of the Arabic language, of the judgmental (*hukmī*) passages of the Qur'an and Sunnah, as well as the mental ability to determine their purpose. Evidently, it is a technical meaning, highly restricted when compared with that of the Qur'anic usage of the root (*fa-qa-ha*), reported in numerous verses, which point to intellection and understanding, to grasping the essence and explanation of Islam as a whole.

The great jurists of Islam—al Shāfi‘ī, Abū Ḥanīfah, Mālik, and Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal—all understood the comprehensive term “*uṣūl al fiqh*” to mean the evidence of the judgment of the Shari‘ah and the first principles of Islamic understanding of life and reality. Part of that is, of course, understanding the general principles of the judgment of Islamic fiqh.

Moreover, the early *fuqahā’* of the Ummah, namely, the companions (*ṣahābah*), their successors (*tābi‘ūn*), and the great founders of the fiqh schools (RAA), were preeminently knowledgeable in all matters affecting the lives of Muslims. These *fuqahā’* of the classical early period maintained an encyclopedic knowledge; they were masters of practically all the disciplines—from literature and law to astronomy and medicine. They were themselves professional men and women who knew Islam as law and additionally, as ideal and theory, as a system of thought and life, lived and practiced by millions. The highest and most important Islamic qualification ever, namely “*al dhawq al shar‘ī*,” or the intuitive *shar‘ī* knowledge of the purposes of the law, was well within their grasp, in addition to a natural sound disposition.

If the early *fuqahā’*, due to their superb training and competence, were models of creative handling of the lives of the Muslims they counseled, however the training and knowledge of today’s *faqīh* does not adequately equip the person to assume the role of the early *fuqahā’* who had carried out very successfully their duties and responsibilities in guiding the lives of Muslims. A great number of graduates from the present day Shari‘ah and Islamic colleges are not sufficiently trained by the curricula of these institutions. Ibn Taymiyah and his student, Ibn al Qayyim, were among the first to call for a reopening of *ijtihād*. They were later followed by a number of ‘ulama and *du‘āt*, until the twelfth Hijri century when Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al Wahhab began to actively pursue the same direction through his movement. His call was adopted by Muhammad Abduh and his teacher, Jamaluddin al Afghani, as well as by other ‘ulama and *du‘āt*.

Although awakened Muslims everywhere approved the call to reopen the gates of *ijtihād*, the movement failed for two reasons:

First, the traditional qualifications required of the *mujtahidun* remained the same as before and, thus, restricted the practice of *ijtihād* to the graduates of the traditional institutes, i.e., to those who saw no need for it. The graduates of the traditional institutes had received an education that convinced them that the methodology was absolutely adequate and that the problem of the Muslim world was merely one of human reluctance to realize the values of Islam.

Second, the understanding of the *mujtahid*, by definition the *faqīh*. The *faqīh* is a person whose training in fiqh and whose knowledge of Shari‘ah has enabled him to translate all contemporary social problems into legal terms and to make pronouncements upon them under the categories of the law.

This approach contained or subsumed the problems of modernity under the categories of Islamic fiqh and contained its verdict, which was pronounced according to one or more of the traditional schools of jurisprudence. The role of Islam in society and life became confined only to legal terms. This restricted ijihad still further by concentrating all its efforts upon *iftā'* or "the pronouncement of *fatāwā* (juristic verdicts given by an *'ālim* on any specific daily action or matter pertinent to Islamic law). This bypassed the necessary alternatives needed to realize the Islamic vision and to establish a social order based upon Islamic concepts and goals. The traditional training of a *faqih* or a *mujtahid* undoubtedly pulled him away from such insight and kept him captive in a restricted circle in which he sought to correlate and to harmonize current social practices and the juristic verdicts relating to them according to one or more traditional schools of fiqh. Such limited practice and conception called for inevitable efforts to reform the traditional methodology and to introduce a new Islamic methodology. A great number of traditional 'ulama were incapable of conceiving either the manifestations or the dimensions of this new methodology in the process of reviewing as well as reopening our very understanding of the *uṣūl*, or sources of Islamic knowledge.

### 3. The Opposition of Revelation (*Wahy*) to Reason (*Aql*)

Probably the most far-reaching development in the intellectual history of the Ummah is the dichotomy between revelation and reason. It was the advent of Greek logic and its influence upon some Muslims, who were all too anxious to utilize the methods it provided to convince non-Muslims of the truths of Islam, that made them indulge in futile theological issues that, eventually, led to a perceived separation of *Wahy* from *Aql*. Hellenized Christians and Jews lived for centuries under the aegis of this dichotomy, and many brought it into the Ummah with them when they converted to Islam. Al Farabi gave this dichotomy its classical statement upheld by the philosophers against the theologians (*mutakallimūn*). The dichotomy was accepted by some later *mutakallimūn* who were content to elaborate on the faith defensively. Such logic continued to dominate the field of intellectual discussion in the age of decline, especially under the influence of sufism, which was influenced by gnosticism. Sufism advocated a purely intuitive and often esoteric methodology, and, hence, found no fault with estrangement between reason and revelation.

Unlike those religions that sought to overwhelm man's understanding and to overpower his conscience so as to surrender to the irrational, or even the absurd, the call of Islam was rational and critical. Invariably, it invited men to use their intelligence, to apply their critical faculties to all claims,

to consider the alternatives, to always be cogent and coherent, to say nothing but the truth of which one is absolutely certain, to always seek correspondence with reality and to shun conjecture, guessing, and supposition. Practically every page of the Qur'an contains such exhortations, injunctions, and commands. Without reason, the truths of revelation cannot be appreciated; nor can they be recognized for what they are; namely, Divine, and acknowledged as such. The claims of revelation would then become indistinguishable from other claims, including the absurd. When acceptance of revelation is not based upon reason, it is subjective, arbitrary, and whimsical. No religious theses based upon personal whims could claim the acquiescence of mankind or of any significant part of it for a long time. When some Muslims placed exaggerated emphasis upon the intuitive at the cost of reason, they unwittingly opened the gates to corruption of the Islamic faith and mind. By not distinguishing things rationally as being fake and absurd, superstition and old-wives' tales certainly masqueraded as truth and penetrated the faith. Just as surely, the over emphasis of "reason" at the cost of intuitive faith corrupted the "life of reason" by reducing it to materialism utilitarianism mechanism, and meaninglessness.

#### 4. The Separation of Thought from Action

In the early period of Islamic history, the leader was the thinker and the thinker was the leader. The vision of Islam was dominant, and the zeal to realize it in history determined all the conduct and the goals of the Ummah. It was the preoccupation of the whole community of Islam. Every conscientious Muslim sought to probe reality for new creative Islamic patterns to enrich the existence of Islamic life. The *faqih* could, at the same time, be a leader of prayer (imam), *mujtahid*; reciter of the Qur'an (*qāri'*); scholar of the traditions (*muhaddith*); teacher, theologian (*mutakallim*), as well as political, military leader, farmer, business person or professional. If the *faqih* felt weak in any of these roles, everybody around him was eager to step in and make up the deficiency. Everybody gave freely of all that they had to the cause, and everybody felt more solidly strong because of the strength of others. Muslims were so closely associated with one another that the weakness of any one of them was quickly overcome by the solidarity and total experience of all. Since Islamic thought was, by nature, oriented toward reality, it was compelled by it to keep its gaze focused upon the real commonweal of living men and women. If that period witnessed little speculative or metaphysical thought, the reason is not that they were incapable of it but that the priority for most Muslim thinkers lay in enabling the masses of people to lead healthy, rational, virtuous and prosperous lives.

On the other hand, the actual life of the people, being the object of continuing thought on the part of their leadership, had the immediate benefit of the thinkers' creative ideas. Adequate thought was applied to the problems of the Ummah, and the solutions fitted the requisites of the situations. The Ummah prospered in every facet of thought and life; for its welfare and interest were constantly in view of the best minds, and the solutions projected by them were implemented and protected because the same minds commanded the executive power or were closely associated with those who did.

Later, this unity between thought and action was broken. The moment they were separated from one another, each began to deteriorate. Political leadership and the men of power moved from one crisis to another without the benefit of thought, without consulting the learned and obtaining their wisdom. The results alienated the wise subjects and 'ulama and isolated them from reality and the important vital concerns of the people.

On the other hand, the leadership was isolated from the sources of Islamic thought. Eventually, this gap grew wider. Put on the defensive, the political leaders perpetrated still more and greater mistakes.

The thinkers, estranged and removed from active engagement in the Ummah's affairs, retreated to the ideal as grounds for their condemnation of political authority. Some began to indulge in affirming the normative over and against the actual. Those whose condemnation carried political consequence were subjected to persecution by the leadership in power. Others whose condemnation did not, were encouraged to soar still higher away from reality. Other thinkers began to compromise the normative in their association with the political leadership. Increased tension led to polarity, and this brought about the ruin of both thought and action. Whereas action became tyrannical and succession to power became violent, thought, having abandoned empirical reality and the real commonweal of the people, contented itself with commentaries on older works or took to mystical flight in mystic Sufi speculation. Soon, the whole Ummah became impervious to its own political leadership. The long succession of tyrants, corrupt leaders, throne usurpers, and puppet caliphs manipulated by powerful men, demoralized the Ummah and repulsed it from the political scene. Consequently the gnostic Sufi brotherhoods received people with open arms. They provided them with spiritual self-discipline and cultivation of mystical experience and, thus, allowed them to be resigned to this in the face of their loss on the scene of history. In their hands, mystical experience provided an escape from the tyranny that none could confront or bear.

Soon, while the sultans reigned without challenge, some of the greatest mental energies of the Ummah were channeled toward spiritual, personal, and subjective values contemplated by *taṣawwuf*. The equivalence and convertibility of the spiritual and the worldly, characteristic of the early period,

disappeared. In its place came the pursuit of the spiritual at the cost of the worldly, of the other world at the cost of this world. Losing its anchor in the actual experiences of the Ummah, Muslim thought became conservative and literal in law, speculative in Qur'anic exegesis and world view, world-denying in ethics and politics and esoteric in the sciences of nature. Great thinkers, jurists, and highly respected people all looked down upon political authority and action as something beneath them, in itself contemptible. At first, resistance to the world—indeed, outright rejection of and then complete disregard for it—became the first conditions of virtue. The Ummah seemed to have lost the balance between the personal and the public values so subliminally exemplified by the Prophet (SAAS) in his life.

## 5. Mundane and Religious Dualism

*Al Širāt Al Mustaqīm*, or “the straightforward path,” which was the hope of all the early Muslims, was a single, unitary path stemming from the vision of Islam and integrating all of man's tendencies and activities into one integral surge toward Islamic self-realization in history. In the period of decay and because of the estrangement between thought and action, the path split in two: the way of the world and the way of virtue. This bifurcation of Islamic life into two paths in constant opposition to each other (the one condemnable and involving the material world with all its values and the other praiseworthy and involving all the religious and ethical values) corrupted and destroyed the role of the two paths, and both were eventually transformed. The former became empty spirituality, similar to the spirituality of Christian and Buddhist monkhood. A spirituality that does not concern itself with the empirical welfare of the masses and does not seek to actualize justice all over a world that is rampant with chaos, corruption, and manipulation, must be subjective, bent upon the religious interest of the adherent alone. Such spirituality is egotistic and individualistic, even when it calls for altruistic acts, for its prime concern is the state of consciousness of the practitioner, not of the Ummah. For the egotistic spiritualist, the nonpractitioning masses and their welfare are mere tools and instruments of self-trial, self-purification, and self-ennoblement. No wonder that this spirituality fell to the lure of gnosis and to the mystical experience and became the prey of superstition and miracle-mongering. It never initially occurred to the virtuous leaders and great minds who laid the philosophical and ideological foundations for what later became Sufi *turuq* that their followings would become brotherhoods and aberrate in such a manner and develop an ethic and a hope that ran counter to Islam. However, most brotherhoods did succumb to this temptation.

The path of the world, on the other hand, developed its own immoral

system, absolved, as it were, from the moral requirements that the representatives of the religion of Islam declared to be the specialized pursuit of another class of Muslims. Without moral values as internal to and constitutive of it, this system was bound to deteriorate and become the prize for anyone who could contend for it successfully. Thus, government and political leadership or office became instruments for self-glorification and brute exercise of power or for extorting moral and material benefits from the people. When, in the modern period, the foreign colonial enemy attacked, invaded, and occupied Muslim lands, the masses barely resisted. They had already become convinced that the battle was not theirs. Finally, when the colonial administrations set up an alien educational system and began to favor a style of life, thought, and activity alien to that of the masses, they regarded it as a new trend, condemnable and contemptible but not worthy of strong and immediate action by the whole Ummah against it.