

THE QURAN'S CHALLENGE TO ISLAM

KHALID SAYYED



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The Quran's Challenge To Islam

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DEDICATION

To Pir Rashid-ud-Daula, who lit in me the torch of knowledge,

and

to Ghulam Ahmed Parwez who taught me to think objectively

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- My family – Masooma, Pakeeza and Imran, and of course their mother, my dear wife and closest friend Billo, for their unflinching confidence and support.

Personal Description and Background

Originally from Pakistan, I have been a naturalised British citizen since 1974. A teacher by profession, I have taught English as a first, as well as a second language in the UK, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Currently, I am teaching ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) at Leicester College. I hold the degrees of B. Sc., B. Ed., MA (English Language and Literature), PGCE and M Ed (Applied Linguistics).

Intellectual and critical inquiry into comparative religion, Islam and the Quran in particular, has always been my major academic interest. While teaching in Saudi Arabia for nearly a quarter of a century I gained fluency in Arabic, which equipped me for meaningful study of primary Islamic sources.

I have written extensively in English and Urdu. My articles have been published in Pakistan as well as Britain in magazines and newspapers. I have translated, from Urdu to English and vice versa, numerous articles and even a complete book. I regularly deliver talks on religious topics to seminars and conferences around the UK.

During my time in King Saud University, Riyadh, I regularly wrote and spoke on local cricket in the Saudi media (newspapers, radio and TV). For *Riyadh Daily*, I covered the 2000 Cricket World Cup as a columnist.

About My Book

Due to sectarian differences in my family, sceptic curiosity regarding religion was aroused early in life. My research interest spans 40 years with active contributions to the area since 1976. I bring this wealth of research and advanced skills as a trained, professional linguist to this proposed work.

My book is a frank academic study of the Muslim scripture, the Quran and its comparison to the early extra-Quranic literature of Islam - highlighting the differences and contrasts between the two. I go on to analyse the Muslim holy book itself from a linguistic perspective and explore its unconventional interpretation based upon the principle that in all Islamic matters, the last and definitive word is that of the Quran. It is not my intention to justify the doctrines of the Quran as the Eternal truth. Rather, that the traditional view of Islam (based upon the infallibility of Hadith and Muslim scholars of early Islam) does not accurately reflect the reality of the Quran.

I invite Muslims (as well as non-Muslims) to make an unbiased study of the Quran by a new methodology and give credit wherever due. I plead with Muslims to recognise real problems in their authentic literature, to exercise self-restraint in the face of criticism and refrain from responding with a *fatwa*. To the Western world, I ask not to paint all Muslims with the same brush. A few thousand – or more – militants who believe in terrorism do not represent the entire billion-strong Muslim community of today's world anymore than the few thousand slave traders of the 18th century colonialism represent the entire Judeo-Christian world. Indeed, the Muslim faith, Islam, has sprung from the same original source of Semitic monotheism of Abraham as have Judaism and Christianity; and, strangely enough, suffers from the same problems of misrepresentations perpetuated through the centuries since its appearance.

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PREFACE

Although I do not have any hand in the composition of this book, yet I take pride in its publication because I have mercilessly exhorted Mr. Khalid Sayyed to begin the work, to continue it, and finally to complete it despite every obstacle of diffidence and over work in other fields. Sayyed has worked exceedingly hard in odd hours of the day and night. I must say that at times when he had already worked from dawn till dusk and leisure and recreation had been fully earned, I stood darkly in the background, cracking my whip. There were two very important reasons for this. First, a book on this topic was a necessity of the hour. Secondly, in my opinion, Mr. Khalid Sayyed was pre-eminently suited to write such a book. I have known the author of this work for more than three decades now. During this period he has earned my respect as a colleague and my friendship as a person.

To my mind, what makes THE QURAN'S CHALLENGE TO ISLAM most welcome is the author's desire to avert clashes caused by misunderstandings about Islam today. Illustrating the author's ground-breaking research, this unusual piece of work convincingly acquaints the Muslim as well as the non-Muslim world with what Islam is and what it really means. Sayyed very clearly highlights the differences and conflicts which the Muslim Holy Scripture has with the conventional beliefs of Islam. Although I do not wholly subscribe to every word written here, I consider this book a pioneering work because Mr. Khalid Sayyed has dealt with the subject matter coolly, calmly, rationally and extremely successfully, attempting to bridge the gulf of misunderstanding that exists between the Muslim and the non-Muslim world. He is well aware of the fact that since the Crusades at the start of the second millennium, the non-Muslim world, particularly Jews and Christians, have looked upon Muslims as global mischief-mongers and uncivilised barbarians, while the Muslims in turn have loathed them as "infidels". However, the author goes a long way to explain that it is a very small number of people who are responsible for the tragic consequences and appeals to both sides to make solemn efforts to understand each other and act wisely in order to bring about peace and harmony in the turbulent world we are living currently.

Syed Azfar Husain
MA, M Ed (Cantab), PGCAL (Edin), PhD (London),
Formerly, Visiting Professor of English,
Cambridge University,
Cambridge, U.K.

FOREWORD

The tragic and deplorable events of September 11, 2001 changed our world for ever. The terrorists, who flew the two hijacked jet planeloads of innocent men, women and children into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York, incidentally triggered multiple feelings on the part of the Western world towards Muslims and Islam – shock, disappointment, fear, disdain, and a rude awakening. Anger was reflected in what may be arguably called a Freudian slip by Gorge W Bush, the president of the United States at the time, when he termed the events the start of Crusades all over again.¹ True to some extent, tensions between the Judeo-Christian and Islamic worlds had reached the peak of armed combat for the second time in history. At the same time, however, there started a renewed interest for more awareness about the faith, hopes and aspirations of about a billion human beings who call themselves Muslim. Wealthy Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia started putting more money into departments of Islamic studies in universities all over the world, especially in the West. A large number of new publications about Islam hit the bookstores. Socially, more and more conversations featured Muslims.

Inadvertently, the 9/11 hijackers forced the Orient and the Occident to start understanding one another afresh. It is high time that they do. Ever since the Crusades at the start of the second millennium, Jews and Christians have regarded Muslims as global trouble-makers and, in return, Muslims have loathed them as ‘infidels’. To some, it is a clash of different ideologies (religions);² to some others it springs from different civic habits or ways of life;³ still others regard it nothing more than a constant war of economy, a tussle to control the world’s resources. In the world of literature, there has been a huge mass of Western publications mindlessly degrading Islam while Muslims have reacted with thoughtless fury even at genuine criticism.⁴ This attitude has taken the world nowhere. It is time we sat down coolly and thought rationally about the obviously very dangerous and volatile situation we all have put ourselves in.

I ask Muslims to exercise self-restraint in the face of criticism and refrain from responding with a bullet, a *fatwa* (religious decree) or an act of terrorism: before deciding upon a course of action, try to take stock of your supplies and put your house in order. Quite often the unwanted and unsightly object, pointed out by neighbours, may be found in one’s own backyard. The notion of Satanic Verses was not an invention of Salman Rushdie’s imagination. It can still be found in authentic Islamic literature. Practices such as misuse of the provision of polygyny, using captive female prisoners of war as sex slaves, and generally looking down upon women as inferior to men – all have their origins in the extra-Quranic literature most Muslims still regard as authentic to the point of reverence. Saucy details of the founder of Islam, Mohammed’s sex life found in the Prophetic Tradition, *Hadith*, as well as in books of *sira* (the biographies of the Prophet) and *tareekh* (annals of history), have been the source of publications like *Rangeela Rasool* (The Amorous Messenger) in India during the British Raj.⁵ Complacency and telling lies may find their justification in Islamic literature. Killing of innocents and hostage-taking are acts which can find no justification in Islam. Muslims have always held the belief, to the dismay of Christian orthodoxy, that Jesus was not Son of God but simply a

man exalted by the office of prophethood; also, they have always looked down upon, and have been quite deridingly vocal about, the doctrine of Trinity. Nonetheless, I am not aware of any Christian on record to have turned hostile towards Muslims for such ‘blasphemous’ beliefs and statements on the pretext that they were hurting Christian sentiment. Why should Muslims pick up arms every time some criticism – even serious, scholarly and academic – is made of Islam? It is only morally fair that if Muslims derive contented pleasure over the prospect of traditional Christianity being destroyed by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, they should gracefully and academically receive the scholarly research resulting from the 1972 find of ancient fragments of the Quran from the Grand Mosque in Sana’a, Yemen.⁶ Apart from the philosophical and academic discussions, Muslims should get used to the place hard evidence, such as archaeological finds, occupy in the human pursuit of knowledge and truth. The Quran lays great emphasis on use of reason; therefore, echoing the appeal to rational thinking made by Mohammed himself, I beseech Muslims to pause and think.⁷

Backdrop

This work is intended for the educated middle classes – young school-leavers, graduates, and generally people with an academic bend of mind who are curious to read and think about Islam seriously and critically. I am assuming some basic background information on the part of my readers about Islam and its founder, Mohammed. However, to save some of my interested readers the trouble of referring to very basic books, I here give briefly what I think should help to appreciate what I have presented in this work. Nonetheless, the following background information is in the form popular among the dominant majority of Muslims as representative of Islam. I have found it difficult to accept the entirety of it as true. Some significant parts of it are in need of critical and academic inquiry according to both internal as well as external criteria. That in fact, is exactly what I have attempted to do in this work.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM

According to the commonly accepted version of history, around the middle of 6th century CE the Middle East had two very powerful empires ruling over a vast area. To the west was the Eastern Roman Empire with its capital at Constantinople (ancient Byzantium), the present day Istanbul in modern Turkey. To the east lay the vast Persian empire of the Sassanid dynasty with its capital at Madaain (ancient Ctesiphone) not far from present day Baghdad in modern Iraq. By the middle of the 6th century, the two giants had almost exhausted themselves to near-total collapse as a result of centuries-long mutual wars. Beyond the Fertile Crescent to the south lay the vast and desolate expanse of Arabia – arid and unattractive to the outside world – inhabited by a few nomadic tribes. On the western edge of the Arabian Peninsula, running along the length of the Red Sea, was a thin area of relatively more active human settlements with a trade route extending from the fertile Yemen in the south to Syria in the north. On this trade route there was a small town,⁸ tucked within

parched stone hills, housing an ancient religious sanctuary called the *Ka'ba*.⁹ It is in this town Bakka (later known as Mecca) that in circa 570 AD was born a boy to a reasonably well-to-do family of the wealthy tribe al-Quraysh. He was Mohammed, son of Abdallah, the future founder of Islam.¹⁰

The Founder

Mohammed was an only child of his parents, Abdallah and Aamena, who were both lost to him when he was still a very young child, in fact before he reached the age of about 4 years. He was taken care of for a while by his grandfather Abdul Muttalib, upon whose death he was raised by one of his uncles, Abu Taalib. Mohammed grew up into a quiet and sober young man who was quite different from the normal contemporary youth in that he developed a reputation for being honest and trustworthy. Following many of his elders, Mohammed became a merchant and entered the world of trade by buying and selling merchandise along the trade route already mentioned. One of his clients was a wealthy widow Khadija who commissioned him to oversee her trade caravans to Syria. She was impressed by the conduct and temperament of the young Qurayshite and offered marriage. Reportedly, Khadija was 40 and Mohammed 25 when the marriage took place in 595. They had several children – at least two boys and four girls. Both the boys died in infancy but the girls survived and grew into important figures of Islamic history; two of them - Ruqqayya and Umm Kulthoom - were one after the other married to Uthmaan ibn 'Affaan, the future third successor (*khaleefa* – Caliph) to Mohammed; the youngest and the most famous daughter, Fatima, became the wife of 'Ali ibn Abu Taalib (son of Mohammed's benefactor uncle), Mohammed's dear cousin and the future fourth Caliph of Islam. Fatima is the matriarch at the head of the Prophet's progeny to this day; she is revered by Shiite Islam as the lady who started the long line of *imam*'s (spiritual and religious leaders) and gave her name to the well-known dynasty of caliphs of Egypt, the Fatimids.

When he was about 40, in about 610, during one of his sessions of solitary retreats in a cave just outside Mecca, Mohammed had the epoch-making experience which was to change the world for ever. It was of a vision of Archangel Gabriel, who brought down the first Divine Message to him appointing him God's Messenger. The angelic visits continued over the next 23 years of Mohammed's life till he breathed his last and the messages became what we today know as the Quran, the holy Book and the Scripture of the Muslim world. The Message called Man to believe in the One Creator God – *Allah* – in the way of the monotheistic philosophy of the great patriarch Abraham, who had been followed by several previous messengers like Moses and Jesus. Mohammed's call to the new faith angered the people of Mecca and, initially, conversions were very few. Eventually, after having suffered the Qurayshite persecution for 13 years, an opportunity arose in a town about three hundred kilometres to the north. The handful of Muslims – the converts to the new faith of Islam - migrated in about 622 to Yathrib, now renamed *Medina tun Nabi* – City of the Prophet. There, gradually, Islam grew in strength and towards his last days Mohammed was able to found the beginnings of the first Islamic state in history. Finally, the great man expired in Medina in about 632.

History

After some teething problems, the fledgling state took roots and by the end of the second caliph ‘Umar’s reign in 644, the Islamic Empire controlled an area of about one million square miles. The era of the first four caliphs ended with the assassination of the fourth successor ‘Ali ibn Abu Taalib in circa 652 and is known as *khilaafa tur raasheda* – the Righteous Caliphate. Thereafter, the Empire digressed considerably from the established way of the Prophet and his Companions and effectively became a hereditary monarchy. The dynasty of Umayyad caliphs ruled the Muslim world for 90 odd years. During this time, the Empire extended to its farthest limits. The Umayyads were overthrown by a rival clan, the ‘Abbasids, to begin a dynastic rule of around six centuries to be terminated in 1258 by the barbarian hordes of Halagu Khan, grandson of the great Mongol, Genghis Khan. The ‘Abbasid era is popularly considered to have been the Golden Age in the history of Muslim civilization and culture. It produced some of the greatest academics, artists, scientists and writers of Islam. The late part of the Umayyad and the early and middle part of the ‘Abbasid rule saw a huge number of literary and religious works produced by some of the greatest names of Muslim history, such as Bokhari (hadith), Abu Hanifa (jurisprudence), Jaaber bin Hayan (science), Ibn Sina (medicine), and al-Ghazali (philosophy), etc.. Modern historians have recognised the Arab contribution to the spread of human knowledge. From the learning places of the Middle East through the universities of Grenada and Cordova in Moorish Spain, Muslims brought Greek thought into medieval Europe and lit up the Dark Age with the torch of Knowledge. ¹¹

Mohammed did not leave behind any legacy other than the Quran. About 150 years later began the appearance of compilations of records of his sayings and deeds – the *Hadith* – literally ‘something new’ but also means ‘talk.’ A little later appeared the first biographical records of Mohammed and his times. They are known as *at tareekh* [(books of) history], *al maghaazi* [(annals of) raids (and battles)], *sira* – short for *sira tar Rasool Allah* (biography of the Messenger of God), and *tafseer* – literally ‘explanation and elaboration’ – [(books of the Quranic) exegeses]. These earliest works from Islamic history formed, along with the Quran, the traditional sources of Islam, which were used by great jurists to compile books on Islamic jurisprudence. ¹² As a consequence of all these historical events, the Muslim world split into several factions (sects) quite early in their march through Time. The dominant mass of Muslims is known as *Sunni* – people who follow the *sunna* (way) of the Prophet. They are further divided into four sub-sects. The other big faction is called *Shia* – from *Shi’aan Ali* (Partisans of Ali) who are further subdivided into several smaller sects. The Shia maintain that, at Mohammed’s death, his cousin and son-in-law Ali ibn Abu Taaleb should have succeeded him as caliph as he was the Messenger’s rightful and divinely-appointed heir; they further hold that Ali’s God-given *imaama* (spiritual as well as temporal leadership of the Muslim nation) carried on in his descendents. ¹³ There are close to a billion Muslims in the world today living in an area stretching from Morocco in northern Africa to Indonesia in the east and from Turkey in the north to Mauritania and the Sudan in the south. There are also several sizable populations of Muslims around the world in non-Muslim countries like the USA, the UK, Canada and many European countries.

Philosophy

The Quran's message, Islam, is not a religion in the conventional sense of the word - not in the sense as the West takes it with reference to Judaism or Christianity. The Western mind takes religion to be a personal discipline, which is a private relationship of an individual with the Creator with the main emphasis on spirituality. The more mundane matters of human life on Earth are left to the state.¹⁴ The Quran, in comparison, presents a set of values on which is based a comprehensive system of social existence for human societies in the present form of life with an aim to develop the human personality so that it is equipped to be transformed to the next stage of existence in the march of evolution. The social system prescribed by the Quran is explained with the help of examples from the Arabian culture at the time and illustrated by instances from prior history. It encompasses all aspects of individual as well as collective human existence – politics, economy, education, welfare, relationships, etc. Theologically, the Quran believes in the one Creator God, who is intelligent and compassionate and has created the Universe according to firm, permanent physical as well as social laws. God created Man different from the rest of His creation in one important aspect – freedom of choice. To help Man choose the best value system of his own volition, God established a system of periodically sending his suggested Message to mankind through specially appointed men – Messengers of Allah, such as Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Mohammed is the last and final messenger in this long chain. Essentially, it is the same message which was given to these men. Prior to Mohammed, the Message used to get corrupted, or lost, due to various reasons, chief among them was men's greed and ulterior motives. But, with the Quran, God vowed to look after the preservation of the Message Himself guaranteeing its incorruptibility till the end of Time. Hence, the finality of Mohammed's mission – there would be no new messenger after him because there is no need of any – the eternal Message of God is forever preserved and enshrined in the book in the Arabic language called the Quran. It has the last word in all matters.

Practically, in everyday life, Muslims are normally expected to: offer five ritualistic prayers every day – at dawn, noon, late afternoon, sunset and late night – individually or (preferably) in congregation in a mosque; observe one month of fasting [abstain from consuming any food and sexual intercourse during daylight hours] in Ramadan, the 9th month of the Islamic (lunar) calendar; contribute regularly to charity; and make at least one pilgrimage in one's life to the holy city of Mecca in the first week of the 12th Islamic month.¹⁵ By observing these rituals, and also by generally trying to live as the Quran demands, Muslims hope to find favour with God on the Day of Judgment (*al qiyaama*) and enter Paradise for an eternal existence of pure bliss. That day, occurring at the end of Time when the Universe will be rolled up, will see each and every single human being ever created brought back to life to be made accountable for their deeds to God, who will preside over the proceedings and send the bad to Hell and the good to Paradise.

Let me now invite my readers to the book proper.

* * * * *

Editorial note:

In all instances I have used Abdulla Yousuf Ali's translation of the Muslim holy book titled *The Holy Quran – English translation of the meanings and Commentary*, unless otherwise stated. Where I have departed from the translation, I have indicated it.

Reference to the Quranic verses have been made in numbers, with the first figure denoting the number of the *sura* (chapter) and the second (after the colon) referring to the verse(s). Thus 2:219 means verse 219 in the second chapter.

Part 1

OVERVIEW

Chapter 1

THE EXTRA-QUARANIC LITERATURE OF ISLAM

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, what we know as Islam has a multiple of sources. The primary source is of course the book known as the Quran while the category of secondary sources comprises of a variety of a great mass of literature mostly authored during the 8th, 9th, and 10th centuries, CE (3rd, 4th, and 5th centuries, Hijra). It is our task to examine the secondary sources of Islam in this chapter. I shall deal with the Quran in the second part of this book.

The question ‘What is Islam?’ has been asked thousands of times and appears to be ridiculously simple. In reality, however, it is not as easy to answer as many of my readers might like to think. As has been realistically - even if in a derogatory tone - observed by some writers, one might distinguish THREE Islams:

First, the Islam contained in the Quran; second, the Islam as interpreted and developed by theologians through the Prophetic Tradition (*Hadith*); it includes what is known as the *Sharia* as well as *fiqh* [the Islamic jurisprudence (law)] for legal purposes; and third, the Islam reflected in the deeds and achievements of Muslims through history as well as the present day.¹

In my personal view, however, this is too fine a distinction. What Muslims have done and achieved throughout their history, and still do, has largely been on the basis of second Islam in our list. At least, they have tried, and still do, to find a justification for most of their actions in Traditional Islam—the conventional view of Islam based upon an amalgam of *Hadith* (records of the sayings and deeds of Mohammed), *Taareekh* [historical records like *kutub al-maghaazi* (annals of raids and battles), *Sira tur Rasool* (biographical records of Mohammed)], *Tafseer* (the Quranic exegeses), as well as *Fiqh* (treatises on Jurisprudence). That has prompted some writers to come up with works such as *Do Islam* (Two Islam’s) and *Do Quran* (Two Quran’s).²

Practically, that means that there is the Scripture (the Quran) and there is the interpretation of it (the extra-Quranic literature).³ At times, the two sources are at odds with one another and present different – sometimes, contradictory – views about a given subject. The result has been scores of brands and definitions of Islam solidifying those different views, over more than fifteen centuries, into as many sects of Islam. The logic commonly accepted and adhered to by the dominant majority of Muslims is as follows:

1. The Quran, the Divine Message, was revealed to Mohammed.
2. He had the duty to transmit, as well as explain and interpret, the Message.
3. Mohammed fulfilled his prophetic duty to the full by honestly transmitting God's Word (the Quran) to the people of Hejaz (whose duty in turn it was to spread the Message to the rest of the world); also, he explained and interpreted the Divine Message by his deeds as well as utterances.
4. Mohammed's explanations and interpretations were recorded by very able compilers, under the title *Hadith*, after extremely careful and hard work that is almost flawless.
5. No one can ever understand God's Message better than the Messenger himself, who was directly guided by God. Therefore, in a way, *Hadith* is God's own explanation and interpretation of His Word.
6. It follows logically that if one finds a discrepancy between the Quran and Hadith,
 - i the problem lies with the reader's understanding,
 - ii the Hadith view overrides the Quranic view (because the reader's conception of the Quranic view is a misunderstanding in the first place and therefore faulty).

The problem is compounded by another term often used by Muslims – the *Sunna* (the Prophetic Model). Short for *Sunna tar Rasool Allah* (the way of the Messenger of Allah) or *Sunna tan Nabi* (the way of the Prophet), it is almost invariably used in conjunction with the term *Quran*. Most Muslims thinkers, on the individual as well as the collective level, assert that Islamic laws must be based upon 'the *Quran* and the *Sunna*.' But, there we come up against a problem. In response to the question 'What / where is the *Quran*?' one can point to a particular volume in a pile of books and say, 'Here is a volume in the Arabic language, consisting of 114 chapters, revealed to the Prophet Mohammed in 6th/7th century Arabia.' No one is likely to dispute that statement. But, the answer to the question 'What / where is the *Sunna*?' is not that easy to provide. The response is very likely to be: 'Well, the *Sunna* is contained in the various authentic compilations of *Hadith*, reliable records of *Taareekh* and *Sira*, and of course, the *Quran*.' So, the *Sunna* has to be compiled from all these sources. There have been scores of such compilations in various languages throughout the history of literature on Islam. The diversity of these sources has meant the appearance of differing versions of the Prophetic Model simply because of the inconsistencies of the source material. The result has been a very conspicuous absence of one authentic compilation of the *Sunna* unanimously agreed upon by Muslims. A more unfortunate consequence has been the division of the *umma* (the Muslim nation) into literally scores of sects believing in versions of Islamic philosophy and conduct based upon the Prophetic Model vastly different from - at times, opposite to – each other. In fact, Islamic sects have been at such variance from one another that each and every sect in history has been branded a *kafir* (infidel) with a proper *fatwa* (religious decree) issued against it.⁵ Sadly from a literary, and tragically from the Muslim, point of view, this lack of a united standpoint on the immensely important question of *Sunna* has been clumsily justified as God's Will by none other than the Prophetic Tradition (*Hadith*) itself. The Messenger of Allah (Mohammed) is reported to have said:

'There are going to be 72 sects in my *umma*, but only one of them is destined for Paradise.' ⁶

That should help a good deal in explaining why today there are so many different Islamic systems in operation even in non-secular Muslim countries professing to have the Law of Islam in place. Saudi Arabia and Iran are two examples in this regard. Saudi Arabia operates strict Wahaabism (named after Mohammed ibn Abdul Wahaab, the late 18th century revivalist from Nejd, central Arabia) under the influence of the Hanbali school, itself a sub-sect of the greater Sunni sect. Iran follows the other big division of Islam, the Shia sect. Countries like Egypt and Algeria are trying to go down the Shafe'i or the Maliki roads, which are the other Sunni sub-sects. If Pakistan ever becomes a theocratic state (after hopefully having resolved the Sunni-Shia differences), it is very likely to adopt the Hanafi jurisprudence, the philosophy of the biggest of the four major Sunni sects. Since these sectarian divisions have existed for the most of the Muslim history, it has forced some thinkers to admit the gravity of the problem. Abul A'la Maudoodi, the founder of *Jamaat e Islami* in the sub-continent of India and Pakistan, one of the most influential Islamic scholars in modern times, wrote:

'It is not possible to arrive at an interpretation of Islam based upon the Quran and the Sunna that may be acceptable to all sectarian divisions in Islam.' ⁷

In view of this confused state of affairs it is desirable for us to attempt to appraise these sources of Islam critically and rationally from an academic standpoint. The most important of all is decidedly the Quran, which we shall take up later. First, let us look at the extra-Quranic material.

1.2 SECONDARY SOURCES OF ISLAM / HADITH

Historically, the most widely accepted as authentic compilations of *Hadith* by Sunni Islam are the *Sahaah Sitta* (the Six Authentic Ones): ⁸

1. *Al-Jaame as Saheeh* by Mohammed bin Ismail Bukhari (d. 256 AH/870 AD) of Bokhara, in central Asia. He is reported to have selected around 2,700 – 3000 reports out of an estimated original collection of 600,000.
2. *As-Saheeh* by Muslim bin Al-Hujjaj (d. 261/875) of Neishapour, in Iran. He selected 4,000 items to report from about 300,000.
3. *As-Sunan* by Abu Dauood (d. 275/888) of Seestan, in Iran. He recorded a selection of 4,800 reports from nearly 500,000.
4. *As-Sunan* by Abu Abdallah bin Maajja (d. 273/887) of Quzwain, in Iran. He selected 4,000 out of an original 400,000.
5. *Al-Jaame'* by Abu Eesa Mohammed Tirmadhi (d. 279/892) of Tirmadh, Itan. He reported about 2,100 items out of 300,000.
6. *As-Sunan* by Abdur Rahman Al-Nisaaee (d. 303/915) of Nisaa in Khurasaan, Iran. He selected 4,300 items to report out of 200,000.

In addition to these six major works, some minor ones are:

1. *Muwatta* by Malik bin Anas (d. 179/795), and
2. *Musnad* by Ahmed bin Hanbal (d. 241/855).

Drawing upon all the above works, Wali ad-Din al-Tibrizi wrote

3. *Mishkaat al-Masaabeeh* in the 8th/14th century.

Shia Islam believes in a Hadith selection of their own. They are:

1. *Al-Kaafi* by al-Kulayni (d. 329/941).
2. *Man la yahduruhu al-faqih* by Shaykh al-Saadiq, also known as Babawayh (d. 381/991).
3. *Al-Istibsar* by Mohammed bin Hasan al-Tusi (d. 460/1067), and 4, 5. *Tahdheeb al-ahkaam* and *Wasai'l al-Shia* by Al-Hurr al-Amili (d. 1104/1692).

In addition to *Hadith*, information about Islam, its founder, and early days is also obtained from three important early works of history. The principal accounts of the life of Mohammed were written in about 100 years from 750 to 850 AD. They are:

1. *Sira tar Rasul Allah* (Life of the Messenger of Allah) by Muhammad ibn Is-haaq (d. 150/767).
2. *Maghaazi* (Battles/Raids) by Muhammad bin 'Umar al-Waqidi (d. 207/823).
3. *Tabaqaat* (Dynasties) by Muhammad bin Sa'd (d. 230/ 845).

The Shia have;

4. *Sharh Nahj al-Balaagha* [Explanation of 'The Mature Path'] by Ibn Abi al-Hdid (d. 656/1258). It is a commentary on the letters and sayings of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's cousin and the fourth caliph of Islam.

Also, among the classical works, we find some biographical dictionaries on Mohammed's Companions by people like Ibn 'Abd al-Barr (d. 463/1070), Ibn al-Athir (d. 630/1233) and Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani (d. 852/1449). Yet another useful source on early Muslim conquests is *Kitab al-Ghazawaat* ('The Book of Raids') by the Andalusian Ibn Hubaysh (d. 584/1188).

Some important works on history are:

1. *Tarikh* ('History') by al-Yaqubi (d. 283/897).
2. *Al-Akhbar al-Tiwal* by Abu Hanifa al-Dinwari (d. 281/894)
3. *Kitab al-Ma'arif* ('Book of Information') by Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889).
4. *Muruj al-Dhahab wa Ma'adin al-Jawher* ('Golden Ways and Mines of Precious Stones') by Al-Masudi (d. 345/956).

But, doubtlessly, the crucial historical works of the late 9th and early 10th centuries – and the most respected and influential in the Muslim world – are:

1, 2. *Ansab al-Ashraaf* ('Genealogies of the Elite') and *Futuh al-Buldaan* ('Conquest of Countries') by Ahmed bin Yahya al-Baladhuri (d. 279/892), and, 3, 4; *Al-Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk* ('The History of Prophets and Kings'), and, *Jaame al-Bayaan 'an Taweel al-Quran* ('Comprehensive Report on the Interpretation of the Quran'), an exegetical treatise, by Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 310/923).

The last two authors mentioned drew upon older collection of historical material which had been written down roughly a century before in the decades around 800 AD. They often narrate not structured and connected events but report from a series of discrete anecdotes known as *akhbar* (singular, *khbar*).⁹

As mentioned earlier, the various sects of Islam take their credence from these extra-Quranic sources. Islamic sects follow their preferred *fiqh* (jurisprudence) as taught by learned scholars [*fuqahaa* (lawyer or legal experts, sing. *faqeeh*)] of yesteryears. That is the basis of the four major Sunni sects:

- The **Hanafi** school of *fiqh* was founded by No'maan bin Thaabet, an 'ajamy (non-Arab) scholar, who is better known as Abu Hanifa (d. 150 H/765 AD) in Kufa, Iraq. The followers of the Hanafi tradition are the most numerous and are spread mostly in Asia and the Middle East.
- The **Maliki** school takes its name from Malik bin Anas (b.93 H/680 AD–d.179 H/796 AD) of Medina. He is the compiler of the earliest collection of *hadith*, titled *al Mu'atta*.
- The **Shafe'i** school comes from Muhammad Idris As-Shafi'i (b.150 H /767 AD – d.204 H / 820 AD) from Gaza, Palestine. His followers are mostly found in Egypt.
- The **Hanbali** school was founded by Ahmed bin Muhammad bin Hanbal (b. 164 H / 780 AD – d. 241 H / 857 AD) from Merv in Iran. A revivalist movement in the Nejd (now Saudi Arabia) in late 18th century by Muhammad bin Abdul Wahaab (d. 1787) founded an offshoot of the Hanbali school. It is known as the **Wahaabi** Movement.

The Shia follow the system of jurisprudence formulated by Ja'far al-Saadiq, their sixth *imam* (religious leader) in the line of twelve direct descendents of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth Caliph.¹⁰

1.3. A CRITIQUE OF HADITH

The dominant majority of Muslims hold the view that most of these extra-Quranic works, especially the *Hadith*, are essential sources of Islam along with the Quran. Support for this view is primarily derived from the Quran :

'... We have sent among you a Messenger of your own, rehearsing to you Our Signs (*aayaatena*), and purifying you (*yuzakeekum*), and instructing you in Scripture (*alkitaab*) and Wisdom (*al-hikma*) and in new knowledge.'
(2:151)¹¹

If ‘Wisdom’ (*al-hikma*) in this verse is to be taken to mean *hadith* (the extra-Quranic utterances and deeds of the Messenger), we are faced with a dilemma. As we know for a fact that Mohammad died around 630 AD/10 H; another fact is that there is no legacy of his available other than the Quran (the earliest compilation of *hadith* did not appear till about 150 years *after* his death). In other words, Mohammed did *not* compile and leave behind a collection of his sayings as he did the Word of God. If his sayings were essential for true understanding of, and were complementary to, the Quran, he should have done that duty. The fact that he did not do so can only mean one of two things: he either did not fully carry out his responsibilities as a teacher, or he was not supposed to, and never intended to do so. From the Quranic point of view, the latter appears more likely to have been the case rather than the former. Evidence to this effect is found in the Quran. The Book claims that it has taken care of *all* that needed to be said (16:89 - ...*al-Kitaabe tabyaanan le kulle shaye*), and has omitted *nothing* (6:38 – *ma farratnaa fil kitaabe min shaye*). Also, he (the Prophet Mohammed) transmitted all he was supposed to (87:6 – *sa nuqruka fa la tansaa*). To emphasize that the Book is self-sufficient for the purposes of teaching what God wanted to, it poses the rhetorical question: ‘And is it not enough for them that We have sent down to thee the Book which is rehearsed to them?...’ (29:51). The task of transmitting God’s Word, as well as explaining the entire system (*ad-Deen*), to its primary audience was successfully completed in the last days of Mohammed’s life. It is popularly agreed that the occasion of the Last Pilgrimage was the time when the last verse of the Quran was revealed:

al yawma akmaltu lakum deenakum – ‘...this day I have perfected your religion for you...’ (5:3).

Outside of the Quran, we find similar evidence: 12

1 A report from *Musnad* by *Imam* Ahmed ibn Hanbal says:

‘We used to write down whatever we heard from the Messenger of Allah. One day, the Messenger happened to come to us and asked, “What is that you write?” We said, “Sir, whatever we hear from you.” He said, “A book parallel to the Book of God? Keep the Book of God clean and pure and free of all confusion.” Then we gathered all that material in a field and burnt it.’

2 *Imam* Zahbi reports in *Tazkera tal Haffaaz Zahbi* about the First Caliph:

‘Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddiq gathered the people after the death of the Messenger of God and said, “You narrate reports from the Messenger which differ from each other. People in future will become firmer in such differences. Therefore, do not attribute any saying to the Messenger. If asked, you should say, ‘We have the Book of God in our midst.’ So, follow the criterion of *halaal* (permissible) and *haraam* (forbidden) as given in the Book.”’

3 *Tabaqaat ibn Sa’d* reports about the Second Caliph:

‘When *ahaadith* [Prophetic Tradition Reports] proliferated in Umar’s time, he put people under oath and forced them to surrender all collections to him. Then he ordered them all burnt.’

4 Above all, ironically enough, one authentic report says that the Messenger said:

'Do not write anything from me other than the Quran; and whosoever has written anything other than the Quran, erase it.' ¹³

Another verse, among several, of the Quran in support of this idea of the Quran-Hadith partnership is as under:

'O ye who are convinced! Obey Allah, and obey the Messenger, and those charged with authority among you..' ¹⁴ (4: 59)

The three distinctly separate spheres of obedience identified by Muslims in this verse [the Quran (*obey Allah*), Hadith (*obey the Messenger*) and, the law of the government of the day (*those charged with authority among you*)] do not synchronize with the general teachings of the Quran for the following reasons.

God's Law (the Quran) was transmitted to men through the Messenger. He is to be obeyed because he is the honest guardian of the Divine Message (81:21). The Messenger asks Muslims to obey God alone through the Quran (5:48; 6:156; 7:3) *not* his own self (4:35; 39:24). That clearly means that obedience of the Messenger is but that of God's. During the lifetime of the Messenger, he was the central authority for Muslims to obtain Quranic judgment on any given matter (4:59). Indeed, as it says in the Quran: "He who obeys the Messenger, obeys Allah..." (4:80). After his death, this responsibility passed on to his rightful and righteous successors. They too asked citizens to follow God's Law (the Quran). There was no question of obedience of the Messenger as different from that of God's because he had not left behind any collection of his sayings/instructions. Every successor must have regarded the judgments of his predecessors, and those of the Messenger, but as precedence only because nothing can supersede God's Word! That is why Muslims are asked by the Quran to make decisions through consultation (42:38). Even the Messenger was asked to consult Muslims (3:159). In fact, according to the Quran, principles and values are more important than persons or personalities:

"Mohammed is no more than a Messenger; many were the Messengers that passed away before him. If he died or were slain, will ye then turn back on your heels..." (3:144)

That is exactly what Abu Bakr, the first caliph meant when he said to mourners at Mohammed's demise,

'If you worshipped (followed) Mohammed, be informed that he is dead; but if you worship (follow) Allah, be informed that He never dies!' ¹⁵

And that is why, on the same occasion, 'Umr bin Al-Khattab, the future second Caliph, made an historical utterance: '*husbunaa kitaabAllah*'—The Book of God suffices for us. ¹⁶

Therefore, in essence, obedience is only for God's Law (the Quran). Clearly, the rulers are to be obeyed only if they enact laws according to the Quran (10:35; 5:77, 25:52; 26:151). Even parents are not to be obeyed if they ask you to go against God's Law (29:8; 31:15). Obedience and loyalty is only to be for one who has the appropriate knowledge (10:89), and refers to God's Law for judgment (31:15).

That is why Abu Bakr, on appointment as the first successor to the Messenger, said in his inaugural address,

‘Support me as long as I abide by God’s Law; if I digress, remove me.’¹⁷

Secondary support for this standpoint is taken by the dominant majority of Muslims from the following argument:

The Quran gives principles, general guidelines and boundaries. It does not contain detailed instructions for, for instance, very essential and basic pillars of Faith like Prayer (*salaa*) and Fasting (*sowm*). It was the Messenger’s duty to provide those details and he did it quite comprehensively. His *sunnah* (his way of putting Quranic principles into practice) is available in the compilation we know as *Hadith*. If we did not have *Hadith*, it would have been impossible to arrive at the true meanings of the Quran.¹⁸

This argument does not hold much water when subjected to critical analysis. Firstly, contrary to the sweeping generalization, the Quran *does* give considerable details on the common rituals. Fasting (*as-Siyaam*), for instance, has detailed instructions on the time of the year (*Ramadan*, the ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar), exemptions and penalties in verses 2:185 – 186; and about the exact timing of starting and breaking a fast, etc in verse 2:187. *Az-Zakaa* (commonly known as poor-tax or alms) is dealt with in great detail throughout the Scripture save for the rate of payment.¹⁹ The annual ritual of pilgrimage (*al-Hajj*) to the Ka’ba in the Grand Mosque at Mecca (now in Saudi Arabia) has an entire Quranic chapter devoted to it – Sura *al-Hajj*, numbered 22. Even *as-Salaa* (daily ritual prayer) has instructions on preparation for the ritual – *wudoo* (ablution) in verse 5:6, the direction Muslims have to face in prayer (2:150), the general etiquette (4:43) and specific mode in travel (4:101) and in battle (4:102) for performing the ritual. Even timing has been dealt with in 62: 9, 10 for the congregational performance on Fridays and also in 11: 114 and 17:78 for the daily prayers.

Secondly, one cannot help wondering, if the detailed instructions and guidance provided by *Hadith* were originally meant to be an integral and essential part of the Islamic system, why did Mohammed not take any steps to preserve it for posterity? How did the hundreds of thousands – if not millions – of Muslims in the vast empire managed to perform their rituals during the 150 years before the first compilation of *hadith* made its appearance?

1.4. THE WORD OF MOUTH

Logically, the unreliability of the word of mouth and its capacity to lose accuracy in no time is quite well known (it is still with us in the form of expressions like ‘the Chinese whisper’). For example, according to Bokhari’s own statement, he gathered the huge pile of reports that he did from scraps of paper, old records and mostly by word of mouth. Remember that he was working almost two hundred years after Mohammad’s death. ²⁰ To raise doubts about the accuracy of these reports is not out of place because Bokhari, and all the other compilers did it. They sifted through the material they had obtained, and decided to accept the reports that they did, on certain criteria. They may have been very meticulous in their work and their

sincerity was beyond doubt. Nonetheless, the fact remains that they did not get those reports directly from the Messenger himself. They duly quote their references in a chain of transmitters (*isnad*) going back to Mohammed. They could not have obtained their material *directly* from the second - and possibly not even the third - generation of transmitters *after* the Prophet because they must have all been dead. They had to rely on their own academic judgment, which was by no means flawless, given the fact that they were all human – they were not divine or even Divine-appointed for this task! If *they* had the right to look critically at that material – and they certainly did – everyone else has the same right. Surely, scholars *have* exercised this right. Abu Hanifa, the great scholar who has given his name to the biggest Sunni sect, the Hanafis, is well known to have made extensive use of his academic discretion in choosing and making use of Hadith while compiling his *fiqh* (jurisprudence). Most recently, Abul Ala Maudoodi in Pakistan is known to have done the same. These scholars were academically in the right when they looked at all that material with a critical eye. Evidence of the use of discretion on the part of the *hadith* compilers remains available in the very work they did. Most of the reports in Hadith open with the words ‘*qaala Rasool Allah*’ (‘The Messenger of God said’) and close with ‘*ow kamaa qaala Rasool Allah*’ (‘or whatever like this said The Messenger of God’). Therefore, the element of doubt and inaccuracy in *Hadith* is inherent and intrinsic to it was admitted and acknowledged by the great compilers themselves.

1.5 CONFUSION AND CONTRADICTION

An impartial, critical examination of Hadith reveals differences not only between various reports on the same subject but also between Hadith and the Quran. I present just a few examples:

1. *Mut’a* (temporary marriage) is forbidden according to some reports while according to others it is permissible.²¹

The Quran, however, does not sanction it; the Quranic marriage is intended for life in a loving and caring environment for both partners (30:21).

2. According to Hadith, the punishment for fornication is 100 lashes for the single (unmarried) and stoning to death for the married.²²

The Quran makes no such distinction and prescribes 100 lashes regardless.

‘The woman and the man guilty of fornication, flog each of them with a hundred stripes;...’ (24:2).

Incidentally, the same verse continues to say:

‘Let not compassion move you in their case, in a matter prescribed by Allah, if ye believe in Allah and the Last Day:...’

But, *Hadith* does exactly the opposite and recommends compassion for the sick and the old, suggesting using a stick with 100 branches to be struck just once ‘to

satisfy the requirements of the law.’²³

3. The Messenger is reported to have said that his *umma* will have 72 sects, and that differences among them are God’s blessing (*al-ikhtelaaf fi ummati rahma*). The Quran emphatically disowns factionalism and sectarianism:

‘And for those who divide their religion and break up into sects, thou hast no part in them in the least...’ (6:160, 3:102, etc).

4. Ritual prayer is one of the ‘Five Pillars of Islam’ and *Hadith* is credited with complementing the Quran on this immensely important and basic aspect of a Muslim’s life. Sadly, *Hadith* has caused factions and sects to arise as a result of different reports on the subject. A few examples:

a. takbeer tahreema – raising ones hands to start prayer

Tirmadhi – The Prophet used to raise his hands up to the shoulder level.

Abu Dawood – He [the Prophet] raised them up to his ear-lobes.

Tirmadhi, Abu Dawood, Nisaai – The Prophet raised his hands only once at the start of prayer and not after that during the entire prayer.

Bokhari, Muslim – He used to raise his hands at the start as well as during prayer.

b. placing one’s hands during prayer

Sunan Shaf’ai and *Musnad Ahmed Hanbal* – The Prophet folded his hands over his chest.

Muwatta – He [the Prophet] used to leave his arms hanging.

c. recitation during prayer

Tirmadhi, Abu Dawood, Nisaai – The Prophet allowed prayer if nothing else but *subhaan Allah* (God is Exalted) and *la ilaaha il Allah* (There is no god but Allah) was recited.

Bokhari, Muslim, Muwatta, Ibn Maajja – No prayer is complete without recitation of *Sura Al-Fateha* (chapter 1 of the Quran).

Muslim – After starting prayer (*takbeer tahreema*), the Prophet used to recite *Al-Fateha*.

Bokhari – He used to recite a short prayer (*Allahumma ...*) before reciting *Al-Fateha*.

Abu Dawood – He used to recite *a’oozu be Allah e min ash-Shaitan*

Nisaai - He used to recite *inn as-salaati wa nuseikee....*

Tirmadhi, Ibn Maajja – He recited *subhaanak Allah humma....*

5. Bokhari reports that the great monotheistic patriarch Abraham was guilty of lying blatantly THREE times in his life.²⁴

The Quran emphatically deplores falsehood and the practice of lying and reports all prophets to have been truthful individuals. About Abraham it is very specific in *Sura Maryam* (Mary):

“(Also) mention in the Book Abraham: he was a man of truth, a prophet [innahu kaana siddiqan nabbiya].” (19:41).

6. The difference – rather, contrast – between *Hadith* and the Quran is perhaps nowhere else more obvious and glaring than in the field of human sexuality. The subject has been dealt with in detail elsewhere in this work. Here, just one example should suffice. The Quran categorically prohibits sexual intercourse (*baashara* in 2:187) during menstruation (2: 222), during ritual fast (2:187), and during Retreat [*e'tekaaf* – a planned isolation at specific times for specific purposes and duties (2: 187)].

But, *Hadith* reports on the authority of Ayesha that Mohammed himself used to do it during menstruation as well as during fasting. ²⁵

1.6. THE UNRELIABILITY OF HADITH

It is not surprising therefore that we see so much confusion and difference of opinion among Muslims as to what Islam really is and what it stands for. They have gone from one extreme of relying totally on the Prophetic Tradition (such as in Wahabism) to the other of completely disregarding everything other than the Scripture proper, the Quran. Thus we witnessed, not long ago, the birth in the sub-continent of India-Pakistan-Bangladesh of a mini sect called *Ahl al Quran* (People of the Quran). This group was led by Abdallah Chakraalewi and Maulvi Charaagh Ali, among others. They proposed total reliance on the Quran for principles as well as laws and sub-laws formulated on the basis of those principles. For example, they practised only three ritual prayers during a day as this is all that can be derived from various verses of the Book. They rejected *Hadith* totally in its entirety. ²⁶

A careful look at the historical evolution of that vast mass of literature known as Hadith raises important questions. The fact is that nearly the entire body of Hadith made its appearance approximately two centuries *after* the death of the founder of Islam; another significant fact is that it was mostly done during the late Umayyad and early Abbasid periods of Islamic history. It is not entirely impossible that a considerable part of this literature was deliberately designed, in the first place, to suit certain social attitudes and practices, which had become standard Muslim behaviour over the previous two centuries, and in the second place, to condone and lend legitimacy to the authoritarian and dictatorial regimes of the day. In short, the socio-politico-cultural needs of the time must have been the impetus and incentive for such a proliferation of Prophetic sayings. That the vast majority of these reports were spurious is undeniable – it is inherent in the records of the numbers of items collected by various compilers before selecting what they deemed as authentic (please see above). As it has been noted by the Hungarian scholar Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921):

The Hadith will not serve as a document for the history of the infancy of Islam, but rather as a reflection of the tendencies which appeared in the community during the mature stages of its development. ²⁷

So confusing and contradictory were these reports that they confound even the very important and basic question of the actual time of their being written down, or worse, if they were written down at all at a particular time in history. One tradition cites ‘Abdullah bin ‘Amr reporting:

‘I used to write everything that I heard from the Prophet, intending to commit it to memory. (On some people taking objection to this) I spoke about it to the Prophet who said: “Write down, for I only speak the truth.”’²⁸

Another report cites the famous Abu Hurairah recording:

‘None of the Companions preserved more traditions than me, but ‘Abdallah ibn ‘Amr is an exception, for he used to write and I did not.’²⁹

Yet, the same Abu Hurairah reports:

‘The Prophet of God came to us while we were writing traditions and said: “What is this that you are writing?” We said: “Sayings which we hear from you.” He said: “What! A book other than the Book of God?”’

Now only one of the two following possibilities could have been the case. Either Mohammed gave mutually conflicting guidance about writing his sayings down, or one of these reports is definitely a fabrication.

Some authors dealing with the issue of the Prophet authorizing the recording of his sayings have gone to extraordinary lengths of argumentation touching the borders of absurdity. Fazlur Rahman, definitely of the opinion that no Tradition was written down in the Prophet’s lifetime, opines:

The delay in compiling Hadith must have resulted from the fear that if the extra-Quranic speech of Mohammed was formally recorded, it could have easily been confused with the text of the Quran (both came out of Mohammed’s mouth). One could have been taken for the other.³⁰

Maulana Muhammad Ali, a prominent and highly respected scholar of the Ahmediya sect of Islam, however, maintains that at least some of the Prophetic tradition *was* written down in his lifetime:

‘It is, however, a fact that the sayings of the Prophet were not generally written down, and memory was the chief means of their preservation.’³¹

But then he goes further and appears to make it as if the non-writing of Tradition was deliberate and, in fact, attempts to put it across as a positive point in the evolution of Islam:

Memory was by no means an unreliable mode for the preservation of Tradition, for the Quran was safely preserved in the memory of the Companions of the Prophet in addition to being committed to writing.

Resting his strange theory on the ‘wonderfully retentive memory of the Arab,’ he then makes the following mind-boggling statement:

In fact, had the Quran been simply preserved in writing, it could not have been handed down intact to future generations. ³²

Why not? How can the written word interfere with the preservation of the spoken?

Such claims are made in the face of the fact that the Quran itself has laid down considerable emphasis on the importance of the written word (2: 282) – the Quran calls itself *al-Kitaab* (2:2), which means ‘written down.’ It is needless to say that, anthropologically, writing was invented to preserve the spoken word. There is also the commonly accepted historical fact that the first collection of the Quran was initiated by ‘Umar al-Khattaab after the battle of Yamamah for fear of its being lost precisely because it had not been entirely written down. As Watt & Bell put it:

According to this report ‘Umar ibn-al-Khattab (who succeeded [Abu Bakr] as caliph in 634) was perturbed by the fact that in the battle of Yamama during the ‘wars of apostasy (*ridda*)’ many of the ‘readers’ [*qurra*] of the Quran were killed. Since these were the men who had learnt parts of the Quran by heart, ‘Umar feared that, if more of them died, some of the Quran would be irretrievably lost. He therefore counseled Abu Bakr to make a ‘collection’ of the Quran.³³

In addition to that, as we have already seen, a large number of Tradition items start with the words ‘*qaala Rasool Allah*’ (The Messenger of God said) and finish with ‘*ow kamaa qaala Rasool Allah* (or whatever like this said The Messenger of God). Also, we can find a number of items which typically mention ‘three important things which the Prophet mentioned’ and the narrator recounts two of those and ‘forgets the third.’ So much for the ‘wonderfully retentive memory of the Arab’!

A large number of reports circulating in the Muslim world at the time were dubious and were produced either as a result of popular versions circulating in society courtesy of the fabled story-tellers in the *souks* (market-places) of Arabia, or fabricated for ulterior or sincere motives. This fact is accepted not only by the ancient writers, i.e. the compilers themselves but also by the most ardent defenders of the hadith genre in modern times. Maulana Muhammad Ali, writes:

‘That there are some incredible stories even in the collections of Tradition is true...’

That explains why we find Prophetic Traditions praising the House of Abbas; it is reported that,

‘The Messenger said, “No Muslim can be a true believer unless he/she loves (my uncle) Abbas and his progeny.”’

This report gives preference to Abbas over other more important and historically illustrious uncles of Mohammed, such as Abu Talib (who protected Mohammed and raised him as his own after the Prophet had lost his parents and his grandfather and had no home) and Hamza (who reputedly became the first Muslim martyr when he laid down his life in the cause of the new Faith during the battle of Uhud).

1.7. OTHER SOURCES

The status and value of Prophetic biographies and other works of history are no different. In fact, the situation is worse because they are not held in that high esteem special to compilations of hadith. The annals of early history of Islam, popularly accepted as authentic sources by Muslims (please refer to the short sampler list given earlier in this chapter), fare as badly, in some cases worse, as the records of Prophetic Tradition do when compared with the Scripture (the Quran). The earliest documented records of Muslim history available to us, as we have seen, date to the 3rd / 9th century and leave a void of at least 250 years since the time of Mohammed. This is about a century longer than the gap left by *Hadith*. As such, it is not entirely implausible that early Muslim historians were, at least to some extent, influenced by the available records of *Hadith*. There must have been other factors, such as the socio-politico-cultural environment of the time, at work to affect an historian's work. The historical records in question were compiled during the 'Abbasid caliphate, and it is difficult to imagine for a literary work of political importance to have survived if it was not at least neutral towards the interests and pleasure of the rulers.³⁴ Actually, writers were more likely to appease and please the ruling elite by toeing the official policy line. The great Muslim divide of *Sunni-Shia*³⁵ is a case in point. Before I attempt to highlight the point under discussion, however, a glimpse at the commonly accepted version of the relevant part of Muslim history is desirable.

1.8. THE SUCCESSION CONFLICT

It is reported³⁶ that the very first conflict resulting in a political division occurred immediately after the death (circa 632 AD) of the Messenger (by some accounts even *before* he was buried). Both the migrants from Mecca (*al muhaajeroon*) and the Medinites (*al ansaar*) aspired to Muhammad's succession, clashed and came to blows. In the words of Al-Tabari, there was enacted a scene reminiscent of *al jaaheliyya* (the age of pre-Islamic ignorance)!³⁷ Eventually, Abu Bakr was chosen as the first *khaleefa tar Rasool* (successor to the Messenger – the Caliph). Reportedly, Ali, Muhammad's darling first cousin and husband to his beloved daughter Fatima, was not happy and considered this a violation and usurping of his declared, firm and deserved right to the succession.³⁸ This seed of resentment was nurtured by a series of later incidents. Among them was the third *khaleefa* Uthman's favoritism of his clan³⁹, the Umayyads – more particularly of Mu'aawiya ibn Abu Sufiyyaan (the fifth *khaleefa*). Later, after the assassination of Uthman (656), when Ali was chosen as the fourth *khaleefa* in Medina, Mu'aawiya, who had been governor of Syria in Damascus, refused allegiance to Ali, and declared himself a contender to the Caliphate (658). There took place two big battles in the indecisive civil war. The assassination of Ali at the hands of the *kharejee*'s (the Exiters)⁴⁰ in Kufa, Iraq, made Mu'aawiya the sole master of the Muslim world. The fledgling plant of discord became a fully grown tree when Muhammad's grandson Hussain (the second son of Ali and Fatima) was killed along with most of his family by the

forces of Yezeed (the sixth *khaleefa* and Mu'aawiyah's son) in the butchery of Kerbala in 680. This was the origin of the biggest rift in the Islamic world and has resulted in the second largest sect—the *Shia*. The discord between the Umayyads and the Alawis – or the Hashemites ⁴¹ / Fatimids / *ahl al Bait* ⁴² / *Shias* – matured into bitter rivalry over the following years, and resulted in numerous armed conflicts, assassinations, constant socio-political tension, and eventually, the full-fledged religious sect, the Shia. In time, the Hashemites found an ally in the Abbasids – descendants of Abbas, one of the Messenger's real uncles. The Abbasids saw their gain in the loss of the Hashemites and started an anti-Umayyad movement in Iran, where many Hashemites and Shias had fled to safety. One Abu Muslim Khorasaani was instrumental in pioneering this campaign.⁴³ The Abbasids adopted as their banner a black flag to symbolize their grief over the Umayyad's brutal mistreatment of the Messenger's progeny. The uprising used the pretext of endeavouring to rectify the wrong and install in power the rightful and true heirs of the Messenger, the House of Ali. Eventually, in 750, the Umayyads were overthrown and the Abbasid era began, depriving the Alawis yet again of the temporal leadership of the Muslim world. They continued to be oppressed by the rulers – only this time round it was the Abbasids – who considered them enemies of the state and a potential threat. This kept the Shia migration trail to Iran alive. Hence we find several of Ali's illustrious descendants buried in mausoleums in Iran. Over time, this ideology fermented into the sub-religion (sect) we know today as *Shiaism*.

It is against this background that it will be interesting to see a report from early Islamic history. Bokhari reports from Abdallah ibn Abbas (incidentally, the son of Abbas ibn Abdul Muttalib, the famous uncle of the Prophet and the ancestor of the Abbasid caliphs): ⁴⁴

During the terminal illness of the Messenger of Allah, when Ali ibn Abi Talib came out from his bedside he was asked, 'Abul Hasan, how is he this morning?' Ali said, 'Praise be to Allah. He is fine.' Abbas ibn Abdul Muttalib took him aside and said, 'By God, you will be a slave in three days. I am sure that the Messenger of Allah will not survive his ailment. I am quite familiar with the facial changes of Abdul Muttalib's progeny when they are about to die. Let us go to him and ask him who will inherit [political] power. We will find out if it is going to be us or some others. If it is someone other than us, he [Mohammed] will instruct his heir in our favour.' [Ali replied, 'Can others beside us be interested in this matter?'] Abbas said, 'By God, I think yes, definitely.' Ali said, 'By God, if we ask the Messenger of Allah and he refuses us, we will surely never be in power after his death. So, by God, I will never ask him.' ⁴⁵

1.9. A CRITIQUE OF HISTORICAL RECORDS

Clearly, this report aims at portraying 'Abbas, the Prophet's uncle and ancestor of the 'Abbasid caliphs, as a friend of Ali's and making him dear in the eyes of the Alids / Alawis. Eventually, Mohammed died without nominating his successor or leaving behind any guidelines for the process save the Quranic principle that the affairs of the *umma* (the Muslim nation) should be decided upon through mutual consultation (42:38 and 3:158). The subsequent commotion for his succession that

ensued at the meeting place (*saqeefa*) of Banu Sa'da has been reported in detail by early historians like at-Tabari (please see note 36 of this chapter). It portrays some Companions of the Prophet—such as Sa'd bin Ibaada, Abu Bakr and 'Umar ibn al-Khattaab—violently arguing and physically assaulting each other for the coveted position of Caliph; Ali ibn Abu Talib, who equally desired the post, sulked and regretted all along as he could not leave his exalted cousin and father-in-law unburied. A critical examination of the episode that Heikel has recorded raises notable concerns from the Quranic standpoint. A negative, i.e. contrary to the Koran, image of the Companions notwithstanding, there are important theological issues which need attention. First, it reports divisions so deep that a serious suggestion was made by Hubaab ibn Mandhar to alternate the caliphate between the Migrants and Helpers. 'Umar rejected it in his usual fiery and hostile manner. Abu Bakr calmly quoted a prophetic Tradition which says, 'Leaders shall always be from (my tribe of) Quraish.'⁴⁶ Second, Ali has been reported to press his claim on the basis of his family relationship to Mohammed. He refused and denied pledge of allegiance to Abu Bakr for six months. When pressed by 'Umar, he is quoted to have said, 'I cannot give you my allegiance as [you have convinced people of your succession on the basis of your proximity to the Prophet, and as such] I am closer to Mohammed in relationship and therefore more worthy of his succession. It should be *you* pledging allegiance to *me!*'⁴⁷ On a subsequent occasion, Ali is reported to have accused Abu Bakr of usurping his birthright to Mohammed's succession which he had because of his blood-ties with the Prophet.⁴⁸

The notion of inheriting leadership solely on the basis of kinship is very clearly rejected by the Quran. As a rule, responsibility and position of authority is to be delegated on the basis of merit alone. The Quranic criterion for appointment to a responsible public office is that the candidate must have STRENGTH (the ability to do the job) and HONESTY / TRUSTWORTHINESS – *al qawi al ameen* as in Sura's *An-Naml* (27:39) and *Al-Qasas* (28:26). Delegation of responsibility shall be according to suitability as in Sura *An-Nisaa* (4:58) where Allah commands to 'render back trusts to the deserving' (*al amaanaat ila ahlehaa*), performance as in Sura *Al-Ahqaaf* (46:19), where it says 'And to all degrees according to deeds (*wa lekulle darajaatum mimmaa 'amaloo...*), and personal character being in line with the Quranic ideology as in Sura *Al-Hujaraat* (49:13). Above all, no position of authority shall be hereditary; that is clear from the example of patriarch Abraham narrated in Sura *Al-Baqara* (2:124) where God promises him leadership of people: 'I will make thee an *imam* to the people.' But, when he desired the same for his progeny (*zurriyyati*), he was denied it unless they deserved it. Not only the highest office in the land but also all the officials of the Quranic government shall be appointed on the same criteria of ability, knowledge, and character as is evident from the story of Taloot⁴⁹ in Sura *Al-Baqara* (2:247).

That brings up yet another dilemma for the educated thoughtful Muslim. Were those close Companions of the Prophet, who were his initial students and disciples, misbehaving disgracefully by so blatantly flouting the Quranic principles? Or, are these historical records of early Islam utterly untrustworthy? The Muslim intelligentsia should seriously attempt to find a way out of this quagmire if there is going to be hope of restoring real and rational confidence in Islam. The need for an intellectual and critical cool look at the sources of Islam is nowhere greater as in the genre of *Hadith* – the Prophetic Tradition. As we have seen earlier in this chapter,

the commonly accepted 'correct' attitude towards *Hadith* is that a report is considered authentic on the basis of the validity of the chain of transmitters (*isnad*). The focus has to be shifted to the contents of a report instead so that it is weighed against the final authority of the Faith, the Quran, which is agreed upon by all Muslims to be the Canon, the Book of God. If Muslims continue to adhere reverently to their extra-Quranic literature of the early Islamic periods, especially *Hadith*, so uncritically as they have for centuries, scathing criticism by non-Muslim scholars of the stature of Goldziher cannot be avoided or ignored. He very rightly observed that the *isnad* is the only method available to Muslims for authenticating the *Hadith* and is wholly inadequate.

Traditions are only investigated in respect of their outward form and judgment of the value of the contents depends on the judgment of the correctness of the *isnad*. If the *isnad* to which an impossible sentence full of inner and outer contradictions is appended withstands the scrutiny of this formal criticism, if the continuity of the entirely trustworthy authors cited in them is complete and if the possibility of their personal communication is established, the tradition is accepted as worthy of credit ... Muslim critics have no feeling for even the crudest anachronisms provided that the *isnad* is correct. Muhammad's prophetic gift is used as a factor to smooth over such difficulties. ⁵⁰

As far as the conventional historical records are concerned, I leave my readers with the standpoint, in his own words, of one of the most respected and renowned historians of early Islam – none other than Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 310/923). In the introduction to his pioneering work *Al-Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk* he writes:

Let him who studies this book of ours know that in everything I say about the subject which I have decided to recount here, I rely on what I transmit from explicitly identified reports (*akhbar*) and from accounts (*aathaar*) which I ascribe by name to their transmitters. I do not achieve understanding through rational proofs nor do I make discoveries by intuition (*fakr al nufus*), save to a very limited degree. For knowledge about the men of the past and current news about men of the present cannot be obtained by one who has not himself witnessed these men or whose lifetime does not reach back to theirs. [In the latter situation knowledge can be obtained only] by the statements of reporters and transmitters, not by rational deductions or intuitive references. And if we mention in this book any report about certain men of the past which the reader finds objectionable or the hearer offensive, to such a degree that he finds in it no sound purpose or truth, let him know that this is not our fault, but is rather the responsibility of one of those who has transmitted it to us. We have presented (such reports) only in the form in which they were presented to us. ⁵¹

Tabari's reluctance to commit himself to the accuracy of his work not only reflects a cautious scholarly approach to the subject but also belies his non-conviction about the reliability of the reports he had based his work upon. Muslim scholars and writers of today should have reason to pause here and re-evaluate their heavy reliance on such works whose reliability was in doubt to their authors themselves.

1.10 CONCLUSION

In my view, the way forward for Muslims, if they desire to remove all that confusion and sectarian stances that exist, may be the following:

According to the Quran, the canon is the Book of God, which was given to Mohammad. His duty was to teach it to the people of his time in a manner which should make them understand it comprehensively so that they could pass it on to the rest of humanity for all times. This included their moral as well academic training, interpretation of the Message, and implementing it under the circumstances of the time. The collection of his actions and sayings is a valuable historical record which should serve as a precedent. It should be used to take guidance from as we do in taking lessons from history. They should help us to know how Mohammed and the people of his time viewed the fundamental principles of the Quran. The details in Hadith were never meant to become etched in stone for all eternity. Of all Muslim literature, only the Quran lays a serious claim to divinity, universality and eternity and as such, in the Muslim context, it should be the ultimate authority in matters of Faith. The Quran has been and still is, to countless human beings the final, unadulterated, direct Word of the Creator.

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