REHABILITATION OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF REVELATION

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Abstract:

Muslims rose to prominence by following revelation. They faded by following tradition. For tradition is a reflection of revelation. How did tradition eclipse revelation? Tradition began to contend with revelation for attention. First, the tradition cast doubt on the ability of reason to “explain” revelation. To enhance its prestige, tradition presented itself as “equal” to revelation. As a result of the inclusion of tradition in revelation, the meaning of “revelation” changed. Revelation was no longer restricted to the word of God; it would in addition encompass the reports of men. This had an effect on the Muslim civilization. For in the longer term, tradition did not merely “supplement” revelation. It went on to “judge,” replace and even abrogate parts of revelation. Traditions – the words of persons – replaced the words of God. Thus, renewal requires rescuing revelation from weak traditions. This entails the assistance of reason, which was similarly sidelined by tradition. People were expected to follow tradition even against reason. Hence, renewal requires the affirmation of the pre-eminence of revelation in relation to reason and tradition. Tradition, for its part, requires being consigned to its role as the actualization of revelation in practice rather than its “judge” or “abrogator.”

Keywords: Muslim Civilization, Rehabilitation, Knowledge, Revelation.

Preview

As a result of the shutting of the gates to *ijtihād*, the reasoning ability of exegetes declined. Exegetes became handicapped. They began to experience difficulties in comprehending revelation. In response, they declared parts of revelation to be “unclear.” They thereby contradicted what revelation says about itself, that it is “a perspicuous book” (*kitab al mubin*).

The rejection of reason necessitated recourse to an alternative method of “explaining” revelation. This alternative method would require the engagement of tradition to “explain” revelation.

The decision to turn to tradition rather than reason to explain revelation reflected the belief that tradition explains better than reason. That even understanding tradition requires the use of reason was disregarded. Exegetes were expected to refrain from using their reason, on

the basis of: “*the hadith that reportedly goes to the prophet, according to which he forbade the use of ‘reason-based tafsir’ as a form of disbelief (kufr)*”¹.

The recourse to tradition to “explain” revelation, however, required the elevation of tradition to revelation. For in verses 44, 45 and 47 of chapter 5 of the Quran, Allah has forbidden “judging” by anything that He did not reveal.

The elevation of tradition to revelation had far reaching and not entirely welcome effects. It expanded the scope of revelation and in the process affected its teaching. Revelation encompassed six extra books, the traditions.

Revelation would be “supplemented” and “explained” by tradition. It was declared not only that “tradition judges revelation,” but also that “revelation needs tradition more than tradition needs revelation.” This reversed the relationship between revelation and tradition. This approach was expected to bring positive results.

However, the traditional approach, in the manner it was presented and applied, did not prevent the Ummah from falling into a state of decline and failure, from which it is still suffering. Likewise, western thought, as it was presented and applied, cannot protect the Ummah from its inherent adverse, harmful, and even disastrous effects ... this is conducive to a wide-ranging question: Is the Ummah going through a serious intellectual crisis, and, if so, how can it find its way out?²

This crisis has been designated as a “crisis in the Muslim mind.” It consisted in the rejection of reason as the faculty required for the attainment of knowledge. It had catastrophic effects. The knowledge of revelation was tainted. The elevation of tradition to revelation reinforced the eclipse of revelation by tradition. The reduced access to revelation accelerated the demise of the Muslim civilization, as traditions were unable to guide as well as revelation.

Introduction

In the past, Islam ruled the world. Yet with a few exceptions, Muslims are experiencing poverty, semi-literacy and backwardness. Muslim establishments of education prefer to “Islamize” rather than rehabilitate knowledge.

Revelation asserts that the conditions of people do not change until they change what is in them. Has anything “changed”? The understanding of revelation was corrupted. This took place when exegetes downgraded reason, accorded the prophetic traditions the rank of revelation and abrogated parts of revelation by tradition.

The characterization of tradition as revelation resulted in an expansion of revelation. This necessitated a partial reorientation from revelation to encompass tradition. Tradition would henceforth be followed together with and even more so than revelation.

Not many were troubled by the repercussions of the amalgamation of tradition and revelation. This was not supposed to happen. In fact, the prophet tried to prevent this. He:

“discouraged the Muslim community from preoccupying itself with any text other than the Qur’an, even if divine authority was claimed for it. God has rendered the Qur’an so complete that it contains the entire Islamic religion. It is

¹ Adis Duderija and Ghulam Rasool, “Bilal Philips as a Proponent of Neo-Traditional Salafism and His Significance for Understanding Salafism in the West,” *Religions* 10, no. 6 (June 2019): 371, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10060371>.

² Taha Jabir al Alwani, “Toward An Islamic Alternative In Thought and Knowledge,” *American Journal of Islam and Society* 6, no. 1 (September 1, 1989): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v6i1.2830>.

the Qur'an that provides the explication of everything, while the Prophet's example provides a comprehensive demonstration of how to apply everything taught in the Qur'an".

The Messenger of God was determined not to allow believers' minds and hearts to be occupied by anything that might set itself up as a rival to the Qur'an, or to let their attention be diverted by things far less worthy. Consequently, he warned the Muslim community against writing down, or concerning themselves with, anything but the Qur'an alone.

However, once the Sunnah had been collected, the Muslim community did, in fact, neglect the Qur'an in favor of narrations of what the Prophet had done and said on the pretext that such narratives "contained" the Qur'an. They then abandoned the Sunnah narratives in favor of Islamic jurisprudence on the pretext that Islamic juristic texts tacitly included both the Qur'an and the Sunnah³.

The abandonment of parts of revelation was facilitated by the application of the theory of abrogation. The abrogation of the peace verses by the ayah as-sayf heralded the emergence of "political Islam."

The religion of peace was re-articulated to furnish a rationale for the expansion of the "realm of peace" at the expense of the "realm of war." This was an early "Islamic" variant of the "clash of civilizations" thesis.

The abrogation of the peace verses inaugurated the emergence of "militant Islam." This process was reinforced by bellicose traditions attributed to the prophet that were at odds with the teaching of revelation. For example, it includes a tradition that says:

God bless prophet Muhammad who was sent with the sword as a mercy to all the worlds⁴.

This tradition compares with the Quran, 21: 107 which says:

And We have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the worlds.⁵

The difference between the two quotations is the presence of the word as-sayf (sword) in the tradition, and its absence from the verse of the Quran. Tradition reflects a bellicose perception of Islam, while the Quranic verse portrays Islam as a religion of peace.

"Islam was never for a day religion of peace. Islam is the religion of war"⁶.

³ Taha Jabir Al-Alwani, *Books-in-Brief: Reviving the Balance: The Authority of the Qur'an and the Status of the Sunnah* (International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2018); أ د طه جابر العلواني, "Reviving the Balance: The Authority of the Qur'an and the Status of the Sunnah," *Reviving the Balance: The Authority of the Qur'an and the Status of the Sunnah*, accessed July 28, 2021, https://www.academia.edu/43889777/Reviving_the_Balance_The_Authority_of_the_Qur_an_and_the_Status_of_the_Sunnah_.

⁴ Narrated by Muslim in Kitab al-Iman, no. 55. "Open Letter to To Dr. Ibrahim Awwad Al-Badri, alias 'Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi' and to the Fighters and Followers of the Self-declared 'Islamic State,'" 19th September 2014 CE, *The Telegraph*, p. 3, Accessed online on 7 July 2020:

https://i.telegraph.co.uk/multimedia/archive/03599/lettertobaghdadi_3599873a.pdf

⁵ Quran, 21: 107, Sahih International, accessed on 7 July 2020:

<http://www.allahsquran.com/read/verses.php?ch=21&vid=>.

⁶ Aimen Dean, Paul Cruickshank, and Tim Lister, *Nine Lives: My Time As MI6's Top Spy Inside al-Qaeda* (London, England: Oneworld Publications, 2018).

The designation of tradition as revelation enabled punishments based upon tradition to replace revealed rulings. In this way rulings drawn from traditions that defied revelation became entrenched in penal law.

Tradition prescribed punishments even for acts not designated by revelation as offences punishable in this life, for example apostasy. Tradition moreover prescribed harsher punishments for particular acts, for example as adultery. In these and comparable cases jurists went beyond the boundaries (hudud) prescribed by revelation.

The replacement of revealed punishments by punishments based on traditions was facilitated by the elevation of tradition to revelation. For if tradition is revelation, the abrogation of revelation by tradition would be perceived merely as the abrogation of “manifest” revelation by “internal” revelation.

The replacement of a punishment prescribed in revelation by a punishment prescribed by tradition was significant. For it was tantamount to replacing the rulings of God with rulings based on the reports of transmitters.

This took place despite a warning against judging by what God did not reveal in chapter 5, verses 44, 45, and 47. This was probably the result of the deterioration of reasoning. The differences between revelation from tradition began to elude the exegetes.

The Muslim civilization is based on revelation. Revelation requires comprehension. Understanding requires the engagement of reason. To reject reason means to prevent oneself from understanding anything, including revelation.

The rise of Islam to pre-eminence was enabled by the rejection of polytheism. Accordingly, it should not hardly be a surprise that the eclipse of revelation by tradition was followed by the eclipse of the Islamic civilization. For tradition was not able to guide believers as well as revelation.

If the Islamic civilization is to rise again, it will have to do it in the way it rose to prominence in the first place, by following revelation rather than tradition. For the foundation of the Islamic civilization is revelation not tradition.

Preface

The Muslim civilization is facing challenges. It appears that change has taken place, not all of it for the better. When traditions were accorded the rank of revelation, knowledge of revelation changed. Revelation states: “*Allah never changes the condition of people until they change what is inside themselves.*”⁷

The alteration of knowledge resulted in an alteration of behaviour. Due to the assertion that the peace verses were abrogated by the ayah as-sayf, Islam began to appear militant. Expeditions to the abode of war appeared to take priority in relation to peaceful proselytisation. But Allah does not love aggressors, and permits fighting only in self-defense. “And fight in the way of God with those; who fight with you, but aggress not: God loves not the aggressors”⁸

Thus, eventually, there was retribution. A sequence of defeats followed the expansionary expeditions of the Muslim realm. These included the defeats of the Umayyads, (750), of the

⁷ Quran, 13: 11.

⁸ Quran, 2: 190, Transl. by Arberry, corpus.quran.com, accessed on 14 Aug. 2020; <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=2&verse=190>.

Abbasids, (1258) the defeat in Spain (1492), Vienna (1529 and 1683), Egypt (1798), and of the Ottoman Empire (1919).

Faith

Islam is the last of the three Abrahamic religions. It is based on the revelation – the Quran – revealed to prophet Muhammad in Arabic. While the first recipients of the revelation were Arabs, the message of revelation is for all mankind; it is presented as a teaching for all the worlds.

Revelation

Revelation comprises the teachings of Allah. The person who receives revelation and then relays it to people is known as a “prophet.” Revelation provides knowledge and sets boundaries on behaviour.

Allah raised prophets to teach us. Allah does not leave people in the dark – which He could – about who man is, where he is, where he is going, and what is expected of him.

Faith teaches us how to relate to God. It also teaches us how to relate to people. Justice is at the heart of acceptable behaviour. It is the key purpose of the law.

Tradition

Islam is also based on the traditions of the prophet Muhammad. When tradition was designated as revelation, Islam became “traditional,” i.e., based on tradition in addition to revelation. However, the tradition methodology did not save Islam from decline:

the traditional approach, in the manner it was presented and applied, did not prevent the Ummah from falling into a state of decline and failure, from which it is still suffering ... this is conducive to a wide-ranging question: Is the Ummah going through a serious intellectual crisis, and, if so, how can it find its way out?⁹

In the process of the amalgamation of tradition and revelation, tradition became pre-eminent to the point where it “eclipsed” that which brought it about in the first place, revelation. Restoring balance requires reinstating revelation to its rank of pre-eminence and tradition to its function as an “elaboration” rather than an exegete, judge and abrogator of revelation.

Ijtihad

Another root of the law is juristic reasoning. Juristic reasoning takes place in jurisprudence. Juristic reasoning suffered when the gates to ijtihad were shut and unquestioning following became widespread.

For the ummah, taqlid represents a blameworthy innovation (bid’ah) as well as a deviation from the straight path (*dalalah*). No researcher or scholar has ever found a valid text from either the Qur’an or the hadith, or even an argument based on pure reason, to support Islam’s approval of taqlid, for the very idea is alien to Islam’s view of humanity. The teachings

⁹ أد طه جابر العلواني Dr Taha Jabir al-Alwani, “The Crisis of Thought and Ijtihad,” *The Crisis of Thought and Ijtihad - The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* Vol.10, No.2 10, no. 2 (2005), https://www.academia.edu/44528250/The_Crisis_of_Thought_and_Ijtihad.

of Islam clearly state that all assertions must be supported by either verifiable evidence or proof ... If such conditions cannot be met the assertion is to be rejected.¹⁰

This was reinforced by the persecution of philosophers who were stereotyped as free-thinkers and accused of being apostates. This paralysed juristic reasoning and explains the relative backwardness of Muslim nations. The one declared an apostate was to have a death sentence declared over one.

Ijma

Additional information about Islam is derived from the consensus of jurists (ijma) and the contributions of individual jurists in the form of juristic reasoning or ijtihad. Another source of knowledge about Islam is the consensus of jurists. However, the truth is not always with the majority, which is also a problem in democracy

Reason

Reason is the ability to attain, retain and apply knowledge. Reason is a faculty of knowledge. Knowledge is the awareness of truth. No knowledge is attained without the use of reason.

Reason is the instrument humans use to understand, distinguish and compare insights, and it is the means of carrying out responsibilities in the seen world ... It is reason which distinguishes between true wahy and false, between misleading lies, fabrications, and myths. Likewise, it is reason which enables humans to choose and face the consequences of the choices they make¹¹.

Reason is equated with 'aql, or the mind. The slight regard for reason is reflected in the paucity of prophetic traditions about 'aql. It was also evident in the treatment of reason by academic persons.

However, the disregard of reason produced unwelcome long-term effects. For it produced the alleged "clash between reason and revelation." The endorsement of this epistemological partition retarded the evolution of technology in the Muslim world.

The opposition of the Muslim orthodoxy to rational and empirical sciences, in the end created a seemingly unbridgeable gap between the so-called 'religious sciences' derived from the 'signs' of the Qur'an ('al-ayat al-Qur'aniyyah') on the one hand, and 'non-religious sciences' derived from the 'signs of being' (al-ayat al-kawniyyah) on the other ... This dichotomy of sciences is undoubtedly also responsible for the backwardness of science and technology in the Muslim world.¹²

The bias against reason was evident early. The repression of reason began early and in earnest in the past. During the reign of Musa al-Hadi, in 786, thousands of philosophers were put to death.

Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti [Egyptian scholar, 1445-1505] tells that the Caliph [Musa] al-Hadi [reigned 785-786] put to death in Baghdad 5,000 philosophers in

¹⁰ Taha J. al 'Alwani, "Taqlid and the Stagnation of the Muslim Mind," *American Journal of Islam and Society* 8, no. 3 (December 1, 1991): 513-24, <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v8i3.2610>.

¹¹ AbdulHamid A. AbuSulayman, *Crisis in the Muslim Mind*, trans. Yusuf Talal DeLorenzo, 1st edition (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1993).

¹² Azyumardi Azra, "Education and Literacy in the Muslim World: Paths to the Future," *International Forum on "The Makkah Declaration: Implementing Economic Agenda of the Muslim World,"* (pp. 4-5), organized by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia at Hotel Nikko, Kuala Lumpur 1-3 September 2007: www.isis.org.my/html/events/event_makkahdeclaration.htm.

order to destroy sciences in the Muslim countries down to their roots. Admitting that this historian exaggerated the number of victims, it remains nonetheless established that this persecution took place, and it is a bloody stain for the history of a religion, as it is for a history of a people.^{13 14}

After the passing of the “golden age,” there was a relapse into anti-rationalism. The bias against reason was reiterated by the prohibition of reasoning, entailed by the shutting of the gates to *ijtihād* and in the adoption of the unquestioning following of tradition, even against reason. This had unwelcome effects:

For the *ummah*, *taqlid* represents a blameworthy innovation (*bid'ah*) as well as a deviation from the straight path (*dalalah*). No researcher or scholar has ever found a valid text from either the Qur'an or the *hadith*, or even an argument based on pure reason, to support Islam's approval of *taqlid*, for the very idea is alien to Islam's view of humanity. The teachings of Islam clearly state that all assertions must be supported by either verifiable evidence or proof ... If such conditions cannot be met the assertion is to be rejected¹⁵.

Hence among the challenges facing Muslims is the need to overcome the culture of unquestioning following of jurists. “It is unfortunate that in the teaching processes in Islamic education in general, rote learning tends to continuously dominate, not only in social sciences and humanities, but also in science teaching...”¹⁶

Muslims still see knowledge as something to be memorized: “the attitude of mind is passive and receptive rather than creative and inquisitive... all knowledge comes to be viewed as unchangeable and all books tend to be memorised or even venerated.” For this reason, “it is now necessary to introduce new methods of teaching in all levels of Islamic education ... there are many subjects that need analytical and critical thinking...”

Unwarranted Accretions

When tradition fails to preserve revelation in an uncorrupted form, confusion results. Accordingly, tradition has to be re-examined and freed of unwarranted accretions.

Unwarranted accretions encompass perceptions that run against the teaching of revelation. They comprise the assumption that revelation is “ambiguous,” that “tradition is revelation,” and that tradition “judges” and even “abrogates” revelation.

For example, the assertion that the *ayah as-sayf* abrogated a hundred and twenty peace verses attributed to Islam an aura of bellicosity which is at variance with Islam as a religion of peace. Endorsement of a bellicose perspective:

is found in those *hadith* reports attributed to the Prophet in which he defines the greater *jihad* (*al-jihad al-akbar*) as a moral and spiritual striving, an internal *jihad*

¹³ Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani “Response to Renan,” in *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940: A Sourcebook*, edited by Charles Kurzman, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 107- 110, p. 110.

¹⁴ Monica M Ringer and A Holly Shissler, “The Al-Afghani-Renan Debate, Reconsidered,” n.d., 18.

¹⁵ al 'Alwani, “*Taqlid and the Stagnation of the Muslim Mind.*”

¹⁶ Azyumardi Azra, “Education and Literacy in the Muslim World: Paths to the Future,” *International Forum on “The Makkah Declaration: Implementing Economic Agenda of the Muslim World,”* (pp. 4-5), organized by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia at Hotel Nikko, Kuala Lumpur 1-3 September 2007; www.isis.org.my/html/events/event_makkahdeclaration.htm.

in which one combats the moral vices and evil tendencies present within one's soul. In contrast other scholars, basing their conclusions on a different set of hadiths, proclaim that an offensive jihad (jihad al-talab) launched to extend the abode of Islam is valid on religious grounds and, moreover, that it is a collective responsibility (fard kifayah) devolving upon all Muslims. If it remains unfulfilled, all of them would be guilty of violating a divine injunction. Undertaking this religious obligation is mandated at least once every year and cannot be neglected, as its importance is equal to observing the obligatory prayers, the Ramadan fast, pilgrimage, and giving alms. This suggests that it is incumbent upon every adult male.¹⁷

Expunging these aberrations from exegesis should assist in bringing rulings of jurisprudence into harmony with revelation. This should assist renewal, as various misperceptions about Islam have arisen from a mis-rendering of its teaching.

Paralysis of Jurisprudence

Jurisprudence is the process of arriving at laws. Laws about murder, theft, adultery and slander are already prescribed in revelation. To produce reliable results, jurisprudence must be based upon firm foundations and employ reliable procedures.

That not all is well in Islamic jurisprudence is evident from the fact that little progress is taking place. While there are requests for better approaches, taqlid remains pervasive.

We hear the shout from every corner that we must have a new ijihad. This has been the refrain of every academic and even political or economic gathering for the past century and half. Yet, all that came of it are a few trimmings at the edges based on eclectic procedure (talfiq), involving jettisoning ideas of different schools (which are not necessarily derived through the same system of evidence) and then presented as new ijihad. It is indeed strange that the views of past scholars have acquired such authority in themselves. The degree of trust and reverence accorded to a fatwa depends on how far back in history its author lived.¹⁸¹⁹

Problems were compounded by the presence of unwarranted accretions. As a result, jurisprudence arrived at erroneous results. The death penalty for adultery provides an example. The death penalty for apostasy provides an additional example.

For neither of these is prescribed in revelation; both are inferred from "traditions." The inclusion of these penalties in penal law reveals tacit endorsement of the perception that tradition is able to abrogate revelation. This is problematic, however, because the abrogation of revelation by tradition amounts to the abrogation of the words of God by the words of men.

¹⁷ Hamid Mavani, "Tension between the Quran and the Hadith: The Case of Offensive Jihad," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*, Autumn 2011 · Vol. IV · No. 4, p. 398, accessed on 30 May 2018; <https://serdargunes.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/mavani-tension-between-the-qur_an-and-the-hadith-case-of-offensive-jihad.pdf>

¹⁸ Badawi, M.A. Zaki "Islamic Studies in British Universities: Challenges and Prospects," in *Islamic Studies in World Institutions of Higher Learning*, Islamic University College of Malaysia, 2004, p. 11.

¹⁹ Shahin Rahman, "Rethinking Education: A Case for Tarbiyah in Contemporary Britain," *Nazhrun: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 3, no. 3 (2020): 444–55, <https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v3i3.1129>.

All assumptions in jurisprudence require being in agreement with revelation. If any assumption departs from revelation, the results of the process based upon that assumption will be flawed. Among the reasons not much progress has been made was the approach:

We are all aware that we have not moved forward in any perceptible way. The reason can be attributed in large measure to the fact that the approach is wrong. Ijtihad in sharia should start dealing with the furu' of fiqh; it should begin by looking at the principles of jurisprudence *usul al-fiqh*. This discipline provides the way to follow to arrive at the *hukum* or *fatwa* or judgment. For as long as we use the same road map as our ancestors, we are bound to arrive at the same destination. In other words, we remained standing still. The way forward is to examine *usul al-fiqh* itself. It is not ordained; it is not sacred. These are rules formulated by past scholars based on their observation and innovation, like Aristotle's Logic and Sibawaih grammar. Al Shafi discovered the rules of deriving *ahkam*. His contribution was enlarged and built upon. It served us for centuries but now we need new developments in the methodology of fiqh. We will not advance an inch without reexamining these rules.²⁰

A suitable way to begin examining fiqh is to contrast its rules and procedures with the teaching of revelation. If discrepancies emerge, the rules and procedures require being amendment to agree with revelation.

Revelation is "Unclear"

An assumption or procedure of exegesis becomes problematic if it departs from revelation. Problematic perceptions encompass the designation of revelation as being "unclear," that tradition is revelation, and that "tradition judges revelation." These assumptions had far-reaching effects.

The perception that revelation is "unclear" paved the way for its explanation by tradition. The expectation that tradition would explain revelation required the elevation of tradition to revelation. The perception that tradition judges revelation facilitated the adoption of the theory of abrogation.

To characterise revelation as featuring "unclear" passages, however, is to express doubts about revelation. It is to be recalled that revelation refers to itself not just as a "clear" book but also as a book about which "there is no doubt."²¹

The application of the teaching of abrogation resulted in an alteration of the teaching of revelation, in a warping of its teaching. The abrogation of the peace verses heralded the transformation of Islam into "political Islam."

With the abrogation of a hundred and twenty peace verses, buttressed by the proliferation of bellicose reports, revelation began to project an aura of bellicosity.

Another problem is that the teaching of abrogation requires us to refrain from believing in the allegedly abrogated parts of revelation. Yet revelation exhorts us to believe in all of its verses.

²⁰ Badawi, M.A. Zaki "Islamic Studies in British Universities: Challenges and Prospects," in *Islamic Studies in World Institutions of Higher Learning*, Islamic University College of Malaysia, 2004, pp. 11-12.

²¹ Quran, 2: 2, and 32: 2.

Remaining a Muslim thus requires us to believe in all of the Quran. This should not be too difficult, as revelation is perfect. What is more, God warned against believing in parts of revelation and rejecting others:

... So do you believe in part of the Scripture and disbelieve in part? ²²

The allegedly abrogated parts of revelation were in a few cases replaced by weak traditions. This practice tainted the knowledge of revelation. We have been warned not to replace the teaching of Allah by different teachings.

وَإِذَا تَتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتُنَا بَيِّنَاتٍ قَالَ الَّذِينَ لَا يَرْجُونَ لِقَاءَنَا إِنَّكَ بِقُرْآنٍ غَيْرِ هَذَا أَوْ بَدَّلَهُ أَفَلَا يَكُونُ لِي أَنْ أَبَدِّلَهُ مِنْ تَلَقَّاءٍ نَفْسِي إِنْ أَتَّبِعُ إِلَّا مَا يُوحَىٰ إِلَيَّ إِنِّي أَخَافُ إِنْ عَصَيْتُ رَبِّي عَذَابَ يَوْمٍ عَظِيمٍ

When Our clear revelations are recited to them, those who do not expect to meet with Us say, 'Bring [us] a different Quran, or change it.' [Prophet], say, 'It is not for me to change it of my own accord; I only follow what is revealed to me, for I fear the torment of an awesome Day, if I were to disobey my Lord.' ²³

Moreover, no one can change the words of Allah. This is stated in the Quran:

"They shall have good news in this world's life and in the hereafter; there is no changing the words of Allah; that is the mighty achievement".

And the word of your Lord has been accomplished truly and justly; there is none who can change His words, and He is the Hearing, the Knowing.

And recite what has been revealed to you of the Book of your Lord, there is none who can alter His words; and you shall not find any refuge besides Him. ²⁴

Accordingly, altering the teaching of the Quran by the application of the theory of abrogation requires rethinking. For contradicting revelation is a grave matter. When revelation says it is perspicuous, we should accept it.

But a few exegetes assert that revelation features ambiguous passages. This appears to be due to the atrophy of reasoning skills resulting from the alleged shutting of the gates to ijtihad and the entrenchment of taqlid.

The assertion that revelation features "unclear" passages is unfounded. Regrettably, this mischaracterisation of revelation triggered a sequence of events whose end result was a tainting of knowledge, a warping of Muslim law, and the fading of the Muslim empire.

Tradition Is Revelation

The assertion that revelation features ambiguous passages suggests that revelation requires an explanation. As the traditionists prevailed against the rationalists, the task of explanation went to tradition.

²² Quran, 2: 85, Sahih International, accessed on 18 July 2020; <https://quran.com/2/85-95?translations=20>

²³ Quran, 10: 15, Transl. by Abdel Haleem, *Islam Awakened*, accessed on 13 Aug. 2020; <https://www.islamawakened.com/quran/10/15/default.htm>

²⁴ Quran, 10: 64, 6:115, and 18:27, *Islam Awakened*, Transl. by Muhammad Habib Shakir, accessed online on 5 July 2020, <https://www.islamawakened.com/quran/10/64/default.htm>.

But as long as tradition was treated as different from revelation, it could not be used to explain revelation. For verses 5: 44, 45 and 47, prohibits judging by what Allah s.w.t did not reveal. In response to this requirement, exegetes elevated traditions to the rank of revelation. In this way folklore became revelation.

This had far-reaching effects. Revelation acquired a partner: tradition. This “partnership,” however, presents a threat to tawhid. For it appears to suggest that tradition is an “addition” to revelation and just as “authoritative” as revelation. But revelation prohibits “adding” to the Quran.²⁵

Traditions Judge Revelation

After being accorded the rank of revelation, tradition was asked to “explain” revelation. The explanation of revelation by tradition was expressed in the perception that “tradition judges revelation.”

But a judge is above whatever or whoever he or she judges. In different words, asking tradition to explain revelation amounted to placing tradition above revelation.

This represented a reversal of the relationship between revelation and tradition. The reversal, however, is problematic. For it places the authority of tradition above that of revelation. Moreover, as jurists explain tradition, they become the greatest authority. As a commentator put it:

“While historically the Sunnah of the Prophet has controlled understanding of the Qur'an, religious scholars (ijma) have ruled over the Sunnah, representing the source of religious authority. In other words, historically in Sunni Islam, the consensus (ijma) of the past is authoritative and overrules everything.”²⁶

In this way, relationship between tradition and revelation was reversed. Moreover, it appears that the relationship between ijma (agreement) and revelation was reversed as well.

The reversal of the relationship between tradition and revelation was a break from the traditional ranking of the roots of the law. For in the traditional ranking, revelation has the uppermost position. But the reversal of the relationship of revelation and tradition placed revelation under the authority of tradition.

An additional problem with the perception that “tradition judges revelation” is that its position as a “judge” of revelation enabled tradition not just to explain but even to abrogate revelation.

Tradition Abrogates Revelation

By elevating tradition above revelation, jurists paved the way for the emergence of the theory of abrogation. This theory made it possible to tamper with revelation to an unprecedented extent.

The tampering resulted in an alteration of the teaching of revelation. With the alleged abrogation of the peace verses by the ayah as-sayf, Islam began to acquire an aura of bellicosity.

²⁵ Quran, 69: 44-47.

²⁶ John L. Esposito, *Rethinking Islam and Secularism* (Association of Religion Data Archives, 2011).

Jurisprudence was also affected by the application of the concept of abrogation. This is evident from the incorporation of the penalties for adultery and apostasy in Islamic law. Both were taken from tradition, rather than from revelation. Thus, the acceptance of these penalties represented a departure from revelation.

The abrogation of revelation by tradition subjugates the word of Allah to the word of man. Thus, the theory of abrogation appears to be an aberration. It requires being set aside, along with the presuppositions that facilitated its absorption into jurisprudence.

What Is Required

A few amendments are required. These encompass the recognition that the Quran is a “perspicuous” book, a desacralisation of tradition, and setting aside the perception that “tradition judges revelation.”

The theory of abrogation requires being put in abeyance – a juristic quarantine, as it were – while reason requires rehabilitation. Unwarranted accretions have to be purged, and the pre-eminence of revelation requires being affirmed.

The theory of abrogation has affected the knowledge of Islam. Therefore, it has to be set aside. Moreover, it played a part in the formulation of problematic expeditions in the past, based on the separation of the world into the realm of peace and the realm of war.

The allegation that 120 verses on the invitation to Islam were abrogated by the verse of the sword, is in fact one of crassest stupidity and only serves to show that the great number of Muslims are in a stage of regression of either knowledge or intelligence in our time, and have become ignorant of the Qur'an. As a result of this ignorance therefore, they have forgotten how to call to the way of God, how to facilitate the call to Islam, and how to be proper examples, and how to present a good perspective. Perhaps this is the reason for the failure in the propagation of Islam, and the prolonged stagnation of the Islamic message being effected (sic) – for it has been assumed that the sword is that which fulfills the obligation of delivering the message. Such a concept is, by the agreement of all those who are rational and discerning, totally absurd. This tale of abrogation then, or the notion of embalming of some verses, in that such verses are present but are inoperative, is a baseless one. There is no verse in the Qur'an which may be said to be out of commission, and is therefore now invalid; this is nonsense. ²⁷

That the theory of abrogation should be rejected was also supported by Muhammad Asad, Muhammad ‘Abduh, Rashid Rida and Abu Muslim Isfahani.

²⁷ Muhammad Ghazali, in Khaleel Mohammed, “Muhammad Al-Ghazali's View on Abrogation in the Qur'an,” accessed on 11 June, 2020;
http://www.forpeoplewhothink.org/Topics/Abrogation_in_the_Quran.html

Rehabilitation of Exegesis

Exegesis requires rehabilitation as it has been penetrated by unwarranted accretions. These accretions are unwarranted as they veer from, and even defy revelation. It appears that the relationship between revelation and tradition has to be revisited.

Revelation does not say that tradition is revelation. Neither does it say that tradition judges revelation or that tradition may abrogate revelation. In fact, revelation presents itself as *furqan*,²⁸ the criterion of judgment.

To say that tradition judges or abrogates revelation is to reverse the relationship between tradition and revelation. This is problematic as it appears to encroach upon revelation.

For to say that a person has to follow tradition even when tradition is “against reason” is itself unreasonable: it appears to require a renunciation of reasoning, whose protection is among the purposes of the shariah.

Hence, it is necessary to rehabilitate reasoning, too. For reason is indispensable in the acquisition of knowledge. It may be designated as a necessary, even if not a sufficient condition for the acquisition of the knowledge of revelation.

It assists in telling the difference between what is and what is not revelation, between what is and what is not tradition, and in understanding both. Reason is also required for the understanding of tradition, as well as in applying present-day knowledge. Without reason, life would be impossible. Hence, it is essential to redress biases against reason and rationality.

The Ummah must understand that *ijtihād* provides it with the fundamental means to recover its identity and reestablish its place in world civilization. Without *ijtihād* the Muslim mind will never rise to the levels envisioned for it by Islam, and the Ummah will not take its rightful place in the world. Unless the call to *ijtihād* becomes a widespread intellectual trend, there is little hope that the Ummah will make any useful contribution to world civilization or correct its direction, build its own culture or reform its society. To liberate the Muslim mind, the Ummah needs *ijtihād* in every aspect of its life. If it is to play its preordained role, it must undertake a new reading of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, study its past, analyze its present and, by means of these, ensure its future.²⁹

In different words, a “better reading” of revelation is required. Unwarranted assumptions require being discarded.

Retrieval of Revelation

The rehabilitation of exegesis requires rejecting the perception that revelation features “ambiguous” verses. Exegetes should adopt the view that revelation is “perspicuous.” For to attribute ambiguity to revelation is to attribute ambiguity to its Author. Exegesis requires retaining the pre-eminence of revelation in relation to all tradition.

Exegesis also has to set the theory of abrogation aside. For it has led to tampering with revelation. It should be rejected also on account of the warping it produced in Islamic law.

²⁸ Quran, 2: 185.

²⁹ Taha Jabir al-Alwani, “The Crisis of Thought and Ijtihad,” in *Issues in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, pp. 65-67, Compiled from the American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences, IIIT, 2005, p. 67, accessed on 14 Aug. 2020;

https://iiit.org/wp-content/uploads/IssuesinContemporarIslamicThought_Combined.pdf

Revelation does not endorse the perception that it features abstruseness, that tradition is better than reason to explain revelation, or that tradition³⁰ “judges” or endorses the theory of abrogation. Hence, these assumptions require being set aside.

A renewal has to take place in exegesis based upon the view that – as stated in revelation – the latter is perspicuous and that there are no passages that cannot be reconciled with different passages. Revealed passages should first be reconciled or explained by an appeal to reason rather than tradition. For even appeals to tradition require reasoning.

Implementing these suggestions requires a reconstruction of exegesis. An appeal to reason must take priority in relation to appeals to tradition. Traditions that are at variance with revelation require being set aside. In effect interpretation requires being placed upon firm foundations.

Rethinking Tradition

Tradition requires purification. For over time, various accretions tend to be “equated with the Sunnah of the Prophet [thus being] given an unwarranted, elevated religious status.”³¹ As another writer remarked:

The Indonesian reformer Nurcholish Madjid has referred to this phenomenon as the “sacralization” of tradition in Islam and called for a “de-sacralization” of tradition. However, he does not reject the importance of tradition but the notion of a fixed, static tradition, arguing that tradition and consensus or *ijma* are ongoing and cumulative ...³²

But Allah prohibited ascribing sacredness to anything but Himself. As veneration of tradition raises the prospect of polytheism, it is wise to practice:

periodic efforts of renewal (*tajdid*) or restoration of the authentic and original spirit, purpose or authoritative sources of the Islamic religious sciences in order to get rid of unwarranted accretions, misguided innovations/and ineffective or counter-productive teaching methods, the accumulation of unhealthy traditions which came to be regarded as sacrosanct or orthodox.³³

These efforts have to be carried out on a regular basis. It is important to remain vigilant against the absorption of unwarranted additions in the guise of tradition. It has to be emphasised that tradition is derivative and not an “independent” root of Islam.

Pre-eminence of Revelation

The pre-eminence of revelation in relation to tradition also requires being affirmed. In this way, jurisprudence may be rehabilitated, and the affairs of the Muslim ummah be put back on track. Moreover:

the Qur’an must be returned to its rightful place as the supreme arbiter of the authenticity of hadith. The tendency in classical scholarship had been just the reverse: the sunna was viewed as a commentary on the revelation, infallible in its own right, and not subject to abrogation by the Qur’an.³⁴

³⁰ The difficulty in using reason stems in part from the denigration of rationality by the partisans of tradition.

³¹ John L. Esposito, *Women in Muslim Family Law: Second Edition* (Syracuse University Press, 2001).

³² Esposito, *Rethinking Islam and Secularism*.

³³ Mohd Kamal Hassan, “The Integration of Human Sciences and Revealed Knowledge in the KIRKHS” (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2009), 111–24, <http://rms.research.iium.edu.my/bookstore/Default.aspx>.

³⁴ Daniel W. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

In different words, it is necessary to affirm unequivocally the pre-eminence of the Quran in relation to tradition, and in that way to prevent further confusion.

Conclusions

Exegesis requires firm foundations. It is evident that exegesis took a wrong turn when reason was downgraded, when exegetes asserted that the Quran features ambiguous verses, and when they mis-rendered the term *mutashabihat* as “unclear” rather than “metaphorical.”

The rehabilitation of exegesis requires an affirmation that revelation is perspicuous. It also requires a desacralisation of tradition and discarding the problematic perception that tradition “judges” or “abrogates” revelation.

These perceptions are unwarranted. They flout revelation. Assumptions that depart from revelation have to be replaced by assumptions that agree with revelation. When unwarranted assumptions are set aside, renewal should resume better than before. With these amendments, exegesis should return to the right track.

For the time being, Muslims remain trapped in “tradition.” They follow the path of persons who equate piety with unquestioning following of traditions, with no use for thought, and who perceive people that reflect with apprehension. To go forward, it is necessary to entrust the exposition of revelation to persons with knowledge rather than to unquestioning followers of traditions

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