THE IDEA OF TRADITION
IN THE LATE MODERN WORLD

An Ecumenical and Interreligious Conversation

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oral and spiritual attitude to a tradition's formal expressions, then, is not simple clinging to what has been received but also a relinquishing—even, times, of things that had once seemed most precious: Gelassenheit, to use eister Eckhart's language, release. Only thus can one receive tradition as liberating counter-history, as the apocalyptic exception to bare history at promises us a higher truth than death: by remembering a first interruption, awaiting a last interruption, and attempting to sustain the theme siting them in the interval. Only thus can one find the meaninglessness bare history converted into a completed tale of vocation and judgment, a call heard from far away that nevertheless summons one to a promised meldand. Perhaps, of course, the entire tale is an illusion at the end of the y, a fable we have told ourselves to carry us through the dark places of is world. Conversely, though, perhaps tradition comes to us instead as entirely gracious invasion of history, shattering the walls of our prison: gift awakening us (if we will listen) to the knowledge that the kenoma of re history is not our true home, and that our true story comes from—and ust finally be told—elsewhere.

Disruptions and Connections
Rediscovering and Remaking the Muslim Tradition in Late Modernity

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Practitioners and students of religion recognize that contemporary religious practices and beliefs were once part of a different world. But the past and the present always have a complex relationship with one another. This is what makes the study of tradition and its transmission interesting. Aspects of a tradition might be continuous with the past, discontinuous with it, or part of a complex set of overlapping cosmologies representing both past and present. Tradition, furthermore, is always shaped by particular economic and political milieus with their own arts, literatures, histories, liturgies, and moral practices—all of which are tied to a particular conception of being-in-the-world. With the devout of other traditions, Muslims usually have commitments to long-observed practices and outlooks, even if they might struggle with some aspects of their tradition. Some might sently wonder if some of these practices still apply today and whether or not selected ones are mutable. Others are inclined to accept dutifully what has
been handed down, while still others might vocally challenge past practices and advocate reforms.

Thinking about tradition can raise difficult questions. If tradition is mutable, then what are the limits of alteration and remaking it? If it is unchangeable, then why and how does one engage with it when it appears anachronistic? These are age-old questions, but periodically, they come to us in new forms.

In the cultural climate of late modernity, such questions have become acute for Muslims. Forces of globalization, which have spread Western intellectual and religious currents of thought to the Islamic world, have often led to intense discussions among Muslims about the state, future, and present-day applicability of their traditions. Internece divisions have arisen among Muslims, pitting adherents of different sub-traditions against one another. Perhaps the most transformative encounter leading to our current moment took place when multiple Muslim societies came under the political control and intellectual sway of modern European colonial powers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This essay explores aspects of this encounter, especially its intellectual implications for contemporary Muslim thought and practice. But first, we will consider the meaning of tradition more probingly, drawing from past commentary and reckoning with three contemporary thinkers: Aziz al-Azmeh and Fahmi Jad'ān (whom I engage constructively) and the late Saba Mahmood (whom I criticize). Toward the end of the chapter, we will turn to the thought of Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406), a particularly valuable conversation partner, I shall contend, for Muslims today who desire to think incisively and imaginatively about the question of tradition. Along the way, I think one will observe how debates over tradition among Muslims today resemble disputes that have taken place within Judaism and Christianity in the recent past.

**TRADITION: TAKING A CLOSER LOOK**

Tradition is an abstract concept in Arabic-Islamic thought and it is often deployed in confusing ways. Its meanings range from the "past" in general, to "religious doctrines," to "Islam in its totality." Many people speak freely about "traditional perspectives." These perspectives bring with them value judgments and they generate particular social and political practices and commitments; sometimes they might even "devalue" the past or create a

"rupture" with it, albeit in the name of tradition. Further, tradition might stand more prosaically for customary institutions, actions, ideas, and written and oral texts from the past, which are accepted as normative for a given community.¹

Particular words matter and they can be difficult to translate. In debates concerning tradition in an Arabic/Muslim context, one sometimes encounters "legacy" (turāth), "canonical tradition in law or normativity" (madhhab), or "that which is 'given' or provided in a path" (šar' or shar'iyāt), among other vocabularies. Their use and the context in which they are used can spark debates about the meaning of traditions.²

In recent decades, discussions among Muslims about tradition have often found food for thought in the Western academy. Particular noteworthy are the reflections on tradition offered by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. His ideas, in turn, have shaped conversations among social scientists and anthropologists, notably Talal Asad, who study Muslim societies "on the ground" and not just Muslims’ learned traditions. Such anthropological and sociological studies have invigorated debates about tradition in interesting ways.³

To reflect on tradition more intently, let’s turn briefly to the extraordinary medieval figure, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111). In a memorable passage, he reminds us about two sources of learning and thinking that are indispensable to each other: reason or intellect (‘aql) and that which is learned through auditory means, literally "heard" (samā'), or what is sometimes called the transmitted tradition. "The intellect," he writes, "cannot dispense with instruction transmitted by hearing nor can instruction transmitted by hearing dispense with the intellect."⁴ Transmission by hearing and audition has a simple formulation in Arabic—the word samā'—but it contains an entire universe of meaning. Ideas, teachings, habits, practices were transmitted intergenerationally for centuries by means of the spoken and heard word, in short reenacting what is heard, observed, and

1. I want to thank Thomas Albert Howard for his careful edits and suggestions in this chapter. I thank Mahmoud Youness for the research support provided for this chapter.

2. See Kendall and Khan, Reclaiming Islamic Tradition. For an excellent and close study of how scholars engage tradition see Haj, Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition; Jad’ān, Naṣariyat al-turāth wa-dirāsāt 'Arabiyya wa-Islāmiyya ukhra.

3. See, for example, Asad, “Thinking about Tradition.”

understood. That hearing component, the ear, then often functions as a
synecdoche for what is called tradition in Islam. In one constellation
of words—listening and recitation—an entire civilization of hearing and
performance is portrayed. One outcome is the role of orality in Arabicate
cultures, namely, the need for “direct control of learning by the agencies
and institutions of learning” and to prevent “the unmediated access to
sources.” Only centuries later, with the advent of written culture, was the
oral tradition transformed into one of notation and documentation. But
even then, “hearing” had an abidingly important place in Muslim tradition:
the written word did not displace but rather even sought to simulate older
oral practices in a new medium.

Another category embedded in the learned traditions of Islam is the
idea of a lived community practice, known as the sunna. Containing both
good and bad elements, this in fact preceded Islam. With the advent of
Islam, this lived practice gradually became consecrated as the exemplary
practice of the Prophet Muhammad and often turned out to be an im-
portant source of Islamic teaching. Yet the concept of tradition continued
to grow in Muslim history as other forms of passing down critical learning
and practices were cultivated over time. Multiple specialized fields de-
veloped—law, theology, literature, and history, among others. These shaped
and added variety to the tradition. In many respects, tradition became
synonymous with so-called “reports” from these fields. The authenticity of
reports, secured through a chain of narrators (isnad, pl. asanid), became at
once theaters for the transmission of tradition and the tradition itself.

The Syrian-born scholar Aziz al-Azmeh, perhaps more than anyone,
haves raised critical questions about understandings of tradition in Arab-
Islamic societies, which owes their origins to the seventh century and to
later developments in Arabicate and Persianate cultures. Tradition is reg-
ularly secured through pedagogic techniques, which hallow the origins of
the tradition as incontrovertible—what Azmeh calls “apodictic.” Based on
hierarchy, companionship, and apprenticeship, these apodictic techniques
lead to a partial mystification of pedagogic authority and a veneration of
the learned fields and disciplines of the tradition. Teachers and authors
themselves are not the sources of authority, but over time, they come to
serve as the revered mouthpieces of a complex “epistemic and legislative
oracle,” as Azmeh puts it. Although the origins of disciplines are taken to
be beyond doubt, anchored in a mythical Urtext, Azmeh nonetheless raises
sharp questions—questions often occluded by the cumulative weight of the
tradition. After problematizing the sources of tradition, Azmeh acknow-
edges that traditions of learning are nonetheless effectively transmitted due
to the aforementioned techniques of pedagogy, which induce in the student
a skill-creating process of training (habitus/malaka). But even if these
methods are effective, Azmeh worries that they often bring about the “clo-
sure” of each discipline and science; students only hallow them and they
are not taught how to creatively engage with them. “Closure of sciences,”
writes Azmeh, “is realized . . . by its faithful transmission . . . with the af-
firmation of a tradition by means of its constant redaction and as present
in the institution through which learning is borne.”

Put differently, the authority of tradition is not historically preserved but rather ritually pre-
erved through processes of education and initiation. In order to allow for
historical transmission, Azmeh believes that one must recognize that “it is
always the present which constitutes the past after its own image” or that
the past is best and most faithfully preserved in terms of the requirements
and imperatives of the present. Absent such a recognition, Azmeh feels that
the past will only be beheld and not employed, thus turning the present into
the passive recipient of the past, not a dynamic participant in the making
of tradition. Commenting more generally on the Islamic past as tradition,
Azmeh writes: “It is not the past, ‘tradition,’ that lives in the present, but
it is rather the present which claims that past, and this has never been
done except very selectively, ever renewing it, but always attributing this
reclamation and renewal to the past itself, and undertaking it in the name
of the past. . . . The integrity of tradition is a myth of origin articulated in
many forms, as logical or exemplary apodicticity, as positive origins; it is a
myth which unifies a culture by provision of a uniform sphere of reference
in terms of which, by means of education, paradigms are differentiated.”

These are of course complex matters, and Azmeh’s prose is sometimes
more suggestive than precise. Whatever the case, the idea of tradition has

5. Al-Azmeh, Arabic Thought and Islamic Societies, 234.
8. Al-Azmeh, Arabic Thought and Islamic Societies, 228–38.
9. Al-Azmeh, Arabic Thought and Islamic Societies, 229.
10. Al-Azmeh, Arabic Thought and Islamic Societies, 229.
11. Al-Azmeh, Arabic Thought and Islamic Societies, 233.
12. Al-Azmeh, Arabic Thought and Islamic Societies, 237.
13. Al-Azmeh, Arabic Thought and Islamic Societies, 237.
been widely debated in modern times as Muslim communities have sought to carve out identities and futures for themselves in a post-colonial world greatly influenced by the West. In this regard, we will turn to another contemporary scholar, Fahmi Jad’ân, a Jordan-based Palestinian historian of Islamic philosophy, who sees tradition as essentially constituted by “human accomplishments”; it is the product of human endeavor and creativity.\textsuperscript{14}

In making this claim, Jad’ân makes a distinction between theology and metaphysics on the one hand and the human understanding and approximation of them on the other. Yes, knowledge of the Qur’an as Scripture and knowledge about the teachings of the prophet Muhammad are the bedrock of much Muslim thought and practice. But the actual teachings of the sacred are not in themselves identical with tradition. The sacred is always filtered through human approximation and the creation and development of a variety of discursive practices. Jad’ân is among the few scholars who, along with Azmeh, makes such a clear distinction between the two. But in doing so, he has helped distinguish between the sacred itself and the many-faceted, human-created discursive traditions that have sought to interpret it and realize it over time.

Jad’ân emphasizes that tradition understood as heritage, turâth, is a double-edged sword. Together with the many positive aspects of tradition also come the problematic aspects: “authority, monarchy, and sacrality,” i.e., the coercive dimensions of tradition.\textsuperscript{15} Arab-Islamic tradition, in Jad’ân’s view, is tethered to three crucial relationships: a relationship with religion, with Arabness or Arab nationalism, and with humanism.\textsuperscript{16} We might also think of these as different pillars or strands. The role of Islam as a religio-civilizational force is undeniable, but debates continually arise between those who give Islam and its accomplishments a significant but limited role in the formation of the Arab-Islamic tradition and those who see Islam as virtually tantamount to the tradition itself. The latter camp over-sacralizes the tradition, and this enchantment or “sacrality” (qadâsa), argues Jad’ân, has at times haunted the Islamic tradition. Arab nationalism, too, has a stake in the Islamic heritage, since the Arabs, beginning in the seventh century and in locations of present-day Saudi Arabia, played such a crucial role in shaping the consciousness of the people who identified with Islam. But neither religious commitment nor national/ethnic identity exhaust the

\textbf{Disruptions and Connections}

Arab-Islamic tradition. Arabic people and their faith have contributed to the broader story of humanity. Put differently, the Arabic heritage is not for Arabs alone but a tradition for all of humanity to learn from, to grapple with. This is what Jad’ân means by humanism, and along with faith and ethnicity, it is a third “relation” or pillar of Islamic civilization in his interpretation.\textsuperscript{17}

Tradition is not something abstract for Jad’ân. It is always dynamic in its “embodied this-ness”; that is, it has “political” significance, and as a consequence, it is “social” and can be “ideological.”\textsuperscript{18} Jad’ân points out that when tradition comes under the purview of ideology, it usually takes one of three forms: people either become (1) hidebound literalists (salafiyûn taqâlidîyûn), attempting to realize the sacred apart and separate from discursive reasoning and reflection; they become (2) revolutionaries without a sense of the absolute that can relativize and constrain their own endeavors; or they become (3) selective and eclectic constructivists, accepting this and rejecting that aspect of a tradition in the absence of clear epistemological agreement among all parties to a tradition. Each one of these positions reflect the exigencies and configurations of power arrangements in a given society, according to Jad’ân.

Additionally, one of two approaches in conversations about tradition are available to us, argues Jad’ân. One is to accept tradition as having a “natural place,” passively embracing and trying to understand it in its three relations: religion, Arabness, and humanism. The second approach commits one to what he calls “realist pragmatism.”\textsuperscript{19} Such pragmatism, which entails discrimination, helps one decide which elements of these relations ought to be retained in order to constitute a flourishing and functioning tradition. Often those elements that have withstood the test of time will define the final meaning of tradition.\textsuperscript{20} Jad’ân is wary of idealized conceptions of “reviving” or “drawing inspiration” from tradition. In his interpretation, these moves can easily become anachronistic and mechanistic—if not downright flawed and fruitless—modes of engagement with tradition. What is more, they can prevent one from constructively engaging with new cultural and civilization developments in the present. They often sacrifice nuance for artificial certainty. Nonetheless, tradition should also not be defined by grabbing whatever pleases us from the past and dressing it

\begin{itemize}
\item[] 14. Jad’ân, Naṣâriyât al-turâth, 14.
\item[] 15. Jad’ân, Naṣâriyât al-turâth, 13 (al-su’ûd, al-qasr, al-qadâsâ).
\item[] 16. Jad’ân, Naṣâriyât al-turâth, 14.
\item[] 17. Jad’ân, Naṣâriyât al-turâth, 14.
\item[] 18. Jad’ân, Naṣâriyât al-turâth, 14 (al-annî al-mushakhkhâṣ).
\item[] 19. “waqî‘îya ‘amaliyya.”
\item[] 20. Jad’ân, Naṣâriyât al-turâth, 15.
\end{itemize}
up to suit what fits well with our contemporary sentiments. In contrast to idealizing the past and over-accommodation to the present, Jad‘an believes that one should first pause and observe how a tradition has been lived out and is being lived out. Such an “experiential” approach to tradition works against investing it with fanciful, erroneous conceptions, even if it also has the potential to demystify the assumed “sacrality” attached to tradition. Experiential familiarity with a tradition, in other words, helps “ground” it in actuality and staves off overly sentimental or romanticized understandings of it.

Further, Jad‘an favors a creative engagement with tradition and, invoking a metaphor from biological chemistry, he proposes viewing tradition as an “organic or living compound,” one that grows and develops over time, that even “metabolizes.”

Such a biological paradigm finds sustenance from three sources: firstly, actual involvement in a lived tradition (as mentioned); secondly, a discriminating discursive mindset to reflect on the given realities surrounding the Muslim community; and thirdly, sacred sources or revelation. Of these three sources perhaps one and three come most naturally: drawing from revelation and involvement in an actual community of practitioners. But two is equally important. One must have the discursive ability, the perspicacity, to reflect on and evaluate what one is doing. This reflective or “psychological” aspect is critical because it gives the practitioner discerning acumen and a sensibility of past achievement, thus helping him or her deal with challenges, defeats, and setbacks. Additionally, beauty is required, for without aesthetics—literature, art, architecture, music, and the fine arts—tradition is impoverished. Beauty elevates us from isolation and small-mindedness, replenishing the spiritual resources of a person, community, and a people.

All literary and aesthetic elements must undergo a “figurative metabolism” just as all disciplines of knowledge are part of this metabolizing process as well. Taken together, these aspects of a tradition contain both practical and contemplative resources, which have historically sustained communities.

A living tradition, Jad‘an emphasizes, is not static: some aspects continue over time and are incorporated into the ongoing present while others wither away and drop out. For this reason, one must always exercise discretion, avoiding elements of a tradition that violate human dignity or detract from human flourishing. In making his proposals, Jad‘an is fully aware of the unequal and disproportionate power of the West in shaping knowledge about and reflection on tradition. And he concedes that some Muslims might dissent from his views. But the challenge to participate in the formation of an innovative and vital Muslim tradition remains as inviting as it is difficult, and one should neither walk away from the opportunity nor seek succor in too-simplistic solutions.

Modern Islam encounters the inherited or transmitted tradition in at least two discursive contexts. To politically secular and nationalist advocates among Muslim and Christian segments of Arabic-speaking societies, tradition presents itself as part of a sequence of renewals (tajdid) of tradition (turāth). Jad‘an aligns with this camp, but not if the idea of renewal is a surreptitious way of importing atavistic and regressive ideas as a stand-in for tradition. Others employ “renewal” in a more emphatically religious way. Given the semantic breadth behind “renewal,” the term has taken on a larger meaning over time, that of a civilizational renewal. But it also bears a more secular connotation in the modern period as indigenous cultural renewal against the foreign hegemony of Western powers. Renewal draws its strength from the religious vocabulary of Islam, particularly in regard to the prophecy of Muhammad that God would send a person every hundred years to renew dīn, too often translated uncritically as “religion” in modern times, but in fact meaning the idea of the good, the truly normative, the salvific order for society.

Politically secular Muslims have latched on to the idea of renewal as being synonymous with the revitalization of culture and sometimes they intend by renewal the “enlightenment” of Arab-Islamic civilization. Secular voices employ turāth, literally meaning that which “remained,” but when they do so they use it to signify the attainment of a cosmopolitan civilizational advancement. Such usage of the term might not be hostile to

25. See Ḥanafi, Al-Turāth wa-al-tajdid.
27. Al-Jābiri and Dowell, Arab-Islamic Philosophy.
The Idea of Tradition in the Late Modern World

religion, but it does not give religion an exclusive or decisive role in determining normative judgments and/or cultural values and sensibilities.

By contrast, in the religious circles of Arabic-speaking societies as well as in different parts of the non-Arabic speaking world where Muslim-majority societies and minority communities prevail, a different set of vocabularies and valences are deployed to grapple with quandaries posed by tradition and its renewal. In these circles, debates are usually most intense concerning what counts as Muslim ethics or what might be categorized as “Islamic law.” Debates over tradition usually pit those who permit human authority ab initio to initiate an interpretive framework (ijtihad) in order to discover norms for juridical and moral scholarship against those who oppose such efforts and who call for religiously-inspired normative scholarship to strictly adhere to the un molested authority (taqlid) of tradition. Polarized positions in this matter—especially in Sunni circles, but to a lesser extent in Shi‘a quarters—have often resulted in mutual antagonism and stalemate. Some conciliation has been arrived at once the assumptions and goals of various positions have been sufficiently examined. But many modernizing voices continue to regard taqlid, which they see as an appeal to authority without soliciting proof in support of their arguments, as the permanent adversary of their bid to perform ijtihad. Thus, one often encounters a relentless and unhelpful polarization, pitting taqlid against ijtihad, without any compromise or forward movement.

Yet a third trend is found in the literary realm of Arabic letters, both in the premodern and modern eras. A particularly relevant figure is the contemporary Syrian poet and literary critic Ali Ahmad Sa‘id (b. 1930), better known by his pen name Adûnis or Adonis. In his four-volume work The Permanent and the Changeable, he lays the blame for the lack of innovation and creativity in Arabic letters squarely on the notion of formality and hidebound conformity (taqlid).29 One of the more exciting developments spurred by Adonis and others is a return to the idea of adâb (plural, âdâb) as a “field of production” to invoke a formula associated with the French critic Pierre Bourdieu.30 Adâb is the term for literature but the same term can be used for ethics. Historically viewed, adâb suggests a field of normativity not strictly beholden to religiously-inspired normativity, found more in the realms of culture, civilization, and experience. This field was never understood to stand apart from religious influence—and a major figure such as

al-Ghazâlî employs it in a religious sense—but it did alternate between a certain autonomy from the religious field and at times even a dialectical relationship with this field. To rejuvenate the conversation about tradition in Islam today and search for premodern models, the notion of adâb is and will continue to be a vital resource provided the historical present is viewed as an active dimension in the making of tradition. Debates on the meaning, purpose, and relevance of tradition are ongoing. They produce both exciting and at times soul-searing predicaments for communities and individuals; they have resulted in both tragic elements of loss and creative moments of gain.

Disruptions and Connections

Tradition and the (Late) Modern Predicament

In contemporary Muslim discourse, the debate about tradition, to my mind, has received insufficient historical and theoretical scrutiny since passions and politics often preclude coherent conversation and considered judgment. For instance, in some Western scholarly circles, the Muslim engagement with Aristotelian thought is seen, and welcomed, as a novelty. Yet in Islamic history, Aristotle and Aristotelianism, as well as Platonism, were long considered fixtures in philosophy, theology, law, and literature. Even so, perhaps the return to Aristotle, especially after Alasdair MacIntyre’s strong appeal to this figure, is, for some, an appropriate response to modernity, since his thought offers a capacious space for inquiry and reflection relevant to multiple communities of discourse. But in my judgement, this remains insufficient. Recall the dilemma Jâ’dân points us to concerning the hegemony of Western liberalism and the challenges that this poses for the production of a creative and imaginative Muslim engagement with tradition in the present. Questions of power and competing ideologies around the world complicate Muslims’ efforts to engage tradition creatively and produces a climate best characterized by the Greek notion of agonism—perpetual struggle.

To illustrate what I mean, let’s focus on the anthropologist Saba Mahmood, who made significant contributions on gender, religion, and secularity before her untimely death in 2018. In an important essay, she offers an acute analysis of the foolhardy efforts of the US government and US-based think tanks to propose reforms for Islam.31 But her essay quickly

The Idea of Tradition in the Late Modern World

loses all nuance when she appears to suggest that there is collusion between US policy aims and what she deems as "liberal" currents of thought in the Muslim world. She argues that post-9/11 US policy toward the Islamic world is coterminous with the fruit of decades of work by leading secular and left-leaning literary scholars and philosophers of Islamic thought; she even names Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (d. 2010) and Hasan Hanafi from Egypt and the reformist intellectual Abdul Karim Soroush from Iran as unwitting collaborators with US policy. Bear in mind that these intellectuals sought to further the modern Arab renaissance (nahda) in the case of the two Egyptians or to voice dissent with post-revolutionary Iran in the case of Soroush. Mahmood astonishingly attempts to show that these intellectuals and their followers were unwittingly or unwittingly bedfellows of a nefarious US agenda to manufacture and export liberal Islam to the world. She made this claim despite the fact that all three scholars were critical of US policies before and after 9/11 and hardly self-identified as liberal!

Mahmood fails to show common threads between these Muslim intellectuals and the US government and other US actors (especially the secularism-touting and security-oriented Rand Corporation), yet she reaches the questionable conclusion that the two sides in fact share common political ends, namely, to remake Islam in the image of Western liberalism and secularism. Even worse, she seemed to suggest that reformers must also carry the burden of US imperial designs. As she put it, the "US strategists have struck a common chord with self-identified liberal Muslim reformers who have been trying to refashion Islam along the lines of the Protestant Reformation." No names of well-known figures with whom the US government have struck "a common chord" are mentioned in her essay, but these two Egyptians and Iranian are named and implicated in an apparent collusion.

What Mahmood omits saying is that the intellectual efforts, especially of Hanafi and Abū Zayd, began decades ago in left-inspired readings of traditional literary, philosophical, and theological resources. But for Mahmood, what counted was that after the 9/11 attacks, attempts were made to "reform Islam" by the US government and its allies. Her strategy was to rename critical Muslim intellectuals as "liberal" without any validation. By suggesting guilt by association, an entire archive of scholarship unrelated to these political designs now suddenly becomes tainted by being seen as in service to the American project. "The convergence," she writes, "of US imperial interests and the secular liberal Muslim agenda needs to be understood, therefore, not simply as a fortuitous coming together of political objectives and an indigenous social formation, but... from the standpoint of normative secularity and the kind of religious subjectivity it endorses." Again, Mahmood omits to tell her readers that varieties of liberal Islam have at least a century-old pedigree in the Muslim world, long pre-dating recent US foreign policy interests. One wonders how far back Mahmood would have pushed her argument and whom she would implicate in the roster of prosecutable actors for being part of this "convergence" of US "imperial interests" and a "secular liberal Muslim agenda."

She accuses Soroush for saying that revelation is "silent." Yet she shows no awareness that Soroush was merely channeling 'Ali b. Abū Tālib, the first leader after the Prophet Muhammad, an imām, in terms of Shi‘a theological claims and the fourth Sunni caliph. 'Ali is reported to have rebuked persons who used unfiltered Qur‘ānic passages as political slogans. The Qur‘ān, 'Ali remarkably said, was between two covers, and it is men who interpret it. Would Mahmood’s "convergence" of ideas also implicate the eleventh-century al-Ghazālī? The latter built on the readings of his teacher and formulated a utilitarian theory of the purposes of the Shari‘a, the normative rules of Islam. In doing so, Ghazālī initiated an entirely new outcome-based reading of Shari‘a that has gained great traction in modern times. In other words, to use one of Mahmood’s keywords, Ghazāli “resituated” enormous tracts of scholarship in formulating his argument and hermeneutic. The ill-advised nature of Mahmood’s prosecution is patent and cannot survive close scrutiny. But perhaps even more astonishing is that her harsh judgment on these scholars went largely unchallenged. To be fair, her essay contains a salutary critique of US-based agencies and of Western secularism, which often functions as ersatz-religion in her view. Yet these positive elements do not detract from the disservice that she does to critical Muslim thought by conflating it with US foreign policy and liberalism.

I particularly disagree with Mahmood for wading into hermeneutical complexities of the historical tradition of Islamic thought and for allowing over-confidence in her political convictions to run roughshod over circumspection. In doing so, she exploited a sensitive and contentious zone of intra-Muslim debate on questions of interpretation, authority, and the meaning of a religious tradition in modernity, in order to serve her political

ends, filled, as they are, with presentism and as an indulgence toward questionable ultra-orthodox Muslim practices that she condoned in a previous book, *Politics of Piety*, as almost the totality of authentic Islam.\(^{35}\)

Muslim orthodoxy of different stripes zealously guards and polices the boundaries of allowable interpretation. Its ammunition includes proclamations of heresy and excommunication; these are not simple admonitions but rather are meant to target and discredit thinkers such as Abū Zayd or Soroush. If Muslim orthodoxy's criticism stopped at the mere denouncement of rivals' views, that would be a mercy. But these denunciations are often accompanied by edict-like fatwas that encourage violence against those labeled reformers, critics, or freethinkers. Mahmood's unjustified association of critical Muslim thinkers with American imperialism only plays to the choir of these unsavory aspects of Muslim orthodoxy and its violent allies in various geographical theaters.

Mahmood's intervention distorts an accurate view of Islamic reform; where it required nuance, she offers a blanket attempt to discredit efforts at rethinking Muslim religious thought and tradition. In her view, reformers were attempting to "resitute" religious texts.\(^{36}\) And this amounted to an attempt to frame Islam within a despised modality of modern liberalism or, worse, within a hermeneutics of American empire; whether her targets intended to have a dalliance with American power was irrelevant.\(^{37}\) In her own words:

> What is notable here is that these liberal reformers do not abandon the religious text but resitute it. The question is, once metaphysical intention is separated from the text, how is this text to be read and what would its significance be for the secularized believer? The liberal reformers are resolute in their answer, as is the Rand Corporation report: the Quran should be read as a system of signs and symbols, whose meaning is to be deciphered in a manner not dissimilar to how we read literature or poetry—its meaning open to infinite play but also to historical determination. The notion of the transcendent, no longer locatable within the religious text, finds a place in the ineffable and privatized world of individual readers who turn not to traditional authority but to their own cultured sensibilities to experience the true meaning of the word.\(^{38}\)

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The Idea of Tradition in the Late Modern World

These other issues would include interpretations by a range of Muslim orthodox actors who condone slavery and other anachronistic practices. Or, for instance, take damage done to free speech and human rights by condemnations of blasphemy justified under Shari‘a governance. For critical traditionalist Muslims trying to live in a globalizing world by the lights of their faith and intellect, these issues present real dilemmas of conscience; they find themselves in a liminal space, sandwiched between powerful globalizing discourses of liberalism and secularism (both of which are not unfree from their own violence) on the one hand and cruelties done in the name of Muslim orthodoxies on the other.

But perhaps this liminal space is precisely where one ought to be in order to face the challenges and struggles of the future. The Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci fully understood that the intellect allowed for a certain kind of pessimism to set in when one ponders the enormity of any major undertaking. But Gramsci also grasped that the reach of the human will could overcome this pessimism. Hence, he turned the French novelist Romain Rolland’s maxim “pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will” into a guiding axiom for himself. Yet Gramsci also had little patience with indifference and hence he fostered a life of activism. Reform-minded Muslims might heed Gramsci’s words, embrace their liminality, and not remain on the sidelines.

Writing about tradition, Sherman A. Jackson engages the work of the Ghanaian scholar Kwame Gyekye and provides illuminating insights. Tradition is not only about preservation, notes Jackson, but also about the role that the receiving generation or the “custodial generation” must play. “Tradition,” Jackson writes, “is not the result of the simple act of transmission or handing down but of a process of evaluation, amplification, suppression, refinement, and assessing the polarity between would-be tradition and contemporary, indigenous innovations or nonindigenous ideas and practices.” He then adds: “As long as no essential elements are deemed to have been sacrificed in this process of reception, the result will be a tradition that while only a simulacrum of the original is vested with all the authority of having resulted from a direct act of handing down.”

Debates over tradition in Islam today can be enriched by looking at how Muslim thinkers in the past dealt with “thought-styles” and practices around similar debates. I borrow the notion of “thought-style” (Denkstil)

Disruptions and Connections

from the physician and scholar Ludwik Fleck (1896–1961), who examined how ideas emerge in complex scientific contexts, especially in the molecular field. Scientific facts, in his view, like any other facts (whether social or cultural), do not exist prior to an external world. But nor are they wholly determined features of the external world. Rather, scientific facts, like other modes of data, are “event[s] in the history of thought.” When people articulate those “events,” they deploy certain social-psychological dispositions and operations for successful expression. Giving attention to these composites of social and psychic operations both enable and constrain the expression of complex ideas in what, again, Fleck calls “thought styles.” In many ways, traditions, too, are “thought styles” writ large, each having its own unique social-psychological features from which one might learn. To introduce a helpful thought-style, permit me now to examine how a towering scholar and intellectual from the Muslim past dealt with questions concerning tradition—in this case, with respect to medicine and faith healing.

Ibn Khaldūn Examines Arguments from Tradition

Few writers can be as thought-provoking as the late-medieval North African thinker ‘Abd al-Rahmān Ibn Khaldūn (732–808 AH/1332–1406 CE) on virtually any topic, but especially in matters concerning tradition, a topic that surfaces repeatedly in his thought.

An intriguing and instructive argument emerges when Ibn Khaldūn compares two types of medical practices and remedies afoot during his day. One was the cosmopolitan and urban medicine of the cities, the other consisted of rural folk therapies. Medical practices dating back to the insights of the physician Galen were taken up later by Muslim admirers such as Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. c. 925–935), Abū al-Ḥasan al-Majūsī (d. 994), and Abū ‘Ali Ibn Sina (d. 1037). Reflecting on their accomplishments, Ibn Khaldūn lamented the decline in the practice of medicine during his own time. As a sub-discipline of physics (tabī‘īyat), Galenic medicine followed certain verifiable procedures and had certain well-defined features, among which was the well-known theory of balancing the bodily humors—namely blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm. (Admittedly, Galenic medicine

40. Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, 175.
41. Jackson, Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering, 42.
42. Fleck, Genesis and Development.
43. Fleck, Genesis and Development.
44. Ibn Khaldūn, Muqaddimah Ibn Khaldūn, 479.
The Idea of Tradition in the Late Modern World

is not scientific in the modern sense, but it evinced a rigorous, "scientific" approach to natural phenomena.)

Rural medicine, by contrast, was based primarily on the experiences of a few elderly individuals, resulting in various folk remedies that were then handed down (mutawâ'râthân) to subsequent generations. Such therapies from rural areas, to Ibn Khaldûn's mind, were not based on a clearly-defined science, but some folk remedies, he concedes, might be effective. Attempting to be even-handed, he explains how the apparent success of some of these remedies had produced well-known healers such as Hâríth bin Kalada al-Thaqafi (d. 634–5) (known simply as Harth) from the city of Taîf in the Arabian peninsula.

From Ibn Khaldûn's perspective, medical remedies transmitted (manqûl) over time and faithfully documented in the normative tradition (shâri‘yât) were matters of folk therapy and not based on science. Even though they were part of the canon of documented traditions and teachings (hadîth and sunna), he indicates that they should not be considered religiously normative and binding. In his view, their claims of therapy "have no grounding in revelation,"45 but were "derived from what was customary ('â'dîyân) for the Arabs."46 The only reason accounts of these remedies have come down to us, he insists, was due to the high value attached to the reported history of the lived circumstances (âhwâl) of the Prophet Muhammad. One should keep in mind, Ibn Khaldûn continues, that the Prophet's medical practices derived from his particular cultural lifestyle, natural disposition, and preferences (jibillâ) as a human being. These actions of the Prophet were "not derived from the perspective that it is a prescribed practice [of remedies] in a specified manner."47 Averting the desire to give the Prophet's medicinal therapies a semi-sacred status, Ibn Khaldûn categorically states: "For surely the Prophet, on whom be peace and blessings, was commissioned to teach us the normative teachings (shârâ‘i‘) and he was not dispatched to instruct us in medicine and other customary matters."48

46. Ibn Khaldûn, Muqaddimah Ibn Khaldûn, 479.
47. Ibn Khaldûn, Muqaddimah Ibn Khaldûn, 480.
48. I will explain later that shârâ‘i‘ are normative instructions that are blended with teachings derived from revelation and prophetic utterances, but are also constituted by human labor and endeavors in the search for the good.
49. Ibn Khaldûn, Muqaddimah Ibn Khaldûn, 480 (emphasis added).

Disruptions and Connections

Readers might by now see where Ibn Khaldûn is heading. He wants to show that some practices and behaviors of the Prophet stemmed from the realm of the mundane and quotidian and should not enjoy normative status. But it is likely that some people conferred normative status on these practices, and so the topic was contested, as were many other topics, then and now.

To make his case, Ibn Khaldûn mentions two well-known incidents reported in the authoritative collections of prophetic reports and acknowledged by a large cross-section of Muslim sects and schools. Each example not only nuances the meaning of these reports but also allows one to derive certain analytic categories relevant for my own discussion of tradition, so permit them to be discussed in some detail. Ibn Khaldûn especially helps us steer through traditions and practices where the invocation of prophetic and divine authority might on the face of it sound daunting to challenge. Yet he weighs and evaluates these reports with the help of more capacious and historically-informed analytic categories in order to produce more compelling interpretive outcomes.

The first example concerns the Prophet Muhammad's disapproval of agricultural practices involving the cross-pollination of date-palm seedlings. When his companions stopped the practice in an effort to comply with his wishes, there followed a failed harvest of their staple. The Prophet in turn rebuked them in a statement that could apply to many quotidian matters: "You all [more so than me] are more knowledgeable in matters related to your [agricultural] world."

more compelling framework. We have already noted that he acknowledged both the validity of natural science-based Galenic medicine and folk remedies. If believers used folk remedies as an act of spirituality or to affirm solidarity with the Prophet, Ibn Khaldūn concedes that surely blessings will follow. Such remedies in fact are intricately connected to affective realities, religious liturgy, belief in faith healing, and spirituality. They draw on the presence of the supernatural, Ibn Khaldūn says, and depend on the “formulic traditions of faith-infused words” (āthār al-kalimāt al-imāniyya). The Prophet’s recommendation of medicinal honey is on par with the use of formulic words of faith for healing. But Ibn Khaldūn just as clearly maintains that such pious actions not be mistaken for actual science, for which he also has high regard.

Ibn Khaldūn’s elegant resolution of the matter requires an interpretation (hermeneutic) on his part to resituate past practices within a plausible historical framework. In this instance, his task was relatively easy. He identified natural science-based medicine as discursively intelligible and as a historically established genre bearing its own rationales. By contrast, folkloric and rural medicine were in the realm of the local and were inflected with liturgical faith-healing properties and performances. Once he could identify two different types of healing practices, his task to provide reasonable explanations for each from the past became plausible, if not absolutely convincing.

More broadly, Ibn Khaldūn provides a crucial insight about how creatively and incisively tradition could be dealt with in the premodern world. One must approach tradition with the scalpel of a surgeon, he seems to say, together with a nuanced skepticism. Doing so provides one with the ability to discern different logics of practice at work by means of “radical contextualization.” Ibn Khaldūn could have easily acquiesced to the authority of tradition and accepted honey simply as a wonder potion. Recall how the Prophet’s intimidating rhetoric seemed to pit the truth of God’s revealed speech about the remedial powers of honey against the “untruthful” stomach of the sick man. Yet Ibn Khaldūn remained unaunted by the face value of the Prophet’s rhetoric since he possessed “an eminent heuristic virtue” and had the capacity to enter the fields of history, culture, science.

53. He explains how this healing works is: “‘āllā jiha-t al-tabarruk wa šīdq al-‘aqd al-imāni—from the perspective of spiritual blessing and an affirmation of a commitment to faith” (Ibn Khaldūn, Muqaddimah Ibn Khaldūn, 480).
54. Bourdieu, Field of Cultural Production, 9.
55. Bourdieu, Field of Cultural Production, 29.
The Idea of Tradition in the Late Modern World

dence, and juridical hermeneutics of “relational thinking” simultaneously. Deploying his knowledge and skills, Ibn Khaldūn both empathizes with the sincere piety behind folk healing practices while maintaining that they still do not add up to actual science. In short, he makes a distinction crucial for religious hermeneutics.

Finally, it is interesting to note that the Cairo-based expert on prophetic traditions, Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d.1449), who lived roughly two centuries before Ibn Khaldūn, provides copious reference to authors who wrote about the medicinal properties of honey in his commentary of prophetic reports. ‘Asqalānī’s authorities also report that honey does not serve as a blanket remedy for all illnesses and all persons.57 ‘Asqalānī reports the majority of scholars saying that the referent “it is a remedy for humanity” refers to honey. However, ‘Asqalānī claims that many exegetes of the Qur’ān think the possessive pronoun “it” in fact refers to the Qur’ān as a whole, as a spiritual remedy for humanity.58 In other words, the signs and words of the Qur’ān are the remedial honey. A later expert of traditions, Bāqir al-Majlisī (d.1110/1698), three centuries after Ibn Khaldūn, argues that it is grammatically incoherent for the referent to mean the Qur’ān. Still, he affirms earlier authorities who claim that honey can be medicinal, but it can also harm someone suffering from bile.59 In Majlisī’s view, the messenger of God persisted in his prescription of honey for the sick man on the grounds that divinely inspired knowledge and intuitions—his “light of revelation” (nur al-wahī), vouchedsafe to Muhammad alone—assured him in this particular case, but not necessarily in all others, that honey could be an effective remedy.60

To return to Ibn Khaldūn, one senses that he is generally agnostic about supernatural powers and feats if they are not explicitly corroborated by authoritative teachings in either the Qur’ān or in sound reports from the Prophet. He is inclined to dismiss messiahs and millenarian figures, even if he admits supernatural realities and believes that they can even be the subject of discursive understanding. In the final analysis, the Prophet’s cure of the man with a stomach ailment appears plausible to Ibn Khaldūn. But since he sees this as an extremely rare, supernatural event, the method

Disruptions and Connections

of the cure might only apply in this specific instance and should not be mistaken for precedent-setting medical advice.

Conclusion

Understanding debates about the place of tradition in Islam—and perhaps seeing these as a resource for other faith traditions—requires a familiarity with the complexity of the Muslim tradition, past and present, and a recognition of just how contested engagement with tradition has become in our own day and age among Muslims. At least this much is true at the scholarly level with respect to the interpretation of sacred texts and their meaning and implications today. At a more popular level, even without such scholarly analysis, Muslims across the globe remain deeply engaged in a variety of tradition-based practices that reflect the beauty, intricacy, and diversity of Islam.

I hope this chapter has shown how Azmeh and Jad’an and other scholars have proposed nuanced and creative ways to help one conceptually and practically engage with tradition—ways that require careful reading and interpretation and a keen sense of history and its impact on lived societies. By contrast, I hope to have pointed out how Saba Mahmood instrumentalized tradition as a weapon against liberalism and secularism; she reduced tradition to the singular, if not the absolute, by failing to carefully engage in the deeper resources of Islamic thought.

Ibn Khaldūn, moreover, shows us that tradition can be quite complex and to understand it, one must grapple with this complexity. He managed to craft two kinds of moral or spiritual economies at work in his account of different types of medicine advocated by tradition: the economy of the art or science of medicine on one hand and the charismatic economy of the social miracle of prophetic medicine and folk therapies on the other. Both have validity as tradition, but only once the proper hermeneutic is deployed to distinguish between them.

The interpretative questions facing Islam today are in many respects not dissimilar to those faced by Ibn Khaldūn. Some advocates of Muslim tradition steer people in the direction of that which is affirmed as permanent and persistent (thabīt, pl. thawābīt). They even want to expand the domain of what is resolutely permanent. By contrast, others raise questions about this direction and appear to want to deny that tradition possesses absolute permanence. The former frequently charge the latter of denying

56. Bourdieu, Field of Cultural Production, 29.
the tradition, while the latter charge the former with the unwarranted absolutizing of tradition.

The tension between these competing directions raise acute questions about what I will call moral ontology. Would moving against that which is perceived to be the permanent in tradition-based practices be tantamount to a negation of moral ontology? In my view it would not. It would, however, introduce greater pluralism, nuance, and latitude into how one interprets and practices a tradition; it would expand one’s moral-ontological horizon, as it were, in conversation with the present. And this expansion can even be a good and necessary thing, even if at first it might appear inadmissibly altering or reassigning the valuation of the permanent. But under these changed conditions, the permanent gains a different, broader horizon in which to realize itself. In fact, as the moral-ontological horizon shifts, what was once deemed as permanent and persistent in the tradition does not disappear altogether. Far from it. It is simply recoded and rethought, as one applies the tradition’s first principles to new circumstances and new knowledge, often even while drawing from the past, as I have drawn in this chapter from Ibn Khaldün.

Thus understood, and returning to a previous biological analogy, tradition always has a “metabolic” character; it continuously remakes and refines itself, blending old and new, past and present, changing but remaining permanent nonetheless.