



THE ROLE OF SUNNAH IN THE FORMATION OF MUSLIM IDENTITY AND PRACTICE

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THE ROLE OF SUNNAH IN THE FORMATION OF MUSLIM IDENTITY AND PRACTICE

Muhammad Rafique Phulpoto, Sana Jadoon

ABSTRACT:

The paper will discuss the constitutive nature of the Sunnah the normative model of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the identity and practice of Muslims. Going past theological claims, it contends that not only is Sunnah not a secondary source, but also the working, living guide in which Islamic identity is created and maintained. The discussion follows the historical role that the Sunnah played in the unification of the early Muslim community and how this was handed down by strict scholarship in Hadith. It also discusses how the Sunnah shapes individual identity in terms of character perfection (akhlaq) and the spiritual life, at the same time shaping a collective and transnational identity in the form of ritualized expressions, social conventions and Islamic law (Shariah). Amidst the present-day challenges of globalization and modernity, the article notes that there are on-going intellectual discussions on the issue of reinterpretation and adaptation. It ends, however, by concluding that the Sunnah still serves as the key point around which a coherent and dynamic Muslim identity still is expected to swing, requiring a careful work on the part of scholars and educators to guarantee an authentic and relevant transmission.

KEYWORDS: Sunnah, Hadith, Muslim Identity, Islamic Practice, Prophetic Example, Akhlaq, Shariah, Ummah, Ijtihad, Islamic Law

1. Introduction:

In its utopian form, Muslim identity is not only a label of origination or a

cultural heritage, it is an active and conscious condition of subjectivity, being based on a strong rapport with the divine. It includes an all-inclusive worldview, a unique moral and ethical code, and a list of practices that control all aspects of life of a believer. The belief in oneness of God (Tawhid) and the faith in prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as the last messenger is the basis of this identity, whose life offers the final paradigm in terms of living Islamic values. The establishment and maintenance of this identity is, consequently, directly connected with the sources of Islamic guidance, which give the blueprint to what it takes to be Muslim.

This guidance is based primarily and without question the Holy Quran which is the sacred word of God (Allah) which was revealed to Prophet Muhammad in its original form. It gives us the general rules, the law suits and spiritual principles of the faith. Nonetheless, the Quran itself in many verses asks believers to obey Allah and his Messenger.¹ This twofold guidance is directed to the second basic source of guidance: Sunnah. Sunnah means the sayings, actions, tacit approvals and physical and moral aspects of Prophet Muhammad.² It is the practical living version of the Quran. Although the theory is found in the Quran, the Sunnah is a source of the methodology, which gives detailed directions on how these divine commands should be applied in everyday life. An example is that though the Quran commands the creation of prayer (Salah) it is the Sunnah which teaches the Muslims how the prayer is to be conducted, when and what is to be recited.

¹ Quran 4:59, 4:69, and 33:36

² Mustafa al-A'zami, *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1977), 3.

This study seeks to explore in details the role and the extent to which the Sunnah played in shaping the identity of the Muslims and standardization of religious practice. This paper will assume that, the Sunnah is not the ancillary source but rather it is the constituent part which has actively shaped the peculiarities of Muslim consciousness and life within the community throughout centuries. It transcends the theological claim to its authority to discuss its practical place: how the imitation (Iqtida) of the example of the Prophet encourages a sense of belonging together, forms a common ritualistic language, and instills a particular moral personality. This paper seeks to illustrate that Muslim identity as traditionally construed and constructed is directly connected to the normative example of Prophet Muhammad and ultimately influenced by this role model to an extent that is insurmountable. Its scope will involve both the epistemological power of the Sunnah, and its practical effects on the practices, laws and social norms that are all unifying in the definition of the meaning of being a practicing Muslim.

2. Conceptual Framework:

In order to define the role of the Sunnah in the formation of Muslim identity and practice, the first step will be to have a clear conceptual framework of the main constituents of the Sunnah: the multi-dimensionality of the Islamic identity, the overall definition of the Sunnah as such.

Theological, Spiritual and Social aspects: Islamic Identity:

The Muslim identity is not a unitary phenomenon but a stratified fact. It is also rooted theologically in the Shahadah (the profession of faith), which entails a direct covenant with God and is the recognition of Prophet Muhammad as the last messenger. This theological foundation establishes what a Muslim is supposed to do with the end goal: to serve God alone

and lead a life that was guided by His commands.³ This identity is developed spiritually through rituals such as prayer (Salah), fasting (Sawm) and remembrance (Dhikr) that are supposed to cleanse the heart and remind the individual of the divine at all times. In its social expression, the Islam identity takes the form of a collective awareness called as Ummah, which overrides ethnic, national, and cultural identities. It dictates an ethical code that regulates relations, starting with family life to business dealings and social justice and social responsibilities, and thus, establishing a specific moral and social fabric.

The Sunnah: Type, Form and Authenticity Test:

Islamically the term Sunnah is used to refer to all the normative example of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). It is systematically divided into three:

1. **Qawli Sunnah (Verbal):** The sayings of the Prophet documented are in the Quran and provide explanations, legal rulings as well as moral guidance.
2. **Fili Sunnah (Practical):** The actions of the Prophet which are a practical illustration of the Islamic teachings, are most notable the detailed way in which the acts of worship are carried out.
3. **Taqirri Sunnah (Approval):** individually are those cases upon which the Prophet heard or heard women of his companions and what he approved of either by remaining silent or by express consent, thus rendering the permissibility of such.

³ Vincent J. Cornell, *Voices of Islam: Volume 1, Voices of Tradition* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007), particularly the chapters on identity and practice.

It is the exact science with the assistance of which the Sunnah has been preserved and verified: its science is known as the science of Hadith criticism (Mustalah al-Hadith). The lineage of the reporters to the Prophet (chain of narration, Isnad) was scrutinized by scholars who evaluated the moral uprightness and the accuracy of the memory of each reporter. They examined the text (Matn) of the report also in terms of its consistency with the Quran and existing principles of the Islam and facts of the history. This strict methodology gave rise to the grading of report as Sahih (authentic), Hasan (good), or Da'if (weak) so that the normative practice attributed to prophet is founded on evidence that can be relied on.⁴

Connection between Qur and Sunnah in the Islamic Law and Life:

The connection of the Quran and Sunnah is symbiotic and cannot be separated in its spectacle on the Islamic law and life. The Quran offers the general, main principles- the constitution of the religion. The Sunnah serves as the greatest juristical interpretation of the Quran, and it elaborates and explains these general commandments. To take an example, the Quran requires us to pray; whereas the Sunnah requires us to specify its times, its units and physical movements. The Sunnah in certain instances establishes independent legislation on certain issues not explicitly elaborated in the Quran, a role that is noticed by the Quran itself: "And whatever the Messenger has given you, accept it, and whatever he has forbidden you, do not obey it. (Qur'an 59:7). They are all the parts of one, continuous guidance framework with Quran as the foundation and Sunnah as the elaborative building of a Muslim life with emulating the

⁴ Mustafa al-A'zami, *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1977), 1-10.

Prophet as the actual realization of obedience to God.

3. Historical Situation of Sunnah and Identity Formation:

The early days of Islam, which are the timeframe of the life of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the centuries right after his death, were critical in entrenching the role of Sunnah as the driving force behind the development of Muslim identity and development of Muslim communities. The example set by the Prophet during this period shows that it was not only a lawgiver but rather the center around which a new civilization was formed.

Early Muslim Community and the Place of the Prophet in It:

The Prophet at the helm of the Muslim community formed its first community (Ummah) in Medina. His position did not only stop at being a spiritual messenger but he was also the leader of the state, judge, commander of the army and a social reformer. Islamic identity to the Companions (Sahabah) was not an abstract idea, but it was a living reality, and the Prophet was its embodiment. They witnessed all his activities, the way he carried out ablution, business, his treatment to his family, interaction with the non-Muslims, how he commanded the community to pray and fight. This practical model was developed through this firsthand observation. As an example, the Constitution of Medina, which was formulated by the Prophet, created a social and legal identity founded on faith and collective security, but not tribal descent, a radical innovation in 7th-century Arabia. The Sunnah of the Prophet was, thus, the practical, day-to-day power, which applied the general principles of the Quran into a working society and formed a particular identity based on piety, justice, and community togetherness.

Sunnah was transmitted through Hadith Compilations:

The Islamic empire started growing at a very high rate thereby introducing

new challenges and other population groups to the Muslim population, after the death of the Prophet. This necessitated the official conservation of the Prophetic model in order to preserve a single identity. The Companions who were viewed as the living repositories of the Sunnah have carefully transmitted what they saw and heard to the subsequent generation, the Tabi'un (Successors). This oral tradition was not originally very organized but it slowly became an organized academic project. The amount of narrations alone and the advent of spurious reports required a strict scientific approach to verification. By the 3rd century of the Islamic religion, the scholars had started some monumental work in order to compile authenticated reports. The collections of such scholars as Al-Bukhari (d. 870) and Muslim (d. 875) took center stage. They were arranged in a topical order and also subject to exacting standards on the chain of narration (isnad) and text (matn) and they offered a standardized point of reference to Muslims throughout the world⁵, making sure that the identity and practices of the community were always fixed to a single, verifiable source and therefore preventing fragmentation.

Sunnah as a Normative Guiding Model in the Early Muslim Behavior and Community Formation:

The Sunnah served as the standard blueprint of all life in the early Muslim world to create a solid behavioral and moral identity. The common standard was it that controlled the purity of rituals and the worship of all things, as well as the business dealings and the decisions of the courts of justice. Such commonality to the model of Prophet formed a strong sense

⁵ Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 17-40.

of belonging and self-identification among Muslims, notwithstanding their ethnicities and geographical backgrounds. A Muslim who is Persian, and a Muslim who is Spanish, with all the differences of their culture, would pray in the same way, observe similar maxims of diet, and seek to copy the same moral mould--and all this is taken from the Sunnah. Historians point out that the scholarly elite (Ulama) was very instrumental in spreading this model by teaching and issuing legal rulings (fatwas), which made the Sunnah the final jury in the disputes and the guide in shaping the societal norms⁶ which would remain in place throughout the centuries to come.

4.Sunni The Impact of Sunna on the personal identity:

The Sunnah may have a vastly greater implication than simply the sphere of the native ritual and legal prescription and can reach the most personal aspects of the life of a Muslim. It is the main map outlining the makeup of individual character, spiritual purity and ethical behavior and it does this in effect by imprinting the Muslim personal identity within. Internalization of the Prophetic model makes faith not a form of belief system but an actual existence that is holistic.

Internalization of the Character Traits of Prophet (Akhlaq):

The most central concept in personal identity in Islam is that of akhlaq--moral character. The very Quran itself states that the main mission of Prophet Muhammad was the completion of the nobility of character.⁷ and he was said in the revelation to be of tremendous character. To a Muslim, thus, the imitation of the akhlaq of the Prophet is not optional piety; but it is an essential part of this Muslim. The Sunnah gives a practical and

⁶Wael B. Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), particularly chapters 2 and 3.

⁷ Qur'an 68:4

detailed list of these qualities, and this is easy to memorize. The truthfulness was a foundation of the Muslim personality because the Prophet had set an example of honesty (siddiq) even prior to his prophethood. His deep-mercy (rahmah), pity to children, tenderness to animals and forgiveness of his enemies set a precedence of being soft-hearted in opposition to the pre-Islamic standards of cruelty and revenge. His distinguished yet humble nature and his immense faith in God (tawakkul) is a lesson to how one can deal with success and failure. These qualities are advised to be taken, not by imitation, but by spiritual assimilation by Muslims, attempting to make the sublime character of the Prophet their second nature. This quest is the moral essence of personal identity of a Muslim, which stands out both in personal and social interactions.

The Sunnah and its use in Spiritual Development and Self-Purification:

One of the main aims in Islam is the purification of self (tazkiyat al-nafs), which is spiritual development and the Sunnah is its practical guide that cannot be done without. The Quran is the presentation of the objectives of purification but the life of the Prophet shows the how. His individual disciplines of worship are something that offer the particular channel of spiritual development and contact with the Divine. His minute insistence in prayers, the length of prostrations, his particular supplications (du'a`) and his vigils at night (Tahajjud) are no meaningless rites of passage to nourishment of God-consciousness (taqwa), of alertness (khusht) and constant mindfulness of the spirit world. In addition, the Sunnah enacts and promotes supererogatory practices (nawafil) on top of the mandatory i.e., voluntary fasts and charity, which enables believers to be closer to God. The diseases of the heart are also directly referred in the teachings of

the Prophet, and he provided a solution to the problems of arrogance by humility, to the problem of greed by contentment and to the problem of anger by patience and restraint. This holistic approach to spiritual cleanliness which is directly out of his example guides Muslims in the continuous battle against their lower selves and helps them to undergo a transformative process of a state of heedlessness to that of interior peace and closeness to God.⁸

Influence on Gender Roles, Family Life and Ethical Behaviors:

The Sunnah has a strong influence on the most basic units of society and the most widespread ethical conflicts: it directly affects personal identity in the framework of gender, family, and everyday behavior. The Prophet sets out an exquisitely subtle and misconstrued model in gender roles and family living. Relationship with his wives which included mutual consultation, love and sharing domestic chores is an example of what a partnership should be. His teaching specifically balancing mercy and mutual rights because of his explicit command to be kind to women and his fatherly and grandfather role of caring father and grandfather, a family identity is formed. An iconic narration pushes the position of a caring daughter, an obedient wife, and a caring mother, and it directly forms the identity and meaning of a female in the Islamic paradigm.

Outside the family, the Sunnah also provides specifications of ethical behavior in every life field. Strict prohibition of interest (riba), fraud, and hoarding as provided by the Prophet even in commerce require transparency and fairness as uncompromising conditions of the professional identity of a Muslim. His lessons on the importance of

⁸ William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oneworld Publications, 2008)

respecting the guests, the need to preserve kinship (silat al-rahim), and his visits to the sick in the context of social interactions create identity based on the community. His decrees on the rights of the neighbors mankind, with or without faith, and his empathy towards the entire creation, even the animal kingdom, put a grand ethical conscious mind. Making a Muslim out of these Prophetic models means to make him a garment out of the strands of personal piety, family duty, and social morality, which are all brought together by one goal of experiencing the good pleasure of God by imitating the ideal model of his Messenger.

5.Sunnah and General Muslim Identity:

Although the Sunnah has an enormous influence on the individual, the strongest and the most obvious one is the fact that the Sunnah creates a unified collective that is not restricted by ethnicity, nationality or cultures. It is a cohesive force that has established a language of ritual and a common language of law and ethics that pulls various peoples into a single global village, the Ummah.

Sunnah as a Homogenizing Element in Multeous Cultures and Societies:

The Islamic civilization spread to areas that had a very strong culture, including Byzantines and Persians, as well as the Berbers and South Asians. The Sunnah allowed an enduring, normative center, capable of inhibiting the total homogenization of Muslim identity into such local cultures, and at the same time permitting some non-conflictual culturalization. No matter whether the Muslim is in Indonesia, Nigeria or Bosnia the basic model of the life of the Prophet is similar. Such a common point of reference produces an instant familiarity and friendship. The way of greeting by using As-salamu alaykum, the exact postures of the prayer, the way of eating using a right hand, and the type of trim used

in the beard all this is minute and powerful indicators of the unity that has its foundation on the Sunnah itself. They are universal practices practiced the same way all over the world, which constantly serve to affirm a sense of belonging to some sort of transnational community, more primary than that of nation or ethnic belonging. The Sunnah is thereby a cultural continuum, a red line that connects the diverse venus of human societies into a familiar and uniform system to make sure that the essence of Muslim identity is the same and recognizable.

Construction of Social Practices and Communal Rituals:

The most important practices of the Moslem, the Ibadaat, as ordained in the Quran, are assigned their definite, unifying structure by the Sunnah. This uniformity is essential in the establishment of a shared identity. The 5 prayers (Salah) are not just personal performances; a description of the prayer in the Sunnah, with the recitations of prayers, their bowing (ruku) and prostrations (sujood) all described, is such that any Muslim may attend a prayer anywhere in the world and just continue following the prayer. This elaborate explanation of the fast with the time of the pre-dawn meal (suhoor) and the time of breaking the fast (iftar) establishes a common time beat of life among the whole global fraternity during Ramadan. Likewise, Hajj pilgrimage rites are a literal recreation of the Farewell Pilgrimage of the Prophet and cause a strong, physical experience of oneness among millions of people. In addition to rituals, other social activities such as the obligatory charity (Zakat) are arranged according to the Sunnah, which promote the shared responsibility of the economically unproductive. Observance of both Eids as practiced in the Prophetic tradition gives universal days of happiness and celebration. These communal practices, which are all based on the Sunnah, produce an influential, physical solidarity impossible by theoretical conviction alone.

The Sunnah and the Legal Identity: Shariah Implementation and the jurisprudence:

Sunnah is one of the main sources of Islamic law (Shariah), and it ranks after the Quran, and consequently, it plays a major role in determining the overall legal and moral identity of Muslim communities. The relation is infrastructural: the Quran gives the general principles and the Sunnah, the details, the elaboration and the practical application.⁹ Classical jurists in unison were of the view that the Sunnah has the capability of several important legal roles, which included, the affirmation and reiteration of a decision contained in the Quran, elaboration and explanation of a general Quranic order (as in the prayer), and the ability to make rulings independently on a matter not directly stated in the Quran. This was a legal status of the Sunnah through which there arose the fertile tradition of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), in which jurists ascertained legal verdicts by critically examining the Quran and the proven Sunnah. The legal identity of the Muslim communities throughout centuries was defined by the body of law that was formed as a result of this process, i.e., family law, commercial law, and criminal law. It formed a popular definition of justice, rights and duties. Though the extent of formal application of Shariah is quite different in the contemporary Muslim world, the values of Quran and Sunnah remain the foundation of the Muslim collective conscience about justice, social order and morality in the community that remains a permanent reference point of their unique civilizational

⁹ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2003), 47-92.

identity.¹⁰

Modern Problems and the Sunnah:

The connection between the Sunnah and the Muslim identity has never been challenged as it is challenged in the modern era. The onslaught of modernity, globalization and changing world views has led to multifaceted identity crises in which Muslims are forced to find a place of its traditional normative model in the fast-shifting world.

Among Muslims, there is modernity, globalization, and identity crisis:

The rise of the nation-state, secularism, and westernized cultural values has provided a deep conflict to most Muslims. The transcendent, universal identity of the Sunnah tends to conflict with current secular identities based on nationalism or the individual. Moreover, by way of digital media, globalization subjects Muslims to an endless flow of alternative systems of values and lifestyles resulting in confusion and in a few instances, erosion of religious observance. This has led to an extreme of reactions as far as fanatical isolationism to complete assimilation. To others, Sunnah is a fortress to run away into, resulting in literal and even decontextualized versions. The need to fit in to the global norms leaves others disconnected with the Sunnah as a historical relic as opposed to a living guide and this leads to a diluted or conflicted religious identity.¹¹

6. Reinterpretation of Sunnah in the Contemporary Times:

¹⁰ Wael B. Hallaq. He argues that the Shariah, derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah, provided the "constitutional" framework for pre-modern Islamic societies. See Wael B. Hallaq, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1-32.

¹¹ Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008),

This pressure has sparked heated intellectual discussions in relation to the reinterpretation of the Sunnah. One of the most crucial aspects is how there is a difference between the perennial, religious, and moral aims of the Sunnah (maqasid) and its practical, time-related uses. Progressive reformists tend to insist on the emphasis on the wider principles and ends, and they indicate that some of the particular Prophetic practices might be modified to the new conditions. On the other hand, traditionalists focus on the eternal relevance of the Prophetic model in its historically conceived form, and the subjective reinterpretation may have the danger of watering down the faith to an unrecognizable point. Such debates are especially keen in such spheres like gender relations, finance, and bioethics, where modern reality poses questions that were not directly discussed in the classical literature. The issue is that a strict methodology should be developed so that it is loyal to the true Sunnah and at the same time it should be able to give meaningful guidance to the modern life, without falling into the extremes of literalism and relativism.

The Identity and Media in the Transmission of the Sunnah-Based Identity. Education and media have never played such an important role in the formation of a sound, Sunnah-based identity, in this disputed landscape than before. The traditional Islamic education that was systematically used to transmit the sciences of the Sunnah now competes with a massive digital ecosystem. The internet provides the most access to Islamic knowledge since it has never been accessible in such a way, but it also carries the danger of misinformation, where voices who have not been qualified as such advance extremist or highly idiosyncratic views. The difficulty of the modern Muslim communities has been to reconstitute traditional education and make it pertinent to the younger generation and at the same time using the modern media to help spread authentic,

balanced and contextual knowledge about the Prophetic example. The solution to a unified and assertive Muslim identity will be greatly achieved by the capability to convey the relevance of the wisdom of the Sunnah- its compassion, justice and spirituality, using very tools of modernity which are currently attempting to disintegrate it.¹²

7. Case Studies or Examples:

The rational model of the Sunnah in the identity formation is represented in the practical form in the other contemporary movements and institutions. These case studies reveal both proactive and even contradictory perspectives through which Muslim communities butcher the Prophetic model and its uses in the modern world.

Communities/Movements that Place Special Emphasis on Sunnah in Identity Formation:

Two separate movements are used to demonstrate the strong, but opposite, ways in which Sunnah can be central to identity. The earliest is the Tablighi Jama'at which is a global grassroots pietistic movement that started in South Asia. To its millions of followers, identity is created by immediate, personal imitation of the Prophetic way of life, especially in the aspect of worship, clothing, and personal behavior. The central activity of the movement, khuruj (going out preaching), is founded on one of the Hadiths that underline the spreading of the faith. Their dressing, plain robes, uncut beards among men, and complete veils among women are not only conscious but visible symbols of an identity based on their understanding of the way the early Muslim community had done it. The

¹² Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, eds., *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007)

Tablighi focus is on spiritual reform and personal religiosity, which does not take a political approach much thus forming transnational identity of personal devotion and ritual rectitude.¹³

The second, more codified, example is the movement towards Shariah-based governance in some Muslim majority settings, including in some parts of Northern Nigeria or the Shariah application in the past in Saudi Arabia. The Sunnah as interpreted by the school of particular schools of law is not only in these instances, a matter of personal guidance, but the basis of legal and social order in society. The state imposes rulings based on the Quran and Sunnah to determine collective identity such as on criminal punishment, gender interaction and financial transactions. This forms a legalistic self in which being a good Muslim can be confused with following the state-defined interpretations of the Prophetic model, and the impressionism of how the Sunnah can be used to construct a holistic socio-political identity.

The place of Youth and Educational Institutions in saving Sunnah Traditions:

In the face of globalization, formal schools have become hot contested places of maintaining Sunnah-based identity. Scholarly attempts to preserve the classical tradition of Hadith sciences are institutionalized in such universities as Al-Azhar University in Cairo and Islamic University of Medina. The al-Azhar, with its centuries-old curriculum, is the source of the Sunni intellectual tradition in the form of scholars (ulama), who combats the interpretation they view as unqualified. The Islamic

¹³ Muhammad Khalid Masud, ed., *Travellers in Faith: Studies of the Tablighī Jamā'at as a Transnational Islamic Movement for Faith Renewal* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

University of Medina, on the contrary, actively gathers students representing the entire Muslim world and produces a diverse group of students, who graduate with a unified and standard knowledge of the Sunnah, and spread this knowledge in their home countries.

At the same time, a new trend is the emergence of Islamic educational sites that cater to young people and English-speaking Muslims by being digital-savvy, such as "SeekersGuidance" or "Yaqeen Institute" in particular. These schools have the classical teachings put into present-day lingo and answered in modern existential questions. They also present an alternative to the two extremes of rhetoric and secular assimilation by offering online courses, podcasts, and articles on the Prophetic biography and sciences of Hadith. They enable a new generation to build a self-reliant religious identity that is both intellectually rooted in the Sunnah and yet is thoroughly in touch with modern reality, so that the tradition is passed on using the very technologies which are usually threatening it.¹⁴

8. Conclusion:

This paper has clarified the deep-seated and complex use of the Sunnah as the cornerstone of the construction and maintenance of the Muslim identity. The discussion shows that Muslim identity is a moving reality rather than a fixed label as it is constantly being formed and brought to life through the imitation of the Prophetic example. The Sunnah has been a consistent normative guide since it was used in the first integration of Ummah in Medina until it is used today to integrate different cultures. It forms the inner world of the believer by developing the akhlaq (character)

¹⁴ Malika Zeghal, *Gardens of Knowledge: The Azhar and the Transformation of Contemporary Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024).

and spiritual cleansing, and at the same time forms the outer world with standardized rituals, shared ethical system and shared legal tradition based on the Shariah.

The study validates the central, indisputable continuity of the Sunnah. Despite the limitations of modernity and globalization, the Prophetic model is the main source of orientation that Muslims are using when trying to find their identity in the world. It is a guiding light of authenticity, a Masterpiece of spiritual strength and a guide to a unique moral and social life. The modern controversies of its interpretation are not an indication that it is obsolete but are evidence of its constant relevance as a living guide.

Going forward, scholars and educators should bear the brunt of making sure that this relationship is one that is robust and real. The most important suggestion is a two-level one. To scholars the challenge is to conduct an honest and open ijthad to spell out wisdom and goals of the Sunnah in meeting contemporary realities without undermining the integrity of the texts it transmits. To teachers the challenge is to come up with pedagogical strategies that render the Sunnah available and relevant to the youths to go beyond ritual education towards the enlightenment of the great relevance of the Sunnah to individual development, social justice and ethical living in the 21st century. In such a manner, they will be able to imbue the generations to come to internalize the Sunnah not as the relic of the past, but as the timeless centre of a resolute, humane and positively active Muslim identity.



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