

THE MEANING OF TRADITIONS

The following is an excerpt from "Dictionary of Islam," by Thomas Patrick Hughes. T.P. Hughes was a Christian Scholar and missionary in India in the 1886. In this passage, he explores the meaning of the word 'Tradition' and this is what Muslims refer to when they mention the 'Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, p.b.u.h.'

“TRADITION. It is the belief of all Muhammadans, whether Sunni, Shi'ah, or Wahhabi, that in addition to the revelation contained in the Qur'an, the Prophet received the *Wahy ghair Matlu* (lit. an unread revelation") whereby he was enabled to give authoritative declarations on religious questions, either moral, ceremonial, or doctrinal. Muhammad traditions are therefore supposed to be the uninspired record of inspired sayings, and consequently occupy a totally different position to what we understand by traditions in the Christian Church. The Arabic words used for these traditions are *Hadis*, pl. *Ahadis*, "a saying"; and *Sunnah*, pl. *Sunan* "a custom." The word *Hadis*, in its singular form, is now generally used by both Muhammadan and Christian writers for the collections of traditions. They are records of what Muhammad did (*Sunnatu 'l-fi'l*), what Muhammad enjoined (*Sunnatu 'l-qaul*), and that which was done in the presence of Muhammad and which he did not forbid (*Sunnatu 't-taqrir*). They also include the authoritative sayings and doings of the Companions of the Prophet.

The following quotations from the Traditions as to the sayings of Muhammad on the subject of this oral law, will explain the position which he intended to assign to it.

"That which the Prophet of God hath made unlawful is like that which God himself hath made so."

"I am no more than a man, but when I enjoin anything respecting religion receive it, and when I order anything about the affairs of the world, then I am nothing more than man."

"Verily the best word is the word of God, and the best rule of life is that delivered by Muhammad."

"I have left you two things, and you will not stray as long as you hold them fast. The one is the book of God, and the other the law (*Sunnah*) of His Prophet."

"My sayings do not abrogate the word of God, but the word of God can abrogate my sayings."

"Some of my injunctions abrogate others." (Mishkat, book i. Ch. vi.)

Muhammad gave very special injunctions respecting

the faithful transmission of his

sayings, for, according to at-Tirmizi, Ibn 'Abbas relates that Muhammad said: "Convey to other persons none of my words, except those ye know of a surety. Verily he who represents my words wrongly shall find a place for himself in the fire."

But notwithstanding the severe warning given by their Prophet, it is admitted by all Muslim scholars that very many spurious traditions have been handed down. Abu Da'ud received only four thousand eight-hundred traditions out of five-hundred thousand, and even in this careful selection, he states, that he has given "those which seem to be authentic and those which are nearly so." (Vide Ibn Khalikan, vol. I. P. 590).

Out of forty thousand persons who have been instrumental in handing down traditions, al Bukhari only acknowledges two thousand as reliable authorities.

In consequence of the unreliable character of the Traditions, the following canons have been framed for the reception or rejection (*vide* Nukhbatu 'l-Faqr, by Shaikh Shihabu 'd-Din Ahmad, ed. by Captain N. Lees): -

I. With reference to the character of those who have handed down the tradition:

(1) *Hadisu 's-Sahih*, a *genuine* tradition, is one which has been handed down by truly pious persons who have been distinguished for their integrity.

(2) *Hadisu 'l-Hasan*, a *mediocre* tradition, is one the narrators of which do not approach in moral excellence to those of the *Sahih* class.

(3) *Hadisu 'z-Za'if*, a *weak* tradition, is one whose narrators are of questionable authority.

The disputed claims of narrators to these three classes have proved a fruitful source of learned discussion, and very numerous are the works written upon the subject.

II. With reference to the original relators of the Hadis:

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(1) *Hadisu 'l-Marfu'*, an *exalted* tradition is a saying, or an

act, related or performed by the Prophet himself and handed down in a tradition.

(2) *Hadisu 'l-Mauquf*, a *restricted* tradition, is a saying or an act related or performed by one of the *ashab*, or Companions of the Prophet.

(3) *Hadisu 'l-Maqtu*, an *intersected* tradition is a saying or an act related or performed by one of the *Tabi'un*, or those who conversed with the Companions of the Prophet.

III. With reference to the links in the chain of the narrators of the tradition,

Ahadis is either *Muttasil*, connected, or *Munqati'* disconnected. If the chain of narrators is complete from the time of the first utterance of the saying or performance of the act recorded to the time that it was written down by the collector of traditions, it is *Muttasil*; but if the chain of narrators is incomplete, it is *Munqati'*.

IV. With reference to the manner in which the tradition has been narrated, and transmitted down from the first: -

(1) *Hadisu 'l-Mutawatir*, an *undoubted* tradition, is one which is handed down by very many distinct chains of narrators, and which has been always accepted as authentic and genuine, no doubt ever having been raised against it. The learned doctors say there are only five such traditions: but the exact number is disputed.

(2) *Hadisu 'l-mashhur*, a *well-known* tradition, is one which has been handed down by at least three distinct lines of narrators. It is called also *Mustafiz*, diffused. It is also used for a tradition which was at first recorded by one person, or a few individuals, and afterwards became a popular tradition.

(3) *Hadisu 'l-'Aziz*, a *rare* tradition, is one related by only two lines of narrators.

(4) *Hadisu 'l-Gharib*, a *poor* tradition, is one related by only one line of narrators.

(5) *Khabaru 'l-Wahid*, a *single* saying, is a term also used for a tradition related by one person and handed down by one line of narrators. It is a disputed point whether a *Khabar Wahid* can form the basis of Muslim doctrine.

(6) *Hadisu 'l-Mursal* (lit. "a tradition let loose") is a tradition which any collector of traditions, such as al-Bukhari and others, records with the assertion, "*The Apostle of God said.*"

(7) *Riwayah*, is a Hadis which commences with the words "*it is related*" without the authority being given.

(8) *Hadisu 'l-Mauzu'*, an *invented* tradition, is one the

untruth of which is beyond dispute.

The following is a specimen of a *hadis*, as given in the collection of at-Tirmizi, which will exemplify the way in which a tradition is recorded:

"Abu Kuraib said to us (*haddasa-na*) that Ibrahim ibn Yusuf ibn Abi Ishaq said to us (*haddasa-na*), from (*'an*) his father, from (*'an*) Abu Ishaq, from (*'an*) Tulata ibn Musarif, that he said, I have heard (*sami'tu*), from 'Abdu 'r-Rahman ibn Ausajah, that he said (*yaqulu*), I have heard (*sami'tu*) from Bara ibn 'Azib that he said (*yaqulu*) I have heard (*sami'tu*) that the Prophet said, Whoever shall give in charity a milch cow, or silver, or a leathern bottle of water, it shall be equal to the freeing of a slave."

The Honourable Syed Ahmed Khan Bahadur, C.S.I., an educated Muhammadan gentleman, in an Essay on Mohammedan Traditions, gives the following information

The Style of Composition employed in the imparting of a Tradition.

For the purpose of expressing how a tradition had been communicated from one person to another, certain introductory verbal forms were selected by duly qualified persons, and it was incumbent upon every one about to narrate a tradition, to commence by that particular form appropriated to the said tradition, and this was done with the view of securing for each tradition the quantum of credit to which it might be justly entitled.

These introductory verbal forms are as follow: (1) "He said to me"; (2) "I heard him saying"; (3) "He told me"; (4) "He related to me"; (5) "He informed me"; (6) "He informed me"; (7) "From."

The first four introductory forms were to be used only in the case of an original narrator communicating the very words of the tradition to the next one below him. The fifth and sixth introductory verbal forms were used when a narrator inquired of the narrator immediately above him whether such or such a fact, or circumstance, was or was not correct. The last form is not sufficiently explicit, and the consequence is that it cannot be decided to which of the two persons the tradition related belongs, so that unless other facts be brought to bear upon it, it cannot be satisfactorily proved whether there be any other persons, one, or more than one, intermediary between the two narrators. As to any external facts that might prove what was required to be known, the learned are divided in their opinions.

First: If it be known of a certainty that the narrator is not notorious for fraudulently omitting the names of other parties forming links in the chain of narration, and

who also lived at such a time and in such a locality that it was possible, although not proved, that they visited each other, then it might be taken for granted that there were no other narrators intermediary between these two.

Secondly: Other learned authorities add that it must be proved that they visited each other, at least once in their life-time.

Thirdly: Others assert that it must be proved that they remained together for such a time as would be sufficient to enable them to learn the tradition, one from the other.

Fourthly: Some hold that it must be proved that one of them really learned the tradition from the other.

Degree of Authenticity of the Narrators as Judged by their Acquirements

The associates of the Prophet, and those persons who lived immediately after them, used to relate, with the exception of the Qur'an, the sense of the Prophet's words in their own language, unless they had to use some phrases containing prayers, or when they had to point out to others the very words of the Prophet. It is natural to suppose that deeply-learned persons would themselves understand and deliver to others the sense of the sayings better than persons of inferior parts, and therefore narrators have been divided into seven grades.

First: Persons highly conspicuous for their learning and legal acquirements, as well as for their retentive memory. Such persons are distinguished by the title of *A'immatu 'l-Hadis*, that is "Leaders in hadis."

Second: Persons who, as to their knowledge, take rank after the first, and who but very rarely committed any mistake.

Third: Persons who have made alterations in the pure religion of the Prophet, without carrying them to extremes by prejudice, but respecting whose integrity and honesty there is no doubt.

Fourth: Persons respecting whom nothing is known.

Fifth: Persons who have made alterations in the pure religion of the Prophet, and, actuated by prejudice, have carried them to extremes.

Sixth: Persons who are pertinaciously skeptical, and have not a retentive memory.

Seventh: Persons who are notorious for inventing spurious traditions. Learned divines are of opinion that the traditions related by persons of the first three classes should be accepted as true, according to their respective merits, and also that traditions related by persons coming under the three last classes should be, at once, entirely rejected; and that the traditions related by persons of the

fourth class, should be passed over unnoticed so long as the narrator remained unknown

Causes of Difference among Traditions

We should not be justified in concluding that whenever a difference is met with in traditions, these latter are nothing more than so many mere inventions and fabrications of the narrators, since, besides the fabrication of hadis, there are also other natural causes which might occasion such differences; and we shall now consider those natural causes which produce such variety among hadis.

(1) A misunderstanding of the real sense of the saying of the Prophet.

(2) Difference of the opinions of two narrators in understanding the true sense of the Prophet's saying.

(3) Inability to enunciate clearly the sense of the Prophet's saying.

(4) Failure of memory on the part of the narrator -- in consequence of which he either left out some portion or portions of the Prophet's saying, or mixed up together the meanings of two different hadis.

(5) Explanation of any portion of the hadis given by the narrator, with the intention of its being easily understood by the party hearing it, but unfortunately mistaken by the latter for an actual portion of the hadis itself.

(6) Quotations of certain of the Prophet's words by the narrator, for the purpose of supporting his own narration, while the hearers of the narration erroneously took the whole of it as being the Prophet's own words.

(7) Traditions borrowed from the Jews erroneously taken to be the words of the Prophet, and the difference existing between such Jewish traditions was thus transferred to those of the Muhammadans. The stories of ancient persons and early prophets, with which our histories and commentaries are filled, are all derived from these sources.

(8) The difference which is naturally caused in the continual transmission of a tradition by oral communication, as it has been in the case of traditions having miracles for their subject-matter.

(9) The various states and circumstances in which the different narrators saw the Prophet.

Apocryphal Hadis

There exists no doubt respecting the circumstance of certain persons having fabricated some hadis in the Prophet's name. Those who perpetrated so impudent a forgery were men of the following descriptions :-

(1) Persons desirous of introducing some praiseworthy custom among the public, forged hadis in order to secure success. Such fabrication is restricted exclusively to those hadis which treat of the advantages and benefits which reading the Qur'an and praying procure to any one, both in this world and the next; which show how reciting passages from the Qur'an cures every disease, etc.: the real object of such frauds being to lead the public into the habit of reading the Qur'an and of praying. According to our religion, the perpetrators of such frauds, or of any others, stand in the list of sinners.

(2) Preachers, with a view of collecting large congregations around them, and of amusing their hearers, invented many traditions, such traditions being only those which describe the state and condition of paradise and of hell, as well as the state and condition of the soul after death, etc., in order to awaken the fear of God's wrath and the hope of salvation.

(3) Those persons who made alterations in the religion of the Prophet, and who, urged by their prejudices, carried the same to extremes, and who, for the purpose of successfully confronting their controversial antagonists, forged such traditions in order to favour their own interested views.

(4) Unbelievers who maliciously coined and circulated spurious hadis. Learned men, however, have greatly exerted themselves in order to discover such fabricated traditions, and have written many works upon the subject, laying down rules for ascertaining false traditions and for distinguishing them from genuine ones.

The modes of procedure were as follows: Such persons examined the very words employed in such traditions, as well as their style of composition; they compared the contents of each hadis with the commands and injunctions contained in the Qur'an, with those religious doctrines and dogmas that have been deduced from the Qur'an, and with those hadis which have been

proved to be genuine; they investigated the nature of the import of such traditions, as to whether it was unreasonable, improbable, or impossible.

It will, therefore, be evident that the hadis considered as genuine by Muhammadans must indispensably possess the following characters: The narrator must have plainly and distinctly mentioned that such and such a thing was either said or done by the Prophet; the chain of narrators from the last link up to the Prophet, must be unbroken; the subject related must have come under the actual ken of its first narrators; every one of the narrators, from the last up to the Prophet, must have been persons conspicuous for their piety, virtue, and honesty; every narrator must have received more than one hadis from the narrator immediately preceding him; every one of the narrators must be conspicuous for his learning, so that he might be safely presumed to be competent both to understand correctly, and faithfully deliver to others, the sense of the tradition; the import of the tradition must not be contrary to the injunctions contained in the Qur'an, or to the religious doctrines deduced from that Book, or to the traditions proved to be correct; and the nature of the import of the tradition must not be such as persons might hesitate in accepting.

Any tradition thus proved genuine can be made the basis of any religious doctrine; but notwithstanding this, another objection may be raised against it, which is that this tradition is the statement of one person only, and therefore, cannot, properly, be believed in implicitly. For obviating this, three grades have been again formed of the hadis proved as genuine. These three grades are the following: *Mutawatir*, *Mashhur* and *Khabar-i-Ahad*.

Mutawatir is an appellation given to those hadis only that have always been, from the time of the Prophet, ever afterwards recognized and accepted by every associate of the Prophet, and every learned individual, as authentic and genuine, and to which no one has raised any objection. All learned Muhammadan divines of every period have declared that the Qur'an only is the Hadis *Mutawatir*; but some doctors have declared certain other hadis also to be *Mutawatir*, the number, however, of such hadis not exceeding five. Such are the traditions that are implicitly believed and ought to be religiously observed.

Mashhur is a title given to those traditions that, in every age, have been believed to be genuine, by some learned persons. These are the traditions which are found recorded in the best works that treat of them, and, having been generally accepted as genuine, form the nucleus of some of the Muslim doctrines.

Khabar-i-Ahad (or hadis related by one person), is an appellation given to traditions that do not possess

any of the qualities belonging to the traditions of the first two grades. Opinions of the learned are divided whether or not they can form the basis of any religious doctrine.

Persons who undertook the task of collecting traditions had neither time nor opportunity for examining and investigating all the above particulars, and some of them collected together whatsoever came under their notice, while others collected only those whose narrators were acknowledged to be trustworthy and honest persons, leaving entirely upon their readers the task of investigating and examining all the above-mentioned particulars, as well as of deciding their comparative merits, their genuineness, and the quantum of credit due to them.

There is some difference of opinion as to who first attempted to collect the traditions, and to compile them in a book. Some say 'Abdu 'l-Malik ibn Junaij of Makkah, who died A.H. 160, whilst others assert that the collection, which is still extant, by the Imam Malik, who died A.H. 179, was the first collection. The work by Imam Malik is still held in very great esteem, and although not generally included among the standard *six*, it is believed by many to be the source from whence a great portion of their materials are derived.

The following are the *Sihahu 's-Sittah*, or "six correct" books, received by Sunni Muslims: -

- (1) Muhammad Ismail *al-Bukhari*, A.H. 256.
- (2) *Muslim* ibnu 'l-Hajjaj, A.H. 261.
- (3) Abu 'Isa Muhammad, at-*Tirmizi*, A.H. 279.
- (4) Abu Da'ud as-Sajjistani, A.H. 275.
- (5) Abu 'Abdi 'r-Rahman *an-Nasai*, A.H. 303.
- (6) Abu 'Abdi 'llah Muhammad *Ibn Majah*, A.H. 273.

According to the *Ithafu 'n-Nubala*, there are as many as 1,465 collections of traditions in existence, although the six already recorded are the more generally used amongst the Sunnis.

It is often stated by European writers that the Shi'ahs reject the Traditions. This is not correct. The Sunnis arrogate to themselves the title of Traditionists; but the Shi'ahs, although they do not accept the collections of traditions as made by the Sunnis, receive *five* collections of Ahadis, upon which their system of law, both civil and religious, is founded.

- (1) The *Kafi*, by Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Ya'qub, A.H. 329.

- (2) The *Man-la-yastahzirahu 'l-Faqih*, by Shaikh 'Ali, A.H. 381.

- (3) The *Tahzib*, by Shaikh Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn Husain, A.H. 466.

- (4) The *Istibsar*, by the same author.

- (5) The *Nahju 'l-Balaghah*, by Saiyid ar-Razi, A.H. 406.

There are many stories which illustrate the importance the Companions of the Prophet attached to Sunnah. The Khalifah 'Umar looked towards the black stone at Makkah, and said, "By God, I know that thou art only a stone, and canst grant no benefit, canst do no harm. If I had not known that the Prophet kissed thee, I would not have done so, but on account of that I do it." Abdu 'llah ibn 'Umar was seen riding his camel round and round a certain place. In answer to an inquiry as to his reason for so doing, he said: "I know not, only I have seen the Prophet do so here." Ahmad ibn Hanbal is said to have been appointed on account of the care with which he observed the Sunnah. One day when sitting in an assembly, he alone of all present observed some formal custom authorized by the practice of the Prophet. Gabriel at once appeared and informed him that now, and on account of his act, he was appointed an Imam. And on another occasion it is said this great traditionist would not even eat water-melons, because although he knew the Prophet ate them, he could not learn whether he ate them with or without the rind, or whether he broke, bit or cut them: and he forbade a woman, who questioned him about the propriety of the act, to spin by the light of torches passing in the streets by night, because the Prophet had not mentioned that it was lawful to do so.