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ISLAM

THE STRAIGHT PATH

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thousands of traditions, covering a broad spectrum of diverse topics. Some traditions were authentic, others spurious, but all were capable of sustaining multiple interpretations and norms for Muslim life. Similarly, legal scholars, however much revealed texts served as their reference point, also relied on their intellects and insights and borrowed from the wisdom of their past and the present, customary law as well as Byzantine and Jewish laws.

Hadith scholars, reacting to what they regarded as the dangerous use of personal interpretation or opinion by jurists, sought to limit and circumscribe reason, insisting that Prophetic traditions alone should be employed to corroborate or elaborate Quranic teachings. Muslims, they believed, were to follow God's teaching as revealed in the Quran and the example of Muhammad, not to interpret or create supplementary doctrines and practices.

Early Islamic theological schools struggled over the relationship of reason to revelation both among themselves and in response to the emergence of Muslim philosophers, many of whom were strongly influenced by Greek philosophy. And finally, the Sufis, reacting to the legalism of the Sharia-minded and the intellectual debates of theologians and philosophers, sought to experience and live in the immediacy of God's presence and love. The tensions between reason and revelation, legalism and spirituality, unity and diversity have continued to be played out down to the present.

While the Five Pillars and the Sharia remain the common basis of faith and practice for all Muslims, at the same time Islam incorporated a variety of beliefs and activities that grew out of religious and historical experience and the needs of specific Muslim communities. The inherent unity of faith, implicit in statements like "one God, one Book, one [final] Prophet," should not deter one from appreciating the rich diversity that has characterized the religious (legal, theological, and devotional) life of the Islamic community.

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Modern Interpretations of Islam

Though the sultanate period had marked a new and somewhat different beginning after the fall of Baghdad, it began to fall apart by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Political disintegration and social and moral decline once more gripped much of the Muslim world. The internal breakdown of Muslim society was exacerbated by the growing threat from European presence and imperialist designs. Many concerned Muslims and Western observers at that time would have agreed that Islam was a spent force, helpless before the military and political cadres of Europe and rendered religiously impotent by the superstitious and fatalistic tendencies that had infected much of popular Islamic belief and practice. Yet, these internal and external threats to the life of the community proved once again to be stimuli for religious revival and reform. Premodern revivalist movements rose up in the eighteenth century to address the social and moral decline, while the nineteenth and twentieth centuries produced the Islamic modernist movement and Islamic societies like the Muslim Brotherhood, which offered Islamic responses to the challenges of European colonialism and modernization. These movements not only contributed to the revitalization of Islam in their own times, but also left a legacy that has informed much of the temper and mood of contemporary Islam. Understanding the background and context of revival and reform, its leadership, and their interpretations of Islam is essential for an appreciation of Islam's dynamism and diversity.

From Imperial Islam to Islamic Revivalism

The power, prosperity, and dynamic expansionism of imperial Islam had seriously declined by the eighteenth century. Military revolts and

reversals, the decline of a strong central authority, and economic setbacks affected by European competition in trade and manufacturing proved costly. For many of the religiously minded, the causes for this political, military, and economic breakdown were to be found in the spiritual and moral decay that afflicted the community of believers. They believed that the fundamental failure of the community resulted from its departure from true Islam; its revitalization could only come from a return to the straight path of Islam. This call for a moral reconstruction of society did not occur in a vacuum. During the sultanate period, many of the nonofficial *ulama* had concluded that a religious renewal was desirable. This sentiment had an international dimension due to the contacts and exchanges that took place among those scholars who had traveled extensively in their search for knowledge and studied at major Islamic centers of piety and learning in Mecca, Medina, and Cairo (al-Azhar University). At the same time, a new wave of Neo-Sufism arose that sought to restrain and purify the excesses of pantheism and eclecticism that had infected Sufism. Influenced by the thought of men like al-Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyya, and Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi, it reemphasized the importance of divine transcendence and the primacy of the Sharia.[48] These reformist tendencies grew and multiplied with astounding vitality during the eighteenth century, both because the sociohistorical conditions were ripe for reform and because the calls for religious renewal occurred within a religious tradition that had strong revivalist precedents and tendencies.

Revivalism in Islam

From its earliest days, Islam possessed a tradition of revival and reform. Muslims had been quick to respond to what they regarded as the compromising of faith and practice: Kharijite secession, Shii revolts, the development of Islamic law, and Sufism. In succeeding centuries, a rich revivalist tradition expressed itself in a variety of concepts and beliefs, in the lives and teachings of individual reformers, and in the activities of a host of movements.

The concepts of renewal (*tajdid*) and reform (*islah*) are fundamental components of Islam's worldview, rooted in the Quran and the Sunna of the Prophet.[49] Both concepts involve a call for a return to the fundamentals of Islam (the Quran and Sunna). *Islah* is a Quranic term (7:170; 11:117; 28:19) used to describe the reform preached and undertaken by the prophets when they warned their sinful communities and called on them to return to God's path by realigning their lives, as

individuals and as a community, within the norms of the Sharia. This Quranic mandate, epitomized in the lives and preaching of the prophets, especially that of Muhammad, coupled with God's command to enjoin good and prohibit evil (3:104, 110), provides the time-honored rationale for Islamic reformism, however diverse its manifestations in history.

> In so far as it is on the one hand an individual or collective effort to define Islam solely in relation to its authentic sources (i.e. the Kuran and the Sunna of the Prophet) and on the other an attempt to work towards a situation in which the lives of Muslims, in personal and social terms, really would conform to the norms and values of that religion, *islah* is a permanent feature in the religious and cultural history of Islam.[50]

Tajdid is based on a tradition of the Prophet: "God will send to this *umma* [the Muslim community] at the head of each century those who will renew its faith for it."[51] The renewer (*mujaddid*) of Islam is believed to be sent at the beginning of each century to restore true Islamic practice and thus regenerate a community that tends, over time, to wander from the straight path. The two major aspects of this process are first, a return to the ideal pattern revealed in the Quran and Sunna; and second, the right to practice *ijtihad*, to interpret the sources of Islam. Implicit in renewal is: (1) the belief that the righteous community established and guided by the Prophet at Medina already possesses the norm; (2) the removal of foreign (un-Islamic) historical accretions or unwarranted innovations (*bida*) that have infiltrated and corrupted community life; and (3) a critique of established institutions, in particular the religious establishment's interpretation of Islam. Despite the general tendency in Sunni Islam after the tenth century to follow (*taqlid*) the consensus of the community, great renewers or revivalists like al-Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyya, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and Shah Wali Allah claimed the right to function as *mujtahids*, practitioners of *ijtihad*, and thus to reinterpret Islam in order to purify and revitalize their societies. Both Sufi excesses and prevailing *ulama* interpretations of Islamic law and belief were to be corrected by subordination to pristine Islam. In contrast to the Islamic modernist movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the purpose of reinterpretation (*ijtihad*) was not to accommodate new ideas but to get back to or reappropriate the unique and essentially complete vision of Islam as preserved in its revealed sources. However, Islamic revivalism is not so much an attempt to reestablish the early Islamic community in a literal sense as to reapply the Quran and Sunna rigorously to existing

conditions. Thus, we see its militant, even revolutionary, potential as both a moral and a political force, as witnessed by the wave of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century religiopolitical revivalist movements that swept across the Islamic world from the Sudan to Sumatra. The orientation and diversity of revivalism are demonstrated by the cases of several movements in Arabia, Africa, and India.

Arabia: The Wahhabi Movement

The Wahhabi movement is perhaps the best known of the eighteenth-century revivalist movements. Its significance is due not only to its formative influence on Saudi Arabia but also, and more importantly, to its role as an example for modern revivalism. Its founder, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–92), was trained in law, theology, and Sufism at Mecca and Medina, where he was drawn to the Hanbali school, the strictest of the Sunni law schools, and to the writings of the rigorous revivalist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). Ibn Abd al-Wahhab regarded the condition of his society as little better than that of pre-Islamic Arabia, the *jahiliyya* or period of ignorance, with which he compared it. He was appalled by many of its popular religious practices, such as the veneration of saints and their tombs, which he condemned as pagan superstitions and idolatry, the worst of sins in Islam. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab denounced these beliefs and practices as unwarranted innovations. They compromised the unity of God (Islam's radical or absolute monotheism) and the Islamic community, as evidenced by the tribalism and tribal warfare that had returned to Arabia. Living in the Islamic heartland, the homeland of the Prophet and the site of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, made these conditions all the more reprehensible. The diagnosis of ibn Abd al-Wahhab was similar to that of other revivalists. The political weakness of the community and its moral decline were due to a deviation from the straight path of Islam. Its cure was equally obvious; the task was clear. Muslims must return to true Islamic practice. This could be achieved only by a repetition of Islam's first great reformation, the social and moral revolution led by Muhammad, a return to a community life based strictly on the Quran and the example of Muhammad and the Medinan community.

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab joined with a local tribal chief, Muhammad ibn Saud (d. 1765), and a militant reformist movement was set in motion that would subdue large areas of Arabia. Although commonly referred to as Wahhabi, its self-designation was the Muwahiddun ("unitarians," those who uphold and practice monotheism). Religious zeal and military power were united in a religiopolitical movement that waged holy war with an uncompromising, Kharijite-like commitment that viewed all Muslims who resisted as unbelievers, enemies of God who must be fought. The tribes of Arabia were subdued and united in the name of Islamic egalitarianism; the Wahhabi missionary-warriors referred to themselves as the Ikhwan, or Brotherhood. In contrast to other revivalists, like the Mahdi of the Sudan and the Grand Sanusi of Libya, who reformed Sufism, ibn Abd al-Wahhab totally rejected it. As Muhammad had cleansed the Kaba of its idols, Wahhabi forces destroyed Sufi shrines and tombs. Their iconoclastic zeal against idolatrous shrines led to the destruction of sacred tombs in Mecca and Medina, including those of the Prophet and his companions. In addition, they destroyed the tomb of Husayn at Karbala, a major Shii holy place and pilgrimage center, an act that has never been forgotten by Shii Muslims and has affected their attitude toward the Wahhabi of modern-day Saudi Arabia.

For ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Islam's normative period was the time of Muhammad and the early community. All subsequent, post-Prophetic developments and the time-honored interpretations of the *ulama* and the law schools were subject to review and reevaluation in the light of Islam's fundamental sources. The purpose of *ijtihad* was a return to a purified Islam by weeding out those un-Islamic beliefs and practices that had infiltrated the law and life of Muslims. Because he was in Arabia, ibn Abd al-Wahhab's mode of revivalism was a more literalist recreation of the life and customs of the early Medinan community, that of the pious forefathers. He equated "Arab" and "Islam." This differed somewhat from revivalist movements outside Arabia, where a return to the Quran and Sunna meant reform through the subordination of Muslim life to God's revelation, not simply the appropriation of Arab Islam in toto. It also differed from the process of reinterpretation espoused by the Islamic modernist movement in the next century, which sought to formulate Islamically acceptable solutions for new situations. For ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the Islamic way of life was to be found in its pure, unadulterated form in the seventh-century community.

The Wahhabi movement influenced other revivalists in Africa and India. In addition, its legacy may be found in the state and society of Saudi Arabia and the ideological worldviews of many contemporary Muslims.

African Jihad Movements

A series of jihad revivalist movements led to the establishment of Islamic states such as those of Uthman Dan Fodio in Nigeria (1754–1817), the Grand Sanusi in Libya (1787–1859), and the Mahdi of the Sudan

(1848–85). A distinctive characteristic was its Sufi leadership—reformist, militant, and politically oriented charismatic heads of Sufi orders. Their posture was in striking contrast to the syncretistic, passive, nonworldly image of mystic orders whose missionaries had brought Islam to much of Africa. Although much of the success of African Sufism had been attributed to its openness to cultural synthesis, blending Islam with indigenous African beliefs and practices, reformers now attempted to bring Sufism into conformity with the demands of Islamic law in order to stamp out what they regarded as idolatrous customs that had led to social and moral decline. Sufism was not suppressed but redefined, emphasizing a spirituality that incorporated militant activism with its willingness to fight and die to establish Islamically oriented states and societies. Prayer and political action were joined together in the earthly as well as the heavenly pursuit of the divine.

The Sanusi and Mahdi Movements

Born in Algeria, Muhammad Ali ibn al-Sanusi (1787–1859) or, as he came to be known, the Grand Sanusi, studied in Cairo and Mecca, where he earned a reputation as a scholar of law and *hadith.* He rejected the political fragmentation of Muslims resulting from tribalism and regionalism and reasserted the need for Islamic unity and solidarity. A student in Mecca of Ahmad ibn Idris, the renowned scholar of Prophetic traditions and revivalist Sufi, al-Sanusi followed in the footsteps of this great Moroccan reformer in calling for the purification of Sufism and much of Islamic law, which, he believed, had been distorted by *ulama* interpretation. This and his claim to be a *mujtahid* (an independent interpreter of Islam) alienated him from many of the *ulama* and Sufi leaders. Al-Sanusi moved from Arabia to what is modern-day Libya after the death of his teacher and established the Sanusiyyah brotherhood, a reformist and missionary movement that created a network of settlements across central and western Africa.

The Sanusi program pursued a path of militant activism, consciously emulating the example of Muhammad. It involved the unification of tribal factions in the name of their common Islamic brotherhood and the establishment of Sufi centers, or lodges, which served as places of prayer and instruction as well as of military training and social welfare. They were committed to both the creation of an Islamic state and the spread of Islam. Although not hostile to the outside world, descendants of the Grand Sanusi resisted European colonialism. His grandson led the Sanusi resistance to Italian colonial rule and at independence became King Idris I of Libya.

In contrast to the Grand Sanusi, Muhammad Ahmad (1848–85), the founder of the Mahdiyyah in the Sudan, proclaimed himself Mahdi in 1881. Although Sunni Islam, unlike the Shii, does not have a formal doctrine of the Mahdi, popular lore did accept the notion of a *mahdi* ("divinely guided one"), a messianic figure who will be sent by God to rescue the community from oppression and to restore true Islam and a just society. This eschatological belief should be distinguished from the more specific Shii expectation that the twelfth Imam will return at the end of time as the Mahdi. Unlike the renewer of Islam who claimed the status of *mujtahid* (one who is qualified to interpret Islam), the Sudanese Mahdi claimed to be the divinely appointed and inspired representative of God. He shared with other revivalist leaders the belief that he was reenacting the paradigmatic drama of early Islam—establishing, as the Prophet had done in the seventh century, God's rule on earth. As with Muhammad's victories, the gains of the Mahdi's forces were attributed to divine guidance and interpreted as divine validation of his mission. He established an Islamic community-state, and in common with other reformers, called for the purification of Islam and the unity of Muslims. Accomplishing this mission meant not only reforming Sufism, but also uniting his followers, who, like the Prophet's companions, were called the Ansar, in a struggle against fellow Muslims. Like the early Kharijites, the Mahdi justified waging holy war against other Muslims, in this case the Sudan's Ottoman Egyptian rulers, by declaring them infidels who

> disobeyed the command of His messenger and His Prophet . . . ruled in a manner not in accord with what God had sent . . . altered the Sharia of our master, Muhammad, the messenger of God, and blasphemed against the faith of God.[52]

Alcohol, gambling, music, and prostitution were all denounced as foreign (Ottoman Egyptian) and indigenous, un-Islamic practices that had corrupted Sudanese Islamic society.

When the Mahdist forces finally triumphed over Egyptian forces in 1885, an Islamic state was established in Khartoum, governed by Mahdist religious ideology. The Mahdi had supreme power as God's delegate, and the Sharia was its only law. The Mahdist state, which many regard as the forerunner of the modern Sudan, lasted until 1899.

The Indian Subcontinent

Two men in particular stand out in the premodern era of Muslim India: Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624) and Shah Wali Allah of Delhi

(1702–62). Both provided the foundation for Indian revivalism and were formative influences on modern Indian Muslim thought.

Shah Wali Allah lived during a critical period for Indian Muslims. The power of the Mughal empire was in decline. A Muslim minority community faced not only the disintegration of its political rule, challenged by Hindu and Sikh uprisings, but also the internal disunity of conflicting factions: Sunni and Shii, *hadith* and legal scholars, *ulama* and Sufis. Educated in Mecca and a contemporary of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Wali Allah was also a member of the revivalist-oriented Naqshbandi order. He followed in the footsteps of the great revivalist of seventeenth-century India, Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi. Like Shaykh Ahmad, he asserted the need for Muslims to purge their lives of un-Islamic practices and to reform popular Sufi practices, which he believed were responsible for much of the religious syncretism that threatened the identity, moral fiber, and survival of Indian Islam in its multiconfessional setting. As with other revivalists, the purification and renewal of Islam were contingent on a return to the pristine Sharia, grounded in its two infallible sources, the Quran and Sunna, which encompassed all areas of life. For Wali Allah, the revivification of Muslim society was a prerequisite for the restoration of Mughal power.

The genius of Wali Allah was his method of reconciliation. He eschewed the rigid, confrontative style of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Sirhindi. His surgery was less radical than that of the Wahhabi. Instead of rejecting the current to restore the past, he sought to modify and refashion present belief and practice in light of early Islamic practice. Like Sirhindi, he sought to reform rather than, as the Wahhabi had done, suppress or eradicate Sufism. Sirhindi's condemnation of error as unbelief was offset by Wali Allah's penchant for a synthesis of contending ideas. In reforming Sufism, Sirhindi had enthusiastically declared Ibn al-Arabi an infidel; Wali Allah softened the condemnation. He resolved the contradictions between the ontological monism of Ibn al-Arabi's unity of being, which denied all existence except God's and declared the ultimate unity of God and the universe, and Sirhindi's "unity of experience," which maintained that Ibn al-Arabi's pantheistic union with God was experiential (based on a subjective experience of illumination or ecstasy) rather than an ontological reality (a union with the divine reality). Wali Allah taught that the seemingly contradictory teachings of Ibn al-Arabi and Sirhindi were two different ways of speaking about the same underlying reality. He denied that there was any substantial difference between the two; instead, the problem was one of semantics. As a result, Shah Wali Allah was able to reconcile contending camps within Indian Sufism and to couple this reconciliation with an appeal to Sufi leaders to cleanse their practices of un-Islamic, idolatrous, and antinomian tendencies.

The great legacy of Wali Allah and his major contribution to Islamic modernist thought was his condemnation of blind imitation and his emphasis on reopening the gates of *ijtihad*, the right to reinterpret Islam. As he had used his principle of reconciliation to resolve differences among Sufis and between Sunni and Shii, his teaching regarding *ijtihad* was pivotal to the resolution of a long-standing conflict between jurists and traditionists.

From the tenth century, two opposing trends had developed among the scholars of India. One emphasized strict and exclusive adherence to a particular school of law, and the other opposed this method and instead stressed rigorous following of the clear meaning of the Sunna of the Prophet as found in the accepted compendia of Prophetic traditions (*hadith*). Competition and bitter clashes had become the norm rather than the exception. Wali Allah criticized the partisanship of jurists, which had hardened into a belief that their leaders' interpretations or rulings were infallible and resulted in a rigid doctrine of blind imitation (*taqlid*). He distinguished between blind imitation, which was prohibited, and a more flexible imitation, for those incapable of *ijtihad*, which was subject to change in light of a new understanding of the Quran and Sunna. Wali Allah followed Ibn Taymiyya in calling for the opening of the gates of *ijtihad*, since the rulings of the old jurists were open to correction in light of the Quran and the Sunna. He maintained that the nature of interpretation itself was susceptible to error because of human limitations or because new evidence might arise. In practice, wherever possible, he resolved questions of law by seeking a synthesis of points of agreement among the law schools. However, ultimately he sided with the traditionists, for in doubtful cases he subordinated the fallible opinion of the jurist to Prophetic tradition, since the Sunna of the Prophet, unlike legal opinion, was an infallible source of law.

Shah Wali Allah has often been regarded as the father of modern Indian Islamic thought because of his condemnation of blind imitation of the past and his advocacy of personal interpretation. In this, he opened the door for many reformers who followed, from modernists like Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Iqbal to neorevivalists like Mawlana Abul Ala Mawdudi. While he established the acceptance in principle of the need for reinterpretation and reform, it is important to distinguish his meaning from that of others who later broadened and extended its use. For Wali Allah, as for other premodern revivalists,

the purpose of reinterpretation was not to formulate new answers but to rediscover forgotten guidelines from the past. Thus, when Wali Allah spoke of the use of *ijtihad* to avoid the rigid particularistic following of one school of law, he did so with the objective of obtaining an answer solely from the "purified past," from a Sharia that was complete and final in its Arabian form, although in need of periodic purification from historical accretions by Islamic reformers or revivalists (*mujaddids*).

Wali Allah believed that the restoration of Mughal power, and thus assurance of Muslim rule, was dependent on the social and moral reform of Muslim society. It was Sayyid Ahmad Barelewi (1786–1831), a disciple of Wali Allah's son, who transformed a reformist school of thought into a jihad movement. For Sayyid Ahmad, effective response to the breakup of the Mughal empire required a jihad against the military threat of Sikh armies, and later, the colonial ambitions of the British. Loss of Muslim power meant that India was no longer an Islamic land but an abode of war. Thus, jihad was obligatory.

Sayyid Ahmad combined a program of religious purification with military power to establish an Islamic state based on social justice and equality for its Muslim citizens. He emphasized pristine monotheism and denounced all those practices (Sufi, Shii, and social customs borrowed from Hinduism) that compromised it. Patterning his revivalist movement on the example of Muhammad, he led a group of his followers on pilgrimage to Mecca. At Hudabiyya, the place where Muhammad's followers had sealed a pact to fight the Meccans, Sayyid Ahmad administered an oath of jihad to these new holy warriors for Islam. Revered as a renewer of Islam, he returned to India where, in 1826, he led his holy warriors 3,000 miles to the Northwest Frontier Province (Pakistan) to wage war against Sikh armies that had taken control of the area. Sayyid Ahmad regarded both a holy war against a non-Muslim regime that ruled a predominantly Muslim population and the restoration of Muslim rule as Islamically required and legitimate. After the Muslim warriors defeated the Sikhs at Balakot, they established a religiopolitical state based on Sharia law. Like the early caliphs, Sayyid Ahmad was proclaimed commander of the believers. Although he was killed in battle in 1831, Sayyid Ahmad's movement continued for some years, his followers waging jihad against the British.

Islamic revivalist movements sought to revitalize their societies through a process of moral reconstruction that transformed not only the religious but also the sociopolitical life of their communities. Despite some considerable differences, their strength and legacy included an ideological framework and example that strongly influenced subsequent developments in the history of Islam. This ideological worldview included belief that: (1) the process of renewal requires a reenactment of the first and paradigmatic Islamic revolution or reformation of the Prophet Muhammad; (2) religion is integral to state and society; (3) departure from this norm leads to the fragmentation of the community and a decline in its fortunes; (4) only a purging of un-Islamic behavior and a return to the straight path of Islam, a life governed by Islamic law, can restore the community to its rightful place of ascendancy and power; (5) major causes of Muslim decline are the unchecked cultural syncretism of popular Sufism and the uncritical acceptance of tradition; (6) the reform of Sufism must be accompanied by the practice of *ijtihad*; (7) renewal is the task of both individuals and the community; (8) true believers, like the early Muslims, may need to separate themselves to preserve their faith and form a righteous society or brotherhood; (9) the struggle (jihad) to reassert the rightful place of Islam in society requires moral self-discipline and, where necessary, armed struggle; and (10) those Muslims who resist are no longer to be regarded as Muslim but numbered among the enemies of God.