DIOGENES

Diogenes 226: 84–91
ISSN 0392-1921

Mists and Turbulence in the 'Sunni' Ocean

Youssef Seddik

The concept *Sunna* (سُنّة, with its derivatives 'sunni' and 'sunnism') has in recent times suddenly burst upon the everyday lexicon of Western political, cultural and media discourse. In this environment it stands coupled with another concept with which it is contrasted, or often treated as its diametric opposite, that of Shi'a (شيعة with its derivatives 'shi'ite' and 'shi'ism'). We can date the brusque emergence of these terms into common usage from the time of the Iranian Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Prior to that, it was only in the scholarly discourse of academics and orientalists that any significance was granted to this pairing of terms. Oddly enough, European commentary proved slow to accommodate the sunni/shi'a problematic into its thinking, even at a time when the latter was marking out the political landscape of another Middle Eastern country, Lebanon, through the course of a long civil war, and even though that country was relatively close to Europe and viewed positively from there. The definitive and complete adoption of these two concepts became necessary and unavoidable as a grid for characterising the whole of the Islamic world from the moment when the Iraq war finally alerted the world at large that Saddam Hussein's regime represented above all else an oppression exercised by a sunni minority over a shi'ite majority.

That said, the hitherto exclusively lexical and semantic permutations of the word 'sunna' were already of much greater complexity than those associated with its entry into the various registers of contemporary discourse. Though if one limits oneself to the way this word is used in the founding text of Islam, the Qur'an, one will seek in vain for any multiplicity of meaning, such as it would acquire in later usage. The fact is that in the Qur'an the word 'sunna' has but one meaning, that of 'legal disposition'. This sense applies whether the Qur'an uses the word positively to describe or characterise the way in which God has laid out the various manifestations of His Creation, or whether the same word, used in the singular or the plural (سُنن), is applied polemically to refer to the annulment of the norms, usages and customs of the periods prior to the coming of Islam, as in the verse: 'Say to those who disbelieve, if they desist, then that which is past shall be forgiven to them, and if they return,

Copyright © ICPHS 2010
SAGE: Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore, http://dio.sagepub.com
DOI: 10.1177/0392192110393214

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192110393214 Published online by Cambridge University Press

then the example (سُنَّة) of those of old has already gone' (Surah VIII: 38). When used in a positive sense, 'sunna' has the same conceptual weighting as would later be found in the writings of determinist philosophers, as in the notion of pre-established harmony or theodicy of Leibnitz for example. This is the way the word may be read in numerous verses, such as the following where both positive and polemical senses are present: '. . . so they wait for naught but the way (سُنَّة) of the ancients. But you will find no alteration in God's way (سُنة الله), you will find that God's way does not change' (Surah XXXV: 43).

The slippage of this notion of 'sunna' from its position as a precise and consistent concept in the Qur'an towards multiple meanings began to take place from the time of the prophet himself. He, from the evidence of numerous hadiths, spoke of his personal sunna (سُنتي) and already the word was coming to mean my 'conduct', my 'way', or even more simply my 'mode of living and being'.

If a similar examination is made of the lexical and semantic progression of the term 'chi'a', a similar transformation can easily be observed for this word from the way it is used in the Qur'an to the ideological connotation which is applied to it today. The founding text gives the word chi'a an entirely negative and polemical sense other than when it is used in the neutral sense of 'social group', such as in Surah XXVIII: 15 where, in reference to two protagonists involved in a fight, Moses intervenes in favour of 'the man of his community (شيعته)'. It should be noted here that, in this usage, the word chi'a can indeed be construed as the opposite of sunna but strictly in the sense where that latter means the common acceptance of a law, in this case a divine law, whereas chi'a indicates marginality, self-exclusion from this common acceptance, even rebellion: 'those who become divided in their religion into sects (chi'a), you (the prophet) have no concern for them . . .' (Surah VI: 159). Outside of the 'party of God' which embraces the primary sense of 'sunna' in the Qur'an, all other parties are caught up in the scandal that involves the setting aside of the divine law (sunna): 'Among those who become divided in their religion into sects, behold each rejoices in the party (حزب) he has adopted.'

In the same way that the term sunna developed multiple senses out of its original single sense used in the Qur'an, so the word chi'a would undergo the same process as well, slipping first towards the neutral sense of 'social group' already found in the Qur'an to become later a collective term for everything that is the opposite of the sunna in the ideological sense defined earlier. For it should be noted that those who identify themselves as adherents of what we today call chi'ism never use this term to designate themselves, but do so either through reference to the essential concept of their doctrine, that of imam authority (they are then called إمامية), or by their acknowledgement of a founder figure (جعفرية, إسماعلية, زَيدية, etc).

These days, however, the term 'sunna' seems to be a label for the whole set of behaviours adopted by believers, from simple details of dress or diet to the most elaborate of ritual and cultural attitudes. The daily lifestyle of the prophet is invoked so as to imitate the way he washed, how he lay down to sleep, or 'sat at table', not to mention his ritual gestures during prayer, what he preferred to eat after breaking fasts, his slightest movements over the nights and days of pilgrimage etc.

However, through a study that we believe to be unprecedented, we intend to demonstrate that the Islamic society of a very large city, that of tenth century Baghdad,

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192110393214 Published online by Cambridge University Press

was for a considerable period of time completely disengaged from such obsessive scrupulousness of religious observance, and that the sunna of the 'Messenger of God' which we today interpret in terms of the 'Prophetic Tradition', or simply as 'Tradition' itself, did not overly concern anyone, whether among the anonymous populace of the streets or among the political and intellectual elites.

Before beginning on this demonstration, comment should be made on the work from which we will draw to provide supportive evidence of our contention. It is in fact an imposing opus, written in the most classic and beautiful of Arabic prose and today published in eight volumes (1971, 1999), which we owe to the cadi (Islamic civil judge) al-Muhassin at-Tannukhi (c. 940–994), and of which we have translated extensive extracts under the title of *Brins de Chicane, la vie quotidienne de Bagdad au Xe siecle* (A Judge's Tales: Daily Life in 10th century Baghdad).[1] What we have before us is a large collection of what appear as the dossiers of a *reporter*, in the most modern sense of that term. This moreover is the way the author himself refers to them:

> It is my purpose to collect in this work such stories as are current on men's lips, and which have not hitherto been transferred from the custody of their memories to perpetuation in note-books; matters such as are not usually written down nor placed on record in scrolls; [. . .] It may be that the reader will hold them in low esteem when he finds that they vary from the usual style of narratives and anecdotes, which have their established place in literature and are in the hands of men of letters; especially if he be unaware of the cause which induced me to put them into writing . . . [Margoliouth, p. 1]

This false modesty on the part of the author is paradoxically a guarantee of his credibility. These anecdotes captured live, as it were, seem to be free of any type of self-censorship. The cadi at-Tannukhi, who was a thoroughly scrupulous judge according to all his biographers, proceeded as though drawing up objective statements of fact, summaries of evidence. He however dispenses with any form of earnest commentary and in particular with any degree of judgement, for it is thought that no religious-based penal code had yet been established to pass such judgement on the plethora of transgressions, deviant behaviours and manifestations of impiety that he describes. At that time, though the idea of 'sunna' as the Prophetic Tradition certainly was in existence, present in hadiths, in jurisprudence and in all sorts of general writings, it in no way constrained the body of society and did not prescribe any collective model of proper behaviour. These days, a novel that is somewhat sexually provocative or disrespectful of religion or even of morality might well arouse the ire of the masses and cause riots, whereas many of the stories reported by Tannukhi in his work are quite surprising in terms both of the distance they reveal from the Islamic norm, which at the time was still found essentially in books, as by the nonchalance of the tone and style of the author in reporting them. It is scarcely possible to imagine in any present-day Islamic environment, or more generally any contemporary urban space, a scene such as the following one recorded by the pen of the judge:

> I once found myself, during a time when the Tigris was in flood, opposite a house on the bank of the river which had a fine terrace on which some pretty young women were enjoying themselves. They had taken me as the butt of their jesting, which had finally roused me to annoyance. So I then lay down upon the ground and exhibited my male member. When

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192110393214 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> it had reached the summit of its erection, I began to call out: 'How smooth! How smooth is the asparagus!'
> One of the maidens lifted up her gown to reveal her vulva and exclaimed: 'How warm, straight from the oven, is the white bread!'
> And all the boatmen along the quays set up a most lubricious clamour. (II: 279)

This testimony, drawn from the everyday life of a large Islamic capital city from the tenth century, is really quite astounding. So what might we conjecture about the type of ideas that were circulating in the seclusion of the centres of theological study? In that century, which witnessed the fading of the Abbasid dynasty, the mists that shrouded Islamic practice enveloped both the scholarly elites and the ordinary people. The same author records this equable legitimisation of the consumption of wine on the part of a theologian renowned for his rational approach to thought:

> The experts of the Prophetic Tradition and the Keepers of the Hadith say that no holy word of the Prophet has been authenticated that declares wine to be forbidden, nor is there any which declares it to be permitted.
> That is why Abu Ali Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Jubbai,[2] during a famous lesson in which he concluded that there was no prohibition against wine, asserted that the principle in all things [edible] is the freedom to consume them, unless their harm can be established.
> Therefore, given that reason does not provide proven grounds for the prohibition of wine, and that no pretext for forbidding it resists that objection, it follows that it is permissible to take of it in virtue of the principle that we have just expressed . . . (III: 143).

This distancing from that which widespread belief today holds to be the essence of Islam could, according to other stories recorded, lead a man on the pilgrimage to turn completely aside from his faith and his devotion. According to at-Tannukhi, this was the case of the famous scholar Abu Ma'char al-Balkhi,[3] who was to become one of the greatest of his time, who renounced Islam from simply coming into contact with a great and beautiful library:

> There was in Karkar, on the outskirts of Qofs,[4] a splendid garden surrounding a magnificent palace that belonged to Ali ibn Yahya, son of the astrologer. There was in this palace an immense library which the owner named 'the Storehouse of Wisdom' [. . .]
> One day, Abu Ma'char, arriving from Khorasan while journeying on the great pilgrimage, stopped to lodge in Karkar. At that time he knew nothing of the lore of the stars. This library was revealed to him, and so amazed was he that he decided to remain there, renouncing his intention to fulfil the pilgrimage. And it was there that he learned all of astronomy, expanding the theory of it, and reaching the limits of what may be known of it. This came after his breach with the pilgrimage, with faith and even with Islam itself (IV: 66).

In this tenth century, during which the author cast his eyes and drew his pen over the great capital on the banks of the Twin Rivers and over the great metropolises of the empire, the tensions and antagonisms between several ideological visions of Islam were at their height. The famous controversy initiated by Mu'tazilism over the createdness or uncreatedness of the Qur'an,[5] aroused such passions that the ques-

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192110393214 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tioning of a simple unknown person could give rise to a veritable insurrection, as in this story recorded in '*A Judge's Tales*':

> [. . .] He was arrested and led before Nizar ad-Dabbi, at that time the governor of the city, who cast him in prison.
>
> Ishmael [a theologian] went around the mu'tazilites and brought together more than a thousand of them. Early in the morning, they proceeded all together to the palace of the governor and requested that they be received by him.
>
> In the presence of the governor, Ishmael said:
>
> – May God protect the emir! We have learned that a man has been cast into prison on thy order for having declared that the Qur'an was a created thing; behold, we here before thee number one thousand, and we all say that the Qur'an is a created thing. There are in this city thousands of others who affirm this same thing. Therefore, either shouldst thou imprison us all with our brother, or shouldst thou let him depart with us!
>
> The governor took thought within himself that if he did not agree to their demand he would provoke disorders whose consequences could not be foreseen, and that it would be much wiser to show discretion. So he said:
>
> – We will release him to you.
>
> The man was released and all hastened away . . . (II: 208).

In contrast to this crowd of citizens who had gathered to march in protest and save one of their fellows guilty of having expressed such complex views on the contingency of the word of God, Tannukhi goes on to relate the disturbances fomented by supporters of other doctrines not held by these street mu'tazilites, who were loosely, at the time, followers of what now is called sunnism. It is in the very precinct of the holy sanctuary of Mecca that the author of *A Judge's Tales* brings to life several highly spectacular scenes to show the sacrilegious behaviour of the extreme shi'ite sect of the Qarmatians[6] at the height of its frenzy:

> When Abu Tahir the Qarmatian laid siege to the city [Mecca], he put it to the sack and pillaged the Holy Dwelling, taking down the Black Stone and the portal, and slaying the faithful during their devotions and in the hall of prayer.

The narrator continues his story thus:

> I beheld a man climb on to the roof of the Ka'aba to tear away the guttering. Once up there, he fell and broke his neck. The leader then forbade his men to climb on to the roof and the guttering was not torn away. After a day or two, the agitation subsided.
>
> It befell me, as I was performing the ambulation around the Ka'aba, to meet one of these Qarmatians as, in a state of drunkenness, he was penetrating into the mosque mounted upon his mare. Seized by the desire to urinate, the mare did so in the courtyard of the circumambulation. The man drew his sabre to smite with it any who would risk approaching him. I was within the reach of his arm and took flight. The man caught another man who was standing near to me and slew him.
>
> Then he stood still and began to shout:
>
> – Ye pack of asses! Have ye not said, concerning this Dwelling that 'He who shall enter it shall be safe . . . ' How can one be safe in it, when I have in this moment slain this man?
>
> I hesitated to answer him for fear of being slain in my turn, then choosing to be a martyr I approached and, hard up against him, I seized the reins of his mount and held firm his

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192110393214 Published online by Cambridge University Press

knee by pressing against his flank to prevent him from smiting me with his sabre, saying to him:

– Hearken to what I say!

– Speak!

– God, All-Powerful and Munificent be He, did not signify that all those who penetrated here would be safe, but that it was the task of the people of Mecca to ensure their safety . . .

I said to myself that surely he would slay me. But he turned about and left the mosque without a further word (IV: 166).

In looking over the impressive compilation of these tales of such vividness, the modern reader is left astonished at the tumultuous combination of both religious feeling and practice in everyday life, so unemotionally laid out by the author. Often the bewildered ineptitude of the caliphal or provincial authorities in not knowing how to deal with such tumult seemed to lay grounds for fearing and even announcing the fading of Islam. In several accounts relating the ordeal suffered by the great Sufi Mansur al-Hallaj (857–922), subjected to inquisition then finally put to death after a long period of hesitation by the caliph al-Muqtadir, Tannukhi's chronicles focus a reporter's gaze on the effect of such an event on the populace and on the way in which the latter perceive the religious 'matter'. Tannukhi captures the manner, which is nothing less than 'doctrinal' or 'philosophical', in which a large proportion of the people identified themselves with the person of al-Hallaj and with the ideas that the latter's disciples had preserved, even going so far as to take him for a 'shi'ite':

'Thou art the Master of Time!' That is, the Imam that the imamite shi'ites were awaiting. Others as well 'gave him the name of the Supreme Nomos, which might be given only to the prophet Mohammed, may God bless him and grant him salvation.' Yet others said to him: 'Thou art he that is!' meaning by that that he was no other than God, All-Powerful and Magnified be He ...

The idea of an al-Hallaj who, according to his followers, might be endowed with supernatural powers to harm or cure, was so prevalent among the people that it led the caliph himself to withdraw his sanction for Hallaj's execution granted to his vizir Hamid ibn Abbas.[7] The vizir, faced with the superstitious vacilation of the caliph and his mother, expressed not only his fear of disorder, but, according to Tannukhi's account, warned the ruler that it was Islam itself, the source of the legitimacy of the Messenger of God's caliph, which was in danger of total destruction: '*Commander of the Faithful, declared the vizir, if this man lives, he will overturn the shari'a and, under his influence, the masses will fall into apostasy. The caliph's power will slip away . . .*' (I: 162).

At the end of such a tumultuous era, and following upon a long period of disasters visited upon the Islamic world (in particular the Crusades and the Mongol invasions), the sunna was to take on the identifiably rigorous aspect that marks it today: a rule defining the coercive power of the Islamic faith. On the doctrinal level, it was through drawing upon a veritable theoretical 'pacification' found in the work of Abul Hassan al-Ash'ari (873–935) that the social space would henceforth become regulated by the systematisation of a mode of behaviour, and this under the control of the State. Al-Ash'ari in effect founded his work, and set in train a legitimacy which

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192110393214 Published online by Cambridge University Press

would extend to all his posterity right up to the present, on the basis of a series of successive dreams in which he beheld the prophet charging him personally with everywhere reinvigorating his Tradition (sunna).

Later, from a philosophical point of view, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111), who was called the 'Proof of Islam', would consolidate the theoretical base of a faith which considered as vain any form of thought that was not closely bound to it, and any way of life which was not inscribed in this surety against 'straying from the true path' (الضلال). He set all this out in his major work, *The Revivification of the Sciences of Religion*. A century and a half later, another mighty thinker belonging to that line of saviours of the 'true' religion, as the sunni world considers them today, Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), would complete the task of clearly defining the outlines of Islamic orthodoxy. He was to revive the notion of *hisba*, a type of moral police which would direct what was virtuous and repress what was considered vice, following the prescriptions of a Qur'anic verse which Ibn Taymiyya's interpretation has reduced to the dimensions of an administrative principle.

Youssef Seddik
Tunis
Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

Notes

1. Translator's note: An English translation of Part I of this work was published in 1922 by the Royal Asiatic Society, London, under the title The Table-Talk of a Mesopotamian Judge. The translator was Dr D.S. Margoliouth, who had also established a definitive Arabic text. This work can be accessed on-line at: www.archive.org/stream/tabletalkofmesop00tanu#page/n5/mode/2up. However, there does not appear to have subsequently been undertaken any English translation of the remaining seven parts (or ten altogether, according to Margoliouth, preface p.1). Hence, the English versions included here are secondary renditions of the French translations made by the author of this article, given that they are all except one from further parts of Tannukhi's work.
2. Al-Jubbai (d. 915): leading figure in his time of the Mu'tazalite School in Basra where he had the difficult task of defending the Kalam (the 'theology' of reasoned argument) against the final blows of orthodoxy which would see him delivered up to the hatred of the street and the seraglios. He was the master and trainer of the famous Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari, who would later distance himself from his mu'tazalite masters and fellow scholars in order to operate a false reconciliation of reason and faith, which brought a definitive closure to any attempts to 'reason' religion.
3. Abu Ma'char Ja'far, called al-Balki (788–886): the most illustrious of the Arabo-Islamic astronomers and astrologers, he was the contemporary of the philosopher al-Kindi whom he knew in Baghdad.
4. According to معجم البلدان, *The Dictionary of Countries of Yaqut al-Hamawi* (1179–1229), Qofs was a quarter of Baghdad, famous in the Abbasid era for its taverns, its wines and its places of pleasure and enjoyment.
5. The principal doctrine of the mu'tazilites, for whom the eternal and hence the state of uncreatedness, belong to the Divinity alone. The assertion of this belief had an influence on events throughout the reign of the Abbasid dynasty . . .
6. The Qarmatians were supporters and militants of a very widespread religious and political movement in the Islamic realm who drew their name from that of the movement's founder, Hamdan Qarmat, an Ishmaelite from Khuzestan. They fomented disturbances over nearly a century in most parts of the tottering Abassid empire, firstly in Iraq (871), and more particularly in Bahrein, in the Yemen, the

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192110393214 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Hejaz and in Syria (with their capture of Fatimid Damascus in 970). They went so far as to profane the sanctuary of the Ka'aba in Mecca (930) and carried off the Black Stone which they did not restore until more than twenty years later. Intending to march on Egypt, they were defeated and dispersed by the Fatimid emir al-Mu'izz (972).

7. Hamid ibn al-Abbas: vizir of the 19th Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir, from the year 306 of the Hegira. So mercurial, indecisive and spendthrift was he that the caliph finally appointed a shadow vizir, Ali Ibn 'Isa, before eventually dismissing him and recalling to the position the brilliant Ibn al-Furat, who had long been in disgrace. The latter, at the urgent injunction of his master, seized his predecessor and ordered his assassination.

References

Ahmad, Khurshid (1986) 'Islam's Contribution to International Political Thought', in *L'Islam dans les relations internationales. Actes du IVe Colloque franco-pakistanais (Paris, 14–15 mai 1984)*, pp. 53–66. Aix-en-Provence: Édisud.

Al-Tannukhî, A. (1971) ونشوار المحاضرة وأخبار المذاكرة. Beirut: Dar Sader.

Al- Tannukhî, A. (1999) *Brins de chicane: la vie quotidienne à Bagdad au Xe siècle*, selected extracts, translated from the Arabic, presented and annoted by Youssef Seddik. Arles: Actes Sud-Sindbad.

Armanazi, Najib (1929) *L'Islam et le droit international*. Paris: Picart.

Ben Achour, Yadh (1980) 'Islam et droit international humanitaire', *RICR* 722: 59–69.

Boisard, Marcel A. (1979) *L'Humanisme de l'Islam*. Paris: Albin Michel.

Boisard, Marcel A. (1980) 'On the Probable Influence of Islam on Western Public and International Law', *IJMES* 11(4): 429–450.

Cahen, Claude (1970) *L'Islam. Des origines au début de l'Empire ottoman*. Paris: Bordas.

Cardahi, Choucri (1937) 'La conception et la pratique du droit international privé dans l'Islam', *RCADI* 60: 507–650.

Charnay, Jean-Paul (1986) *L'Islam et la guerre*. Paris: Fayard.

Djaït, Hichem (1986) *Al-Kufa, naissance de la ville islamique*. Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose.

Djaït, Hichem (1989) *La Grande Discorde*. Paris: Gallimard.

Essid, Yacine (1994) A *Critique on the Origins of Islamic Economic Thought*. Leyden: Brill.

Étienne, Bruno (1986) 'Contre le droit international', in: *L'Islam dans les relations internationales. Actes du IVe Colloque franco-pakistanais (Paris, 14–15 mai 1984)*, pp. 103–117. Aix-en-Provence: Édisud.

Flory, Maurice (1986) 'Islam et droit international', in *L'Islam dans les relations internationales. Actes du IVe Colloque franco-pakistanais (Paris, 14–15 mai 1984)*, pp. 47–52. Aix-en-Provence: Édisud.

Laghmani, Slim (1986-1987) 'Le droit des gens est-il nécessairement international?', *RTD* 1986: 209–253 and 1987: 155–232.

Laoust, Henri (1977) *Les schismes dans l'Islam*. Paris: Payot.

Lombard, Maurice (1971) *L'Islam dans sa première grandeur (VIIIe–XIe siècles)*. Paris: Flammarion.

Massignon, Louis (1952) 'Le respect de la personne humaine en Islam et la priorité du droit d'asile sur le devoir de juste guerre', *RICR* 402: 448–468.

Miquel, André (1968) *L'Islam et sa civilisation, VIIe–XXe siècles*. Paris: Armand Colin.

Rabbath, E. (1959) 'La théorie des droits de l'homme dans le droit musulman', *RIDC* 11(4): 672–693.

Rabbath, E. (1950) 'Pour une théorie du droit international musulman', *REDI* 6: 1–23.

Seddik, Y. and Essid, Y. (1998) مالك ابن أنس الموطأ. Tunis: Éditions Médiacom.

Sedillot, L. A. (1984) *Histoire générale des Arabes*. Paris: Éditions d'aujourd'hui.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192110393214 Published online by Cambridge University Press