Among Muslims today, there are three major viewpoints about the nature of the Islamic Tradition, and how we are supposed to act in response to that tradition.

**Viewpoints about Islamic Tradition**

According to the first viewpoint, the Islamic tradition was developed by our pious scholars in the past; they did so under the guidance of and inspiration from Allah (SWT) who had chosen them for this essential task. Further-more, those ‘Ulama were closer to the time of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), and therefore their interpretations hold more weight than modern opinions. We can access the Islamic tradition by learning from an authentic ‘Alim who has received the knowledge of the tradition through an unbroken chain of transmission going back to Prophet Muhammad (SAW). The Islamic tradition is inseparable from the Deen of Islam itself; it is already perfect and there is no need for any change.

According to the second viewpoint, it is a grave mistake to give a central place to the opinions of past ‘Ulama. In fact, this is such a grave mistake that we would be committing shirk if we start obeying the ‘Ulama instead of Allah (SWT) and His Messenger (SAW). The fact is that we are obliged to follow the Qur’an and the Sunnah only, not the Islamic tradition; anyone seeking guidance under any circumstances should simply read the Qur’an and Sunnah, where solutions to all problems have already been given.

According to the third viewpoint, only the Qur’an is the authoritative source for what we are supposed to believe and how we are supposed to behave. The ‘Ulama in the past tried to understand what the Qur’an meant, but they did so in a fragmented and piecemeal manner; hence they couldn’t effectively grasp the spirit and unity of the Qur’an. This means that while the Islamic tradition should be critically studied, it cannot be blindly followed because its dictates do not adequately fulfill the demands of the Qur’an and the needs of contemporary societies. Using proper methods of interpretation, however, modern scholars are in a position to correctly understand the Qur’anic spirit and apply it to contemporary situations. The Islamic tradition needs to be thoroughly overhauled and transformed.

Where do we stand with respect to the Islamic tradition? What is our position in relation to the three common viewpoints mentioned above? As we analyze these three viewpoints, we note that each of them has some truth in it as well as some misunderstanding or error.

**What is “Islamic Tradition”?**

We will start by examining the meaning of “Islamic tradition.” First of all, what do we mean when we use the English word “tradition”? The Merriam-Webster Dictionary gives the following definitions:

1. An inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior (as a religious practice or a social custom);
2. The handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction;
3. Cultural continuity in social attitudes, customs, and institutions;
4. Characteristic manner, method, or style.
These definitions are fairly close to each other, and, taken together, they give us a good picture of how the word “tradition” is used in the English language. The exact meaning of the word “Islamic,” however, is not that easy to grasp; this is because we use this word in many different ways in order to convey many different shades of meanings. We must pause, therefore, and pay more attention to this word.

To begin with, we notice that the denotation of the word “Islamic” is fairly simple because it is used in English as the adjective of the Arabic verbal noun “Islam.” Therefore, we can say that the word “Islamic” means “having to do with the Deen of Islam.” However, there are many different connotations of this word, and it is the variety of these connotations that make things more complex. When people use the word “Islamic” to carry shades of meanings that are quite different from each other without specifying which of the many connotations they have in mind, a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding naturally result.

Consider the following sentences and note how the word “Islamic” is used:

1. “Islamic terrorism has now reached the United States.”
2. “Islamic injunctions require that women should not speak in the mosque.”
3. “The Muslim community in Texas is building another Islamic school.”
4. “There are great monuments of Islamic architecture in India.”

In each of these sentences, the word “Islamic” definitely contains the original denotation, i.e., “having to do with the Deen of Islam.” However, in each of these usages of the word “Islamic,” there is something more, an additional shade of meaning over and above the basic definition. This additional meaning is called connotation.

Unpacking the connotation of key words is very important in figuring out the intention of a writer or speaker. This is because a given word can have one connotation in the mind of the writer or speaker, and quite different connotations in the minds of his/her readers or listeners. If someone says in a Friday sermon that “American Muslims must do jihad” and doesn’t explain further, we can be sure that different segments of the audience will get very different messages, all because of the ambiguity of the word “jihad” resulting from its multiple connotations.

Now, let’s examine the above examples and see the variety of connotations attached to the apparently simple word “Islamic.”

In the first sentence, the word “Islamic” means “having to do with some of the contemporary political movements in the Muslim world that identify themselves and their cause with the Deen of Islam.”

In the second sentence, the word “Islamic” means “having to do with the juridical verdicts of a particular style of interpretation of the Shari’ah that was historically favored by some Muslim scholars as part of their effort to understand and practice the Deen of Islam.”

In the third sentence, the word “Islamic” means “having to do with a particular group of people who identify themselves as Muslims, in relation to the way in which they wish to practice their understanding of the requirements of the Deen of Islam.”

In the fourth sentence, the word “Islamic” means “having to do with the culture and lifestyle of a particular society that existed at a particular period in history, consisting of people some or most of whom identified themselves as Muslims, and who were influenced by the Deen of Islam.”

Some readers may find these lengthy definitions to be mere nitpicking; however, it is important to note that underneath the word “Islamic” there are always a number of hidden assumptions that are usually not explained by the person using the word in written or spoken discourse. More often than not, these assumptions include a positive or negative value judgment; these judgments are usually conveyed to the audience not explicitly but by implication. For example, in the first sentence it is implied that the Deen of Islam has a direct causal relationship to terrorism, and in the second sentence it is implied that there is only one correct interpretation of the Shari’ah. Irrespective of whether these assumptions are correct or incorrect, the point is that they need to be recognized by the audience.

Now, let us go back to the meaning of “Islamic tradition.” First of all, it is obvious that “Islamic tradition” has something to do with Deen of Islam. At the same time, it is equally obvious that “Deen of Islam” is not synonymous with “Islamic tradition.” There is a significant difference between the two.
Most Muslims would accept the following definition of “Islam”: “the Deen based on submission to the divine will, revealed by Allah (SWT) as His final guidance to humanity, in the form of the Qur’an and the living example of Prophet Muhammad (SAW).”

When using the phrase “Islamic tradition,” however, we mean not only the revealed Deen of Islam as defined above, but we also include in our implicit definition all the ways in which this Deen was received, experienced, understood, applied, practiced, developed, and passed along through teaching and imitation by all the countless generations of Muslims who came after the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) had left this world for his eternal abode.

The Development of Islamic Tradition

To further clarify the nature of “Islamic tradition,” we should attempt to answer the following question: How was the divinely revealed Deen of Islam conveyed all the way from the early followers of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in 7th century Arabia to us living in 21st century North America?

There is a gap of fourteen centuries between the revelation of the Deen of Islam and our own times. There are barriers of differences in social context, language, and culture. The Companions (RAA) were the first audience of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), and a great many of them were personally guided and mentored by the Prophet himself. From their generation onwards, however, several developments took place on a constant basis. These developments influenced the way in which the Deen of Islam flowered into what we call the “Islamic tradition.”

First, the number of men and women professing allegiance to the Deen of Islam continuously increased; this happened both through a natural increase in population and through conversion from other religions.

Second, almost all Companions (RAA) were Arabs and they belonged to more-or-less the same social, linguistic, and cultural background. This had given a particular texture and flavor to their experience, understanding, and practice of Islam. Subsequently, the proportion of Arabs in the Muslim Ummah continuously decreased, so that today only 15% of Muslims are Arabs. When non-Arab peoples started to become Muslims, they brought with them a great diversity of historical legacies, social norms, languages, cultures, and customs, etc., all of which influenced, to a lesser or greater extent, the way in which they experienced, understood, and practiced Islam.

Third, these later Muslims (both Arab and non-Arab) experienced social, political, economic, and cultural situations that were increasingly different from those that existed in the time of the original revelation of the Deen of Islam. Consequently, Muslims were continuously faced with the challenge of finding the will of Allah (SWT) under new and previously unknown situations without having the privilege and advantage of simply asking Prophet Muhammad (SAW). By necessity, they looked at the knowledge they had received from the Companions (RAA) and started to preserve, compile, and codify that knowledge in various ways. But that was not all they did. They also started to make their own efforts to understand the Deen of Islam to the best of their abilities in order to apply its teachings to their situations.

The Growth of “Islamic Sciences”

As a result of these three changes, new “Islamic sciences” started to flourish, including Tafsir, Hadith, Kalam, and Fiqh. The science of Tafsir was born out of the necessity to regulate the community’s interpretative needs pertaining to the Qur’an. The science of Hadith was born out of the necessity to critically evaluate oral reports of Prophetic actions and sayings and to standardize their compilation. The science of Kalam was born out of the necessity to rationally formulate the dogmatic aspects of belief in the face of religious polemics among different Muslim sects as well as between Muslims and non-Muslims. The science of Fiqh was born out of the very practical need of standardizing the application of Shari’ah in the personal and public domains of life.

Of course, these sciences were not really new, in the sense that they were already present in their rudimentary forms during the time of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). What happened in the subsequent generations was a great unfolding and blossoming of knowledge in these areas.

Soon, a fifth dimension was added to the four mentioned before, called Tasawwuf. That too represented an actualization of what was already present in the Deen of Islam. As is well known, Tasawwuf was born out of the need for fostering, regulating, and correctly interpreting the spiritual experiences of devout Muslims.

We can see here the historical process through which the revealed Deen of Islam grew into what we now call
“Islamic tradition.” This happened not only through the scholarly efforts of our pious and learned ‘Ulama, but also through the day-to-day activities of countless generations of ordinary Muslim men and women as they went about the business of understanding and following the will of Allah (SWT). If it were not for the sincere efforts of these post-Prophetic generations of Muslims to understand and practice the Deen of Islam, we would not have the amazing breadth, profundity, and richness that we find in our tradition.

As we begin to understand this historical process of the unfolding and growth of Islamic tradition, we can appreciate that this process did not stop at any point during the last fourteen centuries. Moreover, the nature of this process is such that it will never come to an end as long as there are Muslims in the world. Indeed, there were times when developments in the Islamic sciences occurred at a very rapid pace, and there were times when such developments slowed down considerably. However, the overall process of the transmission of this knowledge remained unbroken. Looking at our history, we can say with absolute certainty that there were no breaches or gaps in the continuity of this tradition.

Differences between Islam and Islamic Tradition

The Deen of Islam that was revealed by Allah (SWT) to Prophet Muhammad (SAW), and that was practiced, preached, and taught by him, became “complete” and “perfect” within a short period of 23 years. This has been announced by Allah (SWT) Himself in the Qur’an. It is important to note, however, that when the Deen of Islam was completed and perfected by Allah (SWT), at that moment in history the Islamic tradition was just beginning its long and eventful career.

While the Deen of Islam was given to us by Allah (SWT) in its complete and perfect form, the Islamic tradition is the result of a historical process that, by its very nature, can achieve neither completion nor perfection. The reason for this is the following: While the Deen of Islam was divinely revealed, the Islamic tradition came into being and developed due to the efforts of human beings as they applied themselves to understand and practice that Deen.

The emphasis here is on the difference between what is divine and what is human; what is absolutely certain and what is only relatively certain; what is free from errors and what is open to corrections.

The weakness and fallibility of human nature ensures that the Islamic tradition will always be in a state of growth and self correction, and that it will never reach the completion and perfection that is the privilege of divine revelation only.

We are now in a position to understand the connotation of the word “Islamic” as used in “Islamic tradition.” It means “having to do with the diverse ways in which Muslims receive, preserve, practice, teach, interpret, develop, and transmit the knowledge of those religious sciences that originated from their efforts to understand and practice the Deen of Islam.”

An Important Corollary of the Finality of Prophet-hood

The emphasis on the role of human beings in the historical construction of the Islamic tradition is directly related to our belief in the finality of prophet-hood.

To say that Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is the last messenger and the final prophet sent by Allah (SWT) is to acknowledge that no human being after Prophet Muhammad (SAW) will receive incorruptible communications from Allah (SWT).

The finality of prophet-hood does not mean that Allah (SWT) has stopped communicating with human beings. It is a part of our belief that dreams, inspiration, and other channels of communication between Allah (SWT) and His servants are still open. What it means is that after the death of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) no one can claim any authority based on his/her purported communication with Allah (SWT). To say that “you must follow me, for God has revealed His will to me” is tantamount to claiming the status of a prophet. Even though Shi’i thought has arguably granted that status to the “Imams,” the majority Sunni tradition never gave that position to anyone, nor accepted such a claim as a basis for authority.

While Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was privileged to receive absolutely correct and certain knowledge of what Allah (SWT) wanted, there is no infallibility in matters of Deen in the post-Prophetic period, at least according to Sunni Islam.
This does not mean that after the passing away of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), it is impossible for us to know what Allah (SWT) wants us to do in any particular situation. Of course, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) did leave the Qur'an and his Sunnah for our guidance, which serve precisely this function. Similarly, it is also possible that some pious scholars feel that Allah (SWT) has endowed them with correct knowledge. The point, however, is that infallibility as a social and religious institution does not exist after Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Consequently his followers must exercise their own faculties of reasoning, comprehension, and interpretation as they approach the Qur'an and Sunnah to discover the will of Allah (SWT). To say that this is a thoroughly human process is not to claim that it cannot lead to the truth. It only means that the process is fallible and imperfect; it naturally leads to a variety of opinions and disagreements and, as such, its results are open to criticism and subject to correction.

Of course, Allah (SWT) can, and does, guide those who strive in His path to understand His will. Moreover, Allah (SWT) bestows His approval and reward to anyone who sincerely struggles to understand His will. Yet, the finality of prophethood precludes anyone from claiming that his/her opinions or judgments are absolutely correct representations of divine will.

It is due to the recognition of precisely this fact that our jurists would always add “and Allah knows best” after writing their verdicts. Even when disagreeing with each other, they acknowledged the possibility that they might be wrong and their opponent might be correct, and that all final verdicts rest with Allah (SWT) alone.

We are Part of a Living Tradition

Another point that should be clear from the above definition is that the Islamic tradition is not something that developed exclusively in the past. In other words, it is wrong to claim that the Islamic tradition is to be found only in certain books written during a certain period. The fact is that the Islamic tradition is a living—as compared to a dead—tradition. Living traditions grow, dead traditions do not.

In order to appreciate this fact, let us look at two scientific traditions, one living and the other dead.

In the nineteenth century, many Europeans believed that the little bumps on one's skull indicated one's character and mental faculties. Consequently, a tradition of studying these bumps and interpreting their meaning came into being, called phrenology. This was considered a branch of knowledge and a respectable skill. Today, that belief is dead, and the so-called science of phrenology is dead too. If someone is interested in phrenology today, they will have to study it by exploring nineteenth century texts dealing with this subject. The dead tradition of phrenology exists only in the past.

Compare this with the study of human physiology, which is a living tradition. A person interested in this subject will first study what has been achieved in this tradition so far; he/she will study the history of physiology as a branch of human knowledge. Then he/she must learn how the tradition of human physiology is being practiced today. This will allow the person to join the tradition, do his/her own research, and present new findings, thereby participating in and contributing to the growth of the tradition.

The Islamic tradition is far from dead. It is alive and kicking, and it shows its vitality by growing.

Healthy and Unhealthy Growth

This does not mean, of course, that all growth in a tradition is good and desirable. When some cells of the body start growing haphazardly, beyond any control or regulation, and in a manner that hurts the rest of the body, we call that growth a cancer. Cancer too is a form of growth, but it is a bad growth.

The same is true of the Islamic tradition. At many points in its history, abnormal, uncontrolled, and unregulated growths appeared on the body of the Islamic tradition. Such tumors had to be excised. These kinds of pathologies appear today as well, perhaps with greater frequency since we are living in more toxic environments.

One way to make sure that the Islamic tradition grows in a healthy manner is for more Muslims to acquire the knowledge of how it grew in the past as well as what sort of developments are taking place now. Authentic and reliable authority comes into being when there is a combination of knowledge, sincerity, responsibility, and good judgment. Such authority can help enhance healthy growth of the tradition while checking pathological ones.

Typically, it was our ‘Ulama who had been the custodians of the Islamic tradition and the guardians of its proper
growth. With the collapse of the classical institutions in the wake of European colonialism and the penetration of the Muslim world by Western modernity, we entered a period characterized by a veritable crisis of authority.

This means that old certainties have disappeared and new certainties are difficult to come by. Traditional beliefs, practices, and customs are being constantly challenged and contested. Merely appealing to the precedents of the past no longer provides a safe foundation for authority. Unlike the past, there are simply no agreed upon authorities today whose judgments can be widely experienced as authentic and trustworthy. Due to these upheavals, an increasing number of Muslims are in a situation where they simply cannot follow an established pattern of culture that is safely rooted in their tradition; instead, they are forced to make their own choices. This causes extreme anxiety, for modern culture has no reasonably certain mechanism of providing assurance that one’s choices are in accordance with the will of Allah (SWT).

In chaotic conditions, people scramble for safety. Change is scary, and rapid change is disorienting as well. Most of us find safety in the familiarity of the past, for the present confuses us and the future appears even more uncertain and dangerous. It is tempting, when there is a crisis of authority, to call any growth a cancer. Indeed, the verdicts of kufr are more easily issued today than they have been at any other time in our history. Just as care must be taken to ensure the healthy growth of our tradition, care is also called for so that a normal growth may not be attacked for fear of being malignant. Growth does not stop in times of crisis; in fact, crisis is precisely what stimulates a tradition to grow.

Order is created out of Chaos

We must not be discouraged by the present crisis of authority in our tradition, for Allah (SWT) has not abandoned the Muslim Ummah. Difficult times are trials from Him, and trials are supposed to make us stronger. In our own history, the thirteenth century was simultaneously a time of great upheaval (such as the destruction of Baghdad) as well as a time of unprecedented growth in the tradition (such as the great intellectual production of Ibn Al'Arabi and his disciples). The history of our own tradition gives us reasons for optimism. The Ummah will find its way, and the very chaos that it is now experiencing will become the source of a new order, if Allah (SWT) so wills.

Prophet Muhammad (SAW) reportedly said: “Differences of opinion are a mercy for my community.” Even though this narration is “weak,” the saying itself is true. This is because a tradition grows as a result of disagreements, and it becomes static and stagnant when either its followers become intellectually lazy or when an artificial consensus is imposed without adequate discussion. Diversity in human languages, skin colors, and ethnicities are so many of signs of Allah (SWT). Similarly, differences in perspectives result from the way in which He has created us; these too are signs of His creativity and mercy. It is foolish to run away from the mercy of Allah (SWT).

Disagreements are not to be feared or avoided; they must be welcomed and embraced. When sincere and knowledgeable people disagree among themselves, new and unforeseen solutions emerge. All major growths in the Islamic tradition took place as a result of the creative tension produced by some sort of disagreement. The theology of Al-Ash'ari came into being as a response to the disputes between the Ahl Al-Hadith and the Mu'tazilah. The great works of Al-Ghazali would not have been written had it not been for the tensions among the proponents of philosophy, law, and spirituality.

It was the disagreement among our ‘Ulama in how to correctly understand the will of Allah (SWT) that enriched our tradition and caused it to grow so wonderfully diverse and beautiful.

The Creative Impulse

The contribution of the best of our ‘Ulama to the development of the Islamic tradition was never restricted to receiving knowledge from the past and handing it down to the subsequent generation; a mere transcriber could have done that. Of course, the ‘Ulama would often become the embodiments of what they would teach, thereby guiding people by their pious characters as well, so that people would benefit just by their company. More importantly, the contribution of the ‘Ulama had frequently been creative and innovative in the service of the tradition.

The best and the most well-known of our ‘Ulama were never content with merely receiving and passing along past knowledge. They frequently synthesized, interpreted, and developed that knowledge, thereby making new contributions. The revered authorities of our tradition, such as Imam Al-Tabari, Imam Al-Qurtubi, Imam Abu Hanifa, Shaykh Ibn Al-'Arabi, Imam Ibn Taymiyyah, Imam Al-Ghazali, Imam Bukhari, Shah Wali Allah, etc., were no mere preservers; they were creative geniuses, who broke new ground with their respective works. They were “trail blazers” in the true
sense of this term.

In times of social and political crises, when there are too many drastic changes taking place at too rapid a pace, it is tempting to argue that the tradition needs to be preserved and stabilized and that innovations should be avoided. This argument comes from a sincere desire to prevent cancerous growths. Yet, the best way to ensure that the tradition does not develop abnormal growths is to foster healthy growth, rather than try to stop growth altogether. Growth cannot be stopped in a living tradition; it can only be guided in the right direction.

Where do We Stand?

Let’s go back to the three viewpoints regarding the Islamic tradition that were mentioned earlier. We must formulate our own position only in conversation with these viewpoints.

It is true that, in principle, we are obliged to follow the Qur’an and the Sunnah rather than the subsequent Islamic tradition, but it is also true that our heritage is too valuable to be simply thrown out of the window. For us living in the twenty-first century, the legacy of the Islamic tradition is neither worthless in itself, nor is it outdated in its entirety. We ourselves are part of the Islamic tradition, and, as such, we must approach the Qur’an and Sunnah through the various methods and styles of interpretation that were developed previously. We may seek to improve these methods and styles, and even create new ones, but we cannot reject the earlier efforts altogether. Instead of reinventing the wheel, we must build upon the legacy of the past. We cannot establish authentic authority today by circumventing the achievements of the Islamic tradition in the past.

At the same time, we recognize that the authority of the tradition cannot replace the authority of the Deen of Islam itself. We recognize the relative and fallible nature of the tradition and its openness to correction and growth. Consequently, we acknowledge that there is nothing inherently illegitimate in critically evaluating the tradition, nor in developing new methods and fresh styles of interpretation to approach the Deen of Islam. Of course, some of these new methods and styles will turn out to be less useful than others, but this can only be decided through scholarly discussions.

We advocate going back to the Qur’an and Sunnah, but we also advocate going back to the best practices of our tradition. To reestablish authentic Islamic authority today and overcome the present crisis, we must follow in the footsteps of our great scholars. We must follow them by learning the legacy of the past and by contributing to the healthy growth of our tradition in a responsible manner. Like every generation that came before us, we are at the growing edge of a living tradition.