Neo-Traditional Salafi Qur’an-Sunna Hermeneutics and Its Interpretational Implications

Adis Duderija*
University of Western Australia

Abstract
The purpose of this article is to outline the delineating features of a Qur’an-Sunnah hermeneutic of one of the contemporary Muslim schools of thought, here named Neo-traditional Salafism (NTS). The first section of the article provides a brief discussion of the main representatives of NTS. In the second part NTS is positioned in relation to the broader Islamic tradition. This is done so with respect to the relative status and authenticity of various sources of legal authority in the Islamic tradition and with a special attention given to the concept of Sunna. In the third part of the article NTS’ Sunna hermeneutic is examined more closely and its interpretational implications are noted. The fourth section describes the NTS approach to Qur’anic hermeneutics and its interpretational implications. The author argues that in terms of their methodology of interpretation of the Qur’an-Sunnah NTS is closely related to that of the pre-modern ahl-hadith school of thought as both NTS and ahl-hadith hermeneutic are characterized by a philologically centred interpretational orientation; textual ‘intentionalism’, i.e. the subscription to a voluntaristic view of law, ethics, morality and ontology; the belief in the fixed, stable nature of the meaning of the Qur’anic text residing in totality in the mind of its Originator, the interpretational marginalization of Qur’anic revelatory background; a ‘voluntarist–traditionalist’ view of the relationship between reason and revelation; textual segmentalist approach to the Qur’anic content and the illegitimacy of a hermeneutically privileged aims (maqasid) and social benefit (maslaha) based approach to Qur’anic interpretation.

In the past as well as in the present, a variety of interpretive communities across the Muslim divide have formulated their interpretive approaches (manhaj, sg. manhaj) on the basis of the Qur’an and the Sunna, the primary and most authoritative sources of the Islamic tradition. They have done so often invoking a formula of ‘going back to the Qur’an and Sunna’ which throughout the Muslim historical experience up to, and including, the present times has served as a battleground in terms of whose understanding, definition, nature and scope of these (textual) sources is the most representative of God’s Intent/Will and the Prophet’s embodiment and elaboration of it. This article examines one such interpretative community here termed Neo-traditional Salafi (NTS).

The first section of the article provides a brief discussion of the main representatives of NTS. In the second part NTS is positioned in relation to the broader Islamic tradition. This is done so with respect to the relative status and authenticity of various sources of legal authority in the Islamic tradition and with a special attention given to the concept of Sunna. In the third part of the article NTS’ Sunnah manhaj is examined more closely and its interpretational implications are noted. The fourth section describes the NTS approach to Qur’anic hermeneutics and its interpretational implications. The final fifth section is a succinct summary of the delineating features of NTS Qur’an-Sunna hermeneutic.
The Main Representatives of Neo-traditional Salafism

Neo-traditional Salafi is a contemporary Islamic school of thought. Among the most influential exponents of NTS are contemporary Middle Eastern Muslim scholars Al-Albanee (d. 1999 CE), Bin Baz (d. 1999 CE) and Al-Madkhalee (1931–). Although the majority of the theoreticians behind NTS and its manhaj are of Saudi Arabian background or have lived in the Saudi Kingdom, the proponents of NTS school of thought are well entrenched in many parts of the Muslim clerical (and non-clerical) establishment. Namely, the influence of the NTS Middle Eastern scholars is felt not only across the Middle East but also North Africa, the Indo-Pakistani Subcontinent and, due to easier and faster communications, in major Muslim communities living in the United States, Canada, Australasia and the United Kingdom where their ideological sympathizers have established their own publishing houses and websites. This is where the works of the Middle Eastern NTS scholars are translated into, among others, English. In the western context the NTS scholars include personalities such as Jamal Zarabozo and Dr Bilal Philips. Although the Middle Eastern NTS scholars write exclusively in Arabic their western colleagues write exclusively in Arabic their western colleagues write in English.

NTS Thought in Relation to Islamic Tradition—A Brief Overview

In order to have a better understanding of the delineating features of the NTS Qur’an and Sunna manhaj a brief genealogy of the still ongoing debates over the relative status and authenticity of various sources of legal authority in the Islamic tradition with a special attention to the concept of Sunna is necessary as this will help us position NTS thought into the broader Islamic historical tradition.

Facing numerous political cum sectarian schisms and rapid geographical expansion the nascent Muslim community very early on after the Prophet’s death was faced with the challenge of not only preserving its scripture, the Qur’an, intact but also the legacy of the Prophet of Islam, known as the Sunna, as the scripture’s most authoritative embodiment, elaboration and clarification. During the first three centuries the concept of Sunna was conceptualized in terms of recognized Islamic religious norms and accepted standards of conduct derived from the religious and ethical principles introduced by the Prophet. It was a rather ambiguous, general, not-systematically defined action-behavioural practice of the early Muslim community predominantly formulated, preserved and transmitted either orally or in actu. This concept of Sunna, furthermore, was independent of any written recording and existed in a hermeneutically symbiotic relationship with the Qur’an (Duderija 2009). I refer to this as hadith-independent concept of Sunna.

However, just before the end of the first century of the Islamic calendar2 for several political and religious reasons, an initiative towards a systematic collection and documentation of the events surrounding the Prophet’s life, in a written form of traditions (hadiths), known as talab al-’ilm phenomenon, began to take place. I term this process ‘hadithtification’ of Sunna. By ‘hadithtification’ of Sunna I mean that the written hadith body of knowledge became Sunna’s only vehicle of embodiment and transmission. I employ the same phrase to denote the later developed process of hadith-dependent methodology of derivation and interpretation (i.e. manhaj) of Sunna. This development, in turn, was a part of a larger process of ‘traditionalisation’ of Islamic thought. In a broader sense by ‘traditionalisation’ of Islamic thought I refer to those religious, social and political forces which throughout the latter half of the first and the entire second and third centuries of the Islamic era contributed to:
• the continued growth and proliferation of hadith;
• the increased perceived importance given to hadith at the cost of non-hadith dependent concept of Sunna;
• the absorption of practically and verbally based Sunna into hadith;
• the increased application of hadith in the Qur’an and Sunna sciences such as usul-ud-din (theory of theology), tafsir (exegesis), usul-ul-fiqh (legal theory), usul-as-Sunna (principles of Sunna) and
• the development of hierarchical, interpretational models used in Islamic usul-ul-fiqh that were entirely textually based (i.e. based on Qur’an and hadith texts) and the subsequent devaluing of non-textually based epistemological and methodological tools of Sunna (and Qur’an). These interpretationally marginalized atexual mechanisms included al-aql (reason), ra’y (reason-based opinion) or the notion of Sunna (and the Qur’an) being conceptually coterminous with certain ethical values or principles such as Sunna signifying anything deemed just (al-’adil), righteous (al-salih) or good (al-ma’ruf) in the minds of the people.

As a result of these processes, a shift in understanding of the boundaries of legitimate religious knowledge and its sources (’ilm) took place. For example, prior to the above mentioned process of traditionalization of the Islamic thought and hadithification of Sunna, reason (’aql) and ra’y (reason-based opinion) were considered as constitutive of the concept of ’ilm (legitimate religious knowledge including the Qur’an and the Sunna) and were essentially seen as legitimate, pragmatic tools used in extrapolating law (Hallaq 2005, pp. 42–57). Subsequent to the traditionalization of Islamic thought the legitimacy and scope of ’aql and ra’y gradually started declining leading to their significant interpretational sidelining and, in some cases (e.g. Hanbali school of thought), near complete exclusion from ’ilm in the four schools of thought (madhahib, sg.madhhab) comprising contemporary mainstream Sunni Islam. Some traces of reason as a source of legal authority were to be found in some later developed juristic principals of interpretation such as ‘ijma (consensus of scholars), taqlid3 (madhhab-based legal manhaj), istihsan (juristic preference), istishab (presumption of continuation), istiqra (induction) and qiyas (analogy).

At the beginning of the second century Hijri hadith collections were considered by some section of the Muslim community to be a truer reflection of the Prophet’s legacy (Sunna) than that of other methodologies used by other groups whose concept of Sunna was, epistemologically and methodologically independent of hadith. The former were named ashab al-hadith or ahl-hadith and the latter ahl-ra’y. Ahl-hadith school of thought considered hadith as being the sole and the complete depository of Sunna and the only means of its perpetuation. This hadith-based approach to Sunna came into being out of opposition to the ahl-ra’y concept of the nature and the scope of the Sunna (and by extension to that of the Qur’an itself) and the role of the ‘aql and ra’y in interpreting the Islamic tradition. The ahl-hadith insisted that all law had to be traced back to the Qur’anic text and hadith-based Sunna and that ‘aql and ra’y were to be considered either as illegitimate interpretational tools in entirety or that their use had to be constrained to only those cases in which Qur’an and hadith texts offered no insight at all (Abu Zahra n.d., p. 458).

As a direct consequence of the above described ahl-hadith’s conflation of hadith and Sunna bodies of knowledge, the ahl-hadith-based Qur’anic exegesis/manhaj (tafsir) is characterized by an unflinching epistemological addiction to hadith-based and hadith constrained bodies of knowledge and is known as tafsir bi-l-mathur or the traditionalist, hadith-based exegesis. This tafsir bi-l-mathur is just one of many tafsir categories that exist
in the broader Islamic tradition. Others include theological, literary-rhetorical, mystical, reason/opinion-based (ra’y), literary-philological, shi’a, esoteric, or juristic exegesis.

On the other hand the ahl-ra’y, which later developed into different schools of thought, the madhahib, five of which became and are still recognized as orthodox, retained to varying extents the old hadith independent Qur’an and Sunna manhaj.

The NTS Qur’an-Sunna manhaj is a direct ideational outgrowth and continuation of the above described ahl-hadith manhaj. This is evident in a number of statements of contemporary NTS scholars. For example, Al-Atharee in his book Clarity That The Ahlul-Hadeeth Are The Saved Sect and Victorious Group, is of the view that the ‘truth is found in the creed of the Ahlul-Hadith’ (2003, p. 24). In addition Al-Atharee links only the ahl-hadith group with those who have remained on the path of the righteous predecessors (as-salaf as-salih; Usually referring to the first three generations of Muslims.) following Sunna (2003, p. 29). A similar view is expressed by Al-Madkhalee who states: “The religion of the prophet Muhammad is the narrations”; “the knowledge that is followed is that what contains ‘qalaa haddathana’6 and everything else is whispers from the Shaytaan [The Devil]”; “the knowledge is what contains ‘qalaa haddathana’ and everything else is error and darkness” (2005, pp. 193–4). The same thinking is evident in Al-Albanee’s assertion who restricts the definition of ilm, apart from the Qur’an, only to hadith (in Haddad 2004, p. 136). Bin Baz echoes these views by quoting the words of Al-Bayhaqi (d. 384 A.H. stands for After Hijri, meaning the year according to the Islamic calendar.), a famous Sunni hadith expert who in turn quotes Sufyan Al-Thawri as having said that “The whole of knowledge is knowledge of the narrations (i.e. hadith)” (2004, p. 22).

NTS Sunna Hermeneutics and Its Interpretational Implications

I turn my attention now to discussing the NTS concept of Sunna in more detail. The concept of Sunna according to the NTS school of thought is that defined by the muhaddithun (i.e. people who were involved in compilation, recording, transmission and criticism of hadith.) and some of the jurists, the fuqaha as those statements (qawl), actions (fi’l) and tacit approvals (taqrir) found in the authentic hadith collections. For example, Al-Albanee defines Sunna this way (2003, p. 26). Likewise, Bin Baz in his discussion on the meaning of the concept of Sunna writes that the Sunna is ‘whatever is authentically narrated from Allah’s Messenger’ (2004, p. 6). Another prominent NTS scholar Al-Azami defines Sunna in an identical manner to that of Bin Baz and Al-Albanee (2002, p. 6). Al-Atharee also tells us that Sunna cannot be known through qiyas and that its concept consists only in “attesting the athar without asking how and why” (Al-Atharee 2003, pp. 98–9).

The concept of a sahih hadith, as defined by early classical hadith sciences known as ulum-ul hadith, and the nature and the scope of the concept of Sunna are, thus, used interchangeably in NTS thought. This argument is represented by Al-Atharee (2003, p. 65) with the following statement:

It will not be hidden from one who knows the Book that the usage of the term Ahlus-Sunna is not correct to be used for any of the current sects, except for the Ahlul-Hadeeth, because the hadeeth and the Sunna have come from the Prophet.

Al-Atharee similarly argues that the ahl-hadith are the defenders of Sunna as based on their manhaj (2003, p. 13) To argue for this type of understanding of the nature and the scope of the concept of Sunna, NTS scholars again rely on views of selected authorities from the past such as Ahmed Ibn Hanbal (d. 241 A.H.) who is considered to be a major proponent of ahl-hadith manhaj (Al-Madkhalee 2005). Ibn Hanbal’s approach to the nature and the scope
of the concept of Sunna is clearly demonstrated in his treatise *Tabagatul-Hanabilah* in which he states: “And the Sunna with us are the athar (narrations) of the Prophet” (*wa-s-sunnatu ‘indana atharu resulillah*); “there is no analogical reasoning in the Sunna and examples or likenesses are not to be made for it (*wa laysa fi sunneti qiyas, wa la tudrebu laha al-amthal*)” and “nor is it [Sunna] grasped and comprehended by the intellects or the desires (*wa la tudrebe bi ‘uqaw’li wa la ‘l ahwa*)” (Ibn Hanbal 2003, p. 12). Elsewhere he has reportedly said that an unreliable hadith was dearer to him than the use of reason (Abu Zahra 1965, p. 239).

What are the interpretational implications of this Sunna manhaj?

The canonical collections of hadith literature, the so called *al-kutub al-sitta*, present a picture of the Prophet as having a say on a vast number of issues concerning dogma, law, theology, ethics and morality, even to the extent of laying down rules concerning the most private spheres of an individual’s life. Those who *a priori* uphold the Sunna value of these narrations, such as the proponents of NTS thought, consider nearly all aspects of the Prophet’s behaviour (i.e. ethics and morality) and conduct found in the canonical hadith as having a normative Sunna precedent, thus to be *imitated* by all Muslims as well as, in case of those hadiths with legal implications, implemented by an ‘Islamic state’. This includes more trivial matters such as growing a beard which is at least a fist in length for Muslim men as well as very consequential matters such application of stoning to death for married adulterers all of which are found in *al-kutub al-sitta* (but not the Qur’an).

Therefore, the *hadith-independent* concept of the nature and the scope of Sunna that was current in the formative period of Islamic thought was substituted by a voluminous, written hadith dependent Sunna imbibed with a legal ethos. This process, in turn, distorted and changed the original ethico-religious and behavioural nature and scope of the concept of Sunna and is based upon a number of assumptions.

Firstly, it assumes that the epistemological scope of Sunna is epistemologically dependent upon and constrained by hadith, i.e. that it’s epistemological value is the same as that of each “authentic” hadith and that hadiths are the only depository and the sole vehicle of perpetuation of Sunna. Secondly, it assumes that Sunna is methodologically dependent upon hadith. By methodologically dependent on hadith it is meant that the Sunna compliance (or otherwise) of certain (legal, ethical or theological) practices or principles, is and can only be determined by sifting through numerous narratives reportedly going back to Prophet Muhammad via an authentic chain of narrators (*isnad*). Thirdly, as a corollary to the second premise, coalescing and substituting the nature and the scope of the concept of Sunna with that of Hadith breaks the symbiotic and organic relationship between the concept of Qur’an and Sunna as it existed during the formative period of Islamic thought making the Qur’an increasingly more interpretationally dependent upon the hadith compendia.

A new hadith–based Sunna was seen as something additional to, a necessary exegetical supplement to, and explicator of the Qur’an rather than the other side of the same coin. This function of Sunna was based exactly on this reasoning and was expressed in the well-known maxim in Islamic jurisprudence affirming that the Qur’an’s interpretational need of the Sunna (in form of hadith, its sole means of transmission) is greater than the Sunna’s interpretational need of the Qur’an. Fourthly, Sunna’s function and purpose became increasingly imbibed with a positively legalistic ethos rather than being considered in primarily ethico-religious terms.

All of the above hadith dependent aspects of a NTS Sunna manhaj influenced the epistemologico-methodological parameters within which Qur’anic interpretation could develop. Moreover, because the early concept of Sunna, was primarily conceived in abstract ethico-behavioural and/or religious terms, was reason inclusive and conceptualized
in terms of the broader Qur’anic objectives and purposes (maqasid), it permitted a wider Qur’anic interpretational framework than that championed by NTS scholars (Duderija 2009; Younis 2002).

The Delineating Features of the NTS Qur’an Hermeneutic and Its Interpretational Implications

Prior to proceeding with the discussion of Qur’anic (reading) hermeneutics, which is the task of the following section, few words on the definition of hermeneutics and reading are in order.

Hermeneutics is a study of interpretation theory. In the context of religion it refers to the study of the interpretation of sacred texts, especially texts in the areas of theology and law (Virkler 1981). Reading, put simply, is a process whereby a reader derives meaning from a piece of text. The outcome of this process, termed determinacy of meaning, is governed by the following factors:

- The nature of the reader (previous bodies of knowledge-termed schemata-, gender, experience and personality/character/moral sense/development of the reader, socio-cultural norms governing the society in which s/he lives/lived).
- The (intent of) the author.
- The nature of the text (i.e. context and mechanics of language).

Every time a reader is engaged in the process of reading, these factors contribute to its determinacy. So, put briefly, Qur’anic reading hermeneutics relates to the study of theories of interpretation and understanding of the Qur’an, especially in relation to how meaning is derived and the role of the reader, author (or the author’s intent to be more specific) and the text in this dynamic (El-Fadl 2001).

The first point that needs to be made in respect to the NTS Qur’an reading hermeneutic is its lack of incorporation of the knowledge branches underpinning modern hermeneutics as a broader category such as literary theory, text and textuality and deconstructivism. This is so for two reasons. Firstly, because, as argued above, NTS thought is entirely embedded in a pre-modern episteme of the ahl-hadith manhaj. Secondly, it is a result of the broader aversion of NTS scholars and proponents display toward epistemologies and methodological constructs that originate from modern epistemes and hermeneutics. In other words, the NTS manhaj is characterized by an epistemology that denies the legitimacy of modern hermeneutical methods.

One aspect of the NTS Qur’an manhaj is shrouded in broader interpretational inclination that B. Weiss, a renowned scholar of Islamic law, terms textual ‘intentionalism’. By intentionalism Weiss means a wide-spread interpretational tendency of the NTS (and the majority of the pre-modern Islamic legal scholars) to focus on authorial intent as the object of all interpretation and the belief in principal potential discoverability of the author’s intent (Weiss 1998, p. 53). This implies that the derivation of meaning rests heavily on the side of the author. It also presupposes that the role of the nature of the text itself or that of the reader/interpreter in the overall process of meaning derivation is considerably sidelined.

NTS Qur’an manhaj is also characterized by a philologically centred approach to Qur’anic interpretation. By philologically centred approach to Qur’anic interpretation I mean that various philological sciences and their role in the process of derivation of (Qur’anic) meaning came to be considered as the Qur’an’s most decisive and hermeneutically powerful interpretational tools. This aspect of the NTS Qur’an manhaj was based
on a strong interpretational tendency which assumes that interpretation is largely restricted to observable features of language. It has a strong positivistic foundation and orientation according to which the meaning or the understanding of the Qur’anic text is univocal and objective.

Another delineating feature of the NTS Qur’anic manhaj relates to its view of the nature of language and therefore, the nature of the Qur’anic text. This manifests itself in NTS belief in the ‘uncreatedness’ of the Qur’an and its metaphysical existence prior to the actual event of Revelation. The view is closely linked to the concept of the Qur’anic language and text being operational outside, originating prior to reality and history thus not being subject to interpretation against this background. According to this ‘revelationist’ theory of language, the origin of language is a result of Divine designation (tawfiq) thus its formation is outside the space-time dimension. This view is, based upon an assumption that Divine Speech (goettliche Rede) is not subject to rational, human methods of analysis.

Another characteristic of the NTS manhaj concerns the nature of Revelation or wahy. The pre-modern embedded concept of wahy and the role of the Prophet, its recepient, in it is based on a mechanical, non-symbiotic, independent dynamic between the two, a relationship that posits God as a Speaker (in an anthropomorphic sense) and the Prophet as the God’s loudspeaker whose persona, psychological make up, mind and ‘situatedness’ in history do not affect the nature and the content of Revelation whatsoever.

The interpretational consequences of this approach to the nature and the function of language in interpretation of the Qur’anic text are several. Firstly, it leads to the view of the Qur’anic text as being largely and in essence fixed in meaning (not just in text) and the imposition of Qur’anic interpretational reductionism and uniformity considered to be the norm. Secondly, the ‘uncreatedness’ of the Qur’anic text further reinforces this interpretational method as it places Revelation outside the domain of linguistic/literary criticism and reason. Thirdly, this approach considers the sacred scripture to be on a meta-human epistemological plane.

The above mentioned revelationist theory of language, an ahistorical view of the nature of Qur’anic language and a hermeneutical tendency of intentionalism contributed to the development of a Qur’anic methodology which was premised upon the assumption of a fixed, stable nature of the meaning of the Qur’anic text residing in totality in the mind of its Originator. This propensity was further reinforced and extended to that of the Prophet by the proliferation and subsequent canonisation of the vast hadith-based Sunna literature. Consequently, this NTS Qur’an manhaj does not fully recognize the inherently subjective nature of the reader in the process of determining meaning as well as the essentially subjective nature of the entire reading hermeneutics process. This interpretational trait contributed to the phenomenon of ‘interpretational authoritarianism’ (in opposition to interpretational authoritative) and monopolization of God’s words so strongly evident in NTS manhaj (El-Fadl 2001).

In addition, it also rejects all a priori claims to knowledge of the Islamic law that are outside and are not unequivocally documented in the textual sources of the Qur’an and hadith thereby establishing the primacy of texts and eschewing any extra-textual biases and presuppositions (Jackson 2006).

All of the afore mentioned aspects of the NTS Qur’an manhaj largely resulted in the decontextualisation and hermeneutical marginalization of the Qur’anic revelatory background and the importance it played in the very shaping of the Qur’anic content. This, in turn, also obstructed the process of discerning of its actual character/nature and the essence of its message. Consequently, the notion of the historical embeddedness of the
Qur’anic content was de-emphasized and the interpretational approaches based on a historical approach to the Qur’an were not fully developed. In other words, the interpretational consequences of this NTS Qur’an manhaj vis-à-vis its revelatory context, resulted in an inadequate appreciation of the importance of the socio-cultural milieu and the prevailing norms, customs, beliefs and traditions of pre-Qur’anic Arabia (i.e. the entire pre-Qur’anic worldview) in the understanding of the actual primary purpose and nature/character of the Qur’anic revelation. The interpretational implications of this aspect of the NTS Qur’an manhaj are two-fold. Firstly, it is not capable of interpretationally distinguishing, in a systematic manner, between the universalist and socio-historically contingent elements of the sacred scripture. Secondly, the proponents of the NTS Qur’an interpretation consider the historically contingent elements of the Qur’anic Revelation as part of its universal, meta-historical dimension. This fundamental and principal lack of recognition of the historical dimension of Revelation for the purposes of its actual interpretation results in an interpretational orientation which is unable to break the shackles of the Qur’an’s revelatory historicity in order to free it from the spatio-temporal constrains within which it initially operated. In this context the words of Younis (2002, p. 596) are very instructive:

Most lacking in classical legal hermeneutics was the articulation of context based theory or legal hermeneutics that genuinely read the text both in letter and spirit.

Thus, the NTS Qur’an manhaj cannot uncover its underlying ethos or élan. Finally, as a corollary to the above, the NTS Qur’an manhaj also universalises what could be termed the particularist dimensions of the Qur’an that were contingent upon it being revealed within history.

The NTS manhaj to Qur’anic interpretation does recognize the need for what I term ‘superficial’ or non-comprehensive contextualisation of (certain) Qur’anic verses as evident in their reliance on Qur’anic science of asbab al-nuzul (occasions of revelation), naskh wa mansukh (abrogation and abrogated) as well as their recourse to hadith literature when interpreting the Qur’an. However, this manhaj is problematic in at least two ways. Firstly, in essence, to a large extent it depends upon the hadith bodies of knowledge which are based upon certain methodological and epistemological assumptions. Secondly, the way the content of these Revelation contextualizing reports were employed and the manner in which the purposes of abrogation were conceptualized were such that their full interpretational leverage was, for the reasons outlined above, not fully realized. For example, the Qur’an in 33:59–60 instructs the Prophet to tell his wives, daughters and believing women to cast their outer garments (jilbab) over their persons so that can be recognised as such and not be molested. The tradition records the background behind the ‘occasion of this revelation’ as that of a group of men in who on a number of occasions molested believing women who were waking the streets of Medina. When confronted as to why they did this they responded by saying that they thought these women to be slaves and not free women thus as ‘fair-game’. Now, despite the fact that the Qur’anic verse in question clearly links the purpose and the function of the jilbab to this specific context of a slave-owning society in which sexual abuse by non-Muslim men was normative and in which jilbab signified sexual non-availability of women, because of the NTS superficially contextual manhaj, its intention and purpose was not recognized and the jilbab was considered as being normatively prescribed regardless of the change in context. This view is not restricted to the proponents of NTS manhaj but also the broader madhhab-based Islamic tradition because of the manhaj-based similarities between the two.
Another way of delineating the NTS Qur’an-Sunna manhaj is by examining the dynamic between reason and revelation in its thought. The above described interpretational tendencies in NTS thought are based upon a particular concept of the nature and the scope of the concept of the Qur’an and Sunna in particular. Because of the above discussed NTS hadith-dependent concept of Sunna and its hadith-based methodology of interpretation of the Qur’an, the role of reason in the overall NTS Qur’an manhaj is severely restricted. The reason-based interpretation in NTS Qur’an manhaj functions within the boundaries of the entirely textually based interpretational framework permitting only a derivative use of reason in form of analogy (qiyas). As I will argue below this narrowing of the interpretational scope of reason is interpretationally incapable of going beyond the text and searching for the possible moral trajectories, rationale and/or objectives (maqasid) of the Qur’anic revelation. Weiss terms this interpretational tendency evident in NTS thought as voluntarism. According to him voluntarism permeates the way in which nature of law, ethics, morality and ontology is conceptualized in all pre-modern embedded manahij including what I here term NTS (Weiss 1998).

A subscription to voluntarism has important interpretational implications. Firstly, voluntarism was responsible for infusing the Revelation with a comprehensive legalistic ethos and subsequent hermeneutical marginalization of some of its other dimensions such as those which could be broadly termed ethico-religious in nature. As a corollary voluntarism also implies a legalistic expression of the Will of God which can only be known from commands and prohibitions. This approach renders the law entirely dependent upon a sovereign and unbound divine will which denies any rational element in it as well as views humanity as not being capable of comprehending independently of the help of revelation. An interpretational model premised on voluntarism also assumes that the text includes the complete knowledge and that the role of reason in interpretation of the text is minimal.

Another delineating feature of NTS Qur’an manhaj is what I term textual segmentalism. The traditional ‘authentic’ division of the Qur’an (i.e. mushaf) into a particular sequence of surahs was neither chronologically nor thematically ordered. The nature of the Qur’anic discourse, however, was such that the concepts, ideas and the moral and ethical lessons internal to the Qur’an were dispersed throughout the Scripture and are often repeated. This nature of the Qur’anic discourse has been traced to the specific linguistic-cultural characteristics/requirements of its first recipients to ensure Qur’an’s comprehensibility and optimize the ethico-religious and didactic nature of its message (Achrati 2008).

The NTS Qur’an exegesis mainly adopts a lemma plus comment exegesis, that is, a word for word, verse-by-verse, surah by surah, linear, segmental analysis and commentary of the Qur’anic text. In the Islamic tradition this is known as a tajzi’i or tariqa tahliliyya method which involves a chronological analysis of the mushaf uthmani Qur’anic codex (Al Alma’i 1984, p. 18; Al-Shadr n.d., p. 7–9). This interpretational technique has certain interpretational implications. Several scholars argue that it largely ignored the Qur’an’s thematic coherence and underlying unity of the revelatory message and thereby prevented the generation of a Qur’anic Weltanschauung on its own terms neglecting of the Qur’anic thematic and structural nazm [coherence]. (Abdul-Raof 2003, p. 17; Mir 1986). I refer to this aspect of NTS manhaj as textual segmentalism.

A corollary to this feature of the NTS Qur’an manhaj is the interpretational tendency to form opinions on the basis of particularistic, isolated Qur’anic injunctions, which are then applied generally by being considered universal in nature, regardless of either the
contextual factors which might have ‘occasioned’ them or consideration of other relevant Qur’anic evidence. As noted earlier I refer to this aspect of the NTS Qur’an manhaj as the universalisation of the contingent/particularistic.

All of the so far mentioned delineating features of the NTS Qur’an manhaj inevitably result in a Qur’anic interpretational model which is hermeneutically incapable of conceptualizing, discovering, recognizing—or even distorting—the underlying what in later classical Islamic legal theory became formulated as purposeful nature and the character of the Qur’anic discourse and its objective-based interpretation (maqāsid) whose ultimate interpretational task or goal, is the facilitation of public welfare/common good (known in later classical Islamic legal theory as maslahā mursala). The NTS thought in actual fact considers maqāsid cum maslahā oriented manahij as religiously illegitimate hermeneutical tools.

Therefore, according to this NTS Qur’an-Sunna manhaj, the nature of Qur’an-Sunna teachings was neither seen as essentially nor principally aiming to promote public common good/welfare based on giving interpretational primacy to these considerations over that of the text/nass nor for the Qur’an and Sunna to have underlying objectives (maqāsid) in form of certain ethico-religious values or principles. Instead, like any other atextual source their interpretational force was severely limited in the NTS thought.

Conclusion

Neo-traditional Salafism is a contemporary school of thought whose adherents, in terms of their overall approach to interpretation of the Qur’an and Sunna, are the historical and intellectual followers of the ahl-hadith manhaj. The NTS Qur’an and Sunna manhaj was found to function within a number of interpretational presuppositions. Firstly, the NTS nature and the scope of the concept of Sunna is premised upon its conceptual conflation with the concept of a sahih hadith as developed by the early masters of classical ulum-ul hadith sciences. As I attempted to show this has a number of important interpretational implications not only in relation to the concept of Sunna but also in relation to the NTS Qur’an manhaj. The delineating features of the latter can be characterized as being premised upon a revelationist theory of language, philologically centred interpretational orientation; textual ‘intentionalism’, i.e. the subscription to a voluntaristic view of law, ethics, morality and ontology; the belief in the fixed, stable nature of the meaning of the Qur’anic text residing in totality in the mind of its Originator, the interpretational marginalization of Qur’anic revelatory background; a ‘voluntarist–traditionalist’ view of the relationship between reason and revelation; textual segmentalist approach to the Qur’anic content and the illegitimacy of a maqāsid cum maslahā approach to Qur’anic interpretation.

Short Biography

Adis Duderija’s research interests include the study of Islam from religious/hermeneutical, international relations, social, political and cultural perspectives. He has authored a number of papers published by journals such as Islam and Muslim-Christian Relations, HAWWA, Arab Law Quarterly and Muslim Minority Affairs. He has recently completed his PhD thesis titled “Constructing Normative ‘Believer’ and ‘Muslim Woman’ Concepts: Comparing and Contrasting Neo–Traditional Salafi and Progressive Muslim Methods of Interpretation (Manahij)” and is working on its publication. His current research focuses on religious identity construction among western Muslims as well as issues pertaining to Islamic hermeneutics.
Notes

1 The words hermeneutic, 'methodology of interpretation' and manhaj for the purposes of this article will be used interchangeably.
2 This is known as the Hijri calendar. Year one Hijri marks the time when Prophet Muhammad is said to have emigrated from Mecca, his city of birth, to Medina.
3 Taqlid is a legal tool or method by which a legal scholar belonging to a particular school of thought (madhhab) will, when forming a view on a legal matter, be loyal to the school's already extant legal method and theory in the light of which he will interpret the normative texts, the Qur'an and Sunnah, rather than simply engaging these sources directly. He does so with the hope that his views will be more widely and easily accepted by other legal scholars.
4 Apart from the four Sunni madhhab, which include the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki and Hanbal schools of thought, Sunni Islam recognizes the Jafa'ri school of thought, which belongs to Shi'i Islam, as also orthodox.
5 This hadith-independent concept of Sunna was, for example, evident in the writings of the eighth century madhhab scholars from Iraq such as Abu Yusuf (d. 182/798) who referred to it as al-Sunna al-mahfuza al-ma'rufa, the well established Sunna, or that of the Medinian scholar, Malik ibn Anas (d. 178/795) who referred to it primarily as Sunna madiya'amal.
6 This is a standard formula used in front of the actual content of the hadith implying usually oral transmission of knowledge via a chain of narrators reportedly going back to the Prophet or in some cases the Companions only.
7 Sufyan al-Thawri ibn Said (d. 161 A.H.) was a tabi'i (i.e. belonging to second generation of followers of Muhammad) Islamic scholar, hafiz and jurist, and the founder of the now extinct Thawri madhhab. He was also a hadith compiler.
8 Athaar, generally speaking, is another word for hadith.
9 According to classical hadith sciences, hadiths, in terms of their authenticity, are rated from that of being sound or of highest authenticity termed sahih to that of mawdu’ or fabricated.
10 Literally ‘The Six Books’, referring to what eventually came to be recognized as the six canonical hadith collections in Sunni Islam including those compiled by third century Hijri hadith collectors Bukhari, Muslim, Tirmidhi, Nasa'i, Ibn Majah and Abu Da'ud.
11 A single hadith consists of a text (matn) and a chain of transmitters (isnad) involved in its transmission.
13 Examples of qiyas would be taking the statement of the Prophet that a jurist ought not adjudicate in state of anger since it can affect his judgment adversely or extending the Qur'anic prohibition of wine drinking to other intoxicants or narcotic drugs all of which have detrimental effects on the functioning of the brain.

Works Cited


Further Reading


