

Flexibility within Rigidity: Understanding the Concept of Reform in Islam

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ABSTRACT

The concept of reform is integral to the very fundamentals of Islam. Prophets of God who were sent towards different nations primarily worked as divine representatives of reform their respective communities within. Reform was also at the heart of Prophet Muhammad's (ﷺ) mission which sought to revive Islamic monotheism and reform the then extant Arabian society from prevailing ignorance, socio-moral corruption and idolatry. The primary scriptures of Islam (Quran and Sunnah) have clearly discussed nature and scope of reform for the post-Prophetic times. There upon in the history of Islam after the cessation of institution of prophet-hood, leading Muslim scholars, theologians and Saints actively participated in the pursuit of reform within the backdrop of Prophetic model of reform. This paper thoroughly elaborates the concept of reform in Islam in the primary texts (*nuṣūṣ*) of Islam (*Quran* and *Sunnah*). The genesis of Islamic concepts like *Iṣlāḥ* (reform) and *Tajdīd* (renewal) has been discussed vis-à-vis their linguistic and technical meanings in the Islamic tradition. Besides the approach and understanding of these referential concepts of reform by medieval and modern thinkers have been discussed. Further concept of reform vis-à-vis the reformation movement in Christianity has been discussed in order to showcase the scope and limitations of reform in Islam as compared to drastic reforms initiated by protestant reformers. Lastly, the tools of reform in Islam have been discussed.

Keywords: Continuity, Change, *Iṣlāḥ*, *Tajdīd*, *Ijtihād*, Reform and Revival.

1.1. Introduction

Islam being a revealed religion is comprehensive and holistic in its nature which deals with all aspects of human thought and civilization. Accordingly Islam includes in its holistic teachings both the spiritual and the material facets of human life. Apart from its universal and inclusive nature, Islam in its spirit is among the oldest Semitic religions of the world¹. As per the primary Islamic texts, Islamic belief system is based upon the primordial principles; the first human being on earth being

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Adam, who besides being referred as the first vicegerent (*Khalīfah*) of God on earth was also the first Prophet of God². With the passage of time, innumerable Messengers of God were appointed and sent by God towards different communities with the identical message of Islam, as was earlier propagated by Prophet Adam, but the new messengers who came after Adam were not merely messengers; they also acted as reformers for the erstwhile message that began with Adam. Quran explicitly states to this effect: “God has chosen Adam, Noah and family of Abraham, and the family of Imran as Messengers for people”³. With the passage of time these messages became corrupted or fell in to oblivion, which caused the moral and ethical degradation of the social fabric. Indeed as per Quranic injunction, it is in the nature of man to forget and become weak in his resolve⁴.

The primary task of the Messengers of God therefore was not just to deliver the divine message to their respective communities. The message itself was planned to return that community towards the straight path, the path of truth, which their Lord and Sustainer ordained them to tread. The Prophets and Messengers of God in their respective communities always represented a higher level of ethical, moral and mental consciousness. It was an intrinsic part of their message to amplify their community’s level of consciousness, polish up their moral wit, intensify their resolve and redirect their path till the community reunites with and submits perfectly to its Creator and Sustainer of the world. In simple terms, the Messengers were to deliver their messages and endeavor to return their respective communities, as it were, back to Islam. Although different Messengers were confronting diverse socio-religious conditions, therefore, there seems varying depiction of one common message by different Messengers as per the challenges they were confronting. However, the primary principles of faith were left unaltered, because according to the Islamic tradition, the basic principles of faith including the fundamental belief in the oneness of God (*Tawhīd*)⁵ are indefinite and ubiquitous which can never be altered nor can be reformed with time. Verily, Quran states about the same, “And indeed, We raised a Messenger amongst every people (saying): (O people) Worship Allah and keep away from *Taghut* (i.e., Satan and idol-worship).⁶ At another place Quran states about the same, “And We did not send any Messenger before you (O Muhammad) but We revealed to him (saying): “None has the right to be worshipped but I (Allah)”⁷.

Thereupon the primary job of all the Messengers has been the practical application of the faith of Islam, which revolves around the belief in worship of one God (*Tawḥīd*). As a matter of fact Islam as a religion is based on the idea of the reiteration with in the course of history, of a unique and universal Divine message. A large number of Prophets participated in the transitional process of purifying the tradition and defining the status of the human being down the stream of history as a vice-gerent of God (*Khalīfah*) on earth.

Primarily, the whole discourse of reform in Islam revolves round the scope of what needs to be changed with the changing time and space, and what will remain permanent in Islam which cannot be changed or reformed with the passage of time. In the Islamic tradition, the rules which are immutable and trans-historical are called *Al-Thawābit* (immutable) which include basic tenets of the faith (*‘Aqā’id*), the primary principles of religion. Those rules which are subject to change with time and space, and are linked to the temporal evolution and environmental changes which are called *mutagayyirāt* (mutable) rules⁸. The primary subject of reform in Islam is the mutable rules. The core ideological tenants (*al-Uṣūl al-Thābitah*) in Islam are immutable and absolute, yet their practical implementations may differ in relation to changing time and space milieus. Tariq Ramadan has provided a beautiful exposition to the implementation of these timeless ideological tenants within the shifting time and space milieus by referring to the example of state established by Prophet of Allah at Madinah within these remarkable words:

Muslims must, in the course of history, try to remain faithful to those principles and strive to implement them as best they can accord the requirements of their time, but they cannot merely imitate, reproduce, or duplicate a historical model that was adapted for a particular time but no longer corresponds to the requirements of their own⁹.

1.2. Institution of Prophet-hood and the Task of Reform in Islam:

The pursuit of reform is intrinsic to the very history of Islam. The coming of different Prophets towards different nations and communities is itself regarded as a divine task to reform that community from moral and social corruption including different polytheistic practices which were prevailing in the society at that particular point of time. From the first Prophet Adam till the last Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), the divine revelation was conveyed in a complex and devoted way,

a consecration through preaching of authentic traditions as a way to return man to his natural state of being (*fitrah*)¹⁰. Thus the Islamic concept of *al-Iṣlāḥ*¹¹ corresponds to the process of reform of human beings as an ideal explicitly advocated by the Prophets of God¹². Therefore the divine messages throughout the history primarily came to reform human understanding, and messengers of God worked as “*Musliḥūn*” [reformers] of the society who were bringing good, reconciling human beings with the divine, and reforming their societies towards the better¹³. The Prophet retains those laws which either pertain to the pure Divine rites or to the religious and social practices commensurate with the laws of religion. Prophet amends only those laws which though were originally based on the understanding of common good but now they were not serving the said purpose in the society¹⁴.

Reform was always at the center stage of Prophet Muhammad’s (ﷺ) life and mission, and the divine revelation transmitted through the Prophet depicts a discrete condition of moral fracture, disintegration, and chaos about the place and time in which it was revealed. Holy Quran provides an idea of this disintegration and chaos, “Mischiefs have appeared on land and sea because of what the hands of men have earned.”¹⁵ The seventh-century Arab society was enveloped by the corruptions of unbelief and varied forms of idolatry. People of Arabia were valorizing ancestral authority over the sacred tradition; they were preferring tribal customs over divinely ordained law. The revelation of the Quran, as embodied in the life and teachings of the Prophet, intervened to mend, resolve, and reform that disorder which was prevalent in the society at that particular time.¹⁶ Thus the advent of Islam - the message and mission of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) - itself can be seen as a divine endeavour to revive Islamic monotheism and reform Arab society and culture from *Jāhiliyyah* (ignorance) to Islam.

The Quran states about the same trans-historical legacy of Prophets that, “And I follow the *Din* (Religion) of my father and forefathers: Ibrahim, Ishaq and Ya‘qūb.”¹⁷

About the Prophet’s role as a reformer, Dr. Taha Jabir al-Alwani aptly remarks,

The Prophet laid down for renewal and reform in order for the discerning and upright members of Ummah to be able to meet the Ummah’s needs lest with the passing of time. In this way, he prepared the way for Islam to prevail over all [false] religions and its law to be manifested as universal and comprehensive, capable of meeting the Ummah’s needs in all times and places¹⁸.

The idea of reform from beginning has always been at the heart of Islamic tradition. Islamic theology does not recognize the rise of any prophetic figures after Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). In fact it has been unanimously established in the Islamic creed (*al-Aqīdah*) that Muhammad ﷺ is the last of the Messengers¹⁹ and that he represents the final stage in the cycle of Messengers. The primary task of a Muslim reformer after the demise of Prophet Muhammad is not to entail a change in the message of Prophet but only to reform the way the religion is understood, implemented and practiced during his own spatial-temporal paradigm. Reformers after the Prophet are not supposed to create a new model based on concept of progress rather the perfect model is already available in the revelation, they only need to implement that already existing model present in the figure of Prophet and the divinely revealed book al-Quran in the changing time and space²⁰.

The task of reform after the last Messenger, in the Islamic world-view falls in line with the succession to the institution of Prophethood. While every Muslim individual has a responsibility to partake in this process of reform as per his qualifications, the Islamic scholars (*Ulama*) including intellectuals within the Muslim community justifiably bear the bigger part of this responsibility. The major difference between Prophetic mission of reform and a non-prophetic reformer who is among the followers (*Ummah*) of the Prophet is that, while the Prophets bring new divine message which usually abrogates old messages, the non-Prophet Reformers, just possess the provision to reform the understanding of that very divine message which a Prophet brings to his community (*Ummah*).

Although Muslims believe that Prophet Muhammadﷺ is the seal of entire Prophethood, yet at different times and in different parts of the Islamic world, new non-Prophetic renewers and reformers will emerge. These reformers will challenge the prevailing status quo in the community and will strive for righteous reform of believers. Although the issues and challenges that the different reformers deal with, naturally vary according to time, place, and circumstances, yet the religion of Islam, as manifested in the *Quran* and *Sunnah*, has already been revealed and will remain intact, which needs no addition or subtraction but only interpretation and application. Therefore it is the understanding and application of the primary texts of Islam - which tends to wane with time - that needs reform. The concept of reform after the finality of Prophethood in Islam therefore, from this perspective means the reformation in the application of Islam in society, revitalizing the Muslim community and returning it to the path of Islam afresh. As a matter of fact, return

to the past does not merely mean to copy the past but to reconstruct and rebuild authentic and genuine human traditions, culture, society and civilization²¹. Abul Hasan Nadwi remarks about the same encompassing fact of Islamic tradition, “the spirit to preserve and renovate the pristine teachings of the faith and the effort to infuse people with a revolutionary spirit to re-assert the divine message are as old as Islam itself²².”

1.3. Nature and Scope of Reform in Islam

Islamic concept of reform is embedded in the primary texts (*nuṣūṣ*) of Islam; its ultimate purpose has been to bring prevailing realities and social change in line with the transcendental and universal principles of the Quran and the Sunnah through a process of restoration and reform. Before explaining the origin and meaning of reform in Islam, it is necessary to know the meaning of the word ‘reform’ in the English lexicographical works vis-à-vis concept of reform when used in the context of Christianity, so that it can be properly understood within its definitive Christian perspective likewise its similarity and difference from the Islamic concept of reform may be properly established. There are many Muslim scholars (*‘ulama*), as well as intellectuals and ordinary Muslims who oppose the use of the word “reform” because they think it is an alien and inappropriate term which cannot be used in the Islamic tradition in place of the Quranic concept of *al-Iṣlāḥ*²³.

Tariq Ramadan has very elaborately discussed this debate. He has summarized arguments of all those who oppose the use of word ‘reform’ in place of Arabic term *Iṣlāḥ*. Those who oppose the use of word reform usually base their criticism of the usage of the same upon three reasons. They argue that the word reform represents a threefold danger as far as faithfulness to the Islamic tradition is concerned. The primary argument of those who oppose the use of word reform in Islamic discourse is that “reforming” Islam sounds like changing it and perverting it to adapt it to current times. Second criticism comes from those who see in word “reform” something foreign, an approach imported from the Christian tradition, which may cause Islam to undergo the same evolution as Christianity saw due to Protestant reformation and thereby Islam may lose its original soul and substance. The third usual criticism comes from traditional scholars who believe that Islamic teachings are based on the universal and timeless character so they do not need “reform” and can be implemented in all the times and in all places²⁴. Despite all these reservations, the feasibility of using the word ‘reform’ has been clarified by Muslim

reformist thinkers by explaining similarity and compatibility of the term 'reform' with the Islamic concept of '*Iṣlāḥ*'. As a matter of fact, majority Muslim scholars, use the word 'reform' as the translation of Quranic term '*Iṣlāḥ*' and not in the sense of reform while being used in the Christianity.

Reformation basically emerged as a theological movement during 16th century CE in Europe which attempted to change and improve the Catholic Church, and which ultimately resulted in the establishment of the Protestant Church. Reformation movement primarily emerged as a revolt against the authority of medieval Catholic Church hence aimed at reforming the church of Christendom and removing its tribulations. To put an end to the dominant authority of popes in Christian world was among the major objectives of Reformation. The movement provided ground for Individual interpretation of the Bible which was used as the tool to express personal opinion. In order to free the state from the influence and dominance of the church, the term "divine right of the king" was introduced. Martin Luther of Germany (1483-1546), John Calvin of France (1509-1564) and Ulrich Zwingli of Switzerland (1484-1531) as the main architects of the Reformation Movement in Christianity.

Reformation movement with its different objectives primarily worked at three levels. The first was purely religious in nature; this meant that everyone had to decide in his own conscience how the words of God should be read. The second level was the revolt against the magnificence with which papacy had come to surround itself. And the third level was the promotion and development of new political and social ideas²⁵.

Since Islam does not have either the institutionalized clergy or the institution of Church, so naturally there is enough scope for fundamental differences between the concept of reform in Islam and the Christian reformation movement (also called Protestant reformation) of 16th century²⁶. The same difference has been expounded by Muhammad Iqbal in these words, "A Luther in the world of Islam, however, is an impossible phenomenon; for there is no church organization, similar to that of Christianity in the Middle Ages, inviting a destroyer."²⁷ Osman Bakar also expounds the same difference vis-à-vis reform in the two religious traditions in spite of some similarities, according to him,

The notion of reform necessarily takes different meanings and forms in the two religious traditions, although certain commonalities are entirely possible. It would be unreasonable to expect Islam to produce the same kind of religious reformation as western Christianity had done, not even in the more limited domain of Islam the culture²⁸.

1.4. Reformist Discourses in Islamic Tradition

The usual concepts used in Muslim history within the Reformist Discourse are those of *Iṣlāḥ* and *Tajdīd*. *Iṣlāḥ* is usually translated as reform in English and *Tajdīd* as renewal or revival, but both the terms are extensively used interchangeably in the Islamic reformist discourse. When both the terms are used together they reflect a continuing tradition of revitalization of Islamic faith and practice within the historical communities of Muslims. Both *Iṣlāḥ* and *Tajdīd* provide a basis for the conviction that movements of reform and renewal are an authentic part of the working out of the Islamic revelation in history²⁹. To understand the concept of reform in Islam, it is necessary to make genesis of both the terms (*Tajdīd* and *Iṣlāḥ*) and their use in the primary texts of Islam (Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet (ﷺ)) vis-à-vis their understanding throughout the history of Muslim reformist and revivalist Discourses.

1.5. *Iṣlāḥ* in the Primary Texts of Islam (*Nuṣūṣ*)

As for as the lexical meaning of the term *Iṣlāḥ* in Arabic is concerned, *Iṣlāḥ* is defined as the opposite of *ifsād* (mischief) in the major Arabic lexicons. Holy Quran also pitches the word *Iṣlāḥ* in contrast to the word *fasād* and considers *Iṣlāḥ* to be corrective measure for *fasād*, “And do not cause disruption and mischief (*fasād*) in the land after it has been set in order (*Iṣlāḥīha* i.e., after reformation of the living conditions in the country).³⁰” Prominent Muslim Lexicographer Imam Raghīb al-Asfahani in his magnum-opus Quranic Lexicon, *al-Mufradat* has presented the various shades of meaning for the word *Iṣlāḥ*, “*Salah* (the root word of *Iṣlāḥ*) is the antonym of *fasād* and both these words are often used as verbs. In the Quran *salāh* is sometimes used against *fasād* and sometimes against *saiah* (vice) and *salah* is sometimes used in the context of reconciliation”³¹.

Therefore from Arabic lexical perspective, the outcome of the act of *Iṣlāḥ* is a state of benefit and directness in the sense of commitment to the right path.

Comprehensiveness is the major characteristic of the Quranic perspective of *Iṣlāḥ*. The meaning and scope of *Iṣlāḥ* is very broad; it touches major aspects of human thought and civilization, and it is not confined within the domain of religion in its literal sense. Primarily *Iṣlāḥ* is used as a Prophetic task to remove different forms of *fasād* (corruption) from society, so that there can be peace both at the individual and societal levels. The Quran considers the pursuit of *Iṣlāḥ* as an extremely necessary and highly appreciable task. From the Quranic perspective, *Iṣlāḥ* is a safeguard for society, as the Quran clearly states: “Thy Lord would not destroy communities unjustly while their members were *muslihin* (those engaged in the task of *Iṣlāḥ*)”.³² In addition, the reward of the *muslihin* is guaranteed in the Quran; Allah states: “surely We leave not to waste the reward of the *muslihin*.”³³ At the same time, the *mufsidun* (those who spread corruption in the society), in total opposition to the *muslihin*, are vehemently condemned in the Quran: “Allah loves not the *mufsidun*.”³⁴ The Quran lays such a great emphasis on the task of *Iṣlāḥ* that it calls *Iṣlāḥ* as the prime concern of the Prophets. While referring to Prophet Shu‘ayb, Quran states that he clearly addressed his community that: “I desire only *Iṣlāḥ*, as far as I am able.”³⁵ The above mentioned Quranic verses make it very visible that *Iṣlāḥ* (reform) of one’s community has been the main task of the Prophets of God. In fact, the Quran does not see the institution of *Iṣlāḥ* to end with the finality of the Prophethood as such, but after the finality of Prophethood, those among the followers of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) who occupy themselves chiefly with the noble task of *Iṣlāḥ* and tread on the steps of the Prophets thereupon are appropriately regarded as *Musliḥūn* from the *Quranic* perspective.

The most distinguishing characteristic of the *Quranic* perspective of *Iṣlāḥ* is the one regarding its criteria. It is essential to note that, from the *Quranic* perspective, not every claim of *Iṣlāḥ* can be justified as a real act of *Iṣlāḥ*. The Quran thus indicates, “Do not cause corruption (*la-tufsidu*) in the earth after its *Iṣlāḥ*.”³⁶ At another place the essential criterion for *Iṣlāḥ* prescribed by the Quran is to hold its Scriptural authority very strongly and to show perseverance in prayers, “and those who hold fast to the Book (Al-Quran) and establish prayer (with punctuality, then) certainly Allah will not waste the wage of *Musliḥūn*.”³⁷

As per Prophetic use of term *Iṣlāḥ* and its related concepts, one of the unique characteristic is great emphasis has been laid on esoteric nature than exoteric nature of man. In spite of the socio-political and legal connotations of the term *Iṣlāḥ*, the uniqueness of the Prophetic model of *Iṣlāḥ* lies in the fact that in spite of the social and legalistic aspects of *Iṣlāḥ*, it is primarily directed towards the esoteric development of man and the society and in spite of being a historical phenomenon- its be all and end all is the spiritual elevation of the society towards which the program of *Iṣlāḥ* is directed. The priority given to pondering over inward as is evident from the very well-known Prophetic tradition in which it is clearly stated that the *salāḥ* (peace) and the *fasād* (mischief) of the whole body of man depends upon the condition of the heart. Narrated by al-Bukhāri on the authority of Nu'man bin Bashir, the Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said:

Truly, what is lawful is evident, and what is unlawful is evident, and in between the two are matters which are doubtful which many people do not know. He who guards himself against doubtful things keeps his religion and honour blameless, and he who indulges in doubtful things indulges in unlawful things, just as a shepherd who pastures his flock round a preserve will soon pasture them in it. Beware, every king has a preserve, and the things Allah has declared unlawful are His preserves. Beware; in the body there is a flesh; if it is sound, the whole body is sound, and if it is corrupt, the whole body is corrupt, and behold, it is the heart³⁸.

This tradition of the Prophet (ﷺ) clearly shows that the priority in *Iṣlāḥ* should be given to the interior state of man i.e., heart as whole nature and attitude of man depends on the reformation of heart.

As per the above discussion on lexical and morphological meaning of the term *Iṣlāḥ* and particularly its use in the primary texts of Islam, Quran and Prophetic traditions. *Iṣlāḥ*, as an Islamic concept is a human corrective task in which any state of *fasād* (corruption) is correctively changed into its opposite desired state which meets the Islamic criteria presented in the Quran and as exemplified in the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ); and by *fasād* it is meant a state of loss of the benefit of a thing, inexcusable detriment, or unjustified deviation from a moderate norm.

1.6. *Iṣlāḥ* in the Modern Islamic Reformist Perspective

Due to the comprehensiveness of the term *Iṣlāḥ*, no hard bound consensus exists on definition of *Iṣlāḥ* among scholars and reformers. Every Muslim reformist scholar has understood the concept of *Iṣlāḥ* (reform) in his own context as per the challenges of his time. Muhammad Abduh was one of the leading voices of reform in the Egypt. For him *Iṣlāḥ* refers to, “eliminate confusion and accomplish God’s messages for the preservation of humanity and world order.”³⁹ For the Contemporary Muslim reformist thinker Tariq Ramadan, *Iṣlāḥ*, “implies bringing the object (whether a heart, an intellect or a society) back to its original state, when said object was still considered to be pure and good: it is indeed a matter of improvement, of curing, through re-forming, through reform”.⁴⁰

The concept of *Iṣlāḥ*, whether in its classical meaning or in the modern discourses has a twofold application at individual and collective level, in so far as it is on the one hand an individual or collective effort to define Islam solely in relation to its authentic sources (Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet) and on the other it is an attempt to work towards a situation in which the lives of Muslims, in individual and collective terms, really would conform to the norms and values of their religion, therefore the concept of *Iṣlāḥ* has been a permanent feature in the religious and cultural history of Islam⁴¹.

1.7. Concept of *Tajdīd* in Islam

In the Islamic reformist discourse another primary concept besides *Iṣlāḥ* that underlines the idea of reform in Islam is *Tajdīd*, and usually both the terms *Iṣlāḥ* and *tajdīd* are used interchangeably. As the concept of *tajdīd* is fundamental for the proper understanding of concept of reform, so it is necessary to study concept of *tajdīd* in Islam vis-à-vis its origin and development in the Islamic reformist thought from the Prophetic times down the contemporary times. The whole discourse on *tajdīd* is based on the famous tradition (*Hadith*) of the Prophet (ﷺ) which is recorded in the *Sunan Abu Dawud*, with an authentic chain of narrators. Abu Hurayrah narrates that the Prophet (ﷺ) said that “God will raise for this community (*Ummah*), at the head of each century, someone who will rejuvenate (*yujaddidu*) for them their

Religion⁴².” It is evident from the text of the Hadith that, the Muslim community after the Prophet will indeed go through certain phases of stagnation and at the same time there lies a clear assurance that it will certainly be revived and put back on track through the process of revival and reform. Since *tajdīd* is derived from the root ‘*jadada*’ which means to renew something but this renewal of religion (*tajdīd al-Din*) does not, of course, entail a change in the sources, principles, and fundamentals of Islam, but only in the way the religious texts (*nuṣūṣ*) are understood, implemented, and lived during different times or places. The scriptural sources (the Quran and Sunnah) remain the primary references in every age and the fundamentals of faith and practice will always remain intact, but it is only reading and the understanding of the texts which will be “renewed” by the efforts of those Muslim thinkers who will point out new perspectives by reviving ageless faith in the hearts of the believers and at the same time stimulating their thoughts so as to enable them to face the challenges of their respective ages.⁴³

Tajdīd (renewal) is sometimes misunderstood with the concept of *bid‘ah* (that is introduction of new innovation in Islam), but the notion of *bid‘ah* is totally antagonistic to the concept of *tajdīd*. Primary sources of Islam encourage the pursuit of *Tajdīd* in order to preserve the spirit of Islamic tradition while as *bid‘ah* means to add new accretions to Islam which are essentially against the spirit of Islam hence vehemently condemned by the Islamic scriptures. One of the primary tasks of a *Mujaddid* is to identify such new innovations (*bidaat*) which are alien to the spirit of Islam and present Islam in its pure and pristine form. The Hadith of *tajdīd* is central to the subject of reform in Islam, it is very fundamental to analyze it further to clarify its content and delineate its message.

1.8. Prophetic Tradition of *Tajdīd* and its Interpretation:

The key word in the Hadith is *yujaddid*, from the verbal root, *jadada*, the noun of which is *tajdīd*, which linguistically means to renew something⁴⁴. *Mujaddid*, being its active participle, refers to one who renews or revives the neglected aspects of religion to their original state. Restoring and disseminating the purity of those principles among people and their acting upon them is the main task of the *mujaddid* hence one who renews or better still revives the application of the Islam in the Muslim society is a *mujaddid* and as this endeavor of revival is very much sensitive and complex, the personages associated with the task of *tajdīd* must possess some special qualities. Besides possessing profound knowledge of religious texts, he must

be a dedicated and pious believer and must be capable of undertaking *ijtihād* wherever and whenever it is needed⁴⁵. Hashim Kamali, a notable reformist thinker, while summarizing the essential qualities of a *Mujaddid* observes that:

- 1) He must possess clear understanding of the changeable (*mutagayyirāt*) and unchangeable (*Thawābit*) rules in Islam.
- 2) He must possess Knowledge of the rules of necessity and concessions in Islamic law (*darurah, rukhsah*).
- 3) He must possess Knowledge of the place of rationality and proper use in the understanding of Islamic scriptures.
- 4) He must give due regard to people's welfares.
- 5) He must possess knowledge of observance of the general customs and cultures of his society⁴⁶.

Another question which is usually discussed in the commentaries and scholarly discussions on the tradition under review is that, whether the tradition visualizes one common renewer for the whole Muslim *Ummah* or whether each country and community could have their own renewers. Though, as has been mentioned earlier, the classical scholarship of the Islamic world supported individual efforts of one renewer in one century for whole *Ummah*,⁴⁷ but the modern scholarship supports collective revival, by diverse personalities in different fields and different regions at one time, but the fact that is central to all those who are working as renewers in different places is that *tajdīd* for the renewal of Islam must be in principle meant for the whole *Ummah* in spite of being related to the specific spatial-temporal times of reference, but on practical level, due to the vast territorial domain of Islam, different regional and geographical segments of the *Ummah* may have different renewers as Muslims living in different regions will have different challenges⁴⁸. Most of the classical commentaries had attempted to identify one *mujaddid*, and certainly all had ignored the plurality of claimants in the hadith collection. Perhaps it was first famous commentator of *Sunan Abu Dawud*, Muhammad Shams al-Haq Azimabadi (d. 1911) who suggested that renewal is no longer the responsibility and prestige of one individual every hundred years: renewal is owned by communities, groups and movements. As a social group, they are in a position to identify the immediate crisis and attempt for its resolution⁴⁹.

1.9. *Tajdīd* as understood by Muslim Scholars and Reformers

The literary genres which mainly contain information of *tajdīd* in classical times are some Hadith collections their commentaries and some biographical works. Despite of the fact that the concept of *tajdīd* was very close to the discourses on difference between Sunnah and *Bid'ah*, scope and development of *Ijtihād*, but during the medieval times discussions on *tajdīd* were been mainly conducted in personnel, not in conceptual terms, which resulted in *tajdīd* couldn't become central concept in the evolution of medieval Islamic thought, it was rather used as an honorific title bestowed upon popular religious figures of every century over the ages, and the conceptual aspect of *tajdīd* was given least importance, which usually dealt with the qualifications of the *mujaddid*. Unlike medieval times during modern times, especially after the Western onslaught of Muslim world, *tajdīd* retained central place in the evolution of Islamic thought.⁵⁰

Muslim scholars have recorded diverse definitions for *tajdīd*, some of which are antecedent whereas some others tend to be more broad and open. The earliest definition on record of *tajdīd* is that of the *Muḥaddith* Muhammad ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 121AH/ 724 CE) according to whom, *tajdīd*, “means revival (*Ihyā*) of that which has disappeared or died out due to neglect of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* and their requirements.”⁵¹ Prominent Traditionist and historian Ibn al-Athir's (d.606 A.H) definition of *tajdīd* reflects more on legal and scholastic developments during the early centuries. He described *mujaddid*, or carrier of *tajdīd*, as “a prominent leader who emerges at the head of every century to revive the religion for the *Ummah* and preserve the *madhhabs* of their following under their leadership of respective imams.”⁵² The renowned Quran commentator Jalal-ud-Din al-Suyūṭī (d.1505 C.E) had a much broader vision of *Tajdīd*. He was among the leading classical scholars who have written a book on the *Hadith al-Tajdīd*⁵³. For Suyūṭī, “*Tajdīd* in religion means renewal of its guidance, explanation of its truth, as well as eradication of pernicious innovation (*bid'ah*), extremism (*al-ghuluw*) and laxity in the religion.”⁵⁴ Muhammad Shams al-Ḥaqq Azimabadi, a prominent Hadith commentator of Indian sub-continent and the author of famous commentary on Hadith collection of Imam Abu Dawood, '*Awn al-Ma'būd fi Sharḥ Sunan Abu Dā'ūd*, defines *Tajdīd* as the “revival of what has been marginalized of the Quran and Sunnah and issuance of judgment

on their basis as well as eradicating pernicious innovation (*bid'ah*) that contravenes the established Sunnah.⁵⁵

Tajdīd accordingly implies renewal and regeneration of the application of Islam in the Muslim community. Since, the religion of Islam, as presented in its two revealed sources, has already been revealed and will remain intact, craving neither addition nor subtraction, but only interpretation and application with the passage of time; certainly it is the application of Islam which with time tends to wane and thereupon needs reformation. The word *tajdīd* means therefore, the renewal of the application of Islam in society and the role of a *mujaddid*, thereupon pertains to the revitalization of the understanding of the Muslim community and returning it to the path of Islam afresh, as it was originally during the Prophetic times.⁵⁶ Badiuzzaman Said Nursi⁵⁷ (1876-1960) who has also been considered as a renewer (*mujaddid*) of his age by his followers has given a comprehensive interpretation of *tajdīd* vis-à-vis nature and functions of a *mujaddid*. He aptly defines the nature and scope of *tajdīd* and *mujaddid* as;

They [*mujaddids*] straighten religion and make it firm; clarify its essence and true nature; refute and disprove the absurdities which some have attempted to mix with religion; repel and annihilate all attacks on religion; establish all the commands of Allah; and proclaim and make manifest the nobility and sublimity of all divine ordinances. However, at the same time, without in any way damaging the fundamental nature of religion or violating its essential spirit, they fulfill their duties [as *mujaddid*] by employing new methods of explanation, new means of persuasion that are consonant with the age, new forms of detailed instruction... they act entirely in accordance with the ethical model of the Prophet[ﷺ].⁵⁸

From the above quoted various definitions of *tajdīd* by classical and modern scholars, understanding *tajdīd* and what it has been understood by different commentators has thus been influenced by various factors, one of which is historical in that challenges faced by people and societies in various periods of history are evidently not the same everywhere. This also implies that people tended to interpret *tajdīd* in the light of their own experience and conditions. Another factor which seems very dominant is the interpreter's own point of view and his own field of expertise. A

jurist may understand *tajdīd* differently from a historian or a sociologist and vice-versa, as Prof. Hashim Kamali aptly remarks about the same:

...reading the views of a 20th century scholar or *faqih* [jurist] may well provide a different vision of *tajdīd* compared to his earlier counterparts. This is partly because *tajdīd* is inherently dynamic and multi-dimensional, and can tie up with many other ideas and principles⁵⁹.

1.10. *Ijtihād* as the tool of Reform and Renewal in Islam

Ijtihād is the most significant and primary instrument in the process and application of reform in Islam. *Ijtihād* has been from the very beginning used as the main tool for interpreting the divine message and relating it to the changing conditions of the Muslim community in its aspirations to attain justice, salvation and truth. *Ijtihād* is the most important source of Islamic law next to the Qur'an and the Sunnah. The main difference between *Ijtihād* and the revealed sources of the *Shari'ah* lies in the fact while *Ijtihād* is a continuous process of development whereas divine revelation and prophetic legislation discontinued upon the demise of the Prophet,⁶⁰ but while as former ones are divine in nature and the later one is human effort to understand and implement them in the changing time and space. Literally the word *Ijtihād* has been derived from the root word *jahada*, hence *Ijtihād* literally means striving, or self-exertion in any activity which entails a measure of hardship. In the Islamic terminology of law, *Ijtihād* is defined as the total expenditure of effort made by a jurist in order to infer, with a degree of probability, the rules of *Shari'ah* from their detailed evidence in the sources of Islam. Eminent legalists have defined *Ijtihād* in various ways but the whole content of these definitions can be summed up in the following definition by Imam al-Shatibi:

An extreme intellectual effort employed by expert interpreters to have a correct and definite perception of the original basic maxims of Islamic law with (the aim) to derive operative orders there from to provide the necessary legal solution of the problems and issues faced by an Islamic society at any stage of its development.⁶¹

Being rooted in the Islamic tradition, apart from various Quranic verses which directly or indirectly discuss the nature and importance of *Ijtihād*, it is primarily the Prophetic traditions which act as the most prominent source of *Ijtihād* in which the

Prophet has guided his companions about its nature and scope. The tradition of Mu'adh bin Jabal is the foremost tradition on this, which not only discusses the meaning and nature of *Ijtihād* in the changing paradigms of time and space but it also determines the framework to be adopted while partaking the pursuit of *Ijtihād* and reform. When Mu'adh was about to set off for his mission to Yemen as a governor, the Prophet ﷺ asked him: "According to what will you judge? He answered: "According to the Book of God and then the Sunnah of His Messenger ﷺ." "And if you find nothing?" "Then, I shall exert myself (*ajtahidu*) to my utmost to formulate my own judgment", Mu'adh answered the Prophet, and in response the Prophet then exclaimed, "Praise be to God who guided His Messenger's messenger to what pleases His Messenger!"⁶²

The first two questions and their respective answers directly mention the importance of revealed texts and their interpretations for that one must possess profound knowledge of primary texts (*nuṣūṣ*). The third question is of particular importance in the Islamic reformist discourse, because it stipulates that Mu'adh will necessarily be confronted, in the new environment of Yemen, with situations of which no direct guidance may be found explicitly in the Quran or in the Sunnah, as Quran gives the general principles and the practical implementation of them has to be thought out through the medium of intelligence according to circumstances and situations, Prof. Khurshid Ahmad states about the same,

God has revealed only broad principles and has endowed man with the freedom to apply them in every in the way suited to the spirit and conditions of that age. It is through *Ijtihād* that people of every age try to implement and apply divine guidance to the problems of their times⁶³.

The second teaching drawn from this tradition is directly linked to these situations: Yemen-although not far away from the Prophet's city, already contains a different geographical, cultural, and legal setting, requiring the scholar to produce a reflection, an extrapolation effort, reasoned and reasonable *Ijtihād*, to remain faithful to Islamic prescriptions. As Tariq Ramadan states, "that Mu'adh's last answer is no less edifying in this respect, since it directly refers to his own critical intelligence, which will have to face both the texts potential silence and the new context".⁶⁴ Muhammad Iqbal in his lectures on Reconstruction of Islamic Thought has very thoroughly discussed the concept of *Ijtihād* and had called it principle of movement

in the structure of Islam because Iqbal considers *Ijtihād* the main principle of Islam in which the ideal eternal laws are reconciled and implemented in the changing paradigms of time and space.⁶⁵

To conclude it may be asserted that, *Ijtihād* has been proved as an essential and dynamic legal tool in the past and has enough scope in the current times for the (re) interpretation and (re) understanding of Islam vis-à-vis contemporary issues and the challenges faced by Muslim community.⁶⁶

1.11. Limitations of Reform in Islam

Throughout the Muslim history there has been multiple understandings of these core concepts of reform in Islam, while some scholars have tried to restrict their meaning and scope but others have given very less attention towards the limitations of the concept during the modern times, among the host of reform movements and thinkers there are few such understandings of the concept of reform in Islam which becomes problematic and controversial therefore, for instance the case of Ayaan Hirsi Ali's infamous work on the reform in Islam titled *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now*⁶⁷, which has turned out to be a controversial book, largely denounced both by traditional scholars and Modern Muslim Reformers for its controversial content. Some of the unqualified and controversial/disputed statements which bypass the limits of reform include, "Until Islam can do what Judaism and Christianity have done – question, critique, interpret and ultimately modernize its holy scripture – it cannot free Muslims from a host of anachronistic and at times deadly beliefs and practices."⁶⁸ In this regard it is necessary to mention the limitations of the pursuit of reform. First it must be clear, by 'reform' it has never meant in the mainstream Islamic Reformist Discourse reform in Islam vis-à-vis its sacred revealed texts (Quran and Hadith), rather by reform, it is meant to change/reform the mindset/understanding of the reader of the divine revealed texts of Islam with due consideration to the changing paradigms of time and space. While discussing the nature and scope of reform/renewal in Islam, Dr. Taha Jabir al-Alwani clearly debunks such claims of reform in the light of Islamic tradition of reform which may attempt to change the revealed scriptures itself or even out rightly denounce contribution of predecessor scholars and reformers. For Alwani;

True renewal derives its substance from the reconstruction or reformation of the Muslim mind, and restoration of its connection with the Book of God

[Quran] in its capacity as the sole creative source-together with the cosmos-of thought, knowledge, creed, law and method. Similarly, genuine renewal entails repairing what has been broken in the connection between the Muslim mind and the Sunnah as well as other aspects of the age of revelation and prophet-hood.⁶⁹

1.12. Conclusion

The scope of reform in Islam revolves around approaching its scriptures with a fresh mind and a sincere intention to improve one's own understanding of scripture. Never does it permit to approach them in order to change, mend or "improve" scripture itself. Since Islam is a revealed religion, its primary scriptures are trans-historical and eternal, which can never be changed or reformed. What reform then means from Islamic perspective is the fresh interpretation of those permanent and eternal sources as per the new challenges and demands of time. Any attempt in the past or in the present wherein reform has meant to change/reform the scriptures, such acts have been denounced not only by the common believers but also by the learned Muslim scholars and by rightful Muslim reformers themselves.

As has been already discussed the spirit of reform is common to both the Christianity and Islam but what kind of reform Islam permits is different from that of reformation of Christianity which took place in 16th century, the nature and scope of reform necessarily takes different meanings and forms in the two religious traditions. M. Wilfried Hofmann has summarized the scope and limits of reform, by stating that, "there can be no renewal of Islam as such, in particular of its creed (*al-'Aqīdah*), its rites of worship (*al-'Ibādah*), its ethics (*al-Akhlāq*). Hands off the core of Islam! But there can be a renewal of the civilizational aspects of our social life."⁷⁰ Reform in Islam therefore primarily corresponds to the new understandings and interpretations of Islam vis-à-vis changing time and space.

References and Endnotes

¹ Semitic religions are also called Abrahamic religions and commonly refer to three prominent religions of the world viz., Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All three acknowledge and trace their teachings back to Prophet Ibrahim (A.S). For further study see, David Kay, *The Semitic Religions: Hebrew, Jewish, Christian and Moslem*, Read Books, 2007.

² Adam being the prototype of man, Quran frequently mentions the event of his creation (*takhliq*), vicegerency (*Khilāfah*) and prophet-hood (*Nubuwwah*) of Adam, see Al-Quran, 2: 30-38, 15: 30-35, 38: 71-72.

³ Al-Quran 3: 33.

⁴ Al-Quran 20:15.

⁵ *Tawhīd* corresponds to unity of God in His Lordship, Worship, and Names and Attributes, Islam as a religion is primarily a monotheistic religion. Its central and unifying principle is the concept of *Tawhīd* upon which the entire edifice of its creed, rituals and practices is based. The primary difference between Islam and other religions of the world is Islam's strict adherence to the belief in oneness of Allah. Concept of *Tawhīd* is classified into three categories, *Tawhīd al-Asmāwa al-Ṣifāt* (oneness of Allah's names and attributes), *Tawhīd al-Rububiyyah* (oneness of Allah's Lordship) and *Tawhīd al-Uluhiyyah* (oneness in Allah's worship). For further study see, Abu Mansoor Maturidi, *The Book of Monotheism Kitab al-Tawhīd*, (Eng. Trs) Sulaiman Ahmad, Maturidi Publication, 2019.

⁶ Al-Quran 16: 36.

⁷ Al-Quran 21: 25.

⁸ Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2009, p.18.

⁹ Tariq Ramadan, *ibid* p.19.

¹⁰ *Fitrah* in Islam refers to the natural disposition of human being which is pure and innocent, Quran while refers to the *fitrah* states, "truly to the religion being upright, the nature in which Allah has made mankind: no change (there is) in the work (wrought) Al-Quran, 30: 30, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) further explains the above verse of Quran about, "No child is born except on al-fitrah (Islam) and then his parents make him Jews, Christian or Magain" Muhammad bin Ismail, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Vol. 6, Hadith No. 298, available online at <http://sunnah.com/bukhari:4775>

¹¹ For comprehensive study of the *Iṣlāh* and its use Islamic tradition, see A. Merad, *Islah* from *Encyclopedia of Islam*, edited by E. van Donzel, B. Lewis and Ch. Pellat, Vol. 4, E.G Brill, Leiden, 1997, p. 141-161.

¹² Alina Isac Alak, "The reform within Islam and the legitimacy of the contemporary reinterpretations of the Quranic text". In: *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, vol.12, no.1, 2012, p.31.

¹³ Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform* op.cit., p. 13.

¹⁴ Khalid Masud, op.cit., p. 50.

¹⁵ Holy Quran, 30: 41.

¹⁶ Ebrahim Moosa and Tareen Sherahli, 'Revival and Reform' in Gerhard Bowering (ed.) *Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, Princeton University Press, Princeton New Jersey, 2013, p. 464

¹⁷ Al-Quran, 12: 38.

¹⁸ Taha Jabir Al-Alwani, *Islamic Thought: An approach to Reform*, The International Institute of Islamic Thought, London, 2006, pp. 58-59.

¹⁹ Prophet Muhammad (SAW) as per Islamic tradition is regarded as *Khatam an-nabiyin* (Seal of Prophets), Quran explicitly states in this regard, "Muhammad (SAW) is not the father of any men, but (he is) the Messenger of Allah, and the Seal of the Prophets" Al-Quran 33: 40.

²⁰ John Obert Voll, "Renewal and Reform in Islamic World: *Tajdid and Islah*" in John L. Esposito (Ed.) *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1983, p. 34.

²¹ Hayat Amir Hussaini, *On Islamic Thought*, Jay Kay Book Shop Srinagar, n.d, p. 48.

²² S. Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, op.cit., Vol. 1. p. 11.

²³ For further study, see the discussion between Shaykh Hamza Yusuf and Tariq Ramadan in Oxford University Islamic Society on the theme "Rethinking Islamic Reform" held on 26 May 2010. The discussion can be accessed online on this link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qY17d4ZhY8M>

²⁴ Tariq Ramadan, op.cit., p. 11.

²⁵ Johan Herman Randall, *Making of the Modern Mind*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1976.

²⁶ Although there are some reformers who demanded 'Luther in the Muslim world', for insistence Jamal-ud-Din Afghani used to say that Islam was in need of a Luther even he used to see himself as the Luther of Islam, for further study see Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, Oxford University Press, 1970.

²⁷ Muhammad Iqbal in his historical Presidential Address of Annual Session of All India Muslim League at Allahabad in 1930, see Latif A. Sherwani, *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, Adam Publishers and Distributors New Delhi, 2006, p. 6

²⁸ Osman Bakar, 'Islam and the Challenge of Diversity and Pluralism: Must Islam Reform Itself' *Islam and Civilizational Renewal*, Vol. 1. No. 1. 2009, p.61.

²⁹ J. O. Voll, op.cit., p. 32.

³⁰ Al-Quran 7: 56

³¹ Raghif Asfahani, *Mufradat filAlfaaz-ul-Quran*, al-MaktabatalAsria, Beirut, 2006, p. 302

³² Al-Quran, 11:117.

³³ Al-Quran, 7: 170.

³⁴ Al-Quran, 5:64, 28: 77.

³⁵ Al-Quran, 11:88.

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- ⁴⁰ Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform*, op.cit., p. 13
- ⁴¹ A. Merad, *Islah* op.cit. P. 141.
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- ⁴⁵ Dr. YasirNadeem, *Tajdid-i-Din: Shariat aur Tarikh ki Roshni Mein*, Darul Kitab Deoband, 2014, p. 110.
- ⁴⁶ Muhammad Hashim Kamali, *Tajdid, Islah*, op.cit. p. 489.
- ⁴⁷ Dr. YasirNadeem, op.cit. P.248
- ⁴⁸ M.Hashim Kamali, loc.cit.
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