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## A Critical Review of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's View on the Challenge of Tradition and Modernity

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### Abstract

This study critically analyzes the views of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, a prominent contemporary intellectual, on the challenge between tradition and modernity in Islamic thought. Abu Zayd proposed a re-reading of Islamic tradition and a reinterpretation of sacred texts, seeking to reconcile traditional values with modern demands. His approach included a critique of traditionalist interpretations, a redefinition of Ijtihad and Ta'wil (interpretation), and a strong emphasis on reason in evaluating religious texts. The article provides a critical analysis of Abu Zayd's methodology, acknowledging his significant contributions in challenging intellectual stagnation and advocating for a dynamic understanding of Islam. However, his approach is critiqued for several key weaknesses. Some scholars argue that his reliance on modern hermeneutics deviates from the traditional foundations of Islamic exegesis by neglecting historical context and divine intentions (maqasid al-shari'ah). Additionally, his emphasis on rationalism has been criticized as a form of radical modernism that disregards the spiritual and sacred dimensions of religious texts. The study concludes that while Abu Zayd successfully criticized extremist traditionalism and advocated for religious re-evaluation, his methodology falls short of providing a practical model for harmonizing tradition and modernity, suggesting it requires revision for a more comprehensive and practical solution.

**Keywords:** Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Tradition, Modernity, Neo-Mu'tazila, Religious Critique, Islamic Thought.

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## Introduction

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, as one of the most prominent contemporary Islamic thinkers, presented a new and rational approach in response to the complex challenges between tradition and modernity. By criticizing traditional interpretations of the Quran and emphasizing the re-reading of religious texts based on historical contexts and the needs of the modern era, he sought to offer a dynamic and up-to-date understanding of religion. However, his views have always been a subject of debate and controversy, attracting numerous critiques from various intellectual currents.

This article aims to critically examine Abu Zayd's views and poses the key question: Have Abu Zayd's efforts in re-evaluating religion and reinterpreting sacred texts provided a sustainable solution for reconciling tradition and modernity, or does his approach still face serious theoretical and practical challenges?

The challenge of tradition versus modernity is one of the most fundamental intellectual issues in the contemporary Islamic world, with widespread impacts on religious and interpretive approaches. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, by emphasizing the necessity of rationalism and critiquing traditionalism, intended to propose a new model for Quranic exegesis and the re-reading of Islamic texts. He believed that religious concepts must be redefined based on historical and social contexts to meet the needs of the modern age.

However, his methodology and views have been criticized by many Muslim thinkers for deviating from classical interpretive principles and for a strong inclination toward modern hermeneutics. This issue highlights the need for a precise re-evaluation of Abu Zayd's approach to clarify its compatibility with the actual conditions and intellectual needs of the Islamic world.

## Research Objectives

1. To study and analyze Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's views on the challenge of tradition and modernity.
2. To critique Abu Zayd's methodology in interpreting the Quran and re-reading religious concepts.
3. To evaluate the reactions and criticisms of Muslim thinkers toward Abu Zayd's views.
4. To determine the extent of Abu Zayd's success in providing a practical solution for reconciling tradition and modernity.

5. To analyze the feasibility of using Abu Zayd's proposed methods to solve the intellectual challenges of the Islamic world.

### A Review of the Life and Thought of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, born on July 10, 1943, in a village near Tanta, Egypt, became engaged with religious issues and Islamist ideas from his youth. At the age of 12, he was imprisoned on charges of collaboration with the Muslim Brotherhood and was influenced by the ideas of Sayyid Qutb, although he later distanced himself from these views. At 15, he had memorized half of the Quran, and at 25, he worked as an Imam.

After receiving technical training, he enrolled at Cairo University and earned his bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in Arabic language and literature in 1972, 1977, and 1981, respectively. He established his academic standing through his research on the interpretation of the Quran, particularly with his doctoral dissertation titled "The Interpretation of the Quran from the Perspective of Ibn Arabi." In 1995, he attained the rank of full professor at Cairo University.

Due to his modernist approach to religious interpretation, Abu Zayd faced severe opposition from religious institutions. In 1995, an Egyptian court convicted him of apostasy, and the "Al-Jihad" organization issued a fatwa for his assassination. Following these events, he emigrated to Leiden University in the Netherlands (Tavakoli Bina, 1401: 48).

Abu Zayd passed away on July 5, 2010, at the age of 66 in Cairo and was buried in his hometown of Tanta. He published 13 books and over 70 articles in both Arabic and English. His most important works include:

1. *Al-Ittijah al-'Aqli fi al-Tafsir* (The Rationalist Trend in Interpretation)
2. *Ma'fhum al-Nass* (The Concept of the Text)
3. *Al-Imam al-Shafi'i wa al-Idiyulujjiya al-Wastiya* (Imam al-Shafi'i and the Moderate Ideology)
4. *Naqd al-Khitab al-Dini* (Critique of Religious Discourse)
5. *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta wa al-Haqiqa* (The Text, Authority, and Truth)
6. *Ishkaliyat al-Qira'a wa Aliyat al-Ta'wil* (Problems of Reading and Mechanisms of Interpretation)
7. *Al-Takfir fi Zaman al-Takfir* (Accusation of Heresy in the Age of Accusations)
8. *Didd al-Jahl wa al-Zayf wa al-Haqiqa* (Against Ignorance, Deception, and Truth)
9. *Dawa'ir al-Khawf: Qira'a fi Khitab al-Mar'a* (Circles of Fear: A Reading in the Discourse of Women)

## Defining Tradition and Modernity

### *The Concept of Tradition*

#### Tradition in Language

The word "tradition" (سنت) in Persian has multiple meanings, such as custom, ritual, and inherited legacy. In the Dehkhoda Dictionary, it is defined as path, method, law, and the rules of the Prophet of Islam (Dehkhoda, 13775, p. 9). The Moein Dictionary lists similar meanings like path, method, and conduct (Moein, 1382, p. 1927).

In Arabic, "Sunnah" (سنة) also carries various meanings:

1. Method and Conduct: Al-Tarihi defines "Sunnah" as a way or method, while Ibn Faris considers it equivalent to conduct (sira) (Al-Tarihi, 1375, p. 269; Ibn Faris, 1404, p. 66).
2. God's Commands: Ibn Manzur, in *Lisan al-Arab*, defines "Sunnah" as God's commands and prohibitions (Ibn Manzur, 1420, p. 225).
3. Continuity and Permanence: Mohammad Taqi Hakim defines "Sunnah" as continuity and permanence (Hakim, 1397, p. 1).
4. Flow and Continuity: Ibn Faris interprets this word as the flowing and continuous movement of something (Ibn Faris, 1404, p. 60).

Based on these meanings, "tradition" in both Persian and Arabic points to concepts like continuity, permanence, conduct, and rules, which can be interpreted differently depending on the context.

#### Tradition in Terminology

In Twelver Shi'a thought, tradition (Sunnah) includes the sayings, actions, and tacit approvals of the Infallibles (Ma'sumin). Allama al-Muzaffar in *Usul al-Fiqh* states: "The term 'Sunnah' in the terminology of Twelver jurists means the saying, action, and tacit approval of an infallible person, which is as authoritative and obligatory to follow as the saying of the Prophet" (Al-Muzaffar, 1405, p. 64).

In the science of Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), Sunnah is sometimes used to mean recommendation (mustahabb), such as when Shahid al-Awwal in *Al-Lum'a al-Dimashqiyya* speaks of the recommended acts of ablution, using the term *sunnat al-wudu'* (Al-Amili, n.d., p. 17), or Imam Reza's statement on recommended baths, where he uses the word "Sunnah" (Hurr Amili, 1387, p. 305).

Sunni jurists have defined Sunnah as the sayings, actions, and tacit approvals of the Prophet. Al-Shawkani defines it in a general sense to include both obligatory and non-obligatory acts and in a specific sense as the opposite of

innovation (bid'ah) (Al-Shawkani, 2003, p. 23). Al-Shatibi adds the condition of "not being explicitly mentioned in the Quran," limiting Sunnah to what is specific to the Prophet and separate from the text of the Quran (Al-Shatibi, n.d., p. 289). Sheikh Shaltut also considers the practical Sunnah as the recognized method of the Prophet and his companions in applying Quranic commands and notes the change in the meaning of Sunnah among scholars of Usul (principles) (Shaltut, 1395, p. 492).

### *1-1. Different Views on Tradition and Modernity*

The concept of "tradition" has long been a subject of discussion and disagreement among Islamic scholars. These differences are particularly evident in the scope of Sunnah: does it only include the sayings, actions, and tacit approvals of the Prophet Muhammad, or does it also encompass the Infallibles, the companions, and the followers?

#### *The Shi'a Scholarly Approach to Tradition*

Shi'a scholars consider Sunnah to include the sayings, actions, and tacit approvals of the Infallibles and regard it as an authority. The late Qomi defines Sunnah as: "The saying of an infallible person or their non-ordinary action or tacit approval" (Qomi, 1367, p. 409). Mamaqani also defines Sunnah as the sayings and actions of those who are protected from falsehood and error, provided that they are not mentioned in the Quran and are not ordinary matters (Mamaqani, 1411, p. 69).

Based on this, for the Shi'a, the Sunnah of the infallible Imams is as authoritative as the Sunnah of the Prophet. However, some consider the Imams' Sunnah to be an independent authority, believing that the Imams were divinely appointed to explain rulings, while others see the Imams' Sunnah as a reliable way to discover the Prophet's Sunnah (Baha'i, 1401, p. 88; Al-Muzaffar, 1405, p. 57).

These definitions of Sunnah among Shi'a scholars contain two fundamental points:

1. The Comprehensiveness and Scope of the Concept of Sunnah for Shi'a Scholars: The definition of Sunnah as "the saying, action, and tacit approval of the Infallibles" by Shi'a scholars is both comprehensive and exclusive, as it includes all behavioral and verbal dimensions of the Infallibles. The late Qomi and Mamaqani, by emphasizing specific aspects of Sunnah (such as it being non-ordinary or not mentioned in the Quran), have tried to distinguish it from ordinary actions and sayings. This distinction shows a special sensitivity to accurately defining the authority of Sunnah.

2. **Emphasis on the Infallibility of the Infallibles:** Both definitions (Qomi and Mamaqani) emphasize the infallibility of the Infallibles, as the essential condition for the authority of Sunnah is the speaker's or actor's protection from falsehood and error. This characteristic plays a key role in distinguishing the Sunnah of the Infallibles from other narrative sources.

#### *The Sunni Scholarly Approach to Tradition*

Sunni scholars generally limit Sunnah to the sayings, actions, and tacit approvals of the Prophet Muhammad. Al-Shafi'i explicitly states that Sunnah only includes the Sunnah of the Prophet (Sarakhsi, 1414, p. 113). Al-Ghazali and Al-Razi also emphasize this view by denying the authority of the sayings of the companions. Al-Amidi, alongside them, states that the dominant view of scholars is the limitation of Sunnah to the Prophet (Al-Asqalani, 1300, p. 204).

However, some Sunni scholars have implicitly included the sayings, actions, and tacit approvals of the companions within the scope of Sunnah, considering them as revealing the Prophet's Sunnah. For example, Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani clarifies that according to the majority of scholars, the words of a companion are accepted as Sunnah and a transmitted hadith (Al-Asqalani, 1300, p. 204). Sunni scholars mainly limit Sunnah to the sayings, actions, and tacit approvals of the Prophet Muhammad. The emphasis of Al-Shafi'i on this limitation and the denial of the authority of the companions' sayings by figures like Al-Ghazali and Al-Razi show the dominant view. Despite this dominant view, some Sunni scholars, like Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, have included the sayings and actions of the companions in the scope of Sunnah, considering them as revealing the Prophet's Sunnah. However, the inclusion of the companions' sayings as Sunnah creates a superficial contradiction with the view that limits Sunnah to the Prophet.

#### **Abu Zayd's View on Tradition**

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd defines Sunnah in its primary and linguistic sense as "conduct and method," a term used in the common practice of Medina and among early Muslims. He clarifies that this word had not yet become a terminological principle during the Prophet's era: "The word Sunnah exists in the Arabic language, but its transition from a linguistic meaning to a legal-principled term did not happen in the era of the Prophet" (Abu Zayd, 1996, p. 53).

Abu Zayd emphasizes that this linguistic concept was later expanded by Al-Shafi'i and was exclusively assigned to the sayings, actions, and tacit

approvals of the Prophet: "He expanded the concept of Sunnah to include sayings, actions, and tacit approvals" (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 84).

Based on this view, he considers the term Sunnah to be a product of human thought and a fabricated concept that emerged due to historical developments and is by no means a product of revelation or a direct command of the Prophet. Abu Zayd concludes that this concept, as a human phenomenon, is not only prone to error but its inherent sacredness and validity are also called into question: "Everything that is a human product carries the possibility of error, and what is old does not mean it is sacred or infallible" (Abu Zayd, 2000, p. 67).

Abu Zayd believes that Al-Shafi'i was the first to develop the concept of Sunnah into its common terminological meaning. Before him, the word was used simply in its linguistic sense, meaning "the conduct and method of the people." For example, when Malik spoke of "*al-Sunnah 'indana*" (the Sunnah among us), he meant "the practice of the people of Medina": "*al-Sunnah 'indana ta'ni al-'amal al-sari fi al-Madina*" (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 69). Similarly, when Mu'adh ibn Jabal referred to the Sunnah of the Messenger of God, he was referring to the prevailing customs and traditions of society: "The Prophet used to rule in accordance with the prevailing social norms" (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 54).

To analyze Al-Shafi'i's expansion of the concept of Sunnah, Abu Zayd states two main goals:

1. Legislation of Rulings: Al-Shafi'i needed to legitimize Sunnah to introduce it as a second source of law alongside the Quran: "Al-Shafi'i's need for Sunnah as a second source of law was the motive for developing its concept" (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 36).
2. Supporting the Authenticity of the Quraysh and Rulers: Abu Zayd believes that by expanding the concept of Sunnah, Al-Shafi'i intended to legitimize the customs and traditions of the Quraysh and strengthen their ideological position. This approach helped justify the event of Saqifa and the superiority of the Quraysh: "Al-Shafi'i gave Sunnah a Qurayshi color to justify political and religious domination" (Abu Zayd, 2003, pp. 56-58).

Based on Abu Zayd's theories, the concept of Sunnah in its terminological meaning was not formed in the Prophet's era but in later periods, mainly by Al-Shafi'i. Al-Shafi'i developed this concept to meet legislative needs and strengthen the position of the Quraysh. Therefore, Sunnah in its current meaning is a human and historical concept that has undergone changes over time and lacks inherent sacredness.



## The Concept of Modernity

Modernity refers to newness and a tendency toward novelty, where what is new and modern is prioritized. The word "modern" is derived from the Latin word "*Modernus*," meaning new and contemporary. The Romans in the 5th century AD used the word "*Moderni*" to refer to new beliefs in contrast to old ones (Scruton & Bradbury, 1378, p. 91).

Philosophers and sociologists have offered various definitions for the term modernity. Krishan Kumar, in his article, states that in the 18th century and the Enlightenment era, the concept of "modern" became linked to a specific time, place, and contemporary society. From this time onward, modern society became particularly evident in Western societies, and the process of modernization was considered equivalent to Westernization (Ahmadi, 1373, p. 3).

Modernity, in contrast to tradition, signifies a conflict and interaction between two mindsets and lifestyles belonging to different historical and philosophical periods. This confrontation is particularly evident in fields such as culture, religion, politics, and social sciences. To understand this concept, modernity and tradition can be briefly explained as follows:

Tradition refers to a collection of beliefs, values, customs, and social institutions inherited from previous generations, which usually emphasizes continuity and stability. In tradition:

- Past Authority: Great importance is given to teachings, religious interpretations, or historical norms.
- Belief in Certainty: Fixed principles and rules in life and religion are accepted.
- Role of Religion and Custom: Religion or cultural traditions are often the determining factors of morality, law, and lifestyle.
- Resistance to Change: Rapid developments and fundamental innovations are usually met with skepticism or opposition.

Modernity refers to a historical and philosophical period that began with the Renaissance in Europe and was shaped by rationalism, scientism, and individualism. In modernity:

- Authority of Reason: Reason holds a prominent position as the main tool for knowledge and judgment.
- Relativity of Values: Values and social rules are considered changeable and adaptable to new conditions.
- Evolution and Progress: Change and innovation are encouraged in all aspects of social, scientific, and intellectual life.



- Separation of Religion and Politics: There is a tendency toward secularism and a reduced role for religion in the public sphere.

The Conflict Between Tradition and Modernity in the Thought of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd

This conflict arises when the fixed and enduring values of tradition confront the views of modernity. For example:

- In the realm of religion: Tradition emphasizes fixed interpretations based on sacred texts, whereas modernity inclines toward new and rational interpretations of religious texts.
- In society: Tradition supports an old and divine social order, while modernity pays more attention to a new and human-centric order.
- In culture: Tradition believes in preserving the identity and divine authenticity of culture, whereas modernity emphasizes the acceptance of other cultures.

This confrontation, especially in Islamic and Eastern societies, leads to challenges. The main question is how to create compatibility between the enduring values of tradition and the changing demands of modernity. Thinkers like Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, in his own mind, tried to provide a path for reconciling these two perspectives by re-reading tradition from a rational perspective.

## A Critical Analysis of Abu Zayd's View on the Religious Nature of Tradition

By looking at the theory Abu Zayd presented to prove that Sunnah is religious knowledge, in addition to the fundamental problems of his view, one can easily expose his biased and one-sided approach of using evidence that fits his intellectual premises while ignoring materials that did not align with his view.

1. What Abu Zayd presents as the linguistic meaning of Sunnah is only one of its meanings. In the Arabic poetry of the era of revelation and before, Sunnah was used in other meanings besides practical conduct (Hudhayl, 1950, p. 157). It was also used to mean a followed leader (Labid ibn Rabi'a, 1414, p. 179; Tabari, 1412, pp. 65-66), form and face (Qurtubi, 1364, p. 216), and community (umma) (Nuwayri, 1367, p. 82). The word Sunnah in the Prophet's era, in addition to meaning method and conduct, also had legal meanings such as the Prophet's narrations (other than the Quran) and legal obligations (Bukhari, 1391, p. 169; Hajjaj, 1412, p. 322). By comparing the concept of Sunnah in language and narrations with the terminological concept of Sunnah, one can find that the term Sunnah has emerged from its uses.

The difference is that in the terminological concept, there is an effort to achieve a comprehensive definition that applies to multiple cases, while in specific uses, only one of the meanings might be considered depending on the context and associated concepts.

Based on what has been stated, in the uses of Sunnah in language and also in narrations, there were other meanings besides conduct and practical custom that Abu Zayd ignored in his attempt to prove his point of view.

2. Abu Zayd considered Sunnah to mean the conduct of the people. Therefore, it was necessary for him to look at the customs of the Muslims to understand their special interaction with the sayings and actions of the Messenger of God and their particular attention to the Sunnah. But he overlooked and ignored this issue. The people's special attention to the Prophet's Sunnah was more apparent in cases where there were opposing views to his. If Sunnah was the conduct of all the people of Medina, then the method and tradition of the Prophet's opponents, who were also from Medina and apparently Muslims, should also have been considered. However, what was followed by the public was the Sunnah of the Messenger of God.

Also, Abu Zayd did not pay attention to the fact that Islam accepted the accepted traditions of society but rejected many of their wrong customs. So how can we consider Sunnah to be the custom of the people when many customs were forbidden in the religion of Islam? How can one claim that in these circumstances, the revelatory parts of the Sunnah are not identifiable? If the Prophet's traditions were the same as the people's customs in Islam, would there have been any reason for the polytheists to oppose the Prophet?!

While it can be accepted that the customs of Muslims had certain characteristics, this does not mean that the people's customs were guided blindly and without rules. Rather, this custom was formed under the guidance of Islamic teachings. The Quranic verses that called for following the Prophet (Al-Hashr/7) and considered him a role model (Al-Ahzab/21) gave a special characteristic to the Prophet's Sunnah, so that the prophetic Sunnah was always used as a criterion for judging the customs of society. After the Prophet, one of the reasons for the companions' protests against the rulers' actions was their opposition to the Prophet's Sunnah.

3. Abu Zayd considered the change from the linguistic meaning of Sunnah to its terminological concept to be a product of Al-Shafi'i's thought. But it should be noted that the explicit statement of the term

Sunnah does not mean its creation. Many Islamic sciences, including the science of Usul (principles) and Hadith (narration), were formed after the Prophet's death, and Al-Shafi'i was one of the thinkers who played a significant role in shaping and systematizing these sciences (Hanafi, 1415, p. 6; Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 9). Therefore, it was natural that his definition of Sunnah had not been stated with such precision before him.

Abu Zayd believed that Al-Shafi'i, due to his political leanings toward the Umayyad dynasty, gave special authority to the Quraysh and their language and culture, and by coining the term Sunnah, he forced the entire community to follow the customs and traditions of the Quraysh (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 56). And it is unclear on what historical documents Abu Zayd based such a claim. Historical evidence shows that Al-Shafi'i was born years after the fall of the Umayyad state in the year 150 AH. Therefore, he had no opportunity or motivation to help the Umayyad rulers who had been overthrown years earlier in 132 AH. It seems that Abu Zayd made a mistake in stating the date. For this reason, his like-minded colleagues who put forth similar views corrected this mistake and clarified that Al-Shafi'i was only a jurist who willingly cooperated with the Abbasid rulers (Dwayib, 2013, p. 75).

4. Abu Zayd considered the terminological definition of Sunnah to have arisen from the need of jurists after the Prophet for legislation based on Sunnah (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 39). The need for Sunnah in legislation is a correct and commendable point because the Quran often limited itself to generalities, and the details of the rulings were stated in the Sunnah. But the point is that this need existed not only in the periods after the Prophet but from his own time. In later periods, none of the jurisprudential schools disregarded the legislations stated in the Prophet's Sunnah (Ibn al-Jawzi, 1407, pp. 147-169).
5. In addition to these points, is Sunnah only referred to and given attention by the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam? And do other Sunni groups and Shi'a Muslims not have an interest in it? When Abu Zayd considered the term Sunnah among Sunnis to be a creation of Al-Shafi'i, the question remains: who created the term Sunnah among the Shi'a? Is the term Sunnah and the Shi'a's attention to the Prophet's Sunnah also influenced by Al-Shafi'i's theory about Sunnah?!
6. Abu Zayd's view on the concept of Sunnah has many similarities with the views of Orientalists and thinkers influenced by them. They

considered Sunnah to mean the customary and traditional practice during the time of the Messenger of God, which was transformed into a legal term in the late second century (Na'im, 1994, p. 49). And they believed that before the second century, Sunnah, without being exclusively attributed to the Prophet, was a collection of accepted and well-known views for the general public (Coulson, 1412, p. 65). The most prominent Orientalist in the study of Sunnah is Joseph Schacht. He ultimately considered the prophetic Sunnah to lack authenticity and evaluated it as a collection of jurisprudential fatwas that were formed over time and for which chains of transmission were later fabricated (Schacht, 1965, pp. 33-35).

The point-by-point correspondence of Abu Zayd's ideas with the views of Orientalists makes it seem that his thoughts are more a product of ideas with the same foundations as Orientalists than of impartial and free-thinking research. His translation of Sunnah, instead of being consistent with the historical realities of Muslims, stems from the Western concept of tradition, such that Abu Zayd introduced the new concept of tradition into the old concept of Sunnah and divided it into two parts: revelatory and customs and traditions (Hanafi, 1415, p. 33). A division that, due to the inability to separate the revelatory parts from the non-revelatory ones, led in practice to the denial of Sunnah.

### **A Critical Analysis of Abu Zayd's View on Religious Knowledge and Tradition**

Abu Zayd distinguishes between religion and religious knowledge. He defines religion as a body of fixed, historical sacred texts. In contrast, he views religious knowledge as human-driven interpretations (ijtihad) of the religion. From this perspective, he argues that the religious knowledge passed down from earlier generations lacks sanctity because it's a product of specific socio-historical, geographical, and ethnic conditions. Therefore, it can and should change to reflect different thinkers and environments (Abu Zayd, 1383, pp. 263-264). He critiques mainstream Sunni thought, arguing that they mistakenly equate the definitive and unchallengeable opinions of their predecessors with religion itself (ibid., pp. 88, 264).

Based on this, Abu Zayd rejects the conventional understanding of Sunnah as the sayings, actions, and tacit approvals of the Prophet and his companions. He considers this definition a form of religious knowledge, as it was not a

recognized term during the Prophet's time but was instead created by Al-Shafi'i (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 69).

Abu Zayd prefers the literal meaning of Sunnah as "conduct" or "method," a term that referred to the prevailing customs of Medina and early Muslims. In his view, Sunnah becomes a general concept encompassing both the common traditions of the people and the revelatory tradition. However, he sees no clear distinction between these two, believing it's difficult to separate the revelatory parts from the customary ones (ibid., p. 84). He claims that before Al-Shafi'i, when Malik spoke of "*al-Sunnah 'indana*" (the Sunnah among us), he meant the practices of the Medinan people (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 69). He also suggests that when Mu'adh ibn Jabal referred to the Sunnah of the Messenger of God, he was simply referring to the established social customs that everyone accepted, and which the Prophet himself ruled by (ibid., p. 54).

Abu Zayd maintains that religious knowledge and the understanding of scholars in a particular era gained a sacred aura for specific purposes and became ingrained in religious thought. Through an ideological analysis of religious concepts, he believes we can see that they are not absolute truths but are historically contingent. Consequently, the dominance of a particular idea in a certain period does not prove its validity but rather its acceptance by the ruling political class (Abu Zayd, 1383, p. 76).

Using this framework, Abu Zayd re-examines Al-Shafi'i's motivation for creating the term Sunnah. He believes Al-Shafi'i's goal was to legitimize the Sunnah as a source of law and to ally with the Umayyad rulers. By doing so, Al-Shafi'i gave authority to the customs and traditions of the Quraysh, imbuing their customary practices with religious significance and obliging people to follow them (ibid., p. 56). This, Abu Zayd argues, ideologically justified the event of Saqifa and the political dominance of the Quraysh (ibid.).

## Critical Analysis of the Concept of Religious Knowledge in Tradition

A critical look at Abu Zayd's work reveals how deeply his intellectual framework influences his definition of Sunnah. While using a conceptual framework is natural, Abu Zayd's approach is problematic because he inconsistently applies the principles of a single school of thought. He based his work on hermeneutics but used contradictory ideas from Gadamer, Habermas, and Hirsch to serve his specific arguments (Tavakoli Bina, 1393, pp. 61-90).

He was heavily influenced by Gadamer's hermeneutics (Salehi, 1393, p. 178) but switched to Habermas's model for an ideological critique of Al-Shafi'i.

This inconsistent methodology weakens the scientific and academic credibility of his view on Sunnah, making it appear as an unprincipled and selective use of scholarly thought rather than a solid scientific theory (Tavakoli Bina, 1393, pp. 77-81).

While the distinction between religion and religious knowledge is ontologically sound, it's not entirely tenable from an epistemological standpoint. Epistemology is concerned with correspondence to reality. The belief that all religious knowledge is human, non-sacred, fluid, and relative implies a rejection of the principle of correspondence and provides no criteria for validating knowledge. This mirrors Kantian epistemology, which posits a gap between the thing-in-itself (noumenon) and the thing in the mind (phenomenon) (Kant, n.d., p. 14). Accepting this view means abandoning the idea that our knowledge can correspond to reality, thus moving away from realism (Firoz Jani, n.d., pp. 274-275).

However, value judgments and religious propositions can be either true or false; they are not meaningless (Amoli, 1384, p. 249). Furthermore, the belief that knowledge is constantly changing and cannot correspond to reality creates a paradox for Abu Zayd's own theory (Nikzad, 1387, Article 1). Under his own framework, his view that Sunnah is religious knowledge would also lack any proof of its correctness or correspondence to reality.

### **Critical Analysis of Abu Zayd's View on the Religious Nature of Sunnah**

A closer look at Abu Zayd's theory on the religious nature of Sunnah, along with its foundational flaws, reveals his biased and one-sided approach. He selectively uses evidence that supports his intellectual premise while ignoring facts that contradict his views.

1. **Limited Definition of Sunnah:** Abu Zayd's definition of Sunnah as merely a linguistic concept is incomplete. In pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabic poetry and narrations, Sunnah had multiple meanings, including a followed leader (Labid ibn Rabi'ah, 1414, p. 179; Tabari, 1412, pp. 65-66), a form or appearance (Qurtubi, 1364, p. 216), and a community (*umma*) (Nuwayri, 1367, p. 82), in addition to practical conduct (Hudhayl, 1950, p. 157). The word also had legal meanings in the Prophet's era, referring to his non-Quranic narrations and legal obligations (Bukhari, 1391, p. 169; Hajjaj, 1412, p. 322). The terminological definition of Sunnah didn't emerge out of nowhere; it came from these various linguistic uses, seeking to provide a comprehensive definition that applied to all cases. Abu Zayd ignored these other meanings in his quest to prove his specific viewpoint.

2. Disregard for Muslim Practice: Abu Zayd's claim that Sunnah was merely the "custom of the people" is an oversimplification. He failed to consider the special reverence early Muslims had for the sayings and actions of the Prophet. If Sunnah were simply the custom of all Medinan people, then the practices of the Prophet's opponents, who were also Medinans, should have been considered equally valid. Instead, only the Prophet's Sunnah was followed. Islam accepted some societal customs but rejected many others, making it impossible to claim that the Sunnah was merely a reflection of popular custom. The Prophet's Sunnah served as the primary standard against which all community practices were measured. After the Prophet's death, the companions often used his Sunnah to challenge the actions of rulers, demonstrating its authoritative status.
3. Historical Inaccuracy Regarding Al-Shafi'i: Abu Zayd claims Al-Shafi'i created the term Sunnah due to political alignment with the Umayyad dynasty, giving special status to the Quraysh. However, this is historically inaccurate. Al-Shafi'i was born in 150 AH, years after the fall of the Umayyad caliphate in 132 AH. Therefore, he couldn't have had any motivation to support the Umayyad rulers. Historical evidence shows that Al-Shafi'i willingly collaborated with the Abbasid rulers, as corrected by Abu Zayd's own colleagues (Dwayib, 2013, p. 75). Al-Shafi'i, as a key figure in the development of Islamic jurisprudence, systematized the term Sunnah, but he did not invent it out of thin air.
4. Misunderstanding the Need for Sunnah: Abu Zayd attributes the terminological definition of Sunnah to the post-Prophetic need for legislation (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 39). While the need for detailed legal rulings is real, it existed during the Prophet's lifetime as well. The Quran often provides general principles, while the Sunnah provides the specific details. All jurisprudential schools, not just Al-Shafi'i's, have always relied on the Prophet's Sunnah for their legal framework (Ibn al-Jawzi, 1407, pp. 147-169).
5. Neglect of Shi'a and Other Sunni Views: If the term Sunnah was a creation of Al-Shafi'i, Abu Zayd leaves an unanswered question: who created the term for the Shi'a and other Sunni schools? The Shi'a's reverence for the Sunnah of the Prophet and the Imams predates Al-Shafi'i, challenging the notion that his definition was the sole origin of the term in Islamic thought.
6. Influence of Orientalist Thought: Abu Zayd's views on Sunnah bear a striking resemblance to those of Orientalists like Joseph Schacht. Schacht argued that the prophetic Sunnah lacked authenticity and was a later fabrication of legal rulings with forged chains of transmission (Schacht, 1965, pp. 33-35). Abu Zayd's ideas seem to stem from the same intellectual foundation as these



Orientalists rather than from an impartial historical analysis. His translation of Sunnah as the Western concept of tradition and his division of it into revelatory and customary parts, with the claim that the two are inseparable, ultimately leads to the practical denial of the revelatory nature of the Sunnah.

### **Critical Analysis of Abu Zayd's Historicist View of Tradition**

Historicism is a key principle of hermeneutics that Abu Zayd heavily relied on to analyze Sunnah (tradition). First proposed by Heidegger and later by Gadamer, historicism is a philosophical perspective that argues historicity is inseparable from human existence and understanding. Based on this, one's tradition, history, and background become an indivisible part of their being, and human understanding is inherently historical and situated in time (Va'ezi, 1392, p. 176).

One of the most important premises of historicism, which Abu Zayd used to examine the Sunnah, was its anthropological basis. According to this premise, every human is a limited being with a unique background and specific circumstances. They are bound by their environment and position, which are historical and subject to change. As such, they cannot achieve a universal, timeless, or trans-historical state (Salehi, 1393, pp. 184-185).

Abu Zayd applied this premise to the Prophet Muhammad, viewing him as a product of his society and time, confined by his specific environment and circumstances (Abu Zayd, 1387, p. 122). Following this logic, the Prophet's Sunnah—his sayings, actions, and tacit approvals—are considered historical matters. He argues that a trans-historical view of the Sunnah and unconditional adherence to it is both impossible and irrational.

Thus, Abu Zayd's historicist view of the Prophet leads to historicism at the level of the religion's ongoing existence (Salehi, 1391, pp. 72-73). This means the Prophet's Sunnah cannot be a source of law for other people, especially those living centuries later. Abu Zayd rejects the trans-historical view of the Prophet and his actions, claiming it turns the Prophet into an idealized, mental construct separate from reality. He argues it portrays the Prophet as a figure who is detached from his society and its realities, stripping him of his visible, human, and material existence (Abu Zayd, 1387, p. 122).

### **Critique of the Historicist Basis of Sunnah**

The most significant flaw in the historicist approach to Sunnah is its foreign origin. This historicist perspective emerged in the West to address specific challenges within Christianity. However, this view was applied to Islam without considering the key differences between the two religions. As a result, intellectual outcomes from the West, which had their own historical and

philosophical context, were mindlessly and superficially applied to Islam. This turned them into a prescription that, because it didn't align with the underlying problems, exacerbated them instead of solving them (Salehi, 1393, p. 106).

Another issue with this theory is its claim that there is a contradiction between being human and having a connection to the trans-historical (Salehi, 1393, p. 141). Yet, Abu Zayd himself doesn't remain faithful to this principle. He speaks of the Prophet's connection to an infinite and trans-historical source for receiving the verses of the Quran (Abu Zayd, 1387, p. 91). This implies that while the Prophet was human, his role as a recipient of revelation and his connection to its source place him beyond an ordinary human. The Quran itself reinforces this idea (18:110, 41:6). Abu Zayd used Gadamer's hermeneutics and his historicist perspective but failed to fully adhere to them. He extracted a *method* from Gadamer's philosophy of understanding, which Gadamer himself never intended (Va'ez, 1392, p. 211). Using historicism as a method can lead Abu Zayd to absolute relativism, a pitfall Gadamer was aware of but one Abu Zayd overlooked. This relativism could even undermine the validity of Abu Zayd's own works (Tavakoli Bina, 1393, pp. 198-199).

### Critique of Abu Zayd's View on the Historicity of Sunnah

Abu Zayd's historicist view of the Sunnah and his application of historical anthropology to the Prophet led him to seek out evidence suggesting the Sunnah lacks a divine origin, is not revelatory, and contains human errors. He argues that even the Prophet's contemporaries did not rely on his Sunnah, did not consider it independently authoritative, and refrained from collecting and compiling it. The question is, to what extent are Abu Zayd's claims and evidence valid?

#### *Analysis of the Non-Revelatory Nature of Sunnah*

Abu Zayd challenges the revelatory view of the Sunnah, which gives it its authority. He doesn't consider revelation a sacred matter unique to the Prophet. Instead, he sees revelation as a universal connection between God and humanity, one that has existed for all people throughout all periods. The Prophet's uniqueness in receiving revelation lies only in its legislative nature, which was the reception of the Quran through Gabriel and which ended with the death of the Prophet (Abu Zayd, 2000, p. 35).

Abu Zayd claims that the revelation of the Sunnah was not legislative but rather a form of inspiration and a distinct communication between the Prophet and God. He argues that after the Prophet, Al-Shafi'i was the one who tried to

impose the concept of revelation on both the Quran and the Sunnah, thereby giving both a legislative value (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 86).

According to Abu Zayd, the Prophet's Sunnah, which was merely the customs of the Quraysh, became a part of the religion through Al-Shafi'i's ideological perspective and Arab bias, and all people were forced to follow it. This, he argues, had no precedent; no one had previously made the customs of a particular group obligatory for all Muslims. He offers as evidence that Malik rejected the Abbasid Caliph's request to make his *Muwatta* obligatory for all Islamic lands, because Malik's work was based on the practices of the Medinan people, not divine revelation. Abu Zayd rejects the Quranic and narrative evidence for the revelatory nature of the Sunnah, considering them incorrect interpretations that are inconsistent with the context of the verses (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 52).

Al-Shafi'i interpreted the term wisdom (*hikmah*) in the verses: "And remember that which is recited in your houses of the signs of Allah and of wisdom" (33:34) and "He it is Who has sent among the unlettered a messenger from among themselves, who recites to them His signs and purifies them and teaches them the Book and the wisdom" (62:2) as the Sunnah of the Messenger of God (Al-Shafi'i, 1367, p. 288). He also interpreted the pronoun *huwa* in the verse "Nor does he speak from whim; it is nothing but a revelation revealed" (53:3-4) as referring to the Prophet, concluding that everything the Prophet uttered was divinely inspired. Abu Zayd, however, disagrees, arguing that these interpretations are inconsistent with the verses' context. He claims the pronoun *huwa* in Surah al-Najm refers to the Quran, because a pronoun cannot refer to a hidden pronoun in a verb (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 126). Similarly, Abu Zayd sees Al-Shafi'i's reliance on the concept of *ilqa' fi al-raw'* (inspiration), a direct revelation to the heart, as an improper interpretation aimed at equating the Sunnah with the Quran (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 126).

#### *The Prophet's Consultation with the People*

Abu Zayd argues that the Prophet's act of consulting with people is inconsistent with the revelatory nature of the Sunnah. He questions, if all the Prophet's actions, sayings, and even his silence were from revelation, why would he consult his companions? Did these consultations indicate the Prophet's ignorance or the absence of revelation? What about the many instances where the Prophet followed the people's suggestions? Were these instances also revelatory? (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 125). When the Prophet said, "You know better about your worldly affairs," doesn't this mean that the Sunnah is not as comprehensive and revelatory as Al-Shafi'i claims? (Abu Zayd, 1383, p. 77).

Abu Zayd is correct that the Prophet consulted with the people on many occasions. However, this does not mean the Prophet was ignorant. Rather, the purpose of consultation was to foster unity and solidarity with the people, as commanded by God: "And consult with them in the matter" (3:159). The Prophet never consulted on matters of fixed religious law (Abdul Mutalib, 1417, p. 90). These consultations were about changing, day-to-day events for which there was no specific divine legislation (Tabatabaei, 1417, p. 5). The Prophet's consultations were not in opposition to revelation; rather, they worked alongside it to manage the affairs of the Islamic community. Therefore, even if we were to consider the Prophet's views as his own interpretations (as some Sunnis do), we would still be obligated to follow them according to the Quran (Ahmad, 2010, p. 31).

#### *The Sunnah's Subordination to the Quran*

Abu Zayd finds a contradiction in the arguments of those who believe in the revelatory nature of both the Quran and the Sunnah, a contradiction he believes is either overlooked or intentionally ignored for ideological reasons (Abu Zayd, 2003, pp. 126-129). He argues that if both are considered texts and revelations, one would expect them to be able to abrogate each other. However, since Al-Shafi'i states that the Sunnah cannot abrogate the Quran (Al-Shafi'i, 1386, p. 106), Abu Zayd questions its revelatory status. He instead views the Sunnah as a collection of interpretations for understanding the Quran that cannot contradict the literal meaning of the revelation (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 126).

In other words, Al-Shafi'i's position does not place the Quran and Sunnah on the same level, even though he does not allow the Sunnah to abrogate the Quran. He considers the Quran the primary source of religion and believes any abrogation must be based on the Quran itself. This belief stems from the Quran's unique status, not from a lack of belief in the Sunnah's revelatory nature. This was not a novel formulation by Al-Shafi'i but a report on the common practice of Muslims. In the mainstream Muslim view, the Quran has always had a supreme status, and a key criterion for accepting a Sunnah is that it doesn't contradict the Quran (Abdul Khaliq, 1415, p. 485). Therefore, the fact that the Sunnah does not abrogate the Quran does not mean it's not revelatory. Rather, any tradition that contradicts the Quran is simply not considered a valid Sunnah and is likely to be corrupted, altered, or fabricated.

#### *The Infallibility of the Prophet and Its Limited Scope*

One of the most important pillars of the Sunnah's authority is the Prophet's infallibility ('isma). If the Sunnah encompasses all the Prophet's actions and sayings, then following it only makes sense if the Prophet was free from

human error. Therefore, if we do not accept his infallibility or limit it to the transmission of Quranic verses, it becomes easy to question the Sunnah and its scope. Abu Zayd rejects the Prophet's infallibility because it contradicts his anthropological view and his human-centric perspective on the Prophet. Consequently, he searches for evidence to portray the Prophet's infallibility as an illusion.

*Al-Shafi'i as the Inventor of the Prophet's Infallibility*

Abu Zayd claims that the belief in the Prophet's infallibility was not widespread during his lifetime and was later introduced by Al-Shafi'i. Abu Zayd suggests that Al-Shafi'i tried to portray the Prophet as infallible and flawless to legitimize his sayings and actions (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 52).

Abu Zayd does not provide any specific documentation to support his claim. However, similar arguments can be found among his followers. They claim that Al-Shafi'i used the word '*isma* (infallibility) when he said, "And God informed His Messenger of His protection of him, which preceded in His knowledge," as evidence of his belief in the Prophet's infallibility (Dwayib, 2013, p. 82). But an examination of Al-Shafi'i's text reveals he made this statement in his commentary on verse 67 of Surah al-Ma'idah (Al-Shafi'i, 2006, p. 766), and the word '*isma* is in the verse itself, not in his interpretation. Furthermore, this verse and Al-Shafi'i's commentary do not aim to prove infallibility in its terminological sense but in its linguistic meaning: that God protects the Prophet from the evil and deceit of the polytheists.

## **Neglecting the Human Aspect of the Prophet**

Abu Zayd argues that believing in the Prophet's infallibility and considering him free from any human error leads to neglecting his human aspects. He places the Prophet on a divine, superhuman level (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 55). He believes this characteristic was attributed to the Prophet during a time when people sought to turn his character into an idealized, mental construct detached from reality and his community. This process, he claims, transformed the Prophet from a visible, material, and human being into a person devoid of all human characteristics (Abu Zayd, 1387, p. 122).

This view by Abu Zayd presents being human and making mistakes as an inherent combination, implying that anyone who escapes error is no longer human. While humans do make mistakes out of ignorance, forgetfulness, or even intentionally due to free will, this does not mean that error is an essential human trait; it only shows the possibility of it. The belief in the Prophet's infallibility does not make him divine but instead affirms his humanity. He is a human entrusted with an important responsibility, and he needs divine

guidance and confirmation (revelation and infallibility) to avoid falling into error.

### *Incompatibility of the Prophet's Infallibility with the Quran*

Abu Zayd considers the belief in the Prophet's infallibility to be in conflict with the Quran, as the Prophet is rebuked for his mistakes in various verses. He also claims this view is inconsistent with narrations that report the Prophet's incorrect interpretations (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 52).

A look at the commentaries on the verses where the Prophet is reprimanded (e.g., 9:43, 66:1) shows that neither Shi'a nor Sunni exegetes have ever considered these verses as evidence against the Prophet's infallibility (Tabatabaei, 1417, pp. 329-330; Tabari, 1412, pp. 170-180; Al-Shafi'i, 1367, p. 766). Additionally, the authenticity of narrations like the story of *Al-Ifk* (the false accusation) and the pollination of date palms, which are used as evidence against the Prophet's infallibility, is questionable. Even if they are authentic, there are interpretations of these narrations that do not compromise the Prophet's infallibility.

## **Abu Zayd's View on the Independence of Sunnah in Legislation**

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd collected information and evidence to show that the independence of the Sunnah as a source of law was not a consensus among early Muslims. He cites a report from Al-Shafi'i, who states that there are three views on the relationship between the Quran and the Sunnah: (1) the Prophet conveyed what is already in the Quran, (2) the Prophet clarified what is stated in general terms in the Quran, and (3) there are things in the Sunnah that are not in the Quran. Al-Shafi'i says that the first two views are accepted by everyone (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 92).

Abu Zayd concludes from Al-Shafi'i's statement that the third view—the independence of the Sunnah in legislation—was not a consensus. He believes this opposing view was forgotten over time due to the dominance of the ruling establishment, to the point that the independent authority of the Sunnah became so widespread it seemed no other view had ever existed (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 119).

As another piece of evidence, Abu Zayd refers to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, claiming that they did not consider the Sunnah an independent source and used it only to explain the Quran (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 93).

Abu Zayd argues that even Al-Shafi'i himself sometimes neglected the independent authority of the Sunnah and relied on the prevailing view before him, which is why he did not consider the Sunnah to abrogate the Quran (Abu

Zayd, 2003, p. 106). If Al-Shafi'i gave the Sunnah an independent role in legislation, why would he consider it subordinate to the Quran? Doesn't this view imply that even Al-Shafi'i considered only the Quran to be a revelatory text with independent legislative authority? (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 89).

As is clear, Abu Zayd, contrary to his claim that the age of an idea does not prove its validity, relies on Al-Shafi'i's book to prove his point, trying to show that the non-independent nature of the Sunnah is a long-standing view. But does Al-Shafi'i really say this? When we look at Al-Shafi'i's complete statement, we see that after discussing the disagreement over the third view, he clarifies its aspects (Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 92). A closer look shows that Al-Shafi'i is not discussing a disagreement over the legitimacy or independence of the Sunnah. He is simply reporting on the different ways scholars have referred to the Sunnah that is not explicitly in the Quran (Al-Sibai, 1999, p. 416). They all acknowledge the existence of rulings in the Sunnah that are not in the Quran. Some did not use the term "independent" while others did, but the practical outcome is the same because they all consider those rulings to be authoritative. Abu Zayd's other evidence, the Hanafi school, is also incorrect, as Hanafis not only pay attention to the Sunnah but have legal rulings that are based solely on the Sunnah, such as the prohibition of eating birds with talons and the simultaneous marriage of a man to a woman and her aunt (Abdul Mutalib, 1417, p. 88).

## Conclusion

A critical review of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's perspective on the challenge of tradition and modernity reveals a dual approach. On one hand, influenced by modernist thought, Abu Zayd takes a historicist view of the Prophet's Sunnah. He believes that since the Sunnah is a product of its cultural and social context, it cannot be an absolute guide for all times without being adapted to the demands of the modern era. From his perspective, the Sunnah must be re-examined based on rationality, ethics, and contemporary conditions, as some of its teachings may no longer be relevant or require reinterpretation. This view emphasizes the need to critique tradition and adapt it for modern societies. On the other hand, critiques of Abu Zayd's view, based on Islamic principles, show that such an approach contradicts the very nature and status of the Sunnah in Islam. In the Islamic view, the Prophet's Sunnah is not merely a historical phenomenon; it is a part of the non-Quranic revelation and a complement to the divine message that is considered necessary and enduring for the guidance of humanity, transcending time and place. The principle of



the finality of the Prophet ensures the validity and authority of the Sunnah as one of the main sources of Islamic law, placing it beyond temporal and spatial limitations. The conclusion is that Abu Zayd's historicist view, while emphasizing critique and rethinking of tradition, faces serious challenges in its religious foundations. His approach could lead to weakening the authority of the Sunnah and ignoring its connection to divine revelation. From an Islamic perspective, his view appears not only incomplete and inadequate but also potentially undermines the coherence and stability of Islamic law. Therefore, any interpretation or re-examination of the Sunnah must be carried out while preserving the fundamental principles of the religion, accepting the authority of the Sunnah, and ensuring its consistency with the Quran and the Prophet's biography to prevent the distortion of religious knowledge.

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