

## Recapturing the Sunni Tradition: “Traditional Islam” and Gender in the United States

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**Abstract:** In this study, the arguments on gender developed in the contemporary American Muslim community are analyzed by focusing on the discourses promoted by Muslim intellectuals who advocate revival of the Sunni scholarly tradition. Since the mid-1990s, growing interest in Sunni scholarly traditions has been observed among Muslim youth living in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. While this is not a group or movement sharing a coherent ideology, proponents of this Sunni revivalist trend have formed a constituency within the American Muslim community under the leadership of several intellectuals who claim to have learned religious sciences from Sunni scholars in the Middle East and North Africa. This new trend is known to emphasize the Sunni scholarly tradition, advocating the authority of what its proponents call “Traditional Islam,” which is a version of Islam abiding by the framework of classical Sunni jurisprudence, creeds, and Sufism. With its heavy focus on classical interpretations, this could give the impression that the trend is merely another anachronistic reaction to—and rejection of—the changing circumstances and lifestyles of contemporary Muslims. However, the trend’s leading intellectuals are actually taking a more flexible stance on some issues at a practical level. These issues typically revolve around gender, over which heated disputes have been taking place within the American Muslim community. By focusing on Hamza Yusuf’s discourses on gender, this study unravels the approach taken by intellectuals of the trend when paraphrasing historical Sunni concepts in the United States context. More specifically, the paper presents a discussion on how established Sunni views on gender are reframed in the discourses of Traditional Islam by examining several contested issues as cases.

**Keywords:** Traditional Islam, Sufism, Sunni revivalism, Hamza Yusuf, Homosexuality

### I. Introduction

In this paper, the discourses on gender issues that have developed in the contemporary American Muslim community are explored by focusing on the Sunni revivalist trend, which is currently thriving. This new trend is known to emphasize the Sunni scholarly tradition, especially the authority of what its proponents call “Traditional Islam”—a version of Islam that abides by the framework of classical Sunni jurisprudence, creeds, and Sufism. While a variety of terms have been proposed to depict this trend, I employ the term Traditional Islam because its proponents describe their teachings with the words “tradition” and “traditional.”<sup>1</sup> According to their view,

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<sup>1</sup> The term Traditional Islam appears in literature produced by its proponents (e.g., Malik 2003, 2; Tarsin 2015, xvi). This term has already been used in several analyses (e.g., Geaves 2006, 142; 2015, 46–47; Hermansen 2019, 154; Mathiesen 2013, 191; Sedgwick 2016, 108; 2020, 121), while other terms have also been suggested, such as “Late Sunni Traditionalism” (Brown 2018, 299), “neo-traditionalism” (Sedgwick 2016, 108; 2020, 121), “Islamic authenticity Sufism” (Hermansen 2014a, 132; 2014b, 193), “Traditional Islam network,” and “neo-Traditional Sufi trend” (Hamid 2016, 75).

tradition is defined as the accumulated interpretations that passed through the consensus (*ijmāʿ*) of past Sunni scholars (*ʿulamāʿ*), which is sharply contrasted with the claims of both modernists and Salafis for the reinterpretations of scriptures.

The most remarkable feature that distinguishes this Islamic trend is its significant presence in the Anglo-American Muslim landscape. Traditional Islam is a worldwide trend composed of a loose network of scholars, intellectuals, and their followers, all of whom concur with its theology. While scholars and intellectuals in the Arab world hold the position of rightful successors to the Sunni scholarly tradition,<sup>2</sup> their Western counterparts have tailored it to fit the Western context, positioning the Anglo-American Muslim community as the locus of Muslims' quest for Sunni orthodoxy. The significance of the Anglo-American Muslim context in the development of this trend is also indicated by its self-proclaimed term of Traditional Islam. Kasper Mathiesen indicated the term "makes only limited sense in Arabic and is, indeed, not widely used" in the Arab world, further suggesting "Traditional Islam is more clearly discernible as a Western Islamic category or denomination" (Mathiesen 2013, 193).

Traditional Islam has gained popularity among Muslims since the mid-1990s, especially Muslim youth in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Prominent figures of this trend include Hamza Yusuf (b. 1958), Nuh Ha Mim Keller (b. 1954), Abdal Hakim Murad (b. 1960), Zaid Shakir (b. 1956), and Umar Faruq Abd-Allah (b. 1948). It is evident that most of these people belong to the same generation and reached the age of maturity in the mid-1990s. In addition to being of the same generation, they also share the same educational and spiritual backgrounds; most of them received classical Islamic learning in the Arab world—such as in Syria and Morocco—and Sufi spiritual training in Shādhiliyya, which is a Sufi tariqa influential in these regions.<sup>3</sup>

The erudition and eloquence of these figures appeals to students and young professionals in their early 20s, who constitute the core supporters of this rising trend. Although the early followers of Traditional Islam are now in their late 40s, younger generations continue to be enlisted, demonstrating the appeal of this trend among Muslim youth. It should also be noted that the American Muslim community has undergone demographic changes since the 1990s, when the children of early Muslim immigrants were approaching adulthood and increasingly constituted a measurable

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Brown includes Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (1879–1952), Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (1917–96), Muḥammad Saʿīd al-Būfī (1929–2013), and ʿAlī Jumʿa (b. 1952) as prominent representatives of this trend (2018, 299). To this list I would add celebrated scholars in the contemporary Arab world who are regarded by Anglo-American proponents of Traditional Islam as their representatives, such as ʿAbd Allāh b. Bayyah (b. 1935), ʿUmar b. Hafīz (b. 1963), ʿAlī al-Jifrī (b. 1971), ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Shāghūrī (1912–2004), and Muḥammad al-Yāqūbī (b. 1963). See also Sedgwick (2020, 124–130) for further details of the trend's worldwide network.

<sup>3</sup> There are two other trends with strong Sufi inclination advocating the revival of Traditional Islam, both of which have thrived in North America throughout the 1980s and 1990s: the Traditionalist School represented by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) and Islamic Sufi tariqas brought to North America by Sufi masters from the Middle East such as Khalveti-Jerrahi order of Muzaffar Ozak (1916–85) and Naqshbandiyya-Nāzimīyya order of Muḥammad Hishām Kabbānī (b. 1945). Mathiesen identifies the influence of the Traditionalist School in the early works of intellectuals of Traditional Islam, although there are marked differences between the two trends in that the perennialist vision is engraved in the concept of Traditional Islam in the former trend (2013, 196–198). See also Sedgwick's analysis on the trend's link with René Guénon's Traditionalism (2020, 132–133). With regard to Islamic Sufi tariqas, I have not been able to find any attempts at identifying their links with the Traditional Islam trend, while it seems that both trends have much in common in terms of theology. Further research to capture the Traditional Islam trend's relations with other trends would enable the observers to place it in the broader context of contemporary Islam.

constituency among American Muslims. Converts and the children of early converts have joined this constituency and their numbers have consistently increased.<sup>4</sup> It is for these American-raised young Muslims that Traditional Islam has been a major appeal. Notably, many of its leaders are converts who were born and raised in the United States.

Hamza Yusuf has been the most celebrated leader of the American Traditional Islam scene. Born and raised in a Greek Orthodox family in California, Yusuf converted to Islam in the late 1970s. He then spent years studying under distinguished scholars in the Middle East and Africa where he acquired firsthand knowledge of Sunni scholarship. On returning to the United States, Yusuf quickly gained a national reputation as an erudite Muslim scholar and orator. He also became the public face of American Muslims, whose activities are not confined to local mosques and inner circles but also permeate mainstream national Muslim organizations.<sup>5</sup>

The discourses of Traditional Islam intellectuals are widely circulated in the American Muslim scene today. These discourses are disseminated not only through conventional publications but also online media, such as news sites, weblogs, online videos, and social networking services. The choice of these new media illustrates the trend’s appeal to the Muslim community by sharing the platform with other contemporary Islamic trends.

Given that Traditional Islam has achieved a measure of success in the American Muslim community, especially among American-raised younger generations, the question arises how this trend can bridge the Sunni scholarly tradition with the reality of American Muslim youth today. In other words, how are classical Sunni interpretations promoted by Traditional Islam understood and practiced by young American Muslims in a way that is relevant to their lives and experiences in American society?

The most heated debates faced by contemporary Muslims living in the United States revolve around gender, such as the empowerment of women and the inclusion of sexual minorities in their community. For example, women leading a congregational prayer that includes men has been a highly debated issue in the American Muslim community, especially since its occurrence in New York in 2005 (Hammer 2013). Regardless of their theological orientations, American Muslim leaders are tasked with addressing such issues and providing their audience with “answers” that both appear religiously orthodox and practically relevant. Leaders of the Traditional Islam trend are no exception.

In this paper, the approaches and strategies employed by leading intellectuals of the Traditional Islam trend to reach out to their audience are examined by focusing on Yusuf’s discourses on gender issues. As the most influential figure of the Traditional Islam circle in the United States, his statements exemplify the ways in which proponents of Traditional Islam are attempting to bridge the gap between Sunni tradition and American reality.

<sup>4</sup> According to a demographic survey of American Muslims released in 2007 by Pew Research Center (2007), American-born Muslims constitute 35% of all United States Muslims, with the younger generation (aged 18 to 29) constituting 30% of the total.

<sup>5</sup> For brief biographies of Yusuf, see Barboza 1994, 350–356; Grewal 2014, 159–169; Idrissi 2013, 85–88; Sabur 2010; Unus 2007c.

## II. What is Traditional Islam?

First, I will summarize the basic theology of the Traditional Islam trend,<sup>6</sup> the key concept of which is the term Traditional Islam. Proponents emphasize the need to follow the framework of classical Sunni jurisprudence (*fiqh*), creeds (*‘aqīda*), and Sufism (*taṣawwuf*). Further, the concept of Traditional Islam encompasses a body of interpretations legitimized via the consensus (*ijmā‘*) of medieval Sunni scholars. After its formulation into four legal schools and two theological schools (*madhhabs*), these interpretations were passed down through generations of qualified scholars. This succession of interpretations is one of the essential structures supporting the authority of Traditional Islam. The proponents employ the term “chain” to designate such a structure, which is the translated term derived from two similar yet distinct concepts: *isnād* of Hadith and *silsila* of Sufism.

The authority of Sunni scholarly tradition experienced a major setback due to the rise of Islamic reformism in the late 19th century. According to the narratives of trend’s proponents, Muslim reformers should be castigated for their claim of direct access to and reinterpretations of the Qur’an and Sunna through bypassing the consensus of medieval scholars. The reformist approach to these scriptures enabled Muslims to promote a variety of creative visions of Islam that have subsequently competed against each other for Islamic authority. The visions of Islam that gained the most influential position by the late 20th century were the literalism of the Salafis and the political Islam of the Islamists, which had by that time dominated Muslim discourse and institutions all over the world. These visions were assimilated into the American Muslim community after 1965, when the United States opened the door to Muslim immigrants from Asia and Africa. By the 1990s, the mainstreaming of Islamic national organizations with Salafi and Islamist orientations cemented the significant influence of these visions.<sup>7</sup>

By contrasting the vision of Traditional Islam with those espoused by its Salafi and Islamist counterparts, its significance in contemporary American settings becomes clear. Zareena Grewal conducted an extensive review of young American Muslims’ quest for Islamic authority. She revealed they had an underlying awareness of religious authority being in crisis and “this sense of crisis is intertwined with the notion that its resolution is located somewhere else, and often some time before” (Grewal 2014, 33). To the proponents of Traditional Islam, the source of religious authority lies in medieval Muslim Asia and Africa. The fact this authority was in crisis was attributable to the disruption in the chain of inheritance that had ensured its succession.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the only solution for the crisis was to reconnect the chain and restore Sunni Islam that had been established

<sup>6</sup> The basic ideas and concepts of Traditional Islam have been elaborated in the literature of both proponents and academics. See note 1 for the list of references.

<sup>7</sup> For example, the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) are two major national organizations that have been tied to global Islamic political movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-i Islami. During my fieldwork in the San Francisco Bay Area conducted between 2016 and 2017, I heard a lot of Muslims in Sufi communities, including proponents of Traditional Islam, criticizing these organizations for mainstreaming Salafi and anti-Sufi visions of Islam in the American Muslim scene. However, it might be misleading to label them as “Islamist organizations” because they are not political organizations promoting a specific ideology. Rather, they are national organizations reaching out to Muslims with diverse ethnic, theological, and political backgrounds. For further details of these organizations and their connection with global Islamist movements, see Leonard 2013, 177–178; Mandaville 2014; Siddiqui 2010; Unus 2007a; 2007b.

<sup>8</sup> Aftab Malik’s work on Traditional Islam is entitled *The Broken Chain*, clearly reflecting the sense of crisis shared by the trend’s proponents (Malik 2003).

and succeeded by past scholars. Hence, the task of contemporary Muslims is to accept and follow the interpretations of past scholars as constituting an authoritative source of Islam alongside the Qur’an and Sunna.

The understanding of Islam promoted by Traditional Islam is seemingly highly conservative, which leaves little room for flexible reinterpretations. Moreover, the narrative of intellectuals within Traditional Islam on gender, which they claim to have inherited from medieval scholars, reflects such inflexibility. For example, Yusuf’s arguments on gender issues are based on the assumption that women and men are created to assume mutually complementary roles, with women taking care of the house and men working outside the home (Yusuf 2014).<sup>9</sup> Further, Yusuf contends that sexual intercourse should only be permitted through marriage and between women and men, clearly indicating his opposition to same-sex intimacy (Yusuf 2013).<sup>10</sup>

The seemingly conservative stance of Traditional Islam, as reflected in its theology, might give the impression that it is merely another anachronistic reaction to—and rejection of—the changing circumstances and lifestyles of contemporary Muslims. However, the approaches taken to the Sunni tradition by proponents of this trend are more nuanced than they first appear, thereby enabling current issues to be addressed with greater flexibility.

A closer look at how the proponents elaborate on the concept of Traditional Islam reveals it is more than simply a body of authoritative interpretations of the past. It also includes methodologies and pedagogies, established by medieval scholars, through which interpretations can be made. The term “discipline” is generally used to describe the methodological aspect of this concept.<sup>11</sup>

From this understanding emerges an emphasis on the scholarship of Traditional Islam’s intellectuals. With Yusuf at the fore, many leading figures of this trend are known for spending years studying under distinguished scholars in the Middle East and Africa to acquire firsthand knowledge of Sunni scholarship. Thus, authority of Traditional Islam is supported by two claims: their interpretations originated from great scholars of the past and their contemporary intellectuals who convey these interpretations to the American audience are themselves masters of classical scholarship. Both the interpretations and the discipline jointly constitute the authority of Traditional Islam.

Authoritative interpretations of past Sunni scholars are not presented as they were originally written. Rather, paraphrasing is used to fit the contemporary context in which they are conveyed. For example, the ideas of medieval scholars were initially and generally expressed in classical Arabic; hence, they must be translated into contemporary American English for a modern audi-

<sup>9</sup> Hitomi Ono questioned the traditional nature of gender roles, such as defining housework as women’s work, arguing instead that such gender views actually reflect the modern concept of family. For further details about her argument, see her article in this special issue.

<sup>10</sup> See also a CNN interview with Yusuf reproduced in SeekersGuidance, which is available at <https://seekersguidance.org/articles/prophet-muhammad/orlandostatement-shaykhhamza-gay-muslims/> (accessed November 5, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Aftab Malik identifies discipline as a term corresponding to *adab*, an Arabic word signifying manners and etiquettes, which he defines as actually encompassing broader meanings than those considered in scholarly methods, including moral cultivation of learners; Traditional Islam intellectuals deem *adab* as constituting essential elements of Sunni scholarly pedagogy (Malik 2003, 18). The translation, or (re)definition, of *adab* as a discipline clearly presupposes moral education for Sufi trainees in their spiritual pursuit. See also Talal Asad’s discussion on “the education of good character (*tahdhīb al-akhlāq*) through the practices of devotion and discipline,” in which he analyzes the concept in his argument on tradition ([https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/thinking\\_about\\_tradition\\_religion\\_and\\_politics\\_in\\_egypt\\_today/](https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/thinking_about_tradition_religion_and_politics_in_egypt_today/) accessed January 17, 2021).

ence. In addition, many topics addressed within classical jurisprudence are no longer relevant to contemporary Muslims.<sup>12</sup> Due to such changing historical circumstances, Traditional Islam's intellectuals are in actuality tasked with reinterpreting the Sunni tradition through selecting terms and topics that reflect contemporary reality. Nevertheless, such reinterpretations can still be considered authoritative given the re-interpreters are also scholars acquainted with the classical discipline.

Many prominent intellectuals of Traditional Islam, such as Yusuf, are converts with at least an undergraduate college education in the United States, which is a background regarded as another source of the authority of their reinterpretations. This means their translations and paraphrasing of the Sunni tradition into American English are considered authoritative, not only because these intellectuals are learned Sunni scholars, but also because they are Americans who are well acclimated to their society and culture.<sup>13</sup>

### III. Traditional Islam on Homosexuality

The composite nature of the concept of Traditional Islam has given their intellectuals the authority not just to transmit the interpretations of past scholars but also to tailor them to match contemporary American settings. This section specifically describes how these intellectuals are attempting to promote an understanding of Islam that is both relevant and acceptable to their American audience while simultaneously maintaining the authority of this understanding with respect to the consensus of medieval scholars. For example, Yusuf's discourses on the issue of homosexuality are scrutinized, where he takes a clear stance against same-sex intimacy. However, he is careful not to blame practitioners explicitly, indicating that homosexuality itself is not the target of outright condemnation.

Concerning his argument against same-sex intimacy, Yusuf offers a succinct justification by claiming that "[t]he Quran is pretty explicit in its condemnation of the act, and we have a long tradition of jurisprudence that defines it as unlawful."<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, it is no surprise that he is not obliged to discuss the grounds for his argument given this view is shared by the majority of Muslims today. In general, the story of the Prophet Lot (*Lūṭ*) and his people is considered a Qur'anic source for the argument against same-sex intimacy.<sup>15</sup> Medieval jurists created the legal term *liwāṭ* based on the name of the Prophet to denote anal intercourse between men. Moreover, they considered the act among the major sins or enormities in their juristic arguments (Ali 2016, 96–98; Kugle 2010, 50). Yusuf's reference to Qur'an and a long tradition of jurisprudence to reinforce his statement may reflect this narrative.

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<sup>12</sup> For example, slavery is one such topic that is often excluded from contemporary discussions.

<sup>13</sup> It seems that American higher education has become more desirable than ever for American intellectuals of Traditional Islam. For example, Yusuf was awarded a Ph.D. in Islamic studies from the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) in Berkeley in 2020 even though he had already firmly established himself as an authority of classical Sunni scholarship (<https://www.gtu.edu/events/congratulations-class-2020>; accessed November 5, 2020). This emphasis on attaining educational qualifications from American universities may be attributable in part to the fact that Traditional Islam has relied on the American educational system as its main development platform. Zaytuna College, an accredited liberal arts college founded by Yusuf, best illustrates this orientation. For more information about Zaytuna College, see its official website, available at <https://zaytuna.edu/> (accessed November 5, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> <https://seekersguidance.org/articles/prophet-muhammad/orlandostatement-shaykhhamza-gay-muslims/> (accessed November 5, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> There are several verses in the Qur'an that recount the story of Lot. See, for example, 11:78, 27:55, 29:28.

Yusuf also calls for a distinction between “same-sex attraction” and “the actual act of sexual relations.” Although he acknowledges there are people “born with the tendency toward homosexuality,” he qualifies this acknowledgment by stating “if they do not act upon this tendency, they are not sinning” (Yusuf 2013).<sup>16</sup> Here, Yusuf is arguing that homosexuality as a tendency, or more precisely an identity, should not be condemned since it is an inborn nature given by God. According to Yusuf, such a distinction between the act and the tendency is not his own idea. He argues it is already present in the juristic tradition, where the term *ma’būn* has been used to describe a person with a homosexual tendencies. Yusuf cites a passage from a supercommentary by the Egyptian Maliki scholar Muḥammad al-Dasūqī (d. 1815) as evidence to support his claim:

It is disliked [but still valid] for a ma’bun to be an assigned leader of the obligatory prayers as well as for communal supererogatory prayers, but not tarawih, or travelers’ prayers, or as someone who leads them on occasion. And the intended meaning of ma’bun is a male who is effeminate in his speech, similar to a woman’s speech, or someone who desires rectal intercourse but doesn’t practice it, or someone who has practiced it but since repented yet, nonetheless, has set tongues wagging. (Yusuf 2013)<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the distinction between the act and tendency, Yusuf also suggests distinguishing between the rule and its application. He admits that same-sex intimacy has been the target of punishment as an illicit sex act according to classical Islamic law (*fiqh*). Nevertheless, he also states that its practitioners would typically go unpunished for the violation since the law requires four eyewitnesses to prove the case, which is unlikely to happen in reality. Thus, the penalty stipulated in classical Islamic law is a “legal fiction” that is not actually implemented in society.<sup>18</sup>

In summation of Yusuf’s discussion, tacit approval is given to homosexuality as an identity while maintaining the arguments of previous jurists by voicing disapproval of same-sex intimacy as an act. Such a nuanced approach to the issue is made possible by distinguishing the concept into three categories: an act of sexual relations, a sexual identity, and an application of the rule. Although same-sex intimacy is prohibited in principle, possessing such a tendency is not a sin, and its practitioners should not be judged in view of the application of the law. With such logic, Yusuf exhibits a degree of acceptance for lesbian and gay Muslims without transgressing the framework of classical jurisprudence.<sup>19</sup> In actuality, he claims to follow the perspectives of past scholars, as illustrated by his quotation from al-Dasūqī’s description of *ma’būn*. Given these observations, it can be seen that the views of Traditional Islam are far removed from Yusuf’s original interpretation

<sup>16</sup> Yusuf’s discussion in the article in question is based on Abdal Hakim Murad’s discourses on homosexuality; the quotation in his narrative cited here is from Murad’s lecture at *Rihla*, an annually held Muslim teaching program organized by proponents of Traditional Islam. Although I could not find the video nor the script of Murad’s lecture, the gist of his arguments can be found in his online article (Murad 2015).

<sup>17</sup> This is a supercommentary (*ḥāshiyā*) on Aḥmad Dardīr’s commentary (*sharḥ*) on *Mukhtaṣir Khalīl*, a well-known legal handbook written by Egyptian Maliki scholar Khalīl b. Iṣḥāq al-Jundī (d. ca. 1365). As for the original text, I refer to an online reproduction of the publication by Dār al-Fikr (date unknown) available at <https://al-maktaba.org/book/21604/329> (accessed October 16, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> <https://seekersguidance.org/articles/prophet-muhammad/orlandostatement-shaykhhamza-gay-muslims/> (accessed November 5, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Kecia Ali indicates that such a narrative is widely observed in moderate and liberal Western Muslim discourses today, which she calls the “don’t ask, don’t tell” philosophy (Ali 2016, 107).

while remaining within the framework of Sunni scholarly tradition.

While Yusuf's somewhat tolerant views about homosexuality appeal to his followers, they have attracted criticism, especially from Muslims who advocate the full recognition of same-sex unions within the Islamic context. Their critical analysis of Yusuf's discourse reveals that the approach he uses in applying traditional concepts to contemporary settings is not as simple as it seems.

For example, Junaid Jahangir and Hussein Abdullatif question Yusuf's understanding of *ma'būn* by reassessing the concept in a historical context. According to them, medieval scholars defined *ma'būn* as "men suffering from the disease of requiring receptive homosexual anal intercourse" (Jahangir and Abdullatif 2016, 6). It is clear that the scope designated by the term *ma'būn* was actually quite limited, as it excluded other actors such as women and perhaps more importantly, men who desire to have active anal intercourse. *Ma'būn* is a concept based on the asymmetrical relation between adult males and youth, where the demasculinization of the latter was considered the issue while the sexual tendency of the former was not questioned.<sup>20</sup> In this regard, what was designated by the terms *ma'būn* or *ubna* (the attribute of *ma'būn*) is quite different from today's concept of homosexuality.<sup>21</sup> Based on their reassessment of the concept of *ma'būn*, Jahangir and Abdullatif criticize Yusuf's argument on homosexuality as follows:

[he] ends up conflating the individual classified on the basis of the tilt toward the singular act of receptive homosexual anal intercourse or on the basis of suffering from a disease or a bad habit with queer Muslims, whose inner constitution has been accepted as an integral part of his identity, which goes beyond the singular sexual act to encompass a life that includes the legitimate need for intimacy and companionship. (Jahangir and Abdullatif 2016, 6)

These arguments over *ma'būn* highlight a peculiar effect that Yusuf's approach has brought about in the contemporary argument on homosexuality. In fact, he is faithfully following the established interpretations of past scholars and cementing his argument by using concepts such as *ubna*, which originated in the juristic tradition and were not his own invention. The contention does not only revolve around such established interpretations being co-opted by Yusuf (which is criticized), it also revolves around his "conflation" of the classical juristic concept with the contemporary idea. Whether intentional or not, Yusuf strips the connotation of passive pederasty from the term *ubna*, equating it with the contemporary notion of homosexuality instead. This suggests that homosexual identity has been acknowledged, or even endorsed, by past Sunni scholars. In other words, the classical concept of *ubna* was detached from the socio-historical context in which it was originally used and applied directly to the contemporary American context instead. In the process, this clas-

<sup>20</sup> Studies on sexual norms and orders in the Muslim world highlight that such an asymmetrical, or more precisely hierarchical, relation has its roots in the ancient Mediterranean world and West Asia. According to these studies, such ancient norms and orders were subsequently accepted by Muslims and reflected in medieval jurisprudence (e.g., Ali 2016, 105; Ahmed 1992, 79–101).

<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that in Hans Wehr's Arabic-English dictionary, the word *ubna* is translated as passive pederasty not homosexuality (Wehr 1994, 2).

sical concept was actually redefined to adjust to contemporary reality. In summary, Yusuf is not simply transmitting the Sunni scholarly tradition; rather, he is reinterpreting it in the transmission process through de/recontextualization, even if this was not the original intention.

#### IV. Diversity and Dynamics of Interpretations

Considering its disciplinary nature and capacity for reinterpretation, the Sunni Islamic teachings promoted by proponents of Traditional Islam should not be considered comprehensible as established doctrines or fixed sets of rules. Rather, they are both the sources and the principles from which the doctrine and the rules are derived. Authoritative interpretations of the past are both transmitted and constantly reinterpreted, as illustrated by Yusuf’s endorsement of homosexual identity discussed in the previous section. This interpretative nature of Traditional Islam’s teachings is also exemplified by only a few guidebooks and manuals being published—apart from translations of classical texts—to provide a full picture of their concrete content.<sup>22</sup>

Traditional Islam’s ideas are most effectively expressed in fragmented formats, such as public lectures, interviews, and short articles. These formats address specific subjects that are often directly related to current events and topics, while websites and other media run by proponents of Traditional Islam function to disseminate the content of these formats. For example, a CNN interview with Yusuf on gay issues, which was conducted a few days after the Orlando nightclub shooting in 2016,<sup>23</sup> was promptly reproduced on SeekersGuidance, one of the major online hubs of Traditional Islam.<sup>24</sup>

The communication strategy employed by Traditional Islam’s intellectuals does not simply showcase a body of pre-determined general rules; rather, it is the provision of specific guidance concerning particular cases as occasions arise. The most important effect of this strategy is allowing a measure of discretion for individual intellectuals, which permits them to reinterpret the Sunni tradition flexibly, depending on context.

Yusuf’s change of opinion regarding the issue of women leading prayer is an example of such flexibility. As mentioned in the introduction, the debate over whether women should lead congregational prayers that include men has been a heated issue among American Muslims, especially since its occurrence in New York in 2005. Yusuf initially refuted then supported the idea, claiming certain prominent scholars of the past had also supported the idea, which surprised many (including Yusuf himself) (Haqqani et al. 2016, 82–83).<sup>25</sup> The past scholars referred to by Yusuf included

<sup>22</sup> There are a few guidebooks and manuals written by the intellectuals of Traditional Islam. One of the most recent works is Asad Tarsin’s guidebook for new converts and young Muslims, entitled *Being Muslim: A Practical Guide*, which was published by Sandala Inc., Yusuf’s publishing house (Tarsin 2015). Notably, the book meticulously regulates every aspect of Muslim life in accordance with Sunna, which leaves little room for reinterpretation. The guidebook’s static and conservative illustration of Islam is remarkable considering that the Traditional Islam’s intellectuals are reinterpreting the tradition more flexibly to reach out to their audience, as illustrated by Yusuf’s discourses on homosexuality.

<sup>23</sup> On June 11, 2016, an Afghan-American Muslim man attacked a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, killing and injuring dozens of patrons. After the incident, the issue of homosexuality in Islam attracted the attention of mainstream media. CNN’s interview with Yusuf was conducted in this context.

<sup>24</sup> SeekersGuidance (formerly known as SeekersHub) is an online educational institution founded by Pakistani-Canadian intellectual Faraz Rabbani. It provides online courses, Q&A, and articles by many intellectuals of Traditional Islam. Available at <https://seekersguidance.org/> (accessed November 5, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> See also Yusuf’s lecture at the Rethinking Islamic Reform 2010, hosted by the Oxford University Islamic Society, which is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x45ysEfSuX0> (accessed November 5, 2020).

Ibn Taymiyya (1258–1326), a Hanbali scholar of the Mamluk period who is regarded by contemporary Salafis as their forerunner. It should be noted that Yusuf’s revised opinion has not been endorsed by many other Muslim leaders, including some of his colleagues from the Traditional Islam circle. Hence, we must realize that authoritative interpretations, which proponents of Traditional Islam claim to have inherited from medieval scholars, are diverse.

However, such diversity is not necessarily perceived as a problem that needs resolving by some proponents of Traditional Islam. They characterize diversity as inherent to the nature of Sunni tradition and emphasize that differences of opinion have always existed and been tolerated, as indicated by the coexistence of different legal and theological schools. Accordingly, flexible re-interpretation and the resulting diversification and dynamics of opinions are considered authentic, even by the Sunni tradition, at least logically.<sup>26</sup>

We cannot minimize the growing impact of the liberal multicultural agenda, which has been both imposed upon and embraced by Muslims in post-September 11 America. The agenda has become a “manifesto” to which Muslims are pressured to subscribe, proving their allegiance to American values. In particular, gender and sexuality have become focal issues in the American public sphere and have always symbolized the “otherness” of Muslims in Western imagination. Currently, these issues are functioning as litmus tests to distinguish between “good” and “bad” Muslims—those who are liberal enough to embrace gender equality and sexual diversity are considered good.<sup>27</sup>

It should also be noted that such a liberal agenda is not only enforced in broader American society, but is also espoused by many American Muslims. This is especially true of the younger generation of Muslims, who have effectively internalized liberal multicultural values while being raised in American society. Moreover, as a religious minority facing discrimination and security surveillance, this liberal agenda ensures civil liberties such as freedom of religion. Accordingly, American Muslim leaders are being pressured to provide visions of Islam that do not overtly conflict with this liberal agenda, while being careful it is not fully endorsed. Yusuf’s flexible interpretation indicates this attitude is also prevalent in Traditional Islam, despite its claim to authority being based on the established consensus of medieval scholars.

Seen in this light, the endorsement of diversity within the Sunni tradition by Traditional Islam’s proponents may also be regarded as part of their endeavor to both embrace the agenda and reach out to young American Muslims. Their framing of the Sunni tradition enables them to promote an image of tolerance and moderation of Sunni Islam and, by extension, of the Traditional Islam trend. Such an image is important for countering the Salafis’ literalism and for advocating the compatibility of their version of Islam with American liberal multicultural values.

## **V. Sympathy and Understanding**

The gap between the normative understanding of Islam based on textual interpretations of the scriptures and the realities faced by Muslims in American society is currently a focal issue in de-

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<sup>26</sup> In reality, such a diversity of views has sometimes led to tensions among proponents of Traditional Islam, which is one of the challenges the trend faces. For examples of such tensions, see Hamid 2016, 80–81, 129–131.

<sup>27</sup> For the framing of “good” and “bad” Muslims in the United States context, see Mamdani 2005.

bates over the quest for Islamic orthodoxy. As we have seen, Traditional Islam’s intellectuals rely on the Sunni scholarly tradition as an authoritative source for Islamic norms. Their argument for the authority of the Sunni scholarly tradition is supported by the understanding that it is a highly sophisticated and universal intellectual tradition that was developed through bypassing the social and cultural circumstances surrounding individual scholars. According to them, the universality of Sunni scholarship has been warranted by the rigorous scholarly pedagogy, or discipline, established by medieval scholars.

The authority of classical Sunni interpretations has been questioned by Muslims who promote progressive interpretations, such as feminist Muslims, who read messages of gender equality and the inclusion of sexual diversity in the Qur’an. Further, they question the universality of the Sunni tradition by claiming it reflects the interpreters’ experiences of reality and/or the social and cultural climate of a given time and place (Shaikh 2007, 70). Feminist Muslims do not endorse the universality of textual interpretations that discard the experiences of interpreters. In contrast, they highlight the very experiences of reality, or lived realities, of individual Muslims, especially women, in their engagement of scriptures. For example, in her argument on the feminist approach to interpreting the Qur’an, Fatima Seedat advocates referring to “experience” as an authoritative source for Qur’anic exegesis that may surmount the limits of literal interpretations. She also states “Muslim women might highlight the value of experience as a site of exegetical authority beyond texts” (Seedat 2016, 142).<sup>28</sup>

While the feminist vision of Islam that promotes full recognition of gender equality and sexual diversity is not accepted by the majority of Muslims, the emphasis on “the lived reality” in the quest for Islamic orthodoxy is now an approach not only advocated by feminists. This has been adopted by many other Muslim leaders with different theological orientations in the United States, including proponents of Traditional Islam.

As discussed in the previous sections, Traditional Islam’s intellectuals have been conducting flexible reinterpretations of the Sunni tradition to address the issues currently faced by American Muslim youth. However, while such reinterpretations should be developed within the framework provided by the consensus of medieval scholars, there are limitations. For example, intellectuals of Traditional Islam would not be able to provide a vision of Islam sufficiently flexible to accept the full recognition of same-sex unions. This is because the prohibition of such unions was explicitly described in the classical jurisprudence and accords with conservative sensibilities shared by the majority of Muslims. In addition, their manipulation of classical interpretations can present other problems. For example, their tacit approval of homosexual identity as distinct from homosexual acts has attracted criticism from an ethical perspective. Kecia Ali criticizes such discourses as representing “deep hypocrisy,” stating “[t]hose who view sexual orientation as inborn but suggest that same-sex desires can never be fulfilled lawfully confront the problem of divine justice” (Ali 2016, 100).

Some intellectuals of Traditional Islam have addressed such limitations by highlighting the lived reality of American Muslims. While calling on their audience to follow Islamic norms, these

<sup>28</sup> The focus on experiences is a viewpoint not unique to Seedat, as she is actually following the arguments of other feminist scholars, such as Amina Wadud and Sa’diyya Shaikh, whose work she cites in her paper.

intellectuals readily address the challenges faced by Muslims in their attempt to live in accordance with these norms within American society. Moreover, they express a sympathetic understanding of this endeavor.

For example, in his interview regarding gay issues, Yusuf clearly articulated his position against same-sex intimacy while also expressing his sympathy for struggling gay Muslims. He stated that he would not judge Muslims who are attracted to same-sex intimacy. Instead, he extended sympathy towards them, mentioning experiences of meeting “with young Muslims who have told me about their struggles.”<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, in his essay on the issue of women leading prayer, Zaid Shakir, another prominent intellectual, drew attention to “the fact that there are many issues in our community involving the neglect, oppression, and in some instances, degradation of our women in the American Muslim community” (Curtis 2008, 245). This was despite him rejecting the concept of a women assuming the role of an imam from a legal perspective.

These narratives can be considered a message aimed at the broader American society. This message can promote an image of tolerance and moderation by Traditional Islam, by showcasing how the trend is addressing issues such as the acceptance of sexual minorities and the empowerment of women. I would also argue that expressions of sympathy and understanding by Traditional Islam’s intellectuals are not really an excuse, they are an attempt to bridge Sunni orthodoxy with the reality of American Muslims. By appreciating their efforts to observe norms, these intellectuals are attempting to reach out to those Muslims whose lifestyles do not conform to their theology. It will be shown in the following section that intellectuals within the trend are not just scholars, they are also mentors tasked with guiding their followers with their spiritual and social life. Seen in this context, the expressions of sympathy and understanding can also be regarded as part of the mentorship that Traditional Islam’s intellectuals provide to American young Muslims.

While such endeavors and struggles are sources for sympathy, they can also be positively valued. For example, Abdal Hakim Murad, another prominent intellectual from the British Traditional Islam scene, identifies homosexual tendencies as tests imposed by God “which we must struggle to overcome as part of our self-reform and discipline” (Murad 2015). Such a struggle is often translated by the trend’s followers as *jihād*, and it is thought that those who are struggling to live their lives in accordance with Islamic norms will be rewarded in the afterlife for their endeavors. Notably, the term *jihād* connotes a strong spiritual dimension that is understood as a struggle against *nafs* (the baser self/ego) in the Sufi tradition. More importantly, it is considered a stage on the spiritual path toward God (Renard 2005, 229; Schimmel 1975, 112). The Sufi use of the term “struggle” or *jihād* clearly reflects this spiritual dimension, given that Sufism is positioned as one of the essential elements constituting the Sunni tradition in the theology of Traditional Islam.

Finally, the status of many Traditional Islam’s intellectuals as American converts probably ensures the apparent sincerity of their sympathy. As converts themselves, these intellectuals also experienced the conflict between Islamic norms and American reality, and this shared experience must have endowed credibility and authority on their expressions of sympathy toward their

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<sup>29</sup> <https://seekersguidance.org/articles/prophet-muhammad/orlandostatement-shaykhhamza-gay-muslims/> (accessed November 5, 2020).

American audience. Again, the spiritual aspect of the trend plays a key role in consolidating the authority of its intellectuals. Traditional Islam defines the Sunni scholarly discipline, including jurisprudence and spiritual and moral cultivation. Accordingly, intellectuals who have mastered Sunni scholarship are considered scholars who transmit knowledge and also mentors who guide their followers through spiritual and moral development. It is their quality as spiritual guides or mentors that enables their affectionate discourses to reach their followers.

A remarkable tendency has recently been observed in the Traditional Islam scene—the proliferation of discourses and practices that increasingly focus on understanding and empathy rather than norms. Notably, this tendency overlaps with attempts of young American Muslims to reconstruct and reinterpret Sufism. They perceive spiritual tradition as encompassing every kind of spiritual and moral cultivation Muslims undertake, not being confined to the structure of historical Sufism, such as *ṭarīqa*. Marcia Hermansen describes this tendency as observable among Muslim youth and constitutes a move from “authenti‘*fiqh*’ation to affect” (Hermansen 2014b, 198), and identifies the emergence of “affective Sufi-influenced publics” as its manifestation. Further, after quoting Charles Hirschkind’s argument on the moral and disciplinary nature of modern public discourse, Hermansen defines the affective Sufi-influenced publics as “counterpublics – that embrace similar projects of disciplining and motivating the self, and likewise move beyond the deliberative discursive power of knowledge and argument” (Hermansen 2014b, 201). I would argue that Traditional Islam’s intellectuals’ focus on sympathy and their remarks on Sufism are not just a strategy intended to reach out to their audience. They are also part of an endeavor designed to reshape the Sufi tradition to fit the contemporary American context. Consequently, a new mode of Sufi discourse and practice is being generated from the interplay between Traditional Islam’s intellectuals and the emergent Sufi-influenced publics.

## VI. Conclusions

In this paper, I have illustrated the approaches taken by Traditional Islam intellectuals in their endeavors to recapture the Sunni tradition and apply it to the American context. Similar to many other revivalist trends, Traditional Islam and its ideas will probably be reduced to simple terms such as “inheriting the Sunni tradition” or “following the consensus of the great scholars of the past.” However, recapturing the Sunni tradition from the past is a much more difficult task than it appears, especially in a country like the United States with no legacy of Sunni scholarship.

Although Traditional Islam’s intellectuals claim to be the inheritors of the “authoritative interpretations of the past,” they are actually re-interpreters who are translating, paraphrasing, selectively adopting, and de/recontextualizing the ideas of past scholars. Their reinterpretation of tradition is made possible by conceptualizing Traditional Islam as a discipline, manipulating the historical contexts of the Sunni tradition and employing modes of communication that focus on specific cases. Moreover, they promote the flexibility and diversity of the Sunni tradition by taking such a nuanced approach. These qualities improve the image of Sunni Islam to render it compatible with American liberal multicultural values, which appeals to American-raised young Muslims who are experiencing conflict between their American and Muslim identities.

The emphasis on sympathy and understanding is another approach employed by the trend’s in-

Intellectuals to bridge the gaps between the Sunni tradition and American reality. The significance of this approach lies in its focus on the challenges and experiences of American Muslims, which enables the trend's intellectuals to accept the lived reality of their audience as reality. Here, the source of authority rests not on juristic tradition but on spiritual tradition, which is another element of the Sunni tradition. In addition, the status of Traditional Islam's intellectuals as American converts plays an important role. We could posit that these intellectuals somewhat embody the compatibility of Sunni orthodoxy with the lived, everyday reality of individual American Muslims. Finally, these affectionate discourses of Traditional Islam's intellectuals correspond to young American Muslims' endeavors to reconstruct new forms and understandings of Sufism. In this respect, we can view their sympathy-based approach as another mode of reinterpreting the Sunni tradition.

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