

How To Distinguish Between Sunnah And Arab Culture

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Questioner:

May Allaah bless you, what is the criterion according to the Islamic legislation for distinguishing between the Sunnah which is considered custom and the Sunnah which is considered worship?

Shaykh Al-Albaanee:

The criterion requires a level of knowledge as relates to the one who wishes to distinguish between a Sunnah that is worship and a Sunnah that is a custom. And it has been mentioned that there are actions of the Prophet (peace and blessings are upon him), that came from him and he did them seeking to get closer to Allaah the Blessed and Exalted; this category is the Sunnah that is worship.

Its opposite is another category that also mentions actions of the Prophet, peace and blessings are upon him; and the least we can say is these actions don't have the ruling of worship, rather they have the ruling of customs or that the affair returns back to the desire of the person and they have no connection to worship. This category is clear that it has no connection to worship so it will be in the category of customs; and between these two are doubtful matters.

If we look at these doubtful matters from a particular angle then the person might lean towards connecting an action to worship, and if we look at these doubtful matters again we might lean towards connecting them to a Sunnah that is only a custom; according to the student of knowledge (who is investigating these issues). And it is sufficient for the student of knowledge to stop at the second category that is opposite the first category.

For example: The Prophet used to have sandals that had two straps, so what appears at first glance is that if the student of knowledge has sandals with one strap then they are opposing the Sunnah!! And the Sunnah is to have sandals with two straps!! It appears that this has a connection to worship, but it is only a custom of the Arabs, they used to wear this type of sandals. And they didn't wear the type of footwear known today as 'shoes' or what resembles that with the different names according to the different countries.

And what is left as relates to the student of knowledge is the category that can be linked to the first group or the second group, and this requires knowledge to distinguish or to determine that it is from the first group and not the second group or the opposite, such that it is from the second group and not the first group.

And with this we find the Scholars agreeing upon affairs that they are from the Sunnah of custom but differing upon the particulars of it, is it from the Sunnah of custom or from the Sunnah of worship?

An example of this is what is connected to the Hajj, and soon we shall be greeting the Hajj, inshaa'Allaah. It is related that the Prophet, prayer and peace are upon

him, descended at al-Batha, so some of the companions said, and I think it was Aa'ishah, 'Staying at al-Mahassab in not the Sunnah.'

And they only agree that he pitched a tent there and rested, but some of the people who arrive believe that resting at al-Batha is from the completeness of Hajj. And here there could be a difference of opinion because this affair requires something extremely clear in order to connect it to the first category or the second category.

Now we shall mention some current examples, because many of the youth and all praises belong to Allaah, shorten their garments and don't allow their garments to flow long and they intend by this to follow the Sunnah, so is this a Sunnah that is custom or a Sunnah that is worship?

If we looked at this action (shortening the garment) of the Prophet, prayer and peace are upon him, separately from some of his statements then perhaps we would waver between connecting this action to the Sunnah that is worship or the Sunnah that is custom.

But when the hadith containing the statements of the Prophet, prayer and peace are upon, came such as the hadith where he said, **'The izaar of the believer is to the midway point of the shin and if it is longer then let it go to the ankles and if it is longer then it is in the fire.'**

This (hadith) cuts off the wavering between whether this action is a Sunnah of worship or a Sunnah of custom and it is certain that this is a Sunnah of worship because when he described the method of clothing as it relates to the believer he said it is to the midway point of the shin and if it is longer then it is no problem if it goes to the ankle, but as for what is longer than that then it is in the fire.

Opposite to this is a Sunnah that has been establish for the Prophet, prayer and peace are upon him, and it is that he used to have long hair.

Sometimes his hair would reach his earlobes and if it was longer then it would reach the top of his shoulders. Rather, it has been confirmed that when the Prophet, prayer and peace are upon him, entered Mecca he has his hair in four braids. Therefore is growing the hair long firstly, and then putting it into braids secondly, a Sunnah of worship or a Sunnah of custom?

The answer as I see it, there is nothing here that calls to or justifies or can be construed to cause any wavering concerning this Sunnah of custom.

Why? Firstly, because the Prophet, prayer and peace are upon him, was not the one who started this Sunnah. Rather this was present before the Messenger was born, not to mention before he became a Prophet, prayer and peace are upon him!!!

This was the custom of the Arabs; they used to grow their hair long. And some of the youth to this day, some of the youth in the deserts of Syria that we have witnessed, some of them bunch their hair and put it into braids.

So this is a custom that was not started by the Prophet, peace and blessings are upon him, rather he just continued upon the customs of the Arabs, and he let his hair grow and when he entered Mecca he put it into four braids.

There is nothing here that would hurt us if we considered this Sunnah a Sunnah of custom, as opposed to a Sunnah of worship.

Another example: The Prophet peace and blessings are upon him used to wear white; is this Sunnah of custom or a Sunnah of worship?

If his statement had not been narrated, "**The best clothes for you are white clothes, therefore dress your living in white clothes and bury your dead in white clothes;**" if it were not for this statement we would have said this was his preference. And the Messenger used to love white clothes just as he used to love honey for example and he used to hate lizard meat, this was his preference.

But when his statement came, '**the best clothes for you are white**', and then he ordered with wearing it and at the least a command shows that it is recommended, so he said '**dress your living in white clothes and bury your dead in white clothes**', then this left from being a Sunnah of custom and it became a Sunnah of worship.

And with this standard and with this criterion it is obligatory for us to weight the actions of the Prophet, prayer and peace is upon him. Therefore what he started and there is nothing in the context of it that can make us believe it is a Sunnah of custom then it is a Sunnah of worship.

But as for his actions, prayer and peace are upon him, which are consistent with the customs of the Arabs then these actions are from the Arab customs and it is no problem for the one who does them and it is no problem for the one who leaves them.

And also his actions, peace be upon him, that dealt with his disposition or his personal taste then this also has no connection to the affairs of worship.

And as for the aforementioned example, the Prophet, peace and blessing are upon him, used to love honey and it's possible that we will find some people that hate honey, but we don't say they have opposed the Sunnah!! Because eating honey in its origin is not worship. Therefore if it is not easy for a person to eat honey or if they have no desire to eat honey then we don't say he has opposed the Sunnah, but he has opposed the disposition of the Prophet which was that he loved honey.

But from a different angle the Prophet, peace and blessing are upon him, used to hate lizard meat and the Arabs used to find it pleasant. And when it was put on the table of the Prophet, peace be upon him, and it was said that it was lizard meat, he didn't touch it.

And in front of him was one of the famous companions, none other than Khalid ibn Walid. And Khalid ibn Walid used to eat with enormous desire such that it would cause people to look at him; he would eat and the juices would stream down his beard. So when he saw that his Prophet was not eating he said, "Oh Messenger of Allaah is this (lizard meat) haraam? Because he felt a shock inside of himself, he's eating ravenously and the Prophet is not reaching his hand towards the food; so he said, 'is this haraam'. The Prophet said, '**No, but this was not in the land of my people so I find that I detest it.**'

Therefore we don't say to the person that loves lizard meat, 'You have opposed the Sunnah', because the Prophet, peace and blessings are upon him, used to hate lizard meat and we also don't say this to the one who does not like honey.

And you will find those who don't like honey, and I have found that one of my sons does not like honey. I love honey and I love all sweets in general, but one of my sons hates honey; but I don't say to him, 'You have opposed the Sunnah',

because this has no connection to worship.

And like this, it is incumbent upon us to look at the actions of the Prophet, peace and blessings are upon him, and many of the people especially the students of knowledge during this time period are heedless of these specifics and some of them go to extremes.

So you find some of the youth intending to grow their hair long believing that this is the Sunnah of the Prophet, peace and blessings are upon him. Yes I say this is from the actions of the Prophet, peace and blessings are upon him, but there is no proof that this is better. Rather the Prophet peace and blessings are upon him, announced as is found in Sahih Muslim, **'Shave it all or leave it all'**.

Therefore if the hair is grown long then it is not a Sunnah of worship rather it is only a Sunnah of custom. So if a person continues to shave his head his entire life it can not be said that he is opposing the Sunnah of the Prophet because the Prophet grew his hair his entire life; with the exception being during the Hajj and Umrah because he, peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him, used to shave his head during this time.

And you know the hadith that appears in Saheeh al-Bukhaaree and Muslim where the Prophet, peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him, said, **'Oh Allaah forgive those who shave their heads, Oh Allaah forgive those who shave their heads, Oh Allaah forgive those who shave their heads,** they said and those who cut their hair short Oh Messenger of Allaah, and he said **'and those who cut their hair short.'** But those who only cut their hair short receive a lesser reward, and to shave the head is more virtuous.

Therefore if the person grows their hair long out of habit or because this is just his natural disposition then there is nothing preventing this, but as for the one who intends by this to get closer to Allaah because the Prophet, peace and blessings are upon him, grew his hair long then we say verily this is in opposition to the Sunnah of the Prophet, peace and blessings are upon him.

And there is a detail that attention has to be given to, by the one who grows his hair long because the Prophet, peace be upon him grew his hair long, so he believes that he is following the Prophet, peace be upon him, by growing his hair long. But I say with all frankness that he is opposing the Prophet. But his opposition is not apparent rather it is hidden on the inside. So from what is apparent it seems that he is following the Prophet by growing his hair long, so what is the opposition?

The opposition: It is obligatory upon us to pay attention to the statement of our Prophet, peace and blessing be upon him, **'Verily Actions are (judged) by intentions, so each man will have what he intended. Thus, he whose migration was to Allaah and His Messenger, his migration is to Allaah and His Messenger; but he whose migration was for some worldly thing he might gain, or for a wife he might marry, his migration is to that for which he migrated.'**

So the one who goes out with the Prophet, peace and blessings are upon him, as a mujaahid then the apparent is what? The apparent is that he is a mujaahid in the path of Allaah; but in reality he went out for some worldly gain or to marry a woman therefore he opposed the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, in his intention. So will he be rewarded as a mujaahid, when he opposed the best of the mujaahids; opposed him in what, in his intention, the answer is no.

Now the one who grows the hair on his head long, emulating his Prophet, his example is like the example of the mujaahid that went out with the Prophet as a mujaahid, but his intention was opposed to the intention of the Prophet, peace and blessings are upon him. (So the question may be) how is this related to the one who grows his hair long?

We say to him: Do you know that when the Prophet, peace and blessings are upon him, grew the hair on his head long that his intention with this was to get closer to his Lord? If you believe that then your action is a blessing and if you don't believe this then you opposed the Messenger in his intention.

He did not seek to get closer to Allaah by loving honey, and he did not seek to get closer to Allah by hating lizard meat, and also he did not seek to get closer to Allah the Mighty and Majestic by growing his hair long!! So you seek to get closer to Allaah (by growing your hair long)? Then you have opposed the Prophet, peace and blessings are upon him, in the strongest condition from the conditions of worship.

The first condition: The intention must be sincerely for the face of Allaah, the Blessed and Exalted.

The second condition: It must be in accordance with the action of the Prophet.

You are in accordance with him in his action, but you opposed him in his intention.

As relates to the Fajr prayer, both the Sunnah for Fajr and the Fajr prayer itself both are two rakats. So if a man prayed the two Sunnah rakat for Fajr with the intention that they were obligatory, was he in accordance with the Sunnah?

The answer is no.

And from the misguidance of the Qadianis is that they believe the two Sunnah rakats for Fajr are obligatory. So when they pray these two rakats the appearance is as though they are in accordance with the Messenger, peace and blessings are upon him. But their heart and their intention opposed the Messenger, peace and blessings are upon him. So the one who prays the two Sunnah rakats of Fajr with the intention that they are obligatory, this one is like the one who opposed the Messenger in his intention but agreed with him in the appearance. And the appearance doesn't have any value because the deeds are by the intentions. And the meaning of the hadith is the righteous deeds are only by righteous intentions.

Therefore if we don't know that the Prophet, peace and blessings are upon him, sought to get closer to Allaah by growing his hair long then it's not permissible for the Muslim to seek to get closer to Allaah by something that the Prophet, peace and blessings are upon him, did not seek to get closer to Allaah with; this is innovation in the religion.

As you all know the hadiths that warn with a severe warning against innovation in the religion. **"Whoever invents something into this affair of ours that is not from it then it is rejected."** Therefore this is a newly invented matter because the person seeks to get closer to Allaah by something that the Prophet did not seek to get closer to Allaah with, peace and blessings are upon him. And this is the nature of the innovator, because they bring actions that the Prophet, peace be upon him, did not seek to get closer to his Lord with.

And like that, we distinguish between the Sunnah of worship that which we emulate the Messenger in and between the Sunnah of custom, that which we have a choice to do it or to leave because it is only a Sunnah of habit.

Shaykh al-Albaanee continues, may Allaah have mercy upon him.

This point, it is incumbent that we separate between this and that; meaning our following the Messenger, peace be upon him, is in the affairs of the religion not in the affair of the worldly life.

And in this there are mistakes, severe mistakes from some of the ignorant people, those who do not separate between the Sunnah of habit and the Sunnah of worship.

The Sunnah of worship does not accept anything extra and for this reason the Messenger, peace be upon him said, **'every innovation is misguidance and every misguidance is in the fire'**.

The Sunnah of custom accepts an increase and it accepts a decrease and it accepts everything, because it's a custom. I will strike for you one example from the Sunnah of custom, from the Messenger of Allaah, peace be upon him. He (the Prophet) entered Mecca with four braids, what do you all call them; Braids? (Translator's note: Here the Sheikh uses the word: **Dafaa'ir** ضفائر for braids.)

Those present respond: Braids (using the same word ضفائر)

Shaykh al-Albaanee: Braids (ضفائر), or braids (using the other word: **Ghadaa'ir** غدائر). He entered Mecca, opening Mecca the day Allaah helped him against the people of Mecca, and he had four braids. This is the Sunnah of the Arabs, to this day you find this Sunnah with some of the youth from the Bedouin. I have seen them in the desert; until today this custom is present with them.

You are free with regards to this, if you see that it is suitable for you then you do it, and if you want you can leave it, and you have not opposed the Sunnah of the Messenger with regards to this. Why, because it is a Sunnah of custom not a Sunnah of worship.

This categorization is from the completeness of comprehension and understanding in the religion where many of those beginners in calling to knowledge and they are not scholars.