

Islamic Terminology in Christian Arabic: The Use of the Term *Sunna*

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The term *sunna* (law) is used in the Arabic Bible as well as in the writings of Christian authors such as Abū Qurra. It is also a key word in the Islamic tradition. As part of an oral and a living religious tradition, the term connotes personal and communal experience and, as such, resists any kind of fundamentalism based on the written word. By using reason and nature as criteria, explains Abū Qurra, man has the means to discern the Truth and distinguish between good and bad. Moreover, believers are actors in a living tradition, *sunna*, that, together with the Scriptures, amount to revelation.

To better understand the protean term *sunna*, which encompasses natural law, the order of creation, the good norms of the ancestors and God's plan for His creatures, we will now examine the various ways that it has been used in the Middle East Christian context.

Nomos in the Greek Tradition

The Greek word *nomos* is translated in the Arabic Bible with the word *nāmūs* as well as *sunna*. *Nāmūs* and *sunna* are words with many meanings in Arabic. In order to better understand the meaning of these terms, we should go back to the meaning of the original Greek word *nomos* and its development in history.

Nomos (law) was first understood by the Greeks as positive law, custom, and consensus in contrast to the divine law or justice, *dike*. However, Plato claimed that *nomos* possessed a universal value and was to be distinguished from the laws derived from decisions taken by the human councils because *nomos* describes

the law of the cosmos that mirrors the order of creation, which is the source of norms for human behavior.¹ *Nomos* can be understood as natural law, law in accordance with the order of cosmos, from which concrete human law and customary law is derived. It also means the normative behavior coming from the ancients, transmitted in the form of tradition or custom from generation to generation.

Hence, the original Greek word *nomos* has two dimensions, one divine and universal and the other particular and concrete that takes the form of custom. Thus custom has a religious dimension as a mirror to the universal order or divine law.

In addition to this, *nomos* has the meaning of consensus, since custom in a wider sense is the consensus or accepted praxis of a community.

In this way, *nomos* is to be understood as the expression of the divine law in the life of the community and at the same time as customary law. *Eudemonia*, the good order guaranteed by the law, was central in Greek thought.

In the Greek universe, even the Gods were subject to the *nomos*, to the natural order of the cosmos, which points to the conception of God as reason.² Thus, *nomos* means universal law, and, at the same time, particular law, which takes the form of custom and consensus or the accepted praxis of a community.

Aristoteles introduces the concept of a personal law side by side with the law of the community that reflects the order of cosmos or divine order. Another dimension of the personal conception of a divine law is found in Christianity, since the incarnation is to be understood as the entering of the divine person into history.

¹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Nomos (Greek Philosophy)”; Wikipedia contributors, “Nomos,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Nomos&oldid=723865656> (last accessed September 15, 2016).

² I do not mean reason in a positivistic sense but reason that requires faith and faith that requires reason.

Sunna and *Nāmūs* in the Arabic and Islamic Traditions

The word *sunna* is a pre-Islamic term that stood first for customary behavior, which could be either good or bad. *Sunna* could be a disapproved or approved custom as long as it was the norm of previous generations, *al-'awwaliyūn*. *Sunna* as an ancient Arabian concept was to play an increasingly important role during the formative period of Islam. Eventually, during the Islamic period, the term *sunna* came to stand for the normative custom of the ancestors and, centuries later, the generally approved practice of Muḥammad.³

Sunna appears in the Qur'an eighteen times in the sense of God's *sunna* or the *sunna* of the predecessors, *'awwaliyūn*. In both cases this usage reflects the meanings mentioned in relation to *nomos*: the universal law of God and the particular law of the predecessors.⁴ The word *sunna* does not appear in the Qur'an explicitly referring to the *sunna* of Muḥammad, although his role as a messenger is clearly stated. According to Juynboll, the Umayyad caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-Azīz was the first to emphasize the idea of *sunna* as the *sunna* of the Prophet.⁵

During the seventh century the term *sunna* was used in debates on legal and ritual issues to indicate any good precedents set by ancestors, one of them was Muḥammad. Indeed, *sunna* referred in the beginning of Islam not only to the *sunna* of Muḥammad but also to the *sunna* of revered ancestors.⁶

³ G. H. A. Juynboll, "Sunna," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* 9:878–81 (Leiden: Brill, 1997); G. H. A. Juynboll, "Some New Ideas on the Development of Sunna as a Technical Term in Early Islam," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 10 (1987): 106–7, 31.

⁴ Qur'an 4:26; 40:85; 17:77; 33:38; and 48:23. G. H. A. Juynboll, "Sunna," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* 5:163–66 (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

⁵ G. H. A. Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition: Studies in Chronology, Provenance and Authorship of Early Hadith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 26, 30–39; Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 44–45.

⁶ Juynboll, "Sunna," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 9:878–81.

Moreover, in the beginning, the word *sunna*, not *sharī'a*, was to designate the concept of law, understood in a wider sense as normativity of the community based on the practice of the ancestors and Muḥammad, which implies a living tradition. Thus in the formative period of Islamic law, or *fiqh*, the term *sunna* was predominantly used in the expression "*sunna* Muhammad," instead of the word *sharī'a*, meaning with that not Muḥammad's law but the practice of the community follower of Muḥammad. The term *sharī'a* was seldom used before the eleventh century and became a wide-spread term only after the thirteenth century.⁷

W.C. Smith affirms that the *mutakallimūn* were not concerned with the concept of *sharī'a*, even if the word was occasionally used. Instead the words *sunna* and *bid'a* were widespread before the eleventh century. He gives examples of works where inexplicably the word *sharī'a* does not appear at all, such as *al-Fiqh al-Akbar* li Abū Ḥanifa, and al-Asha'arī's synopsis in *Maqālāt al-Islamiyyīn* on the position of *Ahl al-Ḥadīth wa l-Sunna*.⁸

Regarding the word *nāmūs*, we find the use of this term in *Sīrat* Ibn Ishāq and Ibn Hishām where it is specifically used to refer to Christian revelation, the gospel. Ibn Hishām, who wrote in the Abbasid period, quotes John 15:26 in his *Sīrat*, commenting: "It is necessary that the Word, *kalima*, which is in *al-Namūs*, would be fulfilled...and if *al-Menahmana* comes...he would give testimony of me." In this passage, Jesus announced the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, in Syriac *al-Menahmana*.⁹ However, the term Word, or Logos, was not understood as a personal Logos but as a transmitted message, reinforcing, in that way, the

⁷ This is based on coming results of the Arabic Papyrology Database project at the Department of Near Eastern Studies, LMU, Munich led by Prof. Andreas Kaplony, supported by Data Base cald-ilm, led by Prof. Christian Müller.

⁸ W. C. Smith, "The Concept of Shari'a among Some Mutakallimun," in *Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of Hamilton A. R. Gibb*, ed. George Makdisi, 581–601 (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 585.

⁹ From the Syriac word *naham*, meaning a roaring, howling fire. See Payne Smith, *Syriac English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), s.v. "Naham."

importance of the concept of so-called “law,” *al-Nāmūs*.¹⁰ M. Plessner¹¹ says that following Islamic tradition Waraqa b. Nawfāl identified the Paraclete with Muḥammad, who links the gospel passage on the Paraclete to sura 61:6 in which the One to come is called Aḥmad.

Consequently, the idea of the Paraclete as the Holy Spirit did not prevail. Ibn Hishām observes that Waraqa said to Ḥadīja: “If thou hast reported the truth to me then truly the greatest *namūs* has come to him, who used to come to Mūsà, and then he (Muḥammad) is the prophet of this *’umma*.” Later on Waraqa personally confirmed this interpretation of the words to Muḥammad: You are the Prophet of this *’umma*, because the greatest *namūs* has come to you, the one which had come to Mūsà before.¹²

In al-Ṭābarī the greatest *nāmūs* is said to be Djibrīl, called *al-Nāmūs al-Akbar*.¹³

Tor Andrae derived the *nāmūs* of the Waraqa tradition from the *nomos aiwnios* in pseudo-Clementine’s writings, which according to the book *Kerigma Petru* was revealed to Adam and afterwards to all the prophets, from Moses to Jesus. Baumstark tries to track down the origin of the Christian use of *nomos* in the Arabic tradition. He notes that a passage in the liturgy of St. James of Jerusalem was authoritative in Bedouin camps and must have existed in an Arabic tradition.¹⁴ In any case, the word Menahmana, meaning the one who fulfills the *nāmūs*, is documented in a Palestinian Syriac lectionary, but not in the Peshitta.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrat al-nabāwīyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma’rifa, 2010), 1:152.

¹¹ M. Plessner, “Nāmūs,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* 7:953–55 (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

¹² Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrat al-nabāwīyya*, 1:155–56.

¹³ Plessner, “Nāmūs”; Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1974), s.v. “Nāmūs.”

¹⁴ Plessner, “Nāmūs.”

¹⁵ I owe this information to Prof. Ronny Vollandt, Department of Near Eastern Studies, LUM, Munich, Germany.

Sunna of the Philosophers

The term *sunna* has also been used by the most important Muslim philosophers.

Lawrence V. Berman and Ilai Alon remark that *sunna* as a translation of *nomos* appears in earlier texts.¹⁶ He studied the short treatise attributed to Socrates, *Maqāla Şuqrāt fī l-muqāyasa bayn al-sunna wa l-falsafa*,¹⁷ in which the term *sunna* is used in the sense of religious law. However the marginal annotations done in a later period by an unknown annotator replace the word *sunna* with the word *sharī'a*.¹⁸ The treatise distinguishes between *sunna* and *falsafa*, and the same annotator replaced later the word *falsafa* with *ḥikma*, which has quasi-mystical connotations.

The object of this short treatise was to prove that law is good but philosophy is better because, among other things, while *sunna* forbids sin, philosophy teaches how to do good. Their relation is similar to that of necessity and free will, necessity being considered of less value than the will. Besides, philosophy is rooted in nature and applies to all people, while the commandments of religious law are restricted to certain times and countries. Philosophy (or wisdom) creates agreement between human beings, while religious law sets sect against sect. Therefore, the conclusion is that it is necessary to teach wisdom, while the duty of the authorities is to enforce religious law.

An abbreviated text of this work ascribed to Socrates makes the same point: "*Al-sunna ḥasana wa-l-ḥikma ḥasana. Al-sunna taqhuru-nā 'ala tark al-ma 'ātim wa-l-ḥikma tunāl bihā al-fā'ida wa tudrik kull faḍīla.*" (Law is good and wisdom is good. Law

¹⁶ Lawrence V. Berman and Ilai Alon, "Socrates on Law and Philosophy," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 2 (1980): 263–79.

¹⁷ This is an unknown work found by L. V. Berman in the Suleymaniye Library in Istanbul in 1972 (MS Esat Efendi 3688). It has been published before in Mubahat Türker, "Petit traité en arabe attribué à Socrate," in *Andara* (Turkey: Necati Lujal Armagani, 1968).

¹⁸ Berman and Alon, "Socrates on Law and Philosophy," 267.

forces us to forsake sins, but advantage is gained through wisdom, and it attains every virtue.)¹⁹

Two of three translations of Mantīq Aristū use the word *sunna* to translate the word *nomos*.²⁰ However, in the translation of Yaḥyā b. ʿĀdī, teacher of al-Fārābī, he differentiates *sunna* from philosophy or wisdom, *ḥikma*, saying, “*wa dālika anna al-sunna ʿarāʾ al-kaṭīrīn wa l-ḥukamāʾ yaqūlū bi ḥasab al-ṭabīʿa wa bi-ḥasab al-ḥaqq*” (*sunna* contains the view of the many, whereas the sages and philosophers speak in accordance with nature and truth).

Al-Fārābī observes that the words *sunna* and *sharīʿa* are the practical part of *milla* or *dīn*, but he qualifies his point by saying that opinions may also be termed *sharīʿa*, “so that *sharīʿa* and *milla* and *dīn* become synonymous terms, for the *milla* is composed of two parts, that of defining opinions and determining actions.”²¹

From the tenth century on, the medieval term *sharīʿa* was understood as religious law; hence from this time the term *sharīʿa* was interchangeable with *sunna* and little by little eventually replaced the term *sunna*. Thus, *sunna* became mainly a technical term used to address *sunnat an-nābī*, even if the original meaning did not disappear completely, especially among the philosophers. For example, Avicena observes in *Majmūʿa al-rasāʾil* that *nomos* as used by Plato and Aristotle means *sunna* in the sense of revelation, for the laws of the community are dependent on prophecy and divine law.²² The term *Sunna Allāh* is also used until today to express the constantly action of God creating the world.

Furthermore, the general and particular aspects of the concept of *nomos* or *sunna*, as understood in the Qurʾan, have been

¹⁹ Al-Mubashshir b. Fatik, *Mukhtār al-ḥikam wa maḥāsīn al-kilām*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Badawī (Madrid: Instituto Egypcio de Estudios Islamicos, 1958), 97.

²⁰ A. R. Badawī, ed., *Mantiq Aristu* (Bayrut: Dār al-Qalam, 1980), 2:867.

²¹ Al-Fārābī, *Book of Religion and Related Texts*, ed. Muhsin Mahdi (Bayrut: Dār al-Maṣriq, 1968), 46. See Berman and Alon, “Socrates on Law and Philosophy,” 265, n.7.

²² Plessner, “Nāmūs.”

grasped and expressed by a gigantic figure of the Islamic intellectual and legal tradition: Averroes. He distinguishes between *sunna ʿamma* and *sunna khaṣṣa*, universal *sunna* and particular *sunna*. In *Talkhīṣ al-khaṭāba*,²³ *Middle Commentary* on Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*,²⁴ Averroes takes the Aristotelian concept of natural justice and understands Aristotle’s distinction between a particular and a general law under the categories of written law, *al-sunna al-maktūba*, and unwritten law, *al-sunna ghayr al-maktūba*. Laws, *al-sunna*, are of two kinds according to Averroes: some are particular, *khaṣṣa*, and others are general, *ʿamma*. Particular laws are written laws, *al-sunnan al-maktūba*, which are written down in order not to be forgotten. These particular laws are specific to each community, *qawm*, or each nation, *ʿumma*. As for the general laws, they are unwritten laws, *al-sunnan al-ghayr al-maktūba*. They are acknowledged by all people (*yu ʿaraf bihā*) as a matter of filial piety, *birr al-wālidayn*, and gratitude to a benefactor, *shukr al-min ʿam*.

Averroes acknowledges the importance of unwritten law as arising from the common nature of all people, *ṭabīʿat al-jamīʿ*. These are laws that people accept as natural although they are stated in no covenant, *ittifāq*, or contract, *taʿāqud*, among individuals in a community, and it is not known when or by whom these laws were laid down, *wuḍiʿat*. Averroes’s understanding is similar to that of Cicero’s in *De re publica* 3.22, who speaks of natural law.

Unlike Aristotle, who maintains that the particular law could both be written or unwritten to account for customs, Averroes separates these ideas, holding that the general law was unwritten and the particular was written. The *sunna ʿamma*, explains Averroes, has an unknown origin. This lack of epistemological origin of the general law could be understood as referring to the impossibility of knowing the Prophet who had laid it down. While he does not negate the divine origin of *sunna ʿamma*, he argues that

²³ Written in 1175.

²⁴ Ibn Rushd, *Averroès (ibn Rušd): Commentaire moyen à la Rhétorique d’Aristote*, 3 vol., ed. Maroun Aouad (Paris: Vrin, 2002).

general (or universal) law arises orally and from human consensus; it does not have any necessary correlation or effect on written law, but it can run parallel to it. Nonetheless, since oral culture used to have a major social role, oral law and written law may have been seen in some ways as interrelated even though *sunna 'amma* is definitively not considered to be the source or foundation of the written law or *sunna khaṣṣa*.

Oral Revelation in Judaism and Early Christianity

In Judaism the revealed law is based on both oral and written law. From the beginning, the Judaic tradition holds that together with the revelation of the law, or written Torah, in Sinai, there was also an oral revelation, the Oral Torah. Hence, the revealed law takes the form of written and oral law. Even the Karaites, who stress the value and truth in the written Torah, understand that a source of law is consensus and custom, called *'adet*.²⁵ The correct reading of the Bible, it is said by the Karaitas, does not depend on the authority of sages but the community that establishes it.²⁶

In this case, the divine law, Torah, is *sunna 'amma* and *khaṣṣa* at the same time. The term Torah, as it has been said, refers to both the oral and written law, to universal or divine law as well as to particular human norms. Hanina ben Menehem²⁷ points out that “there is unanimity of opinion in rabbinic literature concerning the existence and antiquity of the oral law . . . Revelation in Sinai included a significant oral teaching that accompanied written law.”

Origen²⁸ claims that with Christianity the law is a divine and human person, Jesus Christ, not a tradition of the ancients. The

²⁵ Marc Hirshman, “Torah in Rabbinic Thought: The Theology of Learning,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, ed. Steven T. Katz, 4:899–924 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 4: 907.

²⁶ Geoffrey Khan, “Los caraitas ante la Biblia,” *Ilu: Revista de Ciencias de las Religiones*, Anejo IX (2004): 33–46.

²⁷ Hanina ben Menehem, “Talmudic Law: A Jurisprudential Perspective,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, ed. Steven T. Katz, 4:877–98 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 4:877–99.

²⁸ Hirshman, “Torah in Rabbinic Thought,” 4:906.

nomos gives place to the Logos, which is reason and word, and it is at the beginning of creation and creation's end. The Logos does not abolish the law of the ancients, but fulfills it. Therefore, the idea of a living tradition that transmits and witnesses to the Logos or personal *nomos* becomes central in Christianity.

In Syriac we find the concept of law as arising from community consensus. Nonnus of Nisibi, Abū Qurra's Jacobite adversary, who wrote an apologetic treatise on Syriac, mentions the commonly received ideas, *mahshboto gawwonoyoto*, as a way to know the truth, which carries the same value as scriptural proofs or the evidentiary value of miracles.²⁹

J. P. Montferrer-Sala finds in a lectionary of probable Palestinian origin where *sunna al-nāmūs* is used in the sense of *nāmūs al-rabb*,³⁰ the law of the Lord.

Nikolai Seleznyov observes that in a Nestorian encyclopedic work from the mid-tenth to the early eleven century K.al-Majdal uses the expression *Sunna sayyid-na al-Masīh, ḥafaẓa waṣāyā wa sunnata-hu* (*sunna* of our Lord the Messiah, he kept his command and his *sunna*).³¹

Romans 3:31 in the Peshitta Bible uses the word *nāmūs* in the expression *nāmūsa w-nebiyyin*. In the Arabic manuscript London BL 3383 (which contains the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles

²⁹ Nonnus of Nisibi was Abu Qurra's Jacobite adversary in a Christological debate in 815–16 at the court of the Armenian prince Ashat Msaker. S. Griffith, "Faith and Reason in Christian Kalam: Theodore Abu Qurrah on discerning the True Religion," in *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750–1258)*, ed. Samir Khalil Samir and Jørgen S. Nielsen, 1–43 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 41, 39.

³⁰ J. P. Montferrer-Sala, "Arabic rendering of Nomos and nomicos in an eleventh century Greec-Arabic Lectionary," *Folia Orientalia* 49 (2012): 311.

³¹ Chapter on Love and Chapter on Circumcision. I thank Seleznyov for having sent me the pages of the manuscript where these expressions appear. See: Nikolai N. Seleznyov, "'These Stones Shall Be for a Memorial': A Discussion of the Abolition of Circumcision in the *Kitāb al-Majdāl*," *Scrinium* 10 (2014): 115–48.

and is dated in the thirteenth century), this is translated with the words *Sunna of Torah*.³²

Written Law in Islam

With the establishment of Islam as a ruling force, the need for law to organize the conquered territories led to the establishment of written law. The oral tradition of the first community of Muslims was rejected in favor of the written one. The *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq reveals its roots in an oral tradition, which Mālik, who had been charged by the caliph to write down the *sunna* of Muḥammad, would condemn. Mālik is the first to canonize the *sunna* of Muḥammad and the local praxis of Medina in his written work, *al-Muwattaʿa*.³ However, it would be many centuries before the law would be embedded in oral and written tradition. The teaching methodology – an oral one, *samʿa* – presupposes the oral tradition.

On the other hand, the Islamic project of writing down the law had a huge impact on other religious communities. The Karaites, under this influence, may have denied the rabbinic oral tradition of the Torah and followed a pattern similar to Islam, deriving the law from the Torah by means of consensus and analogy, *qiyās*.

The Karaites' doctrine developed in parallel to that of the Shiʿa which uses the categories of *bāṭin* and *zāhir* to describe the exoteric and esoteric in Scripture. The hermeneutic of the written text becomes from now on central when dealing with law and revelation. However, the esoteric or inner meaning of the text, in some way or another, willingly or not, continued to be based on the living, oral tradition of the community.

Al-Shāfiʿī, a legal scholar of the ninth-century, narrowed the idea of religious law in order to reduce dependence on local and customary law and establish a law that could be applied in the whole realm of Islam. He developed a scientific method for eval-

³² I own the reference to my colleague Vevian Zaki, research fellow for The Bible in Arabic Project at the Department of Near Eastern Studies, LMU, Munich, Germany.

uating traditions, *hadith*, and deriving the law from them. However, he never used sura 33:21, in which Muhammad is depicted as the perfect example to be followed in order to legitimize *Sunna* Muḥammad. On the contrary, he uses the word *ḥikma* (wisdom) as a synonym of sunna, in the same sense as it is used in the Qur'an.³³

Moreover, for *Shāfi'ī*, at the outset of his career, *sunna* meant the tradition inherited from the forebears, including teachers, parents, Successors, Companions, and the Prophet. Moreover, *sunna* was to be the criteria for interpreting the Qur'an.³⁴

As a matter of fact, it was Ibn Ḥanbal the first one to use the verse of Qur'an 33:21 to affirm the necessity of following the *sunna* Muḥammad, in this way canonizing the *Sunna*. Soon after this in the ninth century, Bukhārī, Muslim, Ibn Mājā, Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidī, and al-Nizā'ī wrote down the *sunna* Muḥammad, recording his words and deeds in large part as they were passed down through oral tradition and custom. Hence, the corpus of the *ḥadīth* became fixed by means of writing it down.

The following developments in relation to *sunna* Muḥammad is influenced by internal controversies. It seems that the concept of infallibility developed by the Mu'tāzila and the Shī'a influenced the Sunnis so that they adopted the idea that all prophets, including Muḥammad, were infallible.³⁵

On the other hand, the local praxis of the community of Medina, *ijmā' ahl al-madīna*, even if it did not disappear completely, gave way to the legal category of the consensus of the experts for deriving the law. Hence, *sunna* became intertwined into a system of written law enforced by the state, but without disappearing completely as a living tradition until modern times.

³³ Juynboll, "Sunna," *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, 5:1636.

³⁴ J. Burton, *An Introduction to the Hadith* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994) 160, 178–79.

³⁵ G. R. Hawting, "The Development of the Doctrine of the Infallibility of the Prophets and the Interpretation of the Qur'an," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 39 (2012): 141–63, esp. 145–46.

Sunna and living Tradition in Abū Qurra

In the ninth century Abū Qurra, a contemporary of al-Shāfi‘ī, produced writings that reflected the debate in this century on wisdom and law. In his treatise on icons, he affirms the need to maintain the living tradition and the *sunna* of the Christian community because it has a role as important as the written form of revelation. According to Abū Qurra, *sunna* means Christian wisdom. He continues the debate on philosophy and law, *hikma* and *sunna* or *sharī‘a*, asserting the value of Christian wisdom above any custom, while being this wisdom a source of law:

Christianity is a godly wisdom, which the minds of the wise men of the world call ignorance. Because in their own ignorance, they suppose that their wisdom is the utmost of sagacity. They have given Christianity the name of foolishness because it contradicts their wisdom...not what the majority of people think is to be called wisdom; neither the uncommon is to be called stupidity. Christian wisdom surpasses the knowledge of the so called wise people of this world. The latter thinks that their knowledge is the ultimate object of wisdom and call Christianity stupidity, because it differs from their concept of wisdom.³⁶

The Good News, *da‘awa* – so he calls the gospel – is not stupidity. Nonetheless, he says, the majority of people think that wisdom is only what is common to them.

Other authors mirror this debate on wisdom and law. Ṭābarī comments on sura 2:129 in his Tafsīr that Qatāda (d.736) identifies wisdom, *ḥikma*, with the *sunna* of ‘Īsā b. Maryam. While Shāfi‘ī insists that the term *ḥikma* in sura 2:129 (*wa yu‘alimuhum al-kitāb wa l-ḥikma*) means *sunnat rasūl Allāh*. The Qur‘ān also observes that there was a law previous to Islam, meaning that of Jews and Christians. This is clear in sura 4:48, “what others before us legislated” (*shar‘man qablana*).³⁷

³⁶ T. Abu Qurrah, *A Treatise on the Veneration of the Holy Icons*, trans. Sidney H. Griffith, Eastern Christian Texts in Translation (Louvain: Peeters, 1997), 33.

³⁷ M. Rohe, *Das Islamische Recht* (München: C. H. Beck, 2009), 68–70, 73, 32.

Abū Qurra indicates in his debate on wisdom and law (or *sunna*) that the Islamic legal tradition had in large measure already started to develop in the direction of a written law that would be in the service of the state.

Juynboll witnesses this development when he quotes Muslim's Ṣaḥīḥ, which says, "you intended to study the entire body of traditions, *akhbār*, transmitted from the Messenger of God, concerning the usages – or living tradition – *sunna*, and the ordinances, *aḥkām*, of the religion." Previous to this development, Wansbrough mentions that there is "a transition from *sīra* or narration, to *sunna*, or *exemplum* (where the dominant cognitive category is *nomos*)."³⁸

The Islamic oral tradition started to be systematized and written down taking shape, in part, as law for the use of nascent Islamic institutions. Meanwhile, *Sunna* became a written source from which to derive the written law, even if the role of sunna in deriving the law in the classical period as some may understand today is controversial.

On the other hand, in his treatise on icons, Abū Qurra recalls the value of *sunna* as the "living tradition of the Church," which means the life of the community, the example of the Fathers of the Church, and the practice of the disciples. Within this living tradition, Scripture is subject to historical interpretations, and Christians are expected to become icons (images) of the incarnated God. As an icon of the Lord, a true Christian saint is a corrector of customs, traditions, and institutions.

Among the variety of meanings of *sunna*, Abū Qurra asserts the value of *sunna* as a living tradition, a practice that is passed on and lived from generation to generation and which carries theological weight as a source of dogma – although the living tradition does not necessarily correspond to the praxis of the majority of the people.

Abū Qurra's intention is to point out the need to take into consideration the role of the living tradition in the life of the

³⁸ Juynboll, "Some New Ideas on the Development of Sunna as a Technical Term in Early Islam," 106–7.

community as source of revelation. This tradition, together with Scriptures, the lives of the saints, personal testimony, and the experience of believers in the life of the community are criteria and sources of revelation for futures generations. In the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent declared that the truth of the Gospel was to be found both in the Scriptures and in tradition, "in *libris scriptis et sine scripto traditionibus*."

The Role of Living Tradition

At present, few people are aware of the importance of living tradition – of the *sunna*, as Abū Qurra would say – for the life of the community of faith. Indeed, the living tradition of the Church is together with the Scriptures the actual revelation. This tradition of the Church has several aspects, including both the consensus of experts (theologians) and the living tradition of the community.

The Church affirms, as does Islamic law in an unspecific way, that God assures His community that “it would never agree on error.” In the Church that means, concretely, the certainty that the presence of the Holy Spirit guaranties the permanence of the Truth and the renewal of the people of God, which takes expression in the “Sunna” or living tradition of the community.

Abū Qurra states that the living tradition is the opposite of the written law, which kills the spirit. In this way, he stands against the identification of religious law with the law of jurists. Abū Qurra, a contemporary of Ibn Ḥanbal and al-Shāfi‘ī, takes part in the debate on the canonization and the writing down of *sunna* and Islamic law, *fiqh*, and he emphasizes the need of a living tradition that transmits the experience of what is good from generation to generation. For Abū Qurra, this living tradition is the proof of the existence of the Holy Spirit, and the living tradition is as much a source of revelation as the Scriptures. In this sense, the Christian Church affirms that God guaranties that His people will not to fall into error.

By affirming the need of the living tradition, Abū Qurra states that the criterion to discern good from bad tradition is reason, which affirms the interrelation of faith and reason. By the rational

nature inherent to human beings, good and bad can be discerned and deduced from the divine law. The divine law does not contradict reason. Divine law can be grasped through reason, but this reason requires faith. Moreover, the praxis of the saints is the expression of natural law, which is rooted in the order of the cosmos. It is the saints who correct by the example of their lives what is merely contingent and customary.

In his treatise on the true religion, Abū Qurra adds another criterion for recognizing the true religion, nature (*tabī'a*). At the beginning of his treatise, Abū Qurra uses Islamic terminology, which might lead some to think that they were reading a book on Islamic law. However, his use of the term *nature* brings us back to the world of philosophy. He refers to human nature as the criterion for knowing the true religion:

Our nature teaches us the miracle/verses, 'ayāt, of God's messengers, *rusul*, His books, the Truth that comes from God. Their verses, 'ayāt – referring to the verses of the books of the Bible – are His true religion, by which man should worship him according to His perfect attributes. Their verses are His commandment, 'amr, and His prohibitions, *nahā*, His reward, *tawāb*, and punishment, 'aqāb, the Truth.

This treatise uses nature instead of reason – as he did in the treaties on icons – as the criterion or human instrument to obtain the knowledge of God.

Although he begins by paraphrasing Islamic religious language and its fundamental affirmations, he replaces the word Qur'ān with the word *nature*, saying that while the Qur'an teaches us the verses, 'ayāt, of the Messenger of God, the book of nature is directly from God. Hence, reason and nature (in its philosophical sense) are the criteria for knowing true religion and discerning the truth of a tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation. This is the true *sunna*.

Conclusion

I will conclude by listing the various affirmations I have made about the nature of *sunna*.

- *Sunna* as the translation of *nomos* has a variety of meanings.
- *Sunna* as a normativity proceeding from rightful predecessors comprises an aspect of the universal and particular, divine law and customary law, an expression of the good order of the divine.
- *Sunna* comprises in its origin an aspect of oral law or normativity for the community and later also takes the form of written law.
- The term *sunna* has been used for the translation of the term Torah in the Arabic Bible, and it has been used with the expression “*sunna* of the Torah” (*Sunna al-Nāmūs*).
- The expression “*sunna* of Jesus” has been used in Nestorian writings.
- The Melkite writer Abū Qurra describes the living tradition of the Church, *Sunna*, as a source of revelation together with Scripture.
- At a philosophical level, *sunna* is described as natural law, *ius naturalis*. Averroes calls it *sunna ‘amma* – a normativity that is known by all people and whose origin is unknown. It seems that he does not deny a divine origin for it even if an epistemological foundation is lacking.

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