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4. An Innovator, by Any Other Name

The *Mujaddid* and the Rhetoric of Islamic Renewal

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Abstract

This study addresses the question of reform in Islam as formulated under the rubric of “renewal” (*tajdid*). As an idea, *tajdid* arises from a hadith in which God promises to send a “renewer” (*mujaddid*) at the turn of each century. Whereas premodern scholars eagerly made claims on this epithet, modern reformers tend to look past the person of the *mujaddid* to the discourse of renewal itself. Yet, in taking *tajdid* as a broad-based framework for socio-religious reform, do modern advocates violate the spirit, let alone the letter, of the tradition? To answer this question, I examine both the interpretive history of *tajdid* and the interpretive potential of the *mujaddid* hadith. Accordingly, I demonstrate that *tajdid* is less a model or doctrine of reform than the vital rhetoric of legitimating the innovations such reform entails. Insofar as contemporary reformers share in this rhetorical activity, I argue that they too are *mujaddids*.

Keywords: innovation, Islam, reform, renewal, rhetoric

Introduction

In contemporary Islamic discourse, as well as studies of that discourse, the question of religious reform often centers on the concept of *islah*.¹ Although this term has come to convey a sense of “repair,” “renovation,” or “reform” in Modern Standard Arabic (Wehr: 610), its semantic range is much broader. In the Quran, for example, its trilateral root (*ṣ-l-ḥ*) carries the following denotations: “to be or become good, uncorrupt, right, just, virtuous, righteous, honest; to be in a good, healthy or proper state; to be fit or suitable for; to settle differences amicably; reconciliation; peace” (Badawi and Abdel Haleem: 531-33). Accordingly, John O. Voll notes that *islah* retains “a strong sense of moral righteousness” (1983: 33). A. Merad echoes this accent on both personal and public morality, linking *islah* with the collective quranic injunction of “commanding what is good and prohibiting what it evil” (4: 141). Despite disagreements about what such (moral) reform should look like in a given socio-historical context, the discourse of *islah*-reform shows itself to be a generally collaborative process, involving academics and activists, sultans and subjects.

The same cannot be said of the related notion of *tajdid*, however. As the verbal noun of the second verb form of the Arabic root *j-d-d*, meaning “to renew,” *tajdid* is conventionally (and literally) rendered as “renewal.” While it too has come to carry a general sense of religious reform or revival in the modern period – with the two terms (*islah* and *tajdid*) sometimes glossing one another (see Lapidus; Voll 1983) – *tajdid*'s acquisition of this broad-based meaning is, one could argue, a radical recasting of the original idea. For unlike *islah*, conventionally *tajdid* has not been open to popular action, especially not in the sense of modern social or political activism (see Algar: 296; Hernandez: 125-26). Quite the reverse, it is the hadith-sanctioned vocation of a particular personage, the *mujaddid*, a God-sent centennial renewer.

Given this more restrictive context, one might be surprised to find the notion of *tajdid*-renewal employed so freely (and sometimes abstractly) in the rhetoric of such twentieth-century activist reformers and movements as Rashid Rida (d. 1358/1935)² and “Islamic Reformism,” Abu al-A‘la Mawdudi (d. 1399/1979) and the Jama‘at-i Islami, and Yusuf al-Qaradawi (b. 1345/1926) and the Muslim Brotherhood, to name only a few of the most prominent.³ How did this come about? On what grounds do they “liberate” *tajdid* from its

¹ Although *islah* is sometimes employed with specific reference to the movement of “Islamic reformism” (also called “Islamic modernism”) linked to Jalal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1314/1897), Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1323/1905), and Rashid Rida (d. 1358/1935), as well as their intellectual heirs, I use it here in the sense of reform generally.

² In this study I typically supply dates first according to the Islamic/*Hijri* calendar (AH) and second according to the standard Gregorian calendar (CE). I do this not simply based on convention in the field of Islamic Studies but, more importantly, because of the central role played by death dates according to the Islamic calendar in determining the candidacy of *mujaddids* in the classical tradition (see below for further discussion). Finally, it is important to note that the Islamic calendar, which begins in 622 CE, the year of Muhammad’s migration (*hijrah*) from Mecca to Medina, is a lunar calendar, meaning that it is 10-12 days shorter than the solar Gregorian calendar each year.

³ For the role of *tajdid* in the thought of other important reformers, namely Hasan Hanafi (b. 1353/1935) and Hasan al-Turabi (d. 1437/2016), see Esposito and Voll: 81-84, 126-34; On renewal in the thought and rhetoric of the famous Egyptian preacher Muhammad Mitawlli al-Sha‘rawi (d. 1419/1998), see Brinton: esp. 86-108.

traditional *mujaddid* stricture and redeploy it as a general framework of socio-religious reform? More specifically, is there anything in the Islamic tradition of renewal itself that might condone, or even encourage, such an apparently profound transformation?

To answer the above queries this study seeks to contextualize and problematize the concept and rhetoric of *tajdid* as it relates to the classical *mujaddid* tradition. First, I introduce the hadith upon which the tradition is based and discuss the debate about its origin and interpretation in the secondary literature. Next, after briefly introducing the conventional view of “renewal” as the “return” to a primitive state of communal purity, most associated with a revival of the prophetic Sunnah (i.e., the normative praxis of Muhammad), I interrogate the legacies of some of the more recognized *mujaddids* of the premodern period. In so doing, I demonstrate how *tajdid* actually functions as a vital rhetorical strategy to legitimate innovations introduced by scholar-*mujaddids* into the way Islam is elaborated and practiced. Finally, I offer several alternative readings of the *mujaddid* hadith, showing how contemporary reformers who employ a discourse of renewal in seemingly novel ways do so not only in the spirit of the tradition but perhaps according to the letter as well. In these ways, I hope to enhance our understanding of *tajdid* and its role in promoting and authenticating reform in Islam.

Hadith of the Mujaddid

As mentioned above, premodern Islam understood *tajdid* principally as the work of the *mujaddid*. This figure (or, more accurately, series of figures) arises from a popular hadith in the *Sunan* of Abu Dawud:

At the turn of every century,⁴ God will send to this community one who will renew its religion (6: 349-50).⁵

inna allāba yab`athu li-hādhibi al-ummati `alā ra`si kulli mi`ati sanatin man yujaddidu lahā dinahā

Although the original intent of this hadith is unclear, its placement at the head of *Kitab al-malahim* (The Book of Battles) in Abu Dawud’s compendium, a section comprising hadiths about the conflicts and calamities that portend the end of the world, invites an eschatological reading. And yet, the tradition on its own does not necessarily suggest that. If anything, it seems to imply a continuation of human history, not its end.

In order to explain the apparent incongruity between the hadith’s revivalist tone and its particular collation in Abu Dawud’s *Sunan*, Yohanan Friedmann theorizes that the tradition originated as a way to explain why the end had not yet come (1971: 13-14; 2003: 95-97). It is necessary to note here that, like other late antique religions, Islam emerged with a heightened

⁴ A more literal reading of this phrase would be “at the head (*`alā ra`si*) of every century.” Yet, in this context the phrase *`alā ra`si* could be interpreted as either “at the beginning” or “at the end” (see al-‘Azimabadi: 11: 386; Lane: 1: 995-96). Given such semantic elasticity, I have opted for a translation that respects both possibilities (see also Landau-Tasserion: 79; cf. Goldziher 1978: 81).

⁵ Although Taj al-Din al-Subki (d. 756/1335) and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 911/1505) both discuss a minor variant of the hadith that specifies the person sent will be from Muhammad’s progeny (*abl al-bayt*), they interpret this idea in ways that denude it of Shiite implications (see al-Subki: 1: 200; al-Suyuti 1990: 33-45). Interestingly, while there are some lists of Shiite *mujaddids*, the hadith itself is not in any Shiite collection (see Algar: 292, n. 3).

eschatological anticipation. A number of passages in the Quran and various hadiths suggest a conviction that the end is nigh. A few of the latter even provide a centennial deadline (see Friedmann 2003: 96). The continued passage of time presented a fundamental problem, however, obliging the immediacy reverberating in these sources to be mitigated in some way. Enter the *mujaddid*. According to Friedmann, “since Islamic tradition constantly associated the [Last] Hour with the decay of religion and of religious sciences, the final cataclysm could be postponed indefinitely if religion were revitalized on the eve of every century” (1971: 14; see also 2003: 97; cf. al-Suyuti 1990: 63-71). By this thinking, the *mujaddid* tradition does indeed have eschatological relevance, namely as a means of reforming previous end-of-the-world expectations. But Friedmann’s theory of doomsday postponement is not without its critics.

In her critical study of the *mujaddid* hadith, Ella Landau-Tasseron argues that one can discover its original purpose by disregarding its position in Abu Dawud’s *Sunan*, which may have been a mistake (cf. Tayob), and instead attending to those actually named as *mujaddids*. Accordingly, Landau-Tasseron traces the various claims and notes that a surprising number are made of and by Shafi’i scholars,⁶ and these, very often, have secondary teacher-pupil relationships (i.e., a later *mujaddid* was taught by the student of a previous one). What is more, the historical geography of these *mujaddids* generally follows the migration of the school’s hub of intellectual activity, from Iraq and Persia in the third through sixth centuries AH to Egypt in the seventh through tenth centuries AH. Observations such as these, paired with a close analysis of the tradition’s chains of transmission (*isnads*), lead Landau-Tasseron to conclude that the *mujaddid* hadith was likely forged by Shafi’i partisans seeking to legitimate the jurisprudential revolution wrought by their Imam. (The timing of al-Shafi’i’s death just after the turn of the second century AH and the fact that 100 years is a traditional motif are, for Landau-Tasseron, sufficient to explain the tradition’s centennial aspect.) Finally, it is not immaterial to her case that al-Shafi’i is himself one of only two universally-accepted renewers (see Landau-Tasseron: 84ff.).

Up to this point, Landau-Tasseron’s argument is compelling, if circumstantial. All the same, it is weakened by the identity of the other universally-accepted *mujaddid*, the first one, Umayyad Caliph ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-Aziz (d. 101/720), conventionally referred to as ‘Umar II. Not only is he not a Shafi’i (an impossibility since he lived nearly a century before the famous legal eponym), he is not even a member of the *ulama*, the scholarly elite whence *mujaddids* are supposed to hail. According to Landau-Tasseron, ‘Umar II was retroactively selected because: 1) his death date fit (i.e., he was alive at the turn of the century but died soon afterward),⁷ 2) he was famed for his “righteousness,” and 3) he was supposed to have been “the first to develop the concept of the Sunna of the Prophet and to order the collection of Prophetic

⁶ Shafi’ism is one of the four major schools of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam, named after Muhammad b. Idris al-Shafi’i (d. 204/820).

⁷ Traditionally, the date of a candidate’s death was one of the most essential qualifications for recognition as a *mujaddid* (see Landau-Tasseron: 84-85; Algar: 294). According to the classical view, “the *mujaddid* should be a well-known scholar at the end of a century and should die in the first few years of the next one” (Friedmann 2003: 99; see also Goldziher 1978: 81). Exactly how far into the new century one’s death date could be before it would disqualify him was a matter of interpretation and contention. As we shall see, strict adherence to this limiting principle has waned in the modern period.

traditions” (112; see also al-Suyuti 1990: 50-51). While this is a solid theory, it nevertheless seems to me that Landau-Tasseron too easily glosses over the key eschatological connection: specifically, that ‘Umar II also was considered by some in his time to be the *mahdi* (literally, “rightly guided one”), a messianic figure who will come to bring about justice on the earth just before the end (Crone and Hinds: 114).

Now, the relationship of the *mahdi*, the final restorer of religion and justice, with the *mujaddid*, the centennial renewer, is somewhat murky, at least as these epithets were being deployed in the late first and early second centuries AH.⁸ Even so, there is an indication that the latter figure develops from the former (see Yücesoy: 133). For, in the eschatological expectation that surrounded the Umayyad court in this period, a number of *mahdis* were proclaimed. These included both rivals to the Umayyad dynasty – e.g., ‘Abd Allah b. Zubayr (d. 72-73/691-92) and Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyah (d. 81/700-01) – as well as Umayyad caliphs themselves – e.g., Sulayman b. ‘Abd al-Malik (d. 99/717) and ‘Umar II (d. 101/720) (see Madelung: 5: 1231). This proliferation of *mahdis*, coupled with the eschaton’s delay, may well have contributed to the creation of a new role, the centennial *mujaddid*. This innovation can be seen as dealing with both problems: 1) how there could be more than one “restorer,” and 2) why the end has been postponed (because the religion has been renewed).

To accept this premise, that the *mujaddid* hadith originally had an eschatological character, as Friedmann proposes, need not invalidate the whole of Landau-Tasseron’s analysis. For, instead of it being fabricated by al-Shafi‘i’s supporters to legitimate their master’s jurisprudence, it is just as possible that they simply appropriated an existing tradition and adapted it for their own aims. In short, I suggest that Friedmann is probably correct in his assessment of the hadith’s origination as a way to mitigate the immediacy of the eschaton. At the same time, Landau-Tasseron rightly draws attention to how the tradition was employed for sectarian purposes, principally (but not exclusively) by the Shafi‘is (103; see also Hernandez: 107).

Ultimately, it is this last point that concerns us most here. For, regardless of how the hadith originated, it came to be understood in a scholastic manner. ‘Umar II may be given a pass, but all other *mujaddids* were to be, if not Shafi‘is, then at least religious scholars (see al-Suyuti 1990: 74; al-‘Azimabadi: 11: 386; Algar: 295).⁹ But what does it mean to designate a scholar a *mujaddid*? Is it more or less just a posthumous sectarian honorific, as Landau-Tasseron suggests (see 83-84)? Or is there an expectation that a *mujaddid* has an actual plan or project of renewal? And if the latter, what does it look like?

⁸ Eventually, mainstream opinion developed to identify the final *mujaddid* in the cycle with the promised *mahdi* or the returned Jesus (see, for example, al-Suyuti 1990: 63-64; Mawdudi: 40; see also Goldziher 1978: 85-86).

⁹ I should acknowledge here the existence of a series of Turco-Mongol and Ottoman rulers from the late-13th to mid-16th centuries who also were ascribed the epithet *mujaddid* (see Fleischer: 161, 163, and 165; cited in Yücesoy: 179, n. 166). However, the brief emergence of this line of *mujaddid*-rulers coincides with the efforts of these non-Arabs leaders of recently converted peoples to burnish their religio-political credentials. In short, such personages occupy a very different place in the legacy of Islamic reform than do the *mujaddid*-scholars I discuss here; as such, I will leave their treatment to others.

Reviver of the Sunnah

Again, those who made claims on the title of *mujaddid* did so on the basis of *tajdid*.¹⁰ But what exactly does this mean? In his study of the twin ideas of *tajdid* and *islah*, Voll observes,

[The *mujaddid* hadith] has had many different interpreters who have disagreed over details, but the basic tone is remarkably consistent. The Muslim community over time is seen as departing from the path defined by the Quran and the Sunnah, and *mujaddids* are needed to bring about a regeneration of the authentic Islamic spirit (1983: 33).

Hence, *tajdid* (like *islah*) can be seen as responding to a historical trajectory of socio-religious decline with an agenda (or at least an orientation) focused on arresting that decline and returning the community to an idealized state of nascent purity, wherein Islam is practiced completely and perfectly.¹¹ More precisely, this renewal is located in the revival of the Sunnah (the normative praxis of Muhammad). Though they seem to have evolved independently, Friedmann notes, the concept of *tajdid* became “almost indistinguishable from that of *ihyā’ al-sunnah* [revival of the Sunnah]” (1971: 13; see also 2003: 95).

One of the earliest attestations of this interpretation comes from the well-known third/ninth century jurist and traditionist (*muhaddith*) Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 241/855), who is recounted as having glossed the hadith’s phrasing “renew its religion” with “teach the people the Sunnah and refute falsehood about the Messenger of God” (al-Suyuti 1990: 24). Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 911/1505), architect of the classical *tajdid* tradition (see Friedmann 2003: 98), reproduced similar statements in a special treatise dedicated to the matter (see 1990);¹² and he himself declared (in verse no less) that one of the preconditions of a *mujaddid* was that he “defend the Sunnah in his speech” (1990: 74).¹³ Similarly, Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1034/1624), proclaimed “Renewer of the Second Millennium” (*mujaddid-i alf-i thani*), considered revival of

¹⁰ Most *mujaddids* were recognized as such after their death, usually by their immediate students or subsequent adherents to the same school. Though several scholars, such as al-Ghazali, al-Suyuti, Sirhindi, and the founder of the Ahmadi Movement, Ghulam Ahmad, claimed the title for themselves. As noted above, with the exception of the first two *mujaddids*, candidates vary from list to list. Furthermore, a degree of uncertainty is often reflected in a single source. For example, the following is al-Suyuti’s list up to himself: 1) ‘Umar II (d. 101/722); 2) al-Shafi‘i (d. 204/820); 3) Abu al-‘Abbas b. Surayj (d. 306/918) or Abu Hasan al-Ash‘ari (d. 324/935-36); 4) Abu Bakr al-Baqillani (d. 403/1013), Abu al-Tayyib al-Su‘luki (d. 404/1013), or Abu Hamid al-Isfarayini (d. 406/1016); 5) Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111); 6) Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 606/1209) or Imam al-Din al-Rafi‘i (d. 623/1226); 7) Taqi al-Din b. Daqiq al-‘Id (d. 702/1302); 8) Siraj al-Din al-Bulqini (d. 805/1403) or Zayn al-Din al-Iraqi (d. 806/1404); 9) al-Suyuti (d. 911/1505) (see al-Suyuti 1990: 74-75).

¹¹ The idea of communal decline is anticipated in several hadiths. Two of the more famous include the following: “The best of my community is the generation in which I [i.e., Muhammad] was sent, then those that follow them, then those who follow them”; and “Islam began as a stranger and it will return to what it was” (see Friedmann 1971: 13 and 16 for references).

¹² Some of the same material is found in al-Suyuti’s autobiography (1975: 215-27). It is worth noting, as Goldziher (and others) have pointed out, that al-Suyuti had a self-interested motive in writing about the *mujaddid* tradition, namely to support his own claim (see Goldziher 1978: 86-86).

¹³ Some of al-Suyuti’s other requirements for the *mujaddid* are that the candidate is alive at the turn of the new century, proficient in every field of knowledge, famous among the people of his time, and, by virtue of his learning, of universal benefit to the community (1990: 74-75).

the Shari'ah (itself based on the Quran and the Sunnah) as the *mujaddid*'s fundamental charge (Friedmann 1971: 17). And Shams al-Haqq al-'Azimabadi (d. 1329/1911) cites in his commentary on Abu Dawud's *Sunan* that *tajdid* means "the revival of practices in the Quran (*al-kitāb*) and the Sunnah that have been lost and the command to adhere to them" (11: 386).

Such general remarks on the nature of *tajdid* strike a solidly conservative tone. They promote a "back to the sources" orientation, one which seeks a recapitulation of the prophetic period, insofar as it is possible. Hence, *mujaddidi*-renewals traditionally share a rhetorical emphasis on "reviving" a strict adherence to the Quran and Sunnah (often explicitly coupled with a drive to purge Islam from what is perceived as external, corrupting influences). For example, Muhammad b. Idris al-Shafi'i (d. 204/820), the second *mujaddid*, grounded his legal reforms on the conviction that the Quran and Sunnah (established through authentic hadiths) should be the primary foundations of Islamic jurisprudence (see Schacht: 11-20). Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (d. 324/935-6), eponym of the majority school of Sunni theology, and, despite his somewhat late death date, claimed by some as the third *mujaddid*, is famous for rejecting his prior affiliation with the rationalist Mu'tazili school and devoting himself to the defense of the Sunnah (Watt 1986a). And Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111), the distinguished systematician and generally recognized as the fifth *mujaddid*, quite literally wrote the book on the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, a comprehensive spiritual guide deeply grounded in the Quran and Sunnah.

I could go on, but by now the picture should be clear enough. *Tajdid*, as the "renewal" brought by the *mujaddid*, is not anything new at all. It is simply a return to the primacy, if not exclusivity, of the Quran and Sunnah and the restoration of their ethical teachings and legal applications among believers. For, as Voll puts it, "[the role of the *mujaddid*] is not to perfect the model, it is to implement an already existing ideal" (1983: 34). Thus, *tajdid* vigorously opposes innovation (*bid'ah*). In classical Islamic thought *bid'ah* came to convey the sense of "heresy," a blameworthy (if not malicious) deviation from the received practice (see Goldziher 1971: 33-37). Theologically, *sunnah* is the antonym of *bid'ah* (see al-'Azimabadi: 11: 386), and reviving the prophetic Sunnah is what *tajdid* is all about. Right? But here is where the rhetoric of renewal collides head on with the historical record. For, pace Mawdudi (34, 37), *mujaddids* more often tend to share an inspiration to innovate than a commitment to conserve. Let us consider the following examples.

Renewal as Innovation

The fundamental transformation of Islamic jurisprudence wrought by al-Shafi'i, the second *mujaddid*, is hard to overstate. Though originally a student of Malik b. Anas (d. 179/795), eponym of the Maliki school of jurisprudence, al-Shafi'i came to reject his master's reliance on the praxis (*'amal*) of Medina (Muhammad's city) as a chief source of law. In its place, he formulated the science of *usul al-fiqh* (the principles of Islamic jurisprudence). Islamic law, al-Shafi'i argued, should not be based on the custom of a specific place, regardless of how venerable, any more than it should comprise caliphal decrees or speculative reasoning – the latter being a charge aimed against the Hanafi school by its critics. Instead, it is to be grounded *mainly* on the Quran and the Sunnah; and then, if the jurist is unable to extrapolate a ruling from these primary sources, he could appeal to two secondary ones: consensus of the scholars (*ijma'*) and analogical reasoning (*qiyas*). These four principles – Quran, Sunnah, *ijma'*, and *qiyas*

– lie at the heart of Shafi‘i’s legal reforms (Schacht: 1). Yet, because they eventually came to be adopted by the other schools, to one degree or another, it is easy to overlook just how radical his agenda was.

Moreover, when it came to the cornerstone of his system, the prophetic Sunnah, al-Shafi‘i was pioneering in his insistence that it can be known only through trustworthy hadiths, that is to say, reports which were conveyed with verified chains of transmission (*isnads*). Once again, this conviction – that reliable hadiths alone comprise the Sunnah – has become so well accepted that it is tempting to assume this was always the case. It was not. The older schools of law would seem to have placed equivalent authority on traditions ascribed to Muhammad’s Companions. Thus, according to Schacht,

Traditions from the Prophet had to overcome a strong opposition on the part of the ancient schools of law, let alone the *ahl al-kalam* [theologians], before they gained general acceptance. Shāfi‘ī had to fight hard to secure the recognition of their overriding authority (57).

Al-Shafi‘i ultimately won the day due to the efforts of his disciples, who went on to frame his innovations as a triumph of tradition (cf. Landau-Tasseron: 109-11).

A similar dynamic of innovation framed as a revival of the Sunnah is found in the case of al-Ash‘ari, deemed by some to be the third *mujaddid*. As mentioned above, the eponym of the Ash‘ari school of Islamic theology is recognized for his abandonment of the rationalist Mu‘tazili school to become a champion of the Sunnah. But, even though al-Ash‘ari came to denounce Mu‘tazili doctrines, he retained their methods of inquiry and argumentation. This led to charges of *bid‘ah* (heresy/innovation) in some quarters, chiefly from the Hanbalis (whose credo al-Ash‘ari ironically saw himself as defending). Opposition to the school waxed and waned over the centuries, principally due to the changing favors of political rulers and dynasties. And yet, by the fifth/eleventh century, W. Montgomery Watt observes that “the teaching of the Ash‘ariyya was almost identical with orthodoxy” (Watt 1986b). Although other Sunni scholars and schools (e.g., the Maturidis) also employed rational argumentation in defense of the Sunnah and its authority, it is due to al-Ash‘ari’s innovations that discursive theology (*ilm al-kalam*) came to be recognized as a legitimate religious science among the Sunnis.

Concerning the fifth *mujaddid*, al-Ghazali, so towering is his legacy that some have not shied away from according him a rank just below that of the Prophet himself.¹⁴ Fittingly, much has been written about his contributions in such fields as law, theology, philosophy, and mysticism, which need not be reproduced here. Instead, it is sufficient for the present argument that I draw attention to the composition for which he is most celebrated, the aforementioned *Revival of the Religious Sciences*. According to Eric Ormsby, “the impulse to renew propels the *Revival* from beginning to end” (113; see also Garden: 9). Importantly, he rests this appraisal not only on the work’s exhaustive content and compelling rhetoric but also its “architecture.” That is to say, the *Revival* is not just a systematic recapitulation of religious

¹⁴ For instance, al-Suyuti transmits the following sentiment of praise: “If there had been another prophet after the Prophet [Muhammad] it would have been al-Ghazali” (1990: 47).

knowledge, it is, rather, a “script” to be performed (Ormsby: 115-16). Ascending from ritual duties and everyday actions and etiquette to more grandiose and spiritual subjects, al-Ghazali intends for his reader a complete manual for (religious) life, a handbook for salvation. This effort to synthesize and ultimately operationalize knowledge is so ambitious that it belies any attempt to describe it as a simple return to the authority of the sources.

At last we turn to al-Suyuti, dean of the *mujaddids* (see Friedmann 2003: 98; cf. Hernandez: 103-4). Like al-Ghazali before him, al-Suyuti saw himself as the renewer of his century (see 1975: 227; 1990: 66).¹⁵ Though, unlike al-Ghazali, he made his case with a vanity and contempt for other (read: lesser) scholars that was truly unmatched (see Goldziher 1978: 86-89; Sartain: 53-60).¹⁶ Al-Suyuti advertised his superiority with gusto, asserting that he was the only true scholar of the age since he alone “has delved into all the branches of the religious sciences” and spread far and wide his knowledge and works, “the likes of which no one has written before” (1990: 66-67; see also 1975: 155-59; Sartain: 46-52). Moreover, echoing al-Shafīʿi’s jurisprudential innovations, al-Suyuti professes to have “devised” a truly novel science, *usul al-lughab* (the principles of linguistics) (1990: 67). While he was indeed a polymath (as well as the prolific author of some 500 titles!), the substance of his claim to be the ninth *mujaddid* rests primarily on his assertion to be a *mujtabid*, the only of his day (of course) (see al-Suyuti 1990: 66-67; Hallaq: 27; Hernandez: 101-2). As a *mujtabid*, al-Suyuti was declaring himself to be a jurist of such complete comprehension of the law and related religious sciences that he is able to exercise his own legal reasoning (*ijtihad*) in formulating new judgments rather than submitting to the authority of previous decisions (*taqlid*).¹⁷

What is crucial for our purposes is that by grounding his claim to be the renewer on his capability for independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) – which itself rests on his argument for the necessity of such *ijtihad* in each generation (see Hernandez: 117-20) – al-Suyuti opens the door for an unambiguous recasting of “renewal” as a force of adaptation and change. Add to this the fact that many of the materials gathered and themes discussed in al-Suyuti’s works, especially those regarding the concepts of *ijtihad* and *tajdid*, have provided the “resources” for later reformers (Hernandez: 116), and it is little wonder that Rebecca Skreslet Hernandez concludes that “al-Suyūṭī initiated a new phase in Islamic *tajdid* discourse,” explaining further,

As a transitional figure whose work links the pre-modern and early modern, al-Suyūṭī plays a significant role in the transformation of the “*tajdid* genre” into a set of concepts, symbols, and references that later thinkers have molded to

¹⁵ Elsewhere al-Suyuti quotes the relevant passage from al-Ghazali’s autobiography, *Deliverer from Error*, so as to establish precedent for his own self-declaration (see 1990: 47-48; cf. Watt 1994: 81-82).

¹⁶ In her study of al-Suyuti’s legal thought and persona, Rebecca Skreslet Hernandez offers the following gem from one of his *fatwas* to demonstrate his haughty temperament: “Whoever puffs himself up and claims to rival me and to deny my claims to *ijtihad* and peerless scholarship at the turn of this century and asserts that he opposes me and mobilizes others against me is one that, if he and they were to be assembled on a single plateau and I blew one breath, they would become like scattered dust” (2).

¹⁷ To be more precise, al-Suyuti announces himself as a *mujtabid mutlaq muntasib* as opposed to a *mujtabid mustaqill*. The latter, “independent *mujtabid*,” is the rank that al-Suyuti grants only to the eponyms of the four major Sunni legal schools, while the former, “affiliated absolute *mujtabid*,” is a member of one such school and works with reference to the principles, sources, and precedents of that school (see Hernandez: 2, 21-22, 118; cf. Sartain: 64).

suit their own purposes. Al-Suyūṭī's articulation of the concepts of *ijtihād* and *tajdīd* has proven remarkably effective in liberating the *tajdīd* tradition from the realm of Sunni polemics and making it accessible to scholars as diverse as Muḥammad 'Abduh, Rashīd Riḍā, Muḥammad al-Shawkānī, and Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb (219-20).¹⁸

Again, al-Suyuti's "renewal" of *tajdid* with the creative impulse of *ijtihad* is a critical evolutionary step. Though not as revolutionary as the reinterpretations of some later *mujaddids* – such as Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1034/1624), titular father of the Mujaddidi branch of the Naqshbandi Order (see Friedmann 1971: 13-21), and Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1326/1908), founder of the Ahmadiyah Movement (see Friedmann 2003: 105-11) – al-Suyuti's articulation has had the far greater impact on how modern Sunnism conceives of, debates, and pursues reform. Indeed, when surveying the quite diverse revivalist leaders and movements that exploded across the Islamic world in the twelfth/eighteenth through fourteenth/twentieth centuries,¹⁹ a Suyutian notion of *tajdid* as entailing a process of continuous *ijtihad* emerges as one of the few uniting refrains.²⁰ And yet, even as the understanding of renewal has expanded to embrace an *explicit* appeal to independent reasoning (of *mujaddids* at least), the rhetorical framing of any new interpretations and applications as a "revival the Quran and Sunnah," a return to the past, remains as vital as ever to their perceived legitimacy. Innovation (*bid'ah*), especially if it entails (openly) drawing on resources considered to be outside of the Islamic tradition, remains out of the question in traditionalist circles.

One can find this creative tension at work in the thinking of many a renewer or reformer in the modern period, as it is, for example, in the following passage from the *Ṣūnalar* of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (d. 1379/1960).²¹ Here Nursi defends *mujaddids* against charges of *bid'ah*:

¹⁸ In referring to a "*tajdid* genre," Hernandez, drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and others, is theorizing on how the concept and rhetoric of *tajdid* has been shown to be amenable to re-articulations within a more general framework of religious renewal while retaining its authoritative grounding in the classical *mujaddid* tradition (see 113-14).

¹⁹ Some of these key figures include Shah Wali Allah (d. 1175/1762) in India, Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1201/1787) in Arabia, 'Uthman b. Fudi (d. 1232/1817) in West Africa, Muhammad al-Shawkani (d. 1250/1839) in Yemen, Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Sanusi (d. 1275/1859) in North Africa, Jalal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1314/1897) in the Ottoman Empire, Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1323/1905) in Egypt, and Rashid Rida (d. 1358/1935) in Egypt, the Levant, and the Hijaz. On these figures and their relation to broader trends of revival and reform in the modern period, see the relevant sections in Voll 1994; cf. Dallal.

²⁰ To this Voll adds two further themes of *tajdid* (and *islāh*) that have continued into the modern period: 1) "the call for a return to, or strict application of, the Quran and the Sunna of the Prophet" – the rhetoric of which I have discussed above – and 2) "the reaffirmation of the authenticity and uniqueness of the Quranic experience, in contrast to other Islamic modes of synthesis and openness" (1983: 35).

²¹ Nursi is considered by some to be the *mujaddid* of the fourteenth century, and this despite his rather late death date. As I mentioned above, the requirement that one's death be within the first few years after the beginning of a new century became far less of an issue in modern interpretations of the tradition. Hernandez traces this development to Rashid Rida (see 133). Mawdudi likewise rejects this qualification in explicit terms (35). As for the centennial aspect, Mawdudi goes on to explain that "the Holy Prophet has simply asserted that, God willing, no century (of the Muslim era) will remain devoid of such persons as will rise in the face of 'Ignorance' and

Those exalted servants of religion, the glad tidings of whose coming at the head of every century have been proclaimed in a *ḥadīth* are not innovators (*mubtadi*) in the matter of religion, but obedient followers. They do not create anything new of themselves, nor do they proclaim any new ordinances. Rather, by following the letter of the bases and ordinances of religion and the Sunna of the Prophet – peace and blessings upon him – they straighten religion and make it firm. . . . However, at the same time, without in any way damaging the fundamental nature of religion or violating its essential spirit, they fulfil their duties [as *mujaddids*] by employing new methods of explanation, new means of persuasion that are consistent with the age, and new forms of detailed instruction (cited and translated in Algar: 304).

While the historical record of *mujaddids* would seem to challenge the notion that their renewals are simply contextual re-articulations, rhetoric of this sort is the very essence of *tajdid*. Indeed, the continuing power of Islamic renewal lies precisely in its ability to provide a space for the sort of “good innovation” (*bid‘ah hasanah*; see Goldziher 1971: 2: 36-37) necessary for a religious tradition to remain viable and vibrant in changing circumstances.

Reformer as Mujaddid

Given *tajdid*'s legacy of wrapping innovation in tradition, it is little wonder that modern reformers are so eager to adapt it to their particular needs and projects. Yet, this diversity would seem to present a problem. Are not those who employ the rhetoric of *tajdid* identifying as *mujaddids*, either explicitly or implicitly? And if so, what are we to make of such plurality considering the hadith clearly expresses that God will send *one* person to renew religion in each century? Would not allowing more than one *mujaddid* at a time be a serious challenge to the integrity of the tradition? Well, not necessarily. The conventional reading to suggest a single renewer every 100 years is, in fact, only one possibility. The phrasing *man yujaddidu* admits a plural reading as well, so that the hadith could just as easily announce, “At the turn of every century, God will send to this community *those* who will renew its religion.”

While the above may not be the most common construal of the tradition among premodern scholars, it is by no means rejected (see Goldziher 1978: 82, n. 6; cf. Friedmann 2003: 99). Thus, in al-Suyuti's discussion of the possibility of multiple renewers, he identifies several authorities who emphasize the advantage of this reading – e.g., ‘Imad al-Din Isma‘il b. Kathir (d. 774/1373), ‘Izz al-Din ‘Ali b. al-Athir (d. 630/1233), and Shihab al-Din b. Hajar al-‘Asqalani (d. 852/1449) (see 1990: 53-64; see also Landau-Tasserone: 85, n. 26). He goes on to quote Ibn al-Athir at length on the various experts and expertise that benefit religion and which must necessarily be a part of its renewal (e.g., hadith scholars, Quran reciters, preachers, ascetics, political leaders, etc.). Unless God sends one person who is universally acclaimed in every field relevant to *tajdid*, Ibn al-Athir argues, the *mujaddid* hadith should be understood as referring to “a group of renowned leaders” (*jamā‘ah min al-akābir al-mashhūrīn*) comprised of

endeavor to purge Islam of all kinds of impurities and enforce its system in the world in its original form and spirit” (36).

each field and legal school. Accordingly, he gives his own list of these collective renewers up through the fifth century AH (see al-Suyuti 1990: 54-61).

In the twentieth century, Rashid Rida harnessed the potential of this reading not only to render his preferred list of candidates (which, in many cases, differs markedly from the earlier ones) but also to recognize a new subset of “regional” *mujaddids* beginning in the late-medieval and early-modern periods (Hernandez: 133).²² Yet Rida went still further, expanding *tajdid* in ways that he believed would better meet the challenges of his modern circumstances. To quote Hernandez:

[His understanding of] *tajdid* is not confined to religious renewal, but also entails social, political, scientific, and civic reforms. Additionally, while Riḍā speaks of the Islamic *umma*, he also takes into account the reality of the modern nation-state and its concerns, issues that did not occupy the medieval scholars as part of their project of *tajdid*. It is significant that Riḍā opens the field of *tajdid* to encompass multiple reform efforts by people in different occupations, such as scientists and legislators (135).

Rida’s reconceptualization of *tajdid* as “reform” across a variety of areas of human life, and, by effect, its rendering of such reformers as *mujaddids*, has had a transformative impact on popular reformist discourse today.

And yet, if modern reformers use *tajdid* in ways quite dissimilar than how it was employed in the past, this is not a case of haphazard experimentation or opportunistic manipulation. For, I would argue that renewal, as articulated in the classical *mujaddid* tradition, holds the seeds of its own transformation. In point of fact, the semantic range of the second form of the Arabic root *j-d-d* (whence derive the hadith’s verb, *yujaddidu*, as well as the active participle, *mujaddid*, and the verbal noun, *tajdid*) includes not only “to renew,” as in to revive or restore, but also “to make something new,” as in to originate or innovate (see Lane: 2: 384, 385; cf. Landau-Tasserón: 107, 12). While such a reading of the hadith may be theologically inadmissible (at least traditionally), its potency as an alternative sociolinguistic interpretation can be seen quietly reverberating behind much contemporary *tajdid* rhetoric to justify all sorts of novel approaches.

Now, before I can rest my case for modern reformers as authentic heirs to the classical *tajdid* tradition, there is one final question that needs to be addressed: What precisely is the nature of the *mujaddid*’s authority to renew? And to what extent can contemporary *tajdidi*-reformers be said to partake in that authority? Once again, the hadith says, “At the turn of every century, God will *send* (*yab’athu*) to this community one/those who will renew its religion.” Read this way, it sounds as if the *mujaddid* is a prophet-like figure, one who receives his commission and authority directly from God.²³ Indeed, there are examples in the tradition which seem to suggest that the *mujaddid* accomplishes his work through the aid of divine inspiration. Dreams and visions are especially pertinent in this regard, as we see in the claims

²² Mawdudi follows this interpretation in asserting the possibility of country-specific renewers (36).

²³ In support of such a reading, Algar notes that the same verb is commonly used in the Quran for God’s sending of the ancient prophets (297; see also Landau-Tasserón: 82).

for al-Ash‘ari (see Watt 1986b), al-Ghazali (see Watt 1994: 81), Sirhindi, and ‘Uthman b. Fudī (Usman dan Fodio) (d. 1232/1817) (see Algar: 298, 300).

Occasionally an even more explicit connection between renewal and prophetic authority is posited. Along this line, Sirhindi went so far as to depict his role not simply as one of reviving Muhammad’s teaching and praxis but of perpetuating something of his prophethood (see Friedmann 1971: 18-19; Algar: 298-99). And Said Nursi asserts that the *mujaddid*’s works, such as his own *Risale-i Nur*, are not really human products at all but “directly inspired and inculcated from the source of revelation itself, the pure essence of the Prophet” (Algar: 304-5). While these latter ideas represent substantive reinterpretations, they nonetheless signal a certain tendency in the tradition to imagine the *mujaddid* as a singular, larger-than-life character bringing renewal imprinted with a divine imprimatur. In this way, Mawdudi sums up the standard view: “Though a *mujaddid* is not a Prophet, yet in spirit he comes very close to Prophethood” (37).²⁴

There is another way to read the hadith, however, one that I dare say is more in keeping with how concrete *tajdid* efforts have been executed and received in Islamic history. As referenced above, the verb commonly translated as “send” in the *mujaddid* hadith is *yab‘athu*, the imperfect of the first verbal form of the root *b-‘-th*. In addition to “send” or “dispatch,” *yab‘athu* also carries the sense of “rouse,” “stir up,” or “put in action” (Lane: 1: 222-23). Now, irrespective of the tradition’s original purpose, its interpretive history suggests a reading more like this: “At the turn of every century, God will *rouse* for this community those who will renew its religion.”²⁵ While the act of rousing and putting into action may be God’s initiative (cf. Mawdudi: 38), the actual content of the renewal need not be seen as directly inspired. Indeed, unlike a prophet, especially one in the mold of Muhammad’s prophethood, a *mujaddid*’s program is the result of serious study and (in many cases) a lifetime of scholarly achievement (see Mawdudi: 103). In the premodern context this scholastic qualification restricted serious *mujaddid* candidates to the *ulama*. But what about today?

Given that, in the appraisal of Ira Lapidus, “the contemporary world-wide wave of Islamic revivalist movements is a direct response to the global challenges that constitute modernity” (444), competencies in secular fields of knowledge would seem as essential as religious ones. Certainly, it would be nearly impossible for any present-day project of Islamic reform to disregard the influences of a scientific worldview, humanistic thinking, progressive gender norms, consumeristic values, nation-state hegemony, and the like. Accordingly, the marrying of Islamic learning with secular subjects has developed as a hallmark of contemporary revivalist movements. In today’s radically different context, it should therefore come as little surprise that the leaders of modern reform movements are not typically members of the traditional *ulama* but comprise “a new intelligentsia of preachers, community organizers, intellectuals, and missionaries” (Lapidus: 447). For, as knowledge has changed so have those considered “knowledgeable.” Thus, with the recognition of this new *ulama* that we are left with

²⁴ Elsewhere, however, Mawdudi cautions against seeing the *mujaddid* as “a perfect man” and “infallible” like a prophet (104).

²⁵ This reading is in close agreement with Mawdudi’s own rendering: “Allah will raise, at the head of each century, such people for this *Ummah* as will revive its Religion for it” (35).

a seemingly inescapable conclusion: contemporary reformers are very much within the spirit (if not the letter) of the *mujaddid* tradition.

Conclusion: Rhetoricians of Reform

Lapidus argues that “[modern] Islamic revivalism represents not a return to the past but a form of modernity in Islamic terms” (455). Correspondingly, contemporary reformers are more likely to bypass much of the constraints of the classical *mujaddid* tradition to employ *tajdid* as a general framework of renewal encompassing a diversity of fields and authorities, not just the traditional Islamic sciences and the religious elite. From an originalist perspective there is a temptation to see such discursive deviations as revolutionary, even inauthentic. Nevertheless, as we have seen, there are multiple legitimate ways to read the *mujaddid* hadith and interpret its import, including readings that license modern usages, such as those of Rida and Mawdudi, among others. Even the semantic range of the hadith’s verb, *yujaddidu*, infuses the tradition with a potential for innovation.

But, more significantly, surveying how the tradition has been used historically to (re)frame the renewal programs of some of the most noteworthy premodern *mujaddids* underscores *tajdid*’s rhetorical force. And rhetoric is really at the heart of the issue. For, in the final analysis, *tajdid* is not so much a project, proposal, or even just a principle of reform as it is a *rhetoric* of legitimation for said reform. As I have demonstrated, *tajdid*’s legitimating power lies specifically in its ability to inoculate its user against accusations of blameworthy innovation (*bid’ah*) by casting the renewer’s program (whatever it may be) as a “revival of the prophetic Sunnah.” Viewing *tajdid* as a type of Islamic reform rhetoric, rather than as a model or doctrine of reform, goes a long way to explaining why renewal and its related discourses have proven to be so adaptable to different figures, questions, and contexts. Moreover, it addresses the mystery of why the “idea” of *tajdid* appears undeveloped in the premodern literature, a reoccurring observation of modern scholars (see Friedmann 2003: 99-100; see also Lazarus-Yafeh: 99; Landau-Tasserion: 84; Algar: 297).

Ultimately, if *tajdid* is a type of rhetorical legitimation for Islamic reform then the *mujaddid* is perhaps more properly the rhetorician of that reform. As a rhetorician, the *mujaddid* need not be the actual reformer. He/she could just as easily be a disciple. In fact, if one takes this line of thinking to its logical conclusion, almost any scholastically-qualified Muslim who actively promotes a particular project of Islamic reform using the chief discursive strategy of *tajdid* (i.e., *sunnah* vs. *bid’ah*) could (theoretically) be seen as a *mujaddid*. This may sound like a radical conclusion. Yet, I argue that it accurately reflects the dynamics of *tajdid*, especially in the popular reformist discourses of today. Reformer or rhetorician, one thing is clear, the *mujaddid* is an innovator, by any other name.

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