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The Problem of Criticism with a Look at the Opinions of Traditionalists

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Abstract

The act of criticism presents a profound, albeit necessary, challenge, situated at the complex intersection of objective knowledge and subjective selfhood. Effective criticism must transcend personal whims and attachments, grounding itself instead in principles of piety, knowledge, and intellectual asceticism. This article endeavors to demonstrate a fundamental distinction between two disparate concepts of "tradition": first, the Divine Tradition (sunnat Lahiya) as presented in the Holy Qur'an and Islamic jurisprudential texts, and second, the notion of "tradition" as interpreted by Traditionalist thinkers such as Frith of Schoon and Sayed Hossein Nasr.

The former, the Divine Tradition, is intrinsically linked to obedience to Divine Law (Shari's). In contrast, the Traditionalists, or Perennializes, posit a "Perennial Philosophy" or an eternal tradition purportedly underlying all religions. This paper argues that such an understanding has deviated from its scriptural foundations, leading to sophistical explanations of core religious principles and authentic mysticism. Through a critical analysis drawing upon historical works and textual evidence, this study reveals that modernity is not inherently the enemy of tradition. Instead, modernity can serve as a critical vessel for discerning and even reinforcing authentic tradition. Consequently, a wholesale negation of modernity, coupled with an adherence to a non-scriptural conception of tradition, obstructs the path to truth. This article, therefore, posits criticism as an essential tool for a scientific, moral, and philosophical engagement with tradition. Such criticism demands both "minor" (methodological) and "major" (epistemological) rigor, and it must remain safeguarded against the perils of conceptual confusion and undue abstraction.

Keywords: Traditionalists, Criticism, Eternal Tradition, Divine Tradition, Transcendent Wisdom,

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Is the Traditionalist concept of Perennial Philosophy compatible with the Sharīʿah-centric divine tradition in Islam? Furthermore, does this concept represent an epistemological deviation from religious truth and Islamic philosophical reason?

Extended Abstract

This article offers a comparative critique of the concept of "Tradition," contrasting its established meaning in Islamic sources with the interpretation of the Traditionalist School (Perennialism). The study aims to highlight the fundamental conflicts between the Islamic notion of Sunnat Allāh (the Tradition of God) and the Perennialist idea of Philosophia Perennis (Ḥikmat al-Khālidah), challenging claims of their compatibility. In Islamic thought, Sunnat Allāh signifies the immutable divine laws governing creation. Concurrently, the Sunnah—the authenticated sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the Imams (ʿa)—constitutes a primary, historical source of divine law (Sharīʿah) alongside the Qur'an. This framework is specific, textually grounded, and legally authoritative. In stark contrast, Perennialism defines "Tradition" as a singular, trans-historical reality forming the esoteric core of all religions. Proponents like Frithjof Schuon and Seyyed Hossein Nasr posit a "Transcendent Unity of Religions," viewing different Sharīʿahs as mere external forms of one inner truth. This research argues that the Perennialist view is theologically irreconcilable with Islam. By prioritizing a shared esoteric dimension (bāṭin), it diminishes the finality and exclusivity of the Islamic Sharīʿah, potentially leading to religious relativism and devaluing prescribed rituals. Islam upholds an unbreakable link between the exoteric law (ẓāhir) and the esoteric path (ṭarīqah), a bond the Perennialist model compromises. Furthermore, the Traditionalists' wholesale rejection of modernity is critiqued as an oversimplification, ignoring how modern advancements have aided in preserving historical traditions. In conclusion, the Perennialist concept of "Tradition" is an eclectic construct, distinct from its precise definition in authentic Islamic sources. Applying this concept to Islamic phenomena demands a critical reassessment firmly rooted in Islamic theology (kalām) and jurisprudence (fiqh).

Traditionalists, claiming eternal wisdom, have misplaced the concept of divine tradition and transformed it into a supra-religious interpretation. Their understanding of the Islamic religion and art is based on a distorted foundation. Understanding tradition must come from reason and Islamic jurisprudence, and the traditionalists' denial of modernity is an epistemological error, because modernity itself provides the possibility of continuity and protection of divine tradition.

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