

How to distinguish between Sunnah and Arab culture

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allaah, the Most Merciful, the Bestower of Mercy

The following is a summary translation taken from alalbany.ws

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

Shaykh al-Albaanee (رَحِمَهُ اللَّهُ)¹: 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 (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ)², 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 (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ); 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 (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ)³ used to have sandals that had two straps³, 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

¹ (رَحِمَهُ اللَّهُ) (rahimahullaah) May Allaah the Most High have mercy on him

² (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) (sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) May the peace and blessings of Allaah the Most High be upon him

³ Translator's note: Ibn Hajar said these are the straps that go between the middle toe and the toe next to it and some of the Scholars said between the big toe and the toe next to it.

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to wear these types 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 in'sha'allaah. It is related that the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) descended at al-Batha⁴ so some of the companions (رضي الله عنهم)⁵ said, and I think it was Aaishah⁶ (رضي الله عنها)⁷, '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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) 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 hadeeth containing the statements of the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) came such as the hadeeth where he (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) 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 (hadeeth) 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) described the method of clothing as it relates to the believer he

⁴ A city between Makkah and Mina

⁵ (رضي الله عنهم) (rad iyallahu 'anhum) May Allaah the Most High be pleased with them

⁶ 'Aaishah, the Mother of The Believers (رضي الله عنها)

⁷ (رضي الله عنها) (rad iyallaahu `anhaa) May Allaah the Most High be pleased with her

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(صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) 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 established for the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) entered Makkah 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ)!!!

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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ), rather he just continued upon the customs of the Arabs, and he let his hair grow and when he entered Makkah 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) 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, (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ). 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.

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But as for his actions (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ), 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ), 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ), 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ), used to hate lizard meat and the Arabs used to find it pleasant. And when it was put on the table of the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) 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 Waleed (رضي الله عنه)⁸. And Khalid ibn Waleed (رضي الله عنه) 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 saw that his Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) is not reaching his hand towards the food; so he said, 'is this haraam'.

The Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ), 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ), 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ). Yes I say this is from the actions of the Prophet

⁸ (رضي الله عنه) (rad iyallaahu `anhu) May Allaah the Most High be pleased with him

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(صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ), but there is no proof that this is better. Rather the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ), announced as is found in Saheeh 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 cannot be said that he is opposing the Sunnah of the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) because the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) grew his hair his entire life; with the exception being during the Hajj and Umrah because he (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) used to shave his head during this time.

And you know the hadeeth that appears in Saheeh Bukhaaree and Muslim where the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) 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 in 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) grew his hair long then we say verily this is in opposition to the Sunnah of the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ).

And there is a detail that attention has to be given to, by the one who grows his hair long because the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) grew his hair long, so he believes that he is following the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) by growing his hair long. But I say with all frankness that he is opposing the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ).

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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ), **'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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) 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.

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Now the one who grows the hair on his head long, emulating his Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ), his example is like the example of the Mujaahid that went out with the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) as a Mujaahid, but his intention was opposed to the intention of the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ). (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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) in his intention.

He did not seek to get closer to Allaah by loving honey, and he did not seek to get closer to Allaah by hating lizard meat, and also he did not seek to get closer to Allaah 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ).

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 Qadyanee 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ). But their heart and their intention opposed the Messenger (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ). 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) 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 hadeeth is the righteous deeds are only by righteous intentions.

Therefore if we don't know that the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ), 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) did not seek to get closer to Allaah with; this is innovation in the religion.

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As you all know the hadeeths 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, (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ). And this is the nature of the innovator, because they bring actions that the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ), 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) 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 Albaanee (رَحِمَهُ اللهُ) continues. This point, it is incumbent that we separate between this and that; meaning our following the Messenger (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ), 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ).

He (the Prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ)) entered Makkah with four braids, what do you all call them; Braids? (Translator's note: Here the Shaykh uses the word رِئَافِض for braids.)

Those present respond: Braids (using the same word رِئَافِض) Shaykh Albaanee (رَحِمَهُ اللهُ): Braids (رِئَافِض), or braids (using the other word رِئَادِغ)

He (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) entered Makkah, opening Makkah the day Allaah helped him against the people of Makkah, 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 (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) with regards to this. Why, because it is a Sunnah of custom not a Sunnah of worship.

This categorisation is from the completeness of comprehension and understanding in the religion where many of those beginners in knowledge are ignorant about this, and they are not scholars, beginners in calling to knowledge and they are not scholars.