

### Obey the messenger

How do you anchor law so that its authority remains unquestioned for more than a millennium?

This was one of the main concerns of the scholars of Islam in the second through fourth centuries of the expanding Arab Empire. Soon stretching through military conquest from Spain to India, the empire needed law. The scholars did such a fine job of answering this need that shariah has served the Muslim community until today.

The earliest Muslim scholars related law to *sunna*—the practice of peoples and individuals of the past. But this was found inadequate as a source of authority, and was seen to produce too much confusing diversity. Then toward the end of the second Islamic century, a brilliant scholar named Shafi‘i solved this problem by narrowing the concept of *sunna* to the practice of the prophet of Islam. All law, he argued rigorously, must be based on the behaviour of that one person.

Shafi‘i justified his thesis by appealing to verses in the Qur’an which command the reader to “obey the messenger.” Indeed, 13 such imperatives appear in the Qur’an—in tandem with the command to obey Allah in all but one case.

As Joseph Schacht explained, Shafi‘i considered the rulings of the prophet to come from Allah in the same way as the commands of the Qur’an, “because Allah has made obedience to the Prophet obligatory.” Schacht demonstrated that though Shafi‘i’s theory appeared to balance Qur’an and *sunna* evenly, it actually made the *sunna* prevail over the Qur’an, because the Qur’an was to be interpreted in the light of the *sunna*.

A fascinating example of the interplay of Qur’an and *sunna* is the punishment for adultery in Islamic Law. Works of *fiqh* take for granted that the prophet of Islam commanded the stoning of adulterers. But a reader of the Qur’an searches in vain for such a commandment there (but see 24.2). This discrepancy led to some impressive ingenuity among the scholars of Islamic jurisprudence, but the upshot was that in this case *sunna* takes precedence.

The authority of the prophet of Islam is one of the most important things to understand about the faith and life of Muslims. For Muslims, their prophet is the Perfect

Person. He is seen as the one through whom Allah revealed his will. Muslims believe that their prophet was sinless. His *sunna*, therefore, provides the model for the behaviour of all humanity in all situations.

Once the authority of *sunna* was established, the works which recount the behaviour of the prophet of Islam assumed great importance. Works of *sira*, or biography of the prophet, date back to the second century of Islam and are available in English translation. Shafi'i focused on the discrete traditions of the sayings of the prophet which were passed down in a chain of oral transmission. These sayings, together with their chains, are called *hadith*. The third century of Islam saw the production of extensive *hadith* collections, of which six came to be regarded as authentic.

These *hadith*, in turn, supplied the raw material for the development of the specific rules detailed in works of *fiqh*.

The authority of the prophet of Islam helps to account for the tenacity with which Muslims cling to a law code developed more than a millennium ago. It should give pause to non-Muslims who impatiently urge Muslims to jettison shariah in the face of modern western sensibilities.

Perhaps the handiest indication of the basis of authority in Islamic law is the fact that most of the world's Muslims call themselves *Sunni*—that is, followers of the *sunna* of the prophet of Islam.