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Could the Kaaba Represent Tradition?

Martin Nguyen

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What I am ... is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present. I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition.¹

– Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*

The Kaaba, the simple—now black-draped—cubical building at the center of al-Masjid al-Ḥarām in Mecca, is a powerful object and symbol within the Muslim religious imagination. Consider for the moment, then, that the Kaaba or the bayt Allāh (“the house of God”) represents the Islamic tradition. Imagine that it is the tradition.

The Kaaba is a thing that belongs to both the human and the divine. It is at once the house of God, a site declared sacred in the Qur’an—“God has made the Kaaba, the Sacred House, a support for humankind” (Qur’an 5:97)² while also an edifice of stone built by human hands, which lives in human history alongside the passing lives of innumerable human beings. The stones that support the Kaaba today have been replaced and reworked many times during the course of countless generations. It has always been the construct of men. Indeed, it has undergone perpetual reconstruction by men. This is the Kaaba—bayt Allāh, the house of God—protected by our Creator but also maintained by His creation. Such is the nature of tradition.

What is tradition—and why envision the Kaaba to understand it? The first part of this question is not new. The concern for tradition is as old as history. After all, tradition is fundamentally historical in nature. It emerges in the space between the past and the present and is invoked frequently as a key concept for understanding the past, present, and future of communities of faith. For some, tradition represents a rich source of hope, if only it were properly observed, preserved, reformed, or revived. For others, tradition is archaic, outmoded, and possibly deleterious to society—or worse, to “progress”—and must accordingly be restrained, resisted, or abolished altogether. For yet others of a more analytical bent, tradition is a dynamic frame of reference, a mechanism for social adaptation, or an ongoing historical process.

Within Muslim contexts, especially in the wake of European colonialism and encroachment, tradition has acquired seemingly existential significance. The anxiety and confusion around tradition has persisted, if not grown, since then. Today’s Muslim discourses are replete with exhortations to the Islamic tradition, prophetic traditions, traditional learning, (neo-)traditionalism, and “the tradition” in general. These usages are not necessarily commensurate, and reference to tradition often becomes a shortcut to authenticity.³ While Muslims largely recognize the importance of tradition, they differ widely and sometimes divisively about its meaning and scope. With legitimacy and orthodoxy at stake, contention about tradition is to be expected.

Tradition as a Human Affair

The Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre asserts that a tradition—true to its Latin etymology (*traditum*, meaning “what is handed down”)—is inherited by new “bearers” with each successive generation. Those who live in the present participate in a tradition as much as those imagined to embody the past. It is not, however, only a matter of receiving tradition. Each bearer of tradition plays a role in discerning and perpetuating it. Tradition survives only as much as its human recipients desire to carry it forward. Change inevitably accompanies tradition’s path forward. For modern thinkers about tradition, human agency is inevitably at work in the formation, adaptation, and perpetuation of a tradition.

This is, for example, the underlying principle of Talal Asad’s notion of “discursive tradition,” arguably one of today’s most influential anthropological theories of tradition. Asad’s explanation is worth quoting at length:

A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. These discourses relate conceptually to a past (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a future (how the point of that practice can be best secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a present (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions)... it will be the practitioners’ conceptions of what is apt performance, and of how the past is related to present practices, that will be crucial for tradition, not the apparent repetition of an old form.⁴

Asad’s definition of tradition shifts the starting point for tradition away from ideas and onto practice—from orthodoxy to apt performance. Orthodoxy, of course, still matters, but it is not understood as a fixed or abiding “body of opinion.” Rather, Asad argues, orthodoxy is as “a relationship of power,” specifically “[w]herever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust correct practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace incorrect ones.”⁵ Traditions are the means through which orthodoxy is developed in that they entail a constant process of negotiation, reasoning, and resistance. To borrow Ebrahim Moosa’s language, tradition “prefigures orthodoxy.”⁶

From the perspective of theology, these theories of tradition share a common limitation. Each casts tradition fundamentally as a human affair. But anthropology tells only part of the story. Theology, of course, is concerned with humanity, but that concern always relates to God. In fact, theology is more properly described as a discipline concerned with talking about God (theos + -logos “an account of God”), or rather with God. Whatever understanding of tradition is adopted by theology, it must account for both God and man to maintain any lasting coherence.⁷

One way to do this is to understand tradition as a story, through what scholars call a narrative theology of tradition. For Muslims, the life of the Kaaba, the sacred structure that lies at the heart of the city of Mecca and to which Muslim prayer and pilgrimage is oriented, offers a faith-oriented reading of Islamic history that also sheds light on important elements of tradition.⁸

Reimagining Tradition

Both the Kaaba and tradition issue from a sacred source. Just as the Kaaba is indebted to the divine decree for its establishment, tradition likewise owes its genesis to God. Tradition would not exist were it not for God sending down revelation. In this way, tradition claims a sustaining heavenly connection. The

Kaaba, in addition, plays a central role in God's working within the world. It is where God has foreordained events of immense significance. To the Kaaba God has sent a procession of His prophets, and to it still God calls the attention of the faithful. The Kaaba has figured into many of the stories we've received about God's prophets and messengers, from Adam to Abraham and Ishmael to the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ. It remains a testament and sign of God's presence in the world as history continues to unfold according to His decree. The Kaaba pervades the consciousness of every believer because it is the ritual axis around which both prayer and pilgrimage revolve. In a resounding moment of divine intervention, God reveals to the nascent Muslim community that the sacred sanctuary is in fact the new qiblah, the direction to which prayer should rightly be oriented. "We have seen you turning your face to heaven, so We shall turn you to a direction of prayer that will please you. Turn your face in the direction of the sacred place of prostration" (Qur'an 2:144). From the moment of this revelation until the end of time, the Kaaba becomes the direction for all Muslim prayers. God returns the ritual attention of believers upon His house, making its place in Islam central. Is not tradition, the Islamic tradition, the same? Is its sacred source not also God? And is its role not central to life in this world and the attainment of a goodly hereafter?

Pressing further back into the past, the Kaaba's beginnings lie in illo tempore, in a time before time. As related copiously in Qur'anic commentaries, historical chronicles, and tales of the prophets, Adam and Eve reunite in the valley of Mecca after descending from Eden.⁹ Here, God commands Adam to honor the first sanctuary, the first iteration of the sacred house, as a site of remembrance and worship of God. Through Adam's labor the valley of Mecca is made into "an earthly substitute for the garden of Eden."¹⁰ The Kaaba and the holy sites associated with reflect the celestial realm, a now lost paradisiacal domain, while simultaneously existing as an accessible, physical reality in this world. The perpetual orientation of the faithful to the Kaaba in this life is merely an echo of their orientation to God in the realms of the hereafter. At one and the same time the sacred house is a place of both heaven and earth. Here is Islam's axis mundi, the spiritual center around which the world is arrayed.¹¹ Tradition, in like fashion, exerts a centripetal force upon believers as they abide in this passing world. It is an axis that orients and directs the faithful towards God.

Yet as much as the Kaaba is the house of God, revelation also describes it as a house of human making: "And when Abraham and Ishmael raised up the foundations of the house" (2:127), the Qur'an reminds. Anchored on the earth, the house of God is a thing of history subject to the attention and neglect of its human custodians. Though rebuilt by Abraham and Ishmael, its stones are still subject to the vicissitudes of time. Each generation must tend to the Kaaba lest it fall into ruin or disrepair. Likewise, the life of tradition depends upon the work of successive generations, each laboring to protect and shepherd it through the ravages of history.

The fortitude of the Kaaba's custodians ebbs and flows over time. As centuries passed, those who clung to Abraham's legacy and honored the Kaaba's original purpose gradually found themselves driven to the periphery. Polytheism displaced monotheism until the Kaaba became a sanctum for idols. Those who cleaved still to the worship of the one God, the few ḥunafā', retreated to the vicinity's surrounding mountains, the margins of Mecca itself. The Kaaba may abide, but its purpose does not. Only five years before the first Qur'anic revelation descended upon the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ, we arrive at the pinnacle of negligence. The house of God had faded to a mere shadow of what it had once been. Early Muslim chronicles record that the Kaaba stood as nothing more than a square of loose stones rising to

just above a man's height, plundered and left roofless by preceding generations.¹² Only at this abysmal low did the tribe of Quraysh resolve to remake it.

The uncertain periods between prophetic messages testify to how readily humans can stray and forget, even when living in the presence of God's house, as the Arabs did. Consider the dereliction of the Kaaba from the time of Adam to the time of Abraham and then from the time of Ishmael to the time of Muḥammad. In this way also, tradition resonates with the story of God's sacred house. Is not tradition likewise a trust passed down by our successive generations to be preserved and protected? But has not this trust been neglected at times by those who are supposedly its guardians? Are we not also struggling to maintain the integrity of the tradition as we understand it?

Nor does the saga of the Kaaba conclude with the end of prophecy. The history that stretches from the Prophet Muḥammad's passing to today chronicles numerous accounts of how humans and natural events have harmed the Kaaba. As in times past, the state of the Kaaba rises and falls with the human condition.

Half a century after the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ, the early Muslim community found itself divided by seemingly unceasing civil war. The Umayyads besieged Mecca and its recently restored sanctuary when 'Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr (d. 73/692), a companion of the Prophet ﷺ born in the early years of Muḥammad's time in Medina, decried the legitimacy of the Umayyad Caliph Yazīd b. Mu'āwiyah (r. 60—4/680—3). When forces loyal to the Umayyads marched against Ibn al-Zubayr, he took up arms and resisted, while fortifying himself in Mecca. It was under Ibn al-Zubayr's banner that the Kaaba suffered its first real wound in the post-prophetic era. The chronicles report, "They [the supporters of Ibn al-Zubayr] were causing fires to be lit around the Ka'bah. There was a spark which the wind blew; it set fire to the veil of the Ka'bah and burned the wood of the Sacred House on Saturday, 3 Rabī' al-Awwal" in the year 64/683.¹³ One witness attested:

I came to Mecca with my mother on the day the Ka'bah was burned. The fire had reached it, and I saw that it was without its silk veil. I saw that the Yemenī corner of the Ka'bah was black and had been cracked in three places. I asked, "What has happened to the Ka'bah?" They pointed to one of Ibn al-Zubayr's followers and said, "It has been burned because of this man. He put a firebrand on the tip of his spear; the wind made it fly off. It struck the veils of the Ka'bah between the Yemenī corner and the Black Stone."¹⁴

The house of God, although proclaimed by revelation to be a sanctuary for humankind, was made by men into the opposite. War fires and arms filled the Kaaba's vicinity, and the followers of Ibn al-Zubayr lapsed in their watchfulness and set God's house aflame. In the wake of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ, his divided community allowed the sacred house to smolder and burn.

Nonetheless, the Kaaba was restored, but the restoration was short-lived. Less than a decade later, 'Abd al-Mālik, the fifth Umayyad Caliph (r. 65—86/685—705), sent al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf (d. 95/714) to end Ibn al-Zubayr's resistance in Mecca. Tensions escalated again, and blood was shed on the plains of 'Arafa, the supposed place of Adam and Eve's earthly reunion and the site from which the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ delivered his final sermon and received the last revelation: "Today I have perfected your religion (dīn) for you, completed My blessing upon you, and chosen as your religion Islam" (Qur'an 5:3). For six months and seventeen nights, al-Ḥajjāj besieged the city of the house of God; engines made by men

hurled stones at the sacred mosque and its quarters, bombarding and shaking the walls of the Kaaba. One witness attested:

I saw the trebuchet (manjanīq) with which [stones] were being hurled. The sky was thundering and lightning, and the sound of the thunder and lightning rose above that of the stones, so that it masked it. The Syrians considered this ominous and withheld their hands. But al-Ḥajjāj... picked up the trebuchet stone and loaded it. "Shoot," he said; and he himself shot with them.¹⁵

Here is a testament to human hubris—to transgress rather than uphold what is proclaimed sacrosanct by God. How often has the tradition also been subject to similar hubris? As for the Kaaba, battered as it was, its fallen and cracked stones would eventually be set aright.

This legacy of human devastation and ruination of the Kaaba continues. In the early 4th/10th century the zealous Qarmaṭīs of al-Baḥrayn brought trauma to Mecca once more. Under the leadership of Abū Ṭāhir al-Jannābī (d. 332/943-4), the Qarmaṭīs assaulted and captured cities throughout Iraq. Before long their sights turned to the holy city of Mecca, and on their push southward, they attacked caravans and pilgrims along the way. They arrived at the city on the 7th of Dhū al-Ḥijjah, 317, one day before the Ḥajj pilgrimage was set to commence. The days that followed were filled with violence. For eight days, the Qarmaṭīs of Abū Ṭāhir plundered the city and massacred pilgrims. The blood of the pious soaked the ground of the ḥaram. In a final imperious act of defiance, the Qarmaṭīs tore the Black Stone from the Kaaba and carried it away.¹⁶ They carried away the stone sent down by God, the same blessed stone carried and cared for by prophets. What seemed inviolable was violated. But in 339/951, after twenty-two years of captivity, the Black Stone was returned, and the house of God was restored.

Even in recent times, the Kaaba weathered the storm of human history. On November 20, 1979, Juhaymān al-ʿUtaybī and his fervent followers captured the sanctuary of the Kaaba, taking thousands of the pious hostage.¹⁷ As in times past, only force and violence could repel the war and bloodshed that had entered the holy sanctuary. But even this trauma, still in living memory, was not beyond reversal. Repeatedly through the ages, and in accordance with the will of God, we find the community of the faithful toiling to restore and preserve the Kaaba after human actions harm it.

We should imagine the Kaaba and tradition as cut from the same cloth. God establishes and watches over both, but their temporal lives yield to the volatility of human care and neglect. Through them, we find a connection with divinity. And while they are human constructs, both exist as referents to God. How precarious does their existence seem when entrusted to human stewardship, yet how vital they are for sustaining prayers and faith, and how constant they have been as the community of faith struggles through the world!

Where Will Tradition Take Us?

Of course, the Kaaba and tradition are not true equivalents. But invoking the Kaaba allows us to discern with greater clarity how tradition is a thing both of God and of humanity, a reality that is lost in strictly academic definitions of tradition. It also allows us to imagine tradition as undergoing constant change in one sense while simultaneously remaining fixed in another.

Also, invoking the Kaaba's trials and tribulations sheds light on the emotional and religious investments that are folded into understandings of tradition. Much blood and ink have been spilled in the ever-present debate about the meaning of tradition. It embodies the diversity and vagaries of historic human

communities while representing the singular unity of God's promise and providence. The significance of tradition is often a matter of perspective. It is as God wills it, and it requires our concern and labor for its continuation because our lives in this world and the hereafter are intimately intertwined with it. The human aspect of tradition has been described by many scholars in various ways, but this description remains incomplete, especially for those operating through a framework of faith. Theologically, tradition is only properly conceived when the human and divine are held in tandem. God is with tradition as much as its human adherents are.

Today, many avenues exist for Muslim communities to pursue the pressing theological questions they face. Unsurprisingly, the doors of possibility opened by the imagination are manifold. Past generations found theological recourse in scholastic theology and in the rhetoric of eschatology. They found it in deep readings of the word of God. They found it in art, poetry, and sacred spaces. They found it in transformative experiences and pious pursuits of many varieties. By what routes of the imagination can theologies be crafted that respond most faithfully and effectively to the religious expectations, lived realities, and salvific aspirations of communities of faith today? Or phrased differently, where will our traditions take us and where will we take our traditions?

End Notes

- 1 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 221.
- 2 All Qur'an translations are my own. *The Study Quran* and Abdel Haleem's translation were regularly consulted.
- 3 As South African scholar and Muslim ethicist Ebrahim Moosa elaborates, "tradition is often confused and conflated with essentialist notions of 'authenticity' stemming from the politics of representation and identity." See Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazālī & the Poetics of the Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 58–61, 60.
- 4 Italics in original. Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986), 14–15.
- 5 Italics in original. Asad, *Anthropology of Islam*, 15.
- 6 Moosa, *Ghazālī*, 53.
- 7 I would argue that Shahab Ahmed, in his attempt to articulate a capacious yet analytically sound understanding of Islam as a conceptual category is moving along a similar trajectory, though I doubt he would classify his work as strictly theological. In his discussion of hermeneutical engagement with revelation, he lays out the operative relationship of "Pre-Text," "Text," and "Con-Text," in which he explains, "Text and Pre-Text are semantically embedded in Con-Text; Con-Text constantly informs (informs) Text and Pre-Text. Quite simply, *a Muslim lives in Con-Text: s/he lives in the complex of meanings that is the elaborated product of previous hermeneutical engagements with Revelation.*" Shortly thereafter, in a footnote, Ahmed acknowledges the apparent similarities between his Con-Text and tradition: "A reader might here think that what I mean by Con-Text corresponds to the idea of 'tradition,' whether in the famous sense put forward by Hans-Georg Gadamer... or as in Wilfred Cantwell Smith's 'cumulative tradition....' The concept of 'tradition' does not, however, express the fundamental thrust and pivot of the concept of Con-Text—which is that *Con-Text is part-and-parcel of the Revelatory matrix of Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text.*" In sum, his notion of Con-Text, the idea that is most like tradition, is one that has some integral accord with the revelation. Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 358–359, 131n.
- 8 Alternatively, my treatment of tradition can be understood as a kind of *figurative theology* in that I am using the Kaaba as a figuration or allegorical representation for tradition itself.
- 9 Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-umam wa al-mulūk: Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī*, ed. Abū Ṣuhayb al-Karamī (Amman: Bayt al-Afkār wa al-Dawliyyah, n.d.), 45; Franz Rosenthal, trans., al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume I: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 291–292; Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Sa'd al-Zuhri, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-kabīr*, ed. 'Alī Muḥammad 'Umar, (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 2001), 1:23; Abū Ishāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Tha'labī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā' al-musammā 'arā'is al-majālis*, ed. 'Abd al-Laṭīf Ḥasan 'Abd al-Raḥmān (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2009), 34–35; al-Tha'labī, *'Arā'is al-majālis fī qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* [Lives of the Prophets], trans. William M. Brinner (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 60.
- 10 Brannon Wheeler, *Mecca and Eden: Ritual, Relics, and Territory in Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 64.
- 11 The Muslim historian al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) relates a mythic narrative to this effect in his immense historical chronicle: "It has been said that God created the Ancient House (the Ka'bah) upon the water on four pillars. He did this two thousand years before He created this world, and the earth was then spread out underneath it." al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 23; Rosenthal, 216–217.
- 12 Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. Alfred Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 84; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 305; W. Montgomery Watt and M.V. McDonald, trans., al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume 6: Muḥammad at Mecca* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 51.

- 13 al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1030; I.K.A. Howard, trans. al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume 19: The Caliphate of Yazīd b. Mu‘āwiyah* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 224.
- 14 al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1030; I.K.A. Howard, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 225.
- 15 al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1142; Michael Fishbein, trans., al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume 21: The Victory of the Marwānids* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 225.
- 16 M.J. De Goeje, *Mémoire sur les Carmathes du Bahraïn et les Fatimides* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1886), 104—111; al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-islām*, ed. ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Salām Tadmūrī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1990-2000), 23:380–83.
- 17 Yasir Qadhi, “Mecca Under Siege: The Juhayman Crisis of 1979,” (presentation, Fifth International Conference on Islamic Legal Studies: Lawful and Unlawful Violence in Islamic Law and History, Harvard Law School, September 10, 2006; Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Apocalypse in Islam*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 74—78; Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca: The 1979 Uprising at Islam’s Holiest Shrine* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).