

# Understanding the Four Madhhabs.

## What is a Madhhab?

‘Madhhab’ is taken from the Arabic to mean ‘to go’. Specifically it means time or place of going.

In Islamic terminology, it refers to where the Imām has ‘gone’ in terms of his opinion over a Sharī’a matter. A Madhhab is the term used to represent the entire school of thought of a particular Imām, such as Imām Abū Hanīfa (150/767), Imām Mālik (d. 179/795), Imām al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/819) and Imām Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 222/847) (may Allāh be pleased with him). These four scholars were exemplary scholars and we describe them as being Mujtahids (explained below). They operated and based their judgements within the context of the Qur’ān and Sunna.

## Who is a Mujtahid?

These four Imāms are described as being Mujtahids, which means to be able to perform Ijtihād. In Usūl Fiqh terminology, Allāma Shoukānī explains that the following qualities must be found in a Mujtahid:

‘He should be learned of the Qur’ānic and Prophetic texts. If he only knows one, then he is not a Mujtahid, and he is not permitted to perform Ijtihād. He should be aware of the issues surrounding the Consensus so that he does not decree contrary to the general consensus. He should be skilled in the Arabic language so that he can identify the difficult texts in the Qur’ān and Sunna. He should be versed with the abrogated and the abrogating.’

Being a Mujtahid is totally different to being an outstanding scholar. For instance, Imām Ahmad ibn Hanbal’s student Muhammad ibn Ubayd Allāh ibn al-Munādī asked the Imām about how many Ahādīth a Muslim should know in order to be classified as a Faqīh. He replied that at least 400,000.

## What areas is Ijtihād done in?

The rulings from the Qur’ān and Sunna can be divided into three types.

### 1. The basic tenets of Islam.

The *Aqā'id* of Islam are explicitly clear, and can be understood by anyone. Examples are the belief in Allāh, the angels and the Last Day.

### 2. The ethical rulings of Islam.

This refers to matters such as performing good, forbidding evil and cooperation with others.

### 3. The Fiqh rulings related to Sharī’a.

This relates to the worships of Islam, Islamic practices and dealing with others (trade and so on). It is matters of Sharī'a which need the help of the Mujtahid.

## How does the system work?

Owing to our insufficient knowledge in matters of Sharī'a, we do the *Taqīd* of one of the main schools of thought. *Taqīd* basically means to follow one of the great Imāms and a person who does so is called a *Muqallid*. We rely upon the judgements and decisions of the Imāms and normally do not make enquiries in this respect. Moreover, we consider such judgements as incumbent upon us to follow.

Not everyone is required to do the *Taqīd* of one of the great Imāms. A Mujtahid himself is required to pursue and act upon his own judgements; he cannot follow others.

## Why cannot we do Ijtihād ourselves?

- Because of the sheer number of Qur'ān and Hadīth texts involved. It would take us a lifetime of education to reach the level of Ijtihād.
- This in turn, would make life impossible for us. We would spend all our times surrounded by books rather than living our lives. This is the precise reason why Allāh, in the Qur'ān, did not order *all* Muslims to fight:

‘Not all of the believers should go to fight. Of every section of them, why does not one party along go forth, so that the rest may gain knowledge of the religion and admonish the people when they return.’ (9: 122).

This verse indicates that if everyone went to war, there would be no people of knowledge left to teach the people. If everyone studies knowledge, then there would be no one to wage the war against the non-Muslims. In short, Islam promotes the idea of the division of labour.

- Because of the complexity of the Arabic language. We may have knowledge of the Qur'ān (through English translations), but not an understanding (which is what Fiqh means).

## Proof for Taqīd of the Mujtahid Imāms.

### a. The Qur'ān.

- The Qur'ān says:

‘O Believers! Obey Allāh and obey the Messenger and those in authority amongst you’ (4: 59)

This verse indicates that following people of authority is encouraged in Islam. Note that the verse asks us to ‘obey Allāh’ and ‘obey the Messenger’ though the word ‘obey’ is not repeated for ‘those people in authority.’ The reason for this is that we only follow the men of authority when it complies with Allāh and His Messenger. And all the great Imāms operated and based their judgements within the context of Allāh’s and His Messenger’s teachings.

- Allāh says:

‘Ask the people of remembrance, if you know not.’ (16:43).

The verse accepts that all Muslims cannot reach a level of deep of understanding of our religion. When we cannot, then we must ask the people of knowledge.

- The Qur’ān states:

‘If they had referred it to the Messenger and to those of authority among them, then those of them ‘whose task it is to find out’ would have known the matter’ (4: 83).’

This verse is telling us that when we are unaware of a religious matter, then we should refer it to the learned ones, whose task it is to find out.

- Allāh says:

‘Allāh does not burden a person more than his ability’ (2: 286).

Asking each and every Muslim to perform Ijtihād on all aspects of religion – Salāh, Zakāh, Hajj, Nikāh, trade and so on – is burdening a person more than he can bear. Lightening this burden is done by allowing us to do the *Taqīd* of the great Imāms.

### **b. The Sunna.**

- The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said:

‘What is good in the view of the Muslims is good in the view of Allāh.’  
(*Baihaqī*)

From the early ages, Muslims have accepted the system of Madhhabs and have appreciated its worth. Therefore, this is also good in the sights of Allāh.

- The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said:

‘Follow the mainstream (of the Muslim community); for he who is separate will be separated in hell’ (*Ibn Māja*).

### **c. Common Sense.**

In our daily lives, we leave matters that are beyond our ability to the experts. When we need a heart operation, we do not perform it ourselves but we go to the heart

surgeons. When our car needs fixing, we go to the mechanic. Why should we act any different when it comes to our religious lives?

### **The benefits of the system & its acceptance.**

- It has kept the Umma united. If everyone had their own way of performing Salāh – based on their limited understanding of the Qur’ān and Hadīth – then the mosques would be in turmoil.
- All of the great scholars of the past were followers (Muqallids) of one of the great Imāms. This includes those scholars who were outstanding men of intellect themselves. Examples are Imām al-Bukhārī (194-256 A.H), Imām Abū Dāwud (202-275), Shaykh Abd al-Qādir Jilānī (470-561) and Imām al-Ghazālī (450-505).

### **Objections.**

#### ***a. If Taqlīd was necessary, then why didn’t any of the Companions practice it?***

The Companions had no need for *Taqlīd* because they took their knowledge and blessings directly from the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him). After the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him), they consulted the learned Companions from amongst themselves, such as Alī, Umar, Zayd ibn Thābit, Ubayy ibn Ka’b, Abū Mūsā al-Ash’arī and Ibn Mas’ūd (may Allāh be pleased with them).

#### ***b. Why are you following these Imāms? You should be following the Qur’ān and Sunna, not these Imāms?***

These Imāms never worked outside the context of the Qur’ān and Sunna. So following these Imāms is following the Qur’ān and Sunna. Sheikh Nuh Ha Mim Keller said:

‘Muslims have realised that to follow a Madhhab means to follow a super scholar who not only had a comprehensive knowledge of the Qur’ān and Hadith texts relating to each issue he gave judgements on, but also lived in an age a millennium closer to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) and his Companions, when Taqwa (or god-fearingness) was the norm – both of which conditions are in striking contrast to the scholarship available today.’

#### ***c. The Qur’ān and Hadith are perfect and infallible. The Imāms can make mistakes.***

Certainly, the Qur’ān and Hadīth are perfect but our understanding of it is not, because we can make mistakes. By depending on the Mujtahid, we are engaging in ‘damage limitation.’ We are more prone to mistakes than these brilliant, early scholars who were marked by unparalleled piety and intellect.

When we depend on a Mujtahid, then nor is the Mujtahid or we accountable for it on the Day of Judgement. This is because the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said:

‘When a judge gives judgement and strives to know a ruling (Ijtihād) and is correct, he has two rewards. If he gives judgement and strives to know a ruling but is wrong, he has one reward’ (*Sahīh al-Bukhārī*).

But if we decree without sufficient knowledge, then we will be accountable for it. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said:

‘Judges are three; two of them are in hell, and one in paradise. A man who knows the truth and judges accordingly, he shall go to paradise. A man who judges for people while ignorant, he shall go to hell. And a man who knows the truth but rules unjustly, he shall go to hell’ (*Sunan Abu Dāwūd*).

***d. Life today is much more complex than it was a thousand years ago. The four Madhhabs are out-dated.***

This points to *our* shortcomings not the systems. It is because we haven’t studied the Qur’ān and Sunna in full. This objection is not something new; when Muslims have gone through difficult periods, they have sometimes blamed the system. Also, one should remember the flexibility in the system.

***e. The fact that we require Madhhabs indicates that the Ahādīth were not reliable. They seem to contradict one another. There are some reports that say the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) raised his hands in Prayers and others that say he did not. This suggests that the Ahādīth material is unreliable.***

Certainly, there are some Ahādīth which seemingly contradict one another. But one cannot assume that this is simply because they were forged or were unreliable. Al-Siba’i writes that there are several reasons why Ahādīth sometimes seemingly contradict one another:

- a. Because the Prophet performed an act twice, in two different circumstances. One Companion reported one occurrence whereas the second Companion reported the other. An example of that is the dispute whether the minor ablution breaks when a person touches the genitals.
- b. Because the Prophet performed an act twice differently to show its permissibility. An example of this is where the Prophet performed the evening *Witr* prayer. Some Companions reported the number of units of this prayer to amount to three, whereas others reported seven, nine and eleven. The Prophet read all of these numbers to show its permissibility.
- c. Because one report is acting as an abrogation of the other. For example, there are some reports in which the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) forbade the visiting the graves and others where he encouraged. The latter report abrogates the former.
- d. Because the Companions were reporting an act from the Prophet which they could not know the full extent of. For example, there is a difference of opinion regarding the exact type of Hajj the Prophet performed before his demise; was it Tamattu, Mufrad

or Qirān. Al-Sibā'ī believes that because this ritual related largely on one's *Niyya* (intention), no one could know for sure which type of Hajj it was.

**f. How can it be that all four Madhhabs are correct (Haqq)? Imām al-Shāfi'i is of the opinion that laughing loudly in Salāh does not break the ablution (but does break the Salāh) whereas Imām Abū Hanīfa states that it breaks the Salāh and ablution. How can both opinions be correct?**

What it means that all the four Madhhabs are correct (Haqq) is that Allāh will not hold us responsible for it on the Day of Judgement. This is because the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said:

‘When a judge gives judgement and strives to know a ruling (Ijtihād) and is correct, he has two rewards. If he gives judgement and strives to know a ruling but is wrong, he has one reward’ (*Sahīh al-Bukhārī*).

A battle took place between Alī and Mu'āwiya (may Allāh be pleased with him). Both were upon the *Haqq*. Even if a Mujtahid makes a mistake, he is still rewarded by Allāh. The Holy Qur'ān talks about the error in judgement of Dāwūd (peace be upon him) and the correct verdict of Sulaymān (peace be upon him). Allāh did not rebuke any of them and instead said in the Qur'ān:

كَلَّا اتَيْنَا حَكْمًا وَ عِلْمًا

‘We gave both wisdom and knowledge’ (21:79)

Today, if a man takes the law into his own hands, then he will be held accountable for it and may be punished as a result. However, if he accepts the decision of a judge, then he will not be a law-breaker but a law-abider.

## **Concluding remarks.**

Allāh says in the Qur'ān:

‘As for what benefits the people, it remains in the earth.’ (13:17)

The very fact that the system of Madhhab has stayed with us for such a long period of time is the biggest proof that it is useful and beneficial to people.

Understanding why someone would object to the system of Madhhabs is beyond our comprehension. These Muslims who say we should not do the Taqlīd of the great Imāms are full of contradictions. They say that we ourselves should look at the Ahādīth to derive judgements and we shouldn't have to depend on Imām Abū Hanīfa. But by just merely opening *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, they are engaging in Taqlīd themselves. This is because they have now accepted what Imām al-Bukhārī has decreed as being a Sound Hadīth (Sahīh) and what he has decreed as being a Weak Hadīth (by not including it).

Moreover, when Salāh is performed in Jama'a, then the followers (Muqtadī) behind the Imām are in essence doing his *Taqīd*. They follow him when he is correct and when he is wrong too.

Also, these same Muslims quote the likes of Sheikh Bin Bāz, Albānī and Ibn Taymiyya as their authorities. Isn't this *Taqīd*?

It seems there is an underlying issue at stake. These Muslims are not against the four Imāms *per se*. Rather, it is the same Muslims who talk about 'having a direct line to Allāh with no intermediaries'. They are the same Muslims who say:

- that the Imām should not do Du'ā after Salāh loudly; rather every person should do it himself. They say the Imām is interfering between the Muslim and Allāh.
- that seeking the Wasīla of the Prophet is forbidden. They argue that this is Shirk and that it is an interference between Allāh and His servant.

It is the same principle which governs their position regarding the four Madhhabs. They talk about direct communication with Allāh, and depending on the four Imāms seems to conflict with that.

What they do not realise is that Allāh has designed the system as such. Otherwise:

- There would be no need to send Messengers. Instead, Allāh would have given revelation directly to each and every human.
- Allāh would not have sent the Burāq. Instead, the Prophet would have been transported directly to the heavens.
- Allāh would not have created the 'angel of death.' After all, it is He who takes the soul, not the angel of death.

### **Further Reading.**

*What is a Madhhab? Why is it necessary to follow one?*

Nuh Ha Mim Keller

[www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/nuh/madhhab.htm](http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/nuh/madhhab.htm)

*Why Muslims follow Madhhabs?*

Nuh Ha Mim Keller

[www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/nuh/madhhabstlk.htm](http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/nuh/madhhabstlk.htm)

*Understanding the Four Madhhabs; the problem with anti-madhhabism.*

Abdal Hakim Murad.

<http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/newmadhh.htm>

*Taqīd: trusting a Muqallid*

Tahir Mahmood Kiani

<http://www.marifah.net/jurisprudence--fiqh/articles/fiqh/taqlid-trusting-a-mujtahid.html>