



Divine traditions and the governance of the city-state of Medina



Authors:

Ishraq Ali^{1,2} 
 Mohammad E. Abdollahi³ 

Affiliations:

¹Institute of Philosophy,
 School of Humanities and
 Foreign Languages, China
 Jiliang University,
 Hangzhou, China

²Department of Islamic
 Philosophy and Kalam,
 University of Religions and
 Denominations, Qom, Iran

³Faculty of Governance,
 University of Tehran,
 Tehran, Iran

Corresponding author:

Ishraq Ali,
 ishraq.ali@cjl.u.edu.cn

Dates:

Received: 27 July 2024
 Accepted: 24 Sept. 2024
 Published: 25 Oct. 2024

How to cite this article:

Ali, I. & Abdollahi, M.E., 2024,
 'Divine traditions and the
 governance of the city-state
 of Medina', *HTS Theologiese
 Studies/Theological Studies*
 80(3), a10094. [https://doi.
 org/10.4102/hts.v80i3.10094](https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i3.10094)

Copyright:

© 2024. The Authors.
 Licensee: AOSIS. This work
 is licensed under the
 Creative Commons
 Attribution License.

Read online:



Scan this QR
 code with your
 smart phone or
 mobile device
 to read online.

Divine revelations in Islam are not restricted to the spiritual well-being of its followers but aim to guide them towards the realisation of a socio-political organisation, a polity, wherein they can achieve spiritual as well as socio-political excellence. Because of the immense significance of socio-political organisation in Islam, the governance of socio-political organisation is one of the key topics in Islam. The principles of the governance of socio-political organisation in Islam are based on certain divine traditions. This article focusses on five major Islamic divine traditions outlined in Islamic revelatory culture: firstly, the divine tradition of guidance and misguidance; secondly, the divine tradition of *Ni'mat* [Blessings] and their reversal; thirdly, the divine tradition of the triumph of *Haqq'* [Truth] over *Bâtil* [Falsehood]; fourthly, the divine tradition of the destruction of the oppressors and fifthly, the divine tradition of trial. This article attempts to show that these five Islamic divine traditions form the foundation for the structure and function of the governance system of the first Muslim polity, the city-state of Medina.

Contribution: This article highlights the role of Islamic divine traditions in the structure and function of the governance system of the first Muslim polity, the city-state of Medina.

Keywords: divine traditions; governance; city-state of Medina; revelatory culture; Islam; polity.

Introduction

One of the most crucial aspects in which Islam resembles Judaism but differs from Christianity is that it, unlike Christianity and like Judaism, was shaped in a lawless desert. In the absence of any pre-existing law, divine revelations became the only and exclusive source of law for Muslims (Ali & Qin 2019:908; Melamed 2003:3). That is why, in Islam, divine revelations regulate not only the spiritual but also the social and political matters of its followers. Divine revelations in Islam do not restrict itself to the spiritual well-being of its followers but aim to guide them towards the realisation of a socio-political organisation, a polity, wherein they can achieve spiritual as well as socio-political excellence. This is obvious from the fact that the prophet of Islam, Muhammad, was the spiritual as well as the political leader of the Muslims who, in addition to providing spiritual guidance to his followers, ultimately established the first Muslim polity, the city-state of Medina and became its first ruler. Because of the immense significance of socio-political organisation in Islam, the governance of socio-political organisation is one of the key topics in Islam. The principles of the governance of socio-political organisation in Islam are based on certain divine traditions presented in the Quran. This article intends to explore and analyse the role of these divine traditions in shaping the structure and function of the governance system of the first Muslim polity, the city-state of Medina.

Tradition refers to a way, method, behaviour or practice that continues over time and is handed down from one generation to the other (Shils 1981:12). Divine traditions are the ways and methods by which the divine agency, God, manages the affairs of humanity and the universe. The present article intends to focus on five major Islamic divine traditions outlined in Islamic revelatory culture: firstly, the divine tradition of guidance and misguidance; secondly, the divine tradition of *Ni'maat* [Blessings] and their reversal; thirdly, the divine tradition of the triumph of *Haqq'* [Truth] over *Bâtil* [Falsehood]; fourthly, the divine tradition of the destruction of the oppressors and fifthly, the divine tradition of trial. This article attempts to show that these five Islamic divine traditions form the foundation for the structure and functioning of the Islamic system of governance in general and of the governance system of the first Muslim polity, the city-state of Medina, in particular. Before we explore these Islamic divine traditions and their role in governance, it is essential to understand the importance of Islamic divine traditions.

Note: Hangzhou City University, Section: Cross-cultural Religious Studies, sub-edited by Chen Yuehua and Ishraq Ali (Hangzhou City University, China).

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. After the Introduction, the first section of this article will highlight the significance of understanding divine traditions. The second section will explore the five Islamic divine traditions pertaining to governance in the Quran and provide explanations for each. The third section will discuss how these Islamic divine traditions influenced the governance system of the city-state of Medina, promoting good governance and socio-political excellence. Finally, the fourth section will conclude that the divine traditions outlined in Islamic revelatory culture offer not only a moral and ethical framework but also a comprehensive governance system, significantly shaping the structure and function of the first Muslim polity.

The significance of divine traditions

From the perspective of Islamic revelatory culture, divine traditions are among the original bases of futurology (Islam 2019). These traditions, with their impact on the past, present and future, are influential in all periods. Islamic revelatory culture views them as the never-ending laws of the universe, that is, fixed events that not only happened in the past but will definitely occur under specific conditions in the present and future. When the world follows its natural and ordinary course, these laws do not change. The notion of the repeatability and invariability of divine traditions is supported by the text of the Quran. According to verse 62 of chapter 33 of the Quran, 'this has been Allah's way with those who have gone before, and you shall find no change in Allah's way'. Similarly, verse 43 of chapter 35 of the Quran states that 'you shall not find any change in the way of Allah; and you shall not find anything that can ever alter the way of Allah'. The repeatability and invariability of divine traditions make them a great source of learning. Because divine traditions are not restricted to a specific society or a certain time but are universal among all nations and societies throughout all times to the extent that they have taken the title of 'law', knowing the laws and historical traditions will give futurologists the opportunity to recognise the future course of societies by studying and discovering these traditions and to plan and strategise for reaching desirable futures for societies. Quran (12:111, 79:26) advises us to learn from the experiences of other societies that existed before us. By studying and examining historical events mentioned in the revealed text, we can discover the traditions that have been demonstrated in them. These traditions can provide us with useful models and guidance in various fields, including politics, society, governance, ethics, education and more.

Despite all their certainty, divine traditions do not conflict with human freedom and choice (Wright 1977). Divine traditions highlight the choices and the outcomes of the choices made by previous societies in a given situation. They put forward the patterns of failure as well as success, and allow humans to analyse them and interpret them according to their specific situations. No tradition or rule can predict infinite changes. Because humans continuously evolve, the conditions of the world and society keep changing. Although

the traditions and experiences of predecessors can be considered in our decision-making, we must still consider that our decisions and actions may be influenced by new conditions and factors in the future that we do not think of at the moment of decision-making. Therefore, the ability to predict the future with certainty is not in our hands, and in our decision-making, we must still act considering new conditions and changes in society and the world. Consequently, considering current conditions and the course of development along with the historical traditions helps us to act wisely in our decision-making. The influence of human will on the nature and quality of social and historical phenomena is what makes certain predictions of the future impossible. In other words, wherever the free will of humans and their discretionary interference in themselves or another phenomenon comes into play, certain predictions will not be possible (Sadr 2022).

An overview of divine traditions pertaining to governance

There are five major Islamic divine traditions that are relevant to the issue of governance.

The tradition of guidance and misguidance

One of the most significant Islamic divine traditions pertaining to governance is the tradition of guidance and misguidance. According to this tradition, 'divine guidance is the true guidance' (Quran 2:120). This true guidance is given to every nation through God's messengers (Quran 16:36). Some people accept the divine guidance, whereas others deny it and are misguided. The law or tradition of God regarding guidance is to create goodness and comfort in their lives (McCabe 2005). According to the divine law, the guided do not fear what the future holds, and they are not saddened by what has been lost in the past (Quran 2:38). The pursuance of virtuous deeds becomes easy for them. Those virtuous deeds lead them to happiness in both this world and the hereafter. On the other hand, the tradition of God regarding the misguided is to subject them to a difficult and unpleasant life (Adams 2000). In verse 124 of chapter 20, the Quran states that whoever turns away from God's remembrance, indeed, he will have a depressed life. The reason for the hardships in the lives of the misguided is their excessive greed for worldly wealth. They push themselves to the brink of destruction in pursuit of material gains, constantly fearing its loss, leading to a lack of peace.

The tradition of *Ni'maat* [Blessings] and their reversal

Ni'mat or blessing is something through which humans prosper, benefit and achieve happiness and well-being in life. The term '*Ni'mat*' [Blessing] has a broad meaning in both material and spiritual contexts. In material terms, it can refer to wealth or other material things, whereas in spiritual terms, it can signify guidance, freedom, peace and security (White 2000). Quran (8:53) states that God does not reverse the

blessings He has bestowed upon the people unless they change themselves. The reversal of blessings is not desired by God unless the people alter their own qualities and conditions. In other words, if people maintain virtuous qualities and good deeds, God's blessings will remain stable. Conversely, if they deviate from these virtues, God may withdraw His blessings, turning the rich into poor, the honoured into humiliated and the strong into weak. According to this divine tradition, the biggest reason for the reversal of divine blessings is the ingratitude for these blessings. Quran (16:112) gives an example of a city that was safe and at ease, receiving provisions abundantly from every place. However, because of their ingratitude for divine blessings, they were enveloped by hunger and fear. Similarly, verse 58 of chapter 28 of the Quran states that 'many cities and settlements that had become intoxicated and arrogant because of the abundance of blessings, We destroyed! These are their (now ruined) homes, and after them, only a few people inhabited them'. In light of this divine tradition, any nation that is ungrateful for the divine blessings, like those of the past, will face divine punishment.

The tradition of the triumph of *Haqq'* [Truth] over *Bāṭil* [Falsehood]

Haqq' [Truth] refers to anything that is proven and true, and whose fulfilment is obligatory (whether it be a belief, statement or action). *Bāṭil* [Falsehood], on the other hand, refers to anything that lacks stability and credibility and should be abandoned. Therefore, *Haqq'* includes duties and *Bāṭil* includes prohibitions. The Triumph of *Haqq'* [Truth] over *Bāṭil* [Falsehood] means the dominance of truth over falsehood, and the elimination of falsehood when necessary (Wallis 2005). This divine tradition is highlighted in numerous verses of the Quran. For example, verse 24 of chapter 42 of the Quran states that 'He [God] eradicates falsehood and establishes the truth by His command because He is aware of what is in the hearts'. Similarly, according to verse 18 of chapter 21 of the Quran, 'rather, we cast the truth upon falsehood, crushing it, and thus falsehood is obliterated'. The people who believe in and follow truth and are righteous, the Quran (24:55) states, will surely be granted succession to authority upon the earth just as God granted it to those before them.

The tradition of the destruction of the oppressors

Another significant divine tradition mentioned in the Quran is related to the destruction of wrongdoers who commit injustice, tyranny and oppression. Quran (6:45) states that the 'wrongdoers are uprooted'. Similarly, according to verse 13 of chapter 10 of the Quran, 'We surely destroyed other peoples before you when they did wrong, and their messengers came to them with clear proofs but they would not believe! This is how We reward the wicked people'. In their explanation of verse 117 of chapter 11 of the Quran, Tabatabai (2023:72) and Tabarsi (1999:172) argue that the divine tradition of God is not such that He would unjustly destroy cities and settlements while their inhabitants adhere

to righteousness are committed to virtues, and strive to improve themselves and others. God does not eliminate disbelievers solely because of their disbelief; rather, He annihilates them because of their oppression and injustice. Thus, tyranny, injustice and oppression lead to downfall, regardless of the faith professed by the rulers or the ruled.

The tradition of trial

In the Quran, there are two words that are significant for understanding the divine tradition of trial: *فِتْنَةٌ* [*Fitnah*] and *بَلَاءٌ* [*Bala'*]. The origin of the word *فِتْنَةٌ* [*Fitnah*] is derived from the process of melting silver and gold with fire to distinguish between good and bad. The term *بَلَاءٌ* [*Bala'*] means to test someone in both goodness and adversity. Therefore, it can be said that *فِتْنَةٌ* [*Fitnah*] and *بَلَاءٌ* [*Bala'*] refer to the trial and testing of humans with difficulty and ease (Ibn Manzur 2000:90). The divine tradition of trial and testing has been ongoing in such a way that God examines people with adversities and hardships, such as illness, poverty, difficulties and other challenges, as well as with blessings, such as wealth, comfort, prosperity, health and freedom. The purpose of testing with both blessings and adversity is to determine who is grateful in the face of divine blessings and who remains patient in the face of difficulties and adversities. The tradition of testing has both social and individual dimensions, and it applies to both individuals and communities or nations. In the Quran (8:28, 63:9), wealth and offspring are described as a form of trial. Wealth and offspring are used as tests to see whether these blessings lead people towards gratitude and righteousness or these become a source of distraction and disobedience. Verses 94 and 85 of chapter 7 of the Quran explain the process by which people are tried and tested with blessings and adversities. The people are first tested with distress and hardships. It is hoped that the distress and hardships will make them humble and that they will turn towards God. However, when the trial by adversities does not bring about the desired effect, their adversity is replaced with prosperity. If the prosperity also fails to bring about the desired effect and they become excessive and boastful, they are punished. In the process of the divine tradition of trial, adversities and blessings are used as tools to reveal and ascertain the true nature of people.

Divine traditions and the governance of the first Muslim polity

As we mentioned earlier, Islam unites political and spiritual authority in one person. That is why, Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, established the first Muslim polity, the city-state of Medina, and became its first ruler. The divine traditions mentioned in the 'An overview of divine traditions pertaining to governance' section are significant for ascertaining the principles of governance in general and the principles of the governance of the first Muslim polity in particular. These principles are related not only to the ruler and his relation with the ruled but also to the mutual

relationship and interaction among the ruled. From the divine tradition of guidance and misguidance, it is clear that divine guidance is the key to a good and happy life. People come to know the virtuous actions, which are conducive to a good and happy life through divine guidance. However, divine guidance is not given to everyone directly. God gives divine guidance to people through His chosen messengers. Therefore, from the perspective of Islam, the first and most important condition for the ruler of a community, which seeks good governance is that he should be capable of receiving divine guidance in the form of divine revelations. Because of divine guidance, the ruler knows the actual goal of the socio-political association and the ways and actions that lead towards good governance and the achievement of that goal. After receiving the divine guidance, the ruler must transfer this divine guidance to the people. This means that he, in addition to his capacity to receive divine guidance, must possess the skills that are necessary for the dissemination of the instructions, which are provided to him through divine guidance. Firstly, he must possess a sharp memory so that he does not forget any divine instruction. Secondly, he should be eloquent so that he can convey divine instructions to people in the most persuasive way. From the perspective of Islam and the first Muslim polity, all these basic conditions for a ruler were present in the first ruler of the first Muslim polity. He was a chosen messenger and prophet who received divine guidance through revelations. Also, he was well-equipped to transfer divine guidance to the people in the most persuasive way.

It is immensely significant for good governance that the people follow the divine guidance completely and unconditionally after they receive it through the ruler. The eloquence of the ruler will, no doubt, play a role in persuading the people to follow the divine guidance that he provides to them. However, as Ali (2023) has discussed, for a complete and unconditional submission to the commands of the ruler, it is necessary that 'the people are convinced that their ruler is legitimate and infallible'. The people will be convinced of the legitimacy and infallibility of the ruler when they are convinced that the commands of the ruler are, in fact, the divine commands, which are provided to him through divine revelations. Thus, in the Islamic governance system, the authority of the ruler as ruler depends on his ability to receive divine guidance through divine revelations. People believe in the legitimacy of the ruler because they perceive him as chosen by God, receiving divine guidance through revelations. They also believe in his infallibility, viewing his words and actions as guided by God, who is inherently infallible. They trust in his understanding of happiness and the path to it, seeing this knowledge as bestowed upon him by God through revelations. Consequently, they wholeheartedly follow his aims, intentions and commands, considering them to be directly from God and thus submit to them without question or condition.

Muslims view the city-state of Medina under the rule of Muhammad as the perfect example of good governance.

They believe that Muhammad governed the city-state of Medina in light of the divine guidance he received in the form of revelations. However, it is one of the most fundamental tenets of Islam that Muhammad was the last and final messenger of God (Quran 33:40). Thus, in the absence of someone who can receive divine guidance through divine revelations, who will rule and how will that ruler govern the people? This issue is appropriately addressed by Alfarabi in his book *Mabādi' arā' ahl al-madīna al-fādila* [Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City]. Alfarabi (1985:251) suggests that, in the absence of someone who can receive divine guidance through divine revelations, the ruler should be someone who knows and remembers the customs and laws with which the ruler who had direct access to divine guidance had governed. All the actions of this ruler must be in strict conformity with the actions of the ruler who had direct access to divine guidance. In addition to this, this ruler should be excellent in deducing new laws by analogy for new situations using the principles, which are laid down by the ruler who had direct access to divine guidance. In this way, this ruler will be effectively governing like the ruler who had direct access to divine guidance. After Muhammad, the first Muslim polity was ruled by his close companions who knew and understood the customs and laws with which the first ruler governed. Their governance was in strict conformity with the governance of the first ruler. However, they utilised their skills of deduction by analogy for new situations in light of the principles of governance laid down by the first ruler.

The divine guidance contains the divine law, and conformity to this divine law is essential for good governance. In legal systems, conformity to any law is ensured through sanction. According to Black (1990:1341), sanction is 'the part of a law which is designed to secure enforcement by imposing a penalty for its violation or offering a reward for its observance'. The divine traditions mentioned in the 'An overview of divine traditions pertaining to governance' section contain certain penalties for the violation of the divine law and certain rewards for its observance. In this way, these divine traditions act as sanction to facilitate the enforcement of divine law. According to the divine tradition of guidance and misguidance, those who accept and follow the divine law will have a happy and comfortable life in this world as well as in the hereafter, whereas those who deny the divine law will have a difficult and unpleasant life in this world as well as in the hereafter. Similarly, according to the divine tradition of blessings and their reversal, those who follow the divine law and maintain virtuous qualities and good deeds will receive divine blessings, whereas the divine blessings of those will be reversed who deny the divine law and are ungrateful. Likewise, from the divine tradition of the triumph of *Haqq*' [Truth] over *Bātil* [Falsehood], we understand that the followers of divine law are the people of *Haqq*', whereas its deniers are the people of *Bātil*. The people of *Haqq*' will triumph over the people of *Bātil*, and will be granted authority upon the earth. The fourth divine tradition mentioned in the 'An overview of

divine traditions pertaining to governance' section is the tradition of the destruction of the oppressors. This tradition teaches us that those who deny divine law and commit injustice, tyranny and oppression are ultimately uprooted and destroyed. Lastly, we understand from the divine tradition of trial that those who follow the divine law are patient in adversities and are grateful for the divine blessings. These people will pass the divine trial. These divine traditions provided the sanctions, which facilitated the enforcement of divine law in the city-state of Medina and ensured good governance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the divine traditions outlined in Islamic revelatory culture provide not only a moral and ethical framework but also a comprehensive system for governance. These traditions, rooted in divine guidance and conveyed through Quranic revelations, underscore the principles of justice, righteousness and accountability in societal affairs. They emphasise the importance of following divine laws for ensuring societal harmony and individual prosperity, while also warning against the consequences of deviation and oppression.

The governance model exemplified during the time of Prophet Muhammad in Medina serves as a paradigm of good governance, where leadership was guided by divine revelations and upheld the principles of justice and welfare for all. Central to this model was the authority derived from the reception and dissemination of divine guidance, ensuring the legitimacy and effectiveness of governance. Moreover, the enduring nature of these divine traditions, as highlighted in Quranic verses, reinforces their applicability across time and place. They serve as a beacon for societies seeking stability, prosperity and moral rectitude. While human freedom and choice play a pivotal role in shaping societal outcomes, adherence to divine principles provides a moral compass to navigate challenges and uncertainties. In essence, the study and application of these divine traditions offer valuable insights into constructing and sustaining systems of governance that are just, equitable and in harmony with divine will. They illuminate a path towards achieving both spiritual fulfilment and socio-political excellence in Islamic societies and beyond. Thus, embracing these traditions is not merely a historical or religious duty but a practical necessity for building resilient and virtuous communities.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

I.A. contributed to the conceptualisation, methodology, funding acquisition, visualisation and writing of the original draft of the study. M.E.A. contributed to the conceptualisation, resources and investigation of the study.

Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by any of the authors.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

- Adams, R., 2000, 'God, possibility, and Kant', *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 17(4), 425–440. <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil200017439>
- Alfarabi, 1985, *Mabadi Ara Ahl al-Madina al-Fadhila*, transl. R. Walzer, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Ali, I., 2023, 'Philosophy and religion in the political thought of Alfarabi', *Religions* 14(7), 908. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070908>
- Ali, I. & Qin, M., 2019, 'Distinguishing the virtuous city of Alfarabi from that of Plato in light of his unique historical context', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(4), 907–915. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i4.5370>
- Black, H.C., 1990, *Black's law dictionary*, West Publishing Company, Saint Paul, MN.
- Ibn Manzur, M.I.M., 2000, *Lisan al-Arab*, Dar Sader, Beirut.
- Islam, M.H., 2019, 'Islam and civilization (Analysis study on the history of civilization in Islam)', *Al-Insyiroh: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 5(1), 22–39. <https://doi.org/10.35309/alinsyiroh.v5i1.3395>
- McCabe, H., 2005, *The good life: Ethics and the pursuit of happiness*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London.
- Melamed, A., 2003, *The philosopher-king in medieval and renaissance Jewish political thought*, L.E. Goodman (ed.), State University of New York Press, Albany, NY.
- Sadr, H.M., 2022, 'The basics of the effectiveness of Qur'anic teachings on human happiness', *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding* 9(10), 248–259.
- Shils, E.A., 1981, *Tradition*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Tabarsi, F.I.H., 1999, *Tafsir jawami' al-jami'*, Tehran University Press, Tehran.
- Tabatabai, M.H., 2023, *Al-Mizan: An exegesis of Quran*, transl. A. Khaleeli, vol. 21, Tawheed Institute Australia Ltd., Sydney.
- Wallis, J., 2005, *God's politics: Why the right gets it wrong and the left doesn't get it*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY.
- White, G., 2000, 'An inquiry into the concepts of spirituality and spiritual care', *International Journal of Palliative Nursing* 6(10), 479–484. <https://doi.org/10.12968/ijpn.2000.6.10.9047>
- Wright, J.H., 1977, 'Divine knowledge and human freedom: The god who dialogues', *Theological Studies* 38(3), 450–477. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056397703800301>