



Understanding the Role of Taqlīd in Islamic Law

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What is Taqlīd ?

Taqlīd is a Part of Everyday Life. Taqlīd (or Ittibāʿ) essentially refers to the practice of a layperson—someone unqualified in a particular field—submitting to and accepting the authority of an expert in that field without demanding proof or justification for every opinion, ruling, or decision issued by that expert. This is a natural part of human life and is practiced by millions around the world in all areas of daily existence.

One of the simplest examples of Taqlīd is that of a child learning the alphabet at school. The child accepts what the teacher says without question. A learner driver taking instruction from a qualified driving instructor is also practicing Taqlīd. Similarly, when people consult a specialist doctor for treatment and follow his prescriptions, they are engaging in Taqlīd.

A layperson who consults a legal expert or follows the advice of a tax consultant is again practicing Taqlīd. A client at an engineering firm who seeks an engineer's expertise on complex calculations is no different. All these are clear examples of Taqlīd or Ittibāʿ in action.

Consider the countless "facts" taught in sciences such as astronomy or archaeology—who questions whether the sun is really 93 million miles away from the Earth? It is simply accepted because it comes from experts. Teachers present these facts as unquestionable truths, and children memorise them to pass their exams.

There are endless such examples in daily life. It is clear, therefore, that Taqlīd or Ittibāʿ is a universal human practice—not something exclusive to Islam or Islamic jurisprudence.

Taqlīd is the Easy Option for Ordinary People

In the context of Islamic Fiqh (law), Taqlīd or Ittibāʿ refers to the acceptance and adherence to the rulings and interpretations of qualified scholars of Islamic jurisprudence, without demanding from them a detailed explanation of the complex processes they undertake-known as Ijtihād-to arrive at those rulings.

In simple terms, Taqlīd means that ordinary individuals are not required to perform Ijtihād, which involves deep, technical procedures used by scholars when deriving legal rulings (Fatāwā). Instead, their responsibility is to trust in the expertise of learned scholars and act upon their rulings.

In this sense, Taqlīd is a great mercy and blessing for the general public. The intricate mechanisms of Ijtihād are far beyond the capacity of most people. The ability to perform Ijtihād demands many years of intensive study, deep knowledge of various Islamic sciences, and rigorous intellectual exertion-indeed, the word Ijtihād itself literally means "to strive" or "exert effort."

Misunderstandings Regarding Taqlīd

In recent times, various misunderstandings have arisen concerning the issue of Taqlīd. It has become a subject of major debate among Muslims in many parts of the world. As a result, arguments have been put forward by both supporters (protagonists) and critics (antagonists) of Taqlīd. The most effective way to address these misunderstandings is to refer back to the original sources of Islam-the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth-as well as the teachings of the rightly guided scholars and elders of this Ummah. Through a careful and sincere study of these sources, a clearer and more accurate understanding of Taqlīd and Ittibā' will emerge.

The Shar'ī Role of Taqlīd

The essence of guidance is derived from the Noble Qur'ān, which is described as “هُدًى لِّلنَّاسِ” (a guidance for mankind). However, this divine guidance is rooted in fundamental principles, while its detailed application and explanation have been entrusted to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

For example, the Qur'ān commands: “ أَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ ” (Establish the prayer). Yet, it does not outline how the prayer is to be performed-the positions, the recitation, the number of units, and other details. These essential aspects have been taught and demonstrated by the Prophet ﷺ.

1. The verse “ وَأَتُوا الزَّكَاةَ ” (And give Zakāh) is another case. The specific amounts and categories-such as on gold, silver, livestock, agricultural produce, etc.-are not detailed in the Qur'ān, but are explained through Aḥādīth.
2. Regarding Ḥajj, the Qur'ān states: “ وَلِلَّهِ عَلَى النَّاسِ حِجُّ الْبَيْتِ ” (It is obligatory upon the people to perform the pilgrimage to the House [of Allāh]). Yet again, the rituals of Ṭawāf, the number of circuits, standing at 'Arafāt, staying in Minā and Muzdalifah, and the stoning of the Jimār are all elaborated through the Prophetic Sunnah.

From this, it becomes clear that understanding and acting upon the Qur'ānic injunctions-even in core pillars of Islam such as Ṣalāh, Zakāh, and Ḥajj-requires recourse to the Sunnah. The Qur'ān itself commands believers to seek guidance through the explanations of the Prophet ﷺ. Hence, Allāh ﷻ says:

مَنْ يُطِيعِ الرَّسُولَ فَقَدْ أَطَاعَ اللَّهَ

“Whoever obeys the Messenger has indeed obeyed Allāh”. (Qur'ān 4:80)

Obedying the Prophet ﷺ is, in reality, obedience to Allāh ﷻ.

A Direction from the Ḥadīth informs us:

“Perform your prayer just as you see me performing it”. (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Vol. 1, p. 1076)

He ﷺ did not say: “Perform your prayer as you may infer from the Holy Qur'ān”. This is a clear indication that the proper method of performing Ṣalāh is not to be independently derived from the Qur'ān, but rather to be learned from the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ.

The Ḥadīth is traditionally classified into several categories:

1. The sayings (Aqwāl) of the Prophet ﷺ
2. The actions (Af'āl) and practices of the Prophet ﷺ
3. The sayings or actions of others that were approved or affirmed by the Prophet ﷺ

All these categories of Aḥādīth serve as vital sources of guidance for the Ummah.

Qiyās (Analogical Reasoning)

When the Prophet ﷺ was asked a question, he would sometimes respond by referring the questioner to a similar, known situation. Upon receiving a correct answer from the questioner, the Prophet ﷺ would then say: “The matter you asked about is of the same category as this”.

Example: A woman once asked: “Hajj was obligatory upon my mother, but she passed away. Can I perform it on her behalf”? The Prophet ﷺ replied: “Yes, it would be accepted on her behalf. Tell me, if your mother had a debt, would you repay it”? She answered: “Yes”. He then said: “Fulfil what is due on her behalf. Certainly, the right of Allāh is more deserving of being fulfilled”.

This type of reasoning is known in Islamic law as Qiyās, Ijtihād, or Istinbāt. These tools are only employed in matters where no explicit ruling is found in the Qur’ān or Sunnah.

When the Prophet ﷺ sent Mu’ādh ibn Jabal (RA) as governor and judge (Qāḍī) to Yemen, he gave him many parting instructions, even as he led the reins of the animal Mu’ādh was riding. He then asked him: “By what will you judge”? Mu’ādh (RA) replied: “By the law of the Qur’ān”. The Prophet ﷺ asked: “And if you do not find it there”? He replied: “Then by the Sunnah of the Prophet”. “And if you do not find it there either”? “Then I will perform Ijtihād to the best of my ability”.

Hearing this, the Prophet ﷺ expressed his happiness, approved of Mu’ādh’s method, and thanked Allāh ﷻ. (Abū Dāwūd, Vol. 2, p. 149)

When a ruling derived through Ijtihād gains consensus among qualified scholars, it is called Ijmā’. It is important to note that Qiyās and Ijtihād do not create a new ruling—they uncover rulings that are already implied within the Qur’ān or Ḥadīth. The Mujtahid makes these rulings evident through one of three methods: Dalālah (indication), Ishārah (suggestion), or Iqtidā’ (implication).

A person who is not qualified to perform Ijtihād is required to follow a qualified scholar (Mujtahid). This following is what is termed Taqlīd.

When the Prophet ﷺ sent Sayyidunā Mu’ādh as a Qāḍī, it was so that people could act upon his rulings—whether they were derived directly from the Qur’ān, the Sunnah, or his Ijtihād. Accepting all three is, in fact, obedience to Rasūlullāh ﷺ.

As mentioned in Mishkāṭ al-Maṣābīḥ (p. 310), Abū Hurayrah (RA) narrated that the Prophet ﷺ said:

“Whoever obeys me has obeyed Allāh, and whoever disobeys me has disobeyed Allāh. Whoever obeys the Amīr has obeyed me, and whoever disobeys the Amīr has disobeyed me”.

Precepts, Propositions, and Their Types

Masā’il (legal precepts) in Islamic jurisprudence can be classified into four types:

1) Clear Instructions from the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth:

These are direct and unambiguous rulings found in the Qur’ān or authentic aḥādīth. In such cases, neither Qiyās (analogical reasoning) nor Taqlīd (following a jurist) is applicable. The obligation is to act directly upon the clear command.

2) Cases of Known Abrogation (Naskh):

When there are two clear injunctions—one revealed earlier and the other later—and historical evidence establishes their chronological order, the earlier ruling is considered Mansūkh (abrogated), and the latter is binding. Here too, Qiyās and Taqlīd are not permitted, as the command is explicit.

3) Contradictory Texts with Unknown Chronology:

These are cases where two clear texts exist, but it is not known which one was revealed earlier. Since there is no historical evidence to establish the order, further scholarly investigation is required to determine the appropriate ruling.

4) No Clear Textual Evidence:

These are matters for which there is no direct instruction in the Qur'ān or Ḥadīth. In such cases, Qiyās and Ijtihād (independent reasoning) are essential to derive the correct ruling.

While the first two categories are straightforward, the last two require clarification. Since Propositions 3 and 4 are not self-evident, what is the responsibility of the believer? Can he simply abstain from action? The answer is no. The Qur'ān states: "Does man think that he will be left without purpose?" (Qur'ān 75:36) This verse emphasises that a believer is never free from the obligation to seek and follow divine guidance. Where clarity is lacking, qualified scholars must engage in Ijtihād to derive rulings, and the general public must follow them through Taqlīd.

"Do you think that you have been created in vain?" (Qur'ān 23:115) It is not so-you are required to obey Allāh's commands every moment of your life. But how can one fulfil this duty when it is unclear which ruling has been abrogated and which remains in effect? In the fourth type of legal proposition-where no textual evidence is available-what should a person act upon?

Allāh ﷻ warns: "And do not follow that of which you have no knowledge". (Qur'ān 17:36) This demonstrates the necessity of Qiyās (analogical reasoning) and Ijtihād (independent scholarly reasoning). In the third type of proposition, Ijtihād is needed to determine which ruling should be followed. In the fourth, it is used to derive new rulings where none are explicitly stated. It is a well-established fact that not everyone possesses the ability or qualifications to perform Ijtihād. The above verse makes this evident as well. While many may put forward opinions, only those rulings are valid that conform to the Sharī'ah and are issued by a qualified Mujtahid.

The ruling of a Muqallid (non-independent scholar) is not accepted as a legal proof. The Mujtahid engages in Ijtihād, whereas the Muqallid follows the rulings of a Mujtahid-this following is known as Taqlīd. Even if a Mujtahid errs in his judgment, he is still rewarded, as stated in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Vol. 1, p. 1092.

Why Only the Four Imāms?

A common doubt arises: There were many Mujtahids among the Ṣaḥābah (RA), the Tābi'īn, and Aṭbā' al-Tābi'īn. Yet, Muslims today make Taqlīd only of the four famous Imāms-Imām Abū Ḥanīfah, Imām Mālik, Imām al-Shāfi'ī, and Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (RA). Why is it not permissible to follow individual Ṣaḥābah, whose virtues are well documented in both the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth?

There is no doubt that the Ṣaḥābah (RA) hold a far greater rank and status than the four Imāms. Those who perform Taqlīd of the Imāms do not believe them to be superior to the Ṣaḥābah. However, the reason for following the four A'imma is practical: for Taqlīd to be viable, one must have access to detailed, structured rulings across all areas of the Sharī'ah.

From Kitāb al-Ṭahārah to Kitāb al-Farā'id, covering acts of worship, transactions, personal status laws, and all other aspects of life-the four Imāms were the first to compile and systematise this knowledge in a thorough and accessible way. Their Madhāhib became complete schools of jurisprudence, preserving legal knowledge with precision. Such comprehensive codification is not found in the statements of the Ṣaḥābah or many early Tābi'īn.

Therefore, the only practical and reliable choice for lay Muslims is to follow the schools of these four Imāms. It should also be remembered that Allāh ﷻ blessed these Imāms with profound understanding of the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth. As Shāh Walīullāh al-Dihlawī (RA) stated in his commentary on al-Muwaṭṭa' of Imām Mālik (p. 6):

“These four Imāms collectively encompassed the knowledge of the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth to such an extent that not a single Ḥadīth reported by the Ṣaḥābah was left out by them”.

Why Follow Only One Imām?

Another common question is: Why must one adhere to only one Imām? In earlier times—such as the era of the Ṣaḥābah and Tābi'īn—people would refer to various scholars without being bound to a single madhhab. Why is such flexibility not permitted today?

The answer lies in the purity of intention. In the early generations, people asked questions sincerely to learn and practice the truth—not to seek convenience. Today, questions are often motivated by personal ease or preference. Consider the following example:

A man is in a state of wuḍū' and touches his wife. According to the Shāfi'ī madhhab, this nullifies wuḍū'. He is told to repeat his Wuḍū', but replies: “I follow Imām Abū Ḥanīfah, and this does not break wuḍū' in his view”. Later, the same person vomits. According to Imām Abū Ḥanīfah, this does nullify wuḍū'. But now the man replies, “I follow Imām al-Shāfi'ī, and vomiting does not break wuḍū' according to him”.

If he performs Ṣalāh in such a state, his prayer would not be valid according to either Imām. This selective switching between Madhāhib to avoid religious obligations is termed Talfīq, and it is unanimously invalid and impermissible. This is not Taqlīd—it is following one's desires under the guise of scholarship.

The true purpose of Taqlīd is to avoid personal whims and adhere to consistent scholarship. Allāh ﷻ warns: “And do not follow your desires, for they will mislead you from the path of Allāh”. (Qur'ān 38:26)

This is why adhering to one Imām is necessary—so that one does not fall into the trap of tailoring religion to personal convenience, which ultimately leads to misguidance.

For centuries, the Ummah has been blessed with towering figures among the scholars, jurists (Fuqahā'), 'Ulamā', and Awliyā'-who possessed vast treasures of sacred knowledge. Many of them, in their personal capacity, were walking libraries with encyclopedic mastery across the Islamic sciences. Their piety and character mirrored the noble traits of the Ṣaḥābah, and their lives were lived in complete conformity with the Sunnah of Rasūlullāh ﷺ. These luminaries adhered to the four established schools of Islamic jurisprudence—the A'immah Arba'ah. It would not be an exaggeration to say that their spiritual and intellectual heights were attained through their disciplined commitment to Taqlīd. Their consistent adherence to the legal methodologies developed by these Imāms safeguarded both their knowledge and practice from confusion and contradiction.

Today, Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh) remains confined to these four schools. Those who do not affiliate themselves with any one of them are typically referred to as Ghayr Muqallidīn - those who reject the practice of Taqlīd.

—Jam'iat al-'Ulamā' (KZN)