

The definitional and general usage of the word taqlīd

Question: Since when did the word taqlīd began to be used in its definitional meaning? When did its general usage become popular? Was this word in vogue and used during the eras of Rasūlullāh sallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam and the Sahābah radiyallāhu ‘anhum?

Answer: Although there is evidence of the meaning of the word taqlīd being in vogue, the actual word was not in vogue in those days. This is similar to the definitions of Ahādīth – e.g. mudtarib, hasan, daʿīf and so on – which were not used during the era of the Sahābah radiyallāhu ʿanhum. These words came into vogue later on. Likewise, the word taqlīd became common later on.

However, there is certainly evidence of the meaning of taqlīd being used by the Sahābah radiyallāhu ‘anhum and Tābi‘īn. The words iqtidā’ and ittibā’ were used in those days. For example:

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Follow those who are to come after me, Abū Bakr and 'Umar.

Rasūlullāh sallallāhu 'alayhi wa sallam said with reference to the Sahābah:

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Whichever one from among them you follow, you will be guided.

The definitions of the principles of Hadīth (usūl al-Hadīth) were also not found in those days. However, they were accepted later on and became common.

Furthermore, when it comes to the levels of the narrators (tabaqāt) as laid down by the Muhaddithūn, we find Tabaqāt-e-Hanafīyyah, Tabaqāt-e-Shāfi'īyyah, Tabaqāt-e-Mālikīyyah and Tabaqāt-e-Hanābilah, but we do not come across Tabaqāt-e-Ghayr Muqallidīn.

The correct view is that taqlīd only refers to relying on the statement of an Imām in contradictory or unclear texts. In essence, emulation is that of Rasūlullāh sallallāhu 'alayhi wa sallam and not the mujtahid himself. If a person is offended by and detests the word taqlīd itself, we will not refer to him as an abandoner of a compulsory duty if he does not use this word.

However, one thing is certain, it is not possible to escape from accepting the reality of taqlid.

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And Almighty Allah Taʿālā knows best