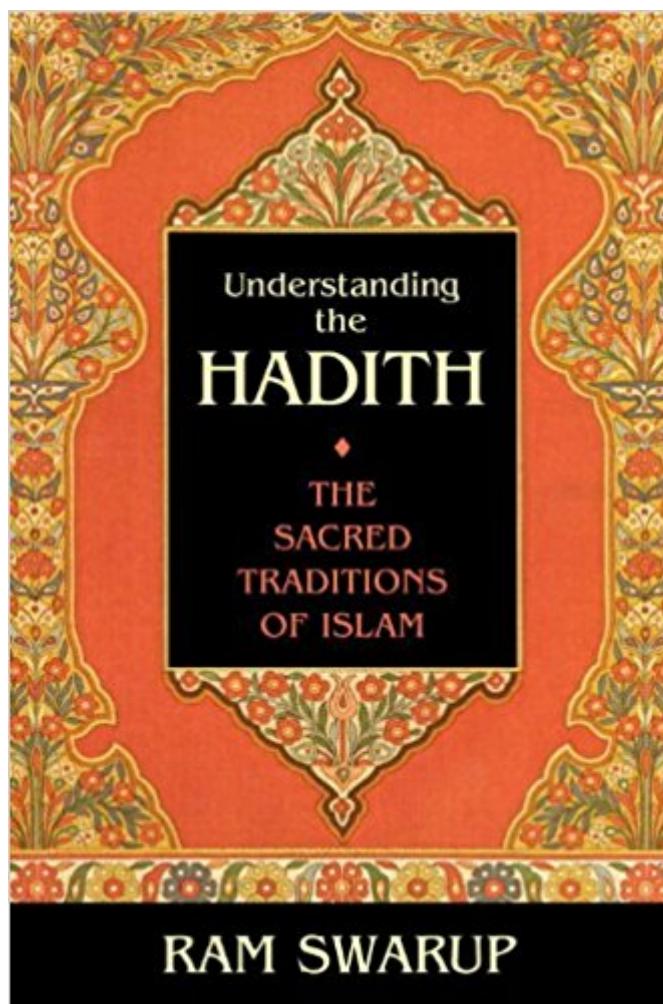


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Understanding The Hadith: The Sacred Traditions Of Islam



Synopsis

Noted Indian writer and polymath Ram Swarup explores the meaning of Islam through the words of the Sahih Muslim, considered by Muslims to be one of the most authoritative of the collections of "traditions" (Arabic Hadith) about the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Like the Koran, these traditions are believed to be divinely revealed by Allah and they complement the verses of the Koran, in many cases expanding upon them and explaining the context of their revelation. As Swarup notes in his introduction, to Muslims the Hadith literature represents the Koran in action, stories of "revelation made concrete in the life of the Prophet." Among the orthodox they are considered as sacred as the Koran itself. Swarup is plainly skeptical of the claim that the Hadith literature is divinely inspired. In the introduction he says, "The Prophet is caught as it were in the ordinary acts of his life - sleeping, eating, mating, praying, hating, dispensing justice, planning expeditions and revenge against his enemies. The picture that emerges is hardly flattering. . . . One is . . . left to wonder how the believers, generation after generation, could have found this story so inspiring. The answer is that the believers are conditioned to look at the whole thing through the eyes of faith. To them morality derives from the Prophet's actions. . . . his actions determine and define morality." The Sahih Muslim, a massive work consisting of 7,190 traditions divided into 1,243 chapters, is hardly accessible to the average reader; so Swarup quotes representative selections that touch upon the main tenets of Islam: faith, purification, prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, marriage and divorce, crime and punishment, religious wars (jihad), paradise, hell, repentance, and many other features of the religion. To non-Muslims this work provides many insights into the mindset of the average Muslim who is raised on these traditions about Muhammad. It also underscores the gulf that exists between the sanctum of orthodox Islam and an increasingly secularized Westernized world.

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Customer Reviews

"...a good place for Westerners to begin to understand the hadith's role in forming the mindset of Islamic fundamentalists." -- The American Enterprise, December 2003"..."a useful resource if read critically...Recommended." -- Choice, May 2003"..."just the sort of introduction the average non-Muslim needs--it's clear, accessible, and designed for a lay audience." -- About.com"An intriguing distillation of the many pieces that make up the Hadith...recommended for dedicated students of Islamic studies." -- The Bookwatch, March 2003

Ram Swarup was one of India's leading intellectuals and a distinguished representative of renascent Hinduism. He wrote on many topics, not only comparative religion but on Gandhian economics, Maoism, and communism.

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Disgusting for civilized world?

Great

This is an odd book. First, most in the West would be surprised to learn just how much of Islam and Islamic culture lies outside of the Koran. (Just as so much of Mormonism is not in the Book of Mormon.) In the Protestant West especially, religion is in the book, the Bible, but so much of Islam is contained in the hadith, sayings either by Muhammad or concerning Muhammad by his early followers. These hadith, of which there are thousands, have been passed down the generations, and must be linked properly to an early follower of Muhammad. This collection is edited by a Hindu thinker with an ax to grind against the Abrahamic religions, Ram Swarup, and taken from a translation of a hadith collection called "Sahih Muslim," a Sunni compilation. Instead of presenting the hadith or quoting from them at length, he paraphrases them, explains them, and comments on them. Generally, the point of this collection is, despite the title, meant as a screed against Islam. And it does that job ably. The Muhammad of this collection is no Jesus, he is a self-serving plunderer and raider, who has others kill Jews and poets he hates, who weds pubescent girls and beds Coptic

concubines, who kills on whims and pillages to bring people to his faith, who... hates dogs. Really. Hates dogs. The problem with the book is its editor/author - you know he is trying to throw scorn on Muhammad and Islam, you know he cherry picks the "worst" hadith, and even, towards the end, he begins referencing other works of history, not the Sahih Muslim, and even praising Hinduism. So, in the end, it isn't a very useful introduction to the hadith from a Muslim perspective.

This edition is particularly useful in that, unlike contemporary Indian editions, it is unexpurgated. The late Ram Swarup Agarwal (1920-1998) was a Hindu thinker and prolific author. He was highly critical of Christianity, Islam and Communism. His support of European neopaganism lent a fascist tone to some of his declarations. His work greatly influenced later Indian writers, particularly the founders of Hindutva nationalism, a movement which has become responsible for the brutal persecution of multitudes of Indian Christians and Muslims. Meera Nanda wrote: "In the hands of Hindutva's deep thinkers, notably Ram Swarup and Sita Ram Goel, dharmic ecology takes an explicitly anti-monotheistic turn, aimed superficially at Christianity. Goel notably, but also many others like N.S. Rajaram and Koenraad Elst hold 'Semitic monotheism' responsible for the crisis of modernity: they take the left's critique of the scientific revolution as disenchanting the world, but blame it on Christianity, rather than on science per se. All the ills of modernity that the left and right both agree upon are pinned on to the monotheistic conception of God who stands outside nature, creating this split between man and nature." [Meera Nanda: "Dharmic ecology and the neo-Pagan international: the dangers of religious environmentalism in India", presented at panel no. 15 at the 18th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, 6-9 July 2004 in Lund, Sweden, Hinduism, Environmentalism and the Nazi Bogey] However, these factors do not automatically falsify all the data which Swarup sought to examine and integrate into his overall system of thought. The present book was originally published in the USA in 1982 under a title which more accurately reflects its content: "Understanding Islam through Hadis: Religious faith or fanaticism?" (Smithtown, NY: Exposition Press, 1982). This edition can be read online at [...] In 1983, the first Indian reprint of the book by Sita Ram Goyal (1921-2003), Swarup's long-time friend and collaborator, sold out quickly. In 1987 Goyal (Goel) printed another edition of the book and also tried to publish a Hindi translation which he had commissioned. The details are not known with certainty but, apparently on the basis of a complaint lodged with the police, all copies of the Hindi translation were seized from the printer's shop and Goyal was arrested. Goyal was bailed out after 18 hours in police custody, but the impounded copies of the Hindi translation were never returned to him. Later, public furore ensued after a claim in the Jama`at-e-Islami weekly "Radiance" that the book was

offensive to Muslims. Finally, in 1990 the Hindi translation of the book was officially banned. In March 1991 the English original was also banned. The criminal case against Goyal for printing the book was dismissed after some years on 5 May 1997, but the book still remained banned. However, after a court case, the Delhi High court approved the book with the omission of 5 excerpts to which Muslims had taken strong exception. This expurgated edition (0-682-49948-X), the "Fourth reprint", is published by Voice of India, New Delhi, and is available for purchase in hardcopy through the Internet. It states: "All passages pointed out as objectionable material by the Government of Delhi in their letter dated 17 April 2001 have been deleted in this fourth edition in keeping with our statement submitted to the High Court of Delhi on 11 May 2001" (p.iv). The blanks where the deleted passages would have appeared remain and are found on pages 26-27, 65-66, 67-68, 102, and 174-175. Fortunately, these expurgated passages have been restored in this new edition by Prometheus Press, albeit with the less-helpful title: "Understanding the Hadith: The sacred traditions of Islam" (2002). These are as follows:^{*} pages 38-39: "The First Mosque: Facing the Qibla", and a paragraph from the following section entitled: "Allah allows Muhammad terror and war booty";^{*} pages 74-75: Safiyya [One of Muhammad's wives]^{*} pages 76-77: Zainab bint Jahsh [Another of Muhammad's wives]^{*} page 108: A paragraph from "A great motivating force"^{**} pages 178-179: The merits of 'Aisha [4 paragraphs are deleted] This book is a survey of the of the "Sahih Muslim", the second most important collection of Ahadith (traditions), after al-Bukhari. As the Ahadith are, for all practical purposes, on the same level of authority as the Qur'an itself for Muslim doctrine and practice, this book is particularly useful. Swarup's quotations are taken from the English translation by Abdul Hamid Siddiqi. As Swarup states in his foreword, "we have quoted extensively and faithfully from it" (p.10). Muslims do not regard all Ahadith as authentic, but there is still a debate in Muslim circles as to where the line should be drawn, the most notable being between Sunni and Shi`ah. In reality authenticity of the ahadith collected by Imam al-Bukhari and Imam Muslim are taken for granted by Sunni unless challenged by a respected Muslim jurist. Therefore, Swarup was right to treat the Ahadith texts as meaning what they say, just like Salafi and Deobandi Muslims. So let Muslims themselves say openly precisely which ahadith are authentic and which not. Generally speaking, Muslims are offended by any critique of their faith and practice from nonMuslim thinkers. This explains the reactions to this book by some of the other reviewers. The idea that a scholarly approach will lead to a more honest conclusion is a fabrication either of sheer naïf or of a misguided attempt at political correctness.

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