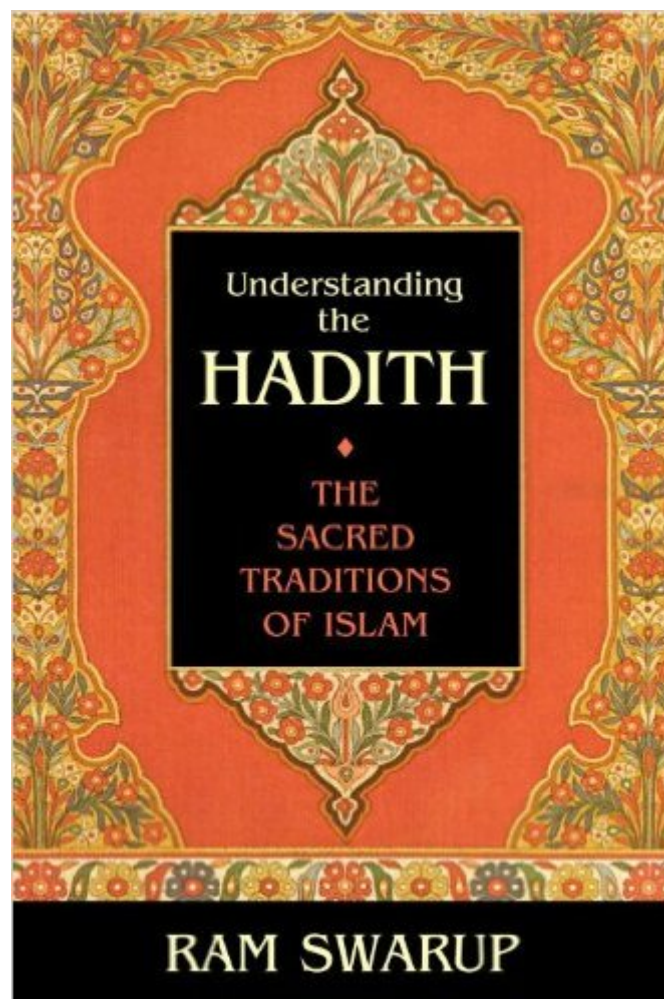


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Understanding The Hadith



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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Islam is unique in the sense that if the Holy Quran serves as its theory, the practice is contained in the Hadith. The Hadith contain thousands of reports on how Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) dealt with day-to-day matters. These include extremely detailed information on even very small events, which are of immense interest to his followers, who try to emulate him in every way, from the length of their beard down to the length of the pyjamas. They also emulate him in other, more important matters, related to worship, charity, love, hate and war. If one wishes to understand Islam, and how it affects the world today, then it is of utmost importance that one understands the Hadith. Ram Swarup is a fairly well-known writer in select circles and is often quoted by right-wing intellectuals in India. He wrote extensively on Communism, Islam and Christianity, which he saw as three main challenges for Hindu India. Although his perspective and selection of topics is influenced by his beliefs, he does try and make an effort to remain neutral to the topic itself. Therefore, his writings come across as insightful and analytical, rather than polemical. The present book is a fairly good example of his writings. When it was first published in India in 1984, he was arrested and the book was banned by Delhi Government. The matter went to court. Finally, the Delhi High court approved the book for publication in 2001, after removal of two or three excerpts to which the Muslims had taken particularly strong exception. The present edition, published in the US, includes these excerpts as well. In India, the book has been published by Voice of India (Understanding Islam through Hadis), and is also available for download on their web-site.

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.

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