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Muslims should welcome a new, modern perspective on prophet's sayings

The end of Ramadan this week marks a good time for Muslims to consider Turkey's new, modern version of the Hadith – which records the sayings and customs of the prophet Muhammad. The multi-volume set moves away from literal interpretation and embraces the inspired meaning.


Houston

As the Islamic fasting period of Ramadan ends this week, Muslims might be curious about a modern interpretation of the Hadith – the sayings and customs of the prophet Muhammad – which is now being published in Turkey. Certainly scholars will be.

Change is certain to come to the Islamic world, not just to the streets of Cairo or Istanbul but deep within Islam’s religious tradition as well. The Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs, called the Diyanet, recognizes this with its seven-volume revision of the Hadith – which is the source of Sharia law and second only to the Quran.

Thousands of the prophet’s sayings and traditions were circulated and eventually collected in the centuries after his death in 632. The sheer size of Hadith collections and their archaic 7th century Arabian context have made the texts too intractable for many Muslims today. This is the challenge which the six-year Turkish Hadith project, with its selections and interpretive essays, seeks to overcome.

The central issue surrounding the Hadith, as with other foundational religious works such as the Bible, is whether it should be read literally or in a historical context and for its inspired message. A literal reading, for instance, may seek to justify medieval practices like severing the hands of thieves or allowing underage marriage. An inspired interpretation would see them as historical practices absent the kind of rule of law that democracies like Turkey have today.

The question for Turkey’s new multi-volume set is whether its contemporary interpretations can be widely appreciated by the Islamic community, or whether they will be considered too avant-garde – the fate of previous modern interpretations.

In a March 7, 2008 interview with Reuters, Prof. Mehmet Gormez – now president of Diyanet – explained that the project is about facilitating the “understanding” of the Hadith. “It is not,” he added, “a radical reform or revision.”

Worshippers pray on the last Friday of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, at the courtyard of Fatih mosque in Istanbul Aug. 2. Op-ed contributor Emran El-Badawi writes: ‘My hope is that the Turkish Hadith...encourages each reader to engage with the text more directly – without recourse to clerics – and that it opens the door to more nuanced and critical appreciation of Islamic texts.’ (Murad Sezer/Reuters)
Professor Gormez adds that the Hadith revision should not be considered a rule book, but rather a source of guidance on matters of belief, worship, and morality—also addressing issues of interpersonal relations and women’s rights. These goals are consistent with Turkey’s “conservative modernism” that adheres to Sunni Islam’s core doctrines within a modern day context, and without the literal interpretation of Salafism or Wahhabism.

Muslim intellectuals around the world have long been enamored by Turkey’s separation of mosque and state, its economic prosperity, and the simultaneous preservation of its Islamic past, which has borne fruit in the ruling Justice and Development Party. In recent decades, large numbers of Turkish students and scholars have studied at Islamic universities like Al-Azhar in Cairo, as well as universities in western countries like Germany and the United States. Their expertise in Islamic texts, combined with newly acquired critical methods, has surely benefitted the scope and rigor of the Turkish Hadith project.

It must be remembered, however, that “revising” the Hadith is not new to Islamic tradition. In fact the very “science of Hadith,” which flourished in the 9th-10th century, is predicated upon the desire of scholars to distinguish authentic reports going back to the prophet, from forgeries.

The six Sunni and four Shia canonical Hadith collections date to this time period, in which the Muslim community developed a need for the legal, social, and political wisdom to conduct their daily lives. The body of Hadith texts has served, therefore, as the quintessential source of Islamic law. Like the Catholic Church’s Canon law and the Halacha of Rabbinic Judaism, the Hadith teaches the faithful multitudes how to behave correctly.

Later generations of Muslim scholars continued “revising” the canonical texts and producing compendia, commentaries, and newer Hadith distillations. The Turkish Hadith project should be considered another step in the continuous process of re-contextualizing the Hadith for new times and places. Like its predecessors, whatever controversy arises out of the Turkish Hadith is likely to fade and might, furthermore, give way to broad acceptance by the Muslim public.

The precise impact the project will have on Turkish Muslims, and those around the world, is difficult to predict. Other re-evaluations or abridgments of the Hadith, like those by more liberal minded scholars in Egypt for example, faced too much resistance by the religious establishment to have any lasting effect on the public.

Works like “Muhammad the Messenger of Freedom” by ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi, which was published in 1962, and “Stripping Bukhari and Muslim of Unneeded Hadiths” by Gamal al-Banna, which came out in 2008, sought to reform the beliefs of an increasingly conservative public too abruptly. This is because the greater Muslim community, or Jamaah, is an enormous vehicle, which can only slowly change direction.

However, the Turkish Hadith is already coming at a time of revolutionary change. In many countries today, the Muslim public is weary and cautious of literal and close-minded interpretations of Shariah by extremist minorities. In the wake of the unrest that has embroiled much of the Muslim world since 9/11 and later, the Arab Spring of 2011, combating Islamic extremism has become part and parcel of people’s struggle for a better life. There is already ample interest in the project’s publication, and word has spread of possible translations into German, Bosnian, Arabic, and English.
My hope is that the Turkish Hadith is more than just tradition repackaged for the 21st century. I hope it encourages each reader to engage with the text more directly – without recourse to clerics – and that it opens the door to more nuanced and critical appreciation of Islamic texts.

I hope it tones down the culture of Hadith memorization in some parts of the world, and demonstrates to readers that when it comes to the verbosity of quoting the Hadith – less is more. After all, the prophet is reported to have said, “give word of me, if even a single verse.”

Editor's note: The original version incorrectly identified the date of Mehmet Gormez’s interview with Reuters and his title.

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