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## THE AUTHENTICITY QUESTION: WESTERN DEBATES OVER THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF PROPHETIC TRADITIONS

### INTRODUCTION

Thus far we have discussed hadiths and their functions in Islamic civilization as a tradition developed by a people who affirmed that Muhammad was a prophet, the last in a series sent to humanity by a God who created the universe and is its sole font of truth. So far, the hadith tradition has unfolded among Muslims. Though they might have disagreed on the proper use or interpretation of hadiths, Muslims have controlled the boundaries of the discussion. This book, however, does not assume that the reader believes that God influences the course of history or that Muhammad was a prophet. Instead, you may have noticed (assuming I've done my job) that this book discusses hadiths in a 'neutral' or 'objective' tone according to the methods of modern historians of a religious tradition.

Like Muslim hadith critics, however, our methods of historical criticism in the West have their own tradition with its own assumptions. What we must admit before any further discussion is that, because a book does not assume that God directly intervenes in human events, that Muhammad was a prophet, or that hadiths are in general authentic, then what it really assumes is that God does *not* directly interfere in historical events, that Muhammad was *just a man*, and that there are *real doubts* about the historical reliability of the entire hadith corpus. Few Western readers of this book, for example, would accept the explanation that we know the Muslim hadith tradition is an accurate record of Muhammad's words because God would never let his

chosen religion go unpreserved (a standard Muslim explanation). As you can imagine, discussion of hadiths in the West differs dramatically from its indigenous Muslim counterpart.

This chapter explores the Western academic investigation of early Islamic history and its radical critiques of the Sunni hadith tradition. 'The Authenticity Question,' as we will term it, has two implications that we must bear in mind. First, Western scholars' critical examination of hadiths and the methods that Muslims used to authenticate them can be seen as laudably advancing our understanding of Islamic origins and as part of a larger human endeavor to expand all areas of knowledge. Second, however, Western criticism of the hadith tradition can be viewed as an act of domination in which one worldview asserts its power over another by dictating the terms by which 'knowledge' and 'truth' are established. From this perspective, one could ask why the 'light' that Western scholars shed on hadiths is necessarily more valuable to 'the advancement of human understanding' than what the Muslim hadith tradition has already offered. As the likes of Edward Said have shown, knowledge is power, and studying an object is an act of establishing control over it. It is thus no coincidence that two of the three main avenues through which the Western study of the Islamic world progressed, that of Ottoman studies and the study of Persianate culture in South Asia, were originally tied to the European pursuit of diplomatic and colonial agendas in the Ottoman Empire and India (the third avenue, that of Semitic studies, stemmed from Biblical studies, as we shall discuss below).<sup>1</sup>

Western discussions about the reliability of the hadith tradition are thus not neutral, and their influence extends beyond the lofty halls of academia. The Authenticity Question is part of a broader debate over the power dynamic between 'Religion' and 'Modernity,' and between 'Islam' and 'the West.' Instead of approaching the Authenticity Question from a teleological perspective, where we assume that the native 'Muslim' vision of the hadith tradition is wrong and that Western scholars have awakened it from its millennial slumber and are guiding it gradually forwards, we will assume what I think is a more accurate approach: the hadith tradition is so vast and our attempts to evaluate its authenticity so inevitably limited to small samples, that any attitudes towards its authenticity are necessarily based more on our critical worldview than on empirical fact. Because we ultimately cannot know empirically whether Muhammad was a prophet or a character formed by history, or whether or not God

played any role in preserving his words for posterity, we will not look at the Authenticity Question as one to which there is a right and wrong answer. Instead, we will identify what the various schools of thought on this question have taken as their basic assumptions and how they have built on them. We will examine how some schools of thought reacted to others and how their assumptions cast doubt on those of others.

#### THE ORIGINS AND ASSUMPTIONS OF THE WESTERN STUDY OF HADITH VS. THE ISLAMIC TRADITION

The Muslim hadith tradition and the Western academic study of Islamic origins represent diametrically opposed approaches to evaluating the authenticity of reports about the past. Both are critical, in that they concern themselves with questions of the reliability of historical sources, but they proceed from two sets of assumptions that are at loggerheads.

As we have seen, the Sunni tradition of hadith criticism was founded on a commitment to sifting reliable from unreliable hadiths based on criteria that examined both the sources of a report and its contents. In the absence of conflicting evidence or some strong objection, however, Muslim hadith scholars and jurists treated a report attributed to the Prophet *prima facie* as something he really said. Ibn Hanbal thus famously stated that even a hadith whose authenticity was not established was a better source for law than ruling by one's reason alone. A critical examination of a hadith was required only when a scholar had some compelling reason to doubt its authenticity. Even then, the charismatic authority of the Prophet could overwhelm any critical concerns. The famous Egyptian scholar Ibn al-Hājj (d. 737/1336) ignored the legal ruling of a hadith and was subsequently afflicted by leprosy. When the Prophet appeared to him in a dream, the scholar asked him why he was being punished, since he had analyzed the hadith and concluded that it was not reliable. The Prophet replied, 'It suffices you to have heard it from me.' Ibn al-Hājj repented and was cured by the Prophet in his dream.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Muslim belief that the Prophet had been granted knowledge of the unseen and intended his legacy to form the basis for the civilization of Islam has meant that Muslims venerate statements attributed to the Prophet before they

doubt them. Skepticism towards hadiths was not the default setting of Muslim hadith critics.

The approach of Western scholars has been the converse. The modern Western study of history, commonly referred to (despite its internal diversity) as the Historical Critical Method (HCM), is an approach to the past that emerged from Renaissance humanism and the critical approach to the sources of history and religion that subsequently developed in Germany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Maintaining a 'historical critical' perspective towards the past means that we do not accept what historical sources tell us without question. Instead, we interrogate them and attempt to establish their reliability according to a set of assumptions about how human society functions. As the great German historian Leopold von Ranke (d. 1886) declared, history is about looking behind the sources to find out 'What really happened.'<sup>3</sup>

The roots of the HCM emerged from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, when Italian and French humanist scholars adopted a new perspective towards their cultural heritage. This perspective focused on the study of language as a means to rediscover the perceived origins of Western European culture in the legacies of Greece and Rome. Western Europe had always considered itself a continuation of the Roman tradition, looking to Roman law and literature as exempla. But this relationship lacked any notion of historical distance; pre-Renaissance medieval artists painted classical Greek heroes in the armor of English knights and portrayed French kings in Roman regalia.<sup>4</sup>

Beginning with the Renaissance 'rebirth' of an interest in the pure Latin language of Roman figures like Cicero (d. 43 BCE), however, Italian scholars like Petrarch (d. 1374) developed a sense of historical depth – to understand truly the great figures of the Roman past, to imitate their mastery of language, rhetoric, and ethics, one had to realize that they were very different from us. They inhabited a different cultural milieu that predated Christianity.

This fascination with recovering the pure Latin language of the Romans led the Italian scholar of language, or philologist, Lorenzo Valla (d. 1457) to realize how much Latin had changed since the peak of Roman literature in the first century BCE. Since then, many scholars had been using Latin words to mean something other than their original, unadulterated meaning. Examining a document called *The Donation of Constantine*, which the Roman emperor Constantine

supposedly had written in the early fourth century granting the pope control over some lands in the environs of Rome, Valla pointed out that the presence of linguistic anachronisms (things that appear out of place in time – like a letter supposedly written by Jesus but mentioning mobile phones) meant that this document must have been a later forgery. The document mentions 'fiefs,' or land grants, but Valla points out that this word did not appear until much later.<sup>5</sup> Noticing how language changed over time had led Valla to unmask a historical forgery that had long served as a pillar of the papacy's claim to the right to act as a temporal power! Identifying anachronisms would serve as a pillar of the HCM.

The Renaissance fascination with language as a tool for rediscovering origins had even more stunning implications for the study of the Bible. One of Valla's successors in philology, the famous Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (d. 1536), duplicated Valla's obsession with classical Latin in the field of Greek. Erasmus devoted his career to producing the most reliable and accurate versions of classical Greek texts by comparing the oldest possible manuscripts of the books and then purging them of mistakes made in copying and the linguistic misunderstandings or even insertions of later scholars. When producing a new edition of the original Greek text of the New Testament, Erasmus discovered that a verse that had long been part of the Latin Bible and used as a definitive proof of the trinity was a later addition totally absent in the original Greek.<sup>6</sup>

The critical methods of Valla and Erasmus took root in Europe and blossomed in the universities of Germany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There the philological study of classical texts led to a myriad of critical revelations about Greco-Roman history and the Bible. Examining the Greek of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, F.A Wolf concluded in 1795 that the two works could not have been the product of one author.<sup>7</sup> Studies of the New Testament Gospels led German scholars of the nineteenth century to conclude that, far from being themselves eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus' life, the Gospel writers Luke and Matthew had both constructed their versions of Christ's life on material from the book of Mark.

Following in the footsteps of Valla, this new German school of history assumed that the first step of studying any text was to question its reliability and establish its authenticity. In other words, the default setting for scholars was to doubt the reliability of material transmitted about the past.

Certainly, this principle of doubt did not mean that European historians doubted *everything* about the past. But as their criticisms of the textual integrity of Homer's epics or the authenticity of the New Testament illustrate, they were willing to indulge fundamental doubts about the cornerstones of Western history based upon the presence of what they considered anachronisms or stylistic inconsistencies within a text. Contrast this with the statement of Sunni hadith critics like Mullā 'Alī Qārī (d. 1014/1606), who asserted that 'it is manifestly obvious that if something has been established by transmission [from the Prophet], then one should not heed any contradiction with sense perception or reason.'<sup>8</sup>

Along with this *a priori* doubt about textual reliability, the German school of history rested on other revolutionary methodological foundations. The European Enlightenment had produced materialist understandings of the world in which events proceeded according to natural laws and not according to divine intervention. As a result, history could not be explained by God's direct involvement or miracles. Instead, it was the immutable laws of human society that shaped human history.

One of the central principles of the HCM was thus the Principle of Analogy, which dictates that, although cultures can differ dramatically from place to place and era to era, human societies always function in essentially the same way. As a result, we can reconstruct how and why events transpired in Greece thousands of years ago based on our understanding of how individuals and groups function in our own societies today. If people generally tend to pursue their own interests and advance their own agendas today, then they did so in Greek times or at the time of Christ, and no one can be realistically exempted from such motivations.<sup>9</sup> Contrast this with the Sunni Muslim view of history in which, as the Prophet supposedly said, '**The best generation is the one in which I was sent, then the next, then the next.**' For Sunni hadith critics, the Prophet's time was 'free of evil.'<sup>10</sup> His Companions were incapable of lying about him and certainly not analogous to anyone else!

Another radical scholarly step which specifically held great import for the study of religion came from the German sociologist Max Weber (d. 1920), who argued that the original founders of religions were not actually responsible for their formalized teachings. These were organized by later generations in order to institutionalize the founder's charismatic religious authority. Contrast this with

the Sunni belief that hadith scholars were merely *preserving* their Prophet's original teachings by 'fending off lies from the Sunna of God's Messenger.'

In the study of the Bible, these trains of thought led to the development of what was termed **Form criticism** in Germany in the first decades of the twentieth century. This method of criticism combined the presumed doubt in the integrity of texts with the modern critic's confidence that the construction of these texts was affected by very profane, worldly interests. Form critics identified smaller sections within biblical books from which their larger narratives were composed. Each of these smaller components, termed forms, 'served a definite function in a concrete situation in the life of the early church.' 'The main purpose for the creation, the circulation, and the use of these forms was not to preserve the history of Jesus, but to strengthen the life of the church.'<sup>11</sup>

We thus find some important basic assumptions and methods that together made up the Historical Critical Method of scholars in Europe and America:

- 1 Initial doubt about the authenticity or reliability of a historical text
- 2 A general suspiciousness towards orthodox narratives presented in texts
- 3 The conviction that by analyzing historical sources a scholar can sift the reliable from unreliable by identifying which parts of the text served which historical agendas.

Along with the Principle of Analogy and the detection of anachronisms to identify unreliable reports, the HCM has also relied on a tool often referred to as the Principle of Dissimilarity. Developed by the Dutch classicist Jakob Perizonius (d. 1715), this states that a report that seems to contradict or challenge orthodoxy is probably originally true, since no one trying to construct that orthodoxy would have made it up.<sup>12</sup>

The development of the Historical Critical Method would have immediate consequences for the questions of authenticity in the Islamic tradition. In their efforts to better understand the historical development of the Old Testament, German biblical scholars of the late nineteenth century looked for the closest surviving analogy for ancient Israelite society: the Bedouins of Arabia. Soon the methods

of biblical scholars would be brought to bear on the Arab-Islamic tradition.

#### THE STAGES OF WESTERN CRITICISM OF EARLY ISLAMIC HISTORY

Unlike Muslims, who developed a distinct and independent science of hadiths, Western scholars have studied hadiths as part of a broader investigation of early Islamic history and the origins of the religion. We can divide these studies into three general areas, all of which touch upon the reliability of hadith literature: early Islamic political and sectarian history, the origins of the Quran, and the origins of Islamic law.

In the Western study of early Islam and the Authenticity Question we can discern four stages that are either chronologically or thematically distinct:

- 1 *The Orientalist Approach*: the initial application of the Historical Critical Method to early Islamic history, which challenges many features of the traditional Islamic legal and historical narratives but accepts its general structure.
- 2 *The Philo-Islamic Apology*: the arguments of some non-Muslim and Muslim scholars trained in the West responding to Orientalist critiques of hadiths.
- 3 *The Revisionist Approach*: beginning in the late 1970s, this approach applied the critical assumptions of the Orientalist Approach at a more basic level and questioned the greater narrative of early Islamic history, the origins of the Quran and of Islamic law.
- 4 *The Western Revaluation*: since the 1980s, this approach has rejected the extremes of the Revisionist Approach while continuing criticism of the early Islamic period according to the Historical Critical Method. Rejecting the radical skepticism of the Revisionists, however, has led some Western scholars to recognize both that the Orientalist method involves some questionable assumptions and also that the Muslim hadith tradition is much more sophisticated than previously believed.

#### THE HISTORICAL CRITICAL METHOD AND THE *MATN*: GOLDZIHHER'S REVOLUTIONARY CRITICISM OF HADITHS

One of the first Western writers to question the reliability of the hadith corpus as a source for Muhammad's life and deeds was the Scotsman William Muir (d. 1905), who served as a colonial administrator and educator in British India. In his *Life of Mohamet* (1861) he rejects the hadith corpus as clearly biased and unreliable. Hadiths merely promoted the Muslim 'chorus of glory to Moḥammad' as well as the political, sectarian, and scholarly ambitions of the early Muslim community.<sup>13</sup> Only the Quran was a reliable source for the Prophet's teachings, Muir claims. Although he feels that 'European critics' must reject at least half of the material in *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, Muir admits that some hadiths can be considered reliable. These include hadiths on issues on which independent reports are in general agreement as well as hadiths that portray the Prophet unfavorably (an example of the Principle of Dissimilarity at work).<sup>14</sup> He also notes that classical hadith criticism was useless because it focused only on the *isnād* and not the content of the hadiths themselves.<sup>15</sup> Although with Muir we see the application of the Historical Critical Method to hadith literature, it was the Hungarian Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921) who applied this on a larger scale and with more academic rigor.

Faithful to the German school of history, Goldziher approached the textual sources of early Islamic history and thought with 'skeptical caution.' The fact that there was no historical documentation of the Prophet's life written in his own time, and that material about him had been transmitted through the very flexible medium of oral traditions, meant that hadiths could not be viewed as documentary evidence. They were eminently subject to forgery and manipulation.

Like Valla and the German biblical scholars, the critical keys that Goldziher used to sift true from false reports about the Prophet were anachronism and the Principle of Analogy; hadiths that seemed to address conflicts and concerns that emerged only after the Prophet's death must be propaganda created by parties involved in these conflicts, not the actual words of the Prophet. As a result, the contents of many hadiths not only prove they were forged, but they also allow the historian to determine who forged them and when.<sup>16</sup> For Goldziher, then, hadiths serve not as a document of the Prophet's actual legacy, but rather as 'a direct reflection of the aspirations of the Islamic community.'<sup>17</sup>

Goldziher notes that the Prophet's authority was immediately both compelling and appealing to Muslims. He concludes that the limited writing down of hadiths was a very early process, but the very power of the Prophet's precedent meant that Muslims also quickly found manipulating hadiths for their own purposes irresistible.<sup>18</sup> The fact that the Prophet could have had knowledge of future events served as a license for anachronism among early hadith forgers. Events unfolding in the nascent Muslim community could be 'described' or 'judged' by attributing statements to the Prophet, who had been informed about them by God.<sup>19</sup>

Goldziher lays out four main stages and motivations for the forgery of hadiths by Muslims during the first three hundred years of Islam: political agendas, legal agendas, sectarian agendas, and communal/historical agendas. For Goldziher, the original and most potent motivation for the forgery of hadiths was politics. Specifically, he argues that many hadiths and the nature of the early hadith tradition as a whole leave no doubt that the Umayyad dynasty pursued a program of political propaganda in which hadith forgery played an important part.

Unlike the Muslim community during the Prophet's lifetime and the pious inhabitants of Medina after his death, in Goldziher's opinion Umayyad rule from Syria was entirely secular with no inherent Islamic legitimacy.<sup>20</sup> The Umayyads thus arranged for hadiths to be forged which legitimized their rule and political practices. Goldziher argues, for example, that during the Second Civil War (680–92), when the Umayyads' enemy 'Abdallāh b. al-Zubayr (d. 73/692) was in control of Mecca and the pilgrimage routes, the Umayyads circulated a hadith that urged Muslims not **'to remove the saddles from their mounts [in other words, to visit] except at three mosques,'** the Haram Mosque in Mecca, the Prophet's Mosque in Medina and the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Goldziher infers that this hadith was an attempt to establish an alternative annual pilgrimage location in Umayyad-controlled territory in Palestine.<sup>21</sup> When the Umayyad caliphs wanted to appear more majestic before the congregation by delivering sermons while seated at Friday prayers, agents of the dynasty forged a hadith that the Prophet had given his sermons while seated.<sup>22</sup>

The Umayyads were able to forge and circulate these hadiths successfully, Goldziher argues, because they patronized and sponsored the early collection of hadiths in general. Goldziher points out that

the early pivot of hadith collection in the Hejaz and Syria, al-Zuhrī, served as a tutor to Umayyad princes and a judge for the state. He even wore the uniform of the Umayyad military. Goldziher thus does not find it surprising that al-Zuhrī appears in the *isnād* of the above-mentioned hadith of the three mosques suitable for visiting.<sup>23</sup> He notes that many other early hadith masters, such as al-Sha'bī al-Himyarī (d. 103–10/721–8), were also associated with the Umayyad court. To a large extent, he suggests, the study of hadiths on a large scale occurred *because of* Umayyad interest in political propaganda.

Just as political concerns drove forgery of hadiths in the Umayyad period, Goldziher continues, they continued to motivate forgery under the Abbasids. Unlike the 'secular' Umayyads, the Abbasid state was built on a religious message: the return of rule to the family of the Prophet, the Quran, and the Sunna.<sup>24</sup> He argues that under Umayyad rule, many of the Muslims living in their newly conquered realms had very little knowledge about the ritual and legal details of their religion.<sup>25</sup> Under Abbasid patronage, the pious religious scholars whose voices had been subdued during Umayyad times had to produce a comprehensive legal, dogmatic, and communal vision for the new Islamic empire. It was under the Abbasids that the Sunna of the Prophet became seen as the norm for all areas of life and that hadiths began to be used in religious law.<sup>26</sup>

Since the Quran contained very little legal material, these Muslim scholars had to resort to other means to construct Islamic law. The Partisans of Reason (*ahl al-ra'y*) turned to the legacy of Roman provincial law where, for example, Goldziher claims Muslims acquired the notion that a defendant in a case may clear himself of charges by swearing an oath. As for the Partisans of Hadith (*ahl al-hadīth*), 'the path followed by them was a less honest one.' They invented whole swathes of hadiths on issues of Islamic law and dogma in order to provide the raw material for their construction of Islamic tradition. With the Abbasids promoting such activities, he concludes, 'it may be imagined how greatly the fabrication of hadiths flourished under these circumstances.' In addition to forging a vast number of hadiths, Goldziher claims that the Abbasid-era Partisans of Hadith also invented the system of hadith criticism wholesale as a tool for rebutting any hadiths that their opponents might use against them in debates.<sup>27</sup>

Like the Umayyads, the Abbasids and their partisans also forged hadiths to legitimize their rule. Concerning a hadith in which the



Prophet gives the spoils of war to his clan, the Banū Hāshim, from whom the Abbasids claimed descent, while giving none to the Banū ‘Abd Shams, the clan of the Umayyads, Goldziher remarks that the ‘dynastic-legitimistic character of this ḥadīth is obvious.’<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the early Islamic period, he asserts, pious Muslims also forged ḥadīths that allowed them to make sense of the turmoil and strife wracking their community. Thus we find the ḥadīth in which the Prophet says that his is the best of generations and that all subsequent ones will diverge further and further from his golden age.<sup>29</sup> These pious scholars similarly forged ḥadīths urging political quietism – a cause no doubt supported by the government – with ḥadīths such as **‘Blessed is he who avoids public agitations** (*inna al-sa‘īd man junniba al-fitan*).<sup>30</sup>

Forging ḥadīths became a way for religious scholars to narrate the course of Islam’s history, as well as to predict its future, through the Prophet’s words. Goldziher states that the Partisans of Ḥadīth ‘do not restrain themselves at all when they make the Prophet speak about the general development of the Islamic empire.’ Hence we find ḥadīths describing how the Prophet, while digging the defensive ditch around Medina, saw visions of the faraway castles of Syria and Persia that the Muslims would conquer.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, Goldziher noted how more strictly sectarian conflicts also led to the forgery of large numbers of ḥadīths.<sup>32</sup> Shiites eager to prove ‘Alī’s claim to leadership forged the ḥadīth of Ghadīr Khumm, in which the Prophet is made to announce to his Companions that **‘Whoever’s master I am, ‘Alī is his master.’** Sunnis countered by forging exact counterparts to such ḥadīths featuring Abū Bakr or ‘Umar instead of ‘Alī, or circulating reports emphasizing that the Prophet had in fact made no will at all assigning a successor.<sup>33</sup> He also identified some less idealistic motivations for forging ḥadīths. Individual cities, tribes, and schools of law would forge chauvinistic ḥadīths in which the Prophet would foretell or affirm their prominence.<sup>34</sup>

Since Goldziher’s work provides the foundation for later Western criticisms of ḥadīths, we must pause to examine some of his assumptions. As we saw with the German school of historical criticism, Goldziher maintains an attitude of pronounced skepticism towards the orthodox Muslim narrative of Islamic history. It is neither shaped by God’s will nor immune from the profane motivations that afflict humans everywhere. The early Muslim community was not some

morally upright polity but a series of self-interested parties that exploited the authority of the Prophet to their benefit. At the root of his reasoning lies the critical assumption that, if a ḥadīth serves the purposes of a group, it was forged by that group. This is especially clear if the ḥadīth contains some anachronism.

His willingness to indulge in skepticism is crucial for his conclusions about the ḥadīth tradition. Describing the ḥadīth activity of the early transmitter ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Khālid, Goldziher states confidently that ‘there are presumably many [of his ḥadīths] which were to benefit the prevailing political tendencies, because this ‘Abd al-Rahmān was for years an important official of Umayyad princes.’<sup>35</sup> In other words, the simple fact that ‘Abd al-Rahmān served as an Umayyad functionary meant that he *must* have forged ḥadīths to support Umayyad causes. Less skeptical scholars might not feel comfortable with this reasoning, since a person can work for a state or company without lying on its behalf. In the above-mentioned case of the Prophet giving his clan more of the spoils of war than he gave to the Umayyad clan, why should we assume that this is forged simply because it seems to support the anti-Umayyad agenda of the Abbasids? It is not inconceivable that the Prophet actually did grant his clan the lion’s share of booty, especially since the chief of the Umayyad family, Abū Sufyān, had been a diehard opponent of Islam in Mecca.

Sometimes Goldziher’s vision of the ḥadīth tradition as inherently manipulative and unreliable leads him to misinterpret evidence. As proof that Abbasid-era ḥadīth scholars forged reports for the benefit of the state, he discusses the case of Ghiyāth b. Ibrāhīm, who made up a ḥadīth in which the Prophet allowed raising pigeons for competition because Ghiyāth knew that the Abbasid caliph al-Mahdī was fond of them. Goldziher concludes that, although the caliph caught on to the forgery, ‘the tale nonetheless shows what a court theologian was capable of doing in matters of the tradition.’<sup>36</sup> This story, however, is only found in Muslim sources as a textbook example of the sin of forging ḥadīths. Sunni ḥadīth critics reviled Ghiyāth b. Ibrāhīm as a forger and referred to the incident as an example of how one person forged a ḥadīth and how the network of critics immediately caught it. Goldziher, on the other hand, uses a story designed to illustrate an exception to represent the rule.

Goldziher’s investigation of forgery in the ḥadīth tradition nonetheless leads to some tremendous insights as to how pious Muslims could concoct lies about their Prophet. He describes how after the

Prophet's death even his Companions forged hadiths 'which were thought to be in accord with his sentiments and could therefore, in their view, legitimately be ascribed to him.'<sup>37</sup> Under the Umayyads and Abbasids, he suggests, hadith scholars could justify forging hadiths because phrasing statements as the words of the Prophet was the idiom in which authority was expressed. 'The end sanctified the means.' The widespread circulation of hadiths such as one in which the Prophet instructs Muslims that, if they hear a hadith whose meaning accords with the Quran, **'then it is true whether I said it or not,'** demonstrate that some Muslims found no conflict in preserving what they felt were legitimate components of the Prophet's teachings by attributing false hadiths to him.<sup>38</sup>

Like Muir, Goldziher concluded that content criticism played no discernable role in the work of Muslim hadith critics. Even if the text of a hadith is replete with suspicious material, he observes, 'Nobody is allowed to say: "because the *matn* contains a logical contradiction or historical absurdity I doubt the correctness of the *isnād*."' From this he concludes that 'Muslim critics have no feeling for even the crudest anachronisms provided that the *isnād* is correct.'<sup>39</sup> Goldziher's conclusion that examining the contents of reports was not a component of early hadith criticism has been consistently echoed by Western scholars.

#### DATING HADITH FORGERY BY *ISNĀDS*: THE SCHOOL OF JOSEPH SCHACHT

Goldziher had brought the European historical critical tradition to bear on hadith literature and had concluded that a significant number of hadiths that Muslims believed were authentic were actually forged as part of the articulation of Islamic political, legal, dogmatic, and historical worldviews. Western criticism of hadiths was brought to a new level by a German scholar named Joseph Schacht (d. 1969), who built on Goldziher's skepticism towards the reliability of hadith literature. Schacht also concludes that hadiths cannot be assumed in any way to actually describe the Prophet's life.<sup>40</sup> While Goldziher focused on political propaganda and sectarian agendas, Schacht focused specifically on the function of hadiths in Islamic law. Whereas Goldziher had utilized the *matn* of hadiths to determine when and why they

were forged, Schacht examined the *isnāds* and the diachronic (literally, 'across time') tradition of hadith collection and use.

Legal hadiths, Schacht argues, do not represent the actual details of the Prophet's life. Rather, they were attributed to the Prophet by later schools of law to lend support to their doctrines.<sup>41</sup> He presents one simple observation that underlies his entire criticism of the hadith corpus. If we look at admittedly early Muslim scholarly writings, such as the letter that al-Hasan al-Basrī (d. 110/728) addressed to the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik (d. 86/705) warning him not to adopt a predestinarian outlook, we find that al-Hasan does not mention hadiths as part of his argument. Instead, he draws on the Quran and stories of earlier prophets.<sup>42</sup> Since Sunni hadith collections contain plentiful hadiths that al-Hasan al-Basrī could have used as evidence in his treatise, Schacht concludes, the fact that he did not use them in his polemics means that these hadiths must not have existed at the time.<sup>43</sup> This type of argument is known as an argument *e silentio*, or 'from silence.'

Schacht argues that the original study and elaboration of Islamic law, which he calls 'the ancient schools of law,' developed in cities such as Kufa and Medina around the practice of that local community and the opinions of its senior Muslim religious figures, such as Abū Hanīfa, Mālik b. Anas, and al-Layth b. Sa'd. The Prophet's Sunna

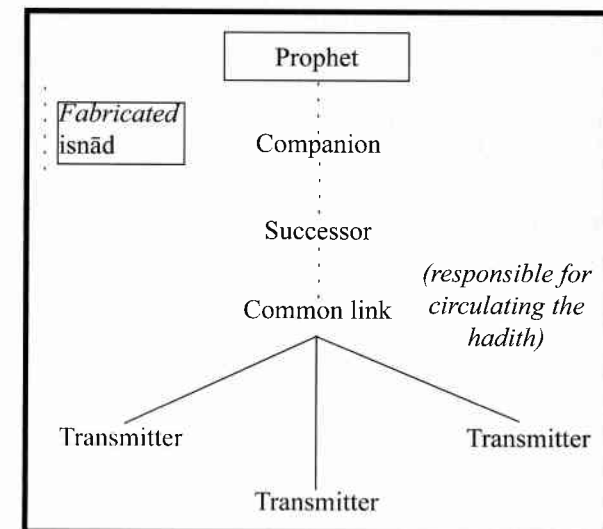


Figure 8.0 Schacht's Common Link



was not an immediately revered source for law. Debates among these scholars, however, caused a great deal of contention because none of these ancient schools of law possessed arguments that their opponents found compelling enough to follow. Schacht thus concludes that by the late eighth and early ninth centuries, Muslim scholars of these ancient schools attempted to resolve this interpretive chaos by investing the legal precedent of the Prophet and his Companions with more authority. Schacht associates this transition with al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/820), whose famous *Risāla* documents his campaign to identify the notion of authoritative precedent (*sunna*) solely with Prophetic hadiths.<sup>44</sup>

According to Schacht's thought, the movement away from the precedent of numerous authoritative figures such as the Companions and Successors to the Prophet himself manifested itself in the 'backgrowth' of *isnāds*. Schacht's reasoning was simple and clear. Books surviving from the ancient schools of law, like Mālik's *Muwatta'*, include far more reports from later figures than from the Prophet himself.<sup>45</sup> The collections compiled after al-Shāfi'ī, however, such as the canonical Six Books, were undeniably focused on Prophetic reports.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, these collections often included reports attributed to the Prophet that the authors of earlier hadith collections had attributed to Companions or Successors. A report in the *Muwatta'* may be attributed to a Companion, while a generation later al-Shāfi'ī attributes the same report to the Prophet through a defective *mursal isnād* (in which there exists a gap in the *isnād* between the Prophet and the person quoting him). Two generations later, in the *Sahīh* of al-Bukhārī, we find the same hadith with a complete *isnād* to the Prophet.<sup>47</sup> Schacht contended that the Prophetic versions of these reports had clearly been forged after the compilation of works such as the *Muwatta'*, since if they had existed earlier, then scholars like Mālik no doubt would have included them in their writings to trump their adversaries in legal debates.<sup>48</sup>

In Schacht's view, the development of law in the first centuries of Islam was thus a slow process of finding more and more compelling sources of authority for legal or doctrinal maxims. Statements from Successors were the oldest and thus most historically accurate.<sup>49</sup> In debates between early legal scholars, however, the problem of competing Successor reports was solved by disingenuous experts attributing these statements to the next highest rung on the ladder of authority: the Companions of the Prophet. We should thus treat these

Companion reports as historical fabrications.<sup>50</sup> By the mid eighth century, the problem of competing reports from the Companions resulted in such statements being pushed back to the Prophet himself. Al-Shāfi'ī proved the greatest champion of this total reliance on Prophetic hadiths. Since the major Sunni hadith collections consist almost entirely of reports from the Prophet, much of their material must have been put into circulation after al-Shāfi'ī's time.<sup>51</sup> Schacht's conclusions yielded a simple rule: the farther back the *isnād* of a hadith goes, the more assured we should be of its fabrication and the later the date that this fabrication occurred.<sup>52</sup>

But how do we know who was responsible for the backgrowth of an *isnād* and when they had attributed a statement to the Prophet? For the legal hadiths that Schacht studies, he posits the theory of the Common Link (see Figure 8.0). Schacht notices that for the hadiths he selected for analysis, the report is transmitted by only one chain until a certain point several generations after the Prophet. After this transmitter, whom Schacht terms the 'Common Link,' the hadith spreads out to more chains of transmission. Since the eighth century witnessed a process of *isnāds* growing backwards, then it seems reasonable to assume that this Common Link is responsible for fabricating his *isnād* back to the Prophet. Everything before the Common Link is thus made up, which explains why the hadith only spreads out widely after him.<sup>53</sup>

Schacht adds that, in addition to the backgrowth of *isnāds* leading to a massive increase in the number of 'hadiths,' jurists and hadith scholars also created 'parallel' *isnāds* to help avert the arguments made by Mu'tazilites who rejected the use of hadiths with a limited number of chains of transmission.<sup>54</sup> To avoid the stylistic awkwardness of putting what were clearly legal statements made by early Muslim scholars in the mouth of Muhammad, Schacht explains that the circumstances and contextual details of legal hadiths were added to provide 'an authentic touch.'<sup>55</sup>

Schacht's understanding of the early Islamic legal tradition and his Common Link Theory became the dominant vision of the hadith tradition among Western scholars and has exercised tremendous influence. This approach has been elaborated further by the Dutch scholar G.H.A. Juynboll, one of the leading proponents of what we have termed the Orientalist school.

While acknowledging that the origins of what became hadith literature no doubt occurred in the life the Prophet, Juynboll adds that

'surely it is unlikely that we will ever find even a moderately successful method of proving with incontrovertible certainty the historicity of the ascription of such to the prophet but in a few isolated instances.' Too many of the Companions, he continues, were credited 'with such colossal numbers of obviously forged traditions that it is no longer feasible to conceive of a foolproof method to sift authentic from falsely ascribed material.'<sup>56</sup>

If it is beyond the historian's means to prove that the Prophet did say something, Juynboll certainly believes that one can prove that he did *not* say something. He does this by dating when the hadith came into existence. Building on Schacht's Common Link Theory, Juynboll asserts that the more people transmit a hadith from a scholar, 'the more historicity that moment has.' In other words, the more people narrated a hadith from a transmitter, the more attestation there is that the hadith actually existed at the time.<sup>57</sup> It must therefore have been forged at some earlier date.

Any links in an *isnād* that lack such multiple attestations are of dubious historical reliability, especially in light of the supposed adoration that early Muslims had for hadiths and their preservation. Juynboll asks, if the Prophet had really uttered a certain hadith in

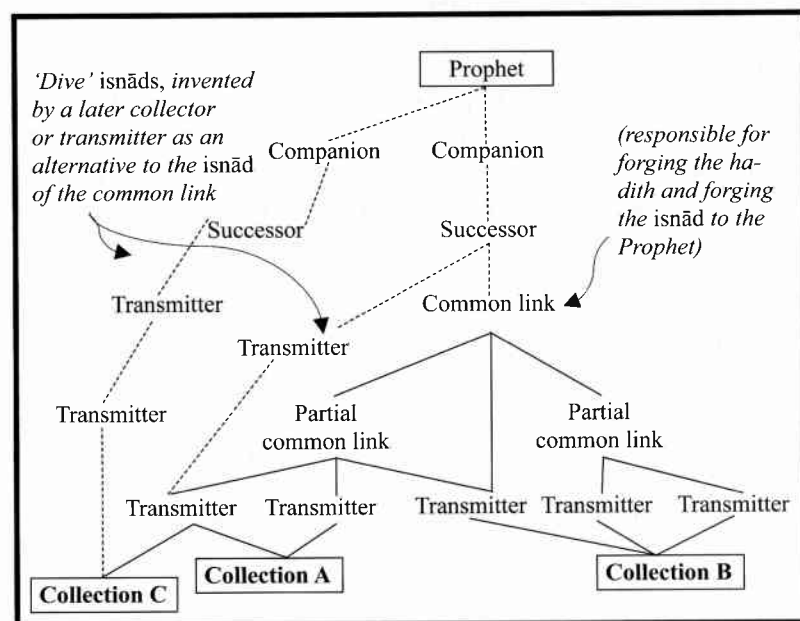


Figure 8.1 Juynboll's Common Link Theory

the presence of his devoted followers, how do we explain why he 'should choose to convey his saying about [a topic] to just one companion, and why this companion should choose to convey it to just one successor?'<sup>58</sup> For Juynboll, then, the only historically verifiable 'moment' in the transmission of a hadith occurs with a Common Link. Because it is inconceivable that a real hadith could be transmitted by only one *isnād* from the Prophet, anything before this Common Link must have been fabricated by him or her.<sup>59</sup>

Juynboll feels that concluding that a hadith must have been forged because more transmissions of it do not exist (an argument *e silentio*) is well justified. Since Muslim hadith scholars habitually collected all the available transmissions of a hadith they could find, their omission of any transmission must entail that it did not exist.<sup>60</sup>

In his case-by-case analysis of many hadiths, Juynboll develops a jargon for describing the different phenomena of *isnād* fabrication. As is illustrated in Figure 8.1, we see that the hadith has a clear Common Link, whom Juynboll would accuse of attributing the hadith to the Prophet along with a suitable *isnād*. We also find two other transmissions of the hadith besides that of the Common Link, one through the Common Link's source and another through a second Companion. Since there is no historical way to verify the existence of these two alternative transmissions (they lack a Common Link), they must have been forged by a transmitter or collector to provide an alternative chain of transmission, perhaps with a more elevated *isnād*, to that of the Common Link. Juynboll terms these alternative transmissions 'Diving' *isnāds*.<sup>61</sup> A hadith that has no Common Link, only a set of unrelated 'diving' chains (which Juynboll terms a 'spider'), is not historically datable in any sense.<sup>62</sup>

Juynboll's judgment on 'diving' chains of transmission leads him to dismiss the whole notion of corroborating transmissions (*mutāba'a*) among Muslim hadith scholars. Because these chains of transmission appear independently and lack any Common Link, they cannot be verified and should be assumed to be forgeries. They are simply plagiarisms of the Common Link's *isnāds* to make the hadith seem more reliable. Juynboll notes that it 'never ceases to astonish' him that master Muslim hadith scholars like Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalānī did not realize that corroborating *isnāds* were in fact groundless fabrications.<sup>63</sup>

As his treatment of corroborating transmissions suggests, Juynboll feels that the Muslim methods of hadith criticism were wholly ineffective at weeding out forged hadiths. First of all, he says, the

science of hadith criticism emerged far too late to judge with any reliability what transpired in the early period of hadith forgery in the late seventh and early eighth centuries. Second, the methods of hadith critics did not consider the possibility that *isnāds* could be made up wholesale, a fact that rendered the proof value of any corroborating *isnāds* null. Juynboll notes that the phenomenon Muslim critics called *tadlīs* (obfuscation in transmission, see Chapter 3) would have allowed disingenuous forgers to attribute a hadith to an earlier respected scholar. He claims that *tadlīs* 'was hardly ever detected.' Finally, he follows Goldziher in asserting the 'near absence of application of suitable criteria' for content criticism by early hadith critics.<sup>64</sup>

Like Goldziher and Schacht, Juynboll concludes that the 'programmatic' production of hadiths started after the death of the Companions, with the standardization of the *isnād* format taking place in the 680s and 690s.<sup>65</sup> Following those earlier Orientalists, he agrees that hadiths originated as the exhortatory material of storytellers and preachers and only later addressed topics of Islamic law. Most of what Muslims considered to be the most reliable hadiths probably emerged in the 700s to 720s, when Muslim scholars began to invest the Sunna of the Prophet with ultimate authority and when the backgrowth of *isnāds* allowed material to be manufactured to furnish the Prophet's legacy. While Schacht had identified the backgrowth of an *isnād* if he found a Prophetic hadith in a collection like *Sahīh al-Bukhārī* that had appeared in an earlier collection as a statement of a Companion or Successor, Juynboll generalized this conclusion. Even if you cannot find a Companion/Successor opinion that corresponds to a Prophetic hadith, the fact that so many hadiths seem to have originated from these kinds of non-Prophetic statements makes 'any "prophetic" saying suspect as also belonging to that genre.'<sup>66</sup>

Using information provided by Muslim hadith critics and collectors themselves, Juynboll offers proof for the massive multiplication of hadiths in this period. In the earliest sources available, he says, major hadith transmitters like Ibn 'Abbās were described as narrating as few as nine hadiths from the Prophet. Yet by the time Ibn Hanbal compiled his vast *Musnad* in the first half of the 800s he collected 1,710 narrations from Ibn 'Abbās (although Juynboll admits that these included repetitions of the same hadith).<sup>67</sup>

Beyond the backgrowth of *isnāds*, in his numerous articles Juynboll criticized a variety of other concepts developed by Muslim hadith critics. He challenges the provenance of the *isnād* that Muslim

critics considered one of the most reliable: Mālik ← Nāfi' ← Ibn 'Umar ← Prophet, by claiming that the transmitter Nāfi', the client of Ibn 'Umar, did not really exist as a major hadith narrator. Arguing that Nāfi' cannot be established as a Common Link, and pointing to the fact that the early transmission critic Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845) did not describe him as a noteworthy hadith transmitter, Juynboll concludes that Mālik and other early scholars simply invented Nāfi' as a useful tool for anchoring their own legal opinions in the words of the Prophet.<sup>68</sup>

Juynboll also challenges the notion that attaining the level of *mutawātir* in the eyes of Muslim critics in any way guaranteed the authenticity of a hadith. Using his Common Link method on the famous hadith of **'Whoever lies about me intentionally, let him prepare a seat for himself in Hell,'** Juynboll claims that Common Link analysis cannot establish it as reaching back to the Prophet. He thus concludes that if the most famous *mutawātir* hadith cannot be proven to be authentic according to his methods, then the whole idea of *mutawātir* hadiths 'is **no guarantee** for the historicity of a *ḥadīth*'s ascription to the prophet.'<sup>69</sup>

#### THE PHILO-ISLAMIC APOLOGY

Orientalist criticisms of hadiths quickly elicited responses from Muslim scholars. Although he affirmed many of Muir's critiques of the hadith tradition, the Indian Islamic modernist, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) retorted that Muir's assumption that the bulk of hadith transmitters were engaged in deliberate misrepresentation stemmed from his anti-Muslim bias. Furthermore, Khan accuses Muir of supporting his accusations of the political and sectarian motivations behind hadith forgery using as evidence the same reports he had deemed historically unreliable.<sup>70</sup>

Later, more in-depth responses to Orientalist criticisms came from scholars working and trained in Western universities who did not wholly agree with Goldziher, Schacht, and their followers. From the 1960s to the 1980s, a number of scholars, most of them from Muslim or Middle Eastern backgrounds, challenged Orientalist conclusions either wholly or in part. The most influential challenge came from Nabia Abbott (d. 1981) (a Christian from Iraq and later professor at

the University of Chicago) who based her book *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri II: Qur'ānic Commentary and Tradition* (1967) on a selection of early Arabic papyrus documents from the second half of the eighth and the early ninth centuries.

Abbott presents an interesting challenge to Goldziher's theory that the Umayyad government, with its agents like al-Zuhrī, instituted hadith collection and actively fabricated a substantial component of the hadith corpus pursuant to their political agenda. Evidence from our earliest sources on the origins of hadith study, she contends, portrays the Umayyads as concerned first and foremost with collecting the Prophet's teachings on administrative issues like taxes and charity, not with material connected to the political image of their rule. She notes how the first state attempt to collect hadiths, ordered by the caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz (d. 101/720), was limited to administrative hadiths. The hadiths that al-Zuhrī collected for the Umayyads for promulgation in the provinces dealt only with charitable tithes (*sadaqa*).<sup>71</sup> Abbott argues that the 'family *isnāds*' like those from Nāfi' ← Ibn 'Umar or al-'Alā' b. 'Abd al-Rahmān ← his father ← Abū Hurayra emerged far earlier and were far more numerous than previously imagined. Umayyad rulers were attempting to make these private collections public, not ordering the forgery and circulation of baseless hadiths.<sup>72</sup>

Abbott also rebuts the argument that the exponential increase in the number of hadiths in the eighth and ninth centuries proves that hadiths were being forged *en masse*. First of all, she notes that even early written collections of hadith could be sizable: al-Hasan al-Basrī's *sahifa* was a scroll six inches in diameter. Certainly, however, early written collections were much smaller than the great hadith compendia of the ninth century. Al-Zuhrī's library could be carried in one bag, while Ibn Hanbal's was twelve and a half camel loads, and al-Wāqidī's (d. 207/822) six hundred boxes.<sup>73</sup>

The explanation for this growth, however, was not necessarily forgery. Papyrus and parchment were extremely expensive, and scholars could only use them to record the most basic information about their hadiths, such as the *matn* with perhaps one *isnād*. With the arrival of cheap paper in the Middle East at the end of the eighth century, scholars could afford to write down every hadith narration they came across. In his famous *Musnad*, for example, Ibn Hanbal tried to include an average of seven narrations for every tradition he listed.<sup>74</sup> As the science of hadith collection and criticism developed in the mid

eighth century, a 'hadith' became identified with its *isnād*, not with its *matn*. As ninth-century scholars obsessively collected all the various transmissions (each called a 'hadith') of one tradition, the number of 'hadiths' multiplied rapidly. As *isnāds* developed and became interlaced, this number increased even more, while the actual number of Prophetic traditions remained relatively small.<sup>75</sup>

Abbott's challenging some of the Orientalist attacks on the Sunni hadith tradition, however, did not mean that she embraced it fully. She notes that the widespread disagreement between Muslim critics on the reliability of a transmitter or *isnād* 'nullified' the real effectiveness of the Muslim science of hadith as a critical tool.<sup>76</sup> Abbott provides perhaps the most insightful explanation of how so much forged material did appear. Since Muslim hadith critics treated hadiths dealing with law much more severely than those that they used in exhortatory preaching (*al-targhīb wa al-tarhīb*), the type of *matn* greatly affected the critical stringency with which the hadith was treated. Much of the material forged in areas such as exhortatory preaching thus survived because Muslims allowed it to.<sup>77</sup>

A vigorous rebuttal of Orientalist scholarship came from an Indian scholar who studied at Cambridge University, Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami. In two books, *Studies in Early Ḥadīth Literature* (1978) and *On Schacht's Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (1984), Azami attacked Schacht's work (and also that of Goldziher) and those who had relied on his conclusions. One of the points for which Azami takes Goldziher and Schacht to task is the substantial inferences they make without any conclusive evidence. Goldziher, for example, had concluded that the Umayyad state had sponsored hadith forgery based on the fact that certain hadiths seemed to support Umayyad interests and that certain transmitters were linked to the court. Certainly, Azami acknowledges that the Umayyads fought groups like the Shiites. But he contends that there is no evidence of an official or unofficial Umayyad directive to fabricate hadiths for the cause of the state (here we should note that the historian al-Madā'inī did adduce evidence for this; see Chapter 3).<sup>78</sup>

One of Azami's principal objections to Schacht is his reliance on a small number of sources to reach broad generalizations. Azami begins his discussion by pointing out how few sources Schacht had relied on and drawing attention to the numerous early Arabic manuscripts that had been discovered since his time. Western scholars of hadiths, he states, should update their data instead of parroting Schacht

uncritically.<sup>79</sup> Azami states that Schacht based his conclusions on the *Muwatta'* of Mālik and the *Umm* of al-Shāfi'ī, but he 'imposed the results of his study on the entire *ḥadīth* literature.'<sup>80</sup> Moreover, one of the *isnāds* that Schacht relies on for his evidence that *isnāds* grew backwards in Mālik's case was an instance in which later Muslim *ḥadīth* critics believed Mālik had made a mistake. Schacht thus took an error on Mālik's part as an example of the rule instead of an exception to it.<sup>81</sup>

Azami also accuses Schacht of fundamentally misunderstanding the realities of early Islamic legal scholarship.<sup>82</sup> Schacht's argument *e silentio*, where a scholar failing to mention a *ḥadīth* or a complete *isnād* meant that the *ḥadīth* or that complete *isnād* must not have existed at that time, is flawed. A legal expert (*muftī*), Azami argues, often answered questions without documenting the evidence he had used in arriving at his conclusion or without providing a full *isnād* for his *ḥadīths*. Azami provides an example from al-Shāfi'ī's famous *Risāla*, where al-Shāfi'ī provides an incomplete *isnād* for a *ḥadīth* but excuses himself because he did not have with him the book that included his more complete *isnād* for that *ḥadīth*.<sup>83</sup>

Finally, Azami devotes a large portion of his books to attempting to prove that Muslims had begun writing down *ḥadīths* and even using the *isnād* during the time of the Prophet and his Companions. Here, he relies on surviving sources from the eighth and ninth centuries which mention earlier written sources. He does this in order to disprove Schacht's claim that Prophetic *ḥadīths* only appeared as *isnāds* grew backwards, a claim Schacht based in part on a lack of books surviving from the first two centuries of Islam that could serve as evidence that Muslims had recorded *ḥadīths* during that time.<sup>84</sup> Of course, here Azami relies on Muslims' testimony about their own thoroughness in *ḥadīth* collection – a biased source that some Orientalists would not believe to begin with.

#### THE REVISIONIST APPROACH AND THE CATEGORICAL REJECTION OF THE MUSLIM NARRATIVE

Orientalists such as Goldziher, Schacht, and Juynboll had questioned the authenticity of individual *ḥadīths* and established a skeptical outlook towards *ḥadīth* literature as a genre, but they did not

doubt the overall narrative of the Prophet's life and Islamic origins. Muhammad was still assumed to have been a merchant from Mecca who had preached the monotheistic 'religion of Abraham' to his peers in Mecca before fleeing the city to establish a new Muslim community in Medina. Orientalists never questioned that he had claimed to receive revelations in the form of the Quran and had engaged in known conflicts with his enemies with the help of his famous cadre of Companions.

From 1977 to 1979, however, a series of studies demanded that the Historical Critical Method be applied fully and consistently to early Islamic history. If historians were supposed to adopt a skeptical attitude towards obviously biased sources and attempt to rely on the earliest, best documented evidence possible, why had Western historians believed the grand Muslim narrative of Islam's origins at all? After all, the history of the Prophet's life, message, and community was told solely by Muslims, and there were no surviving textual sources from before the mid 700s, a full century after the Prophet's death. This would have provided ample time for Muslim scholars and historians – certainly not impartial in their activities – to construct whatever legacy they wanted for their 'Prophet' from scratch. This Revisionist criticism of the Orientalists applied equally to scholars like Azami who had objected to their critiques, for Azami had also relied on sources written down long after the first generations of Islam to reconstruct the early collection of *ḥadīths*.

Two scholars, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, proposed rewriting early Islamic history using the earliest written sources on Islam, which had the added benefit of not being written by Muslims. On the basis of a set of surviving Christian religious writings dating from as early as 634 CE, Crone's and Cook's book *Hagarism* (1977) proposed that Islam had actually been a late version of apocalyptic Judaism in which the Arabs of the Hejaz had rediscovered their Abrahamic roots and sought to retake the Holy Land of Palestine. Clearly, this was a very different history than the detailed account of Muhammad's life and teachings given in the *ḥadīth* literature!

The novel contribution of the Revisionist approach was not the mechanics of criticizing the *ḥadīth* tradition, but the scale of skepticism. Crone, for example, espouses Schacht's and Juynboll's theory about the backgrowth of *isnāds* and the conclusion that *ḥadīths* cannot really tell us anything about Islam before the year c. 100/720. Crone seconds the Orientalist critique that *ḥadīths* transmitted by

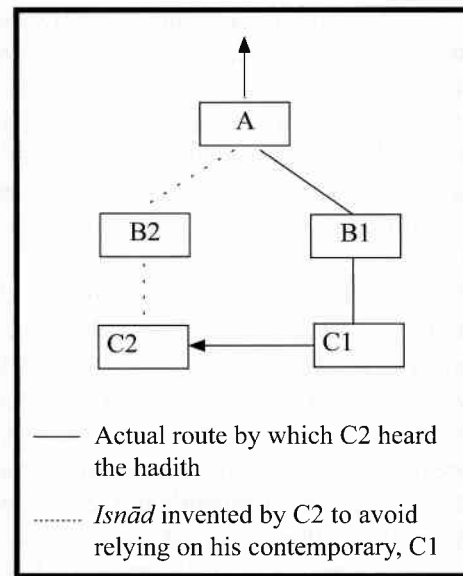


Figure 8.2 Cook's Theory of *Tadlīs* and Spread of *Isnāds*

Muslims reflect 'what the Prophet meant to *them*, not what the generation before them had taken him to say, let alone what he had said or done in his own particular time and place.'<sup>85</sup>

In her work on the origins of Islamic law, *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law* (1987), Crone's severe doubt about the reliability of the Islamic historical tradition leads her to a new degree of skepticism towards the hadith corpus as a whole. '[I]n the field of substantive law,' she argues, 'traditions attributed to the Prophet must indeed be presumed to be inauthentic.'<sup>86</sup> As an example, she takes one hadith that 'practically all' Orientalists had considered authentic: the famous 'Constitution' of Medina, the agreement between Muhammad and the Jews of Medina in which all parties agreed to be part of one 'community (*umma*)'. (Orientalists regarded this as authentic in part because it seems to contradict the orthodox Islamic notion that non-Muslims could not join Muslims in their religious polity, an example of the Principle of Dissimilarity at work.) Concerning the legal issue of patronage (*walā*'), early scholars like Ibn Jurayj (d. 150/767) and Ma'mar b. Rāshid (d. 153/770) had forbidden its sale or transfer, but they narrated no Prophetic hadiths to that effect. Based on Schacht's and Juynboll's argument *e silentio*, that would mean that no hadiths on that topic existed at their time. In the 'Constitution' of Medina found

in the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767), however, we find a statement by the Prophet banning the transfer of *walā*'. This hadith must have therefore been altered to meet this legal agenda sometime around the 770s CE.<sup>87</sup>

If even a report that Orientalists had felt confident about was not historically reliable, then what hadith could have escaped the ingenious designs of early Muslim scholars? 'The chance of authentic material surviving at their hands is exceedingly small,' Crone contends. 'Indeed, in purely statistical terms it is minute.' She reminds her readers of figures Juynboll had collected about the growth of the numbers of hadiths supposedly narrated by Ibn 'Abbās. If there had been this massive increase, how do we know which ones Ibn 'Abbās really transmitted? 'Under such circumstances it is scarcely justified to presume *ḥadīth* to be authentic until the contrary has been proven.' Since this is very difficult indeed, 'then the presumption must be that *no ḥadīth* is authentic.'<sup>88</sup>

Crone (*Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, 1987), and the British scholars John Wansbrough (*Quranic Studies*, 1977) and John Burton (*Introduction to Hadith*, 1994) also stressed the exegetical origins of hadiths. In other words, hadiths were often created by Muslim scholars to help them explain the meaning of the Quran. Early Muslims disagreed on the meanings of many Quranic verses, so the hadiths produced to explain its meaning differed too.<sup>89</sup>

Although Revisionists generally built on the conclusions of the Orientalists, Michael Cook argues that even a key concession they had made – that a Common Link was a historically reliable moment in transmission – was wrong. Cook offers a novel argument as to how Muslim hadith transmitters were able to multiply the number of narrations of a hadith and, in essence, fabricate a Common Link. Juynboll had noted how *tadlīs* allowed disingenuous forgers to attribute a hadith to an earlier scholar by falsely inserting his name in the *isnād*. Cook saw an even more prominent role for *tadlīs*. In a traditional society, Cook explains, 'the relevant issue is not originality, but authority: sharp practice consists in falsely *ascribing* my view to a greater authority than myself.'<sup>90</sup>

*Tadlīs* was the means by which a hadith transmitter accomplished this. As shown in Figure 8.2, if C2 hears a hadith from his contemporary C1, who had heard it from his teacher B1 from A, and so on from the Prophet, C2 does not want to appear to be deriving religious knowledge from a peer. He therefore attributes it to the generation



of his teachers, citing the hadith from his instructor B2 and extending the *isnād* back to A, *et cetera*. If history preserves both C1's and C2's *isnāds*, then it seems as though two chains of transmission emanated from A, when in reality there was only one. This accounts for the fraudulent spread of *isnāds*. By asserting that the *matns* of certain eschatological hadiths clearly emerged later than the Common Link in their *isnāds*, Cook argued that dating by Common Links was naive.<sup>91</sup>

#### THE WESTERN REVALUATION

The fundamental doubts that Revisionist scholarship raised about early Islamic history prompted an unprecedented defense of the traditional narrative of hadiths and Islamic origins on the part of certain Western scholars. In a sense, regardless of the specific criticisms Western scholars might have launched at individual hadiths, they had heavily invested in the basic outline of Islamic history provided by Muslim historians and hadith scholars. To defend the overall integrity of the hadith tradition was to defend the vision of early Islamic history on which generations of Western scholars had relied.

What we are calling here 'Revaluation' scholars have challenged two main aspects of Orientalist and Revisionist criticisms of hadiths. First, they have argued that many of the basic assumptions made by these two groups are inherently inaccurate. Second, Revaluation scholars have demonstrated that earlier Western criticisms did not take into account the massive breadth and complexity of the Islamic hadith tradition. When hadiths are looked at from this more humble perspective, many of the arguments advanced by Orientalists and Revisionists lose their efficacy.

This does not mean that Revaluation scholars have accepted the Sunni vision of hadiths and their authenticity outright. While rejecting the Revisionist arguments, Fred Donner and others have espoused a theory that until the time of the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Mālik (d. 86/705), Islam as a religious ideology was very pluralistic and allowed both Christians and Jews to follow Muhammad's teachings without abandoning their own religions.<sup>92</sup> Nonetheless, the tone of Revaluation scholars is less combative than earlier generations. They speak more of 'dating' when we can be sure a hadith was in circulation than deeming it forged and identifying who forged it.

The most basic objection to the Revisionist recasting of the whole Muslim narrative of early Islamic history is that it simply asks us to believe too much. We might find it difficult to believe that Muslims could avoid all the pitfalls of historical manipulation, propagandizing, and error in their collection of hadiths, but it seems even harder to believe that a scholarly community stretching from Spain to Central Asia and plagued by intense internecine conflicts could have orchestrated such a colossal historical conspiracy in a time of pre-modern communication. As Fred Donner states in his rebuttal of the Revisionists, it is inconceivable that the divided and decentralized early Muslim community could somehow orchestrate a 'comprehensive redaction of the [Islamic] tradition as a whole into a unified form'<sup>93</sup> without leaving ample historical evidence. Similarly, Harald Motzki notes that the forgery of hadiths on the massive scale suggested by Orientalists and Revisionists would have been prevented by the communal oversight of hadith scholars.<sup>94</sup>

Some scholars have revaluated the standing assumptions that Orientalists and Revisionists had made about the overall authenticity of hadiths. Crone had stressed what Goldziher, Schacht, and Juynboll had implied: no hadith could be assumed to be the authentic words of Muhammad. This point is contested most overtly by David Powers, who is also an early pioneer of what can be termed the 'large-scale' identification of Common Links, or the notion that when one collects *all* the available transmissions of a hadith, its Common Link is much earlier than those supposed by Schacht and Juynboll.

In an article about wills and bequests in early Islamic law, Powers challenged Crone's and Cook's dismissal of a famous hadith in which the Prophet tells the Companion Sa'd b. Abī Waqqās that he may only specify one third of his wealth for his daughter (the rest is automatically divided by existing Islamic inheritance law). Powers argues that examining the *isnāds* and *matn* of the hadith suggests that it did in fact originate with Sa'd b. Abī Waqqās. In light of her error in evaluating the hadith, Powers concludes that Crone's statement that Prophetic hadiths should be assumed to be inauthentic 'hardly inspires much confidence.' Quite the opposite, Powers asserts that the burden of proof 'lies on those who would deny the authenticity of reports attributed to the Prophet.'<sup>95</sup> The default assumption is that a hadith is actually authentic.

Power's argument for dating this hadith at the very latest during the time of the Companions rested on an examination of all the extant

transmissions of the report – something that Crone had neglected. He admits that trying to authenticate an *isnād* and find a Common Link is delving into the ‘realm of conjecture and speculation,’ but he argues that it seems very unlikely that the Sa’d b. Abī Waqqās tradition is forged. He collects all the narrations of the tradition, which emanate from six different individuals who all converge on Sa’d as the Common Link. Powers states that it is:

either strange or a remarkable coincidence that half a dozen Successors, living in different cities of the Umayyad empire and presumably working independently of one another, adopted the same story to illustrate the origins of the one-third restriction, tracing it back to the Prophet by means of fabricated *isnāds*, all of which converge on one and the same Companion.<sup>96</sup>

The ‘large-scale’ analysis of transmission and fundamental questioning of Orientalist and Revisionist assumptions has continued in force in the scholarship of the German Harald Motzki. In a sense, Motzki is the first Western scholar to treat hadiths with the same ‘respect’ as Muslim hadith masters did. Like figures such as Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī, his judgments about hadiths depend on collecting *all* the available narrations of the report, not just the ones easily accessible in well-known collections.

Motzki’s work proffers three main criticisms of previous Western hadith scholarship. First, he argues that the argument *e silentio* relied upon by Schacht, Juynboll, and Crone is invalid. Second, he demonstrates that Common Links are much earlier than previously thought, dating some to the time of the Companions in the second half of the seventh century. Finally, Motzki argues that, rather than being consummate forgers of hadiths, major hadith transmitters such as al-Zuhrī and Ibn Jurayj were in general reliably passing on reports from the previous generation.

Orientalists and Revisionists had relied on the premise that an early scholar’s failure to employ a Prophetic hadith, or the best possible version of that hadith, in a debate in which it would have been pertinent proves that this Prophetic hadith did not exist at that time or in that form.<sup>97</sup> Motzki argues that this assumption is both unreasonable and inaccurate. A scholar could decide not to mention a hadith because he did not feel that it actually addressed the issue at hand. Especially in the time of early legal synthesists like Abū Hanīfa and Mālik, hadiths were still distributed regionally. We already saw the

example of Mālik’s Egyptian student informing him of a reliable hadith about washing one’s feet that Mālik, who never left the Hejaz, had never heard.

As for the assumption that if a hadith was transmitted via only one *isnād* in the early period then it must have been forged, Motzki argues that we should not expect to find numerous *isnāds* from figures like the Successors back to the Prophet. *Isnāds*, after all, only came into use during the Successors’ generation in the late 600s/early 700s. Even for those early hadith transmitters and legal scholars who provided *isnāds* to the Prophet at that time, it was only necessary to provide one *isnād* for a hadith, not a bundle as became common in the second half of the 700s and the 800s.

As for Juynboll’s argument that Muslims obsessively transmitted hadiths, with hundreds of students attending their teachers’ dictation sessions, common sense tells us that there are many reasons why history preserved one person’s transmission from that teacher instead of those of many students. Just as only a small percentage of a teacher’s students go on to become teachers themselves, so it is not inconceivable that only one of a hadith transmitter’s students would go on to become a transmitter as well. Juynboll had argued that only the transmission of one to many can be considered a historically documented ‘moment’ in the life of a hadith. But, Motzki counters, if we only consider transmission from one person to a number of people historically reliable, then why do we have only a few hadith collections or Partial Common Links (Common Links that form in the transmission of a hadith after the Common Link, see Figure 8.1)? If we have established that the hadith came into existence with the Common Link, and that any hadith that actually existed must have been transmitted by all those who heard it from a teacher, then after the Common Links we should find thousands of chains of transmission in the fourth and fifth generations. The fact that we find so few Partial Common Links strongly suggests that Common Links and Partial Common Links were the exception rather than the rule in the transmission of hadiths. Their absence thus cannot be construed as proof for a hadith not existing at that time.

One of Motzki’s central criticisms of Schacht’s and Juynboll’s work is the small number of sources from which they drew hadiths in determining the Common Link. In collecting transmissions of a hadith to locate a Common Link, for example, Juynboll relied principally on the *Tuhfat al-ashrāf* of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Mizzī (d. 742/1341),

a work that collects together all the chains of transmission for a hadith but is limited to the traditions and transmissions found in the Six Books (and a few other small books). Motzki draws on a much larger and more diverse body of sources including early ones, such as the *Musannaf* of 'Abd al-Razzāq al-San'ānī (d. 211/826), and later ones, such as al-Bayhaqī's (d. 458/1066) *Dalā'il al-nubuwwa*. By consulting a much wider range of sources than these earlier scholars, Motzki demonstrates that the Common Links for the hadiths he analyzes actually belong to the time of the Companions in the second half of seventh century.

Motzki lays out his rebuttal of Schacht's and Juynboll's Common-Link-as-forgery argument most clearly in an article devoted to studying the hadiths related to the Prophet's order that a prominent Jewish leader in Khaybar, Ibn Abī Huqayq, be assassinated. By gathering together a tremendous array of chains of transmission from a wide variety of sources, Motzki demonstrates that this hadith has not one Common Link but several who were working independently and thus must have relied on some earlier common source. In the case of the killing of Ibn Abī Huqayq, Motzki concludes that the common link transmitters of hadiths relating to the event probably received their reports no later than the last third of the seventh century.<sup>98</sup> The hadith was circulating during the time of the Companions.

Motzki's 'large-scale' analysis of hadith transmission is based on a method of analyzing the *isnād* and *matn* together (termed *isnād cum matn* analysis). He explains that this process relies on three premises:

- 1 Variants of a tradition are (at least partially) the result of a process of transmission.
- 2 The *isnāds* of the variants reflect (at least partially) the actual path of transmission.
- 3 If variant texts (*matns*) of a tradition emanating from the same common link are in fact similar enough, then it seems to be an authentic moment of transmission. If they are not similar, this is the result of either carelessness or intentional manipulation of the material.<sup>99</sup>

In order to determine whether the basic information found in the text of the hadith originated from before a Common Link, you must see if different Common Links all have the same basic *matn*. This requires a two-step process: 1) analyzing the elements of the different *matn*

variants from all the chains of transmission emanating from one Common Link; 2) comparing the conclusions about the common material from that Common Link to the *matn* elements of other Common Links.<sup>100</sup> One must then ask whether the differences between the versions of the *matn* from the two Common Links are significant enough to preclude the possibility that one copied from the other and then provided his hadith with a different *isnād*.<sup>101</sup> If two variants of the same text from two separate Common Links are too disparate to be dependent on each other, then they *must* stem from an earlier common source. In order to verify this conclusion, one must determine whether variants on the common *matn* correlate with the chains of transmission. In other words, do the variants of the common story (*matn*) match the *isnād* tree?<sup>102</sup>

We can demonstrate this method of *isnād cum matn* analysis with a famous hadith stating that God descends at some point in the night to answer prayers (see Figure 8.3). Strictly speaking, *isnād cum matn* analysis must take into consideration *all* the extant transmissions of a hadith. Since that would be far too time-consuming for our purposes, we will only focus on those narrations that yield the sort of benefit associated with this type of analysis. In particular, we will look at two narrations of the hadith, one from Abū Hurayra and one from another Companion, Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī.

We find the narration of Abū Hurayra recorded earliest in the *Muwatta'* of Mālik, which means that we know that the hadith was in existence at the very latest during the mid eighth century when Mālik was writing. Mālik's fellow student of al-Zuhrī, Ma'mar b. Rāshid, had this transmission as well as the other version from Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī. Examining the two *matns*, we find that they contain the same general tradition but also feature noticeable differences. *Matn* 1, for example, states that God descends in the last third of the night, while *Matn* 2 says He descends after the first third. *Matn* 2 also includes the unique wording 'God bides His time.' Since we know the tradition existed with Ma'mar, but the differences between his two versions of the hadith preclude him having copied one from the other, he must have obtained the Abū Sa'īd version from an earlier source other than al-Zuhrī. If al-Zuhrī's source and Ma'mar's second source (presumably Abū Ishāq al-Sab'ī) both had two different versions of the same general hadith, they must have received them from a common source, especially as Abū Ishāq was from Kufa and al-Zuhrī from the Hejaz. Since al-Zuhrī and Abū Ishāq, both Successors, died in 742–3 CE and

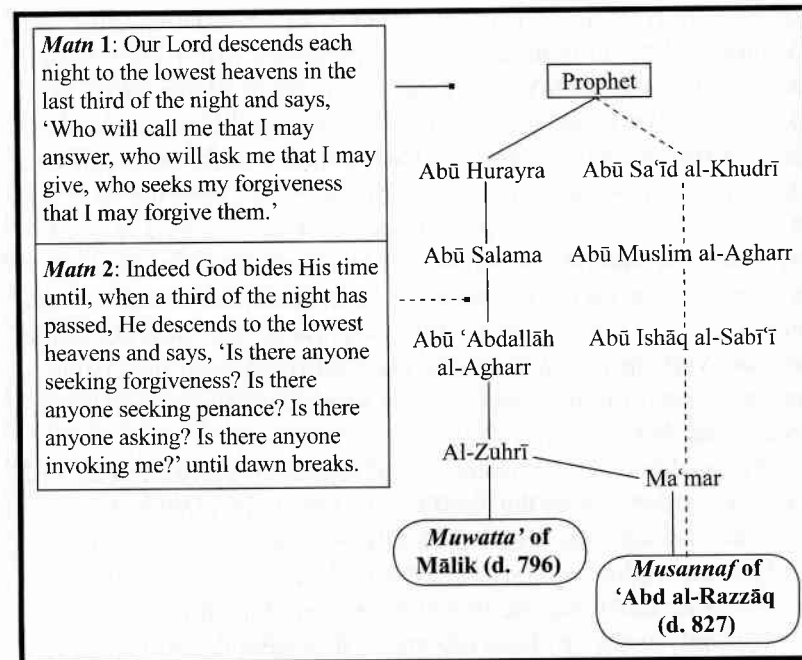


Figure 8.3 *Isnād/Matn Analysis*

744–6 CE respectively, their common source must have lived in the late seventh century, which demonstrates that the hadith was in existence during the time of the later Companions.

One of the key sources that Motzki uses in his investigation is the *Musannaf* of 'Abd al-Razzāq al-San'ānī (d. 211/826). In a series of articles in the early 1990s, Motzki used the *Musannaf* to prove that Schacht's conclusions about the reliability of legal hadiths were tainted by the narrow range of sources he consulted and a hypothesis-driven analysis by which Schacht judged the provenance of early legal material based on flawed assumptions about the nature of early Islamic legal scholarship.

In one article, Motzki takes up the material that 'Abd al-Razzāq included in his *Musannaf* through the well-known *isnād* of Ibn Jurayj (d. 150/767) ← the famous Meccan Successor 'Atā' b. Abī Rabāh (d. 114/732). Motzki argues that both 'Abd al-Razzāq's and Ibn Jurayj's material and their manner of presenting it exhibits two startling characteristics that dispel the likelihood that they forged or intentionally misrepresented reports they transmitted. First, the characteristics of

transmissions via the *isnād* are entirely consistent both in their form and content. Thus, both 'Abd al-Razzāq and his source Ibn Jurayj always uses the term 'I heard it from (*samī'tu*) ...' for some of their sources, while they use 'on the authority of (*an*)' consistently for others. If either of these authorities were 'back projecting' their own legal views on to earlier authorities, Motzki argues, it is improbable that they could have maintained such formal consistency in their forgery.<sup>103</sup> Second, 'Abd al-Razzāq admits to not knowing the exact origins of some of the hadiths in his collection, and Ibn Jurayj often admits to not understanding either the meaning or the wordings of the reports he transmits.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, in his narrations from 'Atā' b. Abī Rabāh, Ibn Jurayj sometimes posed questions directly to this scholar and sometimes heard his opinions second or even third hand. Including less direct transmissions when he could have easily claimed to have heard 'Atā' first hand suggests that Ibn Jurayj was forthcoming about such transmissions.<sup>105</sup>

Based on this evidence, Motzki argues that 'Abd al-Razzāq and Ibn Jurayj both faithfully transmitted the material they received. Since there is thus little likelihood that the hadiths narrated by Ibn Jurayj from 'Atā' b. Abī Rabāh were forged, they can be seen as authentic representations of Muslim legal scholarship in Mecca in the late seventh and early eighth centuries.<sup>106</sup>

In another 1991 article, Motzki continues to use the *Musannaf* of 'Abd al-Razzāq as a tool to correct Schacht's conclusions about early Islamic legal hadiths, in particular legal material ascribed to the famous al-Zuhrī. Motzki compares the legal hadiths narrated by al-Zuhrī's students Ma'mar b. Rāshid and Ibn Jurayj from their teacher with material found in the book of another of al-Zuhrī's students, Mālik. By proving that both the hadiths from Ma'mar/Ibn Jurayj and Mālik came from a common source, presumably al-Zuhrī, Motzki suggests that material attributed to al-Zuhrī actually came from him. Especially in the case of Ma'mar and Ibn Jurayj, their narrations bear no signs of intended forgery. These scholars drew on very diverse sources, and they readily transmitted hadiths or scholarly opinions that disagreed with their own stances. If they were using these transmissions only as a means to promote their own legal agenda, why would they transmit reports that disagreed with them?

Motzki devotes special attention to a bizarre report that al-Zuhrī attributes to one of the Prophet's Companions who allowed grown men to become related to women by breast-feeding from them. By

establishing the transmission from al-Zuhrī and then showing that the material that al-Zuhrī reported was in itself compiled from several sources, Motzki argues that the Common Link for this report is in fact the Companion who supposedly said it in the second half of the seventh century. That al-Zuhrī personally disagreed with the Companion ruling he transmits (he did not approve of the practice of grown men suckling) testifies to his integrity as a transmitter.<sup>107</sup>

## CONCLUSION: QUESTIONS ABOUT ASSUMPTIONS

Motzki raises some other interesting questions about the assumptions made by Schacht and Juynboll, assumptions that, I think, we can trace back to the Historical Critical Method itself. Extreme skeptics of the hadith tradition are motivated by the historical-critical approach of the Western tradition, which asks whether we should believe what historical sources tell us. However, sometimes doubting these sources obliges us to believe things more fantastical than simply accepting that the source might be authentic. Juynboll assumes that all 'diving' chains of transmission, all corroborating chains, and in fact any chain of transmission that does not emanate from a Common Link are forged (see Figure 8.1). But why? In the example of the hadith of God's descent at night, the only Common Link is the Companion Abu Hurayra. There are seven other chains of transmission through other Companions (not listed in Figure 8.3); are we to suppose that all these other chains coming from the Prophet, *via* different Companions, all with slight variations in the *matn* that are dispersed with total consistency among these different chains, are all fabricated? All this in a period of a hundred and fifty years (about the time that the earliest surviving written source for this hadith, the *Muwatta'*, was produced) within a circle of scholars who exerted a great deal of effort to prevent material from being forged wholesale about the Prophet? It seems more likely that the Prophet actually said that God descends at night to answer men's prayers. As Motzki points out, there is a certain *a priori* doubt about the reliability of the Muslim hadith tradition that may be totally groundless.

Western historians are of course totally right to point out the suspicious anachronism in a hadith in which the Prophet says, 'If you see Mu'awiya on my pulpit, kill him,' or the even more

outrageous hadith of 'There will be in my community a man named Muhammad b. Idrīs [al-Shāfi'i], and the strife he brings will be worse than Satan.' But prominent Muslim hadith critics like Ibn 'Adī, al-Jūzajānī, and al-Dhahabī also considered the hadith about Mu'awiya to be unreliable or fabricated outright, and the hadith condemning al-Shāfi'i was used by Muslim scholars as a textbook example of forgery.<sup>108</sup>

Western critics from Goldziher onwards rebuked Muslim hadith scholars for not taking the contents of a hadith into consideration when analyzing its authenticity. But as we have seen, Muslim critics like al-Bukhārī did in fact use the contents of hadiths to prove that they were unreliable, although their degree of skepticism never approached that of the HCM.

Certainly, Muslim hadith critics differ from modern Western criticism in that they believe that the Prophet could know the future, but perhaps Western scholars could benefit from their cautious approach. Western reasoning for why the hadith about visiting the three mosques must be forged rested on the fact that it seemed to promote an Umayyad agenda and that al-Zuhrī, who was associated with the Umayyad court, is in the *isnād*.<sup>109</sup> But there are other early *isnāds* for this hadith that do not have al-Zuhrī in them.<sup>110</sup> Should we reconsider our conclusion or assume, quite without reason, that these other *isnāds* were forged as well? The Al-Aqsa Mosque is mentioned in the Quran, so is it so inconceivable that the Prophet would order his followers to pay special attention to it along with the Haram Mosque in Mecca and his mosque in Medina?

There is a certain 'chicken and the egg' logic to the Western approach to the reliability of hadiths. Goldziher and others have regularly criticized the hadith, considered *sahīh* by Muslims, 'When you see the black banners approaching from Khurasan, go to them, for indeed the Messiah (*mahdī*) is among them,' which they consider to be a product of Abbasid revolutionary propaganda (the Abbasids both had black banners and emerged from Khurasan).<sup>111</sup> But we must accept the fact that Muhammad, prophet or not, might actually have acted like a prophet and prophesied occasionally. Did the Abbasids forge this hadith about the black banners and the *Mahdī*, or did they take advantage of an existing hadith and simply tailor their banners to fit the messianic image that the Prophet had actually described?

Looking outside the Islamic tradition, the Old Testament Book



of Zechariah reads, 'Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey' (Zechariah 9:9). Does the fact that the Gospels describe Jesus entering Jerusalem on a colt or donkey (Mark 11:1–11; Matthew 21:1–4) mean that Christians made up this part of the Book of Zechariah to bolster the case for Jesus being a messianic figure (we know this is not true since the Book of Zechariah predates Christianity)? Or did Jesus really enter Jerusalem (not unlikely) riding the transport of his day – a donkey (not unlikely) – an event that the Gospel writers then described in the language of Old Testament scripture to show how Jesus' life was part of Old Testament prophesy being fulfilled? Similarly, some of the apparent anachronisms found in hadiths may simply be Muslims scripturalizing their own actions and history to dovetail with statements made by Muhammad.

Both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars of hadiths have agreed that there are many forged hadiths. In my opinion, explaining how this came about involves understanding the choices made by the Sunni scholarly tradition more than it does doubting the systematic effectiveness of their method of hadith criticism. In theory as well as practice, the Three-Tiered system of demanding a source, investigating its reliability and seeking out corroborating evidence is an effective way of determining the authenticity of a report. Modern reporters, after all, employ a similar method. Juynboll and Cook cited the practice of *tadlīs* as the loophole by which hadiths were attributed to major transmitters or equipped with additional *isnāds*. Juynboll states that *tadlīs* 'was hardly ever detected.'<sup>112</sup> But Muslim hadith scholars from the mid eighth century onward were obsessive about identifying which transmitters lapsed into *tadlīs* and when. Shu'ba (d. 160/776) said that '*tadlīs* is the brother of lying' and studied the transmissions of his teacher Qatāda b. Di'āma closely to know when he had heard a hadith directly from the person he was citing and when it was unclear if there was an unspecified intermediary. Yahyā b. Sa'īd al-Qattān (d. 198/813) made sure to identify *tadlīs* even when it was done by as revered a figure as Sufyān al-Thawrī. Later, master critics like 'Alī b. al-Madīnī (d. 234/849), al-Husayn al-Karābīsī (d. 245/859), and others wrote multivolume books identifying the names of those who committed *tadlīs* and the degree of their laxity.<sup>113</sup>

Juynboll states that the critical method of Muslim hadith scholars did not take into account the possibility that *isnāds* were fabricated

wholesale. But the intensive focus on finding corroboration in order to evaluate a transmitter was aimed at isolating those individuals who cited *isnāds* not backed up by other students of the same teacher. If a transmitter was making up *isnāds* wholesale, he would be identified as someone who 'is not corroborated (*lā yutāba'u 'alayhi*)' or narrates 'unacceptable (*munkar*)' hadiths. As we discussed in Chapter 2, the number of hadiths transmitted by Ibn 'Abbās appears to increase incredulously only when we forget to distinguish between the relatively small number that Ibn 'Abbās actually heard from the Prophet and those in which he said 'the Prophet said ...' leaving out the older Companion who had actually told him the hadith.

Clearly, Muslim scholars' rulings on the reliability of individual hadiths cannot be accepted without careful examination. But, as Motzki and others have shown, the classical Islamic method of filtering out forged hadiths was much more effective than earlier scholars like Goldziher and Juynboll have believed. However, Sunni scholars only chose to apply their critical methods *some of the time*. Masters of early Sunni hadith criticism such as Sufyān al-Thawrī, Ibn al-Mubārak, Ibn Hanbal, Ibn Ma'in, and Ibn Abī Hātim al-Rāzī all stressed that they dealt stringently with the *isnāds* of hadiths dealing with law and dogma but were lax with material concerning history (*maghāzī*), the virtues of people or acts (*fadā'il*), pious preaching (*wa'z*), the end of days (*malāhim*), good manners, and the meaning of Quranic terms (*tafsīr*). As Abbott stated, this material easily passed through the hadith scholars' critical filters. These were the doors that Sunni scholars left open for forged material.

For example, in the chapter of al-Tirmidhī's *Jāmi'* that deals with inheritance law (*farā'id*), the author notes that only seven percent of the hadiths he lists have limited corroboration (*gharīb*). In his chapter on manners and proper behavior (*birr wa sila*), al-Tirmidhī notes that thirty-five percent of his hadiths have limited corroboration. If corroboration was the keystone of Muslim hadith criticism, then al-Tirmidhī certainly dropped his critical guard in the second chapter in comparison with the first. It is unfortunate that many of the areas that Western scholars consider the most important subjects of study – political history, apocalyptic visions, and Quranic exegesis – were simply not the priorities of Sunni hadith scholars. It is possible that it was prioritization of law over other areas that led to the inclusion of large numbers of unreliable hadiths in Sunni collections, not the failings of Sunni hadith-critical methods.



## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

A great deal has been written about the Authenticity Question. Students interested in further reading would be best served by consulting the scholarly works cited in this chapter and its notes as the next step in examining the topic. In particular, Harald Motzki's digests of the various Western approaches to dating and evaluating hadiths in his article, 'Dating Muslim Traditions: a Survey,' *Arabica* 52, no. 2 (2005): 204–253, and his introduction to the edited volume on hadiths [*Ḥadīth: Origins and Development*, ed. Harald Motzki (Aldershot: Variorum, 2004), xiii–liii], are extremely useful surveys. The *Ḥadīth: Origins and Development* volume also includes influential pieces on the Authenticity Question from a number of scholars not mentioned in this chapter and translated from their original languages into English. Although it is slightly dated, the *Guide to Sira and Hadith Literature in Western Languages*, ed. Munawar Anees and Alia N. Athar (London: Mansell Publishing, 1986) is also useful. Myron Gilmore's *Humanists and Jurists* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1963), Edgar Krentz's *The Historical Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), Anthony Grafton's *Forgers and Critics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), and Ernst Troeltsch's essay 'Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology' in *Religion in History*, trans. James A. Luther and Walter Bense (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) are very useful introductions to the Historical Critical Method.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1, p. 40.
- 2 Al-'Ajlūnī, *Kashf al-khafā*, vol. 1, p. 12.
- 3 Leopold von Ranke, *Sämtliche Werke* (1868–1890), vol. 33, pp. v–viii.
- 4 Myron P. Gilmore, *Humanists and Jurists*, pp. 1–10.
- 5 Eugene F. Rice, Jr. and Anthony Grafton, *The Foundations of Early Modern Europe*, p. 82.
- 6 This verse reads 'And there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.' King James Bible, 1 John 5:7–8; Rice and Grafton, *Foundations*, p. 82.
- 7 F. A. Wolf, *Prolegomena to Homer*, p. 233.
- 8 Mullā 'Alī Qārī, *Al-Asrār al-marfū'a*, p. 407.
- 9 Ernst Troeltsch, 'Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology,' pp. 13–14.

- 10 The scholar al-Kirmānī (d. 786/1384) said that it is an essential belief in Islam that there was no 'evil (*sharr*)' in the time of the Prophet; Ibn Hajar, *Fath*, vol. 13, p. 26.
- 11 Norman Perrin, *What Is Redaction Criticism?*, p. 16.
- 12 Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament*, pp. 204–205; Arnaldo Momigliano, *Studies in Historiography*, p. 21.
- 13 William Muir, *The Life of Mohamet*, p. xxxvii.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. lxviii, lxxi.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. xlii.
- 16 Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies II*, pp. 19–22. Goldziher's German original, *Mohammedanische Studien*, was published in 1889–1890.
- 17 Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, p. 40.
- 18 Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, pp. 22–23.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 143.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 44–45.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 44–47; Lecker, 'Biographical Notes on Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī.'
- 24 Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, p. 75.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 38–40.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- 27 *Ibid.*, pp. 79–85.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 95–97; *Sunan Abī Dāwūd: kitāb al-fitan, bāb al-nahy 'an al-sa'ī fi al-fitna*.
- 31 Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, p. 122.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 113–114.
- 34 *Ibid.*, pp. 123–124.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 36 *Ibid.*, pp. 74–75.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 38 *Ibid.*, pp. 55–56.
- 39 *Ibid.*, pp. 140–141.
- 40 Schacht, 'A Revaluation of Islamic Tradition,' pp. 146–147.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- 44 Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, p. 13.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 47 *Ibid.*, pp. 165–166.
- 48 Schacht, 'A Revaluation,' p. 151.
- 49 Schacht, *Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, p. 157.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- 51 *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.
- 52 See Schacht, *Origins*, pp. 39, 165; idem, 'A Revaluation of Islamic Tradition,' p. 147.

- 53 Schacht, *Origins*, p. 175.
- 54 Ibid., p. 166.
- 55 Ibid., p. 156.
- 56 Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition: Studies in Chronology, Provenance and Authorship of Early Ḥadīth*, p. 71.
- 57 Juynboll, 'Some *isnād*-analytical methods illustrated on the basis of several women-demeaning sayings from Ḥadīth literature,' in *Studies on the Origins and Uses of Islamic Ḥadīth*, p. 352.
- 58 Ibid., p. 353.
- 59 Ibid., p. 353.
- 60 Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, p. 98.
- 61 Juynboll, 'Some *Isnād*-analytical methods,' p. 368.
- 62 Juynboll, 'Nāfi', the *mawlā* of Ibn 'Umar, and his position in Muslim Ḥadīth literature,' in *Studies on the Origins and Uses of Islamic Ḥadīth*, p. 215.
- 63 Juynboll, '(Re)Appraisal of some Hadith Technical Terms,' p. 318.
- 64 Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, pp. 52, 73, 75.
- 65 Ibid., pp. 5, 10.
- 66 Ibid., pp. 72–74.
- 67 Ibid., p. 30.
- 68 Juynboll, 'Nāfi', the *mawlā* of Ibn 'Umar,' pp. 219, 238–239.
- 69 Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, p. 98.
- 70 Christian Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology*, pp. 132–134.
- 71 Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri II: Qur'ānic Commentary and Tradition*, pp. 31–32.
- 72 Ibid., p. 29.
- 73 Ibid., pp. 21–22, 49–51.
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- 85 Patricia Crone, *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law*, p. 33.
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- 89 Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, pp. 109–110; 203–231; John Burton, *An Introduction to the Hadith*, p. 181.
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- 102 Ibid., p. 187.
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- 109 Lecker, 'Biographical Notes on al-Zuhri,' p. 38.
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## 9

DEBATES OVER PROPHETIC TRADITIONS  
IN THE MODERN MUSLIM WORLDINTRODUCTION: SETTING THE STAGE FOR  
MODERNITY AND ISLAM

In the eighteenth century, a network of interrelated economic, technological, social, and political changes began sweeping the world, beginning in England and Western Europe. Collectively known by scholars as Modernity, these forces ushered in a new phase of human history and raised inexorable questions about the nature of religion and its place in life. The challenges of Modernity have proven especially daunting for those peoples among whom it had not developed gradually before it was imposed through European colonization.

Perhaps nowhere has it been felt more sharply than among Muslims. Since their confrontation with the Modern West, Muslims have faced one daunting question: if Islam is God's true religion, and Muslims God's chosen community, why are they so powerless and subordinate before the Modern West? In attempts to answer and redress this question, Muslim discourse in the modern period has found discussing the role of hadiths in Islam unavoidable.

The stage for modern Muslim thought was set by two main forces: Western colonialism and indigenous Islamic movements of revival and reform. European arms quickly proved vastly superior to Muslim armies. The British East India Company had become the *de facto* government of several provinces of the Muslim Mughal Empire in India by 1764. In 1798 Napoleon occupied Egypt, and in 1882 the country was formally brought under British control.

More alarming for Muslim scholars, however, was the seeming superiority of European ideas to Islamic tradition. European scientists bent to their will technologies undreamt of in Muslim lands, and European society functioned with undeniably impressive organization. The rationalism and historicism of the European Enlightenment accompanied colonial administrations, and European Orientalists soon began turning their critical gaze on the Islamic religious tradition. Some Muslims immediately mistrusted Orientalism and sought to rebut it. Others were convinced by elements of European thought and swayed by Western scholars of Islam. Many Muslims were confused over what elements of Modernity they should embrace and what this entailed for their faith. Whether accepted or rejected, however, European thought and the civilization it represented became a central player in modern Islamic thought.

Interestingly, even before the impact of Modernity, Islamic civilization was shaken by entirely internal forces. In the mid 1700s, previously marginal parts of the Muslim world, such as West Africa, central Arabia, and India, brought forth unprecedented movements of Islamic revival and reform that would exercise tremendous influence on the whole Muslim world. These movements were driven by a sense that the Muslim community had lost its moorings in the legacy of the Prophet. It had been led astray by heretical accretions in theology and worship as well as by chauvinistic loyalty to the schools of law.

Although they did not abandon the classical Islamic tradition, these movements sought to reevaluate it and revive Islam's primordial greatness by breaking with *taqlīd* (unquestioning loyalty to existing institutions and tradition) and embracing *ijtihād* (independent reasoning based on the original sources of Islam – the Quran and Sunna). Many of these revivalist scholars believed that they were just as capable as classical masters like al-Shāfi'ī and Abū Hanīfa of deriving laws directly from the Quran and the Prophet's teachings. As the great revivalist scholar Ibn al-Amīr al-San'ānī (d. 1768) wrote, 'that gift of your Lord has not been made off-bounds, and the virtues that He has bestowed are not limited to those who have come before us.'<sup>1</sup>

Some of these movements were primarily scholarly, such as the reformist trend instigated in Yemen by al-San'ānī and in India by Shāh Walī Allāh (d. 1762). Others added a strong dimension of reforming Muslim society through force of arms, such as Osman dan Fodio's

(d. 1817) expansionist Sokoto Caliphate in modern-day Nigeria or Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's (d. 1792) militaristic *Muwahhid* movement (better known as Wahhābism) in central Arabia.

This common mission of bypassing the rigid institutions of the Late Sunni Tradition to revive the pure Islam of the Prophet's time and purge it of later cultural or intellectual impurities pushed the hadith tradition to the forefront. What better way to return to the source of Islam's original greatness than by renewing the study of the Sunna? Praising the Sunni devotees of hadith (*ahl al-hadith*) in the early Islamic period, al-San'ānī recites:

They quenched their thirst by drawing from the sea of Muhammad's knowledge,

They did not have those schools of law for watering holes.<sup>2</sup>

Many revivalist scholars not only demonstrated a rejuvenated interest in hadith studies, they also believed that they were just as qualified as the great Sunni hadith critics of the classical period to rule on the authenticity of hadiths.

One of the interesting byproducts of the eighteenth-century movements of revival and reform was the shift of hadith studies from its medieval locus in Iran, Egypt, and Syria to the dynamic reformist regions of the Hejaz, Yemen, India, and eventually Morocco. Since the 1700s it has been Hejazi scholars like Muhammad Hayāt al-Sindī (d. 1750), Yemenis like Muhammad al-Shawkānī (d. 1834), Indians like Shāh Walī Allāh and 'Abd al-Hayy al-Laknawī (d. 1886–7), and Moroccans like Muhammad b. Ja'far al-Kattānī (d. 1927) who have pioneered new creative ground in hadith studies.

Precisely why these similar but often unconnected movements arose at this time in distant corners of the Muslim world remains a mystery. Perhaps the Late Sunni Tradition, with its strict loyalty to schools of law, elaborate speculative theology, and Sufi brotherhoods had simply become too entrenched for Islam's inherent antipathy towards institutions of religious authority. When one considers that some late Sunni scholars like the Egyptian al-Sāwī (d. 1825) had asserted that anyone who did not follow one of the four Sunni schools of law was misguided, potentially an unbeliever, even if they followed clear indications from the Quran or Sunna, it seems easy to understand why some Muslims might conclude that reform was necessary.<sup>3</sup>

#### THE MODERN DEBATE OVER HADITHS: FOUR MAIN APPROACHES

In light of these forces, a thoughtful Muslim living in early twentieth-century Cairo, Istanbul, or Delhi might have pondered the following questions: Islam is clearly in a state of decline, whether in comparison to modern Europe or in relation to its own original greatness. But is this due to some inherent failing in the Islamic intellectual tradition or because Muslims have lost touch with Islam's true nature? If one seeks to recover Islam's true nature, does one take Modernity into account or ignore it completely? Ultimately, in the attempt to understand how to live as Muslims in the modern world, what components of Muslims' historical heritage (in Arabic, *turāth*) should they embrace, abandon, or alter, and how does one justify these choices in a way that is authentically 'Islamic'?

The hadith tradition in particular posed two major questions. In light of European historical criticism on the one hand and a revived commitment to the Prophet's authentic legacy on the other, 1) had the hadith tradition and its classical method of hadith evaluation produced a reliable representation of Muhammad's Sunna? and 2) what should be the overall place of hadiths and the Sunna in understanding Islam?

We can identify four broad approaches taken by Muslims to answering these questions: Islamic Modernism, Modernist Salafism, Traditionalist Salafism and Late Sunni Traditionalism. Although this four-fold division is useful, it is not watertight. Some thinkers sway between schools or change their positions depending on context. Also, some of these names are nomenclatures that I have chosen and have not actually been used by their adherents. Nonetheless, this division is helpful for understanding the complexity of Islamic thought in the modern period. Not surprisingly, Islamic responses to Modernity arose earliest in those areas earliest exposed to Europe, particularly India, Egypt, and Ottoman Istanbul.

#### ONE: ISLAMIC MODERNISTS AND THE 'QURAN ONLY' MOVEMENT

Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, some Muslim scholars began challenging core components of the pre-modern

Islamic tradition. Some concluded that the hadith tradition was not at all a reliable representation of Muhammad's message. A few of these thinkers went so far as to reject altogether the authoritativeness of the Prophet's precedent. We can label this overall trend as **Islamic Modernism**, which is characterized by a radical reconsideration of classical Islamic beliefs.

An early, well-known Modernist was Chirāgh 'Alī (d. 1895), an Indian who worked in the civil service of the local ruler of Hyderabad. 'Alī was a close associate of the pivotal Islamic thinker of South Asia in the modern period, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), whom we will discuss shortly. 'Alī rejected all sources of Islamic law and dogma except the Quran, and called for a reinterpretation of Islamic law based on the ideals of humanism (such as rationalism, science, and non-religiously based ethics). Limiting the sources of Islamic law to the Quran was not a hindrance to the Shariah, he argued, since the Prophet had expected his community to revise their law occasionally in accordance with the needs of the times. Influenced by the revivalist movement of Shāh Walī Allāh, he embraced *ijtihād*. *Ijmā'* (consensus), he felt, had never been an acceptable source of law, since 'Alī argued that even Ibn Hanbal had been skeptical about the validity of claims of *ijmā'* (Ibn Hanbal is often quoted as denying any actual occurrence of *ijmā'*).<sup>4</sup>

'Alī accepted the criticism of hadiths published by Orientalists like Muir and Goldziher (see Chapter 8) and felt that the hadith corpus was unreliable. Interestingly, it was 'Alī's desire to defend Islam against Orientalists that led him to this stance. He was disturbed by Christian missionaries and European polemicists claiming that Islam was fossilized and replete with irrational beliefs, such as those found in hadiths.<sup>5</sup> Abandoning hadiths was necessary for saving the rest of Islam's message. Without the hadith corpus, 'Alī could offer unprecedented alternatives to beliefs that a modern mindset might consider backward. The *jinn*, a group of beings that the Quran mentions ambiguously as being composed of fire but that hadiths characterize as beings who inhabit earth in tandem with humans, he argued were actually another Semitic tribe.<sup>6</sup>

'Alī's thought was continued by what became known as the *Ahl-e Qur'ān* (The People of the Quran) movement in India. The *Ahl-e Qur'ān* saw hadiths as an embarrassing travesty in Islam and argued that Islamic dogma and law should be derived from the Quran alone. The movement was started by 'Abdallāh Chakrālāwī (d. 1930)

and Khwāja Ahmad Dīn Amritsari (d. 1936) between 1906 and 1917 and produced several journals devoted to elaborating its ideas. Amritsari had been a student at a missionary school, and his readings in hadiths led him to conclude that many hadiths were shockingly foul and patently false. He wrote a book on the Quran in which, among other things, he tried to demonstrate how Islamic inheritance law could be derived from the Quran without any reference to hadiths.<sup>7</sup>

The next generation of the *Ahl-e Qur'ān* was led by Muhammad Aslam Jayrapūrī (d. 1955), who mocked the traditional science of *isnād* criticism as senseless 'narration worship (*rivāyat parastī*). Since whole *isnāds* were forged, he argued, it was impossible to distinguish truth from falsehood using *isnād* criticism.<sup>8</sup> His colleague, Mistrī Muhammad Ramadān (d. 1940) abandoned the idea of trying to extrapolate the labyrinthine details of Islamic law from the Quran. The holy book readily provided all the legal information Muslims needed, he argued, and anything omitted or left ambiguous was intentional – God had left humans free to use their reason in order to adapt to new times.<sup>9</sup>

Although the 'Quran only' movement flourished in India, it flared only briefly in the Arab world. In a 1906 issue of the famous Islamic reformist journal *al-Manār* (The Lighthouse), the Egyptian physician Muhammad Tawfīq Sidqī (d. 1920) wrote an article entitled 'Islam is the Quran Alone (*al-Islām huwa al-Qur'ān wahdahu*)' in which he argued that Islam was never meant to be understood from anything other than the Quran. One key proof for this was that the Prophet did not explicitly order the recording of his Sunna, and indeed hadiths were not set down in any lasting or reliable form for over a century after Muhammad's death. How, Sidqī asked, could God ever allow His religion to depend on such a dubious source?<sup>10</sup> What has been understood as the 'Sunna' – the detailed precedent of the Prophet – was intended only to be binding on the first generation of Muslims; 'the Prophet gave the Sunna to the Arabs.'<sup>11</sup> After the Companions, Muslims were expected to adapt their law to circumstance according to the principles laid out in the Quran.<sup>12</sup> Like his Indian *Ahl-e Qur'ān* counterparts, Sidqī attempted to demonstrate how the details of Muslim prayer could be inferred from the Quran without hadiths.

Hadiths were patently unreliable in Sidqī's opinion, with the possible exception of those very few that could be considered *mutawātir*.<sup>13</sup> Hadith criticism had begun too late to catch many of the forged

hadiths, and as a result many reports attributed to the Prophet were actually *isrā'īliyyāt*, or stories from Jewish lore.<sup>14</sup> As a doctor, Sidqī devoted special attention to hadiths that he considered incompatible with the realities of modern medicine. He notes the controversial 'Hadith of the Fly' (found in the *Sunans* of al-Nasā'ī and Abū Dāwūd) in which the Prophet states that if a fly has landed in one's drink one should submerge it totally **'because on one wing is disease and on the other is the cure.'**<sup>15</sup> This was not only medically unsound, argued Sidqī, but it contradicted another command from the Prophet that if a mouse fell in liquid butter it should all be poured out.<sup>16</sup> Sidqī's writings caused such a furore in *al-Manār* and other publications that he quickly recanted his ideas, and they died out in the Arab world.<sup>17</sup>

Although they have not announced 'Quran only' positions as explicitly as Sidqī and the Indian *Ahl-e Qur'ān*, many Islamic Modernists have effectively adopted this stance. The influential modern Arab biography, 'The Life of Muhammad (*Hayāt Muhammad*),' by the Egyptian intellectual Muhammad Husayn Haykal (d. 1956) was based on the Quran with reference to only one hadith: the famous Mu'tazilite hadith urging Muslims to reject any hadith that contradicts the Quran!<sup>18</sup> Haykal defended his 'Quran only' biography by saying he was using 'new critical methods' that were not allowed during classical times and writing his book 'in the modern scholarly manner.' Haykal echoed Orientalist criticisms that many hadiths were forged during the early period of sectarian and political strife and that many were fabricated merely to glorify Muhammad's miraculous powers. He therefore rejected any miracles attributed to the Prophet. Moreover, classical Muslim critics like al-Bukhārī and Ibn Hajar did not even agree on what was reliable or not.<sup>19</sup>

By far the most influential Modernist critique of the Sunni hadith tradition came from the Egyptian Mahmūd Abū Rayya (d. 1970). A disciple of the leading Syrian reformist Rashīd Ridā (see below), Abū Rayya wrote a scathing work entitled 'Lights on the Muhammadan Sunna (*Adwā' alā al-sunna al-muhammadiyya*)' (1958) in which he argued that only the Quran, reason, and unquestionably reliable *mutawātir* accounts of the Prophet's legacy were originally meant to be the basis of Islam. 'As for applying the term "Sunna" to what is subsumed by the hadith corpus [in general], that is a later convention.'<sup>20</sup> Neither the Prophet nor his Companions had seen fit to record his every word, and the early jurists of Islam had followed in their footsteps by acting on the legal principles of the Sunna as opposed to

random hadiths. Nothing in Islam required Muslims to read or believe the contents of hadith collections.<sup>21</sup>

Like earlier Modernists, Abū Rayya explained that early hadith critics had not paid attention to the contents of hadiths, and that outrageous reports such as 'The Devil flees, farting, when he hears the call to prayer' had been declared *sahīh*.<sup>22</sup> He also echoes the criticism about the long delay between the Prophet's death and the definitive recording of hadiths – a period in which myriad sectarian and political groups forged countless hadiths. The permissibility of 'narration of hadiths by general meaning (*riwāya bi'l-mā'nā*)' also led to the mutation and misunderstanding of many reports.

Notions that all the Companions were upstanding were patently absurd, Abū Rayya argued, since the Companions violently disagreed with one another. Although Abū Rayya built directly on the work of Ridā, his criticism of the Companions took him outside the fold of what his teacher and mainstream Sunni Islam could tolerate. Abū Rayya rejected exempting the Companions from hadith criticism, saying that 'people are people in every era, and humans have natures, appetites and agendas that do not change.'<sup>23</sup> This attitude closely resembles the Principle of Analogy used by Western scholars, and it is no coincidence that Abū Rayya referred his readers to the works of Goldziher and other Orientalists.<sup>24</sup>

Abū Rayya's most noteworthy contribution to Modernist criticisms of hadith was his multifaceted attack on the reliability of Abū Hurayra, the single most prolific transmitter of hadiths from among the Companions. Using reports from both Sunni and Shiite books of transmitter criticism, Abū Rayya produces evidence characterizing Abū Hurayra as a gluttonous and dishonest opportunist.<sup>25</sup> Noting how he joined the Muslim community only three years before the Prophet's death, Abū Rayya asks how Abū Hurayra could ever have heard the thousands of hadiths he claimed to transmit. Citing an early Hanafī criticism of Abū Hurayra, he argued that he was not learned in issues of ritual and law and therefore frequently mangled the meanings of hadiths he reported.<sup>26</sup> He added that Abū Hurayra was well known to be obsessed with *isrā'īliyyāt*, tales from Jewish lore about earlier prophets, and that he had no compunction about attributing such tales to the Prophet. Such reports included the unacceptably anthropomorphic hadith that **'God created Adam in His image'** and the dogmatically offensive report (both found in *Sahīh Muslim*) that Moses knocked out the eye of the angel of death when he came to take his soul.<sup>27</sup> Abū



Rayya even considers the hadith urging Muslims to visit the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem to be one of the forged *isrā'iliyyāt*.<sup>28</sup>

*Isrā'iliyyāt* proved constantly irksome to Modernists, and Abū Rayya wrote a separate book entitled 'Ka'b al-Ahbār: the First Zionist' on the early hadith transmitter and Muslim convert from Judaism, Ka'b al-Ahbār (d. c. 32/653).<sup>29</sup> Hadiths about the Messianic *mahdī* figure, Abū Rayya asserts, were similarly imported from Christian lore and falsely attributed to Muhammad by figures like the Companion Tamīm al-Dārī, who was a convert from Christianity.<sup>30</sup>

Abū Rayya's book proved extremely influential in the hadith debate, in part because of the author's broad erudition and in part because the book's style is less direct and caustic – and thus perhaps more convincing – than other Modernist works. It quickly prompted at least eight indignant book-length rebuttals from traditional Muslim scholars, the most famous of which was the Syrian Mustafā al-Sibā'ī's (d. 1964) *al-Sunna wa makānatuhā fī al-tashrī' al-islāmī* (The Sunna and its Place in Islamic Lawmaking) (1961).<sup>31</sup>

These rebuttals generally used orthodox Sunni arguments to respond to the criticisms of Abū Rayya as well as to those of Western scholars. Al-Sibā'ī, for example, deemphasizes the late writing down of hadiths by emphasizing the extraordinary memory of the early Arabs. Abū Hurayra's ability to transmit so many hadiths despite his relatively short exposure to the Prophet was due to his tremendous devotion to the Prophet's legacy, not any unscrupulousness. Finally, books of forged hadiths (*mawdū'āt*) showed that hadith critics did engage in content criticism (at least after the 1300s). Other defenses against 'Quran only' arguments relied solely on faith. The Pakistani Islamic political activist Abū al-'Alā' Mawdūdī (d. 1979) contended that the Sunna was intact because 'The God who preserved his last book also arranged for the preservation of the example and guidance of his last Prophet.'<sup>32</sup>

Islamic Modernism and its 'Quran only' trend have thrived among Western Muslim scholars. Although they have not always upheld explicit 'Quran only' positions, many have ignored hadiths in their discussions of Islamic law and dogma, as is the case with the American Amina Wudud's revaluation of the traditional Islamic view of gender, and Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle's argument for the permissibility of homosexual relationships in Islam.<sup>33</sup> The 'Quran only' movement has continued in Turkey, where the activist intellectual Edip Yüksel and his colleagues have published the *Reformist Quran*, an English

translation and explanation of the holy book written without consulting hadiths.<sup>34</sup>

We should also note a Modernist who has proven extremely adept at navigating the tradition of Islamic hadith criticism in order to argue for radical reform. In her work *Women and Islam*, the French-educated Moroccan social scientist Fatema Mernissi states her intent to 'disinter' the original message of Islam 'from the centuries of oblivion that have managed to obscure it.'<sup>35</sup> Her heroine is the Prophet's wife, Aisha, whose criticisms of other Companions' narrations from the Prophet Mernissi sees as epitomizing the critical spirit of Islam as well as the religion's original message of female empowerment. Mernissi argues that, with the exception of a minority of hadith critics, Muslim scholarship functioned as a tool of the social and political elite, indulging 'the desire of male politicians to manipulate the sacred.'<sup>36</sup>

In order to prove this, she examines two Companions known for transmitting hadiths that Mernissi considers misogynist and unbefitting her beloved Prophet: Abū Hurayra and Abū Bakra (not to be mistaken with Abū Bakr, the first caliph). The former transmitted *sahīh* hadiths such as the one that women, donkeys, and black dogs break a person's prayer if they pass in front of them, and the second narrated the hadith that '**The community that entrusts its affairs to a woman will not flourish**' (the first is found in *Sahīh Muslim*, the second in *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*).<sup>37</sup> Effectively engaging in historical psychoanalysis, Mernissi uses data from books of transmitter criticism to argue that Abū Hurayra harbored a deep personal resentment towards women and that Abū Bakra produced his hadith to secure his place with the caliph 'Alī after he had defeated Aisha at the Battle of the Camel in 656 CE.<sup>38</sup>

In a brilliant turn, Mernissi shows how Abū Bakra should be excluded as a hadith transmitter according to the Muslim hadith critics' own critical standards. Mālik is reported to have said that he would not accept hadiths from someone known to have lied about any matter, and Abū Bakra was once flogged for untruthfully accusing someone of committing adultery!<sup>39</sup> Such misogynist figures as these transmitters, upon whom the most revered Sunni collections had relied, lead Mernissi to conclude that 'even the authentic Hadith must be vigilantly examined with a magnifying glass.'<sup>40</sup>

A unique Modernist vision for the proper treatment of hadiths came from the Pakistani intellectual and University of Chicago

professor Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988). He acknowledged that the criticisms of Schacht and Goldziher were 'essentially correct' and that most hadiths were not actually spoken by the Prophet.<sup>41</sup> Where Orientalists saw deception, however, Rahman saw the creative implementation of the Islamic message. Though many of the details of the Sunna were fabricated, the *concept* of the Sunna was authentic. Muhammad's Sunna was not detailed case law, but rather an umbrella of behavioral norms and an interpretive process by which Muslims could adapt their law to changing circumstances.<sup>42</sup> This had been the practice of the Partisans of Reason (*ahl al-ra'y*), who had employed the legal reasoning learned from Muhammad, the original exemplar of Islam, to elaborate law in new situations. This was also why so many early hadiths were actually 'forgeries' – these early jurists had phrased the conclusions they reached using the interpretive process of the Sunna in the words of Muhammad. The Sunna was thus 'very largely the product of the Muslims themselves,' who acted organically on the principles inherited from the Prophet through the mental act of *ijtihād* in order to form new law. Consensus (*ijmā'*) was the acknowledgment of the community that a newly developed part of the Sunna was authoritative.<sup>43</sup>

For Rahman, the hadith tradition had been a creative process in which jurists had channeled the Prophet's authority to guide their community. Hadiths like those warning about the deterioration of Muslims' faith as time went on were designed to steer the community towards certain laudable goals.<sup>44</sup> Yes, the hadiths in al-Bukhārī's and Muslim's *Sahīhayn* that predict the future were clearly fabricated by Muslims after the death of Muhammad. But they were not sinister forgeries, and the hadith corpus was not a conspiratorial web of lies, since participants in the hadith tradition never saw themselves as engaged in a strict process of recording history.<sup>45</sup>

Unfortunately, Rahman continues, the formation of the hadith canon and the literal submission to hadiths introduced by al-Shāfi'ī turned the dynamic Sunna into a petrified and unchanging set of rules. Rahman states that hadiths need to be reexamined critically according to historical criticism in order to determine if they were really part of the original Sunna, 'whose very life blood was free and progressive interpretation.'<sup>46</sup> Once this is determined, modern Muslims can pick up with new interpretation where the jurists left off when the Sunna was frozen in the ninth century. Rahman acknowledges the value of *isnād* criticism in detecting forgeries. This method, however, can only

tell us if a hadith *is* forged. It cannot ensure that it is *not* forged. For that we must employ modern historical criticism.<sup>47</sup>

## TWO: MODERNIST SALAFĪS AND OPPOSING THE WEST

The **Salafī** movement was the name that many of the adherents of this school of thought derived from the *Salaf*, or the pious early generations of Muslims, from whose example these reformists hoped to reconstitute Islam's original purity. To a large extent, the eighteenth-century movements of revival and reform were all Salafī in their approach; for them the early Muslim community represented their hopes for the future. It was powerful, dynamic, and preceded what many reformists viewed as the superstitions, blind loyalty to tradition, and the havoc wreaked on medieval Islam by foreign cultural accretions such as Greek logic and Persian mysticism. In terms of their thought, by the mid 1800s these Salafī movements had split into two main branches, which we will call the Modernist and Traditionalist Salafī groups. These two branches interacted with and affected one another, for both shared a common vision of recapturing the early Islam of the *Salaf*. But they proposed different means and had opposing attitudes towards Modernity.

The Modernist Salafī trend has been the most influential and vigorous of the modern Muslim schools of thought. Nonetheless, it was essentially a response to Modernity. Its proponents looked back into history at the pure Arab Islam of the Prophet's time, but what they re-created by drawing unsystematically from the rich tradition of Islamic civilization was an Islam tailored to fit the modern world. Arguably the most influential Modernist Salafī was the Indian Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), whose thought ultimately aimed at the twin goals of the rationalization of Islamic dogma and 'the liberalization of Islamic law.'<sup>48</sup> An employee of both the British East India Company and the Mughal dynasty, after the Indian rebellion of 1857 Khan remained fiercely loyal to the British. He believed that only by reconciling with Modernity and Western rule could Islam survive. In 1868 he adopted a Western lifestyle, and in 1875 he successfully founded the Anglo-Muhammadan Oriental College at Aligarh in India, the most successful center of reformist Islamic education.<sup>49</sup>

Khan authored numerous books, including a commentary on the Bible, a commentary on the Quran, and established an influential Urdu-language journal called *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*. In general, Khan followed Shāh Walī Allāh's reformist rejection of *taqlīd* and innovations in Islamic belief and worship.<sup>50</sup> He also infused his works with distinctly modern notions, such as an acceptance of Darwinian evolution and the position that nothing in the Quran can be interpreted as contradicting the laws of nature. 'If the word [of the Quran] is not according to the work [the law of nature], then the word cannot be the word of God.'<sup>51</sup> Of course, he notes, humans have only begun to understand the laws of nature!<sup>52</sup> He also rejected claims of *ijmā'* as convincing proof in scholarly discourse.<sup>53</sup>

In the 1860s Khan encountered Muir's criticisms of hadiths, and he was immediately alarmed at this unsuspected attack on Islam from its external foes. In 1870 he began a refutation of Muir's book, although he also accepted many Orientalist criticisms.<sup>54</sup> He acknowledged, for example, that classical Muslim scholars had not performed proper content criticism of hadiths (he contends that they had intended this to be done by later scholars) and that the historical lag in writing down hadiths had resulted in copious forgeries, many concocted to sanctify and glorify Muhammad. He also noted that the permissibility of 'narration by general meaning' had led to the unintentional alteration of many hadiths.<sup>55</sup>

Khan struggled with the solution to the hadith problem throughout his life, but he consistently affirmed that the hadith corpus had to be reexamined according to a new method of content criticism that he drew partly from the Hanafī school of law and Mu'tazilism and partly from Western historical criticism. First of all, hadiths incompatible with modern reason, belittling to the Prophet, or contradicting the Quran must be rejected.<sup>56</sup> He embraced the Hanafī requirement that all the narrators of a hadith be competent legal scholars. Only *mutawātir* hadiths were immune from these critical standards, and these he defined as hadiths that have been accepted as reliable by Muslim scholars throughout history – only five of which he said exist. He added that hadiths should be screened to see if they describe miracles that could not be reasonably believed or historical events that could not have happened.<sup>57</sup>

Khan's critical method for hadith evaluation led him to revolutionary breaks with Islamic tradition. He believed that the Prophet's Sunna was only pertinent to matters of religion, not political or civil

affairs.<sup>58</sup> He concluded that the Prophet's miraculous night voyage to Jerusalem was actually done in a dream (both Sunnism and Shiism generally held that he had been physically transported), and that the Prophet did not perform miracles. Like Chirāgh 'Alī, he argued that the Quran's mentioning *jinn* did not really mean they existed as supernatural creatures. They could well be another Semitic tribe.<sup>59</sup>

Ultimately, defending Islam against infectious Western skepticism was Khan's real goal. Although he admitted many Orientalist criticisms of hadiths, he also understood that hadiths were essential for defending the basic Islamic worldview. When Muir suggested that part of the Quran might have been lost, Khan relied on hadiths to argue the contrary.<sup>60</sup> In proposing that the Quran be the standard against which the contents of hadiths be judged, Khan was seeking to find a critical litmus test that both Muslims and Western Orientalists could agree on (since Orientalists also believed that the Quran was the most historically reliable Islamic document).<sup>61</sup> Khan's concern for protecting religion from Modernity even led him to defend the Bible against European critics. Against claims that the global flood of Noah was impossible and not born out in the historical record, Khan countered that the flood had really occurred but had been restricted to one locale.<sup>62</sup>

While Khan was writing in India, Egypt witnessed a simultaneous efflorescence of the Modernist Salafī movement. In fact, the most influential participants in Islamic thought in the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Arab world were the Egyptian Salafī Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) and his Syrian student Rashīd Ridā (d. 1935). 'Abduh was educated at the renowned al-Azhar University in Cairo but was exiled from Egypt in 1882 for several years due to involvement in an anti-British rebellion. He traveled widely in the Muslim world and France and eventually returned to Egypt, where he became chief *mufī* (jurisconsult) under British rule.

Although 'Abduh never dealt with the issue of hadiths in a systematic way, he upheld the orthodox stance that the Sunna is the second major source of law and dogma in Islam. However, he accepted that the traditional methods of hadith criticism were insufficient and that the hadith corpus must be reexamined critically.<sup>63</sup> In theory, he states, disobeying what is known to have been the Sunna of the Prophet is anathema. This holds true, however, for 'a few only of the traditions.' In the case of non-*mutawātir* hadiths, whoever feels comfortable with them can believe them. But no one can be forced to believe in them or be declared an unbeliever for rejecting them. No hadith, for

example, should be believed if it undermines God's total transcendence.<sup>64</sup> 'Abduh was also very skeptical about hadiths predicting the future, the end of the world or *isrā'iliyyāt*, and accepted very few such reports as authentic.<sup>65</sup> This notion of only requiring Muslims to believe in *mutawātir* hadiths would be a hallmark of both Modernism and Modernist Salafism. Decades later it would be elaborated in a formal religious ruling by the al-Azhar *Fatwā* Committee.<sup>66</sup>

'Abduh's senior student Rashīd Ridā proved his chief acolyte, and his journal *al-Manār* was the main forum for reformist writings. Ridā dealt with hadiths in much more detail than his teacher. Like 'Abduh, he argued that the Quran is the basis of Islam and that only *mutawātir* hadiths can truly be relied upon. After all, *āhād* hadiths yielded no more than probable knowledge, while true certainty came only from *mutawātir* reports. He equated *mutawātir* hadiths with the 'practical', living Sunna that all Muslims know, such as prayer, pilgrimage rituals, and a few of the Prophet's sayings. The chapters of hadith books that list the obscure details of the Prophet's words and actions, such as chapters on manners (*adab*), all consist of *āhād* hadiths and are not necessarily reliable.<sup>67</sup> Like Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Ridā believed that the permissibility of narrating the general meaning of hadiths had introduced many errors into the hadith corpus, since the narrators' opinions could be integrated accidentally into the hadith.

Accepting *isrā'iliyyāt* was another source of misguidance. Even though they had been used in some of the canonical hadith collections, Ridā dismissed Ka'b al-Ahbār and another early transmitter, Wahb b. Munabbih, as unreliable because of their lax transmission of *isrā'iliyyāt*. Interestingly, Ridā argued that modern scholars were justified in overturning earlier approval of these two transmitters because, unlike classical Muslim critics, they could compare *isrā'iliyyāt* reports to the actual Jewish scriptures. Ridā thus dismisses Ka'b and Wahb as unreliable because their descriptions of the Torah were factually inaccurate.<sup>68</sup> Like other reformists, Ridā called for *āhād* hadiths to be resubmitted to content criticism, a process that was originally part of the critical method of Muslim jurists but had been neglected. At one point, Ridā even states that the content criticism of classical Muslim scholars was the forerunner of modern historical 'analytical criticism'.<sup>69</sup>

Ridā devoted numerous articles in *al-Manār* to addressing problematic hadiths. He sometimes declared hadiths that had traditionally been considered authentic to be unreliable because their contents

were unacceptable according to him. Using his in-depth knowledge of *isnād* criticism, however, Ridā could attribute this to a problem in the chain of transmission.<sup>70</sup> The famous story of God ordering the moon to be split miraculously in half as proof of Muhammad's message to his opponents in Mecca had been a required belief in Sunni Islam (it is mentioned ambiguously in the Quran). Ridā, however, said that the various hadiths describing this event were so at variance with one another that one could not base one's faith on them.<sup>71</sup> Another controversial hadith, found in *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, that the sun passes under the earth and prostrates itself before the throne of God when it sets he declared false because it flatly contradicted modern science.<sup>72</sup> The position of only requiring belief in *mutawātir* hadiths allowed Ridā ample leeway for some controversial hadiths. The Hadith of the Fly, for example, could be false or it could be true, since scientists used the flesh of a snake to help prepare antidotes to its poison.<sup>73</sup> Since it was *āhād*, Muslims are not required to believe in the hadith either way.

Ridā's and 'Abduh's approach to hadiths won many adherents among Muslim reformists. The Egyptian Modernist Salafī Mahmūd Shaltūt (d. 1963) was at first persecuted by conservative ulema for his reformist ideas but was eventually appointed as the head of al-Azhar by the Egyptian government (which had a reformist agenda). He held that Muslims cannot be declared unbelievers for rejecting any article of faith that is derived from *āhād* hadiths.<sup>74</sup> Breaking with an essential tenet of faith in classical Sunni Islam, Shaltūt followed his reasoning to its logical but controversial conclusion: Muslims could not be repudiated for rejecting the long-held tenet of Jesus' return at the end of time or the belief in an Antichrist.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, he argued that one could not use consensus as proof for these issues of faith because even the consensus of the Muslim community means nothing on questions known only to God.<sup>76</sup>

'Abduh's and Ridā's school of thought was continued by Shaltūt's most famous pupil, the Azhar scholar Muhammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1996), in his prolific and extremely popular series of books on reviving Islam in the modern world. Like Shaltūt, al-Ghazālī reminds his readers of the classical legal theory stance that *āhād* hadiths are 'merely probable in their reliability and merely probable in their indication' and thus not suitable for essential beliefs.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, he affirms the predominance of the Quran, saying, 'We believe that the Quran is the basis, and the Sunna is built on it.'<sup>78</sup>

Al-Ghazālī's overriding concern throughout his works is the looming presence of the West. Although he reiterates his profound respect for classical hadith scholars like al-Bukhārī, he admits that he will reject a hadith from the canonical collections 'if it touches upon the most intimate part of our religion, or opens frightening borders through which our enemies could pour.'<sup>79</sup> When a student asks him about the *ṣaḥīḥ* hadith of Moses knocking out the angel of death's eye, he replies that its contents show that it is false, since God's prophet could not try to avoid his fate. Muslims, however, should worry about more important matters such as 'the fact that the enemies of Islam are encircling us.'<sup>80</sup>

### THREE: TRADITIONALIST SALAFIS AND THE ELEVATION OF HADITHS

What we have termed Traditionalist Salafism emerged directly from the early modern movements of revival and reform. The most persistent and most politically active Traditionalist Salafī movement was founded by Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb in the mid eighteenth century in central Arabia, expanding through its alliance with the Saud family and eventually becoming the predominant religious movement on the Arabian peninsula. A second Salafī school appeared in the Yemeni city of Sanaa with the iconoclastic hadith scholars al-San'ānī (d. 1768) and al-Shawkānī (d. 1834). A third school developed in Damascus in the second half of the nineteenth century around revivalist hadith scholars Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (d. 1914) and Tāhir al-Jazā'irī (d. 1920). At this same time an influential Salafī school also formed in Baghdad through the Hanbalī revival led by the famous Ālūsī family.<sup>81</sup> In India, some of the devotees of Shāh Walī Allāh's revivalist scholarship formed their own strict Traditionalist Salafī school, dubbed the *Ahl-e Hadīth* (The People of Hadith), whose most famous representative was Siddīq Hasan Khān (d. 1890). Other heirs to Shāh Walī Allāh's legacy combined his hadith-based revivalism with India's longstanding adherence to the Hanafī school of law. This movement resulted in the founding of the influential school at Deoband in India.

The most illustrative example of Traditionalist Salafīs is Muhammad Nāsir al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999), an Albanian whose

family immigrated to Syria. Growing up in Damascus, al-Albānī was deeply affected by Ridā's *al-Manār* articles on the extent to which unreliable hadiths had been used to justify Sufī practices.<sup>82</sup> He began to speak out against what he saw as heretical innovations in every area of Syrian religious life and penned many works attempting to reorient social and religious practices to the pure Sunna of Muhammad as communicated by hadiths.

Like the other reform movements, Traditionalist Salafīs have aimed at reviving Islam's original purity and greatness by clearing away the dross of later cultural accretions. Unlike Modernist Salafīs, who drew eclectically on Hanafī legal theory, Mu'tazilism, and modern rationalism, they have struggled literally to revive the Prophet's Sunna through a narrow focus on hadiths. Like their Modernist Salafī counterparts, Traditionalist Salafīs identify the causes of the Muslim community straying from the Sunna as excessive loyalty to the schools of law instead of a reverence for their sources, indulgence in speculative theology, and popular Sufi practices such as visiting the graves of saints.

To cure these ills, Traditionalist Salafīs have not merely engaged in the study of hadiths, they have tried to cultivate its most critically rigorous spirit. They reject the use of weak hadiths in any matter, breaking with the practice of the classical Muslim scholars (see Chapter 3). Al-Albānī asks rhetorically: if we do not dismiss hadiths once we have determined that they are unreliable, what is the point of the science of hadith criticism?<sup>83</sup> Al-Albānī thus published numerous books dividing the hadiths contained in classical works such as the Four Sunans of Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasā'ī, al-Tirmidhī, and Ibn Mājah, the *Jāmi' al-saghīr* of al-Suyūtī, and the *al-Targhīb wa al-tarhīb* of al-Mundhirī into sound and unreliable. The Saudi Wahhābī hadith scholar 'Abdallāh al-Sa'd rejects the Late Sunni Tradition's method of bolstering evidence for a hadith's authenticity by using other dubious narrations (see Chapter 3).<sup>84</sup> The Indian hadith scholar Shibli Numani (d. 1916), a traditionalist associate of Ahmad Khan, compiled a new biography of Muhammad that purged it of reports transmitted by early Muslim historians that hadith critics had considered unreliable.

Like Modernist Salafīs, Traditionalists were willing to cast aside the institutions of classical Islam, relying on hadiths as the ultimate source for interpreting the faith. The Sunna was preserved in the authentic hadiths, which are accessible to any Muslim. Like



Modernists, Traditionalist Salafīs have been skeptical of claims of consensus, which served as the primary defense for employing weak hadiths as evidence and the legitimacy of many Sufi practices. They do not doubt the theoretical proof value of consensus, but the large number of dissenting scholarly opinions in Islamic history means that it was actually achieved only rarely.

Unlike Modernists, however, Traditionalist Salafīs avow the same intense trust in hadiths found among the early *ahl al-hadīth*. They do not concur with the Modernist reemphasis on the Quran as the ultimate arbiter in matters of faith and law. Like the early *ahl al-hadīth*, al-Albānī asserts that in both law and dogma 'we cannot distinguish between God and His Prophet.'<sup>85</sup> It is thus perfectly acceptable to derive articles of faith from *āḥād* hadiths, which Muslims must accept. Did the Prophet not send single individuals as ambassadors to newly converted communities in order to teach them fundamental Islamic beliefs?<sup>86</sup> Although Traditionalist Salafīs are willing to criticize a hadith for content reasons, like the early *ahl al-hadīth*, they explain such faults by finding a flaw in the *isnād*. 'Abdallāh al-Sa'd thus declares, 'It is impossible for a hadith to have an untrue meaning without there being a flaw in the *isnād*.'<sup>87</sup> Unlike their Modernist and Modernist Salafī counterparts, these Traditionalists do not approve of Aisha's criticisms of other Companions for narrating hadiths that seemed to contradict the Quran. Since these hadiths are well established by multiple *ṣaḥīḥ isnāds*, such apparent contradictions only mean that she did not interpret the Prophet's words correctly.<sup>88</sup>

Traditionalist Salafīs preserve the spirit of *ijtihād*. For them, hadith criticism did not end with the formation of the hadith canon in the classical period. It continues to this day, and modern scholars can achieve just as high a level of critical mastery as great classical scholars such as al-Dāraqutnī or Ibn Hajar. Tāhir al-Jazā'irī defends the right of modern scholars to criticize the meanings of hadiths in the *Ṣaḥīḥayn*, rejecting the argument of those who warn that allowing criticism of the meaning of hadiths will open the door to the 'people with heretical agendas.' He disagrees, saying that proper criticism is a worthy practice.<sup>89</sup> When asked about his controversial criticism of a famous classical hadith transmitter, al-Albānī replied that the science of hadith criticism 'is not simply consigned to books,' it is a dynamic process of critical review.<sup>90</sup> Al-Albānī explained that one of the principles of Islamic scholarship is that 'religious knowledge cannot fall into rigidity.'<sup>91</sup>

This spirit of picking up the classical hadith tradition at its most critical point and applying it today has led to substantial achievements by Traditionalist Salafī scholars. Al-Albānī completed two voluminous series, 'The Series of Weak Hadiths and their Negative Effect on the Muslim Community' and 'The Series of Authentic Hadiths,' in which he reevaluates thousands of hadiths. Many that he authenticates had previously been declared unreliable, and many hadiths that he criticizes had earlier won the approval of great classical critics like al-Bukhārī and Muslim. One of al-Albānī's students, the Yemeni Muqbil al-Wādi'ī (d. 2001) similarly compiled a large work entitled 'The Compendium of *Ṣaḥīḥ* Hadiths Not Found in the Two *Ṣaḥīḥs* of al-Bukhārī and Muslim.'

Traditionalist Salafīs have also revived the genre on the technical terminology and rules of hadith criticism (*mustalah al-hadīth*). The two most famous modern contributions are Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī's *Qawā'id al-taḥdīth min funūn mustalah al-hadīth* (The Principles of Regeneration from the Technical Science of Hadith Study) and Tāhir al-Jazā'irī's *Tawjīḥ al-nazar ilā usūl al-athar* (Examining the Principles of Transmitted Reports). These works are continuations of the classical *mustalah* books, such as that of Ibn al-Salāh, but are imbued with Salafī themes. Tāhir al-Jazā'irī, for example, lambasts the excessive traditionalism of the Sunni schools of law: 'The jurists interpret away any hadith that disagrees with their school, or oppose it with another hadith even if it is not well-known, even if that [first] hadith is found in the *Ṣaḥīḥayn*.'<sup>92</sup>

Because the Salafī approach to Islamic scholarship centers on bypassing centuries of consensus-building among scholars and instead approaches the Quran and hadiths anew, it can produce divergent results. A set of Moroccan brothers who have proven the most adept hadith scholars of our time, Ahmad b. al-Siddīq al-Ghumārī (d. 1960) and his younger siblings 'Abdallāh (d. 1993) and 'Abd al-Hayy (d. 1995), followed the Traditionalist Salafī methodology. They felt entitled to reverse centuries-old rulings on the authenticity of specific hadiths and arrived at legal rulings that broke with all four Sunni schools of law. 'Abd al-Hayy argued conclusively that none of the founders of the four Sunni schools of law had access to all the necessary hadiths and that it was thus entirely acceptable to reject their rulings on the basis of hadith evidence. 'Abdallāh al-Ghumārī repeatedly wrote that '*taqlīd* never comes to any good.'<sup>93</sup> Ahmad al-Ghumārī concluded that the famous hadith in which the Prophet explained that



the 'Greatest Jihad' was 'the struggle against one's own soul' was authentic, while classical critics had considered it weak or forged.<sup>94</sup>

Despite this similarity in approach to Traditionalist Salafīs like al-Albānī, the Ghumārī brothers emerged with polar opposite positions. Salafīs, both Modernist and Traditionalist, have consistently been deeply opposed to Sufism and intolerant of the Shiite veneration of 'Alī. The Ghumārīs' analysis of the Quran, hadiths, and scholarly tradition, however, has led them to embrace 'Alī as the best and most knowledgeable of all the Companions (and in Ahmad's case, to declare Mu'āwiya an unbeliever) as well as to defend vehemently Sufi practices such as visiting graves and engaging in group liturgies not practiced during the time of the Prophet.<sup>95</sup> 'Abdallāh al-Ghumārī repeatedly accused al-Albānī of unmitigated heresy, and at least one Wahhābī hadith scholar called 'Abdallāh al-Ghumārī an unbeliever.

Unlike Modernists and Modernist Salafīs, Traditionalist Salafīs have no concern for the pressures of Modernity. They believe that if Muslims return to the authentic Sunna of the Prophet as preserved in the hadith corpus, the Muslim world will once again enjoy God's favor regardless of any perceived superiority boasted by the West today. Traditionalist Salafīs consider the other schools of thought discussed so far in this chapter to be misguided by Western influence. Al-Albānī thus calls both Abū Rayya and Muhammad al-Ghazālī 'Occidentalists (*mustaghribūn*)' and 'imitators of the Orientalists.'<sup>96</sup>

The most furious conflict among schools of Sunni thought in modern times has surged between the Traditionalist Salafīs and the Late Sunni Traditionalists (see below). Because Salafīs allow a scholar to break with the established rulings of the Sunni schools of law and perform *ijtihād*, Late Sunni Traditionalists accuse this movement of arrogantly claiming to be the equal of the great scholars of yesteryear. Muhammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (d. 1951), a high religious official in the moribund Ottoman Empire, wrote that it was pure error and misguidance to believe that, today, 'at the end of time,' one could correct the great early scholars of Islam.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, adherents of the schools of law accuse Traditionalist Salafīs of total ignorance of legal theory and thus of ignorantly following random hadiths instead of understanding how those hadiths fit into the process of deriving law. These factors combine to create, in the eyes of Late Sunni Traditionalists, interpretive chaos. Muhammad al-Ghazālī, for example, admits that he dislikes chauvinism towards one particular school of law. But it is 'less harmful than the childish *ijtihād*' of Salafī movements like

Wahhābism, which he calls simplistic 'Bedouin legal thought.'<sup>98</sup> Contrary to such polemical claims, Traditionalist Salafī scholars do advocate the study of basic books of legal theory (al-Albānī, for example, cites advanced legal principles such as 'Evidence that breaks with analogy cannot be used as the basis for another analogy').<sup>99</sup> However, the Traditionalist Salafīs' egalitarian argument that any scholar can break with an established ruling if he feels it has not taken certain hadith evidence into account has undeniably led to a proliferation of erratic rulings.

#### FOUR: LATE SUNNI TRADITIONALISTS

All the approaches to understanding Islam in the modern period that we have discussed so far have advocated the rejection of significant components of Sunni Islam as it existed in the medieval world through the 1600s. Conversely, what we can call Late Sunni Traditionalism argues that it is precisely these institutions that are essential for properly living as a Muslim today. In other words, closely following one of the accepted Sunni schools of law, believing in the traditional Ash'arī school of theology, and participating in a Sufi brotherhood provides modern Muslims with all the legal, spiritual, and theological tools they need to succeed. Properly understood and correctly combined, these classical institutions allow Muslims to answer all the challenges of Modernity. Advocates of Late Sunni Traditionalism generally refer to their school of thought as 'Traditional Islam' or 'Sunnism in its authentic form (*ahl al-sunna 'alā al-mashrib al-asīl*).'<sup>1</sup> Prominent representatives of this school include Muhammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī, Muhammad al-Ghazālī<sup>1</sup> and the current Grand Mufti of Egypt, 'Alī Jum'a.

Late Sunni Traditionalism mitigates the stipulations of Islamic law that seem incompatible with Modernity by drawing on the collective diversity of the four Sunni legal schools and the rich

<sup>1</sup> Earlier in this chapter we referred to Muhammad al-Ghazālī as a Modernist Salafī. In terms of the structure of his thought, this is correct. But al-Ghazālī's environment, Egypt in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, was much more religiously conservative than that of 'Abduh or Shaltūt. As a result, in his language and positions al-Ghazālī fits into the Late Sunni Traditionalist category.

intellectual heritage of Sunni legal theory. Although engaging in interest-bearing commercial transactions is generally prohibited in Islamic law, a minority opinion in the Hanafī school allows Muslims to take and pay interest if living in a non-Muslim country.<sup>100</sup> A principle of Late Sunni legal theory, 'Let he who is afflicted with some need take the permissive ruling,' permits a Muslim to act on this minority ruling. As Muhammad al-Ghazālī states, 'when I am defending Islam ... I must move between the opinions of all the imams and benefit from the full range of understandings.'<sup>101</sup> As a result of this methodology, Late Sunni Traditionalism produces a manifestation of Islam that adapts to many of the stringencies of the modern world while remaining grounded in 'authentic' Islamic tradition.

This school of thought also uses the relationship between law and ethics to circumvent seemingly harsh elements of Islamic law. Islamic marriage law, for example, seems to clash with modern sentiments with its legalistic requirements that a woman meet her husband's sexual needs and that a husband bear the full financial responsibilities of a family. Late Sunni Traditionalists, however, argue that the Shariah only addresses people's strict legal rights, and that a husband and wife should turn to the Sufi tradition in order to learn how to treat one another with love and compassion.

Just as Traditionalist Salafis have resurrected the approach of the *ahl al-hadīth*, Late Sunni Traditionalists have revived the methods of the *ahl al-ra'y* jurists. Late Sunni Traditionalists subordinate hadiths to the interpretive traditions of the Sunni schools of law and Sunni legal theory. Late Sunni Traditionalists affirm their total confidence in the classical method of hadith criticism; as al-Ghazālī says, 'I do not know its equal in the history of human culture in terms of establishing principles for verification.'<sup>102</sup> They also, however, entrust jurists, not hadith scholars, with the ultimate authority in determining the authenticity and implication of a hadith. Al-Kawtharī explains that hadith scholars and jurists had divided up the duties of hadith criticism, with the latter responsible for content criticism.<sup>103</sup> In an analogy similar to the doctors versus pharmacists comparison mentioned in Chapter 5, al-Ghazālī states:

The jurists have been, throughout our intellectual history, the leaders of the Muslim community... and the scholars of hadiths have been content to provide them with the reports they transmit just

as raw building materials are given to the engineer who builds a structure.<sup>104</sup>

Al-Ghazālī adds that the classical criteria for a *sahīh* hadith require that it does not include any hidden flaw ('illa) or contradict more reliable evidence. Although hadith scholars can criticize *isnāds*, it is the jurists who are properly trained to spot such errors in the text of a hadith and issue the definitive ruling on its reliability. Al-Ghazālī thus declares that a hadith that al-Albānī authenticated<sup>ii</sup> saying that **'In the meat of a cow is disease'** is false because the Quran notes the blessings of beef. The hadith is thus untrue 'whatever its *isnād* may be.'<sup>105</sup>

Late Sunni Traditionalists also circumvent hadiths that appear to be problematic in the modern world by relying on the classical juristic concept of communal practice or interpretation. Just as Mālik had ignored hadiths he acknowledged as authentic because the Muslim community had never acted on them in law, today's Late Sunni Traditionalists use the collective rulings of Muslim jurists to overrule hadiths. 'Alī Jum'a admits that numerous authentic hadiths exist that command Muslims to kill apostates, such as **'Whoever changes their religion [from Islam], kill them.'**<sup>106</sup> The fact that neither the Prophet nor the early caliphs actually implemented these rulings when individuals left Islam means that these hadiths addressed the issue of treason to the Muslim community and not a person's individual choice of belief.<sup>107</sup> Another influential modern scholar, the Egyptian Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī seconds the necessity of using juridical interpretation to check the categorical application of hadiths. For example, he uses the interpretation of the famous Muslim scholar and historian Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) to nullify the apparent Prophetic command that **'The leaders of the community (imams) are to be from the Quraysh tribe (the tribe of Muhammad).'** Al-Qaradāwī accepts Ibn Khaldūn's interpretation of this hadith, namely that the Prophet was ordering the Muslims to take as their leaders the most strongly unified group, which at the time was Quraysh. Today it might be some other group.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>ii</sup> Although al-Albānī rules that this hadith is authentic, he also notes that it cannot be interpreted literally since we know that the Prophet ate beef; al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-ahādīth al-sahīha*, p. 4:46.

# THE CONTINUITY BETWEEN CLASSICAL AND MODERN DEBATES ON HADITHS

It is worthy of note that debates over hadiths in the modern Muslim world have echoed or recast debates that occurred in the formative period of Islamic thought. Sidqī and other 'Quran only' advocates rehash the debate between early Muslim rationalists and Sunnis such as al-Shāfi'ī in the eighth century. Like al-Shāfi'ī's opponents in this debate, Sidqī argued that the Quran described itself as 'elucidating everything (*tibyān li-kull shay'*)' (Quran 16:89). So how can one argue that Muslims need hadiths to understand their faith as well? The principal argument used by conservative Sunnis like al-Sibā'ī against the writings of 'Quran only' scholars is drawn directly from al-Shāfi'ī's rebuttal of that point: if you reject the Prophet's Sunna, how do you know how to pray or fast?<sup>109</sup>

The raging debate between Traditionalist Salafīs and Late Sunni Traditionalists parallels the eighth-century dispute between the *ahl al-hadīth* and the *ahl al-ra'y*. The principle invoked by Islamic Modernists and Modernist Salafīs that the hadith corpus should be submitted to content criticism revives the long-dormant debate between the Mu'tazilites and the early Sunnis, as does the specific call to use the Quran as the criterion of judgment. The hadith that Haykal cited as his evidence for the determinative role of the Quran – '**There will come to you many different hadiths from me, so what agrees with the Book of God, accept it, and what disagrees with it, reject it**' – was used as evidence by early Mu'tazilites like al-Jāhiz. Sunni scholars, of course, universally deemed the hadith a forgery. Even the reliability and piety of Abū Hurayra was a major item of contention between the Mu'tazilites and the early Sunnis in the eighth century. In an audience before the Abbasid caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, the early Sunni Umar b. Habīb (d. 204/819-20) responded to Mu'tazilite and *ahl al-ra'y* arguments that Abū Hurayra was unreliable by claiming that if one opened the door to criticizing the Companions of the Prophet, Muslims would lose the whole Shariah.<sup>110</sup> Even before modern medicine, the Hadith of the Fly was raising skeptical eyebrows and prompting Sunni defensiveness as early as the writings of Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889).<sup>111</sup>

Of course, modern Muslim scholars have utilized this classical heritage in unprecedented ways. Mahmūd Shaltūt used the distinction between the different levels of certainty yielded by *āhād* and

*mutawātir* hadiths – a purely academic distinction in classical Islamic thought – to excuse modern Muslims from believing in 'backwards' or 'irrational' beliefs. Before Mernissi, no classical Muslim scholar had used historical reports about Abū Hurayra or Abū Bakra to claim a misogynist conspiracy at the root of Islamic law.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

The most useful books on debates over hadiths in the modern Muslim world are Daniel Brown's superb *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and G.H.A. Juynboll's *The Authenticity of the Tradition Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1969). For more general discussions of modern Islamic thought, see Albert Hourani's *Arab Thought in the Liberal Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) and Aziz Ahmad's *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967). For more on the eighteenth-century movements of revival and reform, see John Voll, 'Foundations of Renewal and Reform: Islamic Movements in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,' in *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John Esposito, pp. 509–548 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and the initial chapters of Barbara Metcalf's *Islamic Revivalism in British India: Deoband 1860–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

A difficult-to-find translation of Abū Rayya's *al-Adwā' alā al-sunna al-muhammadiyya* has been published as *Lights on the Muhammadan Sunna*, trans. Hasan Najafi (Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 1999). Muhammad Husayn Haykal's biography of the Prophet, translated by Ismail al-Faruqi, has been published in several editions as *The Life of Muhammad*. Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī's influential *Kayfa nata'āmalu ma'a al-sunna al-nabawiyya* has been translated as *Approaching the Sunna: Comprehension and Controversy*, trans. Jamil Qureshi (Washington DC: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2007). Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's response to William Muir's critique of the *sīra* has been published as *A Series of Essays on the Life of Muhammad* (Lahore: Premier Book House, 1968), and Shibli Numani's biography of the Prophet has been published as *Sirat-un-Nabi: The Life of the Prophet*, 2 vols. (Delhi: Idarat Adabiyat Deli, 1979).

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Al-San'ānī, *Irshād al-muqqād ilā taysīr al-ijtihād*, p. 58.
- 2 Al-Sanānī, *Diwān al-Amīr al-San'ānī*, p. 168.
- 3 'Abdallāh al-Ghumārī, *Al-Khawātir al-dīniyya*, vol. 1, p. 123; Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Sāwī, *Hāshiyat al-Sāwī 'alā Tafṣīr al-Jalālayn*, vol. 3, p. 9.
- 4 Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan*, pp. 60–61.
- 5 Ibid., p. 63.
- 6 Ibid., p. 59.
- 7 Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, pp. 38–39.
- 8 Ibid., p. 98.
- 9 Ibid., pp. 46–47.
- 10 Muhammad Tawfiq Sidqī, 'al-Islām huwa al-Qur'ān waḥdahū,' pp. 516–517; idem, 'al-Islām huwa al-Qur'ān waḥdahū: radd li-radd,' p. 912 (found in Ridā, ed., *al-Manār* 9, n. 7 and 12).
- 11 Sidqī, 'al-Islām huwa al-Qur'ān waḥdahū: radd li-radd,' p. 910.
- 12 Sidqī, 'al-Islām huwa al-Qur'ān waḥdahū,' p. 524.
- 13 Sidqī, 'al-Islām huwa al-Qur'ān waḥdahū: radd li-radd,' p. 911.
- 14 Juynboll, *The Authenticity of the Tradition Literature: Discussions in Modern Egypt*, pp. 28–30; Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, p. 89.
- 15 *Sunan Abī Dāwūd: kitāb al-at'ima, bāb fī al-dhubāb yaqa'u fī al-ta'ām*. This ḥadīth also appears in *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, but as a chapter title and thus not actually one of the author's selected ḥadīths; see *Sahīh al-Bukhārī: kitāb bad' al-khalq, bāb 16*.
- 16 Juynboll, *Authenticity*, p. 141.
- 17 Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, p. 47.
- 18 Muhammad Husayn Haykal, *Hayāt Muḥammad*, p. 67.
- 19 Ibid., pp. 64–66.
- 20 Abū Rayya, *Adwā' 'alā al-sunna al-muḥammadiyya*, pp. 350–351.
- 21 Ibid., pp. 252 ff., 278.
- 22 Juynboll, *Authenticity*, pp. 41–43; see *Sahīh al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-adhān, bāb fadl al-ta'dhīn*. Ibn Hajar notes that this should not be understood literally; Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-bārī*, vol. 2, pp. 108–109.
- 23 Abū Rayya, *Adwā'*, p. 233.
- 24 Ibid., p. 148.
- 25 Ibid., pp. 151 ff.
- 26 Ibid., p. 169.
- 27 Juynboll, *Authenticity*, pp. 88, 133.
- 28 Abū Rayya, *Adwā'*, p. 169.
- 29 Juynboll, *Authenticity*, p. 130.
- 30 Abū Rayya, *Adwā'*, pp. 140 ff.
- 31 Juynboll, *Authenticity*, pp. 30–40.
- 32 Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, p. 57.
- 33 Wadud does not deal with ḥadīths in her discussion, while Kugle avoids discussing ḥadīths that command the death penalty for those 'committing the sin of the people of Lot' because they are not in the *Sahīhayn* (they are found in the Four *Sunan*). See Amina Wadud, *The Quran and Woman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Scott Kugle, 'Sexuality, Diversity and

- Ethics in the Agenda of Progressive Muslims,' in *Progressive Muslims*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), pp. 220–221.
- 34 See <http://www.yuksel.org/e/books/rtq.htm> (last accessed 11/1/07).
- 35 Fatema Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, p. 77.
- 36 Ibid., p. 43.
- 37 *Sahīh Muslim: kitāb al-salāt, bāb al-i'tirād bayn yaday al-musallī; Sahīh al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-fitan, bāb 18*.
- 38 Mernissi, pp. 56 ff., 71–72.
- 39 Ibid., p. 60.
- 40 Ibid., p. 76.
- 41 Fazlur Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, pp. 6, 33.
- 42 Ibid. p. 6, 12.
- 43 Ibid., pp. 15–16, 19.
- 44 Ibid., p. 56.
- 45 Ibid., pp. 72–73.
- 46 Ibid., p. 40.
- 47 Ibid., p. 72.
- 48 Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism*, p. 53.
- 49 Ibid., p. 31.
- 50 Ibid., p. 41.
- 51 Aziz Ahmad and G.E. von Grunebaum, eds., *Muslim Self-Statement in India and Pakistan 1857–1968*, p. 34; Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism*, pp. 43, 46.
- 52 Ahmad and von Grunebaum, p. 30.
- 53 Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism*, p. 54.
- 54 Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology*, p. 113.
- 55 Ibid., pp. 134, 139–140.
- 56 Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism*, pp. 49 ff.
- 57 Troll, pp. 137–139.
- 58 Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, p. 64.
- 59 Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism*, pp. 47–48.
- 60 Troll, p. 129.
- 61 Ibid., p. 141.
- 62 Ibid., p. 111.
- 63 Juynboll, *Authenticity*, p. 15.
- 64 Muhammad 'Abduh, *The Theology of Unity*, pp. 155–156.
- 65 Ridā, *Al-Manār*, 21, no. 1, p. 67.
- 66 Muhammad al-Ghazālī, *Turāthunā al-fikrī*, p. 176.
- 67 Ridā, *Al-Manār*, 27, no. 8, p. 616.
- 68 Ridā, *Al-Manār*, 27, no. 7, pp. 539 ff., 615; ibid., 28, no. 1, p. 67.
- 69 Ridā, *Al-Manār*, 27, no. 8, p. 615; ibid., p. 3:620.
- 70 Ridā, *Al-Manār*, 19, no. 2, p. 100.
- 71 Juynboll, *Authenticity*, pp. 145–146; 'Abd al-Majīd Mahmūd, *Abū Ja'far al-Tahāwī wa atharuhu fī al-ḥadīth*, p. 117.
- 72 Ridā, *Al-Manār*, 27, no. 8, p. 615; *Sahīh al-Bukhārī: kitāb bad' al-khalq, bāb sifāt al-shams wa al-qamar*.
- 73 Juynboll, *Authenticity*, p. 143.
- 74 Mahmūd Shaltūt, *Al-Fatāwā*, p. 52.

- 75 Ibid., pp. 61 ff., 82.
- 76 Ibid., p. 79.
- 77 Al-Ghazālī, *Turāthunā al-fikrī*, p. 169.
- 78 Ibid., p. 181.
- 79 Al-Ghazālī, *al-Sunna al-nabawiyya*, p. 190.
- 80 Ibid., pp. 35–36.
- 81 Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim*, pp. 309–310.
- 82 Al-Albānī, 'Tarjamat al-shaykh al-Albānī – Nash'at al-Shaykh fī Dimashq.'
- 83 Al-Albānī, *Sahīh al-Targhīb wa al-tarhīb*, p. 1:60.
- 84 'Abdallāh al-Sa'd, 'Sharh al-Mūqiza 3.'
- 85 Al-Albānī, 'Tafsīr 1.'
- 86 Al-Albānī, 'Tafsīr 2.'
- 87 'Abdallāh al-Sa'd, 'Sharh Kitāb al-Tamyīz 3.'
- 88 Al-Albānī, *Tafsīr 3*.'
- 89 Tāhir al-Jazā'irī, *Tawjīh al-nazar ilā usūl al-athar*, vol. 1, pp. 331–332.
- 90 Al-Albānī, 'Silsilat as'ilat Abī Ishāq al-Huwaynī li'l-shaykh Muhammad Nāsir al-Dīn al-Albānī.'
- 91 Al-Albānī, *Sahīh al-Targhīb wa al-tarhīb*, vol. 1, p. 4.
- 92 Al-Jazā'irī, *Tawjīh al-nazar ilā usūl al-athar*, p. 1:320.
- 93 'Abdallāh al-Ghumārī, *Tawjīh al-'ināya li-ta'rīf 'ilm al-hadīth riwāya wa dirāya*, p. 15.
- 94 Ahmad al-Ghumārī, *Dar' al-da'f 'an hadīth man 'ashiqa fa-'aff*, p. 121.
- 95 'Abdallāh al-Ghumārī, *Itqān al-san'a fī tahqīq ma'nā al-bid'a*, p. 41; Ahmad al-Ghumārī, *Ju'nat al-attār*, vol. 2, p. 154.
- 96 Al-Albānī, *Mukhtasar Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, vol. 2, pp. 8–9.
- 97 Al-Kawtharī, *Maqālāt*, p. 225.
- 98 Al-Ghazālī, *al-Sunna al-nabawiyya*, pp. 14–15.
- 99 'Mā kāna 'alā khilāf al-qiyās fa-'alayhi ghayruhu lā yuqās,' al-Albānī, 'al-Zawāj.'
- 100 'Alī Jum'a, *al-Bayān li-mā yushghalu bihi al-adhhān*, pp. 99 ff.
- 101 Al-Ghazālī, *Turāthunā al-fikrī*, p. 153.
- 102 Al-Ghazālī, *al-Sunna al-nabawiyya*, p. 19.
- 103 Al-Kawtharī, *Maqālāt*, p. 55.
- 104 Al-Ghazālī, *al-Sunna al-nabawiyya*, p. 32.
- 105 Ibid., pp. 19–20.
- 106 *Sahīh al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-jihād*, bāb 149.
- 107 Jum'a, *al-Bayān*, pp. 78–81.
- 108 Al-Qaradāwī, *Kayfa nata'amalu ma'a al-sunna al-nabawiyya*, pp. 129–130.
- 109 Al-Shāfi'ī, *al-Risāla*, p. 177.
- 110 Al-Khatīb, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, vol. 11, pp. 197–198.
- 111 Ibn Qutayba, *Ta'wīl mukhtalif al-hadīth*, p. 228.

# 10

## CONCLUSION

We must possess a grasp of the hadith tradition and its many functions in order to understand the past and present of the Islamic world. This grasp is indispensable for comprehending Muslim debates over the future as well. When we look behind the headlines today, we see that much of the time hadiths are at the vortex of the most salient debates in Islamic thought. On controversial issues from jihad and martyrdom to women's rights under Islamic law, hadiths always provide key and often determinative evidence. As we have seen, even those Muslims who reject heeding hadiths at all in such debates face the challenge of justifying this position with evidence from the classical hadith tradition.

Even if we understand the importance of hadiths in parsing complex problematics such as 'Islam and the West' or 'Islam and Women,' we must always keep history in mind. History gave birth to the complexities of the present and holds the keys to unraveling them. Debates over the necessity of hadiths, their place in articulating Islamic law and dogma, and how Muslims should know true claims about revelation from the false have been of perennial importance throughout Islamic history.

Let us retrace some of the main thematic steps in the reasoning of Muslim scholars throughout Islamic history, specifically those regarding hadiths. If the Quran is God's manifest revelation to mankind, do we need any other source for understanding His religion? If not, then how do we know how to perform (or, perhaps, how do we justify the fact that we perform) our five daily prayers and fast during Ramadan? – these practices are not explained in the holy book. If we *do* need another source, then does our sense of reason alone suffice? The answer seems to be 'no,' as reason on its own cannot provide the

basis or specifics for Muslim prayer and fasting, which can only be known through some form of tradition handed down from Muhammad and the early Muslim community. If we must rely to some extent on this tradition, then how do we balance it with the Quran and reason? What happens when revelation, reason, and tradition seem to conflict? Does tradition trump reason and our *prima facie* understanding of the Quran, or vice versa? If we are to subordinate some elements of our rational thought and understanding of the Quran to tradition, how do we know when tradition is authentic or inauthentic? How is tradition transmitted or preserved? If tradition overrules the Quran and reason, then can the principles of the Quran or reason be used to authenticate tradition? These are some of the questions that have driven Islamic intellectual history in its various streams and embodiments.

In this book, we have proposed thinking about hadiths in terms of their two essential functions in Islamic civilization. First, the hadith as a text (*matn*) – authoritative statements by the Prophet that shape Islamic law, dogma, and worldview. Second, the hadith as a chain of transmission (*isnād*) – a medium of connection to the Prophet and a paradigm of constructing a relationship between the Muslim present and the Muslim past. Interestingly, in both these cases, the functions of hadiths and the questions surrounding them are common to faith traditions other than Islam.

In an *interpretive* tradition, namely one in which meaning is developed by turning (back) towards and interpreting an authoritative source such as a revealed text or constitution, the interpreter of the source is effectively more powerful than the source itself. Using the analogy of a king or ruler, the king's interpreter is more powerful than the king himself, since the interpreter controls and shapes the king's message. Similarly, it is the lens through which we view an object that controls our perception of that object, not the object itself.

Early in Islamic history, both Sunni and Shiite Muslims decided that the Quran was a source that had to be interpreted through specific lenses. It could not speak on its own (early Muslim rationalists and 'Quran only' advocates today have challenged this). The Prophet was the first interpreter, and his Sunna was what the Muslim scholar 'Alī Jum'a has called 'an infallible application of the Book of God.'<sup>1</sup> But who, in turn, would interpret the Prophet's Sunna? Who would provide the second interpretive layer that would translate the Sunna and apply it among the coming Muslim generations in new Muslim lands? Sunnis chose the Muslim community as a whole, represented

by the ulema, as the authoritative interpreter, while Shiite Muslims selected the family of the Prophet and the scholars who followed in the footsteps of the imams.

But how should the Sunna be communicated and preserved? Some Sunnis believed that the Sunna was preserved in the form of communal practice (like the Mālikī school of law), others in the form of the methods of problem-solving inherited from the Prophet through his Companions and their Successors (like the Partisans of Reason). The Quran is a written text, but these approaches treated the Sunna as a living and unwritten entity. Ultimately, Sunnis accepted that the Sunna must take a written form as well, that of hadiths. Although Sunni scholars continue to debate the proper relationship between practice, interpretive method, and the text of hadiths to this day, Muslim scholars generally recognize that hadiths are the most powerful, even if not the ultimate, vehicle for the Sunna.

This process is common to Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. In all these traditions, a written scripture is interpreted through an oral lens that is eventually also consigned to written form. Classical rabbinic Judaism is based on the idea that Moses received two Torahs on Mount Sinai, the written revelation of the scriptures, designated collectively as the Written Torah, and an oral Torah, which transmitted the authoritative interpretations of these books. This oral tradition was inherited from Moses by subsequent leaders of the Jewish people through the biblical period and on through the time of the rabbis. Eventually, in the early third century CE it was set down in written form in the Mishna.

Among Christians, a Greek translation of the Old Testament served as the community's revealed scripture during the first two centuries CE. Christians read and understood the significance of the Old Testament through the orally transmitted teachings of Jesus and the elucidations of the Christian church fathers – the stories of the Old Testament and pronouncements of Hebrew prophets like Isaiah were interpreted as referring allegorically or literally to Christ. At the same time as the Jews were setting down their oral Torah in written form, the Christians adopted as their written interpretive lens a selection of written accounts of Jesus' life and mission in the form of the New Testament Gospels.<sup>2</sup>

In Islam more than in the other Abrahamic traditions, however, there arose a particular interpretive problem. From the time of the Prophet and the revelation of the Quran itself, Muslims have been self-



consciously obsessed with *textual authenticity*. The Quran explains that previous communities had corrupted or altered the revealed books of God. Muslim scholars therefore proclaimed an enduring devotion to assuring the authenticity of their religion's teachings and its textual sources. This is most obvious in the text of the Quran itself. From the time of Muhammad's Companions, Muslim scholars have obsessively safeguarded the textual integrity of the Quran, meticulously recording any variations in wording or pronunciation.

The hadith corpus, however, was not set down in writing at such an early date, so the authenticity of this interpretive lens quickly became a major matter of contention. Early Sunni Muslims developed their methods of *isnād* criticism in an effort to assure the textual authenticity of the Sunna without relying on the same flawed rational faculties that had led earlier nations astray. However, the tension between surrendering to the *isnād* and its power to authenticate versus the role of reason as a criterion for evaluating truth remains unresolved among Muslim scholars.

When Sunni legal theory matured fully in the tenth and eleventh centuries CE, scholars grappled with a more philosophical problem: how can you interpret a source whose historical reliability is certain (the Quran) through a lens of questionable historical reliability (hadiths)? Classical Sunni legal theorists employed the concepts of consensus (*ijmā'*) and the certainty produced by massive transmission (*tawātur*) to reach a solution to this problem, but it continues to drive the debate between Islamic modernists and traditionalists today.

Interestingly, there are remarkable similarities between the Islamic tradition of hadith criticism and a genre of books in Chinese Zen Buddhism known as *Ching Lu*, which flourished among Chinese Buddhist scholars in the period just before and during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE). *Ching Lu* books were catalogs devoted to distinguishing between writings that were thought to be authentic records of the Buddha's teachings as transmitted to China from India and books that were written by Chinese scholars and thus did not originate in the Buddhist homeland of India. With an attitude very similar to Muslim hadith critics, the authors of *Ching Lu* books saw themselves as sorting the 'rubies from pebbles' in a struggle to preserve the authentic teachings of the Buddha from the accretions of Chinese philosophy and superstition. Unlike Muslim hadith critics, however, *Ching Lu* authors depended primarily on searching for anomalous contents in the books they critiqued – teachings that resembled Chinese lore, for example, were red flags for forgery. Although identifying the authors or translators of books of Buddhist teachings

served as part of the *Ching Lu* critical arsenal, the absence of an elaborate *isnād* tradition and the many anonymously written texts made such transmission criticism much less common than the Islamic hadith tradition.<sup>3</sup>

The second function of hadiths, that of a medium of connection to the Prophet and a framework for imagining historical relationships through the *isnād*, is only partially concerned with authenticity. It is more than anything the foundation of a religious worldview. Although the *isnād* was developed as a tool for authenticating hadiths, it reflected and eventually became the embodiment of a more general conception of the transmission of authority. The *isnād* was the key to distinguishing between reliable and unreliable hadiths for Muslim scholars, but it was also a language for expressing connections with teachers, saints, and the Prophet himself.

As a criterion for textual reliability, the strength and historical accuracy of an *isnād* was essential. As a medium for connection, the *isnād* took on a meaning far beyond and indeed in spite of its historicity. Even if only as a formality, possessing some sort of *isnād* back to the Prophet was the essential mark of a Muslim scholar. Short *isnāds* for hadiths became a means of close connection to the Prophet's blessings. Bizarre *isnāds* were collected like rare coins – it was the rarity and supposed shortness of an *isnād* that made it valuable, not the authenticity of the hadith it communicated. In Sufism, the *isnād* was the chain of transmission for the Prophet's blessings (*baraka*), ethical instruction, and esoteric knowledge. The cloak (*khirqā*) served as the outward manifestation of this chain, literally a means of investiture into the socially expansive class of Sufi devotees.

Even in its abstract sense of a connection to the first and most authoritative interpreter of God's revelation, the Prophet, however, the *isnād* had practical groundings. Arabic texts, whether individual hadiths or entire treatises, were written in a script that left many vowels unwritten and that could easily be misread. Reading a book or a hadith properly thus required the presence of a teacher who had heard that text read aloud. Transmission from teacher to student, however, involved more than just this practical utility. Muslim scholars believe that this living relationship passed on the light of sacred learning and the 'living word of knowledge,' as Plato (d. 347 BCE) called it, from one generation to the next. Transmission creates and passes on authority.

Although Muslims have sometimes touted this connective function of the *isnād* as unique to Islamic thought, it is also a common

theme in other traditions.<sup>5</sup> When the Christian philosopher and maverick theologian Peter Abelard (d. 1142 CE) dared to offer a class in which he provided his own commentary on biblical scripture, students were aghast. To innovate one's own commentary on the scriptures without having the collective commentaries of generations of church scholars painstakingly explained by a teacher, one's link to this interpretive chain, was unthinkable.<sup>6</sup> In medieval Judaism the concept of a chain of transmission that passed on an understanding of the revealed scriptures and bequeathed authority in the process was known as 'the chain of tradition (*shilshet hakabbalah*).'

The commonalities that the Islamic hadith tradition shares with other faith traditions remind us of the supreme importance of context at the close of this study. The grand tradition of Muslim hadith criticism emphasizes the paramount place of *authenticity* in the Islamic religious worldview. When the great hadith scholar al-Khatīb al-Baghdādī died in 1071 CE, crowds carrying his casket through the streets of Baghdad shouted 'Make way! Make way for him who fended off lies from the Messenger of God!'<sup>7</sup>

But discussing the words attributed to Muhammad, debating their authenticity and potential meaning, has never been a discourse that has taken place in objective or neutral isolation. Always there are great consequences. Discussions of the proper place of the Prophet's Sunna began among Muslims in the shadow of unspoken assumptions about the true nature of God's message to Muhammad. Ever looming over these debates have been weighty implications for how that religion would take shape on earth. If we cannot trust a body of hadiths, Muslims have asked, or if we lose the hadith corpus to modern historical criticism, how do we know God's will and sacred law? As al-Shāfi'ī asked, how do we know how to pray?<sup>8</sup> Torn between a commitment to critical rigor and the duty to provide answers for the masses, Muslim hadith critics have always had to balance the scholarly integrity of rigorous historians with the needs and expectations of the Muslim community as a whole.

In no matter have consequences been more intimidating than in that of protecting the purity of the Prophet's message from alien influences. The study and criticism of hadiths among Muslims began as a means to protect the Muslim community from competing claims to truth, such as Greek philosophy, Christian thought, or purely rational approaches to law and worship. The Partisans of Hadith, who later formed the core of Sunni Islam, and the *isnād* itself arose as a con-

servative reaction to fears of the foreign influence that other Near Eastern faiths and philosophies might have upon the still maturing Muslim community. Later, debates over the *isnāds* of Sufism centered on doubts over and defenses of the Islamic authenticity of Sufi beliefs and practices. Concerns over the influence of Greek philosophy or Christianity have faded into history. But today questioning whether or not Muslims can trust the historical reliability of hadiths conjures the twin specters of Western control over defining Islam and Muslims' anxieties about how to reconcile their faith with the hegemonic power of Western science. Always there are consequences for Muslims' sense of Islamic authenticity.

Difficult as it has been to achieve in reality, Muslim scholars have always clung to the ideal of freeing the historical criticism of words attributed to Muhammad from the grasp of consequence and the hopes and multiform fears that always surround us. Yet the modern world is perilous and unrelenting in its temptations and terrors. After our discussion of Muslim and Western perspectives on the hadith tradition and Islamic history, we are left with a great quandary for both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars: what forces should determine our interactions with the past? Plato's Socratic voice, a voice long heeded in Islamic civilization as intently as it has been in the West, echoes across the aeons: 'I have heard a report of the ancients, whether it is true or not only they know; although if we had found the truth ourselves, do you think that we should care much about the opinions of men?'<sup>9</sup>

*Wa Allāhu a'lam* (And God knows best).

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 'Alī Jum'a, personal communication.
- 2 James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community*, p. 14.
- 3 Kyoko Tokuno, 'The Evaluation of Indigenous Scriptures in Chinese Buddhist Bibliographical Catalogues,' pp. 31–59.
- 4 Plato, *Phaedrus*, p. 276a.
- 5 Al-Nawawī, *Sharh Sahīh Muslim*, vol. 1, p. 119.
- 6 Peter Abelard, 'Historia Calimatatum,' p. 63.
- 7 Al-Dhahabī, *Tadhkirat al-huffāz*, vol. 3, p. 226.
- 8 Al-Shāfi'ī, *al-Risāla*, p. 177.
- 9 Plato, *Phaedrus*, p. 274c.