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## Did Muhammad Really Say That?; Muslims Re-Examine the Words of the Prophet in Today's Light

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Jihaad Abdul-Majid has often found inspiration in the words and deeds of Islam's prophet, Muhammad, from his acts of compassion and charity to his counsel that followers treat women fairly and help the poor.

At the same time, other sayings that implied female inferiority and intolerance toward other religions troubled the 23-year-old student at the University of Louisville in Kentucky.

"These issues have pushed me to seek more knowledge," said Abdul-Majid, who recently enrolled in an online course about the hadith, the collected stories of what Muhammad and his closest companions said and did.

Muslims hold the hadith second only to the Koran as a source of Shariah law and personal guidance. For centuries, Muslims have hotly debated the hadith, often coming to vastly different conclusions about what lessons to draw from Muhammad's life.

Now, with extremists citing certain sayings to justify violence, intolerance and the oppression of women, moderate Muslim scholars and lay people such as Abdul-Majid are revisiting the collected sayings and opening a debate about their meaning and role in Muslim life.

Because the hadith carry so much weight, any new interpretations could have dramatic effects on Muslim societies -- influencing views on issues that include the rights of women and religious minorities and the compatibility of Islam with democracy. And a Hyattsville woman, Saida Malik, questions the hadith in part because the stories were gathered by males.

Yet even those who advocate change acknowledge it won't come easily.

"There's resistance because it means changing the culture," said Pamela Taylor, co-chairwoman of the Progressive Muslim Union. "It's a very threatening thing to look hard at your religion and say we've been doing it wrong for the last 1,100 years."

Muhammad commanded followers not to record what he said to guard against the possibility that they would confuse his words with God's. Instead, Muslims kept the sayings alive orally.

By the early 9th century, about 200 years after Muhammad's death, as many as 700,000 sayings were circulating across the Muslim world. Many were of questionable credibility and some were even fabricated to support political or economic policies.

Leading scholars decided that the sayings should be collected and verified. Using a painstaking process, they traced the chain of narration and scrutinized the character and memory skills of the individual reporters.

The two preeminent hadith scholars, Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari and Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj, collected 2,602 and 9,200 hadith, respectively, all of them considered sahih, or "sound," authentic and indisputable. Other collections exist, but they include sayings with weak links or other defects.

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Over the centuries, however, weak classifications have not stopped some Muslims from invoking some sayings for political purposes. Others have interpreted sound hadith in ways that many Muslims find inconsistent with other Islamic teachings. Such practices continue today.

Consider the dispute around a hadith that says, "A woman may not lead a man in prayer, nor may a Bedouin lead Muhammad's followers or a corrupt person lead a committed Muslim in prayer."

Sheikh Muhammad Nur Abdullah, president of the Indianapolis-based Islamic Society of North America, last year cited the first third of that hadith in a paper arguing against women as prayer leaders in mixed-gender congregations.

Taylor of the Progressive Muslim Union, who supports women-led prayer, argued that the hadith suffers from a weak chain of narrators and is a racist text out of step with Islam's racial egalitarianism. It was "hypocritical," she said, to use a hadith knowing it was weak.

Abdullah acknowledged that the hadith is "weak," but said he used it only to support other hadith to make his case. He also denied it was racist.

Sound narrations that some see as inconsistent with the Koran, or that don't fit Muhammad's image as fair and compassionate, can be even more problematic.

For example, in several hadith collected by Bukhari, Muhammad orders adulterers to be stoned to death, although the Koran prescribes a punishment of up to 100 lashes. In recent years, Islamic courts in Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Nigeria have handed down death sentences in some adultery cases, although it is unclear how many have been carried out.

"There are some that show him merciful and there are some that show him otherwise," said Shahed Amanullah, editor of the online magazine [altmuslim.com](http://altmuslim.com). "People are asking, 'How can you have these contradictions?' So something is wrong, and someone needs to resolve that."

Saida Malik, a retired federal worker, took matters into her own hands 40 years ago as a young woman in Pakistan when she picked up an Islamic magazine that advocated rejecting any hadith that seemed inconsistent with the Koran or Muhammad's character.

Malik, who immigrated to Hyattsville almost 30 years ago, said she's still skeptical about the hadith, partly because they were collected by men.

"It's my iman," Malik, 66, said, using the Arabic word for faith, "that he would not have given unreasonable, idiotic advice, which the hadith books are full of."

Some scholars, however, warn against simply dismissing troubling sayings and suggest a better response is to re-interpret the texts.

"The scholars have done a tremendous job of recording and authenticating the hadith. After all that work, to say, 'OK, let's throw the hadith away because it doesn't fit with my intellect,' I should question my intellect, not the hadith," Abdullah said.

Other scholars caution against a rush to view ancient texts through modern eyes. "If people don't like something, the easiest thing to do is to say that the hadith must not be true," said Mohammad Fadel, an Islamic law professor at the University of Toronto.

"This is understandable to some extent, but it's an easy way out; it's not an intellectually sound approach," he said.

There is also no guarantee that new interpretations that try to reconcile certain texts with modern times will be accepted by all Muslims.

This year, for example, Afghan judges justified their death sentence for a Muslim convert to Christianity based on a death sentence handed down by Muhammad to an apostate. Yet most Muslim scholars condemned the Afghan judges, citing examples from Muhammad's life in which he urged tolerance for people of other faiths. They noted that the man ordered by Muhammad to die was not guilty of changing religions, but of treason.

"With this apostasy issue, the differences become so glaring, with one side saying, 'put to death,' and the other saying, 'no, free will.' People are coming from two worlds," said Amanullah of [altmuslim.com](http://altmuslim.com). "The cultural differences in the Muslim world stem from the hadith."

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Other scholars emphasize that the hadith and their interpretations should be viewed through the prism of time and culture. If Muslims are to successfully reinterpret the hadith for the 21st century, they must avoid literalism and be willing to apply the hadith to reflect today's cultural norms.

"In the prophet's time, there was a tacit understanding that things would change as circumstances changed," said Ebrahim Moosa, an Islamic studies professor at Duke University.

"We need to re-evaluate our canon of interpretation."

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