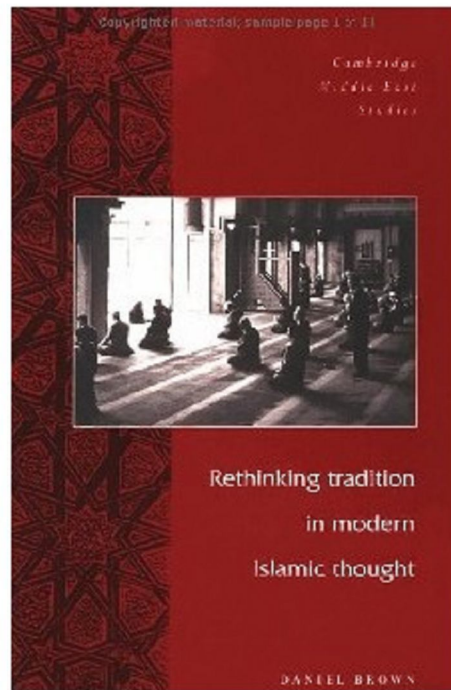# A summary of the book **"Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought"** by **Daniel Brown**.

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Rethinking tradition in modern islamic thought

DANIEL BROWN

"... a good introduction for the reader who is interested in learning about modern Islam and who seeks a serious scholarly treatment of the subject." **Digest of Middle East Studies**

Definitions:
Hadith = saying (or report/statement/tale)
Sunna = way (or method)

Please note that a summary based on what I think to be the important and interesting points will be subjective. Therefore, for a more objective approach, a study of the actual book may be necessary. Sometimes the page number is indicated, this is for those who have the book to be able to verify what I have written.

Summary of interesting & important information:

Chapters:
The relevance of the past: classical conceptions of Prophetic authority
The emergence of modern challenges to tradition
Boundaries of revelation
The nature of Prophetic authority
The authenticity of hadith
Sunna and Islamic revivalism
The spectrum of change

The relevance of the past: classical conceptions of Prophetic authority

The word *sunna* predates the rise of Islam and is well attested in pre-Islamic sources. The word *sunna* was likely to be applied to Muhammad even during his lifetime (p8).

The Quran never mentions *sunna-al-nabi* (*sunna* of the Prophet). The application of the term *sunna* is likely to be post-Quranic, especially when applied exclusively to Muhammad.

Early muslims did not give precedence of Muhammad's *sunna* over other *sunnas*, such as the *sunna* of the early caliphs or early companions. The *sunna* term was not exclusive to

Muhammad. There were no rigid distinctions about sources of religious law, i.e. it wasn't concrete that Muhammad's *sunna* could be used as a source of law.

Shafi was born in 204 AH (193 years after Prophet Muhammad's death). He was the first to argue the Prophet's *sunna* as a source of law, identified to authentic prophetic *hadith*, and give it an equal footing to The Quran. Different attitudes to *sunna* existed during Shafi, al-kalam (a particular group or school of thought) rejected *hadith* altogether in favour of The Quran alone. Shafi's view was also opposed early by schools of jurisprudence in Hijaz, Iraq and Syria, who applied the term *sunna* to Muhammad, his companions and the early caliphs as well.

After Shafi, it is rare to find the term *sunna* applied to other than Muhammad. Al-kalam argued the *sunna* of Muhammad should never be allowed to rule on The Quran and described the science of *hadith* (as in the methods used to collect *hadith)* as arbitrary. Evidence of this was the *hadith* was filled with contradictory, blasphemous and absurd traditions. [top]

The emergence of modern challenges to tradition

In the 19th century William Muir and Alloyce Sprenger were the first Western scholars to question whether *hadith* really reflected the words and deeds of the Prophet. Whether its transmission was reliable, and whether the science of *hadith* (method of collection) was valid.

In the 18th century, because of the decay of the society around them Muslim reformers diagnosed the problem as straying from the original sources, The Quran and *sunna* (p22). Shah Wali Allah in the 18th century stressed the need to re-examine the *hadith* and *sunna* with respect to legal aspects. Shawkani emphasised the trend towards increased stringency and rigorous scholarship in *hadith* studies. He was willing to reject the whole structure of classical Islam or at least subject it to tests, including all *sunna* and *hadith*. The rejection of much of the classical tradition by Shawkani and the followers of Shah Wali Allah and their use of *hadith* to critique this tradition represents a significant divergence from the attitudes of classical law schools towards the *sunna*. Both figures were not alone in this view, people before and also after held this view, they were simply the two main scholars who approached this topic. They prepared the ground for rigorous *hadith* based reform movements in the 19th and 20th centuries (p26).

The first major challenge to *sunna* in the modern period came from the great Indian modernist Sir Sayed Ahmed Khan (SAK), who lived from 1817 to 1898. He eventually came to reject all*hadith* as unreliable, however he never fully rejected the authority of *sunna*. He severely curtailed its scope, and called for new methods of evaluating it and insisted on its subordinate (lower) position with respect to The Quran. SAK worked on the following: *a commentary on the bible*, it was an attempt to establish an Islamic framework within which The Bible could be understood and accepted as a product of divine revelation. In the course of this venture, he was confronted with Western methods of Biblical criticism about questions of inspiration and revelation which caused him to examine his attitudes on corresponding Islamic questions. By accepting the Christian scriptures as revealed he was faced directly with the problem of recording the form of the Biblical text with Muslim preconceptions about what a revealed book should look like.

The Bible he concluded is indeed a form of revelation (*wahy*) but it is not the same kind of *wahy* as The Quran. Jewish and Christian scriptures differ from Quranic revelation in just the same way as does the *sunna*, both contain the meaning and the general sense of the divine message but they cannot be considered to be the very Words of God. He invoked the classical distinction between recited revelation found only in The Quran and unrecited revelation found in the *sunna*. He reinforced this analogy between the Christian scripture and the*sunna* by an unusual application of the terminology of *"hadith* criticism" to the Biblical text. Inconsistancies and corruption of the Biblical text can be explained and reconciled with the general revealed character of The Bible, by distinguishing within the text between revelation itself and explanatory notes of those who transmitted the text. By implication then, both pre-Quranic revelation and the *sunna* are less trustworthy than The Quran and unlike The Quran were liable to corruption.

In the course of subtly undermining The Bible, in relation to The Quran, he also widened the gap between Quran and *sunna*.

Muir who wrote a critique of the *hadith* rejecting all of it and stating that all Islamic information should come from The Quran alone, deeply troubled SAK. So he prepared a rebuttle in his series of essays on the life of Muhammad and subjects. In this work and all of his subsequent writings on *hadith* he demonstrated a preoccupation with issues raised by Muir. He defended the value of *isnad* (transmission) criticism, he argued that Muir was unreasonable in attributing bias to the

early narrators of *hadith* and he suggested his opponent had vastly underated the power of memory. Despite his apologetic tone in the face of Muir's attacks, he made a critical concession agreeing that all traditions, even those in the 6 collections of *hadith* should be subject to criticism. SAK began to regard The Quran as the supreme standard, against which other information about the Prophet should be tested. He came to consider only*muttawatir* traditions (those transmitted by great enough number of persons to eliminate the possibility of collusion to deceive) to be a reliable basis of belief independent of The Quran. Of these, he claimed to have found only 5.

In Egypt, Muhammad Abu began to express skeptisism about the *hadith* about the same time as SAK, but much more cautiously. In the generation following SAK and Abu, another band in the spectrum of modern approaches to prophetic authority took shape, with the emergence of Quranic scripturalism. They were the ahl-i-Quran (p38). They came to view adherence to*hadith* as the cause of Islam's misfortunes, this was about in 1917 (p39).

How most of the people from ahl-i-Hadith (a group who restricted the extent of usage of the *hadith*), or ahl-i-Quran came about: an ardent student of *hadith* came across traditions that shocked his moral sensibilites, in the course of trying to explain the presence of such traditions, he digs deeper and deeper into the study of *Hadith*, only to become more and more disillusioned, concluding in the end that no *hadith* can be trusted.
They were concerned with the precise form of *salat* (prayer/link). They established their own mosques, refusing to pray with other Muslims and they eliminated special prayers for the dead aswell as Eid prayers. But in most matters of doctrine and practice, again like the ahl-i-Hadith, they did not differ significantly from other Muslims.

Simliar arguments made a surprising appearance in Egypt in 1906, Sidqi published an article stating that Muslims should soley rely upon The Quran. He argued that the details of Muhammad's behaviour were not meant to be imitated in every particular. This article caused a controversy for four years. In Egypt anti-*hadith* ideas have been the province of a small number of isolated writers and they have never found fertile ground or developed an institutional base. Anti-*hadith* views, such as those of the ahl-i-Quran and Sidqi have never attracted a large following. In the 20th century however, there have been a handful of important writers, most notably Ghulam Ahmed Parwez in Pakistan and Mahmoud Abu Riah in Egypt, who have developed sophisticated arguments to defend anti-*hadith* views (p42). [top]

Boundaries of revelation

Challenges to the view of the organic relationship between The Quran and *sunna* are not completely unprecedented in the history of Islamic thought. Some of the opponents of Shafi argued that The Quran explains everything (e.g. 16:89) and needs no supplement, this was because one of Shafi's central arguments was the need to clarify The Quran. This opposing viewpoint was snuffed out after the triumph of the traditionist view. However and it was not until the 19th and 20th centuries that the argument was seriously revived. One of the reasons Daniel Brown gives for the defeat of the opponents of Shafi was that they could not deny the authority of the Prophet. If for example, you found a *hadith* that was truly authentic then there is no way you can deny it because as it states in The Quran the Prophet was a very good example. Also, Shafi emphasised that to obey the Prophet was to obey God. Under this pressure, the opponents of Shafi were defeated. Rarely does the author address how specific arguments were defeated unfortunately, which was the most disappointing aspect of this book.

The question arose: how is it possible to determine which *hadith* were authentic and which were not?

In the 19th and 20th centuries, increased criticism and scrutiny by Western scholars of Islam showed Muslims that the *hadith* could not stand up to the criticism, whilst The Quran could. It made Muslims look back on the *hadith* and reflect more and examine their basis and origin in Islam. SAK stressed that The Quran stands on its own requiring only the application of a dedicated and enlightened mind for its understanding. For SAK, the great miracle of The Quran is its universality. He was struck by the fact that each generation continues to find The Quran relevant despite the constant increase in human knowledge. Too heavy a reliance on *hadith* for interpretations of The Quran puts at risk this eternal and universal quality. *Hadith* based *tafsir* (explanation) tends to limit the meaning of The Quran to a particular historical situation, thus obscuring its universality (p44).

Ahl-i-Quran held that The Quran was intended to be clear, accessible and readily understandable.

This meant first that The Quran was self contained and must be interpreted according to internal logic. A conviction summed up in the proposition that The Quran ought to be interpreted by its own verses. In otherwords no external aids are needed for its interpretation except a sufficient command of Arabic. The correct and only meaning of The Quran lies and is preserved within itself and a perfect and detailed exegis of its words is within its own pages. One part of The Quran explains the other. It needs neither philosophy, nor wit, nor lexicography, nor even *hadith*. This conviction gained some popularity.

The pressure for reform and for revision of traditional viewpoints thus drove a wedge between The Quran and its traditional *sunna*-based interpretation.

Chakralawi dedicated his study to showing that all the details of Islam such as the 5 pillars and specifically the prayer method can be found in The Quran. He even demonstrated that the 5 prayers can be found in The Quran. However, divisions amongst the group ahl-i-Quran grew because of this. One of his diciples Muhammad Ramadan argued that his following of 5 prayers demonstrated a continued adherence to Islam of the *hadith*. Ramadan found only 3 prayers (p46).

A recurring point made by those who advocate *hadith*: Prophet Muhammad's words and conduct, the stuff of *sunna*, represent an authoritative interpretation of the revealed text. He was in the best position to interpret The Quran, understand it and implement it. He is the practical example.

If *hadith* represents *wahy* (revelation), argues Parwez, then why didn't God preserve it in the same way that He preserved The Quran? Why would He treat the two kinds of revelation so differently? In the case of Quarinic *wahy*, Muhammad went to great lengths to assure its complete and perfect registration in writing. From beginning to end every word was both written and committed to memory. As for the *wahy* allegedly recorded in *hadith* it was neither written down, nor memorised, nor systematically collected or preserved. No steps were taken by the Prophet or by his immediate followers to preserve the integrity of *hadith*.

If the Prophet failed to have his *sunna* written down, it is also evident according to the "deniers", that God did not preserve the integrity of tradition after the time of the Prophet. At best the collections of traditions, even Bukhari and Muslim, are mixtures of truth and falsehood. At worst they are riddled with blatant blasphemies and absurdities. In such a mixture, how can one distinguish what is revelation from what is forgery? Here again arguments discrediting the historical authenticity of *hadith* mingle with theological assumptions about the nature of revelation. In Sidqi's words "Is it conceivable that God would have subjected the world to something in which it is impossible for anyone to distinguish truth and falsehood?"

According to Parwez, support for the notion that *sunna* is *wahy* can be found neither in The Quran nor in the earlier traditions. Moreover, since neither the Prophet, nor his Companions, nor the early Caliphs considered anything to be revelation except The Quran, it is evident that the elevation of *sunna* to this status must have been a creation of later Muslims. He also speculates about what motives might have led to the establishment of this doctrine. The problem, he argues arises from The Quran itself where some commands are explicit while others are vague. For example, a penalty for adultery is clearly defined, while no punishment is laid down for consumption of alcohol: does this mean that drinking of it is allowed? Details such as the penalty for drinking were left to the Prophet and his successors to establish as *sunna*. God's intent was to allow such details to be changed according to circumstance. But later Muslims were faced with a challenge from non-Muslims and from dissenters in their own community: if commands and prohibitions not found in The Quran are important, why did God not establish these details Himself? And by what authority did the Prophet enforce commands not found in The Quran? In the face of such challenges, and afraid that anarchy would result if the basis for law was undercut, the *ulama* (Muslim scholars) adopted the idea that *sunna* is *wahy (divine revelation)*. (p54-55)

The uncertainties surrounding *hadith* should not be considered an indication of weakness but a necessary test of faith. [top]

The nature of Prophetic authority

The concept of the infallibility of the Prophet found its way into mainstream Sunni doctrine by the

9th century CE (over 160 years after Prophet Muhammad's death), p61. Almost all theologians agreed that Muhammad was free from error when it came to matters of revelation, but there were disagreements to the nature and extent of *isma* (infallibility) in matters outside the sphere of revelation. Only a minority held to a doctrine of complete immunity from error. The majority limited *isma* to the period after a prophet received his call and considered matters only directly related to the prophetic mission to be completely guaranteed. In matters that would not affect the prophetic mission, prophets could conceivelably commit errors or even minor sins, although they would remain protected against major sins. Thus the Prophet's persona was divided into human and prophetic spheres. In his everyday life, personal affairs, and private judgements he was potentially fallible, hence his words and actions are not legally binding. In his capacity as Prophet however, his words and actions were divinely guided and represent God's Will.

Authoritative *sunna* must be limited to those areas of Prophetic activity that are protected from error by God.

Sidqi offers 10 proofs that the sunna was intended only for those who lived during the Prophet's era; some of which are: it was not written during the time of the Prophet, the companions made no arrangement for its preservation whether in a book or in their memories, they did not transmit the *sunna* verbatim (word for word), it was not committed to memory as was The Quran and differences therefore developed amongst the transmitters, if *sunna* had been meant for all people it would have been carefully preserved and circulated as widely as possible (p67).

The relationship of The Quran to *sunna* is like the relationship of a constitution and its bylaws. The Quran like a constitution provides basic unchanging principles, the *sunna* represents detailed laws which are derived from these principles and are subject to change. This theory has two results, first without completely rejecting the efficacy of *sunna* or denying the authority of the Prophet in secular spheres, it allowed a large degree of latitude (scope/leeway) in the interpretation of the *sunna*, secondly it clearly establishes the superiority of The Quran over the *sunna*.

The *hadith* shows that there were situations in which the Prophet and his companions disagreed with each other and revelation subsequently confirmed the opinion of the companion. And also he should make decisions unrelated to revelation in a consultative manner with his companions. Examples in The Quran 8:67, 9:43, 66:1. If God had given Muhammad detailed guidance on every matter why would he have commanded him to consult with his companions? (p71) The prophetic example offers not a set of detailed precedents but a model of how each generation of Muslims should determine the details of Islam for themselves, by exercising reason under the guidance of The Quran, just like Muhammad did.

In Islam prophecy reaches its perfection in discovering the need for its own abolition. The system had become perfected.

Reason under the guidance of The Quran is sufficient for all situations. Muhammad was a normal human being set apart by only his supreme dedication to understanding, teaching and applying the message of The Quran.

Traditionists argue the very purpose of prophecy is to provide a practical working example out of the Quranic commands. [top]

The authenticity of hadith

The great compilations of the *hadith* took place in the 3rd century AH (i.e. beginning about 189 years after Prophet Muhammad's death, with the 6 books being complete about 280 years after his death), p83. In the eyes of most Muslim scholars *sahih* (reliable/authentic) *hadith* could with a high degree of confidence be considered to represent the actual words and deeds of the Prophet. On the other hand, few scholars would have argued the system was full proof. Any information in the *hadiths* was no absolute truth, it had to be classified as conjecture. The opponents of the *hadith* at the start were a minority. It was not seriously questioned.
Goldziher was unquestionably the most important 19th century critic of *hadith*. He became the first scholar to subject the *hadith* to a systematic historical and critical method. His study was published in 1896. Joseph Schacht "origins of Muhammadan jurisprudence" in 1950 was published. Like Goldziher, he concluded that few, if any traditions originated with the Prophet.

Even the Prophet recognised that there were people among his companions or those living during his lifetime were spreading lies about him. This is testified to in a *hadith* in Bukhari (p85). There is documented evidence that the companions disagreed with each other and criticsed each other, for example Aisha and Ibn Abbas were reported to have criticised Abu Hurayra. A number of companions demanded evidence for the truth of reports passed onto them. Umar alledgedly questioned a report from Fatima bint Qays. Umar is also reported to have confined three companions to Medina to keep them from spreading traditions. Abu Huyrara was only with the Prophet for 3 years, yet he is alledged to have been the most prolific in transmitting*hadith*. Biographical literature provides ample material for criticism for Abu Huyrara's character, Umar called Abu Huyrara a liar for example. Aisha criticised Anas for transmitting traditions as he was only a child during the life of the Prophet. And Hassan called both Umar and Zubair liars.

The process of *hadith* transmission was primarily oral, at least through the first century. Even after written collections of *hadith* were compiled, oral transmission remained the ideal (p88). Abu Rayya argues that the late date when traditions began to be registered in written form more than 100 years after the Prophet's death became a major obstacle to the fidelity of*hadith* (p89). Emerged in final form only in the 3rd and 4th centuries. Transmitted in the oral form at least until the 2nd century. Both classical and deniers of *hadith* claim this. By the time the traditions were gathered into the collections during the 3rd century, the corpus of *hadith* was damaged beyond any reasonable hope of restoration. Parwez draws parallels between this situation and the alledged corruption of the Gospels. If Muslims distrust the Gospels which were recorded within a 100 years of Jesus' death, how much more should they distrust*hadith*? (p90)

Those who argue that Muhammad's companions began to record *hadith* in writing during his lifetime must explain the Prophetic prohibition on writing of *hadith*. Contradictions within the*hadith* exist regarding this subject. (p91)

Under orders from Caliph Hisham, Shihab al-Zuhri was first assigned to collect *hadith*. This tradition has commonly been taken to mean that al-Zuhri, under duress, became the first traditionist to violate the Prophet's prohibition on recording hadith in writing. Al-Zuhri is reported to have said: *"We disapproved of recording knowledge until these rulers forced us to do so. After that reason we saw no reason to forbid the Muslims to do so."* In other words, before al-Zuhri writing was the rare exception; after him writing of traditions became commonplace. This argument is bolstered by numerous accounts that early generations of pious Muslims, including not only al-Zuhri and traditionists like him but also the first four Caliphs, strongly disapproved of writing *hadith*. The evidence strongly suggests that early generations of Muslims did record traditions in writing, however having reports about written records is rather different than having the records themselves. Thus, the apparent aversion of pious Muslims to the recording of *hadith* should be interpreted as reluctance to record an official, public collection of *hadith*. (p92)

Scholars agree that forgery of *hadith* took place on a massive scale. The science of *hadith* developed gradually as a response to this problem. The early written compilations called *suhuf*were little more than random transcriptions or personal collections. Muslim sources identify the first systematic collection in recording of the *hadith* with the Ummad Caliph Umar and with the scholars Abu Bakr. No such collection has survived. The earliest systematic collection is the *muttawata* of Mailk bin Anas, 179 AH (168 years after Prophet Muhammad's death), p94.*Isnad* (checking of transmissions) was not applied until after the early 2nd century AH according to Schacht. The book studies in early *hadith* literature stated it was earlier than this. For middle ground see Juynboll: "Muslim tradition". Major works of *hadith* (p161 footnote 70).

According to some, forgers of *hadith* became active even during the lifetime of the Prophet. In the Caliphate of Umar, the problem became so serious that he prohibited transmission of*hadith* altogether. The degree of the problem that resulted can be seen from the testimony of the *muhahadithin* (those who collect *hadith*) themselves. Bukhari selected 9000 traditions out of 700 000 (p96). When Bukhari reports that he selected from over 700 000 traditions, he is counting every different transmission chain, even when the substance of the tradition are the same (p99). The point is that *hadith* criticism did not begin during the 3rd century but was practiced continually from the time of the companions onwards (p99). [top]

Sunna and Islamic revivalism

Aisha for example when she heard it reported that the dead suffer because of the mourning of the relations, a tradition which is found in numerous versions of the classical collections retorted by citing from The Quran "no-one will bare the burden of another", and claimed the narrators of this *hadith* had misinterpreted what the Prophet said. Her objections did not prevent the tradition from being included in the *sahih* collections however. (p117)

The *hadith* must be analysed not only by their transmission chain but also the content, many of the early *hadith* scholars neglected this aspect. The *hadith* must be understood in the light of the background and circumstances of the occurrence. Changable elements must be distinguished from permanent principles. Figurative meanings and literal meanings must be recognised. Apparent and hidden meanings must be recognised, and the meanings of the words themselves must be thoroughly understood. You must gather all the information: the revelation, The Quran, then look at the *hadith*, and other *hadith* that discuss the same topic, then they should be rated on their degree of reliability, then rejected or not. Some *hadith* are only relevant for the time and should not be applied to *shariah* (Islamic Law) in the present time. These have to be distinguished, this has mainly not been done and not been applied today. [top]

The spectrum of change

A Pakistani court decision made by the judge Justice Muhammad Shafi subordinated the *hadith* compared to The Quran, he stated that "When The Quran demands obedience to the Prophet all it means is that one should be honest, steadfast, earnest, religious and pious as he was. And not that we should think and act as exactly as he did, because this is unatural and humanly impossible and if we attempted to do that, life will become absolutely difficult" (p135). He also stated "Every believer must have the right to read and interpret The Quran for him or herself, no interpretation can be considered binding." He was quickly replaced due to these comments. It should be remembered that the main aim of "traditionists" as well as "deniers" of *hadith* is to please God. The approaches differ, but they essentially have the same goal in the end. [top]

Comments & Questions are always welcome by email: 786kas @ lineone . net (no spaces)

Some of the book can be read online here.