

Book Review

Roberto Tottoli (2023). *Studies in Islamic Traditions and Literature*. Routledge. 284 Pages. ISBN 978-0-367-53166-9 (hbk)

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In modern Islamic studies, insights into the early foundations of Islam and beliefs derived from Islamic traditions (*ḥadīth*) and historical accounts have become increasingly significant. In the era of globalisation and the development of information technology, Islamic traditions are often reinterpreted in various contexts, both academic and non-academic, along with the potential to give rise to distortions of the main reference of Islam. As academic studies on Islam proliferate across the globe, there is a need to review how Islamic tenets develop through Islamic traditions and historical reports that shape Muslims' perception of religious values and norms. Amidst an ever-changing Islamic narrative, accurate insights into Islamic traditions and historical data can be a fortress against bias, simplification, and doctrinal influence.

A comprehensive insight into classical texts not only helps to maintain the authenticity of Islamic tenets but also facilitates a more flexible adaptation to the challenges of the times. Roberto Tottoli's *Studies in Islamic Traditions and Literature* answers this challenge by re-examining interesting cases that are often overlooked in conversation with the approach of Islamic traditions and historical reports, presenting innovative insights that enrich the understanding of the evolution of Islamic teachings over time.

In the classical to contemporary eras, the case of *sajada* (prostration, which is rooted in Arabic, or *hishtaḥwāh* from Hebrew), in historical literacy, exposes a very broad scope of meaning (Part I). In Islamic tradition, *sajada* is a core part of the prayer ritual, as exemplified by Muhammad's teaching of the movement to companions. This spiritual movement aims to get rid of selfishness or arrogance (such as the devil's refusal to prostrate to Adam) as well as servitude. But historically, other religions and traditions also know this tradition of *sajada*, regardless of their form of tenets or beliefs.

Sajada is a world heritage that transcends religious boundaries. Pre-Islamic poems, such as those of Amr b. Kulthūm (d. 570 ad ca.), Al-A'ṣhā (d. 5–9/625–30), al-Musayyab b. 'Alas (b. 535 ad ca.), and al-Khansā' (b. 575 ad ca.)¹ serve as historical confirmation that *sajada* was already familiar with the Arabic culture. The descriptions in these poems substantiate that, long before the advent of Islam, the Arabs not only knew of prostration but also recognised it as a practice in the surrounding Arab regions and among Christians and Jews. Furthermore, historical records from Babylonian and Egyptian times indicate that this practice of prostration was already known as a religious agenda or tribute to rulers in various forms. This practice was subsequently carried through to Greece and Rome. The tradition of prostration is also found in the rituals of Israelites (as well as non-Israelites) and recorded in the Gospel (Old Testament),² indicating its widespread use in the cults of Middle Eastern societies before the advent of Islam.

Sajada, based on Tottoli's data, symbolises a profound semantic meaning more than physical mobility in worship. It reflects the intimate relationship between man and God in Islamic spirituality. Even further, this practice is not only inherited as a ritual of worship but also as a symbol of total surrender to God, which is increasingly relevant in the midst of global secularisation and the search for spiritual meaning in the modern era.

In Part II, Tottoli shifts to the case of meat as a food by tracing *ḥadīth* and history. Islamic studies have long addressed the permissibility of consuming meat, with references to verses in the Quran (Al-Bāqarah: 173; Al-An'ām: 145; and Al-Māidah: 3). However, some traditions have a distinctive

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¹ Roberto Tottoli, *Studies in Islamic Traditions and Literature* (Routledge, 2023), 7-12.

² Tottoli, *Studies in Islamic Traditions and Literature*, 4.

perspective, as seen in the psychology tradition concept called totem and taboo.³ For instance, Hindus in India revere cows as animals that should not be slaughtered or eaten because they are sacred, almost the same as slaughtering horses for the Shi'a school is disapproved or forbidden (although Sunnis allow it)⁴. The debate over meat consumption in contemporary times, particularly among those adopting vegetarian lifestyles, has grown increasingly complex, intertwining religious, ethical, and environmental considerations.

Meanwhile, in the modern era, many Muslims live in a multicultural environment where cross-cultural interactions and secularisation often influence perceptions of Islamic traditions. The act of *sajada*, for example, once viewed solely as a ritual movement, is increasingly recognised as a form of spiritual expression, gaining traction in the world of psychology and mental health, such as in the practice of meditation and mindfulness.⁵ Likewise, the debate about meat consumption in Islam has become increasingly complex, especially with the increasing awareness of environmental issues and animal welfare.⁶ In this context, *Studies in Islamic Traditions and Literature* offers valuable insights into these multi-disciplinary discussions, highlighting Islamic traditions and historical literature in order to adapt to the challenges of modern times.

In conclusion, *Studies in Islamic Traditions and Literature* offers an in-depth study of the early foundations of Islam, particularly in relation to *ḥadīth* and historical reports. One of the most prominent aspects of this book lies in the comprehensive approach used in studying the dynamics of Islam, such as the meaning of prostration in prayer rituals and how this tradition has transformed across civilisations. The contribution of *Studies in Islamic Traditions and Literature* is shown in (1); the reinterpretation of Islamic traditions sourced from hadith influenced by the development of Islamic thought, politics, and interaction with other civilisations contained in Islamic literature; (2) Islamic spirituality such as *sajada* is described as a cross-traditional spirituality; and (3) the spotlight on several historical periods on the issue of meat consumption is not only seen as an issue of Islamic law but also related to social, cultural, and ethical aspects. The book not only enriches scientific insights into religious narratives in Islam but also harmonises the differences between Islamic traditions and other traditions so that this understanding is relevant to those concerned with the early history of Islam, religious figures, and the comparative religious community.

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³ Karijn Bonne and Wim Verbeke, "Muslim Consumer Trust in Halal Meat Status and Control in Belgium," *Meat Science* 79, no. 1 (2008): 113-23.

⁴ Tottoli, *Studies in Islamic Traditions and Literature*, 91.

⁵ Fateme Yousefzadeh et al., "The Effect of a Prostration (Sajdeh) on the Prefrontal Brain Activity: A Pilot Study," *Basic and Clinical Neuroscience Journal* 10, no. 3 (2019): 257-67.

⁶ Bonne and Verbeke, "Muslim Consumer Trust in Halal Meat Status and Control in Belgium," 113-23.