

# Salafism: From Theological Discourse to Political Activism

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## Introduction:

The differences between the various Islamic theological and juridical schools could be attributed to many factors including the very nature of Arabic. Like every other natural language, the semantic structure of Arabic permits allegorical interpretation. The Qur'an refers to the existence of verses with allegorical connotations and the problematic possibility of misuse:

He it is Who has revealed the Book to you; some of its verses are decisive [*muhkamat*], they are the basis of the Book, and others are allegorical [*mutashabihat*]; then as for those in whose hearts there is perversity they follow the part of it which is allegorical, seeking to mislead and seeking to give it [their own] interpretation. But none knows its interpretation except Allah, and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge say: We believe in it, it is all from our Lord; and none do mind except those having understanding.  
(Qur'an, 3:7)

The language of the Prophetic traditions also allows different opinions as well. In what I consider the most famous example, some companions of the Prophet had different understandings of a specific Prophetic statement. In a hadith in *Sahih Al-Bukhari (Kitab Al-Maghazi # 3810)*, the Prophet asked his companions not to pray the afternoon prayer (in *Sahih Muslim, Kitab Al-Jihad wal--Siyar #3317*, the 'noon prayer') until they have reach their destination, the grounds of the of the Jewish tribe of Banu Quraizah. Those who

upheld the literal meaning did not pray until they did reach their destination. The other group was worried about the timeslot for the afternoon prayer elapsing; it was getting late in the afternoon! They thought that the Prophet's intention was simply to hasten their pace and not to be preoccupied with anything else on the way. This allegorical interpretation made it imperative for them to pray before they reached their destination because there is a specific time for each prayer. When they returned to Medina, they told the Prophet about their different positions; neither had he said which one of them was right, nor had he reprimanded anyone! The reason for this is that each group exerted their effort (i.e. *ijtihad*) in understanding the hadith, the language of which allowed both positions.

Languages do permit differences, but these differences ought not translate into conflict. Working with original texts, depending on one's "creativity", will yield a new understanding that might not be always reconciled with previous popular perceptions. While a plurality of interpretations has always existed in Islamic scholarship, not every exegesis of the Qur'an was accepted. In what I describe as the Islamic hermeneutical garden, old and new meanings grow, but the garden has fences, and once one is beyond the fence, one will venture into one of the many non-Islamic gardens. The closest of the latter are the hermeneutical gardens of the People of the Book. The intra-Abrahamic fence would look like a continuous chain of Venn Diagrams! A Salafi gardener nurtures the old meanings, and will make sure that seedlings of the same are cultivated. As for the new meanings, even if they have Islamic genetic codes: weeding. For contrast, a postmodern hermeneutical gardener is "egalitarian": she does not recognize the fences, allows every meaning the same chance to grow, only to use a hermeneutical mower that can detect meaning-growth. The latter, strictly speaking, is a "Garden of non-Meaning".

Murad Hofmann, in *Islam: The Alternative*, explains 'fundamentalism' in terms of the foundations that are found in every religion or ideology. All religions go through development as a response to challenges they face and, as a result, complex systems emerge. When faced by complex incomprehensible narratives, the general public resorts to the 'orthodox' worldview because it is simpler:

“...all religions and ideologies from time to time demonstrate a need to return to the original belief, to rediscover their foundations-in the hope that religion, freed of human ballast, may be revitalized and viewed with fresh eyes, in accordance with current problems. Believers become 'Protestant', attempt to find the 'young Marx', up-date Martin Luther's opponent Thomas Muntzer or, like the self-styled Christian Franz Alt, try to form a new image of Jesus.”<sup>1</sup>

Fundamentalism, Hofmann concludes, is not only found in Islam. It has always been around. It may be defined as “a movement which takes the legal norms, the values and behavioral patterns of original, primary Islam as the absolute model for shaping of the present. Hofmann realized that literary fundamentalists were denigrated as naïve, if not stupid. His opinion is that “their approach corresponds to the conclusions of analytical philosophy [of language] of the best contemporary provenance.”<sup>2</sup>

### **The emergence of the Islamic theological schools:**

There are Qur'anic verses about God, the literal meaning of which leads to the formation of anthropomorphic attributes of God! The following example speaks of God's "hand":

Lo! Those who swear allegiance unto thee [Muhammad], swear allegiance only unto Allah. The "Hand" of Allah is above their hands. So whosoever breaks his oath breaks it only to his soul's hurt; while whosoever keeps his covenant with Allah, on him will He bestow immense reward. (Qur'an, 48:10)

To think of an anthropomorphic hand would be absolutely contrary the strict monotheistic message of Islam. Every Muslim scholar knows that the Qur'an negates the possibility of stating anything that stems from human experience about the essence of God:

...there is nothing whatever like unto Him... (Qur'an, 42:11)

Therefore, there was a need to interpret that which appears to be anthropomorphic in a way that does not contradict the Islamic worldview. The Salafi position is neither to attribute anything anthropomorphic, nor deny that which God attributed to Himself in the Qur'an! The Salafis would argue that confirming an attribute of God does not entail similarity with His creation, just like confirming the fact that His Essence does not resemble anything else. Confirming the attribute, such as the "hand" does not confirm its nature. They would argue that the nature of the attribute should not be questioned,

distorted, divested of its intended meaning that befits God's Majesty, nor resembled to His creation.

The Mu`tazilites, or Muslim rational theologians, were at odds with the Salafi School on different accounts, such as the Mu`tazilites' claim of the uncreatedness of the Qur'an. They insisted on a pure theological oneness of God that ultimately forced them to reduce His attributes, and deny their co-eternity with God. The Mu`tazilites agree that God is one, and that there is no thing like Him. He is neither a body, nor substance. He is unlike whatever occurs in the mind or is pictured in the imagination. They rejected anthropomorphism and corporeality; this led them to interpret the relevant verses allegorically. Therefore, as an example, when faced by the following verse, "He (i.e. God) said: O Iblis! What hindereth thee from falling prostrate before that (i.e. Adam) which I have created with *both My hands*? Art thou too proud or art thou of the high exalted? (Qur'an, 38:75), they interpreted God's 'Hands' as 'grace' (*ni`mah*): The Mu`tazilite school struck an alliance with the `Abbasid Caliph Al-Ma'mun and, as a result, those who did not subscribe to the 'uncreatedness' of the Qur'an were persecuted. Those who were persecuted include Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, the founder of the Hanbali School of jurisprudence, and one of the earliest prominent scholars of the Salafi School. The link between the Hanbalites and the Salafis is organic. It should be noted that the Mu`tazilite School did not survive to modern times.

Another schism in the Muslim world exists between the Shi`ites and the Sunnis at large. The word 'Shi`ite' comprises many sects, but in essence they claim a special political role for the offspring of `Ali Ibn Abi Talib and Fatimah, daughter of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him), and their descendents. The Shi`ites believe that the

Prophet named `Ali to be the first Caliph, rather than ending up being the fourth one. Over the years, the Shi`ites developed unique theological and juridical positions. Not all the developments were tolerated by the Sunnis, and some Shi`ite sects were utterly rejected. The `Alawis, for example, divinized `Ali and this created an unbridgeable theological gap.

The Amman Message of July 2005, which I have personally endorsed, considers the followers of eight legal schools as Muslims. These include the *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Shafi`i* and *Hanbali*; the two *Shi`i* schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*Ja`fari* and *Zaydi*); the *Ibadi* school of Islamic jurisprudence and the *Zahiri* (i.e. “literalist”) school of Islamic jurisprudence. In addition, the Amman Message highlighted the fatwa of Sheikh Al-Azhar that “it is neither possible nor permissible to declare whosoever subscribes to the *Ash`ari* creed or whoever practices real *Tasawwuf* (Sufism) an apostate. Likewise, it is neither possible nor permissible to declare whosoever subscribes to true *Salafi* thought an apostate”. Moreover, the Amman Message allows room for any one who falls outside these categories and still accepts the Islamic articles of faith and the pillars of Islam to be included amongst the Muslims. ([www.ammanmessage.com](http://www.ammanmessage.com))

The history of Islam is witness to an ongoing struggle between the Salafi and the Sufi schools. They both exist simultaneously since early Islamic periods. Both schools advocate a link to the early generations of Muslims. For example, Abu Bakr As-Siddiq, who is one of the prominent companions of the Prophet, and first Caliph, is one of the Salaf to the Salafis. However, the Naqshabandi Sufi order traces its spiritual lineage to Prophet Muhammad though Abu Bakr. It is generally accepted that the Salafi School was formulated and given prominence by Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (d. 855 CE). He is also the founder of the Hanbali school of Jurisprudence, which is predominant only in the Arabian

Peninsula today. The Naqshabandi order, which is predominant in the Turkish world, was established by Baha'uddin Naqshaband (d. 1389 CE) in Bukhara, Uzbekistan.

The conflict between the Salafis and the Sufis could mean, at times, a vicious crossfire. There are literary works that were published by both sides rendering each other as infidels. This phenomenon, which is called “*takfir*” is not limited to any specific group. The earliest group that practiced *takfir* was the Kharijites (*Khawarij*). In the aftermath of the Battle of Siffin (658 CE), Mu`awiyah Ibn Abi Sufyan, who later on established the Umayyad Dynasty, and Ali Ibn Abi Talib accepted binding arbitration. The Kharijites declared both sides as infidels and a Pandora’s Box was opened. Their deadly campaign caught up with Ali; they assassinated in 661 CE in the city of Kufa. The Kharijites were very pious Muslims, except that their worldview would not accommodate realpolitik. Ironically, the People of the Book, who were considered protected Dhimmis, were safe, and many Muslims, in order to escape death at the hands of the Kharijites used a narrative that led the Kharijites to believe they were from amongst the People of the Book.

### **The Etymology of “Salaf”:**

Essentially, the meaning of ‘salaf’ is that which has passed. The Qur’an uses ‘Salaf’ in this sense:

And We made them (a people) of the Past (*salaf-an*) and an

Example to later ages. 43:56

When used by the Salafis, the meaning is that who follow the predecessors, the first generation of Muslims and those who followed their footsteps. There is a hadith of the

Prophet in which he praised the first three generations of Muslims considering them the best of all in the following order:

“The best of my Ummah is my generation, then those who follow them, and then those who follow them.” Narrated by Bukhari in the *Manaqib*, # 3377

In his commentary on this hadith in *Fath Al-Bari Sharh Sahih Al-Bukhari*, Ibn Hajar Al-`Asqalani (d. 850 AH/ 1449) said that the first generation is that of the Prophet’s companions. He added that the last of the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of Muslims, whose narration was accepted, lived circa 120 AH/ 738 CE. This was the time when the innovations spread far and wide.

The return to the understanding and methodology of the Salaf meant bypassing the four major schools of jurisprudence. The Salafis advocated a return to the Qur’an and the Sunnah. One criticism that I would mention here is that if the Salafis were true to this principle, it would mean a continuous “deconstruction” of every single “new” understanding *ad infinitum*!

Zuhayr Al-Shawish, a contemporary Syrian Salafi scholar, defined Salafism as “a method in creed and jurisprudence that includes a return to what has been the case with the first generation, Al-Salaf Al-Saleh (i.e., the good ancestors), in their belief (*‘aqidah*), their form of worship, ethics and behavior, similar to other schools in that they also belong to some predecessors.”

Al-Shawish stated that the Salafis focused on the teachings of Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (d. 241 AH/ 857 CE). This was the case especially after the Mu`tazilites promoted the “createdness of the Qur’an” which emerged during the time of the Abbasid Caliph Al-

Ma'mun who endorsed it. This resulted in torturing Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal who advocated the position that the Qur'an was the uncreated eternal word of God.

### **The Salafi-“Wahhabi” Connection:**

The “Wahhabi” version could be considered a renewal movement that took place within the parameters of the same Salafi School. The followers of this school do not refer to themselves using the “Wahhabi” name, though it is used along with Salafism interchangeably by others, and often in a derogatory way. The Salafis refer to themselves also as “*Ahl Al-Sunnah wal-Jama`ah*” though historically this name was used by others including Ah`aris and Sufis. Most recently it was used by the followers of `Abdullah Al-Habashi who was born in Ethiopia in 1910, but found fertile land in Lebanon. One of their mosques in Bienne/Biel in Switzerland declares that it is a mosque for “*Ahl Al-Sunnah wal-Jama`ah*”. Their official website (al-ahbash.org) states that Al-Habashi has *Ijazah* from three Sufis orders: the Rifa`i, the Qadiri and the Naqshabandi. In addition, their website has a warning against the Salafis.

Muhammad Ibn `Abd Al-Wahhab (1703– 1792 CE), after whom the movement is named, was born in `Uyanah on the northwestern outskirts of Riyadh. He studied the Hanbali fiqh at the hands of his father. He also read in the books of two prominent scholars of the Hanbali School of jurisprudence: Ibn Taimiyyah (d.1328 CE) and Ibn Al-Qayyim (d.1350 CE).

Ibn `Abd Al-Wahhab fostered an alliance with the family of Sa`ud, and soon most of the Arabian Peninsula became united under the latter's rule in what became Saudi Arabia. In this alliance, politics was, and still is, the domain of the family of Sa`ud, and

Salafism became the dominant Islamic theological school, with certain religious offices being allocated traditionally to Al Al-Sheikh (i.e. the family of Muhammad Ibn `Abd Al-Wahhab).

The traditional political stand of the Salafis vis-à-vis political authority is obedience. This based on a prophetic tradition narrated by Muslim, the ethos of which is to maintain the unity of the Muslim community and sets the line on when the rulers could be removed from power. The hadith requires them to obey Muslim rulers as long as they establish congregational prayers (...*ma aqamu fikum al-salat*).<sup>3</sup> The hadith further requires the Muslim community to tolerate the ruler's personal sins if they fulfill the said conditions.

Today, one can follow a complex discussion of the different interpretations of this hadith. There are those who extend the meaning of "*ma aqamu fikum al-salat*" to all political, economic and social institutions of the state. Not conforming to Islamic Law (Shari`ah) is tantamount to declaring the state itself as non-Muslim. This has been the case with the *Takfir and Hijrah, Al-Jama`ah Al-Islamiyyah* and those who fall under the general rubric *Salafiyyah Jihadiyyah*.

Many people attribute the root of this modern phenomenon to Sayyid Qutb's *Ma`alim fi al-Tariq* (Signposts along the Road). His description of modern Muslim societies in terms of *Jahiliyyah*, (i.e. ignorance, the state with which pre-Islamic Arabian society was described) portrayed these societies in non-Islamic forms. This category could have paved the road to the use of violence against the state, but the socio-political context should not be ignored. Hassan Hanafi, a prominent Muslim intellectual, who is more of a

socialist, stated that had he been imprisoned and tortured like Sayyid Qutb, he would have also written *Ma`alim fi al-Tariq*.

Texts remain the same, contexts and readers change, and multiple readings follow, with different political implications.

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<sup>1</sup> Murad Hofmann, *Islam: The Alternative* (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 1993), pp. 65-66.

<sup>2</sup> Hofmann, p.67.

<sup>3</sup> Muslim, *Sahih*, # 3448.