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Salafism, Wahhabism, and the Definition of Sunni Islam

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Salafism, Wahhabism, and the Definition of Sunni Islam

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According to Pew, 85-90% of Muslims worldwide are Sunni. Despite such a vast population figure, there is no definitive answer to what makes a Muslim Sunni. This question has become especially complicated over the past two centuries with the rise of various Sunni reform movements across the Muslim world. This essay seeks to develop a working definition of Sunni Islam that existed prior to 1800 and then show how reform movements since 1800 have diverged from that definition. For the purposes of this essay, a traditional Sunni Muslim is a Muslim who adheres to one of the four Sunni *maddhabs*, or schools of law.[1] A reformist Sunni, on the other hand, does not follow any of the four *maddhabs* and instead relies on different authorities and interpretations of scripture when it comes to leading their religious life.[2] Two of the most prominent reform groups are the "Salafis" and the "Wahhabis", terms that also lack strong definitions, have a nebulous association, and are often seen as the face of Sunni Islam worldwide. I argue that, despite the prevalence of Salafism and Wahhabism in contemporary times, the Salafis and the Wahhabis are not one and the same. Wahhabi and Salafi groups took advantage of favorable historical circumstances to rise out of obscurity to become the powerful forces in contemporary Islam that they are today. This paper synthesizes history, law, and political science together in order to create a focused picture of why Sunni identity is confused in the modern day. One common thread among Salafis, Wahhabis, and other disparate Sunni groups, however, is that they all were forced to react to the sudden saliency of modernity, as

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[1] Johnathan A.C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*, (Oxford, One World Publications, 2009-11), 243.
[2] Ibid.

defined by Western, Enlightenment ideals. The seeds of contemporary division were sown in differing reactions to modernity. Discussions and debates between different Sunni groups are now a pressing issue in contemporary Islam.

"Traditional" Sunni Islam

Before I delve any further into the essay, the meaning of the term "traditional Sunni Islam" and a "traditional Sunni Muslim" must be defined. Jonathan Brown uses the term "late Sunni Traditionalist" to describe a Sunni Muslim who adheres to one of the four Sunni *maddhabs*, or schools of law. The four Sunni schools are the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali schools. Each has their own unique way of interpreting Islamic law, as well as a rich tradition of legal work that stretches back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad himself.[3] The Hanafi school arose first historically in the eighth century CE. It is named after Abu Hanifa, who was the first figure in this lineage of Islamic jurisprudence.[4] Abu Hanifa focused his interpretations of Islamic law on analogical reasoning, or *qiyas*, as opposed to the study of the traditions of Muhammad and his companions, or *hadith*.[5] Hanafism is united by its reliance on *qiyas* but it is also by no means monolithic. A split occurred in the tenth century based on geographic and jurisprudential lines. Scholars led by Abu Yusuf in the city of Balkh (modern Afghanistan) applied *qiyas* differently than scholars in Baghdad under Muhammad al-Shaybani.[6] Hanafism also became the most widespread *maddhab* because it was adopted by the Ottoman Empire, which extended its control over much of the Islamic world during a time frame from roughly 1400-1800.[7] One key

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[3] Brown, 261.

[4] Eyyup Said Kaya, "Continuity and Change in Islamic Law: The Concept of Maddhab and the Dimensions of Legal Disagreement in Hanafi Scholarship of the Tenth Century", in *The Islamic School of Law: Evolution, Devolution, and Progress*, eds. Peri Bearman, Rudolph Peters, and Frank E. Vogel, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 26-40.

[5] Abdur Rahim, *The Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence According to the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, and Hanbali Schools*, (New Delhi, Kitab Bhavan: 1994), 15-34.

[6] Ibid, 33-34.

[7] Rudolph Peters, "What Does It Mean to be An Official Maddhab? Hanafism and the Ottoman Empire", in *The Islamic School of Law: Evolution, Devolution, and Progress*, eds. Peri Bearman, Rudolph Peters, and Frank E. Vogel, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 147-148.

feature of Ottoman legal code was that it placed little emphasis on *hadith* in its application of

Islamic law, which would become a major issue with the various reform movements that arose

after 1800.[8]

The Maliki school developed next, arising in Medina in the Hijaz region of modern Saudi

Arabia.[9] This school is named for Malik ibn Anas, who studied under Abu Hanifa.[10] Scholar

Alfonso Carmona writes that the teachings of the Maliki school fall into two categories: the

transmission…of Medinan legal traditions and the explanation of [Malik's] own *ra'y*, a term

translatable as judicial reasoning".[11] Thus, this school focuses on the practices of the first

community of Muslims and Malik's own reasoning to determine how they should live as

Muslims. Like the Hanafis, the Malikis do not place much emphasis on *hadith* in their

jurisprudence.[12] They do so because the *hadith* sometimes have unreliable *isnads*, or chains of

narrators. This allows for people to sometimes "put words into the Prophet Muhammad's

mouth".[13] This potential unreliability is why both the Hanafi and Maliki schools focused on other

forms of jurisprudence besides *hadith*. Maliki jurisprudence, tracing its scholarly lineage back to

Abu Hanifa, was able to exist alongside Hanafism and especially flourished in the Maghreb

region of North Africa (modern Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia).[14]

The Shafi'i *maddhab* adopts a hybrid approach that synthesizes elements from the

Hanafis and the Malikis.[15] This school is named for its' principal scholar, Muhammad ibn Idris

Ash-Shafi'i, more commonly known as al-Shafi'i.[16] He was born in the same year that Abu

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Yassin Dutton*, Original Islam: Malik and the maddhab of Madina* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 69.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Alfonso Carmona, "The Introduction of Malik's Teachings in al-Andalus", in *The Islamic School of Law: Evolution, Devolution, and Progress*, eds. Peri Bearman, Rudolph Peters, and Frank E. Vogel, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 43.

[12] Rahim, *The Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence According to the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, and Hanbali Schools*, 26.

[13] Ibid, 78.

[14] Dutton, *Original Islam: Malik and the maddhab of Madina*, 32-33.

[15] Rahim, *The Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence According to the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, and Hanbali Schools*, 27.

[16] Kemal A Faruki, "Al-Shafi'i's Agreements and Disagreements with the Hanafi and Maliki Schools", Islamic Studies 10, (1971): 129-131.

Hanifa died and studied under Malik ibn Anas. He began his career as a Maliki jurist, but studies in Iraq led him to adopt some Hanafi principles as well.[17] One of the most distinguished Shafi'i contributions to Islamic law was *usul al-fiqh*, or a focus the sources of Islamic law.[18] *Usul al-fiqh* provides sources of Islamic law, gives a method for interpreting those sources, and then provides a system for distinguishing scholars from Islamic lay people.[19] Another example of the Shafi'i hybrid approach comes from how they determine *ijma*, or consensus, about jurisprudential issues. For the Malikis, *ijma* comes from the practices of the people of Medina.[20] But a Shafi'i can find *ijma* anywhere in the Islamic world, which would include *qiyas* (which is favored by the Hanafis).[21] Another important feature that distinguishes the Shafi'i school from its Maliki and Hanafi counterparts is that for a Shafi'i, "only the Qur'an can explain the Qur'an".[22] This means that only work from the Qur'an can override something written in the Qur'an. *Hadith*, *qiyas*, *ijma*, and any other source of jurisprudence is subordinate to the Qur'an. The Shafi'i hybrid approach also allowed it to co-exist alongside the Hanafi and Maliki *maddhab*s, becoming especially prevalent in Egypt, as well as Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine.[23]

The Hanbali school differs greatly from the three *maddhab*s previously discussed because the Hanbalis place a strong emphasis on hadith as a source of jurisprudence.[24] Abu 'Abd Allah Ahmad b. Muhammad ibn Hanbal is the scholar credited with starting this school.[25] According to scholar Abdul Hakim Al-Matroudi, Ibn Hanbal ""granted precedence to sound *hadith* over practice [*amal*] *ra'y* [analogy in any form], and *ijma* [consensus]".[26] Thus, all non-revealed

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[17] Ibid.
[18] N. Calder, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Usul al-fikh".
[19] Ibid.
[20] Rahim, 79.
[21] Faruki, 135.
[22] Ibid, 132.
[23] Rahim, *The Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence According to the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, and Hanbali Schools*, 27.
[24] Ibid, 28.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Abdul Hakim I. Al-Matroudi, *The Hanbali School of Law and Ibn Taymiyyah: Conflict or Conciliation* (London, Taylor and Francis, 2006), 34.

sources of law were de-emphasized.[27] Ibn Hanbal sought to use analogy only as a last resort, using unverified *hadith* or *hadith* with weak *isnads* if there was no definitive evidence to disprove them.[28] Ibn Tayymiyah, a jurist who became popular among the Wahhabis, was also a leading proponent of the Hanbali *maddhab*. His ideas, however, were not shared by the contemporary ruling elite in Damascus and he was jailed and eventually exiled to Egypt.[29] Thus, the Hanbalis were not as popular as other schools were in the Levant. Ibn Tayymiyah's reformist mindset earned the local ruler's enmity and thus Hanbalis faced a less receptive atmosphere in the Levant. The Hanbali school did however, take hold in Arabia and the Persian Gulf region, which would serve as the epicenter of one important Islamic reform movement: Wahhabism.[30]

<center>"Modernity" and Crisis</center>

From the eighth century CE until the nineteenth century CE, the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence were the main sources for Muslims to determine how they should live their lives. But during the nineteenth century, the arrival of "modernity" fundamentally altered this worldview and shook it to its core. Scholar Johnathan Brown attributes this shake-up to the arrival of colonialism and Western ideas, with subsequent reform Islamic movements emerging out of Islamic interactions with European people and ideas. Brown divides these movements into four categories: the Late Sunni Traditionalists, Modernist Salafism, Traditionalist Salafism, and Islamic Modernism.[31] The Late Sunni Traditionalists are embodied by the four *maddhabs* that were explained in the previous section, while the other three categories are reform groups with some similarities and overlap but also a considerable degree of difference.

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[27] "Non-revealed" in this case means that it is a source of law coming from humans and not God.
[28] Al-Matroudi, 33.
[29] Ibid, 18-19.
[30] Rahim, 28 and Algar, *Wahhabism: A Critical Essay* (Oneonta, Islamic Publications International, 2002), 2.
[31] Brown, 243.

Brown describes the arrival of the West and its ideas, known as "Modernity", as a fundamental struggle for Muslims because they had not experienced nor adapted any form of Modernity until they encountered the modern West. Muslims saw themselves as the chosen people of God, but they still found themselves crushed under the boot of the West.[32] European technology greatly aided their conquest of the Muslim world. Scholar Marilyn Waldman writes that the British had taken over India by 1818, and over the next hundred years extended their control over much of the rest of the Muslim world, especially with the establishment of British and French mandates after World War I.[33] Even the Ottoman Empire was forced to adapt to modernity. The Tanzimat, a reform period stretching from 1839-1878, gave all Ottoman subjects equality under the law and limited the power of the sultan, ideas which were in *vogue* in Europe at the same time period.[34] Perhaps the most notorious example of European technological supremacy is the Battle of Omdurman in 1898. British forces used machine guns to mow down thousands of Sudanese Muslims resisting British conquest as part of the Mahdist movement that opposed British expansion into the Sudan out of Egypt.[35]

Once European authority had been established, the colonizers gradually moved to replace Islamic law with European style law. The motive for doing so was primarily to ensure that European power rested on more than brute military strength. Implementing European-style law also allowed for colonizers to extend economic control over Muslim nations as well.[36] This process began in British India in 1772 at the behest of the British East India Company. A process known as the Hastings Plan created a multi-tiered legal system with British administrators at the

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[32] Ibid, 240.
[33] Marilyn Waldman, *The Encyclopedia Brittanica*, 2017, s.v. "Islamic World", 49.
[34] Ibid.
[35] "The Omdurman Atrocity", *Advocate of the Peace*, vol. 60 no. 10 (1898), 222 and Winston Churchill, "The Battle of Omdurman, 1898," *Fordham University Modern History Sourcebook*, http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1898churchill-omdurman.asp.
[36] Wael Hallaq, "An Introduction to Islamic Law", (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2009), 85.

highest level, British administrators who conferred with local Muslims judges at the second level, and solely Muslim judges at the bottom level. Inherent in the Hastings Plan design is the notion that Muslim laws could be subsumed by British legal codes, which always took precedence over local customs. This process was formed by the Orientalist notion that Muslim (and Hindu) law was essentially "a mass of individual opinions" and has no systematic nature, which required a European legal system to establish some semblance of order.[37] The establishment of European "order" essentially stripped Muslim judges of their ability to interpret Islamic law and instead forced them to adhere to European (more specifically in this case British) notions of law. In the 1780s and 1790s, British administrators essentially removed all influence of Islamic law when it came to enforcing laws related to homicide, on the grounds that Islamic law granted "extra-judicial privileges" to the victim's next of kin.[38] Hallaq writes that by 1861, there was essentially no trace of Islamic law left in British India, with Muslim judges being forced to look to higher courts in British India and in Great Britain itself for guidance about interpreting laws, instead of the Quran.[39] This matters because it muddied the idea of what it meant to be Sunni. Although Sunnis comprise the majority of Muslims, not all Muslims are Sunni. Thus, when looking at British administration in India, issues pertinent to Sunni Muslims are not automatically applicable to their Shi'i counterparts, making this question one of Sunni identity, as opposed to Muslim identity as a whole. In British India, there were not only four different *maddhabs*, but also European administrators' cherry-picking different areas of Islamic jurisprudence to suit their own ends. This meant that nineteenth century Muslims were

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[37] Ibid, 86. The idea that Muslim law is individual and arbitrary is far from true, as we will see in the subsequent paragraphs.
[38] Ibid, 87.
[39] Ibid, 87-88.

confronted with a bewildering and often contradictory set of principles about how to live their lives.

However, this "muddying" of Islamic law was not exclusive to India. The Ottoman Empire also experienced profound changes in its legal system after it made contact with Europeans. As early as the 1720s, the Ottoman Empire had adopted legal codes that prescribed non-*shari'a* punishments. Fariba Zarinebaf analyzed Ottoman court records during this time and found that one-third of crimes associated with theft (i.e. larceny, burglary, and property theft) were punished with forcible conscription as oarsmen in Ottoman galleys.[40] This may come as a surprise to those with a shallow depth of knowledge about Islam and Islamic law, given that *sura* 5:38 of the Qur'an ostensibly prescribes the theft for punishment as amputation of the hand or finger. However, after looking at how the Ottomans actually administered justice, it is clear that such punishments were rarely used.[41] Corporal punishment, as prescribed by *shari'a*, occurred only in times of social upheaval; legal codes were usually highly discretionary.[42] Forced service in galleys was used to punish crimes ranging from owning a tavern to homicide to sex crimes to "selling light bread".[43] Rather than amputate limbs, Ottoman judges made criminals oarsmen in galleys or banished them to islands in the Mediterranean. Prisons were occasionally used to house convicts as well, but it was not very popular.[44] Prisons became more popular as a discretionary punishment towards the end of the nineteenth century as galleys were replaced by different types of ships.[45] As compared to European punishments at the same time, Ottoman punishments were often less severe. I will return again to property crime as an example. While

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[40] Farine Zarinebaf, *Crime & Punishment in Istanbul, 1700-1800*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), 176.
[41] Ibid, 173-174.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid, 165.
[44] Ibid, 173-174.
[45] Ibid, 169-170.

Ottoman judges in Istanbul were sending thieves off to the galleys, England's Parliament passed a law that made theft of linen from textile factories punishable by death. Thus, corporal and capital punishment was codified in European laws, while the Ottomans used capital punishment only against bandits and rebels.[46] This matters because Ottoman law is closest example that we have to how law was practiced in the pre-modern Muslim state at the time of the Prophet. Any sources prior to the Ottomans are too sparse to provide definitive information about pre-modern Islamic legal practices.

Fundamental differences in how Islamic law and Western law operate exacerbated the crisis of muddied ideas of Islamic law. European law operates in a positivist manner. This means that the source of law ultimately comes from an individual who imposes that law on others under threat of punishment.[47] Thus, according to positivist law, someone obeys the law because a central authority of some kind told them to, and they will be punished if they do not. According to Wael Hallaq, a modern (see Western) state does not have an obligation to make its citizens morally good. On the contrary, it seeks to rule over a Hobbesian human race that is bent on controlling both the natural world and other humans.[48] Positivist law, above all else, focuses on keeping order and does not seek to have any moral impact on the lives of those who follow it.

Islamic law operates under a completely different principle. There are three types of authority in Islam: *amr*, *hujja*, and *taqlid*.[49] Amr is the ability to command, and comes only from God himself. It can also be delegated by God to an *amir*, or a person who holds such power; the Prophet Muhammad would be an example of an *amir*.[50] *Hujja* roughly translate to the word

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[46] Ibid, 178.

[47] A. Kevin Reinhardt, "Law", in Key Themes for the Study of Islam, ed. Jamal J. Elias (Oxford: OneWorld Publications, 2008), 222.

[48] Wael Hallaq, "The Legal, the Political, and the Moral", in *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 78, 93.

[49] Bernard Weiss, "The Maddhab in Islamic Legal Theory", in *The Islamic School of Law: Evolution, Devolution, and Progress*, eds. Peri Bearman, Rudolph Peters, and Frank E. Vogel, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 1-9.

[50] Ibid.

"authority" and comes from four sources: the Qur'an, the Sunna (sayings attributed to Muhammad, including *hadith*), analogical reasoning, and consensus.[51] Finally, *taqlid* is the authority of judges and men learned in the ways of Islamic jurisprudence, who are called *mujtahid*.[52] *Amr* supersedes *hujja*, and *hujja* supersedes *taqlid*.[53] The Qur'an provides Muslims with a set of natural laws that are based on morality, according to the principle of *haqq*, which Hallaq describes as "divine truth and justice".[54] Thus, for Muslims, obeying the law is not merely a secular matter. Islamic law is not the code of a mortal man; it is God's own prescription for living a morally good life. Unlike a Western state, an Islamic state enforcing true Islamic law does so in the attempt to make sure that its citizens live morally good lives. Punishment for violating Islamic law thus comes from God, not a human ruler.[55] Thus, Islamic law is not codified and has no uniform or universal standards. A European, who only knows positivist law and its universal potency, would see Islamic law as "arbitrary". But from the perspective of a practitioner of pre-Modern Islamic law, all of the *maddhabs* and the judges are informed by the Qur'an and seek what is the best moral verdict in a case. Ottoman legal codes were clearly reflective of this trend; avoidance of amputation and emphasis on forced conscription or banishment meant that Ottoman legal punishment was meant to be corrective instead of punitive.[56] This also makes the gradual "phasing out" of Islamic law under European rule all the more devastating for Muslims. Muslims lost more than just a legal code: their entire moral compasses had to be subordinated to European ideas, which placed Muslims judges in situations

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[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 82.
[55] Ibid, 83-84.
[56] Zarinebaf, 173-174.

where they would be forced to rule against their moral convictions because European powers mandated that European law be followed.

Here we return to Brown's groupings of Sunni Muslims. The "late Sunni traditionalists" placed an even greater emphasis on the *maddhabs* and their related legal scholarship in response to the arrival of Western-style "modernity", thus maintaining the status quo when it came to the interpretation of Islamic law.[57] Many Muslims continued to follow their chosen *maddhab*.

<div align="center">Modernist Salafism</div>

Modernist Salafism is the third major Islamic reform movement with its roots in the colonial era. It sets itself apart from Ottoman legal practices in that Modernist Salafism, and Salafism as a whole, bypasses the centuries of legal scholarship that emerged after the time of the Prophet. The term "Salafism" comes from the Arabic word *salaf*, or the first generations of Muslims. A Salafi, in a broad sense, is anyone who believes that the earliest generations of Muslims embody Islam in its purest form.[58] Modernist Salafis believed in the same core principles as Late Sunni Traditionalists, but took a markedly different approach to reform than the Late Sunni Traditionalists. Led by scholars like Muhammad Abduh' and Rashid Rida, Modernist Salafis believed that many *hadith* were unreliable.[59] However, instead of discarding the *hadith* in its entirety, Modernist Salafis like Abduh' and Rida wanted to reexamine the *hadith*.[60] Muhammad Abduh' believed that *mutawatir hadith* needed to be obeyed. A *mutawatir hadith* is one that can be traced back to the Prophet Muhammad via multiple *isnads* (*sahih*).[61] Since *hadith* of this variety are doubtlessly the word of Muhammad, and by extension God, they

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[57] Brown, 243.
[58] Ibid, 251.
[59] Ibid, 253-254.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.

can be considered valid. However, most *hadith* are non-*mutawatir*, and thus Abduh' believed

that they required some form of reexamination. Because of their dubious authenticity, Abduh'

also believed that no Muslim should be compelled to believe non-*mutawatir hadith* (also known

as *ahad*) or called an apostate for refusing to follow them.[62] This would also allow for Muslims

to both adhere to core Islamic beliefs while also embracing European customs and modes of

thought. Abduh' also rejected much of the body of traditional Muslim scholarship after the salaf

and sought to discern his own interpretations instead.[63] Rashid Rida was Abduh's senior student

and successor to his thought. Rida believed the same things as listed previously about the *hadith*

that Abduh' did, but also added to Abduh's ideas. Rida thought that *hadith* containing *isra'iliyyat*

should not be accepted because modern (see Rida's contemporary) scholars had the advantage of

comparing such *hadith* to actual Jewish scripture, a luxury that earlier scholars lacked.[64] Rida

further clarified Abduh's point about *ahad hadith* by stating that because so many of the *ahad*

hadith contradict or fail to support one another, they cannot be believed as the sole basis of faith.

Rida's example was a *hadith* which stated the after the sun sets, it prostrates itself before God.

Since this contradicted modern science, but was an *ahad hadith*, it does not need to be

believed.[65] In other words, making *ahad hadith* "optional" allowed for Modernist Salafis like

Abduh' and Rida to ensure that Islamic beliefs and European modernism were not mutually

exclusive and thus embrace both modernity and Islam to a limited extent. Modernist Salafis

responded to colonialism by changing or rejecting parts of Islamic practice that ran counter to the

ideals of Modernity.

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[62] Ibid.
[63] Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam Volume 3: Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 274.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.

Traditionalist Salafism

Traditionalist Salafis are similar to Modernist Salafis in that they both looked to the earliest generations of Muslims for guidance about how to live their lives. However, Traditionalist Salafis differed greatly from their Modernist Salafis in that they focus on *hadith* exclusively as their way of returning to the ways of the *salaf*.[66] Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab, the ideological father of Wahhabism, is one iteration of a Traditionalist Salafi reformer.[67] Traditionalist Salafis discard *hadith* entirely if they have been proven to be weak by scholarly analysis. This idea is best embodied by the claims of reformer Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani.[68]

An important feature of Traditionalist Salafism is its absolute trust in *mutawatir hadith* and other *hadith* that have not been proven unreliable.[69] Thus, belief in proven (or simply not yet *un*proven) *hadith* is a requirement for a Muslim to be considered a true Muslim. This is important because it applies to both *mutawatir* and *ahad hadith*.[70] Thus, Traditionalist Salafism takes a much stricter view of a Muslim's obligation to obey *hadith*. This also means that evaluation of *hadith* needs to happen constantly, and that the words of previous generations of scholars regarding a *hadith*'s authenticity or reliability do not need to be blindly accepted.[71] This narrow view of what constitutes proper sources of faith for Muslims may also create Salafi-centric ideas of what it means to be Muslims. Traditionalist Salafis are often at odds with Late Sunni Traditionalists. Traditionalist Salafi bypassing of centuries of Muslim legal scholarship leads Late Sunni Traditionalists to level accusations of arrogance against Traditionalist Salafis.[72]

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[66] Ibid, 256-257.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid, 257-258.
[70] Ibid, 258.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Joseph Lumbard, *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition* (World Wisdom, Inc., 2009), 68.

In terms of responding to modernity, Traditionalist Salafis choose not to adopt any European

ideas at all and instead place more stock in their own faith and religious texts.

Wahhabism

Wahhabism, as briefly touched upon in the previous section, is a Traditionalist Salafi

reform movement. It overlaps with Salafism in that both choose to disregard anything that is not

salaf, which includes centuries of Islamic scholarship and adherence to any of the *maddhabs*.[73]

Both Wahhabis and Traditionalist Salafis also reject Sufism in its entirety because they deem it

an aberration.[74] It constitutes *bid'a* ("innovation"), or any custom created after the third century

of Muslim scholarship.[75] Wahhabis themselves actually prefer to be called "Ahl al-Tawhid", or

"asserters of divine unity".[76] *Tawhid* is a concept loosely translated as "oneness", especially

belief in the oneness of God. Any monotheistic religion has its own equivalent of *tawhid*, or an

interpretation as to what the idea of "one deity" might mean. Since Wahhabis prefer to classify

themselves by this term, they view themselves as strong believers in the oneness of God. For

Wahhabis, *tawhid* has three distinct parts. The first is *tawhid al-rububiyya*, which states that God

alone holds the title of lord (*rabb* in Arabic).[77] The second is *tawhid al-asma wa 'l-sifat*, which

scholar Hamid Algar describes as "a simple affirmation of God's name without interpretation".[78]

The third part of *tawhid* is *tawhid al-'ibada*, or the worship of God exclusively. Algar states that

this is the most important part of tawhid, because anyone who fails to do this is not a true

Muslim.[79] One extremely important implication of these beliefs is that Wahhabis, like

Traditionalist Salafis, are at odds with Late Sunni Traditionalists because the two groups reject

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[73] Algar, 47.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid, 35.
[76] Ibid, 1.
[77] Algar, 30-31.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.

the entire foundation of Late Sunni Traditionalism; namely, the four Sunni *maddhabs*. Another important connection between Traditionalist Salafis and Wahhabis comes in the form of Rashid Rida[80]: he was one of the first non-Saudi scholars to throw his support behind the Saudi State, which adhered to Wahhabi beliefs.[81]

However, despite Wahhabi connections with Traditionalist Salafism, the two are not synonymous. Nor are they interchangeable. Wahhabism sharply diverges from Traditionalist Salafism, and all the other Islamic reform movements in this essay, in the way it treats other Muslims and non-Muslims. A Late Sunni Traditionalist may quarrel with his Modernist and Traditionalist Salafi peers, and they may quarrel with him. However, none of those three groups regards the other's approach to Islam as false or heretical. They may disagree, but they do not try to force their views on other Muslims. Instead, they focus on attempting to persuade people to take their view with argument.[82] This is not so with Wahhabis. If you disagree with the Wahhabi view of what it means to be Muslim (see the three portions of *tawhid*), it is more than a religious argument. Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab himself referred to jurists who opposed his ideas as "the spawn of Satan".[83] Failing to follow a literal reading of Wahhabi monotheism means that, in the eyes of a strict Wahhabi, you are a heretic or an apostate.[84] This is a problem because an apostate forfeits their life and property by committing apostasy, which means that their deaths and seizure of their property at the hands of "true believers" is justified.[85]

Wahhabis also have an extremely broad view of what constitutes apostasy and heresy. Any form of innovation, or *bid'a*, was considered apostasy.[86] Wahhabis considered rationalist

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[80] Ibid, 46.
[81] Ibid, 19.
[82] Ibid, 47.
[83] Khaled M. Abou El Fadl, The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists, (HarperOne, 2007), 47.
[84] Ibid, 48.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Algar, 35.

thought as a construct imposed by the Greeks, Sufism as a Persian ancillary to "pure Islam", and that veneration of grave sites came from Turkey and not the Prophet Muhummad's original entourage.[87] Wahhabis view anything and everything that did not come from the first three generations of Muslims (the *salaf*) as *bid'a* and thus apostasy. This fixation on the ways of the *salaf* also lends Wahhabism an ethnocentric character: it holds the Bedouin lifestyle (which was nomadic and very different from the lives of non-Bedouin Muslims) of the *salaf* as superior to all other forms of living.[88] Wahhabis believe that Muslims were humiliated by colonial conquests because Muslims had strayed away from the lifestyle that God wanted them to take. Wahhabis could regain God's favor and thus beat back Europeans if they returned to the lifestyle of the *salaf* that God intended.[89] Finally, there is no middle ground for a Muslim: they are either an apostate or they are not.[90] Being classified as an apostate was a damning absolution.

It is worth noting that Wahhabi intolerance has managed to manifest itself militarily at various points in Saudi history. An example is the wholesale slaughter of the city of Karbala in modern Iraq in the early nineteenth century by Saudi Wahhabi forces, as well as the desecration of numerous religious sites. It was a center of Shi'ite worship and thus "apostasy", which made genocide and plunder acceptable.[91] A similar massacre happened in Ta'if in the Hijaz region of Saudi Arabia in 1803, where all books that were not the Qur'an and *hadith* burned on top of the slaughter of inhabitants.[92] Furthermore, when Saudi-Wahhabi forces captured Mecca, they demolished various domes and mausoleums over the graves of the Prophet Muhammad's family and Companions because worship at such shrines constituted *bid'a*.[93]

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[87] El Fadl, 46-47.
[88] Ibid, 47.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid, 48.
[91] Algar, 24-25.
[92] Ibid, 25.
[93] Ibid, 26-27.

But in spite of Wahhabism's intolerant and even pro-Arab ideas, it has managed to become popular in contemporary times among Muslims across the world. How can this be? The answer lies in the history of Saudi Arabia as a state. Both Wahhabism and the modern Saudi States had their origin in the Najd region of Saudi Arabia, which is essentially the interior of the modern Saudi state.[94] Scholar David Commins describes Najd as a "remote backwater of Arabia where the tradition of scholastic learning was shallow". Much of the population was illiterate and mainly worked as nomads herding animals or as subsistence farmers in small towns. Only the ulama, or religious scholars, were educated.[95] Hamid Algar likewise describes Najd as "intellectually marginal".[96] This also meant that none of Islam's great empires, i.e. the Ottomans, had ruled Najd.[97] Thus, Najdi intellectual tradition, which grew to become Wahhabism, was free to develop on its own, free of outside influences but also preventing the spread of its tradition beyond the confines of Arabia.

All of this changed with the ascendancy of the Sa'ud family. Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab[98] briefly studied in the Hijaz and largely bounced around Najd, failing to find a permanent home as a member of the ulama due to his extreme ideas.[99] Al-Wahhab was even chastised and expelled from the town of Huraymila by his father. This came after al-Wahhab's zealous exportation of his ideas in the local community of al-Uyayna got his entire family kicked out of the town (of al-Uyayna).[100] Al-Wahhab later married into a prominent family of al-Uyayna, but was also expelled due to his destruction of the tomb of Zayd ibn al-Khattab, one of Muhammad's companions, as well as for stoning to death a woman accused of adultery.[101]

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[94] David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (I.B. Tauris, New York, 2006), 1.
[95] Ibid, 1, 8-9.
[96] Algar, 2.
[97] Commins, 8.
[98] Referred to as "al-Wahhab" from this point forward in the essay
[99] Algar, 11-13.
[100] Ibid, 7.
[101] Ibid, 18.

However, this proved very convenient because al-Wahhab next landed in al-Dir'iyya, where the

Sa'ud family was planning to take over Najd. The Sa'ud family under Muhammad ibn Sa'ud

offered al-Wahhab protection in exchange for his sanction of their expansion across Najd.[102] In

this way, Saudi expansion across Najd meant that not only would it expand Muhammad ibn

Sa'ud's secular control, it was also a *jihad* against people who failed to share al-Wahhab's vision

of Islam.[103]

However, the Ottomans and Egyptians managed to keep the Wahhabi-Saudi alliance

under control for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[104] The modern state of Saudi

Arabia needed the help of a colonial power in order to take shape. The British first made contact

with the Saudi-Wahhabis in 1865 and gave them money and weapons in an attempt to help

destabilize the Ottoman Empire.[105] The culmination of the British and Saudi-Wahhabi alliance

came during World War I, when the head of the Saudi family, Ibn Sa'ud, was knighted in 1915.

His troops also received extensive training and financial backing from the British.[106] Ibn Sa'ud

turned his British-trained troops into an elite shock force called the Ikhwan and used them to

wipe out his main rival for control of the Arabian peninsula, Sharif Husayn of Mecca.[107] Once

political control of Arabia was consolidated under Saudi rule, the Saudi state ensured that

Wahhabi beliefs became the only accepted norm, at the cost of 40,000 public executions and

350,000 amputations.[108] However, when the Saudis tried to expand into Iraq, the British used the

Royal Air Force to stop Saudi expansion and thus prevent Saudi control and Wahhabi ideas from

spreading beyond Arabia. Oil proved to be the decisive factor in allowing for the expansion of

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[102] Ibid, 18-19.
[103] Ibid, 19.
[104] Commins, 19.
[105] Algar, 38-39.
[106] Ibid, 40.
[107] Ibid, 42.
[108] Ibid.

both Saudi political influence and Wahhabi ideas abroad.[109] Saudi oil money built schools and

mosques in other Muslims nations that were taught by Wahhabi preachers or supporters, which is

what has allowed their ideas to gain traction abroad[110], in spite of Wahhabism's original,

puritanical tendencies. Wahhabis also promote their beliefs abroad via organizations like the

Muslim World League and student organizations like the Muslim Student Organization of North

America.[111]

The Saudi state also played a pivotal role in supporting other like-minded Traditionalist

Salafi groups. One of the most important of these Salafi groups is the Muslim Brotherhood,

founded in Egypt in 1928.[112] The early Muslim Brotherhood shared Wahhabi resistance to

Modernity's influence over Muslims and championed Islam as not only "the true religion" but

also an effective way to run secular affairs.[113] However, this also meant that also took on a

distinctly nationalistic character.[114] The Muslims Brotherhood not only opposed the British

government in Egypt, but also the Nasser regime that took power in the 1950s. This helped turn

the Brotherhood down a more confrontational path, with Sayyid Qutb stating that contemporary

modern society existed in a state of *jahiliyya*, or religious barbarism, a view consistent with

Wahhabism.[115] As Nasser became popular as a pan-Arab nationalist figure, the Muslim

Brotherhood and Wahhabi-Saudi state established a close relationship, with the Muslim

Brotherhood acting as a Wahhabi proxy that combatted non-religious Arab nationalism.[116]

During the 1960s, King Faysal spread Wahhabi influence even further by establishing the World

Muslim League to promote Muslim (see Wahhabi) values and ways of living, which spread its

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[109] Ibid, 48.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid, 48-50.
[112] Commins, 140.
[113] Ibid, 141.
[114] Ibid, 142.
[115] Ibid, 148.
[116] Ibid, 151-152.

influence throughout the Middle East and West Africa through the establishment of mosques and schools built with Saudi oil money.[117]

This now bring us to the present and pressing dilemma of so-called "Islamic radicalism". By now, it is evident that Wahhabism can be intolerant and has spread rapidly over the last two hundred years and especially in the twentieth century. However, this spread has not come with a universal notion of what Wahhabi practice and monotheism looks like. As a result, the disparate groups that the Wahhabis patronize have differing ideas of what it means to be a true Sunni Muslim. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s showed how far Wahhabi ideas had spread in Muslim nations worldwide. The *jihad* against the Soviets in Afghanistan incubated many groups that shared puritanical Wahhabi views. One of the most important was the MAK, or Maktab al-Khidmat. This group was founded by Abdullah Azzam, a respected cleric who studied at prestigious religious schools like al-Azhar in Cairo and Damascus University. Its purpose was to bring Arabs to fight in Afghanistan, as part of their duty, as both individuals and as members of Muslim society, to defend Islam from outside attack.[118] The group was financed by a wealthy young Saudi named Osama bin Laden, who used his financial leverage to gain more control over MAK and take power away from Azzam. With the blessing of the Saudi (see Wahhabi) grand *mufti*, or judge, bin Laden built training camps to educate MAK fighters on both warfare and Islam (of the Wahhabi variety). Bin Laden also helped facilitate communication between various MAK fighters after the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989.[119] This had two main benefits for bin Laden and groups who share Wahhabi beliefs. The first was that the MAK fighters now had a clear vision of what "pure" Islam, molded into shape by teachers who

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[117] Ibid, 152-153.
[118] R. Kim Cragin, "Early History of al-Qai'da", The Historical Journal 51, no. 4 (2008): 1047, 1051.
[119] Ibid, 1052-1054.

were Wahhabis or supported Wahhabi beliefs. The second was that the fighters now had the training and the means to coordinate their efforts to bring about pure Islam elsewhere in the Muslim world, which became the main goal of al-Qai'da after bin Laden formed it in 1988.[120]

Eli Alschech's analysis of "Salafi-jihadis" in Jordan provides a compelling case study of different Wahhabi-influenced groups that fall under the "Salafi-jihadi" umbrella, al-Qai'da included. Alshech defines a Salafi-jihadi as a rejection of traditional Salafism that embraces violence as both an inevitable and acceptable means of defending Islam against from both the West and the ruling elite of Muslims nations.[121] The end goal of Salafi-jihadis is to "purge Muslim society of immorality and non-Islamic practices", after which only a pure form of Islam remains.[122] Like Wahhabis and Traditionalist Salafis, Salafi-jihadis view pure Islam as the first three hundred years of Muslim scholarship and nothing else.[123] However, unlike the Wahhabis in the Arabian Peninsula, Salafi-jihadis are hostile toward the ruling elite of any Muslim nation. In Jordan, Salafi-jihadism began to take shape in the 1990s under two men: Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Mu'sab al-Zarqawi.

During the early 1990s, al-Maqdisi was the more respected scholar of the two.[124] Originally, the Salafi-jihadi movement in Jordan was more focused on a refusal to participate in Jordanian society, which they viewed as un-Islamic.[125] Declarations of *takfir* (declaring other Muslims to be apostates) were few and far between. However, all of that changed when al-Zarqawi went to Afghanistan in the late 1990s. al-Zarqawi studied different Salafi thinkers like Sayyid Qutb, and adopted Qutb's views. This meant that any Muslim who lives in an area

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[120] Ibid, 1056.
[121] Eli Alschech, "The Doctrinal Crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi Ranks and the Emergence of Neo-Takfirism", *Islamic Law and Society* 21 (2014): 419-452.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid, 421.
[124] Ibid, 423.
[125] Ibid, 423-424.

controlled by apostates (Western or non-Western) is an apostate simply by virtue of their ruler's apostasy.[126] This applies to any form of non-Islamic governance: democracy, communism, and even ba'athism (Arab nationalism along the lines of Nasser).[127] Another important idea that al-Zarqawi adopted was that making war on apostates in Muslim-majority lands was a more important struggle than making war on the West. War should be waged in the West only after pure Islamic rule returns to Muslim-majority lands.[128] al-Maqdisi strongly disagreed and wrote that Salafi-jihadis should take the "utmost care" to avoid hurting Muslims, despite the fact that these Muslims may be sinners.[129] al-Maqdisi wanted to focus Salafi-jihadi efforts on fighting the West, and that attacking Muslims was an illegitimate *jihad*.[130] al-Zarqawi also placed an emphasis on piety as a measure of being a true Muslim, as opposed to al-Maqdisi's emphasis on scholarship. For al-Zarqawi, a person who lacks "uncompromising zeal" is not properly religious and thus an apostate. This attracted many recruits to al-Zarqawi's camp.[131] The split between was also accentuated by the return of Jordanian participants in the Afghan-Soviet War in the 1980s, who favored views along the lines of al-Zarqawi's.[132] After al-Zarqawi was given command of al-Qaida in Iraq in 2003, his camp splintered off from al-Maqdisi's Jordanian Salafi-jihadis. Alschech gives them the label "Neo-Takfiris" due to their revival of Sayyid Qutb's thought and emphasis on *takfir*.[133]

Conclusion

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[126] Ibid, 422.
[127] Ibid, 439.
[128] Ibid, 422.
[129] Ibid, 426.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Ibid, 430-431.
[132] Ibid, 423.
[133] Ibid, 422.

It is clear that Islamic reform movements since 1800 cover an entire spectrum of beliefs, and respond to modernity, as introduced by Europeans, in a similarly broad manner of beliefs. As Lumbard points out, the most popular reform movements (i.e. Modernist and Traditionalist Salafis, as well as the Wahhabis) tend to either completely embrace European ideas at the expense of European ideas or utterly reject them.[134] The intolerant and ethnocentric nature of certain reformist factions also make it extremely difficult to reconcile any reform movements with the "status quo" as embodied by the Sunni Traditionalists. Thus, Sunni Muslims, who make up 85-90% of all Muslims, do not have any concrete, mutually agreed upon idea of what it means to be a Sunni Muslim. Not only does this divide Muslims themselves, it also make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to explain what a Muslim is to other people in the world. So, this also means that Western scholars, when studying Islam, also fail to grasp what it means to be Muslim. The fundamental problem is that instead of trying to work out an answer to that question themselves, the West arrogantly reverts to Orientalist assumptions and stereotypes about what it means to be Muslim. Despite of the ever-changing and even nebulous nature of Sunni Islam, the West make its own monolithic image of Islam and deems the Western conception of Islam as the true nature of Islam. This happens in spite of the fact that the West has largely created the issue of identity among Sunni Muslims due to their imposition of European governmental and legal structures on Muslim peoples and nations that operated in a fundamentally different way than such structures did in the West. The single most important impact of the various Islamic reform movements of the nineteenth century is the Salafi-Wahhabi leveling of Islamic religious authority. Without the *maddhabs* to provide some semblance of structure to interpret Islamic texts and practices, a menagerie of different views proliferate. This

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[134] Lumbard, 66.

allows for groups like ISIS, the successor group to al-Zarqawi's al-Qaida in Iraq, to claim that they can create a "caliphate" that rules with a positivist interpretation of Islamic law. However, Wael Hallaq showed that Islamic law has a moralistic fiber and is thus incompatible with a Western notion of a state. When a group like ISIS, or even the Wahhabi marriage to the Saudi state, attempts to set religious doctrine, Islam ends up being twisted to suit their own narrow doctrinal views. Late Sunni Traditionalists, through their respect and active contribution to well over a millennium of Islamic scholarship, are able to respond to maintain their faith in the face of Modernity without resorting to violence. The authority of the *maddhabs* and connected legal scholarship provides the necessary continuity.

The West assumes that Salafism, Wahhabism, and terrorism are all the same, while failing to see the truth: Western ideas created an atmosphere that made Muslims feel compelled to reform. That atmosphere produced a bewildering variety of different movements that all look similar at first glance but in reality are quite different. Marshall Hodgson points out that around 1800, Western nations and institutions were just beginning to take a dominant position on the world stage. They seemed to have forgotten that Islamic nations and institutions had been more advanced than European ones for hundreds of years prior to 1800.[135] However, the West treats them all Muslims as the same and thus utterly fails to understand Muslims at all and reverts to Islamophobic and Orientalist conceptions of Islam as compensation. But the question of identity in Sunni Islam still remains. The idea of innovation once again comes to the fore. Wahhabi and some Salafi groups condemn anything outside the practice of the *salaf* as *bid'a*, or innovation. Innovation was also a key part of Western thought at the advent of Modernity. Authority came not from tradition but rather from individual discovery[136], a trend reflected by the scholarship of

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[135] Hodgson, 182.
[136] Ibid, 182.

Muhammad Abduh'.[137] The problem with this view is that tradition, i.e. of the different *maddhabs*, becomes *bid'a*, or innovation, in the eyes of Wahhabi and some Salafi groups. The legal tradition of the *maddhabs* spans more than a millennium and answers important questions that the *salaf* did not. But when this body of scholarship is rejected by Salafi and Wahhabi groups, something needs to fill the gap. Salafis and Wahhabis inadvertently fill this gap with Western/Modernist ideas, which completely changes the type of Islam that they practice. Thus, a contemporary Sunni Muslim is ultimately someone who respects the authority of not only their own chosen Islamic tradition, but Islamic tradition in general.

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[137] Ibid, 274.

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