Introduction

This is a book on salvation and faith. Admittedly not everyone who writes on contemporary Islamic radicalism starts from these topics, nor did I necessarily think to do so at the outset. This is an emphasis that grew on me organically through my years of study of radical writings. If I may be permitted to borrow the words of an eminent historian who understood the importance of theology in quite another time and place, I might say that "what seized upon me and still directs me is the inner logic of the research."[1]

One of the pioneers of the study of contemporary Islamic radicalism, Emmanuel Sivan, prefaced his *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* with the words: "[t]he extended essay that follows presents what I discovered about the transformation of medieval theology into modern Muslim politics, and the twist given to certain age-old Islamic ideas as they entered the contemporary world."[2] In the decades that have since passed, the volume of academic literature on Islamic radicalism has mushroomed, especially in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001. Among these are many excellent studies, and recent years in particular have seen a great qualitative advance in the literature.[3] I have nonetheless found that, with few exceptions,

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[1] Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, New York: Harper and Row, 1964, p. ix.

[2] Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990, p. x.

[3] Recent studies worthy of note include Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

serious inquiry into this central issue of the meeting of medieval theology and modernity has not advanced greatly since the 1980s. In other words, there has been much discussion of "modern politics," but little of "medieval theology."

In parallel, the shape of Islamic radicalism has evolved in the intervening decades in a manner that renders theology ever more relevant. It may be true that some Islamists "no longer cultivate the historical [Islamic] forms of legal, theological, and philosophical knowledge,"[4] but this is not so of the school that predominates today among global jihadists, commonly known as the salafi jihādī school (*al-salafiyya al-jihādiyya*).

Consider the case of 'Umar b. Maḥmūd Abū 'Umar, better known as Abū Qatāda al-Filasṭīnī, who is currently under arrest in the United Kingdom. Britons will be familiar with his name from press reports, where he has been often described as "Osama Bin Laden's righthand man in Europe."[5] He certainly has connections to al-Qā'ida, but he is also the author of a polemic against the theological views of a nineteenth-century rector of al-Azhar,[6] coauthor of a reference work on the eleventh-century scholar Ibn Ḥazm's evaluations of transmitters of *ḥadīth*,[7] and editor of an influential twentieth-century Wahhābī work of theology.[8] Similarly, the Saudi scholar Nāṣir b. Ḥamad al-Fahd, imprisoned in Saudi Arabia since 2003, has written some radical things indeed, including a ruling permitting the use of weapons of mass destruction against the United States[9] and an essay in praise of

2010; Stéphane Lacroix, *Les Islamistes saoudiens: une insurrection manquée*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010; and Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

4   Ira M. Lapidus, "Islamic Revival and Modernity: The Contemporary Movements and the Historical Paradigms," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 40/4 (1997), pp. 444–460; pp. 447–448.

5   For example: Alan Travis, "Abu Qatada: From Refugee to Detainee," http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/feb/19/abu-qatada-profile, February 19, 2009.

6   Abū Qatāda al-Filasṭīnī ('Umar b. Maḥmūd Abū 'Umar), *al-Radd al-atharī al-mufīd fī jawharat al-tawḥīd: mulāḥaẓāt 'alā al-Bayjūrī fī sharḥ jawharat al-tawḥīd*, 1412/1991–1992, http://www.tawhed.ws/dl?i=a2zbmors

7   'Umar b. Maḥmūd Abū 'Umar and Ḥasan Maḥmūd Abū Haniyya, *Tajrīd asmā' al-ruwāt alladhīna takallama fīhim Ibn Ḥazm jarḥan wa-ta'dīlan muqāranatan ma'a aqwāl a'immat al-jarḥ wa'l-ta'dīl*, al-Zarqā': Maktabat al-Manār, 1408/1988.

8   Ḥāfiẓ b. Aḥmad al-Ḥakamī (ed. 'Umar b. Maḥmūd Abū 'Umar), *Ma'ārij al-qabūl bi-sharḥ sullam al-uṣūl*, al-Dammām: Dār Ibn al-Qayyim, 3rd ed., 1415/1995.

9   Nāṣir b. Ḥamad al-Fahd, *Risāla fī ḥukm istikhdām asliḥat al-damār al-shāmil ḍidda al-kuffār*, 1424/2003, http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=2gi7siuw

the 9/11 attacks;[10] but he is likewise the author of a work of proposed corrigenda to an edition of the medieval scholar Ibn Taymiyya's collected writings,[11] and a book criticizing some of the theological positions of the fourteenth-century scholar Abū Isḥāq al-Shāṭibī.[12]

Were it merely that such modern-day radicals at times have a side interest in classical Islamic studies, we might be justified in ignoring their theological views, in which case this book need not have been written. But anyone who examines salafi jihādī writings will see that this is not so, and that there is in fact a robust connection between their theological positions and their "political" ones.

Abū Qatāda broached this issue in a work titled *al-Jihād wa'l-ijtihād*, written in the late 1990s. In a passage criticizing those he calls "Islamic thinkers" (as opposed to scholars in the classical mold), such as the Tunisian Rāshid al-Ghanūshī, the Egyptian Fahmī al-Huwaydī, and the Sudanese Ḥasan al-Turābī, Abū Qatāda writes that they "do not speak as do individuals who are guided by the Noble Qurān":

Instead of speaking to people – to the Muslim youth – about jihad, they began to speak about revolution and political struggle. Instead of presenting people with the expressions *'ubūdiyya* (servitude to Allāh) and *'ibāda* (worship), they started to speak of national (*waṭanī*) obligation, Arab (*qawmī*) spirit, and social necessity. Instead of employing the incentives of love for Allāh, fear of Allāh, and hope for the afterlife, the discussion has come to be about the achievements of the movement, social security, food security, and Arab territorial integrity. And instead of speaking of Allāh's lost right to have His law and punishments implemented, their discourse has come to be about social liberty, social justice, oppression, and dictatorship.[13]

What is important for our purposes is not the accuracy or inaccuracy of this critique; what interests us is Abū Qatāda's conception of Islam, which precludes these forms of discourse that others may well view as entirely consistent with Islamic authenticity.

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[10] Nāṣir b. Ḥamad al-Fahd, *Āyāt al-Raḥmān fī ghazwat sibtambir*, 1423/2002, http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=ktuz8sa8
[11] Nāṣir b. Ḥamad al-Fahd, *Ṣiyānat majmū' al-fatāwā min al-saqaṭ wa'l-taṣḥīf*, Riyadh: Maktabat Aḍwā' al-Salaf, 1423/2003.
[12] Nāṣir b. Ḥamad al-Fahd, *al-I'lām bi-mukhālafāt al-muwāfaqāt wa'l-i'tiṣām*, Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1420/1999.
[13] 'Umar b. Maḥmūd Abū 'Umar, *al-Jihād wa'l-ijtihād: ta'ammulāt fī'l-manhaj*, Amman: Dār al-Bayāriq, 1419/1999, p. 233.

His is a distinctly salafī critique. The word salafi is derived from *salaf*, which means "(righteous) forefathers," and denotes an original- ist tendency in Islamic thought. In the course of this work we will delve further into various, and at times conflicting, conceptions of what it means to be a salafi; it is clear, however, that if contemporary salafis take their originalism seriously – and they do – then we ought to be interested in how precisely they understand the Islamic tradition and relate it to modern contexts.

That is the task I have set before myself in this study. It is a large one, and I make no effort to encompass all its facets. Rather, I have focused on one topic that has proven to be especially significant to modern radicalism: the theology of faith. In particular, the present work seeks to demonstrate how the revival of an age-old and half- defunct theological polemic over the nature of faith helped foster rifts within broader Islamic movements and contributed to the emergence of the salafi jihādīs as a discrete theopolitical school of thought.

The majority of topics in Islamic theology deal with *what* one should believe; these include the issues of predestination versus free will, the ontological status of Allāh's attributes, and the question of whether the Qurān is a created entity or is uncreated. Such topics were the main preoccupation of Muslim theologians throughout most of Islamic history, including those cases in which theological dispute intersected with politics. For example, the 'Abbāsid Caliph al-Ma'mūn wielded the power of state in an attempt to enforce the belief that the Qurān is a created entity; and in North Africa and al-Andalus, the Muwaḥḥidūn (Almohads), who believed in an allegorical interpreta- tion of the divine attributes, waged war against the "anthropomor- phist" Murābiṭūn (Almoravids).

The theology of faith, in contrast, deals with the issue of what faith itself is, and *how* one believes. Is faith a credo one must hold true in one's heart, an act of verbal confession, or perhaps both? Or is it something more demanding: the ordering of one's inner and outer life around the service of Allāh, and the performance of acts of the heart (e.g., love for the Prophet) and acts of the limbs (e.g., prayer, or giving the *zakāt* tithe)? And if the more demanding definition is adopted, how far may one fall short of this ideal and still be considered a believer?

This set of questions constitutes the core of the Muslim theology of faith. There have been two historical periods in which the nature of

faith was a truly dominant concern in Islamic theology. The first was the formative period, which for our purposes can be taken to mean the century or so between the first theological writings that appear reasonably authentic (c. 70/690) and the emergence of early Sunnism. The second of these periods runs from the last decades of the twentieth century to the present day.

These two periods are also the ones in which theology was most intimately linked with polemic over whether the rulers of Muslim polities were Muslim or apostate. In the formative period, it was in fact this theopolitical question that arose first and was only there-after gradually generalized into normative doctrines on the theology of faith. At the end of this process, which was completed around the latter half of the second Muslim century, there emerged three competing tendencies in this matter: the Murji'ite, the Khārijite, and the tendency that would come to be known as Sunni. The Murji'ites were the most lenient and contended that acts were not included at all in the definition of faith. The Khārijites were the most exacting, arguing that acts were part of faith, and that any grave sin of commission or omission made one an apostate. The Sunnis fell in between these poles, although there remained divergences between different Sunni schools, with some remaining closer to the Murji'ites and others closer to the Khārijites. In fact, it is intra-Sunni dispute on this topic that forms the subject matter of this study.

This book traces the modern revival of the debate over the theology of faith and its application to the question of whether the rulers of Muslim countries today are Muslims or apostates. In other words, it examines the role of the theology of faith in what is often referred to today as radical Islam.

The immediate context of this polemic is the rise of Sunni radicalism over the last few decades. The time period treated in this study opened with a number of significant episodes in which a new breed of radicals came into the public eye. In Egypt, the radical al-Takfīr wa'l-Hijra group was put on trial for a political assassination in 1977, and the Jihād group assassinated Anwar al-Sādāt in 1981; in Saudi Arabia, Juhaymān al-'Utaybī conducted an armed takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979. In response to events such as these, the official religious establishments of Egypt and Saudi Arabia made concerted efforts to portray the radicals as heretics. The obvious way

to do this was to compare them to the Islamic archetype of the fanatical religious radical, the Khārijites. This had been one of the principle lines of attack employed by enemies of the Wahhābīs since that movement's origins,[14] and had been likewise deployed against Sayyid Quṭb in the 1960s;[15] now it was used against Shukrī Muṣṭafā, the leader of al-Takfīr wa'l-Hijra,[16] and many others to follow. Wherever employed, the meaning of the accusation of Khārijism is clear: It means to portray the radicals as renegade groups who have rebelled against legitimate authority, separated themselves from the religious community, and pronounced *takfīr* on other Muslims (i.e., declared other Muslims apostate) in contravention of established Sunni doctrine.[17]

The radicals, of course, do not see themselves as Khārijites. With few exceptions, they claim to represent orthodox Sunnism; and as they view their own doctrine of faith as orthodox, they accuse their critics of being Murji'ites. In other words, each party to this struggle strives to define itself as the upholder of Sunnism and attempts to define its antagonist as unorthodox. Unlike the accusation of Khārijism, however, the meaning of the accusation of Murji'ism is not immediately self-evident. It is tempting at first to connect it with a critique of political quietism;[18] indeed, some modern authors of anti-Murji'ite polemic do cite statements in which early Sunni authorities describe the Murji'ites as a sect that is pleasing to the rulers.[19] However, the

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[14] The accusation was made, for instance, in a treatise authored in 1754 by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's own brother, Sulaymān, who was an opponent of the Wahhābī movement. David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, London: Tauris, 2006, pp. 22–23.

[15] Adnan A. Musallam, *From Secularism to Jihad: Sayyid Qutb and the Foundations of Radical Islamism*, Westport: Praeger, 2005, p. 99.

[16] Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 85.

[17] For a more detailed account of the uses of the accusation of Khārijism in Egypt, see Jeffrey T. Kenny, *Muslim Rebels: Kharijites and the Politics of Extremism in Egypt*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

[18] Cf. Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, pp. 156–157. Zaman briefly discusses one of these modern anti-Murji'ite authors, Safar al-Ḥawālī, and seems to view Murji'ism's purported association with political quietism as relevant to al-Ḥawālī's book, although he acknowledges that al-Ḥawālī "does not dwell on this aspect of the Murji'a."

[19] A popular one is the statement by the second-century scholar al-Nadr b. Shumayl that the Murji'a is "a religion that is in accord with the kings" (or in some versions: "that pleases the kings"). It is quoted in Abū al-Faḍl 'Umar al-Ḥaddūshī, *Ikhbār*

contemporary radicals' main line of argument is not that Murji'ism is an explicitly quietist political doctrine. Rather, they take up the issue of Murji'ism in its proper context of the theology of faith and make a more complex argument focused on the connection between Murji'ite theology and the refusal of most *'ulamā'* to make pronouncements of apostasy (*takfīr*) against the ruling regimes.

In this sense, the anti-Murji'ite polemic may be schematically represented as a second stage in the development of modern Islamic radicalism. The first preoccupation of these radicals was the argument that contemporary governments who rule by man-made law are apostate and must be overthrown.[20] When the religious establishments and more moderate Islamists rallied to refute this thesis, they did so by promoting lenient positions on the theology of faith. The radicals' focus then turned to these critics, accusing them of Murji'ism. In a more profound sense, however, these polemics uncover a deeper theological stratum that was already implicit in the radical thrust, which the intellectual contestation between the radicals and their opponents merely served to bring to the fore.

Modern anti-Murji'ite polemic first emerged in the late 1960s or early 1970s within the radical wing of the Muslim Brotherhood. These Brotherhood radicals were followers of the hugely influential Egyptian radical thinker Sayyid Quṭb. Quṭb himself (like Ḥasan al-Bannā, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood) did not normally employ the technical language of medieval theology, but his insistence that the Islamic world had reverted to *jāhiliyya* – a state of pre-Islamic barbarism and

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al-awliyā' bi-maṣra' ahl al-tajahhum wa'l-irjā', n.d., back cover; and Abū Muḥammad 'Āṣim al-Maqdisī, *Tabṣīr al-'uqalā' bi-talbīsāt ahl al-tajahhum wa'l-irjā' wa-huwa radd 'alā kitāb al-taḥdhīr min fitnat al-takfīr*, http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=2mianrha, pp. 61, 146, 184.

[20] This crucial doctrine still awaits systematic study. For Egyptian radicals, cf. Sivan, *Radical Islam*, pp. 94–107; and Kepel, *Muslim Extremism*, p. 194f. For Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī, cf. Joas Wagemakers, "A Purist Jihadi-Salafi: The Ideology of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 36:2 (August 2009): 281–297; for Sayyid Imām, cf. Daniel J. Lav, "Jihadists and Jurisprudents: The 'Revisions' Literature of Sayyid Imam and al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya" in Joseph Morrison Skelly (ed.), *Political Islam from Muhammad to Ahmadinejad: Defenders, Detractors, and Definitions*, Santa Barbara: Praeger Security International, 2009, pp. 105–146, esp. pp. 117–125. I will address some aspects of this issue in the present work as they arise, e.g., conflicting interpretations of Qurān 5:44; see Chapter 5 in this volume.

ignorance – and his view that verbal pronunciation of the declaration
of faith did not suffice to make one a true Muslim led his detractors to
view him as a kind of Khārijite. I attempt to show that, notwithstand-
ing the idiosyncratic nature of Quṭb's writings, these conceptions did
owe something to the medieval debate, and that toward the end of his
life Quṭb likewise helped put in motion the process by which medieval
theology of faith came to be common currency in modern Islamic rad-
icalism. This process began in earnest, however, only after his death:
When the Muslim Brotherhood leadership attempted to check Quṭb's
radicalizing influence by promoting a lenient theology of faith, the
radicals countered by embracing the more exacting medieval school,
and accused the leadership of Murji'ism.

In the 1980s, the polemic passed over to Saudi Arabia, where it was
taken up by Safar al-Ḥawālī, who was at the time a doctoral student
studying under the direction of Sayyid Quṭb's brother Muḥammad.
Al-Ḥawālī emerged as a prominent dissident scholar and a leader in
the movement known as the Ṣaḥwa, which represented a confluence
of Quṭbist thought and the Wahhābī/salafī tradition of Saudi Arabia.
Al-Ḥawālī's doctoral thesis on the topic of Murji'ism, later published in
book form, has been rightly called a *locus classicus* of this debate.[21]

The 1990s then witnessed an eruption of anti-Murji'ite polemic
in numerous countries as the theology of faith turned into a proving
ground between radical and politically quietist salafīs. These radical
salafīs have since come to be known as salafī jihādīs. To the extent
that these authors are familiar at all to the wider public, it is for their
close connections to al-Qā'ida; but those who manned the front lines
in this often abstruse polemic were the movement's scholars, who are
less well known than the al-Qā'ida leadership but arguably no less
important.

These three stages of polemic – the critique of the Muslim
Brotherhood, al-Ḥawālī's Quṭbist anti-Murji'ism, and the intra-salafī
debates – are treated in the present study in Chapters 3, 4, and 5,
respectively. In Chapter 5 I will argue, in addition, that these polemics

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[21] Bernard Haykel, "On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action" in Meijer (ed.), *Global
Salafism*, p. 40, n. 19. For a recent statement from Abū Qatāda al-Filasṭīnī on the
importance of this work, cf. *Ḥiwār min dākhil al-sujūn al-birīṭāniyya maʿa al-shaykh
Abī Qatāda al-Filasṭīnī*, 1429/2008, http://www.tawhed.ws/dl?i=15020911, p. 6.

were a central factor in the emergence of the salafī jihādīs as a distinct
school, through an unfolding process of differentiation between them-
selves and their rivals and opponents. Quṭb was relegated to the role
of an inspirational figure rather than a doctrinal bulwark as the salafī
jihādīs inscribed themselves fully in the salafī-cum-Wahhābī milieu,
and they reformulated Quṭb's key doctrines in the language of clas-
sical Islamic theology and jurisprudence. Within this salafī milieu, it
was, more than anything else, their views on the theology of faith that
set them apart, and it is thus no surprise that these became a major
bone of contention between themselves and politically quietist salafīs.
Finally, in Chapter 6, I will offer some observations on the relation
between these scholarly debates and the trajectory of radical militancy,
with special reference to changes in the global jihadist coalition in the
post-9/11 period.

Chapters 1 and 2 of this book provide background necessary to
understand the origins and meaning of the modern debate on the theol-
ogy of faith. Chapter 1 describes the early emergence of Murji'ism and
its development from a theopolitical doctrine related to the early wars
over leadership of the Caliphate into a general theological doctrine
on faith. Chapter 2 discusses the theology of faith of Ibn Taymiyya
(d. 728/1328), the influential Ḥanbalī jurisprudent and theologian who
begat a school that Western scholars have dubbed "neo-Ḥanbalism." In
particular, the chapter details Ibn Taymiyya's polemic against what he
viewed as the Murji'ite views of some other Sunnis, especially Ḥanafī
theologians and the Ashʿarī school.

Ibn Taymiyya's writings on these topics are absolutely essential to
understanding the modern polemic. Indeed, I hope to show that the
fault line between radical Islamists on the one hand and moderate
Islamists and mainstream *'ulamā'* on the other is, to a large degree,
the difference between those who have adopted Ibn Taymiyya's theol-
ogy of faith and those who have not. It is the salafī jihādīs' doctrine
of *takfīr* that, more than anything, defines them as a group, and their
defense of this doctrine is deeply indebted to Ibn Taymiyya's anti-
Murji'ite writings.

This modern debate on the theology of faith is one manifestation
of the more general Ibn Taymiyya revival that has swept the Islamic
world with increasing speed in the modern era. From the Middle Ages
up until the recent past, Sunni Islam had been dominated by a kind

of informal consensus, consisting of Ash'arī theology (or its largely similar Māturīdī counterpart), recognition of the four established law schools in jurisprudence, and an acceptance of Ṣūfism that extended to tolerance for popular Ṣūfī forms of shrine-centered devotion. The conflict between this rough consensus and the minority Ḥanbalī school was a major fault line running through learned Sunni Islam in the Middle Ages. Thus the famous Egyptian historiographer Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442) wrote that the Ash'arī school became so dominant:

that the other schools were forgotten, to the point that today no opposing school remains apart from that of the Ḥanbalīs.... They held to the views of the *salaf*, believing that one should not explain [Allāh's] revealed attributes allegorically. Then, after 700 A.H.... Ibn Taymiyya al-Ḥarrānī rose to prominence in Damascus and its environs. He applied himself to championing the school of the *salaf* and was unsparing in his refutation of the Ash'arīs, and spoke out in denunciation of them, the Shī'īs, and the Ṣūfīs. People split into two factions: one faction followed his example, relied on his opinions, acted on his views, and considered him to be "Shaykh al-Islām" and the most illustrious of Muslim traditionists; and the other faction pronounced him an innovator and heterodox.[22]

In fact, this second faction was historically the dominant one. Even though Ibn Taymiyya was cherished by a number of later revivalist movements, the majority of Islamic scholars up until the early twentieth century tended to consider him a heterodox gadfly, if not worse.[23] Now, however, the increasing popularity of Ibn Taymiyya in contemporary Islam has combined with other factors to help call into question each of these elements of the medieval Sunni mainstream.

What is truly remarkable is that despite Ibn Taymiyya's fame (or notoriety), his theology of faith, which certainly challenged mainstream Sunni views as much as any of his other doctrinal positions, hardly figured at all in the medieval controversies surrounding him. The recent revival of his polemics on faith is thus a testament to the

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[22] Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Maqrīzī, *al-Mawā'iẓ wa'l-i'tibār bi-dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa'l-āthār*, Vol. 3, Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1998, p. 426.
[23] See the important article by Khaled El-Rouayheb, "From Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 1566) to Khayr al-Dīn al-Ālūsī (d. 1899): Changing Views of Ibn Taymiyya among non-Ḥanbalī Sunni Scholars" in Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (eds.), *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 269–318.