

Introduction

HOW DOES ONE UNDERSTAND SCRIPTURE? WHAT ROLE DO scholars play in understanding religious texts? What should lay Muslims do when they encounter scripture that conflicts with a scholarly opinion? These questions are often at the center of religious disputes among Muslims in the modern world and have sparked debates among scholars and nonscholars alike. The fierce intellectual debates between Salafis and Traditionalists have been a prominent feature of Islamic intellectual history in the twentieth century. Although they both draw from the same sources, each of these groups considers itself to be the authentic version of Islam. Traditionalism is an institutional understanding of Islam that developed over centuries of scholarship. Traditionalists advocate a deference to precedent (*taqlīd*) of the *madhhabs* as a means for Muslims to understand Islam.¹ On the other hand, purist Salafis view themselves as a group that is purifying the syncretic practices that crept into the faith over many centuries. Salafis consider the uncritical following of the *madhhabs* to be the root cause of the Muslim world's political, economic, and social decline. They advocate for a return to the Qur'ān and Sunna as they were understood by the earliest Muslim generations.

Throughout Islamic history, the '*ulamā*' played a leading role in developing Islamic law and dogma. Prior to the advent of modernity, states were not robust enough to define religion across vast geographical regions. It was the '*ulamā*' who spoke for Islam and had a monopoly over religious education

¹ *Taqlīd* has been translated as “blind imitation,” “uncritical following,” and “slavish imitation.” Sherman Jackson's translation of *taqlīd* as deference to precedent is more accurate because it represents the utilization and capacity of *taqlīd* in Islamic law. See Sherman Jackson, “*Ijtihād* and *taqlīd*: Between the Islamic Legal Tradition and Autonomous Western Reason,” in *Routledge Handbook of Islamic Law*, ed. Khaled Abou El Fadl, Ahmad Atif Ahmad, and Said Fares Hassan (New York: Routledge 2019), 261.

and authority. Since the mid-nineteenth century, both state and lay intellectuals have emerged as other voices. These lay intellectuals were usually not trained in Islamic sciences, but their voices were often in accordance with western thought or appealed to modern sensibilities. Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999) is one of the twentieth century's most successful Salafi leaders who attracted millions of followers throughout the Muslim world. His teachings challenged the religious authority of traditionally trained 'ulamā'. His call to follow the Qur'ān, Sunna, and the *salaf* sparked debates about the authority of the 'ulamā' in interpreting religious texts. These debates were not limited to scholarly circles, but they occurred in mosques, coffee shops, online, and in social gatherings. The points of contention between Albānī and his critics impacted the religious understanding of millions of Muslims. At the crux of the issue is defining what the Sunna is, who best represents it, and how it is properly understood.

Other individuals or movements who attempted to start a ḥadīth-focused movement did not have the same impact as Albānī. For instance, the Ahl al-Ḥadīth movement was limited to a particular Muslim context like India but had little influence outside the South Asian context. Albānī's ideas spread internationally because he was a recognizable intellectual power across the Muslim world. Of all Salafi thinkers from the 1960s until today, he is the most recognizable. Albānī is the Salafi that most non-Salafis know because he proselytized his Salafi thought to them in a way that others did not. His fame and reputation were not only due to his dissemination of Salafi thought, but also his encyclopedic knowledge of ḥadīth. He was a self-taught populist who rebelled against the scholarly class in an attempt to purify Islam from unauthenticated scholarly traditions. His teachings appealed to ordinary people who were dissatisfied with Traditionalist 'ulamā'. He rejected the idea of following any school or methodology except the pristine texts. As such he only referred to himself as a Salafi because he wished to follow an untainted version of Islam. Albānī is often referred to as the greatest ḥadīth scholar of modern times and his supporters gave him the title of a *mujaddid*. He was not only admired for his knowledge, but for his commitment and keenness to purging Islam from foreign elements.²

The post-Ottoman political and religious context facilitated the contestation of traditional 'ulamā' and the issue of religious authority took center stage. Colonization, modernization, and globalization all contributed to

² See J. Wagemakers, "Salafism's Historical Continuity: The Reception of 'Modernist' Salafis by 'Purist' Salafis in Jordan," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 30, no. 2 (2019), 213. Also see Jacob Olidort, *The Politics of "Quietist" Salafism* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2015), 15–19.

creating a plethora of religious movements all claiming authenticity and contesting the authority of traditional *'ulamā'*. Although Muslim feminists, progressives, secularists, and Salafis are all different, they share an anticlericalist approach to Islamic studies. They view the *'ulamā'* as backward and as a barrier that prevents the masses from identifying the “true” teachings of Islam. While this book focuses on the tensions between purist Salafis and Traditionalists, it has broader implications for the status of the *'ulamā'* as the gatekeepers of Islamic knowledge. The purpose of this book is to analyze the assumptions, implications, and impact of Salafis and Traditionalists on modern Islamic thought. We cannot properly understand either Salafis or Traditionalists without analyzing how they interacted with each other.

Experts in Near Eastern studies suggest that Salafism is symptomatic of the modern political turmoil in the Muslim world. Religious studies scholars have highlighted Salafi disagreements with traditional *'ulamā'*; but they tend to operate under the assumption that modern Salafism is a transcription of purist movements of the past replicated or cloned into modernity. Only recently have academics begun turning their attention to Salafism, but most works focus on the political aspect of the movement. Failure to account for the compelling nature of the religious message of Salafism will result in the mischaracterizing of the movement as politically, rather than religiously, driven. Overemphasizing the political aspects of Salafism is problematic because Salafism is not a political movement but rather a method of understanding Islam. Political stances do not define what makes one a Salafi, instead they are identified by their religious beliefs and practices. To remedy this gap, I focus on the religious message of Salafism and how it created a version of Islam that stands in stark contrast to Traditionalism.

I do not attempt to speak of Salafism at large, rather I focus on Albānī's brand of purist Salafism. The decision to focus on Albānī is due to his distinction among Salafis. Unlike other leading Salafis, he was intensely engaged in scripturally charged and heated debates with Traditionalists throughout the Muslim world. These disputes were not limited to scholarly circles, but large numbers of students and religious activists served as audiences.

Searching the term “Salafism” on any academic database results in dozens of articles almost all of which mention Albānī. He was a towering and compelling individual in Salafi circles and the most aggressive disseminator of Salafi thought in modern times. Many Salafis see this influential figure as *the* representative of an authentic and scripture-based Islam. They consider his legal, political, and religious stances to be based on authentic scriptural

proof-texts. To many Salafis, Albānī was a reformer who sought to help Muslims return to the authentic teachings of Islam, mainly the path of the Muslim forefathers. Others, however, perceive him to be a thinker who has gone astray due to his bypassing of Muslim legal institutions.

Albānī's life and works are important because he played a major role in establishing and propagating modern Salafism. Traditionalists were threatened by his anticlerical message because they believed that it collapsed any division between the scholarly class and those with no religious training. In other words, they feared that if everyone approached the Qur'ān and Sunna directly, then the *'ulamā'* would no longer be the gatekeepers to "authentic" Islamic knowledge. As a result, Traditionalists throughout the Muslim world felt the need to refute and respond to Albānī and his followers. These debates and discussions resulted in dozens of books and treatises between Albānī and Traditionalist scholars.

This should not give the impression that this book is only about Albānī because it equally focuses on Traditionalism. Purist Salafis and Traditionalists are best understood in light of the dialogues and debates they had with each other. Neither group was formed in a vacuum, but their stances on religious issues were almost always developed as a response to each other. Both groups typify a particular religious phenomenon in contemporary Islam. The larger methodological problems of textual interpretation in modern Islam are exemplified by their differences in a particularly pertinent way. The convergence between purist Salafis and Traditionalists over the contested role of the *madhhabs* is key for understanding how Islamic scriptures are understood and interpreted in the modern Muslim world.

Leading anti-*madhhab* Salafis inspired a new group of young intellectuals in the Muslim world to begin redefining Islam by taking its interpretation out of the iron grip of the Traditionalist *'ulamā'* and seizing for themselves the power to interpret Islam. Through a detailed reconstruction of the dynamically heated debates between the two groups, I analyze the context of the scripturally charged rhetoric against and in defense of particular hermeneutical methods.

Among the arguments I make is that the primary difference between purist Salafis and Traditionalists is not necessarily the content of what it means to be a practicing Muslim, but rather their attitude toward scholarly tradition. While Traditionalists view scholarly tradition as an essential component for the proper understanding of Islam, purist Salafis do not consider it a necessary precondition to Islamic scholarship. I illustrate how

their conflicting approaches impact how both groups approach Islamic education, law, and ḥadīth.

This book is divided into three sections. The first is historical, contextualizing Traditionalism and purist Salafism in the twentieth century. The second focuses on their differences in Islamic law and the third on ḥadīth. Chapter 1 introduces the main religious movements that will be discussed in the book, namely Salafis and Traditionalists, and how they relate to Islamic Modernists. Chapter 2 provides a biography of Albānī and contextualizes the origins of his critique of Traditionalism.

In Chapter 3, I analyze how religious authority is produced in traditional Islamic circles. I explain how their educational methods, and how the degeneration of these methods, as well as the rise of print and technology, mass literacy, modernity, and secularism, resulted in the emergence of self-taught reformers.

In the second part of the book my focus shifts to Islamic law. In Chapter 4, I analyze the differences between purist Salafis and Traditionalists concerning legal pluralism, consensus, and certainty in Islamic law. Chapter 5 expounds on the role of scholars in interpreting scripture. In particular, I shed light on the differences between purist Salafis and Traditionalists on *taqlīd*, *ijtihād*, and adhering to the *madhhabs*.

Along with his efforts to purge Islamic law, Albānī tried to purify the Sunna and make it more accessible to common Muslims. In this final part of the book, I analyze their differences concerning ḥadīth studies. Chapter 6 focuses on the use and value of weak ḥadīth and Albānī's controversial project of removing all weak narrations from the canonical ḥadīth collections. Chapter 7 examines the impact Albānī had on the field of ḥadīth studies and his ḥadīth methodology.