

Article

French Salafists' Economic Ethics: Between Election and New Forms of Politicization

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Abstract: This article sheds light on the way in which activities such as the production and consumption of wealth are conceptualized, interpreted and put into practice within quietist Salafist communities in France. Unlike their jihadi and politicized counterparts, quietist Salafis in lands where Islam is the minority religion are required to emigrate to where Islam is majoritarian. As this article highlights, however, migrating is not necessarily a physical process. What is interesting to underline is that most French Salafists do not perform the Hijra, and favor, for instance, economic strategies allowing them to break with the rest of French society and live in 'isolation' rather than leaving France for good. Although framed as a religious duty, physical migration has been rare among French Salafist communities, whereas other forms of social rupture are emerging. The article explores in detail such economic strategies on the basis of the acceptance of neo-liberal principles allowing for what one can call an internal process of migration/isolation from French society.

Keywords: France; Salafism; ethics; neoliberalism; depoliticization; Max Weber

1. Introduction

This article sheds light on the way in which activities such as the production and consumption of wealth are conceptualized, interpreted, and put into practice within quietist Salafist communities in France. To what web of perceptions, meanings, and practices does this revivalist and “restorationist” ethics (Kurian and Lamport 2016) called Salafism echo to? I define Salafism as an episteme (Foucault 2002), meaning the framework that defines the “conditions of possibility for knowledge” on the basis of which Muslims are supposed to position themselves, notwithstanding the historical and geographic context in which they are a part (Amghar and Zegnani 2019; Adraoui 2013, 2020a). Despite considerable dissonance regarding both the dogmatic and religious exegeses as well as the political content that is supposed to define the revival of the early times of Islam¹, the *Salaf Salih*-Salafism (*al-Salafiyya*) must be understood as the religious movement that considers the temporal origin of Islam as paradigmatic when it comes to interpretation (Meijer 2009; Lauzière 2015; Farquhar 2016). The early days of Islam are thus the ultimate normative source, as it was during the time of the “Ancient Sages” and the “Virtuous Predecessors²” that the Quran (*al-Quran*) and the example of the

¹ For Foucault (2002), the episteme has two dimensions: a structural one, referring to empirical content which actors are able to access (namely, in the case of Salafism, the uses of the Ancient Sages), representing “an imperceptible network of constraints”; and an archeological one, namely a specific way of seeing history and particular ways of producing knowledge (for Salafists, by reconnecting with the reasoning of the Pious Predecessors).

² The term *Salaf* comes from the root *s-l-f*, which indicates anteriority and thus refers to the original believers. The word *Salih* takes its root from *s-l-h*, which refers to moral virtue, pioussness, wisdom, and excellence. Following the *Salaf Salih* (the Companions of the Prophet, and the two generations that followed them), a believer is *salafi* when they choose to follow in the footsteps of these predecessors. It is thus a question of a method (*al-Minalj as-Salafi*) that is supposed to establish a true “orthodoxy”, alternative interpretations being often marked as deviant, and even for some Salafists, as anathema.

Prophet Muhammad (*al-Sunna*) were authentically understood by the Messenger's contemporaries and their immediate successors (Waines 2014). This serves therefore as a basis for any Salafist ("the one who follows in the footsteps of the 'Salaf'") to consider all morality and actions as part of a claimed conformity with the early times (Wagemakers 2016).

In this article, the focus is on quietist Salafist communities, whose theorization of politics pushes their members to favor the act of preaching in order to shift the morals of their contemporaries towards greater compliance with the time of the Ancients³. Unlike other interpretations and movements emphasizing armed insurrection such as al-Qaeda or the Islamic State (Gerges 2014, 2016), organized political parties such as the Egyptian Party of the Light (Cavatorta and Merone 2017) or subversive radical groups such Sharia4UK, contemporary Salafist quietism stands out in its political thought because it places fear of sedition at the heart of its socialization process as it can be seen, at least, within French Salafism (Adraoui 2020b), making classical political activism extremely unlikely. Most of the Salafists in this country indeed identify with a vision that forbids defying established regimes at the benefit of more individuals and communities-centered approaches based on purification and education in the mosques. In a Muslim minority context, where political power is not grounded in Islamic legitimacy, Salafists are encouraged to carry out the "migration of salvation" (*al-Hijra*) (Amghar 2005; Adraoui 2017) to preserve their faith in a society that is supposed to be more respectful of the values and norms of the religion. This is in line with what the first Muslims did when they fled Mecca in 622 to escape the dangers arising from an unjust non-Muslim social order (perversion, perdition, and/or insecurity). As this article will highlight, migrating is not necessarily a physical process or act. What is interesting to underline is that most French Salafists do not perform the *Hijra*, and favor, for instance, economic strategies allowing them to break up with the rest of French society rather than leaving France for good. For instance, according to some estimations (Adraoui 2020b), only 20% of French Salafists have tried to leave France for a Muslim society in their lives, making their dream of definite physical and moral rupture with a non-Muslim country highly hypothetical. Moreover, many of the Salafists who ever took on to leave France have returned a few months or years afterwards, making the *Hijra* issue even more interesting. It ultimately turns out that this first and foremost refers to an ideal that is rarely put into practice (Amghar and Zegnani 2019). Ultimately, even though Salafism is based on an aspiration to a strict puritanical way of being Muslim, analyzing realities leads to consider that the sociology of Salafism in a country such as France is quite different from Salafism as a strict doctrine. However, although framed as a religious duty, physical migration has been rare among French Salafist communities, and other forms of social rupture are now emerging (Simmel 1979). The article explores in detail such economic strategies based on the acceptance of neo-liberal principles allow for what one can call an internal process of migration/isolation from French society. On the basis of a qualitative sociological and ethnographic research of many years (since the mid-2000s onwards), consisting in nearly 100 interviews and hundreds of hours of participant observation in addition to the analysis of Salafist books and scriptures, this contribution offers a study of how economics and entrepreneurship are framed, valued, and put into practice within these orthodox and puritan Muslim communities. Years of immersion into French Salafist groups have explicitly led to the consideration of how important seeking to become a wealthy, successful, and independent businessman was. The meaning of achieving such an economic career, according to them, has to do with continuing and even reinforcing their puritanical and fundamentalist trajectories. In this respect, the two dimensions are deeply intertwined, allowing the researchers to question the type of entanglement between the two.

At the theoretical level, I mainly use the Weberian approach to Protestantism in order to understand to what vision of economics and religion Salafist identify with. Deeply rooted into this sociological tradition, this article offers to shed light on one of the most successful form of contemporary Islamic

³ Whose trace (*al-Athar*) in moral and practical terms acts as a normative source for contemporary Salafists after the Quran and the Sunna.

identity in a secular and western context in order to question certain issues such as politicization, economic success, and proselytizing strategies. In addition to that, as the Weberian approach to the 18th Protestantism is mainly conducted from outside, I add another methodological line in order to get the vision of the economic activity that we today find within French Salafist communities. The use of interviews as well as in situ observation are clearly the best ways to get the meaning of the Salafist social practices and narratives on a daily basis and provide with the subjectivities through which a Weberian framework can be mobilized.

This article will first address the sociology of French Salafism, then go in-depth with this article's scope by examining how the economic field and the figure of the pious entrepreneur are framed in French Salafism. Following up, I will show under what circumstances this type of religious economic commitment can be more or less seen as a form of political activism and a tool for proselytism.

2. French Salafism

With the largest Muslim presence in Western Europe, estimated at nearly 5 million people (Godard and Taussig 2009), France is an interesting context for analyzing the re-composition of revivalist (Bayat 2005) and puritan movements emphasizing an identity that breaks with their environment in the name of an "integralist and radical" (Donegani 1993) vision of Islam within a non-Muslim majority society. Broadly speaking, the purpose of Salafist socialization is a strong degree of introversion in order to remain connected to the only Muslims supposedly following the right path—Salafists tend to believe in their exclusive salvation.⁴ This means isolation from interactions with "deviationist" Muslims and non-Muslims, who are often depicted as hostile to Islam. However, the relationship to the economic sphere represents a considerable exception to their "intransigentist" spirit (Poulat 1986, p. 14). Without going as far as embracing all the norms generally accepted as "normal" within the contemporary economic system in France and worldwide, as illustrated emblematically by the prohibition of usury (*ar-Riba*)⁵ (Calder 2016), the economy is indisputably the one sphere in which French Salafists are the most extraverted, taking on original forms that show the links between religious fundamentalism and the capitalist spirit within Salafism.

This article is based on several years of ethnography on how French Salafists were socialized to follow their understanding of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. I met with over 100 French Salafists, more than half of whom I conducted interviews with, in addition to hundreds of hours of participant observation at their mosques, homes, jobs, and spaces of socialization. This fieldwork took place between 2004 and 2011. In terms of their sociological characteristics and necessarily on the basis of my own fieldwork (more than 100 persons interviewed) as faith-based statistical investigations are prohibited in France, about two-thirds of French Salafists are of North African origin. Within these puritan communities, which are estimated at between 20,000 and 30,000 people, a majority are the children or grandchildren of North African immigrants, primarily Algerian (the majority are Kabyles). Converts to Salafism represent between 25%–30% of the total (more than half have a migrant background, even though a substantial part of this sub-group comes from native French families). The rest of the followers are from 'other' immigrant backgrounds, primarily from West Africa. It is important to emphasize that Turkish immigrants in France, as well as their children, have remained unreceptive to Salafist preaching. Salafism in France has two geographical origins. First it is connected to informal networks of preaching linked to the Gulf countries, notably Saudi Arabia, or to Muslim majority countries (Jordan, Mauritania, etc.), where imams and preachers who were trained in Saudi

⁴ Some of them consider themselves "the saved group" (*al-Firqat an-Najiyya*) or "the victorious faction" (*at-Tayfa al-Mansura*) in reference to the exclusive divine approval that their rigorism is supposed to lead to, unlike other forms of Muslim practice presented by Salafists as deviant.

⁵ The prohibition of usury is something that we will find within many Muslim circles in France and all over the world. However, in France, this is not a prohibition followed by the majority of Muslims (Godard and Taussig 2009). Salafists are the ones who have made it the clearest that committing this sin would be nothing but outrageous and could conduct to terrible punishments in the afterlife (Adraoui 2013).

Arabia have spread. They have promoted a very specific fundamentalist religious narrative that was enabled for several decades by financial power linked to oil, and has led to the emergence and globalization of an explicitly Salafist version of Islam. Students who became preachers after training in Saudi universities or in other religious institutions across the Muslim world where Saudi influence was strong brought this vision of Islam to France. Since the 1990s, taking advantage of the Internet, this form of Islam has influenced young individuals disappointed with their families' religious socialization and who are looking for other forms of Islam deemed more authentic. The second point of origin is linked to the Algerian conflict of the 1990s (Amghar and Zegnani 2019) that pushed some imams out of the country to settle in France, thereby bolstering the spread of Salafist idea, primarily interpreted as legitimizing the disavowal⁶ of French society in favor of a desire to build a counter-society based on its own norms without edifying a type of cult or religious sect in complete rupture with the rest of the society. French Salafists are first of all interested in a relationship of superiority with non-Salafist Muslims and non-Muslims. Their way of life is principally designed to allow a fundamentalist counter-society to rise and oppose the un-Islamic society without entirely breaking away from it. An examination of their *economic ethics*⁷ is an example of this in so far as it is a quest for a moral and alternative form of capitalism aimed at opposing how economics is mostly framed in French society.

French Salafists' engagement in the economic field occurs in the context of a market economy whose basis—private enterprise, profit-orientation, competition—is legitimized as long as it does not violate the fundamental prohibitions of Islam, which makes a certain number of activities 'unlawful' while developing a form of pious entrepreneurship. The economic field represents, unlike the political one, a field of action that is not only legitimate but strongly encouraged, with over half of the Salafists I met engaged in (or attempting to undertake) independent economic activity. These Salafists believe that this life path means greater compliance with the salvationist ideal of returning to the origins of Islam, and strongly emphasize that they value careers of entrepreneurship and self-employment.

Moreover, this economic ethics reflects a quest for social status, particularly when compared to non-Salafist religious peers who are seen as 'dominated'. Acquiring this sort of social status also works as a form of preaching through economic success. Becoming wealthier through self-entrepreneurship supposedly provides the evidence that a Salafist understanding of economics generates a better social position on earth, which in turn needs to be interpreted as the sign that disavowing the French society is morally right. Indeed, by opting for the figure of the pious entrepreneur, which is supposed to reflect the first Muslims—merchants in the cosmogony of Mecca in which the apostolate of Muhammad occurred—the aim is not only to make a living, but also to acquire a hierarchical position. Muslims who have not understood that the Salafist career (Becker 1997) grants material and symbolic privileges, which are superior to other forms of Islam, are thus indirectly targeted for preaching. In short, they have to be convinced that this sort of material and economic success is granted by God as a reward for the Salafist respect for 'orthodoxy'. The Salafist economic ethics is thus part of competing interpretations of the Islamic creed, whose followers take it to heart to show that their feeling to be 'chosen' by God does not only concern dogmatic and religious questions.

Finally, this economic ethics refers to a more or less conscious project of economic self-sufficiency. Economic engagements observed within these puritan communities include also a political ambition regarding the French social and political body, even though this does not become genuinely institutionalized primarily for doctrinal reasons. It is more a question of an oppositional dialectic, whereby Salafists try to remove themselves from an environment which is perceived as dangerous

⁶ At the heart of the teachings in Salafist socialization (without being the only one) is the principle of allegiance and disavowal (*al-Wala wal-Bara*) which refers to the necessity of agreeing with any idea, act, or entity on the basis of the rigorous respect of "authentic" Islam and denying anything that is not. Because France is neither a society nor a state built on this religion, Salafists must reject it. The migration of salvation is an empirical translation of this principle.

⁷ This expression referring, by ethics, to "the way that one should live" (Williams 2011), and by economics, to the sphere composed of human activities of production, exchange, distribution, and consumption of goods and services, whether on a market or not, involving choices in the management of a scarcity of wealth (Robbins 1932).

for their faith, while legitimizing and using full parts of the economic system that supports French society to build a counter-society that is supposed to escape the hold of the latter through the creation of economic spaces that allow social independence and autonomy of identity. Thus, beyond its hierarchical character, it is an economic ethics of immunity, which must be understood as the basis of a political language, whose aim, through specific practices within this field, is to disqualify the non-Muslim social and political order of which Salafists are a part. While traditional politicization is unacceptable within this conception of Islam, other social fields provide opportunities to highlight the superiority of this religious imaginary (Bourdieu 1971). This allows Salafist economic ethics to become a means of opposition to a society whose principles and norms are understood as vile, pushing these communities to convey their repudiation of French society in other spheres and their desire to show their allegiance to other narratives, thus leading to an antagonistic relationship.

2.1. The Salafist Understanding of the Economy: A New Field of Sociological Interest?

The issue of how the economy is represented within contemporary fundamentalist Islamic movements has been debated for years. This contribution is original in drawing a picture of how the Salafist communities established in a Muslim-minority country (France) perceive and practice economic activities. Indeed, much has been written on Muslim-majority societies, especially in the Arab world. In particular, the discourses and actions of Muslim activist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood have become an academic field in itself in the sociology of Islamic movements. Usually focusing on the use of the economy as a tool to promote an Islamist agenda (chasing political power and gaining ideological influence), some authors have for instance highlighted the role of Islamic finance as a key trait of contemporary global Islamism (Henry and Wilson 2004). The same can be said for other economic activities such as the halal food industry (Bergeaud-Blackler et al. 2016), or the desire to support and influence Islamist conservative parties on the part of Islamic entrepreneurs as in Turkey (Yankaya 2013). In these cases, the economic activity is clearly and consciously framed to expand the political influence of Islamist actors. However, other studies have shed light on the fact that the economy could be 'Islamized' mostly at a moral level, usually as a reaction to the politicized version of Islam promoted in the Islamist narrative. In terms of economic practices—being a moral entrepreneur doing business by incorporating religious virtues—or economic philosophy (making money is positive as long as the benefits are used for instance to support poor people), connections between Islam and capitalism have also been analyzed outside of the strict Islamist focus (Haenni 2005; Benaissa 2015; Boubekeur 2007). As shown for instance among some Muslim entrepreneurs in India (Osella and Osella 2013), piety and economic enrichment are seen as highly compatible as long as running a business and making good money serves the moral purposes established by Islam at the individual level. In this case, the "a pious winner", such as in Egypt in the 2000s (Haenni 2005), becomes one of the most praised figures a Muslim can dream of, with no intention to use the economy to undermine the political order which is ultimately legitimized such as in Jordan (Tobin 2016). Religion is here first and foremost reformulated in ethical and moral terms far from any political protest.

Studying how the economy and capitalism are framed among French Salafist devotees leads us to consider new tendencies within contemporary fundamentalist Islamic movements. Free market economics and enrichment are highly valued within Salafism and have a political dimension. In fact, political motivations are not absent but are very different from Islamist ones. Economic activity can be seen as a way of achieving greater social status and presenting it, as well as a sign of 'election' with no intention to change the state and its institutions. Here, therefore, is the fundamental difference between Islamists and Salafists. While the former see their economic activities as instrumental to change the political order, the latter perceive economic success as the sign of their moral and religious superiority, which does not necessarily translate into political power.

2.2. The Figure of the Pious Entrepreneur as the Cornerstone of Salafist Economic Ethics

Almost all of the interviews and participant observation conducted indicate the emphasis on a figure that can be called the pious entrepreneur. This is someone who is entirely faithful to the religious precepts of Salafist clerics of reference (Mouline 2014) and whose piety has some precise implications within the economic field. Unlike the political and cultural fields, the economic field is not discredited. The secular Republican system, as well as its social customs and practices based on individualism and the rejection of religion, is deemed to be immoral in the eyes of the Salafists. Following the imperative of preserving their immunity from the values of French society, they have then to build a counter society. Even though Islam is in this sense theorized as a total system (Goffman 1991), whose principles are by essence pervasive and non-negotiable, Salafists do not apply the same strategy of withdrawal⁸ to the economic field, but rather a strategy of ‘speaking’ (Hirschman 1972). The Salafist economic ethics, similarly to many other fundamentalist Muslim groups, is thus based on banning any activity involving Quranic prohibitions, above all, usury, alcohol, pork, or sex out of wedlock. Once these prohibitions are taken into account, unlike religious practices, which must comply with a very specific interpretation (for instance praying like the Prophet), the economy as a set of social relationships is conceived to be a space where any practice that is not explicitly illegal (*haram*) is permitted (*halal*), and even encouraged.

Moreover, the Pious Predecessors and even the Prophet are represented as spiritual and religious beings who were also engaged in society and for whom being attached to the advantages of the material world is not illegitimate. For instance, economic success and the use of legal material goods (money that was honestly earned, real estate, and/or high-quality clothing) are valued even though no material success would be able to eclipse the divine approval which materializes by entering heaven in the afterlife. Like the Companion Abdurrahmane Ibn al-‘Awf, for whom the Prophet prayed to God for good fortune, the religious and professional method that French Salafists value the most is that of intense faith combined with being a shopkeeper/trader whose wealth is presented as morally good as long as piety directs material success in a moral direction, including generosity towards those in need and lack of vanity in one’s spending. Guided towards a form of production and consumption that is moralized through the discipline of uncompromising faith, the entrepreneur is the representation of success that is the most sought after. Although, on a theoretical level, figures such as the soldier/martyr or the recluse believer are admired for showing a high level of sacrifice (either physical or social) (Bowering et al. 2012), the analysis of quietist Salafist communities demonstrates that political projects based on violence are absent and that there is no appetite for a recluse Muslim ‘career’ (Becker 1997) focused on the beauty of an entirely contemplative faith. Unlike other forms of contemporary Islam, which favor a representation of the first Muslims as fighters, mystics, or political activists, quietist Salafism first and foremost depicts them as socially and economically engaged believers. There is here a significant difference with more Islamist-type fellow Muslims, and this has profound political implications in terms of engagement with society and the institutions of the state as well as with other political actors.

Quietist Salafists in France, although fundamentalist, disconnect social activism within the economic sphere from a settled political agenda. In their economic ethics, they are not seeking power nor trying to change the structure of the State. The economy may be used to carry out a specific type of opposition to the rest of the society but never to the detriment of a hedonist and consumerist Islam. Quietist Salafists represent a new age of the ‘Islamic’ economic ethics, which is more individualistic and self-oriented than the one Muslim Brotherhood-influenced fellow believers subscribe to because, for the latter, economic ethics is historically related to a clear political agenda, namely changing the economic structure towards greater compliance with religion to facilitate the attainment of political power.

⁸ The Salafist prohibition on voting and taking part in democratic elections where the people (and not God) is sovereign is without a doubt the best example.

In the context of France, the Salafist ethics consists of micro-entrepreneurship based on modern codes of liberalism and globalization. While its moral and identity justification are unsurprisingly tied to identification with the first Muslims, their ethics resonates in a clear way with the most modern form of liberalism when it comes to the relationship with the state. Indeed, economic extraversion involves mistrust and even disdain for certain forms of social protection and the welfare state. The understanding of Islam in economic terms clearly reflects a legitimization of capitalism (the sacralization of private property and the entrepreneurial spirit) and makes the believers individually responsible, calling on them to rely primarily on their own strength and the value of work to get by rather than relying on social benefits. Nu'man, a young Salafist imam from the Paris region, told me that he does not believe in voting, which he thinks is contrary to the faith. When I asked him about the argument of the lesser evil which is often emphasized by other Muslims who consider that abstentionism can bring to power people who are opposed to Islam on French soil (the *Front National* for instance), the preacher replied:

I don't share this opinion. I don't encourage people to vote (. . .) And even less for leftist candidates who vote for immoral laws such as gay marriage and who give a lot of social assistance like the Revenu minimum d'insertion [a form of social welfare in France]. I encourage people to work, to help themselves. Relying on the state and its support is not a good thing. Believers must help themselves and work.

Even more explicit on this subject is Yassir, a convert in his thirties, who is the owner of a small company specializing in interior decoration. Yassir does not hide his appetite for profit, his desire to be economically independent, and to be able to pray when he wants to without explaining to a boss, whose higher position in the hierarchy would undoubtedly hinder Yassir's ability to give a central position to his religious practice:

A: "Did you ever try to work for someone? In a business, a company? As an employee?"

Y: "[Very direct] Oh no thanks. Why would I have done that? No praying, no din ("religion"). I'm not criticizing people who do it, they have to live. But me, I am lucky to be able to work for myself, I get by well. Why should I complain?"

(. . .)

A: "And how is it on a daily basis? For example, when your customers see your beard, and that you wear the qamis?"

Y: "No problem! People see that I am not there to lie to them. I'm doing the work . . . We do the work well. The work is clean, and they say thank you. Some even give our name to other people and that's how it works. There is no problem. We follow our religion but we work normally. Recently, for instance, we built a kitchen for . . . [small hesitation]. Well, I won't say how much, but for quite a lot of money. The customers were very happy."

A: "I imagine. I'm not surprised. But you don't want to tell me how much? Does it bother you?"

Y: "[Laughs openly and sincerely] No not at all, but money, well you know, people don't necessarily like to talk about it. Well, I really made al-Hamdoulilah ("Praise God"). Don't worry."

A: "[Trying to excite him] So about how much? 10,000 euros? 5000?"

Y: "[Laughs openly and sincerely again] Well . . . Ha, ha, ha . . . [Another small hesitation during which the Salafist self-made man doesn't lose his smile]. Well, basically, it's not far from what you said, even a little more. When you work well, it's about that. It can be that."

A: "Do you have a hang-up about money?"

Y: "Pfff! No, why? Wait, you work to make money, help others, not to be walked all over, it's normal. Why do you think people work? Allah Zawjel ("Exalted God"), He says it 'Work hard, make an effort.' What are you waiting for? Young people today, for instance, they are waiting for it to happen, for it to fall from the sky. No. You have to take care of yourself. That's what I'm doing."

A: *“But tell me. You do that also to “be relaxed”? So that you don’t have to depend on anyone? For instance, on non-Muslims?”*

Y: *“The brothers here in France, they wonder why they are getting crushed, they do nothing, they stay in France and then they wonder why the state, why it’s crushing you. It’s not normal? (. . .) Muslims in France, they complain but what do they do? They don’t do anything. They don’t get moving, they have to get their head out of the hole. There are other things to do. For your religion, for your life, for your family, etc. For work, if you don’t find what you are looking for, or if you find a good job for doing your prayers, well change. Listen, man, it isn’t worth complaining if you stay and keep getting crushed.”*

2.3. The Salafist Economic Ethnics as a Proselytizing Instrument

The Salafist economic ethnics is presented in these fundamentalist communities as generated through their specific understanding of religion. However, the social context, especially when discussing young people from immigrant families suffering from discrimination and economic disenfranchisement, is paramount. Racism and marginalization are naturally key factors that need to be considered when tackling the issue of the French Muslim’s economic engagement strategies. In the case of the Salafists, the idea of having a social revenge against the rest of the society is to be born in mind, although their way of framing social issues such as economics seems to be entirely due to their religious puritanical believes.

Although the Salafist economic ethnics is organized specifically around the figure of the pious entrepreneur, a relational and competitive approach can also be observed when studying it in connection with the symbolic message that these puritan communities pass on to other Muslims who do not share their views. Beyond dogmatic competition, which brings Salafism into opposition with other Islamic religious interpretations (militant, secularized, or traditionalist), the strategy of devout emancipation and their ethnics in the economic sphere should be understood also as a form of proselytizing and preaching. Although Salafists are far from being the only ones to favor entrepreneurship and self-employment on both the practical and symbolic levels, they view wage earners as the economic continuation of religious weakness in that the “true” faith is supposed to result in a break when it comes to making one’s living. Being employed, for instance, in a private company belonging to non-Muslims is seen as a form of religious imperfection (due to the difficulty of having a rigorous practice as concerns ritualistic prayers), whereas entrepreneurship is seen as the economic vocation that is the closest to the “orthodoxy” as it enables religious emancipation (freedom of practice), but also symbolic and even political emancipation.

Being one’s own boss provides a feeling of being chosen by God when material success is achieved, which leads to consider the trajectory of Salafists as a moral and economic career in which the self is constructed as being blessed by God. Worldly success and divine approval are thus combined in order to establish the pious Salafist entrepreneur as resisting both idleness in work and weak religious practices. In this context, laziness of effort and indolence in worship are linked and the terrestrial world is presented as a place of both spiritual and physical effort.

When Weber (2010) revealed a set of values within Protestantism which had numerous affinities with the conditions of the emergence of modern capitalism—the primacy of savings over consumption, which in turn explains accumulation followed by investment—he offered one of the most accomplished analyses of the link between religion and the economy. The Protestant entrepreneur is motivated, according to Weber, by the quest for profit, not by virtue of rational maximization but in order to seek signs of divine approval. God, by making the believer successful, thus provides a sign of being possibly chosen by God. Even so, doubts remain and push the believer to make an even greater effort and to work harder in order to ensure the certainty of divine signs and to reduce the fear that worldly failure is a prelude to divine disapproval after death. The economy and morality thus become, in a sense, inextricably intertwined.

The Salafist ethics has some similarities, such as the desire to invest and become an entrepreneur and/or trader like numerous Companions of Muhammad. Success in business, as illustrated in the trajectories of a number of French Salafists now linked to a number Muslim countries after having created companies specialized in *halal* tourism (places where religious morals are respected, such as the island of Lombok in Indonesia) or pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia, is interpreted as the sign of divine approval. There is, however, much less anxiety or fear compared to Weber's protestant ethics, marking a substantial difference between the two. To the contrary, as part of a symbolic rivalry with other forms of Islam, gaining wealth, embodied in the refusal of remaining imprisoned as a wage earner, is interpreted as proof of belonging to the "saved group", with God appearing to confirm the right dogmatic choice by rewarding the "true" believers with worldly financial success in anticipation of the eternal rewards in heaven. The experience of Wissam, who after espousing Salafism decided after a few years⁹ to follow other initiated "brothers" in their business, is revealing. This decision convinced him of the soundness of his trajectory, as well as the uselessness of an existence "integrated" into the French system, as his professional *baccalauréat* (high school degree) with a focus in "sales" restricted him to jobs that offered "the minimum wage". Wissam now travels regularly to Dubai and Sharjah.¹⁰ Along with the religious capital he accumulated from visiting mosques in France and in the Emirates, he improved his English during trips to globalized Gulf companies, in addition to learning Arabic, which he had been studying for several years through remote courses or in religious spaces. Yet, he interprets his relative financial well-being since he switched from the minimum wage to the status of globalized salesman as the sign of the soundness of his religious "bravery", rewarded with material success that is largely symbolized by the cars he has been able to buy, and which are often seen in the French *banlieues* as one of the most prestigious goods to possess whenever someone becomes sufficiently wealthy:

"No, it's not to brag but al-Hamdoulillah, thanks to what I do, I have been able to do things I would never have done if I had stayed like other people. Before, when I was taking the train every morning to go to Paris, to go work in telemarketing ... Well, OK, I was able to make money but it wasn't enough. Today, what I'm earning and what I'm doing, it is more than enough. (...) Before I didn't have a car. There, you see, since I started getting a grip on myself, you see I was able to buy a [Peugeot] 205. Well, you see, it's not great, but after, I got a more recent [Renault] Mégane, and today? I'm driving a Land Rover 4 × 4. (...) No, obviously, it's not good to brag but I'm happy to have gotten here. If I had not changed my way of seeing, I would have stayed where I was. (...). The car that I have now, I can take the merchandise and I make money with it. Before, I wouldn't have thought like that, I would have said, I need the best car. Now, I am thinking about what I can gain as an investment."

2.4. Economics Ethics: A Substitute for Political Activism?

Although the economic sphere cannot escape uncompromising religious moralization, investment/production and pleasure/consumption are perfectly legitimate and even encouraged as long as the spirit and word of Islam are scrupulously respected. It should be noted, however, that Salafist ethics is also based on the understanding of economic engagement as a substitute for traditional political activism. Indeed, the space that is granted within this puritan socialization to a form of pious economic extraversion must also be analyzed as part of an original dialectic with political activism, and more specifically the relationship maintained with the French social body, which is perceived and 'lived' as impious. In this respect such a social body is dangerous for the religious purity that

⁹ After 2004, Wissam decided to break with the economic paths available to him since his adolescence and chose to invest his savings (having lived until this time with his parents which enabled him to save some money) in order to get into the trade of perfumes and mobile phones coming from the United Arab Emirates.

¹⁰ The Emirate where his first profits also enabled him to open a small restaurant with traditional food, which adds depth to his status as a "globalized entrepreneur", and from which he makes a profit (a small one for the time being), but to which must be added the sale of perfumes (the sector of mobile phone products was hit by a crisis and an increasing number of people in France were told of possibilities of getting products that he used to bring to France).

Salafists aim to acquire, preserve, and fortify. Two issues are essential, but both refer to the idea of an alternative and oppositional capitalism. One of their rationales is here to send a political signal to the rest of society, echoing to a quest for a symbolic and practical rivalry as concerns the meaning of social life and economic success.

First of all, studying this socialization brings to light a relationship to the economic sphere that is at first sight disconnected from a political aim in any organized or institutionalized sense. Financial gain, for instance, does not serve any plan for taking power, as for instance may be the case with some forms of market Islamism (Seniguer 2014) promoted within circles close to the Muslim Brotherhood, whose trademark is to make each social space (related to education, social assistance, charity, journalism, etc.) a legitimate field for activism that is supposed to spread the influence of religious norms to all of society until state power is acquired. It is the purpose of Islamism, namely campaigning in order to put the individual and society in line with the principles of Islam, which leads to the integration of the economy into a broader process of organized and consciously activist protest of the dominant order. Personal piety is in this case thought of as an integral part of a larger project to conquer political and state power. On the contrary, in the ethics observed within French Salafist communities, generosity is self-sufficient. Seeking institutionalized forms of political dominance through economic activity is not something that we notice within French Salafist communities. Having to live in a secular and democratic society, French Muslims who are close to the Muslim Brotherhood's vision do know they can cease power. However, when it comes to how the economic activity is interpreted, they feel allowed to use it in order to put pressure on their adversaries a clear and conscious way. This is, for instance, something that we can observe in the framework of the struggle for the Palestinian cause. Boycotting some brands accused of sponsoring the Israel occupation is seen as totally legitimate in order to put an end to this situation. French Salafists do not join these types of political activism through economic pressures. Generosity is strongly encouraged once followers have a certain level of material comfort, but it is an act of charity occurring without any explicitly political objective, thus embodying a post-Islamist conception clearly centered on the pious entrepreneur, a figure who is first of all an individual whose fundamentalist approach does not conceive of political activism. This is more about a market Islam at ease with the codes of liberal globalization as long as the latter are moralized at the individual level (compliance with religious prohibitions), without being linked to a whole narrative of the transformation of the Muslim world through radical political activism. In the Salafist ethics, the state is a constraint that complicates the operation of business, and is even seen as a parasite that prevents individual responsibility through work. The economy proves here to be a sphere that is entirely distinct from the political field, as the Salafist conception cannot be compared to market Islam(ism), whose rationale is to implement a radical aim in the world of modern capitalism. It is even possible to affirm that the Salafist ethics has "depoliticizing" (Schmitt 2007) traits in that productive, financial, or market investment has reinforced the bypassing of institutional politics (Amghar and Zegnani 2019). The focus on the economic field permeates the *stricto sensu* partisan debates observed in France these past few years (Islamophobia, terrorism, or Palestine). As though the purely religious part of Salafist socialization was enough to discredit the "impious" social order, the economic dimension is used to acquire not only the means of subsistence, but also prestige and the possibility of social and symbolic upward mobility, such that classic political activism becomes in this case quite useless. As argued in the case of Sweden for instance (Olsson 2019), this is more a public activism inspired by a desire to wider morality than to legitimate politics as usually understood that characterizes Salafism in the country, which is similar to France according to what I have observed. The Salafist conception of the economy does not stem from a political movement seeking power, needing for that purpose to promote a new global economic narrative. As a ground-rooted counterculture, Salafism promotes primarily religious values within the economic sphere without any desire to use it for political revolution (Boggs 1977). In this regard, their understanding of the economy may refer to a post-Islamist timeline. Their fundamentalism is disconnected from any conscious form of classical political activism. Then, if we simply understand politics as a form of institutionalized and conscious

way of acting in order to change the fate of one society, French Salafists turn out to evolve outside this framework (Mahmood 2005; Parvez 2011).

Nonetheless, another conceptualization of the dialectic that unites the economy and politics within Salafist socialization makes it possible to shed light on a form of political language attributed to the economic ethics. If one considers that along with an institutionalized view of politics, other social and cultural practices can also be part of a symbolic balance of power between actors competing over the meaning of social life, economic engagement such as it is conducted within orthodox communities seems to be a substitute for classical political activism. Conceptualized as a field in which a competitive relationship is observable between a “group of elected ones” and a sociopolitical order that is religiously discredited, the economic sphere is an alternative space of contention. By defining within it the contours of a salvation obtained by understanding Islam as a message reverberating in the economic field and not in French political institutions, an imaginary of the victorious minority is affirmed. The Salafist understanding of economic engagement reminds that political stances often go over traditional practices (electoral participation or running for office). It appears that Salafists do not share the same notions of politics in a secular society such as France while they project themselves into an alternative web of significance according to which other social facets (economy, culture, etc.) act as spaces for antagonism. Their desire to oppose the rest of the society, and in the meantime not to engage into traditional politics, leads them to ‘ideologize’ spheres such as economics and culture. In this regard, it must absolutely be understood that French Salafists do not fit with our traditional comprehension of politics, political activism, and politicization. This is an ideology of cultural resistance (Geelhoed 2014) more than politics for institutional power that needs to be addressed when one wants to understand how they see the society and how they are led to deal with it. In other words, by perceiving both non-Salafist Muslims and non-Muslims as following a “wrong path”, they are led to consider religious ways of challenging a secular social body. In this regard, the economic ethics of Salafists has two main functions. Although they are a cultural movement based on religious values claiming to be uninterested in political power or in influencing traditional political actors, they nonetheless see non-Salafist values that have been guiding most people’s life as a lie. Therefore, the “politics of lifestyles”—using cultural symbols to distinguish oneself from the mainstream within a social sphere—is a valid framework of understanding what Salafists in France are about (De Koning 2012; Melucci 1988). Actually, politics can also be a matter of competition over symbols, language, and the meaning of life in society (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996; Meijer 2012). That is why focusing on lifestyles as marks of differentiation between “the saved group” and “the sinking otherness” may be very relevant to understand how Salafists see the world and try to influence it. The economic issue thus represents the most perfect case of cultural antagonism that reflects political considerations defined as struggles for moral hegemony within a specific society in which principles become so challenged, and every opportunity for enlarging the field of application of the Salafist identity would be ceased.

3. Conclusions

The analysis of the economic ethics such as it emerges from French Salafist communities suggests a practice of entrepreneurship made of piousness and desire for preaching. However, this may be above all a desire to challenge a political and symbolic order that a radical religious doctrine, resistant to classic politicization, pushes to support an uncompromising relationship with the rest of the world. This is manifested in the economic sphere through an original dialectic between economic engagement and depoliticization. Investment in the economic field is somehow sufficient to channel an ideal of separation that in the end makes it possible to gain a high social status in both material and religious terms, especially when business is flourishing. In turn, this is interpreted as proof that the puritan condition enabled not only liberation from the torments of French society, but the implementation of alternative economic circuits, making it possible to reach salvation as well as worldly success. In conclusion, it seems justified to emphasize the profound originality of the relationship to the economy

that is valued within these communities, including a preaching-related dimension, a function of bypassing institutional politics, as well as an ideologizing of the economy. This analysis shows that, more than ever, the economy and politics must not be interpreted in an exclusive way but rather as complementary, even more so as these two languages are used in the shadow of a rigorist religious project, pushing researchers to be wary of pretensions to depoliticization that are too often attributed to the economy and to deepen our understanding of contemporary capitalism with a study of how certain radical religions conceptualize it and transform the economy into a means of political and symbolic opposition.

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