Essay

Islam, Salafism, and Peace: Facing the Challenges of Tradition and Change

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Abstract: Moving away from both the apologetic and polemical frames that have become ubiquitous in public discourses about Islam and Muslims, I position Salafism within the interpretative battles of the mainstream Sunni tradition. Through that analysis, I also highlight how the salafi orientation presents a difficult challenge for contemporary Muslims who seek to promote peace, pluralism and harmony within their communities and with other groups and communities in a fast-changing world.

Keywords: Islam; Religion; Interpretative Communities; Theology; Peace; Conflict; Pluralism; Tradition

Is Islam a religion of peace? Such a question has become ubiquitous in all sorts of political and academic conversations in the last few decades. Before attempting to engage with some elements of this problematic, let me start this essay by boldly claiming that there is no such thing as "Islam". My point is simple. What is accessible to us, as observers of the religious scene or as participants in it, is not an abstract "Islam" but a series of interpretations and practices. These interpretations and practices, and not "Islam" in the abstract, have constituted an important element in the lives of varied communities around the world for many centuries. This point is valid both from a theological point of view and through a sociological lens.

1. The Theological and the Sociological in Approaching Islam, Peace, and Violence

In Islamic theological discourses, only God is viewed as perfect; the perfectness of God does not transfer to people who read and interpret the Qur'an or the Sunna of the Prophet (his exemplary and normative practice). Equating God with human beings is termed *shirk* and is considered the greatest sin. And since seeking to understand the Qur'an and Sunna is unquestionably an exercise performed by human beings, who are often dealing with texts open to various meanings and with others that are seemingly contradictory, the resulting interpretations cannot simply be equated with "Islam", if by Islam is meant the will of God in the absolute sense.

At the sociological level, when we analyze the realities of communities that define themselves as "Muslim", it is obvious that their religious practices and beliefs are diverse and deeply connected to local socio-economic realities, political settings, and cultural frames of reference. This is the case historically as well as in our contemporary times. Muslim life in 10th-century Baghdad was different from Muslim life in the mountains of 15th-century South Asia; contemporary Muslim life in Nigeria is different from contemporary Muslim life in Indonesia; etc.

If we take this discussion to the topics of peace and violence, we must note that whether one ends up with pluralistic and generally peaceful interpretations of Islam or with confrontational and violent ones has little to do with God and everything to do with the contextually bound humans who speak in his name. Those human beings are the product of particular environments, the impact of which is deep on the question of which texts are favored and which interpretations of those texts become prevalent. The truth is that for every Qur'anic verse or Sunnaic report that seems to promote peace, one can find others that appear to glorify conflict. It is thus necessary to remember that the

"Islam" of God is inaccessible and that religious doctrines, laws, and beliefs are the result of negotiation between complex historical human beings and multi-vocal sacred texts and discourses. Not only did this help create sectarian divisions within Islamic contexts, but it also engendered all kinds of schools of thought within such fields as law, theology, mysticism, and philosophy.

Refocusing the discussion on social actors and interpretive communities and what they do with their religious heritage is crucial for our understanding of the dynamics at play. This is not to downplay the role of religious discourses in peace or violence. This role remains very important. Religious frames supply social actors with an emotional component that affects one's demeanor and actions in significant ways. It also provides a frame for social and political action. Today, in a world where all certainties have been shaken and all ideologies have seemingly failed, religious language and rituals give seekers a sense of identity and belonging. Therefore, we ought to take religious discourses seriously in any analysis, but religion is never divorced from the realities of social actors.

It is easy and tempting for many to view violent religio-political groups as irrational. It is simple for others to blame this abstract thing called "Islam" for the violent crimes that those religio-political groups have committed. It is also appealing for Muslims to claim that these groups are not Islamic. However, a more sober look tells us that these groups are rational social actors with political agendas who also happen to be part of the religious market, providing a religious interpretation for consumption. Unfortunately, there are takers who find that interpretation appealing. They are certainly a small minority but even such a relatively small number is enough to wreak havoc on the world.

Muslims are right to politically distance themselves from all of these violent groups. They are also right to repeat everywhere that it is ludicrous to blame all Muslims for the actions of a small number of people. The potential backlash against Muslim individuals and communities could and has taken ugly turns, especially given the highly problematic and irresponsible rhetoric of far right-wing politicians in recent times. However, Muslims are wrong to keep denying any connection between Islam and the violence that we are witnessing everywhere. While individual Muslims are certainly not responsible for the actions of extremist groups, the Muslim community, as a whole, has serious responsibilities on at least two fronts.

Firstly, Muslims as a group have a duty to protect the present and future of their religion from its deteriorating reputation in large parts of the world. This cannot be achieved by simply repeating that Islam is peace and that the terrorists have hijacked it. What is truly required is a healthy dose of self-criticism. As carriers of an ethical message and a long tradition of spiritual teachings that have provided countless human beings throughout the ages with hope and love, Muslims cannot settle today for reactionary stances. Tough questions must be asked about the directions of Islamic thought in the contemporary world and about the failure of religious leaders to rise up to the challenges of our times.

Secondly, Muslims as a community have a responsibility toward the young Muslims who are falling prey every day to the recruiting effort and propaganda of terrorist groups. It is easy to vilify these young men and women, who are in search of identity and purpose in life, after they join violent groups and commit atrocious acts. What is needed is to ask difficult questions as to why no adequate alternatives were provided for them before such transitions occurred. It is imperative to contain the bleeding before the whole body succumbs to the wounds inflicted upon it. This is not simply a matter of reaching out to vulnerable members of the community; there is a real problem with the message of the religious scholars and the educational curricula in many Muslim contexts.

Although the majority of religious scholars condemn the actions and agendas of terrorist groups, they perpetuate the myths that sustain the appeal of these extremist groups in the minds of average Muslims from a young age. The religious scholars often preach about topics like the importance of jihad in Islam, the necessity of the institution of the Caliphate, the obligation of implementing "God's Law", and many others. These scholars

do not necessarily perceive these issues in the same light as the jihadist organizations, but they nevertheless skip any critical analysis of the historical character of these concepts and institutions. The result is the sustaining of a mytho-history in the minds of Muslim audiences.

2. Salafism and the Concept of *Salaf* in Islamic Discourses

To illustrate these dynamics, the following essay seeks to be a reflection on what I term the problem of the "Salafi impulse". A central aspect of the Salafi movement within Islam is its insistence on positing the *salaf* (the early Muslims), their behavior, and their perspective as uniquely authoritative for Muslims of all times and places. It is important to consider the implications for modern Muslims of positioning the *salaf* in these terms. I argue that the resulting dichotomy of *salaf/khalaf* (early Muslims vs. the following generations) not only creates a serious existential crisis for modern Muslims by amplifying the anxiety of living in a world that is drastically different from the world of the "Muslims" of the formative and classical periods, but also sets up conflictual relations with the religious other. Certainly, modern Salafis have been criticized by a variety of Muslim orientations. Perhaps, the strongest of these critiques is what can be termed the neo-traditionalist one. But because these critiques fail to consider the implications of keeping intact the understanding of the role and authority of the *salaf* in the contemporary world, they remain limited for the purpose of providing avenues for modern Muslims to fully engage with their times, to further participate in solving the current spiritual crises of the world, and to build meaningful and peaceful bridges with the practitioners of other religions and the non-religious populations.

Admittedly, defining Salafism is a rather tricky task, given that what might fall under its rubric might stretch from a very unique and exclusivist religious perspective to a significant and even close to mainstream one in the contemporary period. This partly depends on whether one speaks of a strict methodology, just an attitude, or something that falls in between. Without getting into the debate of when and how the term *Salafiyya* becomes part of the picture in Muslim contexts,[1] it is safe to say that there has constantly existed within the Muslim community "a reality without a name" (to use an analogy to the Sufi claim of Islamic authenticity) that stems from taking very seriously the perceived standard that expresses the earliest generations of Muslims. I will therefore continue to use the term "Salafi" for the purpose of the discussion, while stressing the caveat that the term neither necessarily entails a self-appellation by a person/group nor proposes the existence of a homogeneous sectarian movement.[2]

At a basic level, one can posit that Salafism regards the *salaf*, their religious understanding, and their exemplary behavior to be the exclusive way in which Muslims of all times and places ought to understand and practice their religion. Consequently, any perceived deviation from that ideal is not acceptable and must be fought in one fashion or another. What is at stake for the Salafis is nothing less than "true" Islam itself. By positioning themselves as the authentic followers of the *salaf*, the Salafis have constantly, and not surprisingly, clashed with both the realities of living "Muslim" communities in changing contexts and with the various developments of a historically adaptive and synthesizing mainstream Islamic tradition. Modern Salafism is no exception in relation to this conflict, especially as it gradually became aware of itself as a religious movement and not simply as a methodological orientation.

The Islamic tradition developed within a highly diverse civilizational framework. Long-established patterns of thought and practice have shaped and were themselves shaped by the communities and institutions in the lands that Muslims conquered. The slow transformation of Islam from a rudimentary and localized religious perspective into a universal, full-fledged, and complex religious system was a process through which various social actors negotiated their relation to a variety of historical, political, cultural, and intellectual tensions within their contexts. It was a process of integration, acculturation, and compromise (Berkey 2003, pp. 113–59). Ultimately, many theological, mystical, and

legal perspectives imposed themselves on the religious scene. In the midst of evolving socio-historical contexts and power structures, a workable orthodoxy[3] emerged from a creative mix of the elements available on the religious market. Thus, the Sunni mainstream comprised rationalist and mystical elements, living under an umbrella that is theoretically based on adherence to textual precedent.

Salafis have generally claimed to reject these compromises, particularly at times of upheavals or rapid change. Seeking to control the flow of religious legitimacy and to maintain a sense of stability that appeared to be under threat, Salafis have emphasized in one way or another their rejection of the hallmarks of the compromises made by the mainstream Sunni tradition. For Salafi thinkers, strict loyalty to the schools of law (*madhāhib*) and the insistence on the practice of following school precedent (*taqlīd*) when it stood against Hadith reports was tantamount to rejecting the authority of Muhammad himself. Similarly, Sufi rituals and practices that had no basis in the worship that Muhammad practiced, according to the prophetic reports collected by the Hadith experts (*muḥaddithūn*), were nothing but forms of heretical innovation (*bid'a*). And so it was for speculative theology, even when the latter reached acceptable positions to the Salafi worldview. Dialectical theology (*kalām*) was seen as misguided because of its use of "Greek" rationalistic tools and its delving into territories that were not grounded in the textual sources, as understood by the Salafis (Brown 2009, pp. 181–82, 194–95; see also Brown 2015, pp. 5–10).

In addition to having often shown themselves as very critical of the intellectual compromises of the mainstream Sunni tradition, Salafis constantly clashed with the folk practices of the larger populations. At the anthropological level, human communities inherit particular cultural and religious beliefs and practices from the previous generations. As times and circumstances change, shifts in these beliefs and practices occur. Often, these shifts might be barely noticeable in the short term. But at times of direct encounter with significantly different traditions and teachings, tensions between the way things "have always been" and the "new" directions are more acute. Importantly, the resulting cultural and religious structures are syncretic, mixing "old" and "new". This can be seen within the communities that arose over the centuries in areas that Islamic teachings had entered. Local populations have practiced and continue to practice popular forms of Islam that mix local traditional religious practices and Islamic notions. It is toward this folk religion that many Salafi movements and scholars directed their ire, particularly at times of instability and struggle over social and political control.[4]

3. The Neo-Traditionalist Response to Salafism

Not surprisingly, the Salafi perspective has been criticized from competing interpretive orientations within the Islamic tradition. This is the case in the modern world as well. The most sustained attack on the rise in popularity of Salafism in the 20th century came from the religious scholars (*'ulamā'*) who came to perceive themselves as the inheritors of what Jonathan AC Brown terms the Late Sunni Tradition.[5] As such, they also see themselves as the defenders of mainstream Islam against sectarian divisions and heretical beliefs. In many ways, they represent what remains of the "establishment" religious class. They often pride themselves as the carriers of a deeply sophisticated religious legacy. From that position, they realize that the increasing popularity of Salafism is first and foremost a threat to a whole class of "official" interpreters of the religion of God, whose prestige has been acknowledged by both Muslim rulers and Muslim populations. In other words, the popularity of Salafis becomes a threat to a dominant interpretive community and to a perceived consensus over what Islam is, *regardless* of how different in reality the Salafi interpretations are from the positions of the Late Sunni Tradition. In the words of the late Syrian scholar Al-Būtī (d. 2013), a strong critic of Salafism, non-madhhabism [rejection of different orthodox schools of law] is the most dangerous innovation that faces the *sharī'a*.[6]

The bulk of the response of those I call neo-traditionalist Sunni scholars to the Salafi challenge builds on one main point. They suggest that the Salafis are simply not knowledgeable enough to realize that the mainstream Sunni tradition had already dealt with all of

the points raised within Salafi circles about the Islamic authenticity of various practices and beliefs. As a result, whenever the Salafis raise the banner of the practice of the Prophet and the *salaf*, they do not understand that these precedents were taken into consideration within the Sunni schools, using sophisticated interpretative models (Al-Ghazālī 1996, pp. 14–15).

Khaled Abou El Fadl notes that Muslim jurists did not perceive the Hadith experts as "legitimate legal scholars". He highlights an analogy that the jurists utilized to describe themselves in relation to the Hadith experts. This was the analogy of doctors and pharmacists (Abou El Fadl 2001, pp. 49–50). While the latter have access to medications, they do not have the adequate training to prescribe them to patients. On the other hand, doctors, who have deep training in diagnosing the ills of their patients, are the ones who use their knowledge to indicate which medications are to be prescribed and at what doses they ought to be given to particular people. Similarly, the People of Hadith sift through available Prophetic reports to find the authentic traditions, but they cannot make legal rulings based on them. They need jurists who, like the doctors, have the required knowledge and training to recognize which texts fit what situation and to deal with seeming contradictions. Muḥammad Al-Ghazālī (1996) uses a similar analogy, insisting that the *ahl al-ḥadīth* only provides the building materials, but it is up to the architects, i.e., the jurists (*ahl al-fiqh*), to decide what use to make of them in order to erect buildings (Al-Ghazālī 1996, p. 32). By not respecting this hierarchy, those who claim to follow the practice of the *salaf* are in fact corrupting the practice that they seek to defend, because they are unable to deal with the subtleties of the received traditions on one hand and of the realities of changing circumstances on the other hand.

4. Rethinking the Notion of *Salaf*

The various forms of criticism that the neo-traditionalists level against the Salafis highlight both the latter's often unpractical and anti-pluralistic understanding of Islamic teachings and their reductive view of a rich tradition of religious thought and practice. However, I would argue that these forms of criticism fall short of opening the needed space for contemporary Muslims to fully engage their time. Even though the neo-traditionalists are aware of the importance of contemporary realities, they maintain a structure that ultimately disregards the need to take those realities in a very serious and methodical way.

I see this to be partly the result of failing to critically question the centrality of the religious perspective of the *salaf*. The critiques above keep intact the dogma of the first generations of Muslims being the best of all generations. The neo-traditionalist response to the Salafis primarily seeks to defend the intellectual and cultural/religious developments and compromises of Sunni orthodoxy over the centuries. In other terms, the bulk of the response to the Salafis wants to show that the Sunni mainstream tradition had not deviated from the way of the *salaf*. This response predictably accepts the premise that the religious perspective of the *salaf* is indeed supreme; it rejects, however, the narrow Salafi view of what the perspective of the *salaf* entails. The problem is that while the responses to Salafism are useful in the hands of modern social actors and political entities that fear its uncompromising character, they do not consider the serious implications of the *salaf*-centered religious worldview for modern Muslims.

The dichotomy of *salaf* vs. *khalaf* remains within the domain of the *unthought* in Islamic thought, to use Mohammed Arkoun's terminology.[7] Putting aside the textual claims used to sustain this dichotomy, I would suggest that what occurred in the historical setting and ultimately produced the dichotomy is what might be termed the *construction of the salaf*. I see this as a lengthy process of religious and political negotiations that ultimately led to the creation of the image of *who* the *salaf were* and *what* their legacy *meant*. In this regard, I insist that the formation of more concrete Islamic identities by the 9th/10th centuries (identities that can partially be seen in the intellectual production of the scholars of Islam) cannot blind the historian to the strong competition over meaning that preceded these more concrete identities (Arkoun 2003, pp. 28–46).

I would argue that within what would mature as the Sunni context, a particular image of the *salaf* became the norm because it served an important role in the formation of a stable religio-political identity. The religious primacy of the *salaf* guaranteed the legitimacy of Qurʾanic revelation, particularly in its written form of the official codex (*muṣḥaf*),[8] against the claims of those who raised doubts about its integrity. In response to and in negotiation with other still forming Islamic orthodoxies in their Shiʿi and Khariji versions, the Sunni "middle ground" embraced the universal probity of the Companions of Muhammad (*ʿadālat al-ṣaḥāba*).[9] Not surprisingly, this was concomitant with the rise and ultimate success of the Hadith movement and its drive to localize the Sunna (normative practice of Muhammad) within Prophetic reports. It is here that one might find the fertile ground for such ideas as the best generations being the ones that came right after the Prophet, possessing a rightly guided path to be strongly held onto. This ideal image clearly clashes with what survived in the historical record. It would not be a stretch to think of the early years of the post-Muhammad community as much more chaotic in political terms and as much more spontaneous in religious terms. Accordingly, the *construction of the salaf* had much more to do with those involved in negotiating Sunni orthodoxy in the 9th and 10th centuries than with the Companions of Muhammad themselves. Importantly, once the constructed notion of the *salaf* became at the center of the Sunni perspective, the battle over religious authority became tied to being able to position one's perspective within the range of the religious thought and practice of the *salaf*.

Beyond the question of considering the basis of the dichotomy *salaf / khalaf*, it is crucial to highlight why this is not simply a description of what a "correct" Islamic theological perspective ought to be. What this dichotomy creates is, on one hand, a hierarchy of human beings in relation to God and on the other hand, a powerful political tool to be harnessed by social actors in a variety of contexts. Regarding the first question, one of the basic elements that the Qurʾan constantly stresses and that can confidently be seen as central to Muhammad's vision is the notion of the equality of believers in the eyes of God. The basis of the community, as Muhammad seems to have envisioned it, was to move beyond the hierarchies of Arab society and to establish an egalitarian framework based on faith. Certainly, there is a new hierarchy that is part of the Qurʾanic message itself. Arguably, this hierarchical view postulates awareness of God (*taqwā*) as the criterion of superiority (Rahman 1980, pp. 28–31). "The most honored among you in the eyes of God are the most aware of Him (*atqākum*)", states the Qurʾan.[10] However, this is an open field of competition. Theoretically, anyone from any generation or place can reach a high position, based on one's cultivation of *taqwā*. This is in contrast to the dogma of the superiority of the *salaf* as an undisputable starting point.

The latter dogma is especially problematic when the tradition itself recorded a big number of instances of ethically questionable behavior on the part of the first generations of Muslims. One must add that the historicity of these accounts is irrelevant to the argument made here, because whether the specifics occurred or not, they did become part of the memory of the later generations of Muslims and were featured in the works of Muslim historians. Yet, the *salaf* were given moral and religious primacy, thus establishing a hierarchy with serious ramifications. Moreover, in Sunni thought, the term *salaf* became associated with the adjective "pious" (*ṣāliḥ*), thus their *ṣalāḥ* (piety) became both a religious dogma and an important component of the religious memory of Sunni Muslims in all contexts. This makes the hierarchy *salaf / khalaf* even more challenging. If piety is connected to one part of the dichotomy, it does not take much to perceive the religious worth of the *khalaf* as low and their religious perspectives as accordingly lacking. Even more impactful is the position that every generation of Muslims is worse than the one that preceded it. This is clear in the statement attributed to Muhammad in the hadith collection of Bukhari, according to which, "a time period will not come upon you but with the one following it being in a worse state (*lā yaʾtī ʿalaykum zamān illā wa-lladhī baʿdahu sharrun minhu*)". Therefore "*khalaf*" is not a simple description but a political statement made with the purpose of

discrediting the religious perspective of opponents at every juncture of Islamic history. This takes us to the question of the dichotomy *salaf /khalaf* as a powerful religio-political tool.

The dogma of the primacy of the perspective of the *salaf* becomes a powerful tool in the hands of those who speak in its name. Long after the *salaf* had left this world, those who have claimed to speak in their name have been able to impose a particular religious perspective that *supports* and *is supported* by a political order whose legitimacy stems from defending the "true" religion (Arkoun 1986, p. 31). As stated above, once this framework becomes dominant, any religio-political opposition must present itself as adhering to the perspective of the *salaf*, if it hoped for any success. It is not surprising that neo-traditionalists, modernists, and Salafis all stress that the religious perspective of the *salaf* has primacy, although they differ as to what constitutes a deviation from it. This is also why the Salafi argument *has been and will continue to be potent*. Arguably, the Salafi message is more consistent with the constructed notion of "*salaf*". So, when an acute identity crisis hits, the certainty and straightforwardness of that message becomes more appealing. I would suggest that this is the case at both the individual and communal levels.

5. Religious Claims of Authenticity and the Realities of Historical Change

The tension that is inherent in the *construction of the salaf*, as a basis for religious authenticity, is that the human condition inevitably changes. Even within the same geographical area, social, economic, and political conditions shift and thus create new challenges to the communities and individuals who reside in that area. Adapting to change is always a necessity. However, the tension is much more acute when a religious perspective that develops within a particular socio-linguistic and cultural setting is exported elsewhere. This is why the mainstream Sunni tradition had to negotiate, albeit unevenly, with each new environment and with each local cultural and religious perspective. In many cases, local practices, often with a Sufi garb, were introduced into the scholarly world. Significantly, the primacy of the *salaf* remained untouched at the theoretical level despite being compromised in practice. At the popular level, local populations often went way beyond what the scholarly elite would tolerate. Syncretism was the norm. As mentioned above, Salafi scholars and movements decried both the compromises of the mainstream scholars and the syncretism of the Muslim populations. What remains in the domain of the *unthought* for the Salafis is that religious syncretism is a natural and unavoidable element in the growth of any religious perspective. The religious perspective of the *salaf* itself is a syncretic one. How can it be otherwise? A religious perspective is born and grows in an already existing cultural framework and using an existing language and an existing stock of symbols (Abū Zayd 1994, pp. 130–31). Even the rituals that came to be the five pillars of Islam are adaptations of existing religious practices. This is clear in the case of pilgrimage (Ḥajj) and fasting (Ṣiyām), but even daily prayers (Ṣalāt) fits this description (Mohammed 1999, pp. 17–28). In other words, there is no such thing as religion in a historical vacuum. The religious perspective of the *salaf* is intimately tied to the cultural, religious, and linguistic setting in which they operated as social actors. Freezing the Muslim religious experience in the particular experience of the *salaf* is untenable because there is no way around historical changes in human mentalities, knowledge production, and cultural frames. The mainstream Sunni tradition survived and continued to be relevant because it made compromises and engaged with the new settings that it came across. But by maintaining the primacy of the *salaf* at the theoretical level, it carried within it the powerful Salafi impulse.

The most significant attempt within Islam to break free from the constructed notion of the *salaf* and from the primacy of their religious perspective is the Sufi experience. The Sufis stressed the here and now, although in terms of their spiritual experience, time was relative (Abū Zayd 2002, pp. 127–29). Generally, Sufism challenged the reliance on past religious experiences and instead focused on having direct interaction with the divine through a spiritual process that allowed the true Sufi to ultimately become one with God. This was a serious challenge to the more legalistic forms of Islam because the language of the latter positioned God outside the world even though He, of course, interacted with it. Sufism, by

contrast, based itself on the notion of the unity of the world; thus, God was the only reality. This led to serious misunderstandings, as witnessed by the experience of al-Ḥallāj (d. 923), who was excommunicated and ultimately executed for stating "I am the Truth (*anā al-ḥaqq*)" and refusing to recant. This moment must be read in the larger religio-political context of a struggle over meaning in Islamic contexts.

What the Sufi experience brought to the table was the ability of every Muslim to reach the highest of religious levels. Therefore, the Muslims *of the here and now* mattered and their religious experiences and perspectives had the *potential* to be equal to or higher than what was inherited from the *salaf*. It is no accident that a number of Sufi figures perceived themselves as friends of God (*awliyā' Allāh*) and even as quasi-prophets (see Abū Zayd 2002, pp. 29–62). I would argue that this was a religiously and politically subversive position and that this is partly why it could not be sustained without compromise.

The mainstream Sunni tradition ultimately incorporated Sufism into its fabric, but at a cost to the religious perspective of the here and now. A dividing line was drawn between the acceptable and unacceptable forms of Sufi spirituality. By the time Sufism reached its institutionalized forms, the Sufi paths (*ṭarīqas*) had elaborated chains of transmission (*silsila*) of their religious practice, reaching back through the *salaf* to the Prophet (Brown 2009, pp. 192–95). It was then becoming common, in a way reminiscent of the Shi'i perspective, that Muhammad's teachings included an esoteric component that was passed down through some of his prominent companions and their successors.

Here again, we see the power of the constructed notion of *salaf* which became the only way to guarantee the authenticity and legitimacy of Sufi practices. Salafis remained skeptical, not without reason, of the Sufi claims of being grounded in the practices of the *salaf*. It must be stressed, however, that unlike what Salafis have often claimed, "unorthodox" Sufism has always been Islamic, in the sense that the spiritual experiences of the Sufis could not exist in the forms that they took without the seekers being an integral part of the world of symbols and discourses initiated by the Qur'an and Muhammad. However, in my opinion, the softening of the radical spirituality of Sufism, as a way to include it within the mainstream tradition, was a big blow to the right of Muslims belonging to the "*khalaf*" to define their own Islamic perspectives in ways that are uniquely meaningful to them.

6. Islamic Discourses and the Challenge of Modernity

If the issue of historical change has always been central to the tension between the demands of the time and the inherited notions and beliefs, it is no surprise that the tensions would intensify after the Muslim encounter with European modernity. The advent of modernity in Europe led to tremendous shifts in the way social, political, and economic interactions occurred in European societies. This was obviously not a sudden shift, but rather the result of a long process, the elements of which can arguably be traced all the way back to the 15th century, if not earlier. Importantly, this process was far from being a smooth transition. Bloody conflicts and major setbacks were part of the transmutation, to use Marshall Hodgson's term. Nevertheless, the severe changes proved inevitable, not only in Europe, but eventually in the whole world.

Modernity has been a challenge to traditional societies in general. At one level, one can argue that modernity's building was constructed on the base of the notion of doubt. Whereas premodern societies generally found their stability in assuming an ontological reality that was beyond doubt, modernity shifted its focus to human reason and through it, questioned everything else. In other words, traditional societies put a transcendent reality at the center of the world and everything else was built around this "truth". Modernity allowed human reason to move beyond this center. Certainly, one can argue that human reason itself was the new ontological reality, but in hindsight, it was inevitable that a more relative approach to human reason would find its way into the framework of modernity. In all cases, the cataclysmic results of the shift away from the premodern transcendent truth as center are still felt today in important ways.

Not surprisingly, the impact of the modern framework in Europe was felt in the field of religion. Modernity challenged both the authority of traditional religious clergy and the sacred character of religious texts. In premodern times, the interaction of living communities with religious texts that they came to recognize as authoritative created lasting and sophisticated traditions. In this structure, the "managers of the sacred", to use Weberian terminology, played a major role as speakers in the name of the divine. Importantly, the religious and the political were in constant negotiation because the rulers needed to legitimize their standing in the eyes of populations, for which religion provided meaning at all levels of existence. Modernity brought about systemic changes that limited this traditional religious authority.

Slowly, access to the interpretation and study of religion moved away from being the exclusive prerogative of a particular group of religious professionals. In many contexts, the separation of church and state and the relegation of religious practice to the private sphere also limited the reach of religious education. In time, religion, like any other human activity, came to be "scientifically" approached in modern universities. Religious texts have come under close scrutiny. No longer considered exclusively and simply sacred depositories of God's words, scriptures were studied from outside their religious traditions. As a result, light was increasingly put on the human side of these texts. Philological, historical, and linguistic tools were put to the service of dissecting them and understanding the way in which they developed in specific historical circumstances.

In addition, modernity brought with it a renewed focus on the individual. With that, the right of an individual to dissent and to go against the beliefs of the community was slowly becoming the norm within Western societies. In the premodern societies of the Mediterranean Basin, the identity of the individual was generally inseparable from that of the religious group; one could almost not exist outside the strict control of the community. With the rise of modernity, people became increasingly aware of their individuality.

It would not be an exaggeration to describe the changes introduced into the Muslim contexts as a result of the encounter with modern thought as cataclysmic. It suffices here to briefly highlight four elements that have had a huge impact on the paradigm of the religious primacy of the *salaf*. Firstly, modern technology and communication tools made the pace of change much faster than ever before in human history. Muslim societies have changed irreversibly, though unevenly, in the last two centuries. Secondly, modernity brought to the Muslim world a much higher awareness of each person's individuality. The spread of education and economic independence on a much larger scale has created individuals that are more likely to challenge communitarian limitations imposed on them. This process will continue to make things more complex as literacy rates climb and as globalization expands its reach into more territories. Thirdly, although the rethinking of religion that has occurred in Western contexts has only partially entered the Muslim study of Islam, it seems inevitable that new approaches to Islam will develop, as more Muslims become acquainted with the scholarly tools that have reshaped human knowledge. Fourthly, awareness of the religious other has shifted in a significant way. It is true that in premodern times, members of different religious communities did interact, but the interactions remained limited because interaction generally and mostly occurred when it was necessary and only within an internalized hierarchical structure. Understandably, one's identity was closely tied to one's group. One grew up, learned a craft (or received a religious education), married, and died within the confines of one's community. Thus, converting to another religious path was tantamount to betrayal and even treason within charged political contexts. In contrast, within modern contexts, the concept of citizenship, even when misapplied and misappropriated, has allowed individuals belonging to different religious denominations to interact on a more intense level than before. As a result, there arises a sense of egalitarianism that has challenged, at the level of everyday practice, the hierarchical tendencies of premodern religious dogmas.

As a result, in no other time in Islamic history have Salafi positions and actions seemed so anachronistic. In this context, I might argue that change in the modern world is so

radical that the neo-traditionalist attempt to compromise with lived realities would neither satisfy the needs of modern Muslims in convincing ways nor will it be able to persuasively show the Salafi character of their compromises. The neo-traditionalist perspective can only present a hybrid that is sustained by the weight of tradition in the minds of the Muslim populations and the need for legitimacy of political regimes that are not grounded in popular sovereignty. Within such contexts, a worldview centered on the religious views of the *salaf* has created and will continue to create sharp identity crises that push idealist youth into clashing with the realities of their world and fermenting conflicts that threaten peaceful interaction within Muslim communities and with other religious and non-religious groups and communities.

7. Conclusions

Jacques Derrida once wrote, "if there is a categorical imperative, it consists in doing everything for the future to remain open" (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, p. 83). In this essay, I reflected on a question that imposes itself within Muslim contexts, namely, whether the centrality of the religious perspective of the *salaf* is sustainable in the long term. Can the Muslim future remain open within such framework when the pace of change in the world is growing faster every day? From artificial intelligence soon reaching amazing new heights to the creation of life in laboratories that is already upon us, to the possibility of manipulating human genes, to the fact that living on other planets is on the agenda of scientific research, etc., human existence will change faster and in much more unpredictable ways than ever. The sky is not the limit anymore, yet humankind needs moral, ethical, and spiritual guidance more than ever before. This requires adherents of all religions to grow and sustain interpretations of their traditions that uphold human dignity and peaceful interactions with others. I suggest that an open Muslim future is possible in those terms, but the Salafi impulse must be ethically, intellectually, and spiritually scrutinized. The concepts developed within a religious system are tools and means and not goals; consequently, if they fail to reach those goals, they must be rethought.

In relation to peace and violence, the right question to ask is not whether Islam is peaceful or violent; it is to ask which interpretations of Islam can participate in creating a peaceful future for the coming generations, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. My hope is that this essay opens a few doors of reflection and debate beyond polemics and apologetics.

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Notes

1   Commins makes a good case for the Syrian origin of modern *Salafiyya* in (Commins 1990, pp. 34–48).
2   For a good summary of premodern "proto-Salafis", see (Brown 2015, pp. 117–44).
3   For a good definition of orthodoxy, see (Arkoun 1982, pp. 158–59).
4   See, for instance, the world of the reformer dan Fodio in (Hiskett 1994).
5   Brown astutely discusses the Late Sunni Tradition in terms of the stabilizing institutionalization and consolidation of various forms of religious knowledge (Brown 2009, pp. 56–57).
6   This is the title of one of al-Būtī's books in which he responds to Salafī scholars. See (Al-Būtī 2005).
7   For an elaboration on the concepts of the "unthought" and the "unthinkable", see (Arkoun 2002, pp. 24–34).
8   For the implications of the establishment of the muṣḥaf, see (Arkoun 1994, pp. 37–39).
9   For a critique of the notion of ʿadālat al-sahāba, see (Abū Rayya 1994, pp. 310–17).
10   Qurʾān, 49:13.

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