


11-2017

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Recommended Citation

Vondrasek, Matthew (2017) "The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century," *International Dialogue*: Vol. 7, Article 12.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.ID.7.1.1146>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal/vol7/iss1/12>

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Review

The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century

Henri Lauzière. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.
328pp.

Matthew Vondrasek*

Henri Lauzière takes the reader on a multi-dimensional counterintuitive journey with *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century*. The book might be more aptly titled *The Conceptual Construction of Salafism* as its most illuminating and insightful features focus more on linguistics and heuristic devices rather than history or political developments. Through detailed analysis of language, religion, history, and politics, Lauzière shows how Salafism, as it is understood today, represents a misunderstood construction that is often portrayed back into history onto primary sources. Perhaps the most important parts of the text help the reader “unlearn.”

The text displays an almost circular pattern with an introduction of foundational concepts that are left somewhat open then re-examined and brought full circle in the conclusion. The six chapters that make up the body of the work each follow a mostly historically linear development of one or two primary individuals with an additional dozen or so peripheral figures. A large majority of the book follows the development of Taqi al-Din al-Hilali and also examines the work of his mentor Rashid Rida. The timeline involving

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these figures could be separated into two main historical periods, colonial and post-colonial.

Many texts that focus on the development of Salafism, or modernist or purist Islam, as it is sometimes described, generally approach the concept in several ways. Some assert that there has been a dichotomy between modernist and purist Salafism throughout history, others assert that modernist Salafism was popular then shifted and gave way to purist Salafism. Others still describe Salafism as a large umbrella category with various, sometimes conflicting, strands and versions beneath it (13). Lauzière rejects all three of these ideas and additionally asserts that Salafism, as we understand it, is much more a product of modernity than most realize.

The main feature of the introduction is an examination of linguistics. The Arabic feminine adjective ‘Salafiyya’ translated as ‘Salafism’ comes from the root ‘*Salaf*’ or ‘ancestors’; specifically, the ancestors who were the companions of the Prophet Muhammad. This term ‘Salafism’, historically referred to the theological aspects of Islam in referencing the belief systems of the pious ancestors. Many incorrectly assume that the term was used by Abduh, Afghani, and Rida, the “reformists,” to describe their Islamic movement of the late nineteenth century. Little to no evidence suggests these reformers used the term ‘Salafiyya’ to refer to their movements or called themselves Salafis. The term was actually used in this context starting later on in about 1920 when it was used in orientalist magazines by French intellectuals who mistakenly associated the term with a group of reformers and their ideas (39).

The text transitions from explanations of the origins of the concept of Salafism into the historical developments and progression of the Salafi reformer Taqi al-Din al-Hilali. Lauzière uses the life and career of Hilali as a case study showing how the Moroccan, born into a Sufi background, converted from Sufism to Salafism at a young age, then progressed from a balanced reformer or modernist to a purist Salafist as he grew older. We should caveat that although he abandoned Sufism at a young age (about 1921) and embraced Salafism, he described this transition later in life (about 1971). The key point being that “Salafism” was not a term used at the time to describe rationalist, modernist, or reformist approaches to Islam (50).

The examination of the beginning of Hilali’s career is placed within the larger backdrop of both the heyday of the balanced reformer movement, as well as the beginning of the anti-colonial struggle.

The text also takes a broader look at Hilali as one of Rashid Rida's many disciples and students. During this period, the interplay is seen between Rida's balanced reformers and the more orthodox and purist Wahabbi intellectuals of the fledgling Saudi state. This is one of the main points Lauzière demonstrates over and over in the first half of the book. What are often portrayed as opposing or dichotomous camps in the field of Salafism, reformist and purist salafi intellectuals actually co-existed and intermingled heavily during the beginning of the twentieth century (71).

The reason for this co-existence and unity can be traced back to the previously mentioned anti-colonial struggle. Both the balanced reformers and purist Salafis saw the encroachment and threat of colonialism as a common enemy. To unify the ummah and propel Muslims to independence, Salafis, both reformers and purists saw their movement as the best possible solution (92). To maintain this unity, we see both reformers defending and justifying the often maximalist and intolerant views of purist Salafis, as well as the purist Salafis holding back criticism and disdain for what they viewed as the often innovative or enlightened views of reformist Salafis (94).

During the colonial period even though the purists and balanced reformers co-existed and worked together for the sake of the anti-colonial struggle, the groups had two very different goals in mind. The reformers saw Salafism or balanced reform as a means to achieve independence and to build Islamic nations based on Islamic principles. Purists saw the cause of independence and Islamic nationalism as the means to achieve Salafist orthodoxy and orthopraxy free from Western influence and innovation. While balanced reformers cared a great deal about the broader social and legal reform of Salafism, purists could care less about which type or brand of Islamic nationalism brought about orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

Enter act two; post-independence. This period is where the most dramatic shift can be seen. Although this shift occurred over multiple decades from the mid to late twentieth century, this is where the biggest changes can be seen in the development of Salafism. As nations slowly gained independence from colonial Europe, the moderating and unifying influence of the anti-colonial struggle no longer held Salafism together (134). Decolonization resulted in the rise of secular regimes across the Middle East that used socialism or capitalism as drivers of their nationalist causes. The balanced reformers who had invested in individual states' nationalist causes were now sidelined and co-opted by the secular regimes that were often Islamic in name only. Comparatively, the purists who

had been largely indifferent to individual states' nationalist causes were not co-opted by the state and continued their original goal of calling Muslims to orthodoxy and orthopraxy (164). As noted in the introduction by Lauzière, balanced reformist Salafism did not transform into purist Salafism. Rather, both developed in relation to one another the wake of the post-classical Islamic period. Then, during the post-independence period, purist Salafism endured and eventually gained prominence while balanced reform Salafism fell out of vogue and eventually faded into the ether. Moreover, in the wake of decolonization, purist Salafis no longer had the incentive to act with restraint (165). Purist salafis became less tolerant and actively rooted out and cleansed what they saw as innovations. The scope of what they considered Salafism became increasingly narrow and intolerant.

In the last few decades of the twentieth century, as reformist Salafism faded away or were re-labeled as lesser known movements such as the "Islamic left" (199). Purist salafis had a free reign over the use of the term 'Salafism'. The purist Salafism that came to overshadow the balanced or modernist concept of the Salafism was based and centered in Saudi Arabia. This helped cement the idea of Salafism as a purist and Wahhabi-oriented version of Islam (200). Additionally, the rentier status of the Saudi Kingdom allowed it to export its often ultra-orthodox version of Salafism and purist Islam to other nations. Saudi Arabia and its educational and religious institutions promulgated vast amounts of Salafist texts to non-Arab nations and also sponsored Salafist scholars and educational institutions around the globe.

The conclusion circles back to the main points expressed in the introduction including the misconceptions surrounding the first use of Salafism as a doctrine or movement (233). It also highlights the indigenized aspects of Salafism, where a term invented or construction by orientalists came to be used by reformers in Morocco, creating a circular affirmation of the concept. It also highlights the social and political aspects of the movement especially in the later years of the twentieth century. The influence of the Saudi Kingdom to the purist Salafism cannot be overstated.

What is most striking about *The Making of Salafism* is the historically linear development of many of the characters and their connection to the broader concepts. The main figures in the text, Rida and Hilali, and their main works are not themselves necessarily important to the main ideas presented in the book. The broad trends seen over their entire careers and their relationships and interaction with other individuals and institutions is probably the most enlightening. In fact, this is perhaps the biggest obstacle

to the work. In some cases the information presented about Rida Hilali and others became overly biographical and historical, sometimes even unnecessary, and it was difficult to connect to broader points. In many ways the concepts and important information presented are seen not in the individual trees and their aspects but in observing the forest as a whole.

Lauzière does an excellent job of showing how the social and political contexts surrounding Islamic discourses of the twentieth century had a large influence on the “construction” of Salafism. The pitfalls of dichotomy often attach themselves to Islamic studies in its many aspects. Yet throughout the text, the reader is repeatedly reminded of the push and pull interplay between politics, colonialism, religion, law and the enlightenment on the process of making Salafism.

Most valuable to this work that seems absent or overlooked in other texts is the importance of the linguistic aspects of Salafism, particularly the different linguistic interpretations of Salafism to different people and at different times. Lauzière begins by confronting a lack of discipline by other researchers who failed to recognize that many aspects of Salafism are construction that are portrayed back into history. The text shows how Salafism was not recognized as a concept or movement any time prior to the twentieth century, yet modernity repeatedly tries to push it into the past: on people, ideas, and groups. Specific emphasis is placed on the fallacy of using secondary and primary sources to confirm modern concepts, when the original source had a totally different interpretation or relationship to the concept.

These issues are approached up front where Lauzière notes, “Instead of accepting Salafism as a historical given and using it as a heuristic device for making sense of the past, I do the opposite. I examine the historical process by which various intellectuals came to shape and defend the concept of Salafism in ways that we now take for granted” (3).

This firm analysis of the conceptual process of how we understand Salafism accompanies the reader throughout the work. The reader is repeatedly forced to analyze how the concepts, beliefs and processes of different groups and individuals bled into each other and transformed the process by which Salafism was made. The “mirage” of Salafism is deconstructed through time and history to bring us to our present understanding. Simply, the reader is forced to ask, “Do ideas matter more than the words by which they come to be known?” (17).