



## CHAPTER 7

# SALAFIZATION OF ISLAMIC NORMS AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE EXTERNALIZATION OF ISLAM

**D**ebates concerning Islam and Muslims in the West are inscribed in several transnational spaces. As described in chapter 3, identifications and connections to countries of origin are still a significant part of Muslim religious identities. Despite the fact that transnational identifications to Islam were not discussed in our focus groups, they nevertheless influence the definition of what is true Islam not only for Muslims but also for political agencies and media in the West. These transnational trends are part of a broad space defined by multiple and contradictory religious authoritative voices.

The proliferation of religious authorities and the shrinking realm of their authority is by no means a new phenomenon and has been the subject of many studies.<sup>1</sup> Both mass education and new forms of communication have contributed to the increase of actors who claim the right to talk on behalf of Islam in both authoritative and normative ways. Therefore, established religious figures, such as the sheikhs of Al-Azhar or Medina, are increasingly challenged by the engineer, the student, the businessman, and the autodidact, who mobilize the masses and speak for Islam in sports stadiums, on the blogosphere, and over airwaves worldwide. This trend predates the Internet and is related to public education programs and the increased availability of new technological communicative mediums, such as magazines, cassette tapes, and CDs.<sup>2</sup>

However, the Internet has added a new element to this proliferation of religious voices: the greater influence of globalized authority figures who have an audience beyond their particular cultural background. This trans-nationalization of religious voices can be defined as neo-pan-Islamism. Although there are multiple forms of this contemporary pan-Islam, contemporary Salafism has become the most widespread, and in the context of our investigation is influential because it contributes to the binary opposition between the West and Islam.

## Renewed Forms of Pan-Islamism

We have seen in chapter 4 that national versions of Islam from Turkey to Morocco and Pakistan are still relevant for Muslims in Europe and in the United States. At the same time, transnational movements have gained significant influence as contenders of religious legitimacy, giving a new meaning to pan-Islamism.

Historically, pan-Islamism refers to religio-political transnational movements that emphasize the unity of the Community of Believers (*Ummah*) over specific cultural, national, or ethnic loyalties. These movements were particularly active in the defense of the caliphate at the end of the Ottoman Empire. Today, as stated above, the conditions for communication and the circulation of people and ideas make the *Ummah* all the more effective as a concept, especially, considering the fact that nationalist ideologies have been waning. The imagined *Ummah* has a variety of forms, the most influential of which emphasizes direct access to the Qur'an and Muslim unity that transcends national and cultural diversity. In this sense, those extolling this modern trend can be called pan-Islamists even though the restoration of the caliphate is no longer their priority.<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that not all these movements are reactionary or defensive. For this reason, a distinction must be drawn between the Wahhabi/Salafi and Tablighi movements on one hand and the Muslim Brotherhood on the other. Both trends dominate global interpretations of Islam but have very different positions vis-à-vis modernity.

Wahhabism as a specific interpretation of the Islamic tradition emerged in the eighteenth century in the Arabian Peninsula with the teachings of Muhammad Ibn Abdel Wahab (1703–1792), whose literalist interpretations of the Qur'an became the official doctrine of the Saudi Kingdom upon its creation in 1932. Wahhabism is characterized by a rejection of critical approaches to the Islamic tradition. Mystical approaches and historical interpretations alike are held in contempt. Orthodox practice can be defined as a direct relation to the revealed Text, with no recourse to the historical contributions of the various juridical schools (*madhab*). In this literalist interpretation of Islam, nothing must come between the believer and the Text: customs, culture, and Sufism must all be done away with.

The heirs of this rigorist and puritanical line of thought are the clerics of the Saudi religious establishment, also known as Salafi. However, compared with Wahhabism, Salafism's orientation—at least at its inception—was significantly broader and more diverse.<sup>4</sup> Adherents of Wahhabism have rejected all ideas and concepts that are deemed Western, maintaining a strictly revivalist agenda. They contend that the Qur'an and Hadith, when interpreted according to the precedents of the Pious Forefathers (*al-salaf al-salib*), offer the most superior form of guidance to Muslims. As a stringently revivalist movement, Wahhabism seeks the "Islamization of societies"<sup>5</sup> that entails formulating contemporary ways of life in relation to the

conditions of seventh century Arabia by “returning to the sources” whose “true meaning,” Wahhabis argue, was lost over the centuries following Prophet Muhammad’s death.<sup>6</sup> In their resistance to Western expansionism and globalization, Wahhabis have remained true to their literalist, antihistorical, and anti-traditionalist origins and continue to uphold the Qur’an and Sunna as literal instruction manuals.<sup>7</sup>

In sum, the Wahhabi interpretation can be defined as a revivalist movement premised upon the return to the “unadulterated” Islam of the “Pious Forefathers.”

The only significant difference between the global Salafi Islam of today and the original Wahhabi period is its audience: in other words, Salafi decisions and interpretations are no longer limited to the Saudi Kingdom but are now followed by Muslims around the world. The fatwas of Sheikh Abdul Aziz Ibn Baaz (d. 1999), Grand Mufti of the Saudi Kingdom, and of Sheikh Al-Albani (d. 1999) are the shared points of reference for their followers in Europe and the United States, and, more generally, throughout the Muslim world. The movement has succeeded in imposing its beliefs not as one interpretation among many but as the global orthodox doctrine of Sunni Islam.

The considerable financial resources of the Saudi state have certainly helped create this situation of religious monopoly. In the 1970s, Saudi Arabia began investing internationally in a number of organizations that “widely distributed Wahhabi literature in all the major languages of the world, gave out awards and grants, and provided funding for a massive network of publishers, schools, mosques, organizations, and individuals.”<sup>8</sup> In the West, this *darwa* (proselytization) resulted in the building of new Islamic centers in Malaga, Madrid, Milan, Mantes-la-Jolie, Edinburgh, Brussels, Lisbon, Zagreb, Washington, Chicago, and Toronto, to name just a few; the financing of Islamic Studies chairs in American universities; and the multiplication of multilingual Internet sites. In March 2002, the official Saudi magazine *Ain al-Yaqin* estimated that the Saudi royal family has “wholly or partly financed” approximately 210 Islamic centers; 1,500 mosques; 202 colleges; and 2,000 Islamic schools in Muslim-minority countries.<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that these estimates do not include the number of institutions funded by the Saudi Government in its entirety or other sources within Saudi Arabia that finance Wahhabi proselytizing.<sup>10</sup> According to some estimates, the Saudi Kingdom spent over \$80 billion on various Islam-related causes in Muslim-minority countries between 1973 and 2002.<sup>11</sup> King Fahd alone invested over \$75 billion dollars in the construction of schools, mosques, and Islamic institutions outside of the kingdom in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>12</sup> This massive effort of propagation has contributed to the promotion of Wahhabism as the sole legitimate guardian of Islamic thought.<sup>13</sup>

The construction of mosques, schools, and other Islamic institutions is only one strategy of the Saudis to circulate the Wahhabi doctrine. They

also rely heavily on media to promote and spread their message, through the circulation of handouts, the creation of websites, or the airing of satellite television shows. For example, in 1984, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia opened the King Fahd Complex for printing the Holy Qur'an in Medina. According to the website of the now-deceased king Fahd bin 'Abdul 'Aziz, the complex produces between 10 and 30 million copies of the Qur'an each year. Copies of the Qur'an is also available in Braille, as are video and audio recordings of Qur'anic recitations. By 2000, the complex had produced 138 million copies of the Qur'an translated into 20 languages.<sup>14</sup>

It is extremely difficult to gauge the precise influence exerted by Wahhabism on Muslim religious practice. In the case of European and American Muslims, the influence cannot simply be measured by statistics. In a minority culture, lacking both institutions for religious education and the means by which to produce new forms of knowledge, the easy access to theology that Salafism offers is one of the main reasons for its popularity. The widespread diffusion of Salafi teachings means that even non-Salafi Muslims evaluate their Islamic practice by Wahhabite standards. In other words, even if most Muslims do not follow Wahhabite dress codes—white tunic, head-covering, beard for men, niqab<sup>15</sup> for women—the Salafi norm often becomes the standard image of what a good Muslim ought to be.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the strong presence of many different interpretations at the grassroots level,<sup>17</sup> the Salafi revivalist interpretation of Islam dominates the Internet *darwa*.

### The Salafi Voice Dominates the Internet: Forging “Homo Occidentalis”

Our systematic review of online religious sites by a team of multilingual researchers has confirmed that the Salafi interpretation of Islam has come to dominate other forms of religious guidance on the Internet. The review of Islam-centered websites was the basis for an online research project called Islamopedia<sup>18</sup>—a collection of religious forums, fatwas, and other resources from a variety of international websites (see appendix 9). The religious opinions collected on Islamopedia Online provide evidence of the Salafization of Islamic thought and discourse in regions well beyond Saudi Arabia such as Europe, Africa, and Urdu-speaking countries. Across the Muslim world, religious authorities tend to adopt aspects of Salafi doctrine in their Islamic practice and activism, either implicitly or explicitly. (See appendix 7 for a description of the building of Islamopedia fatwa database.) This does not imply that more liberal trends do not exist in what may be categorized as Islamic websites, but Salafi sites have been more expressive and successful in laying claim to what they argue is the true and “authentic” Islam. Of course, the majority of Muslims do not follow these instructions (as we

have shown in chapters 2 and 3). However, the Salafi interpretation is significant because, as discussed previously, it has come to be perceived as the true or “correct” form of Islam, or at least a significant interpretation that must be addressed by religious authorities who compete for the definition of orthodoxy. Thus, even Muslims who criticize the stringency of the Salafi interpretation must take this opinion into account. Many Muslims use this interpretation as delineation of what a good Muslim is and judge themselves against this norm.

The Salafis’ success on the Internet can be explained by what anthropologist Michael Wesch calls “context collapse.” This refers to the unique features of digital places where individuals can ask and discuss intimate questions, with no fear of exposing themselves, that they would not feel comfortable broaching in person because the Internet annihilates the context and the identity of the user.

Most interestingly, it makes the traditional dichotomies between “devotional” and “non-devotional” less acute. This means that users of fatwas online consume orthodoxy without automatically implementing it. Consequently, Islam is not any longer only a set of rituals, beliefs, and doctrines, but also a symbolic commodity relevant to social demands for multiple lifestyles, and enjoyment. This use of Islamic websites is, therefore, a way to express the religious self. It also globalizes a vision of Islam pitched against the West.

## The Binary World of the Salafis

With the diffusion of the Salafi doctrine worldwide, fundamentalism has become global. This global fundamentalism is defined, above all, by an exclusive and hierarchical vision of the world as well as by a taxonomy of religions that places Islam at the top. The expanded use of the term *kafir* (infidel, heretic), for example, is very common among Wahhabis. In the classical Islamic tradition, this term was used only for polytheists, not for members of competing monotheistic faiths. In globalized fundamentalist groups, however, it has been extended to include Jews, Christians, and sometimes even non-practicing Muslims.

Thus, the world is divided into Muslims and infidels. The image of the West, automatically associated with moral depravity, is always a negative one. It contributes to the building of Homo Occidentalis: sexually promiscuous, materially greedy, and impure. This topos mirrors the Western imaginary of Homo Islamicus presented in chapter 1.

Also common to these movements is a worldview that separates the various aspects of life—family, work, leisure—and classifies everything according to the opposition between *haram* (forbidden) and *halal* (permitted). Everything that did not already exist or happen during the time of the Prophet is an innovation, thus *haram*. Khaled Abou El Fadl has called

this particular interpretation, the culture of “*Mamnu*” (what is forbidden).<sup>19</sup> Islam as it existed during the time of the Prophet, especially during his stay in Medina, is idealized and essentialized, functioning as an “epic past” and gold standard for life in the present. The smallest aspect of this period serves as the basis for the present day, for “in this era, everything is good, and all the good things have already come to pass.”<sup>20</sup>

Another characteristic common to both Tablighis and Salafis is their extreme inflexibility regarding the status of women. The rules determining proper dress for women—namely niqab and a long loose garment covering the entire body—are presented as absolute and may never be questioned. Salafis are more extreme than Tablighis in their imposition of dress code; for Salafis, a woman must cover not only her hair but also her face and hands. The niqab, gloves, and long tunic fashionable in Saudi Arabia are what distinguish the Salafi woman from the Tablighi woman. The latter also wears a long tunic, but in a neutral color (not necessarily black) and covers her hair with the hijab only.

This puritanical interpretation of women’s behavior regulates not only their dress but also their role as wife, as mother and daughter, and as a participant (or nonparticipant) in the community. Mixed-gender interaction is forbidden in both public spaces and schools, and male superiority is constantly reaffirmed, along with the Qur’anic legitimacy of corporal punishment for women (Qur’an, 4:34). This question of women’s status—both within the family and in society—functions as a kind of litmus test, according to which the various interpretations of Islam may be classified from the most reactionary to the most liberal.<sup>21</sup> As mentioned in the previous chapter, the politicization of the female body is a general feature of Muslim societies from the colonial to the postcolonial periods. A consistent theme throughout this development on which the Salafi movement has capitalized is that women are the symbolic embodiment of morality and, therefore, are key to securing familial, national, and religious values in the uncertain maelstrom of social change.

In this light, Islam serves as a countercultural voice that simultaneously rebukes Western cultural hegemony and serves the respective political interests of Islamic religious authorities. In other words, Islam is conveniently used by both politicians and religious authorities in Middle Eastern countries to critique Western and secular values.

The female body has become the major site of this cultural and political tension that pitches Islam against the West, the past against the present, and community rights against individual rights.

### *The Subordination of the Religious Self to the Community*

Similarly, the religious self is often defined by ritual action and public behaviors. Whereas in the West equality refers to uniform sets of individual rights, in the Salafi version, equality is the shared obligation of individuals to promote communal welfare. Hence, the moral obligation of the family

allows no room for the “promotion of self” above the interests of the community. Globalization and consumerism challenge the adepts of this puritan and reactive vision of the world, which, in return, regards consumerism as the pinnacle of Western moral depravity.

In the same vein, these fundamentalist movements reject political participation, holding that the believer must maintain a separatist stance in relation to public institutions. A concrete example of this position is the fatwa, issued in 1996 by an American Salafi group, approving the actions of Abdul Rauf, a black Muslim basketball player who refused to rise for the singing of the national anthem.<sup>22</sup>

It is, therefore, no surprise that the themes on the most popular Salafi sites in the West concern primarily women’s rights, sexuality, and relationships with non-Muslims.

### Women Rights and Status

Most of the responses provided to questions on women reassert the Salafi orthodoxy:

- Women need to pick careers that allow them to observe Islamic legal boundaries, that is, a teacher for female students or a doctor for female patients (“women’s work outside the home is permissible as long as it is not in conflict with modesty”).<sup>23</sup>
- Women are weak and need the companionship of a male family member while traveling (“a woman traveling without a *mabram* (a chaperon) is a way to adultery”).<sup>24</sup>
- The full-face veil (the niqab) is the correct dress code for women (not wearing the full-face veil could trigger “lust or even incest”).<sup>25</sup>
- It is not justified for a woman to remove her hijab because the law forbids her from wearing it.<sup>26</sup>
- The marriage age for women is whenever she reaches puberty (“the issue of marriage is linked with the age of menstruation”).<sup>27</sup>
- Although women are allowed to drive, they should beware of the consequences of driving (i.e., if the car breaks down, a woman might be put in a bad situation).<sup>28</sup>
- Women should not be alone with men in an elevator (“Allah has forbidden a man to be alone with a woman who is not her *mabram* . . . This meaning applies when a woman travels in an elevator with a man.”).<sup>29</sup>
- Women and men should not shake hands (“Verily, I do not shake hands with women.” — Bin Baz).<sup>30</sup>

### Sexuality

The review of European Salafi sites shows that one of the great concerns of Muslims living in Western countries is about birth control and fornication.

The most common responses to questions regarding these topics are as follows:

- Sex education in school is “religiously forbidden for it contains description of male and female genitalia; exposing young children to this form of education can be indecent and immoral.”<sup>31</sup>
- Birth control should not be used (“It is not allowed to take birth control pills. Allah has sanctioned the means that lead to procreation and a larger Muslim nation.” — Bin Baz).<sup>32</sup>
- A couple that fornicates together is advised to get married.
- Homosexuality is unequivocally forbidden.

### *Relations with Non-Salafis and Non-Muslims*

Most responses regarding relations with non-Muslims are summarized in the following points:

- Westernization is a great threat facing Muslim youth and is “one of the great threats facing the Muslim *Ummah*.” Therefore, Muslims should try their best to avoid the influences of it.<sup>33</sup>
- Muslims should treat non-Muslims with respect but should not become friends or loyal to non-Muslims (“Be true in your sayings with your brothers and with those non-Muslims whom you live along with.”)<sup>34</sup>
- Salafi Muslims should treat Shiites with respect and advise them on the right path, but should not pray with them (“Advise them to the right path and on what’s wrong and what’s right; show them that is a duty to like Ali bin Abi talib, but not to overpay reverence to him and his family.”)<sup>35</sup>
- Avoid eating meat slaughtered by Shiites (“To be on the safe side avoid eating their meat” unless they are proven not to be *kaafir*).<sup>36</sup>
- “A Muslim is not to shake hands with Jews or Christians.”<sup>37</sup>
- A Muslim can only swear allegiance to a Muslim ruler (“Allegiance... means: a pledge to obey; it is as if the one who swears allegiance is promising his ruler that he will accept his authority with regard to his own affairs and the affairs of the Muslims.”)<sup>38</sup>
- It is permissible for a Muslim to obtain the nationality of a non-Muslim state only after he has sought the nationality of a Muslim state, and only if he can practice his religion (“If a person is compelled to seek the nationality of a *kaafir* state because he has been forced to leave his own country and he can find no [Muslim] country to give him refuge, then this is permissible on the condition that he is able to practise his religion openly... But with regard to obtaining *kaafir* nationality for purely worldly purposes, I do not think that this is permissible.”)<sup>39</sup>



There are a few instances when original opinion comes into some of the clerics' responses. When asked if it is permissible to speak at a community center that has a bar, Shaykh Jneid said that this is allowed as long as alcohol is not being served during the event.

Regarding politics and whether or not it is permissible to take part in elections there are varying views, depending on the political or apolitical orientation of the site. The latter reject political participation because they see it as giving power to an authority other than God. However, the former, particularly those in the Netherlands, encourage political participation. Shaykh Fawaz Jneid states that it is permissible to vote in elections if one does so in an effort to build justice within society.<sup>40</sup>

### Conclusion: The Performance of Authenticity

The globalization of Salafism is somewhat at odds with the commodification of religious goods observed across all religious groups today. To be clear, Muslims like all other believers do consume their religion.<sup>41</sup> But it is not clear that this commodification leads to free-floating signifiers as described by Miller.<sup>42</sup> According to this author, commodification of religion has reduced religious beliefs, symbols, and values into free-floating signifiers to be consumed like anything else. As such, it takes them from their original contexts and throws them into a cultural marketplace where they can be embraced in a shallow fashion but not put into practice. In the case of the Muslims we have surveyed, their relation to Islam is not completely defined by this level of consumerism. What is at stake instead is a tension between Islam as the main communal marker and Islam as the marker of the religious self. In this context, the Salafi interpretation is only *one* way to draw boundary between religious community and religious self. But it is certainly the most accessible to Western political actors and media, on which they build their understanding of Islam.

To conclude, this visibility of Salafism leads to the confrontation of two opposite tropes. One comes from the dominant Western society, which seeks to posit Islam as its enemy, backward and incompatible with Western values of modernity, equality, and freedom. The other is the Salafi trope, in which the West is regarded as the enemy of Islam, Western developments as corruption of the Muslim faith, and Western influences as a threat to Islamic purity. Thus, these exclusivist tropes operate on a reversed but parallel process of, on one hand, putting Western culture outside the realm of the true Islam and, on the other, reinforcing the image perpetrated in many Western circles that Islam is incompatible with the values of the West. These two ideologies work simultaneously within each European society discussed above and tend to solidify the divide between Muslims and non-Muslims. These two mindsets leave no room for compromise or negotiation and convey intolerant and exclusive visions of the public space that feed into and reinforce each other, widening the gap between Islam and the West.



## CONCLUSION

# NAKED PUBLIC SPHERES: ISLAM WITHIN LIBERAL AND SECULAR DEMOCRACIES

**I**n the previous chapters, we have shown that Muslims are politically constructed as the other of Western democracies. As synthesized by David Theo Goldberg:

The Muslim in Europe has come to represent the threat of death... The Muslim image in contemporary Europe is overwhelmingly one of fanaticism, fundamentalism, female (women and girls') suppression, subjugation and repression. The Muslim in this view foments conflict... *He* is a traditionalist, pre-modern, in the tradition of racial historicism difficult if not impossible to modernize, at least without ceasing to be "the Muslim."<sup>1</sup>

This book is an attempt to unveil the multiple mechanisms at work in the binary opposition that pitches Islam against the West. To do so, it has operated at two different levels.

The first level was to de-link the empirical political and religious behaviors of Muslims from the putative monolithic religion that supposedly is Islam. To shed light on the way Muslims "of flesh of blood" behave and interact within current political conditions, we produced original data on Muslim religiosity and political participation. Our inquiry draws a complex and rich web of meanings and behaviors both on what it is to be a Muslim *and* a citizen in a European country or the United States. It is not possible from the existing data to conclude that Islamic religiosity impinges on political participation. Most interestingly, the data reveals that Islam is not per se the main factor in the building of Muslims' social identities or in their political participation. Instead, other elements—ethnicity, class, and residential distribution among them—have an effect that requires further investigation.

Since the empirical behavior of Muslims in the West is not the major reason behind the reification of Islam as the enemy, the second level of investigation was an exploration of three political and cultural factors that influence it: the War on Terror, the religious integration of Islam in secular spaces, and the salafization of Islamic thinking. Introducing Salafism was