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## **Qur'ān and Sunna or the Madhhabs?: A Salafi Polemic Against Islamic Legal Tradition**

Emad Hamdeh

*Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, HAMDEHE@erau.edu*

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## A SALAFI POLEMIC AGAINST THE *MADHHABS*

### *Abstract*

The Albanian scholar Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999) established a unique type of Salafism, a movement whose adherents follow a puritanical model of Muslim creed, exegesis, and conduct that is critical of *madhhab* Traditionalism. In this article I present an annotated translation of an audio lecture in which Albānī attempted to defend Salafism against its anti-*madhhab* image. I shed light on the religious and social climate that played a role in triggering Albānī's disdain for Traditionalism and led him to discredit *madhhab* Traditionalist *fiqh* and replace it with his own interpretation of the jurisprudential requirements of Islamic scripture. Among the arguments I make is that Albānī's claim to follow only the Qur'ān and Sunna is a rhetorical strategy designed to present Salafism as the absolute truth and distinguish it from being categorized as another *madhhab* or religious movement.

*Keywords:* *Madhhabs*, Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, Salafism, Traditionalism, *Fiqh*, Ḥanafī school, *Taqlīd*.

### **Introduction**

Salafism is sometimes compared to the Protestant reformation because it strips interpretive authority from religious institutions and empowers individual interpretation of Islamic scripture.<sup>i</sup> In the years following the replacement of Islamic law by secular law in the post-Ottoman Muslim world, the role of the *madhhabs* in interpreting religious law has been debated in mosques, coffee shops, online, and in social gatherings.<sup>ii</sup> Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī's (d. 1999) Salafi movement is critical of the *madhhabs* and circumvents them in order to interpret the texts anew. Whereas *madhhab* Traditionalists understand scripture through the opinions of the legal schools, Salafis hold that scripture is clear and “speaks for itself.”<sup>iii</sup>

Although some scholars have suggested that Salafism is symptomatic of the ongoing political turmoil in the Muslim world, they often overlook the movement's legal and hermeneutical underpinnings.<sup>iv</sup> Because Salafis are primarily religious reformers who seek to purify the religion, it is important to understand Salafism's religious appeal.<sup>v</sup>

I analyze Albānī's defense of Salafism in his lecture *Shubah Ḥawl al-Salafiyya* ("Misconceptions About Salafism"). In this lecture, as its title indicates, Albānī seeks to provide a proper understanding of Salafism's position toward the *madhhabs* in light of its anti-*madhhab* image. Albānī felt compelled to correct the movement's prevalent image at the time, for some were antagonized by it and/or completely rejected it, while others accepted it and had absolute belief in its authority.<sup>vi</sup> By clarifying its image, he sought to refute the false beliefs and practices of non-Salafis.

Albānī's attempt to "clean up" legal tradition was not viewed positively by Traditionalists. One scholar notes that although there are frequent calls for a "Muslim Martin Luther," Traditionalist *'ulamā'* suggest that much of the turmoil and extremism in the Muslim world results precisely from unlearned Muslims who have broken with tradition and approach their religion Luther-like, by means of scripture alone.<sup>vii</sup> Albānī's critics oppose not only his unconventional opinions, but also his methodology, which threatens their scholarly authority and institutions.

A strong anti-*madhhab* campaign lies at the heart of Albānī's Salafism. Although Albānī's anti-*madhhabism* may have been inspired by the likes of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), Ibn Qayyim (d. 751/1350), and Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1206/1792), his attitude toward the *madhhabs* is unique. Although these three scholars were anti-*taqlīd* to varying degrees, they were not anti-*madhhab*. For example, Ibn Taymiyya's primary goal was to purify

theology, not law. He rarely engaged legal issues without mentioning the four schools, and he did not prohibit *taqlīd* for the common man.<sup>viii</sup> Indeed, many scholars who are identified with Salafism, such as Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), were themselves members of a *madhhab*. By contrast, Albānī refused to present himself as a follower of any individual or *madhhab*.

This refusal distinguishes Albānī from contemporary Salafī scholars like ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Ibn Bāz (d. 1999) and Muḥammad b. Ṣāliḥ al-‘Uthaymīn (d. 2001), both Ḥanbalīs. Although they acknowledged that a stronger proof-text trumps the school’s teachings, this concession was largely rhetorical. That is to say, whereas Albānī was a systematic and principled anti-*madhhabist* in both rhetoric and practice, Ibn Bāz and Ibn ‘Uthaymīn were not concerned with persuading other Muslims to abandon the *madhhabs*. The large number of book-length responses to Albānī written by *madhhab* Traditionalists throughout the Muslim world shows how threatening they found his particular anti-*madhhab* polemic.<sup>ix</sup>

### ***Albānī’s Life***

Albānī was born in 1914 in Shkoder, the capital of Albania, which had become independent from Ottoman rule two years earlier. Ahmet Zogu (d. 1961), who envisioned making Albania a secular nation, became its ruler and dictator in 1925.<sup>x</sup> Albānī’s father was a Ḥanafī scholar who refused to live in a country governed by secular values. He moved his family to Damascus, Syria, which had come under a French mandate in 1920. After completing his elementary education, Albānī spent hours reading books in the city’s Zāhiriyya library. He came across an article in *al-Manār* in which Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) criticized Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) for his use of weak *ḥadīth* and his use of Sufism in his *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn (Revival of the Religious Sciences)*.

Albānī was inspired by Riḍā’s willingness to challenge tradition, especially the work of a celebrated scholar like al-Ghazālī. Riḍā’s article introduced Albānī to a text written by Zayn al-Dīn al-‘Irāqī (d. 806/1404) in which he highlights the weak *ḥadīth* found in al-Ghazālī’s *Iḥyā’*. ‘Irāqī’s book prompted Albānī to suspect that foreign teachings had entered Islam through Sufism. He dedicated himself to the study of *ḥadīth* in an effort to purge Islam and its sciences of all such impurities.<sup>xi</sup> His opposition to the *madhhabs* emerged when he was a teenager and it created tension with his father and with the predominantly Ḥanafī Albanian community in Syria. His father ultimately asked him to move out of their house because he could not tolerate his son’s audacious attitude toward the Ḥanafī *madhhab*.

Albānī’s objections to Islamic jurisprudence were so serious that he severed his ties with his father. When someone suggested that this might be considered an act of disobedience, Albānī replied by comparing his situation to that of the Prophet Ibrāhīm and his father. He said: “You might say that [Ibrāhīm’s situation] is about disbelief (*kufr*) and the Oneness of God (*tawḥīd*). I would reply: Yes, but here it is Sunna and *taqlīd*.”<sup>xii</sup> Albānī’s sour relationship with his Ḥanafī father arguably contributed to his life-long animosity toward the legal schools, especially the Ḥanafī *madhhab*. In post-Ottoman Syria, Muslims manifested a strong allegiance to the *madhhabs*, especially the Ḥanafī school.<sup>xiii</sup>

During the Ottoman period (1453-1922), Traditionalist scholars were responsible for the education of the nobility who staffed various levels of judiciary. As the bureaucracies expanded so too did the role of scholars. Leading members of the scholarly class ranged from those who led the prayers in small towns to the most prestigious courtiers.<sup>xiv</sup> Through their control of the posts of judge, mufti, guardian of religious endowments, scribesmen, and market inspector, the

'*ulamā*' served as the mouthpiece for Islam. As spokesmen for Islam, they were empowered to interpret scripture and to define the religious outlook of society.<sup>xv</sup>

The caliphate embodied Muslim unity, not only politically but also in terms of scholarship. The fall of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of secular governments in the Muslim world resulted in a decline of Traditionalist '*ulamā*' authority and pedagogical methods. As Traditionalist scholars lost their powerful positions, a vacuum in religious authority emerged. These changes took Traditionalists by surprise and some of them held on to the *madhhabs* in a very rigid fashion as a way of rejecting secularism. Albānī grew up in this atmosphere of unbending *madhhabism*, which contributed to his disdain for Traditionalists.

According to Albānī, *madhhab* Traditionalism manifests excessive reverence for scholars and uncritical acceptance of the legal schools, with the result that members of different *madhhabs* came to behave as if they belonged to different religions. He proposed to solve this division among Muslims by returning to the Prophet's true and pure teachings. Albānī held that legal confusion, innovation in religion, and all other problems facing Islam and Muslims are a result of not properly adhering to the science of *ḥadīth*.<sup>xvi</sup> As a result of his frustration with *madhhab* Traditionalists, he became harsh, callous, and confrontational.

In the 1950s Albānī began to deliver weekly classes in several mosques. In addition to attempting to reform Islamic scholarly thought and practice, he was an activist who traveled across Syria to call people back to the Qur'ān and Sunna by attacking what he considered to be heresies. As the country's Muslim population was predominantly Ḥanafī, Albānī made it a point to invite local Ḥanafī scholars to reexamine their school's doctrines, many of which, in his opinion, were not based on authentic *ḥadīth*.<sup>xvii</sup>

Albānī's scholarship and activism eventually made him one of the world's prominent Salafī leaders. In the 1950s Albānī became famous in Syria for his knowledge of *ḥadīth* and call to Salafism. In 1961 he happily accepted an invitation to teach at the University of Medina. By 1963 his anti-Ḥanbalī views had stirred up so much controversy that he was expelled from the university and asked to not return to the country.<sup>xviii</sup>

Albānī's vision of Salafism crystallized in the early 1980s when he decided to reside permanently in Jordan. Many young men began flocking around him, calling themselves “students of the Islamic religious sciences” (*ṭalabat al-‘ilm al-shar‘ī*) and often taking his opposition to *madhhabism* further than he intended, furthering Salafism's anti-*madhhab* image.<sup>xix</sup> Albānī was careful not to attack the *madhhabs* directly, but rather to attack blind anti-*madhhabism*. Other Salafis, as he notes in his lecture, went so far as to declare that *madhhab* treatises should be burned. Some Salafis argued that following a *madhhab* is a religious innovation, and Albānī was criticized for defending their position.<sup>xx</sup>

### ***Albānī's Anti-Madhhab Polemic***

Albānī uses historical circumstances connected with the emergence of the *madhhabs* to argue that the very concept of the *madhhab* is foreign to authentic Islam. He cites a *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet states that the first three generations of Muslims are the best. The *madhhabs* are invalid because they did not exist during the lifetime of the Prophet. To support his argument he references statements attributed to the eponyms of the four legal schools, who reportedly said that their true *madhhab* is the following of authentic *ḥadīths*. Albānī understood such statements to mean that the eponyms themselves opposed the concept of a *madhhab*, a strong argument against the position that the *madhhabs* are divinely guided.

By using the Qur'ān and Sunna as his only two sources, Albānī rejected any kind of speculation in matters related to Islamic law. He emphasizes a strict adherence to the Qur'ān and Sunna, as understood by the early generations, as a necessary precondition for understanding Islam. However, he falls short when it comes to explaining how the Qur'ān and Sunna should be applied in the real world. He does not explain how changing legal rulings in ritualistic practices will bring about political, social, or economical justice. His critics accuse him of understanding scripture without any consideration for historical context. For instance, he uses a statement attributed to the founders (e.g., “If the *ḥadīth* is authentic, it is my *madhhab*” [*idhā ṣaḥḥa al-ḥadīth fa huwa madhhabī*]) to discredit *madhhab* Traditionalists when he finds a *ḥadīth* that contradicts the position of a *madhhab*.

By using the statements of the eponyms of the *madhhabs*, Albānī aligns himself with the founders and portrays their followers as blind adherents who distanced themselves from the methodology of those they claim to follow. In his famous *Al-Lā Madhhabiyya*, Muḥammad Ramaḍān al-Būṭī (d. 2013) chastises Albānī for taking out of context the abovementioned statement (“If the *ḥadīth* is authentic, it is my *madhhab*”), noting that if the merely apparent meaning of a *ḥadīth* seems to contradict the founder’s opinion, it is not necessarily a contradiction.<sup>xxi</sup>

Al-Būṭī explains that this statement does not mean that every person who sees an authentic *ḥadīth* could then say that this is the *madhhab* of al-Shāfi‘ī and act according to its surface meaning. Instead, Shāfi‘ī’s statement is intended for the scholar who is qualified to exercise independent reasoning (a *mujtahid*) within the *madhhab*. Furthermore, the person must be certain that al-Shāfi‘ī did not know the particular *ḥadīth* or its authenticity. This task, which can be accomplished only by scholars, requires reviewing all al-Shāfi‘ī’s writings and his immediate



students.<sup>xxii</sup> Al-Būṭī contextualizes the abovementioned statement (“If the *ḥadīth* is authentic, it is my *madhhab*”) and argues that a number of considerations must be made before it can be applied. He argues that the Four Imams may have known a particular *ḥadīth* but did not apply it because they may have considered it abrogated or interpreted it in light of other evidence.

Albānī’s career is full of tug-of-war battles over the specific interpretation of particular texts. His opinions often contradicted those of the legal schools and he became famous for his opposition to *madhhabism*. Albānī explains that Salafīs follow scripture while *madhhab* Traditionalists follow scholars. For Albānī, following scripture dispenses with the need to unquestioningly conform to the authority of scholars (*taqlīd*) which, in his view, is the source of many problems in the Muslim world. He does acknowledge that the individual who circumvents scholars and approaches texts directly must be well-grounded in the Islamic sciences and that most people are not qualified to engage in *ijtihād*. When seeking religious guidance from scholars, laity must always ask them for scriptural evidence.

Albānī reasons that laypeople will avoid blindly following scholars by asking a *mujtahid* to provide a proof-text. According to Albānī’s description of compliance (*ittibā’*), the role of the scholar is limited to passively presenting proof-texts, and non-scholars need only a text to understand a ruling. This implies that scripture is clear and can be understood by everyone. In Albānī’s view, someone who accepts an opinion from a scholar without asking for scriptural evidence performs *taqlīd*, but an individual who requests scriptural evidence (*dalīl*) is acting in compliance with (*ittibā’*) scripture instead of in compliance with scholars.<sup>xxiii</sup> This is the proverbial distinction without a difference: In the end the layperson must put his trust in the scholar to provide the correct scriptural evidence. The very act of asking the scholar

acknowledges a level of submission and trust in his knowledge and authority. This distinction is purely semantic because *taqlīd* is disguised as *ittibā'*.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Many scholars fail to grasp the nuances of Albānī's position on *taqlid* and *madhhabs*, which is viewed by some as a messy bag of contradictions. Albānī distinguishes between the learned and the unlearned and insists that laity must seek knowledge from scholars. In the process of seeking knowledge, however, he requires laypeople to ask for proof-texts, which assumes they are learned enough to interpret these texts on their own. At times Albānī insists that his polemics are not aimed at lay Muslims, but at scholars who should know better than to uncritically conform to past judgments.<sup>xxv</sup> He also makes it clear that common Muslims should seek knowledge from scholars while simultaneously arguing that Islam is easy to understand. In other cases, as in this lecture and in his famous *Ṣifat Ṣalāt al-Nabī*, lay Muslims are given the distinct impression that the statements of the Four Imams censuring *taqlīd* apply equally to themselves as they do to qualified and seasoned jurists.

The tensions in Albānī's positions cannot be properly understood outside the context of the battle he was fighting against *madhhab* Traditionalists. Jonathan Brown has correctly explained that the Salafī argument that ordinary Muslims can understand scripture as well as the Companions was an essential move designed to undermine the rigid authority of the *madhhabs*. Brown states, "Arguing that the Muslim masses were innately competent and needed no guardian class to understand their religion was the most effective means to neutralize the appeals to authority made by mainstream Sunni scholars, even if all ulema, even Salafi ones, knew this claim was false."<sup>xxvi</sup> In other words, since both Albānī and his critics hold that scholars must be followed, the difference between the two groups is not as stark as it may appear. His criticism of *taqlīd* is a rhetorical strategy designed to undermine Traditionalist institutions. Albānī rejects the

view that tradition is an essential pre-condition for the proper understanding of Islam.

### ***The Lecture on Defending Salafism***

Although many translations of Albānī’s books are available, his audio recordings have not attracted much attention from translators and Western scholars despite their wide popularity among religiously-oriented Arabic speakers. Albānī’s attempt to purge Islam of foreign elements was not only a scholarly pursuit but also an on-the-ground project directed toward Muslims at large. The large number of his audio lectures indicates that he devoted a great deal of time to both preaching and writing.

In this lecture, Albānī attempts to defend Salafism against an unidentified author’s claims that it is anti-*madhhab*.<sup>xxvii</sup> Although the time and place of the lecture are unknown, it was one of a series of five lectures given by Albānī under the title *Mafhūm al-Salafiyya* (“The Meaning of Salafism”). The topic of Salafism and the *madhhabs* recurs throughout Albānī’s works. Albānī was regularly in heated confrontation with *madhhab* Traditionalists over the correct understanding of Islam from the earliest days of his career to the last moments of his life. This translation serves as window into his life-long concerns, particularly his attitude towards *taqlīd* and the *madhhabs*.<sup>xxviii</sup>

### **TRANSLATION OF “MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT SALAFISM”**

We seek refuge with God from our evil deeds and intentions. Anyone who God guides, there is no one who can misguide him, and anyone He leads astray, there is no one who can guide him. I bear witness that there is no one worthy of worship except God, without partner, and that Muḥammad is His servant and messenger. “You who believe, be mindful of God, as is His due, and make sure you devote yourselves to Him, to your dying moment.”<sup>xxix</sup> “People, be mindful of your Lord, who created you from a single

soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them spread countless men and women far and wide; be mindful of God, in whose name you make requests of one another. Beware of severing the ties of kinship: God is always watching over you.” “Believers, be mindful of God, speak in a direct fashion and to good purpose, and He will put your deeds right for you and forgive you your sins. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger will truly achieve a great triumph.”<sup>xxx</sup>

To proceed: The best of all speech is God’s speech, and the best of guidance is that of Muḥammad (ṣ).<sup>xxx</sup> The worst affairs are newly invented religious matters. Every newly invented religious matter is an innovation, every religious innovation is a misguidance, and every misguidance leads to Hellfire.<sup>xxxii</sup>

In the previous lecture we read a passage from a contemporary Muslim writer that mentions a specific aspect of the Salafi movement and the effect it has on Salafis. Those who attended the previous lesson might clearly remember the words of this particular author when he criticized Salafis and asked: “Are you Salafis able to instill the proper respect of scholars in those who follow your methodology?” In the last lesson, I spoke about the particular phrase “those who follow your methodology” in a manner sufficient to resolve the issue. I will now address the rest of his statement: “Their actions actually prove that only a few of them choose to respect scholars. The majority of Salafis are the opposite; they consider the *madhhabs* to be an enemy that must be eliminated. We have seen and heard some of their senior scholars openly express this opinion. We have also heard some lay Salafis say that all the books of the *madhhabs* must be burned.”

The author attributes these words to some people who follow Salafism. He divides them into two categories: senior and junior scholars. This division indicates that the

author tries to be objective towards the people he criticizes. I want to comment on two aspects of his criticism. One is more important than the other, so I will begin with that which is more important.<sup>xxxiii</sup> First, what is the position of Salafism with respect to the *madhhabs* and their imams? Second, do the followers of Salafism actually say things like the author claimed, attributing some of those statements to senior Salafis and some to junior Salafis? Regarding the first issue, as mentioned in the previous lesson, we insist that Salafism does not disrespect the *madhhabs* and the imams, so I do not want to dwell on this issue.

We consistently say that the call of Salafism is based on knowledge of the Qur'ān and Sunna. It is also based on following the methodology of the first three generations, the early predecessors to whose righteousness the Prophet testified in an authentic and *mutawātir ḥadīth*<sup>xxxiv</sup>: *The best of people are my generation, then those who follow them, and then those who follow them.*<sup>xxxv</sup> The Four Imams and those who lived during their time, or slightly after them, are also considered part of the early generations. All of them are considered to be among the great imams of the early predecessors who we imitate and follow in our Salafi calling. Therefore, it is absolutely inconceivable that a true follower of the Salafi methodology would defame such reputable figures or wish to burn their books and ruin their legacy. I spoke about this fact in the introduction to *The Nature of Prophet's Prayer (Ṣifat Ṣalāt al-Nabī)* where I mentioned that the imams, particularly the Four Imams, have great virtue and will be rewarded because they guided us to the correct methodology of following the Qur'ān and Sunna.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

In the introduction to *Ṣifat Ṣalāt* I compiled the sayings of the Four Imams that clarify the methodology of following the Qur'ān and Sunna and not being fixed on

unquestioning conformity to the authority of scholars (*taqlīd*) or following the *madhhabs*. I already referenced their statements concerning this so I do not want to dwell on them. However, it is sufficient to mention something they all said: “If the *ḥadīth* is authentic, then it is my *madhhab*.” Accordingly, we believe that Salafism reveres the imams as they deserve to be revered. Salafism is not to blame if there are individuals who follow it and say unfair things about the imams, their efforts and their knowledge. It is not the fault of Salafism if these people criticize the imams with the examples mentioned by the author since no one is responsible for the faults of others. Because the principles of Salafism are built on the Qur’ān and Sunna, we clearly say what God the Most High said: *Has he not been told what was written in the Scriptures of Moses and of Abraham, who fulfilled his duty: that no soul shall bear the burden of another.*<sup>xxxvii</sup>

It is also mentioned in the authentic Sunna that one of the Companions came to the Prophet (ﷺ) with one of his sons. The Prophet said: *Is this your son? He said: Yes.* The Prophet said: *Verily, you cannot protect him and he cannot protect you.*<sup>xxxviii</sup> This is an explanation of the previous verses [53:36-38] which state that no bearer of burden is responsible for the burden of another. If these incorrect statements mentioned by the author come from individuals who follow Salafism, then Salafism is not responsible for them or for the person who says them, based on the Qur’ānic verse and authentic *ḥadīth* I just mentioned.

We regrettably acknowledge that such statements are made by some zealous Salafis who are particularly harsh or allow their tongues to precede their minds, and consequently speak without thought. We cannot be held responsible for such individuals. The Companions of the Messenger (ﷺ) were not absolved from having critical verses

revealed about some of them. The Messenger (ﷺ) became angry with some of them and occasionally censured and cursed some of them. In every group there are individuals who do not discipline themselves according to the etiquette and manners of the others.

We take two points from the author's criticism of some of those who invite others to Salafism and claim to be its followers, one of which is more important than the other. The first is that everyone knows that Salafism is not based on diminishing the rights of scholars. How could that be the case when the Noble Qur'ān says: *Do not let hatred of others lead you away from justice, but adhere to justice, for that is closer to awareness of God?*<sup>xxxix</sup> If the Qur'ān commands all Muslims to be just in their judgments, even with those whom they hate, how would you expect them to be with those whom they love? Therefore, we maintain what we said almost twenty years ago about our reverence, emulation, and following of our imams. The bottom line is that we differ in a fundamental way from the majority of Muslims who do not follow Salafism, particularly in the way we follow, respect, and revere our imams.

This fundamental difference may be the reason behind the resentment of those who do not properly understand the Salafi mission, whether it be those who follow it [fully] or those who adopt only some of its ideas and beliefs. We respect and revere the imams because we know that they are guides and invite to the same thing we do, which is following the Qur'ān and Sunna. We consider them to be intermediaries between us and the Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ). We believe that there is only one way of seeking knowledge, the way that everyone knows, which is that the ignorant learn from scholars.

Our way of seeking knowledge is different than the way claimed by members of some Sufi paths. They claim that a person who is illiterate, or unable to read or write, can

acquire knowledge without learning from scholars. They call this spiritual inspiration (*ilhām*). According to many Sufis, *ilhām* is almost like revelation. We regrettably mention the bitter fact that imam al-Ghazālī discusses this path of *ilhām* in the beginning of his book, *Revival of the Religious Sciences (Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn)*. He mentions that a person who struggles against his desires, holds himself accountable, and calls upon God in his moments of seclusion can acquire knowledge through *ilhām*.

Like other Sufis he mentions a specific way of acquiring knowledge that he was previously unaware of: A person sits in a dark room, puts his head on his knees, and closes his eyes. He must sit like this in three layers of darkness: the darkness of the room, the darkness of closing his eyes, and the darkness of lowering his head on his knees and waiting for some revelation to come down to him. This is what they call *ilhām*. This is the source of the phrase repeated by many early and late Sufis: “My heart has narrated to me from my Lord”.<sup>x1</sup> They are not like the scholars of *ḥadīth* who say: “So-and-so has narrated to me from so-and-so”, or like scholars of *fiqh* who say: “So-and-so has said in his book from so-and-so.” Instead they say: “My heart has narrated to me from my Lord.” This is another exhaustive area of research and I do not intend to delve into it. I am trying to show the point of difference between Salafis like us and other Muslims. We agree with the majority of Muslims that one should revere and respect the imams.

What makes us different is that we consider the imams to be mediators and intermediaries who convey knowledge from God and His Messenger. We do not follow them for who they are and following them is not one of our objectives. The only objective is to know what God revealed to the Messenger of God (ﷺ) in His book or what he (ﷺ) explained in his Sunna. We take these great imams as intermediaries who convey



the message of the Qur'ān and Sunna to us. As for the majority of Muslims who agree with us in revering and respecting these scholars, they have the matter backwards. They have made following scholars their objective, and it may thus be accurate for us to describe them as blind followers of these imams.

It is said that things are known by their opposites. To clarify, everyone who follows a *madhhab* has settled for following one imam, accepting all of his opinions, while abandoning all the opinions of other scholars. There is no doubt that the sayings of three imams are more than those of one. Therefore, unquestioning submission is a total loss for a *muqallid* even when the Imam is correct. As for us, we acknowledge the scholarly status of the imams, but we maintain that they are a means and intermediaries to knowledge. As I have noted in the introduction of my book *Şifat Şalāt*, the Imams emphasized that they are not meant to be followed for who they inherently are. They told their followers and students: “Take from where we took.” This confirms that they are not meant to be followed unconditionally.

The one meant to be followed is God and then the Messenger of God (ﷺ) who alone must be followed without anyone else. He is the only Prophet who God, may He be glorified and exalted, made following him a sign for attaining His love, as is mentioned in the famous verse: *Say, 'If you love God, follow me, and God will love you.'*<sup>xli</sup> The difference between Salafis and followers of the *madhhabs* can be summarized in a few short words: Our mission is limited to exclusive compliance (*ittibā'*) with the Prophet (ﷺ). For us, there is no one equal to him, and he has no partner in compliance (*ittibā'*). We do not follow any person at all in the unrestricted and absolute sense except the Messenger (ﷺ).

As for others, it is well known that they follow many people other than the Prophet. Would that the matter of compliance (*ittibā`*) for them was restricted to the Four Imams! If only it was restricted to following the students of these imams! If only, if only! There is absolutely no benefit from wishing “if only.” However, following other than the Prophet shows that the issue is very dangerous. With the succession of days and the passing of years, it has reached a point where those who claim to follow the Four Imams actually follow thousands of others instead.

If you approach a person who is learned in a certain *madhhab* and use a book of the imam he follows, like Abū Ḥanifa or al-Shāfi‘ī, for example, as evidence against him, bringing him the text from the book of the imam, he will say: “We do not follow these texts”. If you say: “But you are a Ḥanafī or Shāfi‘ī,” he will say: “We cannot use the text of the imam.” Consequently, he acquires knowledge from the one who acquired, from the one who acquired, from the one who acquired, from the one who acquired, until he reaches the imam. This shows that they acquire knowledge from contemporary imams instead of from the early imams.

In fact, the problem is restricted to our mission of following the Qur’ān and Sunna and following only the Messenger (ﷺ) without the Four Imams, the four true leading personalities in knowledge. The problem is even greater than that because they also refuse to limit themselves to following only the imams. They do not have enough knowledge, understanding, and intelligence in either the foundations of the religion or its branches to find the ability to follow the imams directly. Instead, they follow a person, who follows a person, who follows a person until they reach a jurist in the contemporary

era. We have a great deal of evidence and examples of this from our debates before the spread of the Salafi mission.

I clearly remember the reaction of one scholar, who passed to God's mercy, when he heard about my statement that it is not permitted to conduct multiple congregational prayers in a single mosque that has a designated imam and a designated person who calls to prayer (*mu'adhdhin*). This issue is known to our brothers, so those who do not know the issue with its evidence ask those who know. I met him in front of the mosque, and he said: "Do you say such-and-such?" I said: "Yes." He said: "How so?" I said: "What did the imams say?" I brought al-Shāfi'ī's *Kitāb al-Umm* because this scholar was in fact a follower of the Shāfi'ī *madhhab*. When I read the statement to him, he said: "We do not use the words of the imam." He does not use the words of the imam! I said to him: "Why?" He said: "Because many scholars came after imam al-Shāfi'ī and studied his opinions."<sup>xlii</sup>

They discovered that some of al-Shāfi'ī's statements are preponderant (*rājih*) and others are non-preponderant (*marjūh*), and we use the opinions to which they gave more precedence. Seeking to turn his attention to one of their accusations against us, I said to him: "So some of al-Shāfi'ī's views have the status of preponderant (*rājih*) and others are non-preponderant (*marjūh*), meaning that his statements include both correct and incorrect views, and that some people came after him and distinguished his correct opinions from the incorrect ones?" He was so taken aback by this surprising point that he changed the topic and said: "We are not Shāfi'īs, we are Bājūrīs."<sup>xliii</sup>

This is the actual state of everyone who blindly follows the opinions of others. The Ḥanafī does not unquestioningly conform to Abū Ḥanīfa, nor does the Shāfi'ī

unquestioningly conform to al-Shāfi‘ī. This is the case with others who unquestioningly conform to the opinions of others. Therefore, since you must eventually end up following someone, the one we choose to follow is Muḥammad (ṣ). This does not mean that we do not revere the sayings of the imams, but we do not follow the imams for who they inherently are. As for the Messenger, we follow him because of who he inherently is. We do not question him if he says something. However, if an imam of the Muslims says something, let alone a shaykh from among the later shaykhs, then we do not follow the way of the shaykhs who say: “Whoever says ‘why’ to his shaykh will never be successful.” We say to him: “Why?” To any scholar who says something, we ask “Why? What is the evidence and proof from the Qur’ān and Sunna?” We question him because we are commanded to follow the Qur’ān and Sunna.

This is the fundamental difference between Salafis and followers of the *madhhabs*. It is an important distinction between Salafis like us, who revere the imams, and those who unquestioningly conform to them, who also join us in revering them. However, in our view, we do not give them the status that God, may He be glorified and exalted, gave exclusively to Muḥammad (ṣ). Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that some Salafis directly or indirectly criticize one of the *madhhabs*.<sup>xliv</sup> This is not permitted in our religion and understanding because scholars who are qualified to exercise independent reasoning (*mujtahids*), as we always affirm, are rewarded whether they are correct or mistaken. This is proven by the Prophet’s (ṣ) saying: *If a judge makes a judgment and makes an effort and he is correct, he gets two rewards. If he is mistaken, he gets one reward.*<sup>xlv</sup>

Therefore, we believe that the jurist is rewarded by God whether he is correct or incorrect. This is in addition to what we know about the Four Imams' efforts, their fear of God, asceticism, and openly professing the truth in what they believed. This means that we are not permitted to take any of that away from them. By saying this I am not introducing anything new that the author has not already pointed to [viz., that some Salafis disrespect the imams]. However, the criticisms of the imams are to be attributed to the one who says them and not to Salafism.

Then the author says, and we agree with this, that lay Muslims who are not recognized as “seekers of knowledge or researchers”, are not responsible for the same task as advanced researchers. In the previous lecture I explained that a feature of Salafism is that Salafis call to the Qur’ān and Sunna and study the four *madhhabs*, while they also question and debate the [legal] opinions and evidence of the *madhhabs*. He described this method of study as a pursuit of truth. Now he wants to demonstrate that laypeople are not capable of taking on the task of discovering the truth because it requires academic research. These words are true, but what he understood from them is not correct, as you will hear. He says: “There is no disagreement between us that the terms ‘seekers of knowledge’ and ‘researchers’ do not apply to lay Muslims. They are not responsible for the same task as advanced researchers.”

Here is the main point that shows the danger of his words: “Their call to disband the *madhhabs* actually leads them to doubt the religion itself, and that suffices to demonstrate their misguidance and to push them collectively into the abyss of misguidance.” It is according to this statement that we interpret the position of [Muḥammad Ramaḍān] al-Būṭī and Ḥamīd, may God have mercy on him, about non-*madhhabism* as a threat that

destroys Islamic law.<sup>xlvi</sup> The beginning of the author's statement is in complete agreement with Salafism. Unfortunately, the last part of his statement is in complete disagreement with Salafism. The reason for this can be reduced to one thing: Since Salafism is naturally the correct understanding of Islam, and Islam is actually a comprehensive religion for all people at all times and places, then naturally Salafism is also not specific to one group of Muslims to the exclusion of another.

Salafism is Islam in its correct understanding and it invites Muslims to closely adhere to their original Islamic beliefs. Salafism does not single out one group over another. In its call to follow the Qur'ān and Sunna Salafism does not differentiate between the cultivated person and the illiterate or between the educated and uneducated. Rather, it calls all groups and individuals to worship God sincerely and to follow their Prophet respectfully. All Muslims have this in common. Now we hear a new tone. This author is also one of the problems that impacts the Salafi mission because he associates himself with Salafism even though here he clearly separates himself from it.

The reason for this separation goes back to the fact that there are people who, before becoming Salafis, belonged to another party or group that did not have the same methodology as Salafism. Before adopting Salafism they followed a group and educated themselves accordingly. The purpose of most of these groups, as we discussed in detail in our commentary on the previous statement in the last lecture, is to gather, unite, and increase the numbers of their followers. Their purpose is not to spread education and understanding of religion. When some individuals from this group are exposed to Salafism, they are attracted to its purity, clarity, and strong arguments, with the result that they adopt part of it. However, because they were part of another group that focuses on

increasing numbers and partisanship, their earlier beliefs do not actually allow the Salafi mission to enter the depths of their heart and govern all of their senses and actions.

You will find these people Salafi in one respect and against Salafism in another. This is an example that we used to discuss before we saw people write about it as we are doing now. We used to see this in the actions of some people who claimed to be members of the Salafi mission, although none of those around them benefitted from their claim or adoption of Salafism except in an insignificant way that is not worth mentioning. Why? Because they adopted it only in their personal life and did not call others to Salafism. They are determined and hard working when inviting to their movement, which seeks to increase the number of their followers and unite them. They do this according to general Islamic concepts that do not clarify the correct understanding of Islam. The correct understanding is found in the Qur'ān and Sunna for anyone who wishes to embrace it.

This idea of increasing the number of followers and uniting them does not allow the Salafi mission to spread among all the classes and individuals of the *umma* because Salafism opposes the increasing of numbers and uniting. When we say: “Salafism is the truth, not that which is concealed.” [Inaudible]... people will naturally be separated from one another and brothers will separate; this is the opposite of trying to increase numbers.<sup>xlvii</sup> Therefore, there are people who are partially Salafi and partially belong to other groups. They are Salafi in their personal lives and on an individual level, but belong to another group at the societal level. In other words, they are not Salafis at a societal level. They want us to allow the general public, which naturally represents the overwhelming majority of Muslims, to follow the *madhhabs*. They do not want us to invite them to the Qur'ān and Sunna.<sup>xlviii</sup> The author claims that calling them to the

Qur'ān and Sunna will lead to complexity, misguidance, and detachment from the religion. God forbid. Here we want to show the difference between what Salafism is really like compared to the limited understanding of some people from other Islamic groups who also follow Salafism.

We agree with all the Islamic groups on one fact but differ in the details of how to call to this fact and the means of achieving it. We all agree that Muslims must return to an Islamic lifestyle. We all say that we must return to an Islamic lifestyle, but I wonder in light of what we see in their communities and what we are currently reading, just who represents the Muslim community? Is it a limited minority of people in each country or each province? Or is it all Muslims, including the scholar, student, and the illiterate? There is no doubt that the last answer is what represents the Muslim community.

If we really want to cooperate on returning to an Islamic lifestyle, does this require that we divide people into two groups, one group that is educated with the correct understanding, which is Salafism, as this author acknowledges, and another large group that should be allowed to remain in their ignorance? Are only members of the first group to be called to the truth - following the Qur'ān and Sunna - because they are considered to be elite and distinguished Muslims? Should we not also call the majority of Muslims to the truth? Otherwise it would mean that we are to leave them in their ignorance, mistakes, nay, even their misguidance. Not only this, but we also leave them in their differences and severe conflicts, the effects of which have led many of them to prevent one Muslim from praying behind his Muslim brother under the pretext that the latter's *madhhab* is contrary to his *madhhab*.



We still see the followers, nay those who unquestioningly conform to the *madhhabs*, not praying behind other Muslims when they pray with those who invite to the following of the Qur'ān and Sunna. When they are asked: “Are the Salafis disbelievers?” They say: “No, but they are innovators.” Okay, is prayer behind an innovator permitted by the *madhhab* or not? It is permitted. They cite as evidence a *ḥadīth* that we consider weak because of its narration (*riwāya*), but authenticate in terms of its meaning, namely: “Pray behind every righteous and evil person.”<sup>xlix</sup> They narrate this *ḥadīth* and then go against it and do not act upon it while all the *madhhabs* accept it.

The point is that the author wants us to leave the majority of Muslims in their ignorance, mistakes, and division. Is this the Islam that says: *Do not join those who ascribe partners to God, those who divide their religion into sects, with each party rejoicing in their own.*<sup>1</sup> Does Islam, which calls all groups to unite, collaborate, and not separate, differentiate between the minority of Muslims, who are the only ones called to follow the correct understanding, and the majority of the Muslims, who are to be left as they are? No Muslim who properly understands anything from the message of the Qur'ān and Sunna would say this. Here we clarify the issue of dividing in groups a little bit by saying, why do we say “Salafis” and “Salafism”? We repeatedly mentioned that all Muslims call others to follow the Qur'ān and Sunna. This call is restricted to a particular subject or methodology that is manifest and clear. We saw that the mission of the Qur'ān and Sunna must be defined according to what the righteous predecessors followed. Who were the righteous predecessors? Were they all scholars? Were they all educated and scholars? Or were the minority of them scholars and the majority of them not scholars?<sup>li</sup>

This author presented us with the distinction that scholars are commanded to follow the Qur'ān and Sunna but that the majority must follow a specific *madhhab*. Does this distinction exist? Every Muslim certainly knows that the concept of belonging to a specific *madhhab* did not exist in the greatest generations. We all know that there is no difference between a scholar, a student, and an ignorant person because in the time of the Righteous Predecessors there was not a *madhhab* called the *madhhab* of Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq that some people could follow and say: “I am a Bakrī.” There was no 'Umarī, 'Uthmānī, or 'Alawī *madhhab*.<sup>lii</sup>

Therefore, what were the common people in those golden centuries whose greatness has been affirmed like? Does the author want to impose the stagnation of the *madhhabs* upon the golden centuries? What were the common people in these golden centuries like? I ask, in general, and the details are known, what were they like? What were they not like? The general Muslim population today and in the future must be like the general Muslim population of those three great centuries. While we strive to return to the true Islamic lifestyle, history must repeat itself. Modern Muslim scholars must become like the scholars of the first three centuries. Their pupils, as well as the common Muslims today, must become like those in the golden centuries.<sup>liiii</sup> If we say: “No! We should call the educated and scholarly class to follow the Qur'ān and Sunna and leave the majority of Muslims in their *madhhabs*, out of fear that common Muslims would stray and supposedly be misguided,” then that means that we would not be honest when we call for returning to the Islamic lifestyle.<sup>liv</sup>

Therefore, what is our position concerning the laity who the author fears will be misguided because of our call to the following of the Qur'ān and Sunna? The reality,

which gives me comfort, is that the author refers to what we hear many times from some people who do not understand or comprehend the Salafi mission. They do not understand it either directly from those who call to it or from their publications. Instead, they understand Salafism from its opponents and enemies, namely, the ones who cause tribulation due to their misunderstanding of this mission. Many people narrate from us, some phone us, and some secretly fight and attack us by accusing us of inviting all Muslims, even the general population, to understand the Qur'ān and Sunna directly without going back to the scholars.

The statements of this author and of the opponents of Salafism would clearly be correct if there really were people who encouraged the ignorant and illiterate to interpret *fiqh*, creed, and religion directly from the Qur'ān and Sunna, although they cannot properly read a verse or *ḥadīth* narration.<sup>lv</sup> However, is Salafism really like this? Do we invite a person who does not have any knowledge to approach the Qur'ān and Sunna and impose his ignorant, lay, and illiterate interpretation on them? And then say: “I understand like this and I am commanded to follow the Qur'ān and Sunna?” There is no Muslim, however you wish to describe him, either a Salafi or a *khalafī*,<sup>lvi</sup> who makes such statements. This is what we have always said and will continue to say forever. Yesterday a few individuals from Aleppo visited me. Among them was a young man who had little education. He was familiar with the famous book *Al-Lā Madhhabiyya* and similar books referenced by the author. These books claim that we invite all people to follow the Qur'ān and Sunna, that is to say, that an ignorant person should understand the Qur'ān and Sunna according to his ignorance.

As a result, I explained the issue to him in detail. In summary, I said to him: “The text of the Qur’ān places people, in terms of knowledge and ignorance, into two groups: scholars are those who understand the Qur’ān and Sunna, and non-scholars are ignorant people who do not understand the Qur’ān and Sunna.” Each of these two groups has a responsibility according to the text of the Glorious Qur’ān, where the Most Exalted states: *You [people] can ask those who have knowledge if you do not know.*<sup>lvii</sup> God is addressing the entire *umma*, both its scholars and its ignorant, educated and unlettered, saying: “You are two groups: scholars and non-scholars. The non-scholars must ask the scholars.” *You [people] can ask those who have knowledge if you do not know.*<sup>lviii</sup> This is what we invite to, but we might differ with those who unquestioningly conform to the *madhhabs* about the definition of knowledge and scholars.

What is considered knowledge, and who is considered a scholar? We already responded to this question more than once with quotes from our scholars that the true scholar is the scholar of the Qur’ān and Sunna. Even if a person acquires all the knowledge found in the secondary literature of the *madhhabs*, he is not a scholar. Instead, he is like a collector who has gathered everything that the scholars have said in their books, which include many differences of opinions. If you ask him: “What is the saying of God and what is the saying of the Messenger of God in all that you have compiled?” he will openly admit: “I do not know.” Hence, he acknowledges that he does not know because, as Ibn Qayyim [al-Jawziyya] mentioned, true knowledge is based on “God said and His Messenger said etc.” When God said: “Ask the people of remembrance if you do not know,” it means ask the people of knowledge if you do not know.

Who are the people of remembrance? Are they those who dance while remembering God as some claim?<sup>lix</sup> Certainly not! The people of remembrance are, as the Most High said: *We have sent down the Qur'an Ourselves, and We Ourselves will guard it.*<sup>lx</sup> The people of remembrance are the people of the Qur'an. Therefore ask the people who know the Qur'an. A scholar is not a scholar of the Qur'an unless he is a scholar of the Sunna because the Qur'an says: *We have sent down the message to you too [Prophet], so that you can explain to people what was sent for them.*<sup>lxi</sup> A scholar is a scholar of the clear Qur'an and the clear Sunna, the one who has knowledge of the clear Qur'an and the clear *ḥadīth*, as mentioned in the words of the Messenger (ﷺ): *We have sent down the message to you too [Prophet], so that you can explain to people what was sent for them.*<sup>lxii</sup>

The true scholar is the one who says, "God said and God's Messenger said" in all matters of religion and in all that he refers to concerning Islam. No one else is a scholar. The verse divides people into two groups: the scholar who receives a question from an ignorant person, and the ignorant person whose responsibility is to ask the scholar. They attribute to us the assertion that it is the responsibility of an ignorant person to understand the same thing as a scholar, which is impossible. This lie about us is then leaked, spread, and publicized. It might sound persuasive to some who hear about Salafism from a person who adopted only part of it. However, he missed the fact that Salafism does not allow an ignorant person to claim scholarship. In fact, there is no difference on this point between Salafism and all other groups. An ignorant person is ignorant regardless of what he claims.

I mention this fact in order to give a better understanding of Salafism. And yet I find myself compelled to acknowledge that I am unable to deny the allegations of people who accuse Salafism and its followers of professing that which is not part of it. This is my admonishment to my brothers. Some people accepted the Salafi mission, studied it, and became people of knowledge. They are able to understand issues first from the Qur'ān and Sunna, and second from seeking assistance from the statements of early scholars who studied the Qur'ān and Sunna. I say with regret that I am unable to make it clearer to my brothers who are zealous for the Salafi mission that they can be a source of misunderstanding and doubt for the likes of those who attack Salafism and its advocates.

It is because of them that the author who ultimately agrees with *madhhab* fanatics states that inviting people who have no way of following the Qur'ān and Sunna directly is a way of misguiding them and causing them to leave the religion. Therefore, there are two issues, only one of which is related to some of our brothers. I advise them not to prematurely claim to have reached the status and level of understanding the texts of the Qur'ān and Sunna independently without assistance and without paying attention to this massive heritage that we inherited from our scholars. We pointed to the efforts and virtues of these scholars in our introduction to this lecture. On the other hand, those who attribute things to Salafism that are not part of it will not benefit because Salafism does not allow an ignorant person to understand the Qur'ān and Sunna directly. At the same time I want to say that the Salafi mission includes all Muslims in its command to follow the Qur'ān and Sunna, according to the details previously mentioned. However, a scholar does so independently and a non-scholar does so by following a scholar.

The obvious difference between Salafism and the *madhhabs* is that the unlettered Salafi does not say, “This is my *madhhab* and I seek a fatwa according to my *madhhab*.” As for the non-Salafi, he says, “This is my *madhhab*, so what is the ruling?” This is one of the clearest differences between the Salafi mission and the *khalafī* mission.<sup>lxiii</sup> The phrase that was mentioned here means that the general Muslim population will remain in their *madhhabs*. Thus, when one is challenged about an issue, he asks about his *madhhab*, and when a person from a different *madhhab* is challenged, he asks about his *madhhab*. As a result, Islamic society will remain like this to the point that a child will inherit the stagnant opinions of the *madhhab* from his father. Eventually, living in accordance with the Qur’ān and Sunna will be forgotten. Therefore, those who fear that the general Muslim public will be misguided because of Salafism have this fear only because of their ignorance of the Salafi mission. I hope all of us are in agreement that we must revive the early Islamic lifestyle when the concept of adhering to *madhhabs* did not exist even though there were scholars and non-scholars. Whatever the non-scholars of the time did is what must be done at all times and in all places.

## **Conclusion**

The crux of the Albānī’s polemic against *madhhab* Traditionalists is their unwillingness to reexamine the positions of their schools in light of proof-texts. He launched his polemic against *madhhab* Traditionalists by discrediting their *fiqh* methodology and accused them of preferring the opinions of the *madhhabs* over the teachings of the Prophet. Concurrently, he put forward his own scripture-based *fiqh* by removing himself from the interpretative process and presenting his conclusions as the direct teachings of the Qur’ān and Sunna. Albānī’s

disagreements with his *madhhab* Traditionalist critics stem from his opinion that his own understanding of proof-texts is the absolute truth.

Albānī had to remain uncompromising in his positions in order to maintain his image as a scholar who was not involved in the interpretive process, but rather one who passively understood the direct meaning of scripture. Had he compromised on his positions he would have been forced to acknowledge that his conclusions were based on a fallible interpretive process rather than the direct meaning of infallible texts. Had he conceded that his conclusions involved an interpretive process he would not have been able to claim to depend only on scripture. In other words, instead of Salafism being based on the absolute truth it would just be another *madhhab* trying to understand texts.

Albānī's presentation of the *madhhabs* as fallible human institutions and Salafism as being based only on the Qur'ān and Sunna was crucial to the survival of his claim to possess the absolute truth. His unbending attitude, contradicting positions on *taqlīd*, along with his iconoclasm, contributed to his reputation as irreverent toward both scholars and *madhhabs*. He attempted to change this image by denouncing overzealous Salafis and positioning himself as being detached from anything but the truth, just like the founders of the *madhhabs*. By doing so he positioned himself as their true follower rather than a critic.





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<sup>i</sup> Interview with Asma Afsaruddin and Jonathan Brown, "How Islamic is Isis, Really?," *Here & Now*, Boston NPR News Station (Boston, MA: WBUR, November 19, 2015). See Jonathan Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy* (London: Oneworld, 2014), 161-75. Yasir Qadhi explains that "Salafis are *the* Protestant reformation of Sunni Islam. There is no question about it that Salafis view themselves as the Protestant reformation. They are purifying the syncretic practices that crept into the faith over the many centuries in the exact same manner that Martin Luther viewed himself as purifying a cultural corrupted Christianity." Interview with Yasir Qadhi, "Salafi Muslims: Following the Ancestors of Islam," *Interfaith Voices* (February 21, 2013).

<sup>ii</sup> See Monique C. Cardinal, "Islamic Legal Theory Curriculum: Are the Classics Taught Today?," *Islamic Law and Society* 12:2 (2005).

<sup>iii</sup> Kasper Mathiesen uses the term *Traditional Islam* or *Traditionalists* to refer to a current within Islam that claims to follow what is authentically rooted in revelation, has crystallized under the banners of scholarly consensus (*ijmā'*) and has been transmitted as Islamic knowledge (*'ilm naqlī*) in chains of scholarly authority (*isnāds*). This movement is didactic and instructional, unlike Salafism's autodidactic "do it yourself" Islam. See Kasper Mathiesen, "Anglo-American 'Traditional Islam' and its Discourse of Orthodoxy," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 13 (2013), 191-219. Sherman Jackson correctly explains that "tradition is not the result of the simple act of transmission or handing down but a process of evaluation, amplification, suppression, refinement, and assessing the polarity between would-be tradition and contemporary, indigenous innovations or nonindigenous ideas and practices." See Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 42.

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<sup>iv</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries?,” in *Global Salafism*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29 (2006): 207-39; Christopher M. Blanchard, *The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyya* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 2007).

<sup>v</sup> On the term Salafism, see Henri Lauziere, “The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42 (2010), 368-89; idem, *The Making of Salafim: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). On the Salafi movement from a largely political perspective, see Roel Meijer, *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement* (London: Hurst & Co., 2009); Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Mohammad Abu Rumman and Hassan Abu Hanieh, *Conservative Salafism: A Strategy for the “Islamization of Society” and an Ambiguous Relationship with the State* (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2010); Yasir Qadhi, “On Salafi Islam,” <http://muslimmatters.org/2014/04/22/on-salafi-islam-dr-yasir-qadhi/> (accessed June 26, 2014); Quintan Wiktorowicz, *The Management of Islamic Activism: Salafis, the Muslim Brotherhood, and State Power in Jordan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

<sup>vi</sup> I have been unable to establish the exact date on which the lecture was delivered, but it appears to be from the latter part of Albānī’s career.

<sup>vii</sup> Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, 7.

<sup>viii</sup> Bernard Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action,” in *Global Salafism*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 37-45.

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<sup>ix</sup> See ‘Abd al-Fattāh Abū Ghudda (d. 1997), *Kalimāt fī Kashf Abāṭil wa Iftirā’āt* (Aleppo: Maktabat al-Maṭbū‘āt al-Islāmiyya, 1990); Ismā‘īl al-Anṣārī (d. 1997), *Ibāḥat al-Taḥallī bi’l-Dhahab al-Muḥallaq wa’l-Radd ‘alā al-Albānī fī Tahrimihī* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Imam al-Shāfi‘ī, 1988); *idem*, *Taṣḥīḥ Ṣalāt al-Tarāwīḥ ‘Ishrīn Rak‘a wa’l-radd ‘alā al-Albānī fī Taḍṭīfi-hī* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Imam al-Shāfi‘ī, 1988); Muḥammad Awwāma, *Adab al-Ikhtilāf fī Masā’il al-‘Ilm wa’l-Dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā’ir al-Islāmiyya, 1997); *idem*, *Athar al-Ḥadīth al-Sharīf fī Ikhtilāf al-‘A’imma al-Fuqahā’ raḍiya Allāhu ‘An-hum* (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā’ir al-Islāmiyya, 1997); Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-A‘zamī (d. 1992), *Al-Albānī: Shudhūdhu-hu wa Akḥṭā’u-hu* (Kuwait: Maktabat Dār al-‘Urūbah, 1984); Muḥammad Ramaḍān al-Būṭī, *Al-Lā Madhhabīyya Akḥṭar Bid‘a Tuhaddid al-Sharī‘a al-Islāmiyya* (Damascus: Dār al-Farābī, 2005); ‘Abd Allāh al-Ghumārī (d. 1993), *Al-Radd ‘alā al-Albānī* (Beirut: Dār al-Janān 1991); Gabriel F. Haddad, *Al-Albani: A Concise Guide to the Chief Innovator of Our Time* [Online]. Available at [http://sunnah.org/history/Innovators/al\\_albani.htm](http://sunnah.org/history/Innovators/al_albani.htm). 12 January 2012 and *Albani & His Friends: A Concise Guide to the Salafī Movement* (United Kingdom: Aqsa Publications, 2004); Maḥmūd Mamḍūḥ, *Al-Ta’rīf bi-Awhām Man Qassama al-Sunan ilā Ṣaḥīḥ wa Ḍa’īf*, 6 vols. (Dubai: Dār al-Buḥūth li’l-Dirāsāt al-Islāmiyya wa Iḥyā’ al-Turāth, 2000); *idem*, *Tanbīh al-Muslim ilā Ta’addī al-Albānī ‘alā Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Mujallad al-‘Arabī, 2011); *idem*, *Wuṣūl al-Tahānī bi Ithbāt Sunniyyat al-Subḥa wa’l-Radd ‘alā al-Albānī* (Cairo: Dār al-Imām al-Tirmidhī, 1994); Muḥammad al-Nu‘mānī (d. 1999), *Makānat al-Imām Abī Ḥanīfa fī l-Ḥadīth*, ed. ‘Abd al-Fattāh Abū Ghudda (Beirut: Maktabat al-Maṭbū‘āt al-Islāmiyya, 2007); Ḥasan Saqqāf, *Ihtijāj al-Khā’ib bi- ‘Ibārat Man Idda‘ā al-Ijmā‘ Fa-huwa Kādhib* (Amman: Maktabat al-Imām al-Nawawī, 1990); *idem*, *Qāmūs Shatā’im al-Albānī* (Amman: Dār al-Imām al-Nawawī, 1993).

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<sup>x</sup> Ahmet Zogolli was the President of Albania from 1925-28. In 1928, he declared himself King of Albania. He gave himself the title of Zog I, King of the Albanians and changed his name to Ahmet Zogu. He remained in power until 1939. See Miranda Vickers, *The Albanians: A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), 117-25; William Miller, *The Ottoman Empire and its Successors, 1801-1927* (New York: Frank Cass, 1966), 561.

<sup>xi</sup> On Albānī's *ḥadīth* method, see Kamaruddin Amin, "Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī On Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ*: A Critical Study of His Method," *Islamic Law and Society* 11:2 (2004).

<sup>xii</sup> See Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, "*Sīrat al-Imām al-Albānī 1*," lecture at [www.alalbany.net/?p=4654](http://www.alalbany.net/?p=4654), last accessed 1/21/16.

<sup>xiii</sup> In his *Durrar al-Ḥukkām Sharḥ Majallat al-Aḥkām* (Riyadh: Dār 'Ālam al-Kutub, 2003), 9-15, 'Alī Ḥaydar highlights how Ḥanafī scholars in the latter part of the Ottoman period were unwilling to include opinions of anyone other than the Ḥanafīs while compiling the *Majalla*. See also Muḥammad 'Abd al-Ḥayy al-Laknāwī, *Al-Fawā'id al-Bahīyya fī Tarājum al-Ḥanafīyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1975), 1-10. Laknāwī, a Ḥanafī himself, notes that many followers of the Ḥanafī *madhhab* have become rigid in their *madhhabism*. He notes that some rigid followers of the Ḥanafī school have claimed that when Jesus returns he will judge according to the Ḥanafī *madhhab*. I thank Jonathan A.C. Brown for bringing these sources to my attention. On the Ḥanafization of Sharī'a courts in the nineteenth and twentieth century, see Kenneth M. Cuno, *Modernizing Marriage: Family, Ideology, and Law in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Egypt* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 123-28.

<sup>xiv</sup> Barabara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 18-20.

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<sup>xv</sup> Suha Farouki and Basheer Nafi, *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 6.

<sup>xvi</sup> Daniel Lav, *Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 110.

<sup>xvii</sup> On Abū Ḥanīfa's use of *ḥadīth* as a source of law, see Sahiron Syamsuddin, "Abū Ḥanīfa's use of the Solitary *Ḥadīth* as a Source of Islamic Law," *Islamic Studies* 40:2 (2001). Syamsuddin explains that the notion that Abū Ḥanīfa paid little attention to solitary *ḥadīths* is incorrect. Rather, he rejected many *ḥadīths* on the grounds that they did not meet his criteria of authenticity.

<sup>xviii</sup> On Albānī's time in Saudi Arabia, see Stephane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); idem, "Between Revolution and Apoliticism: Nasir al-Din al-Albani and his Impact on the Shaping of Contemporary Salafism," in *Global Salafism*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

<sup>xix</sup> Abu Rumman and Abu Hanieh, *Conservative Salafism*, 45.

<sup>xx</sup> Muḥammad Sulṭān al-Khujnadī (d. 1380/1960), *Hal al-Muslim Mulzam bi-ittibā' Madhhab Mu'ayyan Min al-Madhāhib al-Arba'a?*, ed. Salīm Hilālī (Amman: al-Maktaba al-Islāmīya, 1984). Khujnadī argues that Muslims should not follow the *madhhabs* in any way since the Qur'ān and Sunna are clear. This work was edited by one of Albānī's main students, Salīm al-Hilālī.

<sup>xxi</sup> On the life of Būṭī, see Andreas Christmann, "Islamic scholar and religious leader: A portrait of Shaykh Muḥammad Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būti," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 9:2 (1998) 149-69.

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<sup>xxii</sup> Būṭī, *Al-Lā Madhhabiyya*, 103. Also see Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Nawawī, *Kitāb al-Majmū' Sharḥ al-Muhadhdhab li'l-Shīrāzī* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2001), 105.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, “*Aḥwāl al-Ijtihād wa'l-Ittibā' wa'l-Taqlīd*,” lecture from [www.islamweb.net](http://www.islamweb.net) last accessed 1/24/2012.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Albānī likely borrowed the idea of camouflaging *taqlīd* as *ittibā'* from Muḥammad al-Shawkānī (d. 1834). See Bernard Haykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam: The Legacy of Muhammad al-Shawkani* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 102.

<sup>xxv</sup> Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, *Al-Ḥadīth Ḥujja Bi Nafsi-hi fī l-'Aqā'id wa'l-Aḥkām* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 2005), 80-81.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Jonathan Brown, “Is Islam Easy to Understand or Not?,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* (2014), 28.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Albānī refers only to “the author,” and I could not identify the source or determine the author’s identity despite searching through his books and online publications. He was certainly not referring to Muḥammad Ramaḍān al-Būṭī’s well-known book against those who invite people not to follow the *madhhabs*, because, during the lecture, he refers to al-Būṭī as “another author” who accuses Salafis of being anti-*madhhab*. Albānī also notes that the author considers himself to be a Salafī, which may explain his calm and respectful tone. The identity of the author is not as important to me because my concern here is with Albānī’s ideas.

<sup>xxviii</sup> The audio clips were obtained from [www.alalbany.net](http://www.alalbany.net), a website dedicated to maintaining Albānī’s legacy by spreading his teachings, lectures, and writings. Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, “*Shubah Ḥawl al-Salafīyya*,” lecture at [www.alalbany.net/?p=4075](http://www.alalbany.net/?p=4075), last accessed 10/14/2013.

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<sup>xxix</sup> Q. 3:102. Translations of Qur’ānic verses are from M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>xxx</sup> Q. 33:70-71.

<sup>xxxi</sup> I have replaced Albānī’s blessings on the Prophet with (s) in order not to interrupt the flow of the translation.

<sup>xxxii</sup> This is the “Opening Supplication of Necessity,” found at the beginning of all of Albānī’s speeches and writings. Albānī considered this supplication to be an abandoned Sunna. He attempted to revive it by insisting that all speeches and books must begin with it. ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, a strong critic of Albānī, disagreed with him on this point. As a Traditionalist, Abū Ghudda used the practice of the scholarly community to support his argument. He explains that this supplication could not possibly be a Sunna because most early scholars did not begin their books with it. If it were a Sunna it would mean that the vast majority of early scholars did not apply it, an idea that Abū Ghudda could not accept. See Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, *Khuṭbat al-Ḥāja* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1979). Also see ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, *Khuṭbat al-Ḥāja Laysat Sunna fī Mustahall al-Kutub wa’l-Mu’allafāt* (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā’ir al-Islāmiyya, 2008). On Abū Ghudda’s differences with Albānī, see Jonathan Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 327-28.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> In his speeches, Albānī regularly breaks down his opponents’ arguments into numerous points and deals with them individually.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> *Mutawātir* narrations are a category of *ḥadīths* that have the highest epistemological value for jurists and *ḥadīth* scholars. They are considered to be reports that were transmitted through such a large number of narrators in the first three generations of Muslims that they are highly unlikely to have been fabricated.



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<sup>xxxv</sup> See Muslim, b. al-Ḥajjāj (d. 261/875), *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Riyadh: Dār Ṭayba, 2006), kitāb 44, Faḍā'il, i. 1178, no. 2535.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> In the introduction to his *Ṣifat Ṣalāt al-Nābī* Albānī makes his case against the *madhhabs* and *madhhabism*. See Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, *Ṣifat ṣalāt al-Nabī* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 1996).

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Q. 53:36-38.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> See Sulaymān b. al-Ash'ath Abū Dā'ūd al-Sijistānī (d. 275/889), *Sunan Abī Dā'ūd* (Damascus: Dār al-Risāla al-'Ālamīya, 2009), kitāb al-Dīyāt, vi, 546, no. 4495.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Q. 5:8.

<sup>xl</sup> In this example, Albānī sets out to demonstrate the “stupidity” of Sufis. Although al-Ghazālī does speak of *ilhām* and of being focused while in seclusion, I was unable to find this specific formulation in the *Ihyā'*. Like other Sufis, al-Ghazālī did not understand *ilhām* to be intellectual knowledge; rather he considered it to be a spiritual knowledge that cannot be attained by reading books. It is a product of illumination in the heart, and knowing God through spiritual experience. *Ilhām* is a special understanding of the divine that is given to those near to God.

<sup>xli</sup> Q. 3:31.

<sup>xlii</sup> The history of the *madhhabs* is not as simple as Albānī makes it out to be. *Madhhabs* are schools based on principles of understanding the Qur'ān and Sunna. The methodology of the eponyms of these schools was clarified by their students. The Four Imams did not write much themselves. Most of what is available are narrations of their positions. If there are more than one narration from the same eponym on a particular topic, his students attempt to determine which is more consistent with his principles.

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<sup>xliii</sup> Ibrāhīm al-Bājūrī (d. 1276/1860), Shāfi‘ī rector of al-Azhar University from 1847-1860. On him see Khaled El-Rouayheb, "Sunni Muslim Scholars on the Status of Logic, 1500-1800," *Islamic Law and Society* 11:2 (2004), 230.

<sup>xliv</sup> Albānī is distancing himself here from directly or indirectly criticizing the *madhhabs* even though he criticized them many times elsewhere.

<sup>xlv</sup> Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870), *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2004), kitāb 96, I‘tiṣām, 1814, no. 7352.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Albānī is most likely referring to Muḥammad al-Ḥamīd. On him, see Itzhak Weismann, "The Politics of Popular Religion: Sufis, Salafis, and Muslim Brothers in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Hamah," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 37:1 (2005), 39-58, at 51-53. Also see *idem*, "Sufi Brotherhoods in Syria and Israel: A Contemporary Overview," *History of Religions*, 43:4 (2004), 315.

<sup>xlvii</sup> For Albānī, Salafism is not about increasing numbers or compromising on the truth in order to win people’s hearts. However, as Bernard Haykel notes, Albānī and Salafis are often mocked by their detractors for speaking out about secondary issues such as ritual purity and menstruation, while overlooking more important matters such as political injustice. Members of this group are sometimes referred to as scholars of menstruation and puerperium (*‘ulamā’ al-ḥayḍ wa’l-nifās*). See Haykel, *Salafi Thought*, 49.

<sup>xlviii</sup> If a *madhhab* is understood to be a legal school, then the general Muslim population does not follow the *madhhabs* because they lack legal training. Instead they follow their local imams. Albānī’s criticism of the *madhhabs* is usually based on actions of the general public, not that of scholars.

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<sup>xlix</sup> ‘Alī b. ‘Umar al-Dāraqūṭnī (d. 385/995), *Sunan al-Dāraqūṭnī*, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifa, 2001), kitāb 6, ‘Īdayn, 2:194, no. 1741.

<sup>l</sup> Q. 30:31-32.

<sup>li</sup> Albānī’s interlocutors criticize him for claiming that the first three generations of Muslims had a single methodology. In his book, *Al-Salafīyya Marḥala Zamaniyya Mubāraka Lā Madhhab Islāmī* (*Salafism is a Blessed Temporary Phase, not an Islamic Madhhab*), al-Būṭī argues that these three generations never had a single methodology; instead, they had different methodologies such as that of the *ahl al-ḥadīth* and *ahl al-ra’y*. Hence, the claim of modern Salafis that they possess the only correct methodology is incorrect. See Muḥammad Ramaḍān al-Būṭī, *Al-Salafīyya Marḥala Zamaniyya Mubāraka Lā Madhhab Islāmī* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1988).

<sup>lii</sup> This is an example of Albānī’s contradicting himself as to whether laity should follow texts directly or rely on scholars. Earlier in the lecture Albānī noted that laymen are not held to the standards of scholars. Since they are laymen and cannot be expected to distinguish between a sound and false interpretation, they must follow a scholar. The *madhhabs* are made up of a scholarly class that interprets Islamic scripture according to the methodology and principles of that school. Albānī also included the Four Imams among the blessed generations. It was this generation that considered al-Shāfi‘ī a reviver of the religion (*mujaddid*) for introducing the principles of jurisprudence.

<sup>liii</sup> This statement suggests that scholarship should remain identical to the way it was in the first three centuries of Islam. Any scholarship that ventures away from the literal opinions of the first three centuries is considered to be inauthentic. In his understanding of what it means to follow the early generations, Albānī remains loyal to the literal opinions of the earliest Muslims. This is

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what makes Salafism unappealing to Muslims who seek a more intellectually engaging form of Islam. See Qadhi, *Salafī Muslims*.

<sup>liv</sup> Albānī's uncompromising positions highlight how important it was for him to be consistent. In his view, Islam is for everyone, the educated and uneducated. Everyone is required to follow all aspects of Islam. There is no elitism or elect class in Albānī's understanding of Salafism; scholars and non-scholars are equally required to adjust their lives to follow the teachings of Islam.

<sup>lv</sup> Albānī's critics accuse him of encouraging laity to interpret texts on their own because he forbids them from following the *madhhabs* and requires them to ask for proof-texts without possessing the tools to properly interpret them.

<sup>lvi</sup> Literally, someone who comes later. Salafis use the term to refer to those who follow later scholars. This means that the *khalafī* version of Islam is not authentic. The term *khalafī* is sometimes used to imply that non-Salafis are innovators in religion.

<sup>lvii</sup> Q. 16:43.

<sup>lviii</sup> Q. 16:43.

<sup>lix</sup> Referring to Sufis who dance in remembrance of God.

<sup>lx</sup> Q. 15:9.

<sup>lxi</sup> Q.16:44.

<sup>lxii</sup> Q. 16:44.

<sup>lxiii</sup> See note 56 for an explanation of the term *khalafī*.