

The Modern Salafi Revolution and the New Frontiers of Islam

Prof. Itzhak WEISMANN

Department of Middle Eastern Studies, Haifa University, Haifa, Israel

weismann@research.haifa.ac.il

Abstract

The Salafi epistemic revolution of the late-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries postulated that by a return to the model of the ancestors (*al-salaf*) Islam would regain its leading position in the world. It was waged on two frontiers: Muslim pre/early modern tradition and Western civilisation. This paper examines the conditions that led to the rise of a new strand of religious intellectuals in the Arab provinces of the late Ottoman Empire, their ideology, and the opinions of some major protagonists: the Islamic Modernist 'Abduh, the conservative Salafi al-Alusi, and the progressive Salafi al-Kawakibi. The article shows that modernist Salafism emerged as a politico-religious opposition of middle standing men of religion to the autocratic rule of Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II and to his conservative collaborators. The Modernist Salafis strove to strike a balance between an authentic original Islam and selective adoption of Western ideas, institutions, and ways of life. They diverged in the force of their attack on the tradition and the measure of their borrowing from the West. The Salafi revolution was completed in the aftermath of the catastrophe of World War I, making it the dominant paradigm of modern Sunni Arab Islam. At that same movement, however, began its split between Wahhabi-type ultra-conservatives and an increasingly radicalized Muslim brothers-type Islamists, which has recombined in global jihad.

Keywords: Islam, Salafism, modernization, Western Civilisation, Sufism