

Article

Unveiling the Innovators—A Glimpse on Sufi-Salafi Polemics

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Abstract: In western public discourse, as well as in parts of academia, Sufism and Salafism are sometimes portrayed as arch enemies in Islam. However, so far, very few studies have analyzed in detail the polemics between Sufis and Salafis in a western setting. This article tries to fill this gap by providing a snapshot of the critique of Salafism by the Sufi *Nāẓimiyya* order, as well as the response from the British Salafi spectrum. It will argue that although both protagonists would perceive themselves in the same way as outlined above, in fact both groups are influenced by each other with regard to the benchmark of what constitutes “authentic Islam”, as well as the ways in which arguments are portrayed as legitimately grounded in Islamic thought. These insights may help in better understanding the complexities of contemporary intra-Muslim debates and representations.

Keywords: Sufism; Sufism in the West; Salafism; Salafism in the West; Islam in Europe; Islam in the US; intra-Muslim discourse; contemporary Islam

1. Introduction

At a first glance, Sufism and Salafism might be perceived as existing in a solely antagonistic relationship in contemporary Sunni Islam. At least in the eyes of most of their followers, both currents seem to be mutually exclusive.¹ The first pays close attention to the spiritual dimension of Islam. In the view of the Sufis, this spiritual dimension is more important than the mere observance of legal prescriptions and therefore, Muslims should try to establish a closer relationship to God via constant remembrance (*dhikr*), in order to receive certain religious knowledge (*yaqīn*). The most beneficial way to do this is to follow a shaykh, who will act as a teacher on the spiritual ladder. In contrast to that, Salafis follow a heavily textualist interpretation of those religious sources they regard as legitimate. The exact performance of specific rituals and the minute abidance by the prescriptions they deem obligatory is of paramount importance. Many of the performances conducted by Sufis in the context of the expansion of consciousness are regarded as deviant by Salafis. Whether both approaches to Islam are really as conflicting as claimed by their followers is something to be discussed in this article.

These above-outlined delineations of what it means to be a Sufi/Salafi has been partially taken for granted in western public discourse on religious extremism and Islamist militancy. In these generalizing debates, Sufis are often portrayed as liberal, peaceful, and less strict in their religious behavior, while Salafis are viewed as stern zealots prone to justify or conduct violence in the name of Islam. For example, a documentary on the German branch of the *Naqshbandiyya-Nāẓimiyya* order called its members simply

¹ Some exceptions can be found among those belonging to the “post-Salafi spectrum” (Hamid 2008). For the attempt of an ecumenical discussion, see (2016) “Imam’s panel discussion: Salafis/Sufis finding common ground” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=825GBE0S6EM&t=89s>).

“the Anti-Salafis” (ZDF 2017). Furthermore, some pundits have called for a stronger governmental engagement with Sufi groups in the fight against Salafi inspired religious extremism (Jenkins 2009). The simplicity of this “solution” for rising religious extremism has been questioned by researches in Islamic studies. As Mark Sedgwick has argued: “Sufism may be the natural enemy of Salafism, but this does not mean that Sufism is the natural ally of those who are opposing Salafism, especially when they are opposing Salafism for their own reasons” (Sedgwick 2015, p. 117). Another academic study on both currents similarly concluded that “theological orientation cannot be used as a predictor of either violent or nonviolent behavior. Broadly defined theological orientations including Salafism and Sufism are not prime movers or causal factors leading to either acceptance or rejection of violence against religious others as a political strategy. They can, however, be used to legitimate a priori dispositions towards both” (Woodward et al. 2013, p. 59). From this follows that self-descriptions and attributions found in the polemics of both groups should be regarded with great caution.

Beyond public debates on extremism and militancy, numerous studies have dealt with the apparent conflict between Sufis and Salafis on a more general level. A comparatively recent anthology was published by Ridgeon (2015). Slightly older comprehensive works on Muslim criticism of Sufism are those of De Jong and Radtke (1999) and Sirriyeh (1999), although they do not focus as much on contemporary Salafism. When it comes to articles and essays, some authors have focused on regional case studies, such as Knysh (2007) for Yemen and North Caucasus, Tariq (2012) for Kashmir, Khemissi et al. (2012) for Algeria, or Brown (2011) for Egypt. Analyses of the relationship between Sufis and Salafis in the West, are still rather scarce. A noticeable exception surely is Hamid (2016), whose focus on explaining different forms of Islamic activism in Great Britain includes both Sufi and Salafi groups.

For all their merits, the aforementioned studies do not delve into the subtleties of the theological discourse between both groups. This should not be regarded as a deficiency, since the authors place their focus on more overarching research questions. Still, there remains a research gap when it comes to analyzing the polemics between Sufis and Salafis in a western setting. Such an analysis can prove beneficial in that it might challenge common assumptions on the nature of both currents based on a critical reading of primary source material. Critically assessing the arguments found in these debates might help answering the following questions: Do Salafis really disavow every form of contextual or metaphoric interpretation? Are Sufis really less dogmatic and strict with respect to certain religious obligations and prescriptions? What are the arguments put forth and what do they tell us about the relationship between both groups? Does the content relate to the lived experiences in a western setting, and to which extent can they be relevant to the process of identity formation?

In this article, I explore these questions by using a case study of the *Naqshbandiyya-Nāẓimiyya*, led by Shaykh Nazim Qibrisi until his death in 2014 and Salafi writings published on the website “Salafipublications”, which belongs to the network of the British Salafi preacher Abu Khadeejah.² This particular order was chosen since the publications of the *Nāẓimiyya* were a general response to various criticism levelled at Sufism by Salafis both in the western as well as in the Islamic world. The response of “Salafipublications”, in turn, was specifically limited to these very publications by the *Nāẓimiyya*.

The article starts with a review of relevant academic literature on the relationship of Sufism with historical and contemporary figures which are relevant for present-day Salafism. It will then portray the arguments found in the writings of the *Nāẓimiyya*, followed by the counter-arguments of “Salafipublications”. It will finish with a discussion of the questions raised in this introduction.

2. The Relationship of Textualist Currents within Islam with Sufism—Some Examples

The views of one of the scholars who will play an important role in the subsequent discussions in this article is the eponymous founder of the fourth Sunni law school Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855), especially

² <http://www.salafipublications.com/sp/>.

those regarding the relationship between Hadith and reason, as well as some of his theological stances concerning God's attributes that heavily inform contemporary Salafi thought (Dziri 2014; Schneiders 2014). During his lifetime, Sufism was only in its infancy, and from what is known so far, his stance towards the early Sufis was rather ambivalent. Although he believed in the power of the relics of the Prophet as well as in the *abdāl*, "extraordinarily pious Muslims" (Melchert 2006, p. 356),³ he was skeptical about the *dhikr*-ceremonies, which he regarded as an unnecessary innovation (Melchert 2001, pp. 356–60).

There is also some dispute among scholars on the attitude towards Sufism of Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), who is prominently featured in Salafi writings (Krawietz 2014). His polemics against well-known mystics such as Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240) are well documented (Knysh 1999). On the other hand, scholars such as George Makdisi (d. 2002) have argued that he was himself a member of a Sufi *ṭarīqa* (Makdisi 1973). This view has been challenged (Meier 1981; Ansari 1985). Contemporary research suggests that "it should nonetheless be clear that Sufism, within the boundaries of traditionalist theology, had a place in Ibn Taymiyya's worldview" (Post 2016, p. 161).

The antipathy towards Sufism is more obvious in the writings of Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1792), the founder of the Wahhabi movement from which contemporary Salafism emerged.⁴ The idea of an unbroken heart-based link (*rābiṭa*) between the student (*murīd*) and his shaykh, blind obedience towards him, and his claim to stand in a spiritual line all the way to the Prophet Muhammad (*silsila*) were for 'Abd al-Wahhāb signs of manifest unbelief (*kufr bawāḥi*) (Peskes 1999, p. 159). Still, "Wahhābism, in its early stages, confronted Sufism primarily at the level of popular practice and daily routines. Discourse was not carried out on the level of sophisticated theological argumentation" (Peskes 1999, p. 159).

This was rather done by representatives of the contemporary Salafi movement. Two prominent books containing a comprehensive critique of Sufism are "These are the Sufis (*Hādhihī hiya l-ṣūfiyya*)" and "The demise of Sufism (*Maṣra' al-taṣawwuf*)", written by 'Abd ar-Raḥmān al-Wakīl (d. 1971), the third leader of "Anṣār al-Sunna al-Muḥammadiyya", Egypt's oldest and biggest Salafi organization (Gauvain 2015). Other examples can be found in the writings of 'Abd al-'Azīz Ibn Bāz (d. 1999), the former grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, as well as Ṣāliḥ al-Munajjid, who administrates the Salafi website "Islam Q&A". Although they differentiate between different Sufi movements, both conclude that Sufism would have to be rejected in its entirety (Ibn Bāz n.d.; Al-Munajjid 2014). Against this historical background, the following chapter will analyze some of the most extensive Sufi responses to these Salafi criticisms, which were published by the *Ṭarīqa al-Nāẓimiyya*.

3. A Sufi Critique of Salafism

One of the most vocal anti-Salafi Sufi orders situated in the West is the *Ṭarīqa al-Nāẓimiyya*, which is part of the Naqshbandi-tradition in Sufism.⁵ Several websites on Islam in English are affiliated with the order.⁶ The order in its present form was founded by Muḥammad Nāẓim 'ādil al-Qibrīṣī al-Ḥaqqānī, known as Shaykh Nazim, who was born 1922 in what is now the Turkish part of Cyprus. During his studies in Damascus, he became the student of 'Abd Allah al-Dāghistānī (d. 1973), a local leader of the *Naqshbandiyya-Khālidiyya*. He told Shaykh Nazim to go back to Lefke in Cyprus in order to spread his message to the western world. The center of his activities in Europe was a mosque in London, which he visited annually for several months, almost up until his death in 2014 (Atay 2012, pp. 42–45).

³ It is unclear if the description of *abdāl* as "extraordinarily pious Muslims" is taken from the writings of Ibn Hanbal or if it is an explanation by Melchert. In later Sufism, the *abdāl* are more than just pious. They are seen as saints, without whom the universe would be thrown off balance (Goldziher and Kissling 2012).

⁴ For a depiction of this process from the perspective of the history of ideas see Lauzière (2015).

⁵ Also known as *Naqshbandiyya Ḥaqqāniyya*, *Ḥaqqāniyya* or *Naqshbandiyya Nāẓimiyya*.

⁶ <http://naqshbandi.org/>; <https://sufilive.com/>; <http://www.nurmuhammad.com/pbuh/> or <https://eshaykh.com/>.

The order regards itself as the most authentic representative of the *Naqshbandiyya* Sufi branch and denies other orders to be on the same level (Dantschke et al. 2001, p. 92; Atay 2012, p. 226). This claim is unsurprisingly disputed by other branches of the *Naqshbandiyya*, for example, by the Istanbul-based *Ismā'īl Ağa Community*.⁷ Points of critique are the ecstatic *dkhr*-ceremonies, which are accompanied by music and dance, which starkly contrasts with the *Naqshbandi* tradition of silent *dhikr*. Another point of contention is the mingling of sexes during these ceremonies, which often occurs in a western setting.⁸

In the US, the message of this order is spread by Hisham Kabbani,⁹ who is married to one of the daughters of Shaykh Nazim. Since the latter's death, Kabbani presents himself as his rightful successor. This, however, is contested by Mehmet 'ādil, who is one of the sons of Shaykh Nazim and resides at Lefke in Cyprus. A split into a diaspora-oriented group and a Turkish-based group seems therefore rather likely (Stjernholm 2015, p. 55). Kabbani is the founder of the Islamic Supreme Council of America and the As-Sunnah Foundation of America, two large Muslim NGOs in the US.¹⁰ He is regarded as one of the most prominent Muslim voices against Salafism and Islamist violence in North America (Curtiss 2009).

The basis for the analysis of this groups' anti-Salafi critique is Kabbani's "Encyclopedia of Islamic Doctrine", which consists of seven volumes as well as his book "The 'Salafi' Movement Unveiled". The "Encyclopedia", which came out at the end of the 1990s "functions as a scholarly and erudite criticism of Wahhabi and Salafi beliefs and accuses them of destroying Islamic consensus of belief and practice by inviting Muslims to follow a heretical innovation." (Geaves 2005, p. 8).¹¹ The first volume talks about the correct beliefs, and the second tackles the issue of remembrance (*dhikr*). The third discusses the nature of the Prophet, while the forth speaks about the topic of intercession (*tawassul*). The fifth is about self-purification, and the sixth and seventh deal with apparently forgotten aspects of Islamic worship. As stated before, the *Nāẓimiyya* tried to provide a comprehensive rebuttal of the accusations not only levelled at their particular order, but at Sufism at large.

"The 'Salafi' Movement Unveiled" in turn was written as a response to an anonymous work called "The Naqshbandi Tariqat [sic] Unveiled", in which the *Nāẓimiyya* was attacked for holding and spreading apparently deviant views.¹² In addition to that, the book "Albani and his Friends. A Concise Guide to the Salafi Movement", which was written by Gibril Fouad Haddad, another prominent scholar of the *Nāẓimiyya*, will also be part of the analysis, as well as some of his essays published on his website.¹³

3.1. Some Aspects of a Sufi Critique of the Salafi Understanding of Islamic Concepts

The fact that Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) developed in the centuries after the death of the Prophet is not denied by the Sufis of the *Nāẓimiyya*. To say, as the Salafis do, that it was therefore "unislamic" was not only an intellectually weak, but rather a preposterous argument, since it would render all Islamic sciences developed after the period of the Salaf superfluous:

And just as the Shari'a [sic] did not develop outside the framework of Islam, the Qur'an and the Sunna, even though it [sic] branches and knowledge encompassed many areas

⁷ For a portrayal of this order, see Pirický (2012).

⁸ For some critical questions by Malay students concerning the *Nāẓimiyya* directed to the former Mufti of Egypt 'Ali Jum'a, who is a Sufi himself, see (2015) "Ali Jumaa's Answers to the Wahhabi Run JAKIM of Malaysia, Regarding Naqshbandis" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNXAR-M_VpM).

⁹ The names of persons commonly known in their English version will not be put in Arabic transliteration.

¹⁰ See <http://www.islamicsupremecouncil.org/>; <http://sunnah.org>.

¹¹ Similar to Hamid, Geaves does not provide an in-depth analysis of the "Encyclopedia" since his article focuses on the ways in which Traditionalist and Sufi circles in Britain re-organized in response to the Salafi challenge.

¹² Much of the criticism in this book focuses on another anonymous book called "Haqiqat ul-Haqqani", whose content was purportedly rejected by Shaykh Nazim himself (Kabbani 1997, p. 50).

¹³ <http://www.livingislam.org/>.

not mentioned verbatim in these sources, so too did tasawwuf develop based on the framework established by the Book and the Sunna and never did it step out of the bounds of these parameters. (Kabbani 1996, p. 266)

From a scholarly perspective, this claim needs to be questioned insofar as certain mystics and Sufi practices have been subject to strong criticism by currents other than Salafism throughout Islamic history. The institutionalization of Sufism in modern Egypt, for example, went hand in hand with the ban of certain rituals deemed unislamic (De Jong 1999, p. 311).

It is noticeable that among the Hadiths quoted in this context, there are two which are frequently used by Salafis to refer to themselves. The first states that the Prophet has said that the Muslim Umma will split into 73 sects, only one of which will be saved.¹⁴ The second says that (true) Muslims will feel like strangers (*ghurabā'*) in a world surrounded by people who follow the wrong faith.¹⁵ On the one hand, Salafis say that they are the saved group, since they only rely on what is found in the Quran and in the Hadith (Meijer 2009, p. 5). This, in turn, would make them feel as strangers in the wider Muslim community (Köpfer 2014, p. 454). The Sufis, on the other hand, say that if Sufism is part and parcel of Islam, then the saved group can only be Muslims who have joined a *ṭarīqa*. In Kabbani's view, it is because of the ongoing onslaught on Sufism at the hands of the Salafis that Sufis feel as strangers in the contemporary Muslim world (Kabbani 1996, pp. 284–87). The interpretation of the Hadiths among both groups is virtually the same, they just use different labels.

In the attempt to portray Sufism as an integral part of the Islamic tradition, Kabbani extensively quotes the founders of the four law schools as well as other luminaries of Islamic legal thought. One of the most famous quotes he uses is attributed to Imam Mālik Ibn Anas (d. 795):

Whosoever practices Sufism without legal knowledge is a heretic, whosoever [in turn] practices jurisprudence without Sufism is a deviator and who combines between the two has found the truth (*man taṣawwafa wa-lam yatafaqqih fa-qad tazannadaqa wa-man tafaqqaha wa-lam yataṣawwaf fa-qad tafassaqa wa-man jama'a bainahumā fa-qad taḥaqqaqqa*). (Kabbani 1996, p. 278)¹⁶

If almost all prominent scholars of Islamic history have ruled in favor of Sufism so the logic goes, there does not remain any authority the Salafis could rely on in their critique of Sufism. As stated before, this holds true only for what was regarded by the religious establishment as orthodox Sufism. The question of what constitutes orthodox and non-orthodox Sufi beliefs and practices has always been an ongoing process of negotiation (Green 2012).

Given that, according to Kabbani, certain knowledge (*yaqīn*) cannot be obtained by the study of books alone, it is mandatory to follow a shaykh, since “every true Sufi is a scholar in Sacred Law, though the reverse is not necessarily true” (Kabbani 1996, p. 396). The puritanical approach of the Salafis was a deviation from the tradition and proof that they were a new phenomenon in Islam, inspired by western notions of epistemology:

The delusion that ‘no Islamic knowledge is hidden from me if only I decide to find it in the books,’ is the Westernized belief of the ‘Salafis’ who rebel against the idea of having an

¹⁴ It is transmitted in different versions in the Hadith-collections of Abū Dāwūd (d. 889) in the “Book of Sunna”, chapter “Explanation of the Sunna” (*sharḥ al-sunna*), al-Tirmidhī (d. 892) in the “Book of Faith” according to the prophet, chapter “What has been told about the split of this Umma” (*mā jā' a fi ftirāq hādhihi l-umma*) and Ibn Māja (d. 887) in the “Book of Tribulations” (*fitna*), chapter “The splitting up of peoples (*iftirāq al-umam*)”. It is not to be found in the collections of al-Bukhārī (d. 870) or Muslim (d. 875).

¹⁵ It can be found in Ibn Māja in the “Book of Tribulations”, chapter “Islam began as something strange” (*bada' a l-Islām gharībān*).

¹⁶ This quote was first mentioned in the marginal notes (*ḥāshiyāt*) of the Maliki scholar Aḥmad al-ʿAdawī (d. 1775) in the explanatory work (*sharḥ*) of the Maliki scholar ʿAlī Ibn Muḥammad al-Manfūfī (d. 1532) on the prominent legal compendium “*Risālat Ibn Abī Zaid* (Epistles of Ibn Abī Zaid)”, written by the Maliki scholar Muḥammad Ibn Abī Zaid al-Qairawānī (d. 996). Almost needless to say, Salafis regard this connection as being too vague, which is why they refuse to attribute this quote to Mālik. See Islamweb (2005).

Imam of fiqh or tasawwuf (...). Therefore it [Islamic knowledge] is taken and understood NOT [original emphasis] from the books—as is taught by Jewish and Christian professors in non-Muslim academies—but from Allah’s *awliya’*, the scholars of knowledge who are the full beneficiaries of the Prophet (...). (Kabbani 1997, pp. 110–11)

Probably aware of the fact that Salafis would strongly challenge this statement, Kabbani tries to prove that the legal scholars themselves have declared the superiority of the Sufi shaykh over the legal scholar. He points to a passage in a work by the prominent medieval legal scholar ‘Izz al-Din Ibn ‘Abd al-Salam (d. 1182), in which he said that “the friends of God” (*awliyā’*), i.e., the *shuyūkh*, possess a higher status among God than the legal scholars (*fuqahā’*) and even the martyrs (*shuhadā’*) (Kabbani 1996, p. 349).¹⁷

The lower status of those who fight in the name of Allah (*mujāhidūn*) and strive to become *shuhadā’* in comparison to those performing constant remembrance of God (*dhikr*) is further exemplified by other Hadiths quoted by Kabbani. When asked who will be on the highest ranks among God on the day of resurrection, Muhammad is reported to have said that it will be the one who remembers God most frequently. Puzzled by this answer, the questioner asks about those who fight for the sake of Allah and gets the following answer:

Even if he fights the unbelievers and the polytheists with his sword until it breaks and is being stained red from blood, those who continuously remember Allah are better than him (*lau ḍaraba bi-sayfihi fī l-kuffār wa-l-mushrikīn ḥatta yankasira wa-yakhtaḍiba damman la-kāna l-dhākirūn Allāh kathīr afdāl minhu*). (Kabbani 1998a, p. 6).¹⁸

This Hadith can be found in debates about the nature of the great and the small Jihad. However, in many of these debates, those who remember Allah constantly and those who fight for his sake are not understood as two separate or even opposing groups, as the quote of Kabbani suggests. Traditionalist scholars have rather argued that both can and should be done simultaneously (Schleifer 1983; Churchill 1991).

Neither the practice of *dhikr*, nor the use of prayer beads would constitute an innovation according to Kabbani. All the Hadiths which were used by Salafis to prohibit their use, were supposedly weak and could not be found in the six well-known Hadith collections. Moreover, in Kabbani’s view there was clear evidence for their use in exactly these collections:

The statement that counting *dhikr* on beads is an innovation is undoubtedly false. The use of beads for counting *dhikr* was definitely allowed by the Prophet, and a sunna of the Companions. This is proven by the *sahih* hadith of Sad ibn Abi Waqqas, who related that the Prophet once saw a woman using some date-stones or pebbles to count *dhikr* (...), and did not prohibit her use of them. (Dawud, Tirmidhi, Nasai, Majah) (Kabbani 1998a, p. 37)

With this style of argumentation, the Sufis try to defeat the Salafis with their own rhetorical weapons. This means that they accept the Salafi claim that Hadiths serve as the only legitimate source for judicial rulings next to the Qur’an. This could prove problematic, insofar as in this particular case, the Hadith does not speak exactly of prayer beads. It is rather Kabbani who draws an analogy on the basis of date stones or pebbles mentioned therein. This is exactly why Salafis accept the authenticity of the report, but they do not agree with its interpretation as a legal basis for the use of prayer beads (Al-Munajjid 1998).

¹⁷ The original quote can be found in one of the Fatwa collections of Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām, published by Ibn ‘Abd al-Fattāh (1986, pp. 118–19).

¹⁸ The Hadith can be found in al-Tirmidhī in the “Book of Supplications”, chapter “More [on the benefits of remembrance] (*minhu*)”. The prominent Salafi scholar of Hadith al-Albānī (d. 1999) downgrades the rating of al-Tirmidhī from good (*ḥasan*) to weak (*da‘if*). See Al-Albānī (1998).

3.2. On the Status of the Prophet and Sound Belief

Another strong point of contention between Sufis and Salafis is the correct way of venerating the Prophet. The celebration of the Prophet's birthday (*mawlid*) is a case in point. For the Salafis, it is a reprehensible innovation (*bid'a*), since it has not been practiced during the time of the Prophet and moreover leads to acts considered as forbidden (*ḥarām*) and/or reprehensible (*makruh*). The Sufis object to this reasoning by pointing to a so-called "Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb-week", which was celebrated in Saudi-Arabia in 1980. If the founder of their movement was worth a week full of festivities, why should this not be legitimate in the case of the Prophet (Kabbani 1998b, p. XVIII)?

According to the Sufis, the aim of *mawlid* was to increase one's love of the Prophet. The fact that one should love the Prophet more than anybody else was proven by different authentic Hadiths as well as the Qur'an itself. Because of all these proofs, the majority of scholars had agreed upon the legitimacy of celebrating the *mawlid*, even Ibn Taymiyya, probably the most venerated medieval scholar for Salafis. Kabbani reminds the Salafis of the words of the companion Ibn Mas'ūd (d. 650), who has reportedly said:

Whatever the majority of Muslims see as right, then this is good to Allah, and whatever is seen by the majority of Muslims as wrong, it is wrong with Allah (Kabbani 1998b, p. 11).¹⁹

The Salafi's objection to this argument is based on an assessment by al-Albanī, who deemed the report as being not authentic (Ahl al-Hadeeth 2009). As for Ibn Taymiyya, Salafis argue that he clearly considered the practice of *mawlid* to be an unlawful innovation (*bid'a*), although he mentioned that the intention of venerating the Prophet was a good thing (Salafipublications n.d.).²⁰

The Salafi's objection, in turn, is completely discarded by the Sufis. In their eyes, the Salafis neither possess the qualifications nor the legitimacy to question what has been agreed upon by the scholars of the Umma. The Sufis even equate this attitude with potential unbelief and use the following quote from the Hanafi scholar Mulla 'Alī al-Qārī (d. 1606) to support their view:

To prohibit that upon which the scholars have formed consensus is disbelief, because it exceeds the allowable prohibiting that is agreed upon in this topic. (as cited in Kabbani 1998b, p. 98)²¹

The apparent deviance of Salafi positions from what is accepted by the majority of Muslims was not only apparent in legal matters, but also in the realm of theology. In this context, the contemporary Salafis are accused of being anthropomorphists, despite the fact that some of their major authorities deny equating God with his creation.²² One example of non-anthropomorphic interpretations by historical scholars Salafis heavily rely on is Ibn Ḥanbal's tafsir of Sura 89, Verse 22, where Allah says: "And thy Lord cometh, and His angels rank upon rank".²³ In order to avoid giving God a direction, Ibn Ḥanbal had interpreted "thy Lord cometh (wa jā'a rabbuka)" as the coming of his command (*amr*) (Kabbani 1996, p. 190–92). This view was shared by later Hanbali scholars such as Ibn Jawzī (d. 1200), Shafii scholars such as Ibn Kathir (d. 1373), and even the Zahiri scholar Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064) (Kabbani 1996, p. 193). Against this background of evidence, it is beyond the comprehension of the Sufis that

¹⁹ The Hadith is not found in the six prominent Hadith collections, but is mentioned in the "Musnad (Hadith-Collection)" of Ibn Ḥanbal. It seems, however, that the word "majority" was added to the English translation, since it cannot be found in the Arabic original.

²⁰ I mention the response by "Salafipublications" already here because it is not present in the articles of Abu Hudhayfah, which are specifically directed at the "Encyclopedia". For an academic discussion of Ibn Taymiyya's views on celebrating *mawlid* see Ukeles (2010).

²¹ The quotation is taken from an explanatory work of al-Qārī on the famous book "*Al-Shifā' bi-ta'rif ḥuqūq al-muṣṭafā* (Healing Through the Identification of the Rights/Truths of the Chosen One)" by the Maliki scholar Qādī 'Iyād ibn Mūsā (d. 1149).

²² For a comparison of Salafi theology with the Ashari and Maturidi school of thought concerning these issues see Gharaibeh (2014) and to a lesser extent Wiktorowicz (2006).

²³ Translation by Yusuf Ali.

the prominent Salafi scholar Ibn ‘Uthaymīn (d. 2001) insists on a literal interpretation and claims that anything else would clash with the consensus of the Salaf (Kabbani 1996, pp. 191–94).

By this way of argumentation, the Sufis try to deconstruct the ideational genealogy of today’s Salafis back to the Salaf. Anthropomorphism was rather prevalent among extreme offshoots of the Hanbalis and other misled groups:

The recurrence of such historical incidents teach us time and again that the Salafis of today, like the Wahhabis before them, like Ibn Taymiyya and his student, did not make up all of their positions but took many of them from previous anthropomorphists, such as the Barbaharis and Karramis of Baghdad who raged in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries and were put down each time (. . .) (Kabbani 1996, p. 37)

While it is true that Ibn Jawzī was an opponent of anthropomorphism, Kabbani fails to mention that he faced some fierce resistance from other prominent Hanbali scholars of his time, such as Abū l-Faḍl al-Althī (d. 1236) or Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī (d. 1223) (Swartz 2002). Generally speaking there have been very few supporters of speculative theology (*kalām*) among Hanbalis (Halverson 2010).²⁴

Maybe the most well-known Hadith quoted by Salafis in order to prove that God is in the heavens is the one about the slave girl of the companion Mu‘āwiya Ibn al-Ḥakam (d. 685).²⁵ The report states that Muhammad asked this girl about the whereabouts of God, whereas she pointed towards heaven and said “in heaven (*fi s-samā’*)”. The Sufis, however, insist on the necessity of a metaphorical interpretation, since giving direction to Allah was forbidden by consensus. For Kabbani, the story has to be read keeping the context of idol worshipping of those days in mind:

The Prophet therefore meant to determine what she worshipped. When she said: in the ‘heaven,’ – and another narration says that she made a sign towards the heaven – it was understood that she was a believer in oneness. He meant by this line of questioning the disavowal of the gods of the earth (*nafi al-aliha al-ardiyya*) which are the idols, not the establishment of the heaven as a location for Allah, and Allah is greatly exalted from the sayings of the wrong-doers! (Kabbani 1997, pp. 41–42).²⁶

The Sufis of the *Nāẓimiyya* admit that sometimes Salafis do use metaphorical interpretation, but then they seem to make things even worse. One example is a part of Sura 57, Verse 4: “And He is with you wheresoever ye may be”. In order to avoid pantheistic beliefs and to insist that God is literally in the heavens (*bi-dhātihī*), Ibn al-‘Uthaymīn compares God with the sun, which is also fixed at the firmament, but whose rays touch humans on earth.²⁷ A second example is a Hadith in which the Prophet prohibited spitting in front of someone performing prayers, since God would stand in front of him in this moment.²⁸ For Ibn al-‘Uthaymīn, there exists no contradiction between the two examples, since the sun is during its rise in front of the one who looks eastwards, while it is simultaneously fixed at the heaven. If this is possible for something created, it has to be even more valid for its creator. The Sufis however, do not like to follow that line of reasoning:

²⁴ For the influence of Zahiri theory on Ibn Hazm’s theology in this context see Makin (1999).

²⁵ It can be found in Muslim in the “Book on Mosques and Places of Prayer”, chapter “The prohibition of talking during prayer and the abrogation of its permission (*taḥrīm al-kalām fi ṣ-ṣalāt wa-naskh mā kāna min ibāḥatihi*)”.

²⁶ These words are originally found in ‘Alī al-Qārīs commentary “*Mirqāt al-mafātīḥ* (Ladder of Keys)” on the book of Hadith-science “*Mishqāt al-maṣābiḥ* (The Niche of the Lamp)” of the Persian Hadith scholar Muḥammad Khaṭīb al-Tabrizī (d. 1341), which is based in turn on the original work “*Miṣbāḥ as-sunna* (Lamp of the Sunna)” written by the Shafīī scholar Abū Muḥammad al-Baghawī (d. 1122).

²⁷ Al-‘Uthaymīn’s comparison is to be found in his commentary on “*Al-‘Aqīda al-wāsiṭiyya* (The Creed of [the town] Wasit)” written by Ibn Taymiyya, who took the moon instead of the sun as the object of comparison (Kabbani 1996, p. 190).

²⁸ It is found in al-Bukhārī in the “Book of Prayer”, chapter “The burying of the expectoration in the mosque (*ḍafn al-nakhāma fi-l-masjid*)”.

He [al-‘Uthaymīn] continues his explicit similes (“just as the sun . . .”) with royal indifference to his blatant commitment of tamthīl [comparing God to his creation] (. . .). Since when do created things serve as an analogy for the Creator? (. . .) No rational person can say that such a meaning is meant here, for when the person at prayer prostrates, he does not draw near to a body nor to Allah’s body. This proves that the proximity in question is that of his mercy, and that the words ‘in front of him’ in the above hadith mean that Allah is looking over him and taking account of his works—not that He is there literally, which would be ascribing to Him a place, and this is an aberration. (Kabbani 1996, p. 191)

This section illuminates that the debate is not about the legitimacy of literalist or metaphoric interpretations per se. It is rather the attempt by the *Nāẓimiyya* to prove that the Salafis fail in both respects: Literal and metaphorical approaches to the text. For the Sufis, this was due to their bad character, as will be shown in the next section.

3.3. On the Bad Character of Salafis

One of the main points of criticism of the contemporary Salafis by the *Nāẓimiyya* is the apparent tampering by Salafis of classical works of Islamic jurisprudence and Hadith science. One example is the famous commentary of al-Bukhārī by Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 1449), in which he speaks of a consensus among the ‘*ulamā*’ with regard to the prohibition of giving direction to Allah. In the version published by the previous Mufti of Saudi Arabia Ibn Bāz, there is a footnote stating that this is the consensus of the people of *kalām* (speculative theology) only and not of Ahl al-Sunna (Kabbani 1996, p. 167). This was an obvious manipulation of the original message, which is considered an act of unbelief (Kabbani 1996, p. 189).

In fact, for Kabbani, Muslims were the primary targets of the Salafi rhetorical attacks. Instead of concentrating their efforts on Muslim unity and criticizing the enemies of Islam, Salafis would weaken the Umma through their sectarianism:

It is ironic that under all such lying charges, the ‘Salafis’ cannot hide the fact that they are seldom seen bringing anyone into Islam, while the Naqshbandis whom they attack have brought thousands and tens of thousands into Islam! (. . .) ‘The Salafis’ have declared loud and clear that their aim is to destroy Islam from within, while wearing the cloak of Islam. (Kabbani 1997, pp. 14, 137)

This statement needs to be seriously questioned when looking at the extensive research on converts and so-called reverts in the western Muslim Diaspora. It is true that the *Nāẓimiyya* attracted a significant number of followers in western countries in the 70s and 80s (Duran 1991). However, both official numbers published by governments, as well as numerous studies, point to the fact that Salafism has become the most dynamic current for people turning to Islam in the West (Roy 2004; Hamid 2009; Dantschke 2014; Inge 2017).

One of the worst culprits among the Salafis has been al-Albānī. According to Haddad

he remains the qibla of the people of Innovation [sic], self-styled re-formers of Islam, and other ‘Salafi’ and Wahhabi sympathizers, and the preferred author of book merchants and many uneducated Muslims. (Haddad 2000)

For Kabbani, Muslims should be cautious the moment an individual questions what has been a consensus for centuries. Of course, difference of opinion and the acceptance thereof has been part and parcel of the legal disputes over centuries. However, if one single person stands up against the majority, his position could no longer be regarded as a legitimate discord, but rather as a reprehensible deviation (*shudhūd*) (Kabbani 1998c, p. 111). One example concerns the nature of the performance of the daily prayer:

He advocates in his Salat al-Nabi the formula “Peace and blessings upon the Prophet” instead of “upon you, O Prophet” in the tashahhud in contradiction of the Four Sunni Schools, on the basis of a hadith of Ibn Mas’ud whereby the Companions used the indirect-speech formula after the passing of the Prophet. But the Prophet himself instructed them to pray exactly as he prayed saying: “Peace and blessings upon you, O Prophet” without telling them to change it after his death, nor did the major Companions (whose Sunna we were ordered to imitate together with that of the Prophet), such as Abu Bakr and ‘Umar, teach the Companions and Successors otherwise! (Haddad 2000).²⁹

Thus, the Sufis accuse al-Albānī for demanding something, which has not been demanded by the Prophet himself, something which is illicit. The argumentation becomes contradictory to some extent, however, because in the following passage, al-Albānī is accused of exactly the opposite, which is prohibiting something because the Prophet did not do it.

He prohibits praying more than 11 rak’as in Tarawih prayers on the grounds that the Prophet never did and in blatant rejection of his explicit command to follow the Sunna of the well-guided Caliphs after him. (Haddad 2000)

This brings up several questions: What is more important in finding the correct doctrine, the words or the deeds of the Prophet? Does every action have to be expressed verbatim by the Prophet in order to be legitimate? What role do the actions and sayings of the companions after the death of the Prophet play in this context? Looking at the arguments put forth, it seems that the Sufis of the *Nāẓimiyya* consider right what the majority of scholars have considered to be right.

This does not mean that their attitudes are always more liberal than those of the Salafis. When it comes to the matter of excommunication (*takfir*), al-Albānī is accused by Haddad of being too lenient. This is because the former should have declared that a Muslim can only be regarded as an infidel (*kāfir*) if his heart was convinced by his words or deeds containing unbelief (*kufur*). This would mean, in turn, that although someone who had worshipped an idol, insulted God, or killed a Prophet could technically still be considered a Muslim. Since it was unimaginable that the inner intention was opposed to such deeds, the majority of scholars have ruled that these words or deeds are a certain proof for apostasy (*ridda*) (Haddad 2009, p. 53).³⁰

These apparently deviant views of al-Albānī are considered by the Sufis as the result of his deficient methodology (*manhaj*). In relation to a Hadith in the context of intercession (*tawassul*), he has said that one man in the chain of narrators, Mālik al-Dār, was unknown (*majhūl*) (Kabbani 1998b, p. 125).³¹ Kabbani points out, however that this claim was only based on one source, and that he neglected the fact that this person is being mentioned in another chain of narrators. According to the rules of the science of Hadith, however, nobody must be declared *majhūl* if he is mentioned in at least two Hadiths and is not explicitly listed in the authoritative works on weak narrators (Kabbani 1998d, p. 45).³² It needs to be asked therefore if al-Albānī did not know the second chain of narration or whether he kept silent on it. In both cases, he had squandered his credibility as an authority in the field of Hadith.

Next to his textual and methodological errors, the Sufis of the *Nāẓimiyya* are appalled by the disrespect to other scholars they find in the expressions of al-Albānī. The most infamous incident according to Kabbani was his claim that Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 767) was weak in his dealing with Hadith

²⁹ The *tashahhud* is an invocation during prayer, where the person facing the qibla is greeting God and the messenger.

³⁰ For an analysis of not only the legal views on apostasy, but also of its practical implementation in Islamic history, see Cook (2006).

³¹ The “Hadith of the blind man” can be found in al-Tirmidhī in his “Book on Supplication” with no subchapter, and in Ibn Māja in his “Book on Establishing the Prayer and the Sunnah Regarding Them” with no subchapter.

³² For an explanation of some less known technical terms in the science of Hadith, see Juynboll (2001).

and the apparent comparison of Hanafi *fiqh* with the Christian gospels (Kabbani 1996, pp. 79–82).³³ The first claim was to be considered invalid insofar as al-Albānī would only rely on the opinions of people who are by and large considered weak. Their opinion bears no relation to the amount of prominent scholars who have praised Abū Ḥanīfa for his scholarship in Hadith. The Sufis say it is true that al-Nasā'ī (d. 915), Muslim, and Bukhārī are said to have declared Abū Ḥanīfa as “not strong with regard to Hadith (*laisa bi-l-qawī fī-l-ḥadīth*)”. This criticism, however, was illegitimate, since they have been proponents of the legal school of Ahl al-Ḥadīth, while Abū Ḥanīfa did belong to the Ahl al-Ra'y.³⁴ According to the laws of criticism and praise (*al-jarḥ wa-l-ta'dīl*), it is prohibited to criticize the members of the other school according to the criteria of one's own school (Kabbani 1998d, p. 164).

Criticism and praise is a form of narrator criticism, and was developed as a religious discipline to investigate the trustworthiness of the transmitters of Hadith. To say that members of Ahl al-Ḥadīth did not criticize Ahl al-Ra'y is historically inaccurate insofar as the polemics between both groups are very well documented (Makdisi 1979, p. 4; Çakmak 2017, p. 80). The rules of *al-jarḥ wa-l-ta'dīl* also have never been fully agreed upon, as they “are basically subjective in nature, and therefore do not yield any consensus that can be measured in statistical terms” (Koç 2005, p. 156).³⁵

The most famous critique of Abū Ḥanīfa al-Albānī relies on, was apparently made by Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 778), a follower (*tābi'ī*) of the generation of the companions of the Prophet (*ṣaḥāba*). After he had heard of the death of Abū Ḥanīfa, he reportedly said: “Praise be to God, never has been born someone more sinister in Islam (*al-ḥamd li-l-lāh, mā wulida fī-l-Islām aṣḥ'ām minhu*)” (Kabbani 1998d, p. 171). Kabbani's response to this is that it was highly unlikely that a highly respected scholar such as al-Thawrī would have said something that disrespectful, especially because his praise for Abū Ḥanīfa was well-known. If he had really uttered these words, he would have disqualified himself as an authority in Islam, and one should pay no attention to this statement (Kabbani 1998d, p. 172). For the Nāẓimiyya, it is only the Salafis who are notorious for their foul language towards everybody who disagrees with them. In order to see whether this claim is empirically justifiable, the next section takes a look at the Salafi responses to the accusations levelled against them.

4. The Salafi Response

The most comprehensive response to the accusations against the Salafis by the Nāẓimiyya has been formulated by a member of the British Salafi scene, Abu Hudhayfah. He belongs to a group of Salafis associated with the website “salafipublications.com”. The website is still in use, and was established in 1996 by members of a now dissolved organization called “Organisation of Associated Salafi Islamic Societies” (OASIS). This organization was led by the prominent British Salafi activist Abu Khadeejah Abdul-Wahid.³⁶ It was a break off of “The Society for the Revival of the Prophetic Way” (JIMAS), Britain's first Salafi organization, founded in 1984 (Hamid 2009, p. 394).

While the JIMAS leadership sympathised with the political “Sahwa”-movement in Saudi-Arabia at that time, Abu Khadeejah belonged to the so-called quietist spectrum, which is ideologically very much

³³ The quote in question goes as follows: “This is evident by the fact that Jesus, peace be upon him, ruled with our law and ruled with the Quran and the Sunna and not with something else such as the gospels or Hanafi law or something similar (*hādḥā ṣarīḥ fī an 'isā' alaiḥi al-salām yaḥkumu bi-shar' inā wa-yaqḍī bi-l-kitāb wa-l-sunna lā bi-ghairihimā min al-injīl au al-fiqh al-hanafī wa-naḥwahu*)”. This comparison is supposedly found in his commentary on “*Mukhtasar ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Summary of the Hadith collection of Muslim)” of the Shafii Hadith scholar Zakī al-Dīn Abū Muḥammad al-Mundhirī (d. 1258). It is said that the commentary has been removed from later editions. I was not able to detect a version containing the original citation. Looking at Salafi websites, however, it is possible to find the quote, which is interpreted in a different way: al-Albānī did not equate Hanafi *fiqh* with the gospels, all he wanted to do is to point to the fact that there were Hanafi scholars who stick so much to their *fiqh* that they neglect the Quran and the Sunna. See Sunnah.net (2011).

³⁴ The school of the textualists (Ahl al-Ḥadīth) and the school of the rationalists (Ahl al-Ra'y) were the two major legal schools in Islam before the formation of the four contemporary law schools. For a depiction of this process see (Melchert 1997). For the two terms Ahl/Aṣḥāb al-Ḥadīth and Ahl/Aṣḥāb al-Ra'y see (Schacht 2012a) and (Schacht 2012b).

³⁵ On the politicized use of *al-jarḥ wa-l-ta'dīl* in intra-Salafi polemics see (Meijer 2011).

³⁶ <https://www.abukhadeejah.com/>.

attached to the Saudi scholar Rabi' Ibn Hādī al-Madkhālī. The group around Abu Khadeejah is known for its lengthy polemics also against other currents of the Salafi spectrum, such as those associated with Bilal Philips (Duderija and Rasool 2019). Since it regards itself as the only legitimate group to carry the label “Salafism”, it was pejoratively dubbed the “Super Salafis” by other Salafi currents (Hamid 2008, p. 11). In an article by Abu Iyad, who is administrating the website “salafipublications.com”, we can find a self-description of the group:

He [the Salafi] is not of the sects of the Khawaarij who consider the Muslims to be Kaafirs (nonbelievers) due to their committing major sins, and make lawful the taking of their wealth and blood. He is not of the sects of the Shi'ah (Shi'ites) who hate and curse the Prophet's Companions and claim them to be apostates, claim that the Qur'an has been altered, reject the authentic Sunnah and worship the Prophet's Family, peace be upon them. He is not of the Qadarīyah who deny Qadr (the Divine Decree). He is not of the Murjiah who claim Imaan (Faith) to be only in words and not in deed. He is not of the Asharriyah who deny Allah's Attributes. He is not of the Sufis who worship graves, saints and claim Divine incarnation. He is not of the Muqallidoon who necessitate that every Muslim adhere to the Madhhab (School of Thought) of a particular Imam or Shaikh, even when that madhhab differs with the clear verses of the Qur'an and authentic hadiths of the Prophet, peace be upon him. (Iyad n.d.)

The text mingles historical and contemporary Muslim currents, which are considered deviant by the Salafis around Abu Khadeejah. As can be seen, the Sufis are one of the groups mentioned. The following analysis will rely on a series of 21 articles written by Abu Hudhayfah called “Exposing Kabbani”, which can be found in the section “Callers & Individuals” on “salafipublications.com”.³⁷

4.1. Countering the Accusation of Anthropomorphism

The majority of the arguments employed by Salafis against Sufis revolve around the age-old debate of the right interpretation of God's attributes and the pitfalls of anthropomorphism. Based on a part of Sura 42, Verse 11, both Salafis and non-Salafis alike deny any interpretation which likens God to his creation.³⁸ While non-Salafis resort to some extent to metaphorical interpretation (*ta'wīl*), Salafis insist that the immediate meaning of the words has to be accepted, but their nature or “howness” (*kaifiyya*) remains unknown.³⁹ They point to a quote of Imam Mālik, who is reported to have said that one should not even ponder about how God has established himself (*istawā*) upon the throne, as mentioned in Sura 20, Verse 5. Mālik is supposed to have said:

The establishment on the throne is not unknown, the how is beyond the intellect, the belief in it is obligatory, and asking about it is an innovation (*al-istiwā' ghayr majhūl wa-l-kayf ghayr ma'qūl wa-l-imān bihi wājib wa-s-su'āl 'anhu bid'a*). (Abdul-Raof 2012, p. 151)

Taking this as a premise Kabbani is accused of negating the fact that the meaning of the word *istawā* is known. His argument that the meaning of the ambiguous verses (*mutashābihāt*) is only known to God is challenged by the Salafis, who claim that the ambiguousness is only valid for the “howness” and not for the meaning of these verses (Abu Hudhayfah 1999c). If the meaning was not known, there would be no possibility to know God, something the famous Qur'anic exegetes Ibn Kathīr and al-Tabarī (d. 923) have declared to be the meaning of Sura 51, Verse 56 “I have only created jinns and men, that they may serve Me”. In fact, it would render the whole prophetic message null and void. In this context Abu Hudhayfah asserts:

³⁷ <http://www.salafipublications.com/sps/sp.cfm?secID=NDV&subsecID=NDV07&loadpage=displaysubsection.cfm>.

³⁸ “[...] there is nothing whatever like unto Him (*laisa ka-mithlihi shay'*)”. For a thorough analysis of both Salafi and non-Salafi perspectives on anthropomorphism see (Gharaibeh 2014).

³⁹ For an analysis of the foundations of the “*Bi-lā Kayfa*” doctrine in Islamic theology see (Abrahamov 1995).

Either the Prophet (. . .) knew the meanings of the words with which Allaah described Himself or he did not. If he knew them then he would have taught their meanings to his Companions by virtue of the command of His Lord: “O Messenger! Proclaim that which has been sent down to you from your Lord. And if you do not do it, then you have not conveyed His message.” (5:67). And if he (. . .) did not know their meaning then it results in a Messenger from Allaah who speaks about His Lord’s Attributes and yet he does not know what they mean and he is speaking with words he does not understand, and this is inconceivable. (Abu Hudhayfah 1999c)

The Salafis further accuse the Sufis of using double standards. Was it not al-Dāghestānī, Kabbani’s teacher himself, who has said that he dreamt of Allah’s eyes and described their beauty?⁴⁰ If the apparent meaning of these words was not intended, then what else was meant (Abu Hudhayfah 1999d)? This accusation indicates that the Salafis do not limit their critique to the “Encyclopedia”, but also consider other works of the *Nāẓimiyya* in order to look for potential points of criticism. Given the fact that the master of a Sufi order yields unrivaled spiritual authority, Kabbani is portrayed as either disobeying his master or giving up on his stances towards metaphorical interpretation (*ta’wīl*).

The issue of *ta’wīl* as used by Sufis is one of the main issues the Salafis take offence at. For them, any interpretation must be based on a textual proof “since it is only through revelation that knowledge of the Unseen can be arrived at” (Abu Hudhayfah 1999b). In order to substantiate that claim, the author draws back on the medieval polemics between the scholars of speculative theology (*kalām*) and those who relied on the textualist method of the *Ahl al-Hadīth*. He quotes Ibn Qudāma (d. 1223) as a proponent of the latter saying:

If he should say: ‘You have abstained from the interpretation of the Qur’anic verses and narrations which have come down to us in respect of the Attributes, claiming that the Salaf did make *ta’wīl* of them and explain them, then he is uttering falsehood, forging lies, and is guilty of the most grievous aberration. For there is no question about the fact that the doctrine of the Salaf, in this regard, consisted in acknowledgement, unreserved approval, and avoidance of the temerity of using allegorical interpretation (*ta’wīl*) and resemblance. Moreover, the fundamental rule is to presume the lack of their use of *ta’wīl*. So, let him who claims that they did interpret them allegorically produce evidence in support of his statement. But there is no way of knowing this save by the transmission and relation of narrations. Let him then transmit to us narrations to this effect on the authority of the Messenger of Allaah (. . .) or his Companions or from one of the Successors or one of the approved Imaams. Furthermore, he who claims this is one of the people of *kalam* (theological rhetoric), and they are the most ignorant of men with regard to the narrations.’⁴¹

The quote suggests arbitrariness when it comes to figurative interpretation. It also suggests that the historical Salaf were opposed to this. Modern day Asharis would counter these claims and say that the Salaf simply had no necessity to debate such issues. Things, however, changed with the emergence of the philosophers and members of other faiths who challenged the basic tenets of Islamic theology. It was only then that Muslims started to use the instruments of Greek rationalism and logic to defend themselves. From the perspective of traditionally trained Ashari and Maturidi ‘*ulamā*’, *ta’wīl* is only to be used by the experts in Islamic exegesis and not by the laymen. (Gesink 2010, p. 233).⁴²

How then do the Salafis explain the alleged metaphorical interpretation of God’s face by Imam Aḥmad mentioned in this article in Section 3.2 “On the status of the Prophet and sound belief”?

⁴⁰ This statement can be found in (Qibrisi 1980, p. 44).

⁴¹ This lengthy quote by Ibn Qudāma is originally found in (Makdisi 1985, p. 7).

⁴² It is therefore no coincidence that the Syrian Ashari scholar Sa’id Ramaḍān al-Būṭī (d. 2013) is frequently quoted in the works of Kabbani.

According to Abu Hudhayfah this interpretation has simply never been made by Ibn Ḥanbal. The chain of narration (*isnād*) for this report was weak and has to be rejected. For him, this makes much more sense insofar as there would be countless authentic reports which state that Ibn Ḥanbal always relied on a literal interpretation of the religious proof text, something already Ibn Taymiyya had acknowledged (Abu Hudhayfah 1999h).

Getting back at Ibn Taymiyya's and Ibn Uthaymīn's apparent comparison of God with the moon and the sun, respectively, Abu Hudhayfah cannot understand Kabbani's problem. Both scholars had explicitly affirmed the prohibition of likening God to his creation. They simply wanted to illustrate the Arabic word "with" (*ma'a*), as in the Sura 57, Verse 4 "And He is with you wheresoever ye may be" (Abu Hudhayfah 1999a). In fact, for Abu Hudhayfa, Kabbani's criticism of Ibn Taymiyya was nothing short of disparaging the Prophet, who has used the same comparison when he told his companions: "You will certainly see your Lord as you see this moon, and there will be no trouble in seeing Him".⁴³ Kabbani is further advised to have better listened to his own master, who, in his book "Mercy Oceans" wrote: "Allah Almighty called Muhammad (...) to His Divine Presence, and the Prophet (...) went as ordered, just as a dignitary is received by the Queen of England" (Qibrisi 1980, p. 7). Again, the rhetorical strategy employed at this point by the Salafis is one of accusing the Sufis of being inconsistent and contradictory, which was a trademark of deviant beliefs.

4.2. Further Points of Contention

The same is true for Abu Hudhayfah concerning the story of the slave girl. From the Salafis' perspective, the answer given by the girl ("Allah is in the heaven") was the only acceptable answer, since everything else would be speculation. The proof is that the Prophet was satisfied by her answer. To substantiate this claim, Abu Hudhayfah quotes Abū Ḥanīfa, whose quote from his "*al-fiqh al-akbar* (The Greatest Insight)"⁴⁴ is to be found in Kabbani's book himself:

Allah has no limits, nor any rivals ... He who says: 'I do not know if my Lord is in the heavens or on earth' is a disbeliever, and he who says: 'He is on the Throne, and I do not know whether the Throne is in the heaven or on the earth,' he is also a disbeliever. (Kabbani 1996, p. 136)

Kabbani has used this quote as a proof that whoever describes a place to Allah was an unbeliever. He relies thereby on the interpretation of this passage by the famous scholar of Islamic creed (*'aqīda*) Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 941). This view is discarded as erroneous by Abu Hudhayfah because it apparently neglects the context in which this statement was made. The narration goes as follows:

Aboo Mutee' al-Hakam ibn 'Abdullah al-Balkee said: "I asked Aboo Haneefah about the one who says: 'I do not know whether my Lord is in the sky or the earth.'" So he said: 'He is a kaafir, for Allaah, the Most High, says: "The Most Merciful has ascended over the Throne" and His Throne is above the heavens.' So I said: "If he says: 'I say that He ascended above the Throne but I do not know whether the Throne is in the heavens or the earth.'" He said: 'If he denies that He is above the sky then he is a kaafir'. (Abu Hudhayfah 1999g)

Thus, Abu Hudhayfah concludes that al-Māturīdī's and subsequently Kabbani's reading is wrong, and whoever denies that Allah is above his throne was a *kāfir*. What is interesting about this passage is that it is originally found in an explanatory work (*sharḥ*) of the prominent work "*Al-'Aqīda al-ṭahāwīyya* (The Creed of al-Ṭahāwī)" by the supposedly Hanafi scholar 'Alī bin 'Alī Ibn Abī l-'Izz (d. 1390) (Ibn Abīl-'Izz 1997, p. 222). "*Al-'Aqīda al-ṭahāwīyya*" goes back to the Hanafi Egyptian scholar Abū Ja'far

⁴³ The Hadith is to be found in al-Bukhārī in the "Book of Times of the Prayers", chapter: Superiority of the Fajr [early morning] prayer (*faḍl ṣalāt al-fajr*).

⁴⁴ On this book see (Van Ess 1991).

al-Ṭahāwī (d. 933). He lived approximately at the same time as the other two famous scholars of *‘aqīda*, Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 936) and al-Māturīdī. His work was an attempt to provide a theological consensus on basic Islamic creedal positions, which were fiercely fought over during that time (Calder 2012). Since the theological schools of today were not fully formed during that time, both Salafis and non-Salafis try to interpret “*Al-‘Aqīda al-ṭahāwiyya*” through their own theological lenses. As for Ibn Abī l-‘Izz, despite being a Hanafi in *madhhab*, he belonged to the textualists, which is why his *sharḥ* is famous among Salafis. Their critics on the other hand go as far as denying the existence of Ibn Abī l-‘Izz. Some even claim it was just a pseudonym for Ibn Qayim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350), the famous student of Ibn Taymiyya (Haddad 2015).⁴⁵ This passage illustrates that both Salafis and Sufis try to co-opt partially the same medieval authorities to give more legitimacy to their claims.

As has been shown in Section 3.3 of this paper, “On the bad character of Salafis”, the Sufis of the *Nāẓimiyya* accuse the Salafis of tampering with the classical works by adding to and subtracting passages from the originals. The Salafis, in turn, accuse the Sufis of a selective reading, which leaves out decisive passages and thereby gives a totally wrong impression of the author’s original intent. The case in point is a quote where Ibn Taymiyya had seemingly described a body to Allah (Kabbani 1996, p. 66). According to Abu Hudhayfah, Ibn Taymiyya was quoting someone else in this passage in order to portray the falsity of anthropomorphist views. Leaving out the information that Ibn Taymiyya was already referring to someone else was an act of deliberate deception.

How ludicrous then are the words of Kabbani: ‘We warn the reader not to be deceived by the disclaimer invoked by some of Ibn Taymiyya’s admirers that he did not really hold all these beliefs but merely quoted them in his review of the positions of those he criticized.’. (Abu Hudhayfah 1999e)

As stated before, the Sufis try to reinforce their arguments through statements by prominent legal scholars of the Islamic tradition. At the same time, they continue to insist on the claim that the spiritual leaders of the Sufi *ṭuruq* are superior to legal scholars, since they are able to receive direct inspiration from God (*ilhām*). The Salafis therefore look for other works than the “Encyclopedia of Islamic Doctrine” authored by the *Nāẓimiyya* in order to confront them with contradictory statements. One of the passages quoted is taken from Kabbani’s “Mercy Oceans Shore of Safety”, where it says that the knowledge of previous generations of scholars had “become as nothing in the ocean of knowledge of the saints of this present day umma” (Kabbani 1993, p. 93). With regard to this statement, Abu Hudhayfah ironically asks:

What benefit, therefore, is there in Kabbani quoting the earlier scholars if, as he would have us understand, their knowledge is over and done with, it is now limited to its own time and place? (Abu Hudhayfah 1999e)

The final issue to be discussed here is about terminology. The previous section has depicted the Sufi defense of the term *tasawwuf* as a legitimate Islamic science. The Salafis use a similar argumentation with regard to the term *bi-dhātihī* (“with his essence”) in relation to the establishment of Allah over the throne. For the Sufis, the use of this term is illegitimate, since it has no precedence in the Qur’an and Sunna. This point of criticism by Sufis is, in turn, taken up by the Salafis, who say:

There are a number of phrases and terminologies used within the various Islamic sciences, such as the science of hadeeth, fiqh, tajweed and their like, which are not to be found in either the Qur’aan or hadeeth. Should all these terms then be rejected? (. . .) Accordingly, the term *bi dhatihi*, although not employed to begin with, came into use at the appropriate time when it was helpful for the People of Knowledge to clarify the false interpretations of the various sects. (Abu Hudhayfah 1999f)

⁴⁵ So far I have not come across an academic study on Ibn Abī l-‘Izz. He is not mentioned in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

This statement is quite remarkable, since it gives the impression that the argumentative standpoints of both groups had switched. While the Sufis insist in this context on the necessity of a verbatim reference of terms in the Qur'an and Sunna, the Salafis adopt the previous argument about *tasawwuf* and argue in support for neologisms as long as these do not contradict the Sharia. This is exactly the way of argumentation used both by the Sufis with regard to *tasawwuf* as well as traditionally-trained 'ulamā', who defend the use of rationalist arguments and terminology by the Asharis against the opponents of their time.⁴⁶

Based on the analysis presented above, it should have become clear that the depiction of Sufis as mere spiritualists, who do not pay too much attention to the proof texts, and the Salafis as mere textualists, who will not accept anything not mentioned verbatim in these sources, is a simplification. The debate therefore serves as a vivid example to show how both groups are affected by each other's arguments, even if they claim to have nothing in common.

5. Discussion

This part of the article will summarize the arguments made in the previous parts and comment on the discursive relationship between both groups. It will then place the results in the wider context of contemporary western intra-Muslim debates and their role concerning identity formation. It will end by outlining some suggestions for further research in this field.

The first thing to note is that some arguments in the Sufi discourse discussed in this paper are of a defensive nature. They address the legitimacy of certain Sufi practices and the compatibility of a Sufi-inspired understanding of Islam with the legal prescriptions of the Sharia. This sort of vindication indicates that ignoring the Salafi accusations against Sufism is not an option for the *Nāẓimiyya*, because the fear of losing Muslim youth to Salafism looms large.

Other arguments are more accusatory, especially when it comes to the theological views of the Salafis. The aim of the Sufis here is to insinuate anthropomorphic tendencies among the Salafis, since anthropomorphism has been regarded as heretical in the Islamic tradition by consensus. The argument goes that since Salafis have already been declared as deviants, there is no further need to deal with their criticism of Sufism. The Salafis are further disparaged by the accusations of a deficient Islamic education, unjustified defamation and slander of respected past and present scholars, the deliberate tampering of texts from the Islamic tradition, as well as being influenced by western hermeneutics and epistemology. Thus, the Salafis are depicted both as a group similar to heretical sects of Islamic history, as well as a modern phenomenon which is not rooted in Islam at all.

The ways in which the Sufis try to generate religious authority seems ambiguous to some extent. The value of books and the science of Hadith is being portrayed as less worthy compared to the knowledge of the Sufi *shuyūkh*, but in order to make this claim, the authors rely on material which has been authenticated by exactly these sciences. Giving the status of the shaykh in Sufi thought, it seems odd that Shaykh Nazim is rarely mentioned, and that the bulk of the "Encyclopedia" is made of Qur'anic verses, Hadiths, and the opinions of medieval authorities. It is therefore possible to assume that the "Encyclopedia" is not so much directed at members of the *Nāẓimiyya*, but rather at its critics who would not accept arguments not directly related to a quote from the Qur'an and the Sunna.

The flip side of this approach, however, is that the material is methodologically virtually indistinguishable from Salafi writings. This is also something other Muslim currents who participate in the critical examination of Salafism have noticed. The reformist scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl, Professor of Law at the UCLA School of Law, writes about the "Encyclopedia":

Kabbani generally presents a series of anecdotal and juristic statements for most issues he addresses. However his treatment lacks a critical analysis of the material. Rather his conclusions,

⁴⁶ For a primary literature case example see [Al-Būḥārī \(1988\)](#).

whether on the legality of wiping over one's socks for ritual ablutions or the permissibility of juristic difference, are simplistic and unequivocal. (Abou El Fadl 2001, p. 202)

Interestingly enough, it is also the Salafis themselves who partially take up this argument, as has been shown in the previous section. They question the merit of quoting the primary texts, if the skill of receiving *ilhām* is generally understood by the Sufis as being superior to textual knowledge. The Salafis also criticize the Sufis' interpretation of the Qur'anic verses and the Hadiths found in the "Encyclopedia". They lament a neglect of a contextual placement for certain narrations, false analogical reasoning, as well as a misunderstanding of special Islamic terms and concepts. This can be interpreted as an appropriation of the critique normally levelled against them, which is an approach to the text without the right methodological tools. By doing so however, they actually give up on their premise that the religious sources speak for themselves and are self-explanatory for everybody; a presumption which precludes a variety of interpretations, even if only one of them was true.

These insights from the debate reinforce the necessity of questioning stereotyping depictions of Sufis and Salafis in public discourse on Islam and Muslim life in the West. As shown in the introduction, Sufis are often portrayed in such debates as the liberal and less textualist face of Islam, while Salafis are depicted as anti-modern zealots and the antithesis of anything "western". Such notions might mirror the image Sufis and Salafis want to convey of themselves, but they partially contradict the statements found in the analyzed material, as the examples I have quoted have shown. This insight is corroborated through other passages as well. For while it is known that Salafis pay close attention to the way they dress, one actually finds similar guidelines for western Muslims in the "Encyclopedia":

As for those who lead prayer and khutba in Western-style pants and other tight-fitting garments, both they and those who follow them are behaving indecently and ignorantly, jeopardizing their worship, ignoring the excellent example of the Prophet, and instead following the model of non-believers. (Kabbani 1998c, p. 112)

Another similarity between the *Nāẓimiyya* and the Salafis of "Salafipublications" is their rejection of modernist/reformist approaches to Islam. While modernists call for a critical reading of the Hadith literature (Kurzman 2002, p. 10), Haddad is as unequivocal as Salafis when it comes to questioning the content of these collections:

To reject a hadith that is in al-Bukhari and Muslim and claim that it is inauthentic is the mark of deviancy and innovation because it also contradicts the consensus of Ahl al-Sunna that everything attributed to the Prophet, upon him peace, in the Sahihayn is unquestionably authentic. (Haddad 2005)

The aforementioned reformist scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl has not only been attacked by Salafis (Abou El Fadl 2001), but also by Haddad, who called him "a Mu'tazili" who writes for a "Zionist magazine" and ignores the tradition in his "outlandish ijtihad" (Haddad 2003).⁴⁷ These examples show that the fault lines in contemporary western Muslim debates run between Salafis and Sufis as much as between modernist and anti-modernist currents, with the *Nāẓimiyya* and "Salafipublications" both belonging to the latter.

Keeping the overall picture in mind, the topics of the Sufi–Salafi apologetics discussed here do not have any relation to the lived realities or the social setting of the authors. It is a debate about the right dogma and manhaj. Only a few scholars of the contemporary Muslim world are cited, the focus lies on theological quarrels which are several hundred years old. This begs the questions of relevance for Muslims living in the West. Although no empirical investigation in different Muslim communities

⁴⁷ On the *Mu'tazila*, a rationalist movement in early Islam deemed heterodox by most contemporary Muslim currents, see (Gimaret 2012).

could be made in the scope of this article, the fact that these issues are fiercely fought over in different online forums indicates that they do indeed play a role. Not always, however, do the protagonists really delve into the details of the controversy. One case in point is a forum entry about a book which is quoted several times by Kabbani called “Al-Albani Unveiled”, written by Ahmed Ibn Muhammad Sayf al-Din, who belongs to the Deobandi-Movement (Sayf al-Din 1994). On a Salafi-Forum, an evidently upset user has posted the following quote:

Asalamu Alaykum wa Ramatullahee wa Barakatuhu, There is a big, big fitnah in my community of Vancouver Canada. Some brother is passing out this horrific book against our Sh.Albani(Raheemullah). I need to know if there is a book in english [sic] written in defence of the Shaikh, defending him against this book and it's lies??????? Or if there isn't who will stand up for the shaikh and write a piece in defence of him, and make Jihad against the people of desires and deceptions. I need to distribute this in my community ASAP!!! Inshaa'ALLAH. Was Salaam Akhook Fil Islaam Abu Abdurrahman as Salafee al Kanadi. (Abu Abdurrahman 2002)

One of the answers hints to a refutation of that book, which seals the debate (Troid.org n.d.). Such incidents shed light on the process of identity formation and the construction of religious authority among—probably young—Muslims in a western setting. For the *Nāẓimiyya*, their shaykh yields unrivalled spiritual authority.⁴⁸ Anybody who speaks against him is wrong by default. As for the Salafis, it is interesting to note that the originally egalitarian approach of directly accessing the religious sources seems to have been partially replaced by a *taqlīd* of those who are supposed to have mastered this method, such as al-Albānī.⁴⁹ This attachment to a higher authority in both currents leads to a form of group solidarity, where the arguments of the out-group are often discarded a priori. There is no more need to deal with the exact arguments. It suffices to know that al-Albānī has written a refutation of Kabbani or vice versa in order to be on the straight path. The sense of belonging to a group of like-minded worshippers and the unambiguous identity that results from this membership might be, for some Muslims, more important than an independent engagement with theological intricacies.

Others do engage and regard these disputes as a personal challenge to prove their religious qualifications. An indication that these debates matter in contemporary western Muslim communities is given in an essay on Salafi Islam written by the scholar Yasir Qadhi. He belonged to the Salafi movement himself, before turning away to an understanding some scholars have coined “post-Salafism” (Thurston 2018). Criticizing the exclusivist attitude of the Salafi movement, he writes:

No doubt, some people, at some level, do need to discuss the reality of the mawlid, and the Attributes of Allah and other aspects of faith. But these are not the problems of our time, nor do they present major challenges to the faith of our young men and women. These are controversies of a bygone era: the Salafīs and the Ash‘arīs can go on debating such aspects amongst themselves, and I too as a theologian will be glad to participate in such debates, in appropriate forums, in front of appropriate audiences. But the vast majority of our youth couldn't care less about such abstract non-tangible theoretical discussions. They are struggling to retain faith in their religion, problematizing Darwinism and secularism and post-modernism and humanism and liberalism and a thousand other ‘isms’, while Salafīs (and Deobandīs, and Ash‘arīs, and Sufīs) still debate in their circles matters that only concern the 0.1 %. (. . .) And while I might agree with the hard-core Salafī that Allah has indeed istawā ‘alā al-‘arsh (risen over the Throne) in a manner that befits Him, his myopic narrow-mindedness of the problems facing the Ummah, and self-righteous arrogance, and

⁴⁸ On the undisputed authority of the shaykh in Naqshbandi thought, see (Meier 1994, pp. 259–304).

⁴⁹ This holds obviously true for the quietist spectrum only. The politically activist and jihadi Salafīs have their own authorities.

his cultish mentality, will be major turn-offs for me personally, and harmful to the Ummah as a whole. (Qadhi 2014)

This passages illustrates two things: First, some segments of the Western Muslim community obviously grew tired of the recurring theological debates about the same topics. Second, the point that they voice their dissatisfaction about this issue hints towards the fact that these debates still seem to dominate and divide some Muslim communities in the process of identity formation.

To conclude, it shall be said that only a thorough analysis of primary material can provide insights about preconceived notions of the actors involved in intra-Muslim polemical debates. This is important insofar as reporting on Muslims living in the West is often abridged in that Salafism and its opponents are being portrayed as two antagonist black boxes, which are homogenous in themselves and have nothing in common, something which has been expounded in the introduction. These assumptions are false. Both the Salafi movement itself, but especially their opponents, are divided and differ significantly on a variety of subjects concerning the Islamic faith. Still, they sometimes resemble each other when it comes to specific demands concerning legitimate hermeneutics as opposed to some modernist approaches to Islamic scripture.

It must be stressed that this can only be a case example. More in-depth analyses of Salafi-Sufi polemics could show to which extent the results and thoughts presented here can be generalized and if there is a substantial difference between the Muslim world and the western Diaspora.⁵⁰ Other currents and their engagement with Salafism can then be compared with the results presented in this essay. In addition, field research in different Muslim communities could verify or falsify the assumptions about the relevance of these debates in the everyday life of the worshippers. Looking at the above quote by Qadhi, it seems that more than 20 years after the publication of the “Encyclopedia”, these debates seem far from being over.

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⁵⁰ Based on his field studies in Egypt, Richard Gauvain concludes: “Ultimately, charting the boundary lines that separate what is authentically Sufi from what is demonstrably Salafi in modern Egyptian religio-social realities has become an extraordinarily difficult, and arguably rather pointless task” (Gauvain 2013, p. 81).

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