Henri Lauzière


This innovative and learned book covers the development of Salafism over the course of the twentieth century. Most studies of Salafism begin with the present state of the movement, describing its creed (’aqida) and method (manhaj) and continuing with the different currents within Salafism (purist, political, and, of course, jihadi). In this division purist Salafism focuses on Islamic doctrine and theology, purifying them of what it believes are accretions, deviations, and innovations (bid’a) that have been added since early Islam. It rejects the different schools of jurisprudence and calls for a return to the “pious forefathers” (al-salaf al-salih), the first three generations of Muslims, and is quietist. Political Salafism became politically engaged under the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, whereas Jihadi Salafism makes jihad its central tenet. Focusing largely on internal debates between and among these three Salafi currents, most scholars have not been able to break out of the iron grip of Quentan Wiktorowicz’s seminal article, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,” published a decade ago. Remarkably, this article is not even mentioned by Lauzière, who refuses to take for granted the existence of Salafism as a continuous current since early Islam. Instead, he traces changes in the meaning of the term over time and analyzes its genealogy. This is a fruitful approach that casts new light on Salafism.

Lauzière first shows that doctrinal phenomena associated with the term salafiyya are much more diverse than is normally assumed: “The issue is not only that scholars commit a lexical anachronism by suggesting that past Muslims used salafiyya as an abstract noun meaning ‘Salafism’ when they did not,

but also that they commit a conceptual anachronism by assuming that the term Salafi conveyed layers of meaning that, in reality, have been affixed to the word only in the last ninety years or so” (p. 16). Prior to the twentieth century, the author argues, the term *salafiyya* was not used in the sense of a “comprehensive religious orientation.” His second major argument is that what we call Salafism is a modern ideology: “The exhaustive and systematic way in which contemporary purist Salafis now define [Salafism] – as a comprehensive approach to Islam conveying every aspect of the religious experience – is also characteristic of twentieth-century ideologies” (p. 23). Despite Salafi protestations that they are concerned exclusively with religious purification, they have been influenced by the struggle against Western colonialism as much as Arab nationalism has been. At the end of the book, Lauzière returns to this theme and states that beginning in the 1970s “a process of ideologization took place whereby Muslim scholars recast purist Salafism as a totalizing system reminiscent of Sayyid Qutb.” In his view, by the end of the century Salafism had become a “total ideology” (p. 201), as expressed in its *manhaj* or method.

In analyzing the emergence of Salafism, Lauzière reviews much of twentieth-century Islamic thought, from so-called modernist Salafis such as Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Rida to “real Salafis.” The defining feature of the modernist Salafis, whom Lauzière calls “balanced reformers,” was that they were Salafi in creed but modernist in their approach to law, society, and politics. They tried to combine a fixed definition of creed with a flexible and adaptable approach to the modern world, treating reform as a “civilizational process.” By contrast, purists have come to strictly apply Salafi principles to all areas of Islamic thought and practice, thereby turning Salafism into a lifestyle. This trajectory is not straightforward: modernist Salafism did not lead to purist Salafism. Rather, as Lauzière explains, “the conceptual expansion of purist Salafism means that it became increasingly difficult for Salafi theology to adopt a moderate stance on questions that, until then, fell outside the purview of Salafism” (p. 24). The success of purists over modernists manifests itself on many different levels in subsequent periods “in a gradual and tentative way” (p. 99).

*The making of Salafism* opens with a chapter on Muhammad ‘Abduh in which the author explains why ‘Abduh, as a rationalist, does not qualify as a Salafi but why he nevertheless chose the Salafi “orthodox” creed as the anchor for his otherwise modernist program. And Lauzière devotes a good deal of chapter four to the Moroccan modernist ‘Allal al-Fasi. But the book is not a dry analysis of different trends within Salafism and how they interact with each other. Rather, Lauzière has chosen to explore the development of the Salafiyya by following the intellectual journey of Taqi al-Din al-Hilali (1894–1987), a Moroccan thinker whose religious journey traversed many varieties of Salafism,