What We Mean Versus What They Meant by “Salafi”: A Reply to Frank Griffel

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In volume 55 (2015), 186–220, Frank Griffel published an article on salafiyya entitled “What Do We Mean by ‘Salafi’? Connecting Muḥammad ʿAbduh with Egypt’s Nūr Party in Islam’s Contemporary Intellectual History”. In this contribution, he disagrees with my interpretation of the history of Salafism outlined in my article “The Construction of Salafiyya” published in the International Journal of Middle East Studies, volume 42 (2010), 369–89. Griffel claims that the evidence I offered does not warrant the conclusion that French scholar Louis Massignon made a mistake when, in 1919, he first spoke of the salafiyya as a movement of reform spearheaded by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad ʿAbduh. As a result, Griffel makes a point of reiterating a slightly modified version of Massignon’s old narrative, claiming that “there was in Islam a broad Salafist movement of reform that began around 1870 or 1880” (p. 217) and that ʿAbduh should be counted among its exponents. I wish to respond to Griffel’s arguments and clarify our disagreement. In turn, I wish to tackle the larger question of how historians should tell the story of a notion such as Salafism.

Implicit in Griffel’s critique of my work is a dismissal of the methodology that I adopted and the angle from which I approached the problem. My 2010 article was a foray into the conceptual history of Salafism: I chose to examine Salafism as an empirically identifiable concept precisely because generations
of scholars had failed to do so, thus neglecting to verify whether primary sources supported or disclaimed some of our basic historical assumptions. Did the modernist reformers of the late 19th century really use the terms salafi and salafiyya, as the secondary literature suggests? If so, what did these terms mean to them? In my research, I found no indication that the Arabic word salafiyya was ever used as an abstract noun (maṣdar ṣināʿī) meaning “Salafism” prior to the 1920s.¹ Despite claims to the contrary, the word did not serve as a reformist slogan in the late 19th century. And while some ʿulamāʾ of that period used the technical term salafī from time to time as an adjective and as a noun (in masculine, feminine, and plural forms), they did not employ it to designate proponents of a modern movement of Islamic reform, as so many of us took for granted. On the contrary, the ʿulamāʾ who used the term gave salafī the same narrow meaning that past Muslim scholars had given it since the medieval period. That is, they used the label to designate one’s adherence to the Hanbali creed and, in particular, its rejection of theological rationalism or speculative theology (kalām) with respect to the interpretation of God’s attributes.

For these reasons, I concluded that the standard narrative of modernist Salafism (that is, the idea that al-Afghānī and ʿAbduh either founded or spearheaded a movement of reform called salafiyya in the late 19th century) was unfounded. From the perspective of conceptual history, this narrative remains untenable. Neither al-Afghānī nor ʿAbduh claimed to be Salafis, nor were they Hanbali in creed – quite the contrary. Moreover, there is nothing to date to corroborate the belief that they or any of their contemporaries conceived of themselves as part of a multifaceted reform movement called salafiyya.² Where, then, did this unfounded narrative and its conceptual implications come from?

The answer, I argue, is part of a broader story involving the expansion of print culture and the commodification of religious technical terms in the early 20th century. In my 2010 article, I contend that Massignon was searching for a convenient label to categorize a particular group of modern reformers different from the Wahhabis of Najd and neither fully scripturalist nor rationalist. It is likely that the publication of an Egyptian journal entitled the Salafyah

¹ I spoke of a “substantive” rather than an “abstract noun” in my 2010 article.

² Griffel is wrong when he claims that ʿAbduh occasionally used the term salafiyya with positive connotations toward the end of his life (p. 202). The only source he cites is my article, where I make no such claim. What I wrote, rather, is that ʿAbduh used the term al-salafiyyīn (meaning “the Salafis”) on one occasion to refer to a Sunni theological group that differed from the Ashʿaris. Griffel’s misreading has led him to make another groundless assertion, which is that the term salafiyya (most likely in the sense of “Salafism”) slowly came into use during the very first years of the 20th century, when ʿAbduh was still alive (p. 202). To my knowledge, this is inaccurate.