

The History Of Salafism I

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There is an oft-made claim that Salafism is a uniquely modern-day phenomenon. The following two-part essay aims to debunk this myth. This will be done by focusing on countervailing evidence in the historical record—first in discourse, then in deed.

This requires us navigate a skein of highly-varnished pseudo-history. Ever since the earliest sources were written, Islamic historiography has been a veritable saturnalia of confabulation. Dubious accounts of the history of Islam include that of the 14th-century Mamluk commentator, Al-Dhahabi of Damascus, whose “Tarikh al-Islam al-Kabir” rambles on for FIFTY VOLUMES. (That’s in addition to his collection of overwrought hagiographies of exalted Islamic figures: the “Siyar al-Lam al-Nubala”, which runs for a mere 28 volumes.)

For recent examples of (white-washed) historiographies of Islam, see: John Esposito, Fazlur Rahman, Hugh Kennedy, Tamara Sonn, Marshall Hodgson...along with the usual suspects: Karen Armstrong, Reza Aslan, Martin Lings, Zakir Naik, Mark Hansen (a.k.a. “Hamza Yusuf”), Timothy Winter (a.k.a. “Abdal Hakim Murad”), etc. {20} Alas, there is a long roster of charlatans with which to contend.

The popularity of such material is—to put it mildly—dismaying.

Then again, that so many take such pabulum seriously is unsurprising once we realize that there are many who’d much prefer the record not be set straight. Consequently, those of us who deign to set the record straight are held in contempt. Rather than honest brokers, we are seen as unwanted interlopers. (After all, we are meddling in what is supposed to be sacrosanct.) Acting in good faith is not enough; one is often expected to adhere to the ordinances of pro forma commentary.

If nothing else, weighing in on such matters is seen as very poor manners. Brute candor is tantamount to insolence in the genteel corridors of academia. And so it goes. When it comes to this contentious topic, most scholars opt to demure—as is expected in polite society. The degree of dissimulation can be exasperating to behold.

But take heart. One is SLIGHTLY better-off reading “only” marginally white-washed accounts—like Francis Edward Peters’ “Muhammed And The Origins Of Islam”, R. Stephen Humphreys’ “Islamic History: A Framework For Inquiry”, or Chase F. Robinson’s “Rise of Islam”. Such men are bona fide scholars; yet seem to feel obliged to gloss over certain infelicities so as the remain academics in good standing.

Hence the need for the present essay. I figured: If nobody else has the gall to take the plunge, it may as well be me. The key, I found, was not to let my audacity compromise my perspicacity. (It’s easy to get carried away with one’s own iconoclasm.) So I have made a concerted effort to keep conjecture—tempting as it might be—in check. When doing history, it’s usually best to just stick to the facts (viz. the documented historical record; in this case: what happens to be documented in Islam’s most trusted sources.)

The problem—as with most heterodox disquisitions—is that most of those who will bother to read the present essay are those who LEAST need to read it; and the people who most need to read it will be precisely the ones who don't. (The latter will typically dismiss such disquisition with a scoff, basking in the warm glow of their own sycophancy.)

Felicitously, not ALL contemporary material is hokum. For a reasonable historical account of the origins of Islam, one might consult:

- Albrecht Noth's "The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source-critical Study"
- Jonathan P. Berkey's "The Formation of Islam: Religion And Society In The Near East"
- Patricia Crone's "Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World"
- Robert G. Hoyland's "In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire"
- Peter Sarris' "Empires of Faith" (not to be confused with the white-washed documentary entitled "Islam: Empire of Faith")
- Fred Donner's "Muhammed and The Believers: At The Origins of Islam"
- S. Shoemaker's "The Death of A Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam"

...among others. {8}

Before proceeding, a very important—if elementary—point must be made. Islam is neither a religion of war nor a religion of peace. As with any other religion, it is whatever its practitioners make it...which, over the course of its tenure, has been a wide array of things. Such is the nature of creeds, which are amorphous by nature.

Indeed, Islam can be—and, indeed, has been—many different creeds to many different people...at different places around the world, at different times in history, for different reasons. So we mustn't mistake the present survey—which focuses on the more depraved parts—as an exhaustive account of the religion and its history.

In conducting the present précis, it's worth bearing in mind that Reformers do not dwell on what Islam has been; they focus on what it could be. They focus on its potential rather than its baggage. The blights on the creed's record do not pose a problem for their aspirations; as they recognize that pursuing a noble vision does not require one to deny a checkered past. Legacy is not destiny.

Yet, as mentioned, there is a oft-circulated canard that the fundamentalist version of Islam is only a recent development in the religion's long history. Such a gratifying claim would be anodyne if it did not preclude the ability to accurately diagnose the abiding dysfunction that continues to afflict the Ummah—a dysfunction that, as we shall see, has existed since Islam's inception.

Purveyors of this ingratiating farce expect bystanders to not know any better, so it continues to propagate—unabated by reality-checks. This is a problem; as genuine Reform requires that we all fess up to the nature of that which is (ostensibly) being reformed. Those sincerely interested in progress recognize that one cannot solve a problem until one first accurately determines what, exactly, the problem is.

What has made—and continues to make—Islam “fundamentalist” is what makes virtually ANY religion “fundamentalist”: Reactionary (puritanical, doctrinaire, hyper-traditionalist) thinking—which is to say: a fanatical commitment to inherited dogmas and chimerical legacies. The trait that sets Islam apart from virtually every other major religion, though, is that it is inherently political—to wit: theocratic. Hence one is forced to DEPART FROM its original formulation (wherein political governance and sacred doctrine are seen as one in the same) in order to posit the separation of mosque and State. According to those in the thrall of tradition, such departure is sacrilege...and thus beyond the pale.

In traditional Islam, integral to the notion of “sharia” (which simply means the path to an oasis) is the unity of religion and rule—per the doctrine of “wilayat al-faqih”. This is a long-established precedent that can only be upended via a significant paradigm shift. In other words: Islam is BY DEFAULT theocratic; and remains so insofar as people STICK WITH its original formulation. By contrast, in the event that Judaism and Christianity were MADE theocratic (the former by the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the latter by the Edict of Thessalonica in 380), the religions were obliged to DEPART FROM their nominal framework. Abraham did not mandate a Sanhedrin; Jesus did not envision a Vatican.

Hence reform in Islam means divorcing the creed from politics. That entails “moving on” from the way that Islam was initially conceived. In this sense, a Reform Islam is—among other things—a DE-POLITICIZED Islam; which—to repeat—is a divergence from the religion in its earliest form. Here’s the catch: This does not require anyone to pretend that a liberalized Islam is how it has existed all along. (The spirit of “sharia” can be retained even as it is shorn of its theocratic facet; as the term pertains to no PARTICULAR set of statutes. It is—in essence—a civic order of which god would approve.)

Hence the need to come to terms with the past. Evolution does not require delusion. And Progress is illusory if it is based on fallacy. We don’t need to lie in order to Reform. In fact, Reform REQUIRES that we—as it were—fess up to the facts of the matter.

Before proceeding, a few preliminary points can be made. Starting with the establishment of the original “Ummah” in Yathrib-cum-Medina, all questions were thought of as theological questions. Consequently, all “final answers” had to be theological answers. The problem there was obvious to impartial observers: Casting EVERYTHING in terms of the Sunnah couldn’t help but stymie intellectual endeavor (read: philosophy / science; free inquiry; revolutionary thinking).

In the same vain, all “problems” (real and perceived) were seen as RELIGIOUS problems. Consequently, all “solutions” had to be religious in nature. Addressing all matters according to fiqh / tafsir (decrees issued from faqih, mufassir, qadi, ulema / allamah, kyai, wali, etc. on doctrinal matters) and fatwas (edicts issued from POLITICAL figures like caliphs, muftis, amirs, shahs, pashas, mullahs, sheikhs, sultans, ayatollahs, etc.) inevitably fettered the development of civil society. All theocratic impresarios—from the local imam to the grand vizier—were (by their very nature) Reactionary. Such a paradigm was intellectually-stifling; and an impediment to the realization of a civil society (which does not operate from the top down; and in which the concentration of wealth / power is attenuated).

Hence, political theory within the Ummah was limited to a myopic (read: fundamentalist) conception of “sharia”—an exigency that drastically constrained any / all critical inquiry...with only a few iconoclasts breaking from precedent. This despotic mindset persisted insofar as every decree was seen as being delivered from “on high”; and capitulation was seen as appeasing the godhead. This went for any figurehead—whether an “ustad” or a head of state.

A backward-looking zeitgeist invariably ensued. For any given issue, the assumption was as follows: If things don’t go well for us, then we are being punished for having strayed from the right (“straight”) path: “Sirat al-Mustaqim” (alt. “hal al-wahid”). Therefore—in order to set things aright and realize our divinely-

ordained destiny—we need to go back to our roots.

So goes the thinking of all religious fundamentalists.

Such reactionary thinking is not a recipe for progress on ANY front—especially when it comes to the treatment of women.

Whenever so-called “reform” HAS occurred in the Ummah, it has been a matter of REVERSION, not of progression. After all, Reactionary thinking is a reaction to PROGRESS, not to stasis. That is to say: It is push-back against moving forward; an effort to arrest development...and, ultimately, GO BACK (to how things originally were).

Which brings us back to the task at hand. The trope “Islamism is merely a product of modern geo-political exigencies” is based on a hyper-romanticized historiography (read: faux history) of the religion’s past.

Such ingratiating farce continues to propagate because it is promulgated by unscrupulous Islamic apologists—of which there are legions.

This flattering narrative percolates through even the more “liberal” circles like a candy-coated opioid. It has appeal primarily because it serves as a palliative for those who want to attribute religious FUNDAMENTALISM to something other than RELIGIOUS fundamentalism. It should come as little surprise, then, that the aforementioned trope—insofar as it is stupendously gratifying—has become a hallowed part of Islamic boilerplate.

As is often the case, self-ingratiation—and an abiding need to pander—trumps intellectual integrity. For too many careerist academics, mendacity tends to supercede perspicacity when it suits them. So the discipline has become a veritable orgy of conflicts of interest. {37}

So we find that GENUINE Reform requires a reality-check. In order to move forward, it is important to know where one currently is...which involves recognizing how one got there in the first place. One does not plan the future by eliding the past. Forging a brighter future does not require denying the sordid history that brought us to the present point.

* * *

So where shall we begin?

The risible claim that fundamentalist Islam is a recent phenomenon—and only an aberration at that—is so preposterous that it would not merit attention but for its dismaying popularity. Remarkably, it seems to be taken seriously even by those who claim to be vaguely familiar with world history. For—as we shall see forthwith—the thesis does not withstand even cursory scrutiny.

The meanings of our terms must be made clear: “fundamentalist Islam” is not “radical”; it is TRADITIONAL. That is to say, it is simply unreconstructed—and undiluted—Islam. It should go without saying that any religion becomes more liberalized by being tempered (read: secularized). {1} Salafism has subsisted to the degree that Islam has resisted the natural progression of secularization that has effected the liberalization of, well, every other religion ever to exist.

Salafism exist NOW not because it was recently concocted; but because it has been PRESERVED. The militant Islamic fundamentalism that we see metastasizing in the modern world was not conjured from star-dust; it has been part of tradition of Salafism going back to the Salaf themselves. “Salaf” simply means someone from the first three generations of Muslims, starting with the Sahabah [companions]; then the “Tabi-un” / “Tabi-een” [successors]; and including the “Rashidun” caliphs (along with their acolytes). Short of contending that the Salaf themselves were not Salafi, we can’t do anything but trace what is NOW

Salafi back to what was INITIALLY Salafi.

In sum: Salafism has been Salafi since the lives of the very Salaf that it commemorates. As a way of upholding the Faith of the Salaf, it is predicated on uncompromising doctrinal fealty; and—consequently—an unabashed aversion of progress of any kind. {24}

The point is that Salafism did not magically appear in the modern era out of an ideological vacuum. It has a historical background. Indeed, it is based on NOTHING BUT historical background; which is simply to say that it is an emulation of the mindset of the exalted “Salaf”...which has existed, without interruption, since the ACTUAL DAYS OF said Salaf.

In other words: Salafism, BY DEFINITION, has been around for fourteen centuries. It is not a putrefaction of the some pristine incarnation of the religion from yesteryear. It is a re-instantiation of its autochthonous form.

Understanding this elementary fact, we see that there is nothing radical about Salafism (or Wahhabism)...any more than there was something radical about, say, Puritanism in Christianity or Haredism Judaism (a fact that becomes blindingly evident upon assaying each sect when it had its respective resurgences in modern times). These Reactionary movements were all REVIVALIST in nature, and thus the antithesis of Reformist. By stark contrast, reform is NOT reactionary. It entails progression, not regression (or, as the case may be, reversion). It is about moving forward; not trying to get back to square one. {10}

The distinction here (Revivalism vs. Reform) is as crucial as it is glaring. Various examples illustrate this. Contrast what John Calvin sought to do with what Francis Bacon sought to do (in the 16th century). Then contrast what John Winthrop sought to do with what Baruch-cum-Benedict Spinoza sought to do (in the 17th century). Then compare what Jonathan Edwards did to what Thomas Paine did (in the 18th century). By juxtaposing such divergent ideals (within their respective contexts), we can see the massive gulf that separates revivalist designs from reformist endeavors. The former is predicated on a stolid, doctrinal mindset; the latter (epitomized by the likes of Ahmad Kasravi and Farag Foda) embrace free inquiry.

Recall that Calvin (one of the most deranged fanatics in the history of Christianity) had the pioneering Spanish physician, Michael Servetus, burned at the stake for his (heretical) medical insights. When Torquemada was overseeing the inquisition, he was not trying to “reform” anything. And when Winthrop called for a Puritan utopia in the New World (New England), he was not undertaking a Reformation; he was DOUBLING DOWN on the most reactionary elements of his professed Faith. Such is not how Christianity NEEDS to be; yet it is unfortunately how it often HAS BEEN.

So it goes with Islam vis a vis religious fundamentalism.

Thus it is easy to distinguish between the world that, say, Sayyid Qutb envisioned from the world that, say, Martin Luther King Jr. envisioned. Such examples have shown that revivalism (associated with the vaunted “ihya”) is the antithesis of reform (associated with the reviled “bid’ah”). Without this fundamental distinction, we may as well call Calvin, Winthrop, and Edwards (as well as every practitioner of Salafism / Wahhabism) “reformers”...thereby going completely through the looking glass.

It should be noted up front that the “Well, X were just as bad; or even worse” tac is a dead end. The depravities of medieval Christianity (spec. Roman Catholicism) rival the depravities found within Dar al-Islam during the Dark Ages. However, this fact does not exonerate Islam; nor does it somehow exculpate the impresarios of Islamic fundamentalism. Nobody is exempt from moral culpability simply because others have been guilty of similar transgressions.

Moral principles are not circumstantially universal (as they are not recognized universally); they are CATEGORICALLY universal (as they exist irrespective of being recognized). There are, after all, absolute moral standards—which transcend culture, as they endure independently of any / all historical accident.

More to the point: Rectitude is not relativistic; it is deontic. So it behooves any thinking person to assess things from the standpoint of simply being human; as all humans qua humans have access to the same moral principles.

Dar al-Islam does not fair well even with COMPARATIVE virtue when contrasted with the contemporaneous non-theocratic world. That is, it fairs poorly even when the bar is set abysmally low (i.e. when juxtaposed against much of the rest of human society during the Dark Ages). And as will be shown: To the degree that it fared well in isolated pockets during certain times (the storied “Golden Age” of Islam), it was always IN SPITE OF, not because of, the Sunnah. To wit: It fared well to the degree that it managed to secularize—thereby un-tethering itself from the dictates of its sacred scriptures; and distancing itself from the example / teachings of the purported “Last Prophet”. (I will explore this point more in a forthcoming essay: “Islam’s Pyrite Age”.) This is plain to see upon reviewing the headway made in—say—Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan in the three decades following the Second World War.

The larger point is worth reiterating: Reform is ultimately about what Islam CAN BE; not about what it HAS BEEN. Dwelling on the past is not a recipe for a way forward; as atavism plays no role in Progressivism. {2}

The truth of the matter is as follows: Islam in its original formulation was the epitome of what is commonly known as “fundamentalist Islam”—that is: unadulterated Islam (or—as it were—Islam in its undiluted form). Thus a Reform Islam would—ipso facto—be a divergence from the religion as it initially existed.

To contend that Islamic fundamentalism is entirely disconnected from Mohammedism is to demonstrate a glaring ignorance of what Mohammed of Mecca—and the Salaf—actually said and did (according to their own sources). After all, it’s called “fundamentalism” because it is based on the fundamentals that the Salaf instantiated in the 7th century. In trying to peddle the myth that Islam in its most fundamentalist incarnation is some drastic divergence from the religion’s original formulation, one may as well deign to disassociate present-day Jehovah’s Witnesses from the Watchtower Society. {3}

When it comes to religious fundamentalism PER SE, it boils down to what the FUNDAMENTALS happen to be. (Obsessions only make sense once we’ve identified what’s being obsessed over.) So it is important to cultivate an understanding of the Salafi strain of Islam when assaying the HISTORY OF Islam.

METHOD:

Prescribing a solution requires that one first accurately identify and diagnose the root of the problem. That, in turn, requires one recognizing the larger context within which things have come to pass. And THAT requires coming to terms with the HISTORY OF the problem, since the day it emerged. That problem is not Islam PER SE; it is Islam in its original (fundamentalist) incarnation.

Here, I provide highlights from Islam's sordid history in an attempt to demonstrate this. I will do so in two stages (hence the two-part essay). As they deal with two aspects of the thesis, the two parts need to be read together in order to get the full picture.

I will start with the theological underpinnings of Islam via a survey of its most prominent proselytizers. I will then show how the prevailing ideology was made manifest in the actions of those in power. In other words: I'll start with the creed, then assay the policies enacted BASED ON that creed. The integral connection between doctrine and deed will be shown to be incontrovertible. {31} After all, zealotry does not arise ex nihilo.

Hence the first part of this disquisition will focus on (the history of) the DOCTRINE BEHIND the actions...in order to show that actions did not emerge from the aether. The second part will focus on (the history of) the actions themselves...in order to show that beliefs have repercussions.

In highlighting certain people / events from the long, meandering history of Islam, I limit the present survey to those which were indicative of religious fanaticism. This is not to say that there were no (intermittent) periods of amity...in certain regions...under certain circumstances. Nor does this mean that the spread of Islam NEVER involved good will. (Indeed, it sometimes DID involve a modicum of good will.) Whenever such fortuitous eventualities occurred, it is attributable to a panoply of factors—NONE of which were a matter of more stringently hewing to the Sunnah. {32}

I will address the estimable episodes of Islam's history in a separate essay (focussing on the religion's "Golden Age": "Islam's Pyrite Age"). There, I enumerate all the major instances that attest to the fact that liberal elements have sporadically cropped up in the Dar al-Islam over the centuries. However, with regard to the present purpose, such instances are a moot point. {33} The point HERE is to see how a specific hypothesis ("Fundamentalist Islam is only a recent development") holds up to the facts. Spoiler alert: It doesn't. At all.

Hence I will be INTENTIONALLY selective when summarizing broad sweeps of history. I am doing so not to mis-characterize a Faith, but solely to refute a specific proposition often made ABOUT that Faith. Devoting special attention to countervailing evidence is not the same as cherry-picking. The former is perspicacious; the latter is perfidious.

(If one aims to refute the claim that X had always been a primarily vegan movement, focusing exclusively on all the instances in which meat-consumption was prevalent in X would not be a matter of "cherry-picking"; or of mischaracterizing X. Such selectivity is simply how falsification works.)

Those interested in genuine Reform are interested in disabusing themselves of any and all illusions about that which they are trying to Reform. Consequently, it is imperative to dispel the myths that persist as a result of the dubious historiographies that still propagate throughout the Ummah.

The bottom line here is simple: Knowing where we're going—and how to get there—involves coming to terms with how we got here in the first place. Generally speaking, moving forward entails moving on. This goes for ANY religious fundamentalism.

So rather than give an exhaustive account of ALL things Islamic, I specifically emphasize the FUNDAMENTALIST—especially militant and anti-democratic—elements of Dar al-Islam's checkered

history. In this vein, it is only natural that I have deliberately highlighted whatever involved Islamic fundamentalism.

To repeat: The sole aim here is to bring to light the odious legacy of Salafism; not to slander Islam IN GENERAL. This, then, is not the whole story; but it is the whole story of that with which we are presently concerned: the history of Islamic fundamentalism.

As it turns out, over the course of the past fourteen centuries, Reform in Dar al-Islam has—regrettably—been far more the exception than the rule. While noting those exceptions is very important (a subject for another day), it is not warranted here.

Another point before we begin. It is important that we do not confuse a collection of dots with a connection of dots. The following survey does far more than offer a hodgepodge of hand-picked anecdotes; it reveals a difficult-to-ignore pattern. This isn't a smattering of “gotcha” moments; it is an adumbration of touchstones that—taken together—constitute an overwhelming trend.

What came to be dubbed “Salafism” began with the ministry of Mohammed of Mecca (hereafter: “MoM”); and has existed in numerous iterations ever since. Unsurprisingly, within generations of MoM's death, we saw the rise of the “takfiri” approach to the Faith. In this hyper-puritanical movement, followers were encouraged to persecute any follower who was deemed inadequately doctrinal.

This obsession with heresy shall be our point of departure.

Genesis Of An Ideology:

One would think that of all the thousands of verses in his last message to mankind, the Creator of the Universe would have thought to mention in passing—just once—that human solidarity might be a good idea. No such luck. Not even once do we encounter an enjoinder to love one's fellow man. The Mohammedan theme was made explicit by MoM himself when he exclaimed: “I have been made triumphant with terror” (Bukhari 52/177; alt. no. 2977); then made his creed primarily a function of submission; and his geo-political movement primarily about plunder and enslavement.

Starting in the 7th century, members of the Khawarij (endonym: the “Shurah”; alternate exonyms: “Kharijis” / “Kharijites”) denounced any Muslim less doctrinal than themselves. They tarred insufficiently pious member of the Ummah as de facto apostates (per the tenet of “takfir”; ref. Bukhari 4/63/260). The Khawarij could be described as the most puritanical—and militant—of the first Salafis. They were vehemently anti-Ali'd (that is: Anti-Shia). Those who assassinated the fourth Caliph did so in their name.

The divisive practice of “takfir” (denouncing those who show insufficient fealty) was also pioneered by the “Azraqis”. “Daesh” was only the latest manifestation of this movement, which dates back to the days of the Salaf. (Note, though, that ISIS did not fancy itself as Khariji, as it associated the Khawarij with the detested Ibadite movement.)

The fixation way back then—as it is today amongst Islamic fundamentalists—was on “those who recite the Koran, but [the recitation] does not go beyond their throats” (to quote a famous ahadith). The hostility here is directed toward purported Muslims who don't put their money where their mouth is.

Ideological purity was the name of the game; as it still is amongst Reactionaries within Dar al-Islam.

This didn't come out of thin air. The “takfiri” call-to-arms was exhibited by the noted Sahabah, Abu Musa Abd Allah ibn Qays al-Ash'ari of Zabid (Yemen)—a man who was eventually appointed governor of Kufa

and Basra by the Rashidun caliph: Umar; and then given the imprimatur of Uthman. {9}

Thereafter, this singular doctrinal obsession persisted through a succession of prominent medieval theologians—as we’ll see.

Alas, the Kharijites were not an aberration. The preoccupation with marginalizing—and even persecuting—those who exhibited insufficient doctrinal fealty continued on through the 8th century. Consider the preeminent fuglemen of Salafism: Malik ibn Anas. Imam Malik is widely considered the preeminent “faqih” of Islam’s earliest age. His treatise on fiqh, the “Muwatta”, emphasized martyrdom [“istishad”] as the most laudable achievement for those engaged in “jihad”. Needless to say, one does not become a martyr on the battlefield by engaging in an inner “spiritual” struggle (nor does one acquire “spoils of war”). {25}

In the 10th century, the renown Persian “mu-ta-kalim” [theologian; “kalam” means theology], Abu Said Hasan of Siraf (that is: Fars), was the preeminent “faqih” / “qazi” [municipal judge] in Baghdad. He disdained what he called “Greek logic”. To get a sense of his degree of dogmatic commitment, he insisted that the reputed eloquence of Arabic grammar was sufficient measure of the soundness of any / all Koranic statements (which, by then, had been rendered in Arabic). In other words, Arabic grammar trumped logic; so Truth could be ascertained NOT by critical analysis, but explicitly by how well it was articulated in Islam’s liturgical language. (!)

By the year 1011, Abbasid caliph Al-Qadir commissioned the “Baghdad Manifesto” in a ham-fisted attempt to mitigate the incidence of “fitna” (that is: anything that was seen to have caused disruption to “sharia”, as understood by the powers that be). He was especially concerned with the (Shia) Fatimid-supported Ishma’ili sect. The document sought to delegitimize Ishma’ilis by bringing their purported lineage back to Ali into question. Such a position was in keeping with the treatment of “subversive” activity by any totalitarian (esp. theocratic) regime.

Put plainly: Al-Qadir denounced free-thought (read: science and philosophy) as sacrilegious. He painted critical thinking—which, at the time, was associated with the despised Mu’tazila—as heretical. Hence the emergence of the term “zindiq”, which equates freethinkers with heretics. As a consequence of this draconian policy, the literalism-based jurisprudence of Ibn Hanbal was made official policy. Hence “takfiri” prosecution was re-instituted for any incidence of “ridda” [apostasy]. Moreover, “ijtihad” (anything that might have been seen as independent thought) was forbidden.

In 1075, Mahmud al-Kashgari referred to Tengri-ists as “infidels—may God destroy them!” Why? “Because they call the sky Tengri.” It was for non-Muslims’ BELIEFS that he saw fit to slaughter them. Anything that was not in accord with the Sunnah was to be eliminated.

It might be argued that these intellectually-stifling measures precipitated the demise of Islam’s so-called “Golden Age” (a period that I discuss in a forthcoming essay). For the Sunnah—as it had existed theretofore—could only nourish (circumscribed) intellectual activity within Dar al-Islam for so long before its potential was exhausted. Once the Dark Ages had run their course, society had matured beyond the point for which the creed—in its original Mohammedan form—was geared. After all, it was tailored to medieval minds—that is: minds unacquainted with the fruits of the Enlightenment. So the putative “golden” epoch of Islam had a limited capacity.

Suffice to say: By the time of the European Renaissance, the halcyon era of Muslim luminaries like Avicenna and Averroës had come and gone; and there was no equivalent of a Francis Bacon or Rene Descartes or Baruch-cum-Benedict Spinoza or Desiderius Erasmus or John Locke or Nicolas Copernicus ANYWHERE in the Muslim world.

Shortly after the “Baghdad Manifesto” was composed, a man from Tus in Khorasan (eastern Persia) rose to prominence. He would become the loadstar of Salafism going into the modern era. The timing of this auspicious figure (the late 11th century) is important with regard to the present thesis; as he evangelized almost a thousand years ago.

His name was Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali.

Al-Ghazali

Al-Ghazali is one of the most iconic Islamic fundamentalists in history; though—as we’ve seen—he was not the first to peddle a puritanical version of the Faith. But though he was not the first, he was one of the most—if not THE most—influential. He was, after all, highly skilled in the art of persuasion—an art in which any adept con-man excels. Consequently, he held tremendous sway across Dar al-Islam.

Doctrinal to his core, Al-Ghazali was hardly an innovative thinker. As with any proselytizer, his primary vocation was “balaghah” [rhetoric]. In other words: He was a sophist more than anything else. (To this day, the Islamic tradition of sophistry is referred to as “Rad al-Shubuhah”.) Being an ardent evangelist, Al-Ghazali was looking to bolster his rhetorical skills rather than to glean wisdom (in roughly the same way his contemporary, Christian theologian Peter Abelard had c. 1100 when HE devoted time to the Athenian expositors of the Axial Age.) Edification had nothing to do with it. {12}

Al-Ghazali fashioned himself a “mu-ta-kalim” [theologian] after his ultra-reactionary mentor, Al-Juwayni (an Ash’ari theologian who had carried out the legacy of Abu Said Hasan al-Sirafi). Consequently, he worked diligently to procure skills of persuasion so as to better carry out his charge; and to buoy his celebrity.

So what of this moniker, “mu-ta-kalim”? It is based on the phrase “ilm al-kalam”—commonly (and misleadingly) translated as “science of discourse”. {13} For Islamic apologists who advocate for this practice, though, the phrase is more accurately translated as “knowledge of theology”. Though even this is not precise, as “ilm” connotes something slightly different than genuine knowledge; as it pertains to a familiarity with—and embrace of—the Sunnah.

For many who touted it, “ilm al-kalam” was primarily concerned with RHETORIC (in the service of religious apologetics). Only sometimes did it obliquely refer to a general incorporation of Greek philosophy into theological musings. For those who PRETENDED to value “ilm” (so-called), “ilm al-kalam” referred to the craft of pedantic rationalization. It was not a matter of erudition so much as it was procuring prodigious acumen in sophistry. (I explore the use of the buzz-term “ilm” at length in the Appendix.)

If we are to understand Al-Ghazali, it is important to recognize that he was a sophist as much as he was a religious revivalist. Yes, he read Greek texts (mostly Aristotle). However, he did so not to learn about the world, but to refine his craft—to procure a prodigious savvy in the métier of shrewd argumentation.

He employed euphuistic rhetorical tactics in service to fundamentalist Islamic apologetics; procuring a litany of platitudes that have ended up being profoundly influential to the present day. His interest in Aristotle was solely about enhancing his sermonic acumen. He was not excavating the Axial Age for erudition; he was poaching it for rhetorical ammunition. {17}

Bottom line: Almost all Salafi boilerplate can be traced back to Al-Ghazali's derisive pontifications. {18}

To reiterate: Al-Ghazali was not engaging in anything that could be accurately characterized as critical inquiry; for his conclusions were foregone. The promulgation of (Shafi'i) ideological purity was his summum bonum. Having "ilm al-kalam" meant having the skills to effectively defend sanctified dogmas from detractors. While tremendously useful for the religious apologist, such a craft has nothing whatsoever to do with either knowledge OR science. {14}

Thus Al-Ghazali codified "fide-ism": the theological position that pits Faith against Reason, prizing the former over the latter. The idea, then, was that critical thinking not only sews discord in Dar al-Islam (a practical concern), it is blasphemous (a theological concern).

We might also note Al-Ghazali's unabashed misogyny—as when he declared: "The position of leader [imam] could never be given to a woman even if she possessed all the qualities of perfection and self-reliance. For how could a woman take the position of leader when she did not have the right to be a judge or a witness under most of the historical governments?" Good question.

After all, the Koran AND Hadith were overtly misogynistic in their worldview. {36} Even so, in making this (obnoxious) statement, Al-Ghazali was broadcasting his ignorance. Evidently, he was oblivious to the dozens of prominent female leaders that had arisen around the world for the previous two millennia (see part I of "The Empowerment Of Women In History").

In many ways, Al-Ghazali was the analogue of the Roman Catholic zealot, Augustine of Hippo—who was just as contemptuous of critical / free inquiry (and of women). In this scheme, intellectual curiosity (under the aegis of "ijtihad") was seen as heretical. (Augustine was a vehemently ant-intellectual expositor who believed in the salvation of HENS. As with Al-Ghazali, he reveled in the intoxication of his own dogmatic quagmire.)

Al-Ghazali concocted his own (demented) version of virtue-based ethics; but unlike Aristotle, he was merely using rhetorical tricks to rationalize foregone conclusions. His sole concern was to uphold the prized tenets ("aqidah") of his favored version of Islam: Salafism.

Speaking of "virtue ethics", it might be noted that the Classical Arabic term for "virtue" ("sawab") can also be translated as "piety". This semantic quirk is revealing, as it means these two things are often conflated—or even seen as synonymous—in Islamic discourse. (The nominal term for piety in Classical Arabic is "taqwa", which carries with it the connotation: god-fearing; thereby inferring that piety is based in fear.) Hence what is often translated as "virtue" has almost nothing to do with what is normally understood as virtue. Rather it intimates that one is hewing to the designated "aqidah" [also translated as "creed"]; and thereby maintaining one's "iman" [Faith]. Such "virtue" as obeisance goes against virtually everything Aristotle said.

This queer taxonomy is corroborated by the fact that LACK OF "ilm" is equated with IMPIETY via the term, "jahiliyya" (effectively, lack of awareness of the Sunnah). Thus "ignorance" is synonymous with failure to SUBMIT—a rather cockamamie epistemic standard.

Al-Ghazali's material was no "Nicomachean Ethics"; it was an exercise in hyper-dogmatism. In his ardor to propound religious doctrine, his commentary did nothing to inform people about universal moral

principles. The fact that he invoked Greek thought only made him more dangerous; as—for many—it made him seem erudite. {26}

Al-Ghazali and his ilk represented the antithesis of the figures who would later facilitate the Enlightenment. Unfortunately, he ended up having massive influence in determining Islamic orthodoxy. If the blame for Dar al-Islam’s intellectual bankruptcy can be placed at the foot of any one figure, Al-Ghazali is surely it. The extent of his (deleterious) influence cannot be over-emphasized. Indeed, Islam AS IT ACTUALLY CAME TO EXIST for most Muslims can be attributed to his odious legacy.

The point can’t be emphasized enough: As with Peter Abelard (who attempted to poach Classical Greek thought for his own religious purposes), Al-Ghazali’s only interest in Greek philosophy lay in serving his (atavistic) ideological agenda. And as with any theologian, he was only concerned with finding florid ways to rationalize pre-established tenets. In the event that he was unable to find a compelling rationalization for some point of doctrine, he would simply make things up—as when he put an expiration date on one’s chance to convert to Islam. (!) What might that have been? 40 years old (after which a non-Muslim was doomed to hellfire, regardless of penance). {15}

To reiterate: Al-Ghazali was the quintessential dogmatist. For him, critical inquiry was nothing short of blasphemous. Free-thought constituted “bid’ah” (that dreaded hobgoblin: innovation); and so was to be deemed haram. As far as he was concerned, piety (subservience), not intellectual curiosity, was the prime directive for mankind. Anything else was tantamount to heresy. It is thanks to Al-Ghazali’s precedent that evangelism (typically conducted under the aegis of “dawah”) remains a cottage industry (known as “da’i”) to the present day. (I elaborate upon this point in Postscript 2.)

The puritanical mindset of the “Khawarij”, which had been on the wane, was re-invigorated in the wake of Al-Ghazali’s frenetic proselytization. {16} It should be clear, then, that Al-Ghazali was not a Reformer; he was a REVIVALIST. This was made plain by the title of one of his most popular works: the “Hya Ulum ad-Din” [alt. “Ihya’u Ulumiddin”; “Revival of Religious Way of Life”]. The tract was later re-titled “Kimiya-yi Sa’adat” [Alchemy of Happiness] for propagandistic purposes. Its main themes were salvation, damnation, and religious duties. To say that it contributed NOTHING to human understanding would be charitable. To say that it hamstrung all worthwhile discourse throughout the Muslim world for centuries would be an understatement.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Al-Ghazali was a self-proclaimed “mu-jaddid” (one who renews the Faith). In other words: he was—more than anything else—a religious revivalist. This is simply to say that he sought to BRING BACK that which had PREVIOUSLY BEEN. He succeeded in this task to a degree he could not have imagined.

Equipped with a finely-honed rhetorical acumen gleaned from Aristotle’s commentary, Al-Ghazali’s preachments ended up being influential throughout the Ummah thereafter. Rather than just a flash in the pan, he was the spark that ignited the conflagration that would eventually burgeon into Salafism as we know it today.

It is worth noting the stark contrast between Al-Ghazali (doyen of doctrinal obduracy) and estimable Muslim luminaries like Avicenna (a 10th century Progressive thinker from northeastern Persia) and Averroës (an 11th-century Progressive thinker from Andalusia). Al-Ghazali—the most celebrated commentator of the age—could be accurately characterized as the anti-pole of Avicenna and Averroës. He was, after all, the quintessential revivalist. That is to say, he was an adversary of Progress.

The so-called “Golden Age” of Islam was not as peachy-keen as some Islamic apologists often make it out to be (as I show in my essay, “Islam’s Pyrite Age”). Though Andalusia was a COMPARABLY Progressive region during the Middle Ages, it was not nearly as cosmopolitan as would sometimes seem

from some of the romanticized portrayals that have become so popular.

Take 11th-century Granada. When a Jewish man (Joseph ben Samuel “ha-Nagid”) was appointed to the position of vizier by the local potentate (Badis al-Muzaffar) c. 1066, a mob of indignant Muslims stormed the palace, then lynched and crucified him. The mob then proceeded to massacre thousands of the city’s Jews. Why did they react in this manner? Per sharia, “dhimmis” are not supposed to have a position of authority over Muslims...EVER...under any circumstances. So the political appointment was seen as an outrage.

Bear in mind: This uprising occurred in one of the most liberal places in the Muslim world...during what is reputed to be its most cosmopolitan era. Medieval Andalusia was, in fact, not the utopia of pluralism some historiographers make it out to be. Christians were left to their own devices so long as they kept their heads down. Thus: Even during Dar al-Islam’s most progressive epoch, strict versions of “sharia” was seen as incontrovertible, and non-negotiable. By medieval standards (a very low bar to clear), Granada was somewhat cosmopolitan (that is: quasi-liberal). Yet according to the timeless standards of civil society, it was still palpably illiberal. It is for this reason that Islam’s “Golden Age” is more accurately described as its “Pyrite Age”.

So Al-Ghazali was hardly the ORIGIN of Islamic fundamentalism. Even if it could be shown that he was concocting this fundamentalist theological worldview from whole-cloth, we would be forced to revise the definition of “recent” to “within the past millennium” should we deign to uphold the (spurious) claim that fundamentalism is a (relatively) “recent” development in Dar al-Islam.

Al-Ghazali’s role in the history of Islam is crucial to grasp. He galvanized what was a faltering Islamic fundamentalism, thereby revitalizing the Salafi tradition that he felt was in danger of being lost. And so Islamic apologists today rhapsodize about Al-Ghazali as if he instigated the equivalent of the Copernican Revolution. At the end of the day, though, he was a revivalist, not a revolutionary. (For more on this point, see Eric Ormsby’s “Ghazali: The Revival of Islam”.)

Al-Ghazali’s perorations were such a resounding success, even some of the more naive of ostensibly-Progressive Islamic apologists have been known to celebrate him, and selectively quote him. {20} Islamic apologists often tout the fact that Al-Ghazali “studied” the philosophers of ancient Antiquity. What they neglect to mention is that this “studying” was merely a matter of cultivating his ability to debate. To recapitulate: He sought to sharpen his discursive dexterity in order to better undertake “dawa”, not to discover noble tasks to which said dexterity might be put; NOR to cultivate a thorough understanding of the natural world. All was according to god’s will: THAT was the explanation to EVERYTHING. It’s all anyone ever needed to know. Period.

And so it went that Al-Ghazali’s most popular work was entitled “Ihya Ulum al-Din” [Revival of the Principles of the (Islamic) Way of Life]. The massive corpus consisted of dozens of volumes. It was effectively a re-articulation of the Mohammedan catechism; with extensive commentary and elaboration. In other words: It was the opposite of a clarion-call for reform.

The polemic of Al-Ghazali expresses nothing but contempt for heterodoxy, derided as “bid’ah” (innovation). He was charged by his employer (Seljuk vizier, Nizam al-Mulk) to provide a rationalization for an Islamic theocracy. {16} His job was to furnish Islamic rulers with REASONS WHY those who were designated as “zindiq” by the regime [meaning “heretics”; derived from the Parsik term, “zandik”] were, indeed, heretical. Al-Ghazali was an avid careerist; and being employed as a State propagandist was a surefire way to secure fame. As a hired apparatchik, he wasted no time currying favor with those in power. (This is not to say he was a “sell-out”; it is quite likely that he genuinely believed everything he said.)

One might wonder, then: After all this “study”, what phenomenal rhetorical skills did Al-Ghazali end up procuring? His most famous syllogism is the following: “If the world had two gods, it would surely go to ruin. The world has not gone to ruin. Therefore there can’t be two gods.” (After all his brushing up, THAT was the best he could manage.)

There are various indications of Al-Ghazali’s dogmatic cast. One of his doctrinal sticking points was his insistence that resurrection on Judgement Day involved a literal (corporeal) rising from the dead. For a literalist like Al-Ghazali, nothing was to ever be taken metaphorically. (Fundamentalists are incapable of analogical thinking.)

We needn’t quibble over the pointless issue of whether or not Al-Ghazali was Sufi; and, if so, when and how and to what extent. Insofar as it could be said that—following his brother—he dabbled in one or another version of mysticism later in life (and thus tangentially affiliated himself with Sufism), he might possibly be considered Sufi-adjacent in certain respects. Even if we grant that he was in some (highly circumscribed) way inspired by some aspects of Sufism, he was still a de facto Salafist. Religious fundamentalism is religious fundamentalism, regardless of the branding. {21} I explore this point further in Postscript 2.

Al-Ghazali’s aversion to (genuine) knowledge was made evident in his attitude toward any learning done outside the bounds of strict theological study (that is: beyond the pursuit of maximal piety). With an unabashed contempt for scholars, he said: “Though you studied a hundred years and assembled a thousand books, you would not be prepared for the mercy of god except by pious works.” Elsewhere, he stated that men “should be forbidden as much as possible the perusal of philosophical writings.”

Al-Ghazali admonished people against disputation (ironically: the very thing to which he himself had devoted his life). In other words: “It’s fine when I do it; but nobody else should.” Another quote commonly attributed to him tells us everything we need to know about his agenda: “Do not dispute any matter with anyone; for much harm lies in argumentation; and its evil is greater than its benefit.” (Such hypocrisy is typical of the proselyte. The catch, though, is that the “don’t question, just accept” approach works well for oneself only when EVERYONE ELSE abides by it.) In other words: Al-Ghazali was the consummate Salafist.

Al-Ghazali is also known for saying: “The real friend is the one who, when you ask him to follow you, doesn’t ask where; but gets up and goes.” On the face of it, this abjuration sounds laudable: unconditional loyalty. But what’s really going on here? Al-Ghazali did not want people questioning the tenets he laid out, as doing so might cause dissent...thereby precipitating factionalism. So, in the hypothetical scenario, HE represented the “real friend”; and the lesson was simply: Don’t question, just follow. (Considering Koranic passages like 3:28/118, 5:51-57/80, 6:13, 9:23, 48:29, and 60:1-13 admonish Muslims not to befriend non-Muslims, the implication of “real friend” here was well-understood.)

The concern here is disrupting the established order. To make this point clear, Al-Ghazali declared: “If those who don’t have ‘ilm’ avoid scholarly discussions, then dissension will end.” (Translation: If you’re

not with the program, then keep your mouth shut. Don't get out of line. Keep your head down and so as you're told. Otherwise, there will be problems.) What did he mean by "ilm" here? We don't have to wonder; for he tells us explicitly: "The essence of 'ilm' is to know what obedience and worship ['ibadaat'] are."

So to translate his use of "ilm" as "knowledge" is egregiously disingenuous. If anything, Al-Ghazali meant by "ilm" something resembling supplication. PIETY was the hallmark of "ilm" (as I discuss in the Appendix). As far as he was concerned, orthodoxy took precedence over free inquiry (see Postscript 2).

One must assume that Al-Ghazali realized that if people were allowed to explore secular thought, their Faith might be shaken. He was surely aware that the dogmas he promulgated would not be able to withstand robust critical inquiry. (Free inquiry is the bugbear of institutionalized dogmatism.) It should come as no surprise, then, that he sternly discouraged people from engaging in critical inquiry: "The hypocrite looks for faults; the believer looks for excuses," as he famously put it. The lesson: If you seek to find faults with the prescribed doctrine, you are a hypocrite (i.e. a heretic).

There's that obsession with "takfir" again! According to this thinking, REAL Muslims only concern themselves with finding excuses for doing whatever they've been instructed to do. This is the epitome of the Reactionary mindset; and the hallmark of Salafism to the present day. {14}

Being vehemently anti-intellectual, Al-Ghazali was especially contemptuous of philosophy. So it should come as no surprise that his magnum opus was entitled the "Tahafut al-Falasifa" [Incoherence of the Philosophers]. In this treatise, he reserved special disdain for Avicenna and Averroës (to repeat: the quintessential representatives of Islamic Reform).

Over the course of this tendentious screed, Al-Ghazali was unabashed in his seething contempt for the pursuit of ACTUAL knowledge about the world (then known as "natural philosophy"). He wrote that the laws of nature were a devious fiction; as the very notion contravened the idea that at any given moment, it is god's will ["hukm"] that determines what happens. Far be it from us to question WHY anything might happen. In other words, the very concept of SCIENCE ITSELF was deemed subversive.

All is explained by the provisions of the Abrahamic deity ["ahkam"]—that is: by god's will. End of discussion.

To the very limited extent that Al-Ghazali allowed for SOME tid-bits of scientific insight here and there, it was ONLY insofar as it served his theological agenda. Thus certain scientific claims were permitted IF they could be made to comport with his own catalogue of sacrosanct dogmas.

It is no coincidence that, pursuant to Al-Ghazali's highly-influential proselytization, the so-called "Golden Age" of Islam quickly came to an end. Though no particular person can be said to have single-handedly precipitated the demise of this (soon-to-be-doomed) epoch of open-inquiry, the mindset Al-Ghazali promulgated certainly took its toll. The irony is that resurrecting the creed of the Salaf is what led to the dissolution of Islam's "Golden Age".

The famed Andalusian polymath (and consummate freethinker), Abu al-Walid Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Rushid of Cordoba (a.k.a. "Averroës") soon wrote an indictment of Al-Ghazali's mendacious "Incoherence of the Philosophers"...sardonically entitled, "The Incoherence of Incoherence" ["Al-Tahafut al-Tahafut"]. Presumably, Averroës opted for this title because "Al-Ghazali Is A Bumbling Idiot" would have not been nearly as clever. {4}

Note that Averroës was not the only scholar to take exception to Al-Ghazali's screed. Another Andalusian polymath (Abu Bakr ibn Tufayl of Granada) penned a scathing riposte as well: "Philosophus Autodidactus". In it, Ibn Tufayl countered Al-Ghazali by championing "ijtihad" (independent thought; Reason)...though

the term would later be contorted by perfidious actors into meaning quite the contrary. {5}

To recapitulate: Al-Ghazali's disdain for critical inquiry (nay, for philosophy in general) was especially directed at metaphysics, which naggingly trespassed on his coveted theological musings. Presumably, he did not have any qualms with (what he saw as) "science". After all, he'd not yet gotten the memo that the Earth was spherical (that is, not—as the Koran states—flat). Typical of the senescent cartography of the Dark Ages were maps where the "known world" had edges: often seen as the LITERAL edges of the world. The authors of the Koran clearly thought the world was flat. (Not a single passage in the book indicates that the author's might have suspected the Earth was a spherical body floating through space.)

So far as Al-Ghazali saw it, the Koran WAS "science"; and all "science" could ever be was heeding whatever the Koran stated. And that's all there was to it.

As with most theologians, Al-Ghazali fancied himself a friend of "mantiq" [logic]...so long as it served his dogmatic purposes. (What he called "mantiq" was little other than INSTRUMENTAL reasoning—the most promiscuous of didactic utilities.) Revealingly, he referred to logic as "fan" [i.e. an "ART"]. For, as far as he was concerned, the solution to those pesky metaphysical abstractions was to further indulge in the dogmatism-of-choice, employing whatever suite of rationalizations he could cobble together. He did not want to have to think for himself; and he didn't want anyone else to think for themselves either. (If HE wasn't going to do it; then to hell with anyone who tried.) It is no surprise, then, that Al-Ghazali despised Neo-Platonism so virulently.

So the contrast is stark: Averroës was a scholar who prized critical reflection; Al-Ghazali was a hyper-dogmatist for whom critical reflection was sacrilegious. Like any other fanatical theologian, Al-Ghazali was threatened by knowledge ITSELF...even as his pedagogical adversary, Averroës, openly recognized all that secular insights could offer.

In sum: Al-Ghazali's ultimate nemesis was not superstition or human suffering or social injustice; it was free inquiry. More to the point: His greatest fear was the heterogeneity amongst the hoi polloi that might be precipitated by such unbridled inquiry. Heterodoxy was, for him, the ultimate nemesis of piety. Homogeneity of thought, he contended, was therefore imperative.

We should not be entirely shocked to find that no major Enlightenment philosopher lists Al-Ghazali as an influence. {6} Contrast this with Averroës, who was profoundly influential in the Enlightenment movement (in spite of the fact that he was Muslim, not because of it). Had it had been up to Averroës (or Avicenna, for that matter), the Muslim world may have undergone an Enlightenment as well. Unfortunately, in most of the Ummah, it was the thinking of Al-Ghazali and his ilk that prevailed. This tragic legacy is evident in the abiding Reactionary mindset we witness to this day throughout much of Dar al-Islam. {6}

More than his unabashed scorn for philosophy, Al-Ghazali abhorred mathematics. This can be held in contradistinction to the celebrated Persian polymath, Mohammad ibn Musa of Khwarezm (a.k.a. "Al-Khwarizmi"): lover of algorithms and a pioneer in algebra. Indeed, Al-Ghazali wrote that the manipulation of numbers—nay, the entire enterprise of mathematics—was the work of the devil. (Gadzooks!) Al-Ghazali's rantings served as a touchstone for subsequent Salafi ideology...where any intellectual activity devoted to concerns beyond the Sunnah was disdained.

It is no coincidence that, thereafter, intellectual activity evaporated in the Muslim world.

The juxtaposition here is illustrative of the present thesis. It is important to bear in mind that Averroës and Al-Ghazali, though anti-poles intellectually, were BOTH MUSLIM. Consequently, it is incumbent upon us TODAY to ascertain what, exactly, made the former estimable and what, exactly, made the latter

degenerate. Such discernment—so vital to understanding history—is untenable within a Reactionary mindset, wherein puritanical thinking narrowly constrains the parameters of mental activity. Only by assessing things according to a new paradigm can such fundamental distinctions be accurately explained.

Insofar as we remain hostage to the contents of the scriptures in question, it will be impossible to bring modern insights to bear on ancient dogmas; or to re-assess the credence of institutionalized dogmatic system.

The sham that is “received wisdom” depends on this. Dogmatism—epitomized by Al-Ghazali—enables it.

Pursuant to Al-Ghazali’s grandiloquent asseverations, Muslims were encouraged to spurn the Ummah’s greatest thinkers: Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi, Al-Biruni, Azophi, Avicenna, Averroës, et. al. Such luminaries were all declared heretics, and their books burned. It is likely due to Al-Ghazali’s censorious agenda that we no longer have the works of the great freethinker, Ibn al-Rawandi of Khorasan (from the 9th century).

In a twist of irony verging on the Kafka-esque, the work of said heterodox Muslim thinkers was thereafter embraced by EUROPEAN intellectuals; which, in turn, helped to spur the Renaissance—and subsequent Enlightenment—in the Occident. The ingrained antipathy—nay, hostility—toward the natural sciences (and to innovative thinking in general) sealed the fate of Dar al-Islam...even as Europe awoke from the long religious delirium of the Dark Ages.

While Enlightenment thinkers emerged from the dogmatic quagmire in which Christendom has been plunged, Dar al-Islam immersed itself deeper within its own dogmatic quagmire. In hindsight, it became plain to see how it was that the Occident slipped into such intellectual blight in the first place. As the 10th-century Arab historian, Al-Masudi aptly put it (when explaining how the European Dark Ages began): “Ancient Greeks and Romans had allowed the sciences to flourish. Then they adopted Christianity. In doing so, they effaced the signs of learning, eliminated its traces, and destroyed its paths of inquiry.” Science was eclipsed by institutionalized dogmatism. Little did Al-Masudi know, the same thing would happen to Dar al-Islam; and for analogous reasons. (!)

Dogmatism doesn’t like mirrors. It’s something EVERYONE ELSE is doing. (When WE do it, it’s simply called “Faith”.)

As if it weren’t already bad enough, Al-Ghazali’s writings encouraged martyrdom. “Are you ready to cut off your head and place your foot upon it?” he once asked, conjuring a somewhat sophomoric image for his target audience. “The price of god’s love is your head, and nothing less.” (This is a double entendre if there ever was one.) When piety is put above all else, fanaticism—in all its mindless zeal—can’t help but ensue.

The point is worth emphasizing: THE most prominent Islamic theologian of the Middle Ages was reactionary to the core. Tragically, Al-Ghazali’s invidious ramblings held prodigious sway in the centuries that followed his proselytization; as subsequent theologians (esp. the reactionary ones) ACCURATELY recognized that Al-Ghazali’s pablum was most in keeping with Mohammedism. Ironically, he almost single-handedly initiated the scourge of hyper-dogmatism that led to the demise of Islam’s so-called “Golden Age”.

Rather than the occasional luminary redefining the Ummah, estimable figures (like Avicenna and Averroës) remained felicitous aberrations in an overwhelming trend of entrenched religionism. Even the best minds can only make so much headway in an environment fraught with systematically-enforced dogmatism.

The irony is that now, fundamentalists within the Ummah contend that the demise of Dar al-Islam (the waning of its glory-days that occurred after Al-Ghazali) was due to Muslims not being religious ENOUGH.

(If only they’d been MORE doctrinal!) For the Iranian Grand Ayatollahs or Arabian Wahhabis or the

Pakistani / Afghani Deobandis (e.g. the Taliban), utopia lies in bringing society back to the Dark Ages (read: Dar al-Islam's heyday). Consequently, Salafism is their panacea.

The more fundamentalist strains of Islam today reflect—and seek to revitalize—the vehemently anti-intellectual legacy of Al-Ghazali. So long as this notorious Islamic theologian is held in high esteem (rather than denounced as a blight on the history of Islam), genuine reform in the Ummah will remain untenable.

Alas, when it comes to the history of Islam, Al-Ghazali was not an anomaly. He was but another figure in an on-going legacy. Other torch-bearers of Salafism Islam soon followed. As we'll see, they were—one and all—Reactionaries, not revolutionaries.

After Al-Ghazali:

One of Al-Ghazali's contemporaries was another Hanbali zealot: Ibn Qudamah al-Maqdisi...who was ALSO known for his unreflective hyper-traditionalism. {7}

Just like Al-Ghazali, Al-Maqdisi was fond of incorporating elements of Sufism into his virulent strain of Islam. (He was smitten of the Qadiri brand of mysticism.) It was another reminder that mysticism and fanaticism are not incompatible; and NEITHER has anything whatsoever to do with genuine spirituality.

And as with Al-Ghazali, Al-Maqdisi was afflicted with "takfiri" fervor; and held "bid'ah" and independent thinking in contempt. Al-Maqdisi is famous for declaring: "There is nothing outside of Paradise but hellfire... There is nothing outside of the way of the Prophet but heretical innovation." He adamantly opposed any discussion of theological matters. So far as he was concerned, supplicants were permitted only to repeat what was stated in the Koran and Hadith. Period. Anything further (commentary, inquiry, speculation) was forbidden.

Thus the through-line was carried on. It makes sense, then, that Al-Maqdisi would be the primary inspiration for the 18th-century Arabian patriarch: Mohammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab...who was also obsessed with "takfir".

ALSO in the 12th century was a proselytizer in Baghdad named Abd al-Rahman [ibn Ali ibn Muhammad Abu al-Farash] ibn al-Jawzi. And Al-Jawzi ALSO played an integral role in propagating the Hanbali creed. His primary vocation was denouncing heretics in the public squares (i.e. upholding the practice of the "takfiris"). His disdain for the liberalism of Mu'tazili thought was captured in his screed, "Talbis Iblis" [Delusions of Iblis; alt. the Devil's Delusion].

In the 13th century, Kurdish (Shafi'i) theologian, Ibn al-Salah of Ardlan (Kurdistan) [later affiliated with Mosul] stated that philosophy is "the basis of foolishness and degeneration—a topic of confusion and misguidance, motivated by perversion and blasphemy. Whoever engages in philosophy has been blinded to his insight into the great aspects of sharia that have been corroborated by evidence." It is not a big leap from this mindset to Mohammed Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau: the notorious Nigerian Salafis leading "Boko Haram" [education is sinful]. {22} Nor is it a big leap to the Taliban (who's contempt for education is unsurpassed in the annals of human history).

It is plain to see how Ibn al-Salah's take on Mohammedan lore underlay the thinking of modern-day stalwarts of a hyper-puritanical mentality—fanatics like, say, Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj and Sayyid Qutb. {23} Indeed, there is a straight line from Ibn al-Salah to the likes of "mullah" Mohammed Omar (the Taliban)...and Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi (al-Qaeda)...and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (the Islamic State).

Ibn al-Salah was followed by yet another famed Reactionary: the Syrian (Hanbali) proselyte, Taqi ad-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah of Harran. Ibn Taymiyyah was not a sophisticated thinker; he was a simple-minded, acerbic evangelizer. Like any other outspoken zealot, he was somewhat of a rabble-rouser; and had nothing but disdain for anything resembling philosophy.

Ibn Taymiyyah is most known for being the author of the “Aqidah Al-Wasitiyyah” [Creed of the People of Wasit, Mesopotamia]—which, centuries later, would serve as the handbook for Wahhabism. Like Al-Ghazali and Ibn al-Salah before him, Ibn Taymiyyah was renowned for his disdain for any and all intellectual activity—which he denounced as “bid’ah” (innovation). As he saw it, thinking for oneself was the ultimate transgression against god. (Doing so was, after all, tantamount to a lack of submission; and so was—by definition—a repudiation of “Islam” ITSELF.) The notion that spiritual enlightenment might take precedence over obedience to sharia was, according to Ibn Taymiyyah, born of a failure to follow the “Sunnah” (that is: the example of MoM). Technically, he was correct in this assessment. (Though for those of us who value probity, this is considered a BAD thing.)

As with the 7th-century Kharijites (as well as the 11th-century Al-Ghazali), Ibn Taymiyyah was obsessed with the concept of “takfir”—that is: prosecution against insufficiently devout Muslims (who were seen as de facto apostates; i.e. not REALLY Muslims). Hence, so far as he saw it, it was the duty of all Muslims to oppose—and even kill—ostensibly Muslim rulers who did not implement sharia outright. As we’ll see, this obsession with apostasy WITHIN the Ummah would play a dominant role in the internecine feuds of the Muslim world for well over a thousand years.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Ibn Taymiyyah was a primary influence on men like Sayyid Abul A’la Maududi, Hassan al-Banna, and—of course—Sayyid Qutb. That’s not all; his rantings could be found on the bookshelves of Osama bin Laden / Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Abu Musad al-Zarqawi, as well as the leader of “Daesh”: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

The Salafi thread continued. Ibn Taymiyyah would be followed by another Hanbali fanatic: the Mamluk proselytizer, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah of Damascus. Al-Jawziyyah continued to advocate for the most draconian policies of persecution against anyone who was seen as straying from the Sunnah. He was also notorious for encouraging the practice of torture—not merely of prisoners, but of suspects. In other words, he argued that anyone MERELY ACCUSED of blasphemy should be subjected to severe punishment. He justified this by citing the example of MoM, who had employed the same practices. This modus operandi put the Vatican’s “Inquisition” to shame.

By the High Renaissance in Europe, “the gates of ijtihad [independent thinking / reasoning]” were declared to be “CLOSED” by most of the world’s ulema. This was in keeping with the original Mohammedan vision. Recall that the mantra of the Salaf was: “la hukma illa li-llah” [judgement belongs to god alone]; which is essentially the antithesis of Immanuel Kant’s “Sapere Aude!” As with the asseverations of the likes of Al-Ghazali, the message was: Don’t you DARE think for yourself.

It is telling that there was no word for “philosophy” in medieval Arabic. Muslims were forced to adopt (a variation of) the Greek term—crudely rendered “falsafa”. (See the Appendix for an in-depth exploration of the buzz-term, “ilm”.)

Just as the European Enlightenment (a process of secularization) was gathering steam, the so-called “Golden Age” of Islam had been snuffed out by a surfeit of religious zeal. The former was the result of people emancipating themselves from religiosity; the latter was the result of people further ensconcing themselves in religiosity.

Dar al-Islam was drowning in a dogmatic quagmire.

Fast-forward to the 18th century: An ambitious (Hanbali) revivalist from the Najd named Muhammad [ibn Sulayman] ibn Abd al-Wahhab peddled his puritanical vision for Islam (a return to the ways of the exalted Salaf) across Arabia. His execrable pact with the House of Saud occurred in 1744, thereby ensuring a theocracy that continues to the present day. (That occurred over three decades before the American Revolution. George Washington was twelve years old.) In making the pact, Al-Wahhab stated: “I want you to grant me an oath that you will perform jihad against the non-Muslims. In return, you will be leader of the Muslim community, while I will be the authority in religious matters.”

The Enlightenment was in full swing. And instead of David Hume, Diderot, and Voltaire...Arabia was getting a religious fanatic afflicted with megalomania. (Note: Wahhabism does not call itself “Wahhabism”; its adherents simply fashion it as the REAL ISLAM.)

To be clear: Wahhabism was a REVIVALIST movement (that is: the opposite of reformist). This makes sense; because it was nothin new. Al-Wahhab saw what he was doing as a kind of PURIFICATION of the Faith, not as some bold new innovation. He was not seeking to move anything forward; he was bringing things back to square one. This was made loud and clear in his diatribes: “Book of the Unity of God” [“Kitab al-Tawhid”] and “Book of the Koran” [“Kitab al-Qur’an”].

As it happened, Al-Wahhab lifted most of his convictions from the famed 12th-century Hanbali hard-liner, Al-Maqdisi (who—as we saw—equated any / all inquiry with blasphemy). A fan of stoning adulterers, he worked diligently to revitalize “takfiri” fervor. He was quick to denounce ANYONE who was not perfectly pious—dismissing even fellow People of the Book (Jews and Christians) as “mushrikun” (those who commit idolatry); and thus HERETICS deserving of punishment.

Tellingly, a contemporary Hanbali cleric named Ibn Fayruz of the Banu Tamim referred (not inaccurately) to the Wahhabis as “Kharijites”. (!) As we’ve seen, this was for good reason: The Wahhabi creed was—after all—an exact reiteration of the Khariji creed from the 7th century. This observation was soon echoed by the Hanafi scholar, Ibn Abidin of Damascus—who noted that Wahhabism was a modern version of the Khawarij.

It’s worth mentioning one more important figure. In the early 19th century, the Indian revivalist, Sayyid Ahmad Barelvi attempted to establish an Islamic State in Peshawar and across the Punjab. He was fashioned “Amir al-Mu-minin” [Commander of the Faithful] by his massive following. (To put this in historical perspective, that was when James Monroe then John Quincy Adams were U.S. presidents.) Though he was ultimately unsuccessful, Barelvi’s strident calls for “jihad” (and demand for a theocratic imamate) set a precedent in the region that reverberate to today—especially amongst the Pashtun people.

Modern-day Salafism:

In the early 20th century, Progressive Uzbek writer, Hamza Hakim-zade Niyazi was stoned to death for his (secular) views on women’s rights and social equality. This was not some bizarre anomaly. Such liberal advocacy offended Islamic sensibilities; as any pro-democratic stance was antithetical to the Sunnah; and inimical to traditional conceptions of “sharia”.

One of the most apt case-studies of Salafism in its modern-day incarnation is Sayyid Qutb—a man who had never before been persecuted / oppressed (that is, prior to his imprisonment due to his involvement in the attempted assassination of Nasser in 1954). Nevertheless, he sought to wage war against “the West”. Why? Not because people in American suburbia were hurting him. Rather, it was because they were living what he saw as a PRURIENT—and thus heretical—lifestyle (that is: a “din” not in keeping with the

Sunnah).

This sentiment was not unheard of in Dar al-Islam—a fact most explicitly attested to by the Syrian proselytizer, Mohamed Rashid Rida (d. 1935), who had founded the immensely influential Salafi periodical, “The Lighthouse”. When Qutb wrote “In the Shadow of the Koran” and “Milestones” [alt. “Signposts”], he was not venturing into uncharted waters; he was invoking a legacy that went back to the Salaf...and continued on through “The Lighthouse”.

In other words: Qutb was not articulating a newfangled ideology when he penned his screeds in the 1950’s.

At no point did he suggest that he was coming up with novel ideas; or proposing anything new. He was under no illusion that he was in any way offering a theological vision theretofore unknown to the Ummah.

In his delusive rants, Qutb was merely excavating ideals that had been touted by the Salaf...and had, so far as he saw it, been sidelined by modernity.

Had MoM read Qutb’s “Signposts” (or, more accurately, had he had it read to him), he would certainly have approved. Given this, Qutb was right about at least ONE thing: He was upholding the tenets proffered by the “Seal of the Prophets”. Indeed, Qutb was well aware of the fact that he was not proposing some revolutionary “new take” on the Sunnah. He was, after all, a revivalist through and through. In other words: He was vociferously seeking to REVERSE Reforms, not to Reform.

Suffice to say: The obtuse—and bizarrely acrimonious—thinking represented by Qutb and his 20th-century ilk was not some queer novelty of modern geo-politics. The crucial points of “In the Shadow of the Koran” and “Signposts” held independently of the travails of British colonialism. (Hence the need to parse the explanation for religious fundamentalism. See footnote 18.)

In the 1960’s, Qutb exhibited nothing but scorn for philosophy and reform, echoing the deranged thinking of the Salafi precedent-setters we’ve discussed. He had nothing but disdain for those in the Ummah who had come to elevate Reason to the same status as Revelation. And he resented the fact that Dar al-Islam had recently developed affinities for the “foreign mold of philosophy”, as he put it. In calling philosophy a “mold”, Qutb clearly missed the point of “philosophy”—speaking of it as if it were an alternative doctrine: set in stone for all eternity.

The legacy of Al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyyah had not died. It was alive and well.

To suggest that Salafism began in 1928 with the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood [“Ikhwan al-Muslimeen”] in Egypt (not to be confused with the antecedent “Ikhwan” of Arabia discussed earlier) is to fail to see that Hassan al-Banna’s movement was REVIVALIST—which means there was something he was aiming to REVIVE. While one of the (ostensive) concerns of the movement was anti-Imperialism (the meddling of “Western” powers in Muslim lands), the group was vehemently against civil rights (esp. with regards to women’s rights) for explicitly religious reasons. Hassan al-Banna did not invent the notion of the “Salaf”. He was not concocting new harebrained initiatives; he was feverishly reading Al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyyah, thus following long-established precedent.

When Sayyid Abul A’la Maududi founded “Jamaat-i Islami” in Pakistan in 1941, he was not venturing into uncharted territory. Like all revivalists before him, he was simply trying to bring Islam back to its roots. He was not offering a “new take” on the Sunnah. Nor was he conjuring never-before-seen ideas out of thin air. He was seeking to resume a tradition that dated back to the 7th century.

Indeed, it was Maududi who inspired Muhammad Zia ul-Haq—the notorious general—to introduce the programmatic (and draconian) “sharia-ization” to Pakistan. (Zia ul-Haq had participated in the genocide against the Bengal population of then “East Pakistan” during the latter’s move for independence; though

that was primarily due to racism rather than due to “takfiri” fervor.) It was THAT “sharia-ization” which set the stage for the notorious “Haqqani” network of madrasahs in Waziristan; and paved the way for the Taliban.

It is important to note that Maududi’s cause did not emerge ex nihilo. And his frenetic proselytization did not occur in a vacuum; as he was in close correspondence with the founder of Egypt’s “Muslim Brotherhood”, Hassan al-Banna (as well as Al-Banna’s lieutenant, Said Ramadan). These instances of fanaticism were not isolated incidents.

Eventually, Maududi had a falling-out with the fundamentalist “Jamaat Ulema-i Hind” (another popular organization in the region) due to the latter’s tentative embrace of pluralistic policies. PLURALISM, so far as he understood, was something to be repudiated. Indeed, tolerance of heretical thought was diametrically opposed to the Salafi conception of “sharia”: a scheme that demanded unyielding dominion (in which all people were forcibly subordinated to Islamic rule).

It is not for nothing that the primary perpetrator of the Bengal genocide (the Pakistani cynosure, Ghulam Azam) was influenced by Maududi’s teachings...which were, in turn, based on the deeds of MoM himself (with prodigious scriptural backing). Maududi’s charge was to revive the Islam of the Salaf; there was no need to create it.

In 1975, a Pakistani acolyte of Al-Wahhabi founded “Tanzeem-e Islami”, a militant Salafi organization that was an off-shoot of “Jamaat-e Islami” (which had been founded in the 1940’s). He fashioned himself a REVIVALIST, not a reformer. His personal mentor should not come as a surprise: Maududi.

A simple question might be posed: Why the contempt for education century after century after century? The answer is plain to see: Salafism has always been predicated on holding REAL “ilm al-kalam” (ostensibly: rational discourse; free inquiry) in contempt. The only “ilm” that actually matters to Salafis—ever since the Salaf themselves—is the “ilm” of the “Recitations” (that is: the word of god; not actual knowledge). The earliest Mohammedans would agree; Al-Qadir would agree; Ibn Anas would agree; Al-Ghazali would agree; Al-Jawzi would agree; Ibn al-Salah would agree; Ibn Taymiyyah would agree; Al-Jawziyyah would agree; Al-Wahhab would agree; Al-Maqdisi would agree; and—eventually—the likes of Maududi and Qutb would agree as well. Every one of these men was—more than anything else—a re-constructionist of early Islam.

To the present day, the House of Saud routinely persecutes—and often executes—those who exercise free speech. Nobel Peace Prize nominee, Raif Badawi, who was imprisoned for simply speaking his mind, is but one of many examples (ref. his blog “Free Saudi Liberals”). As we’ve seen, this was not a departure from Islamic precedent. Writers in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, etc. are regularly killed for heresy—a practice that is entirely in keeping with Mohammedan precedent. Recall that MoM prescribed murder for anyone who expressed dissent—as explicated in, say, Bukhari’s Hadith (vol. 5, no. 369). When we see Saudi monarchs lash and imprison civil rights activists for the “crime” of writing a blog, the Salaf’s take on the “Sunnah” is alive and well.

The history of Salafi thought is clear. It was a bulwark AGAINST progress.

So Where Does That Leave Us?

A Reactionary mindset prevents us from being able to recognize what makes revanchist Islam CONSERVATIVE and what makes forward-thinking Islam LIBERAL. This is why so many Islamic apologists are compelled to say that Salafis are “hijacking” the religion—a craven non-diagnosis that gets us nowhere.

So far as the aforementioned Salafi icons go, one can—indeed—fault Reactionary Muslims for many things; but failing to hew closely enough to Koranic dictates is not one of them. Nor can Salafis be accused of not following the example of MoM. Daesh taking sex slaves is nothing new. Saudi monarchs decapitating heretics is nothing new. Such practices have been de rigueur since day one. CEASING them would be the true innovation.

New (read: Reformist) thinking would enable us to see that the answers to these important questions have largely to do with the treatment of Islam’s sacred scriptures: Reactionary Islam has one kind of relationship with the Koran and Hadith; a Reform Islam has an altogether different kind of relationship with the same texts. THAT is the pivotal difference that makes all the difference. The texts don’t change; only the TREATMENT OF the texts can change.

Those who fail to see that Salafism is alive and well throughout the Muslim world today must ignore the routine executions / assassination and imprisonment of innocent people (journalists, artists, commentators) for the crime of blasphemy in nations like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh...as well as they myriad Al-Qaeda and Daesh affiliates around the world.

Even in Indonesia, normally the go-to country for Progressives seeking an exemplar of liberal Islam, Hizb ut-Tahrir is alive and well. In May 2017, an otherwise well-respected governor (Basuki “Ahok” Tjahaja Purnama) was imprisoned simply for saying—during his campaign the preceding September—that Muslim fundamentalists who cited scripture to support the view that Christians should not hold high office were being deceitful. The problem with this statement is that it is patently false. The Koran (4:141, 5:8, and 5:51) as well as various Hadith are very clear on the point that non-Muslims (dhimmis) must never be allowed to hold power over Muslims. It’s not that the protestors were wrong about Ahok’s erroneous citation; it’s that they were wrong to agree with what Islamic scripture says on the matter.

What is extremely concerning about such a drastic reaction was that, rather than simply correct a well-meaning yet incorrect statement, Indonesians rallied to have Ahok imprisoned for blasphemy. In sum: The problem was not that the Salafis were being deceitful. (They were actually being perfectly honest.) The problem was that they were being theocratic.

The point is worth repeating: Reform is not about what Islam used to be, it’s about what it CAN be. Reform is forward-looking, not backward-looking. It is aspirational, not atavistic. It is about being revolutionary rather than Reactionary. Dwelling on the past is not going to solve any problems.

It is plain to see that there has been a continuity of fundamentalist thinking from the inception of Islam. There is—indubitably—a common thread that runs from the Salaf, through the Middle Ages, up to the present day. So if one wants to understand Islam HISTORICALLY, don’t look to exceptional men like Avicenna or Averroës; look to the likes of Ibn Anas, Al-Qadir, Al-Ghazali, Al-Jawzi, Ibn al-Salah, Ibn Taymiyyah, Al-Jawziyyah, Al-Wahhab, Al-Maqdisi, et. al. Such men were bellwethers, not anomalies. The few felicitous exceptions prove the lamentable rule. (Rumi and his ilk were never authoritarian or puritanical...let alone hidebound ideologues.)

Even in 2004, when mullahs—and even a few bona fide scholars—from across the Middle East came together in Jordan to compose the (anti-takfiri) “Amman Message”, it was clear that they were going against the grain. What grain? Well, a grain that had existed since the 7th century. They were undertaking

their laudable endeavor in the name of diplomacy rather than in an effort to prevent heresy.

Noticeably absent from the plea was an enjoinder for jihadists to read the Koran more diligently, or entreaties to more strictly abide by the Sunnah. For the signatories knew full well that such an approach would be counter-productive, as it has always been. Had the “takfiri” precedent that they were so assiduously denouncing never before had precedent, there would have been no need for them to do what they did. It was for good reason they did not make their case by pleading with Muslims around the world to more stringently hew to the guidelines set out in scripture; as they were aware that doing so what make the problem WORSE.

Rather than (disingenuously) notifying the militants that they’d completely made everything up from whole-cloth, or that the militants were hijacking Islam, or that Muslims have never done anything like that before, the authors of the Amman Message opted for a different tac. The gist of the declaration was: We do not endorse this (traditional) approach to “jihad”; as this is not who we are ANYMORE.

Tellingly, nowhere in the document were the authors inclined to demand the militants refer to ANY of the icons of Islamic fundamentalism enumerated here. Such abstention was for reasons that should now be blindingly obvious. Instead, the document sought to revamp the Salafi version of Islam—primarily by promoting the “Ashari” take on “ilm al-kalam” (that is: Greek philosophy-infused Islamic theology).

But here’s the thing: “Ashari” Islam PER SE has little to do with which version of the Faith any given Muslim opts to espouse. The Ashari approach adheres to the Shafi’i “madhhab”—a jurisprudential approach that, though associated with Salafi icon, Al-Ghazali, is not the go-to “madhhab” (school of jurisprudence) for most Salafis. (The Shafi’i approach to “fiqh” is recognized by Muslims primarily on the African Horn...as well as in Kurdistan, Chechnya, and south-east Asia.) And while many Salafi icons have been Hanbalis, most Salafis NOW subscribe to the Hanafi “madhhab”.

In any case, championing the Shafi’i approach to “fiqh” is no guarantee of liberalism—as fanatics like Al-Ghazali attest. In any case, the Shafi’i theologian, Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn Isma’il al-Ashari of Basra (late 9th / early 10th century), founder of the “Ashari” denomination, was no model for reform—let alone a stalwart of liberalized Islam. He was, after all, militantly opposed to the (more liberal) Mu’tazili school.

In the “Amman Message”, there was also an emphasis placed on the “aqidah” [creed] associated with Samanid (Persian) theologian, Muhammad Abu Mansur al-Maturidi of Samarkand—a revered Hanafi scholar from the late 9th / early 10th century. While most Salafis TODAY are—indeed—Hanafis, Maturidis are primarily Turkic and East Asian; and so not the main target audience for the declaration. (!) Appealing to Al-Maturidi to sway the thinking of Salafis is like trying to sway the thinking of Hassidim by appealing to Maimonides. (Shall we also encourage reform amongst American Pentecostals by citing the Bohemian radical, Jan Hus? Shall we bring Jehovah’s Witnesses to their senses via appeals to John Wycliff? Or perhaps we might disabuse American Dominionist’s by quoting Martin Luther King Jr.) Ideologues become stuck in their mindset precisely because they refuse to heed the insights of anyone who is NOT cloistered within their worldview. That’s what makes Reactionary thinking Reactionary: it is inherently parochial.

The Amman declaration then laid out the conditions for issuing valid edicts [“fatwas”]. The authors did so, however, according to their own standards...which were not the standards that are historically salient to militant Salafis. Such standards may be reasonable, but they are not the standards that were set by the Salaf...which is the entire point of being Salafi! One may as well try to persuade a vegan to become a carnivore by pointing out that eating meat requires killing animals. One can’t invoke the standards that one’s audience has already rejected to cajole them into engaging in activities based on those standards.

Enjoiners to liberalize Islam are all well and good; but this particular document seemed to gloss over the root causes of the problems it deigned to address. Be that as it may, it was telling that at no point did the Amman declaration's signatories pretend that the problematic version Islam had come out of thin air. For surely the authors were all aware that religious fundamentalism had a long history.

Nevertheless, the document's wording allowed for the TACIT assumption that everything had been hunky-dory all along (since the time of the Sahabah); and only recently have a handful of wayward fanatics sabotaged the Faith—thereby tainting an otherwise immaculate record. This is not only factually false; it entirely misses the point at hand. {27} One cannot leverage genuine Reform on an illusory fulcrum. While this concession may have given the document rhetorical ballast, it elided that which needed to be confronted head on.

Odious figures like Sayyid Abd al-Maududi and Sayyid Qutb espoused a hyper-puritanical “din” (way of life), replete with a purist “akhlaq” (moralism / etiquette). We mustn't lose sight of the fact that their ideological bent was consummate with the Sunnah as originally conceived. Such men enslaved their minds in order to sustain their delusion; and then worked assiduously to enslave others' minds in order to promulgate that delusion. {28} Recognizing this fact does not detract from the fact that what they were doing was nothing new.

Indeed, none of these men were doing anything novel. They were simply reaffirming the way Islam used to be. They were—one and all—well aware that “Islam” means “SUBMISSION”, not critical inquiry. They sacrificed their dignity (“karama”) on the alter of Faith (“iman”); and proceeded accordingly.

In trying to envision a Reform Islam, it is important to understand that such Islamic icons were not inventing their doctrines from whole-cloth. These men were not innovative thinkers; they were hyper-traditionalists. They were re-constructionists—which is to say: the OPPOSITE of revolutionaries. They may have been fanatics; but iconoclasts they most certainly were not. To dismiss them as historical aberrations is to misunderstand how Islam actually existed over the centuries; and WHY it existed as such.

Salafism (including its Saudi variant, Wahhabism) is an atavism, not an innovation. The preachments of Al-Ghazali and his ilk reverberate to this day in the rantings of myriad fundamentalist organizations. Even during the past generation, we have seen residual signs of Islam's odious legacy; as with Omar Abd al-Rahman (a.k.a. “Abdul Rahman”; a.k.a. the “Blind Sheik”), alumnus of Al-Azhar University's celebrated PhD program in theology. Al-Azhar's department is not a fringe operation; it is Dar al-Islam's preeminent venue for Koranic studies. {11}

When evaluating the thinking of Islamic fundamentalists TODAY, we must bear in mind that the ideological underpinnings of their zealotry did not emerge—as if from the aether—in recent times. It has been operative since the inception of Islam. Salafism is not an adverse side-effect of Western colonialism / imperialism, nor is it some weird byproduct of geo-politics in the modern era. It has been there all along; and is ANIMATED by such exigencies. {29}

As we've seen, the pattern has been consistent since the 7th century: A seething contempt for intellectual curiosity (and for anything that challenged the dogmatic edifice that had been erected). There is nothing revolutionary about Reactionary thinking; and it is Reactionary thinking that has held sway over the majority of Islam's sordid history. A handful of estimable figures does not make the rogue's gallery of fundamentalists magically disappear. It is far more the latter, not the former, who characterized the grand sweep of Islamic history—a fact that informs how we might work to make things different going forward.

Our inquiry now brings us to a pertinent question: What major historical developments did this reprobate theological legacy beget? In part two of this series, we will look at the geo-political impact of Salafism

since its inception in the 7th century.

Footnotes

{1 We must be cautious with amorphous qualifiers like “radical” (and “extreme” and “drastic”). It helps to get our terminology straight. This requires consistency. Worthwhile nomenclature is simply a matter of using otherwise “loaded” terms in the same way we would use them in virtually any other context—thereby UN-loading them, as it were. Fundamentalism—the signature trait of the hidebound ideologue—involves a need to CONFORM and a bent toward hyper-traditionalism (of one sort or another). Progressivism, on the other hand, involves some kind of departure from the established order (which invariably entails contravening “received wisdom” in some non-trivial way). Put another way: The hallmark of *reactionary* thinking is obstinately sticking with the “traditional” way of doing—and thinking about—things. By stark contrast, the prime feature of *revolutionary* thinking is a radical departure from convention. Radicalism, then, is the antithesis of fundamentalism. Indeed, in ALL contexts, radicalism connotes some kind of significant incongruity with what has (heretofore) normally been the case. That is to say, radicalism is an endeavor to countermand traditionalist tendencies (and thus challenge incumbent power structures)...as opposed to an obsessive effort to uphold “traditional” tenets. Hence there is nothing “radical” about Salafism / Wahhabism vis a vis Islam. The only thing radical about Islamic fundamentalism is its divergence from the basic principles of civil society—something that GENUINE radicals often seek to abet. (For examples, see footnote 10 below.)}

{2 For Muslims sincerely looking to disabuse themselves of mis-impressions about the history of their religion, a prudent starting-point would be its putative founder, MoM himself. Erroneous narratives abound whenever HEROIC folkloric figures are at issue. A plethora of embellished tales surrounds most such figures; but, for any given subject, only one account is grounded in the historical record: the account closest to Truth.}

{3 ...or European fascism from Roman Catholicism...or the Judean Settler movement from Orthodox Judaism...or Scientology from L. Ron Hubbard’s “Sea Org”. While we’re at it, we could suppose that the World Bank and IMF have never had anything to do with corporate interests. Certain obvious connections seem to escape many of us. It occurs to surprisingly few to connect the high costs of healthcare with the existence of medical insurance companies and America’s privatized sickness-treatment industry; or volatility, instability, and speculation-fueled bubbles with the hyper-financialization / hyper-privatization of the economy. Such disassociation is easy insofar as we don’t want to connect a universally-recognized problem with something we personally fancy. That much of what is discussed here is so controversial, or even requires pointing out, is indicative of the widespread senescence (nay, intellectual blight) with which we are contending. That many Muslims would find much of what is written in the present work surprising shows us much of what is wrong with the current state of affairs. Insofar as people need to hide history (or deny facts), they reveal the illusory nature of their ideology.}

{4 It might be noted that one of Averroës’ better-known works was “The Decisive Treatise”, in which he argued for the emancipation of science and philosophy from Islamic theology. This position was diametrically opposed to that of Al-Ghazali, who sought to subordinate any/all thought—especially anything gleaned from Dar al-Kufr—to Islamic theology.}

{5 Today, it is quite telling that Al-Ghazali's anti-intellectual drivel is found in madrasahs far more often than is anything by either Averroës or Ibn Tufayl. (Avicenna is downright unheard of.) Given how often he is still extolled amongst Islamic apologists, Al-Ghazali is only remarkable for how UN-remarkable he was. To suppose that Al-Ghazali was a great thinker—or even a halfway decent thinker—is a slap in the face to all of history's great thinkers (and an insult to those of us who have taken the time to study them). There are a few luminaries from the Muslim world worth revering; Al-Ghazali is not one of them.}

{6 Al-Ghazali served as inspiration for a few medieval CHRISTIAN apologists—most notably 13th-century Dominican friars, Ramon Marti (Catalan) and Thomas Aquinas (Sicilian). He also provided some inspiration to the Jewish commentator, Maimonides.}

{7 He is not to be confused with the 10th-century Palestinian geographer, Muhammad ibn Ahmad Shams al-Din al-Maqdisi. Our subject is often referred to as “Ibn Qudamah” instead (to avert this conflation).}

{8 For more on the history of Islam with respect to other Faiths, one might consult “Seeing Islam As Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings On Early Islam” by Robert G. Hoyland. Also see Hoyland's work on the early Islamic State.}

{9 He is not to be confused with his descendent: the famed Shafi'i theologian, Abu al-Hasan al-Ashari of Basra, who lived in the late 9th / early 10th century, and was the namesake of the Ashari denomination.}

{10 Jesus of Nazareth was a radical. Thomas Paine was a radical. Emmeline Pankhurst was a radical. Martin Luther King Jr. was a radical. In a religious context, Baruch-cum-Benedict Spinoza and Uriel da Costa were radicals (critics of Judaic dogmatism)...while Jacob Ettlinger (bellwether for Orthodox Judaism) was not. Jan Hus and John Wycliff (bellwethers for the Christian Reformation) were radicals...while Tomas de Torquemada and John Calvin were not. Within the Roman Catholic Church, radicalism is what led to Liberation Theology. So Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab was the OPPOSITE OF a radical, as were the rest of the Salafi icons adumbrated in this survey. Daesh and the Taliban are no more “radical” than the Vatican's curia. Revivalists aren't radicals; they are revanchists. Retrogression is not a bold act; it is an act of moral—and intellectual—dereliction.}

{11 We might contrast “Blind Sheik” Abd al-Rahman to a more Reformist-minded alumnus of the same institution: the scholar, Mahmud Shaltut (d. 1963). What is it that made these two men so different? One hewed to the Salafi vision of Islam; the other DEPARTED from it.}

{12 It is quite clear that Al-Ghazali did not glean anything of note from the SUBSTANCE of Aristotle's writings (spec. “Politics” and “Nicomachean Ethics”). Indeed, the religious zealot was obviously unconcerned with Aristotle's views on civil society (re: meritocracy, individual liberties, etc.) Aristotle was against marginalizing anyone; and was adamant that the commonweal (esp. universal enfranchisement) was the primary concern of governance. Moreover, Aristotle's conditions for virtue had nothing whatsoever to do with religious affiliation (i.e. worshiping the right deity, or ANY deity for that matter). Al-Ghazali was merely inspired by how PERSUASIVE Aristotle was; and how adroit he was with employing this powerful thing, rigorous logic, that was so foreign to the Muslim world.}

{13 In the ancient Muslim world, the closest we find to “ilm al-kalam” as “knowledge” in the modern sense was the Mu'tazili school of thought (8th to 10th centuries). Mu'tazilites held that morality was not determined by revealed scripture (or even by attempts to “interpret” scripture), but via unsullied reasoning. In other words, they broke with conventional Mohammedan thought and contended that “ilm al-kalam” (in their conception: GENUINE knowledge) can only be derived from Pure Reason. Consequently, reason (rather than the dictates of sacred texts) was seen as the “final arbiter” in distinguishing right from wrong. Predictably, the Mu'tazila movement was wiped out. As with most religious dominion, those who dare to

think for themselves (esp. in ways that don't comport with accepted norms) end up paying a steep price. The irony is that Mu'tazili rulers were THEMSELVES guilty of persecuting people who disagreed with them. Be that as it may, glimmers of a Reformist approach could be seen in the Mu'tazila movement. It should serve as a reminder, though, that rationalism is not enough; pluralism is imperative. This is a cautionary tale as much as it is an example to be emulated. }

{ 14 The point bears repeating: In Islamic theology, the term "ilm" must be taken with a hefty grain of salt. Recall that, within Islamic theology, being "in the know" has traditionally been counterpoised against "jahiliyya" [a state of ignorance]. Hence Dar al-Kufr is commonly referred to as "jahiliyya" (as was pre-Islamic Arabia). According to this taxonomy, "ignorance" was equated with impiety—as the only kind of ignorance worth talking about was ignorance of the Sunnah. Thus, ignorance (lack of "ilm") is equated with impiety (lack of "iman"). In other words: "ilm" is effectively a euphemism for "proper thinking" (i.e. "heeding of the Sunnah"). It is, then, NOT a term for what we'd refer to as (genuine) "knowledge" in the post-Enlightenment era. This is similar to the malleable usage of "hikma" [wisdom] in Islamic theology. The catch is: What an ideological movement deems to be "wisdom" is whatever its impresarios proclaim it to be (i.e. that which accords with the designated creed). Thus: "If you agree with US, then you have wisdom." The problem is that once "knowledge" / "wisdom" is equated with "awareness of—and fealty to—the sacred doctrine", it becomes entirely relativistic, and thus utterly meaningless (just as with, say, "seeing the light" and adhering to the "straight path"). In sum: When it comes to theology, such buzz-terms are entirely question-begging. Theology is not a form of epistemology; it is an avoidance of it. }

{ 15 Ergo an arbitrary statute of limitations on salvation. Presumably, this age was designated because that is how old MoM was when he (purportedly) received his first revelation. (Therefore, the thinking goes, if one hasn't "gotten it" by that point in life, one has—as it were—missed the boat.) Such obvious confabulation is not an aberration. ALL theology, we should bear in mind, is simply the product of people simply making stuff up. Others eventually come to believe it or not. When the tenet "sticks", it is thereafter taken as sacred doctrine. As the disputations in 4th-century Rome demonstrated (with respect to determining official Catholic doctrine), those with the most power tend to dictate what is taken as gospel and what is deemed heretical. But this is a function of institutional power, not of special insight. As Michel Foucault noted, what often passes as "knowledge" is merely a reflection of power structures. And as the revamped "golden rule" says: "Those with the gold make the rules." The rabble tend to acquiesce to this...out of pure pragmatism. However, many acquiesce due to what is sometimes called "social institutionalism"—the theory that institutionalized norms tend to trump rational deliberation. Only those with Kantian "courage" / "maturity" overcome this predisposition. Imagine telling someone after their 40th birthday (who sincerely aims to improve himself): "Sorry; that ship has sailed. Too late. You're screwed." Only the most potent indoctrination could possibly convince someone that this was a reasonable thing to believe. "Dawah" only for those under 40 insinuates that humane-ness stops at middle-age; and that the elderly are a lost cause. This makes perfect sense, though, if the primary concern is promulgating a cult. After all, when evangelizing, why waste time on those who are older than 40 when they are weak and will die soon anyway? }

{ 16 The vehemently anti-Isma'ili "khawaja", Abu Ali Hasan ibn Ali of Tus (a.k.a. "Nizam al-Mulk"), was the Persian vizier of the Seljuk Empire during much of the 11th century. He was himself somewhat of a pseudo-scholar. He wrote the "Siyasat-nama" [Book on Government] in which he conducted a (shoddy) historical survey of alternate forms of government from the past. He is best known for having a series of "Nezamiyyahs" (institutions of higher learning) constructed around Persia. Yet these were little more than theology schools; hardly the sort of institutions that were renown at Oxford, England and at Bologna, Italy. It is for this reason that Al-Ghazali is commonly associated with Nishapur in Khorasan rather than with his native land, Tus. }

{ 17 A century and a half later, Thomas Aquinas would be influenced by Aristotle as well—as demonstrated by his own attempt to use rational argumentation to defend his Faith; and to concoct a religion-oriented

virtue-ethics vis a vis Christianity. Aquinas was even inspired by Al-Ghazali's (hackneyed) attempt to undertake the same project vis a vis Islam. The approach was as obsequious as it was daft: If science conflicted with sacrosanct religious dogmas (which were deemed inviolate), then the disjunction mustn't be blamed on religiosity; it is our own epistemic short-comings. Soon thereafter, scholastics like Roger Bacon, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham were inspired by Aristotle as well. There is a good reason that Aquinas, Bacon, Scotus, and William are taught in collegiate courses on Renaissance thought, while Al-Ghazali is not. For, unlike these other expositors, Al-Ghazali was no fan of the scientific method; nor of critical inquiry.}

{18 Of course, not everything Al-Ghazali said was objectionable. He reiterated the anti-materialism that had been propounded by Jesus of Nazareth—purportedly commenting: “You possess only what cannot be lost in a shipwreck” and “Men whose hearts are changed by money are not learned.” Amen. Felicitously, he was against avarice and ostentation (“riya”). Yet for every tidbit of good advice, we encounter precious gems like, “Do not fix hopes on your health” and “Whoever refuses to marry sins against the purpose of Creation.” Islamic apologists are so accustomed to romanticizing Al-Ghazali and his ilk that they will find the present critique of him uncharitable (to put it mildly). But the aim here is not to be charitable; it is to be accurate. (See footnote 19 below.) As for those who extol Al-Ghazali, I propose a question they might pose to themselves: What original idea did he have that lead to some significant improvement in human society? I am unaware of any such idea. Bottom line: We cannot fully understand Salafism without recognizing its historical underpinnings. There is no need to exalt Islamic icons simply because they have traditionally been Islamic icons. Progressively-inclined Muslims might keep this in mind when they concern themselves with physical health and opt to remain single / childless.}

{19 It's not that I'm putting a negative spin on things. I am simply counteracting the de rigueur POSITIVE spin usually encountered in Islamic apoloia. This act can, of course, be jarring to those accustomed to the usual spin. Any “embellishment-dampening” effect will invariably come off as infelicitous to the True Believer. The problem with Islamic apoloia is that it expects commentary on delicate matters to be, above all else, validating (read: gratifying). But the point of critical analysis is not to avoid discomfiture; it is to tell the truth. A Muslim should have no more compunction acknowledging the checkered history of Islam than, say, a Christian has acknowledging the checkered history of Christianity. One might ask: How is it that a Quaker has no qualms when the horrors of the Inquisition are pointed out? Yes, the program of insidious tribunals was a blot on the legacy of their religion (Christianity-in-general); but they are resigned to it AS FACT, as they recognize that it had nothing to do with THEM. Indeed, they understand that their Faith can, indeed, be something that has no connection whatsoever with Roman Catholic tyranny during the Middle Ages.}

{20 One of the better-known culprits on this score is the dean of Cambridge's “Muslim College”, Timothy Winter—who was indoctrinated in Saudi Arabia, and refers to himself as “shaykh” Abdul Hakim Murad. This is an example of how, in an agora super-saturated with dogmatism, even the dean of a college at an esteemed university like Cambridge can be a complete charlatan. Winter's fawning admiration for Al-Ghazali borders on hero-worship. This makes sense; as Al-Ghazali in the Middle Ages was of the same mind as Winter is today: “It's fine to extract convenient tid-bits from other's material (e.g. Ancient Antiquity) here and there...so long as it is compatible with my holy book. However, the moment something is (seen to be) incompatible with the Koran, it must be rejected out of hand.” In other words: Winter is little more than a hyper-dogmatist masquerading as a scholar (i.e. a shill for Islamic apoloia). Winter is evidently impressed by Al-Ghazali's gem-mining expeditions into Ancient Greek philosophy. Like his hero, he has no interest in learning anything; only in finding rationalizations for his own beliefs. For revelation must ALWAYS trump Reason. (Winter once did an interview in which he gushed about Al-Ghazali for half an hour, portraying the theologian as a fount of wisdom, yet neglected to mention even a single brilliant idea his hero may have offered. He failed to do so for a simple reason: Al-Ghazali had no such ideas.) There is a difference between marginally fanciful and outright delusional. Men like Winter

should not be allowed anywhere near students seeking to learn about the Koran (or about the history of Islam). Presumably, Winter has never actually read any works of truly great philosophers (Spinoza or Hume or Kant or Paine or Schopenhauer or Mill or Kierkegaard or Nietzsche or Peirce or anyone else worth reading); and consequently hasn't the faintest clue what such a work might actually look like. I suspect he would have an aneurism were he to read the present essay. }

{21 Sufism, we often find, is a nebulous category; as it has an ethereal penumbra encompassing a potpourri of different Islamic traditions. A whirling dervish in Turkey (who lauds Rumi, reads "nasheed", and frequents non-halal cafes in Istanbul) is different from a Pashtun mystic spouting "dhikr" from a cave in the Hindu Kush. There is no clear way to demarcate a Sufi with a penchant for fundamentalist Sunnism from a Salafist with a penchant for mysticism. It might be noted that the Sufi strain of Islamic fundamentalism has most often existed within—though by no means has been limited to—the Naqshbandi order. }

{22 It might be noted that the official name for Boko Haram is "Jama'at" [Group / Party of] "Ahl as-Sunnah" [People of the Sunnah] "lid-Dawah wa'l-Jihad" [for Dawa and Jihad]. Here, "sunnah" means "teachings of MoM", "dawa" means proselytization, and "jihad" means struggle. All three elements here can be conceptualized in a myriad of ways—from benign to malign. As the present survey shows, such terms have traditionally had a palpably militant connotation. (See Appendix 1 at the end of part 2 of this essay.) The point, though, is that this group of Salafis—as Salafis often do—explicitly defines itself as those strictly abiding by the Sunnah, and fashions itself as partaking in "dawa" as well as engaging in "jihad", just as any devout Muslim should. What's going on here? Indeed, their agenda seems to belie the rosy picture of "sunnah", "dawa", and "jihad" usually painted by ostensibly Progressive Islamic apologists. Are these Nigerian militants simply making everything up? Are they contriving heretofore unheard-of meanings to these key lexemes? The lesson is that such amorphous buzz-terms (as with "sharia", "fiqh", "ilm", "hikma", "adaala", "sawab", "iman", etc.) mean whatever votaries make them mean. Indeed, such terms are almost infinitely malleable—as they are deliberately kept nebulous. Ironically enough, wide hermeneutic berth is partly what makes genuine Reform possible. It doesn't follow from scripture's semiotic malleability, though, that we get to concoct our own account of what such terms TRADITIONALLY meant. Historical fact is, after all, historical fact. The truth of the matter is: there HAS BEEN a clear precedent; and Boko Haram is, indeed, adhering to a well-known convention that can be traced back to the 7th century. The historical record is incontrovertible on this. The question for us today, then, is: Shorn of their baggage, what can these loaded words POTENTIALLY mean? }

{23 Recall that the primary grievance of Qutb's "Stars of Guidance" ["Ma'alim fi al-Tariq"; typically translated as "Milestones"] was not Western imperialism / colonialism; it was a lack of (sufficiently stringent) sharia in governance; and a dearth of Islamic "din" in daily life. While oriented TOWARD the political and social, the BASIS FOR his grievance was explicitly religious. Moreover, Qutb's primary focus—one might even say, his TARGET—was the MUSLIM world (spec. the Arab world), not the secular precincts of California and Colorado. }

{24 Note that Salafism and Wahhabism are often conflated, as they are both manifestations of fundamentalist Sunnism. There is a convergence that sometimes occurs—as with the Haqqani network of madrasahs in Waziristan. More often than not, though, Wahhabis don't like to be considered Salafi (ask the House of Saud) and Salafis don't like being affiliated with Wahhabism (ask Al-Nusra Front and other Al-Qaeda affiliates, who despise the House of Saud). It should be noted, though, that these two kinds of Sunni fundamentalism are AT ROOT two versions of the same thing. The House of Saud routinely funded—and overtly supported—the Muslim Brotherhood during its earliest decades; and the Muslim Brotherhood returned the praise during that time. For simplicity, my use of "Salafism" is all-encompassing. Note that Wahhabis typically do not explicitly refer to themselves as "Wahhabis" (though they recognize the eponymous patriarch of their movement); as they simply consider themselves the most authentic Muslims. (By implication: all other denizens of Dar al-Islam are deemed to be of dubious authenticity.)

So far as they are concerned, this is the only way to categorize those who profess to be Muslim; so
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denominations are entirely beside the point. That said, we mustn't overlook the fact that Shiism has its own fundamentalist strain, which is every bit as deranged.}

{25 Note that "shahid" has two different connotations. In some contexts, it can refer to a witness. However, it usually means someone who is killed in the process of fighting—as explicated in Koran 3:141-143 / 169-170, 9:11, and 22:58. Ibn Anas was clearly referring to the latter—in keeping with, say, Bukhari 4/52/54. For more on the matter of "jihad" as a concept, and its role in Islamic history, see Appendix 1 at the end of part 2 of this essay.}

{26 Today, most of the available commentary on Al-Ghazali is extremely misleading. As might be expected, the vast majority of the material is from those who are sympathetic to Salafism. Such expositors pose as scholars, yet are nothing more than religious apologists; and they count on their audience not knowing any better. Such charlatans range from Timothy Winter (a.k.a. "Abdal Hakim Murad") to Mark Hanson (a.k.a. "Hamza Yusuf"). (See footnote 20 above.) The only (ostensibly) non-Muslim academic I found who white-washes this reprehensible figure is German professor, Frank Griffel of Yale University. Lord knows what his motivation for doing so might have been.}

{27 Noble as their effort was, the signatories of the "Amman Message" seemed to miss what makes—and has always made—Salafism SALAFI. Alas, their admirable entreaty likely fell on deaf ears—as they effectively stated: "This is OUR reading of the texts; so this is the version of Islam that we endorse. We insist that you adopt THIS way of seeing things; because this way is best." Such a plea is, of course, question-begging. For a Salafist will simply respond: "We don't care what YOUR interpretation is. We think you're wrong. That's what makes us Salafi and you NOT Salafi." The target audience for the declaration should have been all the NON-fanatical denizens of the Ummah. The document may have thus stated: "While admittedly this odious conduct is in keeping with many parts of the Sunnah, good Muslims REJECT those parts. Only by doing so can we forge a new way forward."}

{28 Note that these are not obscure crackpots that I extracted from history in a paroxysm of confirmation bias. Far from being fringe figures, these are some of the most prominent—and influential—figures in the history of Islam. The problematic "beta" factor (in this case, fundamentalist Islam) has been operative since the religion's inception; what DOES change is the "alpha" factor (exigencies of the time and place). What changed the MOST between the Middle Ages and the post-Renaissance era was the direction of hegemony (i.e. who the main culprit of imperialism happened to be). Until the 15th century, Dar al-Islam was on the ascendancy, and so was the primary perpetrator of empire. (Mired in religionism, the Occident sunk into the Dark Ages shortly after the Vatican magisterium overtook Europe. The fragmentation—and dissolution—of the Western Roman Empire promptly ensued.) Since the High Renaissance (i.e. when secularity emerged as a force in Europe), it has been the Occident that's been on the ascendancy. Consequently, Dar al-Kufr [domain of non-Muslims] ended up being the primary perpetrator of colonialism—as the Ummah, which continued to be mired in religionism, stagnated. (See footnote 30 below.) Those on the receiving end of imperialism (and thus colonialism) invariably become resentful and desperate; thereby creating the optimal incubator for cult activity (and right-wing ideology in general). The lesson here is that "alpha" is always relevant. Abiding ignorance, humiliation, and resentment, (along with perpetually-stoked neuroses and simmering rage) provided the ideal climate for the metastasization for a certain kind of religious fundamentalism. In sum: Religiosity (beta) informs people how to frame—and then respond to—their circumstances (alpha).}

{29 There have been instances in which Salafism HAS been stoked by anti-colonialist fervor. The Deobandi movement (born in the midst of the "Dar ul-Ulum" [House of Knowledge] movement in northeast India in the late 19th century) is an example of how religious zeal (read: fundamentalism) can be a reaction to colonialism (in this case: to the British colonialism in India, including Bengal-Kashmir-Pakistan-Afghanistan). The same might be said of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Palestine. Far from being unprecedented (i.e. examples of novel approaches to the

creed), these militant movements had recourse to doctrinal foundations that had been laid over twelve centuries earlier. They were simply revisiting well-trodden paths. It is no surprise, then, that the Deobandi movement has persisted long after its original charter became obsolete. The Taliban's existence cannot be attributed to Soviet incursion, especially since the movement's heyday occurred after the Russians were long-gone; and it was concerned more with throwing acid in Muslims' faces for improprieties than with ousting kuffar from the Hindu Kush. Indeed, the doctrinal obsessions of the Haqani network existed irrespective of grievances about Russian encroachments or Western imperialism. (The U.S. did not invade Afghanistan until the autumn of 2001; it was, in fact, ABETTING the regime until the attacks of September 11.) Their ax to grind was illustrated by the destruction of ancient Buddhist statues—hardly a matter of anti-colonialism. In sum: Deobandi Salafis have persecuted / slaughtered far more Muslims than non-Muslims—an indication that anti-colonialism was not their main concern. }

{30 While imperialism / colonialism invariably involves an iniquitous use of power; it is an indication of power nevertheless. Indeed, the flourishing from which such power emerges is not generated ex nihilo. Augmented secularity was at the root of flourishing (i.e. an increase in societal vitality) in the Occident. Also note that the aforesaid process of secularization was put into overdrive during the Enlightenment. This portended the liberalization responsible for the prodigious Occidental development—and the burgeoning of civil society—that came to pass in “the West” (primarily during the Industrial Revolution). Brute power—for good or ill—was largely the result of the double-edge sword that was industrialization (a categorically secular phenomenon). In any case, the Occident's MIS-use of power (primarily in the form of imperialism / colonialism) fostered the very conditions that kept the Muslim world behind in the first place (conditions amenable to pervasive religiosity). That is to say, the iniquities of “the West” (its leveraging of the advantages conferred upon it by the industrial revolution) perpetuated the power disparities between Occident and Orient, thereby stoking REACTION in the latter. This only reinforced the abiding dysfunctions of the Muslim world...which, in turn, perpetuated (and even augmented) the power asymmetry. It was a positive feedback loop (a.k.a. a vicious cycle). Recognizing this does not require countenancing the divisive “Orientalism” rightly indicted by Edward Said. }

{31 Bear in mind: This survey does not pretend to be an exhaustive history of Islam. It simply mentions salient points. The result is a series of watershed moments that would presumably be included in any introductory class on the subject. Here, I conduct the survey over the course of fourteen centuries, covering a massive geographical area (from Andalusia to Bengal); so I must use broad strokes. Given such an extensive timespan and geographical expanse, the variegation of circumstances at every time and place cannot possibly be specified. Nevertheless, a through-line can certainly be discerned. The present essay is concerned with trends that run counter to the thesis that Islamic fundamentalism arose solely out of geo-political exigencies of the modern age. The goal is to show how the fundamentalism we encounter today has clear roots in bygone eras. Anomalies notwithstanding, the iconic figures discussed here were bellwethers, not fringe figures; so they are key reference points in a common thread that runs through Islam's history. The Salafi approach was baked into the cake from the beginning. True Reformers recognize that it's time to change the recipe. }

{32 The cosmopolitan center of Beirut, Lebanon would be an exemplar of pluralism in modern times (that is, up until the post-War era). Tehran, Iran was relatively secularized in the post-War era, though that mostly occurred in the context of POLITICAL illiberalism (i.e. despotic rule under the “Shah”). In present-day Kyrgyzstan, we also find such harmony; a happy fact that can be attributed to the partial secularization of Kyrgyz culture. Pursuant to the Kamal-ization of the country after the first World War, the same phenomenon occurred in Turkey. Tunisia is also a beacon of liberalism in the Muslim world. To a lesser degree, we've seen sporadic liberalization in other pockets (e.g. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia). The absence of conflict throughout the Levant from the conclusion of the so-called “Crusades” (15th century) to the on-set of the Revisionist Zionist project (the “Nakbah” in 1947-48) can be attributed to the LACK OF an agenda on the part of Jews, Christians, and Muslims to force their respective creeds on the

region. During that period (almost half a millennium), barring intermittent skirmishes, people of the three Faiths lived peaceably side by side. Such happy circumstances existed under a (somewhat pluralistic) Ottoman rule (see footnotes 34 and 35 below). This relative harmony was not DUE TO incipient creedal / tribal fealties; but DESPITE them. That is to say: This era of (quasi-)comity does not serve as evidence that any of those religions were pacifistic. Rather, it shows that—for a time—other factors trumped any sectarian enmity (which may have lain dormant). It was not religiosity that dissolved the antagonisms between the Faiths; it was a conscientious measure of democratic thinking...which was enabled by SECULARITY.}

{33 When refuting a thesis, it is not “confirmation bias” to attend explicitly to that which refutes the thesis. In the event that countervailing evidence constitute a prevailing trend, it doesn’t matter how frequently anecdotal evidence in favor of the thesis is proffered. If we wanted to disprove the claim that Bob has been sticking to a healthy diet for ten years now, we would focus solely on all the occasions in which he’d eaten food that was unhealthy (going back one decade). If every day for the past ten years Bob spent roughly half the time eating Twinkies, and the balance of the time eating quinoa, we would need only document his daily intake of Twinkies over that period in order to refute the thesis. To the objection, “But you are ignoring all the occasions that Bob ate quinoa,” we would simply respond: “In order to refute the thesis, we need only show the incidence—nay, regularity—of Twinkie-consumption.” To demonstrate Bob’s routine of poor nutrition, his intake of nutritious fare is beside the point. This goes for ANY context. “But what about all the days he was nice to everyone?” does not attest to the good character of a serial killer who has committed homicide on, well, many OTHER days. It is not cherry-picking to enumerate ONLY countervailing evidence (whether it regards Twinkies or murder victims) in order to reveal a trend that contradicts the proposed thesis. If facts not commensurate with the thesis-in-question are sufficiently prevalent, the thesis is refuted. After all, junk-food addicts sometimes eat apples.}

{34 The Ottoman Empire—like the Mughal Empire in the Far East—was not a totalitarian theocracy. It was even willing to accommodate vassal monarchs of other Faiths within its vast domain—as with Druze prince Fakhr ad-Din II of Bakleen (of the Banu Ma’an) in (See footnote 35 below.) Lebanon (late 16th / early 17th century)...until, that is, he got too big for his britches. The Lebanese rulers from the Banu Shihab were also Druze. Not surprisingly, these two tribes quibbled with one another.}

{35 It might be noted that the Ottoman sultanate was not entirely beneficent. In the waning days of the Empire, the (Muslim) Turks orchestrated a genocide of 1.5 million (Christian) Armenians (between 1915 and 1917)—a massive ethnic cleansing campaign that was the First World War’s Holocaust. Going back to the 16th century, Ottoman Sultan Suleyman “the Magnificent” instituted a moderated version of pluralism; thereby according unprecedented status to fellow “People of the Book” (i.e. Jews and Christians). This was done under a newfangled imperial order known as “Kanun’i Osmani”. Suleyman’s new policy for “dhimmi” (dubbed “Kanun-i Raya”) was clearly a departure from precedent. (Reference my essay on the history of legal codes. I will explore the history of LIBERALISM in the Muslim world in a forthcoming essay: “Islam’s Pyrite Age”.) Meanwhile, conflict in the Levant can be traced to the dunderheaded “British Mandate” initiated by the knuckle-headed Balfour Declaration—an arrangement hastily cobbled together at the conclusion of the First World War (i.e. pursuant to the dissolution of Ottoman sovereignty). This set the stage for the disaster in Palestine that would follow the Second World War, whereby Revisionist Zionism was given a free pass to establish a theocratic ethno-State.}

{36 The Koran is hardly a clarion call for women’s rights. The most notorious passages are verses 3-4, 15, 22-25, 33-34, and 43 of Surah 4. (Also risible are verses 223-237 and 282 of Surah 2; as well as verses 4-6, 8, and 13 of Surah 24—all of which make clear that women are inferior to men.) This view is in keeping with the teachings of MoM, wherein we are notified that women are intellectually inferior to men (Bukhari chapt. 12, no. 2658; alt. 1/6/301, 2/24/541, and 3/48/826). We are also notified that hell is populated primarily by women...because they deserve it (Bukhari 1/2/29; alt. no. 304). No kidding. This made sense, as women were said to be less intelligent and less morally capable than men (Muslim no.

241). And according to Mohammed’s famed companion, Abu Bakra: When MoM heard that Sassanids had made the daughter of Emperor Khosrow their ruler, he scoffed: “Never will a nation succeed that makes a woman its ruler.” Ironically, there were two successive—and successful—female rulers in Persia (that is: the empire directly to the east of Arabia) during Mohammed’s lifetime.}

{37 For a case-study in this, note the Islamic studies department at Georgetown, which is bought and paid for by the House of Saud. As eminence grise of Islamic apologia, John Esposito’s paymasters hail from this execrable cabal of tyrants. Suffice to say, once academics make their money from Wahhabi monarchs, all bets are off. One may as well deign to learn about the history of Christianity from the faculty at Liberty University.}

Postscript:

The message I aimed to convey in this essay is that Progressively-inclined Muslims cannot formulate a liberalized version of their “din” until they come to terms with the checkered past of Dar al-Islam. This entails disabusing themselves of ingratiating myths—to which many (otherwise sensible) people obstinately cling...as if the past offered some kind of consolation (a consolation to which they feel they are entitled if they are to bring Islam into the future).

The fact of the matter is: Legitimate or not, Salafism has been there all along. Yet to hear it from some Islamic apologists, Daesh’s recent (failed) campaign to create a caliphate in the Middle East is something new to the Muslim world—unprecedented in the annals of Islam. {A} This spurious claim rests on the supposition that the mission of THAT PARTICULAR (unabashedly Salafi) movement were somehow a matter of “hijacking the Faith”—contorting what originally existed into some grotesque new (mutant) version. This is sheer nonsense.

In reality, “Da’i-i-sh” [alt. “Daesh”; acronym for “Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-Iraq wal-Sham”] (a.k.a. the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham; rendered “ISIS”) was a return to the way things were in Islam’s first generations—specifically with respect to the “Salaf”. After all, the entire point of fundamentalism is to revert back to the way things originally were; erasing all subsequent developments, which are seen only as corruptions. The contention that the ideology animating Daesh is a peculiar novelty of the modern world is untenable.

There are, of course, geo-political and other social-psychological explanations for religious fanaticism; but such factors account more for MOTIVES (incentives given the current exigencies; thus the proximal causes for grievances) more than ideological grounding (which prescribes the means—and rational—for addressing those grievances). Here, I am concerned with the latter (“beta”); leaving the former (“alpha”) for another day. (See footnote 28 above.)

So why the obstinacy to which so many cling to myths about Salafism as a DEPARTURE FROM Mohammedan precedent rather than as the epitome of it? We homo sapiens crave certainty. Moreover, we gravitate toward anything that confirms our biases (especially if it seems to serve our interests). Today’s Progressive Muslims naturally want to believe that their Faith has always been what they themselves want it to be NOW.

When engaging in critical inquiry, a modicum of self-discipline is required. As a general rule: If you desperately want to believe what you’re hearing, it makes all the more sense to put your guard up. This means having the self-discipline to step back and engage in serious critical reflection especially when NOT doing so would be the most convenient.

To reiterate: Focusing on salient incidents is NOT the result of my having succumbed to the trappings of confirmation bias. It is simply the way that one CONFIRMS / FALSIFIES a proposition. In order to

disconfirm the claim that Salafism is somehow a DEPARTURE FROM Islam as it was originally conceived (and is thus not as it has traditionally existed), I focused on the slew of countervailing evidence that can be easily found in the historical record.

In the preceding essay, such selectivity was not for obfuscation; it was for elucidation.

The relevance of all this is plain to see: The Salafi legacy has repercussions with which we are dealing to the present day. Indeed, the tirades of today's fundamentalist preachers are perfectly in keeping with the Sunnah (as originally conceived). More to the point: modern-day Salafists are doctrinally identical to the Salafists of the Middle Ages...AND, for that matter, to the Salaf THEMSELVES. An honest reading of the Koran yields the creed touted by Daesh...and the House of Saud...and the Taliban.

So the next time someone claims that Islam has always been a quasi-Progressive religion, request that they look up:

- The imam from Medina, Malik ibn Anas (b. 711)
- Then the Abbasid caliph, Al-Qadir (b. 947)
- Then the Persian theologian, Al-Ghazali (b. 1058)
- Then the imam from Baghdad, Ibn al-Jawzi (b. 1116)
- Then the Palestinian theologian, Ibn Qudamah al-Maqdisi (b. 1147)
- Then the Kurdish sheikh, Ibn al-Salah (b. 1181)
- Then the Persian sheikh, Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah (b. 1263)
- Then the Mamluk faqih from Damascus, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (b. 1292)

...and any number of other Salafi icons. In doing so, they may discover a common theme—a theme that belies their ingratiating misapprehension. After all, such men were not outliers; they were some of the most influential figures in medieval Islam.

These same misguided interlocutors may also wish to learn about the odious legacy of the Arabian proselyte, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (b. 1703); and then the Syrian proselyte, Mohamed Rashid Rida (b. 1865).

Far from aberrations of Islamic “aqidah”, each of these men were emblematic. Not emblematic of EVERY Muslim, of course; but of a distinct strain of “ibadah” [piety] that began with the original incarnation of Mohammedism.

It comes as no surprise, then, that this odious legacy continued into the modern age with:

- Sayyid Abul A’la Maududi (b. 1903)
- Hassan al-Banna (b. 1906)
- Sayyid Qutb (b. 1906)
- Yusuf Abdullah al-Qaradawi (b. 1926)

So what of modern-day Salafists? Behold six key figures who were born during the two decades between 1941 and 1960:

- Abdullah Yusuf Azzam (b. 1941)
- Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf (b. 1946)
- Ayman Mohammed Rabie al-Zawahiri (b. 1951)
- Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj (b. 1954)
- Abu Mohammed [Essam] al-Maqdisi [not to be confused with the medieval Al-Maqdisi] (b. 1959)
- “mullah” Mohammed Omar (b. 1960)

Also note Al-Maqdisi's protegee: Ahmed Fadil al-Nazal al-Khalayleh of Zarqa (a.k.a. "Abu Musab al-Zarqawi"). These men may have subscribed to a deranged "aqidah" (creed); but their thinking was perfectly in keeping with the thinking of the bellwethers enumerated above. {B} To not understand this fact is to not understand the history of Islam. And such ignorance precludes the ability to propound a truly Reformist version of the Faith.

One might ask: Other than a prohibition on usury and infanticide, what has the Sunnah bequeathed to posterity? The answer: Not much. The proposition, "If only we REVIVE the Islam of the Salaf, then things will dramatically improve for everyone" has been debunked so many times, one would have to be insane to take it seriously.

In order for genuine Reform to be possible, it is necessary for Muslims to say: "Stop trying to revive the creed as it was in the Dark Ages. It's time to try something new."

Reformation is possible; but not as long as the Ummah remains delusive. Over the course of Islam's history, the rare occurrence of a luminary here and there reminds us that things can change for the better; but only insofar as secular principles are espoused. Such luminaries attest to the fact that the denizens of Dar al-Islam are capable of so much more. But, ultimately, the solutions cannot be found within ancient scripture.

If we have learned nothing else from the odious figures adumbrated in this essay, it is crystal clear that the problems stemming from the contents of sacred texts cannot be solved by recourse to those same texts. In order to effect genuine Reform, Muslims must strive for ideals that have merit independently of the religion's dogmatic foundations.

As simple as it sounds, in order to effect reform, Muslims need only tell the truth—not only to others, but to themselves.

{A Note here that I do not say "Islamic history"; as the term is nonsensical. There is no more Islamic history than there is Islamic botany. By the same token, there is no Judaic history (though there is a history of Judaism) nor Christian history (though there is a history of Christianity); there is only ACTUAL history. Tragically, there are myriad DISTORTIONS OF history...by this or that ideological camp. The qualifier here is important. If a purported obstetrician claimed to be practicing "Islamic embryology", it would be a queue to disregard anything he said ever again about pregnancy or gynecology. Likewise with claims of "Wiccan bio-chemistry" or "Buddhist climate science" or "Mennonite astrophysics". (As an exercise, try signing up for a class in Hassidic astronomy at the nearest university.) So it is with "Islamic history". A history of X must adhere to the same principles regardless of what X might be—whether X is Islam or baseball. }

{B What might explain this incidence of prominent Salafi figures within the same (quasi-Baby Boomer) generation? A possible explanation: They all grew up in the advent of the "Nakba"—a travesty that surely would have spurred not only anti-Semitism (based on a seething resentment of the perceived culprits), but an abiding animus toward "the West" in general. This vexing geo-political development (alpha factor: social exigencies) would have prompted an urge to lash out...in a way that could be justified by a compelling narrative (beta factor: reaction informed by religiosity). Hence the propagation of extremism amongst an aggrieved Dar al-Islam. (Nothing fuels cult activity like frustration / humiliation.) Religious fundamentalism holds especial appeal to those who feel lost at sea; who need to be validated / vindicated; and who seek a way for their (self-righteous) indignation to be given voice. See footnote 28 above. }

Postscript 2:

A Response To Objections To My Characterization of Al-Ghazali

In Islamic apologetics, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali of Tus is portrayed as a champion of intellectual curiosity. This is asserted about a man who stated that laymen “should be forbidden—as much as possible—from perusing philosophical works.” In fact, Al-Ghazali was the consummate dogmatist who vociferously sought to stifle intellectual activity.

But how can we be so sure? In the main body of this essay, I outlined much of the evidence for this thesis. In light of objections leveled by Islamic apologists who espouse a more charitable characterization of this Muslim icon, some elaboration may be in order.

Al-Ghazali’s doctrinal mindset can be explained by the fact that his mentor in Nishapur was Dhia ad-Din Abd al-Malik ibn Yusuf of Juwayn, Khorasan (a.k.a. “Al-Juwayni”), who subscribed to the Shafi’i “madhhab” (school of jurisprudence) and the Ashari approach to Islamic theology. Al-Juwayni was hostile to ANY speculation for ANY reason. So far as he was concerned, all thinking must strictly hew to the Sunnah. Want answers? Look to scripture. Period. This is made clear in his *“Irshad ila Qawati al-Adilla fi Usul al-I’tiqad”* [Guide To Conclusive Proofs For Principles Of Belief].

Al-Ghazali was eventually employed by the Seljuk minister, Nizam al-Mulk in Baghdad; to be headmaster at the “Nizamiyya” (government-commissioned madrasas). The “Nizamiyya” were effectively indoctrination facilities; not universities. Al-Ghazali was unwavering in his Koranic literalism—as made clear in his screed: *“Fada’ih al-Batiniya”* (a virulent indictment against those who posited “batin”). As luck would have it, the powers that be had an ax to grind with “Batiniyya”—that is: those who were open to not taking Koranic text literally (spec. the Shiite sect known as the “Isma’ilis”). So, at the time, he was a natural choice for the job.

Pursuant to his endorsement of the Shafi’i “fiqh”, Al-Ghazali secured a position as advisor to the Reactionary Seljuk vizier, Nizam al-Mulk—who’s hometown, Tus, was the same as Al-Ghazali’s. In keeping with this vocation, Al-Ghazali came to be a strident opponent of the far more liberal Ishma’ili approach to Faith (primarily affiliated with the Fatimids).

In his memoir, *“Deliverance From Error”*, Al-Ghazali announced that his certainties were derived not from “constructing a proof or putting together an argument”; but were instead the result of “god casting light into my breast.” He concluded, that said “light is the key to knowledge.” He then scoffed at what he dismissed as “unimportant sciences”...which, he averred, “are useless in the pilgrimage to the afterlife.” Recall that he stated: “The price of god’s love is your head, and nothing less.”

Al-Ghazali conceded that, in having briefly allowed himself to engage in free inquiry, he feared displeasing god; and consequently being cast into hellfire. So he sought to adjust his thinking accordingly. While supplication became his sine qua non, free-wheeling speculation and critical reflection became verboten.

Here was a man who seemed existentially disoriented, even lost. Toward the end of his life, Al-Ghazali opted to follow his brother into Sufism, whereupon he became a vagabond / hermit for over a decade. This “tasawwuf” did not preclude his Salafism; it merely demonstrated that he was fumbling around in the dark, groping in desperation for something to hold onto.

As with many who become smitten with mystical mumbo-jumbo, Al-Ghazali managed to find meaning in esoterica. It was at that juncture in his life that his ultimate goal became—in his own words—the “ihya” [revival] of the “ulum ad-din” [principles of the Islamic way of life].

Mysticism is not mutually exclusive with fanaticism; it merely gives one’s religiosity a glossy patina of mystique. The fact that some Salafis denounce Sufism is rather beside the point. The distinction is more about branding—and stylistic choices for observance—than it is about the underlying pathology. Religious fundamentalism is religious fundamentalism. It’s not for nothing that Al-Ghazali’s teachings had a profound influence on Ibn Taymiyya: a Salafi who was NOT a Sufi.

Al-Ghazali’s seething contempt for great Muslim thinkers like Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Al-Farabi is very telling. (He expressed nothing but disdain for such luminaries in his “Incoherence Of The Philosophers”.) He is known for having said: “The ‘munafiq’ looks for faults; the ‘mumin’ looks for excuses.” * In other words: Those who are insufficiently pious try to find defects in the Sunnah, whereas supplicants use rationalizations for their beliefs. This is TRUE. The problem is that Al-Ghazali saw it as a vice for the former and a virtue for the latter (rather than the other way around).

Elsewhere, Al-Ghazali mused that “if those who do not possess ‘ilm’ were to avoid scholarly discussions, all disagreement would end.” Again, TRUE. Apparently, he saw this hypothetical eventuality as a panacea; and lamented that non-Muslims were inclined to weigh in on important matters. So WHAT OF this vaunted “ilm” of which he spoke? As it turns out, it is NOT the equivalent of what we now refer to as “knowledge”. Al-Ghazali was unequivocal on this point. He averred: “The essence of ‘ilm’ is to know what obedience and worship are.” (For more on the buzz-term, “ilm” and why it does not correlate with the post-Enlightenment sense of knowledge, see the Appendix below.)

The point is worth reiterating: Al-Ghazali did not believe in causation. His thinking was as follows: Only god brings things about; so the only things that happen, happen according to god’s will. That’s all anyone needs to know. Any other explanation is superfluous.

Al-Ghazali’s anti-intellectualism was inseparable from his illiberalism. This was exemplified by his unabashed misogyny. In his book, “Revival Of The [Islamic Way Of Life]”, he stated that a woman “should remain in the inner section of her [husband’s] house and tend to her spinning. She should not enter and exit [that section] excessively. She should speak infrequently with her neighbors and visit them only when the situation requires. She should show deference to her husband in his absence and in his presence. She should seek his satisfaction in all affairs... She should not leave his house without his permission. When she goes out, with his permission, she should conceal herself in tattered clothing...being careful that no stranger hear her voice or recognize her... She should be ready at all times for [her husband] to enjoy her whenever he wishes” (Book 12: On The Etiquette Of Marriage). The sequestration of women in the Muslim world follows this precedent...which can be traced back to the earliest days of Islam. Recall that the Koran is addressed explicitly to men (a matter I explore in Appendix 2 of my essay, “Genesis Of A Holy Book”).

We should recall that, for Al-Ghazali (as with all religious fundamentalists), piety was inextricably tied with fear (to wit: fear of god)—a conflation that is captured by the term, “taqwa”. This defective epistemology is based on neurosis rather than on erudition.

It is worth noting that not everything Al-Ghazali said was objectionable. He was against avarice—noting that the only thing that one truly owns is that which cannot be lost in a shipwreck. He was against venality—impugning those who can be paid to change their opinions. Laudable as such positions are, they

are not incompatible with religious fundamentalism. After all, even the most fanatical Puritans tend to be non-materialistic. Meanwhile, there is technically no corruption in North Korea. True Believers are neither conspicuous consumers nor grifters; but that does not absolve them from the detriments of their other dysfunctions.

So how might we cultivate a thorough understanding of this oft-lauded figure?

Let's review. In his "*Tahafut al-Falasifa*" [Incoherence of the Philosophers], Al-Ghazali made his case against, well, PHILOSOPHERS, by contending that since there was no unanimity in the world of philosophy, ALL those who engaged in philosophy must be wrong. Hence it was only religion (spec. Islam) that had legitimate claim on Truth. He thus took the (forced) conformity and (forced) unanimity of a religious community as a sign of its credibility. Those engaged in philosophy or science could not possibly have been on the right track, as they were always disagreeing with one another!

Tellingly, Al-Ghazali's two biggest targets—after Plato and Aristotle—were the two greatest thinkers in the history of Islam: Ibn Sina ("Avicenna") and Al-Farabi.

So why bother talking about him? Lamentably, the majority of Islamic apologists today—from Mark Hanson to Timothy Winter—think that Al-Ghazali was the cat's pajamas; or at least they pretend to think so. This state of denial is de rigueur in much of the Ummah. When most Muslims inquire about Al-Ghazali, it comes as no surprise that they are often treated to gushing encomia rather than serious analysis. Rather than a Reactionary, Al-Ghazali is routinely touted as a luminary. Such pablum is typically offered by charlatans posing as "scholars"—as with Hanson and Winter. This is a reminder that religious apologia thrives in a vacuum of critical thinking.

It beggars belief the pablum with which denizens of Dar al-Islam are systematically inculcated. Such inculcation is carried out by dishonest actors who masquerade as serious thinkers. Why? The likes of Hanson and Winter (a.k.a. "Hamza Yusuf" and "Abdal Hakim Murad") are thoroughly convinced that, in return for their unstinting piety, they will eventually be treated to a coterie of buxom, wide-eyed virgins in a celestial paradise. As a consequence of this reverie, a raft of risible fictions are routinely propounded—among them: the glowing portrayal of Al-Ghazali.

Pretending that a dogmatic thinker—who was expressly anti-philosophy—was somehow a PHILOSOPHER is absurd. Alas. When it comes to Al-Ghazali, such misapprehension is commonplace; which explains why religious fundamentalism subsists.

Though a complete dissection of every page of his works would be a pointless venture, it's worth perusing Al-Ghazali's oeuvre on "logic" ("mantiq") and "knowledge" ("ilm"). There were three notable books that dealt with such matters:

- The "*Thya Ulum ad-Din*" [Revival Of The Knowledge Of The (Islamic) Way Of Life] (often mis-translated as the revival of "religious sciences", a nonsensical phrase) is his magnum opus. Book 2 of this work is helpfully entitled: "*Qawa'id al-Aqa'id*" [Principles Of The Creed], a far cry from principles of SCIENCE. This work is a reminder that Al-Ghazali was, above all, a "mu-jaddid"—that is: a religious REVIVALIST. (The sobriquet means "one who effects tajdid".) As with most proselytizers, Al-Ghazali was adamantly against (genuine) philosophy; so devoted his exposition to doctrinal matters. The work was a dogmatic splurge from cover to cover. **
- In the "*Mi'yar al-Ilm fi Fan al-Mantiq*" [Measure Of Knowledge In The Art Of Logic], he attempted to outline the standards / conditions for "ilm". For Al-Ghazali, the only legitimate "ilm" was theological knowledge: an ersatz "ilm" known as "ilm al-kalam" (which effectively means:

familiarity with doctrine—as explicated in his “*Iljam al-Awam an Ilm al-Kalam*”). It makes sense, then, that in his other tract, “*Al-Iqtisad fi al-I’tiqad*” [The Median In Belief], he indicted Islamic rationalists (spec. the Mutazila school of thought) while arguing for a strict Ashari approach. ***

- In the “*Mihak al-Nazar fi al-Mantiq*” [Touchstone Of Insight Into Logic], he passes his own pseudo-logic off as the only TRUE logic. Does this offer ANY penetrating insight into the study of logic? This question can be answered by posing another: When teaching logic, is this book used in ANY curriculum on the planet? ****

These were works of religious apologetics; nothing more. Rather than anything that resembled critical analysis, such material was a splurge in specious rhetoric. As a dyed-in-the-wool religionist, Al-Ghazali saw logic (that is, REASON) as something that infected Dar al-Islam—and, by implication, the entire world. For he—accurately, it might be noted—saw that independent (rational) thinking was causing people to lose their “iman”. In fact, the one thing he got right was that science and philosophy were the enemies of religious Faith. (With more and more scientific understanding, the raft of glaring mistakes throughout the Koran became increasingly difficult to ignore—a matter I explore in “The Koran A Miracle?”)

Al-Ghazali (correctly) recognized that lots of independent thinking amongst the rabble was a dire threat to the institutionalized dogmatism that he so ardently espoused. He concluded that we should therefore never avail ourselves of our critical faculties. EVER. Instead, we should all simply memorize what we’ve been instructed to memorize; and leave it at that. After all, his great epiphany was that true knowledge came not from critical inquiry, but from MEMORIZATION (of approved material). This point is often made via a silly tale about a bandit stealing his notes, then chastising him for not having memorized everything he’d written down. (Stealing his NOTES was equated with stealing his KNOWLEDGE.) A surefire sign that one does NOT have a profound grasp of material is that one has opted to memorize it by rote. Rote thinking is inimical to critical analysis. (More often than not, memorization is a colossal waste of time.)

To be fair, Al-Ghazali expressed some reservations about “taqlid” (received wisdom); but, of course, that is precisely what he promoted—though on his own terms. His bone to pick was with CERTAIN KINDS of “taqlid”. So long as one stringently adhered to the doctrines that HE propounded...well, then, everything was hunky-dory (ref. his “*Al-Qistas al-Mustaqim*”). Naturally, Al-Ghazali’s concern was that supplicants would listen to the wrong sorts of people. (His compunction, then, wasn’t with conformity per se; it was with conformity to the wrong sorts of things.)

It might also be noted that Al-Ghazali’s views were based on a delusive reading of the Koran, as explicated in his “*Jawahir al-Qur’an*” [Jewels Of The Koran]. This explains such works as “*Al-Qistas al-Mustaqim*” [The Just Retribution] (in which he tries to justify the retributive justice meted out by the Koran’s protagonist) and the “*Mizan al-Amal*” [Balance Of Action] (in which he presents the criteria for the rightness / wrongness of any given action). Here, “mizan” can be interpreted here as “standard of measure”. Unsurprisingly, this “balance” was simply a matter of hewing to Islamic doctrine. In other words: No balance at all.

It’s worth posing the question: Did Al-Ghazali have a firm grasp on the object of his scorn (science and philosophy)? A striking occurrence gives us the answer. In May of 2021, Hamza Yusuf did a seven-part series in praise of Al-Ghazali. In the entirety of the ten-plus hours of “The Jewels Of The Qur’an”, he was unable to mention a single worthwhile insight from the famed mujaddid. This is quite remarkable. Given a platform to showcase ANYTHING that may have been laudable, the president of Zaytuna College came up empty handed.

Al-Ghazali was many things; a fount of wisdom he was not. Al-Ghazali is most accurately characterized as a revivalist. Delusive thinking cannot abide in the midst of robust, critical thinking; so he dedicated

himself to quashing the latter in order to bolster the former. There is a reason that Al-Ghazali's "**Maqasid al-Falasifah**" [The Goals of the Philosophers] does not appear on a syllabus in any philosophy class at any accredited institution in the world. His understanding of philosophy was, at best, worthless.

Far from a reformer (one who seeks to move things forward), Al-Ghazali was a fundamentalist (one who seeks to bring things back to the fundamentals). He is a reminder that those who are most celebrated in Islam tend to be the Reactionaries.

{* The scathing epithet, "munafiq" is typically translated as "hypocrite". It refers to one who professes to be righteous yet does not sufficiently hew to the Sunnah. "Mumin" simply means "believer".}

{** "Ihya" means "revival [of]". "Ulum" is a variation on the term for knowledge: "ilm". The meaning of "din" is "way of life". This has religious connotations; so the word is typically translated as "religion" or "Faith"—as is the case with Al-Ghazali's "**Kitab al-Arba'in fi Usul ad-Din**" (rendered "Book of The Forty Fundamentals Of The Faith" in English). When it comes to Islam, religion IS a way of life. The Sunnah is meant to address EVERYTHING—from how one should eat meals to how political systems are to be designed. A brief, easily-accessible distillation of the larger work (which was composed in medieval Arabic) is Al-Ghazali's most popular book: the oddly-titled "**Kimiya-yi Sa'adat**" (Alchemy of Happiness), which—interestingly enough—was composed in Middle Persian. The latter covers four basic topics: "ebadat" (religious duties), "mu'amalat" (dealings with other people), "monjiat" (salvation), and "mohlekat" (damnation). In it, there is no material whatsoever that could be accurately described as "philosophical".}

{*** It's worth noting that his "**Bughyah al-Murid fi Masa'il al-Tawhid**" was inspired by the vehemently anti-Mutazila tract, "**Kitab al-Tawhid**" by the (Hanafi) Persian theologian, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi of Samarkand. Speculation—whether about "batin" or anything else—was the perennial hobgoblin of Al-Ghazali's career. He was more in his element when he stuck to cut-and-dried juridical matters ("usul al-fiqh"). After all, he was, at heart, an Islamic jurist ("faqih"). Hence works like the "**Asas al-Qiyas**", the "**Shifa al-Ghalil fi al-Qiyas wa al-Ta'lim**", and "**Al-Mankhul fi Ta'liqat al-Usul**".}

{**** "Nazar" indicates something having to do with vision. Suffice to say, there was little ACTUAL "nazar" in Al-Ghazali's book. If we were to survey all the great minds that have made significant contributions to our understanding of logic, we might ask if Al-Ghazali's material played any role. Did Gottfried von Leibniz cite "Mihak al-Nazar fi al-Mantiq" in any of his writing? How about Gottlob Frege or Bertrand Russell or Rudolf Carnap or John von Neumann? How about ANY scholar, ANYWHERE at ANY TIME, who has specialized in this field? If we were to suppose, for a moment, that Al-Ghazali offered indispensable ideas, we might wonder why no luminary in the field has ever mentioned him. This abstention has nothing to do with him having hailed from Dar al-Islam. After all, Ibn Sina ("Avicenna") enjoys near universal praise amongst intellectuals the world over.}

APPENDIX: "Knowledge"?

The Koranic term, "ilm" is typically translated as "knowledge". However it is more accurate to say that it means an acute awareness of Islamic doctrine. That is to say, it is knowledge in a narrow sense: knowledge of god's word (and of MoM's teaching). Thus "ilm" is not knowledge; it is familiarity with—and fealty to—the Sunnah. In Islam, doctrinal acumen is referred to explicitly "hikmah" (commonly translated as "wisdom"), which is seen as concomitant with the Koranic sense of "ilm" (commonly translated as "knowledge"). The equivalent to this in ancient Greek thought was "doxa"; and in Judaic thought as "da'at[h]". This is NOT what the Greeks referred to as "episteme" / "sophie" [knowledge]; or

what was known in Classical Hebrew as “yedi’at”.

Indeed, even thinking ITSELF (what the Greeks often dubbed “phronesis”) was not so straight-forward. For there was the immediate apprehension of concretes (“noesis”); but there was also critical reflection (“dianoia”). Thus the distinction was made between simply understanding instructions versus the higher functions of abstract thinking. Religious “knowledge” is predicated on the former while actively discouraging the latter.

If one wants to see what a text means by X, it is instructive to see what it means by lack-of-X. So, a way of ascertaining what is meant by “ilm” in Islam’s holy book, one needs only see what is meant by “ignorance” (i.e. lack of knowledge). The Koran’s use of “ilm” is best exemplified by the term used for un-belief, “jahiliyyah”. As it turns out, “jahiliyyah” is (conventionally) taken to mean “those in a state of ignorance”. In other words, Faith is equated with knowledge, whereas LACK OF Faith is equated with ignorance. Lo and behold: “jahi” [“ignorance”] is not ignorance in the modern sense (absence of erudition); it means ignorance of the god’s word (and of MoM’s teaching). Hence “ilm” simply means AWARENESS OF something very specific, with the implication that awareness is concomitant with acquiescence.* Meanwhile, a lack of FAITH is synonymous with a lack of KNOWLEDGE. This quirky taxonomy is more theology than epistemology.

And so it went: Those “with knowledge” cannot possibly refer to non-believers (who’s wrong-headedness is relentlessly castigated throughout the Koran). For those “with knowledge” are simply those who adhere to the Sunnah. The people who have “ilm”, then, are people who are PIOUS: those who exhibit doctrinal fidelity (“ibadah”)...who correspond to those who most embody “iman”. Hence the promotion of “uwtuw al-ilm” is none other than the promotion of the most devout MUSLIMS.

Passages like 29:49 tell us that “ilm” is something we are GIVEN, not something that we acquire for ourselves. It is quite telling that “ilm” is seen a function of “wahi” [revelation]. In other words, as far as the authors of the Koran were concerned, being well-versed in Islamic doctrine (itself a function of revelation) is all that “ilm” is. More to the point, “ilm” is something allotted to each of us as god sees fit to allot it. Indeed, 17:85 emphasizes the fact that the knowledge being conveyed to mankind by this Final Revelation is strictly circumscribed: “You are not given aught of ‘ilm’ but a little.” So “ilm” is not something one cultivates by one’s own devices; it is something rationed by god.

And so it goes: In a strictly Koranic sense, “ilm” entails the recognition of certain dogmas; not “knowledge” as understood in the post-Enlightenment sense.

This is further demonstrated by the fact that Sunni theology is often referred to as “ilm al-kalam”. The rubric is typically used as a euphemism for apologia (“kalam” effectively means rhetoric). Once we understand religious dogmas as memetic narcotics, we see that edification is the LAST thing with which religious apologists are concerned. Their charge is to defend sacrosanct “truths” with pedantic flourishes; not to elucidate Reality. Indeed, like Christian apologia, “ilm al-lalam” demonstrates that dogmatism serves as a surrogate for wisdom—an insight that goes back to Socrates’ indictment of sophistry.

To be “in the know” was simply to accede to whatever doctrinal positions were being prescribed. The point was to SURRENDER to dogmatism, not to resist it. If anything, genuine knowledge was a CASUALTY of “ilm”, not its aim.

Such obtuse thinking was illustrated by the (cartoonishly absurd) treatment of “ilm” by the so-called “Dars-i Nizami” [houses of Nizam], an Islamic fundamentalist movement founded in the 18th century (named after its founder, “mulla” Nizam ud-Din As-Sihaalwi). Salafis (esp. Deobandis) prized what they referred

to in their own dialect as the “Dar al-Ulum” [house of knowledge], effectively an indoctrination facility (i.e. Salafi madrasah).

Other dead give-aways of the nature of (what was meant by “ilm”) include the buzz-term “ilm al-rijal” [knowledge of men], which refers to Islamic religious studies that deals with which Hadith are to be deemed more / less credible.

Suffice to say, “ilm” does not correspond with the post-Enlightenment conception of knowledge, as we now use it. In fact, it is the polar opposite of what the ancient Greeks (notably, Socrates) referred to as “episteme” / “sophie”.

And what of clarity of thought? In Vedic Sanskrit, “vidya” is associated with lucidity (while “shastra” refers to an awareness of principles / precepts). This MIGHT refer to “ilm al-kalam” in an oblique sense; but the Vedic concepts are about LIBERATING the mind, not subordinating it to authority. Whereas “ilm al-kalam” has to do with adherence to doctrine, “vidya” is a kind of emancipation from external forces.

Re-labeling dogmatism (or a familiarity with sacred doctrine) “ilm” does not change what it is. It is plain to see that the Koranic “ilm” is not comparable to what the ancient Greeks dubbed “episteme” / “sophie” (in the scientific sense) or “gnosis” (in the spiritual sense); nor is it comparable to the Syriac, “mandata”; nor is it comparable to what Hindus dubbed “abhijna” / “gyan” / “jnana” / “vidya”; nor what Dzogchen Buddhists refer to as “rig-pa”. As it turns out, it is more comparable to what is referred to as “da’at[h]” in Judaism—which primarily has to do with familiarity with—and fealty—to Mosaic law. Note, for example, Hosea 4:6, which reads: “My people are destroyed for lack of ‘da’at’.”

Theology is the handmaiden of religious apologetics. It is—by definition—not about knowledge; it is the craft of concocting rationalizations for pre-established dogmas. Indeed, theology is the ANTITHESIS of a discipline that is genuinely concerned with knowledge (i.e. philosophy / science; which is based on the AVOIDANCE / DEBUNKING of dogmatism). The Islamic term for an apologist is thus “mu-ta-kalim”. Mutakalimun are people who specialize in the peddling of (Mohammedan) superstition under the auspices of “scholarship”. Such pretense perverts the notion of erudition.

Alas, this blinkered epistemology underlies any discussion of “reason” in the Koran. As it turns out, “reason” is something ANYONE would encourage. That the authors of the Koran insist that they are using reason is therefore unsurprising. Isaiah 1:18 in the Hebrew Bible invites readers, “Come now and let us reason together”; yet only the most deluded would suggest this enjoinder was really prescribing “reason” in the Enlightenment sense—as with the German “wissenschaft”.

Here’s the thing: EVERYONE thinks they are being reasonable; this does not make everyone a champion of (actual) Reason. The value of using REASON goes back to the Sanskrit notion, “yukti”. Yet the Koranic use of “A-Q-L” [typically translated as “reason”] is in no way comparable to what the Ancient Greeks dubbed “nous” [the capacity for understanding], which involves (critical) deliberation / reflection. Nor is it comparable to the Syriac “binta”. It is plain to see that “yaqil-una” / “taqil-una” is not employed as an exhortation to engage in critical thinking. Rather, it is used as a way of referring to those who think in the correct manner (as in: those who are pious). Translating this reference as those who REASON is therefore misleading.

As mentioned, the Koran also refers to something called, “hikmah” (e.g. 2:129), which is commonly translated as “wisdom”, as it is simply a variant of the antecedent Semitic root, “H-K-M[a]” (typically rendered “[c]Hokmah” in Aramaic). What does this term actually mean?

The Koranic conception of “wisdom” is: Thinking in a pious way (i.e. in the way we say you’re supposed to think; a.k.a. “correct thinking”). In other words: NOT wisdom. Hence, failing to think in this manner is decried as LACK OF “hikmah” (e.g. 2:171), which is effectively the same as sacrilege. This does NOT correspond with what the Greeks referred to as “arete” / “phronesis” [wisdom]; nor even what was referred to in antecedent Semitic languages as “[c]Hokmah” / “Hak[h]mah”.

The conception of “wisdom” as subservience goes back to the beginning of the Abrahamic tradition. According to the Judaic treatment of the term, we might ask: Who qualifies as “wise”? Proverbs 10:8 explains: It is one who obeys commands. In Proverbs 3:5, we are admonished not to rely on our own understanding. Even worse, throughout the Hebrew Bible, wisdom (qua piety) is rendered a function of FEAR [“yir’at”]. This is made especially clear when the vengeful god of the Torah commands respect by threatening to DESTROY. Most infamously, Proverbs 1:7 states that “the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom.”

Meanwhile, throughout the Hebrew Bible, there is a disdain for the pursuit of GENUINE wisdom—that is: when it is conceptualized in terms of knowledge in the Enlightenment sense [“yedi’at”] rather than knowledge in the sense of doctrinal awareness [“da’at”]. In the opening chapter of Ecclesiastes, we read—in the concluding verse—that “in much wisdom is much vexation; and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.” This can only be taken as contempt for intellectual curiosity. It is no wonder, then, that such an attitude predominated in much of the Abrahamic tradition. After all, critical inquiry is the death-knell of institutionalized dogmatism.

The distinction between worldly wisdom (that is, wisdom in the modern sense) and “wisdom” qua piety is illustrated in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (3:19): “The wisdom of the world is foolishness with god.”

Here’s the thing. According to the Koran, “hikmah” is a mark of “iman” [Faith]. That is to say, it is a function of “ibadah” (fealty). The key, then, is piety rather than probity; devotion rather than erudition. This myopic conception of “wisdom” is purely a matter of “fitra”: the recognition of good and evil (per the Manichean worldview being propounded).

Such blinkered thinking was nothing new in the Abrahamic tradition. Even in the early Christian church, the vague notion of enlightenment was conflated with salvation via the Koine Greek term, “soteria”. In other words, enlightenment was strictly a matter of “seeing the light” in the religious sense. To be enlightened was to be saved; and vice versa.

Thus “hikmah” is not comparable to what the ancient Greeks referred to as “arete” / “phronesis”; or what is referred to in the Eastern tradition as “pragya” / “prajna” / “jina” (rendered “panna” in Pali). Such concepts refer to an insight into the true nature of Reality. Such insight is gleaned not via subservience (and CERTAINLY NOT through dogmatism), but rather via the human powers of intuition / apprehension.**

Importantly, Eastern traditions tend to emphasize a healthy dose of skepticism (“vicikitsa” in Sanskrit) rather than dogmatism; and so encourage precisely what is discouraged in Islamic thought. Also, in the Buddhist tradition, the notion of an enlightened mind (“bodhi-citta”) is a function of compassion [“karuna”] FOR ALL SENTIENT BEINGS (what the Ancient Greeks dubbed “agape”). This means expressing loving-kindness [“maitri”] toward EVERYONE; which involves a principle known as “ahimsa”: never causing harm to any sentient being.

Suffice to say, the Islamic mandate to submit has little to do with what is now normally understood to be

“enlightenment”. There is nothing resembling “arete” / “phronesis” addressed anywhere in Islamic scripture; and for good reason. Such mental acuity would have only undermined the effort to engender “iman” via SUBMISSION.

We might also juxtapose “hikmah” against the notion of “moksha” in Eastern traditions. “Moksha” is a function of LIBERATION, not submission. (It is a matter of bringing one’s soul into alignment with the divine; and so is a matter of synchronicity rather than of obeisance.) It is achieved via one’s own devices; and does not require the simpering / groveling of idolatry. (As the Buddha exhorted: “Be your own lamp.”) In other words, “moksha” involves what Kant would later call autonomy. According to this conception of wisdom, Truth itself serves as one’s light. It is something to be found within all of us. This diverges sharply with “hikmah”, which is a function of subservience (i.e. servility to a cosmic master).

Consequently, the translation of “ilm” (as it occurs in the Koran) as “knowledge” is markedly inaccurate—based as it is on an inverted epistemology. In the Islamic context, “ilm” effectively means “familiarity with doctrine”—a quality that is diametrically opposed to what the Ancient Greeks referred to as “arete” / “phronesis”. Ergo proselytes described as “those with ilm” are simply those who have been properly indoctrinated.

Bear in mind that the theme of FEAR permeates the entire book. So we should not be surprised to learn that the Koran’s authors equate fear of god with wisdom. This is nothing new. Indeed, it is in keeping with, say, Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10 of the Hebrew Bible, in which we are told that FEAR OF THE LORD is the beginning of wisdom. Thus we are asked to suppose that “arete” is predicated on dogmatism; and even on neurosis.*** This would be a gross perversion of the term.

Alas, such a neurotic state is the basis for “hikmah”—nay, of piety in general—was codified in the exalted term “taqwa” [fear of god]. The harebrained notion that wisdom is somehow a function of FEAR is not unique to the Koran...as those in the West have been well-acquainted with the fire-and-brimstone brand of Christianity.

And so it goes: Once one has been inculcated with the appropriate set of beliefs, one can boast that one has “ilm”; and aver that one’s convictions—whatever they might be—are synonymous with WISDOM. Not only does such sacralized dogmatism have nothing to do with knowledge; it is the OPPOSITE OF knowledge. The so called “fard al-kifayah” regarding “ilm” is the mandate for all Muslims to convince themselves of certain things (namely: that of which they have been instructed they should be convinced). That is: It is the duty of each supplicant to ensure he has been thoroughly indoctrinated. This is comparable to the (spurious) Roman Catholic obligation to become well-versed in the catechism.

The instantiation of habits of thought is exactly what knowledge is NOT.

Another revealing indication that “knowledge” is conceptualized in a queer manner in Islam’s holy book is the dual meaning of “aziz”: teacher and authority. That is, to teach is to command. Rather than “aziz” referring to a pedagogue who helps people LEARN (qua think for themselves), it refers to a master (whom we are obligated to honor) who dictates. Edification is thus rendered a matter of obeisance. Meanwhile, “hakim” [wisdom] is equated with deference to the authority of god.

In 49:9, the Koran encourages the pursuit of “ilm”, but links this to an awareness of god (and his “justice”). This myopic conception of “knowledge” is hardly consummate with the use of the term in the modern world. In this sense, “knowledge” is simply reverence for whatever the Koran says. According to this interpretation, the typical Salafi is BRIMMING with “knowledge”. This is hardly consummate with what the ancient Greeks called “arete”—the Enlightenment sense of erudition known in German as

“aufklärung”.

The focus on “ilm kalam” (effectively, an ersatz knowledge) amongst Islamic theologians in no way resembled the systematic pursuit of knowledge (“wissenschaft”) that characterized the Enlightenment.

In closing, it’s worth mentioning some of the works that served as my primary sources:

- R. Stephen Humphreys’ “Islamic History: A Framework For Inquiry”
- Jonathan P. Berkey’s “The Formation Of Islam: Religion & Society In The Near East”
- Chase F. Robinson’s “Rise Of Islam”
- Albrecht Noth’s “The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source-critical Study”
- Patricia Crone’s “Hagarism: The Making Of The Islamic World”
- G.E. von Grunebaum’s “Classical Islam”
- The first volume of the New Cambridge History Of Islam (“The Formation Of Islam: 6th to 11th Century”)

Chapter 5 of Peter Frankopan’s “The Silk Roads” is also worth noting. Meanwhile, Chase F. Robinson’s “Islamic Historiography: Themes In Islamic History” and Fred M. Donner’s “Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing” can be useful for understanding the metamorphosis of the Mohammedan legend. For the earliest Syriac sources, Günter Lüling (Goethe Institute) was the primary expert in the 20th century. Other scholarship is worth consulting—most notably:

- Patricia Crone (Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton)
- F. E. Peters (NYU)
- Fred Donner (University of Chicago)
- Karl-Heinz Ohlig (Saarland University)
- Andrew Lawrence Rippin (University of Victoria)
- Robert Hoyland (NYU, UCLA, Oxford, and St. Andrews)
- Andreas Goerke (University of Edinburgh)
- Gerald R. Hawting and John Wansbrough (University of London)
- Guy Stroumsa (Oxford)

{ This is roughly the same as the usage of “knowing” found in the Christian’s locution: to KNOW Jesus. “Knowing Jesus” is not really a form of knowledge; it is concomitant with religious Faith.}*

*{** This point cannot be emphasized enough. Wisdom is not to be confused with doctrinal fidelity—what the Greeks referred to as “doxa”, and what is dubbed “hidmah” in CA. This is more a function of piety than wisdom. That is: It is based more on subservience than on erudition. There is nothing sagacious about being doctrinaire. We mustn’t confuse being punctilious (the mark of religious zeal) with being perspicacious (the mark of intellectual rigor).}*

*{*** Greek thinkers considered “arete” (wisdom) concomitant with “agape” (universal love; what Marx dubbed “species-being”). In other words, “eudaimonia”, not a regimen of simpering / groveling, was seen as integral to intellectual virtue. Thus wisdom was taken to be predicated on vitality (what Nietzsche called “saying yes to life”) rather than on a state of obsequiousness and intimidation.}*

Epilogue:

I harken back to the massacre at the Charlie Hebdo magazine headquarters in Paris, France in the first week of 2015...perpetrated by affiliates of “Ansar al-Sharia” [Helpers Of Islamic Law]. Islamic apologists

chortled that Islam's prophet would never have condoned such horrific conduct. It is not merely that such a contention is false; it's that it is OBVIOUSLY false.

There can be little doubt that MoM would have unequivocally—and enthusiastically endorsed—the heinous deeds of the Kouachi brothers on that fateful day in early 2015. Indeed, the brothers were “mu-jahideen” [“those who struggle in the cause of god”]; which is to say that they fashioned themselves as modern-day Mohammedan “ghazi” [“raiders”]. To fail to recognize this is to betray ignorance.

Both brothers would have wholeheartedly concurred with Karen Armstrong's glib declaration that MoM is “a prophet for our time.” (This perverse irony was probably lost on Armstrong and her ilk.)

Such Reactionary thinking was not conjured from thin air. It was born of a serious effort to get back to the Sunnah as it existed in the days of the Sahabah (and Salaf)...and continues to the present day in Salafi / Wahhabi circles. Even the most rudimentary knowledge of Mohammedan precedent makes it plain that the Kouachi brothers' deeds were in keeping with the Sunnah, as originally conceived.

It is worth recalling the declaration of Khalid ibn al-Walid (one of the most vaunted companions of MoM), addressed to non-Muslims: “I bring the men who desire death as ardently as you desire life.” This was the most celebrated military general under both MoM and Abu Bakr. In order to get this to fit a more placid narrative, one would be forced to fashion the enterprise of Khalid ibn al-Walid as a humanitarian outreach program.

Ten months later, when jihadists attacked Paris on behalf of “Daesh” (the Islamic State), slaughtering 130 innocent civilians, Progressive voices within the Ummah again (sporadically) deployed the de rigueur expressions of opprobrium. Note, however, that they could not do so by claiming that the assaults contravened the teachings of MoM (or that their holy book forbade such acts). All they had recourse to were secular moral principles. Consequently, they could only issue statements condemning the actions as antithetical to their own (liberalized) version of the Faith. This is a good thing; but it must be recognized for what it is: A revamped version of the Sunnah.

To reform something that was dysfunctional, then pretend that one has not reformed it (that it had been that way all along) is disingenuous. Those who insist that militant jihadists' behavior is counter to MoM's example are either deliberately lying or—though well-intentioned—haven't the faintest clue what they are talking about.

We should be under no illusions that MoM took kindly to being criticized—let alone mocked. The authors of Charlie Hebdo would most certainly have been on his hit-list; though not necessarily for the pictorial representations. (Taboos against visual portrayals were a later development.)

The question arises: Would *I* be on his hit list? I suspect not. It is only through modern eyes that the present assessment comes out looking uncharitable. To the eyes of the Sahabah / Salaf, though, it would be seen for what it is: An accurate characterization. From that perspective, I have not disparaged the Islamic legacy; I have merely described it.

The irony is that Salafis' adherence to their prophet's teachings—as well as reading of the Koran—is more honest than is that of many Islamic apologists, who are resort to white-washing campaigns in an effort to burnish the legacy of their Faith. Unfortunately, it is the most militant of Salafis who actually take bold action; whereas Progressively-inclined Muslim leaders only get around to issuing public statements.

More to the point: One does not need to lie about the past in order to move into the future.