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Between Salafism and Traditionalism: The Case of Nasir al-Din Albani and His Detractors

On March 12, 2015 Emad Hamdeh, a specialist in modern Muslim reform movements, Islamic intellectual history, historical pedagogical methods, and Islamic law, discussed "Between Salafism and Traditionalism: The Case of Nasir al-Din Albani and His Detractors" at the IIIT headquarters in Herndon, VA. He currently serves as an adjunct professor of Arabic and Islamic studies in the Department of Modern Languages and Literature at Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ. His doctorate (Exeter University, 2014) "The Emergence of an Iconoclast: Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani and His Critics" traced the origins of this controversial figure's anti-*madhhab* polemic.

Hamdeh began by presenting a brief overview of al-Albani's life. He was born in Albania in 1914 at a time of increasing secularism. When he was nine years old his father, a traditional Hanafi, moved the family to Syria. While growing up, he studied under his father and with local religious schol-

ars. Early on he revealed his issues with the "*madhhab* traditionalists," saying that Muslims should follow only the Qur'an and the Prophet's teachings. In other words, he rejected all of the scholarly knowledge and the traditional literature (i.e., the Islamic tradition). He emphasized the teacher-student relationship to the exclusion of every other traditional way of acquiring religious knowledge, saying that he alone had the "pure teachings." Due to these and other controversial views that he would argue about with his father, the latter finally kicked him out of the house. After that, wherever he went he continued to generate controversy and would end up having to go somewhere else.

The speaker maintained that Albani adopted this approach for several reasons. First, the Ottoman Empire had fallen and thus there was no authoritative scholarly institution to rule on various issues. The proponents of the new Republic of Turkey, intent upon setting up a secular nation-state, abolished the *shaykh al-Islām* post and, having no need to consult the religious scholars, effectively relegated them to the sidelines. "So, who do we listen to?" Second, as the new education system was western-oriented and secular in nature, the religious scholars and intellectuals largely remained in the mosques and were forgotten. Even worse, those who could not make it in the new secular careers usually ended up there as well. Albani blamed this on the *madhhab*, arguing that in the absence of the direct teacher-student relationship, no *'ijāzah* could be given and that earning a degree in Islamic law from a secular university did not make one a "real" expert. Third, the invention of the printing press, which came late to the Ottoman Empire, meant that anyone could "speak." Hamdeh compared this to the Internet, for it made different views and countless books widely available regardless of one's qualifications.

Albani had two self-proclaimed projects: (1) purity and education and (2) making the hadiths more accessible to the general public. According to him, he was doing no more than cleaning up all that had been handed down on these matters and presenting the information to the Muslims in its pure form. Many traditionalists understandably found this approach very problematic and worthy of severe criticism, for it completely ignored centuries of scholarship.

He was widely criticized for not laying out his methodology of interpretation, something that each legal school did as a matter of course He stated that his methodology was the text and thus his role was completely passive. Such an assertion immediately put his critics on the defensive, for it was basically his way of saying "I follow the Qur'an and Sunnah. Why don't you?"

But this did have one unexpected outcome: His critics were forced to study the hadith in far more detail in order to refute him. He opined that following Imam Ahmad was like committing *shirk*; his critics denied such a claim by stating that a school of law is the "collective memory" of previous generations of Muslims.

Hamdeh remarked that Salafism is appealing for several reasons. For example, it puts one in direct contact with Muhammad. Another reason was that Albani always maintained that there was only one possible interpretation, despite the fact that not all Qur'anic verses and hadith are clear and others leave some room for interpretation. In other words, there is always a "true" answer to every question because there is no room for an "opinion" or a "judgment." Thus one does not have to deal with the fact that "life is not black and white."

But this rather simplistic view does have several defects. For example, although Albani told people not to follow a scholar, he nevertheless told them to ask a scholar for a proof text (*dalīl*) when they had a question. *Dalīl*, however, means "indication" as opposed to "proof." If the questioner is not a scholar, what is the point of asking for a text that he or she will be unable to understand? Besides, since "asking is proof of ignorance," one has no choice but to ask a scholar. The speaker also pointed that, as history records, the Salaf are known to have reached different conclusions on a whole host of issues. Therefore, "when you say you follow the Salaf, which ones are you talking about?" He posited that perhaps Albani had created his own *madhhab*.

According to the speaker, Albani's dream was that "all other perspectives disappear." Such a dream might be due to some "over-reverence" for the *madhhab*s during his youth, or due to his bad relationship with his *madhhabī* father and the existence of many non-experts claiming to be experts. However, there can be no doubt that this was a very personal matter for him.

Several other points were made during the Q&A session, among them the following:

- Modernity insists upon the primacy of the text over the oral transmission. The hadith were verified by one's actual presence at the event, not just because it had been written down. Literalism without context, human input, or the mediation of tradition is responsible for the appearance ISIS and similar groups. By rejecting the tradition, they can no longer be considered Muslim.
- Salafism is not in itself a problem. They have the right to be as they are, but not the right to force others to follow them.

- The Salafi approach is "deceptive." It would be more accurate, perhaps, to call it non-*madhhabī*.
- Albani did not care about the social consequences of his pronouncements. Completely apolitical, his sole concern was to implement the "truth."
- His claims of having the truth were undermined by his reliance of abridged texts (*mukhtaṣarāt*), for there was always the chance that they could contain mistakes or weak hadiths of which he would be unaware.
- This problem is not unique to Islam. For example, in the American context one could plausibly view the Tea Party as following, according to their understanding, the Founding Fathers (the Salaf) and the Constitution (the scripture). All such movements have the same generic trends.

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