
Contemporary Wahhabism rebranded as Salafism:

the issue of interpreting the Qur'anic verses and hadith on the Attributes of God

and its significance

Submitted by Namira NAHOUSA to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arab and Islamic Studies, April 2009.

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ABSTRACT

This research studies the theology of those Wahhabis who have now named themselves Salafis. For the purpose of the study, they are referred to as the ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’ (WSNS). The thesis starts with the observation that the WSNS are usually studied from a political perspective, much less frequently a theological one. Recent research has identified that the theological background of all the different factions of the WSNS is one and the same. This is true for the WSNS who advocate a peaceful way to achieve their goals, as well as those who do not. This thesis aims to explore some of the theological issues that unify these factions.

This research demonstrates that, because the WSNS are opposed to the very concept of interpretation of the Qur’an and the hadith, especially when these texts deal with important theological issues such as the Attributes of God, they have developed a vision of Islamic history which is entirely different from the one which had traditionally been accepted by most Muslim scholars and Western academics. They have redefined the notion of Sunnism as it has been known, mostly basing themselves on this single issue. This thesis shows that the WSNS deny the existence of any interpretation ever made by a recognised member of the Salaf (i.e. the Muslims of the first three generations). In contrast, the Sunnis who do not claim to be Salafis, but who nonetheless consider themselves as treading the path of the Salaf (called in the thesis: ‘Sunnis-not-claiming-to-be-Salafis’) are of the view that they *did* allow interpretation. The WSNS therefore consider that the Ash‘ari scholars (from the main Sunni theological school) had a corrupted creed concerning God. This leads the followers of the WSNS, from across the spectrum of the different factions, to consider that most of the Islamic scholars from the past had actually failed to understand the proper *Tawhid*, or Oneness of God, which is tantamount to considering them all as misguided, with the notable exception of Ibn Taymiyya and his students, and Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab and his students.

The research argues that, by favouring the non-violent factions of the WSNS simply because they are officially opposed to terrorism and suicide bombings, current counter-terrorism strategies are allowing the gradual replacement of the core of the notion of Sunnism to go ahead, thereby fuelling future chaos and confusion in the Muslim community. This thesis highlights the longer term implications of these strategies for the Muslim community and the world at large.

To my parents,

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Notes on transliteration, translation, abbreviation, and dates

The transliteration used in the thesis is based on the modified *Encyclopaedia of Islam* system: *qaf* = q not k, *jim* = j not dj, the *l* of *al-* is not assimilated to the following consonant, *ta marbuta* is rendered *a* not *ah*. The letter *'ayn* is rendered by the opening single quote ' and the *hamza* in the middle of a word is rendered by the closing single quote '. There are no diacritics. The *a* of *al-* is not elided (example: *li-al-nashr wa al-tawzi* '). In titles of references in Arabic, only the first word is capitalised (unless the title contains personal names or names of places which will then be capitalised too).

In the citations and in the titles of references in English or other languages, the transliteration used by the original authors has been left as is. The word "hadith" may take a "s" in those instances but in the thesis it is found in the singular form.

Translations of the Qur'an are based on Abdel Haleem, Muhammad A. *The Quran*, Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Translations from the Arabic are mine unless specified. Whenever a published translation of the source was available to me, I have used this translation and sometimes adapted it (this is always mentioned).

The only abbreviation used in the thesis is *ET²*, which stands for Lewis, B., V.L.Ménage, Ch.Pellat, and J. Schacht, eds. *The encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*. 13 vols. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960-2009.

Dates are usually shown as AH first (*hijri* calendar), followed by the CE equivalent (*common era* calendar). When there is no specific mention, it is a CE date.

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

Since the historic events of 9/11, increasing attention has been drawn towards extremist factions in the Muslim world. Wahhabism, which takes its name from its founder Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (d.1206 AH/ 1792 CE), has attracted more scholarly and public attention since these events, not least due to the presence of 15 Saudi citizens among the 19 men who carried out the attacks. Political and social scientists, religious scholars and others have all tried to shed some light on the ideologies, motives, and personal circumstances of the perpetrators. The works of these scientists have brought us closer to a typology which can allow a better understanding of not just Wahhabism but also the so-called Jihadi-Salafi movements often linked to it. This thesis, on a much smaller scale, aims to analyse some aspects of the theological beliefs of those who call themselves Salafis but who originally are Wahhabis. They are called, throughout the thesis, the ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’ (WSNS) a concept explained in detail in 3.3.3. Most of the scholarly work produced today on movements linked to Wahhabism focuses on their political views and affiliations, their group dynamics and sub-divisions. This thesis, in contrast, will examine one unifying criterion of all of the different factions influenced by Wahhabism: the specificities of their belief in God. It will explore in detail the meaning of the idea that God does not resemble His creation and the debates that this issue has sparked in terms of how to understand texts from the Qur’an or the hadith which are sometimes interpreted in anthropomorphist ways. It will also examine the consequences that the stance of the WSNS has had on their vision of Islamic history, and on how they project themselves within the wider Muslim community. The thesis will also allow us to discuss the drawbacks that some counter-terrorism strategies may present if insufficient attention is paid to theological issues. Finally, it will argue that the emphasis placed on solely fighting the apparent manifestations of terrorism is preventing scrutiny of the theological system of the WSNS and the vision of history that they promote. As all the different factions of the WSNS share the same heritage and the same references, there are questions to be raised as to whether it is the best strategy for Western police forces to fight terrorism by promoting the non violent WSNS as the defenders of “Sunnism”. “Sunnism” and “Sunnis” in the thesis refer to the trend that Muslim scholars and academic literature has

defined as the system of beliefs and practices of the majority of the Muslims.¹ Today's Muslims who defend this definition of Sunnism are called in the thesis: the 'Sunnis-not-claiming-to-be-Salafis'. This study will show that the WSNS have a completely different definition of Sunnism, which does not retain the concept of "majority" as essential, and it may be that this redefinition of Sunnism is being helped by the current tendency of several counter-terrorism policies to favour some factions of the WSNS (the non violent ones) against the others (those prone to violence and terrorism).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The Salaf is the name given to the scholars of the first three Muslim generations. In Sunnism, the Salaf have traditionally been considered an example to follow in their beliefs, actions and statements. Despite the Salaf's position as a reference throughout the centuries, there was no specific group known under the name "Salafi", until about the late nineteenth/early twentieth century CE when reformists in Egypt, Syria and elsewhere in the Muslim world made attempts to adapt to modernity while maintaining the use of Islamic concepts and ideals, and used the name *Salafi* for themselves. The Wahhabis, who did indeed share some principles with that reformist trend, are now actively seeking to be called "Salafis": it is this use of the term "Salafi" that is the central focus of this study. If most of the Muslims already believed that they were upholding the teachings of the Salaf, what advantages can being named "Salafis" bring to the Wahhabis? Have the Wahhabis managed to replace the standards of what is considered "orthodox" in terms of religious teachings?

1.3 Research Objectives and Methods, and Note on the literature

The main goal of the research is to provide a better understanding and awareness of the theological background of all the different groups claiming to follow the Salaf. Although the actions of the different groups of WSNS are influenced by other factors (such as their views on political and societal issues), their theological tenets are usually less highlighted in current research, and this study aims to fill this gap. It also aims to draw attention to the current destabilisation caused by the teachings of the WSNS in the Muslim community. Their opposition to almost every point that Sunnism was made of in the past is leading to a disruption of values and references. A less prominent

¹ For example Henri Laoust, *Comment définir le Sunnisme et le Chiisme* (Paris: Librairie orientaliste P. Geuthner, 1979).

objective is to provide an insight, by way of translations, into some works of classical Muslim authors.

The following questions have guided the research:

- Why do the Wahhabis name themselves Salafis?
- What are the teachings of this group?
- What are the consequences of their stance on the attributes of God?
- What does the term “Sunni” mean for the WSNS?
- What is the impact of their presence in the wider community of Muslims?

The analyses which answer those questions are drawn from a variety of primary sources: mainly works of traditional Islamic scholarship in the original Arabic, and Internet websites, blogs and forums. A few audio recordings (available from the Internet), have also been used. Most of the traditional Islamic works have been used to provide references to the scholars of the Salaf and the interpretation of the verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God. The Internet has been used for two main purposes: to easily access written material on contemporary Islamic debates, and to conduct the case-studies mentioned in Chapter 5 which include a blog maintained by a single individual and forums where dozens of Muslims interact and exchange information about personal experiences.

The academic literature on the historical emergence and the contemporary manifestations of Wahhabism and Salafism has been reviewed and integrated into the main body of the thesis to ensure coherence of the chapters. The critical review of the literature on the history of Wahhabism can be found in 3.4.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This thesis aims to provide a study of Wahhabism from a theological standpoint. It is significant because it demonstrates how far-reaching the consequences can be of a theological debate such as the interpretation of the non explicit verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God.

Current research has identified three main categories of so-called Salafis. Wiktorowicz² makes a useful typology of three categories, although more categories could be found as each of them further splits into different smaller groups:

The different contextual readings have produced three major factions in the community: the purists, the politics, and the jihadis. The purists emphasize a focus on non violent methods of propagation, purification, and education. They view politics as a diversion that encourages deviancy. Politics, in contrast, emphasize application of the Salafi creed to the political arena, which they view as particularly important because it dramatically impacts social justice and the right of God alone to legislate. Jihadis take a more militant position and argue that the current context calls for violence and revolution. All three factions share a common creed but offer different explanations of the contemporary world and its concomitant problems and thus propose different solutions. The splits are about contextual analysis, not belief.³

Wiktorowicz presents here a relevant analysis of the so-called Salafis by dividing them into three factions. The terminology that he presented will be used throughout the thesis to differentiate between the factions of the WSNS.

Firstly, the so-called Salafis that Wiktorowicz categorises as the “purists” are the most numerous: they usually scrupulously abide by the edicts of the official clerics of Saudi Arabia and follow their recommendations to the letter. They emphasise the non permissibility of suicide bombings and of terrorism by relaying the fatwas of their scholars on this issue. In this thesis, it will be argued that when they are called “non violent” by Wiktorowicz, this is an assessment which is from the standpoint of the non-Muslim world worried about potential suicide attacks. However, we will see in the course of this thesis (specifically in chapter 6) that even the so-called “purists” sometimes exhibit symbolic violence towards other groups in the Muslim community that may translate into actual physical violence. The scholars whom the purists recognise are the Saudis Ibn Baz (d.1999 CE) and Ibn ‘Uthaymin (d.2000 CE), and the Syrian al-Albani (d.1999 CE), whose opinions are presented in Chapter 3. As we will see in Chapter 5, the purists are themselves divided into further splits due to some internal polemics, but on the whole they form a coherent group. Nowadays, there is

² Other analysts provide more refined typologies, but this one presents the advantage of being broad enough for the purpose of this study and it gives three easily identifiable categories. For a detailed overview of the current debates within the so-called Salafi milieu notably in Saudi Arabia, see Madawi al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State*, Cambridge Middle East Studies, 25 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For a “rationale-based” typology of “Islamic Militancy”, see Thomas Hegghammer, ‘Jihadi Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism,’ in *Global Salafism : Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (London Hurst & Co. , Forthcoming April 2009).

³ Quintan Wiktorowicz, ‘Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,’ *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): p.208.

speculation that it is the purists who offer the best protection against the violent WSNS; this assumption will be discussed in chapter 6.

The second category that Wiktorowicz has identified is the “politicos”, who are engaged in reforming society and debating current political problems both in Saudi Arabia and the rest of the world. They too recognise the three personalities quoted above, alongside the two reformists Safar al-Hawali (b.1950 CE) and Salman al-‘Awda (b.1955 CE), from the movement of *Sahwa* which advocates a “revival” of the Muslim society. Their opinions on the Islamic creed are analysed in Chapter 3. Al-Hawali and al-‘Awda had been imprisoned by the Saudi government for several years because of their political activism but after their release and apparent repentance from their former stances, they have gradually been reintegrated into more official positions in Saudi Arabia. These two main leaders are personally active on the Internet, and are perhaps more engaged towards the youth and with current affairs than the other established Saudi clerics.

The third category of so-called Salafis are those that Wiktorowicz has named the “jihadis”. Their reading of the current situation is that there is ample ground for violent confrontation with the West and its allies. They are themselves split into further sub-groups depending on how radical their interpretation of “cooperating” with the non-Muslim authorities is. Their sources of inspiration are Osama bin Laden and other leaders of al-Qa‘ida and affiliated groups. It is this group which is at the centre of many recent studies and scholarly works.

The three factions of the WSNS share the same theological background and this is why material from the three trends will be used throughout the thesis to study their understanding of the belief in God and of His Attributes. In Chapter 5, which explores the presence of the so-called Salafis on the internet, there will also be examples from each trend thereby complementing other forms of political and strategic research of the so-called Salafi movement, albeit from another viewpoint.

1.5 Limitations of the Study

Firstly, the thesis does not set out to study in depth what the scholars of the Salaf period actually did and did not say or did and did not believe. Rather, it is centred on the issue of how the scholars of the Salaf have been perceived and defined throughout Islamic history, from immediately after the period of the Salaf ended until today. The thesis

argues that the WSNS contradict a view about the Salaf manifested in a consensus which lasted for centuries, and it continues to determine whether that consensus was based on illusion or upon fact.⁴ The study establishes that throughout history, Sunni scholars agreed upon the belief that it was permissible to interpret the verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God, whereas the WSNS consider that this was never the case. Regardless of whether the scholars of the Salaf did or did not interpret, it remains a fact that in Sunnism, the consensus that they did allow interpretation existed, and the thesis will demonstrate how the WSNS have positioned themselves against this consensus.

Secondly, this thesis does not contest the internal differences of the WSNS which are currently being studied by political analysts and other specialists in the field of counter-terrorism. It is simply limited to theological arguments but does not deny the existence of other criteria with which more refined typologies can be made. The thesis does not make an attempt to provide a precise list of all the various sub-groups within each faction of “purists”, “politicos” and “jihadis”. The focus of the thesis is the theological arguments about God and His attributes and the impact of the stance of the WSNS on this issue.

Thirdly, this thesis is not implying that all those classified here as WSNS are more prone to violence than others. It is not indiscriminately accusing all of them as being potential terrorists. The thesis argues that some of the followers of the WSNS may fall prey to radical preachers because the doctrine of the WSNS implies considering most of the Islamic heritage as deviant, for an issue no less important than the oneness of God. When the position of a Muslim scholar is undermined on the basis of the soundness of his creed, then his position on other less important issues can also easily be discarded, paving the way for new references to be provided by the WSNS on what is and what is acceptable in Islam.

1.6 Why study the Wahhabis, their relation to the Salaf and the issue of the attributes of God together?

The WSNS are of the view that throughout Islamic history, only specific personalities such as Ibn Taymiyya (d.728 AH/ 1328 CE) and Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab and

⁴ This would be the topic of a complete different sort of research such as one published recently in Arabic: Sayf al-Din ‘Ali al-‘Asri, *al-Qawl al-tamam bi-ithbat al-tafwid madhhaban li-al-Salaf al-ikram* (Cairo: Dar al-Faqir, 2009).

their followers can be considered as being completely reliable and having a sound creed. All other scholars, in their view, however high their status in the wider Islamic community, had “issues concerning their creed”. The WSNS blame previous and current Sunni scholars for having allowed interpretation about the Attributes of God, which they regard as nothing less than a denial of the revelation. The WSNS claim to be Sunnis, but the “Sunnism” they are referring to is not a majority group - when compared to the number of human beings who consider themselves Muslims- spread around the world and comprising of about 1 billion individuals (which is roughly the current estimate given today for “Sunnis”). Rather, the Sunnis, for the WSNS, are a select group of people; a minority in the Arab-Muslim world. By using the name Salaf for themselves, the Wahhabis are not only demonstrating that they strive to take the Salaf as a reference in their everyday life, they are also wiping out the centuries of scholarship developed since the Salaf until the rise of their founder Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (d.1792 CE), with the notable exception of Ibn Taymiyya (d.728 AH/ 1328 CE) and some of his students. Linking these issues together enables us to note the practical consequences on everyday life that result from an issue as highly sophisticated as exegesis of the Qur’an. It also demonstrates that currently, there is a systematic rewriting of history and of Sunni religious teachings which is being led by the WSNS, who may succeed if so-called “traditional” Sunnis do not offer alternative methods for Muslims to access knowledge (via alternate sources despite the expansive presence of books from Saudi Arabia currently available on the market).

1.7 Outline of the thesis

The study is presented in five main chapters. Chapter 2 investigates the historical perceptions of the attitude of the Salaf towards the non explicit verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God, from immediately after the Salaf period until the rise of Wahhabism (4th-12th centuries AH/ 10th-18th centuries CE). This chapter offers a definition of the notion of Salaf, a summary of the Ash‘ari and Maturidi definition of God and the rationale of Ash‘ari and Maturidi scholars for allowing interpretation of the non explicit verses and hadith on the Attributes of God. It analyses how Muslim scholars understood the Salaf and dealt with the issue of the Attributes of God. It also provides an overview of the arguments that some thinkers presented at specific times (5th and 8th century AH/11th and 14th century CE) to reject the consensus that had been formed by Ash‘ari and Maturidi scholars.

Chapter 3 follows the issue of the interpretation of the non explicit verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God after the rise of Wahhabism, to demonstrate that the debate has remained the same, although the tone now seems more aggressive than in past literature. The name ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’ is detailed here and this chapter also provides a historiographical account of Wahhabism and the issues surrounding its claim to legitimacy, which is based on a myth and a demonisation of the Arab populations.

Chapter 4 examines the main theological features of the WSNS, regardless of whether they belong to the “purists”, the “politicos” or the “jihadis”. Namely, their specific vision of Islamic history, their relative disinterest in the four legal schools of law which have been inherent to Sunnism (the Maliki school, the Hanbali school, the Shafi‘i school and the Hanafi one), their opposition to invoking God through intermediaries, and their definition of innovation (*bid‘a*) which makes them consider many practices widespread in the Muslim world as reprehensible.

Chapter 5 provides a series of case studies based on Internet websites and forums. It gives examples of how topical the debate on the issue of the attributes of God is today, in spite of the intricacies of the subject. It shows that enmities and friendships between Muslims can be formed on the basis of one’s discourse on the Attributes of God and whether one believes the non explicit verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God can be interpreted or not.

Chapter 6 examines the broader consequences of this issue which is not confined to the realm of theological debates. It argues that even though not all WSNS condone violence in terms of terrorist attacks and suicide bombings, this by no means guarantees an absence of hatred, animosity, or even a form of “moral” violence towards the rest of the Muslim population who do not think like them. It should be mentioned that, originally, the violence of the Wahhabis was directed mainly towards Muslims and not non-Muslims. Today, the Saudi religious establishment is sometimes described as a key player in fighting extremism. However the basic worldview that it offers Muslims is antagonistic and does not promote “community cohesion” (“vivre ensemble”) by any means. This raises questions such as how best to rehabilitate former would-be or seasoned terrorists who have “repented”. Chapter 6 also argues that even without leading to violence, the constant debates caused by the active intervention of the

Wahhabis on almost all religious issues can prove highly destabilising for young Muslims and others trying to learn more about Islam. This confusion can, in turn, facilitate the growth of radical preachers who use the vacuum left by more “traditional” preachers to pursue their own ends.

Chapter 2 Historical perceptions of the Salaf up to the rise of Wahhabism, with a focus on the issue of the Attributes of God

2.1 Introductory Remarks

This chapter will examine how the notion of Salaf was perceived, from the end of the period of the Salaf itself (i.e. from the 4th century AH/10th century CE) until the rise of Wahhabism in the 12th century AH/ 18th CE. After presenting the original description of the Salaf, we will explore why this notion of Salaf has become so important in terms of constructing Islamic orthodoxy. We will then explain why the positions of these early scholars on a range of issues had such a bearing on Islamic theology. From the wide spectrum of issues that could have been selected as areas of focus, the issue of the Attributes of God has been chosen, and the reason for this will also be explained.

It will be shown that, until Wahhabism appeared in the 12th century AH/18th CE, there was a clear consensus among Sunni Muslim scholars on the position of the Salaf regarding the issue of the interpretation of the Attributes of God. From as early as the 6th century AH/ 12th CE onwards, it was clear that there already existed a codified way of explaining the attitude of the Salaf regarding the attributes of God, among the theologians (*mutakallimun*) but also among those scholars dealing with other subjects (e.g., those who interpreted the Qur'an or the Prophetic texts). The contestations of this consensus will also be reviewed, but it will be argued that they remained limited both in time and place. This chapter will then pave the way for a study of the issue in greater detail, and in reference to the key period after the rise of Wahhabism, where we will be able to compare the Wahhabis' rhetoric with that of their predecessors (Chapter 3).

2.2 Salaf: the term and its definition

2.2.1 Definitions taken from Arabic dictionaries , the Qur'an, and Hadith

The term "salaf" in Arabic comes from the trilateral Arabic root "s l f" and means the "previous group", the group which was before, (*al-jama'a al-mutaqaddimun*) as

mentioned by Ibn Manzur.⁵ The *salaf* are literally “those who preceded us”. The term can also mean all the good deeds performed by a person during their life. Those actions are then called a *salaf* in their favour⁶. It also describes a type of Islamic business dealing which contains a prepayment as its common feature.⁷

The noun *salaf* is mentioned in the Qur’an [43: 55-56] “When they provoked Us, We punished and drowned them all: We made them a lesson and an example for later people”.⁸ As for the verb “*salafa*”, it can be found in four verses with the first aforementioned meaning, i.e. “what happened in the past” and always in a context where it is a question of past deeds of people which will be forgiven by God, as they happened before they accepted the revelation Q [2:275, 4:22, 5:95, 8:38]. The noun is also found in numerous hadith⁹; some pertaining to the type of aforementioned Islamic dealing, some concerning supplications that can be made in favour of dead people (who existed before us, and therefore in the supplication referred to as *salaf*).

Whether in the Qur’an or in the Hadith, the meanings found in religious texts for the term Salaf are not the “acquired” meaning of the term by *istilah*: usage. This refers to the meaning that the term has started to bear because of successive usage, and which is the meaning that happens to be the most employed nowadays. The “acquired” meaning is the one we are interested in for this study. It is derived from a hadith which actually does not contain the word *salaf*, but about which there is a consensus of it referring to the Salaf.

2.2.2 Salaf as: the first three generations after the Prophet

⁵ Muhammad ibn Mukarram Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-‘Arab*, 15 vols. (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1968), vol.6, p.331. Ibn Manzur (1233-1311 CE/ 630-711AH) is famous for having condensed five earlier dictionaries into this concise text. For more details on him and his works see *EP*, vol.3, p.864.

⁶ Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Murtada al-Zabidi, *Taj al-‘Arus min Jawahir al-Qamus*, 2nd. ed., 10 vols. (Binghazi: Dar Libya li-al-nashr wa al-tawzi‘, 1966), vol.6, p.143. *Taj al-‘Arus* is al-Zabidi’s commentary (d. 1205 AH/ 1791 CE) on the *Qamus* by the linguist al-Fayruzabadi (d.817AH/ 1415 CE). His other main commentary is *Ithaf al-sada al-muttaqin* where he explores al-Ghazali’s *Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din*. More information on al-Murtada al-Zabidi can be found in *EP*, vol.7, p.445. *Ithaf al-sada al-muttaqin* is also quoted in 3.5.1.2.1: Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Murtada al-Zabidi, *Kitab Ithaf al-sada al-muttaqin bi-sharh Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din*, 14 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1989).

⁷ Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Murtada al-Zabidi, *Taj al-‘Arus min Jawahir al-Qamus*, 2nd. ed., 10 vols. (Binghazi: Dar Libya li-al-nashr wa al-tawzi‘, 1966), vol.6, p.143. There are more details on this type of business dealings in *EP*, vol.8, p.899.

⁸ Literally “We made them a People of the past” i.e. here “a lesson and example”.

⁹ A. J. Wensinck, *al-Mu‘jam al-mufahras li-alfaz al-hadith al-Nabawi : ‘an al-kutub al-sitta wa-‘an musnad al-Darimi wa-Muwatta’ Malik wa-musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal* (Leiden: Brill, 1936), pp.504-05.

The acquired meaning that we use today is taken from a hadith and its different versions. One of the most common versions of this hadith is “*khayrukum qarni thumma al-ladhina yalunahum, thumma al-ladhina yalunahum*” which means: “The best people among you are those of my generation, then those who followed, then those who followed them”.¹⁰ Some narrators expressed doubts about the number of times that the Prophet said “and those who followed them”, i.e. they were not sure if he said it twice or thrice.¹¹ However, as mentioned by Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani and others¹², there are many narrations where no doubt is expressed, and in which he said it twice, making a total of three generations: the Prophet’s and the two that followed. The chains of some of these narrations were attributed to the highest levels of reliability. There are other narrations that are also considered reliable, and in which the Prophet would have clearly mentioned the phrases meaning “and the second generation, and the third generation”.¹³

¹⁰ The version mentioned here can be found in the narrations of Ibn Hanbal: Ahmad ibn Muhammad Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad al-Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal* (Beirut: ‘Alam al-kutub, 1998), hadith 4163, 9307, 10214, 20074, 148, al-Bukhari Muhammad ibn Isma‘il al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 2nd ed. (Damascus: Dar al-‘Ulum al-‘insaniyya, 1993), 6064, 317, 508 and Abu al-Husayn ibn al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar Ihya’ al-turath al-‘arabi, 1972), hadith 214.

The main differences between the various versions of this hadith are whether the Prophet said “the best people of this community are” or “my” community (*khayru hadhihi l-‘umma* or *khayri ‘ummati*): Ahmad ibn Muhammad Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad al-Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal* (Beirut: ‘Alam al-kutub, 1998), hadith 18539, 20195, Abu al-Husayn ibn al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar Ihya’ al-turath al-‘arabi, 1972), hadith 210, 13, 15 Muhammad ibn ‘Isa al-Tirmidhi, *al-Jami‘ al-sahih wa-huwa sunan al-Tirmidhi* (Cairo: Dar al-Hadith, 1999), hadith 2222, Muhammad ibn Isma‘il al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 2nd ed. (Damascus: Dar al-‘Ulum al-‘insaniyya, 1993), hadith 3450; or “the best people are” (*khayru l-nas*): Ahmad ibn Muhammad Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad al-Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal* (Beirut: ‘Alam al-kutub, 1998), hadith 3594, 963, 4140, 216, 18237, 20021, Ahmad ibn Shu‘ayb al-Nasa‘i, *Kitab al-sunan al-kubra* (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Risala, 2001), hadith 4732, 5977, Muhammad ibn ‘Isa al-Tirmidhi, *al-Jami‘ al-sahih wa-huwa sunan al-Tirmidhi* (Cairo: Dar al-Hadith, 1999), hadith 2221, 302, 303, 3859 Muhammad ibn Isma‘il al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 2nd ed. (Damascus: Dar al-‘Ulum al-‘insaniyya, 1993), hadith 6065, 509, 3451, Abu al-Husayn ibn al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar Ihya’ al-turath al-‘arabi, 1972), hadith 212. Some are phrased like an answer that the Prophet gave to the question “Who are the best people?”: Muhammad ibn Isma‘il al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 2nd ed. (Damascus: Dar al-‘Ulum al-‘insaniyya, 1993), hadith 6282, Muslim Abu al-Husayn ibn al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar Ihya’ al-turath al-‘arabi, 1972), hadith 211, 16. A synopsis of the different versions can also be found in A. J. Wensinck, *al-Mu‘jam al-mufahras li-alfaz al-hadith al-Nabawi : ‘an al-kutub al-sitta wa-‘an musnad al-Darimi wa-Muwatta’ Malik wa-musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal* (Leiden: Brill, 1936), vol.5, p.372, but it should be noted that it is not complete, as some versions are available in Abu Dawud’s collection, although absent from this list: Sulayman ibn al-Ash‘ath al-Sijistani Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1983; reprint, Hums, Muhammad Ali al-Sayyid).

¹¹ For the versions where the narrator (Abu Hurayra and others) is not sure about the number of times the Prophet said “and those who followed” (i.e. whether he said it two or three times) see Ahmad ibn Muhammad Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad al-Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal* (Beirut: ‘Alam al-kutub, 1998), 9307, 10214, 20074, 148, 195.

¹² Ahmad ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Banna, *al-Fath al-rabbani fi tartib musnad al-imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal al-Shaybani wa-ma‘ahu kitab bulugh al-amani fi asrar al-fath al-rabbani*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar Ihya’ al-turath al-‘arabi, 1976), vol.23, p.222.

¹³ Ahmad ibn ‘Ali Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, *Fath al-bari bi-sharh Sahih al-Bukhari* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1981), vol.7, p.7.

The main commentaries on this hadith all contain an attempt to determine who can be included in the three “generations” mentioned by the Prophet. The authors of the commentaries start with a discussion of the term *qarn*, which usually means a “century”, and can mostly be taken here to mean a “generation”, i.e., “the people of an equivalent time-span”.¹⁴ The number of years that a generation can count has also been debated: some said forty, some eighty, some a hundred¹⁵, others suggested seventy or eighty,¹⁶ while others have suggested as little as ten years.¹⁷

Al-Nawawi (d.676 AH/1277 CE),¹⁸ the Shafi‘i scholar still renowned today for his theological works and author of a commentary on the collection of hadith of Imam Muslim (one of the six collections considered sound by the Sunnis), lists all the different possible definitions of “generations” in his notes on this hadith. He concludes the matter by saying that “what is certain (*sahih*) is that his “generation” are the Companions (*Sahaba*), the second generation are the Followers of the Companions (the *Tabi‘in*) and the third are the Followers of the Followers (the *atba‘ at-Tabi‘in*)”.¹⁹ This is the widely accepted meaning of the three *qarn* mentioned in this hadith and its different versions. It should be noted that none of the commentators on the hadith explained the three “generations” as being the Salaf, i.e. the word *salaf* is not to be found in the explanations of these hadith.²⁰

It is not easy to pinpoint exactly when the word Salaf started to be directly associated with the meaning of this particular hadith. However, there is no doubt that nowadays there is an association between the consecrated word *salaf* and the meaning of “the three generations” mentioned in it, as can be seen in the recent book of Sa‘id Ramadan al-

¹⁴ Ahmad ibn ‘Umar al-Qurtubi, *al-Mufhim li-ma ashkala min talkhis kitab Muslim*, 7 vols. (Damascus: Dar Ibn Kathir 1996), vol.6, p.486.

¹⁵ Muhammad Shams al-Haqq al-‘Azimabadi, *‘Awn al-ma‘bud : sharh sunan Abi Dawud wa huwa mukhtasar ghayat al-maqsud fi hall sunan Abi Dawud*, 3rd ed., 13 vols. (Cairo: Dar Ihya’ al-Turath al-‘Arabi, 1979), vol.12, p.226.

¹⁶ Sulayman ibn al-Ash‘ath al-Sijistani Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1983; reprint, Hums, Muhammad Ali al-Sayyid); Ahmad ibn ‘Umar al-Qurtubi, *al-Mufhim li-ma ashkala min talkhis kitab Muslim*, 7 vols. (Damascus: Dar Ibn Kathir 1996), vol.6, p.486.

¹⁷ al-Qadi ‘Iyad Ibn Musa, *Sharh sahih Muslim li-al-Qadi ‘Iyad, al-musamma kamal al-mu‘lim bi-fawa‘id Muslim* (al-Mansura: Dar al-Wafa’ li-al-Tiba‘a wa al-Nashr wa-al-tawzi‘, 1998), vol.5, p.571, Abu ‘Abd Allah al-‘Ubi (or al-‘Aybi?), *Sharh sahih Muslim al-musamma bi-Ikmal ikmal al-mu‘allim* (Riyad: Maktabah Tubariyya), p.357.

¹⁸ More information on al-Nawawi in 2.3.3.1.

¹⁹ Abu Zakariya Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi, *Sahih Muslim bi-sharh al-Imam Muhyi al-Din Yahya ibn Sharaf al-musamma al-Minhaj sharh Sahih Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj*, 2nd ed. (Damascus: Dar al-‘Ulum al-‘Insaniyya, 1997), vol.5, p.248.

²⁰ Ali Merad has listed different early meanings of the word *salaf* such as “the wives of the Prophet” for example: *EF*, vol. 4, p.149.

Buti²¹ on Salafism, where he starts by a definition of the Salaf which refers to this hadith: the Companions, the Followers and the Followers of the Followers.²² The ideological opponents of al-Buti, such as the members of the Permanent committee of Saudi Arabia (which issues legal rulings on different issues) also give a similar definition “ the *Salaf* are the companions of the Prophet, peace be upon him, and the imams of guidance from the first three centuries (*qurun*).”²³

In the commentaries of the hadith, each generation is as follows: the first generation started from the revelation (thirteen years before the start of the Hijri calendar), up to the death of the last believer who had seen the Prophet, even if it was only for a moment (which is the definition of a companion “generally agreed upon” i.e. by *jumhur*).²⁴ It would last for around a hundred years, the uncertainty resulting from the date of death of the companion Abu Tafil (or Tufayl).²⁵ On the same premise, the second generation counted seventy or eighty years, and the third generation about fifty. There is a general agreement that this whole period is between 220 and 240 years. Scholars born within this period would be considered as part of the Salaf even though they might have died after 300 AH. A good example of that is the case of the Hanafi jurist Abu Ja‘far at-Tahawi who is considered a “Salafi” scholar by both the Wahhabis and their theological opponents because he was born in 239 AH/ 853 CE and died in 321 AH/ 933 CE.²⁶ Being part of this era means, for some factions, that a particular person’s sayings and actions can reliably be taken into account when defining what is and what is not orthodox. From the Wahhabis’ point of view, for a person to have lived in the Salaf period is not enough to prove his or her religious soundness. However, belonging to this period while being a scholar of notable repute, gave a particular significance to this scholar’s actions and opinions, because the Salaf were (and are) considered central in constructing the notion of Islamic orthodoxy.²⁷

²¹ Sa‘id Ramadan al-Buti is currently the Chair of the Theology Department of Damascus University and an internationally renowned thinker. One of his works is used in 3.5.1.2.11.

²² Muhammad Sa‘id Ramadan al-Buti, *al-Salafiyya : marhala zamaniyya mubaraka la-madhhab islami* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1998), p.9.

²³ Ahmad ibn ‘Abd al-Razzaq Duwaysh, *Fatawa al-lajna al-da‘ima li-al-buhuth al-‘ilmiyya wa al-ifta*, 2nd ed. (Riyad: Maktaba al-‘Ubaykan : ri’asa idara al-buhuth al-‘ilmiyya wa al-ifta, 1992), vol.2, p.166.

²⁴ Abu Zakariya Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi, *Sahih Muslim bi-Sharh al-Imam Muhyi al-Din Yahya ibn Sharaf al-musamma al-Minhaj sharh Sahih Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj*. (Beirut: Dar al-Ma‘rifa, 1994), vol.5, p.248.

²⁵ Ahmad ibn ‘Ali Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, *Fath al-bari bi-sharh Sahih al-Bukhari* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1981), vol.7, p.6. The article *Islah* in the Encyclopaedia of Islam mentions that the last companion was agreed to be Anas ibn Malik: *EI²*, vol. 4, p.149.

²⁶ For more on Abu Ja‘far al-Tahawi see *EI²*, vol.10, p.101.

²⁷ In theory, the Wahhabis claim to follow the opinions of scholars from the period of the Salaf to the letter. However in practice, one notices that the Wahhabis put a greater emphasis on taking as a reference

2.3 Salaf: central notion in constructing orthodoxy, specifically orthodox beliefs

2.3.1 The notion of Salaf and its role in constructing orthodoxy

In contrast to Shi'is, who fault some of the very first companions of the Prophet with treachery and non-respect of the will of the Prophet with regards to his succession,²⁸ Sunnis generally consider the first among the companions and supporters of the Prophet in Medina (respectively called the *Sahaba* and the *Ansar*) the best people of the Muslim community. They use as a proof a verse from the Quran: “Allah approves of the first among the *Muhajirun* [the Muslims who migrated from Mecca to Medina following the injunction of the Prophet] and the first among the *Ansar* [the inhabitants of Medina who welcomed the emigrants in their city and helped the Prophet]” [9:100]. The hadith quoted in the previous section further emphasises, for Sunni commentators, the importance of taking the first three generations from the era of the Prophet as an ideal and a reference. For Sunnis, what the scholars of the Salaf did, said, or agreed upon can be a foundation to follow and a reference for future generations. The Salaf luminaries are often quoted as examples of piety, good character, strength of faith and individuals who had unwavering confidence in the Prophet. To illustrate, we can note this paragraph in the *Risala* of the Maliki scholar Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani (d.386 AH/ d.996 CE),²⁹ where he underlines the importance of choosing the Salaf as examples to follow:

personalities who have emerged after the Salaf period, but about whom it is believed that they do “follow” the Salaf, even if this means contradicting the scholars of the Salaf period. An example of that is the opinion of Ibn Taymiyya that compulsory daily prayers missed voluntarily should not be made up, in spite of a consensus of the first generations of scholars that they should be. Al-‘Uthaymin gave more weight to the saying of Ibn Taymiyya, which hitherto was considered at odds with the consensus. Al-Nawawi mentions the consensus of the Sunni scholars on the fact that obligatory prayers missed voluntarily should be made up: Abu Zakariya Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi, *al-Majmu‘, sharh al-muhadhab li-‘Ali ibn ‘Abd al-Kafi al-Subki* (Cairo: Matba‘a al-‘Asima, 1966), vol.3 p.75. Ibn ‘Uthaymin gives more weight to Ibn Taymiyya’s opinion in: Muhammad ibn Salih al-‘Uthaymin, *Fatawa arkan al-Islam* (Riyad Dar al-Thurayya li al-nashr, 2000) and in the Arabic website gathering most of his writings: http://www.ibnothaimen.com/all/books/article_18007.shtml question 193.

²⁸ The Salaf are not regarded by the Shi‘is as being the best of the Muslims. Those who claim to follow the Salaf and call themselves “Salafis” are often derided in Shi‘i websites. See for example: Murtada al-Basha, ‘Man hum al-Salaf as-salih?’, Raoofonline.com, <http://www.raoofonline.com/index.php?T=11&id=58> Accessed on January 30 2009. The website “Raoof online” is given as a reference by Shiasearch.com for Shi‘i information:

<http://www.shiasearch.com/Sites/index.php?name=Sites&req=details&sid=335>

²⁹ Also called “Maliki the Younger”, Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani was one of the major actors in the spread of the teachings of Malik ibn Anas in Tunisia (where the town of Qayrawan is located) and beyond. For more information on him see *EI*², vol. 3, p.695.

One must submit to the sunnahs [the acts of the Prophet and his companions]. They are not to be contradicted by personal opinions nor are they to be opposed by analogical reasoning. That which the right acting first generations interpreted, we take as our interpretation, that which they acted upon we act upon, and that which they abandoned we abandon.³⁰

A few paragraphs later, al-Qayrawani adds:

Al-Nakha'i said: "Even if I had seen the Companions making wudu up to the wrists I would have performed wudu like that although I recite [in the Qur'an] "up to the elbows". That is because they cannot be suspected of abandoning sunnahs. They were the masters (arbab) of knowledge and the most eager of Allah's people to follow the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace. The only one who thinks bad of them is someone who has a doubt about his deen.³¹

These quotes emphasise why the example of the Companions is so important. They witnessed the message of the Prophet and saw his practice. Therefore they are believed to have had a better understanding of the revelation than any other group of people. The scholars of the Salaf are also considered models of piety and devoutness. Reference to them in Sufi works for their noble character is very frequent. The Sufi master al-Sulami (d.412 AH/) also uses them as a reference for their behaviour:

"A faqir³² does not become aware of his inadequacies regarding the true obligations of faqr until he reflects upon the venerable forefathers (salaf) from among the Companions. God – be He exalted- spoke in His book of their faqr saying: For the poor immigrants (al-Muhajirin) who have been driven out from their homes and their belongings, who seek bounty from God and help His Messenger...They are the righteous. [59:8] And also: For the indigent, who are totally occupied in the way of God [2:273]. And let him ask himself whether any one of the Companions grew arrogant in that state, or haughtily raised his head, or whether God's praise of their traits increased them in anything but humility (khudu') and submission (istikana). They are the first who tread the path of faqr, those who have realized it, and its exemplars. No one of them ever flaunted his faqr, nor acted arrogantly in that state, or haughtily raised his head, nor acted arrogantly [on account of it]. Consequently one whose state is less than theirs – and it would be impossible for anyone to reach the state they realized, as is testified to by the true word of God- and behaves with arrogance and pretension, is nothing but one with whom Satan has toyed, who has acquiesced to the lower nature (tab') and the follies of the ego-self."³³

Towards the end of the same treatise, al-Sulami gives one last advice to the aspirant of high levels of piety:

³⁰ Translation by Abdassamad Clarke. 'Abd Allah ibn 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani, *A Madinan view on the Sunnah, courtesy, wisdom, battles and history*, trans. Abdassamad Clarke (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1999), pp.24-25.

³¹ ———, *A Madinan view on the Sunnah, courtesy, wisdom, battles and history*, trans. Abdassamad Clarke (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1999), pp.25-26.

³² A *faqir* is someone who is poor, and here it means: "someone who is ready to be extremely humble for the sake of God". The small treatise from which this quote is taken is dedicated to what should be done by the one who aspires to follow the path of spirituality: *sabil al-faqr* i.e. the path of poverty.

³³ Translation by Kenneth Honerkamp: Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami al-Naysaburi, 'The Stumblings of those aspiring - Zalal al-fuqara', in *Three early Sufi texts* (Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 2003), p.133.

And he knows above all, that everything [we have mentioned] are but the outward forms of faqr, not its realization. Reaching the reality of faqr is [exceedingly] difficult; because such was the state of the Prophet –may the peace and blessing of God be upon him, the elect among the leaders [of this path] and the pious elders (al-salaf al-salihin)-may God be pleased with them.³⁴

It is very clear from this passage that the scholars of the Salaf are an example so perfect that the Sufis believe they can never be actually reached. There is another example of where the scholars of the Salaf are praised for their exceptional piety in the *Risala al-Qushayriyya* which contains a plethora of examples of behaviours and sayings from the people of the Salaf period. The definitions of Sufi terminology are always illustrated with stories of these pious ancestors. They are even quoted for “*karamas*” i.e. extraordinary events, sometimes translated as “miracles”.³⁵

“Miracles have been displayed by the pious ancestors (salaf), including the Companions [of the Prophet] and the generation that followed them, as well as those who came in their wake. They are abundant indeed. Many books were written about this matter, and we shall mention only a few of them for the sake of brevity, God willing. Thus , [it is related] that Ibn Umar was once on a journey when he met a group of people standing on the road for fear of a lion. He chased the lion away from the road then told them: “God has given power over man to things that he fears. Were he afraid of no one but God, no one would have power over him.”. This is a well-known report.”³⁶

The Epistle contains many a reference to the piety, courage and devoutness of the Salaf and underlines that their way should be taken as an example. Recognising that the first generations, far from being unjust to the Prophet, were actually pious and devoted and the best people of the Muslim community is a core tenet of Sunnism.³⁷ Therefore, it is not difficult to see why the stances of the Salaf on diverse issues would be invoked to impose credibility or authority to a practice or ruling.

2.3.2 Why the issue of the Attributes of God matters

³⁴ ———, ‘The Stumblings of those aspiring - Zalal al-fuqara’, in *Three early Sufi texts* (Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 2003), p.152

³⁵ The Arabic word for “miracles” is *mu‘jizat*, which can, in Islamic doctrine, only occur to Prophets, as opposed to *karamas*, which are extraordinary events which may happen to men and women of high piety and spiritual stature.

³⁶ Translation by Alexander Knysh. Abu al-Qasim ‘Abd al-Karim ibn Hawazin al-Qushayri, *al-Qushayri’s Epistle on Sufism - al-Risala al-qushayriyya fi ‘ilm al-tasawwuf*, trans. Alexander Knysh, Great books of Islamic Civilization (Reading, U.K.: Garnet Publishing, 2007), p.366.

³⁷ In his heresiographical book about what is and is not Sunnism, al-Baghdadi dedicates a final chapter to describing what he considers to be “the saved sect”. This description starts with a paragraph on the stances on the Companions and on the Salaf in general, and how Sunnism is about respecting the scholars of the Salaf and considering them as examples: Abu Mansur ‘Abd al-Qahir Ibn Tahir al-Baghdadi, *al-Farq bayna al-firqa wa-bayan al-firqa al-najiyya minhum* (Beirut: Dar al-afaq al-jadida, 1973), pp.299-301.

In this part we will explore the issue of the Attributes of God and its centrality in terms of the Islamic creed, as related to the Sunnis. Although it might at first seem as peripheral or trivial, the issue of how to understand the non explicit verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God has been considered important enough by some prominent Muslim authors to declare as not belonging to the Muslim community any person with diverging views on it. Seelye, the translator of the heresiographical book *al-Farq bayna l-firaq* by Ibn Tahir al-Baghdadi (d.429 AH/ 1037 CE),³⁸ warned the reader in her introduction, that in some parts, the book made “dull reading”, because of discussions about, as she put it: “whether Allah touches the Throne or not”. Seelye compares the debate to the “pettiness [of] the scholastic debates of the medieval Christian church, regarding the number of angels able to stand on a pin-point at one time, or the consequences attending a mouse’s eating the consecrated host”.³⁹ However, the issue of touching the Throne or not was actually considered by the author whose work she has translated as a vital point which could determine or nullify the Islamic faith of a person. This is why what the Salaf’s view on this issue was particularly important.

A summary of the Ash‘ari and Maturidi worldview and explanation of the oneness of God will help present why this issue defined one’s classification as an orthodox Muslim by the theologians. Ash‘ari and Maturidi theological positions have been dominant from almost immediately after the Salaf, a fact admitted by the WSNS themselves. Ash‘ari and Maturidi books have long been part of the core reading material of the most famous Sunni universities of the Muslim world.⁴⁰ The most famous scholars of the Muslim community from the 4th century AH/ 10th century CE have been either active Ash‘aris or, if theology was not their specialisation, greatly influenced by Ash‘arism whenever they dealt with non-explicit verses, or whenever matters of the creed were touched upon. Abu al-Hasan al-Ash‘ari (d.324 AH/ 935-6 CE) and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d.333 AH/ 944 CE) are two theologians deemed by their followers to have brought a systematic vocabulary and methodology to the explanation of Muslim beliefs, in line

³⁸ Ibn Tahir al-Baghdadi was an Ash‘ari Shafi‘i scholar settled in Nishapur where he became a renowned teacher. For more information on him see *EP*, vol.1, p.909.

³⁹ Abu Mansur ‘Abd al-Qahir Ibn Tahir al-Baghdadi, *Moslem schisms and sects (al-Fark bain al-Firak) being the History of the various philosophic systems developed in Islam*, trans. Kate Chambers Seelye (New York: Amc Press, Inc, 1966), p.7.

⁴⁰ Such as al-Azhar in Cairo, Zaytuna in Tunis and Qarawiyyun in Morocco. An example of this can be seen in the list of table of contents of the different books used in al-Azhar made by Louis Gardet, *Introduction à la théologie musulmane: essai de théologie comparée*, vol. 37, Etudes de Philosophie Médiévale (Paris: Vrin, 1948), pp.139-84.

with what the scholars of the Salaf used to say. Al-Ash‘ari and al-Maturidi are considered part of the Salaf period, as they were both born during the third century AH. These two theologians are deemed to have done for *‘aqida*, i.e. issues of belief, what the founders of the four Sunni schools have done for *fiqh* [jurisprudence]: i.e. to systemise it in a coherent, organised way, and with a comprehensive vocabulary, while at the same time aligning themselves to the methodology of the Salaf.

This point is key and lies at the root of the debate: the Sunnis did not refer to themselves as *Salafis*, though they do think of themselves as followers of the Salaf and take them as a reference in theological matters. Moreover, the Sunnis do not consider they are following innovators who founded a new creed. In contrast, this is precisely what the WSNS accuse al-Ash‘ari and al-Maturidi of having done when they established *new* vocabulary to explain the Islamic creed. The Sunni scholars who came after the era of the Salaf called themselves the “*khalaf*” or “the Successors”, precisely because they imagined themselves as the actual “successors” of the *Salaf*.⁴¹

Summary of Ash‘ari theological arguments concerning the creed in God and His attributes

In the conception of the world of the Ash‘ari and Maturidi scholars,⁴² the entire universe is: everything except God (*kullu ma siwa Allah*).⁴³ As all entities are created by God, they all have a beginning, given to them by God, whereas God is the only One who does

⁴¹ This point is developed in 3.3.1.

⁴² What follows is a condensed version of arguments and examples which can be found in books on Ash‘ari theology such as Abu al-Hasan ‘Ali ibn Isma‘il al-Ash‘ari, *The theology of al-Ash‘ari: the Arabic texts of al-Ash‘ari’s Kitab al-Luma‘ and Risalat istihsan al-khawd fi ‘ilm al-kalam*, trans. Richard Joseph McCarthy (Beyrouth: Impr. catholique, 1953); Muhammad ibn al-Tayyib al-Baqillani, *Kitab al-tamhid al-awa‘il wa-talkhis al-dala‘il* (Beirut: Mu‘assasa al-kutub al-thaqafiyya, 1987); ‘Abd al-Malik ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Juwayni, *Kitab al-irshad ila qawati‘ al-adilla fi usul al-i‘tiqad* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, 1950); Abu Mansur ‘Abd al-Qahir Ibn Tahir al-Baghdadi, *al-Farq bayna al-firaq wa-bayan al-firqa al-najiyya minhum* (Beirut: Dar al-afaq al-jadida, 1973); and Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali, *Ihya‘ ‘ulum al-din*, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-‘arabi; reprint, 1938), vol.1. For detailed landmarking academic studies on Ash‘ari theology and related issues, see Daniel Gimaret, *La doctrine d’al-Ash‘ari* (Paris: Cerf, 1990); Daniel Gimaret, *Les noms divins en Islam: exégèse lexicographique et théologique* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1988) and Michel Allard, *Le problème des attributs divins dans la doctrine d’al-As‘ari et de ses premiers grands disciples*, vol. 28, Recherches publiées sous la direction de l’Institut de lettres orientales de Beyrouth (Beyrouth: Impr. catholique, 1965). For the influence of *kalam* discourse on other fields such as philosophy, see Robert Wisnovsky, *Avicenna’s metaphysics in context* (London: Duckworth, 2003), part II.

⁴³ *Kullu mawjud siwa Allah ta‘ala wa sifatih:* ‘Abd al-Malik ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Juwayni, *Kitab al-irshad ila qawati‘ al-adilla fi usul al-i‘tiqad* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, 1950), p.17; *kullu shay‘ghayr Allah:* Abu Mansur ‘Abd al-Qahir Ibn Tahir al-Baghdadi, *al-Farq bayna al-firaq wa-bayan al-firqa al-najiyya minhum* (Beirut: Dar al-afaq al-jadida, 1973), p.315; *ma siwa Allah:* Mas‘ud ibn ‘Umar al-Taftazani, *Sharh al-‘aqa‘id al-Nasafiyya* (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-azhariyya li-al-turath, 2000), p.33.

not have a beginning.⁴⁴ To ask the question “if God created everything, then who created Him?” would equal saying that the Creator is a creation. Indeed, a creation is something which did not exist, and then came to be. As it was created, this necessitates that it was brought from the state of non-existence into existence. This is the very meaning of creating which can only be applied to God (Arab linguists do recognize that *khalaqa* -to create- can, as in English, be used to mean: to produce or to fabricate when applied to human beings, but they point out that the meaning of “bringing things from the state of non-existence into existence” should be used only in reference to God, as humans may produce chairs and tables from wood, but cannot make wood appear from nothing. That would be creating, and this type of creating applies only to the Creator, God).⁴⁵ Therefore, if all created things have in common the fact that they all have a beginning, to state that God would have a beginning too would equal saying that the Creator is yet another creation. What follows from this is that there would never be an absolute difference between the two. In summary, if all created things have in common this attribute of having a beginning, then it must be the case that God does not have this attribute.⁴⁶ And similarly, anything which is attributed to God, cannot be attributed to the creation (similar terms might be used as a means to partially comprehend and refer to concepts through the limits of language, but with different meanings).⁴⁷ If the Creator and the creations had even one attribute in common then God would not be the Creator. This is substantiated by a hadith of the Prophet considered sound (*sahih*): “God existed, and there was nothing else”.⁴⁸ The Prophet explicitly mentions that God existed and nothing else did i.e., no sky, earth, Throne, no physical entity and no time and no place.

⁴⁴ Abu al-Hasan ‘Ali ibn Isma‘il al-Ash‘ari, *The theology of al-Ash‘ari: the Arabic texts of al-Ash‘ari’s Kitab al-Luma‘ and Risalat istihsan al-khawd fi ‘ilm al-kalam*, trans. Richard Joseph McCarthy (Beyrouth: Impr. catholique, 1953), vol.2, p.7; ‘Abd al-Malik ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Juwayni, *Kitab al-irshad ila qawati‘ al-adilla fi usul al-i‘tiqad* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, 1950), p.32.

⁴⁵ For the various possible meanings of *khalaqa* see Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Murtada al-Zabidi, *Taj al-‘arus min jawahir al-Qamus*, 2nd. ed., 10 vols. (Binghazi: Dar Libya li-al-nashr wa al-tawzi‘, 1966), vol.6, pp.335-8; Muhammad ibn Mukarram Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-‘arab*, 15 vols. (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1968), vol.10, p.85-92.

⁴⁶ On the belief that the world must have a beginning see for example :Muhammad ibn al-Tayyib al-Baqillani, *Kitab al-tamhid al-awa‘il wa-talkhis al-dala‘il* (Beirut: Mu‘assasa al-kutub al-thaqafiyya, 1987), p.41-43.

⁴⁷ On the necessity of God being different from His creations see for example Abu al-Hasan ‘Ali ibn Isma‘il al-Ash‘ari, *The theology of al-Ash‘ari: the Arabic texts of al-Ash‘ari’s Kitab al-Luma‘ and Risalat istihsan al-khawd fi ‘ilm al-kalam*, trans. Richard Joseph McCarthy (Beyrouth: Impr. catholique, 1953), vol.2, p.7 ; and Muhammad ibn al-Tayyib al-Baqillani, *Kitab al-tamhid al-awa‘il wa-talkhis al-dala‘il* (Beirut: Mu‘assasa al-kutub al-thaqafiyya, 1987), p.44.

⁴⁸ This hadith is the story of a group of Muslims from Yermen who travelled to ask the Prophet what the first creation was. Before answering their question directly, the Prophet started with the reminder that God existed and nothing else existed (*kana Allah wa lam yakun shay‘ ghayruh*). The hadith is mentioned by Taj al-Din Abu-Nasr ‘Abd-al-Wahhab Ibn-‘Ali Ibn-‘Abd-al-Kafi al-Subki, *Tabaqat al-shafi‘iyya al-kubra*, 1. Tab‘a. ed. (Cairo: Matba‘at ‘Isa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1964), vol 3, p.364, and Ahmad ibn al-Husayn al-Bayhaqi, ‘Kitab al-asma‘ wa al-sifat,’ in *Furqan al-Qur‘an*, ed. Muhammad ibn al-Hasan Kawthari (Beirut: Dar Ihya‘ al-turath al-‘arabi, 1939).

Time and place constitute “other than God” and the hadith states there was nothing “other than God” *lam yakun shay’un ghayruh*. The maxim according to which God exists without time and place originates from this reasoning. He still does not need time and place, as it is impossible that He would change.⁴⁹

The Ash‘ari and Maturidi scholars emphasise that the Qur’an lets us know that God does not need any of His creation as He is perfect. To illustrate this, they quoted the Qur’anic verse “Indeed Allah is independent of need for the worlds (*al-‘alamin*)” [3:97]. The Ash‘aris define *al-‘alamin* as being composed of only these two elements: bodies (*jism*, pl. *ajsam*), and accidents (*‘arad* pl. *a‘rad*).⁵⁰ A body is anything which has a length, a width, and a depth. An atom is the smallest particle of substance, and it is indivisible.⁵¹ When two atoms are gathered, this is called a body, and has a volume comprising length, width and depth.⁵² The bodies themselves are sub-divided into two categories: tangible and intangible. Tangible bodies are those that can be grasped with the hand, like trees or human beings, and intangible bodies are those that the hand cannot grasp, like light, souls, and the wind. As God created all bodies, whether tangible or intangible, He is necessarily entirely different from these bodies. The same reasoning applies to the accidents (*‘arad*). Accidents do not exist by themselves as separate entities. Unlike bodies, they need a body to exist in association with. An example of “accident” is “colour”. We cannot speak of “blue” by itself by saying “blue did this” or “blue did that”. Rather, we would say: the dress is blue, the table is red, etc. Other accidents include: temperatures, movement, motionlessness and feelings. Indeed, we cannot talk about “anger” without the “body” i.e. the person in whom it exists (“so and so is angry”). The same can be said for movement: it only occurs in bodies. God is also the Creator of all accidents. As accidents can only exist in (or on) a body, they are

⁴⁹ For the impossibility of change being an attribute of God, see Abu al-Hasan ‘Ali ibn Isma‘il al-Ash‘ari, *The theology of al-Ash‘ari: the Arabic texts of al-Ash‘ari’s Kitab al-Luma‘ and Risalat istihsan al-khawd fi ‘ilm al-kalam*, trans. Richard Joseph McCarthy (Beyrouth: Impr. catholique, 1953), vol.2, p.9; and ‘Abd al-Malik ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Juwayni, *Kitab al-irshad ila qawati‘ al-adilla fi usul al-i‘tiqad* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, 1950), p.44.

⁵⁰ For the division of the worlds between bodies and accidents, see Abu Mansur ‘Abd al-Qahir Ibn Tahir al-Baghdadi, *al-Farq bayna al-firaq wa-bayan al-firqa al-najiyya minhum* (Beirut: Dar al-afaq al-jadida, 1973), p.315-16; Muhammad ibn al-Tayyib al-Baqqillani, *Kitab al-tamhid al-awa‘il wa-talkhis al-dala‘il* (Beirut: Mu‘assasa al-kutub al-thaqafiyya, 1987), p.37; ‘Abd al-Malik ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Juwayni, *Kitab al-irshad ila qawati‘ al-adilla fi usul al-i‘tiqad* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, 1950), p.17.

⁵¹ Atom is used here for *jawhar* which is used by Ash‘ari and Maturidi scholars to refer to the smallest indivisible particle, and not in the physicist’s definition according to which the atom can be divided further into electrons and neutrons.

⁵² Abu al-Hasan ‘Ali ibn Isma‘il al-Ash‘ari, *The theology of al-Ash‘ari: the Arabic texts of al-Ash‘ari’s Kitab al-Luma‘ and Risalat istihsan al-khawd fi ‘ilm al-kalam*, trans. Richard Joseph McCarthy (Beyrouth: Impr. catholique, 1953), vol.2, p.9-10.

specific to the creations, and the Creator is entirely free from having even one of them. In conclusion of this point, we can establish that: whatever creations are attributed with, the Creator is not attributed with, and whatever God is attributed with, creations are not attributed with.

To sum up the Ash‘ari and Maturī worldview: if everything has to be either a body or an accident, and God is the Creator of both, God must be entirely different from both. In addition, He has revealed in the Qur‘an that He does not need the worlds, and that the worlds comprise only bodies or accidents. Further, it is neither the case God would have a shape or form that we are not aware of, nor that He would be attributed with a certain colour because our knowledge cannot encompass such specificity. Similarly, it is not that God is a body, about whose reality we are ignorant. Rather, God exists without a “how”, i.e. without a “manner”, altogether. This is known as the Sunni doctrine of the *bila-kayf*—literally, without a how. The *bila-kayf* doctrine is not to be explained as “we do not know how God is” or “we cannot know how God is”, as is found in some books and articles,⁵³ but rather as a total negation of the existence of a “how” in the first place, because God is the Creator of the “how” (the *kayf* i.e. the manners, the shapes, the forms, the accidents, etc). This is a key issue in terms of Sunni Islamic doctrine. If a person understands that what the Ash‘ari scholars meant was that they did not know how God is, i.e. what shape, colour, or size He is, then this person would be misunderstanding the very reason why the phrase “*bila kayf*” was originated by the theologians.

Among the sentences used by Ash‘ari scholars to illustrate the fact that God exists without a how was the phrase: “God is different from whatever you imagine in your mind” (*mahma tasawwarta bi-balika fa Allahu bi-khilafi dhalika*).⁵⁴ This meant that because all what our imagination can conceive is bound to be either a body or an accident, we cannot imagine the Essence of the One who created them both, and who is neither a body nor an accident by mere limitation of our own minds, which is due to

⁵³ Eg Binyamin Abrahamov, ‘The Bi-la Kayfa Doctrine and its foundations in Islamic Theology,’ *Arabica* 42, no. 3 (1995): pp.376-77; Daniel Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ash‘ari* (Paris: Cerf, 1990), p.342; Duncan Black MacDonald, *Development of Muslim theology, jurisprudence, and constitutional theory*, The Semitic series; (New York: Charles Scribner's sons, 1903), p.147. For other studies of anthropomorphism, see Josef van Ess, *The youthful God : anthropomorphism in early Islam. The University lecture in religion at Arizona State University* (Tempe, Ariz.: Dept. of Religious Studies, Arizona State University, 1988).

⁵⁴ The principle is sometimes spelled out slightly differently: *kullu tawahamahu mutawaham bi-al-jahl annahu kadhalik, fa-al-‘aql yadullu ‘ala annahu bi-khilafih*: Abu al-Qasim ‘Abd al-Karim ibn Hawazin al-Qushayri, *al-Risala al-qushayriyya: wa bi-al-hamish muntakhabat min sharh shaykh al-Islām Abi Yahya Zakariya al-Ansari al-Shafi* □i, 2 ed. (Egypt: Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1959), p.6.

their very nature. To clarify the distinction between imagination and reason, we can use the following example: it is known from the Qur'an that both light and darkness are creations as it is mentioned that God created them both [cf Q 53:1]. Therefore, if they are creations, it follows that there must have been a time when they did not exist, as all creations have a beginning. However, if we were to ask our imaginations to picture a time when there was no light or darkness, we would be unable to do so. As far as we are concerned, when we can see something it is because it is illuminated. If we cannot see it, it is because there is no light. For us, darkness is the absence of light and there is no way round this in our imagination. Indeed, our reason tells us that there was such a time when no darkness and no light existed as these are mere creations with a beginning. This shows that our reason can reach some stages where the imagination stops and cannot proceed further. Sunni scholars would encourage human beings to cease using their imagination in attempting to find the Essence of God as they will never succeed. But use of their reason also dictates that there is a Creator and this Creator is entirely different from His creation.

God exists without a place

Another important determinantal point of the creed is the assertion that God exists without a place.⁵⁵ The main Ash'ari/Maturidi argument is that the Creator existed before the creation of any place, that He existed without a place, and continues to exist without a place. He still exists after having created places, without being in need of them, as He is absolutely independent of all needs (*al-qiyamu bi al-nafs*). It is within this framework that the Ash'aris and Maturidis reject the notion God "sits" or is "established on" His Throne, as sitting in or on something necessitates being in a place (see Appendix One).

The Ash'aris and Maturidis view that believing that God is established in the sky or on the Throne is not only a misinterpretation of the Qur'an, but also a mistake which leads one to worship other than God. It now comes as no surprise that excommunications have been pronounced in condemnation of groups who were seen as holding this

⁵⁵ The concept according to which God exists without a place is central to the teachings of Sunni scholars. They reiterate this principle as an important tenet of the Islamic faith: Abu Mansur 'Abd al-Qahir Ibn Tahir al-Baghdadi, *al-Farq bayna al-firqa wa-bayan al-firqa al-najiyya minhum* (Beirut: Dar al-afaq al-jadida, 1973), p.321; Ahmad ibn 'Ali Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, *Fath al-bari bi-sharh Sahih al-Bukhari* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1981), vol.13, p.358; Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-'arabi; reprint, 1938), vol.1, p.155; 'Ali ibn al-Hasan Ibn 'Asakir, *Tabyin kadh'ib al-muftari fi-ma nusiba ila al-Imam Abi al-Hasan al-Ash'ari* (Beirut: Dar al-kitab al-'arabi, 1979), p.150 ; Ahmad ibn al-Husayn al-Bayhaqi, 'Kitab al-asma' wa al-sifat,' in *Furqan al-Qur'an*, ed. Muhammad ibn al-Hasan Kawthari (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-turath al-'arabi, 1939), p.400.

heretical view that God exists on His throne, or in the sky or that He is a body or has organs.⁵⁶ This is mostly due to the fact that the Qur'an and the Prophetic hadith contain phrases in Arabic whose literal meanings would be that God has hands, feet, a face, a shin, or that He is settled on the Throne. These verses and hadith are referred to as non explicit (*mutashabih*). With the actual faith of the Muslim being at stake, it is not surprising to observe some relatively lengthy discussions on this issue. This is the reason why the Salaf's view on this issue is of particular significance.

In the next part, we will explain the issues that surround the understanding of non explicit verses and hadith, and we will then list the positions of scholars from as varied a background as possible in reference to them. They all point to one conclusion: most of the scholars who came after the Salaf period had a precise idea of how the Salaf used to approach the non explicit texts that would suggest that God is limited or would have organs: they came to the understanding that the scholars of the Salaf dismissed the apparent (and usually anthropomorphist) meaning.

2.3.3 The Salaf and the Attributes of God: perceptions of scholars between 4th and 12th centuries AH (10th and 18th centuries CE)

In this part we will expose how Muslims scholars between the 4th and the 12th century AH used to define the attitude of the Salaf towards the non explicit verses dealing with the attributes of God. This is to establish if there was a consensus on what this attitude was, and this will allow us later to assess whether the definition given nowadays by the WSNS is different from that consensus or not.

Before detailing the names and trends of the Muslim scholars chosen for this section, we need to explain the meaning of 'non-explicit verses' or the so-called 'allegorical' verses. Fundamental to this issue is verse 7, chapter 3 because it clearly and

⁵⁶ Strong condemnations going as far as not considering as non-Muslims people with such views are can be found in: Abu Mansur 'Abd al-Qahir Ibn Tahir al-Baghdadi, *Kitab usul al-din* (Istanbul: Madrasa al-ilahiyyat bi-dar al-funun, 1928), p.337; Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *al-Milal wa al-nihal* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1985; reprint, Cairo 1961), p.105; Maymun ibn Muhammad al-Nasafi, *Tabsira al-adilla : fi usul al-din 'ala tariqa al-Imam Abi Mansur al-Maturidi* (Damascus: al-Ma'had al-'ilmi al-faransi li-al-dirasat al-arabiyya bi-Dimashq, 1990), vol.1, p.169; Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, *al-Ashbah wa al-naza'ir fi qawa'id wa furu' fiqh al-shafi'iyya* (Cairo: Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1959), p.488; Abu al-Faraj 'Abd al-Rahman ibn 'Ali Ibn al-Jawzi, *Daf' shubah al-tashbih bi-akuff al-tanzih* (Cairo: Maktaba al-kulliya al-azhariyya, 1991), p.66; Shihab al-Din Ahmad ibn Muhammad Ibn Hajar al-Haytami, *al-Minhaj al-qawim: sharh Shihab al-din Ahmad ibn Hajar al-Haytami 'ala al-Muqaddima al-Hadramiyya fi al-fiqh al-Shafi'i*, 3rd ed. (Damascus-Beirut: Mu'assasa 'ulum al-Qur'an, 1987), p.224; 'Ali ibn Sultan Muhammad al-Qari al-Harawi, *Mirqat al-mafatih : sharh Mishkat al-masabih*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1992), vol.3, p.300.

conclusively mentions that there are two types of verses in the Qur'an: the explicit (*muhkam*) and non explicit (*mutashabih*). It reads:

Huwa al-ladhi anzala 'alayka al-kitab minhu 'ayatun muhkamatun hunna 'umm al-Kitab; wa 'ukharu mutashabihat; fa'amma al-ladhina fi qulubihim zayghun fayattabi'una ma tashabaha minhu bi-itigha'a al-fitna wa bi-itigha'a ta'wilihi wa ma ya'lamu ta'wilahu 'il-la Allah wa al-rasikhuna fi al-'ilm yaquluna 'amanna bi-h kullun min 'indi Rabbina wa ma yadh-dhakkaru 'il-la 'ulu al-'albab.

"It is He who has sent this Scripture down to you [Prophet]. Some of its verses are definite in meaning –these are the cornerstone of the Scripture- and others are ambiguous. The perverse at heart eagerly pursue the ambiguities in their attempt to make trouble and to pinpoint a specific meaning –only God knows the true meaning – while those firmly grounded in knowledge say, 'We believe in it: it is all from our Lord'.

This verse has been the object of lengthy explanations in Qur'anic exegeses and books dedicated to explaining the Islamic creed.⁵⁷ The explicit verses (*muhkam*) are verses which can only have one meaning according to the Arabic language, or whose meaning is well-known. The non explicit verses (*mutashabih*) can have different meanings according the Arabic language and their meaning is considered not immediately clear to the reader, but not impossible to reach for a human with the right knowledge.⁵⁸ In Q [3;7], the explicit verses are called "*Umm al-Kitab*", i.e. the foundation of the Book. Then it is mentioned that people with a disease or something wrong (*zaygh*) in their heart will be attached to the non explicit verses, seeking their interpretation (*ta'wil*) and spreading dissension (*fitna*), when "only God knows the true meaning". It is this last verse which has been much debated, because if *ta'wil* stands for interpretation, then the verse would be an absolute condemnation of interpretation. This is how WSNS understand this verse, and it is their main basis for prohibiting any sort of interpretation. However, Ash'ari scholars are of the view that in this instance *ta'wil* does not mean "interpretation" but "the Day of Judgement". Their main basis for this explanation is another verse from the Qur'an where the noun *ta'wil* clearly refers to the Day of

⁵⁷ For detailed interpretations on this verse see: Fakhr al-Din Muhammad ibn 'Umar al-Razi, *al-Tafsir al-kabir*, 32 vols. (Egypt: al-Matba'a al-Bahiyya al-misriyya, 1934), vol.7, pp.175-95; Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Qurtubi, *al-Jami' li-ahkam al-Qur'an*, 3 ed., 20 in 10 vols. ([Cairo]: Dar al-Katib al-'arabi, 1967), vol.4, p.8-19; 'Abd al-Malik ibn 'Abd Allah al-Juwayni, *Kitab al-irshad ila qawati' al-adilla fi usul al-i'tiqad* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, 1950), p.42; and Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Murtada al-'ilmiyya, 1989), vol.2, pp.177-79. What follows is a summary of those interpretations. For translations in French of most of the interpretations given by Sunni scholars on non explicit hadiths, see Daniel Gimaret, *Dieu à l'image de l'homme : les anthropomorphismes de la sunna et leur interprétation par les théologiens* (Paris: Cerf, 1997).

⁵⁸ For these definitions of explicit (*muhkam*) and (*mutashabih*) see Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Qurtubi, *al-Jami' li-ahkam al-Qur'an*, 3 ed., 20 in 10 vols. ([Cairo]: Dar al-Katib al-'arabi, 1967), vol.4, p.14 and Fakhr al-Din Muhammad ibn 'Umar al-Razi, *al-Tafsir al-kabir*, 32 vols. (Egypt: al-Matba'a al-Bahiyya al-misriyya, 1934), vol.7, p.183.

Judgement,⁵⁹ which according to them proves that the word *ta'wil* in this verse could also have the meaning of "Day of Judgement".⁶⁰

Another possible interpretation consists in reading the verse up to the word *fi al-'ilm: wa ma ya'lamu ta'wilahu illa Allah wa al-rasikhuna fi al-'ilm*. If one stops at "*fi al-'ilm*, the meaning of the verse becomes: And no one knows the true meaning of the non explicit verses except God *and* those who are firmly grounded in knowledge. The term *ta'wilahu* according to this reading would then refer to the interpretation of the non explicit verses which can have different meanings in the Arabic language, especially those concerning the Attributes of God.⁶¹ In summary, the Ash'aris do not understand from that verse any interdiction of interpretation of the non explicit verses dealing with the Attributes of God. On the contrary, some of them have vehemently denied that the verse Q [3;7] could indicate only God knows the true meaning of the non explicit verses. Among those, Abu Nasr al-Qushayri (d.514 AH/ 1120 CE) wrote, in his *al-Tadhkira al-sharqiyya*, as reproduced by Murtada al-Zabidi (d.1205 AH/ 1791 CE) in his commentary of *Ihya' 'ulum al-din* by al-Ghazali (d.505 AH/1111 CE):

Concerning the verse *wa ma ya'lamu ta'wilahu illa Allah* [if one stops at the word Allah in his recitation], it means that no one knows the exact time of occurrence of the Day of Judgment except Allah. Allah revealed this verse because the non-Muslims asked the Prophet about when the Day of Judgment will occur. So [here] the non-explicit verses are signs of the Unseen (ghayb) because no one knows the end and results of matters except Allah. Because Allah the Exalted said *Hal yandhuruna illa ta'wilah, yawma ya'ti ta'wiluh* (Q 7:53), "What are they waiting for but the fulfilment of its final Prophecy?"

Of course it would not be permissible for anyone to say that there are, in the Quran, verses which none of the creation can know their meanings. Isn't it a statement which degrades the status of Prophecy? This statement contains degrading the status of prophecy and belittling the Prophet, peace be upon him, because it claims that the Prophet did not know the meaning of the verses pertaining to the Attributes of Allah ta'ala, and that he ordered people to believe in what cannot be known.

⁵⁹ *Hal yandhuruna illa ta'wilah, yawma ya'ti ta'wiluh* (Q 7:53), "What are they waiting for but the fulfilment of its final Prophecy?"

⁶⁰ Fakhr al-Din Muhammad ibn 'Umar al-Razi, *al-Tafsir al-kabir*, 32 vols. (Egypt: al-Matba'a al-Bahiyya al-misriyya, 1934), vol.7, pp.184-86; Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Qurtubi, *al-Jami' li-ahkam al-Qur'an*, 3 ed., 20 in 10 vols. ([Cairo]: Dar al-Katib al-'arabi, 1967), vol.4, pp.15-17; 'Abd al-Malik ibn 'Abd Allah al-Juwayni, *Kitab al-irshad ila qawati' al-adilla fi usul al-i'tiqad* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, 1950), p.42 and 'Ala al-din 'Ali ibn Muhammad al-Baghdadi al-Shafi'i al-Khazin al-Baghdadi, *Tafsir al-Khazin al-musamma Lubab al-ta'wil fi ma'ani al-tanzil wa bi-hamishihi tafsir al-Baghawi, al-ma'ruf bi-Ma'alim al-tanzil li-Abi Muhammad al-Husayn ibn Mas'ud al-Furra al-Baghawi al-Shafi'i*, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1979), vol.1.p.321.

⁶¹ For the mention of the possibility of reading this verse in two different ways see Fakhr al-Din Muhammad ibn 'Umar al-Razi, *al-Tafsir al-kabir*, 32 vols. (Egypt: al-Matba'a al-Bahiyya al-misriyya, 1934), vol.7, pp.188-89; Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Qurtubi, *al-Jami' li-ahkam al-Qur'an*, 3 ed., 20 in 10 vols. ([Cairo]: Dar al-Katib al-'arabi, 1967), vol.4, p.15-17 and 'Ala al-din 'Ali ibn Muhammad al-Baghdadi al-Shafi'i al-Khazin al-Baghdadi, *Tafsir al-Khazin al-musamma Lubab al-ta'wil fi ma'ani al-tanzil wa bi-hamishihi tafsir al-Baghawi, al-ma'ruf bi-Ma'alim al-tanzil li-Abi Muhammad al-Husayn ibn Mas'ud al-Furra al-Baghawi al-Shafi'i*, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1979), vol.1, p.321.

Didn't Allah say in the Qur'an "bi-lisanin 'arabiyyin mubin": "Allah revealed the Quran in a clear Arabic language"? So according to the anthropomorphists' claim, they are saying that this is a lie, because they claim that the Arabs do not know the meanings of these verses, and if this were the case, then it would not be in clear Arabic.

And we know that the Qur'an was revealed in the Arabic language, so how can anyone claim that the Qur'an contains verses the meanings of which the Arabs do not know? If this was the case, these verses would not be in compliance with the language of the Arabs. And what do you say about a claim that leads to contradicting Allah ta'ala?

Moreover, the Prophet called the people to worship Allah the Exalted. So if in his call to his community there was something which none knows its meaning except Allah, then the non-Muslims would have said to him "O Muhammad, tell us first who you want us to worship and what are you saying?" Because it is not possible to believe in something which one does not know the attributes of, and to say that the Prophet called people to believe in a God whose attributes none can know their meanings is a very abhorrent matter that no Muslim can even imagine, because ignorance of the attributes of something entails the ignorance of the thing itself.⁶²

The relevance of this explanation is to prevent those that the Ash'aris considered as anthropomorphists from using the verse to prove that interpretation was forbidden. Abu Nasr ibn al-Qushayri argues that it would be unacceptable to believe that even the Prophet was unable to explain the Attributes of God. This is the reason why, according to him, the verse cannot be used as an evidence to prove that interpretation is forbidden. Indeed, it does not appear to be the case that Ash'ari and Maturidi scholars understood that the Qur'an contained a clear prohibition against detailed interpretation of non explicit verses, as the quotes below will show.

After this presentation of the issues surrounding how to interpret non explicit verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God, we can now study how a selection of Muslim scholars representative of the Ash'ari and Maturidi theological schools, described the attitude of the scholars of the Salaf towards interpretation. More specifically, we will focus on the opinions of Sunni scholars between the 4th and the 12th century AH/10th and 18th CE (i.e. just after the period of the Salaf and until Wahhabism), on the approach of the Salaf concerning the interpretation of non explicit verses and hadith which if taken literally would attribute organs or a place to God.

2.3.3.1 Presentation of the sources

⁶² Translation mine. Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Murtada al-Zabidi, *Kitab Ithaf al-sada al-muttaqin bi-sharh Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, 14 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1989), vol 2, p.178-79.

This is a presentation of the sources used in 2.3.3.2, and their authors, in chronological order of the authors' date of death:

- *Kitab al-Asma' wa al-Sifat*⁶³ by al-Bayhaqi (d.458 AH/ 1066 CE), who was a Shafi'i scholar specialised in hadith transmission, and an Ash'ari in the field of theology.⁶⁴
- *al-'Aqida al-nizamiyya*⁶⁵ by Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni (d.478AH/ 1085 CE), the Imam of the Two Holy Sanctuaries, a celebrated Shafi'i and Ash'ari scholar.⁶⁶ He was notably among the teachers of al-Ghazali (d.505 AH/ 1111 CE), the famous Ash'ari and Sufi scholar. This short treatise is an Ash'ari summary of the Muslim creed. His theological book detailing rational arguments for the Muslim creed according to Ash'ari principles, *Kitab al-Irshad ila qawati' al-adilla fi usul al-i'tiqad*,⁶⁷ will also be used.
- *Tabsira al-adilla*⁶⁸ by Maymun ibn Muhammad al-Nasafi (d.508 AH/ 1114 CE), a theologian whose book outlines principles of the creed.⁶⁹
- *Kitab al-milal wa al-nihal*⁷⁰ by al-Shahrastani (d.548 AH/ 1153 CE), an Ash'ari theologian. The book *al-Milal*, as *Kitab al-milal wa al-nihal* became to be known by, is an ambitious attempt to retrace the history of all the different religious beliefs of mankind known to him.⁷¹ He mentions the Salaf with regards to some creedal points.

⁶³ Ahmad ibn al-Husayn al-Bayhaqi, 'Kitab al-asma' wa al-sifat,' in *Furqan al-Qur'an*, ed. Muhammad ibn al-Hasan Kawthari (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-turath al-'arabi, 1939).

⁶⁴ For more on al-Bayhaqi see *EP* vol. 1, p.1130.

⁶⁵ 'Abd al-Malik ibn 'Abd Allah al-Juwayni, *al-'Aqida al-nizamiyya fi al-arkan al-islamiyya* (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya, 1992).

⁶⁶ For more information on al-Juwayni, see *EP* vol.2, p.605.

⁶⁷ 'Abd al-Malik ibn 'Abd Allah al-Juwayni, *Kitab al-irshad ila qawati' al-adilla fi usul al-i'tiqad* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, 1950).

⁶⁸ Maymun ibn Muhammad al-Nasafi, *Tabsira al-adilla : fi usul al-din 'ala tariqa al-Imam Abi Mansur al-Maturidi* (Damascus: al-Ma'had al-'ilmi al-faransi li-al-dirasat al-arabiyya bi-Dimashq, 1990).

⁶⁹ Not to be confused with Najm al-Din al-Nasafi (d.537 AH/1142 CE) who wrote the treatise entitled " 'Aqaid al-Nasafiyya", which, with its commentary by at-Taftazani is among the classical books on the Muslim creed⁶⁹, and he is not either the 'Abdullah ibn Muhammad al-Nasafi (d.710 AH/ 1310 CE) who wrote an exegesis of the Qur'an.

⁷⁰ Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *al-Milal wa al-nihal* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1985; reprint, Cairo 1961).

⁷¹ For more information on al-Shahrastani see Guy Monnot's article where he raises serious doubts about Steigerwald's theory according to which al-Shahrastani was an Ismaili acting 'undercover' as an Ash'ari: ———, *Livre des sectes et des religions*, trans. Daniel Gimaret and Guy Monnot, 2 vols. (Leuven, Peeters: Unesco, 1986-1993), p.3-10; and Diane Steigerwald, *La pensée philosophique et théologique de Shahrastani (m. 548/1153)* (Sainte-Foy, Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1997).

- *Kitab akhbar al-sifat*⁷² and *Daf' shubah al-tashbih*⁷³ by the Hanbali traditionist Ibn al-Jawzi (d.597 AH / 1200 CE), one of the most famous scholars of Baghdad at his time. He borrowed enough concepts from the thinking and interpreting of the Ash'aris to be classified as a personality with strong influences from Ash'arism. In these two books he strongly disagreed over the interpretation of the non-explicit verses of the Qur'an with other notable persons from within his own school of thought. The fact that he also had some criticisms about Ash'arism makes him and his works even more interesting to study, as this would only prove that despite divergences over certain issues between scholars, there was a wide agreement over how to understand the non-explicit verses.⁷⁴
- *al-Mulha fi i'tiqad ahl al-haqq*,⁷⁵ by al-'Izz ibn 'Abd al-Salam al-Sulami (d.660AH/ 1262 CE), who was believed to have reached the level of *mujtahid* (a Muslim scholar who possesses the aptitude to form his own judgement on questions concerning the Islamic Law using personal effort) and who was an Ash'ari and Shafi'i scholar. The treatise is dedicated to theological notions and has a passage on the creed of the Salaf. The same text is found in another book published under the title *al-'Aqa'id*,⁷⁶ which gathers credal points by al-'Izz ibn 'Abd al-Salam.⁷⁷
- *Sharh sahih Muslim*⁷⁸ by al-Nawawi (d.676 AH / 1277 CE) a Syrian Shafi'i jurist whose works such as the Forty hadith and the Gardens of the Virtuous ones (*Riyad al-salihin*) are still widely reprinted and translated. He is nowadays respected by a vast array of Muslim groups, which is the reason why using his works in this section is useful. His description of the position of the Salaf on the non explicit verses is mentioned in his commentary of *Sahih Muslim*.⁷⁹

⁷² Abu al-Faraj 'Abd al-Rahman ibn 'Ali Ibn al-Jawzi, *A medieval critique of anthropomorphism : Ibn al-Jawzi's Kitab Akhbar as-sifat : a critical edition of the Arabic text with translation, introduction and notes*, trans. Merlin L. Swartz, vol. 46, Islamic philosophy, theology, and science (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

⁷³ ———, *Daf' shubah al-tashbih bi-akuff al-tanzih* (Cairo: Maktaba al-kulliyya al-azhariyya, 1991).

⁷⁴ Ibn al-Jawzi mastered many different areas of Islamic knowledge, for more biographical information on him see *EI*² vol.3, p.751.

⁷⁵ 'Izz al-Din 'Abd al-'Aziz Ibn 'Abd al-Salam al-Sulami, *The Belief of the People of Truth (al-Mulha fi i'tiqad ahl al-haqq)*, trans. Gibril Fouad Haddad, Islamic Doctrines and Beliefs, volume 3 (Fenton: As-Sunna foundation of America, 1999).

⁷⁶ ———, *The Belief of the People of Truth (al-Mulha fi i'tiqad ahl al-haqq)*, trans. Gibril Fouad Haddad, Islamic Doctrines and Beliefs, volume 3 (Fenton: As-Sunna foundation of America, 1999)

⁷⁷ For more biographical information see *EI*², vol.9, p.812.

⁷⁸ Abu Zakariya Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi, *Sahih Muslim bi-sharh al-Imam Muhyi al-Din Yahya ibn Sharaf al-musamma al-Minhaj sharh Sahih Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj.*, 2nd ed. (Damascus: Dar al-'Ulum al-'Insaniyya, 1997).

⁷⁹ For more information on al-Nawawi see the detailed introduction of Louis Pouzet to his translation of the 40 hadith: Louis Pouzet, *Une Herméneutique de la tradition islamique: Le Commentaire des Arba'un*

- *al-Muqaddima*⁸⁰ by the famous Andalusian historian Ibn Khaldun⁸¹ (d.808 AH/ 1406 CE) who shows remarkable detail and understanding of theological issues in his presentation of the creed of the Salaf.
- *Fath al-Bari bi-sharh Sahih al-Bukhari*⁸² by the famous Egyptian hadith scholar Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani⁸³ (d.852 AH/ 1449 CE). This work has become a reference in terms of hadith commentary. Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani narrates several detailed interpretations of non explicit hadith and occasionally verses. He was a famous historian and judge whose works are highly regarded by Sunni scholars until today.
- *al-Minhaj al-qawim*⁸⁴ by Ibn Hajar al-Haytami (d.974 AH/ 1567 CE), an Egyptian Shafi‘i scholar who studied in al-Azhar under the supervision of the Sufi and specialist of the Shafi‘i school Zakariyya al-Ansari⁸⁵ (d.926AH/ 1520 CE) and other teachers who were themselves disciples of Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani (d.852 AH/ 1449 CE) and of the Shafi‘i traditionist al-Suyuti⁸⁶ (d.911 AH/ 1505 CE). This book is an explanation of a small work of Shafi‘i jurisprudence entitled *al-Muqaddima al-hadramiyya*, and it contains a definition of the Salaf as well.⁸⁷
- *Mirqat al-mafatih*⁸⁸ by ‘Ali al-Qari (d.1014 AH/ 1605 CE), a celebrated Hanafi Maturidi scholar, who wrote a widely available explanation of *al-Fiqh al-akbar* by Abu Hanifa (d.150 AH/ 767 CE) .
- *Isharat al-Maram ‘ala ‘ibarat al-Imam*⁸⁹ by Kamal al-Din al-Bayadi (d.1098 AH/ 1687 CE), a Hanafi scholar. This book was also reedited and commented

al-Nawawiya de Muhyi al-Din al-Nawawi, Langue arabe et pensée Islamique; 13 (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1982), p.1-55.

⁸⁰ Copies used: ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah : an introduction to history, with corrections and augmented bibliography.*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, 2nd ed., 3 vols., Bollingen series: 43 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimat ibn Khaldun - Prolégomènes d'Ebn Khaldoun (d'après le manuscrit de Paris de 1858)*, 3 vols. (Beirut: Maktaba Lubnan, 1970).

⁸¹ For more information on Ibn Khaldun see Franz Rosenthal’s account in his introduction to the translation of the *Muqaddima*: ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah : an introduction to history, with corrections and augmented bibliography.*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, 2nd ed., 3 vols., Bollingen series: 43 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p.xxix-lxvii.

⁸² Ahmad ibn ‘Ali Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, *Fath al-bari bi-sharh Sahih al-Bukhari* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1981).

⁸³ For more information on Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani see *EP*, vol.3, p.776.

⁸⁴ Shihab al-Din Ahmad ibn Muhammad Ibn Hajar al-Haytami, *al-Minhaj al-qawim: sharh Shihab al-din Ahmad ibn Hajar al-Haytami ‘ala al-Muqaddima al-Hadramiyya fi al-fiqh al-Shafi‘i*, 3rd ed. (Damascus-Beirut: Mu’assasa ‘ulum al-Qur’an, 1987).

⁸⁵ For more information on Zakariyya al-Ansari see *EP*, vol.11, p.406.

⁸⁶ A famous Egyptian scholar specialised in hadith, who was also a historian and a biographer.

⁸⁷ For more information on Ibn Hajar al-Haytami see *EP*, vol.3, p.778.

⁸⁸ ‘Ali ibn Sultan Muhammad al-Qari al-Harawi, *Mirqat al-mafatih : sharh Mishkat al-masabih*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1992).

by al-Kawthari (d. 1371 AH/ 1951 CE).⁹⁰ It contains an explanation of Salaf positions.

2.3.3.2 The consensus of a representative selection of Sunni scholars on the Salaf and the interpretation of the verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God

The positions of these scholars are not arranged chronologically. Rather they start by a quote by al-Nawawi which sums up the consensus reached between the end of the period of the Salaf until the arrival of Wahhabism in relation to Salaf treatment of the non explicit verses.

2.3.3.2.1 al-Nawawi (d. 676 AH/1277 CE)

In his commentary on the collection of hadith by Muslim, al-Nawawi explains the hadith called “*Hadith al-nuzul*”. *Hadith al-nuzul* is among the *mutashabih* texts, i.e. non explicit, and possibly controversial. If taken literally, this hadith would mean that during the third part of the night, God descends to earth to grant their wishes to those who are awake praying or supplicating. This is how al-Nawawi approaches this text:

With respect to this hadith (hadith al-nuzul) and the like of it of the hadiths containing the Divine attributes and their verses, there are two well-known approaches: the approach of most of the Salaf and some of the speculative theologians [mutakallimun] is to believe in their true nature according to what befits Him, Exalted Be He, and that their literal meanings that are commonly acknowledged with reference to us [dhahiriha] are not intended. We are to not discuss their meanings but all the while believing in God’s being exalted, Glory to Him, from having all the other characteristics of creation such as transference from place to place [intiqa] and movements [harakat].

The second is the approach of most of the speculative theologians and a portion of the Salaf. It is related about Malik and Awza’i that they said they are to be interpreted in a way befitting them according to their non-literal meanings. Accordingly, the report is to be interpreted with two [different forms of] interpretations. One of them is an interpretation by Malik ibn Anas and others, who said: it is His Mercy (rahmah), His Order (amr) and His angels who descend, as it can be said: “the Sultan did so and so” when actually [the task] has been performed by those under his command [and not by him personally](...).”⁹¹

⁸⁹ Kamal al-Din Ahmad ibn Hasan al-Bayadi, *Isharat al-maram min ‘ibarat al-Imam* (Cairo: Sharika maktaba wa-matba‘a Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi wa-awladih, 1949).

⁹⁰ More information on Muhammad Zahid ibn Hasan al-Kawthari (d. 1371 AH/ 1951 CE) in 3.5.1.2.

⁹¹ Adapted from a translation by ‘Abdullah Ibn Hamid ‘Ali. Abu Zakariya Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi, *Sahih Muslim bi-Sharh al-Imam Muhyi al-Din Yahya ibn Sharaf al-musamma al-Minhaj sharh Sahih Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj*. (Beirut: Dar al-Ma‘rifa, 1994), vol.6, p.279. For the English, see Abu al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn ‘Ali Ibn al-Jawzi, *The Attributes of God*, trans. ‘Abdullah Ibn Hamid ‘Ali (Bristol: Amal Press, 2006), p.94 note 31. ‘Abdullah Ibn Hamid ‘Ali’ translated both the text by Ibn al-Jawzi and the comments on it made by al-Kawthari in his Arabic edition. Al-Kawthari at some point quotes ‘Ali al-Qari (d.1014 AH/ 1605 CE) who quotes al-Nawawi. This is why the reference for the translation of this passage by al-Nawawi is indicating a book by Ibn al-Jawzi. The translation of the last sentence of the

This quote is truly emblematic of the attitude of the Salaf regarding the verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God, as described by classical Sunni scholars. All the other scholars in this section divide the understanding of these texts into two main methods, one specific to the Salaf, and one to the *Khalaf* (the scholars after the Salaf). Al-Nawawi makes the distinction between those early scholars who would mostly refrain from interpreting, and those who came later and who would interpret, as they felt that there was a need for it.⁹²

As explained by al-Nawawi, the method of most of the scholars of the Salaf consists in discarding the literal meaning of the non explicit verses and hadith (this point will prove crucial later, as one of the main arguments of the WSNS is to say that the Salaf used to take the texts according to their literal meaning), but refraining from giving a detailed interpretation. For example, in *hadith al-nuzul* (literally “the hadith of the descent”), this attitude would be summed up by saying “I know that the action of *nuzul* has been attributed to God in this hadith, I know it is not in the sense that God would descend or move as He is exempt from such things, but I do not wish to discuss what particular meanings *nuzul* may have in this hadith”. Al-Nawawi attributes this attitude to “most of the Salaf and to some of the theologians (*mutakallimun*)” because in the next paragraph he will show that some scholars of the Salaf period did give detailed interpretation, and because not all the later theologians favoured the idea of giving detailed interpretations.

The method of most of the scholars of the *Khalaf* and of some of the Salaf period is also to start by discarding the literal meaning, and then to go a little further by assigning precise meanings to these non explicit texts. Here, al-Nawawi does not quote any scholar of the Khalaf but rather he quotes two prominent names from the Salaf period: Malik ibn Anas and al-Awza‘i, as if to prove that the origins of this practice are to be found in this era. To give an example of this method of interpretation on this hadith: one could understand that it means “God orders an angel (for example) to descend” and announce to Muslims that they will be forgiven if they are supplicating and praying, the same way that “the sultan” may be the subject of the verb “to build” in the sentence “the sultan built this school” because he is the one who orders people under his command to build. Even though it is evident that the sultan did not physically build anything, the

quote is mine as it was not quoted by al-Kawthari and therefore not translated by Ibn Hamid ‘Ali. More information on ‘Ali al-Qari is available in 2.3.3.2.2.

⁹² We will see later that it is precisely on this issue that the description of the Salaf made by Ibn Taymiyya differs from what was generally agreed, but he himself only amplified and extended a definition that was circulated by previous Hanbalis.

action is attributed to him because he is the one who gave the order. Al-Nawawi does not condemn this second method, i.e. detailed interpreting, in any of his books, and actually grants it more emphasis, by quoting other interpretations for this hadith, after the paragraph translated above. This statement of al-Nawawi has been taken verbatim by many later scholars, such as ‘Ali al-Qari.

2.3.3.2.2 al-Qari (d.1014 AH/ 1605 CE)

When he came to comment on hadith al-Nuzul, ‘Ali al-Qari states, after repeating word for word al-Nawawi’s summary:

From the sayings of Shayh al-Rabbani Abu Ishaq al-Shirazi, imam al-Haramayn, al-Ghazzali and other than them among our imams, it is known that both methods agree on leaving out the apparent meanings, like for the [terms] maji, sura, shakhs, rijl, qadam, yad, wajh, ghadab, rahma, istiwa ‘ala l-‘arsh, al-kaoun fi l-sama, [literally: coming, image, person, leg, foot, hand, face, anger, mercy, being established over the Throne, being in the Sky] and other than that among all the expressions which, if taken literally lead to things which are considered unbelief (kufr) by consensus (ijma’) [...]. The whole of the Salaf and of the Khalaf have agreed upon leaving out the literal meanings but they diverged over [this issue]: do we simply leave the literal meaning, believing in the fact that God is attributed with what befits His Greatness and Perfection, without making any other interpretation (ta’wil)? And this is the way of most of the Salaf, which is a “ta’wil ijmalî” (a general interpretation); or do we interpret with something else, which is the way of most of the khalaf, and which is a detailed interpretation (ta’wil tafsilî)? They (i.e. the khalaf) were not aiming at contradicting the Pious Predecessors by doing so, may God protect us from supposing such a thing from them! However, they were compelled by a necessity in their times with the multiplicity of anthropomorphists, of Jahmis and other than these two groups among the deviated groups and their control over the minds of the masses. They meant, by this [i.e. by their detailed interpretations] to answer their heresies, but many of them also warned: “Had we been upon what the Pious Predecessors were upon in terms of purity of the beliefs and the non-existence of heresies of their times, we would not have delved into the interpretation of anything [...]”.

I have learned that Malik and al-Awza‘i, who were both among the greatest [scholars] of the Salaf have interpreted [some] hadith in detail and so did Sufyan al-Thawri who interpreted the “istiwa ‘ala l-‘arsh” as His Order (...). Some of the salaf and of the khalaf said that the one who believes in a direction [for Allah] is a non-Muslim, as has been narrated by al- ‘Iraqi, who said that this was the opinion of Abu Hanifa, of Malik, of a Shafi‘i, of al-Ash‘ari and of al-Baqillani.”⁹³

Here, ‘Ali al-Qari provides an explanation for the recourse to interpretation made by some of the later scholars. He defends the position of the *Khalaf* who interpreted more frequently than the scholars of the Salaf used to. This was not because these later scholars thought they knew better than the previous scholars, but rather because the

⁹³ Translation mine. ‘Ali ibn Sultan Muhammad al-Qari al-Harawi, *Mirqat al-mafatih : sharh Mishkat al-masabih*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1992), pp.299-300.

societies they lived in differed from that of the scholars of the Salaf. Therefore, resorting to interpretation should only be seen as a way to protect the masses against wrong beliefs that might fall into their minds due to their ignorance of the Arabic language or of certain rules pertaining to the religion.

2.3.3.2.3 al-Bayhaqi (d.458 AH/ 1066 CE)

In his book *al-Asma wa al-Sifat*, when commenting on a hadith which attributes *al-dahak* to God (literally: laughing), al-Bayhaqi mentions a few words about how the Salaf approached this text as well as similar texts:

“The Predecessors [Salaf] among our companions understood from these hadith that they were falling among the strange ones, and that they were [the kind of topics which they were] talking about [were best left to] God the Exalted. They did not preoccupy themselves with the exegesis of the word dahak, believing in the fact that God does not have organs, points of pronunciation, and that it is not permissible to attribute Him with teeth or a mouth. God is far remove from resembling the creations”⁹⁴

Here, it is clear that al-Bayhaqi is also of the view that the Salaf would not interpret such verses in detail, but that they would negate that God has organs. This quote shows that just after the period of the Salaf, there was already a portrayal of the Salaf as not interpreting the verses, by a recognised scholar.

2.3.3.2.4 al-Shahrastani (d.548 AH/ 1153 CE)

The same aspect of the Salaf’s attitude is underlined in *al-Milal wa al-nihal*, by al-Shahrastani:

[Al-Ash’ari] holds also that the [terms] “yadayn” (literally “two hands”), and “wajh” (literally “face”) are attributes that are reported of God; for, as he explains, revelation speaks of them, and, therefore, they must be accepted as they are revealed. He follows the Salaf in not attempting to interpret them, though according to one opinion reported of him he allows interpretation.⁹⁵

He adds, about the Salaf :

"As for Ahmad b. Hanbal and Dawud b. ‘Ali al-Asfahani and a group of imams of the Salaf, they followed the way of the early traditionalists (ashab al-hadith) of the Salaf, such as: Malik b. Anas and Muqatil b. Sulaiman. They took a safe path, saying “We believe in whatever is reported from the Book and the Sunna, and we do not try to interpret it,

⁹⁴ Translation mine. Ahmad ibn al-Husayn al-Bayhaqi, ‘Kitab al-asma’ wa al-sifat,’ in *Furqan al-Qur’an*, ed. Muhammad ibn al-Hasan Kawthari (Beirut: Dar Ihya’ al-turath al-‘arabi, 1939), p.474.

⁹⁵ Adapted from the translation by Kazi and Flynn. For the English see Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *Muslim sects and divisions : the section on Muslim sects in Kitab al-milal wa al-nihal*, trans. A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn (London: Kegan Paul International, 1984), p.85; for the Arabic see Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *al-Milal wa al-nihal* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma’rifa, 1985; reprint, Cairo 1961), vol.1, p.101.

knowing for certain that God does not resemble any created things, and that all the images we form of Him are created by Him and formed by Him. They avoided anthropomorphism, tashbih, to such an extent that they said that if a man moved his hand while reading the verse "Khaluqtu bi-yadayy" [which would literally mean "that I [God] have created with My hands"]; or if he pointed with his two fingers while reporting the hadith of the Prophet " [which would literally mean "the heart of the believer is between the fingers of ar-Rahman"] his hand must be cut off and the two fingers torn out.⁹⁶

Al-Shahrastani also considers that the Salaf did not take the literal meanings of non explicit verses. The Salaf are believed to have avoided any detailed interpretation, and at the same time they negated meanings specific to the creation.

2.3.3.2.5 al-Juwayni (d.478AH/ 1085 CE)

Al-Juwayni said in his book *al- 'Aqida al-nizamiyya*:

"The imams of the Salaf chose to abstain from ta'wil (detailed interpretation), they put the literal meanings where they belong and they left the meanings to God the Exalted".⁹⁷

Al-Juwayni develops the following argument in his *Irshad*:

Someone might ask why not take the verse in its apparent sense, instead of resorting to allegorical interpretation, by arguing that it is one the ambiguous verses whose interpretation only God knows.⁹⁸ To that we reply: If the purpose of this question is to keep [istawa] [literally: "seating"] strictly within the limits of what is meant when using it literally, then it surely means "to become firmly established" and that results necessarily in a doctrine of corporeality. Any doubt in this matter falls under the same judgment and ends up as belief in corporeality. Deciding that the sense "to become firmly established" is impossible supposes on the contrary, that the apparent meaning is not applicable in this case. And thus those who demand that the import of the verse remain within its apparent sense have no justification for this position.⁹⁹

Al-Juwayni is a reference in classical theology. In these excerpts, he suggests that the scholars of the Salaf did not delve into interpretation and he advocates leaving out the apparent meanings of the non explicit verses on the Attributes of God.

⁹⁶ For the English see Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *Muslim sects and divisions : the section on Muslim sects in Kitab al-milal wa al-nihal*, trans. A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn (London: Kegan Paul International, 1984), p.88 ; for the Arabic see Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *al-Milal wa al-nihal* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1985; reprint, Cairo 1961), vol.1, p.104.

⁹⁷ Translation mine.'Abd al-Malik ibn 'Abd Allah al-Juwayni, *al- 'Aqida al-nizamiyya fi al-arkan al-islamiyya* (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya, 1992), p.32.

⁹⁸ This is a reference to the Qur'anic verse [3: 7] explained in 2.3.2.

⁹⁹ Translation by Paul Walker. 'Abd al-Malik ibn 'Abd Allah al-Juwayni, *A guide to conclusive proofs for the principles of belief : Kitab al-irshad ila qawati ' al-adilla fi usul al-i 'tiqad* (Reading, UK: Garnet : Center for Muslim Contribution to Civilization, 2000), p.25 ; for the Arabic see 'Abd al-Malik ibn 'Abd Allah al-Juwayni, *Kitab al-irshad ila qawati ' al-adilla fi usul al-i 'tiqad* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, 1950), p.40.

2.3.3.2.6 al-Nasafi (d.508 AH/ 1114 CE)

Al-Nasafi mentions the word Salaf in the first page of the book chosen for the sample,¹⁰⁰ stating that in this book he is only following what the shaykhs before him explained. In addition, in this section dedicated to the non explicit verses, he explains what the position of those scholars was:

“Our shaykhs , may Allah have mercy upon them, have differed [regarding the non explicit texts]. Some of them took the view that the obligation regarding those verses and hadith was to believe in them as they came, with faith and submission, to believe in their soundness, and not to preoccupy ourselves about their modality or the search for this modality, with a firm belief that Allah, may He be exalted, is not a body, does not resemble the creations (...).This has been narrated from Muhammad ibn al-Hasan: indeed Nasir ibn Yahya al-Balkhi narrates from ‘Umar ibn Isma’il ibn Himad ibn Abu Hanifah from Muhammad ibn al-Hasan that he was asked about those verses and narrations mentioning the attributes of Allah, and the apparent meaning of which would lead to anthropomorphism, and he said: “we go through them as they came, we believe in them and we do not say “how” and “when””. And this view was also adopted by Malik ibn Anas, the imam of the people of al-Madinah, and by Abd Allah ibn al-Mubarak and Abou Mu’adh Khalid ibn Sulayman the companion of Sufyan al-Thawri, and by a group of scholars from the people of hadith like Ahmad ibn Hanbal and Ishaq ibn Ibrahim and Muhammad ibn Isma’il al-Bukhari, and Abu Dawud al-Sijistani. It has been narrated from Malik ibn Anas may Allah have mercy upon him that he was asked about His saying, may He be exalted: “al-Rahman ‘ala l-‘arsh istawa” [literally: the Merciful is established over the Throne] and he said “the Istawa is not unknown and the kayf is not conceivable and the question about it is an innovation” [i.e. the definition of the word istawa is not unknown, but he did not precisely mention which one he intended, and there is no “how” (kayf) to this act of istawa, as it is not conceivable that God had a “how”]. None of them busied himself interpreting anything from these verses and narrations.¹⁰¹

And some of them [i.e a second group of scholars from “Our shaykhs”] preoccupied themselves with extracting the meaning of these verses and narrations according to what they contain as meanings which do not contradict the proofs of the Oneness of God and the explicit verses . Thereafter, in those cases where the word would only bear (apart from the explicit meaning) one meaning which complies with the proofs, they will decree that this is what is meant by God. And for those expressions which would carry more than one suitable meaning they did not decide in favour of any in particular as being what was meant, because of the absence of a decisive proof which would lead to choose only one of them. They would prevent themselves from confirming this for Allah without a proof forcing them to do so and they would say: “Yes, the meaning of some of these expressions is not the apparent one”.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Maymun ibn Muhammad al-Nasafi, *Tabsira al-adilla : fi usul al-din ‘ala tariqa al-Imam Abi Mansur al-Maturidi* (Damascus: al-Ma‘had al-‘ilmi al-faransi li-al-dirasat al-arabiyya bi-Dimashq, 1990)

¹⁰¹ This is a general statement, as there are indeed some specific interpretations narrated from scholars of the Salaf period, as mentioned by al-Nawawi in 2.3.3.2.1.

¹⁰² Translation mine. Maymun ibn Muhammad al-Nasafi, *Tabsira al-adilla : fi usul al-din ‘ala tariqa al-Imam Abi Mansur al-Maturidi* (Damascus: al-Ma‘had al-‘ilmi al-faransi li-al-dirasat al-arabiyya bi-Dimashq, 1990), p.130

Although the extract above does not contain the word “salaf” as such, all the scholars taken as a reference in al-Nasafi’s text are exclusively from the period of the Salaf, and it is in the chapter regarding anthropomorphism, which is the subject on which the reference to the Salaf is exceptionally common to both Ash‘ari and Maturidi scholars. Al-Nasafi ends his chapter by asking the readers to consult the works of Al-Ash‘ari and specifically to the famous Ash‘ari scholar, Ibn Furak¹⁰³ (d.406 AH/ 1015 CE), for more information on the details of the meanings of such texts.

Al-Nasafi also gives more details about the methods of those who interpret: they would affirm that their interpretation is the actual meaning of the verse only if it turns out that once the literal meaning has been discarded, there is only one possible meaning for this text. However, if it appears that there are several suitable meanings left for this text, then they do not confirm any one of them in particular as being the one intended. Al-Nasafi highlights the fact that the common feature between those who interpret in detail and those who do not is that they all confirm that the meaning of the non explicit verses is not the literal meaning.

2.3.3.2.7 al-‘Izz ibn ‘Abd al-Salam (d.660AH/ 1262 CE)

‘Izz al-Din ibn Abd al-Salam al-Sulami asserts, after having described what it meant to “leave the meaning to God” (*tafwid*):

The foregoing forms the general principles of al-Ash‘ari’s doctrine – may Allah have mercy on him – as well as those of the Salaf or Predecessors and the people of the Path (*tariqa*) and the Truth.¹⁰⁴

He adds:

The school of the [Salaf] is but the upholding of Allah’s oneness (al-tawhid) and His transcendence (al-tanzih), without ascribing a body to Him (al-tajsim) nor likening Him to creation (al-tashbih). Likewise, all the innovators claim that they follow the school of the [Salaf](...). How can it be foisted upon the Salaf that they believed in ascribing a

¹⁰³ Al-Nasafi is probably referring to a work by Ibn Furak dealing exclusively with the non explicit hadith, where he provides explanations for the most well-known of them: Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn al-Hasan Ibn Furak, *Kitab mushkil al-hadith wa-bayanuh*, 2nd ed. (Hayderabad: Matba‘a Majlis da‘irat al-ma‘arif al-uthmaniyya, 1971).

¹⁰⁴ He is probably referring to the people who follow the Tariqa he belonged to, under the teachings of the sufi masters of his time: Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi (d.632 AH/ 1234 CE) and Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili (d. 656 AH/ 1258 CE). Adapted from the translation by Gibril Fouad Haddad. For the Arabic see ‘Izz al-Din ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Ibn ‘Abd al-Salam al-Sulami, *al-‘Aqa‘id* (Dar al-Nashr al-islamiyya), 14 ; for the English see ‘Izz al-Din ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Ibn ‘Abd al-Salam al-Sulami, *The Belief of the People of Truth (al-Mulha fi i‘tiqad ahl al-haqq)*, trans. Gibril Fouad Haddad, Islamic Doctrines and Beliefs, volume 3 (Fenton: As-Sunna foundation of America, 1999), p.40.

body to Allah and likening Him to creation, or that they kept quiet when innovations appeared (...)?¹⁰⁵

The author describes the method of the Salaf as “leaving the meaning to God”. He also gives a reason to explain why every innovator claims to be upon the way of the Salaf: it is because of the supposed purity of the creed that those early followers held.

2.3.3.2.8 Ibn al-Jawzi (d.597 AH / 1200 CE)

Ibn al-Jawzi’s *Daf‘ shubah al-tashbih*, on refuting what he considered anthropomorphic positions, is a good example of the continued debate that raged over the legacy of the *Salaf*. Did they or did they not interpret the non explicit verses? Did they really say that these texts should be understood according to their apparent meaning when the apparent meaning leads to anthropomorphism? If they did not interpret them in detail, was it because they believed it to be forbidden or for some other reason? Ibn al-Jawzi explains :

“If someone should ask why the salaf refused to interpret scriptural texts and [held] instead that these latter be permitted to stand as they are, our answer is that they did so for three reasons. In the first place, these texts were recited [without explanation] in order to focus attention on the reality of God’s existence. When they are interpreted this does not happen, given the fact that some of these texts contain expressions that do, [when explained] require a metaphorical interpretation. Thus, for example, the verse “Fa ja’a Rabbuka” [literally “Your Lord arrived”] refers to the coming of His command. Ahmad ibn Hanbal said “The proofs of reason lead to this conclusion, for movement cannot be attributed to Him.”¹⁰⁶ Secondly, if a term like “yad” [literally, “hand”] had been explained metaphorically to mean “power”, this latter might have been construed in such a way as to include the notion of potentiality [quwwa], and so could have risked diverting attention away from what is acceptable. Thirdly, if the salaf had adopted a metaphorical method of exegesis, the breach would have widened and the result would have been confusion”.¹⁰⁷

The reasons Ibn al-Jawzi gives to explain the attitude of the *Salaf* who did not favour detailed interpretation are all linked to the prevailing circumstances of their era. In essence, he explains that the scholars of the *Salaf* did not, generally, interpret in detail, not because they could not do it or because they considered it blameworthy, but because at their time it was the best solution not to. This helps explain why the scholars of the *Khalaf* resorted to detailed interpretation. The circumstances had changed and people’s

¹⁰⁵ For the Arabic see ‘Izz al-Din ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Ibn ‘Abd al-Salam al-Sulami, *al-‘Aqa’id* (Dar al-Nashr al-Islamiyya), p.15; for the English see ‘Izz al-Din ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Ibn ‘Abd al-Salam al-Sulami, *The Belief of the People of Truth (al-Mulha fi i’tiqad ahl al-haqq)*, trans. Gibril Fouad Haddad, Islamic Doctrines and Beliefs, volume 3 (Fenton: As-Sunna foundation of America, 1999), p.41.

¹⁰⁶ Isma‘il ibn ‘Umar Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidaya wa al-nihaya* (Beirut: Maktaba al-Ma‘arif, 1966), vol. 10, p.327.

¹⁰⁷ Translation by Merlin Swartz. Abu al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn ‘Ali Ibn al-Jawzi, *A medieval critique of anthropomorphism : Ibn al-Jawzi’s Kitab Akhbar as-sifat : a critical edition of the Arabic text with translation, introduction and notes*, trans. Merlin L. Swartz, vol. 46, Islamic philosophy, theology, and science (Leiden: Brill, 2002) p.133 for the text in English, and p.23 for the text in Arabic.

understanding had weakened. The only detailed interpretation Ibn al-Jawzi mentions was given by the founder of the school he followed: Ahmad ibn Hanbal. Like al-Nawawi, Ibn al-Jawzi is showing that the practice of detailed interpretations did exist at the time of the *Salaf*, a point which is denied by today's WSNS.

2.3.3.2.9 Ibn Khaldun (d.808 AH/ 1406 CE)

The historian Ibn Khaldun relates the history of the debate over the attributes of God and how to understand them in his *Muqaddima*:

“It is true that metaphorical interpretation of the attributes mentioned is contrary to the opinion of the Early Muslims [Salaf], who left the matter to God. However, the theologians were led to adopt it by the fact that a number of followers of the early Muslims, namely the innovators [muhdithun, synonym of mubtadi'un] and more recent Hanbalites, erred with regard to the significance of those attributes. They considered them to be confirmed attributes of God of which it is not known “how they are”.

(...)These people do not realize that it comes under the subject of anthropomorphism for them to affirm the attribute of (...) [istiwa], because according to the [Arab] lexicographers, the word [istiwa] implies being firmly settled in a place, which is something corporeal [i.e. “sitting”].

(...). Then they claim that (their opinion) is the opinion of the early Muslims [Salaf], who, in fact, held no such opinion. Their opinion (i.e. that of the Salaf) was the one established at the beginning, namely, to leave to God (the question of) what is meant by the (attributes), and not to say that one understands them.¹⁰⁸

He then concludes :

“These people have even extended these meanings that they had innovated to the literal meanings of “wajh”, “aynan”, “yadayn”, “nuzul”, “kalam” with letters and sounds, giving to those words meanings more general than the corporeal ones, and they then [declare that they] free God from those corporeal meanings, process which is unheard of in the [Arabic] language. The first among them as well as the later ones, followed this course. The orthodox [Ahlus-Sunnah] theologians, Ashari and Hanafi, have contradicted and fought their beliefs”.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Adapted from the translation by Franz Rosenthal. For the English see ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah : an introduction to history, with corrections and augmented bibliography.*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, 2nd ed., 3 vols., Bollingen series: 43 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), vol.3, p.65-67; for the Arabic see ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimat ibn Khaldun - Prolégomènes d'Ebn Khaldoun (d'après le manuscrit de Paris de 1858)*, 3 vols. (Beirut: Maktaba Lubnan, 1970), vol. 3,p.50-51.

¹⁰⁹For the English see ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah : an introduction to history, with corrections and augmented bibliography.*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, 2nd ed., 3 vols., Bollingen series: 43 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), vol.3, p.67; for the Arabic see ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimat ibn Khaldun - Prolégomènes d'Ebn Khaldoun (d'après le manuscrit de Paris de 1858)*, 3 vols. (Beirut: Maktaba Lubnan, 1970), vol.3, p.52.

Ibn Khaldun here gives a short but accurate account where he shows that the apparent meaning of the verses was always rejected by the scholars. He sums up the issue by highlighting the fact that those who insist in adhering to the literal meanings of the non explicit verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God while at the same time claiming that they were not assigning corporeal meanings to God was “unheard of in the Arabic language”. One can note that, in his view, orthodoxy is detailed in the work of Ash‘ari and Hanafi theologians.¹¹⁰

2.3.3.2.10 Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani (d.852 AH/ 1449 CE)

Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani has given interpretations of numerous hadith in his commentary on *Sahih Muslim*.¹¹¹ In some places where al-Bukhari quotes non explicit verses from the Qur’an, Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani comments, mentioning past scholars:

Al-Bayhaqi said, [about the verse *ilayhi yas‘adu al-kalim al-tayyib* [Q 35:10] which literally means: “The goodly word ascends to Allah”], that the phrase “the ascension of the goodly word and of the good charitable act” was an expression to mark the acceptance [by Allah, of those words and charitable acts]. [This phrase also indicates] that [these words and acts are elevated] to the place of residence of the angels, which is the sky. As for the phrase *ila Allah* [literally: to God], [it should be understood] as the Salaf mentioned before us in terms of *tafwid* (leaving the meaning to God) and as the imams after them [explained] in terms of *ta’wil* (interpretation). Ibn Battal¹¹² stated that al-Bukhari’s objective in this chapter was to refute the Jahmi anthropomorphists for they stick to the apparent meanings [of the non explicit verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God]. [For this reason] he [al-Bukhari] affirms that God is not a body and that He does need a place to establish Himself in, as He existed and there was no place.¹¹³

In this instance, Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani makes an explicit reference to the two methods of interpretation: leaving the meaning to God, favoured by the scholars of the Salaf, and making a detailed interpretation, which has been performed by scholars who came after the Salaf. Ibn Hajar narrates the interpretation made by al-Bayhaqi according to which “ascending to the sky” means “to be accepted by Allah”.

2.3.3.2.11 Ibn Hajar al-Haytami (d.974 AH/ 1567 CE)

¹¹⁰ which must be here a reference to Maturidi scholars, who in many cases happen to be Hanafis. For this reason “Hanafi theologians” may be understood as “Maturidi” theologians.

¹¹¹ For other interpretations than the one featured here , see Ahmad ibn ‘Ali Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, *Fath al-bari bi-sharh Sahih al-Bukhari* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1981), vol.3, p.24, vol.13, p.358, p.65-66, p.414.

¹¹² ‘Ali ibn Khalaf ibn Battal (d.444 AH/ 1054 CE) was a Maliki scholar who wrote a commentary on *Sahih al-Bukhari*.

¹¹³ Translation mine. Ahmad ibn ‘Ali Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, *Fath al-bari bi-sharh Sahih al-Bukhari* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1981), vol.13, p.354-55.

Ibn Hajar al-Haytami gives the following presentation, after commenting on the issue of the non-explicit verses:

After that, one can choose, if ones wishes, to interpret [these verses and hadith] according to what we have already mentioned, and this is the path of the Khalaf, and they have chosen it because of the emergence and multiplication of the innovators who were attributing [to God] a direction and having bodily attributes (al-jismiyya) and other than that among what is impossible to attribute to God. If one wishes, one leaves the meaning [of those verses and hadith] to God, and this is the way of the Salaf, and they chose this way because there was not, in their times, what happened [later] in terms of horrendous misguidance and disgusting innovation, so there was no need for them to delve into this. And know that al-Qurafi and other than him have narrated from al-Shafi'i, Malik, Ahmad [ibn Hanbal] and Abu Hanifa may God have mercy upon them that they were declaring unbelievers those who would attribute [to God] the direction and were talking about anthropomorphism, and they were right in doing so.¹¹⁴

Ibn Hajar al-Haytami gives an explanation which is similar to the text quoted earlier from 'Ali al-Qari, i.e. he explains that the only reason for subsequent scholars to delve into detailed interpretation is their impression that people around them had less understanding than before, and the emergence of factions which were using these loopholes to introduce a different creed. When he mentions that one can "choose", it also indicates that both methods are considered sound, a point which is also rejected by the WSNS.

2.3.3.2.12 al-Bayadi (d. 1098 AH/ 1686 (?)CE)

In his book dedicated to explaining religious statements made by Abu Hanifa, Kamal al-Din Ahmad al-Bayadi chooses a sentence from al-Fiqh al-Akbar and then comments on it. The original sentence is:

la yusafu Allahu bi-sifat al-makhluqin wa la yuqal inna yaduhu qudratuhu aw ni'matuhu li anna fihi ibtal al-sifat wa huwa qawl ahl al-qadr wa l-'itizal wa lakin yaduhu sifatuhu bila kayf (literally: "God is not to be attributed with attributes of the creations, and it should not be said that His yad is His qudra (i.e. that yad would mean power) or that it would be His ni'ma (i.e. that yad would mean His Grace), because this entails a nullification of the attributes and this is the saying of the Mu'tazila and the Qadariyya. However, His yad is His attribute without a "how".

Al-Bayadi explains that this statement indicates four things:

The first one is: the obligation to make a general interpretation (ta'wil ijmalī) away from the apparent meanings which come to the mind. That is indicated when he says

¹¹⁴ Translation mine. Shihab al-Din Ahmad ibn Muhammad Ibn Hajar al-Haytami, *al-Minhaj al-qawim: sharh Shihab al-din Ahmad ibn Hajar al-Haytami 'ala al-Muqaddima al-Hadramiyya fi al-fiqh al-Shafi'i*, 3rd ed. (Damascus-Beirut: Mu'assasa 'ulum al-Qur'an, 1987), p.224.

that God is not to be described with attributes of the creations which necessitate an interpretation.

The second one is: the prohibition of a detailed interpretation (ta'wil tafsili) which entails to understand it as power or grace or the like. That is indicated when he says that it should not be said that His yad is His power or His grace as it contains a nullification of the confirmed attribute and is not a synonym of this attribute.

The third one is: the refutation of those who specified the meaning willed [by God] among the metaphors (majazat) and who went too far into detailed interpretations. That is indicated when he says that this is the saying of the Qadariyya and the Mu'tazila.

The fourth one is: to leave the meaning to God (tafwid) in terms of specification, after having taking into account the metaphorical meaning in general, and this is indicated by his saying that the attribute yad is His attribute without a how, which means that the attribute is not the literal meaning of yad at all (laysat ma'na haqiqiyan lil-yad qat'an).¹¹⁵

He then sums up the two positions:

“What the Salaf was doing was: interpreting generally and leaving (tafwid) the detailed meaning of the non-explicit verses [to God]. It appears that the way of the Salaf is safer, and the way of the khalaf is more precise, and none of them is to be opposed to the other one in an absolute way”.¹¹⁶

Here, too, in our last quote in this section, one can see that at the very beginning of the century into which Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab was born, there were similar accounts of the position of the *Salaf* and of the *Khalaf* concerning those verses. This quote is even more interesting when one knows that the original sentence by Abu Hanifa that al-Bayadi comments on is frequently used nowadays by WSNS to justify and prove that interpretation in general is forbidden. Conversely, prominent Hanafi scholars like al-Bayadi did not understand this sentence to mean a prohibition of all interpretations but only of detailed interpretation, and he still considers that Abu Hanifa, by discarding the literal meaning, made a general interpretation.

All of these quotes were taken from prominent scholars belonging to the four different Sunni schools of Law and who in creed could be Ash‘aris, Maturidis, or Ash‘ari-affiliated. They all concur to show that there was a widespread consensus concerning what the attitude of the Salaf was, in relation to the issue of the Attributes of God. They all agree that the literal meaning was not taken into account. This consensus is well-known across the Muslim world in terms of both space and time.

¹¹⁵ Translation mine. Kamal al-Din Ahmad ibn Hasan al-Bayadi, *Isharat al-maram min ‘ibarat al-Imam* (Cairo: Sharika maktaba wa-matba‘a Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi wa-awladih, 1949), p.192.

¹¹⁶ ———, *Isharat al-maram min ‘ibarat al-Imam* (Cairo: Sharika maktaba wa-matba‘a Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi wa-awladih, 1949), p.193.

However, there were some preachers opposing this view and attributing to the Salaf quite a different position in relation on these verses. They argued that the Salaf did take all the verses literally. The full contemporary consequences of this stance will be studied in the next chapter, but the next section will attempt to briefly present the ancestors of contemporary WSNS as far as the issue of interpreting the non explicit verses and hadith is concerned.

2.3.4 The scholars of the Salaf and the Attributes of God: the consensus contested at specific times between 4th-12th centuries AH /10th-18th centuries CE.

The definition of the position of the scholars of the Salaf that we have outlined in 2.3.3.2 was largely accepted by scholars from across the spectrum of Sunnism: members of any of the four main schools of Law, Sufis and Ash‘aris or Maturidis (taking into account that a Sufi may be Ash‘ari and Shafi‘i for example). Those who contested this definition which had seemed to be the norm between the 4th and 12th centuries AH (10th-18th century CE) and whose books we have managed to gather, have one characteristic in common: they are mostly affiliated to the Hanbali madhhab.¹¹⁷ Their books present a rather different type of discourse regarding what “orthodox” belief in God should be, and what the attitude of the Salaf concerning the attributes of God was.

The main issue of the debate was whether the non explicit verses should be taken “literally” or not. In 2.3.3, we showed that there was a consensus of the Ash‘ari and the Maturidi scholars that the Salaf and the *Khalaf* never took these verses literally. However, some individuals linked to the Hanbali madhhab have periodically contended that the Salaf used to take them literally. One might ask what difference this makes. Choosing the apparent meaning of *yad* in Arabic (literally: “hand”) is affirming a hand to God, while the one point of agreement seen in the previous section was that the literal meaning of *yad* i.e. “hand” could never be the intended meaning. For Ash‘ari and Maturidi theologians, choosing the apparent meaning equates purely and simply with

¹¹⁷ In actual fact all of them are with the exception of al-Sijzi (d.404 AH), who was described as a Shafi‘i and whose book is on the subject of proving that the speech of God is made of letters and of a voice Abu Nasr ‘Ubaydillah al-Sijzi, *Risalat al-Sijzi ila ahl Zabid fi al-radd ‘ala man ankara al-harf wa al-sawt* (Riyad: Dar al-Rayah, 1994).

anthropomorphism.¹¹⁸ Therefore, although some might find this type of debate purely theoretical and hair-splitting, it actually cuts deep into the basics of Islam.

The opponents to the consensus also charge the Ash‘aris and Maturidis with disbelief: some of them have not only defined interpretation as a bad innovation, but have also considered it a mark of rejecting the revealed text. They also hold that there are no interpretations narrated from the *Salaf*, which is contrary to what other scholars have mentioned. One of their arguments is as follows: the Salaf either knew about the possible detailed interpretations that later scholars came up with, or they did not. If they knew about them and did not speak about the matter, then what was enough for them should be enough for the subsequent generations and therefore the subsequent generations should not have talked about them either. Furthermore, if the scholars of the Salaf period did not know about these interpretations, then there should be no need for us to learn them as we believe the faith of the scholars of the Salaf was perfect and much better than ours.¹¹⁹ Therefore, those opposed to the existence of the consensus that some scholars of the Salaf period did interpret at times, consider that any of the narrations mentioning that a scholar of the Salaf made a detailed interpretation are either unreliable or non-existent. The interpretation of the Qur’an made by the scholars of the *Khalaf* is deemed tantamount to rejecting the revelation and is harshly condemned. This is in spite of the fact that the scholars who came after the Salaf and who did make interpretations were doing so within well-established limits: the interpretation had to be consistent with the Arabic language (i.e. they must use a meaning which already exists in Arabic), it had to comply with the law of the religion, and the interpretation was considered as a mere possible explanation and not definitive.¹²⁰ In spite of these clarifications and conditions, those who reprove interpretation were of the view that there was no contradiction between professing “we believe in the apparent meaning” and adding “we do not make God resemble His creations”. It is the constant addition of

¹¹⁸ As said for example by al-Shahrastani :Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *al-Milal wa al-nihal* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma‘rifa, 1985; reprint, Cairo 1961), p.105.

¹¹⁹ For this argument one can read, for example, Muwaffaq al-Din ‘Abd Allah ibn Ahmad Ibn Qudama, *Censure of speculative theology : an edition and translation of Ibn Qudama's 'Tahrim an-nazar fi kutub ahl alkalem', with introduction and notes; a contribution to the study of Islamic religious history*, trans. George Makdisi, Gibb memorial series, new series no 23 (London: Luzac, 1962), p.8-9.

¹²⁰ On this for example see al-Juwayni’s explanation for the fact that interpretations must be consistent with both the Arabic language and the Islamic Law: ‘Abd al-Malik ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Juwayni, *A guide to conclusive proofs for the principles of belief : Kitab al-irshad ila qawati ‘ al-adilla fi usul al-i ‘tiqad* (Reading, UK: Garnet : Center for Muslim Contribution to Civilization, 2000), p.25 and for the Arabic see ‘Abd al-Malik ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Juwayni, *Kitab al-irshad ila qawati ‘ al-adilla fi usul al-i ‘tiqad* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, 1950), p.42. The explanation given by al-Nasafi in 2.3.3.2.6 also highlights the precaution used before certifying that an interpretation is the definitive meaning intended in the verse or hadith being interpreted.

phrases such as “in reality” (*haqiqiyan*), “by His Essence” (*bi-dhatihi*), “according to the literal meaning” (*‘ala zahiriha*) in the literature of WSNS which is the target of the attacks of the Ash‘ari and Maturidi scholars. For the Ash‘ari and Maturidi scholars, adding “according to the literal meaning” and other such phrases is a betrayal of the purity of the Muslim creed, which is, as they perceived it, to emphasise that the Creator is absolutely above having organs and limits.

The evidence gathered here highlights two influential persons in this debate. First, the Qadi Abu Ya‘la ibn al-Farra¹²¹ (d.458 AH / 1066 CE), whose students are the authors of almost all the books which will be quoted in this part, and whose book *Ibtal al-ta‘wilat* is replete with literal understandings of the non explicit verses of the Qur’an. It is probably because *Ibtal al-ta‘wilat* had been so seminal that Ibn al-Jawzi wrote a rebuttal of Abu Ya‘la’s theses in his *Daf‘ shubah al-tashbih*, even though it was written a century later after the demise of Abu Ya‘la.

The second main advocate of this contestation is Ibn Taymiyya¹²² (d.728 AH/ 1328 CE). He was one of the key individuals during his time to give ample justifications for the anthropomorphists’ reasonings that had clearly been rejected by Sunni scholars in the centuries before Ibn Taymiyya’s.¹²³ He also inspired works by al-Dhahabi¹²⁴ (d.748 AH/ 1348 CE) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya¹²⁵ (d.751 AH/ 1350 CE) which are overflowing with anthropomorphism. The aim of this part is to present some of the arguments used by those who did not accept that the scholars of the Salaf period

¹²¹ He was considered the head of the Hanbali school in Baghdad during his time, and his books on fiqh and creedal issues remained influential long after his death.

¹²² Born in Harran (in today’s Turkey) but raised in Damascus since the age of seven in 667 AH/1269 CE, he reached the level of “*Hafiz*” in the science of hadith, but also had a vast knowledge of other religious sciences. He became a controversial character during his lifetime: he was accused of anthropomorphism, of contradicting the teachings of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, and of contravening the sultan’s orders, among other things, and he died in prison. Almost all of his works have been preserved and are now available in print. He was to become one of the main references for the ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’. For more biographical information see Henri Laoust, ‘L’Influence d’Ibn Taymiyya,’ in *Islam :Past influence and challenge*, ed. A T Welch and P Cachia (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979); Donald P. Little, ‘Did Ibn Taymiyya Have a Screw Loose?’, *Studia Islamica*, no. 41 (1975).

¹²³ See the rejection of anthropomorphism for example in Abu Mansur ‘Abd al-Qahir Ibn Tahir al-Baghdadi, *Kitab usul al-din* (Istanbul: Madrasa al-ilahiyyat bi-dar al-funun, 1928), p.337-38; Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *al-Milal wa al-nihal* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma‘rifa, 1985; reprint, Cairo 1961), p.105; Maymun ibn Muhammad al-Nasafi, *Tabsira al-adilla : fi usul al-din ‘ala tariqa al-Imam Abi Mansur al-Maturidi* (Damascus: al-Ma‘had al-‘ilmi al-faransi li-al-dirasat al-arabiyya bi-Dimashq, 1990), vol.1, p.169.

¹²⁴ Born and buried in Damascus, he was a historian affiliated to the Shafi‘i school. His works on Islamic history have become a key source of reference.

¹²⁵ The most famous of Ibn Taymiyya’s students, he helped preserve the works of his master. His father was the superintendent (*qayyim*) of the Jawziyya madrasa, which was serving as a court of law for the Hanbalis in Damascus. He wrote extensively on fiqh and creedal issues, but he also drew on mystical themes.

allowed interpretation. The next chapter will demonstrate how the arrival of Wahhabism only revived arguments and polemics that had previously been dealt with. The stark parallel between what occurred at the times of Abu Ya‘la and then Ibn Taymiyya, and what is happening now, will then become apparent.

2.3.4.1 Presentation of the sources

The works used in this part are detailed in the list below:

- *Ibtal al-ta'wilat* by Muhammad ibn al-Husayn Ibn al-Farra, also known as al-Qadi Abu Ya‘la (d.458 AH/ 1066 CE). Abu Ya‘la is one of the three named individuals of Hanbali background that Ibn al-Jawzi heavily criticised in his work *Daf‘ shubah al-tashbih*.¹²⁶ Merlin Swartz, the editor, translator, and commentator of Ibn al-Jawzi’s main work, believes that *Ibtal al-Ta'wilat* has disappeared, apart from a few fragments quoted by different authors,¹²⁷ notably Abu Ya‘la’s grandson in his *Tabaqat al-Hanabila*¹²⁸. However, I have located an edition of this book, in two volumes, from Saudi Arabia.¹²⁹ There are some evidences that Ibn al-Jawzi was not the only one to have criticised Abu Ya‘la for the same accusations of anthropomorphism, as can be seen in *al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh*.¹³⁰
- *al-Idah fi usul al-din* by Ibn al-Zaghuni (d.527 AH/ 1133 CE).¹³¹ Swartz mentions that nothing has remained from his written works¹³² but I have found out that since Swartz’s publication in 2002, there have been two different

¹²⁶ For more information on Abu Ya‘la see *EP* vol.3, p.765 and Abu al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn ‘Ali Ibn al-Jawzi, *A medieval critique of anthropomorphism : Ibn al-Jawzi's Kitab Akhbar as-sifat : a critical edition of the Arabic text with translation, introduction and notes*, trans. Merlin L. Swartz, vol. 46, Islamic philosophy, theology, and science (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p.135, n.235.

¹²⁷ ———, *A medieval critique of anthropomorphism : Ibn al-Jawzi's Kitab Akhbar as-sifat : a critical edition of the Arabic text with translation, introduction and notes*, trans. Merlin L. Swartz, vol. 46, Islamic philosophy, theology, and science (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p.135, n.235

¹²⁸ Abu al-Husayn Muhammad ibn Muhammad Ibn Abi Ya‘la, *Tabaqat al-Hanabila*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Ma‘rifa, 1980), vol.2, p.211-12.

¹²⁹ Abu Ya‘la Muhammad ibn al-Husayn Ibn al-Farra, *Ibtal al-ta'wilat li-akhbar al-sifat* (Koweit: Dar ilaf al-dawliya li-al-nashr wa l-tawzi‘, 1989).

¹³⁰ Abu al-Hasan Ibn al-Athir, ‘Ali ibn Muhammad, *al-Kamil fi al-tarikh* 13 vols. (Beirut: Dar Sader, 1965), vol 10, p.52.

¹³¹ For more biographical information on Ibn al-Zaghuni see Abu al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn ‘Ali Ibn al-Jawzi, *A medieval critique of anthropomorphism : Ibn al-Jawzi's Kitab Akhbar as-sifat : a critical edition of the Arabic text with translation, introduction and notes*, trans. Merlin L. Swartz, vol. 46, Islamic philosophy, theology, and science (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p.136-37, n.236.

¹³² ———, *A medieval critique of anthropomorphism : Ibn al-Jawzi's Kitab Akhbar as-sifat : a critical edition of the Arabic text with translation, introduction and notes*, trans. Merlin L. Swartz, vol. 46, Islamic philosophy, theology, and science (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p.137, n.236.

editions of *al-Idah*, one in two volumes, published in 2003¹³³ and one in a single volume published in 2004.¹³⁴ I have had access to both, and I will use the one published in 2004.¹³⁵

- *Majmu'a fatawa*¹³⁶ which is a collection of the major works of Ibn Taymiyya (d.728 AH/ 1328 CE), as well as his books entitled *Minhaj al-Sunna al-Nabawiyya*,¹³⁷ *al-Fatawa al-Kubra*,¹³⁸ and *Bayan Talbis al-Jahmiyya*¹³⁹. Ibn Taymiyya, who had been put in prison during his lifetime for diverse allegations, including anthropomorphism, has inspired Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab in his works.
- *Ithbat al-yad lillah subhanahu sifat min sifatih*¹⁴⁰ by al-Dhahabi (d.748 AH/ 1348 CE).¹⁴¹ Al-Dhahabi wrote it to confirm a so-called "real" hand to God. He criticises all manner of interpretations given to the word *yad* other than the literal meaning. Al-Dhahabi is probably one of the most famous students of Ibn Taymiyya and is known to have followed his methodology in his understanding of the Attributes of God.

¹³³ 'Ali ibn 'Ubaydillah Ibn al-Zaghuni, *Kitab al-idah fi usul al-din*, Tahqiq al-turath, 2. (Riyad: Markaz al-malik Faysal li-all-buhuth wa-al-dirasat al-islamiyya, 2003).

¹³⁴ ———, *Kitab al-Idah fi usul al-din* (Cairo: Maktaba al-Thaqafa al-Diniyya, 2004).

¹³⁵ The fact that Swartz states that there were no remaining copies of *Ibtal at-ta'wilat* and of *al-Idah* by Ibn al-Zaghuni, made me believe that the anthropomorphists had encountered such a strong resistance that even getting hold of their actual works proved difficult. Then, during the course of the research, and thanks to the help of an anonymous Saudi source, without whom I would have no knowledge of these books, it appeared that in Saudi Arabia, a much longer list of books from that period could be gathered. However, these books do not seem to have been used and quoted as often as other works since the time they were written and they have recently been re-published. The mere existence of these books on the printing market is as much a sign of a current emerging trend, than it is of past debates. The fact that these books are now available after not being accessible is a sign of the growing interest in the current debate. Here these books are studied to give us a flavour of past debates, however, the mere fact that they have been made available to us today is also a sign of the momentum that Wahhabism is gaining, in that it is unearthing controversial texts to legitimise its creed.

¹³⁶ Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Halim Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu'a fatawa*, 37 vols. ([Jedda]: Maktaba ibn Taymiyya, 1979) Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Halim Ibn Taymiyya, *Kitab minhaj al-sunna al-Nabawiyya fi naqd kalam al-Shi'a wa al-Qadariyya wa bi hamishihi Bayan muwaqafa sarih al-ma'qul li-sahih al-manqul*, 4 vols. in 2 vols. (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1973).

¹³⁷ Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Halim Ibn Taymiyya, *Kitab minhaj al-sunna al-Nabawiyya fi naqd kalam al-Shi'a wa al-Qadariyya wa bi hamishihi Bayan muwaqafa sarih al-ma'qul li-sahih al-manqul*, 4 vols. in 2 vols. (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1973) Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Halim Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Fatawa al-kubra : majmu'a fatawa*, 5 vols. (Baghdad: Maktaba al-Muthanna, 1972).

¹³⁸ Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Halim Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Fatawa al-kubra : majmu'a fatawa*, 5 vols. (Baghdad: Maktaba al-Muthanna, 1972), Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Halim Ibn Taymiyya, *Bayan talbis al-Jahmiyya fi ta'sis bida'ihim al-kalamiyya, aw Naqd ta'sis al-Jahmiyya*, 2 vols. (Riyad: Dar al-Qasim, 2000).

¹³⁹ Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Halim Ibn Taymiyya, *Bayan talbis al-Jahmiyya fi ta'sis bida'ihim al-kalamiyya, aw Naqd ta'sis al-Jahmiyya*, 2 vols. (Riyad: Dar al-Qasim, 2000), Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn 'Uthman al-Dhahabi, 'Ithbat al-yad li-Allah subhanahu sifat min sifatih,' in *Majmu' fih* *thalath rasa'il* (Riyad: Dar al-Watan, 1998).

¹⁴⁰ Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn 'Uthman al-Dhahabi, 'Ithbat al-yad li-Allah subhanahu sifat min sifatih,' in *Majmu' fih* *thalath rasa'il* (Riyad: Dar al-Watan, 1998).

¹⁴¹ For more biographical information on al-Dhahabi see *EI*² vol.2, p.214.

This section will also include excerpts of statements by the theologian and exegete Abu Nasr al-Qushayri (d.514 AH/ 1120 CE), quoted in 2.3.2, to help understand the terms of the debate between the Ash‘aris and those that they accused of anthropomorphism in Baghdad. Excerpts from *Kitab akhbar al-sifat*¹⁴² and *Daf shubah al-tashbih*¹⁴³ by Ibn al-Jawzi¹⁴⁴ allow us to comprehend how he understood what the doctrinal problem of his fellow Hanbalis was, especially as it appears that the works of at least one person he was accusing of anthropomorphism are not available: those of Ibn Hamid (d.403 AH/ 1012 CE), who was also from the Hanbali tradition. We have not been able to locate Ibn Hamid’s main book on theological issues: *Sharh usul al-din*, and Merlin Swartz is of the view that none of his books have survived, except for one “small catechism”.¹⁴⁵

2.3.4.2 The consensus contested during the 5th and 7th centuries AH (11th and 13th CE)

2.3.4.2.1 Abu Ya‘la (d.458 AH/ 1066 CE)

Abu Ya‘la, also called simply “al-Qadi” as he occupied this function for the Hanbali school in Baghdad, was of the view that the Salaf took the verses literally. He explains:

It is not permissible to take those hadith narrated by Abu Hurayra by taking the confirmation of it literally, because God did describe Himself in His book and elsewhere without any fabrication, and His Prophet did the same in sahih (hadith). The Predecessors (salaf) of this community did confirm what we are clarifying (...).

“And know that it is not permissible to reject those hadith as what a group of mu’tazilah did, and that it is not permissible to busy oneself with the interpretation of those texts, as what the Asharis did. What is compulsory is to take them according to their apparent meaning, and indeed the attributes of God –exalted be He- are different from those of the rest of those among the creations who have been attributed by the [names of these] attributes, and we do not believe that they resemble them. Rather [take them] according to what has been narrated from our shaykh and our imam Abu Abdullah Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Hanbal and others, who are among the imams of the ashab al-hadith (i.e. the imams of the best transmitters among them), they used to say, concerning those reports: we recite them as they came, and we take them according

¹⁴² Abu al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn ‘Ali Ibn al-Jawzi, *A medieval critique of anthropomorphism : Ibn al-Jawzi’s Kitab Akhbar as-sifat : a critical edition of the Arabic text with translation, introduction and notes*, trans. Merlin L. Swartz, vol. 46, Islamic philosophy, theology, and science (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

¹⁴³ ———, *Daf shubah al-tashbih bi-akuff al-tanzih* (Cairo: Maktaba al-kulliyah al-azhariyyah, 1991).

¹⁴⁴ Swartz, who translated *Kitab Akhbar al-Sifat* thinks that it is either an expansion of his *Daf*, as it is much longer, or it is the book which inspired the *Daf* which would then be the summary of *Kitab Akhbar as-Sifat*. The absence of date on the manuscript that he found made it difficult for him to ascertain which book came first.

¹⁴⁵ For more biographical information on Ibn Hamid one can consult Abu al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn ‘Ali Ibn al-Jawzi, *A medieval critique of anthropomorphism : Ibn al-Jawzi’s Kitab Akhbar as-sifat : a critical edition of the Arabic text with translation, introduction and notes*, trans. Merlin L. Swartz, vol. 46, Islamic philosophy, theology, and science (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p.94, n.72 and p.135, n.234.

to the apparent meaning, in the sense that the attributes of God, exalted be He- do not resemble the attributes of others who are attributed with things.”¹⁴⁶

This rhetoric is exactly what was condemned as being anthropomorphism by the scholars quoted in 2.3.3.2. For the reader to have a glimpse into the consequences of saying “We take them as they came, according to their literal meaning, and God does not resemble His creations”, one can look at what Abu Nasr al-Qushayri said, as he was well known for having debated with the students of Abu Ya‘la in Baghdad. We will also quote Ibn al-Jawzi who, in spite of not being a contemporary of Abu Ya‘la, wrote against him. Without this digression, the differences between the statements of Abu Ya‘la in the paragraph above and the quotes mentioned in 2.3.3.2 might not appear clearly.

Abou Nasr al-Qushayri argues:

Let the person who hears them say to them that these statements need further clarification. To say that these statements need to be taken literally and then to add that the meanings are not conceivable, is contradictory.

If you take the literal meaning of the verse “Yawma yukshafu an saq” (literally: the day when a shin will be uncovered) then you are saying saq [literally: shin] means the organ which is composed of skin, flesh, nerves, bone and marrow, and by this you have attributed organs to Allah and this is blasphemy. And if you say “I do not mean that”, then how is it that you claim to adhere to the literal meanings?¹⁴⁷

What is at stake is that although Abu Ya‘la claims that he does not want to make God resemble His creations, for Abu Nasr al-Qushayri, taking this kind of verse according to its apparent meaning can only be anthropomorphism, for the literal meaning is what is commonly known about a term, what comes to the mind immediately when one utters the word and this happens to be an organ or a direction, depending on the text.

Ibn al-Jawzi uses the same argument:

“Does the word istawa, when taken according to its apparent meaning, mean anything else than sitting (qu‘ud) and does the word nuzul (literally: descending) mean anything else than movement (intiqaal)?¹⁴⁸

He adds:

¹⁴⁶ Translation mine. Abu Ya‘la Muhammad ibn al-Husayn Ibn al-Farra, *Ibtal al-ta‘wilat li-akhbar al-sifat* (Koweit: Dar ilaf al-dawliya li-al-nashr wa l-tawzi‘, 1989), vol.1, p.43-44.

¹⁴⁷ Translation mine. Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Murtada al-Zabidi, *Kitab Ithaf al-sada al-muttaqin bi-sharh Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din*, 14 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1989), vol.1, p.176-77.

¹⁴⁸ Translation by Merlin Swartz. Abu al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn ‘Ali Ibn al-Jawzi, *A medieval critique of anthropomorphism : Ibn al-Jawzi’s Kitab Akhbar as-sifat : a critical edition of the Arabic text with translation, introduction and notes*, trans. Merlin L. Swartz, vol. 46, Islamic philosophy, theology, and science (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p.127; for the Arabic see p.20.

“If [only] you had said: ‘We recite them [without comment]’, no one would have censured you. It is your interpretation of them in a literalistic fashion (‘ala dh-dhahir) alone that is objectionable. Refrain from insinuating into the doctrine of Ahmad, our pious ancestor, what he never taught! Instead you have brought shame and dishonour to the school, so much so that the only thing that is now said of a Hanbali is that he is an anthropomorphist (mujassim).”¹⁴⁹

Both writers blame Abu Ya‘la’s ideas for being easily adopted by people with little knowledge to understand what it will lead them to think about God, and justify the harshness of their attack by the danger of anthropomorphism which they perceive as taking a person out of the fold of Islam.

Abu Nasr al-Qushayri continues:

If it was not for their trying to misguide laymen Muslims with statements close to what they imagine and with rules which they might be deluded by because of insufficiency of knowledge, then I would not have stained my book by mentioning them. The truth is that this faction is more harmful to the Muslims than the Jews, the Christians and the idol-worshippers, because the misguidance of these non-Muslims is known and apparent to the Muslims and they avoid it. But this faction addresses the common Muslim in a way that might trick the people with weak knowledge. They conveyed these bad innovations to people who follow them. They misguided their followers to believe that Allah is attributed with organs and riding and descending from one place to another and lying down and sitting and being established in a place and going from one direction to another. So the one who accepts their claim that one should adhere to the apparent meanings of these non-explicit verses will imagine physical imaginings and attribute them to Allah, and thus fall into an abhorrent creed. And the flood will wash him away without him even realising it.¹⁵⁰

As for Ibn al-Jawzi, he sums up:

“The truth of the matter is that they are steeped into anthropomorphism, and those who follow them are largely from the masses (‘awwam)”.¹⁵¹

Now that the problem lying in the method of “taking the verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God according to the literal meaning” has been clarified, we can continue listing the positions of those who encouraged literalism. For example, Abu Ya‘la confirmed to God the attributes of “the fist between the shoulders”, basing himself on a contested hadith which he considers reliable and according to which the

¹⁴⁹ ———, *A medieval critique of anthropomorphism : Ibn al-Jawzi's Kitab Akhbar as-sifat : a critical edition of the Arabic text with translation, introduction and notes*, trans. Merlin L. Swartz, vol. 46, Islamic philosophy, theology, and science (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p.124; for the Arabic see p.19-20.

¹⁵⁰ Translation mine. Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Murtada al-Zabidi, *Kitab Ithaf al-sada al-muttaqin bi-sharh Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, 14 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1989), vol.1, p.176-77.

¹⁵¹ Translation by Merlin Swartz. Abu al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn ‘Ali Ibn al-Jawzi, *A medieval critique of anthropomorphism : Ibn al-Jawzi's Kitab Akhbar as-sifat : a critical edition of the Arabic text with translation, introduction and notes*, trans. Merlin L. Swartz, vol. 46, Islamic philosophy, theology, and science (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p.18 of the Arabic text.

Prophet dreamed about God and whereby God put His fist between the Prophet's shoulders. Abu Ya'la concludes that taking this text according to its literal meaning does not contradict the fact that it is not an organ:

Know that there is not, in taking this report according to its literal meaning, what makes it impossible to be an attribute of God, and this is not outside the pale of what is true about God, because we confirm the fist the same way that we confirm the two hands, and the attribute of hearing, seeing and of the face, not in the meaning of organs and parts.¹⁵²

His whole book is full of explanations such as these, which are the opposite of the approach taken by the scholars quoted in 2.3.3.

2.3.4.2.2 Ibn al-Zaghuni (d.527 AH/ 1133 CE)

Ibn al-Zaghuni was inspired by Abu Ya'la's writings. In *al-Idah*, he quotes the hadith of the female slave, according to which the Prophet said to a female slave "*Ayna Allah*", which literally means "Where is God?" but was interpreted by Ash'ari scholars as "What importance, what status, do you give to God?". To this question to which she answered "*fi s-sama*", which literally means "in the sky", but was interpreted by some Ash'ari scholars as meaning "a very high status, a great importance, i.e. I worship Him".¹⁵³ After hearing this, the Prophet ordered that she be freed, as her Islam had been proven. Ibn al-Zaghuni then discusses the meaning of this hadith:

The proof that it is permissible to ask "where" [about God] is that the Prophet asked "ayn Allah", and she answered that He is "fi s-sama". And this is a good proof, and a clear text from among what has been narrated. As for the verses that have reached us they are [quoted] above [earlier in the book]. Therefore they prove the confirmation of a place "al-ayniyyah" according to what is apparent [from those texts](...) so we do not repeat them for fear of making [the book] longer, and because we set out to give a summary.¹⁵⁴

His book *al-Idah* also contains a chapter¹⁵⁵ dedicated to demonstrating the soundness, in his view, of taking the verses according to their apparent meaning and which is presented as a polemical discussion with injunctions such as "They argued, we answered..." (*qalu/ qulna*). Throughout the chapter Ibn al-Zaghuni quotes scholars from

¹⁵² Translation mine. Abu Ya'la Muhammad ibn al-Husayn Ibn al-Farra, *Ibtal al-ta'wilat li-akhbar al-sifat* (Koweit: Dar ilaf al-dawliya li-al-nashr wa l-tawzi', 1989), vol.1, p.115.

¹⁵³ Abu Zakariya Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi, *Sahih Muslim bi-Sharh al-Imam Muhyi al-Din Yahya ibn Sharaf al-musamma al-Minhaj sharh Sahih Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj*. (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1994), vol.5, p.26-27.

¹⁵⁴ Translation mine. 'Ali ibn 'Ubaydillah Ibn al-Zaghuni, *Kitab al-Idah fi usul al-din* (Cairo: Maktaba al-Thaqafa al-Diniyya, 2004), p.211

¹⁵⁵ ———, *Kitab al-Idah fi usul al-din* (Cairo: Maktaba al-Thaqafa al-Diniyya, 2004), p.213-29.

the Salaf, especially Ahmad ibn Hanbal, as supposedly having the same creed as his, making it clear that he thinks what he says is the position of the Salaf.

2.3.4.2.3 Ibn Taymiyya (d.728 AH/ 1328 CE).

The individual whose ideas have been most influential in this field, is without a doubt Ibn Taymiyya. He is the one whose arguments are constantly re-used today to defend the theory that the Salaf never interpreted any hadith or Qur'anic verse, and that they took the non explicit verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God according to the literal meaning. He was preceded in his stance by Ibn Qudama (d.620 AH/1223 CE), censor of the Ash'aris, also at the head of Hanbali teaching at his time.¹⁵⁶ Ibn Taymiyya claimed, in *Majmu'a fatawa* (translation mine):

I have not found to this time, that any companion interpreted anything from a verse concerning the attributes or a hadith in contradiction with its situation known and understood.¹⁵⁷

In his *al-Fatawa al-hamawiyya al-kubra* he added:

It is impossible that the Prophet omitted [anything] from the subject of the Faith in God (...) and did not clarify what was compulsory [to know] about God, His Sublime Names and His Perfect Attributes, or about what is permissible [to believe] about God and what is impossible [to believe] about Him, for this knowledge is the foundation of the religion, the basics of guidance, the best and the most obligatory [issue] on which hearts will be taken to account [on the Day of Judgement] (...).

It is impossible that [the scholars of] the first best centuries, i.e. [those of] the century in which the Prophet, peace be upon him, received the revelation, then those who follow, and those who follow, did not know or did not talk about what the truth is concerning this matter, because the opposite of that can only be either that they did not know and did not speak about it, or that they believed in the contrary of the truth and they spoke contrarily to what they believed in, and both are impossible.¹⁵⁸

With this quote we see that Ibn Taymiyya is of the view that none of the scholars of the Salaf ever interpreted, and in addition, if they didn't then there should be no need for anybody else to do so either. The same argument was given by Ibn Qudama in his book against Ash'arism:

If he [the Ashari opponent] should say, "you have abstained from the interpretation of the Koranic verses and the traditions which have come down to us with regard to the

¹⁵⁶ Ibn Qudama's quotes will be integrated here as part of the discussion on Ibn Taymiyya to allow for a more coherent presentation of ideas as opposed to a simple chronological one.

¹⁵⁷ Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Halim Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu'a fatawa*, 37 vols. ([Jedda]: Maktaba ibn Taymiyya, 1979), vol. 6, p.394.

¹⁵⁸ Translation mine. ———, 'al-Fatawa al-hamawiyya al-kubra,' in *Nafa'is*, ed. Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi ([Cairo]: Matba'a al-sunna al-Muhammadiyya, 1955), pp.88-89.

divine attributes”, claiming that the ancestors did interpret them and explain them, then he is uttering falsehood, forging lies, and is guilty of the most grievous aberration. For there is no question, about the fact that the doctrine of the Ancestors, in this regard, consisted in acknowledgement, unreserved approval, and avoidance of the temerity of using allegorical interpretation and tamthil (anthropomorphism). Moreover, the fundamental rule is to presume the lack of their use of allegorical interpretation. So let him who claims that they did interpret them allegorically produce evidence in support of his statement. But there is no way of knowing this save by the transmission and relation of traditions. Let him then transmit to us traditions to this effect on the authority of the apostle of God or that of his Companions, or on the authority of one of the Successors or one of the approved Imams. Furthermore, he who claims this is one of the partisans of speculative theology; and they are the most ignorant of men with regard to the traditions of the Companions, the least possessed of knowledge with regard to those of the Successors, and the most neglectful of their transmission. Whence then would they have knowledge of traditions such as these? Even so, should anyone among them transmit something, his transmission would not be accepted, nor would he be heeded. The sole possessions of these people consist on forgery, falsehood and false witness.¹⁵⁹

This argument used by al-Qudama and later by Ibn Taymiyya, and according to which if the Prophet did not and his companions did not give detailed interpretation then others should not either, has been used since the time of al-Ash‘ari (d.324 AH/ 935-6 CE) as can be seen in his pamphlet justifying the use of reason in religious matters: *Risalat stihsan al-khawd fi ‘ilm al-kalam*:

A certain group of men have made ignorance their capital. Finding reasoning and inquiry into religious belief too burdensome, they incline towards the easy way of servile sectarianism. They calumniate him who scrutinizes the basic dogmas of religion and accuse him of deviation. It is innovation and deviation, they claim, to engage in kalam about motion and rest, body and accident, accidental modes and states, the atom and the leap, and the attributes of the Creator.

They assert that if it were a matter of guidance and rectitude, the Prophet and his Caliphs and his Companions would have discussed it. For, they say, the Prophet did not die until he had discussed and amply explained all needful religious matters. He left nothing to be said by anyone about the affairs of their religion needful to Muslims, (...).

Since no kalam [theological speculation] on any of the subjects which we have mentioned has been related from the Prophet, we know that such kalam is an innovation and such inquiry a deviation. For if it were good, the Prophet and his Companions would not have failed to discuss it. For the absence of such kalam on the part of the Prophet and his Companions can be explained in only two ways: either they knew it and were silent about it; or they did not know it, nay, were ignorant of it. Now, if they knew it and did not discuss it, then we also may be silent about it, as they were, and we may abstain from plunging into it, as they abstained. For if it were a part of religion, they could not have been silent about it. On the other hand, if they did not know it, then

¹⁵⁹ Muwaffaq al-Din ‘Abd Allah ibn Ahmad Ibn Qudama, *Censure of speculative theology : an edition and translation of Ibn Qudama's 'Tahrim an-nazar fi kutub ahl alkalem', with introduction and notes; a contribution to the study of Islamic religious history*, trans. George Makdisi, Gibb memorial series, new series no 23 (London: Luzac, 1962), p.7.

we may have the same ignorance of it. So according to both explanations such kalam is an innovation and plunging into it is a deviation. This is the summary of their argument for abstaining from reasoning about the basic dogmas of religion”.¹⁶⁰

Here al-Ash‘ari shows that he has understood the argument of his opponents. One of his answers to this was:

Moreover, why have you not refused to answer him who says that the Quran is created? And why have you accused him of unbelief? There is no sound tradition from the Prophet on denying its creation and accusing of unbelief him who says that it is created. They may say: Because Ahmad b. Hanbal denied that it is created and held that he who says it is created should be accused of unbelief. One should say to them: And why did not Ahmad keep silent about that instead of discussing it? They may say: Because Abbas al-Anbari, and Waki’, and ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Mahdi, and so-and-so, and so-and-so, said that the Quran is uncreated and that he who says that it is created is an unbeliever. One should say to them: and why did they not keep silent about what Muhammad had not discussed? They may say: Because ‘Amr b.Dinar, and Sufyan b. Uyaina, and Ja’far b. Muhammad, and so-and-so, said it is neither creating nor created. One should say to them: And why did they not refrain from saying this, since the Apostle of God did not say it?

And if they refer back to the Companions, this is sheer obstinacy. For one may say to them: And why did they not refrain from saying that, since the Prophet did not discuss it, and did not say: “Call him who says it an unbeliever”. They may say: The Ulama simply must engage in kalam on a new question, so that the ignorant may know how to judge the matter. One should say: This is the admission which we wanted you to make! Why, then, do you hinder (men from engaging in) kalam? You use it yourselves when you want to; but when you are silenced (in a discussion), you say: We are forbidden to engage in kalam. And when you want to, you blindly and unquestioningly follow your predecessors, without argument or explanation. This is wilfulness and capriciousness!

Then one should say to them: The Prophet did not discuss vows and testamentary injunctions, or manumission, or the manner of reckoning the uninterrupted transmission of estates, nor did he compose a book about those things, as did Malik, and al-Thawri, and al-Shafi’I, and Abu Hanifa. Hence you are forced to admit they are were deviating innovators, since they did what the Prophet had not done, and said what he had not said explicitly, and composed what the Prophet had not composed, and said that those who maintain that the Quran is created are to be called unbelievers, though the Prophet did not say that. What he have said contains enough to satisfy any intelligent man who is not perversely stubborn.¹⁶¹

Al-Ash‘ari tries to prove that his opponents accepted some other concepts introduced into the religion and for which there is no explicit text like a verse or a hadith , such as the blasphemous nature of claiming that the Qur’an was created. The argument of the

¹⁶⁰Translation by Richard McCarthy. Abu al-Hasan ‘Ali ibn Isma‘il al-Ash‘ari, *The theology of al-Ash‘ari: the Arabic texts of al-Ash‘ari’s Kitab al-Luma’ and Risalat istihsan al-khawd fi ‘ilm al-kalam*, trans. Richard Joseph McCarthy (Beyrouth: Impr. catholique, 1953), vol. 1, p.120-21; for the Arabic see vol.2 p.87-88.

¹⁶¹ ———, *The theology of al-Ash‘ari: the Arabic texts of al-Ash‘ari’s Kitab al-Luma’ and Risalat istihsan al-khawd fi ‘ilm al-kalam*, trans. Richard Joseph McCarthy (Beyrouth: Impr. catholique, 1953), vol. 1, p.132-34.; for the Arabic see vol.2, p.96-97.

declaration of unbelief of the one who says that the Quran is created is effective here because both al-Ash‘ari and his opponents agreed that it was unbelief to profess that the Quran is created, in spite of the fact that this was not something said or professed by the Prophet. The problem with this theory of Ibn Qudama and Ibn Taymiyya is: what authority should be granted to the reports that some scholars from the Salaf did interpret some verses and hadith, as mentioned by Muslim scholars in 2.3.3? Even if one accepted that they were all forgeries, these reports have been widely accepted by Muslim scholars throughout history and were frequently quoted. This would mean that all these scholars had somehow been duped or were mistaken on an issue no less important than the Essence of God, which is a strong stance to maintain.

Ibn Taymiyya also abhorred the division of the acceptable methods of interpretation into two: that of the Salaf, and that of the *Khalaf*, as explained by al-Nawawi and others in 2.3.3. According to this division, “the way of the *Salaf* was safer, and the way of the *Khalaf* was more precise”, but Ibn Taymiyya considers that this statement attributes misguidance to the scholars of the Salaf, as if the scholars who came after those of the Salaf could possibly have more knowledge than those who were closest to the Prophet:

“They [the later Ash‘aris] also say: “the Madhhab of the Salaf is that those verses and hadith narrated about the attributes are not to be interpreted and the theologians consider their interpretation either compulsory or possible” and then they quote the difference between the Salaf and the [Ash‘ari] theologians. This is all over in their tongues and in their books. Can the one with sound mind consider this?

Isn't it clear that it means that the Salaf were misguided about tawhid, about the fact that God does not resemble the Creation and about the knowledge of those who came after? This has to be a corruption of the real knowledge and the clear religion.¹⁶²

Ibn Taymiyya criticises the fact that the later Ash‘ari scholars had already distinguished their views from that of the Salaf by saying that there are two correct ways of understanding the Attributes of God as mentioned in non explicit verses from the Qur’an and in hadith:

And some of them will consider their recent brothers better and more knowledgeable than the Salaf, they would say: the way of the Salaf is safer, and the way of [the Khalaf] is more knowledgeable and accurate, so they describe themselves as being better, in the science of proving, verifying and in knowledge [than the salaf], and they consider the

¹⁶² Translation mine. Ahmad ibn ‘Abd al-Halim Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu‘a fatawa*, 37 vols. ([Jedda]: Maktaba ibn Taymiyya, 1979), vol.4, p.156.

Salaf as inadequate, with the fact that they failed in this regard, or that they made mistakes or were ignorant.¹⁶³

He adds:

There is no doubt that this is an [implicit] non acceptance (rafd) [of the Salaf] because even though they [the later Ash'aris] are not declaring the Salaf as unbelievers, like the Rafida and the Khawarij, this is still like what the Mu'tazila, the Zaydiyya and others declare, that they [i.e. the Salaf] were ignorant, prone to error and misguided.¹⁶⁴

This is a very harsh criticism, and it can be compared to what Ibn Taymiyya said towards the end of his life about the way the Ash'ari scholars were interpreting. At the end of the month of Ramadan 726 AH (1326 CE), two emissaries came to see him and asked him to accept this statement:

“What we want from him is that he believes in the negation of a direction for God and of a limit to Him, and that he would not say that the attribute of Kalam [literally: Speech] of Allah is made of letter and voice which would be settled in Him, but that this is a meaning settled in Him, that God is not pointed to with the fingers in the manner of the senses, and we ask from him [i.e. Ibn Taymiyya] that he does not confuse the masses with the hadith and verses pertaining to the attributes of God, and that he does not discuss [this issue] in letters to be sent to different countries, and also not in fatwas dealing with this issue.¹⁶⁵

Ibn Taymiyya then describes this event as a *mihna* (an ordeal)¹⁶⁶. He considers that what the two emissaries required from him was no less than “a change of the religion, and [...] following other than the path of the Muslims”,¹⁶⁷ and that the declaration in itself was among the “innovated sayings” which contained the same misguidance that the Jahmi theologians brought with them: (translation mine):

[I was ordered with] “hypocrisy (nifaq), innovation (...), misguidance. [I was ordered to] obey the highly-ranked righteous Muslims (for awliya) as opposed to God. [I was ordered to] follow what the Devil came with. This is one of the greatest [cases of] replacement of the religion of the Merciful with the religion of the Devil and to seek helpers other than Allah”.¹⁶⁸

His argument consists in saying that he does not confirm a voice or a direction to God not because He is not attributed with them, but because there is no text either

¹⁶³ ———, *Majmu'a fatawa*, 37 vols. ([Jedda]: Maktaba ibn Taymiyya, 1979), vol.4, p.157.

¹⁶⁴ ———, *Majmu'a fatawa*, 37 vols. ([Jedda]: Maktaba ibn Taymiyya, 1979), vol.4, p.157

¹⁶⁵ ———, *al-Fatawa al-kubra : majmu'a fatawa*, 5 vols. (Baghdad: Maktaba al-Muthanna, 1972), vol. 5, p.3.

¹⁶⁶ ———, *al-Fatawa al-kubra : majmu'a fatawa*, 5 vols. (Baghdad: Maktaba al-Muthanna, 1972), vol. 5, p.4.

¹⁶⁷ ———, *al-Fatawa al-kubra : majmu'a fatawa*, 5 vols. (Baghdad: Maktaba al-Muthanna, 1972), vol. 5, p.5.

¹⁶⁸ ———, *al-Fatawa al-kubra : majmu'a fatawa*, 5 vols. (Baghdad: Maktaba al-Muthanna, 1972), vol. 5, p.5

confirming or denying any of those things about God from the Qur'an, from the hadith and from the Salaf, and that declaring that God is attributed with a voice or a direction, or professing that He is not would be an innovation in both cases. He has used this argument in different occasions in his works, like in his *Mufasssal al-i'tiqad* (translation mine) :

“As for the word *tajsim*, it is not found in the sayings of anyone from the Salaf, either to confirm it or to reject it, so how would it be possible to say “the madhhab of the Salaf is to reject *tajsim* or to confirm it ?”¹⁶⁹

In *Bayan talbis al-Jahmiyya*, he affirms:

“It is not in the Book of God, nor in the Sunna of His Prophet, nor in the sayings of anyone from the Salaf of the community or its scholars, that God is not a body, and that His attributes are neither bodies nor accidents, and therefore to reject meanings confirmed by the Book and the Sunna to negate words whose meanings cannot be found in the Book or the mind is ignorance and deviation”.¹⁷⁰

In his *Kitab minhaj al-sunna al-Nabawiyya* he asserts:

“If we say that God moves and that He has in Him things which have a beginning and accidents (*taqum bihi al-hawadith wa l-a'rad*), what is the proof of the incorrectness of what we say?”¹⁷¹

Finally Ibn Taymiyya shows that he is clearly against understanding some of the texts according to a meaning which is not the literal meaning:

God did attribute Himself with an *istawa* (literally: being established) over the Throne and it is obligatory to use this attribute without exegesis (*tafsir*), without interpretation (*ta'wil*), and not with the meaning of elevation in status or in degree, and not in the meaning of dominating or of knowledge. Ahmad [ibn Hanbal] said, according to the narration of [his son] Hanbal: “We believe that God is over the Throne as He wishes the way He wishes without a limit or an attribute that reaches Him, and no one can limit Him”.¹⁷²

The position of Ibn Taymiyya is therefore clearly anti-Ash'ari and anti-interpretation. His arguments are those mainly used today by holders of this position.

¹⁶⁹Translation mine. ———, *Majmu'a fatawa*, 37 vols. ([Jedda]: Maktaba ibn Taymiyya, 1979), vol.4, p.152.

¹⁷⁰ Translation mine. ———, *Bayan talbis al-Jahmiyya fi ta'sis bida'ihim al-kalamiyya, aw Naqd ta'sis al-Jahmiyya*, 2 vols. (Riyad: Dar al-Qasim, 2000), vol.1, p.101.

¹⁷¹ Translation mine. ———, *Kitab minhaj al-sunna al-Nabawiyya fi naqd kalam al-Shi'a wa al-Qadariyya wa bi hamishihi Bayan muwaqafa sarih al-ma'qul li-sahih al-manqul*, 4 vols. in 2 vols. (Beirut: Dar Sadr, 1973), vol.1, p.210.

¹⁷²Translation mine. ———, *Bayan talbis al-Jahmiyya fi ta'sis bida'ihim al-kalamiyya, aw Naqd ta'sis al-Jahmiyya*, 2 vols. (Riyad: Dar al-Qasim, 2000), vol. 1, pp.433-34.

2.3.4.2.4 al-Dhahabi (d.748 AH/ 1348 CE)

One of Ibn Taymiyya's students, al-Dhahabi was also of the view that the Salaf used to take non explicit verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God according to their apparent meanings:

Al-Hafiz Abu al-Qasim Isma'il ibn al-Fadl al-Asbahani said: "About what has reached us about the attributes in the Book and in what has been narrated with reliable chains of transmission, the way of the Salaf [regarding those texts] is to take them according to their apparent meaning and to negate the manner of them."¹⁷³

Similar quotes could be retrieved from Ibn Al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya's works (another of Ibn Taymiyya's famous and influential students) and other Hanbali-affiliated preachers contemporaneous to Ibn Taymiyya and his students. However, after the generation of his students, sources become scarce regarding any contestation of the position of the Salaf. Ibn Taymiyya's legacy in the field of theology and on the issue of whether or not the Salaf did allow interpretation of the non explicit verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God (we are not here making assumptions about his legacy on other issues) seems to have been relatively confined to a certain Damascene sphere of acquaintances who helped spread and preserve his writings but who did not manage to spread their ideas into the whole of the Muslim world. This gap of a few centuries between the generation of his students and the generation of the students of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab is significant. This gap is the main reason why today's WSNS have a vision of Islamic history which does not include the period between Ibn Taymiyya and Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab as a period worthy of consideration (see 4.2.2.2). This thesis argues that the way the WSNS nowadays perceive Islamic history is directly linked to the issue of the interpretation of the Attributes of God, and it will be observed that literature of the WSNS is indeed lacking references to scholars between the time of the students of Ibn Taymiyya and that of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. Therefore the next chapter will deal with how this issue of the position of the scholars of the Salaf regarding the Attributes of God has been perceived since Wahhabism surfaced in Najd in the middle of the eighteenth century.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter set out to study the way the position of the *Salaf* regarding the non-explicit verses and hadith was described and understood before Wahhabism appeared. It appears

¹⁷³ Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn 'Uthman al-Dhahabi, 'Ithbat al-yad li-Allah subhanahu sifat min sifatih,' in *Majmu' fihī thalath rasa'il* (Riyad: Dar al-Watan, 1998), p.42.

that there was a consensus on the idea that the scholars of the *Salaf* did not take the non explicit verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God literally, i.e. according to their apparent meaning, because this would entail making God resemble His creation. We also showed that most of the scholars of the Salaf did not necessarily delve into the actual meanings of these verses and hadith, leaving the issue of the meanings to God. However, as it has been narrated that some of them did interpret some of the non explicit verses and hadith on the Attributes of God, subsequent scholars took the view that it was not unlawful to do so if the circumstances called for it. The same scholars, therefore, attributed the more systematic recourse to interpretation that followed after the *Salaf* era to a change of societal circumstances such as the lack of precise linguistic knowledge among the Arabs but also the active anthropomorphism that was pushed out by some factions. This is why the scholars of the *Khalaf* realised that merely asking the layman Muslim to “leave the meaning to God” (which was the method preferred by the scholars of the Salaf) was not deemed safe to prevent the masses from falling into anthropomorphism. The works against anthropomorphism did not define anthropomorphism as only saying that God has a hand like a human hand. It is clear from the writings of scholars specialised in the field of beliefs (*mutakallimin*) such as al-Qushayri, Ibn al-Jawzi, al-Shahrastani for example, that taking texts according to the apparent meanings was anthropomorphism itself. As anthropomorphism was considered by these scholars as being no less than blasphemy, it is easy to understand why exegetes of the Qur’an (*mufassirin*) and traditionists (*muhaddithin* and *huffaz*), felt the need to explain the non explicit texts from the Qur’an and the hadith in detail: in order to remove any temptation to the reader or listener that any of those texts could have a meaning not suitable for God. When interpreting, those exegetes and traditionists invoke Qur’anic verses or other literary Arabic writings (e.g. poems), to show that the meaning they have chosen does exist in the Arabic language and that it complies with the rules of the religion. Additionally, they would stress that their interpretations are “possible” and not “definitive”.

The contestations of this view of how the scholars of the Salaf handled the interpretation of the verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God was present in the fifth century in the Hanbali milieu and it triggered fierce battles sometimes even physical; however it culminated with the writings of Ibn Taymiyya who considered interpreting as a devilish act of rejection of the revelation.

Chapter 3 Contemporary perceptions of the Salaf: the Wahhabi case

3.1 Introductory remarks

This chapter will present how the notion of Salaf is perceived today, by introducing an example of those who identify themselves as followers of the Salaf today, i.e. the Wahhabis. It will show that the Wahhabis now self-named Salafis brought back a debate that Ash‘ari scholars (whose worldview was explained in 2.3.2) thought they already dealt with in detail in previous centuries.

The approach to the issue will be similar to the one adopted in Chapter 2: after presenting the importance of the notion of Salaf today, and the origins of the use of the attribution “salafi”, we will study how the position of the Salaf regarding the Attributes of God was treated after Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab spread his message in the Arabian Peninsula. It will show that for the Ash‘ari and Maturidi preachers, the definitions are identical to those seen in 2.3.3 before Wahhabism appeared, and that for their opponents, the views are also the same. In essence, the debate is exactly the same, except that it has resurfaced more boldly and it has managed to spread confusion in many Muslims’ minds as to what had been recognised as orthodox in the past. The previous chapter demonstrated in some detail that the Salaf had consistently been seen as having accepted interpretations of the non explicit verses of the Quran and of the non explicit hadith dealing with the Attributes of God, and this chapter shows that this has continued until today.

3.2 The importance of the notion of the Salaf today

In the previous chapter, we observed how instrumental the notion of Salaf has been in constructing orthodoxy in Islam. The Sunnis regularly cited the example of the Salaf and took them as a reference for many issues, in particular in the matter of the creed. Until recent times, the notion of Salaf was used as a reference, but without the term itself being used systematically. There was an implicit understanding that the religious foundation for Muslims should rest with earlier generations, the scholars of which were perceived as having more knowledge, piety and wisdom.

Today, the use of the notion of Salaf is quite different. One defining trait of the people who consider themselves Sunnis is that they all consider that they are following the example of the first generations. The main difference between the Sunnis not *claiming* to be Salafis (as opposed to following their methodology), and the WSNS, is that the majority of the former group did not see the need to use *salafi* as a term to define themselves. In stark contrast, the latter group found it a pivotal point in forming their identity. It is this latter group, i.e. the ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’, that is introduced and studied in some depth in this chapter. We will uncover a few facts about their history and origins, and then we will see how their emergence has reintroduced the issue of the interpretation of the verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God to the forefront of current religious debates.

3.3 Referring to the Salaf: from “Salafi” to ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’

In this section we will present the origins of the attribution to the Salaf, i.e. the origins of the term *salafi*, and the reason why the phrase “‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’” has been used throughout the thesis.

3.3.1 Origins of the attribution *salafi*

The first use of *salafi* as an attribution to mean “a group of people who claim to follow the Salaf” is not easy to trace. For example, the Egyptian historian Abu Zahrah (d. 1974 CE) traces the history of the *salafi* group back to the 4th century AH (11th century CE).¹⁷⁴ However, it is more likely that he meant that the so-called Salafis of today are ideologically close to groups which appeared in the fourth century, and not that there could be found, at that time, people using this attribution. Unfortunately, as he does not provide examples or names, it is not possible to research the particulars of his statement. The only occurrence of this term that might have solidified his claim in a literal sense is the entry “*salafi*” found in a dictionary from the classical period entitled *Kitab al-Ansab*¹⁷⁵ by the Arab biographer ‘Abd al-Karim al-Sam‘ani (d.562 AH/ 1166 CE). This dictionary specifically deals with attributions (i.e. in most cases: adjectives ending with *-i* and which denote a reference to the name of a location, of a tribe, etc). Margoliouth, who edited a facsimile of the manuscript of al-Sam‘ani’s dictionary available in 1912,

¹⁷⁴ Muhammad Abu Zahrah, *al-Madhahib al-islamiyya* (Cairo: Maktaba al-Adab), p.311.

¹⁷⁵ ‘Abd al-Karim ibn Muhammad al-Sam‘ani, *al-Ansab*, Silsila al-jadida min matbu‘at da‘irat al-Ma‘arif al-‘Uthmaniyya (Haydarabad al-Dakkan: Matba‘at Majlis Da‘irat al-Ma‘arif al-‘Uthmaniyya, 1962).

calls it “the most exhaustive work of the kind ever produced”.¹⁷⁶ Unfortunately, the position where the entry *salafi* is explained in the manuscript is damaged, and publishers of the printed editions could only put dots where the text is missing. Al-Sam‘ani quotes a name starting with *Abu* and ending with *al-Salafi*. In the entry it is mentioned that this is to refer to the Salaf, and that it can be used for people who follow their way (here *madhhab*), but after that the remnants of the notice are too scarce for anyone to make any sense of it.¹⁷⁷ Without the full notice it is not possible for us to know what the attribution *salafi* meant for this person. As for the dictionary *Taj al-‘arus*, which is a commentary by al-Murtada al-Zabidi (d.1205/ 1791 CE) on the dictionary *al-Qamus*, (written in the 8th century AH/ 14th century CE by al-Firuzabadi),¹⁷⁸ it also contains a paragraph about this attribution,¹⁷⁹ but it does not contain any further information about its actual meaning.¹⁸⁰

One reason why there might not have been a specific need for a term to mean “those who follow the Salaf for a long time is the presence of another term which already carried that meaning: *Khalaf*. Both Ibn Manzur and Murtada al-Zabidi mention this in their respective dictionaries. Al-Zabidi explains :

“[After quoting a verse of poetry to illustrate his statement,]: here, the *khalaf* is the one who follows those who have passed, and there is no meaning of “changing” here”.¹⁸¹

Ibn Manzur also mentions that to say about an individual that he followed those from the past (*khalafa mimman mada*)¹⁸² means to uphold what they were upholding. Therefore, it appears that the concept of “following the previous generations” already existed, albeit without utilising the term Salaf itself or the attribution derived from that term.

¹⁷⁶ ———, *The Kitab al-ansab of ‘Abd al-Karim ibn Muhammad al-Sam‘ani. Reproduced in facsimile from the ms. in the British Museum, add. 23,355, with an introd. by D.S. Margoliouth*, E.J.W. Gibb memorial series; v. 20; (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970; reprint, 1912), p.2.

¹⁷⁷ ———, *al-Ansab*, Silsila al-jadida min matbu‘at da‘irat al-Ma‘arif al-‘Uthmaniyya (Haydarabad al-Dakkan: Matba‘at Majlis Da‘irat al-Ma‘arif al-‘Uthmaniyya, 1962), vol.7, p.168 and ‘Abd al-Karim ibn Muhammad al-Sam‘ani, *al-Ansab*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Jinan, 1988), vol.7, p.104.

¹⁷⁸ For more information on both al-Zabidi and al-Firuzabadi see chapter 2.

¹⁷⁹ Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Murtada al-Zabidi, *Taj al-‘arus min jawahir al-Qamus*, 2nd. ed., 10 vols. (Binghazi: Dar Libya li-al-nashr wa al-tawzi‘, 1966), vol.6, p.144.

¹⁸⁰ In this entry, there is a discussion about somebody known under the name of Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-Salafi but al-Zabidi says that there was a divergence about whether he had been nicknamed *al-Salafi* because he came out first of the womb of his mother, or because he was coming from a tribe called “Banu Salaf”, which is the view he favours. There is no mention made about a trend of any kind let alone a *madhhab*.

¹⁸¹ Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Murtada al-Zabidi, *Taj al-‘arus min jawahir al-Qamus*, 2nd. ed., 10 vols. (Binghazi: Dar Libya li-al-nashr wa al-tawzi‘, 1966), vol.6, p.95.

¹⁸² Muhammad ibn Mukarram Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-‘arab*, 15 vols. (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1968), vol.9, pp.82-97.

3.3.2 Definition of the attribution *salafi* in academic articles

The terms *salafi* and *salafiyya* in academic articles today can refer to various groups, and not necessarily the group we are focusing on in this work. This thesis argues that more often than not, nowadays, people who go under the name of *Salafis* are none other than the *Wahhabis*. This is not saying that *Salafiyya* and Wahhabism are one and the same. Rather, the use of the term *Salafi* nowadays in the Muslim world or in Muslim forums on the Internet, for example, is more likely to refer to Wahhabism than anything else. However, in academic articles and research, as well as in encyclopaedia articles, the attribution *salafi* still refers, in many cases, to the widespread reformist and modernist trend that appeared at the end of the nineteenth century in Muslim urban centres such as Cairo, with Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905) and Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865-1935), in Damascus with Tahir al-Jaza’iri (1952-1920), in Baghdad with Mahmud Shukri al-Alusi (1857-1924) and many other places of the Islamic world.¹⁸³ Recent research on this movement has focused on regional phenomena and personalities in Iraq¹⁸⁴ and Syria,¹⁸⁵ for example. There have also been interesting nuances in the definitions of the ideology of the first self-proclaimed *salafis* like Abu al-Huda as-Sayyadi, the “forgotten salafi” according to Eich,¹⁸⁶ or Abu al-Thana al-Alusi¹⁸⁷ and Ibrahim al-Kurani¹⁸⁸ both later figures demonstrating sophistication in the formulation of their thoughts.¹⁸⁹ These modernists of the *salafiyya* as a movement in the 19th century, and the Wahhabis who appeared in the Arabian peninsula in the 18th century, did share

¹⁸³ There are plethora of articles on the subject, such as Basheer M Nafi, ‘The Rise of Islamic Reformist Thought,’ in *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki and Basheer M Nafi (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004); Thomas Eich, ‘The forgotten Salafi-Abu l-Huda as-Sayyadi,’ *Die Welt des Islams* 43, no. 1 (2003); David Dean Commins, *The Salafi Islamic reform movement in Damascus, 1885-1914 : religious intellectuals, politics, and social change in late Ottoman Syria* (1986); Butrus Abu-Manneh, ‘Salafiyya and the rise of the Khalidiyya in Baghdad in the early nineteenth century,’ *Die Welt des Islams* 43, no. 3 (2003); Itzhak Weismann, *Taste of modernity Sufism, Salafiyya, and Arabism in late Ottoman Damascus* (Leiden ;; Boston: Brill, 2001); Itzhak Weismann, ‘The politics of popular religion: Sufis, Salafis, and Muslim Brothers in 20th-century Amman,’ *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37, no. 1 (2005); as well as Thomas Eich, ‘Abu l-Huda l-Sayyadi-Still such a Polarizing Figure (Response to Itzhak Weismann),’ *Arabica* 55, no. 3/4 (2008), article which shows that there are fierce academic debates over this movement.

¹⁸⁴ Hala Fattah, ‘Wahhabi’ influences, Salafi responses: Shaikh Mahmud Shukri and the Iraqi Salafi Movement, 1745-1930,’ *Journal of Islamic Studies* 2 (2003), Basheer M Nafi, ‘Abu al-Thana al-Alusi : an Alim, Ottoman Mufti, and Exegete of the Qur’an,’ *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 3 (2002).

¹⁸⁵ Itzhak Weismann, *Taste of modernity Sufism, Salafiyya, and Arabism in late Ottoman Damascus* (Leiden ;; Boston: Brill, 2001).

¹⁸⁶ Thomas Eich, ‘The forgotten Salafi-Abu l-Huda as-Sayyadi,’ *Die Welt des Islams* 43, no. 1 (2003).

¹⁸⁷ Basheer M Nafi, ‘Abu al-Thana al-Alusi : an Alim, Ottoman Mufti, and Exegete of the Qur’an,’ *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 3 (2002).

¹⁸⁸ ———, ‘Tasawwuf and Reform in Pre-modern Islamic Culture: in search of Ibrahim al-Kurani,’ *Die Welt des Islams* 42, no. 3 (2002).

¹⁸⁹ ———, ‘Tasawwuf and Reform in Pre-modern Islamic Culture: in search of Ibrahim al-Kurani,’ *Die Welt des Islams* 42, no. 3 (2002): pp.336-38.

common principles and references: opposition to certain popular forms of religiosity, opposition to the Ash'ari-Sufi theological traditions and the use of Ibn Taymiyya as major reference. Bearing this in mind, one can see how the circumstances could have made it hard for even the public at their time to differentiate between the two, as mentioned by Fattah: “of course , in all this, the difference between the *salafiyya* and the Wahhabiyya may not have been very clear except to initiates”.¹⁹⁰ However, one of the main differences between the Wahhabis and the reformists of the 19th century can safely be identified as the latter’s sophistication which the Wahhabis were somewhat lacking. Nafi concludes :

Generally speaking, the austere, crude and exclusivist conceptualization of Islam advanced by the Wahhabi school is contrasted with the complex, innovative and inclusivist outlook of Wali-Allah Dihlawi, Abduh and Rida, as well as the modern Salafis of Damascus, Baghdad and North Africa. The legacy of this opposition remains a major factor in the shaping of modern Islamic thought.¹⁹¹

Nafi also observes that in spite of common views on what has been termed “tomb worship”¹⁹² and corrupting innovations, the main difference between this *salafiyya* trend and Wahhabism is that *salafiyya* was “without the spilling of Muslim blood and free of the Wahhabis’ extreme theological position”.

Those who actively ask to be called *salafis* nowadays are mainly the Wahhabis, as this thesis will demonstrate, especially when close attention is paid to Internet websites, recent books advocating *salafism* and answers given by figures such as al-‘Uthaymin, Ibn Baz and al-Albani,¹⁹³ who explain the nuances of why it is so important to be called *Salafi* and not simply “Muslim”. In al-Albani’s view, “this [i.e., being simply called a ‘Muslim’] is not sufficient”.¹⁹⁴ This is a contemporary shift which is not yet reflected to a great extent in academic literature.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁰ Hala Fattah, ‘Wahhabi’ influences, Salafi responses: Shaikh Mahmud Shukri and the Iraqi Salafi Movement, 1745-1930,’ *Journal of Islamic Studies* 2 (2003): p.132.

¹⁹¹ Basheer M Nafi, ‘Fatwa and war: on the allegiance of the Muslim American soldiers in the aftermath of September 11,’ *Islamic Law and Society* 11, no. i (2004).

¹⁹² Both the modernists and the Wahhabis condemned a practice identified as tomb worship: the Wahhabis because they would deem it attributing partners to God and therefore no less than blasphemy, while the modernists denounce it because they consider it a sign of backwardness and superstition.

¹⁹³ These personalities will be studied in greater detail in 3.5.2.1.

¹⁹⁴ This has been said by al-Albani in his interview mentioned in many self-named *salafi* websites, where someone asked him « why use the name Salafi ? » <http://www.salaf.info/part3.html> , in the self-proclaimed « Official site of the U.S. Salafiyeen », Article « Ascribing oneself to the Salaf ».

¹⁹⁵ Salafism and Wahhabism are described as distinct movements, but there is little acknowledgement that the Wahhabis, those who are not linked to the reform movements who are inheritors of the modernists of the nineteenth century also want to be called Salafis.

3.3.3 From Wahhabi to Salafi: the “Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis”

During the course of the twentieth century, there emerged growing evidence to suggest that the Wahhabis were entering a phase where they started to accept the name “Wahhabi” despite the fact that it was pejorative when it was first used. Some Western writers are of the view that the term “Wahhabi” was coined by Westerners who had traveled in the area when Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab was acquiring power.¹⁹⁶ This theory is endorsed by some supporters of Wahhabism and has been circulated among them.¹⁹⁷ However al-Radisi and Nuwayra¹⁹⁸ have mentioned that this explanation indicated a significant oversight of the very first source that we possess concerning the naming of the movement as “Wahhabis”: the refutation written by Sulayman ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab. He was Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s own brother, bearing the same family name, and he cannot be accused of disrespecting his own name. He used the term “al-Wahhabiyya” in his title *al-Sawa‘iq al-Ilahiyya fi al-radd ‘ala al-Wahhabiyya*¹⁹⁹ released between 1752 and 1753.²⁰⁰ This is probably the earliest mention of the name “wahhabi” to refer to the teachings of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab.

¹⁹⁶ Pascal Ménoret, *L'énigme saoudienne : les Saoudiens et le monde, 1744-2003*, Cahiers libres (Paris: Découverte, 2003), p.57-78.

¹⁹⁷ As can be seen in the release by the website salafimanhaj.com which edited a chapter of the book Jalal Abualrub, *Biography and Mission of Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab*, ed. Alaa Mencke (Orlando, Florida: Madinah Publishers, 2003), p.677-81 entitled: “who first used the term Wahhabi? Found in http://www.salafimanhaj.com/pdf/SalafiManhaj_TermWahhabi Accessed 28 March 2008

¹⁹⁸ Hammadi al-Radisi and Asma Nuwayra, *al-Radd ‘ala l-Wahhabiyya fi al-qarn al-tasi’ ‘ashar* (Beirut: Dar al-Tali‘a, 2008), p.27-28 They prove that the refutations against the movement started around 1740 i.e. well before the Turks, the travelers to the region, and the diplomats. The book is the latest research published in Arabic that we are aware of and which deals with Wahhabism. The two researchers have unearthed and edited manuscripts of letters written by Moroccan and Tunisian scholars against the Wahhabis in the nineteenth century. Before the part dealing with the letters themselves, the two researchers wrote a long explanation of the historical context of Wahhabism, taking into account European sources as well as Arabic ones, which makes it a thorough work on Wahhabism.

¹⁹⁹ Sulayman Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, *al-Sawa‘iq al-ilahiyya fi al-radd ‘ala al-wahhabiyya wa-yalihi Risala fi hukm al-tawassul bi-al-anbiya wa-al-awliya li-Muhammad Hasanayn Makhlu‘ al-‘Adawi wa-yalihima risalatayn: al-ula al-nuqul al-shar‘iyya fi al-radd ‘ala al-wahhabiyya jam’ Mustafa ibn Ahmad ibn Hasan al-Shatti al-Hanbali ; al-thaniya fi tayid madhhab sadatina al-Sufiyya wa-al-radd ‘ala al-mu‘taridin ‘alayhim li-al-mu‘allif ; sahaha al-jami’ al-Shaykh ‘Id al-Wasif Muhammad* ([Cairo]: Maktaba al-tahdhib, 1900).

²⁰⁰ The story of this brother is also the object of attempts of some ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’ to “rewrite” history. It is now suggested that Sulayman ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab changed his mind before dying, when absolutely nothing confirms or even remotely suggests that he might have, as has been shown in Saud al-Sarhan, *al-Khilaf bayna Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab wa akhihi Sulayman* (Unpublished Article, 2007). This article is the only article that has been written, whether in Arabic or another language, as far as I am aware, to provide a serious study of the arguments of Sulayman ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab against his brother. I am thankful to Saud for having brought the article to my attention. The researcher has shown a great command of his sources and analyses and it would greatly serve the Muslim community if it were published.

Al-Radisi and Nuwayra²⁰¹ also show that the term has been used and endorsed by the Wahhabis themselves at some point. To prove this point they refer to two examples. The first one is a collection of letters published by a prominent Wahhabi Sulayman ibn Sihman (d.1349AH/ 1930 CE), entitled “*al-Hidaya al-sunniyya wa l-tuhfa al-Wahhabiyya al-Najdiyya*”, (“The Sunni guidance and the achievement of Najdi Wahhabism”) and it appears that king ‘Abd al-Aziz himself ordered the impression of this collection. Al-Radisi and Nuwayra take note that Ibn Sihman presents the collection as “letters of the Imams²⁰² of Najd and its scholars in the Wahhabi call to renew Islam” (“*Rasa’il a’imma Najd wa ulama’iha fi al-da’wa al-wahhabiyya li-tajdid al-islam*”), thereby using the term *wahhabi* to refer to the trend founded by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab. The second example taken by al-Radisi and Nuwayra is the book published by Rashid Rida in 1925, who was sympathetic to the Wahhabis, and whose book is nevertheless entitled “*al-Wahhabiyyun wa al-Hijaz*”.²⁰³ There are more recent examples, not mentioned by al-Radisi and Nuwayra, such as a treatise by Ibn Baz (d.1999 CE), who held the title of Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia between 1993 and 1999, where he describes the creed of his movement by explicitly utilising the term “Wahhabiyya”:

The Wahhabiyya, as the writer tends to put it²⁰⁴, are not new in rejecting all such innovations. Their creed is to hold fast to the Book of Allāh and the Sunnah of His Messenger ; to follow his footsteps and those of his rightly- guided Successors; to believe and practise what was propounded by the virtuous Predecessors [Salaf] and the Imāms of learning and guidance who were capable to issue religious injunction [...]. concerning the knowledge of Allāh, and His Attributes of perfection and dignity as shown in the Glorious Book and the authentic Ahādith (traditions) of the Prophet and as wholeheartedly accepted by his Companions.

The Wahhabiyya believe in them, the way they are reported without any alteration, personification, exemplifying or negation of such attributes. They stick to the way of the Successors and their followers from among the people of learning, Faith and piety. They believe that the foundation of the Faith is to bear witness that there is none to be worshipped except Allāh and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allāh. To them, this is the root of Faith and one of its most exalted branches as well.²⁰⁵

²⁰¹ Hammadi al-Radisi and Asma Nuwayra, *al-Radd ‘ala l-Wahhabiyya fi al-qarn al-tasi’ ‘ashar* (Beirut: Dar al-Tali’a, 2008), p.28-29.

²⁰² Imam here is to refer to a Sa‘ud, i.e. to the political leader. *Ulama* is used by the Wahhabis to refer to a Wahhabi scholar.

²⁰³ Muhammad Rashid Rida, *al-Wahhabiyyun wa al-Hijaz* (Cairo: Dar al-Nada, 2000).

²⁰⁴ He is referring to the person against whom he writes. The phrase “as the writer tends to put it” is directed at the rest of the sentence, i.e. his opponent tends to suggest that the Wahhabiyya are “new in rejecting such innovations”, it is not a phrase qualifying the name “Wahhabiyya”. Ibn Baz uses the term “Wahhabiyya” here without condemnation.

²⁰⁵ Translation is anonymous, the pamphlet, in Arabic and in English, is distributed for free in worship places and is also available online ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn ‘Abd Allah Ibn Baz, ‘Indispensable implication of Sunna and caution against innovation,’ Presidency of Islamic Research, <http://www.qss.org/articles/milad.html> Accessed on 22 February 2009.

The use of the term “Wahhabi” to describe the movement, in academic studies and elsewhere, is often simply explained by its practicality, as Rentz mentions: “for the sake of convenience”.²⁰⁶ The best explanation given for this is the one presented by Algar²⁰⁷ who, after discussing the fact that their preferred name (*muwahhidun*) is an “exclusive claim to the principle of *tauhid* that is the foundation of Islam itself”, suggests that

“there is no reason to acquiesce in this assumption of monopoly, and because the movement in question was ultimately the work of one man, Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhab, it is reasonable as well as conventional to speak of “Wahhabism” and “Wahhabis”.²⁰⁸

Despite the fact that the term “Wahhabi” started to be somewhat accepted and somehow widespread, the Wahhabis have recently managed to rename themselves with something which has a much more positive connotation: the Salafis. Historically, it is possible that Rashid Rida was at the source of the trend of naming the Wahhabis “Salafis”. In his treatise entitled *al-Khilafa aw al-imama al-‘uzma*, which is a collection of articles from the journal *al-Manar*, Rashid Rida calls the inhabitants of Najd, the province of origin of Wahhabism, “Hanbali *Salafiyya* who call their Emir an Imam and not a caliph”.²⁰⁹ Laoust is of the view that here, Rashid Rida was probably using the term to describe several reformist movements which all try to return Islam to the purity of the *Salaf*. Rashid Rida’s treatise was written between the end of 1922 and the first half of 1923. This is the earliest historical example we have of “Wahhabism” being referred to as “*Salafiyya*”. From that date onwards, it is difficult to assess to what extent the Wahhabis did re-use this term for themselves. What is well-known, rather, is that they preferred the name *muwahhidun* to any other name, i.e. the upholders of the Unity of God. In any case, the insistence, by the Wahhabis, in being called *Salafis* is tangible from the 1950s²¹⁰ and 1970s, and this became even more evident in the last two decades.

²⁰⁶ George Snavely Rentz, ‘Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia,’ in *The Arabian peninsula: society and politics*, ed. Derek Hopwood, *Studies on modern Asia and Africa*, no. 8 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972), p.54

²⁰⁷ Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism : a critical essay* (Oneonta, NY: Islamic Publications International, 2002).

²⁰⁸ ———, *Wahhabism : a critical essay* (Oneonta, NY: Islamic Publications International, 2002), p.1-2. Al-Radisi and Nuwayra come to the same conclusion that because their preferred name is derogatory to others, using the term “Wahhabis” made more sense.

²⁰⁹ Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Le Califat dans la doctrine de Rasid Rida : traduction annotée de al-Hilafa aw al-imama al-‘uzma (Le Califat, ou l’Imama suprême)*, trans. Henri Laoust, Mémoires de l’Institut français de Damas t. 6. (Paris: Librairie d’Amérique et d’Orient, 1986), p.93. Laoust also mentions that Ibn Taymiyya did use the term *salafi* but that the expression “Muhammadi” was more frequent in his works.

²¹⁰ King ‘Abd al-Aziz, on the day of the celebration of Eid 1946 marking the climax of the hajj, addressed those present with a speech entitled “My belief is *salafiyya*” (*aqidat al-salafiyya*) in which he says that he is a *salafi* man (p.147) and that people call him and his people “*Wahhabis*” when truly they are *Salafiyyun* (p.148): *Mukhtarat min al-khutab al-malakiyya*, 2 vols., Maktaba al-Dara al-miawiyya (Riyad: Darat al-Malik ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, 1999), vol.1, pp.146-49.

There are a series of books which have been published in Saudi Arabia but also Egypt, and which specifically categorise the Wahhabis not as Wahhabis but as *Salafis*. For example, books entitled: “*al-Imam Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, hayatuhu, atharuhu, da‘watu al-Salafiyah*”²¹¹ (“Imam Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab: his life, his legacy, and his Salafi preaching”); “*al-Imam Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab aw intisar al-manhaj al-salafi*,”²¹² (“Imam Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, or the victory of the Salafi Manhaj”), and also “*Da‘wa al-Imam Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, salafiyya la wahhabiyya*”²¹³ (“The call of Imam Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab was salafi and not wahhabi”). The Wahhabis are rewriting their history so as to be rebranded as *Salafis*.

An illustration of this trend is the re-naming of the thesis of the Saudi historian ‘Uwaidah Metaireek al-Juhany, submitted to the University of Washington in 1983, “The History of Najd prior to the Wahhabis”²¹⁴ which became, in 2002, “Najd before the Salafi Reform Movement”²¹⁵ when published twenty years later. In the thesis, in an endnote to the title, he said:

« Wahhabi and Wahhabis are used here because the term is widely used and recognized, and it no longer denotes a negative attribution ».²¹⁶

This note became, in the published book:

«So Salafi and Salafis, or Saudi and Saudis will be used here because they are the names used and liked by the followers of the movement ».²¹⁷

The thesis has been published in association with the “King Abdul Aziz Foundation for Research and Archives”. It might have been decided that the term *Salafi* would best

²¹¹ Muhammad ibn ‘Abdullah Sakakir, *al-Imam Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab : hayatuhu, atharuhu, da‘watu al-salafiya 1115-1206H, 1703-1792M* (Riyad: Maktabat al-Malik ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-‘Amma, 1999).

²¹² ‘Abd al-Halim al-Jundi, *al-Imam Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab aw intisar al-manhaj al-salafi*. (Cairo: Dar al-Ma‘arif, 1986).

²¹³ Ahmad ibn Abd al-Aziz al-Husayyin, *Da‘wa al-Imam Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, salafiyya la wahhabiya* (al-Riyad: Dar ‘Alam al-kutub, 1999).

²¹⁴ Uwaidah Metaireek al-Juhany, ‘The history of Najd prior to the Wahhabis : a study of social, political and religious conditions in Najd during three centuries preceding the Wahhabi reform movement’ (Book; Archival Material, University of Washington, 1983).

²¹⁵ ———, *Najd before the Salafi reform movement : social, political, and religious conditions during the three centuries preceding the rise of the Saudi state* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2002).

²¹⁶ ———, ‘The history of Najd prior to the Wahhabis : a study of social, political and religious conditions in Najd during three centuries preceding the Wahhabi reform movement’ (Book; Archival Material, University of Washington, 1983), p.7.

²¹⁷ ———, *Najd before the Salafi reform movement : social, political, and religious conditions during the three centuries preceding the rise of the Saudi state* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2002), p.164.

represent the “Wahhabis”, even though only twenty years earlier the author himself mentioned that there was no longer anything wrong with the term “Wahhabi”.

When it came to selecting a term to use in the thesis, the fact that the adjective *salafi* is understood by some to mean “identical to the salaf” or “in direct relation to the salaf”, did not make it the simplest choice, as the term chosen needed to convey the idea of “people who define themselves as following the *Salaf*”, but without implying whether they really are or not. Using *salafi* was even less of an option when it is known that there are groups other than the Wahhabis using this name for themselves. Had the term *salafi* been used here, there would have been a constant need to exclude the other groups which are not part of the study. On the other hand, if only the term “Wahhabis” was used, the group would not be easily identifiable, as the ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’ do not call themselves “Wahhabis” today, and tend to deny that this name existed in the first place, precisely because they now want to be called “*Salafis*”, which is the very interest of this thesis. We finally chose the somewhat longer ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’ because it constantly reminds the reader of which faction, out of all the people ascribing themselves to the *Salaf*, we are talking about. The name ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’ also stresses that contrary to what the recent publications mentioned above suggest in their titles,²¹⁸ the movement was not specifically known under the name of *salafi* when it first began. The transition to this name stemmed from a conscious decision of the Wahhabis themselves, who at the start of the movement, preferred the name *muwahhidun*.²¹⁹ It is useful here to give an account of what is known on the history of the movement, its roots and the narratives that have surrounded its writing.

3.4 A historical introduction to the Wahhabis

The main difficulty that emerges when attempting to retrace the history of the Wahhabi movement is the fact that the vision of the history of the movement is in itself a defining feature of the movement and of the state that is now known as the Kingdom of Saudi

²¹⁸ See footnotes 211, 212, 213.

²¹⁹ *Muwahhid* means monotheist. Theoretically a Muslim can only be a monotheist, however the word in itself is not necessarily used on a daily basis by Muslims. It is interesting to note that the extremist groups sometimes labelled as *takfiris* and which will be mentioned later in the thesis are using this same vocabulary for themselves i.e.: they constantly ask themselves whether somebody is or is not not a “*muwahhid*” and frequently refer to themselves as such to the point that it has become part of their daily language as opposed to simply “Muslim”.

Arabia (as will be explained in chapter 4). For this reason, even the method of presenting the history of the movement may reveal a bias for, or against it.

To ease this difficulty, there will be a presentation of “facts” that are agreed upon by both the Wahhabis and their opponents. Thereafter will follow a presentation of the main difficulty arising when studying the history of Wahhabism, which is the fact that until today our main sources are Wahhabi sources, which means that it is difficult to assess the truthfulness of the claims made by the founders.

3.4.1 Historical Facts

Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab was born in 1703 in ‘Uyayna in the province of Najd, in central Arabia. In 1726, he and his family had to move to Huraymila. A year later, he embarked on a study journey to Medina. In 1740, his father had died, and he went back to al-‘Uyayna where he really started to spread his teachings which he presents as a purification of the creed of Islam. After four years, he was expelled by the ruler of ‘Uyayna, and moved to al-Dir‘iyya, there concluding a pact with the ruler of the town: Muhammad ibn Sa‘ud, in 1744. Two years later, a declaration of jihad is made against the Muslims of the Arabian Peninsula. In 1792, even after the death of the Muhammad ibn Sa‘ud (1765) and that of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1792), the movement had not ceased. In actual fact, under the leadership of the son of Muhammad ibn Sa‘ud, whose name was ‘Abd al-‘Aziz (1765-1803), the Wahhabis managed to acquire Riyadh, Kharj, and Qasim, even establishing a temporary hegemony over Ta‘if (1802), Mecca (1803) and Madina (1804) where they ordered the destruction of the domed tombs of the Prophet and the first four caliphs as well as monuments on graves.

A few years later, the Ottoman empire managed to send the ruler of Egypt, Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha (and then after his death his son Ibrahim) and his troops to fight against the Wahhabis in 1811. Madawi al-Rasheed explains that the expansion of this first Saudi-Wahhabi state was actually a “realm with fluctuating boundaries” because of tribal confederations which were still challenging the descendants of al-Sa‘ud, and their authority over their emirate was therefore made all the more difficult to establish. When the Ottoman troops arrived, some of those who had suffered raids at the hands of the Wahhabis switched allegiance to Pasha, and on 11 September 1818, the Wahhabis surrendered. They saw their capital Dir‘iyya destroyed and had some of their major

leaders and people of knowledge killed or forced into exile. This marked the end of the first Saudi-Wahhabi emirate.²²⁰

After this, there was a second phase which took place between 1824 and 1891 during which the descendants of the beheaded ruler of the first Saudi-Wahhabi state attempted to re-establish some semblance of authority in the Peninsula. However, they were but one tribe among others fighting for power over a given territory in Arabia: the Rashids in the north and the Sharifs in Mecca were also attempting to consolidate their power in their own territories. This period, troubled by rivalry between Saudi brothers, ended with the flight of ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn al-Sa‘ud from Riyadh to Kuwait, which had been the capital of the second fragile emirate.

In Kuwait, the Sa‘ud family formed ties with the al-Sabah rulers, and it is from Kuwait that they prepared the attack on Riyadh in 1902 which saw the beginning of the formation of what is now known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, founded in 1932 after ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Sa‘ud (known as Ibn Sa‘ud) conquered the peninsula assisted by a troop of Wahhabi zealots named the Ikhwan. Ibn Sa‘ud was also helped by the plan of the British to abandon the Sharifs of the Hijaz, and by the fact that he signed a treaty with the British in 1915 mentioning :

“[the British government acknowledged:] Najd, Hasa, Qatif and Jubayl and their dependencies and territories are the countries of Ibn Saud” and that aggression to these territories “will result in the British government giving aid to Ibn Saud”. On signing the treaty, Ibn Saud received 1,000 rifles and a sum of £20,000, and the treaty was also providing a monthly subsidy of £5,000 and regular shipment of machine guns and rifles.”²²¹

After the capture of Hijaz in 1925, a new treaty was signed in May 1927 in Jeddah, which acknowledged Ibn Sa‘ud as “His majesty the King of Hejaz and Najd and its dependencies” in exchange for him entertaining good relations with Kuwait, Bahrain, the Sheikhs of Qatar and the Oman coast. The treaty was made to a man as opposed to a state which made it unique.²²²

After 1926, Ibn Sa‘ud could not travel further north, as this move would antagonise his British allies in Kuwait, and most of the rest of the Peninsula he had already conquered.

²²⁰ Madawi al-Rasheed, *A history of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.22-23.

²²¹ ———, *A history of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.20.

²²² ———, *A history of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.20

When his fighting troops, the Ikhwan, decided there should be nothing stopping them from conquering the whole of the Muslim world and beyond, and they started to make power-sharing demands, Ibn Sa‘ud was helped by the British in crushing them and taming their zeal. Before doing so, he sought the advice of the religious establishment. The fatwa that was released then is seen as the first²²³ of a long series of Wahhabi religious edicts aiming at consolidating the Saudi regime.

On September 22nd 1932, Ibn Sa‘ud founded the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (*al-mamlaka al-‘arabiyya al-sa‘udiyya*) to highlight the role that he played in unifying the Peninsula and to impose his line of descent as rulers. It was after the first oil concession in 1933 (which was set up originally to provide money for Ibn Sa‘ud who was heavily indebted at the time), and only after the Second World War when the US started to consider oil as a matter of national security, that the ties between the Us and Saudi Arabia became stronger. The leaders of Saudi Arabia were more concerned over the rising in power of the Hashemites in Jordan, which could constitute a real threat to their power, than with anything else. The Palestinian issue was a source of tension in the relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia but not considered as a reason to prevent cooperation, as can be illustrated by the help provided by King Faysal to the US army in Vietnam (despite this being during the embargo against the US over the handling of the Yom Kippur war in 1973).²²⁴

All the subsequent kings of Saudi Arabia have been Ibn Sa‘ud’s sons: Saud (1953-1964), Faysal (1964-1975), Khalid (1975-1982), Fahd (1982-2005) and ‘Abdullah (2005-present). The increase in funds following the 1973 oil crisis led the country into an economic boom which allowed Saudi Arabia to develop very rapidly. In terms of religion, it also helped the Wahhabis spread their vision of history and their teachings far beyond the limits of their territories. People returning from Hajj now left with free literature paid for with petrodollars.

²²³ This idea is put forward by al-Rasheed in an interview given to Jihan El Tahri in London in April 2003. However, an article by al-Fahad makes the case to show that fatwas to legitimize military action had been used in the past by Saudi leaders. Abdulaziz H. al-Fahad, ‘Commentary - from Exclusivism to Accommodation: Doctrinal and Legal Evolution of Wahhabism,’ *New York University law review* 79, no. 2 (2004).

²²⁴ As admitted publicly by Frank Jungers , ARAMCO President between 73-77 and Mike Ameen ARAMCO Vice-President between 72-75 in the PBS document “The House of Saud” , a transcript of which is available here: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saud/etc/script.html>.

3.4.2 A historiography of Wahhabism and its founder

3.4.2.1 The lack of reliable sources for the history of Wahhabism

Without an awareness of the issue surrounding the bias of the historical sources we have on Wahhabism, one cannot reliably retrace the history of this movement in its true context. The problem stems from a lack of non-Wahhabi sources about whether or not the religious conditions of central Arabia were ever as bad as described by the Wahhabi historians,²²⁵ whose sources are the main ones used by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.²²⁶ The Wahhabi historians would go as far as to deem the aforementioned bloody²²⁷ wars initiated by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad ibn Sa‘ud as “purification”. There are other aspects of the official history of the movement that are now also open for debate, but as they are beyond the scope of this study, they are not detailed here.²²⁸

The facts gathered in 3.4.1 are usually presented with a specific narrative which can be called the “official account” of what happened in central Arabia in the middle of the eighteenth century. To name but one example, we can refer to this summary by al-Rasheed of George Rentz’s thesis,²²⁹ which has been re-published²³⁰ recently in cooperation with the King ‘Abdul ‘Aziz Library:

(...) in the eighteenth century there was a man called Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who was tormented by the blasphemy, corruption and polytheism of his own society, which exhibited religious practices worst than those of the Kafirs of Quraysh at the time of the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. He took it upon himself to ‘reform’ the polytheists of Arabia. As a man of religion, he needed a man of the sword to launch an uncompromising jihad against all those Muslim-polytheists and innovators who

²²⁵ Ibn Ghannam and Ibn Bishr , whose books are presented below.

²²⁶ As shown by Esther Peskes in her thesis, which will be presented below.

²²⁷ Wahhabi historians themselves acknowledge the massacres. However, they say that these took place “after all peaceful means to spread the message had been used and only after they had encountered attacks (i.e. as self-defence)”.

²²⁸ For example the support of Saudi Arabia to the Palestinian cause has been re-assessed by Professor Madawi al-Rasheed in an article entitled “Saudi Arabia and the 1948 Palestine war beyond official history” <http://www.madawi.info/index.php/site/more/133/> . A shorter version of this interesting article has been published and can be found here: Madawi al-Rasheed, ‘Saudi Arabia and the 1948 Palestine war,’ in *The war for Palestine : rewriting the history of 1948*, ed. Eugene L. Rogan and Avi Shlaim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) She also questions the division of the Saudi state into three “states”: she calls the first two formations “Saudi-Wahhabi emirates” with a fragile basis, and not a “Unitarian Empire” (a phrase used by Rentz in his recently re-published thesis) cf: <http://www.madawi.info/index.php/site/more/74/> .

²²⁹ George Rentz was an American academic who helped design the literature available to the ARAMCO workers in Saudi Arabia in the 50s and 60s, ARAMCO being the American company set up in the thirties to extract Saudi oil.

²³⁰ George Snavely Rentz, *The birth of the Islamic Reform in Saudi Arabia: Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703/04-1792) and the beginning of the Unitarian empire in Arabia* (London: Arabian Publisher, 2004).

visited holy men for intercession, sought blessing from trees, and chanted supplications to dead men in their graves. A combination of corrupted religious scholars, sorcerers and charlatans had previously sold them amulets and concoctions, thus diverting them from the true path of Islam. The reformist found in Muhammad ibn Saud, the ruler of a small insignificant town called Deriyah a good pious Muslim who endorsed the religious reformist and put him under his wing. An alliance was struck between the man of religion and the man of the sword, after which a violent 'Islamising' Jihadi campaign was launched with the sword to bring people back to monotheism. After half a century of blood shed, raids, expansion, death and famines, as people are not easily convinced to abandon their blasphemy, a state called the Unitarian Empire was born. The story is meant to be authentic as it draws on local chronicles-legends propagated by eyewitnesses, nobody but those Unitarians themselves who were contemporary followers of the reformist, personalities like Husain ibn Ghannam and the late Othman ibn Bishr, both were 'Unitarian' historians.²³¹

This is the actual summary that she makes. She then rightly notes:

The ARAMCO version of Saudi-Wahhabi history is unfortunately still popular as a meta-narrative infused with mystification. Its methodology is flawed as it is dependent on chronicles whose main objective was to demonise Arabian society in order to justify the bloodshed, divisions and fragmentation that accompanied Saudi-Wahhabi expansion since the eighteenth century. The narrative is dominant in Western academic scholarship, Saudi history text books, and Arab historiography.²³²

This is exactly what Esther Peskes mentioned 15 years ago in her PhD thesis, i.e. that the two Wahhabi historians used extensively by academics until today, make a bipartition of history into the "Pre-Wahhabi" and the "Wahhabi" eras, and these two historians are referred to with minimal critical assessment. The dogmatics of the movement played an important part in their own vision of history. Peskes points out :

"Up to now, one of our main sources of knowledge about the rise of Wahhabism and the early Saudi-Wahhabi state is the Wahhabi historiography represented by the historical works of Husain b. Ghannam (d.1811) and Uthman b.Abdallah b.Bishr (d.1873) These two works have been frequently used and cited without any critical evaluation of their contents or of their necessary biased points of view. The uncritical usage of this historiography combined with the scarcity of other sources for research have been the main reasons for the fact that a Wahhabi concept of history has for a long time been dominant even in western research. One of the most characteristic features of this concept is the reduction of the pre-Wahhabi period to a simple state of 'religious ignorance' or 'un-Islamic conditions' which seemed to be the main and self-evident reason for the rise of Wahhabism in the centre of the Arabian Peninsula by the middle of the eighteenth century".²³³

²³¹ Madawi al-Rasheed, 'Book review of The Birth of the Islamic Reform Movement in Saudi Arabia by G.Rentz,' (2006), <http://www.madawi.info/index.php/site/more/74/>.

²³² _____, 'Book review of The Birth of the Islamic Reform Movement in Saudi Arabia by G.Rentz,' (2006), <http://www.madawi.info/index.php/site/more/74/>.

²³³ Esther Peskes, *Muhammad b. 'Abdalwahhab (1703-92) im Widerstreit : Untersuchungen zur Rekonstruktion der Frühgeschichte der Wahhabiya*, Beirut Texte und Studien (Beirut: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1993), p.368.

Indeed, many articles dating from before Peskes' thesis do reproduce this vision of history²³⁴ or facts about Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's life that can only be found in one source, such as his knowing the Qur'an by heart at the age of ten which is, according to the readings of Peskes²³⁵ reported only by Ibn Ghannam.²³⁶ The problem resides in the fact that the same uncritical approaches are to be found even in academic works written after Peskes' thesis, and even today,²³⁷ as mentioned by al-Rasheed above. It appears that the results of Peskes's work have not been exploited or acknowledged enough in most of the subsequent articles written about the subject, some of them reiterating at times word by word the works of the two Najdi chroniclers²³⁸ with the exception of a few writers: Traboulsi,²³⁹ Commins²⁴⁰ and al-Radisi and Nuwayra.²⁴¹

²³⁴ D G Hogarth, 'Wahabism and British Interests,' *Journal of the British Institute of International Affairs* 4, no. 2 (1925): p.79, W F Smalley, 'The Wahhabis and Ibn Saud,' *The Moslem World* 22, no. 3 (1932): p.229-30, M A Khan, 'A Diplomat's report on Wahhabism,' *Islamic studies* 7 (1968): p.64, John O. Voll, 'Muhammad Hayya al-Sindi and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab: an Analysis of an Intellectual Group in Eighteenth-Century Madina,' *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 38, no. 1 (1975): p.32, Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p.199, M S Zaharaddin, 'Wahhabism and its Influence outside Arabia,' *Islamic quarterly* 23 (1979): p.146-49, Elizabeth Sirriyeh, 'Wahhabis, Unbelievers and the Problems of Exclusivism' *Bulletin of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies* 16, no. 2 (1989): p.123, Elizabeth Sirriyeh, 'Modern Muslim interpretations of shirk,' *Religion Ap* 1990 20, no. April 1990 (1990): p.143, Sheikh M. Safiullah, 'Wahhabism : a conceptual relationship between Muhammad Ibn 'Abd Al-Wahhab and Taqiyy al-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya,' *Hamdard Islamicus* 10, no. Spring 1987 (1987): p.72-73 to name but a few.

²³⁵ Esther Peskes, *Muhammad b. 'Abdulwahhab (1703-92) im Widerstreit : Untersuchungen zur Rekonstruktion der Frühgeschichte der Wahhabiya*, Beirut Texts und Studien (Beirut: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1993), p.375.

²³⁶ An example is what is mentioned in George Snavelly Rentz, 'Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia,' in *The Arabian peninsula: society and politics*, ed. Derek Hopwood, *Studies on modern Asia and Africa*, no. 8 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972), p.55.

²³⁷ Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam : from revival and reform to global Jihad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): this is an example of a recent academic work which not only exclusively uses these two books, but finds a way to dismiss the few other sources because their writers were hostile to Wahhabism. The author dedicates her first chapter to the reconstruction of Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab's life through four types of sources: the chronicles by Ibn Bishr and Ibn Ghannam, polemical works written by his opponents, accounts written by Western travellers, and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's own written works. However, she dismisses the last three as being useless, for the polemical works are too polemical (they "have been largely discarded in the reconstruction of the biography of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab", p.16), for the Western travellers were not contemporaries ("they are not used to reconstruct the biography of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab or his immediate context", p.16), and because Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab "did not write an autobiography" p.16. This choice means that she actually primarily based herself on the chronicles everyone else has used before her, as they "provide a wealth of information about Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the early Wahhabi movement" (p.15). Although she does mention, among the flaws of these sources, that "both chroniclers tended to be supportive of the Wahhabi movement," she does not seem to be aware of the existence of the thesis of Peskes).

²³⁸ Talip Küçükcan, 'Some Reflections on the Wahhabiyah and the Sanusiyah Movements,' *Hamdard Islamicus* 18 (1995): p.69, Bilal Ahmad Kutty, 'Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and his Reform Movement,' *Hamdard Islamicus* 20, no. Ap-Je 1997 (1997): p.43 and Bilal Ahmad Kutty, 'Religious and political origins of Saudi Arabia,' *Hamdard Islamicus* 24, no. 2 (2001): p.51-52, A. M. Vassiliev, *The history of Saudi Arabia* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p.70-76, Samira Haj, 'Reordering Islamic orthodoxy: Muhammad ibn 'Abdul Wahhab' *Muslim World* 92, no. 3-4 Fall 2002 (2002): p.338. Almost ten years after Peskes's thesis, Samira Haj wrote, in the first sentence of her article: « Notably absent in Western scholarship is a serious study of the eighteenth century Muslim reformist, Muhammad ibn 'Abdul-Wahhab », the Western scholarship referred to here being two works by H. A. R. Gibb, *Modern trends in Islam*, The Haskell lectures in comparative religion delivered at the University of Chicago in 1945 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1947) And by Gustave E Von Grunebaum,

So the question is: do we really know if the worship of other than God was so widespread in the Arabian Peninsula that it justified the actions of a man in charge of the task of supposedly “purifying” the Muslim creed? Other academics have questioned the very existence of widespread polytheism in Najd, and therefore the reliability of the propaganda distributed by the Wahhabis and almost taken for granted by Western scholarship (al-Dakhil in his thesis²⁴² and Zdanowski in an article).²⁴³ In a chapter entitled “the Question of Shirk”, al-Dakhil convincingly argues:

“In conclusion, the writings of the sheikh and his followers on the religious conditions in Najd reveal very little in terms of the evidence about the extent of shirk in that region. In fact, if they reveal anything in this regard, it is that shirk in Najd was simple in nature and limited in scope. This contradicts the widely held view that the main instigating factor [sic] behind the rise of the Wahhabi movement was the deteriorating religious condition in Najd, taking the form of shirk being widely believed and practiced among the people in that region. And so the cause of the Wahhabi movement was the eradication of shirk, on the one hand, and the restoration of tawheed, on the other”.²⁴⁴

Thus he explains that right from the start, the debate was a theoretical one, about the definition of what constitutes the worship of other than God and what does not. However, this is not the line taken by the official early Wahhabi discourse, which relied on a demonisation of the Arabian populations of the time to justify the need for reform.

Zdanowski also draws the conclusion that the sources are too scarce to give us a precise idea of what gave rise to Wahhabism:

“In my opinion, there is a more serious problem regarding the reconstruction of the political history of Central Arabia in this period. The problem is that the afore-

Modern Islam; the search for cultural identity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962) written some half a century ago and not actually dedicated to the study of Wahhabism (but this is her point). Published the same year however, Traboulsi’s article starts as follows “The early history of the Wahhabi movement has received considerable attention in modern scholarship” (p.374).

²³⁹ Samir Faruq Traboulsi, ‘An early refutation of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab's reformist views,’ *Welt des Islams* 42, no. 3 (2002): p.374.

²⁴⁰ David Dean Commins, *The Wahhabi mission and Saudi Arabia* (I.B. Tauris, 2006).

²⁴¹ Hammadi al-Radisi and Asma Nuwayra, *al-Radd ‘ala l-Wahhabiyya fi al-qarn al-tasi’ ‘ashar* (Beirut: Dar al-Tali‘a, 2008), p.46 al-Radisi and Nuwayra also state that they find it difficult to retrace the exact conditions of the Arabian peninsula before the Wahhabi call : Hammadi al-Radisi and Asma Nuwayra, *al-Radd ‘ala l-Wahhabiyya fi al-qarn al-tasi’ ‘ashar* (Beirut: Dar al-Tali‘a, 2008), p.29.

²⁴² Khalid S al-Dakhil, ‘Social origins of the Wahhabi movement’ (Book; Archival Material, University of California, 1998).

²⁴³ Jerzy Zdanowski, ‘On reconstructing the history of the Wahhabia Arabia,’ *Hemispheres*, no. 10 (1995)

²⁴⁴ Khalid S al-Dakhil, ‘Social origins of the Wahhabi movement’ (Book; Archival Material, University of California, 1998), p.71.

mentioned Arabic chronicles represent a strong pro-Wahhabi position and their authors-especially Ibn Ghannam and Ibn Bishr- were faithful servants to their lords.”²⁴⁵

Al-Rasheed is also of the view that sources which could have enabled researchers to know what happened have most probably disappeared. She explains:

“Wahhabi legitimacy today rests on a myth that was perpetuated by generations of Wahhabi writers, historians, religious scholars and laymen, as well as royalty. The myth claims that Muslims in Arabia were and are blasphemous, and their salvation is entirely dependent on the message of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the political power that endorsed his message, the Al-Saud family. The Wahhabi narrative of the past undermines the seventh-century message of the Prophet Muhammad. If one is to believe this narrative, one must accept that the Prophet’s message had virtually no lasting influence. The teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab were therefore needed to correct corruption and ignorance that had crept into the religion. If Wahhabiyya and the Al-Saud were accomplices in the Salvation in the Arabian society, then they must be obeyed, revered, and sanctified. Saudi-Wahhabi efforts at mystifying the past²⁴⁶ have resulted in the disappearance of sources that might have challenged the myth about the alleged blasphemy in Arabia in the pre-Wahhabi era. Even if tomb visiting, saint veneration, or tree worship was practiced in Arabian society, it cannot be taken for granted that all members of that society indulged in such practices. It is possible that they only existed among a minority of the population. However, such myths have continued to dominate the historiography of the movement, often written by its own ulama. This demonisation of Arabian society continued in the twentieth century in order to justify the establishment of the modern Saudi state.”²⁴⁷

It is evident from this that there is need for a more thorough investigation into the history of the Arabian peninsula. The fact that the main argument of the Wahhabis to justify their own existence and the need for Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s so-called reform relies on this precise point of history makes it even more urgent to further investigate. Elsewhere, a hopeful al-Rasheed states:

The future generation of scholars will no doubt provide a re-reading of the Wahhabi historical sources such as those of Ibn Ghannam and Ibn Bishr, while a minority of Saudi religious scholars, historians and social scientists are beginning to re-consider the alleged blasphemy of their ancestors and the rationale behind the so-called Unitarian Empire.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁵ Jerzy Zdanowski, ‘On reconstructing the history of the Wahhabia Arabia,’ *Hemispheres*, no. 10 (1995): p.125.

²⁴⁶ For example, Esther Peskes, *Muhammad b. ‘Abdalwahhab (1703-92) im Widerstreit : Untersuchungen zur Rekonstruktion der Frühgeschichte der Wahhabiya*, Beirut Texts and Studies (Beirut: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1993). Peskes proved that the way both chroniclers Ibn Ghannam and Ibn Bishr narrate the early history of the movement depended on what was needed during *their* own respective eras, and not so much on facts (p.375), not to mention the subsequent modifications she has found were undertaken in the edited versions of the manuscripts (the one of Ibn Bishr), ignoring such important events as the battles in the *Haramayn*.

²⁴⁷ Madawi al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State*, Cambridge Middle East Studies, 25 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.23-24.

²⁴⁸ ———, ‘Book review of *The Birth of the Islamic Reform Movement in Saudi Arabia* by G.Rentz,’ (2006), <http://www.madawi.info/index.php/site/more/74/>.

3.4.2.2 Inconsistencies surrounding the historical Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1203 AH/ 1792 CE)

There are at least three areas of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s life which are subject to debate in academic research: the extent of his writings (judged by some as extremely limited if not insignificant, whereas others believe it spans at least 12 volumes of works), his relationship with his father, his brother, and the learned community of his time in general (some researchers consider him as a scholar in his own right, well-integrated into the scholarly community, while others point out that he himself mentioned that his teachers did not teach him anything about the real Islam), and the exact list of his ideological tenets.

3.4.2.2.1 The extent of his writings

In 1913, the orientalist Margoliouth wrote “it does not appear that the founder of the system in Arabia did more than issue letters and manifestos”.²⁴⁹ However, about fifty years later, a collection of twelve volumes of his work have been gathered and published in Riyadh.²⁵⁰ Algar explains the problem as such:

“All of his works are extremely slight, in terms of both content and bulk. In order to justify his encomium for Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhab, al-Faruqi appended to his translation of each chapter of the *Kitab al-Tauhid* a list of “further issues” he drew up himself, implying that the author had originally discussed some of the “issues” arising from hadith in the book; he had not. Similarly, an edition of Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s *Kashf al-Shubuhāt* published in Riyadh in 1388/1968 has a note on the title page, “made detailed by (qama bi tafsihi) ‘Ali al-Hamad al-Salihi”. Another book ascribed to Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhab, *Masa’il al-Jahiliyya* (Madina: al-Jami’a al-Islamiyya, 1395/1975), bears the notation, “expanded by (tawassa’a fiha) al-Sayyid Mahmud Shukri al-Alusi”. In neither of the latter two cases is there any indication of where the contribution of the elaborator begins. It seems that the custodians of Wahhabism, embarrassed by the slightness of Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhab’s opus, have come to regard the expansion of its girth as a necessity”.²⁵¹

Algar expresses doubts as to whether the “further issues” mentioned in each chapter of this popular version of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s book were written by him or added by al-Faruqi. He then adds :

²⁴⁹ D. S. Margoliouth, ‘Wahhabism,’ in *Encyclopaedia of religion and ethics*, ed. James Hastings and John A. Selbie (Edinburgh : : T. & T. Clark, 1913), p.662.

²⁵⁰ Muhammad Baltaji, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn Zayd al-Rumi, and Sayyid Hijab, eds., *Mu’allaqat al-shaykh al-imam Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab* 12 vols. (Riyad: Jami’a al-Imam Muhammad ibn Sa‘ud al-islamiyya, 1981). The volumes are not numbered from 1 to 12 but some volumes are divided into parts (for example there are three book volumes for what the editors have called volume 6: volume 6 part 1, volume 6 part 2, and volume 6 part 3).

²⁵¹ Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism : a critical essay* (Oneonta, NY: Islamic Publications International, 2002), 14-15.

It is true that some fairly thick volumes have been published in Saudi Arabia as the collected works of Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhab (Mu'allafat al-Shaykh al-Imam Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhab, Riyad: Jami'at al-Imam Muhammad b. Sa'ud), but they are mostly a little more than collections of notes and arrangements of hadith according to certain subjects. (...) Volumes one and two consist entirely of hadith relating to regulations for ablution, prayer, and zakat; they contain no elucidation or commentary from Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and the identification of the sources is entirely the work of the three editors of the series. (...) It continues with a work promisingly entitled Tafsir Ayat al-Quran al-Karim, which turns out to be little more than a series of paraphrases of some Qur'anic verses and notes on elementary grammatical points occurring in others; the only interest it exhibits lies in the occasional polemical barbs its author launches against those he calls "the leaders of shirk" (a'immat al-shirk).²⁵²

This is how he justifies his comments:

Assessing Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhab's accomplishments as a scholar and author is an entirely legitimate criterion for estimating for his broader achievement, for the history of Islam as an intellectual and spiritual tradition consists above all of its scholars and the works that they wrote; the book is the quintessential artefact of Islamic civilization. [...] One has, indeed, the impression that Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhab regarded the authorial act as one more unauthorized innovation that for centuries had clouded the Muslim mind.²⁵³

He is not the only one who finds it difficult to pinpoint Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's texts out of the large volumes that are said to be his texts. The same problem was faced by al-Radisi and Nuwayra who have recently edited and commented on a series of hitherto unpublished manuscripts of refutations against Wahhabism made by scholars from Tunisia and Morocco in the nineteenth century.²⁵⁴ They too note that the works of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab are not exactly expansive, and that this might be the reason why they have necessitated explanations throughout the decades by some of his descendants. Furthermore, it might explain why the organisation and editing of his works is confusing; there is somewhat of a grey area between what are termed "letters" (*rasa'il*), which can be quite long, and what is deemed a "book" (*kitab*) which can be as little as four pages when one expects books to be longer than letters).²⁵⁵ They make similar remarks to Algar's regarding the fact that most of the 12 volumes actually bring

²⁵² ———, *Wahhabism : a critical essay* (Oneonta, NY: Islamic Publications International, 2002)

²⁵³ ———, *Wahhabism : a critical essay* (Oneonta, NY: Islamic Publications International, 2002), p.17 This remark may sound disparaging at first, but one needs to take into account that writing books about the religion is indeed considered an innovation by Sunni scholars, but classified among the good ones, as mentioned, for example, by al-Nawawi. Abu Zakariya Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi, *Sahih Muslim bi-Sharh al-Imam Muhyi al-Din Yahya ibn Sharaf al-musamma al-Minhaj sharh Sahih Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj*. (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1994), vol.6, p.393. The position of the 'Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis' on innovations is summed up in 4.4.

²⁵⁴ Hammadi al-Radisi and Asma Nuwayra, *al-Radd 'ala l-Wahhabiyya fi al-qarn al-tasi' 'ashar* (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a, 2008).

²⁵⁵ ———, *al-Radd 'ala l-Wahhabiyya fi al-qarn al-tasi' 'ashar* (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a, 2008), p.95-98: these pages are the most detailed analysis of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab's work we have found so far.

very little text from the author himself. They consider that if one excludes the summaries (which paraphrase earlier books by others, e.g. Ibn Taymiyya), only two volumes out of the series contain elements that can be used for study: the volume on Islamic belief and literature (*al-'Aqida wa l-Adab al-Islamiyya*) and another containing personal letters (*al-Rasa'il al-Shakhsiyya*). His two most well-known books in terms of creed, which is what interests us here, are the one called “*Kitab al-Tawhid*” and another entitled “*Kashf al-Shubuhah*”. Al-Radisi and Nuwayra also highlight that it is as if Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab considered that a title and two words of comment were sufficient enough to convince the reader.²⁵⁶

In spite of these inconsistencies, DeLong-Bas, author of the only biography of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab written in English and drawing directly from his works²⁵⁷, does not explain how she dealt with this issue of the text of the author not always being clearly separated from that of the commentators. The reader is simply told that the work was facilitated by the fact that the writings of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab had recently been gathered into a twelve volume edition which is the basis for her thesis.

3.4.2.2.2 His scholarly relationship with his father, his brother and the learned community in general

Biographical dictionaries of Hanbali scholars such as *al-Suhub al-Wabila'ala Dara'ih al-Hanabilah*²⁵⁸ (which may be translated as “Rain-clouds over the graves of the Hanbalis”) have not been devoid of polemics. The author, Muhammad ibn ‘Abdullah ibn Humayd, who was the Mufti of the Hanbalis of Mecca, wrote a biographical dictionary of Hanbali scholars from 750 AH/ 1349 CE, to 1291 AH (1874 AD) which contains over 800 entries. This book is quoted as an “unpublished manuscript” by al-Juhany²⁵⁹ but it has actually been published and is currently out of print.²⁶⁰ It contains a

²⁵⁶ ———, *al-Radd 'ala l-Wahhabiyya fi al-qarn al-tasi' 'ashar* (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a, 2008), p.96.

²⁵⁷ Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam : from revival and reform to global Jihad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

²⁵⁸ Muhammad ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Najdi al-Hanbali Ibn Humayd, *al-Suhub al-wabila 'ala dara'ih al-Hanabila*, 1 ed. (Maktaba al-Imam Ahmad, 1989).

²⁵⁹ Uwaidah Metaireek al-Juhany, *Najd before the Salafi reform movement : social, political, and religious conditions during the three centuries preceding the rise of the Saudi state* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2002), p.195.

²⁶⁰ Commins provides an interesting study of the background of this book and its author: David Dean Commins, ‘Traditional Anti-Wahhabi Hanbalism in Nineteenth Century Arabia,’ in *Ottoman Reform and*

biographical note on Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s father which then mentions Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, but does not actually contain an entry for Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab himself. In it, Ibn Humayd relates:

‘Abd al-Wahhab Ibn Sulayman ibn ‘Ali ibn Musharraf al-Tamimi al-Najdi (..) He is the father of Muhammad, who was founder of the mission [ie the Wahhabi mission] whose evil has spread across the horizon. However, there is an enormous difference between father and son. Indeed, Muhammad did not reveal his mission until after the death of his father. Some of the people whom I met have related from some of the people of knowledge narrations from the contemporaries of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wahhab that describe his anger against his son Muhammad. This is because he had not agreed to study of the religious knowledge of his ancestors and the people of his area. His father had a presentiment that something would happen because of him, and so frequently said to the people “How much evil you are going to see from Muhammad “.Subsequently, what Allah destined to happen came to pass.²⁶¹

Although this note gives some elements about how the father felt about the son,²⁶² it was neither explored nor mentioned by Western researchers until the article Commins dedicated to the author and his anti-Wahhabi leanings.²⁶³ Some of the events related here, however, do support the analyses of Peskes²⁶⁴ and Cook²⁶⁵ that Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab used to consider his understanding of Islam as superior to that of his teachers. Cook informs us that Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab wrote, in a letter, that no one among his teachers really knew about Islam, and none of theirs did either, for centuries preceding his [Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s] appearance. Cook translates this extract from one of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s personal letters:

I will tell you about myself. By God, apart from Whom there is no god, I sought learning (talabtu l-ilm), and those who knew me believed that I had some; yet at that time I did not know the meaning of « there is no god but God », nor did I know the religion of Islam, before this blessing (khayr) which God vouchsafed to me. Likewise

Muslim Regeneration, ed. Itzhak Weismann and Fruma Zachs, *Library of Ottoman Studies*, 8 (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), pp.81-96.

²⁶¹ Translation mine. Muhammad ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Najdi al-Hanbali Ibn Humayd, *al-Suhub al-wabila ‘ala dara’ih al-Hanabila*, 1 ed. (Maktaba al-Imam Ahmad, 1989), p.275. The notice also relates that his own brother Sulayman wrote a book against him and that Muhammad tried to have him killed by sending an insane person near him with a sword (p.275, notice 415).

²⁶² Bilal Ahmad Kutty, ‘Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab and his Reform Movement,’ *Hamdard Islamicus* 20, no. Ap-Je 1997 (1997): p.49, n.20.

²⁶³ David Dean Commins, ‘Traditional Anti-Wahhabi Hanbalism in Nineteenth Century Arabia,’ in *Ottoman Reform and Muslim Regeneration*, ed. Itzhak Weismann and Fruma Zachs, *Library of Ottoman Studies*, 8 (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005): the article describes the role of *tabaqat* in “asserting the legitimacy of one’s own tradition and authority” and studies Ibn Humayd’s anti-Wahhabi passages in the dictionary.

²⁶⁴ Esther Peskes, *Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1703-92) im Widerstreit : Untersuchungen zur Rekonstruktion der Frühgeschichte der Wahhabiya*, Beirut Texte und Studien (Beirut: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1993), p.374 and p.76 and Michael A Cook, ‘On the Origins of Wahhabism,’ *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 2, no. 2 (1992): p.202.

²⁶⁵ Michael A Cook, ‘On the Origins of Wahhabism,’ *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 2, no. 2 (1992): p.202.

not one among my teachers knew it; if any of the scholars of the Arid claims that he knew the meaning of Islam, before this time, or maintains that any of his teachers knew it, he lies, fabricates, leads people astray, and falsely praises himself .²⁶⁶

This statement of his seems to be ignored by many modern writers who, in an effort to rehabilitate Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab in a status they think he deserves as a scholar, like to replace him within a context of learned tradition²⁶⁷ when he himself declared that he learned very little if anything from them.

3.4.2.2.3 His teachings

The most famous aspect of the creed as advocated by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab is his rejection of the worshipping of tombs and saints he deemed his contemporaries guilty of. He deemed it “shirk”, therefore considering that any person going to a grave to seek blessings or saying “O Muhammad” (“*Ya Muhammad*”) would become a blasphemer.²⁶⁸ This part of his teachings is well known, and is to be found in every study on the movement. He is understood to have taken this idea from Ibn Taymiyya, whose works he apparently copied²⁶⁹. DeLong-Bas contests this but with no serious foundation.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁶ Cook mentions that he found it in Ibn Ghannam *Rawdat al-Afkar*, Bombay, 1337 (AH), i, p.189.12. I did find this edition but I found the letter in two different editions Husayn Ibn Ghannam, *Tarikh Najd, harrarahu wa haqqaqahu Nasir al-din al-Asad* (Cairo: Matba'a al-Madani, 1961), p.341-42 and Husayn Ibn Ghannam, *Tarikh Najd, harrarahu wa haqqaqahu Nasir al-din al-Asad*, 2nd ed. (Beirut Dar al-Shuruq, 1985), p.309-10. It has also been included in the collection of letters by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab: Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, *Mu'allafat al-shaykh al-imam Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab* 12 vols. (Riyad: Jami'a al-Imam Muhammad ibn Sa'ud al-Islamiyya, 1981), vol.5, p.186-87.

²⁶⁷ Uwaidah Metaireek al-Juhany, *Najd before the Salafi reform movement : social, political, and religious conditions during the three centuries preceding the rise of the Saudi state* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2002), p.138, Bilal Ahmad Kutty, ‘Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab and his Reform Movement,’ *Hamdard Islamicus* 20, no. Ap-Je 1997 (1997): pp.43-45, Bilal Ahmad Kutty, ‘Religious and political origins of Saudi Arabia,’ *Hamdard Islamicus* 24, no. 2 (2001): p.51-52 and M S Zaharaddin, ‘Wahhabism and its Influence outside Arabia,’ *Islamic quarterly* 23 (1979): pp.147-48.

²⁶⁸ Although he used to exclude those who according to him had not been explained Islam properly, i.e. those to whom the Wahhabi call had not reached yet would be, in his view, still Muslim, but would be explained the gravity of their actions and then asked not to repeat them.

²⁶⁹ According to Smalley, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab copied them all: W F Smalley, ‘The Wahhabis and Ibn Saud,’ *The Moslem World* 22, no. 3 (1932): p.228. However, according to Safiullah, he copied only a few of the works of Ibn Taymiyya, and he mentions that these copies of Ibn Taymiyya’s books with Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s handwriting can be found in the British Museum in London: Sheikh M. Safiullah, ‘Wahhabism : a conceptual relationship between Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd Al-Wahhab and Taqiyy al-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya,’ *Hamdard Islamicus* 10, no. Spring 1987 (1987): p.70. Safiullah mentions that he found this information in V E Makari, *Ibn Taymiyya's Ethics: the social factor* (California: Scholars Press, 1983), p.190.

²⁷⁰ She deduces from the fact that Ibn Taymiyya is quoted only 3 times -out of 170 citations- in Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s book entitled *Kitab al-Tawhid* that: “Ibn Taymiya was, at most, a negligible source of inspiration”. Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam : from revival and reform to global Jihad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.53. However, the number of explicit references made in the small pamphlet *Kitab al-Tawhid* might not be enough to arrive at this conclusion. After a review of *Kitab al-nikah* by Muhammad ibn ‘ Abd al-Wahhab, DeLong-Bas concludes that she has now “definitively rejected “*taqlid*” to any scholar on the part of Ibn Abd al Wahhab” because Ibn Taymiyya is not mentioned once. Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam : from revival and reform to global Jihad*

This point of the teachings of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab is the only recurrent feature all commentators seem to agree on when it comes to describing what Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab believed in. However, there is more disagreement on what the rest of his religious teachings were. For example, when some authors try to explain that Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab did not totally reject the four schools but only encouraged people to weigh, themselves, whatever is said by a *mujtahid* scholar directly with the Qur’an and the Sunnah²⁷¹ (which would actually mean that anyone could take the role of a *mujtahid* then, as the very role of the *mujtahid* is extracting judgements from the Qur’an and the Sunna), some others deny that this was ever an issue for the movement, as its members claim to be Hanbali.²⁷² Concerning this issue, the best summary of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s position could be the one found in Dallal’s article:

“His [Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s] opposition to taqlid is used only to undermine traditional authority, and is not contrasted with its logical opposite, *ijtihad* “.²⁷³

Indeed, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab is not famous for having left a legacy of how to perform *ijtihad*, although this is what a person would need to do if they are to compare and assess the righteousness of a fatwa by themselves.²⁷⁴

In addition, there are some other aspects of his teachings which are developed by some authors and ignored by others, the main one being “anthropomorphism”, which is to attribute to God humanly attributes.²⁷⁵ It is intriguing that although the fact that

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.109. This approach underestimates a phenomenon that Cook did point out in one of his works, and which is that Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab might have taken all the sources he mentions in his works from one author, and that studying Ibn Taymiyya’s works carefully could reveal that any person Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab quoted who was prior to Ibn Taymiyya’s time might be already quoted by Ibn Taymiyya, which would demonstrate that Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab took most of his references from him, which constitutes a more subtle interpretation than the one offered by DeLong-Bas. Michael A Cook, ‘On the Origins of Wahhabism,’ *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 2, no. 2 (1992): p.198. This dimension (as well as the whole article in which Cook mentions this idea) is not referred to by DeLong-Bas.

²⁷¹ Christine Noelle, ‘The Anti-Wahhabi Reaction in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan,’ *Muslim World* 85, no. January-April (1995): p.32.

²⁷² Samir Faruq Traboulsi, ‘An early refutation of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s reformist views,’ *Welt des Islams* 42, no. 3 (2002): p.385-86.

²⁷³ Ahmad Dallal, ‘The Origins and Objectives of Islamic Revivalist Thought, 1750-1850,’ *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113, no. 3 (1993): p.350.

²⁷⁴ This issue will be developed in the next chapter dealing with the teachings of the Wahhabis self-named Salafis.

²⁷⁵ For more information one can consult Abrahamov, 1995 and 1996, in spite of some problems of translation and Swartz, 2002, can be consulted as a very interesting study of a Hanbali scholar who was a direct student of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal who wrote a book refuting anthropomorphism.

Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab attributes God with human attributes came first in the ten-point list of Margoliouth concerning “the creed of the Wahhabis” in his entry on Wahhabism in the Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, this information is not really studied in any of the numerous writers’ articles I have read so far. Margoliouth states :

“They regard the Deity as having bodily form, with face, hands, etc”.²⁷⁶

Very little has been written on this particular subject, when it is one of the key-elements of the Muslim creed that God does not resemble His creation in any way. Even one of the most recent scholarly studies on Wahhabism does not account for the problem posed by Wahhabism in terms of the definition and comprehension of God and His Attributes,²⁷⁷ which is even more of a reason for this thesis to be written. What we are interested in here is one aspect of the religious doctrine of Wahhabism, as there are some fundamentals that all the people classified here as ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’ rely upon without fail, whether they now condemn violence or not, or accept voting processes or not: the belief in the Attributes of God. This will be the focus of the next section of this thesis: how contemporary Wahhabi discourse has brought the issue of the Attributes of God and their understanding to the agenda, and the consequences stemming from this.

3.5 How the ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’ revived the issue of the Attributes of God

From what has been demonstrated in chapter 2, it appears that after Ibn Taymiyya and the generation of his students, hardly any challenges were brought to the conception of the creed of the Salaf concerning the Attributes of God. Challenges to Ash‘arism as a whole (i.e. challenges to the view that it was dominant) and not just on this issue, were also unheard of during these centuries, to the best of my knowledge. Even WSNS would find it difficult to quote names of scholars from the period between Ibn Taymiyya’s students and Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab that would even remotely relate to what they teach regarding the position of the Salaf on the Attributes of God on one hand and regarding Ash‘arism in general on the other hand.

²⁷⁶ D. S. Margoliouth, ‘Wahhabism,’ in *Encyclopaedia of religion and ethics*, ed. James Hastings and John A. Selbie (Edinburgh : : T. & T. Clark, 1913), p.660.

²⁷⁷ Hammadi al-Radisi and Asma Nuwayra, *al-Radd ‘ala l-Wahhabiyya fi al-qarn al-tasi’ ‘ashar* (Beirut: Dar al-Tali‘a, 2008) One of the reasons for that could be because the study is centered on the refutations made by north African scholars to the letters received by them from the emissaries of the first Saudi rulership. Those letters, as far as we are aware do not say anything specific on the attributes of God but rather on other main themes developed in the Wahhabi rhetoric, i.e. alleged polytheism and the definition of worship of God. The fact that the insistence on this issue did not seem to be as central to Wahhabism as it is now (even though it is touched upon in the book called Kitab al-Tawhid) will be studied later.

When Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab preached, the main aspect developed in his letters and books is without a doubt the issue of so-called grave and saint worshipping and not how to understand the issue of the Attributes of God. However, it cannot be said that this is a theme that was not in his teachings, as he does end his *Kitab al-Tawhid* with a series of non explicit hadith whose authority is not established and which he does not explain, suggesting that God would have a right hand, and fingers. In his grandson’s commentary of that book, one can see that the understanding of the verses on the Attributes of God was literal²⁷⁸ and against interpretation. Studying how the position of the Salaf on the Attributes of God was perceived after the rise of Wahhabism will enable us to assess whether anything has changed compared to the time before it appeared.

3.5.1 Since the rise of Wahhabism: consensus on the Salaf and the Attributes of God

We noted in the previous chapter that, until Wahhabism arrived, a consensus had been established by Sunni scholars surrounding the idea that the scholars of the Salaf did not take the non explicit religious texts about God in a literal fashion, as this would necessitate suggesting that God resembles His creations. We will see that after the rise of Wahhabism, the traditional Sunni scholars continued to define the position of the Salaf regarding those Attributes as they always had. The only difference, if one is to compare both periods, is that their works are very much centered on attempting to refute the works of the WSNS. The works have grown even more numerous in the last 50 years, which coincides with the rise of their insistence on being called *Salafis*. It appears that it was the re-impression and re-edition, in the 1940s, of long-forgotten anthropomorphic works under the name of “ ‘*Aqa'id al-Salaf*”²⁷⁹ that triggered a new wave of works by traditional Sunni scholars to explain why the elements mentioned in those newly edited books were, in their view, incorrect. To understand why the positions of those scholars are more defensive than those in the previous section, one can note the efforts of al-Kawthari (d.1371 AH/ 1951 CE).²⁸⁰ He was the assistant of the last caliph of the Ottoman empire and was considered a *mujaddid* (i.e. renewer of the

²⁷⁸ See chapters mentioned above in the commentaries of Al al-Shaykh and Ibn abd al-Wahhab regarding the position of the Ash‘aris.

²⁷⁹ ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id al-Darimi, ‘al-Radd ‘ala al-Jahmiyya,’ in ‘*Aqa'id al-salaf*, ed. ‘Ali Sami Nashshar and Ammar Talibi (Alexandria: Munsha’at al-Ma‘arif, 1971) and ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id al-Darimi, ‘al-Radd ‘ala al-Marisi al-‘Unayd,’ in ‘*Aqa'id al-salaf*, ed. ‘Ali Sami Nashshar and Ammar Talibi (Alexandria: Munsha’at al-Ma‘arif, 1971).

²⁸⁰ He was mentioned in 2.3.3.1.

religion, a title which can only be granted to one scholar every century because of his efforts and works to clarify and spread the religion of Islam for his contemporaries) by the historian Abu Zahrah (d.1974 CE).²⁸¹ Al-Kawthari was an Ash‘ari Hanafi scholar who wrote –among other works- several articles against the trends of anthropomorphism being spread in Egypt at that time. He is also the one to whom we owe a few editions of books by Muslim writers from the Middle ages who wrote against anthropomorphism, notably Ibn al-Jawzi’s²⁸² book which was quoted in chapter 2. Al-Kawthari also wrote an article entitled “*Tahdhir al-Umma min da‘at al-wathniyya*” (“Warning to the Umma against Polytheistic Preachers”), in which he denounces the re-impression of those books. He ends this article with a recommendation:

“Now it is up to al-Azhar al-Sharif not to delay standing up to its duty towards this book by al-Darimi and what is similar to it, to protect the creed of the masses, and to stop its distribution within their own frontiers [i.e. in Egypt]. And God says the truth and He is the one who guides.”²⁸³

He clearly calls the creed of the claimants of the Salaf “polytheism”, which is nothing short of saying that the one who holds this creed is not a Muslim. He is denouncing the creed that they offer to people: believing that God rested on a rock while writing the Torah with a pen, believing that God created Moses by “touching Adam with His hand”²⁸⁴ and other narrations inconsistent with the existing accepted definition of God and His Attributes in Ash‘ari and Maturidi theology. Al-Kawthari had foresight in his warnings: it appears that these books are now more widely available than they were at the time he wrote this article.

Al-Kawthari also retraces the history of anthropomorphism in Islamic history in another article entitled “The Tribulations of the anthropomorphists”²⁸⁵ where he links the current callers to the *Salafiyya* to Ibn Taymiyya, and then Ibn Taymiyya to ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id al-Darimi (d.280 AH / 894 CE).²⁸⁶ This is the trend of the latest writings on this

²⁸¹ http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/misc/al_kawthari.htm

²⁸² Abu al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn ‘Ali Ibn al-Jawzi, *Daf‘ shubah al-tashbih bi-akuff al-tanzih* (Cairo: Maktaba al-kulliyah al-azhariyya, 1991).

²⁸³ Muhammad Zahid ibn al-Hasan al-Kawthari, *Maqalat al-Kawthari* (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-azhariyya li-al-turath, 1994), p.383.

²⁸⁴ All of these issues (and more) are mentioned in al-Darimi’s book ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id al-Darimi, ‘al-Radd ‘ala al-Jahmiyya,’ in *Aqa‘id al-salaf*, ed. ‘Ali Sami Nashshar and Ammar Talibi (Alexandria: Munsha‘at al-Ma‘arif, 1971).

²⁸⁵ Muhammad Zahid ibn al-Hasan al-Kawthari, *Maqalat al-Kawthari* (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-azhariyya li-al-turath, 1994), p.391-98.

²⁸⁶ Not to be confused with ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Abd al-Rahman (d.255 AH/ 869 CE), who was a hadith scholar.

issue: there is an emphasis on retracing the history of this creed to demonstrate to people the fact that almost none of the arguments of today's WSNS are new, that they were never accepted in the past, and that they never will be. As al-Kawthari puts it:

“Blasphemy is blasphemy regardless of whoever said it, and misguidance is misguidance whatever its sources. There is not, in Islam, a belief which should change with the change of people. Indeed, Faith is faith absolutely, and unbelief is unbelief absolutely”.²⁸⁷

So, for this reason, the main argument of al-Kawthari, but also of the authors of the books that will be mentioned in this section, is that this creed was and is still incorrect, and that the Salaf never understood the non explicit verses in the literal fashion proposed by the WSNS. After a chronological presentation of the books used to collect the opinions of a selection of various scholars and writers defending the traditional Sunni position on this issue, their positions will be explained.

3.5.1.1 Presentation of the sources

This is a presentation of the sources used in 3.5.1.2:

- *Ithaf al-sadat al-muttaqin, sharh Ihya 'Ulum al-Din*²⁸⁸ by al-Murtada al-Zabidi (d.1205 AH/ 1791 CE). Al-Murtada al-Zabidi was a specialist in lexicography, famous for having written *Taj al-'arus*, a commentary of the *Qamus*, an ancient Arabic dictionary. His commentary of the *Ihya* spans over 14 volumes.²⁸⁹
- *al-Manhal al-'adhb al-mawrud sharh Sunan Abi Da'ud*²⁹⁰ and *Ithaf al-ka'inat bi bayan madhhab al-Salaf wa al-khalaf fi al-mutashabihat*²⁹¹ by Abu Muhammad Mahmud ibn Muhammad ibn Khattab al-Subki al-Azhari (d. 1352 AH/1932 CE), the founder of the Association for Islamic Law in Egypt. *Al-Manhal* is a commentary on the Sunan of Abu Da'ud (d.275 AH/ 889 CE), one of the six canonical collections of hadith accepted by the Sunnis in general. *Ithaf al-ka'inat* is exclusively dedicated to the issue of how the Salaf and the *Khalaf* have dealt with the issues of the non explicit verses. It begins with a fatwa written by al-Subki al-Azhari and signed and confirmed by a group of scholars

²⁸⁷ Muhammad Zahid ibn al-Hasan al-Kawthari, *Maqalat al-Kawthari* (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-azhariyya li-al-turath, 1994), p.400.

²⁸⁸ Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Murtada al-Zabidi, *Kitab Ithaf al-sada al-muttaqin bi-sharh Ihya 'ulum al-din*, 14 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1989).

²⁸⁹ For more biographical information on al-Murtada al-Zabidi, see *EP*, vol.7, p.445.

²⁹⁰ Mahmud Muhammad Khattab al-Subki al-Azhari, *al-Manhal al-'adhb al-mawrud sharh sunan al-imam Abi Dawud* (Cairo: Matba'a al-Istiqama, 1932).

²⁹¹ ———, *Ithaf al-ka'inat bi-bayan madhhab al-Salaf wa al-khalaf fi al-mutashabihat: wa radd shibh al-malhada wa al-majsama wa ma ya 'taqiduna min al-muftariyat* (Cairo: Matba'a al-Istiqama, 1932).

from al-Azhar. The rest of the book consists of a thorough census of the different sayings, interpretations and judgements of Muslim scholars regarding the non explicit verses throughout history and in chronological order.

- *Majallat al-Azhar* was a periodical from al-Azhar. We will use here articles by Yusuf al-Dujwi (d.1365 AH/ 1945 CE) who is described in it as being among the greatest scholars of al-Azhar university and Ibrahim al-Dusuqi, a former Minister of Awqaf in Egypt.
- *Manahil al-'irfan fi 'ulum al-Qur'an*²⁹² by Muhammad 'Abd al-'Adhim al-Zurqani (d.1367 AH/ 1947 CE), the descendant of previous famous renowned scholars of al-Azhar, himself teaching sciences of the Qur'an in the college of the Foundations of the religion in al-Azhar (kulliyat Usul al-Din).
- *al-'Aqa'id*²⁹³ by Hasan al-Banna (d.1368 AH/ 1949 AD), the Egyptian scholar who founded the movement "Muslim Brotherhood", where he exposes the fundamentals of the creed and where he dedicates a whole chapter to the view of the Salaf concerning the creed. This book was never finished due to his death in 1949 CE.
- *al-Barahin al-sati'a fi radd ba'd al-bida' al-sha'i'a*²⁹⁴ by Salama al-Quda'i al-'Azzami (d.1376 AH/ 1956 CE) who was an Egyptian scholar contemporaneous with al-Kawthari. His book aims at providing a thorough refutation of Wahhabi teachings.
- *Bara'at al-Ash'ariyyin min 'aqa'id al-mukhalifin*²⁹⁵ by Abu Hamid ibn Marzuq (d.1390 AH/ 1970 CE), an Ash'ari scholar.
- *Tafsir al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir*²⁹⁶ by the late Maliki North African scholar Muhammad Fadil ibn 'Ashur (d. 1393 AH/1973 AD) who was from a well-established family of scholars, and a scholar in his own right.
- *Al-Mizan al-Adil li-tamyiz al-haqq wa al-batil*²⁹⁷ by a Syrian scholar from Aleppo: 'Abd al-Qadir 'Isa Diyab who passed away on an unknown date but he wrote this book in 1978 to gain a degree in Sharia Law and it was published in

²⁹² Muhammad 'Abd al-'Azim al-Zurqani, *Manahil al-'irfan fi 'ulum al-Quran*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dar Ihya' al-kutub al-'arabiyya, 1943).

²⁹³ Hasan al-Banna, *al-'Aqa'id* (Cairo: Dar al-Shihab, 1978).

²⁹⁴ Muhammad ibn Salama al-'Azzami al-Shafi'i al-Quda'i, *al-Barahin al-sati'a fi radd ba'd al-bida' al-sha'i'a wa Barahin al-kitab wa al-Sunna al-natiqa 'ala wuqu' al-talaqat al-majmu'a* (Matba'a al-Sa'ada, 1960).

²⁹⁵ Abu Hamid Ibn Marzuq, *Bara'at al-Ash'ariyyin min 'aqa'id al-mukhalifin*, 2 v. in 1 vols. (Damascus: Matba'a al-'ilm, 1968).

²⁹⁶ Muhammad al-Tahir Ibn 'Ashur, *Tafsir al-tahrir wa al-tanwir* (Tunis: Dar al-tunisiyya li-al-Nashr, 1984).

²⁹⁷ 'Abd al-Qadir 'Isa Diyab, *al-Mizan al-'adil li-tamyiz al-haqq min al-batil* (Damascus: Dar al-Taqwa, 2004).

2008. The book is presented as a scholarly refutation of a book by a Muhammad Ahmad ‘Abd al-Salam whom we understand was considered a Wahhabi by Diyab. There are several core themes of Wahhabi teachings tackled in the book, but the one that is given most prominence is the issue of anthroporphism. The editor introduces us to the book by saying that he found it timely to print because of the teachings of the current “Wahhabis and the claimants to the Salafiyya”²⁹⁸ (“*al-Wahhabiyyun wa ad‘iat al-Salafiyya*”).

- *al-Salafiyya: marhala zamaniyya mubarak la madhhab islami*²⁹⁹ by Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Buti (b.1929 CE), currently the Chair of the Theology Department of Damascus University and an internationally renowned thinker. His work argues against the establishment of “Salafism” as a separate Islamic school, without diminishing the importance and influence of the Salaf in the Muslim Sunni world.
- *al-Sharh al-Qawim fi hal al-faz al-Sirat al-mustaqim*³⁰⁰ by Abdullah al-Harari al-Habashi (d.2008 CE) who is a contemporary scholar writing from an Ash‘ari background. This work contains ample details of the method of the Salaf concerning the non explicit verses. He is famous for his antagonism towards Wahhabism.³⁰¹

3.5.1.2 Consensus on the issue of the Salaf and the Attributes of God

3.5.1.2.1 al-Murtada al-Zabidi (d.1205 AH/ 1791 CE)

Al-Zabidi was a contemporary of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (although it is unclear if he had personal knowledge of the teachings of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab). A lexicographer and scholar of hadith, he says, while commenting on al-Ghazzali’s *Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din* where al-Ghazzali mentions the verse attributing *istawa* (literally “being established” or “sitting”) to God (translation mine):

“[This is] according to what befits Him and He is, exalted be He, more knowledgeable about it. This is what the Salaf did with the non-explicit [verses] in terms of exempting God from what does not befit His Majesty ta’ala, while leaving the knowledge of its meaning to God (ma’a tafwid ma’nahu ilayhi), and not like some people said among

²⁹⁸ ———, *al-Mizan al-‘adil li-tamyiz al-haqq min al-batil* (Damascus: Dar al-Taqwa, 2004), p.5.

²⁹⁹ Muhammad Sa‘id Ramadan al-Buti, *al-Salafiyya : marhala zamaniyya mubarak la-madhhab islami* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1998).

³⁰⁰ ‘Abd Allah al-Harari al-Habashi, *al-Sharh al-qawim fi hal al-faz al-Sirat al-mustaqim* (Beirut: Dar al-Mashari’, 2004).

³⁰¹ Mustafa Kabha and Haggai Erlich, ‘al-Ahbash and Wahhabiyya: Interpretations of Islam,’ *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, no 4 (2006).

those who allow for God that He would be sitting on the Throne the way a king is on his bed over something”.³⁰²

It is not clear whether al-Zabidi is referring to some of his contemporaries or refuting general ideas. In any case it demonstrates that renowned scholars like him did indeed hold a traditional view regarding the position of the Salaf: i.e. that they were “leaving the meaning to God” and not taking the literal meanings (here: being established and being seated) of the non explicit verses. All the other authors in this section clearly wrote in defence of Ash‘ari because they felt threatened by the rise and the expansion of Wahhabi concepts in the definition of the Muslim creed.

3.5.1.2.2 al-Subki al-Azhari (d. 1352 AH/ 1932 CE)

The scholar of al-Azhar Mahmud al-Subki wrote, when he reached the hadith of the female-slave in the collection of hadith by Abu Dawud (translation mine):

For every instance of the word “ayna” generally attributed to Him [i.e. God] then it should not be understood as a place and its apparent meaning should be rejected (masruqat) by consensus of both the Salaf and the Khalaf, because of His saying “laysa kamithlihi shay” [Q 42: 11] (i.e. “There is nothing like Him: He is the All Hearing, the All seeing”). The only difference is that the Salaf would say “we believe in it and in all similar things among the non explicit verses, without delving into the meaning, and with the belief that there is nothing like God.” This is safer, and this is our way. As for the Khalaf, they would interpret it according to what we have mentioned above [he gave several interpretations for “ayna” and “sama” in the explanation of the hadith]”.³⁰³

Here also, just as was the case before Wahhabism appeared, the approaches deemed correct are divided into two: the way of the Salaf (consisting of interpreting broadly by not accepting the literal meaning), and the way of the *Khalaf* (where detailed interpretations are given). He stresses the consensus of both the Salaf and *Khalaf* on discarding the literal meaning. In his fatwa against the belief that God would be in a direction or in the sky (which he denounces as outright unbelief), al-Subki says (translation by Abu Adam al-Narujji):³⁰⁴

Concerning the way of the salaf (the scholars of the first 3 centuries) and khalaf (scholars after the salaf) in dealing with the aayahs [sic] and hadith that do not have only one possible or well-known meaning: they all agreed that Allah is clear of and above the attributes of whatever has a beginning. Therefore, He does not have a place for Him on the Arsh or the sky or anywhere else. He is also not attributed with settling in or on anything that has a beginning, and not with transformation or movement or

³⁰² Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Murtada al-Zabidi, *Kitab Ithaf al-sada al-muttaqin bi-sharh Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, 14 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1989), vol. 2, p.36.

³⁰³ Mahmud Muhammad Khattab al-Subki al-Azhari, *al-Manhal al-adhb al-mawrud sharh sunan al-imam Abi Dawud* (Cairo: Matba' al-Istiqama, 1932).

³⁰⁴ <http://fiqhlessons.blogspot.com/2004/07/fatwa-of-scholars-of-azhar-on-one-who.html>

the like. Rather, He is as he was before the existence of the Arsh or the Kursi or the skies and other things that have a beginning. The Haafith (ibn Hajar al-Asqalani) said in al-Fath (Fath-ul-Baariy - the explanation of al-Bukhaariy): "the Fuqahaa' (fiqh scholars) all agreed, from east to west, upon the belief in the Quran and the hadith that trustworthy people related from the Prophet (may Allah raise his rank) about the attributes of Allah, without likening them to creation or explanation."

They only disagreed on the matter of explaining the meaning of these aayahs, so the salaf (i.e. most of them) believe in them as they were related and that they are not literally meant, because of the saying of Allah which means, "He does not resemble anything and He is All-Hearing, All-Seeing", and leave the meaning be, due to the saying of Allah that means: "and noone knows their meaning except Allah" (suurah 3, 5 - more details later).

Accordingly, they say regarding the Aayah "Al-Rahman , 'alaa al-'Arsh istawa" (if literally translated it would say "He established on the throne"), that He "istawa" in a sense that befits Him, and only He knows it, and regarding the aayah "'a 'amintum man fii al-samaa'" (if literally translated it would say: "Do You feel safe from who is in the sky?") that we believe in it and the meaning that Allah gave it, while clearing Him of the attributes of whatever has a beginning and of settling (in a place.) They also say about the Aayah "yad-ullahi fawqa aydiyhim" (if literally translated it would say: "His hand is above their hands") that He has a "yad" not like our yad (i.e. our hand), and only Allah knows it. This was their way in dealing with these aayahs that do not have only a single possible meaning or only one famous meaning.³⁰⁵

This quote, like the others mentioned in this sections, illustrates the position of the Salaf as presented by twentieth century scholars: their explanations are longer, they tend to include more information, details and examples on this issue than the scholars of the previous period. It might be because previous scholars thought this was a trivial matter hardly ever challenged. Today it is a contested point which needs clarification, hence the length of the explanations. Al-Subki al-Azhari continued after this fatwa with a long list of scholarly quotes gathering interpretations of the most well-known non explicit religious texts about God.

3.5.1.2.3 al-Quda'i (d.1376 AH/ 1956 CE)

After retracing the history of the Wahhabis and highlighting different issues in which he feels they have violated the consensus of the Sunni scholars, (among them an issue on divorce), he explains (translation mine):

³⁰⁵ Mahmud Muhammad Khattab al-Subki al-Azhari, *Ithaf al-ka'inat bi-bayan madhhab al-Salaf wa al-khalaf fi al-mutashabihat: wa radd shibh al-malhada wa al-majsama wa ma ya'taqiduna min al-muftariyat* (Cairo: Matba'a al-Istiqaama, 1932), p.5-6. Translation by Abu Adam al-Narujji who is a Norwegian Islamic studies teacher living in Kuwait and who posted a commented translation of this fatwa on his blog on hanafi fiqh: Abu Adam al-Narujji, 'Fatwa of the scholars of Azhar on the one who believes that Allah settles in created things or that He has a direction,' <http://fiqhlessons.blogspot.com/2004/07/fatwa-of-scholars-of-azhar-on-one-who.html> Accessed on 6 March 2008.

The people of the first centuries were upon a pure creed, and in a healthy state of mind (salamat al-fitra) and they used to stay away from delving into issues which are not of their concern among the detailed sciences. Therefore it was enough that they knew, of the belief of the exemption of God, what does not befit Him like the created things in general, (...) and that it was appropriate to leave the knowledge of the meaning to the One who does know it. And this is exactly what many from the Salaf did (...).

But then when passions spread, and purity from the hearts has lessened, when the hashawiyya (here: anthropomorphists) were preying on the minds of those who are weak, to the point that entered in their souls dangerous illusions as if this was actually what the master of the Prophets came with, when [the anthropomorphists] talked about the meanings of those things which first come to the mind when this is actually the opposite of what came from God and disbelief in what is compulsory to believe about Him, it became an obligation for scholars to clarify the issue, and they have stood by what was obligatory upon them at the time, and let's thank Allah for the two groups and their work, and may Allah grant them a lot of good deeds.³⁰⁶

Here we can see the attempts of scholars to explain more clearly and justify the two positions of the *Salaf* and *Khalaf*, and why these two positions are not contradictory. In simple terms, it equates to saying that had the scholars of the *Salaf* been alive during the times and societies that the scholars of the *Khalaf* found themselves in, they would most probably have interpreted in detail, just the way the *Khalaf* scholars did, because it was the prevalent condition of their societies which pushed those scholars to act in such a way, and not a willingness to contradict their predecessors.

3.5.1.2.4 al-Dujwi (d.1365 AH/ 1945 CE)

He wrote, in the Magazine of al-Azhar (translation mine):

“Know that the Salaf were declaring the impossibility of the ‘Uluww of God in the meaning of a place, unlike some ignorant people who have a shameful position on this issue. Indeed the Salaf and the Khalaf agree on the exemption of God from any resemblance with His creations (tanzih)”.³⁰⁷

After mentioning that it is impossible to take the verses and hadiths dealing with the Attributes of God according to their literal meaning, he states :

“This is the consensus (ijma’) of the Salaf and the Khalaf.”³⁰⁸

These quotes demonstrate that a scholar from those considered the “greatest” of al-Azhar confirms that there was a consensus between the *Salaf* and the *Khalaf* that the literal meaning should not be taken into account.

³⁰⁶ Muhammad ibn Salama al-‘Azzami al-Shafi’i al-Quda’i, *al-Barahin al-sati’a fi radd ba’d al-bida’ al-sha’i’a wa Barahin al-kitab wa al-Sunna al-natiqa ‘ala wuqu’ al-talaqat al-majmu’a* (Matba’a al-Sa’ada, 1960), vol.1, pp.240-41.

³⁰⁷ Yusuf al-Dujwi, ‘Tafsir Surat al-A’la,’ *Majalla al-Azhar* 9 (1938): p.17.

³⁰⁸ ———, ‘Tafsir Surat al-A’la,’ *Majalla al-Azhar* 9 (1938)

3.5.1.2.5 al-Zurqani (d.1367 AH/ 1947 CE)

Al-Zurqani who is also from al-Azhar, says, in his book (translation mine):

“These factions [referring to anthropomorphists in general] are relying upon the verse “al-Rahman ‘ala l-‘Arsh istawa”, so we say: the whole of the Salaf and the Khalaf have agreed upon the fact that the literal meaning of “istawa ‘ala l’arsh”, which is: “sitting, being in place and being limited”, is impossible because of the irrefutable proofs of the exemption of Allah from any resemblance to His creations, or from needing anything from them, be it a place to be in or other than this. They have also agreed over the fact that the literal meaning is absolutely not the meaning willed by God, because He denied about Himself that He would resemble the creations, and He confirmed about Himself the fact that He does not need them: “Laysa kamithlihi shay’” and He also said “wa huwa al-Ghaniyyou al-Hamid, therefore if He had meant the apparent meaning, there would have been contradictions [in the Qur’an].

However they have differed after that. The Salafis (Salafiyyun)³⁰⁹ were leaving out the specificity of the meaning of istiwa to God, as He knows best about what He attributed Himself with and He knows best about what is suitable for Him and for them there are no proofs for such a specification. And the khalaf chose to interpret, after some attributed to God what they do not understand (...). Those who chose to make an interpretation were afterwards divided into two categories: the group of the Ash’aris who were interpreting without specifying a meaning, saying: “indeed the intended meaning of the verse is the fact that God is attributed with a revealed attribute (sifat sama’iyya) which we do not know specifically”; and those who came after that who were specifying a meaning, saying the intended meaning of al-istawa here is control and domination, without composition, because the language includes this meaning (...).³¹⁰

Here, the principles on which both scholars from the *Salaf* and the *Khalaf* agree are highlighted, to make sure that the positions are not perceived as being diametrically opposed, but rather coincide.

3.5.1.2.6 al-Dusuqi

Ibrahim al-Dusuqi, who was the minister in charge of the Awqaf in Egypt said, in an opus of the magazine of al-Azhar dedicated to the verse which contains the phrase *al-Rahman ‘ala l-‘Arsh istawa* [Q 20: 5] and the sayings of Muslim scholars about the non explicit verses (translation mine):

The scholars -both the Salaf and the Khalaf – have agreed upon the exemption of God from what is literal and leads to anthropomorphism (tashbih) as they have agreed upon the belief in what has been confirmed from it and that this came from God. They diverged in terms of giving a specific meaning or rather, making no specification.

³⁰⁹ Here he means the people of the first three centuries. This is not a reference to a movement here.

³¹⁰ Muhammad ‘Abd al-‘Azim al-Zurqani, *Manahil al-‘irfan fi ‘ulum al-Quran*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dar Ihya’ al-kutub al-‘arabiyya, 1943), vol.2, p.186-87.

The Salaf were leaving the meaning to God according to the meaning that He willed, after having believed in it and having freed God from what is literal and impossible. Ibn Hajar says, in *al-Fath al-Bari*, that this was the case of imam Malik, al-Thawri, Ibn 'Uyayna, al-Awza'i, Abu Hanifa, al-Shafi'i and of Ibn Hanbal. And this is the saying of the people of the first three centuries. Muhammad ibn al-Hasan [ash-Shaybani] said: "The scholars of the East and of the West have agreed in the belief in the Qur'an and the confirmed hadith from the Prophet may Allah have mercy upon him about the attributes of the Lord, without anthropomorphism and without exegesis (tafsir)."³¹¹

In the second part of the same magazine, he adds:

It becomes clear that the Salaf and the Khalaf have agreed upon [at least] a general interpretation, as they both leave out what is literal from the text and which would be impossible for Him the Exalted, but they differed afterwards about specifying a meaning for that particular text or not.³¹²

Therefore, al-Dusuqi reminds the reader that literal meanings are not accepted by the Salaf. Here again this was the main point agreed upon by all the major Sunni scholars since the end of the Salaf period.

3.5.1.2.7 Diyab

'Abd al-Qadir 'Isa Diyab, the Syrian scholar, said (translation mine):

At-Tirmidhi said, about the hadith which would literally mean that "Allah accepts honesty and takes it with His right hand": "More than one scholar said about this hadith and what is like it: believe in it, do not imagine [things], and do not ask "how". Similarly, it has been narrated from Malik, Sufyan ibn 'Uyayna, and Abdullah ibn al-Mubarak that they were teaching, about those hadith: "we go through them without a how", and this is also the saying of the people of knowledge among Ahlu s-sunnah wa l-jama'a from Jami' al-Tirmidhi vol 3 page 24 and we [i.e. Diyab] say that this is the way of the majority of the Salaf, but we do not say "of all of them" because it has reached us that some of the scholars of that time did interpret those texts, and here are some of those interpretations [he then quotes some detailed interpretations from scholars of the Salaf]."³¹³

Diyab here clarifies that there are detailed interpretations that have been narrated from scholars of the Salaf. We will see in the next section that WSNS contest all such narrations and are of the view that they never interpreted any of these non explicit texts.

3.5.1.2.8 Ibn Marzuq (d.1390 AH/ 1970 CE)

The Ash'ari Ibn Marzuq said (translation mine):

³¹¹ Ibrahim al-Dasuqi, 'al-Rahman 'ala al-'arsh istawa,' *Majalla al-Azhar* (1993-4).

³¹² ———, 'al-Rahman 'ala al-'arsh istawa,' *Majalla al-Azhar* (1993-4).

³¹³ 'Abd al-Qadir 'Isa Diyab, *al-Mizan al-'adil li-tamyiz al-haq min al-batil* (Damascus: Dar al-Taqwa, 2004), p.129.

The creed of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, may Allah ta'ala raise his rank, about the non-explicit texts that have reached us from the book of Allah ta'ala and from what has been confirmed as an authentic sunnah, is similar to the creed of the imams of ijthad and of the Salaf [in general] [i.e.] they would interpret in detail verses such as those whose apparent meaning is that God comes, that He would be with us, or that the Black stone would be His right hand on earth, and they would leave the knowledge of what they did not explain in detail to Allah ta'ala, while exempting Him from any resemblance to the creations.³¹⁴

Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal's creed is mentioned here to specifically target the WSNS who claim to be following him. Here Ibn Marzuq considers it certain that the imams of the Salaf did allow interpretation in some cases.

3.5.1.2.9 Hassan al-Banna (d.1368 AH/ 1949 CE)

Hasan al-Banna, the Egyptian reformist, said (translation mine):

“To sum up this research [about the positions of the Salaf and the Khalaf] [we can say]: the Salaf and the Khalaf have agreed on the fact that the intended [meanings of those verses] are not the literal meanings familiar to the creations, and this is a type of general interpretation. And they have agreed that any interpretation that would contradict the bases of the Law is not allowed. The Khalaf went further in interpreting the words according to what is permissible in the Law, (...) and this is a matter some of the Salaf themselves delved into [at some point]”.³¹⁵

Here, we can also see that the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood movement also endorsed the twofold division of correct interpretations.

3.5.1.2.10 Ibn 'Ashur (d. 1393 AH/1973 CE)

The North African scholar Ibn 'Ashur said (translation mine) :

“And His [ie Allah's] saying “man fi al-sama” in both cases [referring to a previous explanations he has made] is among the type of mutashabih verses which, if taken literally, give a meaning of being limited to a place (al-hulul fi-makan), and this does not befit God [man fi al-sama literally means “the one who is in the sky”] . Thus we approach this verse, like those which are similar to it, with two ways: the tafwid (to leave the meaning to God) by the Salaf and the ta'wil (detailed interpretation) by the Khalaf, may Allah bless them all.”³¹⁶

This paragraph by al-Ashur shows that from various sections of the Muslim community, the understanding of this issue was the one that emerged as dominant since the end of the first three centuries and explained in chapter 2.

³¹⁴ Abu Hamid Ibn Marzuq, *Bara'at al-Ash'ariyyin min 'aqa'id al-mukhalifin*, 2 v. in 1 vols. (Damascus: Matba'a al-'ilm, 1968), vol 1, p.10.

³¹⁵ Hasan al-Banna, *al-'Aqa'id* (Cairo: Dar al-Shihab, 1978), pp.77-78.

³¹⁶ Muhammad al-Tahir Ibn 'Ashur, *Tafsir al-tahrir wa al-tanwir* (Tunis: Dar al-tunisiyya li-al-Nashr, 1984), vol.9, p.33.

3.5.1.2.11 al-Buti (b.1929 CE)

Among the contemporary personalities who hold similar views as expressed in this section, there is al-Buti. He is the only one of this sample selection to still be alive. He explained, in his landmark book targeting the WSNS (translation by Sunni Publications):

The obligatory way to proceed is either to explain these words according to their external meanings which conform with Allah's transcendence above any like or partner, and this includes not explaining them as bodily appendages and other corporeal imagery. Therefore it will be said, for example: He has established Himself over the Throne as He has said, with an establishment which befits His majesty and oneness; and He has a hand as He has said, which befits His divinity and majesty; etc.

Or they can be explained figuratively according to the correct rules of language and in conformity with the customs of speech in their historical context. For example: the establishment is the conquering (istila') and dominion (tasallut), Allah's hand is His strength in His saying: "Allah's hand is over their hand" (48:10) and His generosity in His saying: "Nay, both His hands are spread wide, and He bestows as He wills" (5:64).[Ibn al-Jawzi interpreted the former verse as Allah's favor (ni`ma) and power (qudra), and the latter, according to Hasan al-Basri, as His kindness and goodness.]

Now, to proceed to any one of these two types of commentary is not devoid of interpretation (ta'wil) in either case. However, the first type of commentary is a non-specific interpretation, while the second is a specific interpretation.³¹⁷

He explains that even when they refused to give a specific meaning to non explicit religious texts the scholars of the Salaf were in a way interpreting, and therefore it is not possible to say that they had never interpreted when discarding the literal meaning is a form of "non specific" interpretation. He also adds, as a strong refutation of the WSNS:

That is the question in which those who stubbornly claim for themselves the name of "salafi" differ with us, substituting their purported affiliation with the pious Salaf, to the Method (manhaj) upon whose perfection in every single doctrinal principle and juridical method there is complete and general agreement. The bases of their claim against us are, first, that the Salaf of this Community, who are the best of Muslims, showed no tendency for specific interpretation whatsoever, nor added anything beyond what Allah established for Himself in those texts, together with His transcendence above all that does not befit His lordship and divinity and loftiness above any kind of partner or rival. And the second of their proofs against us is that any inroad one makes into the words whose lexical sense Allah has linked to Himself, any probing of their import as figures, or metaphors, or similitudes, is necessarily, in one way or another, a form of divestiture (ta`til)!

We say, relying upon Allah for our success, that we consider neither one of the above two proofs binding upon us, for they are both unacceptable and inapplicable, and because they are not real, unlike what they imagined. For it is not true that none of the

³¹⁷ Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti, *al-Salafiyya : marhala zamaniyya mubaraka la-madhab islami* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1998), , p.132-33.

Salaf tended to apply specific interpretation in commenting on the verses of the divine attributes; and even if we were to suppose hypothetically that that were true, it is not true that interpreting these attributes in conformity with the principles of religion and the rules of the Arabic language, and in accordance with their Qur'anic contexts, constitutes a form of divestiture.³¹⁸

Al-Buti does not accept any of the reasonings of the WSNS as convincing. He rejects their claim according to which no scholar of the Salaf ever undertook a detailed interpretation, or that interpreting would equate with negating the religious texts (the positions of the WSNS are the subject of the next section).

3.5.1.2.12 al-Harari al-Habashi (d.2008 CE)

Finally, ‘Abdullah al-Harari al-Habashi explains, in his book *Sharh al-Qawim*, about the non explicit verses of the Qur’an (translation mine):

Here there are two ways, each of them being correct. The first of them is the way of the Salaf, who are the people of the first three centuries, and what is meant here is the way of most of them: they used to interpret [the non-explicit verses] in general, believing in them, and with the belief that they are not among the attributes of the body, but that they had meanings that are suitable to His majesty and His greatness but without any specification, but they refer those verses to the explicit verses such as “Laysa kamithlihi shay’”. This is as Imam al-Shafi’i may Allah reward him, used to say: “I believe in what came from Allah according to what Allah willed, and in what Prophet Muhammad came with, according to what the Prophet intended” i.e not according to what the imaginations and the assumptions may lean towards in terms of physical senses and corporeal meanings all of which are not permissible with regards to God”

As for negating detailed interpretations from the Salaf, as is now claimed by some, it is rejected, as there is, in Sahih al-Bukhari, in the book entitled “Tafsir al-Qur’an wa ‘ibaratih” (i.e. Exegesis of the Qur’an and its expressions) , surat al-Qasas, verse: “kullu halikun illa wajhah” (the literal meaning of which is “everything will be destroyed except His face”, he said “ except His Sovereignty and it was said “what does not ...” ~The sovereignty of God is one of His eternal attributes which is not like the possession which He gave to the creations. And there is [in this same chapter] other than that in terms of ta’wil, like the term “dahk” which is narrated in a hadith, [which is interpreted by] His mercy”.³¹⁹

After quoting other detailed interpretations such as the one narrated from imam Ahmad, he explains the second way:

³¹⁸ ———, *al-Salafiyya : marhala zamaniyya mubarak la-madhab islami* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1998, p.132-133).

³¹⁹ ‘Abd Allah al-Harari al-Habashi, *al-Sharh al-qawim fi hal alfaz al-Sirat al-mustaqim* (Beirut: Dar al-Mashari’, 2004, p.197-199).

The second way is the way of the Khalaf: they used to interpret in detail, by specifying meanings for [those verses] in accordance with the Arabic language, and they were not taking the apparent meanings, just as the Salaf did not either.³²⁰

All these quotes exemplify the consensus that existed in the Sunni world about the Salaf's position regarding the non explicit verses in a stronger and more detailed fashion than before. This, as a result of the rise of Wahhabism which led to an influx in the market of books containing a very different description of the Islamic creed to what was previously known. Sunni scholars not claiming to be *Salafis* but still considering themselves as following the Salaf's teachings nowadays are very much in a defensive position whereby they have to respond to the constant attacks against them made by the vocal minority of WSNS.

3.5.2 Increasing contestation on the position of the Salaf on the interpretation of the verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God

For this part, the sources chosen are mainly drawn from the twentieth century (many of the authors are still alive) and from individuals of various backgrounds, with one common point: their claim to the Salaf. The use of websites in this section is sometimes justified by the fact that literature of some of the most extreme factions (such as those mentioning attacks in Iraq for example) are accessible only on the Internet and sometimes because the website reinforces what is available in print (as in the case of salafipublications.com).

3.5.2.1 Presentation of the sources

This is a presentation of the sources used in 3.5.1.2:

- The knowledge base contained in websites such as salafipublications.com, alhawali.com, islamtoday.net and the one entitled *Minbar al-Tawhid wa l-Jihad*. These are websites which gather information on related issues by current shaykhs in Saudi Arabia (and for the last website outside Saudi Arabia). Salafipublications.com is a conservative website which could be identified as the voice of official WSNS in English on the web. Alhawali.com and islamtoday.net are maintained by the so-called Sahwi shaykhs i.e. reformists, who had been jailed between 1994 and 1999, but who are today more cooperative with the

³²⁰ ———, *al-Sharh al-qawim fi hal al-faz al-Sirat al-mustaqim* (Beirut: Dar al-Mashari', 2004).

official Saudi clergy since they have been released.³²¹ “Minbar al-Tawhid wa l-Jihad” contains a lot of material written by extremist groups calling for what they have defined as a jihad and is a major literary resource for any prospective extremist who speaks Arabic. Using these websites is an effective method of proving that several trends within Wahhabism agree on some fundamental issues, and that these fundamentals, in turn, alienate their followers from the majority of the Muslim community regardless of what faction of Wahhabism self-named Salafism they are a part of.

- *Tanbihat fi al-radd ‘ala man ta’awwala al-Sifat* by Ibn Baz (d.1999 CE), former influential cleric who held the post of “Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia” including various other prestigious positions in the Kingdom. He is one of the main references of most of the WSNS. The whole book is dedicated to proving that the verses dealing with the Attributes of God should not be interpreted.
- *al-Muntaqa*,³²² a three-volume book gathering the main fatwas of Salih ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan (b.1354 AH/ 1933 CE). A former student of Ibn Baz, al-Fawzan is a member of the Saudi instance known as the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fatawa. The first volume, which contains the material that will be used here, is dedicated to the creed. Al-Fawzan has denounced the definition of the position of the Salaf and criticized al-Buti’s book mentioned in the previous section. Extracts from his article on the subject, entitled “*Nadharat wa ta’liqat ‘ala ma fi kitab al-Salafiyya min al-hafuwat*” (Insights and comments into the idiocies of Muhammad Sa‘id Ramadan contained in his book “al-Salafiyya”), will also be used.³²³
- *I’lam al-mu‘asirin*³²⁴ by Muhammad Salih ibn al-‘Uthaymin (d.2001 CE), one of the pillars of the Wahhabi self-named Salafi trend in the twentieth century. He lectured in Mecca for over 35 years and was a member of the Council of Senior Scholars of Saudi Arabia. There are also extracts of an English website dedicated to him which contain many of his sayings on different issues.³²⁵

³²¹ For more details on that one can read the chapter Re-enchanting politics: Sahwis from contestation to co-optation” Madawi al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State*, Cambridge Middle East Studies, 25 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.52-101.

³²² Salih ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan, *al-Muntaqa min fatawa fadilat al-Shaykh al-duktur Salih ibn Fawzan ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Fawzan*, 3 vols. (Cairo: Dar al-Imam Ahmad, 2006).

³²³ A copy can be retrieved here <http://www.sahab.net/forums/showthread.php?t=313365>.

³²⁴ Muhammad ibn Salih al-‘Uthaymin, *I’lam al-mu‘asirin bi-fatawa Ibn al-‘Uthaymin : fatawa mu‘asira* (Cairo: Muassasa al-Mukhtar, 2006).

³²⁵ <http://www.ibnothaimen.com/>

The methodology is the same regardless of which faction of Wahhabism these authors belong to: they deny that the scholars of the Salaf ever interpreted any non-explicit verses. In addition, they might not even count the verses on the Attributes of God as non explicit verses in any case,³²⁶ then they heavily criticise the twofold division into a way of the Salaf and one for the *Khalaf*, both of which do not rely on the literal meaning. The common feature of those critics is that they equate interpreting with negating. Then, when they think they have proven that interpreting is only negating under another name, they only deal with negating, which is indeed considered a heresy in Islam. Most of the literature in this section is based on the premise that interpreting a term from the religious texts equates negating that God has an attribute. What looks like a misunderstanding at first, is actually a clear strategy to not try to understand the position of the adversary. Misrepresenting the position of the opponent is a strategy used constantly by those aforementioned authors.

3.5.2.2 Opposition to the consensus after the 12th century AH/ 18th century CE

3.5.2.2.1 Ibn Baz (d.1999 CE)

His book on the issue is conceived as a refutation against Muhammad ‘Ali al-Sabuni, a Syrian scholar who wrote several articles dealing with the issue of the Attributes of God and how best to understand them. Referring to where al-Sabuni distinguished between “the way of the Salaf” and “the way of the *Khalaf*” regarding the Attributes of God, Ibn Baz asserts:

“This is a wrong division, nobody preceded him [al-Sabuni] in saying so, as far as I know, as indeed the way of “Ahlu l-Sunnah” is only one and this is the one of the Companions of the Prophet – peace be upon him- and of their followers, and it consists in confirming the names and attributes of God, and to go through them as they came, and the belief that they are the truth and that Allah, exalted be He, is attributed with them according to the meaning which is suitable for His majesty, without any distortion, without any negation, without specifying a “how”, without resemblance and without interpreting them with other than their apparent meaning, and without tafwid (i.e. leaving the meaning to God). Rather they believed in their known meanings, that they are a truth suitable for Allah exalted be He and that He does not resemble His creations in anything.

And the madhhab of the khalaf contradicts this as can be known by reading the sayings of these ones and the sayings of those ones. Then he [al-Sabuni] said that Ahl al-Sunnah have left the knowledge of the meaning of those attributes to God and he repeated this out of context, and he made a mistake in this, and he attributed to them what they are innocent of, as we mentioned earlier from what was narrated by the sayings of shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyya may Allah have mercy upon him from the group of Ahlu s-

³²⁶ <http://www.sahab.net/forums/showthread.php?t=313365>

Sunnah may Allah have mercy upon them: indeed Ahl al-Sunna left the knowledge of the “how” to God, not the knowledge of the meaning, as we mentioned earlier.³²⁷

The part where he affirms that nobody preceded al-Sabuni in making this division is surprising, considering what has been mentioned before on this issue (see previous chapter and also previous section in this chapter). There is a tendency to make this division appear as if it was made up by al-Sabuni when al-Sabuni only reiterated what we have proved was said by a majority of Sunni scholars before him. This appears to be a deliberate move to dupe people into thinking that this is a relatively unknown notion if al-Sabuni would be seen to be the only one to have ever come up with this twofold division. It is highly unlikely that somebody like Ibn Baz, with the level of knowledge that his positions entailed, would be ignorant of this definition of Sunni scholars of “two ways” to understand the non explicit verses, when in the previous section we have seen that this was considered a consensus (i.e. not to take the literal meanings of those texts).

3.5.2.2.2 al-Fawzan (b.1933 CE)

In a treatise that is edited just after the *Tanbihat* of Ibn Baz, Salih al-Fawzan also condemns this division. He says:

To say that the madhhab of the Salaf was tafwid is a wrong attribution and an ignorance of the madhhab of the salaf, as the Salaf did not leave the meaning to God, because the meaning was known to them, but they left the meaning of the “how” to God.³²⁸

He also says, referring to where traditional Sunni scholars say that there is no contradiction between the two approaches of both the Salaf and the *Khalaf* (translation mine):

We say that if the madhhab of both of them was one, then why do you divide them into salaf and khalaf? And if the madhhab of both factions are different, as it appears clearly, then it is not valid, in language, in law, and according to the mind, to bring together into one group under this heading and to call them both “Ahl al-Sunna wa al-jama’a”, when the meaning of Ahl al-Sunna is as the Prophet mentioned it “those who are upon what is similar to what I and my companions are upon today” so was the interpretation of the attributes that was done by the khalaf, as you yourself mentioned about them, among the things that the Prophet and his companions were upon? Therefore the one who interprets the attributes is not from Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama’a in

³²⁷ ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn ‘Abd Allah Ibn Baz, *Tanbihat fi al-radd ‘ala man ta’awwala al-sifat* (al-Riyad: al-Ri’asa al-‘amma li-al-idarat al-buhuth al-‘ilmiyya, 1984), p.18.

³²⁸ Salih ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan, ‘Tanbihat ‘ala maqalat al-Sabuni fi al-Sifat,’ in *Tanbihat fi al-radd ‘ala man ta’awwala al-sifat*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn ‘Abd Allah Ibn Baz (al-Riyad: al-Ri’asa al-‘amma li-al-idarat al-buhuth al-‘ilmiyya, 1984), p.62.

this regard, even if he is among them for other issues where they do not contradict them”.³²⁹

Here, al-Fawzan is suggesting that if both approaches were correct, then there would be no need to divide them into two ways, rather there would just be the one way which is correct. This argument is showing that the WSNS are not willing to engage in subtleties of explanations or refined theories: al-Fawzan here sounds as if he is saying “if there is one correct way then you cannot say there are two, that alone proves you wrong”, which seems a simplistic argument. He also excludes from the Ahl al-Sunna all those who interpret the non explicit verses³³⁰.

In the following excerpt, al-Fawzan finds it hard to say that scholars who delve into interpreting could be considered as believing in the Attributes of God “without negation”:

His [al-Sabuni] saying that they were all believing in the attributes of Allah ta’ala without negation or resemblance contains an ambiguity: as how can it be said that the one who interprets the attributes of God away from their proper meaning and who then interpret yad by power, istawa by control, rahmah by favour, how can it be said, in spite of that, that they believe in those attributes without negation? Isn’t this act the very meaning of negating?³³¹

This reasoning is exactly the way the argument of the WSNS is usually presented: that the Ash‘aris are people who negate the religious dogma, who do not accept what is mentioned in the Qur’an. This is the case so that the one who was not previously familiar with the Ash‘aris can only detest everything about them, as negating any part of the Qur’an is traditionally considered in Islam as heresy.

As for the narrations according to which some scholars of the Salaf did make interpretations of some verses of the Qur’an, al-Fawzan does not deny them but he says that he does not classify them as “interpretations”. He justifies:

³²⁹ ———, ‘Tanbihat ‘ala maqalat al-Sabuni fi al-Sifat,’ in *Tanbihat fi al-radd ‘ala man ta’awwala al-sifat*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn ‘Abd Allah Ibn Baz (al-Riyad: al-Ri’asa al-’amma li-al-idarat al-buhuth al-’ilmiyya, 1984), p.68.

³³⁰ Although he qualifies his statement by adding that he only excludes them as long as this issue is concerned, but not in relation to other issues where they do not contradict, according to him, Sunni principles. This argument equals saying that some people can belong “partly” to Ahl al-Sunna”, which is surprising as he was not ready to accept that both the *Salaf* and the *Khalaf* were correct even though they had slightly different approaches to the interpretation of non explicit verses.

³³¹ Salih ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan, ‘Tanbihat ‘ala maqalat al-Sabuni fi al-Sifat,’ in *Tanbihat fi al-radd ‘ala man ta’awwala al-sifat*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn ‘Abd Allah Ibn Baz (al-Riyad: al-Ri’asa al-’amma li-al-idarat al-buhuth al-’ilmiyya, 1984), p.72-73.

As for the quotes that you mentioned among the exegesis of Ahl al-sunna wa l-jama'a about the verses, saying that this was in the sense that his knowledge and that He encompasses everything is not an interpretation, as you claimed [here he is referring as the interpretation of "God is with us" by "God is with us by His knowledge and He encompasses everything"]".³³²

According to him, interpreting is nothing short of misguidance:

"Yes we judge as misguided the one who interprets the attributes of God against what is indicated to him and tries to give it other than its real meaning among the Ash'aris and other than them. If this is not misguidance then what is misguidance?"³³³

We will see in the next chapter the consequences stemming from this. The fact that a majority of Muslim scholars throughout history held the view that interpreting was allowed and even performed by the Salaf means that the WSNS consider misguided most of those figures which had been so far considered major references of the Sunnis.

3.5.2.2.3 Muhammad al-'Uthaymin (d.2001 CE)

In a pamphlet entitled "The Muslim's belief" and distributed free to pilgrims from all over the world during the Hajj among other occasions, al-'Uthaymin states (translation by Maneh Al-Johani, as found on the website):

We believe it is obligatory to take the texts of the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions conceding Allah's attributes at their face value and to interpret them in a way that is suitable to Almighty Allah. We reject the practice of those who twist the meanings of these texts and understand them in a way that was not intended by Allah and His messenger.

We also reject the practice of those who make them devoid of their meanings as conveyed by Allah and His Messenger. Finally, we reject the approach of those who exaggerate, who gave them a physical interpretation that makes Allah similar to some of His creatures.³³⁴

Here "twisting the meanings" is what others call "interpreting". There is a deliberate attempt not to leave room for an interpretation which would be coherent with the text and the meanings of the terms of the interpreted phrase. Official WSNS can only envisage taking the texts according to their literal meaning or negating them. The way chosen by some scholars to give detailed interpretation of those non explicit verses and hadith does not find its place in this representation.

³³² ———, 'Tanbihat 'ala maqalat al-Sabuni fi al-Sifat,' in *Tanbihat fi al-radd 'ala man ta'awwala al-sifat*, ed. 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn 'Abd Allah Ibn Baz (al-Riyad: al-Ri'asa al-'amma li-al-idarat al-buhuth al-'ilmiyya, 1984), p.73-74.

³³³ ———, 'Tanbihat 'ala maqalat al-Sabuni fi al-Sifat,' in *Tanbihat fi al-radd 'ala man ta'awwala al-sifat*, ed. 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn 'Abd Allah Ibn Baz (al-Riyad: al-Ri'asa al-'amma li-al-idarat al-buhuth al-'ilmiyya, 1984), p.78.

³³⁴ <http://abdurrahman.org/faith/muslimsbeliefUthaimen.html>.

3.5.2.2.4 al-Hawali (b.1950 CE)

Safar al-Hawali is a Saudi preacher of reform who spent several years in prison and was warned against by no other than al-Fawzan at several occasions. However, in terms of creed, there is no major difference between the two. Regarding the method of the Salaf concerning the Attributes of God, he, like Ibn Baz denies that anybody from the Salaf ever made an interpretation of any kind (translation mine):

Here it is compulsory to confirm once again that the madhhab of the Salaf is not the interpretation of any text from the texts of the Islamic law ever, and one cannot find a single text, about the attributes of any other subject showing that the Salaf would have interpreted, and to Allah is the praise.³³⁵

He concludes by adding (translation mine):

Why did the Ash'aris declare as non-Muslims the Baatinis (from derogating to the apparent meaning of some verses) when they actually share with them one of their strongest fundamentals [the permissibility of making interpretations]?³³⁶

For al-Hawali, to consider interpretations permissible is in itself a deviation which makes the Ash'aris similar to factions which had been denounced as heretical.

3.5.2.2.5 al-'Awda (b. 1955 CE):

Salman al-'Awda is another ex-opponent to the Saudi regime now freed from jail and co-opted by the official clergy. In the website that he manages, there are many questions on the issue of the non explicit verses answered by teachers of the Imam al-Sa'ud university or of al-Qasim university.³³⁷ For example, one of the contributors to the websites asserts (translation mine):

The people of knowledge have narrated that the imams of the Salaf used to declare as non-Muslims all those who deny the 'uluww of Allah ta'ala as is confirmed in the books of the Salaf related to the creed, and may the one who has a sound mind ask for [God's] assistance. (answered by the director of the department of 'aqidah of Umm al-Qura university, Dr Su'ud ibn Abd al-Aziz al-'Arifi).³³⁸

This answer is typical of the WSNS discourse: although the Ash'aris have never denied the 'uluww (in its Arabic form, literally translated as: physical elevation) of God which is mentioned in the religious texts, the WSNS will refer to sayings of well-known scholars condemning those who deny any of the Attributes of God. This is why the first

³³⁵ <http://www.alhawali.com/index.cfm?method=home.SubContent&contentID=364>

³³⁶ <http://www.alhawali.com/index.cfm?method=home.SubContent&contentID=364>

³³⁷ http://www.islamtoday.net/questions/question_select_cat_content.cfm?maincatid=25&catid=890 This link gives access to all the questions dealing with this.

³³⁸ http://www.islamtoday.net/questions/show_question_content.cfm?id=54633

stage of their argument consists in equating interpreting and negating, so that they are then able to bring up quotes from famous figures not against interpretation, but against negating the Attributes of God.

3.5.2.2.6 al-Khudayri

Interpreting is consistently portrayed as a negation of the religious texts, illustrated clearly by this answer from a member of the teaching body of the al-Saud university, Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Khudayri:

Distorting is changing, and changing can be a change in the words, like when they say that the saying of Allah “ar-Rahman ‘ala l-arsh istawa” and then they say: “istawa i.e. istawla”³³⁹ and also “- in changing the case ending of the Majestic name of God “Allah” in His saying “wa kallama Allahu Musa taklima” where the case ending [of the word Allah] is changed from nomination to accusative [ie the verse would read wa kallama Allaha Musa taklima” [so as to mean that Musa spoke to God instead of “God certainly spoke to Musa³⁴⁰]”.³⁴¹

3.5.2.2.7 al-Dumayji

Dr Abdullah ibn ‘Umar al-Dumayji, member of the teaching staff of Umm al-Qura, when asked if there was an attribute such as place confirmed about Allah, answers (translation mine):

“As for confirming or negating the time and place about Allah, these are words which trigger imagination and which can carry both the truth and what is incorrect, and it is the habit of Ahl al-Sunna with such words which trigger the imagination and which are inclusive [of both good and bad] not to refute them in an absolute way, and not to confirm them in an absolute way”.³⁴²

The same argument is used to say that the Salaf would have never confirmed or negated a body to Allah in an answer given by Abd al-Rahman ibn Nasir al-Barrak, a member of the teaching staff of the University al-Sa‘ud: he says that “it is not permissible to count these particular words [i.e. such as “body”] as Attributes of God whether to negate it or confirm it”³⁴³.

3.5.2.2.8 ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn ‘Abd al-Khaliq (b.1939 CE)

³³⁹ Here it appears that the author tries to make interpretation appear as a distortion, however it is unlikely to find a group claiming to be Muslim that would at the same time specifically say that a word of the Qur’an should be changed. The aim is to make those who appear to suggest *istawla* as a correct meaning of *istawa* in that verse (and *istawa* indeed carries the meaning of *istawla* in some contexts in Arabic) appear as if they are trying to change the words of the Quran, which is abhorrent to Muslims.

³⁴⁰ We are not aware of any group advocating this.

³⁴¹ http://www.islamtoday.net/questions/show_question_content.cfm?id=113819

³⁴² http://www.islamtoday.net/questions/show_question_content.cfm?id=118405

³⁴³ http://www.islamtoday.net/questions/show_question_content.cfm?id=15576

The last person quoted here is found in a website whose URL keeps changing. ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn ‘Abd al-Khaliq, an Egyptian-born preacher educated in Saudi Arabia and who is now based in Kuwait wrote an article entitled “*al-Radd ‘ala Man ankara Tawhid al-Asma wa l-Sifat*” (which means : “the Refutation against the one who denies the Oneness [of God] in the Names and Attributes”) . He explains (translation mine):

To negate one of the confirmed attributes of God is unbelief:

The scholars of the Salaf have considered a disbeliever the one who negates one of the confirmed attributes of Allah subhanahu wa ta’ala whatever that attribute is, as did Khalid ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Qasri the Amir of Wasit when al-Ja’ad ibn Darham negated the attributes of “hubb” and “makhalah” about Allah tabaraka wa ta’ala. So he [Khalid ibn Abd Allah] killed him in front of the people the day of [Eid] al-Adha, by saying: O you people, make your sacrifices, and may Allah accept your sacrifices, as far as I am concerned my sacrifice is Ja’ad because he claimed that Allah did not take Ibrahim as His khalil.” And also: Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal declared as a blasphemer Jahm ibn Safwan and among his problems, was that he was negating the attribute of “Uluww” to Allah tabaraka wa ta’ala and he wrote his famous letter al-Radd ‘ala al-Zanadiqa therefore calling those who negate the attribute of al-‘Uluww as perverse people. As for imam Abu Hanifa, he was among the strongest ones of all in terms of declaring as blasphemers those who negate the attributes of God.³⁴⁴

Here, it appears that a divergence of understanding of the Attributes of God can lead to one being executed. He also adds (translation mine):

As for the one who used ta’wil, he is excused according to Allah, if he is among the Muslim scholars and among those who are looking for the truth and who run towards it. As for the rest of us, we are not excused if the truth has been exposed to us and we leave it, following such and such person.³⁴⁵

This is his way of dealing with the fact that most of the Sunni scholars did interpret; he solves the issue by saying that those scholars will be forgiven by Allah but that ordinary Muslims doing the same will not.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined that the rhetoric of the WSNS concerning the Attributes of God is identical to that of the personalities from Hanbali circles who were opposed to the Ash‘aris in the previous centuries, as seen in Chapter 2. The WSNS do not bring new arguments, but they deny that any other method than theirs was used by the scholars of the Salaf. We saw that the difference between this debate and those that took place before the rise of Wahhabism is that the Ash‘aris have adopted a defensive

³⁴⁴ http://***.ws/r?i=513&c=3673

³⁴⁵ http://***.ws/r?i=513&c=3674

approach, as the WSNS accused them of being a deviant sect as far as the Attributes of God are concerned. As the next chapter will demonstrate, we will see that it is precisely because this issue of the Attributes of God that the WSNS allowed themselves to wipe out the reference to previous scholars as, according to them, these scholars indulged themselves in deviation.

Chapter 4 The ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’: their teachings

4.1 Introductory remarks

As mentioned in chapter 1, this work is attempting to define the group identified here as the ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’ purely on theological grounds. It is not intended to be a definition made on the basis of whether or not the group condones indiscriminate violence, or whether they think current rulers of Muslim countries should be obeyed or not (and other such issues on which this group is divided and on which much is being written at the moment). Current studies on the so-called Salafis, Jihadi-Salafis and other groups more or less loosely linked to Wahhabism do concur on the idea that what they advocate as a creed is similar.

Quintan Wiktorowicz rightly explains that “the splits are about contextual analysis, not belief”.³⁴⁶ He correctly points out that their basic beliefs are similar and he even takes the notion of the names and Attributes of God as an example in a paragraph entitled “A common creed”³⁴⁷ (although this paragraph is not free from mistakes, the main notion according to which the creed is common is a valid one). Madawi al-Rasheed also clearly defines the approach chosen in her latest book:

(..)this book is not about Wahhabiyya as a theological body of religious knowledge produced over 250 years, nor is it an explanation of the main teachings of the movement. I am not concerned here with Wahhabi debate on God and his names and adjectives, or with definitions of polytheism, or salvation by faith and deeds. I do not deal with Wahhabi debates on naql and aql. I overlook Wahhabi theological positions on Sufism and other Sunni schools and sects in Islam. I only consider these aspects as long as they are relevant to the political debate that is continuing in Saudi Arabia.³⁴⁸

I would like to define my thesis as an approach as differing completely (and I hope, complementarily) to this one: I am not concerned with the –albeit important– divergences of the WSNS concerning matters which are not theological but on the broad theological bases which cut across all these differences, and gather people from the main “trends”: the loyalist (such as al-Fawzan or al-Madhkhali and their followers) i.e. those supportive of the Saudi government/establishment, the reformist (such as al-

³⁴⁶ Quintan Wiktorowicz, ‘Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,’ *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): p.209.

³⁴⁷ ———, ‘Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,’ *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): p.208-14.

³⁴⁸ Madawi al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State*, Cambridge Middle East Studies, 25 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.12.

Hawali and al-‘Awda) and the “jihadi” (with radicalists such as al-Maqdisi, who supports Osama Bin Laden).

Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrated that on the issue of the Attributes of God and whether or not the texts relating to them should be interpreted, all these different factions agree that they should not be.

Now this chapter will provide a description of further ideological points that are, in this author’s view, specific to the WSNS. The first point in this list is their different vision of Islamic history (see 4.2) and it will be demonstrated that this vision is an almost direct consequence of their stance on the Attributes of God. The three other points are: their attitude towards the four Sunni schools (see 4.3), the encompassing definition of innovations that they have adopted (see 4.4), and which makes them consider as innovations practices which were considered hitherto permissible if not rewardable, and their stance on the practice called *tawassul* (asking God through an intermediary) which they equate to worshipping other than God (see 4.5). Their stance against *tawassul* is probably one of the most-well-known features of Wahhabism clearly linked to their emphasis on “Worshipping God alone” (as if suggesting that this is not what the partisans of *tawassul* are doing), which is now constantly used as a describer for the Wahhabi movement. We have already mentioned how Peskes demonstrates the vision of an eighteenth-century pagan Arabian Peninsula being saved by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab has been used extensively in Western academic literature and beyond, without the necessary critical approach to what is, after all, only the self-definition of the Wahhabis.³⁴⁹ This chapter is based on sources such as books and websites deemed representative of the Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis. The material used may come from any of their internal trends.

4.2 The visions of history of the Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis and its relation to the notion of Salaf

What is termed here “a vision of history” is how the WSNS perceive now the establishment of orthodoxy in Islam throughout the centuries. It will be argued here that their perception is different from the one which has, so far, been widely accepted by

³⁴⁹ Esther Peskes, *Muhammad b. ‘Abdalwahhab (1703-92) im Widerstreit : Untersuchungen zur Rekonstruktion der Frühgeschichte der Wahhabiya*, Beirut Texts and Studies (Beirut: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1993).

Sunni scholars (this “traditional” vision will be presented in 4.2.1). They challenge the traditional view of what orthodoxy was known to be. They put less emphasis on the significance of being part of a majority group called "Sunnis", and give more emphasis to being "right" in spite of being a minority, thereby challenging an integral trait of Sunnism that had been acknowledged and accepted: the fact that it was supposed to be the trend to which most Muslims adhered.

Today, the notion of “Sunnism” is highly debated by concerned protagonists, yet for unknown reasons this debate does not seem to be recorded in recent research.³⁵⁰ So far, it is established in academic literature that the theological framework of the vast majority of Muslims in the world was Ash‘arism.³⁵¹ Ash‘arism is the name given to the theological school originally based on al-Ash‘ari’s teachings to provide proofs based on textual evidence from the Qur’an and the hadith as well as on rational arguments.³⁵² Before detailing how the vision upheld by the WSNS differs from the hitherto known definition of Sunnism, we first need to explain the latter concept.

4.2.1 The “traditional” vision of Islamic history

Here, the term “traditional” is used to refer to the vision of Islamic history that has been widely circulated and accepted so far. The three main points of this vision are: the

³⁵⁰ I have not managed to find an academic article dealing with the shifting meaning of "Sunnism" (*Ahl al-Sunna wa al-jama‘a*) today. However, this part will show that nowadays the phrase *Ahl al-Sunna* can refer to two diametrically opposed groups.

³⁵¹ See for example Louis Gardet, *Introduction à la théologie musulmane: essai de théologie comparée*, vol. 37, Etudes de Philosophie Médiévale (Paris: Vrin, 1948); Norman Calder, ‘The limits of Islamic orthodoxy,’ in *Intellectual traditions in Islam*, ed. Farhad Daftary (London: I.B. Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2000); Duncan Black MacDonald, *Development of Muslim theology, jurisprudence, and constitutional theory*, The Semitic series; (New York: Charles Scribner’s sons, 1903), p.186-215; or Abdul Hye, ‘Asharism,’ in *A history of Muslim philosophy. With short accounts of other disciplines and the modern renaissance in Muslim lands*, ed. Mian Mohammad Sharif (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1963), p.243. The attempts by George Makdisi to minimise the impact of the Ash‘ari school notably in Baghdad and Damascus in two articles (George Makdisi, ‘Ash‘ari and the Ash‘arites in Islamic Religious History I,’ *Studia Islamica*, no. 17 (1962), George Makdisi, ‘Ash‘ari and the Ash‘arites in Islamic Religious History II,’ *Studia Islamica*, no. 18 (1963)) have been seriously challenged by Makdisi’s own student in the same year A. L. Tibawi, ‘Origins and character of "al-madrassah",’ *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 25, no. 1/3 (1962); and by Madelung in a 1971 article reprinted in 1985: Wilferd Madelung, ‘The spread of Maturidism and the Turks,’ in *Religious schools and sects in medieval Islam*, ed. Wilferd Madelung (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985), n.3 p.110.

³⁵² Describing Ash‘arism as a theological system based only on rational arguments is one way of dismissing it used by its opponents. It appears, while reading al-Ash‘ari’s books on theology such as *al-Luma‘*, that there is a concerted attempt by al-Ash‘ari to quote verses as illustrations for his arguments, thereby demonstrating that all the main rational arguments he uses are indeed rooted in the scriptures Abu al-Hasan ‘Ali ibn Isma‘il al-Ash‘ari, *The theology of al-Ash‘ari: the Arabic texts of al-Ash‘ari’s Kitab al-Luma‘ and Risalat istihsan al-khawd fi ‘ilm al-kalam*, trans. Richard Joseph McCarthy (Beirut: Impr. catholique, 1953). This edition of *al-Luma‘* also contains a treatise where al-Ash‘ari develops and explains the merits of theological speculation (*kalam*), basing himself on the Qur’an.

importance of belonging to one of two main theological schools and to one of four main legal schools (see 4.2.1.1), the notion of continuity (see 4.2.1.2), and the significance of numeric superiority (see 4.2.1.3).

4.2.1.1 Two theological schools, four legal ones

The leading vision of history concerning Sunnism was that there were two main imams who vindicated the creed of the majority of the Muslims against several opponents in the early centuries. These were: Abu l-Hasan al-Ash‘ari (d.324 AH/935-6 CE) and Abu Mansur Muhammad al-Maturidi (d.333 AH/ 944 CE). They both evidently held the belief of the Salaf (whom they are a part of as they were born before the end of the third century) and managed to win the battle against the deviant groups which innovated alternative tenets of Faith. Later, when they established themselves in different parts of the world, scholars would adhere to one of these schools and be therefore either Ash‘ari or Maturidi as far as theology is concerned.³⁵³ This "traditional" vision, ("traditional" here in the meaning that it was upheld by a whole array of Muslim scholars³⁵⁴ and by academics³⁵⁵) is, today, the vision of history of those that will be referred to, for the purpose of this study, the "Sunnis not claiming to be Salafis" but who consider themselves inheritors of the Salaf nonetheless. Contemporary intellectuals and scholars who attempt to defend this vision (and whose works will be quoted in this section as illustrations) are: Muhammad ibn ‘Alawi al-Maliki, a Saudi cleric who was opposed to the Wahhabi doctrine on many issues, Sa’id Ramadan al-Buti, a renowned cleric from Syria (quoted in 3.5.1.1), ‘Ali Jum‘a, Mufti of Egypt, Gibril Fouad Haddad, a Lebanese-born preacher and translator, who wrote articles dealing with a variety of religious

³⁵³ Madelung shows that Maturidism was more restricted in place, and took more time to being established but was still considered part of Islamic orthodoxy Wilferd Madelung, ‘The spread of Maturidism and the Turks,’ in *Religious schools and sects in medieval Islam*, ed. Wilferd Madelung (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985). Other articles explain that Maturidism must have started before Ash‘arism due to the dates of birth of their respective founders (i.e. al-Ash‘ari was born in 260 but starting to preach orthodox views at the age of forty, i.e. at the beginning of the fourth century, whereas Imam Maturidi, probably born in 238AH/ 853 CE, would have started to preach at around the age of forty, or in any case before the end of the third century: A.K.M. Ayyub ‘Ali, ‘Maturidism,’ in *A history of Muslim philosophy. With short accounts of other disciplines and the modern renaissance in Muslim lands*, ed. Mian Mohammad Sharif (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1963).

³⁵⁴ For Muslim scholars who define Sunnism in this way, one can refer for example to an introductory chapter of al-Sinan’s book where quotes of Muslim classical erudites such as al-Baghdadi (d.429 AH/ 1037 CE), al-Shirazi (d.476 AH/ 1083 CE), Ibn ‘Asakir (d. 571 AH/ 1176 CE) al-Subki (d. 771 AH/ 1370 CE), al-Suyuti (d.911 AH/ 1505 CE), al-Murtada al-Zabidi (d.1205 AH/ 1791 CE), among others, are given to this effect, together with references: Hamad al-Sinan and Fawzi al-‘Injari, *Ahl al-sunna al-Asha‘ira, shihadatu ‘ulama’i al-umma* (2006), p.81-88.

³⁵⁵ See note 351 page 121.

issues, Nuh Ha Mim Keller, American translator of the *Maqasid* by al-Nawawi,³⁵⁶ who regularly gives a series of talks in America and Europe on contemporary issues facing Muslims living in the West, and Ebrahim Desai, a Hanafi preacher based in South Africa who is running a website called ask-imam.com.

According to this vision, there is no real difference in terms of creed between al-Ash‘ari and al-Maturidi, the main differences being terminological questions and their consequences.³⁵⁷ Furthermore, neither is there a difference between the creed of al-Ash‘ari and/or al-Maturidi and that of the Salaf, because both al-Ash‘ari and al-Maturidi are deemed scholars from that era [i.e. the Salaf period] who fought against the different innovating groups and won the battle at that time. The proponents of this vision also firmly believe that they are following in the footsteps of the Salaf because they are following, in *fiqh*, the schools of the four imams who all lived during the Salaf period: Abu Hanifa (d.150 AH/ 767 CE), Malik ibn ‘Anas (d.179 AH/ 796 CE), Muhammad Idris al-Shafi‘i (d.204 AH/ 820 CE), and Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d.241 AH/ 855 CE). Sunni scholars have agreed that these four were the best at extracting religious judgements from the Qur’an and the Sunna.

To illustrate the importance of the two theological schools in Sunnism, we can quote Mufti Ebrahim Desai who, when answering a question on what the differences between the Ash‘aris and the Maturidis are, said:

Imaam of the Asharites is Abul Hasan Ashari (RA) [sic] and the Imaam of the Maturidites is Abu Mansoor Maaturidi (RA).[sic]. Both were adherents of the Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamaa`. There is no real difference in Aqeedah between the two. The differences are only in the different use of words and ways of interpretation. And Allah Ta'ala Knows Best.³⁵⁸

Desai minimises the differences between the two schools and stresses that they are both “Ahl al-Sunna”. Sa‘id Ramadan al-Buti, has also this brief answer to a similar question:

³⁵⁶ Abu Zakariya Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi, *Al-Nawawi's manual of Islam*, trans. Nuh Ha Mim Keller (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1996).

³⁵⁷ MacDonald mentions that Muslim scholars have found 13 such points of divergence, most of which they admitted were mere “combats of words” Duncan Black MacDonald, *Development of Muslim theology, jurisprudence, and constitutional theory*, The Semitic series; (New York: Charles Scribner's sons, 1903), p.193. One of their main point of difference about “*istiithna*” in faith for example, is studied here: Toshihiko Izutsu, *The concept of belief in Islamic theology*, Studies in the humanities and social relations v. 6. (New York: Books for Libraries, 1980), p.194-203.

³⁵⁸ Mufti Ebrahim Desai, ‘What are the differences in the aqeedah of the Asharites and the Maturidiites?’, Ask-Imam.com, <http://www.islam.tc/ask-imam/view.php?q=14342> Accessed on 30 July 2006.

The Ash'arites and Maturidites are those who have preserved and transmitted the creed of Ahl al-Sunna whom the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him praised and ordered to be followed [when he said:] "Stick to my tradition and to the tradition of the right-guided caliphs". The Ash'arites are named after the Imam 'Ali Ibn Isma'il Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari and the Maturidites after Imam Abu Mansur al-Maturidi. Both men are salient figures among our Salaf who make the creed of the Salaf triumph, i.e. that of the people of the Sunna. None among them invented a new creed or a new religious school.

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Al-Buti notes that al-Ash'ari and al-Maturidi were themselves part of the Salaf and that therefore following them is part of the injunction of the Prophet to adhere to his tradition. In an article on an exposition of who al-Ash'ari and the Ash'aris are, Gibril Fouad Haddad writes (original language is English):

"The Ash'ari scholars were foremost among those who refuted the Hashwiyya³⁶⁰ from the time al-Ash'ari first appeared until that of al-Bayhaqi and Ibn 'Abd al-Salam. These Ash'ari scholars fought innovators by means of the pen and the tongue until they came to be known as the synonym, or rather the definition of Ahl al-Sunna as described in the words of al-Bayhaqi in his letter to `Amid al-Mulk: "Those of the Hanafis, Malikis, and Shafi'is that do not go the way of divesting Allah of His Attributes (ta'teel) [sic] as the Mu'tazila³⁶¹ do, nor the way of likening Allah to creation (tashbeeh) as the Mujassima³⁶² do." Just as the Prophet and the Companions embodied the "Middle Community" praised by Allah in His Book (2:143), the Ash'aris embodied the "Saved Group" praised by the Prophet in the hadith of the seventy-three sects. That is, the group that holds a middle ground between the vagaries of different heretical doctrines"³⁶³

Haddad stresses the importance of the role played by the Ash'aris in preserving and defending the Sunni creed, and quotes al-Bayhaqi (d.458 AH/ 1066 CE) to support his definition. There is also an article written by al-Maliki which we can quote almost in its entirety as it contains a summary of the case for considering the Ash'aris as being an

³⁵⁹ Arabic text: Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti, 'Ma hiyya 'aqida al-muslimin qabla zuhur al-asha'ira wa al-maturidiyya?,' Bouti.net, http://www.bouti.net/bouti_fatawa_c76.htm#12 Accessed on 30 July 2006.

French text: 'Maqalat hawla al-Buti wa al-Salafiyya,' Ahlalhadeeth Forum, <http://www.ahlalhadeeth.com/vb/showthread.php?t=63500&highlight=%D9%C7%E5%D1+%D3%E1%D> Accessed on 6 June 2007.

³⁶⁰ Literally, from *hashw*, "farce", and hence derogative for "prolix and useless discourse". It is the name given to those who "uncritically and even prompted by prejudice, recognize as genuine and interpret literally the crudely anthropomorphic traditions.": *EI*², vol.3, p.269. It is commonly used by Ash'ari scholars as a synonym for "the most extreme anthropomorphists".

³⁶¹ A theological trend which is sometimes described as having tried to introduce rational arguments into Islamic theological system. It is in the literature against that group that one can most easily pinpoint the differences between them and the Orthodox sunnis; it can therefore be argued that they played an important part in defining orthodoxy. In addition to that,, Imam al-Ash'ari was the student of one of their most prominent figures: al-Jubba'i, and his intimate knowledge of their theory helped him retaliate when he became the leader of the Sunnis in the theological scene. For more on their actual features and interpretations one can consult: *EI*², vol.7, pp.783-93.

³⁶² Name given to those who attribute a body to God, here "anthropomorphists" is used for *mujassima* as well as *mushabbiha* (literally: those who imply God resembles His creations).

³⁶³ Gibril Fouad Haddad, 'al-Asha'ira- the Ash'aris,' Sunnah.org, <http://www.sunnah.org/aqida/alashaira9.htm> Accessed on 30 July 2006.

integral part of Ahl al-Sunna. The article was originally written in Arabic in a book by the author where he gathered a series of articles and lectures dealing with current issues faced by the Muslim community.³⁶⁴ It was then translated into English (used here) and French and uploaded onto various websites.³⁶⁵ It is relatively lengthy, but it gives a good idea of what is at stake here in this debate. He explains:

"Many sons/daughters of Muslims are ignorant of the Ash'ari School, whom it represents, and its positions on the tenets of the Islamic faith (aqidah), and yet some of them are not God-fearing enough to refrain from accusing it of deviance, departure from the religion of Islam, and heresy about the attributes of Allah. The ignorance of the Ash'ari school is a cause of rendering the unity of the Ahl al-Sunnah dispersing its ranks. Some have gone as far as to consider the Ash'aris among the categories of heretical sects, though it is beyond me how believers can be linked with misbelievers, or how Sunni Muslims can be considered equal with the most extreme faction of the Mu'tazilites,³⁶⁶ the Jahmites.³⁶⁷

"Shall We deal with Muslims as We do criminals? How is it that you judge?" [Qur'an 68:35-36]

The Ash'aris are the Imams of the distinguished figures of guidance among the scholars of the Muslims, whose knowledge has filled the world from east to west, and whom people have unanimously concurred upon their excellence, scholarship, and religiousness. They include the first rank of Sunni scholars and the most brilliant of their luminaries, who stood in the face of the excesses committed by the Mu'tazilites, and who constitute whole sections of the foremost Imams of Hadith, Sacred Law, Quranic exegesis. Shaykh al-Islam Ahmad ibn Hajar 'Asqalani [emphasis not mine as for all the subsequent ones] (d. 852/1449; Rahimullah), the mentor of Hadith scholars and author of the book "Fath al-Bari bi sharh Sahih al-Bukhari", which not a single Islamic scholar can dispense with, was Ash'ari. The shaykh of the scholars of Sunni Islam, Imam Nawawi (d. 676/1277; Rahimullah), author of "Sharh Sahih Muslim" and many other famous works, was Ash'ari. The master of Qur'anic exegetes, Imam Qurtubi (d. 671/1273; Rahimullah), author of "al-Jami' li ahkan al-Qur'an", was Ash'ari. Shaykh al-Islam ibn Hajar Haytami (d. 974/1567; Rahimullah), who wrote "al-Zawajir 'an iqtiraf al-kaba'ir", was Ash'ari. The Shaykh of Sacred Law and Hadith, the conclusive definitive Zakariyya Ansari (d. 926/1520; Rahimullah), was Ash'ari. Imam Abu Bakr Baqillani (d. 403/1013; Rahimullah), Imam 'Asqalani; Imam Nasafi (d. 710/1310; Rahimullah); Imam Shirbini (d. 977/1570; Rahimullah); Abu Hayyan Tawhidi, author of the Qur'anic commentary "al-Bahr al-muhit"; Imam ibn Juzayy (d. 741/1340; Rahimullah); author of "al-Tashil fi 'ulum al-Tanzil"; and others - all of these were Imams of the Ash'aris. If we wanted to name all of the top scholars of Hadith, Qur'anic exegesis, and Sacred Law who were Imams of the Ash'aris, we would be hard put to do so and would require volumes merely to list these illustrious figures whose wisdom has filled the earth from

³⁶⁴ Muhammad ibn 'Alawi al-Maliki al-Hasani, *Mafahim yajibun an tusahhaha* (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-'alamiyya, 2002).

³⁶⁵ See in French: ———, 'La vérité sur les Ash'arites,' Islamophile.org, Accessed on 28 September 2008; and in English :Muhammad ibn 'Alawi al-Maliki al-Hasani, 'The Ash'ari School,' Masud.co.uk, <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/misc/ashari.htm> Accessed on 23 July 2006.

³⁶⁶ See note 361 page 124.

³⁶⁷ A sect which denied the distinct existence of all of God's attributes. Their alleged leader, Jahm ibn Safwan, is presented as believing that Hellfire has an end, which is not the orthodox view. There is an account of their beliefs in : Abu Mansur 'Abd al-Qahir Ibn Tahir al-Baghdadi, *al-Farq bayna al-firaq wa-bayan al-firqa al-najiyah minhum* (Beirut: Dar al-afaq al-jadida, 1973), p.199.

east to west. And it is incumbent upon us to give credit where credit is due, recognising the merit of those of knowledge and virtue who have served the Sacred Law of the Greatest Messengers (Allah bless him and grant him peace). What good is to be hoped for us if we impugn our foremost scholars and righteous forbearers with charges of aberrancy and misguidance? Or how should Allah give us the benefit of their scholarship if we believe it is deviance and departure from the way of Islam? I ask you, is there a single Islamic scholar of the present day, among all the PhD.'s and geniuses, who has done what Ibn Hajar 'Asqalani or Imam Nawawi have, of the service rendered by these two noble Imams (May Allah enfold them in His mercy and bliss) to the pure Prophetic Sunnah? How should we charge them and all Ash'aris with aberrancy when it is we who are in need of their scholarship? Or how can we take knowledge from them if they were in error? For as Imam Zuhri (d. 124/742; rahimullah) says, "This knowledge is religion, so look well to whom you are taking your religion from."

Is it not sufficient for someone opposed to the Ash'aris to say, "Allah have mercy on them, they used reasoning (ijtihad) in figuratively interpreting the divine attributes, which it would have been fitter for them not to do"; instead of accusing them of deviance and misguidance, or displaying anger towards whoever considers them to be of the Sunni Community? If Imams Nawawi, 'Asqalani, Qurtubi, Baqillani, al-Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, Haytami, Zakariyyah Ansari, and many others were not among the most brilliant scholars and illustrious geniuses, or of the Sunni Community, then who are the Sunnis?

I sincerely entreat all who call others to this religion or who work in the field of propagating Islam to fear Allah respecting the honour of the Community of Muhammad (Allah bless him and grant him peace) is possessed of goodness until the Final Hour, we are bereft of any if we fail to acknowledge the worth and excellence of our learned."

In conclusion, the Ahl al-Sunnah wa l-Jama'ah are the true followers of the Prophet (Peace be upon him) and his Companions (Allah be pleased with them all), followed by those who trod their path for the last 1400 years. It is in summary the followers of Imam Abu'l Hasan al-Ash'ari (Rahimullah) and Imam Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (Rahimullah) in Aqeedah, and this saved sect is represented by the adherents of one of the four schools - Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali today. This is the sect which has had the largest following throughout Islamic history, as-Sawad al-Az'am as confirmed by the Qur'anic and Ahadith based evidence and it will remain dominant until the Hour is established, inshaAllah.³⁶⁸

With this article we can see that for the 'Sunnis-not-claiming-to-be-Salafis', the two main theological schools as well as the four main legal ones are central in the definition of what Sunnism is. According to them, if all the famous Ash'ari scholars were to be considered misguided or worse, then there will be very few personalities left to be considered as orthodox. This is a recurrent argument. Considering Ash'aris outside of Ahl al-Sunna would also go against the notion of continuity which is the second fundamental point of this vision.

³⁶⁸ Muhammad ibn 'Alawi al-Maliki al-Hasani, 'The Ash'ari School,' Masud.co.uk, <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/misc/ashari.htm> Accessed on 23 July 2006.

4.2.1.2 Notion of continuity

Another feature of this vision is the notion that there has been a continuous chain of scholars on the “right creed” to whom Muslims are indebted today. There is no emphasis placed upon the idea that there were gaps in Muslim history during which it was hard to find somebody on the right path. On the contrary, it is considered that on the whole, the teachings of the previous generations can be relied upon. A good description of this notion of continuity is given by Calder:

"a commentary on a commentary on an epitome of the law- the layered glosses of the work incidentally neatly illustrate the stress on continuity, on preserving the tradition, on acknowledging diachronic continuity , which I have already identified as an essential part of the Sunni religious experience"³⁶⁹ (here Calder is referring to *Hashiyat radd al-muhtar*³⁷⁰ of Ibn 'Abidin, a renowned Damascene Hanafi scholar d.1252 AH/ d.1842 CE).

The author here uses the physical organisation of classical works of jurisprudence to illustrate his point. He also noticed that the earlier generations of commentators are granted great importance by Sunni scholars, to the extent that subsequent commentaries and exegeses are sometimes little more than a reminder of what those earlier scholars said. Although this might be interpreted as a lack of creativity or originality, in Sunni Islam it is actually a sign of acknowledgement of the work of preservation undertaken by earlier generations. Calder adds:

[...] and there is also a tendency for Muslims not to comment directly. When a scholar writes a large tafsir, he explores the views of earlier authorities, including of course the views of the Prophet himself, the views of his Companions, the views of the next generations, until at the end, he might say “and my view is...” or “My preferred view is “, thus expressing preferences within the tradition, rather than pinning down the meaning of the Qur'an.³⁷¹

This statement will help us differentiate the vision of the WSNS with that of the Sunnis not claiming to be Salafis:

(...) Sunni Islam is a religion in which although everything in one sense is taken back to the scripture, in another sense it is ongoing. It is a religion which seems to demand of its participants that appropriate acknowledgement be granted to the community as it develops through time (and as it is represented by scholars) (...) every later statement

³⁶⁹ Norman Calder, ‘The limits of Islamic orthodoxy,’ in *Intellectual traditions in Islam*, ed. Farhad Daftary (London: I.B. Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2000), p.82.

³⁷⁰ Muhammad Amin ibn 'Umar Ibn 'Abidin, *Hashiyat Radd al-muhtar 'ala al-Durr al-mukhtar, sharh Tanwir al-absar fi fiqh madhhab al-Imam Abi Hanifah al-Nu'man, wa-yalihi takmilat Ibn 'Abidin, li-najl al-mu'allif*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1992).

³⁷¹ Norman Calder, ‘The limits of Islamic orthodoxy,’ in *Intellectual traditions in Islam*, ed. Farhad Daftary (London: I.B. Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2000), p.78.

of faith or assessment of meaning in the Qur'an takes into account the earlier statements worked out by the community.³⁷²

This acknowledgement is central in Sunni Islam, i.e. successive generations of scholars who are considered on the right path and not misguided.³⁷³ This notion of continuity also emerges in the articles quoted in 4.2.1.1 such as in al-Maliki's, when he states that:

the Ahl al-Sunna wa l-Jama'a are the true followers of the Prophet (Peace be upon him) and his Companions (Allah be pleased with them all), followed by those who trod their path for the last 1400 years.³⁷⁴

There is no doubt that in every epoch of these 1400 years, it is considered that there were a plethora of scholars who were on the correct path. Not just a few, or a handful of them, but many of them, the majority of them. The high number of renowned scholars who adhered to one of the two theological schools and one of the four legal schools is deemed significant for the Sunnis not claiming to be Salafis.

4.2.1.3 Numeric superiority

In addition to the two major theological trends, the four schools of law, and the notion of continuity, another important feature of this vision of history is the numeric superiority of its holders, which is considered, per se, as attesting to their orthodoxy. It is considered that the majority of the Muslim world follows either Ash'ari or Maturidi in creed, and one of the four schools of jurisprudence.³⁷⁵ They also firmly believe that this superiority in numbers plays in their favour and they then narrate several sayings of the Prophet to that effect. One such hadith is the hadith of the "73 sects", which exists in many different versions, all mentioning that previous religious communities have been divided into numerous sects, but that his will be divided into even more sects. Some

³⁷² ———, 'The limits of Islamic orthodoxy,' in *Intellectual traditions in Islam*, ed. Farhad Daftary (London: I.B. Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2000), p.78

³⁷³ Wahhabis self-named Salafis completely jump this heritage and do not allow for references to be taken from a whole array of scholars whom they deem misguided in terms of creed while the rest of the community considered them reliable on these issues (we will see this below in 4.2.2.2 page 140).

³⁷⁴ Muhammad ibn 'Alawi al-Maliki al-Hasani, 'The Ash'ari School,' Masud.co.uk, <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/misc/ashari.htm> Accessed on 23 July 2006.

³⁷⁵ There are debates about whether a Muslim layman born in a country dominantly Maliki for example, and who learned how to pray there according to Maliki principles, automatically qualifies or not to be called "a Maliki". Some argue that for a person to be called "Maliki" they would need to master the proofs given by Imam Malik before he gave such and such judgement. However, it appears that laymen are referred to in those terms (Hanafis, Shafi'is, Malikis etc) because the only way they know how to pray is derived from the dominant school of their environment, regardless of whether or not they know what prompted the Imam founder of the school to give such judgements. Therefore this is why I allow myself to count laymen as belonging to a given school and all of them count as Sunnis. In any case, were we to consider that laymen should be taken out of the count, then the argument stills follows, as the vast majority of Sunni scholars will be either Ash'aris or Maturidis and following one of the four schools of law.

versions mention that the Jews were divided into 71 sects, the Christians into 72, and that Prophet Muhammad's community will be divided into 73. All of those sects will deserve Hellfire except one. When the companions of Prophet Muhammad asked which one, the answer given was “*al-jama'a*” (i.e. the majority).³⁷⁶ There are several *sahih* versions of the hadith where the saved group is named as “*al-jama'a*”: according to one, reported by Ibn Majah (d.273 AH/887 CE) and Abu Dawud (d. 186 AH/ 802 CE), the Prophet said :

“Banu Isra'il has been divided into 71 sects, and my community will be divided into 72 sects, all of which are in Hellfire, except one: *al-jama'a*”³⁷⁷.

What is at stake here is the meaning of *jama'a*. If it is taken to mean “the majority”, then that gives an objective criterion with which assessing the correctness of a group: its size. This is the interpretation that the Sunnis not claiming to be Salafis favour. For example, both al-Baghdadi (d.429 AH/1037 CE) and al-Shahrastani (d.548 AH/1153 CE), who wrote heresiographical books about all the different sects claiming to be Muslims, start with accounts of this hadith,³⁷⁸ with several versions referenced. Al-Baghdadi states that the majority of the Muslims belong to the group he describes last, i.e. the saved one. As for al-Shahrastani, he explains that when al-Ash'ari left the Mu'tazilites, “he joined the group of the Salaf, and he formed the doctrine which has become the “Ahl al-Sunna wa al-jama'a doctrine”, which is precisely the group he said at the beginning would be saved.³⁷⁹ The famous Muslim scholar and mystic al-Ghazzali (d.505 AH/1111 CE) also acknowledges that there are so many reports of the Prophet

³⁷⁶ According to some other versions, he answered “What I and my companions are upon” (i.e. “those who are upon what I and my companions are upon”): Abu Mansur 'Abd al-Qahir Ibn Tahir al-Baghdadi, *al-Farq bayna al-firqa wa-bayan al-firqa al-najiyya minhum* (Beirut: Dar al-afaq al-jadida, 1973), p.14 and Muhammad ibn 'Isa al-Tirmidhi, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, 10v in 5 vols. (Hims: Maktaba Dar al- Da'va, 1965), vol.7, hadith 2643, page 43, p.297-298 Al-Tirmidhi classifies this hadith as *mufassar gharib* which means that it needs further interpretation. In some other versions he would have answered *al-Sawad al-A'dham*, which means “the majority”. We have not been able to locate this narration with this answer but it is often circulated.

³⁷⁷ Muhammad ibn Yazid Ibn Majah, *Sunan* (Cairo: 'Isa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1972), vol 2, hadith 3993, p.1322 and also Sulayman ibn al-Ash'ath al-Sijistani Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1983; reprint, Hums, Muhammad Ali al-Sayyid), vol 5, hadith 4596.

³⁷⁸ Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *al-Milal wa al-nihal* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1985; reprint, Cairo 1961), vol.1, p.11 and Abu Mansur 'Abd al-Qahir Ibn Tahir al-Baghdadi, *al-Farq bayna al-firqa wa-bayan al-firqa al-najiyya minhum* (Beirut: Dar al-afaq al-jadida, 1973), p.4-5.

³⁷⁹ Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *al-Milal wa al-nihal* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1985; reprint, Cairo 1961), vol. 1, p.93. This is also noted by Gimaret who actually uses this as one among many arguments for his classifying of al-Shahrastani as an Ashari Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *Livre des sectes et des religions*, trans. Daniel Gimaret and Guy Monnot, 2 vols. (Leuven, Peeters: Unesco, 1986-1993), vol 1, p.53.

insisting upon following the majority that they could not be discarded.³⁸⁰ The Ash‘ari scholar and commentator of the Qur’an Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d.606 AH/1209 CE) also discusses this hadith with this answer from the Prophet “*al-jama‘a, al-jama‘a, al-jama‘a*”. He states that the answer of the Prophet is to be taken as an indication that the majority is a sign of the community of the faithful, because if it were not for that, there would have been no meaning to his describing the saved *firqa* (group) by being the *jama‘a* (which also means “a group”).³⁸¹ The argument is that the Prophet would not have answered “the group”, to the question “which group will be saved?” but rather, he was referring to another meaning of *jama‘a*, i.e. “the majority”. This particular notion of numeric superiority as a criterion to recognise the saved sect is, as we will see below, fiercely debated by Wahhabi self-named Salafi groups, as they are a clear minority. However, it is one factor that goes some way in explaining why ‘Sunnis-not-claiming-to-be-Salafis’ seem so confident of them being part of the saved sect: it is because they observe that people around the world, from different cultures, histories and backgrounds, do indeed follow one of the two theological schools, and one out of the four Sunni schools of law. As an example, Mufti Ebrahim Desai answers on his website ask-imam.com, when asked a question on the issue of which “group” is correct :

Now if we take a quick survey of the Muslims in the world we would find that while the Wahabis make up a minority, even in the Arab lands, with probably only Saudia [sic] containing a majority of them, the remainder of the ummah are on the Ashari and Maturidi Aqeedah eg. 200 million Muslims in Indonesia, about 400 million in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, another 150 million in China, Malaysia etc, hundreds of millions in Africa, millions in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Palestine etc; all these are ashari's and maturidi's who make up the ahlus sunnah wal jama'ah [sic]. We thus have no need to fear their baseless arguments, and Allah Ta'ala Knows Best.³⁸²

This text shows that Mufti Ebrahim Desai is confident he is right for the mere reason that the followers of the four schools are more numerous than the Wahhabis, and that the Prophet considered number as a determinant factor. There is another recurring

³⁸⁰ Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali, *al-Mustashfa min ‘ilm al-usul wa bi-dhaylihi Fawatih al-rahamut bi-sharh Musallam al-thubut fi usul al-fiqh*, Reprint of Cairo Edition 1904-1907 ed., 2 vols. (Baghdad: Maktaba al-Muthanna, 1970), vol 1, p.175.

³⁸¹ Fakhr al-Din Muhammad ibn ‘Umar al-Razi, *al-Tafsir al-kabir*, 32 vols. (Egypt: al-Matba‘a al-Bahiyya al-misriyya, 1934), vol 21, p.219. It appears to me that the whole passage when taken into account, shows clearly that al-Razi, far from rejecting the hadith altogether, accepts it, explains its meaning and shows that one should simply understand that the community will be divided in such a way that no new sect would appear (which one could understand as: new groups will always be a resurgence of different subdivisions which have previously existed, and there is this tendency indeed, in Islamic scholarship, to attempt to find roots to new groups in the teachings of other groups that had appeared in the past).

³⁸² Mufti Ebrahim Desai, ‘Why does a majority of Hanafis and Shafii today follow the Aqeedah of the Maturidi/Ashari even though Imam Shafii and Imam Abou Hanifa followed the Aqeedah of the Salaf?’, Ask-Imam.com, <http://www.islam.tc/ask-imam/view.php?q=14342> Accessed on 30 July 2006.

argument that can be summed up as “if Ahl al-Sunna is not the Ash‘aris then who was?”, which al-Maliki used in the article above where he says:

If Imams Nawawi, 'Asqalani, Qurtubi, Baqillani, al-Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, Haytami, Zakariyyah Ansari, and many others were not among the most brilliant scholars and illustrious geniuses, or of the Sunni Community, then who are the Sunnis?³⁸³

This argument is one of the most powerful according to the ‘Sunnis-not-claiming-to-be-Salafis’, and probably one of the most difficult to deal with for the WSNS. In effect, it means that the WSNS can only be vague and ambiguous when dealing with figures of the past such as Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani or al-Nawawi, because dismissing such scholars completely might make their followers (especially the young ones) doubtful about their honesty. On the other hand, acknowledging them as great scholars could damage their own arguments as neither of those two or the others quoted above had a similar outlook on visiting graves, intercession, the Attributes of God and the like.³⁸⁴

To sum up the vision of history of the ‘Sunnis-not-claiming-to-be-Salafis’, we can say that for them, Ahl al-sunna wa l-jama‘a is none other than themselves. They consider that al-Asha‘ari and al-Maturidi have defeated different groups labelled as the Mu‘tazila,³⁸⁵ the Jahmiyya,³⁸⁶ the Murji‘a,³⁸⁷ the Jabriyya,³⁸⁸ the Mujassima³⁸⁹ also called Hashwiyya,³⁹⁰ and the Rafida.³⁹¹ Ash‘arism and Maturidism have then become the dominant theological schools throughout the Muslim world and therefore being a Sunni means to adhere to one of them as well as to one of the four main schools of Law.

³⁸³ Muhammad ibn ‘Alawi al-Maliki al-Hasani, ‘The Ash‘ari School,’ Masud.co.uk, <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/misc/ashari.htm> Accessed on 23 July 2006.

³⁸⁴ This ambiguous position is studied in 4.2.2.1

³⁸⁵ See note 361 page 124.

³⁸⁶ See note 367 page 125.

³⁸⁷ Literally “those who defer judgement”, as originally they were suspending their judgement about whether ‘Uthman or ‘Ali should have been the next caliph. They were described, in Ash‘ari polemical works, as people who believed that a Muslim would be forgiven of all his sins even though he died without repenting from them, and regardless of whether these sins were considered among the biggest or not, i.e. the same way that good deeds are not supposed to benefit the non-believer, sins would not harm the believer. But Madelung is of the view that “Any description of the Murdjiia as either laxists or as raising excessive hope for divine forgiveness, even though suggested by some early anti-Murdjiite polemics, is basically mistaken.”: *EP*, vol.2, p.365.

³⁸⁸ Literally “those who hold the doctrine of “compulsion”, i.e. the idea that man does not really act and that only God does. This belief was combated by Ash‘ari scholars who insisted men are not like feathers in the wind but rather that they have a choice which is under the will of God (notion of *kasb*). They are also called sometimes “Mujbira”, with the same meaning.

³⁸⁹ See note 362 p. 124.

³⁹⁰ See note 360 p. 124.

³⁹¹ Also “*al-Rawafid*”. Literally: “the deniers”. This term is used in polemical works to refer pejoratively to the Twelver Shi‘as. For a detailed account of the history of the word and the movement it refers to one can read Kohlberg’s notice in *EP*, vol.8, pp.386-89.

Now that we have described the most widespread vision of Islamic history, we can move on to detail the view of the WSNS.

4.2.2 The vision of history of the ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’

This vision of history is gaining momentum and is challenging the one described above on every point. The WSNS characterise themselves by their conviction that the Ash‘aris are not the inheritors of al-Ash‘ari (see 4.2.2.1), and are not even part of Ahl al-sunna wa al-jama‘a, because they allow interpretation of the non explicit religious texts on the Attributes of God. The WSNS also consider that, for a long period throughout history, only a handful of scholars and people remained on the correct Islamic creed (see 4.2.2.2). Finally, they do not grant any significance to the fact that the Ash‘aris have been a majority from the third-fourth centuries AH (ninth/tenth centuries CE) up until today (see 4.2.2.3).

4.2.2.1 Ash‘arism as a misguidance rejected by al-Ash‘ari himself

The WSNS argue that the position held by the Ash‘aris regarding the Attributes of God was never “orthodox” and never will be, and does not allow them to be counted as part of Ahl al-Sunna for this very reason. Here, we can see that the issue of the Attributes of God has a direct consequence on which scholars to follow, who to grant authority to, and also who to consider oneself the inheritor of. In this section, we will study on what grounds the WSNS believe al-Ash‘ari denied his own theological thoughts, then we will see why they consider Ash‘ari scholars as deviant and therefore not part of Ahl al-Sunna, and we will discuss why their rejection of the Ash‘ari scholars constitutes a dilemma.

It is commonly agreed by both the Sunnis not claiming to be Salafis and the WSNS, that al-Ash‘ari did start off as a Mu‘tazili for several decades.³⁹² However, their opinions diverge on what happened after that. For the “Sunnis not claiming to be Salafis”, al-Ash‘ari managed to use his knowledge of the Mu‘tazilite theories to actually defeat them and remained on his new doctrine until his death. In stark contrast, the WSNS consider that, before dying, he changed a second time, and then arrived to what they consider the real creed of Ahl al-sunna wa al-jama‘a. According to the WSNS, after his

³⁹² One detailed account of his life can be found in Daniel Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ash‘ari* (Paris: Cerf, 1990). Some aspects of his life (such as how he changed from Mu‘tazilism to Sunnism can also be found here for example Rosalind W. Gwynne, ‘Al-Jubba‘i, al-Ash‘ari and the 3 brothers : the uses of fiction,’ *Muslim World* 75 (1985) as well as in classical works by his followers such as ‘Ali ibn al-Hasan Ibn ‘Asakir, *Tabyin kadhīb al-muftari fi-ma nusiba ila al-Imam Abi al-Hasan al-Ash‘ari* (Beirut: Dar al-kitab al-‘arabi, 1979).

death, people still following his deviant school made it flourish and spread it all around the world, being guilty of *taymi'*, i.e. of being “too soft” against innovations (being innovators themselves), and this would explain why ignorance, blasphemy, and polytheism, flourished in the *Umma* (the Islamic community). The WSNS do not possess any declaration from al-Ash‘ari or any letter from him explaining his alleged second change of mind, or even a sentence where regret of his second phase after Mu‘tazilism was expressed. However, it is the official stance of the WSNS that he did change his mind. Their main argument is to rely on copies of a book entitled *al-Ibana* that they consider his last book but that others consider as among his first ones after he left Mu‘tazilism.³⁹³ Regardless of whether it was written first or last, current copies of this work contain elements which are inconsistent with al-Ash‘ari’s known doctrine, such as the saying that God has two eyes (“*aynayn*”) when this phrase as such is not mentioned in the Qur’an or in any hadith. However, it appears that the WSNS deem this phrase, and a couple of similar ones, to be found in the copies that we now possess of this book, a strong enough proof to allow them to claim that al-Ash‘ari abandoned his teachings. Some of the opponents of the WSNS point out that if al-Ash‘ari really had changed his mind a second time, therefore following a third path, it is not too much to expect at least a trace, written or oral, of his change of heart, and a trace of at least the same scale as his first change from Mu‘tazilism to Sunnism.³⁹⁴ However, no such trace is available, be it from his immediate disciples, or his books. This does not prevent the WSNS from adopting and spreading their claim that al-Ash‘ari without a doubt would have nothing to do with Ash‘arism, following in this matter Ibn Taymiyya before them.³⁹⁵ Salih al-Fawzan (see 3.5.1.1), one of the prominent defenders of the official clergy of Saudi Arabia, declares:

The scholars of Egypt and the shaykhs of al-Azhar defend their creed by the madhhab of Abu l-Hasan al-Ash‘ari, and Iraq, Tunis, and Morocco by the madhhab of al-Ash‘ari, and the answer to this is to tell them:

³⁹³ There are two balanced articles on this issue: one by Ibn Hamid ‘Ali at the end of his translation of *Daf’ Shubah al-Tashbih* and entitled *Kitab al-Ibana: a case study* in :Abu al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn ‘Ali Ibn al-Jawzi, *The Attributes of God*, trans. ‘Abdullah Ibn Hamid ‘Ali (Bristol: Amal Press, 2006), p.117-23 and also one by MacCarthy at the end of his translation of *Kitab al-Luma’* entitled *A note on the Ibana*: Abu al-Hasan ‘Ali ibn Isma‘il al-Ash‘ari, *The theology of al-Ash‘ari: the Arabic texts of al-Ash‘ari’s Kitab al-Luma’ and Risalat istihsan al-khawd fi ‘ilm al-kalam*, trans. Richard Joseph McCarthy (Beyrouth: Impr. catholique, 1953), vol.2, p231-32. Both authors express doubts regarding the true authorship of al-Ibana.

³⁹⁴ It is narrated that he renounced Mu‘tazili teachers and went back to Sunnism in front of an audience, in a mosque ‘Ali ibn al-Hasan Ibn ‘Asakir, *Tabyin kadhīb al-muftari fi-ma nusiba ila al-Imam Abi al-Hasan al-Ash‘ari* (Beirut: Dar al-kitab al-‘arabi, 1979).

³⁹⁵ See note 400.

First, the madhhab of Abu l-Hasan al-Ash'ari that he confirmed lately regarding the attributes was the madhhab of Ahl al-Sunna wa al-jama'a and he changed his mind from what he was upon before in terms of interpretation of the attributes, as becomes clear in his book "al-Ibanah 'an usul al-diyana" and in his book "al-Maqalat", and it is known that the madhhab of a person is what he confirms at the end [of his life]. (...)

Secondly, the madhhab is not known by the number of its followers [...] but by it being right in reference to the Qur'an and the Sunna. What the Ash'aris are upon, regarding the attributes [of God], is not following the Qur'an and the Sunnah.³⁹⁶

This last sentence specifying that the Ash'ari position on the Attributes of God equals not following the Qur'an and the Sunna, is clearly stating that because of the contradiction with their (i.e. the WSNS) position on the Attributes of God; the author does not consider that the Ash'aris abide by the injunctions of the religious texts. These arguments have been dealt with by Nuh Keller, currently based in Jordan, who wrote :

(...) the claims that Imam Abul Hasan Ash'ari (d. 324/936) repudiated his own positions are not new, but have been circulated by these Hanbalis for a long time, a fact that compelled the hadith master (hafiz) Ibn 'Asakir to carefully investigate this question, and the sanads (chains of narrators) for the attribution of these repudiations to Ash'ari. The results of his research furnished probably the best intellectual biography of Ash'ari ever done, a book that rebuts these claims thoroughly and unequivocally, called *Tabyin kadhhib al-muftari fi ma nusiba ila al-Imam al-Ash'ari* [On showing the untruth of the liars, concerning what has been ascribed to Imam Ash'ari], that proves that there are liars in all the sanads that impute this to Imam Ash'ari. The book is in print, and whoever would like the details should read it.

Imam Ash'ari's *al-Ibana 'an usul al-diyana* [The clarification of the bases of the religion] was not his last book, but rather among the first after he broke with Mu'tazilism. Imam Kawthari states: "The *Ibana* was authored at the first of his return from Mu'tazilite thought, and was by way of trying to induce [n: the Hanbali literalist] Barbahari (d. 328/940) to embrace the tenets of faith of Ahl al-Sunna. Whoever believes it to be the last of his books believes something that is patently false. Moreover, pen after pen of the anthropomorphists has had free disposal of the text—particularly after the strife (fitna) that took place in Baghdad [n: after A.H. 323, when Hanbalis ("the disciples of Barbahari") gained the upper hand in Baghdad, Muslims of the Shafi'i madhhab were beaten, and anthropomorphism became the faith ('aqida) of the day (Ibn Athir: *al-Kamal fi al-tarikh*, 7.114)]—so that what is in the work that contradicts the explicit positions transmitted from Ash'ari by his own disciples, and their disciples, cannot be relied upon (*al-Sayf al-saqil*, 108)".³⁹⁷

With this answer, we can see another trait of this debate: the indication that it has been continuing for centuries. Indeed almost none of the arguments, from both parties, are new. What is occurring nowadays with the definition of Ahl al-Sunna is a revivification

³⁹⁶ Salih ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan, 'Tanbihat 'ala maqalat al-Sabuni fi al-Sifat,' in *Tanbihat fi al-radd 'ala man ta'awwala al-sifat*, ed. 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn 'Abd Allah Ibn Baz (al-Riyad: al-Ri'asa al-'amma li-alarat al-buhuth al-'ilmiyya, 1984), p.60-61.

³⁹⁷ Nuh Ha Mim Keller, 'Imam Ash'ari repudiating Ash'arism,' <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/nuh/masudq2.htm> Accessed on 16 August 2006.

of polemics that were present at the 4th century AH/ 10th century CE and which culminated with Ibn Taymiyya during the 8th century AH/ 14th century CE, only to reappear after the mission of Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab.

Ibn Hamid ‘Ali³⁹⁸ investigates the claim that al-Ash‘ari changed his mind before dying in an article dedicated to the case of the book *al-Ibana*. He sums up his article as follows:

1. Kitab al-Ibana ‘an usul al-diyana was not the last book of al-Ash‘ari, that is if we accept it as being one of his books at all.
2. If it was one of his works, it was likely to be his first work or one among his first, before his madhhab took its final form.
3. the claim made by Ibn Taymiyya that it was the last of his works has no strong or valid basis.
4. Even if al-Ash‘ari did go through this third phase of his journey towards truth, it would not mean anything, since men are weighed by the truth. The truth does not gain its authority from the one who states it.³⁹⁹

Ibn Hamid ‘Ali asserts that Ibn Taymiyya is the first person, in his *Majmu‘ al-Fatawa*, to have claimed that Kitab al-Ibana was al-Ash‘ari’s last work.⁴⁰⁰ It is true that articles written by ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’, and dedicated to this issue do not mention from what source it is believed that al-Ibana was al-Ash‘ari’s last book. They simply argue that because it is supposedly his last book, one should refer to it to be sure of what path he died upon.⁴⁰¹ One may wonder why the ‘Wahhabis self-named-Salafis’ so vehemently rely on just a few lines in books whose authenticity is disputed, to prove that al-Ash‘ari finally died on the the so-called “right” creed? Why not just dismiss him? It might be because he was such an important historical figure and because of his title as “the Imam of Ahl al-Sunna”, that it was deemed more important to prove that he was correct but that his followers were not.

³⁹⁸ He is an American graduate of the Islamic University of Qawariyyin in Morocco who recently translated Ibn al-Jawzi’s *Daf‘ shubah al-tashbih* and al-Ghazali’s *Ijlam al-‘awwami ‘an ‘ilm al-Kalam*: Abu al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn ‘Ali Ibn al-Jawzi, *The Attributes of God*, trans. ‘Abdullah Ibn Hamid ‘Ali (Bristol: Amal Press, 2006) and Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali, *A Return to purity in creed*, trans. ‘Abdullah Ibn Hamid ‘Ali (Philadelphia: Lamppost Productions, 2008).

³⁹⁹ Abu al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn ‘Ali Ibn al-Jawzi, *The Attributes of God*, trans. ‘Abdullah Ibn Hamid ‘Ali (Bristol: Amal Press, 2006), p.123.

⁴⁰⁰ Ahmad ibn ‘Abd al-Halim Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu‘a fatawa*, 37 vols. ([Jedda]: Maktaba ibn Taymiyya, 1979), vol.5, p.556.

⁴⁰¹ Example: Abu ‘Iyad al-Salafi, ‘Abu Hasan al-Ash‘ariyy’s Final Book ‘Al-Ibaanah’, Spubs.com, www.spubs.com Article ID AQD060001 Accessed on 14 July 2007.

Now that we have studied the reasons why the WSNS believe that al-Ash‘ari renounced the teachings that later became known as Ash‘arism, we can move on to see why they deem that those that they consider the self-proclaimed followers of al-Ash‘ari went astray.

As we saw in chapters 2 and 3, there was a consensus regarding the fact that Muslim scholars allowed non explicit religious texts dealing with God and His Attributes to be interpreted either in a general or a specific sense. The WSNS are not only of the view that these religious texts should not be interpreted, but they go as far as to say that interpreting them is a sign of heresy and misguidance. For example, if an Ash‘ari scholar explains the verse Q 20: 5 (*al-Rahman ‘ala al-‘arshi stawa*) by “God dominates the Throne”, and not by “God has established Himself over the Throne”, the WSNS consider that this scholar has rejected the revelation. Their reasoning is that the literal meaning of *istawa* is to be established or seated, and that choosing another meaning implies that one does not accept the Word of God. It also means that if it is proven that a past scholar did interpret those religious texts, then this scholar will be put under the category of scholars who, according to the WSNS, unfortunately fell under the trap and misguidance of “distorting the religious texts” (as this is what they understand “interpreting” is, ultimately). We can see here that because of this single issue, they have drawn a line between those whose creed they consider sound and those who they consider had “problems” or “doubts” in their creed. The main problem with that notion is that those Muslim scholars who have interpreted the Attributes of God happen to be, for the most part, either Ash‘aris or Maturidis. Therefore we can see here that if not interpreting the Attributes is essential to the WSNS, then there can be no accommodating of Ash‘arism, as long as one of the defining traits of Ash‘arism is the permissibility to interpret. This rejection of Ash‘arism cuts right across the different factions of the WSNS. One proof of that is a pamphlet against the Ash‘aris written by al-Hawali.⁴⁰² Al-Hawali is a Saudi cleric who is the object of several lengthy refutations on SalafiPublications.com (a completely pro-Saudi religious establishment website based in the UK and studied in more detail in chapter 5) because of some his political activism.⁴⁰³ However, that same website publishes translated excerpts of his pamphlet in

⁴⁰² Safar al-Hawali, ‘Manhaj al-Asha‘ira fi al-‘aqida,’ Alhawali.com, <http://www.alhawali.com/index.cfm?method=home.ShowContent&ContentID=6&FullContent=1> Accessed on 17 August 2006.

⁴⁰³ For severe refutations against Safar al-Hawaali by the traditional Wahhabis, see (among other articles) ‘An Exposition of the Deviation of Safar al-Hawali in his ‘True and Bogus Promise’ ’ Spubs.com, www.spubs.com Accessed on 17 August 2006, ‘Safar al-Hawaali’s Plot and Deception Uncovered: The

English, without mentioning the name of the author.⁴⁰⁴ In one excerpt, to the question “Are the Ash‘aris from Ahl al-sunna wa al-jama‘a?” he mentions:

Thus, the Ash'ariyyah do not enter into it at all. Rather they are outside it.⁴⁰⁵

This is similar to what Salih al-Fawzan, member of the Council of Senior Scholars of Saudi Arabia (see 3.5.2.1) explains, after having mentioned that he does not consider the Ash‘aris as non-Muslims (translation mine):

This does not mean that we will stay quiet and refrain from clarifying the mistakes of the Ash‘aris and the warning against them. Takfir is one thing, and exposing mistakes is another thing.⁴⁰⁶

He clearly condemns the Ash‘aris and, far from considering them as being synonymous with “Ahl al-sunna wa al-jama‘a, he counts them as yet another deviant group among others (translation mine):

“We say: yes we do pass a judgement of deviation on those who interpret the attributes of Allah ta‘ala away from what the true meaning proves to be and tries to give it a meaning which is not a real meaning, be it from the Ash‘aris or other than them. If this is not deviation, then what is deviation?⁴⁰⁷

He seems to make a clear distinction between *tafkir* (considering them as non-Muslims) and *tadlil* (considering them deviated). A few paragraphs later he adds (translation mine):

As for the Ash‘aris not leaving the fold of Islam this is true. They are part of the bulk of the Muslims. As for belonging to Ahl al-Sunna then no, for they contradict Ahl al-Sunna wa l-jama‘a. Indeed Ahl al-Sunna confirm the attributes as they came without any interpretation, and the Ash‘aris do not confirm most of them as they came but rather they interpret them away from the apparent meaning, as this is well-known from them. So how could you consider from the community people who contradict its creed, when the creed is the foundation? Their books are the judge in this affair. Yes they

Accusation of Irjaa,’ Spubs.com, www.spubs.com Accessed on 17 August 2006, ‘Refutation of Safar al-Hawali’s Insults, Revilements and Slanders Against the Major Scholars,’ Spubs.com, www.spubs.com Accessed on 17 August 2006.

⁴⁰⁴ ‘Are the Asharees from Ahl us-Sunnah wal-Jamaa’ah?,’ Spubs.com, www.spubs.com Accessed on 29 July 2006.

⁴⁰⁵ ‘Are the Asharees from Ahl us-Sunnah wal-Jamaa’ah?,’ Spubs.com, www.spubs.com Accessed on 29 July 2006

⁴⁰⁶ Salih ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan, ‘Tanbihat ‘ala maqalat al-Sabuni fi al-Sifat,’ in *Tanbihat fi al-radd ‘ala man ta’awwala al-sifat*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn ‘Abd Allah Ibn Baz (al-Riyad: al-Ri’asa al-’amma li-al-idarat al-buhuth al-‘ilmiyya, 1984), p.58.

⁴⁰⁷ ———, ‘Tanbihat ‘ala maqalat al-Sabuni fi al-Sifat,’ in *Tanbihat fi al-radd ‘ala man ta’awwala al-sifat*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn ‘Abd Allah Ibn Baz (al-Riyad: al-Ri’asa al-’amma li-al-idarat al-buhuth al-‘ilmiyya, 1984), p.78.

might be from Ahl al-Sunna with regards to certain things, but not in an absolute way.⁴⁰⁸

Here we can see that he seems to take a line below that of *takfir* as he attempts to simply “correct” the “mistakes” of the Ash‘aris. However, some other of his statements may lead the reader to think that he does in fact excommunicate the Ash‘aris, by accusing them of *ta‘til* which means to deny the existence of God or of His Attributes; of *ilhad*, which usually means “atheism”, but which they seem to use in the meaning of “disbelief”; and of practising *shirkiyyat* (acts of worship of other than God) as can be seen in the quotes below. For example, he equates interpreting with negating the Attributes of God:

How could it be said that the one who interprets the attributes of God away from its meaning, and then interprets yad by qudra, istawa by istila and rahma by ni‘ma, how could it be said in spite of all of this, that he believes in those attributes without negating them (ta‘til). Isn’t that act the very essence of negating? (‘ayn al-ta‘til)⁴⁰⁹

In his collection of fatwas, when he is asked what is meant by *ilhad* in Q (7:180): “and stay away from those who abuse the names of God” (*dharu al-ladhina yulhiduna fi asma‘ihi*), al-Fawzan answers (translation mine):

This is similar to what the Ash‘aris are saying [when they say]: what is meant by “yad” [literally hand] is “ni‘mah” [grace], what is meant by “wajh” [literally: face] is “the Essence”, and what is similar to this among the invalid interpretations which are, in reality, but disbelief in the names and attributes of Allah, when it is an obligation to confirm them as they came, and to believe in what is indicated by their real meanings.⁴¹⁰

He considers that there could be no unity with the Ash‘aris unless their belief is purified (translation mine):

It is not possible to present a united front against the enemies of Islam unless the creed is purified from the acts of polytheism (*shirkiyyat*), innovations, superstitions, and disbelief in the names and attributes of God. (...) If committing sins in acts prevents the Muslims from showing a united front to their enemies, then how about the sins in belief?⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁸ ———, ‘Tanbihat ‘ala maqalat al-Sabuni fi al-Sifat,’ in *Tanbihat fi al-radd ‘ala man ta‘awwala al-sifat*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn ‘Abd Allah Ibn Baz (al-Riyad: al-Ri’asa al-‘amma li-al-idarat al-buhuth al-‘ilmiyya, 1984), p.59-60.

⁴⁰⁹ ———, ‘Tanbihat ‘ala maqalat al-Sabuni fi al-Sifat,’ in *Tanbihat fi al-radd ‘ala man ta‘awwala al-sifat*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn ‘Abd Allah Ibn Baz (al-Riyad: al-Ri’asa al-‘amma li-al-idarat al-buhuth al-‘ilmiyya, 1984)

⁴¹⁰ ———, *al-Muntaqa min fatawa fadilat al-Shaykh al-duktur Salih ibn Fawzan ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Fawzan*, 3 vols. (Cairo: Dar al-Imam Ahmad, 2006), vol.1 p.93.

⁴¹¹ ———, ‘Tanbihat ‘ala maqalat al-Sabuni fi al-Sifat,’ in *Tanbihat fi al-radd ‘ala man ta‘awwala al-sifat*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn ‘Abd Allah Ibn Baz (al-Riyad: al-Ri’asa al-‘amma li-al-idarat al-buhuth al-‘ilmiyya, 1984), p.89.

He also insists that the creed is a major foundation which does not allow divergence (translation mine):

“The issue of the attributes [of God] is among those dealing with the creed, on which there can be no divergence”⁴¹²

As for Ibn Baz, he also does not count the Ash‘aris among Ahl al-Sunna(translation mine):

Then al-Sabuni⁴¹³, may God guide him, says that God is exempted, Exalted be He, from the body (jism) , the pupils (hadaqah) , auditory meatus (al-simakh), tongue (al-lisan) and larynx (al-hanjarah) is not the way of Ahl al-Sunna but rather it is the saying of those who are adepts of the condemned theology speculation (kalam).⁴¹⁴

Ibn Baz also calls interpreting the Attributes a negation of God, where he explains (translation mine):

“the negation that al-Sabuni makes of these attributes [understand here: the fact that al-Sabuni accepts interpretation of their meaning] is a negation of the Prophet peace be upon him and even more so: it is a negation of Allah ‘azza wa jall, because He mentioned them in His Holy book, and revealed the rest to his Prophet peace be upon him”.⁴¹⁵

After all these statements, it appears that the WSNS are playing with words, for there is no known definition for “negating God”, “disbelief”, and “rejection of the Qur’an” apart from blasphemy and being outside of Islam. Al-Fawzan and his followers might claim that they are not among the so-called *takfiris* (the fringe of the WSNS which is believed to massively consider other Muslims as non-Muslims) because they do not use words with the root *kafara* to describe the Ash‘aris, but in reality the phrases used to describe Ash‘ari teachings leave little room for interpretation. The WSNS might say that they do not consider Ash‘aris as non-Muslims and that they include them among the bulk of the Muslims but they exclude them from the Sunnis, but they speak about the Ash‘aris in terms which can only lead to them being rejected as a deviant group. It might be said that people deemed “innovators”⁴¹⁶ are to be dealt with harshly because they attack the Muslim community from inside, and the WSNS do consider the Ash‘aris as

⁴¹² ———, ‘Tanbihat ‘ala maqalat al-Sabuni fi al-Sifat,’ in *Tanbihat fi al-radd ‘ala man ta’awwala al-sifat*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn ‘Abd Allah Ibn Baz (al-Riyad: al-Ri’asa al-amma li-al-idarat al-buhuth al-‘ilmiyya, 1984), p.59.

⁴¹³ Al-Sabuni is the author against whom Ibn Baz wrote this pamphlet to blame him for allowing interpretation of the non explicit religious texts.

⁴¹⁴ ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn ‘Abd Allah Ibn Baz, *Tanbihat fi al-radd ‘ala man ta’awwala al-sifat* (al-Riyad: al-Ri’asa al-amma li-al-idarat al-buhuth al-‘ilmiyya, 1984), p.19.

⁴¹⁵ ———, *Tanbihat fi al-radd ‘ala man ta’awwala al-sifat* (al-Riyad: al-Ri’asa al-amma li-al-idarat al-buhuth al-‘ilmiyya, 1984), p.21

⁴¹⁶ Innovators here is to refer to people who are accused of having introduced new and evil concepts or practices into Islam.

“innovators”. However, even taking into account this well-known argument, the vocabulary used to describe Ash‘ari positions on the Attributes of God does not seem to accommodate meanings other than that of outright excommunication.

Even if one were to assume that the WSNS do not consider the Ash‘aris as non-Muslims, there is still an issue with how they treat the heritage of the Ash‘ari scholars from the past. As mentioned by al-Maliki, if the Wahhabis are of the view that most of the Muslim scholars had a deviant creed and that they were practising the innovation of interpretation, then what good are the WSNS hoping to take from such people? All this poses a serious dilemma for the WSNS because they themselves have placed *tawhid*, or the belief in the oneness of God, as a top priority. Therefore, one does not expect any compromise from them towards people whose *tawhid* they consider imperfect, flawed or deviant. How, then, to deal with the plethora of Ash‘ari and Maturidi scholars who hitherto were considered the best references and sources of Islamic knowledge? Rejecting them altogether would be too obvious and disturbing. On the other hand, accepting that they were part of the greatest scholars of Islam would entail accepting that their judgement was correct on the issues that they talked about. However, many Ash‘ari scholars’ statements on the creed are in total opposition with what the WSNS teach. What the WSNS have therefore resorted to is to accept the legacy of the Ash‘aris on what they (the Wahhabis) consider correct, and say that they (the Ash‘aris) are misguided on the rest. Thus, the WSNS completely undermine the authority of most of the major Sunni scholars “because they interpret”. This is where the tangible consequences of this stance on the Attributes of God can be seen. For example, the WSNS strongly urge people not to talk to people who hold Ash‘ari views on the Attributes of God, for they describe them as innovators who reject God’s revelation. It also means that the followers of the WSNS gradually refer themselves exclusively to Saudi Arabian preachers for any religious advice. It is quite common to obtain the phone number of a Saudi sheikh to call if one has any question, whether from France or from the UK.⁴¹⁷ This, in essence, eliminates recourse to the different sources of knowledge available in the Muslim world. The common grounds between all the different factions of the WSNS is the overwhelming condemnation of Ash‘arism, thus leaving them in an awkward position with regards to the Islamic heritage. This leads us to the second feature of the vision of history purported by the WSNS: it is the notion of a rupture in history, the notion that there were some eras in Islamic history during which

⁴¹⁷ See for example <http://mouslimines.free.fr/Savant%20Num/Savants.html>

it could be said that most people claiming to be Muslims or speaking in the name of Islam did not know what Islam really was at all.

4.2.2.2 Notions of rupture

In the view of the WSNS, there is a rupture between the *Salaf* and the Ash‘aris, between al-Ash‘ari himself and the Ash‘aris, after the *Salaf* up to Ibn Taymiyya (of 400 years) (d.728 AH/ 1328 CE), and one final 500-year lapse between Ibn Taymiyya and Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (d.1206 AH/ 1792 CE). Those periods of ruptures were filled, according to them, by deviant sects, the main ones being the Ash‘aris and the Maturidis who supposedly let evil spread with regards to the creed.

In an article published on spubs.com, there is a short overview which details how the WSNS perceive Islamic history. The authors of this article are convinced that “there is nothing more appropriate in setting out the scene, or if you like, laying out the complete scenario, so as to give the true context of things to come, than the following speech of shaykh Rabi‘ bin Hadi al-Madkhali”⁴¹⁸ (which, according to the footnote, was originally recorded on tape, subsequently transcribed in Arabic by Abu ‘Abdullah Khalid adh-Dhafayri on Sahab.net, then translated into English by Spubs.com). Rabi‘ al-Madkhali (b.1931 CE)) a Saudi university professor at the Islamic University of Medina and a famous preacher in his country. He explains (translation provided by Spubs):

“And the Salaf us-saalih- may Allaah be pleased with them- understood completely these Rabbaani (i.e. Allaah’s statements in the Book) and Nubuwwi (i.e. of the Sunnah) notifications and warnings. So they perceived the danger of innovations and their people upon Islaam, and the Ummah of Islaam. Thus, they faced them (the innovations) and their people with positions entailing warning and (strong) determination. They used to place barriers and preventative blockades of caution and of warning between the Ummah and between the wolves that lie in wait, lurking in ambush, and also announcing hatred of them, and ordering boycotting of them, and cutting off from them. Thus, the majority of the Ummah was upon the truth, and the Sunnah, and they used to be in goodness, and securiy, with respect to their aqeedah, their deen and their methodologies.

Then when laxity and softness (tasaahul) occurred with Ahl ul-Bida’ and there were to be found the Mumayyi’oon, the People of Innovation and evil, descended upon the Islamic Ummah like the descending of violent torrents (of ocean) upon the banks. And nothing at all stood in the face of them, until they enshrouded the Islamic world, both societies and rulers, except for a small (number of them).

Until Allaah brought Shaykh ul-Islaam Ibn Taymiyyah (rahimahullaah), so he assaulted Ahl ul-Bida’, and made excursions upon them by way of evidence and proofs from the

⁴¹⁸ ‘Historical Development of the Methodologies of al-Ikhwaan al-Muslimeen and their Effect and Influence upon Contemporary Salafee Dawah: Part 1,’ Spubs.com, www.spubs.com

Book and the Sunnah, and the Manhaj of the Salaf, by which he awakened the Ummah from its lethargy, slumber. And Allaah saved whomever He willed by way of him.

Then laxity and softness (*tasaahul*) occurred, and then those hurling (violent) torrents returned, with evil, innovations, misguidance and shirk. Then Allaah brought the Imaam, the Mujaddid, Muhammad bin ‘Abdul-Wahhaab to repel them from the Ummah, and so he assaulted the people of innovations and misguidance and attached them with evidence and proofs and with the sword and the spear, until he returned the strength to Islaam, the illumination back to Tawheed, and the splendour and purity back to the Sunnah.⁴¹⁹

This lengthy quote illustrates effectively the vision of history of the WSNS. They have a cyclic, broken vision of history which is incompatible with the continuity claimed by the Sunnis not claiming to be Salafis. According to the WSNS there were long periods during which the people of “innovations” were dominant. These periods are 400 years between the end of the *Salaf* up to Ibn Taymiyya’s times (8th century AH/ 14th century CE), and then another of approximately 500 years leading up to the emergence of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s mission. Since then, knowledge has supposedly flourished.

Long chronological lists of recognised Sunni scholars⁴²⁰ are hard to find in the literature of the WSNS, due to their vision of history. In fact, the WSNS tend to rely extensively on the writings of Ibn Taymiyya when they need to give references. For

⁴¹⁹ ‘Historical Development of the Methodologies of al-Ikhwaan al-Muslimeen and their Effect and Influence upon Contemporary Salafee Dawah: Part 1,’ Spubs.com, www.spubs.com Accessed on 8 August 2006 also in full in Muhammad Rabi‘ Ibn Hadi al-Madkhali, ‘The Crime of Taymee’ upon the Salafi Manhaj,’ Spubs.com, www.spubs.com Accessed on 29 July 2006.

⁴²⁰ Examples of such lists can be seen here: ‘Chronological list of Islamic Scholars,’ anwarul-islam.com, http://www.anwarul-islam.com/index.php?view=article&id=84%3Achronological-list-of-islamic-scholars&option=com_content&Itemid=68 Accessed on September 18th 2008; ‘What is Orthodox Islam?’, Hanbali Text Society, http://ukiew.org/http/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=6&Itemid=39 Accessed on 29 September 2008 and: ‘Biographies of Scholars and Saints,’ sunnah.org, <http://www.sunnah.org/history/Scholars/Default.htm> Accessed on 29 September 2008. In contrast, there is a website fatwa-online.com which claims to receive 25,000 hits a day, and which has a section entitled biographies, organised in centuries (a column for the first century, then one for the second etc, until the 15th century AH). All the centuries are empty except for the eighth century AH where Ibn Taymiyya’s biography has been entered, and then nothing again until the 14th and 15th centuries where many biographies of Saudi preachers have been entered. All the others mention “No biographies currently listed”. This does not mean that the owners of the website do not acknowledge any other scholars than those listed (as Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab do not figure in this list either), and the lack of names in the other centuries might simply be attributed to a lack of time and resources on the part of the webmasters who no doubt had the intention to fill in all the centuries. However, what this does demonstrate is that the first readily available biographies that they could think of and that they took the time to add to the list was Ibn Taymiyya’s biography and the biographies of some current figures as well as some famous Wahhabis from the past century. This website is regularly being updated; for example, at the time of writing this there were articles dealing with Ramadan along with an official statement dating from August 30th 2008 -so the site is not derelict or abandoned, yet the gaps in the biographies still remain.

example when Ibn Baz introduces his book *Tanbihat fi al-radd 'ala man ta'awwala 'l-sifat*, he says that there are many quotes from the *Salaf* that he could use to prove the position of the *Salaf* on the Attributes of God. However, the long list he promises is in fact a list of quotes gathered by Ibn Taymiyya:

“I will now quote several important narrations from the Salaf Salih in this regard, to clarify for the reader the correctness of what I have mentioned so far: the Chaykh of Islam Ibn Taymiyya may Allah have mercy upon him said that...”⁴²¹

Thereafter come the quotes from scholars of the *Salaf* given and explained by Ibn Taymiyya. The same goes with Ibn al-Qayyim, the student of Ibn Taymiyya, who is Ibn Baz’s only other reference in *Tanbihat*. It is as if nobody before or after Ibn Taymiyya best described what the religion of Islam was about. The consequence of ignoring most of the Muslim scholars in history as a reference is therefore that number is not considered a reference when it comes to assess who is part of Ahl al-Sunna and who is not. This is the third feature of this vision: being part of a majority group is not significant anymore.

4.2.2.3 Numeric superiority is not decisive

As we saw in 4.2.1.3, the Sunnis not claiming to be *Salafis* are of the view that the path that most Muslims are on must be the correct one. The WSNS completely disregard this understanding. They adhere to one version of the hadith of the “73 sects” (see 4.2.1.3) according to which the saved sect is made up of those who followed what the Prophet and his companions were upon. Taken as such, and without reference to other versions, this phrase can mean a group of any size. As for the version which says *al-jama'a*, i.e. “the group”, and which has been interpreted to mean the majority, the WSNS are of the view that here, what is meant is “being unanimous on the truth”, not “the majority”.⁴²² For example, in his *Tanbihat*, Ibn Baz interprets this hadith to mean: “it is compulsory upon the Muslims to be unanimous on the truth”. The WSNS acknowledge that they are not the most numerous group, but as they do not grant to this criterion any weight in terms of assessing righteousness, this is not a problem for them. To illustrate we can quote al-Fawzan who wrote :

⁴²¹ ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn ‘Abd Allah Ibn Baz, *Tanbihat fi al-radd 'ala man ta'awwala al-sifat* (al-Riyad: al-Ri’asa al-’amma li-al-idarat al-buhuth al-’ilmiyya, 1984), p.9-10.

⁴²² ———, *Tanbihat fi al-radd 'ala man ta'awwala al-sifat* (al-Riyad: al-Ri’asa al-’amma li-al-idarat al-buhuth al-’ilmiyya, 1984), p.16.

...the madhhab is not known by the number of its followers [...] but by it being right in reference to the Qur'an and the Sunna. What the Ash'aris are upon, regarding the attributes [of God], is not following the Qur'an and the Sunnah.⁴²³

The importance of the number of followers is continually downplayed and there is an acknowledgement that only a fraction of people can be considered as scholars on the right path. This is clearly illustrated by an answer given by Muhammad Bazmul⁴²⁴, (a contemporary Saudi cleric who is ideologically close to Rabi' al-Madkhali i.e. in support of the Saudi government) who, when asked to give names of scholars with whom to learn a “correct methodology”, answered (translation mine, from French):

The following question was asked to Shaykh Bazmul during a phone conversation in Masjid Al-Salaf al-Salif Sunday October 13th:

Question: the person who asks the question says: I want to travel to Muslim countries to study and learn my religion according to the correct methodology with scholars. So my question is: where do you advise me to go? May Allah bless you.

Answer: the Salafi scholars are here in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, like Shaykh Abdul-'Aziz Al al-shaykh, Shaikh Salih Al-Fawzan, Shaikh Rabi' Al-Madkhali et Shaikh Ahmad Najmi. Also in Yemen, there are Salafi scholars, students of Shaykh Muqbil al-Wadi'i. But not the group of Abu al-Hasan al-Ma'ribi. This group is deviated. However, there are groups of students of Shaykh Muqbil al-Wadi'i, a man who is a khalifa (the successor) of Shaykh Muqbil in Yemen. Maybe you could go to them and study with them. Also there a few Salafi scholars in Kuwait, like a man called Tariq as-Subay'i. This man is a Salafi scholar ('Alim). However, if you go to a specific country, ask about that place, ask for example somebody from here, especially Shaykh Rabi' al-Madkhali for example, about this place, and ask about the scholars of this place. Because, to be honest, we do not know many a Salafi scholar except here in Saudi Arabia.⁴²⁵

In a way, this answer acknowledges that there are not many scholars whom the WSNS deem reliable. Bazmul found it difficult to quote centres outside Saudi Arabia where a person could learn their religion properly. The questioner did not ask where he could get Salafi or Wahhabi teachings, he asked about where to obtain correct learning, and he is being answered with only three “safe” localities. It is common for WSNS to consider that, during the last two centuries since the death of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, real scholars of Islam have only emanated from the Saudi state. For example, the website Salafi Publications (see 3.5.2.1) mentions:

⁴²³ Salih ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan, 'Tanbihat 'ala maqalat al-Sabuni fi al-Sifat,' in *Tanbihat fi al-radd 'ala man ta'awwala al-sifat*, ed. 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn 'Abd Allah Ibn Baz (al-Riyad: al-Ri'asa al-'amma li-idararat al-buhuth al-'ilmiyya, 1984), p.61.

⁴²⁴ A contemporary Saudi cleric who is referred to on various issues. I am unsure about his official occupation but he is among those 'Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis' who support loyalty to the Saudi government.

⁴²⁵ Muhammad 'Umar Bazmul, 'Où étudier?', <http://www.salafs.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=218> Accessed on 30 July 2006.

“And the great blessings in this country can be seen by the fact [that], by and large, the Major Scholars of Ahl us-Sunnah have not been found except in Saudi Arabia, of course with some exceptions”.⁴²⁶

Although they do refer to themselves as being Ahl al-Sunna, what the WSNS are in fact referring to is but a small portion of the Muslim world, and its scholars are mainly from only one country: Saudi Arabia.

4.2.3 “Ahl al-Sunna” as a concept with no fixed definition

To sum up this exposition of the vision of Islamic history of the WSNS, it now appears to be clear that the meaning of the phrase “Ahl al-Sunna” is highly disputed, and it can refer to diametrically opposed groups. In some instances, it is used to refer to the Ash‘aris and Maturidis who have remained loyal to one of the four major Sunni schools of Law continuously throughout history, since the end of the period of the *Salaf* to date. In other cases, it refers to today’s WSNS and their ancestors (8th century AH/ 14th century CE) affiliated to the Hanbali school of Law, a smaller group in size, considered anthropomorphists by the Ash‘aris. Both the ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’ and the ‘Sunnis-not-claiming-to-be- Salafis’ use the term “Ahl al-Sunna” to refer to themselves and to exclude the other group, classified as deviant. They are, in actual fact, diametrically opposed. An example of this classification can be found in an article on Bakkah.net, a website in English providing advice to Muslims who might want to study in Saudi Arabia. This article has been on the front page of the website for more than two years now (it can only be seen if one scrolls down slightly) and it is entitled “the Reality of Al-‘Izz Ibn ‘Abd al-Salam”. The author, who is also the webmaster, apparently realised that Al-‘Izz Ibn ‘Abd al-Salam (d.660 AH /1262 CE) was, in the webmaster’s terms, “an enemy of Islam”. He explains:

“A little over two years ago, I came across a booklet in 'Arabic called Bidaayatus-Suwal fee Tafdheel Ar-Rasool (The Superiority of the Prophet sallallaahu 'alayhe wa sallam, as formerly found on Bakkah.net) by Al-'Izz ibn 'Abdis-Salaam. Since it had been printed along with comments from Shaykh Muhammad Naasir Ad-Deen Al-Albaanee, I felt it was worthy of being translated, especially due to his statement (...)

At that time I was not aware of the reality of this man, Al-'Izz ibn 'Abdis-Salaam. After hearing our scholars begin to warn against him, clarifying that he was not from Ahlus-Sunnah at all, in fact he was a bitter enemy of the scholars of the Sunnah, and then reading what the brother, Khaalid Ath-Thufayree, had gathered about him, I felt it incumbent on me to write something in English to clarify his affair, especially since it

⁴²⁶ ‘Historical Development of the Methodologies of al-Ikhwaan al-Muslimeen and their Effect and Influence upon Contemporary Salafee Dawah: Part 1,’ Spubs.com, www.spubs.com Accessed on 8 August 2006.

was I who introduced him to many of the English speaking Muslims by way of the aforementioned translation and its placement on www.Bakkah.net (...)

Al-'Izz Ibn 'Abdis-Salaam was an Ash'aree

Ash'arees are a people who twist the texts of the Book and the Sunnah until they explain away all of Allaah's Attributes except seven. This was the belief of Al-'Izz ibn 'Abdis-Salaam. (...)

Furthermore, regarding those who affirm all of Allaah's Attributes, like His Hand and His Face, he said:

"The Hashawiyah (those who place padding inside of dolls) and the Mushabbahah, those that claim that Allaah is like His Creation, are of two types: The first type are those who have no problem openly proclaiming their hashw (meaning their claim that Allaah is like His Creation); The second type are those who hide under the math-hab of the Salaf..."

The Ash'arees have always claimed that Ahlus-Sunnah are Mushab-bihah and Mujassimah (those who liken Allaah to His Creation), so this is not shocking, however his labeling them with Hashawiyah, that they are stuffing or putting the padding in dolls by way of their affirmation of the Attributes is a disgusting insult, showing his sheer animosity for Ahlus-Sunnah".⁴²⁷

The last paragraph clearly demonstrates that for the WSNS, "Ahl al-Sunna" throughout history is the very group accused of anthropomorphism by the Ash'aris. This is why the author here calls the Ash'aris the "enemies of Ahl al-Sunna". It is vital to be aware of this difference before envisaging any contemporary study dealing with Sunnism in general and with Wahhabism or *Salafism* in particular. It is not sufficient to simply note that the WSNS are would-be Sunnis because they claim as such, as what they mean by Sunnism is the opposite of what the Sunnis have always intended by the term. The WSNS are gradually succeeding at rewriting the intellectual history of Sunnism to suit their own theories, as Ibn Baz does in his book in his rebuttal of interpretation. He asserts:

Al-Sabuni quoted in his second article that Ahl al-Sunna are known by two ways: one would be the way of the Salaf, and the other one would be the way of the khalaf...until the end of the quote. This is clearly wrong, and nobody ever said that before him, as far as I can tell.⁴²⁸

Here, Ibn Baz considers that al-Sabuni was the first to ever mention that there were two ways of interpretation that were acceptable. However, we saw in chapters 2 and 3 that it was common for Sunni scholars to describe the approach to non-explicit texts in two

⁴²⁷ Abu l-'Abbas, 'Bakkah.net Copyright Policy,' Bakkah.net, <http://www.bakkah.net/articles/copyright.htm> Accessed on 23 July 2006.

⁴²⁸ 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn 'Abd Allah Ibn Baz, *Tanbihat fi al-radd 'ala man ta'awwala al-sifat* (al-Riyad: al-Ri'asa al-'amma li-al-idarat al-buhuth al-'ilmiyya, 1984), 17-18.

different ways and that both ways were considered correct as long as the literal meaning of the phrase was discarded. How, then, can Ibn Baz make such a comment according to which nobody except al-Sabuni ever said the positions of Ahl al-Sunna were divided into these two methodologies? There are only two possible explanations: either Ibn Baz is attempting to deceive his audience into thinking that al-Sabuni's position is a marginal one, or he genuinely believes that nobody ever made those claims before al-Sabuni, which casts a doubt over the quality of the Islamic sciences training Ibn Baz had received before taking the post of Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia. In either case, Ibn Baz's statement, which is both bold and inaccurate, proves that there is a deliberate attempt to change the perception of how Muslim scholars dealt with the non explicit verses and hadith.

This notion of diametrically opposed meanings of Ahl al-Sunna has already been noted by some commentators. Abdullah Ibn Hamid 'Ali makes this remark :

When Shaykh 'Uthaymin makes reference to the madhhab of Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Hadith, it is actually a reference to the madhhab some of the Hanbalis of the past, some of whom had anthropomorphist leanings, and had always been intolerant of those who reject their particular approach while always claiming to represent the Ahl al-Sunna. Modern-day cries of such people to return to the methodology (Minhaj) of the Salaf is no more than the revival of the old intolerant tendencies of such Hanbalis to put down anyone who has a different view from themselves.⁴²⁹

From this, it becomes patently clear to see that the aforementioned two visions of history are opposed in every possible way. Islamic Sunni history is being re-written today by the WSNS. The issue of the Attributes of God, before any other issue, allows the WSNS to wipe out entire centuries of Islamic history. The references have changed and been marginalised. This then leads us to another important determining feature of WSNS: their approach to the four legal Sunni schools.

4.3 The attitude towards the four Sunni legal schools and its relation to the notion of Salaf

In addition to their specific vision of history, another salient trait of the WSNS is their attitude towards the four main Sunni schools of law. The 'Sunnis-not-claiming-to-be-Salafis' believe that following one of those four schools is an integral part of being a *Sunni* (see 4.2.1.1). They do not to claim to be *Salafis*, but that does not mean they do

⁴²⁹ Abu al-Faraj 'Abd al-Rahman ibn 'Ali Ibn al-Jawzi, *The Attributes of God*, trans. 'Abdullah Ibn Hamid 'Ali (Bristol: Amal Press, 2006), p.118-19.

not see themselves as inheritors of the scholars of the *Salaf*. They do, mainly because following one of the four main legal schools equals following the teachings of a scholar who is from the period of the *Salaf* which the Prophet recommended to follow (see 2.2.2). The teachings of the founders of the four schools have been verified many times by successive generations of scholars who wrote commentaries and supercommentaries on their books, which cements their authenticity in the Sunni community.⁴³⁰

One would expect the WSNS to consider the founders of the four schools as major references, as all of them are part of the *Salaf*. However, this does not appear to be the case. Although the WSNS do praise each of them individually, they also maintain that these scholars never asked to be followed. To analyse a good example of their rhetorical arguments we can refer to the explanations of al-Fawzan (translation made by editors of the spubs.com website):

The issue of sticking to a madhhab has in it some detail. If a person has the ability to know the ruling from its proof, and to deduce the ruling from its proof, then it is not permitted for him to cling to a madhhab. Rather, it is upon him to take the ruling from the evidence - if he has the ability to do so. However, this is rare amongst the people, since this is a quality of the mujtahideen from the people of knowledge; those that have reached the levels of *ijtihad*.⁴³¹

This is what both the ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’ and the ‘Sunnis-not-claiming-to-be-Salafis’ agree on: it is actually very rare for a person to attain a level at which he or she can judge the proofs from the Qur’an or the Sunna for themselves. To reach this level means one has become a *mujtahid*⁴³² and this is neither a common nor an easy feat to achieve. Here, al-Fawzan is simply reiterating the principle according to which a *mujtahid* cannot rely on another *mujtahid*’s findings. However, immediately after the paragraph quoted above, he adds:

As for one who is not like that, then he cannot take the rulings directly from the evidences. And this is the predominant case amongst the people, especially in these latter times. So [in such a case] there is no harm in adopting one of the four madhhabs and making taqleed of one of them. However, he should not make blind taqleed such

⁴³⁰ One can note Calder’s remarks about the physical organisation of super commentaries of books of *fiqh* in 4.2.1.2 note 369.

⁴³¹ Salih ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan, ‘Guidelines for Following Madhhabs,’ spubs.com, <http://spubs.com/sps/sp.cfm?subsecID=MNJ06&articleID=MNJ060006&articlePages=1> Accessed on September 19 2008. The editors of the website mention “*Muntaqaa min Fataawa* vol.5, 365-366” as their source for this statement of al-Fawzan, however I have been unable to find this book.

⁴³² For details about the criteria required to make an *ijtihad* one can read al-Nawawi’s list in: Norman Calder, J. A. Mojaddedi, and Andrew Rippin, *Classical Islam : a sourcebook of religious literature* (New York: London, 2003), p.192-96. For a more contemporary analysis, there is also a discussion on “Neo-*ijtihad* and return to the *Salaf*” in Ian Richard Netton, *Islam, Christianity and Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p.127-39.

that he takes all that is in the madhhab; whether it is correct or incorrect. Rather, it is upon him to take from the madhhab that which - in his view - does not clearly oppose the evidence.⁴³³

This is the part which is ambiguous: at first it is understood that there is no harm in following a madhhab, but then he adds that “it is upon him to take from the madhhab that which -in his view- does not clearly oppose the evidence”. What is not clear is: what personal view can a layman who is not a *mujtahid* possibly have on detailed legal questions to the point that he or she could judge the accuracy of a *mujtahid*'s judgement? Al-'Uthaymin (see 3.5.2.1) adopts a similar approach, as explained by the authors of salafipublications.com:

Shaykh Muhammad Salih ibn Uthaymeen was asked: When encountering a difficult issue, do you advise the student of knowledge not to stick to a madhhab, or [do you advise] to turn to a particular madhhab?

The Shaykh, hafidhahullaah, responded: “If what is intended by sticking to a madhhab is that a person sticks to that madhhab, and turns away from everything else; whether the correct view lies in his madhhab or another madhhab - then this is not permissible, and is from the blameworthy and bigotted partisanship. But if a person ascribes to a particular madhhab in order to benefit from its principles and guidelines, but he refers it back to the Book and the Sunnah; [such that] if it becomes clear to him that the preferred view lies in another madhhab, he then adopts that view - then there is no problem with this. [Note: this is for a student of knowledge, not a layman]”.⁴³⁴

Here, one also has the impression that the advice is only directed to the person who has sufficient knowledge in this issue. However, the question remains at what level of knowledge do the WSNS consider that a person is among those who can assess the validity of a proof in terms of Islamic legal reasoning? This vital point is never clarified in their literature. Are al-'Uthaymin and al-Fawzan stating that only the *mujtahid* cannot follow a school (other than his own), or are they suggesting that even the layman should not? They both warn their followers against a so-called “bigoted partisanship” or against a “blind following in spite of the evidence” which is difficult for the reader to interpret. This is leading to problems which have been addressed in an article by Ridhwan Saleem which has been circulating on the web in forums over the last few years. Ridhwan Saleem is the founder of the West London School of Islamic Studies. Originally trained as a medical doctor in 1997, he thereafter engaged in Islamic Studies for seven years. One relevant extract from his article is as follows:

⁴³³ Salih ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan, ‘Guidelines for Following Madhhabs,’ spubs.com, <http://spubs.com/sps/sp.cfm?subsecID=MNJ06&articleID=MNJ060006&articlePages=1> Accessed on September 19 2008.

⁴³⁴ Muhammad ibn Salih al-'Uthaymin, ‘Guidelines for Following Madhhabs,’ spubs.com, <http://spubs.com/sps/sp.cfm?subsecID=MNJ06&articleID=MNJ060006&articlePages=1> Accessed on September 19 2008.

I remember once entering a discussion with an 18 year old, clean-shaven youth, dressed in jeans and a leather jacket, outside my local masjid. He had started practising two years previously. He was quite soberly explaining to me how he examines the "evidences" put forward by the different legal schools on each "issue" and then is able to conclude for himself which is the strongest opinion! The fact that he didn't know a word of Arabic was not enough to deter his scholastic pursuits – he would get everything translated into English of course!

Unfortunately, such poor brothers have no idea of how complicated many legal rulings are, and how extensive the discussions between the legal schools on each issue can be. Don't they realize that they are merely "blindly following" whichever "scholar" has presented to them the information on this particular "issue". They haven't even checked the sources themselves, e.g. the reference books of the four legal schools, to see what they say in their discussion on the issue.⁴³⁵

What one realises is the ambiguous rhetoric of the WSNS on this issue has given their followers a complete 'free-for-all' attitude when it come to interpreting the inner workings of *fiqh*. As the amount of knowledge one needs to acquire before being able to challenge a religious saying is not clarified by the leaders of the movement, some of their followers might be under the impression that merely reading excerpts of hadith books in English should be sufficient, as demonstrated in this article. There seems to be a blurring of lines between the scholar who is able to use the proofs by himself and the layman who has no such intricate knowledge of the religion. It appears as if the WSNS prefer a deliberately ambiguous discourse with their followers regarding this issue which makes their followers think that the warnings actually aimed at *mujtahid* scholars (and therefore at a considerably small part of the population as there may be only a few per generation) are also aimed at people at a lesser level. Nasr al-Din al-Albani (d.1999 CE) is one of those who helped spread this ambiguity by gathering statements of the founders of the four schools of law originally aimed at their most knowledgeable students but which al-Albani make appear as if they were intended to the general public. Al-Albani is the third preacher, along with al-'Uthaymin (d.2001 CE) and Ibn Baz (d.1999 CE) who is heavily relied upon by most of the WSNS, who have nicknamed him "*muhaddith al-'asr*" (the [best] hadith Scholar of this era). In his book entitled "*Sifat al-Salah*" he gathered statements by the founders of the four schools to this effect (translation from AbdurRahman.org website):

It would be beneficial if we gave some of these here, for perhaps this will admonish or remind those who follow the opinion of the Imaams - nay, of those far below the Imaams in rank - blindly, sticking to their madhhabs or views as if these had descended from the heavens! But Allaah, Mighty and Sublime, says:

⁴³⁵ Ridhwan Saleem, 'Asking for "Evidences" is a Clear Daleel of Your Ignorance,' Originally at shaykhbrahminstitute.org, <http://wlsis.org/multimedia/Article%20Ridhwan.htm> Accessed on 19 September 2008.

"Follow (O men!) the revelation given to you from your Lord, and follow not, as friends and protectors, other than Him. Little is it you remember of admonition."

(...) The first of them is Abu Haneefah Nu'maan ibn Thaabit, whose companions have narrated from him various sayings and diverse warnings, all of them leading to one thing: the obligation to accept the Hadeeth, and to give up following the opinions of the imaams which contradict it:

[a]. "When a hadeeth is found to be saheeh, then that is my madhhab."

(...)As for Imaam Maalik ibn Anas, he said:

[a]. "Truly I am only a mortal: I make mistakes (sometimes) and I am correct (sometimes). Therefore, look into my opinions: all that agrees with the Book and the Sunnah, accept it; and all that does not agree with the Book and the Sunnah, ignore it."

[b] "Everyone after the Prophet (sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam) will have his sayings accepted and rejected - not so the Prophet (sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam)."

(...)]As for Imaam Shaafi'i, the quotations from him are most numerous and beautiful, and his followers were the best in sticking to them:

[a] "The sunnahs of the Messenger of Allaah (sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam) reach, as well as escape from, every one of us. So whenever I voice my opinion, or formulate a principle, where something contrary to my view exists on the authority of the Messenger of Allaah (sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam), then the correct view is what the Messenger of Allaah (sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam) has said, and it is my view."

[b] "The Muslims are unanimously agreed that if a sunnah of the Messenger of Allaah (sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam) is made clear to someone, it is not permitted for him to leave it for the saying of anyone else."

[c]. "If you find in my writings something different to the Sunnah of the Messenger of Allaah (sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam), then speak on the basis of the Sunnah of the Messenger of Allaah (sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam), and leave what I have said."

In one narration: "... then follow it (the Sunnah), and do not look sideways at anyone else's saying."

[d]. "When a hadeeth is found to be saheeh, then that is my madhhab."

(...)Imaam Ahmad was the foremost among the Imaams in collecting the Sunnah and sticking to it, so much so that he even "disliked that a book consisting of deductions and opinions be written." Because of this he said:

[a]. "Do not follow my opinion; neither follow the opinion of Maalik, nor Shaafi'i, nor Awzaa'i, nor Thawri, but take from where they took."⁴³⁶

Those statements of the four imams are probably the most well-known and the most representative of the kind of arguments that the WSNS use to justify their approach.

⁴³⁶ Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani, 'The Prophet's prayer ' abdurrahman.org, <http://abdurrahman.org/salah/prophetsPrayerAlbaani/> Accessed on September 19 2008 (in the section : Methodology of the book).

Although al-Albani is not accused of having forged or invented those reports, he has taken them out of their context. Tim Winter (b.1960 CE) , a British lecturer, also known as Abdal Hakim Murad, has written extensively on contemporary issues such as these. He is the author of a pamphlet about the issue of following one of the four legal schools in which he explains why the four founders were not addressing laymen when they were warning people against so-called “blind following” but rather those among their students who had already acquired a considerable amount of knowledge. He explains:

A scholar who has fulfilled these conditions can be considered a *mujtahid fil-shar*, and is not obliged, or even permitted, to follow an existing authoritative *madhhab*. This is what some of the Imams were saying when they forbade their great disciples from imitating them uncritically. But for the much greater number of scholars whose expertise has not reached such dizzying heights, it may be possible to become a *mujtahid fi'l-madhhab*, that is, a scholar who remains broadly convinced of the doctrines of his school, but is qualified to differ from received opinion within it. There have been a number of examples of such men, for instance Imam al-Nawawi among the Shafi'is, Qadi Ibn Abd al-Barr among the Malikis, Ibn Abidin among the Hanafis, and Ibn Qudama among the Hanbalis. All of these scholars considered themselves followers of the fundamental interpretative principles of their own *madhhabs*, but are on record as having exercised their own gifts of scholarship and judgement in reaching many new verdicts within them. It is to these experts that the *Mujtahid* Imams directed their advice concerning *ijtihad*, such as Imam al-Shafi'i's instruction that 'if you find a hadith that contradicts my verdict, then follow the hadith'. It is obvious that whatever some writers nowadays like to believe, such counsels were never intended for use by the Islamically- uneducated masses. Imam al-Shafi'i was not addressing a crowd of butchers, nightwatchman and donkey-drovers.⁴³⁷

We can see here that it is not the veracity of these statements by the founders of the schools which is disputed. Rather, it is the fact that because these statements are somewhat misused and decontextualised today by the WSNS, the bulk of their followers now believe that if a Muslim layman has been informed of a single hadith (on a particular issue), then he is able to challenge the sayings of a *mujtahid* scholar.

This approach has also triggered another trend: the constant demand for religious “proofs” by people who might not be able to assess them in a proper manner. This means that the traditional way of learning Islamic studies, which included learning from a summary first, and then, for those interested, learning more details and proofs, is also in jeopardy. Books about matters of *fiqh* which do not contain constant references to the Qur'an or hadith are seen as weak, whereas they used to be considered as valid “starters” for anyone interested in learning about the religion. We can refer here to

⁴³⁷ Abdal Hakim Murad, *Understanding the four madhhabs: the facts about Ijtihad and taqlid*, The MAT Papers (Cambridge: Muslim Academic Trust, 1999). The full text is also available online here: <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/newmadhh.htm> Accessed October 1st, 2008.

traditional “*mukhtasar*” (summaries) of *fiqh* which became famous in the different schools⁴³⁸. These books do not usually contain verses or hadith to support all the judgements they contain, because they are summaries of much more detailed books covering not just the proofs but also the reasonings behind a particular judgement. However, this absence of proofs within the text itself means that these books appear less attractive to followers of the WSNS. The reason why al-Albani’s book on prayer was greeted with such success might reside in the fact that for each paragraph or piece of information he gives, he quotes a hadith with which to support it. It is the methodology used in al-Albani’s book (a statement followed by a verse or a hadith) which appeals to some readers, as opposed to its content and whether this content is accurate or not. To illustrate this point, we can quote another part of Saleem’s article. It is relatively lengthy, but this is precisely to prove that obtaining a judgement in the religion is not a quick process. Arriving at a particular judgement is not just a matter of reading a single hadith or two and deducing a judgement, as he explains in his story:

I will just give you one simple, commonly-seen, example where the poor brother/sister thinks that they have done a great "ijtihad", and come to their "own" conclusions on an issue (having realized that all the four legal schools got it wrong for the last 1,424 years). This is the issue of where to place the hands in the prayer. It is quite usual now to see Muslims praying while placing their hands on their chests or necks rather than the traditional above-or-below the navel position, which was the practice of the Muslims for over a thousand years until recent times. Indeed all four legal schools agree that the hands should be just above or below the navel – definitely not on the chest (except for women in the Hanafi school), and especially not on the neck! (Some of the Maliki's hold that the sunnah is to place the hands at the sides).

However the young mujtahids of the 21st century know better. Obviously all those great legal experts of the four schools didn't have access to " Fiqh us-Sunnah ", that essential guide for all budding mujtahids! It's even available in a handy translated version for non-Arabic mujtahids! You simply flick open the relevant chapter on: "Sunnah acts of prayer, The Position of the Hands" (vol.1 p.132) and you will discover that al-Tirmidhi narrates a hadith that the Prophet (mercy of Allah and peace be upon him) prayed with his hands on his chest, and that al-Tirmidhi grades this hadith "as hassan". Also you will read that a similar hadith is found in "The Saheeh" of Ibn Khuzayma, and that Ibn Khuzayma "considers it as sahih".

That's it! The young mujtahid has done his job! Obviously there are sahih hadiths about this! (Don't know who that Ibn Khuzayma guy is...but he sounds important!) The four legal schools got it all wrong! Thereafter the brother is seen in the local masjid placing his hands high up on his chest, looking rather scornfully at those who "blindly" follow the legal schools.

⁴³⁸ Such as *Mukhtasar Khalil* in the *fiqh* Malik, or the *Matn* of Abu Shuja' in Shafi'i *fiqh*. *Mukhtasar Khalil* has been partially translated in English: al-Jundi Khalil ibn Ishaq, *al-Mukhtasar fi al-fiqh: Maliki law : being a summary from French translations of the Mukhtasar of Sidi Khalil with notes and bibliography*, trans. F.H Ruxton (London: Luzac, 1916) Ahmad ibn Husayn Abu Shuja' al-Isfahani, *Matn Abi Shuja' al-musamma al-ghaya wa al-taqrib* (Beirut: Mu'assassat al-kutub al-thaqafiyya, 1985).

Now let's have a closer look at the "evidences" given above in "Fiqh us-Sunnah". We make some startling discoveries.

First of all, those who actually studied "al-Jaami'" of al-Tirmidhi itself would realise that al-Tirmidhi does not even mention a hadith that the Prophet (mercy of Allah and peace be upon him) prayed with his hands on his chest! Let alone grade it as hassan!! A very serious mistake on the part of the author of "Fiqh us-Sunnah".

Second major mistake: although Ibn Khuzayma (may Allah have mercy on him) does mention a hadith of the Prophet (mercy of Allah and peace be upon him) placing his hands on his chest, he does not consider it to be saheeh. In fact Ibn Khuzayma makes no comment on the authenticity of the hadiths that he narrates in his book. But those who know Ibn Khuzayma's methodology will see that all indications are that he did not consider this narration as sound. First of all he does not mention placing the hands on the chest in the chapter heading of that chapter (which is his usual method of indicating his understanding of the legal implications of the narrations in the chapter). Secondly, he places the narration at the end of the chapter, which also indicates its weakness.

Anyhow, a look at the chain of narrators of this hadith will show that it contains Mu'ammal ibn Isma'il, who most scholars of hadith say is a weak narrator, pointing out that he had a terrible memory! Imam al-Bukhari (may Allah have mercy on him) actually says he is "munkar al-hadith", meaning his hadith are totally rejected! There are also further criticisms of this narration possible but we will not delve into these right now.

Now we see the problem. The young mujtahid was not really a mujtahid after all! He was the worst type of "blind follower" . He read a chapter from "Fiqh us-Sunnah" and accepted what he read "blindly", all the while thinking that he had done a great ijihad! Imagine how many more mistakes this book contains. And it is one of the most popular books nowadays amongst Muslims! The type of mistakes pointed out above are serious errors. One of my teachers said that these are not the type of slips you would see sometimes in the writings of scholars. Rather they indicate a real ignorance in the author that is inexcusable.⁴³⁹

Saleem's thorough argument clearly demonstrates that it can be difficult to challenge the confidence acquired by the person who believes firmly that there is a *sahih* hadith on a certain issue because he read it when, truly, that person only knows this hadith from one source, and has not checked the reference for it, let alone the other hadith dealing with the same judgement. There is the assumption that if one follows a particular madhhab, then this prevents him from following the Prophet. Al-Albani affirms :

However, detailed familiarity with all these aspects of prayer is unlikely to be achieved by most people nowadays, even many scholars, because of their limiting themselves to a particular Madhhab. But, as anyone concerned with assisting in compiling and studying the purified Sunnah knows, in every Madhhab there are sunnahs which are not found in other Madhhabs; moreover, in every Madhhab there are sayings and

⁴³⁹ Ridhwan Saleem, 'Asking for "Evidences" is a Clear Daleel of Your Ignorance,' Originally at shaykhbrahminstitute.org, <http://wlsis.org/multimedia/Article%20Ridhwan.htm> Accessed on 19 September 2008

actions which cannot be authentically traced back to the Prophet (sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam) - most of these are found in the sayings of the later scholars, many of whom we see firmly attributing these to the Prophet (sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam)!⁴⁴⁰

This is why al-Albani believes that his book “The Prophet’s prayer” is the definitive work on how to pray and that not following the indications of his book is a sin, now that the proofs have been presented to the reader. He warns:

Since this book of ours has collected the authentic sunnahs reported from the Messenger of Allaah (sallallaahu 'alaihi wa sallam) about the description of his Prayer, there is no excuse for anyone to not act on it, for there is nothing in it which the scholars have unanimously rejected, as they would never do. In fact, in every instance several of them have adopted the authentic sunnah; any one of them who did not do so is excused and rewarded once, because the text was not conveyed to him at all, or it was conveyed but in such a way that to him it did not constitute proof, or due to other reasons which are well-known among the scholars. However, those after him in front of whom the text is firmly established have no excuse for following his opinion; rather, it is obligatory to follow the infallible text.⁴⁴¹

Here, he clearly states that, after having read his book, people are not allowed to doubt whether or not this is the correct way to pray and that this book should be the reference for anybody willing to pray as the Prophet did, because until this day and age nobody has been presented with all the texts that he has gathered. Now that this has been achieved, his book is supposedly the last word on the subject. People who made mistakes in the past will be excused, but subsequent readers of his book will not. This sounds as nothing but a demand to be followed “blindly”. The reason underlying this request is the fact that al-Albani genuinely believes that all the texts he has relied upon were *sahih* and reliable texts. Therefore, his followers believe they are not following al-Albani per se, rather the texts that he presented. However, this methodology raises a few questions, the first of them being “what is the difference between following al-Albani’s prescriptions about the prayer and following al-Shafi‘I, for example, in his sayings?”. Aren’t the adherents of a *madhhab* relying on a scholar’s judgements because they trust them? Is it not exactly what the WSNS are doing with al-Albani’s book? Essentially, to follow the Qur’an and the Sunna, they are relying on the honest research of a person deemed a great scholar. So where is the real harm in what the ‘Sunnis-not-claiming-to-be-Salafis’ are doing, when everything is put in its real context? In his book on the issue and in rebuttal not of al-Albani but of another writer with views slightly more extreme than al-Albani’s, al-Buti says:

⁴⁴⁰ Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani, ‘The Prophet's prayer ’ abdurrahman.org, <http://abdurrahman.org/salah/prophetsPrayerAlbaani/> Accessed on September 19 2008.

⁴⁴¹ ———, ‘The Prophet's prayer ’ abdurrahman.org, <http://abdurrahman.org/salah/prophetsPrayerAlbaani/> Accessed on September 19 2008.

I have spent considerable amount of time quoting from Ibn al-Qayyim because of the bigotry I know that some of the advocates of la-madhabiyah have for his opinions. They are so particular about him that they display more abominable bigotry than that which they accuse the majority of Muslims of in terms of following their imams. I have done this hoping that if they were to consider closely his writings, they may find it easier to return to the path of truth.⁴⁴²

This is an approach often made by the WSNS; i.e., the fact that they discourage others from adhering to a *madhhab* which had been established during the Salaf and subsequently checked by a plethora of scholars throughout the centuries, only to themselves embrace the views of contemporary preachers (who are clearly not of that blessed era mentioned in the hadith). The WSNS do not actively encourage their followers to become *mujtahid*. Therefore, if one cannot rely completely on a *madhhab* but still has not reached a level at which one can deduce laws for oneself then what is left, apart from following other than the four schools, and preferably a 'Wahhabi-self-named-Salafi' authority? So, the real question becomes: "why would one replace following the four schools with following al-Albani and others?" It is only when this question is answered that the person can make an informed choice. However, to claim that by following al-Albani one is only following the *sahih* hadith when the others following a *madhhab* are supposedly following a man and not the Qur'an and the Sunna, is misleading to say the least, and is a case of applying double standards. This is why Saleem ends his article by saying:

At the end of the day, the reality is that you are a muqallid, whether you know it or not. The choice simply remains as to whom you follow: is it going to be the author of "Fiqh us-Sunnah", or al-Albaani, or one on the four legal schools. In the end, studying evidences for legal rulings is not wrong in itself, but it has a certain context and place.⁴⁴³

Finally, the major consequence of the attitude of the WSNS towards the four *madhhabs* is the dismissing of a heritage to be replaced with something new and recent, and this is the opposite of their claim of going back to the origins and to "pristine Islam" which is often taken for granted in some commentaries on 'Wahhabism self-named Salafism'. The same phenomenon is witnessed with their definition on the concept of innovations.

4.4 The definition of innovations and its relation to the notion of Salaf

⁴⁴² Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti, *al-La-madhabiyah -Abandoning the madhhabs is the most dangerous bid'a threatening the Islamic Shari'a* (The Netherlands: Sunni Publication, 2007), p.78

⁴⁴³ Ridhwan Saleem, 'Asking for "Evidences" is a Clear Daleel of Your Ignorance,' Originally at shaykhbrahminstitute.org, <http://wlsis.org/multimedia/Article%20Ridhwan.htm> Accessed on 19 September 2008.

Another feature of the WSNS is their definition of the term “innovation”, *bid‘a*, which is an act introduced after the death of the Prophet, and which he and his companions had not performed. The WSNS are not the first to warn Muslims against innovations of all types. In fact, if there is one issue on which one could easily find early texts by scholars of the Salaf and later texts by scholars of the Khalaf, it is certainly on the condemnation of innovations in general. However, the definition that the WSNS have made of these innovations, (which we will demonstrate below), leads to considering that practices that had originally been part of Sunnism for centuries were actually heretical. This view obviously violates the idea that the majority of the Muslims have remained on the right path, which is a determining feature of Sunnism (as seen in 4.2.1.2). The most well-known of these hitherto accepted practices which they have recategorised as an evil innovation is the one we studied in the vision of history of the WSNS: the interpretation of the non-explicit verses of the Qur’an dealing with the Attributes of God. Castigating Ash‘aris as dangerous innovators allows their followers to behave in the harshest way with them, because they are, as a result of that, to be ostracised from the community.⁴⁴⁴ Another well-known act that they deem a condemnable innovation is the *Mawlid* i.e. the commemoration of the birth of the Prophet.

Their definition is that there can only be one type of innovation, because an innovation is de facto wrong. They do not consider as valid the division of innovations into good and bad ones, i.e. into those which do not contradict the religion and those that do. They do not take into account an overwhelming number of sources which had, until recent times, defined innovations into good and bad ones.⁴⁴⁵ The main proof for their reasoning is that the Prophet has said *kullu bid‘a dalala wa kullu dalala fi ‘l-nar*, literally “every innovation is a misguidance and every misguidance is destined to Hellfire”, narrated by Muslim.⁴⁴⁶ They consider that there is nothing to add to this statement as long as the Prophet said *kullu* (“all”) innovations were a misguidance. However, it has been documented that *kullu* in Arabic does not always mean “every”

⁴⁴⁴ As we noted in 4.2.2.1, this attitude sometimes means treating them as non-Muslims (in spite of the fact they publicly do not call Ash‘aris “*kuffar*”).

⁴⁴⁵ Haddad refers to a good number of them, translated into English and fully referenced, here: Gibril Fouad Haddad, *Sunna Notes Volume 2 The Excellent Innovation in the Qur’an and Hadith with Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali’s The Sunna of the Caliphs*, Studies in Hadith and Doctrine (London: Aqsa Publications, 2005), p.121-41. They include texts by al-Shafi‘i, al-Bayhaqi, al-Ghazali, Ibn al-Jawzi, Ibn ‘Abd al-Salam, al-Nawawi, Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani and others.

⁴⁴⁶ Abu Zakariya Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi, *Sahih Muslim bi-Sharh al-Imam Muhyi al-Din Yahya ibn Sharaf al-musamma al-Minhaj sharh Sahih Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj*. (Beirut: Dar al-Ma‘rifa, 1994), vol. 6, p.393.

but rather, sometimes means “most of”, as explained, for example, by al-Nawawi (d.676 AH/1277 CE) in his explanation of the hadith. He comments (translation mine):

As for his [i.e. the Prophet's] saying, peace be upon him: *Kullu bi'a dalala*: this [hadith] is classified as “general but with a specific meaning” (‘amm makhsous), because what is meant is “most of the innovations” [and not all the innovations]. The linguists have said that [a *bid'a*] is anything that has been done without having a previous example. The scholars have said that the *bid'a* can be of five types: compulsory, recommended, forbidden, disliked, and allowed (*wajiba*, *manduba*, *muharrama*, *makruha*, *wa mubaha*). Among those which are compulsory there is [the fact that] theologians have gathered proofs against atheists, innovators and their likes. Among the recommended [innovations] there is the authorship of religious books, building religious schools, and other things. Among the permissible [innovations] there is [to eat] a great variety of foods, and other things. As for those which are forbidden or disliked, they are obvious, and I have clarified this issue already in [my book] *Tahdhib al-Asma wa 'l-Lughat*, and what I mentioned [in that book] is known, then it is known that this hadith is among those general texts which have a specific meaning, and the same goes for other similar hadith. Moreover, what reinforces what we have mentioned is the saying of ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab, may God be pleased with him, about the *taraweh* [optional night prayers during the month of Ramadan]: *ni'matu l-bid'a* (“what a good innovation”).⁴⁴⁷ Therefore nothing prevents this hadith to be general but with a specific meaning”. As for the saying *kullu bid'a*: indeed it is the word *kullu* [which is used here], but nonetheless, *kullu* is sometimes restrictive like in [the verse from the Qur'an 46: 25]⁴⁴⁸ *tudammiru kulla shay'* [it (the wind) destroys everything] (...).⁴⁴⁹

Al-Nawawi mentions the division of innovations into five types by the Muslim scholars, and he explains that the term *kullu* does not always mean “everything”. In spite of the existence of these commentaries, most pamphlets on innovations in Islam by major figures of the WSNS have no other argument than the use of *kullu* by the Prophet, in this hadith. The main argument of the WSNS can be summed up as follows: “Is there a more blatant contradiction of the hadith of the Prophet than to say that there are good and bad innovations, when the Prophet himself said that every innovation was a misguidance and therefore bad?”. Al-‘Uthaymin explains:

⁴⁴⁷ Al-Nawawi is referring to the fact that it was ‘Umar, when he was caliph, who first decided that those optional prayers be prayed in assembly in a mosque with one person leading the prayer for everybody, as opposed to each person praying on their own, as this was still the case at the time of the death of the Prophet. It is believed that the following day, when he saw all the Muslims gathered behind one man praying he said “What a good innovation”, implying that he had introduced an innovation which was good.

⁴⁴⁸ This verse is an example of an instance where “*kullu*” is used with a specific meaning, and not to mean “every”. The verse literally means that the wind sent to the tribe of ‘Ad to destroy them because of their disbelief will destroy “everything”. However, the common exegesis of that verse is that the wind only destroyed the disbelievers, not all the tribe, and not all the environment that was around (trees, mountains, etc). Al-Nawawi uses this as an example to show that in the Qur'an there are places where the word *kullu* is used with a meaning other than “everything”, and if it occurs in the Qur'an, then all the more reason to believe it might be possible for hadith of the Prophet too. Al-Nawawi quotes other verses after that one, which are not mentioned here for the sake of brevity.

⁴⁴⁹ Abu Zakariya Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi, *Sahih Muslim bi-Sharh al-Imam Muhyi al-Din Yahya ibn Sharaf al-musamma al-Minhaj sharh Sahih Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj*. (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1994), vol. 6, p.393.

Built upon this, there is no way for the people of innovation to make from among their innovations something which is a bid'ah hasanah [i.e. a good innovation]. In our hands is this sharp sword from the Messenger of Allaah (sallallaahu alayhi wasallam): "Every innovation is misguidance". Verily, this sharp sword was manufactured in the factories of prophethood and messengership. It has not been made in the fragile and feeble factories (of people) but rather, it has been made in the factories of prophethood. The Prophet (sallallaahu alayhi wasallam) designed it into this fine and efficacious art. It is not possible for anyone to challenge the one in whose hand is this sharp sword with any innovation, saying it is a bid'ah hasanah while the Messenger of Allaah (sallallaahu alayhi wasallam) says: "Every innovation is misguidance".⁴⁵⁰

This is, in a way, consistent with their approach that texts should be taken literally. Therefore, according to them, the aforementioned hadith can have no meaning other than that of a broad condemnation of all the new practices after the Prophet, as the WSNS consider that *kullu* can only ever have one meaning and not several.

As for whatever their opponents might present as historically renowned "good" innovations, the WSNS have already re-classified them as other than an innovation. For example al-'Uthaymin says (translation by Spubs website):

After this comprehensiveness is it correct that we divide innovations into three types or five types? Never! This is not correct.

The claim of some of the scholars that there is Bid'ah Hasanah (good innovation) falls into one of two situations (and is explained in one of two ways):

1. It is not an innovation in reality but a person considers it an innovation
2. That it is an innovation, which makes it evil, however a person does not know about its evil

Therefore, this is the answer to everything which is claimed to be a bid'ah hasanah [i.e. a good innovation].⁴⁵¹

This is a good summary of their position. Once again, the heritage of scholars throughout the centuries is disregarded (those scholars are, in many cases, not deemed reliable anyway, as they are considered "innovators in the creed" if they interpreted the Attributes of God). The WSNS do not refrain from saying that some of the greatest scholars of Islam have contradicted the saying of the Prophet. They also do not take into account that if it were the case that *kullu* does not, in fact, carry multiple meanings, then

⁴⁵⁰ Muhammad ibn Salih al-'Uthaymin, 'Innovation in Light of the Perfection of the Shari'ah,' spubs.com, <http://spubs.com/sps/sp.cfm?subsecID=BDH02&articleID=BDH020003&pfriend=> Accessed on 27 September 2008.

⁴⁵¹ ———, 'Innovation in Light of the Perfection of the Shari'ah,' spubs.com, <http://spubs.com/sps/sp.cfm?subsecID=BDH02&articleID=BDH020003&pfriend=> Accessed on 27 September 2008. Similar positions can be found in other trends of the movement e.g. on the website of Salman al-'Awdah: Salim al-Qarni, 'The concept of a 'good innovation' and the meaning of a 'good Sunnah', ' Islamtoday.com, http://islamtoday.com/show_detail_section.cfm?q_id=897&main_cat_id=13 Accessed on 27 September 2008.

it would mean that this hadith on innovations had been misunderstood for centuries, until they arrived and shed a new light on it. They act as if this hadith had been overlooked by past scholars and only recently rediscovered, when it has been the subject of numerous commentaries, as seen above.

The WSNS use another argument, which is as follows: the religion is perfect, therefore adding innovations, however good, would imply that the religion was not complete or perfect to begin with. They also explain that the Companions and other people nearer to the Prophet used to love him most, so if they did not judge necessary or rewardable to do something like the *mawlid*, for example, then why would we now do it? Al-'Uthaymin says (translation by Spubs website):

My brothers, now that this matter has been settled, did the Prophet (sallallaahu alayhi wasallam) die while something from the religion which draws one closer to Allaah the Exalted remained which he did not explain?

Never!⁴⁵²

Their opponents argue that they do not declare acts such as the *mawlid* as being compulsory but rather as being compliant with Islamic law as it originally only consisted in reading the Qur'an, talking about the life of the Prophet so that people, young and old, would get to know and love him better, and offering food to poor people: all actions which can be performed at any time during the year. Therefore, choosing any one day in the year to do these things which are allowed on all the other days of the year does not constitute any harm to the Muslim community.⁴⁵³

The discussion on this issue could include more details, but the main principle is that, on yet another issue, the WSNS are attempting to adapt major Sunni concepts, thereby revealing that they do not acknowledge the legacy of the majority of scholars before them. The same concept applies to a certain extent to the issue of *tawassul*.

4.5 The definition of *tawassul* and its relation to the notion of Salaf

⁴⁵² Muhammad ibn Salih al-'Uthaymin, 'Innovation in Light of the Perfection of the Shari'ah,' spubs.com, <http://spubs.com/sps/sp.cfm?subsecID=BDH02&articleID=BDH020003&pfriend=> Accessed on 27 September 2008.

⁴⁵³ There is a comprehensive article on this issue, in refutation of the fatwa of Ibn Baz. It gives most arguments of the opponents, and with references from the Imam Ahmed Raza Academy, 'The permissibility of celebrating the meelad-un nabi (saw) in refutation of the fatwa of sheikh Abdul 'Aziz bin Baaz of Saudi Arabia,' Sunnah.org, http://www.sunnah.org/publication/salafi/mawlid_refute.htm Accessed on 27 September 2008.

Tawassul is asking God something via some intermediaries. The permissibility of *tawassul* is derived by Muslims from religious texts such as Q 5: 35 “You who believe, be mindful of God, seek ways to come closer to Him and strive for His cause”. The WSNS are against the forms of *tawassul* which they have identified as constituting worship of other than God; mainly the practice of seeking intercession from saints (*awliya*) who have passed away. Although the exposition of this feature of their theology comes last in this chapter, it is the concept that is the most well-known about the WSNS and the most written about. As we saw in 3.4.2, the WSNS have divided history into a pre-Wahhabi era (where people were supposedly indulging in popular religious practices which were not Islamic), and a post-Wahhabi era (a period of enlightenment during which real Islam has made a resurgence thanks to the teachings of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab). It is therefore this “fact” (i.e. that most of the Muslims in the Arabian Peninsula were not worshipping God alone) that is at the root of their movement. For this reason, there is an abundance of literature on this issue and this section will aim to sum up the major issues at stake for the purpose of this study.

To summarise their position, it can be said that the WSNS allow a portion of *tawassul* in some cases, based on hadith the authenticity and well-known nature of which can not be disputed. This includes *tawassul* through one’s good deeds, by calling on God using His names and Attributes, or asking somebody else to ask God something on one’s behalf, as long as this person is alive and present.⁴⁵⁴ They limit the permissible *tawassul* through the Prophet to the time that he was alive, and through other than the Prophet to when the person whose supplication is sought is alive and present with the person who asks for this supplication.

Their opponents are of the view that these limitations put by the WSNS are not grounded in the Islamic heritage and tradition. They accuse the WSNS of having misunderstood the concept of *‘ibadah* as defined by Arab linguists and Islamic scholars. As the WSNS have accepted a whole array of permissible forms of *tawassul*, their opponents take their justification for the prohibition of making *tawassul* after the death

⁴⁵⁴ The permissible forms of *tawassul* that the ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’ accept are listed in: in Abd al-Rahman al-Barrak, ‘Permitted forms of Tawassul,’ Islamtoday.com, http://islamtoday.com/show_detail_section.cfm?q_id=303&main_cat_id=13 Accessed on 27 September 2008 Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani, *al-Tawassul : anwa’uhu wa-ahkamu : buhuth* (Kuwait: al-Dar al-Salafiyya, 1975) (the first part of the book is dedicated to permissible forms). Note that on some points al-Albani’s position is different from that Ibn Taymiyya on some issues. The position of Ibn Taymiyya has been the object of this study: Niels Henrik Olesen, *Culte des saints et pèlerinages chez Ibn Taymiyya : 661/1263-728/1328*, Bibliothèque d’études islamiques 16 (Paris: Libr. orientaliste P. Geuthner, 1991).

of the Prophet as absurd and not sustained by textual proofs. For example, there is a *sahih* hadith⁴⁵⁵ narrated by al-Tabarani (d. 360 AH/ 971 CE) according to which the Prophet taught a blind man to recite a supplication. The WSNS say that the only reason that it was valid is because the Prophet was present and alive at the time the blind man made that supplication. Their opponents note that the Prophet asked the man to go “where the wudu is performed” and that the narrator mentions that the man “came back” to them (*dakhala ‘alayna*) and could see which means that he must have left the place where the Prophet was while he performed that intercession. Even if that supplication was allowed only because the Prophet was alive, why then did the Prophet not warn that man that this statement would become blasphemous immediately after his death? Why would the Prophet teach a supplication which could potentially turn into blasphemy? The actual statement is:

Allahumma inni as'alouka wa 'atawajjahou 'ilayka bi-nabiyyika Muhammad sallallahu 'alayhi wa alihi wa sallam nabiyi 'l-rahma, ya Muhammad inni 'atawajjahou bi-ka ila Rabbika jalla wa 'azza fa-touqda li hajati” [“O Allah I am asking You and I am turning to You by Your Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him and his family, the Prophet of mercy. O Muhammad I am turning to Your Lord exalted be He, by you, to solve this affair of mine”.]⁴⁵⁶

This full sentence is a form of seeking intercession from the Prophet which the WSNS now consider as blasphemous. Therefore, would it be acceptable to believe that the Prophet taught it without a warning? The ‘Sunnis-not-claiming-to-be-Salafis’ sometimes use the following argument in support of seeking intercession through the Prophet even after his death: if *tawassul* through the Prophet was allowed before he was even born, such as mentioned in the hadith where Prohet Adam asked forgiveness to God via the name of Prophet Muhammad,⁴⁵⁷ if it was allowed during his life (see hadith of the blind man mentioned above), and if it is allowed on the day of Judgment (notably through the intercession *shafa‘a*, which the WSNS do not and can not contest), then why would it suddenly become not only forbidden but blasphemous to make *tawassul* during the specific time between his death and the day of Judgment? There has already been extensive study of this issue by Muslim scholars and academics⁴⁵⁸ and

⁴⁵⁵ Sulayman ibn Ahmad al-Tabarani, *al-Mu‘jam al-saghir*, 2 vols. (Madina: al-Maktaba al-Salafiyya, 1968), vol. 1, 183-84.

⁴⁵⁶ ———, *al-Mu‘jam al-saghir*, 2 vols. (Madina: al-Maktaba al-Salafiyya, 1968), vol.1, p.184

⁴⁵⁷ ———, *al-Mu‘jam al-saghir*, 2 vols. (Madina: al-Maktaba al-Salafiyya, 1968), vol. 2, p.82-83.

⁴⁵⁸ See for example Abu Hamid Ibn Marzuq, *al-Tawassul bi-al-Nabi wa bi-al-salihin wa yalihi al-Tawassul* (Istanbul: Hakikat Kitabevi, 2005); Mustafa ibn Ibrahim al-Karimi, *Risalat al-sunniyyin fi al-radd ‘ala al-mubtadi‘in al-wahhabiyin wa al-mutawahhabin al-musamma bi-nur al-yaqin fi mabath al-talqin* (Egypt: Matba‘a al-Ma‘ahid, 1927); and Hammadi al-Radisi and Asma Nuwayra, *al-Radd ‘ala l-Wahhabiyya fi al-qarn al-tasi‘ ‘ashar* (Beirut: Dar al-Tali‘a, 2008).

the aim of this chapter is not to replicate those texts. Regardless of whether the different hadith establish the lawfulness of this practice or not, it is evident that, with their opposition on *tawassul*, the WSNS are once again opposed to a broad consensus that had previously existed for many centuries, and which was only challenged by the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya, and then revived by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab.

4.6 Conclusion

The ‘Sunnis-not-claiming-to-be-Salafis’ are, not only fighting against what they consider an innovation (i.e. Wahhabism) but are also in the position of having to justify their own existence and relevance. For the first time in Islamic history, Sunnism is undergoing a systematic and meditated re-writing of its basic tenets, its fundamental beliefs and its values, with very little notice from the outside world. The WSNS are opposed in almost every possible way to “Sunnism” in its true sense, as already noted by Algar:

“...almost all the practices, traditions and beliefs denounced by Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhab have been historically integral to Sunni Islam, enshrined in a vast body of literature and accepted by the great majority of Muslims. Precisely for that reason, many of the ‘ulama contemporary with the first emergence of Wahhabism denounced its followers as standing outside the pale of Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama’a.⁴⁵⁹

For the ‘Sunnis-not-claiming-to-be-Salafis’, being a Sunni entails having adopted Ash’arism or Maturidism in terms of creed, one of the four legal schools in *fiqh*, and considering oneself part of the majority of the Muslims. This is currently changing due to the efforts made by the WSNS to contradict the very foundations of Sunnism in literature, bodies of work, talks, university campuses etc. The next chapter will focus on the effects of the WSNS influence on the Internet.

⁴⁵⁹ Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism : a critical essay* (Oneonta, NY: Islamic Publications International, 2002), 3

Chapter 5 Case studies: the online presence of the ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’

5.1 Introductory remarks

In Chapter 4, we set out a list of the main teachings of the WSNS. In this chapter we will see the direct consequences of the teachings of the WSNS on Muslims nowadays via their presence on the Internet. After some initial remarks regarding researching websites dealing with Islam (for more general remarks on the use of the Internet for research see Appendix Two), there will be a presentation of some websites and forums from which to glean information about the WSNS: the websites of the “purists”, and of the “jihadis” are described here, whereas the presentation of the websites of the “politicos” is shorter as they have been mentioned in 3.5.2.1. The last part will analyse a number of specific stories found on the Internet which reflect some of the key theological issues faced by Muslims nowadays when enquiring about their faith. This chapter will establish that the issue of the interpretation of the Attributes of God is relevant today to some Muslims. The description is illustrated by printscreens gathered at the end of the chapter.

5.2 Remarks about Cyber Islamic Environments

“Cyber Islamic environments” is the phrase used by Gary Bunt to describe “a variety of contexts, perspectives and applications of the media by those who define themselves as Muslims. These may contain elements of specific Muslim worldviews and notions of exclusivity, combined with regional and cultural understanding of the media and its validity”.⁴⁶⁰ His phrase is reused here as it is the most appropriate for our needs. While researching cyber Islamic environments, some technical problems arose, simply due to the nature of the Internet. These are summed up in an appendix (Appendix Two). There were, however, problems specific to the fact that these were websites dealing with religious concepts.

It is a usual disclaimer in websites, that the contents of sites pointed to by external links are not to be considered endorsed by the website of origin. However, in the context of religious websites, the webmaster will actually take great care to only link websites

⁴⁶⁰ Gary R. Bunt, *Islam in the digital age : e-jihad, online fatwas, and cyber Islamic environments*, Critical studies on Islam; (London: Pluto Press, 2003), p.5.

which at the very least do not contradict the views contained in his own website. Religious websites are environments of perceived “right” and “wrong”, and this affects the way links are suggested. For example, many different websites go to a great deal of effort to clarify to the visitor who is supposed to be “truly” Salafi or not. Therefore, it is commonplace to see different websites systematically indexing the same other websites whose content is supposed to be above all suspicion. Although this still does not mean that the website linked to in this way is fully endorsed by the webmaster, one can be certain that the “main issues” will have been checked, such as the people quoted as “scholars”, the links and the contents of the articles on the creed. What this means in practice is that it is possible to experience a type of “closed-circuit” browsing, whereby one navigates through different websites by clicking randomly on links provided in the links sections, only to realize that one can only go to websites which are of the same view. For example, through salafipublications.com,⁴⁶¹ one can only land on websites with similar views, and those websites are only linking back to websites either powered or recommended by salafipublications.com. This makes a very coherent and ordered cyber environment, which makes one wonder to what extent those people know each other and what the nature of their interaction may be. It also gives the impression that one is surfing on a single, giant website. This means that once one has entered such a website, one is trapped into the specific interpretation advocated therein. The only way to research religious websites and views effectively will not be by clicking randomly on the links section of a website but by having prior knowledge of antagonistic views or personalities, and to research them separately. The links policy in such forums are often found to be rigid to the extent that the opportunity to click on an opponent’s website rarely presents itself, and this is expected in various religious websites. For example, if salafipublications.com publishes a refutation against Safar al-Hawali, one might naturally expect a link to al-Hawali’s official website, yet none would be found, not even for information purposes, as linking is considered as a sort of endorsement. An example of the strict linking policy can be seen in the confrontation that recently occurred between sunniforum.com and marifah.net. These two websites defend Ash‘arism, Maturidism, and the adherence to one of the four Sunni main schools of law. Some of the founding members of sunniforum.com are also part of the board of marifah.net and marifah.net links to sunniforum.com. However, recently, sunniforum.com “banned” all outgoing links to marifah.net. What follows is the reason given by one of the administrators:

⁴⁶¹More detailed study of the different sample websites is found in 5.3.1.

Any level headed person can visit your forums and view the Deobandi/Barelwi thread⁴⁶² and see for themselves the amount of hatred, outright lying, takfir, and mockery of the scholars of Deoband Marifah is being explicitly allowed to take place in broad daylight. I encourage all the critics of our policy (the permanent ban of Marifah dot net until they remove all such content) to please visit their forum and read that particular thread. At Sunniforum we will NEVER allow such discussions to take place targeting any of the traditional scholars in such a manner.⁴⁶³

A lot of information can therefore be gathered from studying the Internet, as ultimately it is rarely in a world of its own, especially for websites which deal with religion. It is clear that the Internet is used as a facilitating tool, aimed at mirroring what occurs in real life, which explains why so many “online” fatwas are actually translated excerpts of printed Arabic books for example, or that there are forums organised to follow a preacher’s lesson over the net, live from Saudi Arabia. Because of its strong connection to real events and people, the cyber environment we have set out to analyse in this thesis has therefore proved to be useful in detecting related trends.

5.3 The ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’ and the World Wide Web

The websites used for this section will be websites and forums mostly in English, although there is plethora of material available in Arabic and French. All of them display articles in compliance with the vision of history of the WSNS in terms of strong opposition to the interpretation of religious non explicit texts dealing with the Attributes of God and to the Ash‘aris in general, denial of the existence of good innovations and considering most Muslims guilty of not worshipping God alone. What follows is a presentation of websites with a great Internet presence, although this does not automatically necessitate that the group which maintains it are influential where they are located.

5.3.1 Websites of the “purists”

One of the most well-known and long-running websites administered by WSNS advocating complete obedience to the Saudi preachers is Salafipublications.com and its associated websites. It is run from the U.K. and its webmasters and translators are associated to the mosque called al-Masjid al-Salafi in Wright Street, Birmingham. It is also known as “spubs.com”, or SPUBS. It claims to have “the Richest Content on the Web” and it works like a giant database of articles which can easily be accessed through

⁴⁶² He is referring to a thread in marifah.net.

⁴⁶³ <http://www.sunniforum.com/forum/showthread.php?t=38758>

a variety of other websites. For example, there is an article on marriage by Ibn Baz which can be accessed through the “Life and Marriage” section of the website. This same article can also be found on “binbaz.co.uk” under “Life and society matters”. It is not simply the case that there are various links pointing towards the same page, but rather, they seem to have a database which, whether accessed from spubs.com or from binbaz.co.uk, would retrieve the same article from these various locations. The best way to identify a given article found in that database is therefore its “Article ID”, composed of letters and numbers that can be typed on the front page to be retrieved. The contributions are mostly translations and comments of the works of famous ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafi’ preachers such as al-Fawzan, Ibn Baz, al- ‘Uthaymin, Muqbil, al-Albani, or contributions by unknown –but considered authoritative- “brothers” (not one “sister”) who have gathered some information from other sources, which are always mentioned. Some documents do not have an author mentioned, and represent the views of the website owners. All the websites linked from the front page are not simply websites that they recommend, rather, these are websites that they power themselves. They have been founded after having established spubs.com to complement them. The websites powered by spubs.com are:

www.salafibookstore.com
www.theNobleQuran.com
www.sahihalbukhari.com
www.sahihmuslim.com
www.salafiaudio.com
www.islam4Kids.com
www.albani.co.uk
www.binbaz.co.uk
www.binuthaymeen.co.uk
www.rabee.co.uk
www.ubayd.co.uk
www.fawzan.co.uk
www.muqbil.co.uk

The last seven websites, dedicated to prominent personalities of the WSNS also have another particularity: they include tabs which allow the visitor not only to retrieve articles from spubs.com, as explained earlier, but also from bakkah.net, troid.org, fatwaislam.com, masjiduthaymeen.org, and therighteouspath.com. Here, again, these are not mere links towards those websites. Rather, there is a coherent and systematic interface from which one chooses which website they want to interrogate within the database, and this will bring up all the articles written by the personality present in that website. This seems to imply a degree of cooperation more advanced than simply

linking to articles within the website. Even if this was not a complicated technical matter to innovate, it proves a certain level of interrelation which transcends mere referencing. It implies that all seven websites quote the same personalities in a coherent way. We could have imagined a situation where the same person is quoted by different groups with different purposes (like Ibn Taymiyya). They would not share the same platform in that case. But in this case, we can see that there is common understanding of the persons quoted. The welcoming blurb on the top of the page of websites powered by psbis.com reads (see Figure 1):

“Welcome! On this website, you will be able to keep up to date on whatever is available of the Shaykh's materials in English on the well known Salafee web sites. This website physically retrieves and displays updates from each of the abovementioned sites in real time, as you click on the relevant page. To view translated articles contributed by each of these sites click on the buttons above.”⁴⁶⁴

The fact that Spubs.com, which is the oldest website among them, as it was registered in 1997 in the UK, is affiliated with an almost equally old website based in Canada and opened in 1998 (troid.org), a Saudi-based website established in 2002 (bakkah.net) and a US one (therighteouspath.com), along with another UK- based but fairly recent one website (fatwaislam.com) shows that spubs.com has acted as a centralising figure of websites throughout the development of their literature on the Web, and it almost acts as a seal of approval for the contents of a given website. For these reasons, the sites powered by spubs.com will be treated as one big website, as the contents are coherently interlinked. Although spubs.com is a general website, each of the others has a specificity and contains links to all the other websites.

Bakkah.net is a questions and answers website but has the specificity of mostly containing translations from ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafi’ preachers’ books and tapes. The webmaster, Abu l-‘Abbas, lives in Mecca, and he provides information for people who are thinking about travelling to study in Saudi Arabia, as well as links to the Saudi universities. He claims to transmit the questions asked by his readers to some teachers in the Holy cities, and he then translates the written answer into English and files the copy of it with a reference code. Out of the 20 external links provided in the first page of Bakkah.net, under the categories of “scholars, recommended, and commerce”, ten are powered by spubs.com. In addition, other websites used by spubs.com (troid.org, bakkah.net, and the righteouspath.com) are also linked.

⁴⁶⁴ <http://www.albani.co.uk/>

The website fatwaislam.com is not a website where readers can submit their own questions, but it is a collection of translated legal judgements of various ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafi’ preachers such as Ibn Baz, al-Fawzan, al-Albani, al-‘Uthaymin, Muqbil and even Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab. They are mainly retrieved from books but also from magazines and they are classified by topics, scholars, or latest 30 fatwas (i.e. the latest 30 fatwas recently added). There is also a search engine to lead the visitor through the 779 fatwas (as of July 23rd 2006, 1029 on Feb 22nd 2009). There is no “about us” section, but the directory “whois”⁴⁶⁵ website let us know that it is a UK-based website and that it was created in this form in 2005.⁴⁶⁶ It does not offer any external link but it is linked to from various websites.

The website TROID.org is quite an eclectic one. It has developed and evolved a long way since its beginnings.⁴⁶⁷ The acronym TROID stands for “The Reign of the Islamic Da‘wah” and it is the website representing the “Masjidul-Furqaan and Islaamic centre” based in Toronto. It has five sections: the main one contains links to the articles contained in the website, arranged by themes on a bar on the left: news, information about the centre, the forums, and a store. The richest in terms of content is the main part with the articles. The site used to be difficult to navigate due to the inconsistency of the pages with different interfaces, the internal broken links, and the fact that some links simply sent the user back to the previous page. However, it is now more consistent in style and is frequently being updated as can be evidenced by the recent notices. Those in charge of this website have been instrumental in laying foundations for the WSNS on the Internet (at least in English-speaking zones) as will be demonstrated in the next section.

The website masjiduthaymeen.org is the Arabic-only website of this database. It has a corpus of articles from the same ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafi’ authors as usual, and the section of links is identical to those quoted above (i.e. most of them being powered by salafipublications.com).⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁵ The one I have used throughout this study is www.allwhois.com. It gives information about when the domain name was purchased and by whom.

⁴⁶⁶ The existence of previous forms of the same website under another name cannot be ruled out, for instance bakkah.net which used to be makkah.net.

⁴⁶⁷ I have been a regular user of this website since 2005.

⁴⁶⁸ On February 22nd 2009, the website was bizarrely replaced by a page offering the pain-killer drug TRAMADOL. It appears that the website was hijacked or fell victim to spammers.

As a final note, the website therighteouspath.com used to offer a series of articles in different categories, all in PDF format with the source clearly stated (e.g. a translation of a book excerpt or a transcription and translation of a recording heard on Salafiaudio.com, another website powered by spubs.com). Out of the twenty external links on the front page, fourteen were for websites powered by spubs.com. In February 2009, the website was out of service because the domain had expired, however it was still linked to from the salaf.com webpage (see below).

These websites form a closed-circuit network where one can only read the same version of so-called Salafism despite the diversity of interfaces, languages and countries available on the internet. All these websites can be found on www.salaf.com, a domain name purchased by spubs.com in 1998.

The screen shots in Figure 2, Figure 3 and Figure 4 show how different the websites are on the surface and how this does not prevent them from having aggregated their contents so that it can be accessed through a single database (salaf.com). All these websites exclusively utilise the references of Saudi preachers such as al-Madkhali, in addition to al-Albani (Syrian) and Muqbil (Yemeni). They have adopted a distinctive transliteration system, writing long vowels by doubling the letter representing it in English, like in the word “Allaah” or in “Aboo al-Maqdisee” for example. This transliteration system is mocked by their opponents who sometimes add more than two vowels and write “Salafee” for example, in reference to SPUB (examples below in the case studies in 5.4).

Another website belonging to the trend of the “purists” but not directly related to spubs.com is salafimanhaj.com. There are no links from one of the SPBUS sites to salafimanhaj.com and salafimanhaj.com only links to two websites: darussalaam.com (website of one of the most prolific Saudi publishing houses in English with religious material) and islamicknowledge.co.uk, a website advertising free lessons about the Islamic creed taking place in Brixton Mosque in London, and elsewhere. However, the content and alliances displayed in both spubs.com and salafimanhaj.com are similar, along with the same transliteration system. Salafimanhaj.com is updated regularly as can be seen in its PDF section from the homepage. They release well researched articles in PDF format expressly for the Web and encourage their distribution. Many of the articles are translations of Arabic statements, books, or fatwas, but some material is

written directly in English for an English audience, such as their refutation to a report by the New York Police Department accusing Salafism of encouraging terrorism.⁴⁶⁹

In the English-speaking so-called Salafi scene on the Internet, the second group of websites to be considered as among the “purists” are those linked to the forum ahya.org. It is very similar to SPUBS in condemning suicide bombings and terrorism in general, along with the same creed and the same Saudi references. The main difference is essentially in the tone and attitude that these members adopt. They do not necessarily shun Muslims belonging to groups other than theirs and are less prompt to accuse and attack those from their own side, as opposed to the people behind spubs.com who are very rigid in the way they categorise Muslims (examples in the case studies below). In ahya.org the users are more careful with the language they choose, and they are more open in terms of the speakers that they will accept to invite in their premises. Their opposition to the WSNS running spubs.com is neither theological nor political but rather methodological (i.e. with which methods should innovators be addressed?), which is still enough to stir a lot of shared enmity between the two groups. As far as the issue of the Attributes of God, Ash‘arism and other related issues mentioned in Chapter 4, the forum offers material similar to spubs.com. An overview of the forum and the topics that it covers follows can be found in Figure 5.: apart from a general section and one in Urdu, all the other sections are concerned with refuting various groups from the Shi‘i to the “Extremist Sufis” including the Ash‘aris, the Maturidis, the Deobandis and those called the “ghulaat”, i.e. the other WSNS that they consider extreme in their position and statements, like those at spubs.com. The website also has audio lectures that can be downloaded. The lesson dealing with the names and Attributes of God is titled “Sifat Eyes Ears”. In it, the lecturer, named Dr Abdullah al-Farsi, is asked whether God has ears or not. He answers that because there are no explicit texts affirming it or negating this, it cannot be confirmed or denied:

it is not accurate to say that no one known amongst the of Ahl al-Sunna said that Allah has ears. This is not an accurate statement. It is accurate to say that it is not common amongst the scholars of ahl al-sunna to say this, but to deny it altogether, this is not true. I do not recall right now but I recall that I have come across some quotations at least. Now they base it on a hadith where the Prophet says “maa adhina Rabbuka li-ahadin ka idhnihi li qaari'in hasan al-sawt” that Allah did not give His ears in hearing to something or to someone more than some person who reads Qur'an or recites Qur'an in a beautiful voice.

⁴⁶⁹ <http://salafimanhaj.com/ebook.php?ebook=49>

He highlights that the hadith does not mean that God has one ear or two ears because according to Him here the verb “*adhina*” is equal to “*sami‘a*”, which simply means “to hear”, and attributes are not derived from verbs. To conclude he says:

“It is true that we cannot say that Allah has two ears, and also it is true to say that we cannot deny it, we cannot deny it, because we don’t know, how could we deny it?”⁴⁷⁰

This is typical of the position that Ash‘ari scholars have classified as anthropomorphism. Where an Ash‘ari would have said categorically that God has no ears, the WSNS say that they do not take sides because the issue was not specifically dealt with by the Prophet.⁴⁷¹ In the same recording, he is asked a second question about the validity of saying that God has two eyes, when the word ‘*ayn*’ in the Qur’an is never found in the dual form attributed to God. The answer of Dr Abdullah al-Farsi is also one of the main fundamental points of the creed of the WSNS, mentioned by Ibn ‘Uthaymin in his treatise on the creed.⁴⁷²

The strongest proof that most of the scholars of Ahl al-Sunna use regarding the two eyes for Allah subhanahu wa ta‘ala is the hadith which is in Bukhari and Muslim and other books of hadith which is the hadith of the Dajjal⁴⁷³ where the Prophet says that one of the attributes of Dajjal is that he is cock-eyed, one eye is spoiled, and then the Prophet *salla* Allah ‘alayhi wa *sallam* says “while your Lord is not cock-eyed” that means He has both two eyes [sic] to be perfect, both two eyes are perfect. Also there is another hadith which Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyya has mentioned and also Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen *rahimahullah* has mentioned, and some scholars consider it to be an OK hadith, *hasan*, it says that Allah has two eyes.⁴⁷⁴

This argument consists in saying that because the Prophet said that God is not one-eyed then this would prove that God has two eyes. This reasoning has been criticized by the ‘Sunnis-not-claiming-to-be-Salafis’ because there is no proof that it would be two and not three, four or other than that, and also because it could simply convey that God is not one-eyed because He does not have any imperfection, not because He would necessarily have two eyes. The lecture of al-Farsi quoted above has featured on this

⁴⁷⁰ <http://www.ahya.org/realaudio/farsi/SifatEyesEars1.rm> This link is in the section called “Lectures” of *ahya.org* website, then “Abdullah al-Farsi”, then “Questions on Asmaa was-Sifaat”.

⁴⁷¹ As we saw in chapter 2, al-Ash‘ari denounced this argument by saying that in some cases there is a need to deny things that are impossible about God, otherwise, if asked if his God performs *hajj* or gets married then the Muslim would say that he cannot deny it because there is no explicit text saying that He does not. Al-Kawthari (3.5.1.2) was of the view that the verse negating all resemblance to God [Q 42: 11] should have been a strong enough proof against all sorts of anthropomorphism concerning the belief in God: Muhammad Zahid ibn al-Hasan al-Kawthari, *Maqalat al-Kawthari* (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-azhariyya li-al-turath, 1994), p.395.

⁴⁷² Muhammad ibn Salih al-‘Uthaymin, ‘The Muslim’s Belief,’ *Allaahuakbar.net*, http://www.allaahuakbar.net/scholars/uthaymeen/muslims_belief.htm Accessed on 19 July 2006

⁴⁷³ The *Dajjal* is the name of the Antichrist (the “Deceiver”) whose arrival on earth is believed by Muslims to be one of the signs that will precede the final hour.

⁴⁷⁴ The question starts at 5’27 in the audio downloadable at <http://www.ahya.org/realaudio/farsi/SifatEyesEars1.rm>

website since May 28th 2004. It demonstrates that even though the style of ahya.org is more amicable towards the theological enemies of the WSNS than that of salafipublications.com, the creed is the same. Some particulars of the feud between the two trends will be exemplified in the part dedicated to the case studies.

5.3.2 Websites of the “politicos”

Safar al-Hawali and Salman al-‘Awda have websites that they regularly maintain which have been described in 3.5.2.1. Safar al-Hawali is the author of a pamphlet against Ash‘arism that is considered accurate across the different factions of WSNS.

5.3.3 Websites of the “jihadis”

One of the most well-known of these “jihadis” websites in Arabic, has been quoted in 3.5.2.1. However, there are other websites, in English, perhaps with a less significant online presence, such as the blog of the “at-Tibyan Publications”. There are two forums in English that one needs to be registered to before even being allowed to enter and read the messages. In this section, many of the active forums and blogs are in French, such as the one openly maintained by the widow of the individual who killed Commandant Massud in Afghanistan in 2001, two days before the attack on the World Trade Center. She is now settled in Belgium and officially gathers information about Muslim prisoners around the world, but also act as a platform from which one can download the latest video messages from al-Qa‘ida leaders. In this forum, people may rejoice at the establishment of a new website for another branch of al-Qa‘ida: in Figure 6, the first message has been pinned, which means that it is always supposed to remain on top of the other messages. It is entitled “Good news! A New internet website for al-Qa‘ida in the Maghreb”.

There are also translations of articles originally written in Arabic, such as the one entitled “Whoever denies that terrorism is part of Islam is a disbeliever” (Figure 7).

5.4 Case-studies from English-speaking websites

5.4.1 The blog Khalas

The blog Khalas hosted by Wordpress is written by a man whose pen-name is Abdul-Quddus. He subtitles his blog as follows: “a former convert to Islam turned apostate, ex-muslim, freethinker, born-again atheist, and vegetarian gone wild” (Figure 8). The blog

itself is quite short; it consists of only three posts all written in March 2007. The first post is entitled ‘I left Islam’. It is an account of the author’s “Journey through Islam”, as he puts it. In it ‘Abdul-Quddus reveals that he left Islam because he discovered that the god he was asked to worship was no more than another idol with a face, hands, eyes, a shin and feet, sitting over a Throne, all things which, he says, do not make this god any different from an idol. He says:

My expectations of a Supreme Being was in contrast to the conventional god of Prophet Muhammad. I yearned for a deity that was transcendent, incomparable, and an indefinable holy unable to be conceptualized. To my discovery, the Islaamic deity was actually the generic anthropomorphic Sky Father abound in popular mythology. He was afflicted with psychological infirmities such as megalomania, melancholy, and malevolence.[...] I could not worship a God that changed. As just another idol, Allaah was depicted and contained in the literary work of al-Qur’aan. According to one hadeeth (Sahih Bukhari: Volume 8, Book 74, Number 246), the Islaamic God created Aadam upon His soorah (form, shape, image), sixty cubits in height. Allaah rested upon His Throne (arsh) near His Footstool (kursi). He claimed to have an Eye (20:39), a Shin (68:42), a Face (55:27), a Foot (Sahih Bukhari: Volume 9, Book 93, Number 541), even both Right and Left Hands (39:67). [...]Discovering Allaah to be as mythical as the elephant-god Ganesha or temper tantrum Yahweh was a devastating blow to my heart. Relying on tawheed, the initial attraction to Islaam, was ineffectual for I now discerned Allaah as fictitious like the rest of the idols. The god of Islaam, likely just Muhammad’s alter-ego, displayed masculinity, anger, indecision, misogyny, and other moral weaknesses unbecoming of a majestic deity.⁴⁷⁵

Here, we can see that this very issue of the Attributes of God was deemed so important that he left Islam when he read literal translations of the Qur’an⁴⁷⁶ which did not offer a description of God which was befitting to the perfect Being. This example shows us that the issue of the Attributes of God and their meaning is still of vital importance today. From his own personal account, it is understood that ‘Abdul-Quddus most probably did not hear of the Ash‘aris, or least of their teachings. The creed of Islam as presented by al-Ash‘ari and Maturidi scholar is the polar opposite of the definition that ‘Abdul-Quddus has described. As we mentioned earlier, Ash‘ari and Maturidi scholars throughout history have condemned the practice of taking the verses and hadith reports according to their literal meaning when this literal meaning leads to anthropomorphism. Their reason for doing so is precisely because of their belief that God does not change, is not limited, is not a body, and is not in a specific place, be it the sky or elsewhere. This does not seem to be what ‘Abdul-Quddus had learned, and he does not seem aware

⁴⁷⁵ <http://khalas.wordpress.com/2007/03/16/i-left-islam/>

⁴⁷⁶ He mentions in his accounts that he was using a translation published by Darussalaam, the main Saudi publishing house in terms of religious materials. It is most probably the one which is widely circulated for free in the English-speaking world, with the title “Interpretations of the Meanings of the Noble Qur’an in the English Language, by Dr Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Dr Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali”.

that there are Ash‘ari scholars who do interpret those non explicit texts and provide explanations for them. This is an example of how the rhetoric of the WSNS is trying to replace Sunni teachings developed by al-Ash‘ari. Although ‘Abdul-Quddus says of himself that he did not belong to any particular sect, his references and the way he describes his friends are compliant with the teachings of WSNS. In spite of all the research he admits to have done, he managed to not come across the explanations of Ash‘ari and Maturidi scholar regarding those non explicit verses. This means that in his particular case the only vision of history he was aware was that of the WSNS. It appears that the Muslim community would benefit as a whole if there were more scholars trained in theological dialectics and other domains. In this specific case, having an Ash‘ari scholar nearby might not have changed the outcome for ‘Abdul-Quddus, but at least he would have managed to hear a presentation of the creed of Islam which would have answered his questions.

5.4.2 The case of Said Gunnar Bak

Said Gunnar Bak is a Danish man who embraced Islam a few years ago, works in computing , and acts as a webmaster for different sites about Islam. All the information found in this section has been gathered from his websites where he has left a considerable amount of information about himself to be accessed by the public. I chose him out of many because he has, as he puts it, been “sect-surfing” between what we have described in this thesis as the WSNS and the ‘Sunnis-not-claiming-to-be-Salafis’ but also others. He became known on the web because of his website salaf.dk which used to be a sort of directory page where one could find all the favorite websites that WSNS would want to visit. They were organised by language: English, Urdu, French, Indonesian, and other languages. There was also a newsletter to which one could subscribe to receive an email whenever a supposedly trustworthy website was added to the already long list. This remained until around May 2006. In May 2006, the website shut down apparently due to “maintenance work” but it was meant to reopen soon. It did in September, but to the great surprise of the subscribers, the website was now linking to articles written by Gibril Fouad Haddad (see 4.2.1) and Nuh Keller (see 4.2.1); it was denouncing Salafism as being Wahhabism, and it was advocating adhering to one of the four schools. Readers could now find this disclaimer:

This is not a Salafi/Wahhabi site. This site adheres to Ahl us-Sunna wa'l-Jama'a. Ahl us-Sunna wa'l-Jama'a are those who adhere to the Ash'ari/Maturidi 'aqida and the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali madhhabs.

Shortly after this occurrence, there were to be found posts in forums where Said Gunnar Bak was branded as an innovator who had been misguided and who therefore should be shunned. He received a great amount of emails by subscribers who wanted to be removed from the list, to which he replied :

It seems a lot of people have a hard time figuring out how to leave a yahoo! group (even though they managed to join it all by themselves).⁴⁷⁷ From now on "remove me from the list" and "stop sending me /#%" kind of messages will be ignored. If you are unable to figure out how to unsubscribe from a mailing list, you should probably be doing something else than being on the Internet.⁴⁷⁸

After explaining to people how to unsubscribe for the last time, he added a series of links he deemed beneficial :

Recommended articles for the seekers of truth:
Is it permissible for a Muslim to believe that Allah is in the sky in a literal sense?
Literalism and the Attributes of Allah
The Ash'ari School - a Defence
Sh. Murabit al-Haj's Fatwa on Following One of the Four Accepted Madhhabs (pdf).
Understanding the Four Madhhabs - The problem with Anti-Madhhabism
Why Does One Have to Follow a Madhhab? - A Debate
What is a Madhhab?
Why Muslims Follow Madhhabs
Who or what is a Salafi - Is their approach valid?
Asking for 'evidences' - is a clear dalil of your ignorance
The Place of Tasawwuf in the Traditional Islamic Sciences
How would you respond to the claim that Sufism is Bid'a?
The Meaning of Tasawwuf⁴⁷⁹

Most of these articles have been written by Nuh Keller (see 4.2.1). There are also articles that were quoted earlier in defense of the 'Sunnis-not-claiming-to-be-Salafis': notably Saleem's and al-Maliki's. All of them advocate the creed that God exists without a place, that Ash'aris and Maturidi are ahl al-sunna, and that they are the majority of the Muslims. This vision of history that Bak came to support is the complete opposite of what he used to promote. As he was the webmaster of several websites, the content of all these websites changed when he did, which confused a few people. There was a vindictive letter against him, posted as a PDF document on the web, entitled

⁴⁷⁷ To subscribe to a "Yahoo group" one needs to actively click and reply to an email. It is technically possible for the owner of a group to enter the email address of somebody without their approval but this is contrary to the terms and conditions of the use of groups and the owner may see his group terminated if misconduct is proven. In other words, those writing to Said Gunnar Bak did choose to be part of the group themselves.

⁴⁷⁸ Email sent to the subscribers of the list on September 21st, 2006.

⁴⁷⁹ Originakky at www.salaf.dk but now accessible via www.archive.org

“The ridiculous situation of the one who went “bak”: Aboo Zakariyya Sa’eed Gunnaar Bak of Denmark and his Salaf.dk Website”.⁴⁸⁰

However, after about a year, during which he adopted the Maliki madhhab, he announced on one of his websites and on a forum that he had gone back to “Salafiyya”.

He said:

Declaration Regarding My Islamic Stance

(...)Dear brothers and sisters in Islām,

There is no reason to delay telling you about where I stand, other than fearing your reactions and we should not fear anything other than Allāh (subhāhanu wa ta’ālā), so let me explain. In my time as a Muslim I have been through times of confusion and have changed my views more than once. When I was a new Muslim I went to the Waqf mosque in Copenhagen[1] and later joined Hizb ut-Tahrīr and stayed with them for 3-4 years. After that I was nearly drawn in by the Shī’ah, but al-hamdulillāh Allāh protected me from that fitnah. Then I became a Salafī and was one for another 3-4 years. Internal disagreement amongst the Salafies (not on fundamental matters) left me tired and confused and so I left the Salafī understanding for what has been called “Traditional Sunni Islam” or the “Ash’arī/Māturīdī/Sufi” understanding. That change happened in the Summer of 2006.

Looking at this through a negative filter, it is easy to criticise me and call me a “leaf in the wind” and there is of course some truth to that, considering the number of times I have changed. However, I choose to look at this from a positive perspective and I thank Allāh (subhāhanu wa ta’ālā) for letting me experience these groups and sects first hand and learn how they are in reality and not just through words in articles and on paper. Furthermore, my changes have always been grounded in my intention to follow al-Haqq (the Truth).

This yearning for al-Haqq has now lead me back to the understanding, about which I no longer hold any doubt is the correct and true one, namely Fahm as-Salaf as-Sālih (the understanding of the Pious Predecessors), without adding anything to it. I wash my hands from the Ash’arī and Māturīdī understandings and all the other understandings of the Ahl ul-Kalām and Ahl ul-Bid’ah in general, among them those who like to call themselves as-Sūfiyyah or Ahl ut-Tasawwuf. There is no doubt that sulūk and tazkiyat un-nafs is a part of Islām, but as with everything else in Islām this “science” too needs to be understood through the principle of: “There is no salvation except through following the Salaf”. And Allāh is the One Who Guides.

So I am a Salafī (Atharī) in ‘aqīdah and manhaj (methodology), wal-hamdulillāh [2] As shaikh Muhammad Nāsiruddīn al-Albānī (rahimahullāh) wrote: “As for the one who ascribes himself to all of the as-Salaf us-Sālih then he ascribes himself to what is protected from error.” [Majallat ul-Asālah, 9/87]

Allāhumma yā Muqallib al-Qulūbi thabbit qulūbanā ‘alā Dīnik, wa sallī wa sallim wa bārik ‘alā nabiyinā Muhammadin wa ‘alā Ālihi wa Sahbihi ajma’in.

⁴⁸⁰ This used to be available at this address: http://www.salafimanhaj.com/pdf/SalafiManhaj_SalafDK.pdf but it is not anymore.

Wrote the slave in need of his Rabb's Forgiveness and Grace, Sa'id bin Gunnar Bak al-Iskandinâfi

Odense, Denmark - 4 Shawwâl 1428 | 15 October 2007

Notes:

[1] Al-Waqf al-Iskandinâfi also known as "Masjid ut-Tawbah" a mostly Ikhwâni/Qutbi controlled mosque and organisation in Copenhagen, Denmark.
[2] This public declaration is necessary because I have been involved in spreading falsehood and misunderstandings in my time with the Ahl ul-Bid'ah. So now it should be clear to whoever reads this that I have nothing to do with my former Ahl ul-Bid'ah stances, having made Tawbah from them.⁴⁸¹

He justifies the need for a public declaration because of his personal involvement in spreading certain beliefs, and he wanted to be sure that his new beliefs were clarified. The reactions in sunniforum.com, a forum which openly supports following a madhhab and Ash'arism along with Maturidism were varied. Some greeted the announcement with contempt, such as the member "dining_philosopher" who wrote, the day following the declaration:

This is by you? What put's you under the impression that we care what your stance is on anything?⁴⁸²

Others tried to hope he will be back, like this teacher, Ibn Ajibah, who posted on Oct 17th, 2007:

"You'll be back"--Words of a Shaikh to a person who left him to be a salafi. And yes, he did come back.⁴⁸³

Others, well aware of the subdivisions of the WSNS, asked:

So did you turn madkhali, suroori, qutbi, takfiri or ...?⁴⁸⁴

The transliteration with "oo" is a way to refer to the transliteration system of the websites affiliated to salafipublications.com where vowels are written twice when it is prolonged in Arabic, a system which is ridiculed by their ideological opponents as mentioned in the previous section.

The thread where Said Gunnar Bak intervened was a more general one where the importance of creedal issues can be seen in the debate that followed. A contributor posted a message by Muhammad ibn al-'Uthaymin regarding "sect-surfing", somebody

⁴⁸¹ Used to be available at sunnilinks.dk, but it is not anymore.

⁴⁸² <http://www.sunniforum.com/forum/showthread.php?p=237475>

⁴⁸³ <http://www.sunniforum.com/forum/showthread.php?t=27978&page=120>

⁴⁸⁴ <http://www.sunniforum.com/forum/showthread.php?t=27978&page=120>

else took this opportunity to ask “Is he [al-‘Uthaymin] sunni or not?” He received the following reply by “nik61”:

From what I read about him by Shaykh GF Haddad, he doesn't appear to be Sunni. Try the link below and read it.

http://www.abc.se/~m9783/n/uthaym_e.html

In his book Aqidat al Muslimin, pg 11, Ibn Uthaymeen said, "The establishment of Allah on the throne means that He is sitting in person on His throne."

We can see here that the reason why al-‘Uthaymin is not considered a Sunni is because of his stance on the issue of Istiwa, and because he attributes a place to God. This shows that belonging to Sunnism is, for some members, directly linked to whether one interprets the non explicit religious texts dealing with the Attributes of God or if one takes them literally.

Another member, Habib1968, added this anecdote :

Salam alaikoum ,

I was last year in Egypt and there was some salafi brothers from my country in the mosque where I used to pray and we had sometimes some discussions ; they talked a lot about sheikh Outhaymeen ; he is well respected ...

They also asked me where is Allah (swa) ; " aqida control "  ⁴⁸⁵

Wa salam

The phrase “aqida control” means that some WSNS wanted to check his stand on the issue of a place or direction attributed to God. Some WSNS suspect that an Ash‘ari or a Maturidi will not answer “in the sky”, but will try to explain that God is not limited or in a direction. This phrase shows the mechanisms which are in place so that people from each “group” recognise one another. As opposed to asking a person whether he would call himself a Salafi or something else, a question on creedal issues might serve to achieve the same purpose in a more accurate way as these are issues on which Muslims consider they cannot lie. The member “celt islam” then adds this summary:

The reality is this, the salaafis do not represent traditional islamic teaching in fact they reject the teachings of the madhabs and claim that anyone following a madhab is a blind follower.

These neo-Khawarij salaafi movements are well-known for attacking the mainstream Muslims for following the established Madhabs (the traditional Schools of thought).

⁴⁸⁵ Emoticons are an important way to qualify one’s statements on the Internet, which is the reason I have copied it here. This one is animated and rolls its eyes.

They say you should not follow the Scholars but only the Quran and Sunnah (Hadith) of the Prophet (SAW). Which tacitly implies the previous Scholars did not do that.

In any case this is a redundant argument as following the opinion of a scholar is a must, unless one is a scholar who is capable of deducing the rules from the Islamic texts.

The vast majority of the Muslims are not scholars. Therefore, the salaafis claim of following the Quran and Sunnah in reality means: do not follow the established Madhabs but follow our interpretation of the Quran and Sunnah, i.e. our Madhab. So instead of referring to the books of the traditional scholars like the Hanafi, Shafee, Maliki, Hanbali, Ghazali, and others, you should pickup 'only' the books of Al-Albani or Bin-Baaz etc etc⁴⁸⁶

We can see that the changes of Said Gunnar Bak are blamed on his personality but first and foremost on the confusion created by the opposite vision of history of the WSNS. Since that time (2007), his websites also changed, as less militant links such as translations of the Qur'an, hadith databases and where to learn Arabic were introduced. After a few more investigations, we found out that in January 2008 he posted again in sunniforum under the pseudonym of "Danimarki". When some people wondered if he was Said Gunnar Bak he answered yes and reverted to so-called "traditional" Sunnism, more precisely in the Shafi'i school.⁴⁸⁷ At the end of January 2008, when he posts in the Maliki section of the forum, others users are curious to know how and why he changed again but this time he said he would made no public declaration as people did not care. The pseudonym "loveProphet" then writes :

I sort of thought that when you left the "Salafi" group and stuff on facebook.⁴⁸⁸

Abdullah ibn Adam asks, on the thread where he announced his changes:

"Btw, what about your wife? I remember you asked on Ahadun Ahad Forums/Marifah forums for a text on tasawwuf to convince your wife that tasawwuf is part of Islam. Did she turn into a salafi again? Or is she still Sunni?"⁴⁸⁹

On another thread where one his latest changes was discussed, a member posted this off-topic comment:

"I don't know you but I think I've seen some of your cool pictures on flickr."⁴⁹⁰

Flickr is a website where one is able to share pictures with the rest of the world, Ahadun/Ahad is the name of a forum which has been integrated into another website called Marifah (mentioned above), and Facebook is the famous social networking

⁴⁸⁶ <http://www.sunniforum.com/forum/showthread.php?t=27978&page=122>

⁴⁸⁷ <http://www.sunniforum.com/forum/showthread.php?t=30355&page=3>

⁴⁸⁸ <http://www.sunniforum.com/forum/showthread.php?t=31271>

⁴⁸⁹ <http://www.sunniforum.com/forum/showthread.php?t=27978&page=119>

⁴⁹⁰ <http://www.sunniforum.com/forum/showthread.php?t=30355&page=3>

website. The same ‘Abdullah ibn Adam reminds him that there was a refutation against him in a so-called Salafi website.⁴⁹¹ All of this demonstrates how the Internet has evolved with all the many different tools that people have to keep in touch and to gain knowledge. Here, “JawadS” is warning Said Bak against the Internet when it comes to learn religious tenets :

Sidi Said, you should not rely on the Internet and don't adopt it as your "Shaykh". It is very easy on the Internet for someone to add Shaykh in front of their names and write an article, which may contain errors regarding the deen, and thus, misleading many from obtaining the right knowledge of Islam. Therefore, you should try (if you can afford and circumstances allow you) to go learn at the feet of authorized scholars, especially in terms of our basic Islamic knowledge (i.e. Aqeedah and Fiqh), wherever you are able to do so. There have been many scholars who traveled to places quite afar from where they lived to gain knowledge. All matters of Aqeedah should be learned with the help and guidance of authorized scholars. There is alot of misguidance and error on the Internet and it is very unsafe to learn the deen and Aqeedah on it, as it will taint your Islam and Iman.⁴⁹²

Celt Islam also make a short history of Said Bak’s changing alliances, and he links them all to the Internet, including the act of giving allegiance to a shaykh :

Sidi Said bak gave bayah once to the amir of the Murabitun Darqawi tariqah and then due to his lack of yaqin he left almost straight away and became an Internet mureed of the wonderful Shaykh Nuh Keller, due to the nature of Sidi Said you will see he has a pattern of not being able to ground himself in a path hence why he changes his opinions almost weekly.

After some time Sidi Said came back to the company of various Mureeds of Shaykh Abdal Qadir as Sufi by internet and wanted to give his Bayah once again at this time He was advised not to take things lightly but he was demanding and full of energy in becoming part of the Murabitin that we gave him another chance to prove himself and the amir once again allowed Sidi Said to give bayah again which he did .

After a short time Sidi Said came and visited me and we have such a great time chating about various things to which he said many a great thing about how he was lost and now he had finally made his mind where his heart lays, within a month of him returning back home he again decided to leave the Murabitun darqawi tarqah[sic].⁴⁹³

The case of Said Gunnar Bak demonstrates that the debates can be confusing and forcing one to question his/her references. Some other Internet actors did not cease to be among the WSNS, but questioned some of its methodology, like Umar Lee.

5.4.3 Umar Lee’s series on the Rise and Fall of the Salafi Movement in the US

⁴⁹¹ <http://www.sunniforum.com/forum/showthread.php?t=27978&page=119>

⁴⁹² <http://www.sunniforum.com/forum/showthread.php?t=27978&page=121>

⁴⁹³ <http://www.sunniforum.com/forum/showthread.php?t=27978&page=118>

Umar Lee is an American blogger who embraced Islam in the early 1990s. He has been blogging since August 2005, as the archives of his wordpress blog show. He is also present on the social networking websites myspace.com and facebook.com where he maintains pages and posts some videos of himself. In January 2007, he wrote a 10-part series that he entitled the “Rise and Fall of the Salafi Dawah in the US”. He later said he would have preferred to change it to “movement” instead of “dawah”, as he does not believe that the Salafi message is wrong, but that the methods of some of its members is wrong and led to a downfall of the group as a whole. Although he is still actively blogging and seems to be maintaining his pages, the series of texts is no longer available on his website. Only the last part, the tenth one, is still there, and it is the only one in which commenting was allowed. The pages must have been removed before May 20th 2008, as a person whose nickname is “Muslim Sister” commented on the contact page of Umar Lee, saying that she was unable to access the pages.⁴⁹⁴ The series is an account of how he lived through the development of the so-called “Salafi” movement in the US, from the early 90s when he converted, up until today. He did not write it to mock or deny what he had believed in the past, on the contrary, the account is full of empathy. The author is of the view that problems need to be aired if they are to be solved, and although he has been criticised for exposing these issues, he stood firm in his decision to publish the series online, although I have not been able to find out if he explained the reason why he has removed the whole series except for the one final post. The quotes below will be referenced from another blog which had gathered the whole series in one web page. The first five parts retraces the establishment of what the author describes as the best Salafi community in the US at that time, and that was in the city of East Orange, in New Jersey, where he spent “the best times of [his] life”. They had managed to build a strong community with regular classes and activities, a sense of brotherhood strengthened by frequent visits and a common purpose. However, some divergences over two main theoretical issues was at the origin of the disintegration of the movement. He starts to explain the downfall of the movement from the sixth part. He sums the problems as follows:

In the beginning, it really centered around a couple of issues:

- Whether or not it was a MUST [emphasis in original] to call oneself a salafi even if he/she adheres to the salafi dawah.

⁴⁹⁴ <http://umarlee.com/contact/>

- Loyalty to the Saudi throne even if one is not Saudi (They will say “the rulers”, but they mean the Saudi throne)

On the first issue, there were many of the opinion that it was almost sinful to not [sic] distinguish oneself as a salafi and became more and more belligerent and uncompromising over time.

[...]As I said, in the beginning, this was of little consequence to those of us in the rank and file, but it began to trickle down as QSS⁴⁹⁵ speakers started giving lectures about “the importance of obeying the rulers” and “Why one should [sic] call oneself Salafi” and began an inquisition to “purify the ranks of the salafis”. Their guiding principle was that the small evil must be exposed because it is not clear while the big evil is clear. In other words...we are going to concentrate on the small mistakes...we are going to drive it into the ground (and we are going to drive everyone away in the process).

He adds:

Much of the promotion of this schism came out of the UK from Salafi Publications (SP) [referred to as SPUBS] in this study] and they began to distribute mass emails that began to create a lot of confusion amongst the rank and file. New Muslims soon got involved in issues that had nothing to do with them and thought that Islam was all about these two issues. For a few years, this fitnah festered below the surface, and many hoped that this issue would go away, but it continued to grow and grow.⁴⁹⁶

Here, the impact of the Internet and of the salafipublications.com is clearly described. In the passage below, Umar Lee describes the meltdown that occurred in a vivid and detailed way which is rarely reproduced in other websites of personalities linked to the WSNS, which explains the length of the quote. The fact that these pages have been removed from his website renders them even more valuable to cite here. He adds:

Then there were the seeming concurrent deaths of Ibn Baz, Ibn Uthaymeen and Al-Albani who all died during this period. This started a new period in which “the ulamaa” became a term to bash brothers who listened to Western speakers. “No scholars in the West!!!” they would shout at you in their efforts to discredit all Western speakers not in their clique.

[...]There was a character assassination taken out on speaker after speaker and one by one, they were discredited with seemingly a mountain of “daleel”. This great Salafi Speaker purge would leave no survivors from the speaker’s circuit and eventually kill off the larger events that were not replaced by those who only had the power to destroy and not build.

[...]Soon, it was not good enough to remain silent on these issues. They started to demand a “bayaan” from every individual – whether written or spoken and recorded – “clarifying their position”. In this “bayaan” one would affirm their rejection of the list of “deviants” the self appointed ecclesiastical tribunal came up with and affirm their loyalty to a list of scholars many had never heard of that they were calling “the Kibaar” (i.e., the biggest scholars on earth).

⁴⁹⁵ QSS refers to the Qur’an and Sunnah Society in North America, which was organising major events in the US in the form of conferences : www.qss.org

⁴⁹⁶ http://notanothermuslimblog.com/?page_id=32

Many were forced into a corner to accept the position of the ecclesiastical tribunals. Everyone that wanted to maintain their standing in the community was forced to comply. It was a form of “thought reform”.

The penalty for not complying? ... The dreaded boycott. This meant that no one would give you the salaam, nor speak to you, your wife or even your children. That being the case, this created a lot of problems inside homes as the wife would not appreciate being boycotted by her friends because her husband is not “taking the correct position” or vice versa. The obsession with “clarifying one’s salafiyah” reached a fever pitch.

Many took “the correct position” under social duress. Those that did not were not only ostracized, but risked having a huge “refutation” written against them on the email lists and their name dragged through the mud. They may even make up a nickname for you. Books were set on fire and thousand of tapes thrown out as TROID’s ecclesiastical edicts spread across the country. Long lists of people who were “off of it” were distributed and put on the walls of salafi masjids.

Anyone associating with the people on the “off it” list, defended their honor, or who had their books or tapes was to be boycotted as well. The people on these lists (and those with them) could be backbitten with no problem. TROID even had a lecture entitled “Come let us backbite for an hour for the sake of Allah” that showed exactly where they thought the priorities of the Muslims should be

[...]The most rabid ones were obstinate and could not be reasoned with. Salafi email lists that had open membership, closed and some made all current members send an email to the administrator “clarifying their salafiyah” or risk being thrown off the list. They refused to do any sort of reconciliation and insisted on humiliating and abusing their opponents. Anyone who was friends with someone who was friends with someone who listened to the banned speakers was accused with “tamyee” (watering down the religion) and risked abandonment.

[...]Since “the kibaar said to remove the children from the Islamic school in EO” many put their children in public schools or made feeble attempts to homeschool. No need to think and weigh the benefit of this boycott versus the evil that it was causing. The “kibaar” had called for a boycott and they knew best. No need to research further or stop and think about this.

Soon, EO was nearly abandoned and all the progress that was being made as a community stopped. And it would hurt everyone ... including many children.

[...]Every common person was suddenly subjected to the rules of jarh wa tadeel as if they were a narrator of hadith and people were divided between “thiqah” (trustworthy) and “matrook” (abandoned). All these things were introduced to new Muslims and it was misapplied on people relentlessly.

Things continue to descend into chaos as people even started to ask people their position on people they had never even heard of like Abul Hasan Al-Maribee. No one knew who this man was, yet it was essential for one to take a solid position against him in order to be considered “thiqah”. Abandonment, name-calling, “exposing”, rumor-mongering, and the self appointed ecclesiastical tribunals testing peoples’ “manhaj” became the rule of the day.

This ideological schism and TROID's inquisition and thought reform program caused so much confusion that breakdowns in the social fabric started to breakdown.⁴⁹⁷

Most of these splits were occurring within the sphere of the "purists" (although here there is the description of the beginning of the schism that created the difference between the "purists" and the "politicos", as some of the leaders that TROID and spubs.com were warning about were the leaders promoting social action and were conducting talks on social justice and questions of power), but that did not prevent them from having a highly disruptive impact on peoples' lives. Umar Lee describes:

As the TROID ecclesiastical edicts were passed around, it had a negative effect on friendships, marriages, and entire communities. Especially after TROID's thought reform started to take affect.

[...]Many, who'd been friends for years, were now splitting up over these issues of who is "on it" or "off it". Marriages broke down and even ended in divorce because of arguments over these issues. There were even instances of blood brothers splitting and not speaking to one another. It ravaged the entire movement like a forest fire.

Even when you spoke to an old friend, you did not know which side of the issue he was on. The trips and visits across the country stopped. Brothers stopped keeping in touch as it might end up in an argument.

[...]A new term was coined - "Salafi Burnout" - to describe this phenomenon of sudden drop in Iman after (supposedly) being strong salafis. The course of action the salafis took with their lives - cutting off everyone - was now backfiring. They'd cut off their non-Muslim families and Muslims of other groups and now had no one to turn to in times of need. And it was all the more important at this point because so many had children that now needed to be raised.⁴⁹⁸

Umar Lee's honest and documented account from inside the movement gives us an invaluable insight into the direct consequences of the actions of the "purists". They are generally not interested in politics, however, some minority elements of this faction have managed to destroy it from inside leaving people feel as though they were "relics", in Umar Lee's own terms. It appears from this last quote that the antagonising worldview that the WSNS were taught has left them with no one to turn to after the collapse of their own movement, as they had already alienated former friends and Muslims from other organizations.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter gave us a glimpse of what one can come across while browsing mainly English forums and blogs containing discussions about Islamic theology. The cases

⁴⁹⁷ http://notanothermuslimblog.com/?page_id=32

⁴⁹⁸ http://notanothermuslimblog.com/?page_id=32

chosen here have only be chosen because of their prominence and of the debates that they have triggered, but the forums quoted are a very rich source of meaningful material on the issues that matter to Muslims. It appears that the rhetoric of the WSNS proves challenging for Muslims who want to learn their religion and are faced with opposite definitions of God. The existence of radically opposed visions of history and references has led some to a state of confusion. The potential breeding ground for extremism that this situation creates will be studied in Chapter 6.

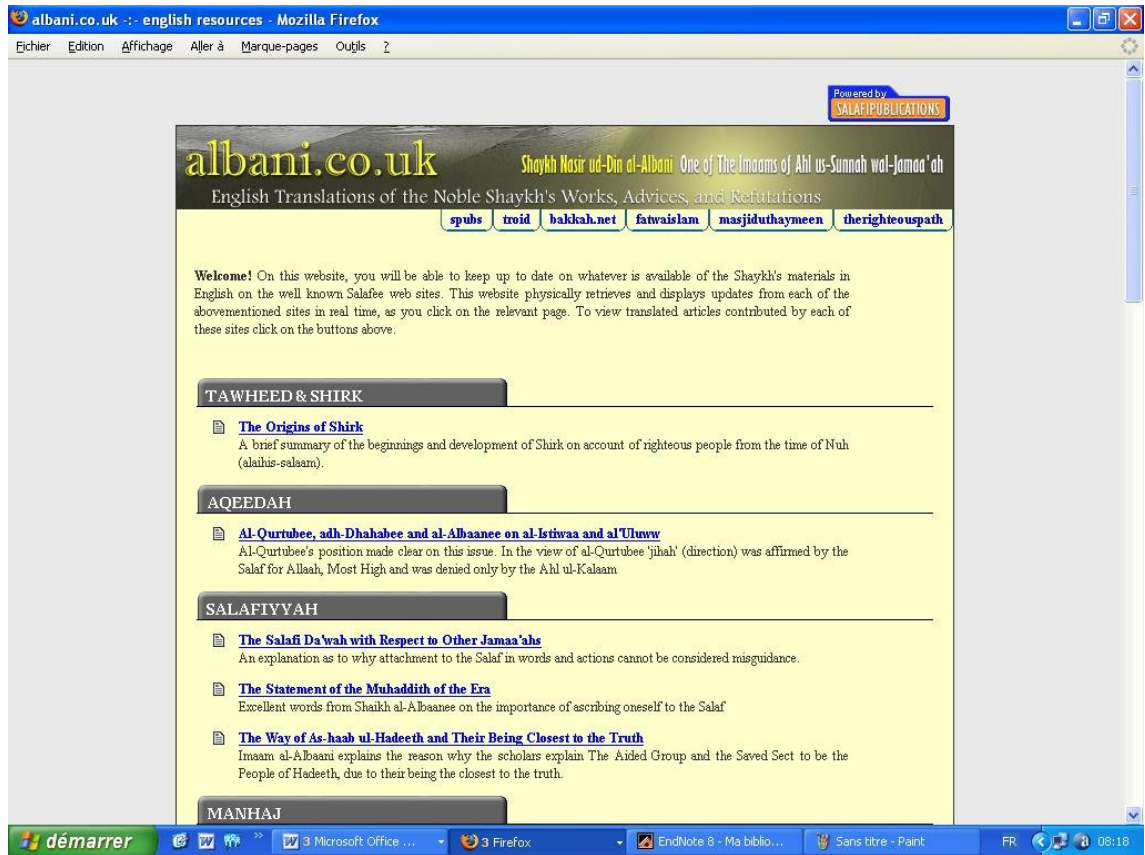


Figure 1 - A website powered by spubs.com – May 2006

We can see the “Powered by salafipublications.com” sign on the right top corner, as well as the tabs mentioning the names of the other recommended websites.



Figure 2 - Homepage of Salaf.com - May 2006

On the left, the links all point to websites powered by spubs.com, with the exception of the Arabic ones, which are maintained in Saudi Arabia. On the top of the page there tabs for websites associated to salaf.com. Clicking on a tab brings a page such as Figure 3.

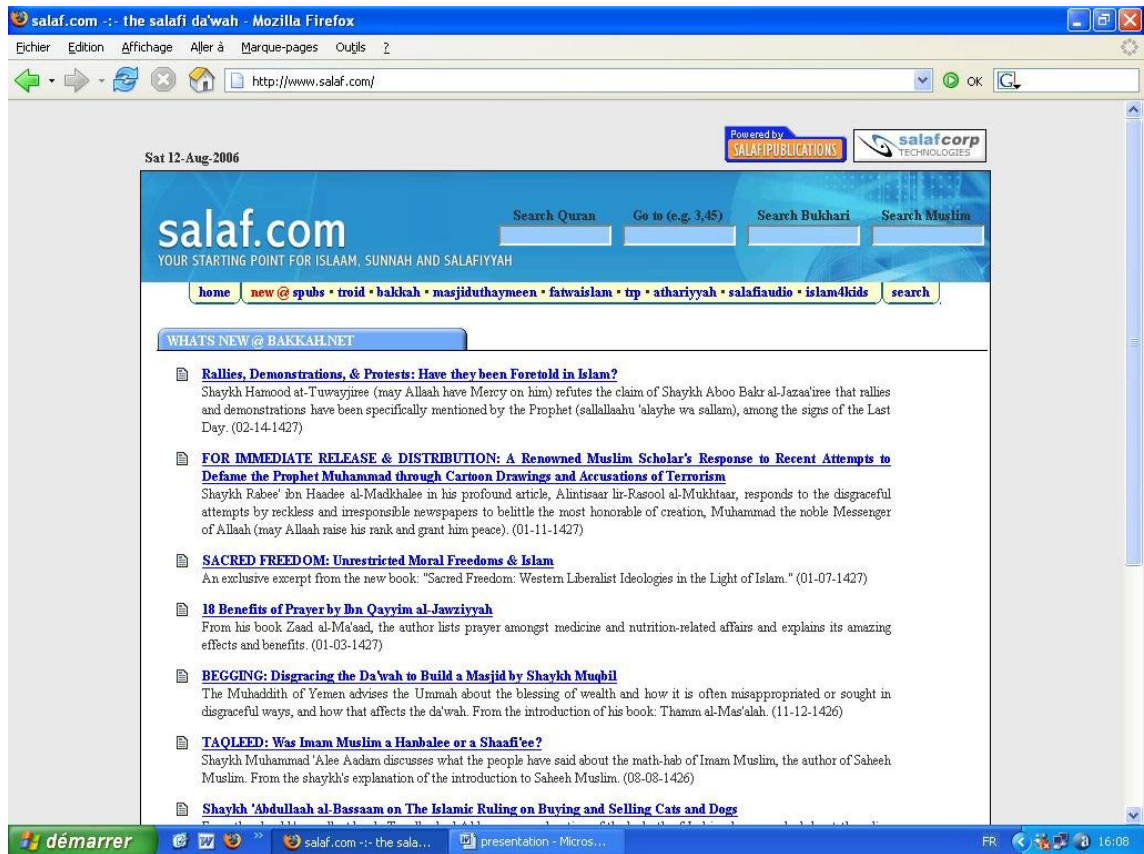


Figure 3 Updates of the bakkah.net website showing in salaf.com - May 2006



Figure 4 - Actual homepage of Bakkah.net – May 2006

| Forum | | Topics | Posts | Last Post |
|---|---|--------|-------|--|
| Islamic Knowledge, Information and Dawah | | | | |
| | General Discussion Discuss anything Related to Islamic Information, Resources and Dawah | 1323 | 4589 | Sun Feb 22, 2009 4:50 pm CHILL |
| | Urdu Discussion Urdu Books and Lectures | 117 | 360 | Sun Feb 22, 2009 4:54 pm CHILL |
| | Ideological Attack The Perpetual War of the Disbelievers on Islam and Muslims | 35 | 55 | Thu Jan 22, 2009 7:36 am reality.com |
| REFUTATIONS - OPPOSING VIEWS | | | | |
| | Discussions / Refutations on the Ghulaat / Haddadi Views (IMPORTANT POSTS AND REFERENCES) Good References and Articles for those who seek the reality of the Haddadis | 20 | 85 | Tue Oct 24, 2006 2:27 pm Moubeen |
| | Discussions / Refutations on the Ghulaat / Haddadi Views "Thus, Salafiyah that is taken to mean a special party (Hizb) with specific rules whose members consider anyone who differs with them as astray then they have nothing to do with Salafiyah" (Allama Ibn Uthaymeen, Liqaa-al-Baab al-Maftooh Q # 1322) | 1088 | 4871 | Mon Feb 23, 2009 1:24 pm abooasha |
| | Discussions on the way of Ahlus-Sunnah in matters of Eeman and Kufr Clarification on the middle-course of the People of Sunnah and Refutations on the views of the Khawaarij and the views of the Murja | 37 | 247 | Sun Jun 15, 2008 5:09 pm sajid |
| | Discussions on the Jamaat Tabligh and the Deobandis Discussions on the Jamaat Tabligh - its scholars, books, objectives and methodology | 199 | 1178 | Sun Feb 15, 2009 9:45 pm Abu Alqama |
| | Discussions / Refutations on the Asha'aree and Maturidee Aqeedah The school of belief adopted by the hanafees and other madhhabis | 231 | 744 | Sun Feb 08, 2009 2:47 pm sunnite |
| | Discussions / Refutations on the Barelwis and other Extremist Soofis Discussions on the heresies of Ahmed Raza Khan's followers and their manhaj of grave/saint worshipping | 131 | 586 | Fri Jun 06, 2008 10:12 pm Abu Alqama |
| | Discussions / Refutations on the Rawafidha and the other Sheites A collection of articles refuting Shi'ism | 15 | 16 | Mon Feb 11, 2008 8:09 am rasheed12824 |

Figure 5 -Categories of Ahya.org forum – February 2009

| Discussions dans le forum : Al-Qa'ida | | Outils du forum | | |
|--|------|---|----------|------------|
| Discussion / Auteur | Note | Dernier message | Réponses | Affichages |
| Important : Bonne nouvelle:~^^~Nouveau site internet d'Al Qa'ida au Maghreb Islamique~^^ (1 1 2 3) RafidaynCenter | | 10/08/2008 20h23 par Mohammed.al | 20 | 9 487 |
| selon la presse algerienne algerianmuslim | | 19/02/2009 08h00 par houcine | 4 | 226 |
| Abou Qatada peut être extradé vers la Jordanie ali_kameleddine | | 18/02/2009 18h32 par ali_kameleddine | 0 | 55 |
| L'Organisation Al Qa'ida au Maghreb Islamique abou riad | | 18/02/2009 15h06 par algerianmuslim | 1 | 161 |
| Organisation Al Qa'ida au Maghreb Islamique abou riad | | 05/02/2009 03h44 par abou riad | 0 | 217 |

Figure 6 - "Good news! A new website for al-Qa'ida in the Maghreb": an example from a forum for "jihadis" – February 2009

Forums > Général > Histoire

Quiconque Renie Que Le Terrorisme Fasse Parti De L'Islam Est Mecreant

Identifiant Identifiant Se souvenir de moi ?
 Mot de passe S'identifier

S'inscrire FAQ Membres Calendrier Messages du jour Recherche

Histoire Ce forum est dédié aux événements historiques que l'humanité a connu pendant son long parcours sur terre en générale. Nous donnons une importance particulière à l'histoire islamique et tous ce qui est en relation directe ou indirecte avec elle. N'hésiter pas donc d'enrichir vos connaissances de votre propre histoire et de nous rapporter des informations qui peuvent nous être utiles. Des questions sur ce Sujet seront les bienvenues.

Ajouter une réponse

31/03/2007, 19h47

LinkBack Outils de la discussion Modes d'affichage

#1 (normal)

Ummu al jihad
 Member Date d'inscription: février 2007
 Messages: 55

Quiconque Renie Que Le Terrorisme Fasse Parti De L'Islam Est Mecreant

السلام عليكم

Shaykh Hammoud ibn 'Oqla Ash-Shu3aybi

Beaucoup de gens utilisent le terme 'terrorisme', en particulier parce que les Etats-Unis d'Amérique (qu'Allah les désunit et les avilit à jamais et en fasse un signe pour l'humanité comme Il l'a fait pour Pharaon et son peuple amine) a déclaré que leur guerre est contre le 'terrorisme'. Ceci est une pratique très dangereuse, parce qu'elle devient subjective pour l'opinion personnelle et peut être abusive et appliquée pour quiconque est en désaccord avec celui qui utilise à tout va ce terme ou contre ceux avec lesquels ils ont un grand grief etc...

Figure 7 - An article from a forum for "jihadis" – February 2009

KHALAS!
 by Abdul-Quddus — a former convert to Islam turned apostate, ex-muslim, freethinker, born-again atheist, and vegetarian gone wild!

HOME ABOUT FAQ QUOTES CONTACT

Allah: Evidence Of An Anthropomorphic Deity

by Abdul-Quddus

In the minds of all Muslims, there is held a belief in "tawheed" — the Oneness or Uniqueness of Allaah (Arabic: The God). According to Islaamic theology, there is no god but one; Allaah. This deity alone is worshipped by today's Muslims and they vehemently reject the idols or man-made gods abound in other world religions. In the 112th chapter of the Qur'aan, Soorah Al-Ikhlaas, it reads, "Say: He is Allah, the One and Only; Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him." Contrary to popular belief, the deity known as "Allaah" actually possesses anthropomorphic qualities. The following evidence to be presented below is from the corpus of Islaamic scripture — the Qur'aan and Ahaadeeth.

The Face of Allaah:

Translation of Al-Qur'an 055:027:
 "And the **Face of your Lord** full of Majesty and Honour will abide forever."

Translation of Sahih Bukhari, Volume 9, Book 93, Number 503:
 Narrated Jabir bin 'Abdullah:
 When this Verse:-'Say (O Muhammad!): He has Power to send torments on you from above,' (6.65) was revealed; The Prophet said, "I take refuge with **Your Face**." Allah revealed:- '...or from underneath your feet.' (6.65) The Prophet then said, "I seek refuge with **Your Face!**" Then Allah revealed:-'...or confuse you in party-strife.' (6.65) Oh that, the Prophet said, "This is easier."

AS-SALAAMU 'ALAYKUM!

Welcome to KHALAS! My name is Abdul-Quddus and I'm a former Islamic fundamentalist turned born-again atheist. In the summer of 2004, I abandoned Islaam as my religion. I testify that there is no deity worthy of worship and that Muhammad is not my messenger.

ADD THIS BLOG TO MY **Technorati FAVORITES**

OUTSPOKEN EX-MUSLIMS

- The Apostate
- Isaac Schrödinger
 - Muslihoon
 - Ibnillathinah!
- The Lone Voice
 - Ahmed Salib
 - Iraqi Atheist
 - Nimbu
 - Serendip
- Not Muslim Anymore
 - Kareem Amer
 - Basharee Murtadd
 - Towelianism
 - Haroon

Figure 8 - Khalas Blog - March 2008

Chapter 6 Scholarly and Strategic implications of the Study

6.1 Introductory remarks

As we noted in Chapter 1, recent research on Wahhabism mainly centres on the subdivisions of the WSNS based on their political views,⁴⁹⁹ while this thesis has put its emphasis on their theology and their teachings regarding the belief in God, His Essence and His Attributes. In this chapter, we will explain how the outcomes of the thesis can help fine-tune the definitions of the theology of the WSNS used in academic literature, as these definitions are sometimes approximate. This is one of the main implications of the findings of this study. The second implication of the thesis developed in this chapter is the need to debate whether or not Western counter-terrorism strategies are heading in the right direction.

6.2 The theology of the ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’

Recent studies have identified that all the factions of the WSNS shared a common creed, however this “common creed” is sometimes misunderstood. This thesis provides a tool to understand the theology of the WSNS better, especially as this specific creed has significant repercussions on other aspects. Wiktorowicz briefly presents their stance on the Attributes of God, which he has identified as being common to the three trends of WSNS: the purists, the politicos and the jihadis. He describes it as such:

“Muslims cannot understand the words literally, because this implies anthropomorphism; but nor should they interpret them as metaphors, because this questions the Qur’an description of God. Instead, the names and attributes are to be understood without turning to limited human faculties for specification or comprehension (bila kayf, literally without how).”⁵⁰⁰

This description is not what the WSNS teach. On the contrary, they consider that the texts are, indeed, to be taken literally. This is the very reason why the Hanbali figures who held these views in the name of Islam in the past have been denounced. The Ash‘ari scholars who wrote against anthropomorphism before the arrival of the WSNS deemed it unacceptable to say that one should take the expressions in the non explicit

⁴⁹⁹ See, Madawi al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State*, Cambridge Middle East Studies, 25 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Thomas Hegghammer, ‘Jihadi Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism,’ in *Global Salafism : Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (London Hurst & Co. , Forthcoming April 2009); Jarret M Brachman and William F McCants, ‘Stealing Al Qaeda's Playbook,’ *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29 (2006); International Crisis Group, ‘Saudi Arabia Backgrounder : Who are the Islamists?,’ *Middle East Report* 31 (2004).

⁵⁰⁰ Quintan Wiktorowicz, ‘Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,’ *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006).

verses and hadith literally, because this was the essence of anthropomorphism. Literal meanings are those which lead to anthropomorphism because they are the most common. It might not appear logical to insist on taking the literal meaning of those verses and hadith if one also denies anthropomorphism, but this is what the WSNS do. What Wiktorowicz has described in this paragraph is the attitude of the Salaf scholars as described in 2.3.3 and 3.5.1; that of neither taking the literal meanings of those verses and hadith, nor interpreting them with specific meaning. The WSNS, like some of their predecessors also linked to the Hanbali madhhab, do not take this approach. They do not consider that “Muslims cannot understand the words literally”. The position of the WSNS on the interpretation of the verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God is best expressed by works by Ibn ‘Uthaymin and Ibn Baz. Ibn Baz explains:

“We consider it an obligation to take the text from the Quran and the Sunnah on their apparent meaning, and to deal with them in the real sense which befits God.”⁵⁰¹

As for Ibn Baz, he adds:

Interpretation for the attributes [of God] is rejected and not permitted; on the contrary it is an obligation to read through the attributes as they came according to their literal meaning which befits God.⁵⁰²

These sentences are a real paradox: as mentioned by al-Qushayri (see 2.3.4.2.1), taking the literal meaning of *saq* (literally: shin) (Q 68:42) , refers to the shin, which is an organ with flesh, bone and marrow and that would without doubt constitute anthropomorphism. If one refuses to accept to attribute this meaning of “shin” to God, then one is not taking the literal meaning. There does not seem to be a choice between those two options. However, the WSNS believe it is correct to adhere to the literal meaning without implying anthropomorphism, and this is exactly what the anti-anthropomorphist scholars used to denounce from the 4th century AH/10th century CE until today, as we saw in in 2.3.3 and 3.5.1.

Another contemporary writer also portrays this issue of anthropomorphism in a way which differs to that of the Ash‘ari scholars. Vincenzo Oliveti is the pen name of a Western specialist in Islamic studies. In his book entitled *Terror’s source: the Ideology of Wahhabi-Salafism and its Consequences* , he explains:

⁵⁰¹ Muhammad ibn Salih al-‘Uthaymin, *‘Aqida ahl al-Sunna wa-al-jama‘a*, 3rd ed. (Madina: al-Jami‘a al-Islamiyya, 1988).

⁵⁰² www.binbaz.org.sa

The Prophet, in agreement with the Book of Genesis, said: Verily God created Adam in His own image. The Salafis, by contrast, are anthropomorphic: that is, they remake God in their image. They believe that God is on His Throne in Heaven like a man, since the Qur'an describes that He has a Hand, a Side, a Face, a Throne, and that He is the Hearer, the Seer, and so on. This idea is partly a result of the previous point (literalism) and partly due to Ibn Taymiyya, who referring to a famous Hadith, once declared: 'God descends from the Heavens, even as I am descending from this minbar (pulpit).' Thus instead of believing that man is made in God's image the Salafis believe that God is like a man sitting in the sky.⁵⁰³

Oliveti gives an accurate description of the belief of the WSNS but the paragraph above also implies that the belief of the Muslims in general is that man has been made in God's image, which is not the stance that Ash'ari scholars had. The hadith that Oliveti quotes in this extract -about the Prophet stating that God created Adam in His image- has been considered as a non explicit text that requires interpretation and cannot be taken literally.⁵⁰⁴ Ash'ari scholars do not consider that humans have been made in the image of their God for, as mentioned in 2.3.2, they do not believe that God has an image or a reflection in the first place. Ash'ari and Maturidi scholars have explained that God has no shape, colour, form, volume or image and that attributing these to God is blasphemous.

Furthermore, there is a need to rethink the meaning of "Sunnism". Classifying the WSNS as "Sunnis" needs to take into account that what the WSNS call "Sunnism" might be different from what is generally meant by "Sunnism" in academic literature. The fact that the WSNS have a vision of history which is the exact opposite of the one adopted by the 'Sunnis-not-claiming-to-be-Salafis' should at least lead to a reassessment of whether it is accurate to classify the WSNS as "Sunnis". Adding the qualifiers "extreme" or "narrow-minded" to the adjective Sunni when the WSNS are described might not be enough. Algar mentions that the fact that the WSNS have managed to now be described as Sunnis is a sign that the term has started to mean very little more than non-Shi'i:

That Wahhabis are now counted as "Sunni" is one indication that the term "Sunni" has come to acquire an extraordinary loose meaning, not extending much beyond recognition of the legitimacy of the first four caliphs (regarded by Sunnis as the Khulafa

⁵⁰³ Vincenzo Oliveti, *Terror's source : the ideology of Wahhabi-Salafism and its consequences* (Birmingham: Amadeus Books, 2002), p.31-32.

⁵⁰⁴ For example, many possible interpretations of this hadith which rule out that the hadith means "the form of God" are found in Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn al-Hasan Ibn Furak, *Kitab mushkil al-hadith wa-bayanuh*, 2nd ed. (Hayderabad: Matba'a Majlis da'irat al-ma'arif al-'uthmaniyya, 1971), pp.6-31; Ahmad ibn al-Husayn al-Bayhaqi, 'Kitab al-asma' wa al-sifat,' in *Furqan al-Qur'an*, ed. Muhammad ibn al-Hasan Kawthari (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-turath al-'arabi, 1939), 290 and 'Abd al-Malik ibn 'Abd Allah al-Juwayni, *al-Shamil fi usul al-din* (Alexandria: Munsha'a al-ma'arif, 1969), pp.560-61.

al-Rashidun [“the Rightly Guided Caliphs”]; in fact, it signifies little more than “non-Shi’i”. Our characterization of Wahhabis as non-Sunni is therefore above all a historical clarification; it has no polemical purpose (...)⁵⁰⁵

Although Algar’s essay does have a polemical tone at times, it is true that it should not be considered controversial to not consider the Wahhabis as Sunnis, but factual. There are certainly some questions to be raised about how the WSNS have been described in academic literature. Researchers need to question how much of the rhetoric of the WSNS they have assimilated and accepted as true because it was presented as such, without much inquiry. This reassessment might prove to be a lengthy and difficult process, due to the fact that today, Saudi Arabia and its clerics are seen as the “defenders of Sunnism” against a Shi’i axis which, according to them, spans from Iran to Lebanon via Iraq. However it will have to take place if we are to understand Wahhabism in its entirety. The mere fact the WSNS are now seen as the main Sunni voice in the international scene reveals how the movement has succeeded in altering external perceptions in its favour. In an article published in the French daily newspaper “Libération”, the Tunisian philosopher Mezri Haddad sums up the situation:

The arrival of the Taliban in power in Afghanistan was a Saudi ideological victory, a Pakistani logistical success, and a consecration of the American strategy. The 9/11 attack changed everything. However, by a bizarre twist of History, instead of triggering the decline of this monarchy [...], these events gave a new life to the Saudi regime. In fact, the Wahhabis should thank their fellow citizen and disciple Ben Laden. For the mere reason that, compared to al-Qaeda’s barbarism and nihilism, the Wahhabi theocracy now stands as a moderate regime.⁵⁰⁶

The “War on Terror” alluded to in this article has also contributed to making the West believe that so-called “non violent Salafism” was the remedy to the proliferation of the teachings of the extremists.

6.3 Is the current strategy of cooperating with the “puritsts” the right one?

Recent research is suggesting that the best and most realistic solution to fight terrorism is to counteract the extremists with references to people they consider as real scholars and to use the factions of the WSNS officially opposed to violence. It seems as though the WSNS known as “purists” are now qualified to talk in the name of the majority of the Muslims, because of their widespread condemnation of suicide bombings. However,

⁵⁰⁵ Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism : a critical essay* (Oneonta, NY: Islamic Publications International, 2002), p.32.

⁵⁰⁶ Translation mine. Mezri Haddad, ‘Le wahhabisme, négation de l’Islam,’ <http://www.liberation.fr/tribune/010174694-le-wahhabisme-negation-de-l-islam> Accessed on 24 February 2008.

evidently, there is more to “orthodoxy” in Islam than simply being against suicide-bombings. We can take the UK as a case-study. The British police, quite rightly, are only interested in any category of citizens who can help fight terror and terrorist ideas, whether Muslims or not, and they do not need to pay attention to the kind of theology they are promoting while doing so, as long as this ideology does not advocate murder on British soil. For example Robert Lambert, a police officer working in the Muslim Contact Unit at the Metropolitan Police in London who is also conducting PhD research, considers that it was more effective for the police to have fatwas condemning suicide bombings from “Salafis”, as they are the personalities that suicide bombers would most likely consider.⁵⁰⁷ This means that cooperation with the non violent faction is deemed to be the strategy promising the best results. However, scientific researchers do need to assess whether or not the notion of Sunnism is being gradually altered because of international policies which are now of the view that the best way to end terrorism is to promote a softer version of the same theological system. For example, Wiktorowicz’s conclusion is that out of his three categories of “purists, politics and jihadis”, it is up to the purists to face their paradox which is that to oppose the politics and the jihadis, they need to become more involved in politics:

“A purist scholar with a Ph.D. in the Islamic sciences as well as advanced education in international relations would be well situated to deconstruct and rebut Al Qaeda’s worldview (although there is obviously the danger that purists might arrive at similar conclusions about politics)”.⁵⁰⁸

The International Crisis Group (ICG), which regularly issues reports and makes recommendations to policy makers, has issued a report about Indonesia which is entitled: “Why Salafism and Terrorism mostly don’t mix”, available online.⁵⁰⁹ The conclusion of its executive summary states:

...ICG concludes that Salafism in Indonesia is not the security threat sometimes portrayed. It may come across to outsiders as intolerant or reactionary, but for the most part it is not prone to terrorism, in part because it is so inwardly focused on faith.⁵¹⁰

Here one can see that because the upholders of the so-called Salafi trend in Indonesia are mainly interested in piety and obedience to the ruler, it is concluded that for the most part they are not prone to terrorism. However, what is this “faith” mentioned in the

⁵⁰⁷ Esther, ‘UK police: you can't fight terror without working with extremist Muslims,’ *Islam in Europe*, <http://islamineurope.blogspot.com/2007/04/uk-police-you-cant-fight-terror-without.html> Accessed on 14 July 2007.

⁵⁰⁸ Quintan Wiktorowicz, ‘Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,’ *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): p.234-35.

⁵⁰⁹ <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=2967&l=1>

⁵¹⁰ <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=2967&l=1>

ICG report, and on which the members “focus” themselves? If it is a faith that actually requires its followers to consider the vast majority of Muslims to be misguided, if it is a faith that is actually asking its followers to deny centuries of scholarship and to replace traditional references by exclusively Saudi ones or only Saudi-approved ones, how safe are those who adhere to it from the propaganda of terrorism?⁵¹¹ It appears that even those from the so-called “non violent” faction of the WSNS have been violent not only with Muslims groups opposed to them, but also with their own fellow so-called “Salafis”.

6.3.1 The hidden violence of the supposedly non-violent factions

To give an explanation to the recourse to violence and extremism within the Muslim community, Abdul-Haqq Baker, chairman of the Ibn Taymiyya mosque in Brixton, London, and who is conducting a PhD research on community cohesion, offered a diagram of the Muslim community, comprising three categories.⁵¹² On the left, what he called “liberal extremism” which he linked to being the Sufis, on the right, what he termed “extremism” which he explained was the terrorists, and between the two, a middle-way approach which was according to him embodied by those who call themselves Salafis. According to him, new converts would be first attracted by liberal extremism, but then after a while, boredom might seize them as the “liberal extremists” were too lax when dealing with current issues affecting the Muslims, and they might turn to something more radical, i.e. they might then join the extremists, namely the terrorists, if the upholders of the middle-way approach (i.e. the so-called Salafis in the middle of his diagram) did not catch them soon enough. The theory was interesting, but there was a non negligible category of Muslims missing, which was the vast majority of the Muslims who, without having antipathy for Sufism would not describe themselves as Sufis, would not call themselves Salafis, and are certainly not potential terrorists either. If one argues that they were represented in that diagram, knowing that the majority of the Muslims in the UK are neither terrorists nor WSNS, the only possible category for them would then be the “liberal extremism” which still cannot possibly contain most of them. The reality is that they were notably absent from this representation, and yet, this exposition was created to give an example of what orthodoxy in Islam is and what might cause a Muslim to go down the extremists’ route. However there is another possible interpretation of the situation which can be found in a

⁵¹¹ We will study the ideological proximity of both the “violent” and “non-violent” factions in the next section.

⁵¹² This diagram was presented at the Exeter University Postgraduate Conference of May 2007.

website recommended by Abdul-Haqq Baker:⁵¹³ it is an analysis by the main lecturer of the website, Dr Abdullah al-Farsi, mentioned in 5.3.1. When asked to give his sentiment on the impact that the internal polemics have had on the WSNS, al-Farsi commented:

Also we found that those da'is who were criticised,⁵¹⁴ they had a lot of followers, so when they were forced to step away [...] it pushed the people who were their followers to find alternatives other than the great scholars, and of course other than the sheikhs of Medina and others shaykhs who were criticizing the da'is, and they found no one in replacement but stooges of takfir, who insult the great scholars, and consider them hypocrites and munafiqs and so on and so forth. They were very smart in gaining those people, those youth, first by using tuqiya⁵¹⁵ towards them, by not showing that they consider our scholars to be kafirs [...] Those heads of takfir were the biggest winners and we found for example in the incidents that happened in Afghanistan, things like this etc., we found that the majority of the youth who were before following the da'is, they [now] follow those takfiri heads! Which is a big negative thing actually [...]. This was one of the consequences of the ways of some of the Salafi sheikhs and brothers who in the name of abandoning the innovators they mistreated the da'is and they made the Salafi way make look [sic] ugly to a certain extent.⁵¹⁶

Al-Farsi explains that the internal dissensions (such as those related by the blooger 'Umar Lee in 5.4.3) within the faction of the "purists" may have led many to the extremists' path. It was the WSNS who advocate violence who won followers. The intensity of the divergences within the environment of the "purists" and the consequences that this might have is a reason to question the validity of encouraging former prospective or past terrorists to accept the theology of the non violent WSNS. It also appears that the debates between the so-called Salafis are not only confined to being theoretical, but have also been physically violent. Al-Farsi says, in the same recording:

It happened that some of these ignorants [sic] beat each other, and I don't know if any kind of murder has occurred in the name of being tough against the innovators, any murders [sic] amongst the Salafis themselves, but I don't see it far from happening if they follow this wicked path".⁵¹⁷

⁵¹³ The website Baker recommended both for content and style was www.ahya.org and its forum which has been presented in 5.3.1 and in Figure 5. This website is opposed to the salafipublications.com studied in 5.3.1 not because of theological arguments but because of the severity against other groups displayed by the 'Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis' who are running it.

⁵¹⁴ He is referring to some preachers whose methodology was deemed incorrect by the likes of Ibn Baz and Ibn 'Uthaymin, or had criticised them both or just one of them. The preachers ("da'is") in question are not named clearly during the recording, but they are most certainly Salman al-'Awda and Safar al-Hawali and other preachers influenced by their points of view (for information on them, see 3.5.2.2.4 and 3.5.2.2.5).

⁵¹⁵ He is referring to a concept according to which he is allowed to his his/her religious affiliation.

⁵¹⁶ My transcription from the audio recording. From 18'50 in Abdullah al-Farsi, 'Dr Abdullah Al-Farsi replies to his critics,' Ahya.org, <http://www.ahya.org/realaudio/reply/reply1.rm> Audio recording Accessed on 23 February 2009.

⁵¹⁷ 9'15 in the same recording: <http://www.ahya.org/realaudio/reply/reply1.rm>.

Here al-Farsi acknowledges (and condemns) the policy of those among the WSNS who attack harshly and sometimes physically their opponents, even if they all consider themselves as Salafis (i.e. both al-Farsi and those that he condemns here consider each other as Salafis, and both consider the preachers that they were criticising as being Salafis. However, in spite of this, dissensions occurred). He is worried about the fact that if they continue on this path, they might end up with fatalities on both sides due to these differences. This is from those WSNS who are considered “nonviolent” by Wiktorowicz.⁵¹⁸ Their following the orders from preachers in Saudi Arabia to the letter (being harsh against the innovators, even those from the same camp) has already led to social disruption as we saw in 5.4.3, and has also led to violence as al-Farsi mentions here. This is not an isolated case of violence being resorted to because of theological debates amongst the WSNS. Another example can be found in a recording by one of the teachers of Salih al-Fawzan, shaykh Ahmad al-Najmi, who firmly condemns suicide bombings and terrorism. In this recording, he is asked: “what is the judgement of somebody who accuses Ibn Baz, al-‘Uthaymin, and al-Albani of being “Murjis”⁵¹⁹ because they do not call the rulers blasphemers?”, and he answers:

“This is ignorance and misguidance, and these innovators, everyday they come to us with a different face. If al-Albaani, Ibn Baz, and Ibn Uthaymin, the scholars of the Ummah, the leaders, learned ones, senior ones, the men of knowledge, if they are labelled as Murjis who will remain? Who remains? Is there anyone who remains? No one remains.

Indeed to God we belong and to Him we shall return. This is a calamity. This is a calamity. And indeed, my view concerning those is that from whomever this statements appears, and he remains upon that saying, then he should be imprisoned and given correctional treatment, and he should be beaten. And if he does not recant, then perhaps he is in need of even more correctional treatment [sic].”⁵²⁰

This passage expresses two ideas: the first one is that in his worldview, if one does not consider Ibn Baz, al-‘Uthaymin, and al-Albani as correct leaders then there is no one else to consider as great scholars. As the WSNS are of the view that only they are Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama‘a, so this statement needs to be understood in this context. Here again, and as shown in other parts of this thesis, there is the idea that ahl al-Sunna refers only to them. What is interesting is that what al-Najmi is describing in this quote is

⁵¹⁸ Quintan Wiktorowicz, ‘Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,’ *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): p.208.

⁵¹⁹ Defined in 4.2.1.3, note 387.

⁵²⁰ Shaykh Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Najmi, ‘Those who accuse al-Albani of irjaa should be locked up and beaten,’ Salafiaudio.com (Audio recording in Arabic, written translation in English, reference SA 46), <http://salafiaudio.com/> Accessed on 14 July 2007. The same recording is also available from a French website: Shaykh Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Najmi, ‘Réponse,’ Alminhadj.fr (Audio recording in Arabic), <http://www.box.net/public/1t0qexgd6o> Accessed on 14 July 2007.

exactly what the Wahhabis are accused of doing: i.e. casting doubt upon the orthodox character of the major scholars of Islam throughout history,⁵²¹ however when the same is done to the scholars of the WSNS, al-Najmi suggests that the solution is to be imprisoned, corrected, beaten and even “more” if they [those who attacked the integrity of the leaders of the WSNS] do not stop.

Ultimately, one should take into account that these factions, be it the “jihadis”, the “politicos” or the “purists” are, for the most part, endorsing the legacy of a personality who did use force and violence to impose his ideas: Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab. As Commins puts it, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s first concern was not the establishment of a Saudi state but the propagation of his call. Commins notes:

The marriage between doctrine and a particular political power was one of convenience. Before arriving at al-Dir‘iyya, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab had preached his message in two nearby towns. Had his previous hosts withstood pressures to expel him, we might today be speaking of “Muammari”⁵²² Arabia.⁵²³

The WSNS do explain that Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab never called a Muslim non-Muslim, but his definition of who is a Muslim was so narrow, it meant that his definition implied calling the vast majority of the Muslims either ignorant polytheists (who according to Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab indeed should not be killed but have the creed explained to)⁵²⁴ or knowingly and wilfully polytheists who, it appears, *could* be killed as long as the “message” had reached them and they knew perfectly well that what they were doing was polytheism.⁵²⁵ To stay in power, the so-called ‘non-violent’ WSNS have realised that they needed to make a certain number of concessions. It is those concessions made to their own principles which makes them probably less able to counteract the arguments of the extremists’ who use the same literature as their opponents.

⁵²¹ The argument of “if you accuse so and so then who’s left?” is the very one used in these articles by al-Alawi al-Makki and al-Qaradawi: Muhammad ibn ‘Alawi al-Maliki al-Hasani, ‘The Ash’ari School,’ Masud.co.uk, <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/misc/ashari.htm> Accessed on 23 July 2006.

⁵²² Mu‘ammar is the name of an influent Arab clan at the times of Muhammad ibn ‘abd al-Wahhab, the same way that Sa‘ud was. ‘Uthman ibn Mu‘ammar was the ruler of al-‘Uyayna, where Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab was born and he protected Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab for several years at the beginning of his call in 1740. Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab married one of his aunts. However in 1744 ‘Uthman ibn Mu‘ammar was forced to expel him. It is at this occasion that Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab found refuge in al-Dir‘iyya where he allied with Muhammad ibn Sa‘ud.

⁵²³ David Dean Commins, ‘The Jihadi Factor in Wahhabi Islam (conference paper given on December 13 at the UCLA International Institute),’ (2007): p.2.

⁵²⁴ This is one of the main arguments of Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, *Kashf al-shubuhah wa-al-riisalah al-mufida* (Riyad: Ri’asa idara al-buhuth al-‘ilmiyya wa al-ifta, 1988).

⁵²⁵ These points are detailed in Abdulaziz H. al-Fahad, ‘Commentary - from Exclusivism to Accommodation: Doctrinal and Legal Evolution of Wahhabism,’ *New York University law review* 79, no. 2 (2004).

6.3.2 The theological closeness of the factions may hinder counter-terrorism efforts

It should be noted that the terrorists' websites and literature are actually using the same references. To be fair, the rhetoric of the so-called Jihadis makes in some cases much more sense (example below), if one takes into account the teachings of the Wahhabis themselves, than the rhetoric of the WSNS who condemn terrorism. So how safe is a person from falling into the trap of the extremists if he shares the same references, has the same antagonising views regarding the majority of the Muslims, and might learn of the existence of previous speeches of his leaders which actually prove that the extremists are right in their claims? This is not to suggest that any person who become a 'Wahhabi-self-named-Salafi' is bound to be interested in terrorism, let alone in committing suicide for the cause, as only a minority, in all cases, will be prone to that anyway, even among those who have been indoctrinated directly by extremists. However, the confusion caused by the vision of history offered by the WSNS should be a reason to investigate the impact of this theology on Muslim communities and their cohesion. Indirectly, this confusion might create a ground where extremist ideas, whatever their origin, breed more easily.

This tendency to consider that it is the non-violent individuals from the WSNS who can best help might have some results. However, if their worldview is the same, if the teachings are antagonising the main body of the Muslims and the world at large, doubts may be raised about how successful this method will be in the long term. There certainly is a need to oppose "jihadis" with arguments and references that they themselves accept. However, by so doing we might promote a faction which, ultimately, has a very different worldview from that of the majority of the Muslims that it claims to represent. This should be taken into account when one realises that the "purists" sometimes struggle to properly address the arguments of the extremists. One of the reasons for this is the fact that official clerics such as Ibn Baz, had to renounce some of their own principles to remain in their position or to help the rulers stay in power. In some cases, the extremists' literature uses references that the purists would accept, and this may make the points of view of the so-called "jihadis" come across as more coherent than that of the "purists". There is a letter against the "Saudi Salafis" which circulates on the Internet, written by 'Abdullah al-Faisal, a supporter of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who is behind the extremists' website *Minbar al-tawhid wa'-jihad* used in Chapter 3. In it, he explains:

The 3rd issue we have with the Saudi salafis is that they claim that tawheed Haakimiyya is not an aspect of the Deen. They even claim that tawheed haakimiyya is a bid'ah [cursed innovation] The Saudi salafis are so jahil [ignorant] they do not know that Muhammad Ibrahim [the shaikh of bin baaz] said in page 6 of his book tahkeem al qawaaneen:

"Tawheed haakimiyya is the twin half of tawheed ibaada."

Some of them happen to be aware of this fatwa of Muhammad ibrahim so they reprint his book and remove this precious and crucial fatwa which was meant to guide the ummah of Muhammad.⁵²⁶

In this letter al-Faisal uses a well-know Saudi figure (Muhammad Ibrahim, one of the teachers of Ibn Baz but also the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia until Ibn Baz replaced him) to prove his point, which is that to be a true monotheist one needs to believe that God is the only Lawgiver. This is quite embarrassing for the so-called "purists" who replied, in a 76-page document entitled 'The Devil's Deception of 'Abdullah (el) Faisal al-Jamaykee' :

Furthermore one should not forget that Faisal says all of this yet he himself studied in Imaam Muhammad bin Saud University in Riyadh!! So according to his own extremist reasoning and arguments, his own Islamic education from whence he began to utilize in order to promote himself as a 'Shaykh' is in question!As Faisal studied in Saudi Arabia and used that as his main proof to call himself a 'Shaykh'!⁵²⁷

As for the argument drawn from Muhammad ibn Ibrahim's works, the only answer of the "purists" is that Ibn Baz declared :

Muhammad ibn Ibraheem was not infallible, he was a scholar among the scholars and he made mistakes at times and he is correct at (other) times, he was neither a prophet nor a messenger. Also like that were Shaykhul-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn ul-Qayyim, Ibn Katheer and other scholars. All of them made mistakes at times and were correct at (other) times. Whatever from their statements agrees with the truth is to be taken and whatever opposes the truth is to be returned onto the one who utters them.⁵²⁸

From an external point of view it seems that Ibn Baz has denied part of the teachings he received because it did not fit the Saudi government's agenda. This might not be the case, but what is interesting here is that the debate between the two parties is more complicated than it seems precisely because they share the same references. What results is the possibility of having to admit that one of these references might be wrong. Today's so-called "takfiris" will prefer to think it is Ibn Baz and others who are wrong, and the "purists" prefer to think it is Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathir, and Muhammad Ibraheem who were wrong. This is not the focus of this study, however, and there are

⁵²⁶ <http://revolutionmuslim.com/written-by-sheikh-faisal/147-a-letter-from-sheikh-faisal>

⁵²⁷ http://www.salafimanhaj.com/pdf/SalafiManhaj_KufrDoonaKufr.pdf p.56.

⁵²⁸ http://www.salafimanhaj.com/pdf/SalafiManhaj_KufrDoonaKufr.pdf p.56-57.

many instances where one can detect that it is actually the so-called jihadis who are drawing on the “pure” Wahhabi heritage and are completely coherent with this worldview, whereas the “politicos” and the “purists” have denied some of their own basic principles to remain in power, and they therefore lack credibility. Wiktorowicz gives us an example with the Jam‘at Salafiyya of Saudi Arabia:

“A particularly striking example of this common educational lineage is represented by the students and followers of Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (d. 1999), a wellknown Salafi hadith scholar and ardent opponent of political activism (particularly violence). Albani taught in Saudi Arabia for a time; and although he moved to Syria during the 1960s, he inspired a movement in Saudi Arabia called al-Jamaa al-Salafiyya al-Muhtasiba (JSM), which was founded sometime in the mid-1970s. Although part of the JSM emphasized an apolitical focus, a radicalized faction led the takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979. Members of JSM fled to other countries, including Yemen and Kuwait, where they set up religious study circles and influenced figures such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who went on to become one of the most influential scholars in the jihadi Salafi network”.⁵²⁹

In such circumstances, it might be difficult to see the long-term positive effects of placing somebody who has repented from belonging to a so-called “salafi-jihadi network” into a rehabilitation centre such as the one in al-Thoumama,⁵³⁰ where many of the references of the “jihadis” are used, and sometimes in a less coherent way than what was offered by al-Qaida for example. From a short-term perspective, allowing those “boot camps” to exist might look like a helpful choice as long as the attendees finally promise not to bomb themselves or anybody else. In the long run, however, isn’t this also allowing the violation and eradication of traditional Islam so long as there are no deaths to mourn? There is a need to realise that this global crisis of the fight against terrorism is certainly affecting the whole world and not just Muslims. The difference here, is that this situation is not only affecting Muslims in ways shared with other people on Earth, but also in more implicit, unexpected ways. In terms of Islam’s heritage and knowledge, worldview, how to define God and how to project oneself within Islamic history, the ‘Sunnis-not-claiming-to-be-Salafis’ are now challenged like never before. They cannot blame Western Police officers, other government representatives and even academics for setting the agenda towards cooperation with so-called non violent “Salafis” to achieve their aim of reducing the number of people who are likely to kill themselves and others in the name of Islam. However, by so doing, there is a doctrinal violence which is being spread in Muslim communities and which

⁵²⁹ Quintan Wiktorowicz, ‘Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,’ *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): p.213.

⁵³⁰ <http://www.lefigaro.fr/actualites/2008/01/09/01001-20080109ARTFIG00472-la-reeducation-des-terroristes-d-arabie-saoudite.php>

consists of calmly accepting the notion that all the Muslim scholars throughout history were deviated and misguided as far as their creed was concerned. This may in turn disorientate some of the youth, and then make them prey to more simplification, falsification, and brainwashing by terrorists. However, if one takes into account a more long-term approach, perhaps then and only then one may realise that it might actually be in the interest of all to address the issue of the subtle alternation of the notion of Sunnism, even for those who are not Sunnis.

6.4 Conclusion

To sum up this chapter, one could say that it might be worth looking at the brand of Islam that is being promoted to try to eradicate terrorism. It might be tempting to cooperate with the factions of the WSNS who vocally denounce terrorism attacks. However, this strategy gives to the WSNS in general a visibility that is beyond their representativeness. This is why it might prove more fruitful in the long-run to cooperate more actively with all of those who are trying to protect the heritage of Muslim scholars. It would enable the Muslim youth to find itself at peace with its history, and clear in its references. This path might be more difficult to reach, but the reward will definitely be more meaningful for the Muslims and for the world at large.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

This thesis has studied some of the theological tenets of the ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’; that they take the non explicit verses of the Qur’an and the hadith literally and refuse to interpret them while at the same time claiming that doing so does not entail anthropomorphism.

We saw in Chapter 2 that almost immediately after the period of the Salaf and until the rise of Wahhabism, Sunni scholars mostly agreed on the idea that the scholars of the Salaf were not completely opposed to the interpretation of the non explicit Qur’anic verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God, but that by and large, they did not explain these texts in detail. Most of the classical Muslim scholars who came after the period of the Salaf, known as the Khalaf, agreed that the Salaf scholars were disregarding the apparent meaning of those texts which, if taken literally, would indicate that God is a body, or limited in a direction, or other anthropomorphic descriptions. These texts have been classified by Muslim scholars as non explicit texts requiring interpretation. According to Ash‘ari scholars, the interpretation of these texts should take into account the meanings of the Arabic phrases used as well as the religious laws, so that the explanations given would not be opposed to the actual meanings that these phrases have in the language, while at the same time being coherent with the rest of the Islamic rules. This is the description of the attitude of the Salaf and the Khalaf as conveyed by some well-known classical Muslim figures. The consensus that existed around this issue between the period of the Salaf and the rise of Wahhabism had only been questioned by figures linked to the Hanbali madhhab, around the 5th century AH/ 11th century CE and the 8th century AH/14th century CE, notably by Ibn Taymiyya. He was not only of the view that these texts should be taken according to their literal meaning, but he was also convinced that the Salaf held the same belief, and he denied that any scholar of the Salaf ever made any interpretation.

In Chapter 3, it was noted that on the issue of the permissibility of interpreting the verses and hadith dealing with the Attributes of God, today’s WSNS are successors of the early opponents to the consensus of the classical Sunni scholars. The Wahhabis appeared in the Arabian peninsula at the end of the 18th century and have been named after Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, a preacher from Najd who set out to purify the creed of his fellow countrymen and the rest of the Muslims for he considered them to be

steeped in superstition and worship of other than God. The “Wahhabis” have never appreciated this name, giving preference to the term “Muwahhidun”, which means the “Monotheists”. However, even Muhammad’s own brother , Sulayman ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, called his movement “al-Wahhabiyya”, and the term since then has been widely used more by their enemies than by themselves (although there are a few instances when some of their own scholars did use this term to refer to themselves). Calling themselves “Salafis” is a way to use a reference to what is considered the golden age of Islam after the Prophet, which comprised the first three generations of scholars of the community. Following the Salaf is a fundamental trait of Sunnism (as opposed to Shi‘ism which does not idealise this era the way Sunnism does, notably because the Shi‘is consider that some of the closest companions of the Prophet betrayed him). By using this reference, the Wahhabis are therefore appealing to a wider audience in the Muslim world. They are also recycling a term that had so far been claimed by a trend of reformists who appeared between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century CE such as Muhammad ‘Abduh and Jamal al-Afghani. In current academic articles, “salafi” in many cases still refers to these two reformists and their like-minded contemporaries, whereas nowadays, in most cases, a person claiming to be Salafi is more likely to be a Wahhabi than a follower of Muhammad ‘Abduh. This is why the term ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’ was used throughout the thesis: to emphasise that today’s so-called Salafis are mainly Wahhabis who use the term ‘Salaf’ in direct reference to themselves.

In Chapter 4, we demonstrated that the fact that the WSNS oppose the interpretation of the Attributes of God has made them adopt a definition of Sunnism and a vision of Islamic history diametrically opposed to what had been adopted by Ash‘ari scholars and reflected in academic literature. As we saw, when the WSNS use the term “Sunni” they neither refer to the Ash‘aris, nor the Maturidis, who were considered to be the two main groups of Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama‘a. Rather, they refer to themselves, and to these groups in the 5th and in the 8th centuries AH (11th and 14th CE) who were also opposed to the interpretation of the religious texts about the Attributes of God. This means that for them, the Sunnis, far from being the majority of the Muslims, are a small proportion of people whose creed they consider pure because they take the verses dealing with the Attributes of God literally. In addition, while the ‘Sunnis-not-claiming-to-be-Salafis’ see themselves as the inheritors of a long and uninterrupted chain of scholars from the end of the era of the Salaf until today, the WSNS consider that between the Salaf and

Ibn Taymiyya, and then between Ibn Taymiyya and Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab there were very few “real” scholars. Both the Ash‘aris and the Maturidis, although considered as representants of “Sunni orthodoxy” are, for the WSNS, misguided. The WSNS claim to be Sunnis as well, as long as one understands from Sunnism not what was known as Sunnism before they arrived, but after they redefined it. Therefore, it is important to pay due attention to the content of the notion of Sunnism that is used by the WSNS before considering calling the WSNS “Sunnis”. If the ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’ are called “Sunnis” then one has to take into account the fact that they reject almost all of what Sunnism stood for before they appeared. This is why the use of the term “Wahhabis” in this thesis is relevant in the sense that the ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’ really have developed an approach to Islamic history and an understanding of some of the key Sunni notions that is radically different from what had previously been established.

In Chapter 5, the thesis demonstrated that this situation has resulted in increasing confusion over the notions of who is deemed Sunni and who is not. This has amplified the phenomenon known as “sect-surfing”, which consists in a person switching allegiances several times before finding their own truth. In this chapter, some consequences of the existence of contradictory definitions of who is a Sunni and who is not were studied. There was the notable example of a man who started a blog because he left Islam, as he was under the impression that the belief in God was anthropomorphic, and he seemed unaware that this vision was challenged by other Muslim groups. This seems to imply that the WSNS are making progress towards making their own definition of a god with two eyes, a face, a shin and two hands more widespread than the definition of a Creator who exists without organs and without a place. We have witnessed that the rhetoric of the WSNS is currently prompting heated discussions in Islamic forums over which scholars from the past are to be considered Sunni, and who to pray with in case of a disagreement over the issue of the interpretation of the texts related to the Attributes of God. The divisions of the WSNS are also clearly detailed on the Internet, with so-called “Salafi burnouts” setting up blogs or opening threads in different forums to talk about their experiences and disappointments. Despite these internal differences, which are nevertheless significant developments, the fact that a non-negligible number of extremists ready to kill themselves in the name of Islam and of the so-called Salafis who strongly condemn these actions share the same theological background raises questions as to whether the

current attempt to “rehabilitate” former terrorists by teaching them the principles of the so-called non-violent ‘Wahhabis-self-named-Salafis’ is the best one.

In Chapter 6, it appeared that, to a certain extent, some terrorists upheld the same reasoning that was closest to that of original Wahhabism than the current holders of the official religion in Saudi Arabia, and that being opposed to suicide bombings does not necessitate being opposed to any form of violence, especially when the violence is aimed at individuals belonging to other Muslim groups. We saw that the constant criticism and inquisitorial procedures that some WSNS face have, at times, produced a form of social chaos which is a vector of discord in its own right. It is almost an intra-community violence or sometimes a moral form of violence but nonetheless, it is highly disruptive and may have led some people into the ranks of the extremists. The so-called Jihadi fighters have only to point out that they are merely applying the principles that renowned figures such as Ibn Baz for example, held, and then later rejected. Most of the references of the so-called Jihadis concerning the validity of their own actions are to be found in the books of Ibn Taymiyya, and of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab and his descendants whom they hold in high esteem. Some so-called Jihadis may consider that Ibn Baz has left the fold of Islam because of some of his fatwas aimed at accommodating the power in place, but to prove this they will only have to quote Ibn Baz himself. This clearly shows that if an individual among the WSNS opposed to terrorism were to try to convince a terrorist of his wrongdoings, that ‘purist’ might be in greater danger of succumbing to his opponent’s arguments, as the ‘purist’ might listen to the extremist’s discourse and be unable to fault him. In the UK, some members of the police force are of the view that it is precisely because the terrorists share a common set of references with the WSNS opposed to violence that it is meaningful to cooperate with them as opposed to any other group in the current climate, because this is what might, in the short-term, control the number of volunteers participating in indiscriminate violent attacks. In a long-term perspective however, this might not be the case, because the vision of history of all WSNS, regardless of their political views, is one which incites hostility against the majority of today’s Muslim practices and yesterday’s Muslim scholars whom they view as not knowing the essence of monotheism. Holders of this vision of history remain in permanent opposition to the community. Although maintaining theological cohesion in the ranks of the Sunnis is certainly not the priority (or one might say the concern) of counter-terrorism heads and intellectuals, they should nevertheless be aware that the confusion caused by the WSNS leaves more space for

extremist points of view to surface, because the scholars considered as references for the Sunnis are being constantly undermined.

Throughout the research, there are a number of issues which have been identified as deserving a more thorough treatment in future works. The first of them is the writing of a history of the origins of Wahhabism which would be as free as possible of the definition given by the WSNS themselves. The works of Peskes, Dakhil, Zdanowski, al-Radisi, Nuwayra, and al-Rasheed have opened up avenues regarding the deconstruction of the current version of their historical origins made by the WSNS. However, a precise study which would question the one-sided sources that have heavily been used so far, and perhaps locate new and possibly non-partisan sources would greatly help in understanding Wahhabism and the reasons why it gained such momentum in its time and place.

The second issue in need of investigation is the use of the Internet in research work. During this research, the matter of how to maintain traces of data that could be verified independently proved to be difficult. The solution outlined in Appendix Two presents some advantages but is not the perfect solution. There might be a way for universities to offer something similar to what is outlined in the Appendix (i.e. a way to save cached copies of pages read on the Internet so that they can be consulted independently of whether the website is still online or not) by dedicating a few servers for researchers across campus. Alternatively, there might be an opportunity to establish a new website offering a service similar to that of furl, but one only accessible to researchers with valid authentication. A researcher writing an article using extensive Internet resources would then be asked to store the cached copies in that website under the name of the article so that it could easily be found and referenced. There are many avenues to explore in this regard; the increasing significance of the Internet for the propagation of Islamic knowledge in particular makes it one of the key places to look out for useful information and sources. It is much more than a virtual second sphere, it is a sphere integrated into peoples' lives whereby they might look up information and as a direct result of their search change their beliefs, their affiliations and their behaviours. If research is to use the internet increasingly as a source of reference, in Islamic studies or otherwise, it does not seem adequate to continue quoting from websites without them being accessible at the time one reads the product of the research. This would open the door to many articles being written with no way of verifying the accuracy of the claims

made (for example Bunt's article on Jihadists' websites contained references which were no longer accessible online almost as soon as the book was published).

The third area that this research has touched upon is the theories and strategies of counter-terrorism and how to best comprehend the motives and thinking patterns of terrorists. This study may encourage current specialists of the field to take into account the theological background of the WSNS when conducting their own research. This may not be the single determining factor of the actions of the terrorists, but it might shed light on the background of some of their decision making and practices. It is important to take into account the inevitable inaccuracy and sometimes deliberate misinformation that opposing groups use to describe other groups' thinking. For example, some Ash'aris might describe the WSNS as a group who consider that God has a hand which is like the hands of human beings. This is not the case, the WSNS do not say that God has a hand similar to that of humans, they rather say that He has a real hand but that they do not know how this hand is. Although this is still considered as anthropomorphism by the Ash'aris, accusing them of saying that God has a hand like humans is underestimating the level of their followers, as this statement would be considered as a heretical one by many Muslims, followers of the WSNS or otherwise. On the other hand, the WSNS might describe the Ash'aris as deniers of the revelation when they are not. The so-called Jihadis might also be called *takfiris* as if they were indiscriminately accusing all the Muslims of being outside the fold of Islam, when truly they are referred to in such terms by the the 'purists' and to a certain extent in academic literature, because they consider Ibn Baz and some of the Saudi religious elite as having blasphemed, but do not consider that most Muslims have left Islam. The self-definitions cannot rein the researcher who is in need of a working typology. However, it appears that the WSNS have managed to have some of their rhetorical arguments taken for granted by some researchers and this thesis might help in the production of more fine-tuned analyses.

Finally, the thesis has highlighted the need for more research into the dogmatics of Sunnism and more translations of classical works by classical Sunni scholars that the WSNS have now cast as heretics in the creed. For example, the principle of 'without a how' (*bila-kayf*) is still explained in many cases in academic literature by 'not knowing the how' as opposed to 'there is no how to the attributes of God', which is a very different approach. To say that God does not have a "how", a "manner", precludes the

idea that God has a shape, a place, a colour, or the like. To say that we do not know ‘how God is’ implies that He has one of those characteristics of shape, place, colour and the like, but that it is not known exactly ‘how’ they are. We also noted the example of al-Shahrastani who, in his description of the beliefs of an anthropomorphist, carefully works his sentences so as not to declare that the anthropomorphists he denounces in his book *al-Milal* worship “God”. Instead, when describing the creed of one anthropomorphist leader, he uses the phrase “*ma‘buduhu*”, which means “what he worships”, as he does not consider that something described with organs and a place should be called “God”.⁵³¹ All of these examples demonstrated that the precision that some scholars used when discussing the Muslim creed is still largely unwritten about, when compared to other areas of studies dealing with Islam. The current interest in groups claiming to fight in the name of Islam has sparked more interest for this religion’s norms and phenomena, and how they fit in within broader theoretical concepts. However, some of this attention can also be transferred to, for example, the study of how Muslims learn the basics of their beliefs (mostly orally, and now frequently on the Internet for example) and how this impacts on their lives; or to the analysis of specific points of belief and how they are debated today, especially with the existence of opposing claims on almost every subject. Studying further the theological tenets of Islam in general and of Sunnism in particular is even more necessary now that it is being gradually and systematically altered without much realisation from the outside world.

⁵³¹ See Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani, *al-Milal wa al-nihal* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma‘rifa, 1985; reprint, Cairo 1961), p.108.

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APPENDIX ONE

Two detailed interpretations by al-Razi

Two examples of detailed interpretations by al-Razi have been recently translated and have been copied here. The following pattern is used : al-Razi first explains why the literal meaning of a non explicit verse on the Attribute of God cannot be retained, then he offers some possible interpretations.

On the verse:

Wa li-Allah al-mashriq wa al-maghrib; fa-aynama tuwallu fa-thamma wajh Allah, inna Allah wasi‘ alim (Q. 2:115) literally : “The East and the West belong to God: wherever you turn, there is His face. God is all pervading and all knowing”, al-Razi explains:

Fourth issue. The verse is one of the strongest proofs for refuting corporealism (tajsim) and affirming [God’s] transcendence (tanzih). This is made clear in two ways:

First: god says And to God belong the east and the west. He makes it clear that these two directions belong to Him. This is so because direction is something that in the imagination (wahn) extends in length, width and depth. Everything that is so consists of divided parts and everything that is divided is composite and compound, and everything that is so must necessarily have a creator and an originator. This proof is a general one concerning all directions, [by which] I mean, what is above and what is beneath; by this, it is proved that God is the Creator (khaliq) of all directions and a creator necessarily precedes creation. The Creator (bari‘) therefore, before the creation of the world, transcended (kana munazzahan) all direction and [spatial] spheres (ahyaz); and it is inevitably necessary that He remain thus after the creation of the world, since it is impossible for realities (haqa’iq) and essences (mahiyat) to change.

Second: God says whithersoever you turn there is the face of God. If God were a physical body and had a corporeal face, the His Face would have been specified by a certain side and a certain direction, in which case His saying whithersoever you turn there is the face of God would not have been true. And as God specifies this [by explicitly mentioning it], we know that He transcends corporeality.

[...]Therefore, interpretation [in the case of this verse] is necessary , and [such interpretation] has different aspects.⁵³²

On the verse *Nur samawati wa al-ard* (literally *the light of the heavens and the earth*) (Q:24:35):

Know that in Arabic the term “light” (nur) is used for that phenomenon which the sun, the moon and fire diffuse over the ground, [over] walls and [over] other things. According to various different points of view it is impossible that this phenomenon be a god. (...) The second [point of view] is that, whether we say that light is a bodily form or is something present in the body, [the fact remains that] it is divisible. [This is]

⁵³² Feras Q. Hamza, Rizvi Sajjad, and Mayer Farhana, eds., *An anthology of Quranic commentaries. Vol. 1, On the nature of the divine*, Qur’anic studies series 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.100-01

because if it a bodily form then it must be divisible, and if it is present in it [the body], then [its very] presence in that which is divisible [means it too] is divisible. According to two accounts, light is divisible, and everything that is divisible requires the existence of its part in order to itself to exist. Each one of its parts changes it, and each required part requires [parts] other than itself in order to exist. That which requires [the existence of] another is made possible by its essence, which is occasioned by [something] other than itself. Thus, light is something that is brought about [by another] and so is not a god. The third [point of view] [is that] were this tangible light to be God, it could not vanish because it is impossible that God ever vanish.

The fourth [point of view] [is that] if this tangible light arrives when the sun and stars appear, and this is not possible for God [since He is ever-present](...)God's statement And appointed the shadows and light (Q. 6:1). This states unequivocally that the essential nature of light is something that God has created, so it is impossible that god [Himself] be a light. It is established that [this] requires explanation and the religious experts mention various differing points of view about it.

The first [point of view] is that light causes [things] to become visible, and since guidance and light share this sense [i.e. since they are both understood to perform this function], it is correct that the name "light" is often bestowed on 'guidance'. The second [point of view] is that the meaning [of the verse] is that He [God], is truly just, competent and enlightening ruler of the heavens and the earth. He describes Himself like this just as the learned leader is described as being the light of [his] country. If their ruler rules well he is for them [i.e. for the inhabitants of a given region] like the light that guides to the ways of the right path.⁵³³

⁵³³ ———, eds., *An anthology of Quranic commentaries. Vol. 1, On the nature of the divine*, Quranic studies series 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.385

APPENDIX TWO

Researching the Internet: keeping a trace of referenced data

When referencing articles from the Internet, I have used a method similar to that used for books or articles, adding the URL of the website, and the date on which it was accessed.⁵³⁴ Academic standards imply that the researcher's evidence should be accepted, i.e. that on the accessed date stated, he or she did, in fact, see that sentence or passage quoted on the mentioned website. However, on balance, this does not appear as a reliable enough system, especially if one has a complete chapter evidenced solely by the Internet. It is vital that the analyses of the writer are accessible to be verified by third parties. In forums, (which contain, at times, long and complex discussions) it is easy to quote a sentence by a contributor and misunderstand the context in which it was written, thereby making the analysis questionable. Verifying the full discussion and context in which a quote appeared is therefore of great significance.

In addition, the inexplicable omission of a page from the Internet is not the sole disruption that the data gathered by a researcher can be prone to. Data on the internet may change because of alterations which are not limited to mere deletion. A case in point appears in Chapter 5 (5.4.2), where we mentioned the incident of a particular webmaster who changed his religious affiliation but maintained his websites. Had this thesis been completed before he changed his views, a reader attempting to recheck the information would be considerably puzzled to note that the link to the original website does work, but the content is not consistent with the analysis. Furthermore, a contributor to a forum can revisit his posts (or messages) and amend or delete them as he wishes. In such a case, the link would not necessarily become defunct, but the content may not now corroborate the findings of the thesis to the same extent. What the researcher needs is a way to store his or her data gathered from online sources in such a way that it is made accessible at a later date without undergoing any change whatsoever. Uploading everything onto a CD or removable storage seems too arduous a task for a simple researcher. Printing is another possibility, but would result in placing a considerable burden on the shoulders of the researcher. If a solution is not found, it could make all

⁵³⁴ This is valid for articles where there is an identifiable author. For texts written by people using pseudonyms, or for blogs, the general address of the forum or blog is given at the end of the references list above.

the findings of a thesis relying on the Internet potentially unverifiable after some time, which proves extremely problematic.

One possible way to overcome this problem is to use the “Internet Wayback Machine”,⁵³⁵ which “crawls” the entire web, and archives all websites. It is a very useful tool as it archives almost everything from the web and therefore may make a thesis’s references available to readers who would otherwise find themselves unable to access a particular link. However, this tool has some limitations: it has a moving wall of six months, which means that not all recent activity can be retrieved. Furthermore, specific features may be added to the source of the website to prevent indexing which poses another problem. There is also a way for webmasters to have their website removed from the database, even after their website has been archived (they can simply write to the organisation behind the “machine” and ask to have their personal information deleted).⁵³⁶ Even the existence of this worldwide Internet archive does not, therefore, solve the problem of the researcher, as some material might be too recent to figure in the database, may never be archived if the website’s structure does not allow it, or might disappear from the database altogether after a specific request from the owner of the website.

After several attempts to resolve the aforementioned issues and much researching on the Internet, we eventually discovered a better way to keep all the data quoted: using the social bookmarking website www.furl.net. Such a compendium has two advantages compared to the most popular sites (such as del.icio.us): not only is the user able to save a copy of any link (bookmark) to particular websites that he finds interesting, (to be retrieved later from any computer connected to the Internet, like in any social bookmarking website), he also has the ability to keep a cached copy of the website and allow a full-text search in his archives. These features mean that if linkrots occur (i.e. the link does not work anymore because the page has been moved or changed), the user has a copy of that page available in his online account. When looking for a page in his personal online database, the user can type any word that was on that page (not just the words from the title, which is a significant improvement) and the article can be easily retrieved from the archives. The links can also be organised by categories, to make the

⁵³⁵ www.archive.org.

⁵³⁶ For more information about this, see Internet Archive, ‘Wayback Machine,’ <http://www.archive.org/web/web.php> Accessed on 23 July 2006 and especially their FAQs which explain how the system works.

search easier. For example one would have Chapter 2, Chapter 3, etc as topics. Then, when saving a page to furl.net, the user would click on “Chapter 3” if this link has been quoted in Chapter 3. The user can also regularly export all the cached copies in a .zip file that can be stored in their computer or sent to themselves by email, thus ensuring constant availability of their findings, even if the website furl.net becomes obsolete.

How different is this method from keeping a digital copy of interesting pages? Firstly, saving one web page is usually a tedious act, as it generates several files that one then has to keep in one place in order to be able to reopen the page later, whereas furl.net does that in a single click. Secondly, the database is always available on any computer connected to the Internet. Thirdly the database is fully searchable and stamped automatically, which means that if one is ever asked for a copy of one of the web pages referenced in a thesis (assuming the link placed as a reference no longer works), the date on it would already have been established by furl.net and not by the researcher. For all the aforementioned reasons, it seems that this resource is more reliable than any other method. The only limitation to the accessibility of the data to third parties is that because of copyright issues, the cached copies are only accessible to the user who saves them, and not to the wider community. In practice, this means that the researcher always has an online copy of all the pages referenced in their thesis, but they cannot send that link to a third party requesting it if the original link no longer works. However, as mentioned above, the cached copy can be retrieved and therefore sent by email, for example. Although this was not the original motive and purpose of social bookmarking websites, this is one application which has proved very useful for this research.⁵³⁷

⁵³⁷ For more information on social bookmarking websites and their respective advantages one can read: Roxomatic, ‘Furl, Spurl, or del.icio.us?’, <http://www.roxomatic.de/498/furl-spurl-or-delicious> Accessed on 5 October 2008; and Michael Arrington, ‘Profile : Furl,’ (Techerunch.com, 2005).