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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,*

*Nahouza Issilame and Nafissa Abdulhamide*

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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 *EP*<sup>2</sup>, 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.