

'One of the most important questions that human beings have to understand'

Salafism as Islamic deferentialist fundamentalism

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In the present article, the authors argue that the study of Salafism as a contemporary Islamic new religious movement could benefit from an analytical perspective separating fundamentalism into the modes of inferentialism and deferentialism. The basics of these concepts are outlined and discussed in relation to different aspects of contemporary Salafism as well as in relation to previous tendencies in Islamic history. As a case study, the authors employ the concept in an analysis of a contemporary Swedish Salafi discourse on the 'wiping of the (leather) socks' in the context of ritual purity. The authors argue that the concept of 'deferential fundamentalism' has a potential in the study of Salafism in that it allows for comparative analysis, both cross-religiously and diachronically, in contextualising Salafism historically. It also allows for an analysis of Salafi thought and practice in relation to theories of how human beings in general process social information.

Introduction

In the last three decades Islamic studies scholarship has paid an increasing amount of attention to the phenomenon of Salafism, considered a 'new religious' movement (Meijer 2009) that is gaining ground worldwide. This includes research on both general features of the movement (Meijer 2009; Lauzière 2015; French 2020), and more detailed case studies focusing on its local manifestations around the world (Gauvain 2013; Inge 2016; Olsson 2019;

Adraoui 2020). While Salafism has been firmly established as a descriptive term in the scholarly study of Islam (Weissmann 2017), it also serves as a self-designation by members of this movement, denoting a self-perceived, strict and detailed imitation of the ways of the 'pious predecessors', *al-salaf al-salih*. As a self-designation it carries a strong positive emotive value, not least since many Muslims would agree that it is a religious ideal to follow the first generations of Muslims in belief and practice, albeit not perhaps in form of detailed imitation. As an analytical concept, then, Salafism has some problems. It primarily has a categorising function, which is also why it is the subject of much academic discourse on necessary and sufficient criteria for an individual or a group to be categorised as Salafi. Its strong positive emotive value when used as a self-designation also makes the academic task of determining who to include in the category problematic, particularly since it was used as a self-designation long before the contemporary phenomenon was identified by Islamic studies scholars, and with different meanings from those attributed to it in contemporary scholarship (see Lauzière 2010).

Nevertheless, we recognise that Salafism is a term that has been firmly established in

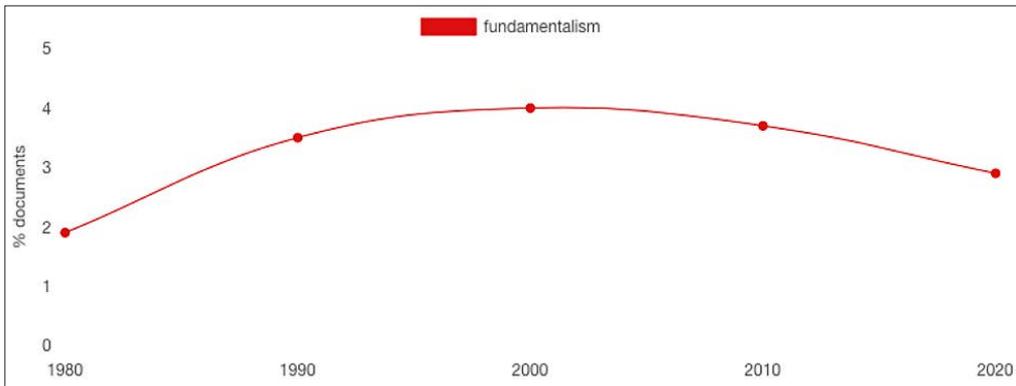


Fig. 1. Percentage of documents (research articles and books) using the term 'fundamentalism' in total number of documents using the term 'religion', 1980–2020.

scholarly discourse to denote a particular tendency in contemporary Islam, even if, as a descriptive concept, it may be somewhat blurry around the edges. In this article, however, we argue for the reintroduction of 'fundamentalism' as a suitable *analytical concept* in the study of Salafism. For this, however, some modification and expansion of the concept of fundamentalism, compared to how it has been used academically for more than four decades, is necessary.

We are well aware of the long discussion on the pros and cons of using the term 'fundamentalism' to denote particular movements or trends in Islam, and how its actual use in everyday speech, often with negative connotations, makes its use problematic. It is a term that was coined at the beginning of the twentieth century as a self-designation of a highly specific movement in North American Evangelical Christianity, in opposition mainly to liberal theology. In this context, 'fundamentalism' was primarily a matter of stressing the Bible as a sacred text, and its inerrancy. In this limited understanding, 'fundamentalism' is hardly useful for comparative purposes outside the context of evangelical Christianity.

Resisting this narrow understanding of the term, however, the large Funda-

mentalism Project, co-directed by Martin E. Marty and Scott Appelby, between 1987 and 1995, used the term in a comparative manner to outline and analyse what the project members saw as a recurring anti-secularist movement in contemporary religious contexts worldwide, most notably the demand among religious groups for social and political reorganisation in line with what they perceived as an ideal, timeless order (Olsson 2021). One of the aims of the project, which resulted in five large published volumes on the topic (e.g. Appleby and Marty 1991; Marty and Appleby 1993, 1995), was to 'help politicians, communicators in the media, and academics to use fundamentalism and similar terms non-pejoratively' (Marty 1996: 33). This ambition was perhaps not realised in full, at least not in academia.

The graph in Fig. 1, constructed with the help of the Constellate text analysis service (<https://constellate.org>), shows the relative frequency of documents containing the keyword 'religion' (1.8 million in total), also using the term 'fundamentalism' over the last forty years.

As can be noted, although there was an increase in use during and slightly after the duration of the Fundamentalism Project, there has been a steady decrease in the use

of the term over the last two decades. The reasons for this decline could be investigated further, but that is not our aim here. In what follows, we take on the task of exploring what aspects of 'fundamentalism' as an analytical concept may be apt for analysing Salafism as a cultural phenomenon in contemporary Islam. We will make some references to periods, events and processes in history and contemporary times that have been objects of much scholarly research. We will not, however, go into detail on that research, since the aim here is not to provide an overview of what has been done, but to point forward to what may be done in the future.

Conceptual distinctions and elaborations

In pursuing our ambition, we start by introducing some distinctions and limitations, and above all a reservation. The latter concerns the academic study of fundamentalism. A Google Scholar search for 'fundamentalism' returns around 317,000 results. Narrowing the search to 'fundamentalism AND islam' the number of hits is still impressive, at 170,000. It goes without saying that producing a comprehensive overview here of how the term has been used and discussed in different scholarly contexts is a formidable task, not suitable or useful for the present context. We thus take the liberty of specifying how we use the term in the following discussion, without claiming that our understanding is in any way superior to or should replace other understandings. Based on our knowledge of the field, we deem that our use of the term is not one that will generate much academic controversy, but admittedly it does not rest on a careful inventory of, and dialogue with, all previous attempts at definition.

As mentioned above, 'fundamentalism' as a term was first introduced into public

discourse as a self-designation for a particular strand of Evangelical Christianity, stressing the literal reading and basic inerrancy of the Bible. Disregarding the actual object of focus (the Bible), this view of a *static, textually encoded, self-contained and unchanging reference point* as the *exclusive* source of religious truths may serve as an important defining characteristic of fundamentalism as an analytical concept relevant also for Salafism. Although groups who characterise themselves as Salafi, or are identified by scholars as Salafi, may differ considerably from one another in terms of goals, practices and forms of activism, they all share a strong notion that 'pure' Islam is the equivalent of what the basic scriptures, the Qur'an, and not least the hadith-literature, contain. In this sense, then, Salafis are fundamentalist in their views on what constitutes the *sources* for religious truths, the pure 'essence' of Islam. For the purposes of this article, we find the following characteristics of fundamentalists by the Islamic studies scholar Michael Cook in line with our own:

that they should identify one component of their religious tradition as its foundation while the rest is superstructure; that they should locate authority in the foundation rather than the superstructure; and that they should take the authority of the foundation seriously in a substantive way. (Cook 2014: 373)

Concerning Islam specifically, Cook stresses that this religious tradition easily lends itself to fundamentalisation, because of the authoritative role given to Muhammad, and to the pristine community of Muslims during his and his immediate followers' lifetimes, and also to the textual canonical authority of the Qur'an

and Sunna (Cook 2014: 377–8). While we agree with Cook here, we also argue that our introduction below of a theoretical distinction between two major forms of fundamentalism, what we term ‘deferentialist’ and ‘inferentialist’, and the identification of Salafism with the former rather than the latter, will facilitate a more nuanced use of the analytical concept. It is this distinction, which we have not encountered in previous research, and its implications for the analysis of Salafism exemplified by the case study below, that we consider to be our novel contribution to the study of Salafism, Islamic fundamentalism and religious fundamentalism in general.

In line with Cook, we limit our discussion on fundamentalism to the issue of theological (in a wide sense) *content*.¹ It concerns only the emic understandings of the *source* or *sources* for religious truths. In this, we deviate from the wider understanding of fundamentalism that also covers activism based on such understandings, directed at changing society to conform with whatever becomes the result of this specific approach to the religious tradition. In our conceptualisation, such social or political activism, which could perhaps,

1 Our use of the word ‘theology’ might appear odd in the context of Islam, since in the specialised scholarly tradition of Islamic studies, ‘theology’ is usually reserved for *kalam*, as a particular sub-section of ‘*ulum al-din*’ (or ‘religious sciences’). *Kalam* here denotes elite scholastic, philosophical reflections on the nature of the divine and on revelation. In the context of the present article, however, ‘theology’ is used in a much broader sense, denoting reflective thought on all things religious (i.e. pertaining to the nature, thought and actions of superhuman agents, and the consequences these entail for human beings), which makes it into a comparative term that can be used cross-religiously.

then, be termed politico-fundamentalism or something similar, is a possible, but not necessary, bed mate of what we focus on, which could consequently be termed theo-fundamentalism. This limitation is necessary in the context and aim of the present article because one of the more well-cited distinctions made concerning contemporary Salafism is that groups seen as parts of this movement differ considerably precisely in their views on activism, both in form and scope, in relation to a wider society (Wiktorowicz 2006). A particular subgroup, in scholarly contexts often referred to as ‘Puritan Salafis’, focus on studying and practising Islam, not on social upheaval or transformation. Such a stance does not have to involve plans for how to change society at large. On the contrary, such Salafism often involves a notion of *withdrawing* from politics and the rest of society in order to protect the purity of faith and practice (Olsson 2012). This form of Salafism, which arguably is the largest, is difficult to embrace within a wider definition of fundamentalism that also by necessity entails political activism.

Although it apparently never became a widespread practice, some Muslim groups advocating a return to ‘true religion’, did, in the height of the popularity of the term in Western media, embrace the term ‘fundamentalists’ and used its translation, *usuliyun*, as a self-designation (Haddad 1992). This appropriation is telling. The word *usuliyun* has connotations with a core notion in Islamic tradition, and in particular in Islamic jurisprudence. Here *usul al-fiqh*, ‘the roots of jurisprudence’, refers to a set of basic principles used to arrive at specific rulings pertaining to a particular issue, through effort (*ijtihad*), or more technically ‘interpretation’. The classical list of the four ‘roots’ (a metaphorical equivalent, perhaps, of ‘fundament’), commonly attributed

to the scholar and alleged founder of the Shafi'i school of law, Muhammad Idris al-Shafi'i (d. 821), includes two sets: one of sources for information, the Qur'an and the Sunna, and one of methods to expand the information and reach conclusions on its meaning, *qiyas*, 'analogical reasoning', and *'ijma*, 'consensus'. Using *usuliyun* as a self-designation and translation of 'fundamentalists', thus focuses on the first set, that is, the basic scriptures of the Qur'an and the hadith collections. It does not entail accepting the whole of 'roots of jurisprudence'. Indeed, a recurring topic in contemporary Salafi discourse is the rejection of this system.

When al-Shafi'i formulated the *usul al-fiqh* in the ninth century CE he also insisted on the primacy of the first two roots in his system, and particularly on the Sunna of the Prophet (see Juynboll and Brown 2012). Nevertheless, his system was a compromise between a previous movement among some religious scholars, sometimes referred to generically as the *ahl al-hadith*, or 'hadith folk', and the so called *ahl al-ray*, 'people of opinion'. The *ahl al-hadith*, perhaps as early as the beginning of the eighth century CE, insisted on making information about the Prophet Muhammad and his words and deeds into a direct source of religious belief and practice, as a revelation complementary to the Qur'an. This was done in a prevailing situation where the Qur'an, because of its limited content, often had to be complemented as a source for Islam with established custom (*sunna* in a pre-Shafi'i understanding) and scholars' personal judgements or opinions, *ra'y* (Brown 1996: 6–15; Lowry 2010: 88; Schacht 2012).

This original context of what could perhaps be seen as a start of the institutionalisation of fundamentalism in Islamic tradition, at least in the sense of

stressing the primacy of the two sources of the Qur'an and the Sunna, may also serve to distinguish it as a particular approach. Fundamentalism should primarily be juxtaposed against notions that 'true religion', in terms of beliefs and practices, is to be found in whatever is established tradition or in prevailing local beliefs and practices, in other words, what is established religion in any given context.

In contrast with much scholarly work on fundamentalism in general, we hence do not consider fundamentalism, in the limited understanding provided above, to be an exclusively modern phenomenon. In the context of Islam, then, it could be traced back as far as we have historical sources. It has been part and parcel of revivalist movements throughout Islamic history (Rahman 1970).

However, modernity has greatly affected and contributed to the spread and establishment of Islamic fundamentalism as a general view among a larger Muslim population, and not only among religious scholars, around the world. Previous scholarship has suggested several reasons for this. For example, increased knowledge among Muslims around the world or intra-religious diversity has resulted in an 'objectification of Islam' on an individual level, that is to say, Islam has become an object of reflection concerning what it 'really' is, favouring a search for a stable essence. This is combined, in the twentieth century onwards, with increased levels of education and increased access for a general public to the original scriptures, including translations from the original Arabic, as a result first of print technology and later of other forms of technology for mass production and distribution of information (see e.g. discussions in Eickelman and Piscatori 2004; Roy 2004).

It should be noted that a common focus on a particular set of self-containing, core scriptures as sources of ‘true’ Islam among Islamic fundamentalists does not translate into common conclusions concerning what can be derived from these scriptures in terms of religious truths. Hence, for example, Muslim fundamentalist feminists may claim that a ‘true’ feminist message of the Qur’an has been tainted by 1400 years of patriarchal interpretation and demand a return to an original Islam of gender equality in creation as expressed in verse 4:1 in the Qur’an.² On the other hand an ISIS volunteer may take a Yazidi sex-slave besides his four wives, fundamentalistically arguing that this is his prerogative in accordance with the wording ‘what your right hand possesses’ in the Qur’anic verse 4:3.³ Both examples display a fundamentalist orientation, but arrive at quite different results.

Hence, the view that ‘true Islam’ must be extracted from the scriptures directly, rather than from secondary authorities or established tradition, is a widely shared notion among Muslims today. Consequently, fundamentalism in itself is too broad a concept to be of much use in addressing the specific character of Salafism. It needs further qualifications, particularly concerning divergences in views on how information is to be extracted from the sources, the nature of

- 2 ‘O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them twain hath spread abroad a multitude of men and women.’ Pickthall’s translation (1953) of the Qur’an is used in the article.
- 3 ‘And if ye fear that ye will not deal fairly by the orphans, marry of the women, who seem good to you, two or three or four; and if ye fear that ye cannot do justice (to so many) then one (only) or (the captives) that your right hand possesses. Thus it is more likely that ye will not do injustice.’

that information, and the consequences of the information on correct behaviour. For this we now turn to a more general theoretical discussion on two modes in which human beings, and not only Muslims, in everyday contexts process social information: we term these modes *inferentialism* and *deferentialism*.

Inferentialism and deferentialism

The following distinction between an inferential and a deferential mode of processing social information is inspired by the anthropologist Maurice Bloch’s article ‘Ritual and deference’ (Bloch 2004) and has been discussed at greater length in a previous publication (Svensson 2015).

The inferential mode relies on the possibly unique human ability to mentalise, that is, to form beliefs about the beliefs, wishes and intentions of others, sometimes referred to as a ‘theory of mind’ (Premack and Woodruff 1978; Baron-Cohen 1995; Sodian and Kristen 2010). When as humans we observe the behaviour of others (humans or non-humans) that we identify as agents, including, for example, what they say or write, we more often than not assume that this behaviour is caused by their internal mental states. This we do unconsciously and without much effort. This *inferred* (not observed) ‘meaning’ of the observed behaviour of others need not correspond with what would, at first glance, appear to be the surface meaning. The *inferentialist* mode of processing social information is the basis for such phenomena as irony, and is useful for detecting deceit, for example.

But we need not always rely on mentalisation when interpreting others. In the *deferentialist* mode we allow the information received to directly affect our beliefs and behaviour, regardless of the (assumed) intentions of the producer of information.

When, for example, someone follows an operation manual to install an electric device, there is, usually, no simulation of the mind of the author of the manual. The text is allowed to directly influence action.

Most humans, in everyday life, alternate between an inferentialist and a deferentialist mode, depending on contextual factors such as the subjective evaluation of the importance of the information given and trust in the source of information or authority ascribed to it.

Turning back to fundamentalism, and Salafism, we believe that considering these two general modes of relating to social information may contribute a useful analytical distinction. An inferentialist fundamentalism in an Islamic context would entail using the Qur'an and the hadith corpus as sources for making *inferences* concerning the intentions of God and the Prophet respectively, and subsequently to make these inferences, rather than the apparent surface meaning of the actual text, the basis for belief and action. Deferential fundamentalism, on the other hand, entails deferring to whatever is understood to be the surface meaning of the texts, and arranging beliefs and behaviour accordingly. Salafism falls more into the latter category than into the former, which makes it into a particular form of fundamentalism, the topic of the remainder of this article.

It is important for our argument here that the two modes are not limited to fundamentalism. They are general. A deferential or inferential mode may be present also in relation to other sources of social information than foundational texts, such as established scholarship, charismatic leaders or prevailing customs in any given locality. Two examples from Islam of non-Salafi deferentialism would be the attitude inherent in the principle of *taqlid* (imitation) within Sunni legal tradition, and the deference to

mujtahids on different levels of a hierarchy of scholars within Shiism.

Salafism as deferentialist fundamentalism

Salafism, as it is commonly approached in contemporary Islamic studies scholarship, can thus be construed, in terms of ideological content, as an Islamic fundamentalism with a strong leaning towards a deferentialist mode. Not only is there among Salafis an exclusive stress on the text of the Qur'an and hadith (fundamentalism), but there is also a strong suspicion of both historical and contemporary attempts at mentalising the divine, that is, at simulating the mind of God or the Prophet in search for guidance in beliefs and practices. While the pious predecessors are indeed also models to be deferred to, it is only because they themselves are assumed to have deferred to the Qur'an and the Sunna. The recordings of their beliefs and actions also become texts to which deference is due. Salafi practice is characterised by an obsessiveness with details in the texts, taken literally, and an insistence that these details should, without pondering on possible divine intentions behind them, be directly realised in belief and practice here and now.

The clear anti-inferentialist stance appears also in matters of creed. A true believer should adopt any statements on the divine nature that are expressed in the literal text, without asking any questions or discussion or pondering or attempts at rational justification. At times, this view of theology, in a more limited sense, is termed a 'traditionist' (*athari*) stance, meaning the rejection of argumentation and debate (*jadal*), and accepting the exact words in revelation at face value, nothing more and nothing less. 'For the Athari movement, the epistemological validity of human reason is severely limited, and rational proofs can neither be trusted nor relied upon in

matters of belief, thus making theology [i.e. *kalam*] a sinful innovation (*bid'ah*) and dangerous exercise in human arrogance' (Halverson 2010: 43).

The concept of *bid'a*, 'illegitimate innovation' in belief and practice, is central to Salafi thought. The Salafi rejection of such innovations corresponds well to a deferentialist mode. Introducing something novel into belief and practice requires mentalisation, assuming that there are things that God wants, or allows or likes, that he has not clearly expressed, but that can be inferred from whatever information available. However, such inferences, like all attempts to simulate the minds of others, carry with them a level of uncertainty, which makes them dangerous.

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein makes a remark on 'the singular view on truth' among what he terms 'fundamentalists', but which correspond closely with what we here term more narrowly a deferentialist fundamentalism:

There is no doubt, no scepticism, and, as a consequence, no irony in radical Islamic thought. Tragic irony, in particular, is unthinkable because the zone of the sacred contains only one single concept and one single point of view from which the world can be interpreted. (Botz-Bornstein 2019: 176–7)

Doubt, scepticism and irony are all features that belong to the inferentialist mode, but are absent in the deferentialist mode.

Salafism is treated, in an Islamic studies context, mainly as a contemporary phenomenon, but considering it rather as deferentialist fundamentalism, it has clear historical precedents. The relationship between contemporary Salafism and these precedents is often framed academically as

a case of historical influence. It is possible, however, from the perspective adopted here, to view Salafism merely as a contemporary manifestation of a tendency of deferentialist fundamentalism that, just like fundamentalism in general, has been present throughout Islamic history.

Among the different Sunni legal traditions that developed out of al-Shafi'i's system, some tended towards a deferentialist stand, being clearly sceptical towards the 'roots' of *qiyas* and *ijma*. The prime example here is Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (d. 855), considered the founder of the Hanbali school of law. In the six creeds that the Hanbali jurist Ibn Abi Ya'la (d. 1131) attributed to Ibn Hanbal, the stress on what is regarded as authentic sources is straightforward, and those who disagree are defined as innovators and deviators, having left the community of believers. Of importance in the citation is the stress on holding on to the roots (*usul*), which is attributed to 'the people of Sunna':

These are the doctrines of the people of knowledge, the adherents of hadith (*aṣḥāb al-aṥar*), and *ahl al-sunnah* [people of Sunna] who hold on to its roots, who are known by them, and who are to be followed in them, as they have been from (the time of) the Companions (*aṣḥāb*) of the Prophet. ... Whoever disagrees with anything of these doctrines, or asperses them, or blames one who advocates them, he is an innovator who has departed from the community (*jamā'ah*) and deviated from the way of the *sunnah* and the path of truth. (Ibn Hanbal 2015: 2)

An example of a 'traditionist' (deferentialist) stand on *kalam* is the Hanbali jurist Ibn Qudamah (d. 1223), and his

treatise *Tahrim al-nazar fi kutub ahl al-kalam* (Prohibition of the study of the books of the partisans of theology). For him, 'the path to salvation was very clear. The religion of the *salaf* was one of simple submission to God and His Messenger through strict adherence to the letter of the Qur'an and Sunna and believing in their content without asking *kayf* (how). Believing was enough' (Halverson 2010: 38). The deferentialist creed (*aqida*) was stressed, above inferentialist theology, citing the doctrine of *bi-la kayf* (without [asking] how) (p. 39; see also Abrahamov 1995). Creed is not based on theological discussions or rational proof, but on the textual authoritative sources of the Qur'an and Sunna.

Later examples of a deferentialist fundamentalism include, for example, the works of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), both of which are important reference points for contemporary Salafis. The possibly most conspicuous in history is the Zahiri school of law, with its extreme form of literalism, refusing to consider anything Islamic but the literal, external (*zahir*) meaning of the scriptures (Adang 2006; Turki 2012). While extinct since the fourteenth century, individual scholars, often with a Salafi leaning, have professed their sympathies with its teachings (Rane 2010: 84), such as the well-known translator (together with Muhammad Muhsin Khan) of the Qur'an into English Taqi al-Din al-Hilali (d. 1987) (Lauzière 2015: 158). It can be noted in passing that the English Wikipedia page on Zahiri lists fourteen contemporary followers of the school, among them al-Hilali and the well-known hadith scholar Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani (d. 1999) (Wikipedia 2021).

While thus being a recurrent tendency in Islamic tradition, at least on a scholarly level, deferentialist fundamentalism

has historically not been a major popular movement, until perhaps the modern period and the rise of Salafism. There are several possible reasons for this. Apart from the general processes mentioned above that have nurtured fundamentalism in general, the *deferentialist* variety is strengthened by the massive missionary activities of oil-rich Gulf states from the 1970s onwards, mainly Saudi Arabia. We claim that the increased access to the foundational texts has facilitated the emergence of individuals and groups, who, alongside traditional scholars, who can claim authority on the basis of knowledge of the content of the scriptures in the sense of being able to deliver the correct quotation at the right time, or in the emic language 'proof' that can be deferred to. These have become 'religious virtuosos' (Weber 1978: 539–42). Several such deferential fundamentalists have been strongly affected by Wahhabi scholarly institutions, such as the Islamic University in Madinah that educates missionaries (Farquhar 2016).

The remainder of this article will further elaborate on how deferentialist fundamentalism plays out in a Salafi context, using examples taken from a contemporary Swedish context and related to an issue that in all its mundaneness illustrates the phenomenon: the 'wiping the two (leather) socks' (*mashi 'ala al-khuffan*).

Salafism as deferentialist fundamentalism in Sweden: the case of 'wiping the (leather) socks'

Islamic tradition has the notion of ritual purity, *tahara*, as a prerequisite for the performance of certain rituals, most notably the daily prayer, *salat*. Depending on the level of impurity, *tahara* is usually attained either through the performance of the great ablution (*ghusl*) or the small ablution (*wudu'*) with water. The latter involves washing hands and feet, rinsing the mouth

and nose and stroking the head and ears with wet hands. In this context, there is a widespread notion that if one puts on footwear after performing *wudu*' then the feet need not be washed again next time the procedure is repeated. It is enough, to attain *tahara*, to wipe the covered feet with wet hands.

It is not unreasonable to assume that for the majority of Muslims who practise 'wiping,' it is conceived merely as established practice. This is what one does and what has always been done. In the framework of deferentialist fundamentalism, such a justification for the practice does not hold.

For Salafis, as a case of contemporary deferentialist fundamentalism, issues of ritual purity are not to be taken lightly. Scholarly works on Salafism have noted the central position of ritual purity in thought and practice (Gauvain 2013). The obsession with specific issues and neglect of political engagement has also earned some Salafi scholars the somewhat less flattering epithet '*ulama*' *al-haydh wa-l-nifas*, 'scholars of menstruation and puerperium' among its critics (Haykel 2009: 49). Hence, also the issue of 'wiping' is a serious matter that needs 'proof', that is, a clear textual basis. And proof there is.

The issue of wiping is addressed in all hadith collections, primarily in the context of ritual ablution, purity and pollution. *Sunan Abi Dawud*, and the 'Book on Purity' (*tahara*), address several topics related to purity, including wiping of socks, and several of its chapters have titles such as 'Wiping over the *khuffan*' (chapter 60) and 'How one should wipe' (chapter 64) (Kitab Al-Taharah).

Since this practice is mentioned in the sources, and explicitly so, it is understandable that the deferentialist fundamentalist orientation of Salafis would have addressed it. As a general rule, since it is

clearly described in hadiths considered 'sound', *sahih*, it should have consequences for behaviour. However, as the cases from a Swedish context will show, this is still no straightforward matter.

Swedish Salafi wiping

The website *darulhadith.com* is arguably the major supplier of Salafi-oriented text material in the Swedish language. This material mainly has the form of short 'articles' where speeches and written texts by contemporary scholars associated with Saudi Arabia are translated into Swedish. According to the website, the number of such articles at the time of writing exceeds 25,000. The group behind the homepage is anonymous, and claims to serve only as a channel for the 'voices of the learned', that is, the Salafi/Wahhabi scholars cited.

Although *darulhadith.com* is probably not a particularly influential voice in the Swedish Salafi landscape (Svensson 2020), it is an interesting case in light of deferentialist fundamentalism, mainly because it practises what may be termed 'secondary deferentialism', by deferring, to the scholars cited, who, in turn, defer to the scriptures in a standard Salafi manner. Whether or not there is a selection of topics among the articles conditioned by the Swedish context in which these articles are reproduced is difficult to ascertain, but the general impression is that the selection is more conditioned by preference for particular scholars, or 'virtuosi' (see above) than content (*ibid.*).

It was actually as a result of a computer-assisted analysis performed in 2019 on over 19,000 articles on *darulhadith.com* that the theme used as an example here, that is, the wiping procedure, presented itself for the authors' attention. In a comparison between articles citing different authorities, the topic of 'leather socks'

stuck out as an important theme in articles connected to one of these: Muhammad bin Salih bin 'Uthaymin (d. 2001), who is one of the most influential Saudi Wahhabi shaykhs and still considered a major source of authority among Salafis. In total, 140 articles address the topic of 'socks', and in 77 of these, there is mention of 'leather socks'. Of these 77, half (38) are translations of utterances by this particular scholar, who in one of the articles states that the question of how long a believer can continue to wipe before the feet have to be washed again 'is one of the most important questions that human beings have to understand' (darulhadith.com 2015).

One conspicuous example of a deferentialist fundamentalism comes from a translated statement of Muhammad bin Salih bin 'Uthaymin that the wiping of socks is *preferable* to washing the feet. Why? Because there is a hadith where the Prophet declined an offer from one of his companions to remove his (the Prophet's) 'leather socks' when preparing to perform prayer. The Prophet said that he put on the socks in a pure state, and wiped over them. The important thing to note here is that Muhammad, in this hadith, did not expressly advise anyone else to follow his example in this matter. This is an example of how 'Uthaymin represents a tradition that holds that imitating the Prophet, regardless of the intentions underlying his utterances or behaviour, is preferable (darulhadith.com 2014).

In general, among Muslim scholars throughout the ages, there has been a distinction between what the Prophet did as a messenger of God and in his capacity as a 'beautiful example', whose Sunna, in the understanding of preferred behaviour, is to be followed, and what he did as a private person (his personal preferences, what he liked and what he disliked). This was done

by the majority of scholars approaching the hadith literature, theologically motivated by a distinction between *al-sunna al-'adiya*, that is, information on the personal preferences of the Prophet, and *al-sunna al-huda*, that Sunna which forms part of the revelation, and is thus binding for Muslims. The latter is to be followed, the former not necessarily so (Brown 1996: 62; see also Gleave 2010: 105–6).

The theological problem also made it into the hadith collections, where statements are attributed to the Prophet on several occasions in which he makes a distinction between divine rulings (mediated through his sayings and actions) and his own preferences and thoughts as a private person. The most famous example of this, present in several hadith collections, is Muhammad's not so suitable advice to date-farmers that they should not pollinate their trees. When the crops failed, he advised his followers to listen to him only in matters concerning religion, not on matters relating to worldly affairs (see e.g. *Sunan Ibn Majah* Book 16: hadith 36). A less known hadith concerns the Prophet's distaste for lizard meat, which he nevertheless allowed others to eat: 'I am neither the eater of it nor its prohibitor' (*Sahih Muslim* Book 34: Hadith 56).

The theological problem here, of course, lies in how to make the separation in the large amount of information available in hadith literature and other biographical material. Noteworthy, for this article, however, is that this separation requires entering into the *inferentialist* mode, of simulating the mind of the Prophet. What were his intentions behind certain actions and utterances? What can be noted from the historical record is that some groups refused this distinction because of the notion of *'isma*, the infallibility of the Prophet and of him as the 'perfect man', *insan al-kamil*. More

importantly in the context of this article, however, are those who refused the distinction on the basis of deference to textual ‘proof’. If recorded in the sound hadith collections, whatever the Prophet did or said had to be considered necessary to follow (Brown 1996: 63).

‘Leather socks’, in Arabic, is *khuff*, and *khuffan*, in the dual form, is the term used in the hadiths from Abu Dawud’s collection cited above. Hence, in a deferentialist mode, one could argue that the wiping applies only to this particular footwear. In the translated articles on darulhadith.com there are those among the scholars that allow themselves to enter the inferentialist mode when reasoning, through analogy, *qiyas*, that the *khuffan* mentioned in hadith could be seen as equivalent to other kinds of socks (e.g. made of cotton), and the same rules of wiping apply to the latter as they do to the former. Such rules, outlined in the articles, include how high the socks (leather or not) should be, how many fingers should be used in wiping, for how long a person can do wiping before the feet have to be washed again (one day if stationary, three days while on a journey) and if socks with holes in them could still be wiped (yes). All answers are provided with ‘proof’ of the practices of the Prophet and the companions. While the original statements from the scholars cited then display some inferentialism in allowing the rules of wiping to apply to socks in other material than leather, the translations insist on translating *khuffan* as ‘leather socks’, instead of using the more generic ‘socks’ or ‘footwear’. This indicates that fabric may indeed matter.

That it does matter, also in a contemporary Swedish context, may be seen from another instance where the leather socks appear. The company Tahara has both a physical shop in Malmö in the southern



Fig. 2. A woman displaying her *khuff* by the fireplace, 18.5.2005.

part of Sweden, and an online shop catering mainly for Scandinavian customers in search of Islamic products. These include a wide variety of merchandise ranging from women’s and men’s Islamic clothing to electronic rosaries (*tasbeih*) and beard oil. Among the products for sale are ‘khufs-leather socks’. These are marketed in the following manner: ‘Black leather socks in hardy cow leather. Elastic on the side so that you do not have to fiddle with a zipper’. In the description, there is some indication as to why this item may be attractive to certain buyers with deferentialist fundamentalist inclinations: ‘The Prophet, peace be upon Him, teaches us that if you do the ablution (*wudu*) and then wear Khufs it is enough if, with a moist hand, you wipe over the leather socks’ (tahara.se 2021).

The main point here, then, is that this item has a unique quality, but only from a deferentialist fundamentalist perspective. Not just any socks will do if you want to

keep your feet ritually pure through covering. It should be 'leather socks', so you had better buy a pair of those. Why? Don't ask, just defer (and buy).

The website darulhadith.com is, as noted, arguably the most productive of providers of Salafi material in Swedish. It is, however, not the most popular at the time or writing; this accolade probably falls to the website islam.nu (for metrics in support of this, see Svensson 2021). Unlike darulhadith.com this is a website run by a group of Swedish Salafi activists who are anything but anonymous transmitters of 'the voices of the scholars'. Indeed, in the material produced and published on the website there is an abundance of texts, videos and audio recordings where the members of the group appear as authorities, or 'virtuosi' in their own right, especially those among them that have pursued higher studies at the University of Medina, Saudi Arabia. The prominent representatives of the group have their own Instagram accounts and act in a manner that resembles that of 'influencers'. They have also been analysed as such (Sorgenfrei 2021).

One of those representatives is Abdulwadud Frank, whose Instagram account describes him as 'a converted Muslim with a college degree in Islamic theology from the Islamic University in Medina' (Frank 2021). It is also in one of his many audio lectures available on the website that we have found a discussion of 'wiping of the socks'. On 15 February 2021 we downloaded metadata on all audio lectures published on islam.nu. At that time, the total number of lectures was 1566. Of these, 81 per cent featured Frank as sole speaker.

The lecture that we focus on here is entitled '*Bulugh ul Maram* – Del 18' (islam.nu 2017). In it, Frank dwells at length on the issue of 'wiping the socks'. The lecture is part of a long series of comments on the

work *Bulugh al-Maram* by the medieval scholar Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani (d. 1449). The lecture is an audio recording of 51.57 minutes, and was published on 9 October 2017.

At the very beginning of his address, Frank deviates from an extreme deferentialist position in claiming that 'socks' in the context should not only be understood as footwear made out of leather. Even here, however, deviation needs 'proof'. This is provided by a general reference to the Prophet and the Sahaba using other kinds of footwear in other materials. This is an important note, according to Frank, because there are those who claim that the ruling concerning wiping (*mash*) applies only to socks made out of leather (cf. above). What matters, instead, is what areas of the foot are covered by the footwear. Here, there is a shift to an inferentialist mode of reasoning. The *reason* why wiping is allowed is that the footwear covers those parts of the feet that should be washed during *wudu*'. The ruling thus applies to every footwear that covers not only the foot but also the ankles, in line with the divine command in verse 5:6 of the Qur'an where believers are instructed to wash 'their feet up to the ankles'. The inferentialism here is limited. It is restricted to assuming a connection between the Qur'anic commands for *wudu*' concerning which body parts should be washed, and the rulings on 'wiping of the socks'.

But Frank's argument also has a more clearly inferentialist orientation. There is a direct reference to the technical term '*illa*, i.e. *ratio legis*, and how it relates to the 'wiping'. The underlying divine intent behind the practice is that God wishes to make life easier for Muslims. This intent, thus, invalidates the claim that the footwear used should necessarily be of leather. Frank presents the 'wiping' as an 'exception', *rukhsa*, to the general law, in order

to lessen the hardships of Muslims. This is presented as a *sadaqa* (benevolence) from the side of God, like the exemption from fasting in Ramadan if on a journey. As if to further stress this point, Frank notes the practical aspect of the 'wiping of the socks' in a country of cold weather, such as Sweden, where, in addition, work or school attendance may complicate undertaking complete *wudu'* before all prayers.

But what if you can perform complete *wudu'*, including the feet? Is it not better to do so? If the 'wiping' is an exception in order to make life easier, do you have to choose the easy way? Perhaps you do not mind going the extra mile to make some extra effort in order to please God. No, according to Frank. It is not only permitted to choose an easier way if there is one. This is also the best choice. The justification is deferentialist. Since the Prophet himself sometimes chose to wipe his socks instead of washing his feet, Muslims should also do so. Not doing so, and always going for the complete *wudu'*, would indicate that one considers oneself better than the Prophet.

Here there is a glimpse of a possible social function of deferentialism. Frank claims that only the deviators of the *ahl al-bid'a*, 'the innovation folk', such as 'Khawarij' and the 'Rafida', reject wiping. While 'Rafida' here is a derogatory term for Shiites, the term 'Khawarij' has a less clear denotation. Khawarij is the name of the early rebellious group who turned against the fourth Caliph 'Ali, and accorded themselves the right to punish those whom they regarded as sinners (Levi Della Vida 2012). However, in puritanist (non-politically oriented) Salafist contexts, it is today used as a generic word for zealots, and in particular militant zealots, for example the Islamic State, and others who want to overthrow governments (see e.g. Kenney 2006). The important point here, however, is not what

actual groups are intended by this statement, but that what from an outsider's perspective would appear to be an issue of lesser importance (whether or not to wipe the socks) becomes, in a Salafi context, a clear identity marker in a distinction between in-group and out-group, where the latter is identified by its lack of appropriate deference.

Frank's lecture contains several in-depth presentations of diverse topics related to wiping, for example concerning what happens with ritual purity when socks are changed or if one washes one foot and then puts on one sock before washing the other foot and for how long wiping is allowed. As a general comment on all the details outlined, Frank states, in a deferentialist manner, that the human intellect cannot be a source for religious rulings. Some rulings contained in the scriptures may be understood using common sense. There is, for example, a ruling that you are not to wipe the sole of the socks, only the upper side of the foot. This is common sense, since the sole may contain polluting substances that can make your fingers dirty. This shows that the texts of revelation are *compatible* with common sense. Common sense, however, cannot be used to evaluate rulings. If you do not understand the wisdom behind a particular practice, you must still accept it as it is expressed in the scriptures. Human reason has limitations that revelation does not have, and Muslims, Frank stresses, should practise imitation, *ittiba'*, of the Prophet and the Sahaba, and implicitly then also in contexts where common sense cannot provide any good reasons why. Noteworthy here is that Frank then returns to the issue of wiping only the top, and not the soles, of the socks. He cites the Hanbali jurist Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350), claiming that all authentic hadiths stress this, but now *without* justifying the ruling

with common sense (i.e. that the soles may be dirty) but merely stating that doing otherwise is innovation, *bid'a*, which itself is enough justification in a deferentialist fundamentalist framework.

It could be noted, then, that while deferential fundamentalism is the dominant mode in the examples from a Swedish Salafi discourse, there is recurrently a certain element of inferentialism involved. This is to be expected. 'Mentalisation' is a default stance in human mental processing of social information (Dennett 1987). Deferentialism is a special case in certain, limited, contexts. In Salafism, deferentialism is a preferred stance in theory in relation to information considered to be of divine origin. But it is probably quite difficult to uphold in all aspects of everyday life.

Concluding remarks

This article has argued for considering 'fundamentalism', with some additional modifications, as an apt analytical concept with which to approach the contemporary phenomenon of Salafism, at least concerning particular notions within the latter regarding religious belief and practice. While the concept of 'deferentialist fundamentalism' does seem to work quite well in this respect, there is still the question why it should be invoked at all. Why not stick with 'Salafism'?

The main reason lies in the fact that Salafism as a concept serves mainly to name an actual, observed tendency in contemporary Islam. In itself it carries little analytical value. The discussion above shows some of the advantages, from a scholarly perspective, of approaching the very same tendency with the concept of 'deferential fundamentalism'.

First, fundamentalism is a general tendency that, while being present throughout Islamic history, has gained prominence

as a popular understanding of 'what Islam is' mainly in the modern period. Contemporary Salafism, as a form of fundamentalism, is part of this development, and may be analysed as such, that is to say, with reference to the same underlying larger social, political and cultural processes. Second, deferentialism, as a particular mode of relating to social information, including information of religious issues, is likewise a general tendency, both inside and outside a fundamentalist, and even religious, framework. Also, in this case, more general theoretical consideration can be taken in the analysis of Salafism regarding what contextual factors favour deferentialism, be it in relation to a text, an institution or a charismatic leader. The application of the concept of 'deferentialist fundamentalist' to Salafism makes it possible to move beyond questions such as 'What is Salafism?' or 'What is Salafism like?' and to enter the realm of 'Why does Salafism exist, and why now?'.

As has been noted above, neither fundamentalism, nor more specifically deferentialist fundamentalism, is a novelty in the context of Islam. This indicates that what is identified as mainly a contemporary phenomenon (Salafism) may actually be merely a contemporary manifestation of a more general tendency (deferentialist fundamentalism) long present in Islamic tradition. Moreover, since deferentialist fundamentalism is not *tied* to Islam, similar tendencies in other religious traditions, contemporary and historical, may serve as useful comparative material. Such comparison may, moreover, stretch outside the realm of religion.

While fundamentalism, as discussed here, does have a clear religious element attached to it (i.e. the 'theological' qualifier), deferentialism and inferentialism do not. As concepts, these are formed

considering *general* modes employed by human beings processing social information. This expands the analysis beyond the religious domain and facilitates comparison with deferentialism and inferentialism as they manifest themselves in other domains of human interaction. In such a context, where general theories of human information processing and behaviour are applied, Salafism, which to an outsider, particularly one with no previous knowledge of Islam as a religious tradition, may appear both foreign and strange, can be understood for what it most definitely is: a basically human phenomenon (cf. Svensson 2012). ■



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