

Why Salafis have Anti-Sufi Attitudes

21/06/2017 | [Joas Wagemakers](#)

Salafis have doctrinal and political objections to Sufis

If one visits a website espousing Salafism, the branch of Sunni Islam whose adherents claim to emulate the first three generations of Muslims (al-salaf al-sālih, “the pious predecessors”) as closely and in as many spheres of life as possible, one is likely to see a long list of firaq (sects) that Salafis oppose. [1] One “sect” sure to be included in such lists is Sufism.

A Complicated Relationship

Given Salafis’ clear opposition to Sufism, it may seem as if pre-modern scholars appropriated by Salafis must also have been anti-Sufi. This is not entirely the case, however. Some have pointed out, for example, that one of the main sources of inspiration to Salafis today, the Hanbali scholar Ahmad b. Taymiyya (1263-1328), was a Sufi himself. [2] Others have shown that Sufism, at least in as much as it concurred with Ibn Taymiyya’s theological views, was certainly present among his circle of students, including Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292-1350), another Salafi favourite. [3]

Considering Salafis’ opposition to Sufism, it is not surprising that some of them find this hard to accept and want this issue clarified. [4] Such ambivalent views on Sufis can be explained by pointing to the diverse expressions of Sufism, ranging from asceticism, respect for the texts and adherence to scholarly tradition to rituals and practices rooted less in scriptural sources. It appears that it is only the latter that Salafis really object to in Sufism, which is also how they explain the complicated relationship that men such as Ibn Taymiyya had with Sufism. [5]

Doctrinal Objections

There are clearly doctrinal aspects about Sufism that Salafis strongly object to, as is evident from the views of perhaps the most prominent Salafī scholar of the twentieth century, the Syrian Muhammad Nāsir al-Dīn al-Albānī (1914-1999). One

concept associated with Sufism he criticises is *wahdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being), an idea developed in detail by the Sufi scholar Ibn al-‘Arabi (1165-1240). It expresses the view that God and his creation are one, since everything that God created must have existed in his knowledge before creation and will, eventually, return to him. Al-Albānī ascribes such ideas to “extremist Sufis” (*ghulāt al-Sūfiyya*) who “do not differentiate between the Creator and the created”. As such, he rejects it as “an error” (*dalal*) and as contrary to the unity of God (*tawhīd*). [6] There are clearly doctrinal aspects about Sufism that Salafis strongly object to Al-Albānī also disavows *‘ilm al-ghayb* (knowledge of the unknown) and *du‘ā’ al-amwāt* (invocations of the deceased). The former refers to what al-Albānī describes as the belief of “some Sufis” that people can have knowledge of things unseen. He rejects this, however, by citing Quran 72:26-27 [7] “(…) He discloses not His Unseen to anyone, save only to such a Messenger as He is well-pleased with (…)”. [8] *Du‘ā’ al-amwāt* refers to the practice of asking the dead for favours or help “apart from God” (*min dūn Allah*). Al-Albānī refutes this by citing Quran 35:22 “God makes to hear whomsoever He will; thou canst not make those in their tombs to hear (…)” and labels this a practice of polytheists. [9] For similar reasons, al-Albānī has warned against making requests (*tawassul*) from the dead and praying in mosques built around graves of so-called saints (*awliyā’*). [10]

Political Objections

Apart from doctrinal reasons for rejecting Sufism such as those mentioned above, Salafis also have political objections to Sufis. This is related to the often state-led policies to employ Sufis as a “moderate” antidote to Jihadi-Salafis, [11] who hold radical ideas and often support terrorism. Because of their political quietism and doctrinal “moderation,” Sufis appear risk-free partners for Arab regimes to cooperate with, in order to crack down on radical Islamism. Although these attempts have not always been successful, [12] this practice must have solidified the view among Jihadi-Salafis that Sufi sheikhs and their followers are stooges of Arab regimes. [13]

Ironically, the politically quietist Salafis who make up the largest share of Salafism as a whole sometimes have opposite political reasons for disliking Sufis. The Jordanian Salafī scholar ‘Alī al-Halabī not only claims that Salafism – rather than Sufism – has long and established roots in the Hashimite Kingdom, [14] but also states that Sufism is actually a threat because of its alleged links to Shiite

Islam. [15] Given the scepticism of Shi'ite Iran in Jordan (and the rest of the Arab world), this should be interpreted as an attempt to smear Sufis. Al-Halabī emphasises this by pointing out that, unlike quietist Salafis, Sufis have done little to combat Jihadi-Salafi ideas and, as such, are rather useless in the fight against terrorism. [16] Thus, while Jihadi-Salafis dislike Sufis for being close to the regime, al-Halabī wants quietist Salafis to take their place as the Jordanian regime's favoured group of Muslims. [17]

Destruction of Sufi Shrines

While the destruction of Sufi shrines in countries such as Libya and Mali was likely always done by Jihadi-Salafis – not quietists – the doctrinal arguments used against Sufis are shared by both branches of Salafism. Salafis sometimes apply labels such as “grave worshippers” to Sufis for their alleged polytheism, as expressed in their willingness to visit and worship at the tombs of so-called saints. The fact that such practices touch on the concept of *tawhīd*, which is hugely important to Salafis, often turns Sufi mosques into doctrinal eyesores for Salafis, yet we must be careful not to ascribe too great a role to religion here.

Not only do Salafis have political reasons to be against Sufism as well, attacks against Sufi shrines most often take place in contexts where conflict and violence are quite present anyway, suggesting this may also have something to do with political power and influence in societies in flux.¹⁸ As such, we may conclude that while Salafis have long-held and widespread anti-Sufi beliefs based on both doctrinal and political views, it may well be the specific context in which they find themselves that decides which of these prevail – and whether they become violent or not.

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[1] See, for example, www.ilmway.com/site/maqdis/MS_88.html and www.salafipublications.com/sps/sp.cfm?secID=GSC&loadpage=displaysection.cfm. Both were accessed 10 March 2017.

[2] See, most explicitly, George Makdisi, “Ibn Taymiya: A Sufi of the Qadiriya Order”, *The American Journal of Arabic Studies* 1, 1973, pp. 118-129.

[3] Arjan Post, “A Glimpse of Sufism from the Circle of Ibn Taymiyya”, *Journal of Sufi Studies* 5, 2016, pp. 157-163.

[4] See, for example, www.aahlalhdeth.com/vbe/showthread.php?p=32084, accessed 10 March 2017.

- [5] See, for instance, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Od2rwGwwj3E, accessed 17 March 2017.
- [6] Abū ‘Abd al-Rahmān Muhammad b. Surūr Sha ‘bān, *Al-Shaykh al-Albānī wa-Manhajuhu fī Taqrīr Masā’il al-I’tiqād (Dār al-Kiyān, Riyadh, 2007)*, p. 726
- [7] All Qur’anic verses are from A.J. Arberry’s translation of the Qur’an.
- [8] Sha ‘bān, *Al-Shaykh*, pp. 728-729.
- [9] *Ibid.*, p. 735.
- [10] Muhammad Nāsir al-Dīn al-Albānī, *Al-Tawassul: Anwā’uhu wa-Ahkāmuhu* (No publisher, Beirut and Damascus, 1977 [1975]); *idem*, *Tahdhīr al-Sajid min Ittikhād al-Qubūr Masājid (Al-Maktab al-Islāmī, Beirut and Damascus, 1978 [1957/1958])*.
- [11] For more on the different types of Salafīs, see Joas Wagemakers, ‘Revisiting Wiktorowicz: Categorising and Defining the Branches of Salafism’, in Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone (Eds.), *Salafism After the Arab Awakening: Contending with People’s Power*, (Hurst & Co., London, 2016), pp. 7-24.
- [12] Mark Sedgwick, ‘Sufīs as ‘Good Muslims’: Sufism in the Battle against Jihadi Salafism’, in Lloyd Ridgeon (Ed.), *Sufīs and Salafīs in the Contemporary Age*, (Bloomsbury, London, etc., 2015), pp. 105-117.
- [13] Jihadi-Salafīs also share the doctrinal objections to Sufism, however. See, for example, Abū Anas al-Shāmi, *Al-Sūfiyya* (www.tawhed.ws/dl?i=040309gl, accessed 4 March 2014), n.d.
- [14] ‘Alī b. Hasan b. ‘Alī b. ‘Abd al-Hamīd al-Halabī al-Atharī, *Al-Da‘wa al-Salāfiyya bayna l-Turuq al-Sūfiyya wa-l-Da‘awa al-Sahafiyya wa-Kashf al-Sila bayna l-Tasawwuf wa-l-Afkār al-Shi‘iyya* (Al-Dar al-Athariyya, Amman, 2009), pp. 12-24.
- [15] *Ibid.*, pp. 35-70.
- [16] *Ibid.*, pp. 71-76.
- [17] See also Joas Wagemakers, *Salafism in Jordan: Political Islam in a Quietist Community* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, etc., 2016), pp. 144-156.
- [18] For an overview of the destruction of Sufi shrines, see <http://themuslim500.com/2013-2/issues-of-the-day/destruction-of-sufi-shrines>, accessed 17 March 2017.