

Emad Hamdeh, *Salafism and Traditionalism. Scholarly Authority in Modern Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. x, 229 pp., ISBN 978-1-108-48535-7.

A few years ago, I taught a class in which I had the temerity to refer to Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (1914–99), a Syrian Salafi *ḥadīth* specialist who plays a major role in the book under review, as a “scholar”. A Muslim student quickly raised her hand to point out that I was wrong to refer to him as such. al-Albānī, she told me, was not a scholar at all, but a charlatan without a proper scholarly education whose work had been rejected by “real” scholars. Listening to her comment, I immediately understood why she was saying this and what scholarly disputes underpinned her views on al-Albānī. The book under review is essentially an analysis of why my student made this remark.

Emad Hamdeh, an assistant professor at Embry-Riddle University in Daytona Beach, Florida, wrote this book on the basis of his PhD thesis (for which I acted as an external examiner). It concentrates on religious discussions between what the author refers to as “purist Salafis” and Traditionalist scholars, particularly as they pertain to scholarly tradition and authority in Sunni Islam. As the author writes on page 4: “While Traditionalists view scholarly tradition as an essential component for the proper understanding of Islam, purist Salafis do not consider it a necessary precondition for Islamic scholarship.”

In order to show how these debates over scholarly tradition have developed between Salafis and Traditionalists, Hamdeh divides his book into three sections. The first, “History”, is divided into three chapters. The first one addresses Traditionalism, which the author defines as “a current within Islam that adheres to what is considered authentically rooted in revelation, has crystallized under the banners of scholarly consensus (*ijmāʿ*), and has been passed on as Islamic knowledge (*ilm naqli*) in chains of scholarly authority (*isnād*). It is a current that is didactic and instructional, which stands in opposition to autodidactic ‘do it yourself’ Islam” (p. 21). This Traditionalism was challenged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by modernists who felt Traditionalist scholars were too close to the rulers, part of a stagnant religious tradition, and trapped in their schools of law (*madhāhib*, sing. *madhhab*). Modernists, by contrast, wanted to modernise the religion through concepts such as *ijtihād* (independent reasoning). Although Salafis are not modernists, the author writes, the latter did “lay the foundation for the emergence of modern Salafism” (p. 13) by adopting an anti-*madhhab* position and rejecting the scholarly tradition based on it. This was especially the case with al-Albānī, whose life, lack of scholarly credentials, and critics are discussed in Chapter 2. The third chapter of Part I discusses the highly personal, careful, and thorough scholarly tradition advocated by Traditionalist scholars and how the fall of the Ottoman Empire (with

which these scholars were often closely intertwined), the rise of profane education, and (new) media facilitated a process of their disenfranchisement by autodidacts—including Salafis—lacking the same scholarly background.

Part II of Hamdeh's book addresses Islamic law and uses Chapter 4 to concentrate on the notions of *ikhtilāf* (difference of opinion) and *ijmāʿ*, both of which are much more acceptable to Traditionalists, who incorporate them into their work and rulings, than to Salafis. Chapter 5 focuses on why Traditionalist scholars view the schools of Islamic law, the deference to scholarly precedent (*taqlīd*), and the strict norms for *ijtihād* as so important, while al-Albānī and other Salafis mostly reject these concerns. Part III, finally, deals with Traditionalists' and al-Albānī's use of so-called weak *ḥadīths* (Chapter 6), where they have rather different views, and al-Albānī's method of *ḥadīth* criticism and the role of early scholars on the Sunna (Chapter 7).

Hamdeh has written a book that is not only interesting but may also be illuminating to a diverse group of people. Salafis, with the direct appeal to the Qurʾān and the Sunna, often give the impression that they simply do and say what the sources tell them, giving outsiders a sense that their interpretation is the “true” Islam and that others (including Traditionalists) are unable (or unwilling) to do what the religion requires of them. The author makes abundantly clear that things are not that simple. He also shows that the oft-heard calls for “an Islamic Martin Luther” (i.e., someone who shakes things up to drag Islam out of its supposed mess) have long been heeded by Modernists and Salafis alike, with results that those who call for such a reformer may find less than satisfactory.

As a text for a broader audience, this book, therefore, has a lot of value. As a scholarly text on the debates between Salafism and Traditionalism, however, its record is more mixed. The title of the book, for example, is *Salafism and Traditionalism* and the work claims to deal with debates between Traditionalist scholars and “purist Salafis”, who adhere to “the version of Salafism practiced by Albānī and his students” (p. 30). However, the author does not make clear how the term “purist” is related to the existing literature on Salafism: is it similar to Henri Lauzière's use of this term (who contrasts it with “modernist Salafism”), or does he apply it the way Quintan Wiktorowicz does (who uses the term to distinguish it from political and Jihadi-Salafism)? Moreover, the debates dealt with in this book are actually between Traditionalists and al-Albānī. The latter's students are left virtually unmentioned in the book. In fact, the scholars of the Jordanian Salafi community, hardly addressed by Hamdeh, even though it has probably been influenced by al-Albānī more than any other in the world, are almost completely absent from this work. Given the fact that the author has only used one book on Salafism in Jordan by Abu Rumman and Abu Haniyya

and has entirely ignored my book *Salafism in Jordan*, which deals extensively with al-Albānī and his students in Jordan, this may not be surprising.

The author also does not always do justice to Salafi arguments. Hamdeh pays little attention, for example, to why Modernists (whose arguments partly overlap with those of Salafis) wanted to break with Traditionalists in the first place. Although he does mention that Traditionalism was perceived as “stagnant” and “rigid” (p. 11), he basically debunks this notion on p. 19 and portrays Traditionalism in a highly positive way, particularly in Chapters 3–5, seldom pointing to the closed, elitist, detached, and, indeed, the stagnant and rigid character that it can adopt. The author also has a tendency—though he does not do this consistently—to associate scholars with Traditionalism and laypeople with Salafism, but the dichotomy between the two regarding this issue is obviously not as clear cut.

As an academic text on Salafism, this book thus certainly has its flaws and the same applies—though to a lesser extent—regarding the debates between Traditionalists and Salafis (or even just al-Albānī). These comments mostly pertain to Parts I and II of the book, however, because Part III is a highly detailed, nuanced, balanced, and well-informed account of the debates on *ḥadīths* between Traditionalists and al-Albānī (though not Salafis in general). Granting that others have preceded Hamdeh in writing about al-Albānī and *ḥadīths*, I believe his work is the best English-language account covering the topic thus far and the part of the book where the analysis really comes into its own. The author explains the different methods of using *ḥadīths* and does an exceptional job showing why al-Albānī and Traditionalists were so critical of each other yet could each still command a strong following.

Consequently, Hamdeh’s book is an interesting and important work for a general audience that wants (or needs) to understand that Salafis are not the only Muslims who claim to represent “true” Islam. For scholars of Salafism, this work may be somewhat disappointing for its partial failure to connect the topic with the broader literature on the subject and its focus on al-Albānī. To those concentrating on the latter and Traditionalist criticism of his work, particularly in the field of *ḥadīth* studies, this book will be of great interest.

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