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Salafis in Cape Town in Search of Purity, Certainty and Social Impact

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Abstract

Salafism has become part of a public discourse in Cape Town since the last decade of the 20th century. Drawing on extensive interviews with a number of such Salafis and anti-Salafis, this article examines how this search was manifested and then negotiated within the local religious sphere of the city. This article confirms the view presented in the general literature that Salafism represented the aspiration of individuals who desired to chart an independent approach to Islamic practices. Nevertheless, by focussing attention on a number of individuals and measuring their successes, strategies and life-trajectories, the social dimension of Salafi practices is brought into sharp focus. Salafis were not only effective as lone figures who were prepared to break away from everybody; they were also involved in founding communities for their ideas. And in this regard, they could not escape the social contexts in which they found themselves.

Keywords

Salafism, Islamic reform, congregations, South Africa, imams, *ʿulamāʾ*

Introduction

Since 9/11, the Salafiyya reform movement within Islam has stimulated great interest among students of Islam. Part of the reason for the great

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interest is that Usāma b. Lādin and his *al-Qāʿida* network have been identified as Salafis in religious orientation. Not surprisingly, their role in violence has produced an extensive literature on this global religious movement of the 21st century. Scholars have generally concluded that Salafis are not only engaged in violence. In fact, they debate the legitimacy of violence extensively, and are deeply divided between violent and non-violent trends. More importantly, Salafis represent a serious challenge to Muslim religious trends and groups almost everywhere, sometimes making a significant impact in society, in the media and, not least of all, on the Internet.[1]

The Salafis are marked by their distinctiveness and sometimes self-isolation from prevailing religious groups and trends. This tendency has led Roy and others to argue that the Salafiyya represents a highly individualist quest for conviction and purity.[2] The present study tests this theory among Cape Town's Salafis, all of whom have studied in Saudi Arabia and Yemen since the 1980s. We focus on their life-stories, and analyze their engagement with existing religious institutions and patterns in the city. We found that Salafis as individuals grappled with a quest for purity and certainty in the context of an intense diversity of Islamic trends. Whilst most projected strong conviction in their identities as Salafis, there were also among them those who were not entirely satisfied and continued to search for conviction. Moreover, Salafis in Cape Town attempted to establish congregations, using the same techniques and discourses used by local religious leaders. The most successful Salafis incorporated their ideas and modified local practices within existing institutions.

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1) Roel Meijer, ed. *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (London: Hurst & Company, 2009).

2) Olivier Roy, "A Clash of Cultures or a Debate on Europe's Values?", *ISIM Review* (2005), 6f.; Martijn de Koning, "Changing Worldviews and Friendships: An Exploration of the Life Stories of Two Female Salafis in the Netherlands", in *Global Salafism*, ed. Meijer; Sadek Hamid, "The Attraction of 'Authentic' Islam: Salafism and British Muslim Youth", in *Global Salafism*, ed. Meijer.

Salafism between Context and Individual Search

Salafis claim an uncompromising return to the original sources of Islam, and a rejection of innovation in religious thought and practices. They consider the literal meaning of the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth* to be sufficient for religious life and oppose those who argued that their meanings may be extended in new contexts. Haykel traces their emergence as a clearly identified religious movement to Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) who has left an extensive and sophisticated corpus.[3] We think, however, that one can go much earlier for Salafi ideas to the juridical and theological debates in the 9th century between the so-called *ahl al-raʾy* and *ahl al-ḥadīth* (respectively, people of opinion and people of Prophetic traditions). Then, the emerging theological and juridical schools were framed between those who turned to the original teachings of the Prophet Muḥammad, and those who depended on their opinions. The choice between the original, pure sources that could be traced to the foundation of Islam, and borrowings from other cultures, became part of intensive and extensive scholarly debates. Such 'Salafi' ideas were felt in politics, jurisprudence and theology.[4] Even though Salafism has been closely associated in modern times with an anti-Sufi attitude, certain Sufi movements in the past also exhibited similar tendencies.[5] In general, then, Salafism may be identified as a search for the pure teachings of the Qurʾān and Prophetic statements, rejecting external influences and also rejecting any human involvement in interpretation.

The continuity of Salafi ideas from the early days of Islam does not mean that we are dealing with a changeless movement throughout history. Salafi ideas invariably take shape in contexts, and modern Salafism

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3) Bernard Haykel, "On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action", in *Global Salafism*, ed. Meijer.

4) Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Religion & Politics under the Early ʿAbbāsids: The Emergence of the Proto-Sunnī Elite* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Scott C. Lucas, "The Legal Principles of Muḥammad B. Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī and their Relationship to Classical Salafi Islam", *ILS* 13 (2006), 289-324; Gavin Picken, "Ibn Ḥanbal and al-Muḥāsibī: A Study of Early Conflicting Scholarly Methodologies", *Arabica* 55 (2008), 337-61.

5) Basheer M. Nafi, "Taṣawwuf and Reform in Pre-Modern Islamic Culture: In Search of Ibrāhīm al-Kurānī", *WI* 42 (2002), 307-55; Scott Alan Kugle, *Rebel between Spirit and Law: Ahmad Zarruq, Sainthood, and Authority in Islam* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

has taken on at least two distinct forms. The first originated at the end of the 19th century in Damascus and Egypt, and was closely identified with the modernist reformer Muḥammad ʿAbduh. According to ʿAbduh, the original teachings of the Prophet did not contradict the essential ideas of modernity. If Muslims returned to these, they would benefit both themselves and their societies.[6] This modernist Salafism has been eclipsed by a more traditional Salafism that is associated with Saudi Arabia founded by the religious revival of Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (1703-1792). In the 20th century, the Saudi state promoted Salafism as state ideology and later foreign policy within Muslim societies worldwide. In the 1970s and 1980s, in particular, it provided scholarships for students and support for Muslim communities throughout the globe. In this second form of Salafism, modernism was replaced by a passionate and absolute devotion to authentic Prophetic statements, often with a deep antagonism towards the teachings of the law schools. Moreover, Salafism re-affirmed an anti-rational approach to theology that banished the overt use of any form of interpretation.[7]

This article follows the biographies of students who were exposed to the second form of modern Salafism. It pays particular attention to the rejectionist and critical sentiments within Salafism towards existing scholars, institutions and trends. It builds on similar studies that have focused on the motivations and implications of this critical stance among Salafis. Thus, Roy was among the earliest scholars who pointed to the anti-cultural approach of European Salafis, rejecting culture in favour of Islam.[8] This rejectionist spirit of modern Salafism has been

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6) David Commins, *Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Itzchak Weismann, *Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafiyya, and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Itzchak Weismann, "Between Ṣūfī Reformism and Modernist Rationalism—a Reappraisal of the Origins of the Salafiyya from the Damascene Angle", *WI* 41(2001), 206-37.

7) Ebrahim Moosa, "Shaykh Aḥmad Shākir and the Adoption of a Scientifically-Based Lunar Calendar", *ILS* 5 (1998), 57-89; Butrus Abu-Manneh, "Salafiyya and the Rise of the Khālidiyya in Baghdad in the Early Nineteenth Century", *WI* 43(2003), 349-72; Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29 (2006), 207-39; Haykel, "On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action".

8) Roy, "A Clash of Cultures Or a Debate on Europe's Values?".

confirmed by others, particularly Hamid and de Koning on individual Salafis searching for Islamic roots in Britain and the Netherlands respectively.[9] Adraoui pointed to one notable effect of this search for purity, leading to the self-exclusion of Salafis in France.[10] Going further afield, Lacroix has identified the departure of one of the leading proponents of Salafism, al-Albānī (1914-1999), from his Saudi colleagues on the basis of their continued commitment to Ḥanbalism. Al-Albānī could not tolerate any accommodation with a legal school against the purity of a *ḥadīth* text. Salafis rejected existing Muslim trends, schools and institutions in search of a pure Islam, unmediated by personal interpretation, post-Prophetic authorities and local institutions. Salafism by definition led to isolation and exclusion.

Salafism has become part of a public discourse in Cape Town since the last decade of the 20th century. Drawing on extensive interviews with a number of such Salafis and anti-Salafis, this article examines how this search was manifested and then negotiated within the local religious sphere of the city. The interviews confirmed the search for purity and conviction that studies on Salafism have shown so far. However, they also revealed a strong desire to establish a following or found a new tradition. Salafis in Cape Town were not completely uninterested in creating new communities. There was a distinction between Salafis who had a secure position in the mosque tradition of the city, and those who had to build a following from scratch.

The Salafi Movement in Cape Town

Salafism as a set of ideas was a common feature in Cape Muslim discussions and debate in the beginning of the 21st century. Our interviews with religious scholars and students indicated that they were the subject of virulent criticism from Sufis, but also from Deobandi teachers and institutions. Since the democratic transition in South Africa in 1994,

9) De Koning, "Changing Worldviews and Friendships"; Hamid, "The Attraction of 'Authentic' Islam".
10) Mohamed-Ali Adraoui, "Salafism in France: Ideology, Practices and Contradictions", in *Global Salafism*, ed. Meijer.

any public challenge presented by Salafis was quickly[11] condemned in local national and Muslim media. Sufi teachers in particular have been quick to condemn both their "deviation" from existing legal schools, and their rejection of Sufi-based traditions that go back to the founding of the Cape Islamic community in the 17th century.[12] Partly as a result of this hostile reception, initial interviews suggested that there were not as many people who openly identified themselves as Salafis. Perhaps, we began to suspect, Salafism may have been a useful marker against which religious leaders in Cape Town could clearly define themselves. Salafism seemed more like a straw-dog than a real movement that threatened existing institutions. However, we eventually found Salafis, both those who were tenacious in their commitment and those who were more indirect in their work and impact in Cape Town. Some lost their positions in mosques for insisting on upholding Salafi ritual practices. We also found those who lost their conviction about Salafism, and openly called themselves "lapsed Salafis". One prominent Salafi who preached against local practices in the early 1990s had joined the local liberal party in national politics, and emerged as its prominent spokesperson. Another interviewee embraced Salafism after other shifts of his Islamic allegiance. We eventually located a Salafi teacher who had established a modest but growing following. We begin our description with this particular individual. This will be followed by brief presentations of a few others we interviewed. With these biographical studies, it becomes clear how Salafism found a home in Cape Town, but also how Salafis adjusted their tactics in the face of opposition.

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[11] Stéphane Lacroix, "Between Revolution and Apoliticism: Nasir Al-Din Al-Albani and his Impact on the Shaping of Salafism", in *Global Salafism*, ed. Meijer.

[12] In 2001, Cape Town was embroiled in a Salafi debate that began with a TV documentary on the shrine on Robben Island. Gamieldien, a prominent imam in the city, objected to what he considered *shirk* displayed at the shrine in a letter to *The Argus*, the daily afternoon newspaper. This was a grave charge in Islamic theology and was met with a swift response in the local Muslim newspaper that continued deep into 2002, see Wahbie Long, Don Foster, "Dissension in the Ranks: The 'Sufi'-'Wahhabi' Debate", *Journal for the Study of Religion* 17, no. 1 (2004), 67-93. See also letters to the editor of *The Argus* and *Cape Times* in the first half of 2001, in *Al-Qalam* (newspaper of the Muslim Youth Movement) and a monthly Muslim newspaper in Cape Town, *Muslim Views*.

Shaykh Jameel Adam was only 31 in 2008 when this research was conducted, but he was already making a mark in the Coloured townships as a rising Salafi preacher and teacher. He called himself a *dāʿiyya* (a missionary to Islam), and saw himself as the restorer of Sunni orthodoxy (*ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa*). In his view, all other religious groups and movements had deviated from the true path, either by negligence or through deliberate serving their self-interests. He was on a path to 'purify' Islamic beliefs and practices in Cape Town and South Africa.

Adam was born in a religious family, and first began the study of Islam with his uncle, Shaykh Muhammad Adam, and then with other local teachers. Later, he attended two Islamic Centres of learning established in Cape Town in the 1990s, which have since combined into the Islamic Peace University (est. 2004). First, the Islamic College of South Africa attempted to combine traditional Islamic sciences with modern social sciences, while the *Dār al-Arqam* was an attempt to provide training in the dominant Shāfiʿī tradition of the Cape. Jameel Adam attended many other groups of learning, including the new Deobandi madrasa *Qaasim ul-Ulum* (est. 1998). He did not complete any course in particular, and attributes this to feeling "unsettled" at these centres. Moreover, he did not limit himself to educational institutions. He joined the pietistic *Tablighi Jamaat*, and also the vigilante People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (est. 1996). For one reason or another, he rejected them all.

Nevertheless, Adam identified three individuals in his career who led him to Salafism. He was impressed with a Qurʾān teacher, Ḥāfiẓ Shamsuddin, who stayed away from all the Sufi groups in Cape Town. Ḥāfiẓ Shamsuddin was a teacher well known in Cape Town for producing excellent reciters of the Qurʾān. Adam singled out another teacher, Muadh Ali, who inadvertently led him to Salafism by telling him that only the Salafis followed all the imams of the legal schools. It was a third person who directly introduced Adam to Salafism. Adam met Shaykh Murad Ismail Ali, a Yemeni trader who had settled in Cape Town, with whom he became close. Ismail Ali introduced him to the serious study of *ḥadīth* as an exclusive path to the truth. He taught him the *Mukhtaṣar Bukhārī*, and then later suggested that he should study

with the leading Salafi teacher in Yemen, Muqbil b. Hādī al-Wādiʿī, one of the prominent Salafi teachers in the region.[13]

Adam presented his search for Salafism as a search for the true and pure teachings of Islam. This interview in 2008 seems to have provided a framework for identifying those from whom he distinguished himself. He identified his formative teachers as all those who instilled doubt about local practices. Shamsuddin stayed away from Sufis; the high school teacher unsettled his faith in the legal schools; and Ismail Ali opened the door to the truth. Each represented a path towards truth that seemed clearly mapped out for Adam. The search for purity included a rejection of local traditions, and the development of an alternative. Salafism was a home created in active criticism of local traditions.

On his return from Yemen in 2002, when he was 25, Adam returned to Mitchell's Plain where he was brought up, and attended one of the central mosques in this sprawling Coloured township. The mosque was headed by Shaykh Ebrahim Gabriels who had himself studied at the Islamic University of Medina in the 1980s, and had returned to Cape Town to become one of the leaders of Muslims in the city. Gabriels occasionally invited him to lead the prayer, but this soon led to dissension:

> When I returned from Yemen, he [Gabriels] used to delegate me to lead the *ṣalāt* [daily prayer]. I will lead the *ṣalāt* but my methodology after *ṣalāt* is the prophetic methodology which is to make individual *dhikr*, whereas they have this collective *dhikr* in tone. Because he has a problem with me because I don't do it the way they do it. I told them that this is the way I believe it's supposed to be done.

Cape Islamic practice includes an elaborate recitation of supplications after the completion of the main prayer. Adam's refusal to follow this tradition was considered to be disruptive to the order of ritual. The dispute over rituals continued for a year until 2003, when Gabriels forbade Adam or any of his supporters to lead the prayer. This was not the only mosque that objected to the ritual innovations introduced by

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13) *http://www.muqbel.net/index.php*, accessed 21 December 2009.

the Salafis.[14] For Adam, this was a turning point in his life, as he henceforth sought to establish himself as a leader.

Presenting Salafism as the authentic way of performing rituals, Adam soon made a name for himself in the Coloured township of Cape Town, and began attracting students who sought him for his learning. He began teaching at the mosque where he had a dispute, but soon spread out in many different directions after he was barred from leading prayers. He taught adults and students in two in Landsdowne (Landsdowne Madresah and Cultural Centre) and Wynberg (York Road Mosque). Both these areas are lower middle class areas, well known for their established Muslim communities. He taught all the major Islamic disciplines, from Arabic to theology:

> In Michell's Plain I have 3 days in week. […] Monday I teach *ḥadīth* and *fiqh* [jurisprudence], Tuesday I teach Arabic, Wednesday I teach *tawḥīd* and ʿ*aqīda* [theology]. The other place that I teach is Lansdowne […] on Thursday night I teach *tafsīr* [exegesis] and ʿ*aqīda* [theology]. And Friday night I have a special class for a family in the Landsdowne area. Sunday morning, I have Arabic classes for the adults at Mitchell's Plain. I also organise public lectures in every two weeks in the Cape here.

His daytime teaching was devoted to children whom he taught at his home. In 2008, he was teaching 30 children. Moreover, he also taught at an African township mosque in Langa in the mornings. Although somewhat energetic, Adam was not very different from other religious leaders who served the Muslim community's religious and instructional needs. This ranged from private family tuition to adult education in mosques and school halls, to public lectures in mosques. Although he had been barred from the mosque where he started, he was on his way to becoming a recognized Islamic leader in the city.

Adam's message and mission were set in opposition to what the rest of Muslim scholars did in Cape Town. A closer examination of his criticisms of others illustrates a distinguishing mark of Salafism in Cape Town. As in the mosque rituals, he seemed determined to set himself

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[14] One other Salafi lost his position for refusing to follow similar local Cape ritual traditions.

apart from other teachers. Believing that he had the most dependable proofs for Islamic practices, Adam challenged his students to find better ones:

> I always ask them to go and search for their proof, and I will present to you my proof, and then you judge what the correct way is. [...] Sometimes, they will bring me the proof from their teachers. Like some of the students attend another class which is being organised by one Maulana Abdul-Nabi, they will bring me writings proof by him on the permissibility of Mawlūd [Birthday celebration of the Prophet Muḥammad]. [...] So I will destroy all his arguments to the students. [...] Eventually, they find out that not all their teachings are rooted on the Qurʾān and Sunna.

This statement reveals that Adam did not directly address his opponents. He engaged them through students, some of whom apparently moved from one teacher to another. He had to persuade his students that his "proofs" were better than others. In one case, he claimed, that a student was persuaded "to leave the Maulana's classes which are not based on Qurʾān and Sunna". Adam identified one group after another for criticism. Like other Salafis, his most vehement criticism was directed against Sufis, but equally against the *Tablighi Jamaat*, the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC), and other graduates of the Islamic University of Medina. Sufism formed the bedrock of Islam in the city of Cape Town, and Adam was determined to undermine its hold. According to Adam, Sufis divided Muslims into groups, referring as proof to the many Sufi orders (*ṭuruq*) into which Muslims were divided. In contrast, Salafism was not a distinctive group but a commitment to the authority of the first generation of Muslims. Adam seemed oblivious of his own sectarian goal and effect in society. Next, Adam particularly inveighed against local shrines (*kramat*s), where he claimed intercession was taking place. Moreover, he was astounded that "one of the people who brought Islam to Cape Town who is regarded as one of the *kramat* or *awliyāʾ* [saints] is a person who used to practice divination. This really made many people in the Cape to practice divination."

This was a direct attack on the venerated founder of Islam in the Cape, Tuan Guru (d. 1807), who established the first mosque in Cape Town. Adam was referring to his book which included divination for-

mulas.[15] According to Adam, Sufis engaged in foreign practices derived from extra-Islamic sources. An equally important problem with the Sufis was the kind of leadership role played by Sufi teachers. The Naqshbandi Shaykh, he asserted, cannot be "be held accountable for anything he does", claiming an esoteric knowledge of revelation.

Adam extended his criticism to other religious groups as well. He dedicated special sessions of his class to criticize the popular *Tablighi Jamaat* texts that were used in Cape Town. These books were clearly also based on *ḥadīth*, but Adam rejected them since they contained 'weak' and 'unreliable' narrations according to *ḥadīth* scholars. With respect to their activities, he criticized their method of going out in groups to preach Islam. They should, according to Adam, do so on an individual basis as he himself was doing in the African townships. Turning to the Muslim Judicial Council, the body representing the majority of religious scholars in the Western Cape, Adam charged that they were not doing enough to teach the community. They had the opportunity to do so, but were motivated by a combination of moral failings: "lack of sincerity" and a willingness to "allow ignorance to be rife in the community". Adam took a particularly critical view of those graduates of Medina University who were privy to the true knowledge of the *salaf*. Shaykh Ebrahim Gabriels was the main target of his objection, someone who had been exposed to Salafi thought, but who had abandoned his responsibility on his return. Gabriels, not surprisingly, was the same imam with whom Adam clashed on his return from Yemen. Gabriels had established himself in the religious structure of the city, according to Adam, and was unwilling to change anything: "He established himself on the Cape Townian belief system and methodology. So he does not want anybody to oppose him on anything or say anything about the Cape Townian belief system and methodology."

This quote captures the gist of Adam's message to his students and followers. His teachings were directed against the existing religious practices of Cape Town. He believed that his colleagues had abandoned the true teachings of Islam. The whole tradition of Islam in Cape Town,

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15) Bunyamin Marasabessy, "Tuan Guru: The Cape Muslim Philosophy Education System", *Makara, Sosial Humaniora* 8 (2004), 126-32.

from Tuan Guru to Gabriels, had diverted from the true path. Adam was putting it back into shape. Whilst some students seemed to have settled down with Adam, he was aware of the continued opposition that he faced in Cape Town's Muslim debates. He seemed to use his sermons and classes to re-create these debates in his teaching practices, illustrating and proving his own success.

Closer attention to his responses revealed, however, that he had to make some concessions to Sufism's popularity. Adam was fully aware of the widespread support for Sufism within the community. While most of his message was a critical attack against existing Sufi practices, he also tried to resuscitate an original pure Sufism:

> If you look at those founders of Sufism those people were founded on the Qurʾān and Sunna. […] If you look at any Sufi movement that you find today their belief is contrary to that. […] So Sufism we find it today I reject it in totality. But those practices which are found in the Qurʾān and Sunna which the Sufi practices we don't reject it.

Adam specifically referred to ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jilānī and his book which lauded the *salaf* as the ideal generation.[16] According to Adam, al-Jilānī followed the Salafi way, and should be the model for Muslims in Cape Town! His modern followers had lost the path. Claiming the original Sufi founders to be Salafis, Adam too was more of a Sufi than his current Cape Town followers.

A sense of purpose, and mission for the truth, underlined his self-representation. The original founders of Islam (*salaf*) gave him a foundation and a sense of personal experience. He was fully aware of the opposition he faced in the particular approach he took. For him, though, this was in itself a virtue which he found in a *ḥadīth*:

> [Through teaching Salafi thought and practice] you will find that you will encounter the very things that they have encountered in their time […] you will be an outcast or a mad person etc. The follower of the Salafiyya then has

[16] Shaikh ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, *Sufficient Provision for Seekers of the Path of Truth (Al-Ghunya Li-Ṭālib Ṭarīq Al-Ḥaqq): A Complete Resource on the Inner and Outer Aspects of Islam,* trans. Muhtar Holland (Hollywood, FL: al-Baz Publishing Inc., 1995).

> to make the patience and perseverance which was found in the Prophet when he came with the true Islamic message.

Adam then went on to relate the persecution felt by the great Salafis in the past, eventually leading to the suffering of the Prophet against his enemies. This feeling of embattlement was his source of strength, leading towards greater faith and purpose. Such a perception of his place in Cape Town was important for Adam. It helped him in his controversies against the established schools and networks. Both the sense of individual purpose and the drive to be distinct and independent constituted important foundations of his mission.

With this extensive account of Jameel Adam, we now turn to shorter accounts of a number of other graduates of Saudi Arabia. Their exposure to Salafi teaching provides a basis of comparison with Adam, producing a more comprehensive map of how Salafis expressed their conviction within the religious context of Cape Town. Moreover, these accounts point to the impact of Salafi ideas within the institutional structure of Islam in Cape Town. We begin with Najjar who studied in Medina, and who had adapted himself to a mosque tradition without the combative approach of Adam. We then go on to Gqamane from a Xhosa-speaking background who also studied in Medina, but who established himself in a fledgling African community of converts. This will be followed by Abdulrauf who was still on a search for Islamic purity, having given up on Salafism at the time of the interview (2008).

Duaffir Najjar was a graduate of Medina and a well-respected scholar in South Africa. He completed a degree in *daʿwa* (mission) studies in Medina in 1980, and then later a master's degree in Cairo in 1989. He regarded himself as a product of Salafi education from both Medina and Cairo. However, he also valued the education that he obtained from both his father and his uncle before his departure from Cape Town. The latter, Abu Bakr Najjar (d. 1993), was a well-known and leading religious scholar and imam in Cape Town. He headed the Muslim Judicial Council between 1978 and 1982, and then broke away to join the Islamic Council of South Africa.[17] Duaffir Najjar has followed in

[17] Gert Johannes Alwyn Lubbe, *The Muslim Judicial Council—a Descriptive and Analytic Investigation* (University of South Africa, 1989).

his footsteps and was the head of this organization in 2008.[18] He was also the imam of the al-Nur Mosque for over 20 years, and the head of a primary religious school with an enrolment of close to 500. His approach was indirect and subtle. Najjar was a Salafi with a family background of leading religious reformers in the Cape.

Najjar regarded himself as a Salafi, devoted to the original teachings of Islam. He was aware of being called a Wahhabi, but dismissed the name-calling as a typical response of those who protected a limited and false understanding of Islam in the Cape. In addition to his training in Medina and Cairo, he linked his search for Salafism to his uncle who preached against local practices. He "used to take Sufi groups on for visiting the *kramat*s [coll. challenged them] […] Islam is not the religion where people can go and sit in the mountains". However, he himself appreciated the religious diversity that permeated the Cape Islamic milieu. Muslims in South Africa came from different geographical backgrounds (South-Asia, Africa, Malaysia and the Middle East). In this context, one had to be tolerant: "When you have diversity you have to tolerate one another." Outright censure of other Muslim groups was avoided.

Najjar, however, did not give up a sustained criticism against local practices. He refused to participate in the group *dhikr* or to visit the *kramat*s (shrines), and attempted to correct perceptions and ritual practices:

> In this community, people believe that celebration and participation in Mawlūd [celebration of the birthday of the Prophet] will take them to *janna* [heaven]. What we do is that we correct this kind of perception. I also tell them that if you do *tarāwīḥ* [night prayers] in Ramadan, it is not compulsory to recite the whole of the Qurʾān. Allah says we should practice the religion according to our ability. Because of this interpretation of Islam that I give about *tarāwīḥ*, my mosque gets full up during Ramadan.

Najjar went on to say that he was not opposed to Sufism as such, or against visiting shrines around Cape Town. However, he taught his

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[18] The Islamic Council of South Africa is a smaller but nation-wide network of *ʿulamāʾ* and professionals who founded a national representative body of Muslims in 1980. It is affiliated with the Mecca-based World Muslim League (*Rābiṭat al-ʿĀlam al-Islāmī*).

congregation that such practices were not part of Islam. He particularly emphasized the fact that Muslims should not feel compelled to participate in these activities. Najjar's criticism against local practices included some concessions and relaxation of obligation. He seemed to insert Salafi ideas within the centre of Cape Town's Islamic practices. Najjar's approach revealed a different public dimension of Salafism. With Adam, a firm stand against local practices implied a sustained antagonism with traditions. Najjar's approach against local practices was framed as concessions and fewer commitments that were eagerly embraced by a large congregation.

There were others like Najjar who returned to Cape Town with a similar Salafi background, and merged these ideas with the local tradition. However, Ismail Gqamane stands out with a different social profile and background. He studied at many different schools and centres between Cape Town and Johannesburg, crossing the racial boundaries of Black, Indian and Coloured Muslims. He attended primary school in Gugulethu and Muhammadiyya (Wynberg), but then was sent to memorize the Qurʾān at Mia's Farm, one of the first and famous *ḥifẓ* centres in South Africa near Johannesburg. He later also studied at the Deobandi *Dār al-ʿUlūm Zakariyya* in the Indian suburb of Lenasia outside Johannesburg. Here he learnt Urdu in addition to being exposed to a sound Deobandi education. However, this was not his final stage of a long educational journey, as he was soon on his way to Medina from where he graduated from the Faculty of Sharīʿa (Law) in 1997.

Gqamane does not remember having any clear ideological leaning before his departure for Medina. There were certain practices like visiting the *kramat*s that he avoided, and he was warned about becoming a Wahhabi by one of his teachers. Two values seemed to stand central in his conviction about Salafism. Firstly, he was persuaded that devotion to the earliest generation of Muslims provided 'clarity'. Confusion within Islam, in his view, came much later. Paraphrasing a *ḥadīth*, Gqamane said that he left out any doubtful things, all of which came after the first few centuries. The development of Sufism with its excessive devotion to its leaders, and differentiation into separate groups was included in these later developments. The second value that he derived from Salafism was a feeling of reassurance: "I think I can defend myself on how I view things and [I am] comfortable before my Creator. I think

for me that is usually the line. Everything else to me does not matter." This second personal conviction with God provided a psychological vision with the historical perspective. Salafism provided a historical view of the past that almost obliterated any alternative approach to Islam, and followed with a conviction that was rooted in an individual feeling. For Gqamane, in particular, this conviction provided a vision towards the series of educational backgrounds that he passed through, and a commitment to the present in his belief that "nothing else mattered".

The context in which Gqamane developed this Salafi vision is worthy of note. Gqamane was devoted to the establishment of Islam in an African society, to be distinguished from the dominant Indian and Coloured Muslim communities of Cape Town and South Africa. He was engaged in various forms of missionary work and supported by a monthly stipend from a Saudi agency. On one level, his work was not directly related to serving the religious needs of the community. Unlike Adam or Najjar, the economic and social needs of the African Muslim community and converts needed more immediate attention. Gqamane was able to mobilize both local and international support for economic and social projects. In addition to the Saudi support, he sometimes also obtained support from the Libyan Call Society. On a personal level, however, Salafism provided a critique of existing religious practices:

> Our love for the Prophet could manifest in our striving towards societal development. [It was] not necessary […] [to] sing praises about the Prophet and the following morning everything is forgotten about him. To me following the exemplary conduct of the Prophet is the best way of showing love to him. […] Singing and praising Allah and the Prophet cannot be traced to the authentic tradition or life of the companions.

Gqamane was clearly criticizing Sufi practices in which singing the praises of the Prophet formed an important role. It is interesting to note how he incorporated a Salafi criticism of local practices as part of his social project.

Outside this social project, the religious identity of Gqamane was even clearer and important for himself and other Muslims in the city. Gqamane was aware of the concerns that some local Muslims felt towards him. He says that he was respected for his Islamic credentials, and he was a member of the Muslim Judicial Council. However, he was

aware that there were suspicions towards his Salafi identity and objectives. This suspicion was not entirely unfounded. On the one hand, he was insistent that he was calling people to Islam without qualification: "I don't invite people narrowly to Salafi but to the *dīn* of Allah." On the other hand, talking about a charitable organization through which he worked, he said: "*Masakane* was a tool for us to disseminate our brand of Islam to our activities." By us he meant another graduate of Medina, Abdul Hakim Quick, who had settled in South Africa after his graduation. And whilst Gqamane did not want to confuse "newcomers" to Islam about the divisions, he also clearly revealed that when the time was right "we give them guidelines how things are done in Islam and the differences among Muslim groups". It seems that the suspicion was justified that Gqamane and others like him were promoting Salafism in emerging African Muslim communities. The religious establishment was concerned about these developments, given the tense relations between the dominant Coloured and Indian communities and the poorer and emerging African Muslims. Further conversation brought up the racial character of the new community that was being forged. Gqamane spoke unmistakably about an African identity around Salafism:

> At a point in time we have Shīʿa participating in our activities. This was so because our message was clear that we African Muslims want to come together as one group to give dignity to the *dīn* of Allah in terms of how we present ourselves in our *own* [emphasis his] communities. With time we found ourselves over disagreement [...] which somehow affected it. But the organization still remains because those who were in the forefront are always in touch through their vision and ideology for the African Muslims.

Salafis were not the only group working on missionary activities among African Muslims. It had to compete with Shīʿism, Islamism and many other groups who were also looking for converts and providing support for African Muslims. For Gqamane, nevertheless, mission in the township provided a space to promote Salafism in a very distinctive way. It gave African Muslims like himself an opportunity to create a "vision and ideology for African Muslims". The fact that it faced the politics of race and class was not surprising, given the context of South Africa.

Our third biographical sketch is equally fascinating for understanding Salafism between personal commitment and local traditions. Abdulrahim Abdulrauf enjoyed a lineage of Islamic scholarship that led back to Tuan Guru and his student successor, Achmat van Bengalen, who had founded the first mosque in Cape Town. Abdulrauf was a descendent of van Bengalen who was succeeded by a long line of imams and scholars through the 19th and 20th centuries.[19] He studied Arabic within the family tradition since he was nine, and was being groomed for taking on a religious leadership position. Steeped in Shāfiʿī jurisprudence and Ashʿarī theology in the tradition of Cape Town, he was nevertheless sent for further studies in Saudi Arabia in 1972. There, he was challenged by a strong Ḥanbalī tradition in which he immersed himself. He adopted this tradition, but also exposed himself to more activist political and social movements in the Middle East. Through his teachers, he was exposed to and then briefly joined what he called the "militant" Muslim Brothers. When the Iranian Revolution took place at the end of 1970s, he raised its flag too. Subsequently, he even met some of the Shīʿī *ʿulamāʾ*, and was impressed by their openness to independent thinking (*ijtihād*) and close relationship they cultivated with the masses. These two qualities were in stark contrast to what he called "Islam restricted to personal piety and reformation".

Abdulrauf came back to South Africa with a strong Salafi identity, even putting on a "turban like the Imam of Mecca". Following upon his contacts with the Muslim Brothers and the Iranian Revolution, he joined the Muslim Youth Movement which was the nation-wide Islamist movement at the time of his return in 1980.[20] Like many South African Muslim activists, he made a close connection between apartheid and Western politics in the Middle East:

> You know anything anti-America or anti-West was welcome, because as a South African whose racial identity was denigrated by the apartheid racial policies and supported by the West, anything which also affected their symbols whether, political, economic and social was good for me.

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19) Abdulkader I. Tayob, *Islam in South Africa: Mosques, Imams and Sermons* (Gainesville: University of South Florida Press, 1999), 46-53.

20) Abdulkader I. Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa: The Muslim Youth Movement* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 1995).

With his scholarly credentials, he was equally critical of local practices. His criticism was directed at religious scholars and their institutional position in the Muslim community:

> The *ʿulamāʾ* in South Africa are very weak and follow the masses. In order to change the face of Islam in the Muslim thinking first you need to be very strong to withstand pressures. They are very materialistically inclined. Their understanding of the *dīn* was very superficial.

Because of this view, he did not join any association or network of *ʿulamāʾ*. They were "susceptible to the manipulation of the masses" which stifled "the growth and progress of the *dīn*". He rather resolved to "follow the footstep of the imams of the four schools of jurisprudence". He held a number of positions in South African mosques: Durban, Johannesburg, Kimberly and Cape Town. At the time of the interview, he was relieved not to be working for committees "being controlled by a system which is *kufr* [disbelief] […] dictat[ing] to the imam on what to do or not". This criticism of the structure of religious leadership was significant. It hinted at the vulnerability felt by Abdulrauf and other imams in South Africa, dependent upon communities for salaries and infrastructural support. It particularly exposed those who did not have a strong support base. For Abdulrauf, at least, Salafism might be a way of asserting independence in the face of this vulnerability.

Abdulrauf adopted Salafism in his intellectual journey, but remained open to other Islamic trends. He was soon confronted directly with the intellectual challenges posed by the opponents of the Salafis. Whilst most Salafis were satisfied with the confidence and conviction that *ḥadīth* provided them, he was also exposed to its multi-variant readings. He met a group of Sufis in Australia who directed him to an authenticated *ḥadīth* in "Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī which talks about the Prophet permitting people to do group *dhikr* […] I came to understand that any form of praising God is acceptable". Next, he recalled listening to a television programme in which a Mauritanian scholar took a well-known *ḥadīth* used by Salafis and gave it a very different meaning. This *ḥadīth* referred to the splintering of the Muslims in seventy-three groups, only one of which would be saved (*firqa nājiya*). Usually, the

text was used to justify Salafis against all the other groups. This Mauritanian suggested that all seventy-three groups were potentially included. He then shared his own search and discovery:

> I read the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet which talks about leniency and compassionate to people and approach them with wisdom as indicated in the Qurʾān. You know we cannot fight fire with fire and being harsh with people, like when some people are doing *haddad* [Thursday *dhikr*] or Mawlūd you stand up and condemn them as *bidʿa* [innovation].

Taking these statements together, we may conclude that Abdulrauf was gradually persuaded that the Salafi method of relying only on *ḥadīth* was not as decisive as it appeared. He seemed to have been open to the public debate on *ḥadīth*, in contrast with Adam who built a Salafi fortress by avoiding direct confrontation with his adversaries. In the interview, at least, Abdulrauf presented a series of reflections that catalogued his loss of confidence in the certainty that *ḥadīth* apparently offered to Salafis. He concluded with a telling statement: "I take the inspiration from Imam Ghazali who entertained different Muslim groups before he joined the *tassawuf* movement, because he was searching for the truth in his life-time."

Conclusion

Students graduating from Salafi centres in the Middle East were critical of Sufi groups and practices, as well as what they considered uncritical adherence to traditional jurisprudential schools. Practices related to Sufism and ritual practice in prayers were the most prominent sources of contention. Some of these were directly related to communities, while others to personal issues like dress and individual ritual behaviour. In this article, the implications of the former have been followed more closely than the latter. Salafis may be highly individualistic as most studies have shown, but they also pursue various strategies to gain acceptance and even a following in communities. With one exception, all the Salafis in this study were committed to founding a community through teaching and ritual leadership. Adam was barred from an established mosque, but he proceeded to found a congregation around a range of religious classes offered to children, adults and new converts. He used the same methods that imams have used in the city since the

19th century. Najjar successfully inserted Salafi ideas into his mosque, providing a range of concessions from traditional practices. Gqamane found Salafism a refreshing way to start a new African Muslim community, elbowing out other groups in the process. His own racial background seems to be put in the service of a pure Islam. Abdulrauf's journey revealed the intersection of the personal and communal dimensions of Salafism. His journey also revealed some of the fissures that lay at the heart of leadership in Muslim congregations, particularly the vulnerability felt by religious leaders against those who financed mosques and other institutions.

Turning to the individual dimension, Salafism for those interviewed in this study meant making personal choices in religious devotion. Salafism offered a simple and secure foundation for students engaged in the study of Islam. The source of uncertainty and doubt may be difficult to generalize for all Salafis, but the interviews in Cape Town provided some answers. Students were confronted by the large number of jurisprudential schools offering different approaches to ritual performance. Sufi practices that formed the bedrock of local communities could not easily be justified on the basis of a literal reading of texts. Individuals visiting and teaching in Cape Town were bringing different perspectives, reinforcing doubts raised. Salafis, both local and global, exuded a certainty and confidence in their choice.

Abdulrauf's personal doubt in Salafism when confronted by multiple readings of *ḥadīth* points to how conviction was maintained and promoted by the interviewees within the communities. Adam formulated his responses among his students, asking *them* to test his ideas and his convictions with his opponents. It was a safe place from which to launch one's proofs! Gqamane seemed to be satisfied with his conviction that deviations began after the first centuries of Islam, but enveloped that conviction with a self-declared comfort: "before my Creator […] everything else […] does not matter." Whilst he seemed to be sure of the former, it was the latter that he was prepared to put forward in this interview. And Najjar seemed to be aware that his "mosque [was] get[ting] full during Ramadan" because of an "interpretation of Islam" that stresses that one practices religion "according to [one's] ability". Personal conviction went along with concessions that were eagerly adopted. In these cases, personal convictions were subtly modified in

public contexts. Recalling Abdulrauf's reading of *ḥadīth* texts over a period of time, Salafi convictions lay not so much in the texts but in the commitment made to the texts. And the public performance of these interviewees revealed this differentiation very clearly.

Perhaps it is this difference that explains another feature of Salafism in Cape Town. Most Salafis in Cape Town did not present a robust Salafi identity for the people of Cape Town. Apart from Adam, the Salafis in Cape Town adjusted their teaching to a greater or lesser extent to the demands made by local patterns of Islamic life. The demands of the local population were mostly accommodated, allowing Salafi ideas to slowly infiltrate into communities. It seems that Salafism was most successful in this indirect and subtle form. Adam was resolute in his mission, but Najjar was more successful in taking the message of Salafism to his much larger congregation and school. At the same time, we note that even the idea of Salafism as a critical voice within Cape Islamic society had a place. Two contrasting examples were provided by Adam and Gqamane. Adam represented Salafism to Coloured Muslims, challenging the history, theology and ritual practices of Islam in Cape Town. For Gqamane, on the other hand, Salafism provided a means to fashion a pure Islam for Africans who did not have to rely on Coloured and Indian Muslims. The racial antagonisms inherited from apartheid continued within the Muslim community. Salafism provided a religious language for these antagonisms.

In conclusion, then, this article agrees with the general literature that Salafism represented the aspiration of individuals who desired to chart an independent approach to Islamic practices. Nevertheless, by focussing attention on a number of individuals and measuring their successes, strategies and life-trajectories, the social dimension of Salafi practices is brought into sharp focus. Salafis were not only effective as lone figures who were prepared to break away from everybody; they were also involved in founding communities for their ideas. And in this regard, they could not escape the social contexts in which they found themselves.