

UNDERSTANDING THE TERMS

SALAFI

AND

SALAF



SO THAT WE CAN IDENTIFY AND FOLLOW THE TRUE SCHOLARS OF ISLAM

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UNDERSTANDING THE TERMS “SALAFI” AND “SALAF” SO THAT WE CAN IDENTIFY AND FOLLOW THE TRUE SCHOLARS OF ISLAM¹

لا يَصْلِحُ آخِرُ هَذِهِ الْأُمَّةِ إِلَّا بِمَا صَلَحَ بِهِ أَوَّلُهَا

☞ *The latter part of this Ummah will only be corrected by what corrected its first part* ☞

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM WE FACE

If a survey were conducted amongst the general masses of Muslims, asking them to tick boxes whether or not they faithfully follow the Qur’an and the Sunnah, the overwhelming majority would tick the ‘yes’ box without any hesitation. Which Muslim, in his right mind, would tick the ‘no’ box?! That would be tantamount to saying “**I am not a Muslim!**” That is all fine and dandy until, of course, we probe the state of Muslims today, like a complex specimen under a microscope. When we do this, we find that the statistics collected in our survey are instantly challenged by the following observable activity:

- ✓ The mass claim of Muslims following the Book and the Sunnah cannot be true simply because amongst their ranks are so many groups and sects, which viciously oppose each other.
- ✓ The mass claim of the Muslims following the Book and the Sunnah cannot be true simply because of the woeful state of the present-day Muslim world in terms of the constant catastrophes and calamities that are besieging it.

¹ Abu Ameenah AbdurRahmān Bennett.

² A statement from Imam Mālik (*Iqtidā Sirāt al-Mustaqeem* 2/763).

One of the first things we thus learn is that the tongue does not always express a reality. What I am attempting to say here is more eloquently expressed in an Arabic adage:

العِبْرَةُ بِالْحَقَائِقِ وَالْمَعَانِي وَلَا بِالْأَلْفَاظِ وَالْمُبَانِي

What matters are realities and states, and not mere verbal gestures and constructs.

In non-technical language, this proverb is better known to us as **“Actions speak louder than words”**. The general, universal truth contained in this axiom teaches us to take what we observe in reality to be a more likely truism than what is merely stated by the tongue. However, this handy proverb only solves a small part of the puzzle. What good is this piece of the puzzle if a bigger piece is missing? The bigger piece provides the criteria for separating **fact** from **falsehood**. How can we know the falsehood of a statement if we do not have the correct tools to undertake the procedure of falsifying?

In these times, wherein mass ignorance and disunity prevail, separating between fact and falsehood is easier said than done. Not only do we lack knowledge of the fundamentals of our religion, but we also lack knowledge of the divine methodology that acts as a mechanism to preserve our religion. Thus, as a result, many of us find ourselves in a religious predicament. On one hand, we need to trust someone who possesses knowledge so that we can nourish our obedience to Allah; but on the other hand, we lack the basic criteria (i.e. methodology) to recognise the people who possess true knowledge and act on its instructions. This religious predicament does not get any easier, especially when we are commanded to implement this verse:

فَسَلُّوا أَهْلَ الذِّكْرِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ۖ

So ask the people of the reminder if you do not know,

[Al Anbiya 7]

And in our attempts to implement this wonderful verse, we are religiously challenged by the reality of this prophetic hadith:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَقْبِضُ الْعِلْمَ انْتِزَاعًا يَنْتَزِعُهُ مِنَ النَّاسِ وَلَكِنْ يَقْبِضُ الْعِلْمَ بِقَبْضِ الْعُلَمَاءِ حَتَّى إِذَا لَمْ يَبْقَ عَالِمًا اتَّخَذَ النَّاسُ رُءُوسًا جُهَالًا فَسُيَلُّوا فَاقْتَوْا بغيرِ عِلْمٍ فَضَلُّوا وَأَضَلُّوا.

“Allah does not take away the knowledge by taking it away from (the hearts of) the slaves. But, He takes it away through the death of the scholars, until no scholar remains. The people will take as their leaders ignorant people who when consulted will give their verdict without knowledge. So, they will go astray and will lead the people astray.”³

On one hand, we, the common folk, are commanded to ask the people of knowledge, but on the other, we know that identifying the true people of knowledge is a difficult task because (1) their numbers are slowly dwindling and (2) we may not possess the relevant tools to separate the scholars from the pretenders.

Shaykh Sālih al-Fawzān⁴ commented on the above hadith with the following words:

By Allah, this [the contents of this hadith] is what is happening today. Right now, the heads of the ignorant are speaking on legal religious rulings and are [legally] instructing the people, giving lectures and sermons even though they have no knowledge or understanding of fiqh. The only thing they do possess is buffoonery and the ability to excite and agitate. Unfortunately, it is these people who the public label as scholars and there is neither might nor power except with Allah! And if you were to ask these people concerning legal rulings and their correct application they would not be able to provide you a legally correct answer. And this is because they say that this is not knowledge, and true knowledge refers to being politically active or informed on current affairs, and as a result, knowledge has been withheld. Refuge is sought with Allah and we ask Him for wellbeing!⁵

What further exacerbates this dilemma is the YouTube boom. With the boom of YouTube came the boom of everyone’s 15 minutes of fame. Now we have in their multitudes self-styled Muslim

³ Saheeh al-Bukhārī vol. 1, no. 100 and Saheeh Muslim.

⁴ <http://abdurrahman.org/2013/12/21/shaykh-fawzaan-my-story-of-seeking-knowledge-must-watch/>

⁵ *Ajwibah al-Mufeedah ‘an Asiliyah al-Manāhij al-Jadeedah* ().

scholars and personalities who lecture the masses from their electronic domains and sell-out auditoriums. YouTube, along with many other social networking and video sharing sites, has opened a portal to another dimension that allows any opportunistic Muslim with a camera and an articulate tongue to try his hand at preaching and teaching the Muslim masses. These self-styled Muslim scholars and personalities come in a variety of forms. Some of them are involved in comparative religion and religious polemics; others are involved in a type of da’wah which merges between education and entertainment (e.g., conspiracy theories and motivational talks) and can aptly be labelled as ‘edutainment’. Others are involved in a type of **‘street da’wah’** which attempts to communicate on an urban level by use of slang and a grimy demeanour that is highly reminiscent of street thuggery.

However, all of these new-age da’wah scenes (NADS) pale in comparison when it comes to the **self-confessed scholar** who has an agenda to undermine the value of the true scholars by attempting to prove their incompetence when it comes to passing religious verdicts on matters that are perceived as being particular to the West. All of these self-styled scholars and Muslim personalities, negligently or deliberately, blur the lines that set apart the true scholar from the wannabe, and this, in turn, gives rise to a migration of the masses to a barren land that is incapable of producing organic knowledge. As a result, **the ones who are qualified to be listened to** are unknown or are even abandoned but **the ones who are required to listen and learn** are the ones that are listened to by the masses.

So how are we to navigate the treacherous waters of the electronic domain? Well, before we can even attempt to differentiate between the true scholars and the pretenders, we firstly have to familiarise ourselves with the litmus test that separates between the true scholars and the counterfeit ones.

THE LITMUS TEST LIES IN THE WORDS “SALAF” AND “SALAFI”

Before we delve into the subject of who the *Salaf* are and what is a *Salafi*, it is important that we familiarise ourselves with the linguistic and Islamic meanings of these terms. Many individuals blur the meanings of the words سَلَف (Salaf) and سَلَفِي (Salafi) because (for the untrained eye) the only distinguishing factor is the letter باء on the term سَلَفِي. Such is the extent of this problem, even so-called Islamic personalities who are sought after for Islamic verdicts struggle to make this distinction. In order to locate this word in the dictionary, you would have to search for it by its

root letters, which are س – ل – ف. For instance, if you went to any well-known English to Arabic dictionary, like Hans Wehr, you would unearth its linguistic roots to mean:

سلف *salafa u (salaf)* to be over, be past, be bygone; to precede, antecede II to lend,⁶

So from the extract above, we can clearly see that the verb سَلَفَ means ‘to be bygone’ or ‘to precede’. We can contextualise these words by saying a *salaf*⁷ is someone who precedes you in time. To make the example more acute, we can simply say that your father is a *salaf* (predecessor) to you and his father is both your *salaf* and your father’s. Thus, the term *salafi* always refers to someone who precedes you in some capacity, whether it be in knowledge, ancestry etc.

In order to understand its technical usage (i.e. Islamic usage), we will first provide a prophetic narration that serves as an integral part in forming the technical usage of the term *Salaf*. The Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said,

خَيْرُ النَّاسِ قَرْنِي ثُمَّ الَّذِينَ يَلُونَهُمْ ثُمَّ الَّذِينَ يَلُونَهُمْ

“The best of mankind is my generation, then those who come after them, then those who come after them.”⁸

In this authentic hadith, the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) sequentially informs us about the best of Muslim generations. He starts with his generation who are famously known as the *Sahābah* (Companions).⁹ The *Sahābah* are indisputably the best of this Ummah because Allah made them the direct inheritors of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) and because, as stated by Ibn Mas’oud, Allah

⁶ Hans Wehr Arabic dictionary

⁷ The word *salaf* is a اسْمُ الْجِنْسِ الْجَمْعِي (a word which denotes a category and defaults at a plural and needs to be suffixed with the letter الياء to form is singular).

⁸ Reported by Bukhāri and Muslim.

⁹ Al-Hāfidh Ibn Hajar (d.852H) - rahimahuAllah - said:

The most correct of what I have come across is that a *Sahābi* (Companion) is one who met the Prophet whilst believing in him, and died as a Muslim. So that includes the one who remained with him for a long or a short time, and those who narrated from him and those who did not, and those who saw him but did not sit with him and those who could not see him due to blindness.

نظر في قلوب العباد فوجد قلب محمد -صلى الله عليه وسلم- خير قلوب العباد فاصطفاه لنفسه فابتعثه برسالته
ثم نظر في قلوب العباد بعد قلب محمد فوجد قلوب أصحابه خير قلوب العباد فجعلهم وزراء نبيه يُقاتلون
على دينه

looked into the hearts of His servants and found the best of hearts to be the heart of Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) and so He chose him for Himself and sent him with the message. Then He looked into the hearts of His servants after the heart of Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) and found the hearts of his companions to be the best of His servants' hearts. And so He made them the Prophet's supporters who fought for His religion.¹⁰

So after he (صلى الله عليه وسلم) labels his generation (i.e. *Sahābah*) as the best, he labels the generation who immediately follows them as second best. This generation is called *at-Taabi'oon* (the followers of the companions). He (صلى الله عليه وسلم) then seals his praise with the third generation that comes after the *Taabi'oon*. This third generation is aptly named *Atbaa' at-Taabi'een* (the successors to the followers of the Companions). So these three generations have been singled out with excellence and a superiority over all other Muslim generations. So the term *السلف* (*as-Salaf*) or *السلف الصالح* (*Salaf as-Sālih*) is a phrase that encapsulates the first three generations of Muslims. These three generations are the collective benchmark for the whole of the Muslim nation in terms of correct creed, righteous actions and apt mannerisms up until the establishment of the Hour.

THE MISSING LINK THAT GUARANTEES GUIDANCE

Scenario: Two Muslims declare that they strictly follow the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of His Messenger (صلى الله عليه وسلم); however, when we analyse their respective creeds and methods for implementing Islam, we see that they conflict heavily, proving that at least one of the two is wrong in his declaration. So what is the procedure for deciphering which of the two is true to his claim of strictly adhering to the Book and the Sunnah? Well, we find out if their claims can stand up to scrutiny by investigating if their claims of **adhering to the Qur'an and the Sunnah** are filtered through the funnel of **the Salaf as-Sālih**. Now we have added a clause that effectively has the potential to separate between a false claim and a true one. Appealing to this clause necessitates

¹⁰ Reported by Imam Ahmed in his Musnad (1/379).

that you can provide evidence from the first three generations for a particular point of creed or a practice in Islam.

But what if someone were to say: **“Allah instructed us in times of dispute to do the following:**

فَإِنْ تَنَزَعْتُمْ فِي شَيْءٍ فَرُدُّوهُ إِلَى اللَّهِ وَالرَّسُولِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ ذَلِكَ خَيْرٌ وَأَحْسَنُ تَأْوِيلًا ٥٩

And if you differ in anything amongst yourselves, refer it to Allâh and His Messenger, if you believe In Allâh and In the Last Day. That is better and more suitable for final determination.

Nowhere in this verse does it instruct us to seek the intervention of the early generations of Islam to solve a religious dispute.” We would reply to this doubt by stating that the instruction in this verse was indeed enough for the early generations of Islam because (1) they truly knew how to follow the command of Allah and His Messenger (صلى الله عليه وسلم) and (2) the people of innovation were not the majority during that golden period of Islam and thus the correct creed and correct practice were virtually monolithic.

As for evidence to support what we are saying here, then Allah, the Mighty and Majestic states in His Book:

فَإِنْ ءَامَنُوا بِمِثْلِ مَا ءَامَنْتُمْ بِهِ ۖ فَقَدِ اهْتَدَوْا ۗ ۱۳۷

So if they believe in the like of that which you [people] believe, then they are rightly guided.

[Al-Baqarah 138]

Any Muslim with an ounce of intellect and a disposition towards sincerity will instantly understand the clause in this beautiful verse. Allah mentions at the end of the verse **“then they are rightly guided”**. However, in order to secure this position, the subordinate clause needs to be fulfilled. And this condition is that we believe *just* as those who were the immediate beneficiaries of this verse believed in the time of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) - namely the Companions. Therefore, one cannot hope to have correct belief or righteous action unless he believes and practises Islam just as the three first generations practiced it.

Here are some more evidences from the Book of Allah and the Sunnah that intrinsically link guidance to the early generations of Islam. Allah states in His Mighty Book:

وَمَنْ يُشَاقِقِ الرَّسُولَ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا تَبَيَّنَ لَهُ الْهُدَىٰ وَيَتَّبِعْ غَيْرَ سَبِيلِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ نُوَلِّهِ مَا تَوَلَّىٰ وَنُصَلِّهِ ۖ جَهَنَّمَ وَسَاءَتْ مَصِيرًا ١١٥

And whoever contradicts and opposes the Messenger (Muhammad) after the Right Path has been shown clearly to him, and follows other than the believers' way, We shall keep Him in the path He has chosen, and burn him in Hell - what an evil destination.

Once again, Allah makes the Companions and those who correctly follow them a part of the subordinate clause that must be fulfilled for anyone who wishes to avoid the aforementioned destination. When Allah states **“and follows other than the believers' way”**, to whom is Allah referring? Who were the believers at the time when this verse descended from the heavens? None other than the Companions!

The next evidence is even more explicit in making the Companions a part of the procedure laid down to attain correct guidance. The Messenger of Allah (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said:

ألا وإن من قبلكم من أهل الكتاب افترقوا على ثنتين و سبعين ملة وإن هذه الملة ستفترق على ثلاث و سبعين : ثنتان و سبعون في النار " وواحدة في الجنة و هي الجماعة و في رواية : "كلهم في النار إلا ملة واحدة ما أنا عليه و أصحابي.

“Indeed, you were preceded by a people from the people of the Book who split into seventy-two sects and this religion (i.e. Islam) will split into seventy-three sects; seventy-two will enter the fire and one will enter Paradise, and it is the Jamaa’ah.”¹¹ And in another narration, it says, “All of them will enter the fire except one sect (and that sect is) what I am upon and my Companions.”

Not only does this narration categorically prove that the Companions are an essential part of the

path that leads to Jennah, but this narration also informs us that the people who follow the Messenger (صلى الله عليه وسلم) and his Companions are indeed a minority. We need to reflect on the fact that the people who follow the Salaf are a minority because it will save us a lot of trial and error. What further consolidate the people of the Sunnah being a minority is the following hadith:

بَدَأَ الْإِسْلَامُ غَرِيبًا وَسَيَعُودُ كَمَا بَدَأَ غَرِيبًا فَطُوبَى لِلْغُرَبَاءِ

Islam began as something strange and will return to being something strange, so glad tidings to the strangers.¹²

As-Sindi said in *Hāshiyat Ibn Mājah*,

(غَرِيبًا) أَيْ لِقَلَّةِ أَهْلِهِ وَأَصْلُ الْغَرِيبِ الْبَعِيدُ مِنَ الْوَطَنِ (وَسَيَعُودُ غَرِيبًا) بِقَلَّةِ مَنْ يَقُومُ بِهِ وَيُعِينُ عَلَيْهِ وَإِنْ كَانَ أَهْلُهُ كَثِيرًا (فَطُوبَى لِلْغُرَبَاءِ) الْقَائِمِينَ بِأَمْرِهِ ● و"طُوبَى" تُفَسَّرُ بِالْحُجَّةِ وَبِشَجَرَةٍ عَظِيمَةٍ فِيهَا

“Strange” refers to the small amount of these people [who are strange], and the basic meaning of *al-ghareeb* (stranger) means to be far from one’s homeland. “And will return to being something strange” refers to the small numbers who practice and support it (i.e., Islam) despite its adherents numbering many. And *Toobā* has been explained to mean Paradise a tremendous tree in Paradise.¹³

Due to the state of the hearts of the Muslims nowadays, the Qur’an or the Sunnah is tampered with to suit sectarian agendas. Therefore, we have to go back to the early Muslims to understand the correct application of a verse or prophetic narration. A real-time example of this can be provided in light of the following verse:

وَمَنْ لَّمْ يَحْكَمْ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْكَافِرُونَ ۖ

¹² Saheeh Muslim (270).

¹³ In Sharh Saheeh Muslim, an-Nawawi quoted al-Qādi ‘Iyād as saying regarding the meaning of the hadith of the strangers: “Islam began with a few individuals, and then it spread and prevailed. However, then it will reduce in numbers until there are only a few left, as it was in the beginning.”

And whoever does not judge by what Allah has revealed then it is those who are the disbelievers.

[Al Mā'idah 44]

Those of a takfeeri¹⁴ temperament use this verse in their pernicious pursuit of declaring all Muslim rulers as disbelievers because they rule by other than what Allah has revealed. They use this verse to unrestrictedly declare all the Muslim rulers as disbelievers, regardless of the reasons why they rule by other than Allah's rule. However, those of a Salafi disposition state that the disbelief mentioned in this verse is not necessarily the disbelief that takes you out of the fold of Islam because disbelief is of two types: (1) **major disbelief** that expels from the fold of Islam and (2) **lesser disbelief** that does not expel from the fold. So which one of these two contrasting views echoes back to the understanding of the Companions? This is what the Companion Abdullāh ibn Abbās, who was aptly named the **'Interpreter of the Qur'an'**,¹⁵ said regarding the aforementioned verse:

إنه ليس بالكفر الذى يذهبون إليه إنه ليس كفراً ينقل عن الملة كفر دون كفر

It is not the disbelief that they are going towards (in their minds). It is not the type of disbelief that expels from the religion. It is disbelief less than disbelief.¹⁶

In another statement, Ibn Abbās said,

وليس كمن كفر بالله وملائكته وكتبه ورسله

It is not like the one who has disbelieved in Allah, His Angels, His Books and Messengers.¹⁷

¹⁴ This is a treacherous trait of the Khawaarij. They used to declare Muslims who had committed major sins as disbelievers. We have many groups nowadays walking in the ill-fated footsteps of this old sect. From them are ISIS, al-Qaeda, al-Muhajiroun who all share a deviant urge to revoke a Muslim's Islam because of falling into major sin.

¹⁵ From 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās:

I was in the house of Maymūnah bin al-Hārith and I prepared some water for the Messenger of Allāh (صلى الله عليه وسلم) to make purification with. The Messenger of Allāh (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said, "Who prepared this?" Maymūnah said, "Abdullāh did." The Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said, "O Allāh, grant him understanding of the deen and teach him the interpretation.

¹⁶ Reported by al-Hākim with an authentic chain of narration, and Imam adh-Dhahabee concurred with him.

¹⁷ Ibn Jareer at-Tabari reported this in his explanation of Surah al-Mā'idah.

These are just two statements of many that have been preserved for us from the early generations, and therefore all we are required to do is to compare the statements of the contemporary scholars with the statements of the Salaf and then we will have an effective way of identifying the true scholars of our times. For example, let us take the great scholar, Shaykh Muhammad ibn Ibrāheem,¹⁸ who passed away in the year 1968/1389 AH. What did he say about this verse? Did his statements echo the statements of the Salaf? Let us see:

وما جاء عن ابن عباس - رضى الله عنهما - في تفسير هذه الآية من رواية طاووس وغيره يدلُّ أنَّ الحاكم بغير ما أنزل الله كافرٌ إمَّا كفرٌ اعتقادٍ ناقلاً عن الملة وإمَّا كفرٌ عملٍ لا ينقلُ عن الملة

What has been reported from Ibn ‘Abbās (رضي الله عنهما) regarding the explanation of this verse from the report of Tāwūs and others shows that the one who rules by other than what Allah has revealed is a disbeliever, either by kufr i’tiqād which expels him from the religion or by kufr of actions which does not expel him from the religion.¹⁹

And, in this fashion, the baton of this belief has been passed onto each Muslim generation, and thus you will find the scholars and Imams of this ummah in their respective generations echoing the words of Ibn ‘Abbās and the words of the early generations.^{20,21} This one example serves as the modus operandi for identifying the true scholars of our times. You will always find the true scholars referencing their beliefs and practices back to the Salaf with evidences. And by following the true scholars, we are attaching ourselves to the Salaf because no one can trace back the path that leads to the Salaf better than the true scholars of Islam. Let us not forget that the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said about the scholars,

¹⁸ <http://www.salafi-dawah.com/shaykh-muhammad-bin-ibraaheem-aal-ash-shaykh-1389h.html>

¹⁹ *Risalah Tabkeem al-Qawaneen.*

²⁰ Read on from page seven: <http://www.slideshare.net/omnumn/7-reasons-why-almuhjiroun-are-deviant>

²¹ Shaykh al-Islam said regarding the one who rules by other than what Allah has revealed:

He could be Muslim yet within him is kufr less than kufr which does not expel him from Islam absolutely, as the Companions said, such as Ibn ‘Abbās and others: “kufr less than kufr” this is the saying of the generality of the Salaf and this is what Ahmad and others documented. This is also what al-Bukhārī bore testimony to in his Saheeh. (Majmū’ al-Fatāwā, vol.7, p.350-351)

وَإِنَّ فَضْلَ الْعَالِمِ عَلَى الْعَابِدِ كَفَضْلِ الْقَمَرِ لَيْلَةَ الْبَدْرِ عَلَى سَائِرِ الْكَوَاكِبِ وَإِنَّ الْعُلَمَاءَ وَرَثَةُ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ وَإِنَّ الْأَنْبِيَاءَ لَمْ يُورَثُوا دِينَارًا وَلَا دِرْهَمًا وَرَثُوا الْعِلْمَ فَمَنْ أَخَذَهُ أَخَذَ بِحِطِّهِ وَإِفْرِ

And the superiority of the learned man over the devout is like that of the moon, on the night when it is full, over the rest of the stars. The learned are the heirs of the Prophets, and the Prophets leave neither dinar nor dirham, leaving only knowledge, and he who takes it takes an abundant portion.²²

SO WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE WORDS ‘SALAF’ AND ‘SALAFI’?

Now that we have a good grasp of the word *Salaf*, we can confidently bring into the spotlight the word *Salafi* and start the procedure of separation. These two words cause a bit of confusion for some English speakers. They are rather reminiscent of some of the English homophones that wreak havoc with its native speakers. How many of us have to think twice when choosing between ‘where’, ‘were’ and ‘we’re’? To some extent, some Muslims face the same problem with *Salaf* and *Salafi*. The only difference between the terms is the Arabic letter الياء (*Yaa*). However, despite the *Yaa* being the only visible distinction, the distinction in meaning is massive.

In the English language, we have a group of adjectives that show relationship or a sense of belonging to. We use these words not only to describe something but also to show that there is a relation between it and something else. For instance, someone who lives in Britain is called ‘**British**’. The word ‘**Britain**’ is modified with the suffix *-ish* to provide both a description and a relevant connection. Many of the Arabic terms used by Muslims include many of these types of words. For example, the much-used term *Hanafi*, connects a person to a particular school of thought. A more common word, in the dialect of the Muslims, is *Sunni*,²³ which (historically) attaches a person to the Prophetic Sunnah.

The word *Salafi* is one of these types of adjectives. The word *Salafi* links someone back to the *Salaf*, the first three generations of Muslims. If he is sincere, it links him in belief, actions and behaviour. Thus, the word *Salafi* is just verbal shorthand for the verbose statement “**I follow the Book of**

²² Sunan Abi Dāwood (3634).

²³ Nowadays, the word *Sunni* is more of a political term that tells us more about what someone is not as opposed to what he is. Politically speaking, the term *Sunni* merely means that someone is not from the Shia.

Allah and the Sunnah of His Messenger, based on the understanding and practical implementation of the Salaf as-Sālih (i.e. first three generations)”. Humans love convenience and language is no exception.

Another interesting observation is that, after we learn the reality of the word *Salafi*, we also learn that it is not a term that attaches itself to any single personality. This is reminiscent of the same fact that exists outside of Islam with respect to other religions and ideologies. We find most names of religions and world organisations being derivatives of those who purportedly founded them. The Christians are named after Christ; Buddhists are named after Gautama Buddha and the Marxists are named after Karl Marx. Islam, however, is named not after any personality; rather, its name denotes the quintessence of Allah’s religion, namely submission. This fact plays a small role in deciphering the true religion from all other false ones, and the same can be said for the word *Salafi*, which plants signposts along the road of salvation. Shaykh Muhammad Nasr ad-Deen al-Albāni said about the word *Salafi*:

The first point: That this ascription [i.e. Salafi] and attachment is not to a single person or a few people, as is the case with other Jamaa'ahs (groups) that are present in the Muslim world today. This is not an attachment to a person or even tens of people, but this is an ascription to a group that will not err. That is because the Righteous Predecessors would never agree upon falsehood, and it is impossible that the Salaf would unite upon an error, as opposed to the Khalaf (the people of later generations). With regard to the later generations, there is no text speaking in their favour, on the contrary, their majority are generally spoken of with ill, such as in the end of the previous hadeeth when he [peace be upon him] said: "Then there will come a people who give witness and their witness is not asked for..."

So the difference between the word *Salafi* and *Hanafi* is that the word *Hanafi* associates someone to a school of thought that goes back to a single individual. However, the word *Salafi*, relates someone, provided that that he is truthful towards the word, to the first three generations of Muslims who collectively cannot err because they are the embodiment of Islam.

SO IS A MUSLIM LEGALLY OBLIGATED TO LABEL HIMSELF AS SALAFI?

The Islamic sharee’ah does not require a Muslim to merely label himself as *Salafi*; however, it does require a Muslim to follow the way of the *Salaf* and as a natural result, you become a *Salafi*. Labelling oneself as *Salafi* is not the objective; the objective is to be a *Salafi* and the label blossoms in recognition of achieving that reality. It is possible for a Muslim to label himself as *Salafi* and be far away from the path of the *Salaf*, and likewise, it is possible for someone not to label himself as a *Salafi* but still be on the path of the *Salaf*. Thus, proclaiming the word *Salafi* does not automatically make you *Salafi*; implementation of everything that the term technically implies is what makes you a *Salafi*. Shaykh Sālih al-Fawzān answers the following question:

“Is the one who labels himself as a *Salafi* considered as someone who is forming a group?” “There is no harm in labelling oneself as Salafi as long as it is true. If however it is merely a claim then it is not permissible for him to label himself as Salafi whilst being on a methodology besides the Salaf.”²⁴

It is said that labels are only as good as they are perceived. A label’s strength hinges on how well it is received or perceived by the masses. For example, the term ‘fundamentalist’ just means someone who strictly adheres to the principles of his belief. However, nowadays, the term has strong negative connotations which have caused structural damage beyond repair. So even though the word originally had a positive meaning, what matters now is how it is used and perceived amongst the masses. What is the point of using a term to denote one thing when it denotes another in the mind of the masses? Let us not forget that the term *Salafi* is meant to be a religious landmark in terms of guidance and direction, but what if this landmark, for whatever reason, has been shifted to the point that it no longer provides a correct reference point? Does the term remain religiously viable in terms of pinpointing its desired destination? This is a question that only the people of knowledge can answer, but the term *Salafi* right now is undergoing some social reconstruction.

DISINFORMATION THAT SPAWNS MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE WORD “SALAFI” AND ITS PEOPLE

As we said earlier, the word *Salafi* is a capsule that contains a comprehensive compound of truth. As long as the capsule is not tampered with, its contents remain whole. But, what happens when the capsule is emptied of its true contents and filled with a noxious compound? Let us not forget that the word *Salafi* only remains a true asset as long as the term is not abused, misused or vilified.

²⁴ *Ajwibah al-Mufeedah ‘an Asiliyah al-Manahij al-Jadeedah* (p.39).

The more a word is abused misused or vilified, the more it fails to serve its purpose. For the sake of brevity, we can classify those who corrupt the term *Salafi* into three broad categories:

Non-Muslims who vilify the term *Salafi*:

It is not uncommon nowadays to hear in the media the term *Salafi* falsely attributed to extreme Muslim factions who could not be any further away from the true teachings of Islam.²⁵ This is either a result of compounded ignorance surrounding sectarianism amongst the Muslims or, even worse, because there is an agenda to poison the well through a carefully constructed smear campaign to vilify those who faithfully follow the path of the *Salaf*.²⁶

Muslims who vilify the word *Salafi*

This type is no different from the first type except for the first type being non-Muslims. Many from amongst this type are either ignorant about the true meaning of the term *Salafi* or they are well aware of its historical meaning but they have an evil agenda against its people.

Muslims who abuse the term *Salafi*

This type stands distinguished from the first two groups because this type recognises the worth and value of the word *Salafi* and they even embrace it, but they abuse it like a wolf in sheep’s clothing. This group, in some ways, is worse than the other two groups because they have betrayed the trust when it comes to remaining faithful to the true teachings of the *Salaf*. This group has turned *Salafiyyah* into the very thing that it wages war against: *bizbiyyah* (partisanship). This group of Muslims feeds the second group of Muslims with ammunition to use against *Salafiyyah* and its people. However, despite this, the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) addressed the balance by saying,

لَا تَزَالُ طَائِفَةٌ مِنْ أُمَّتِي ظَاهِرِينَ عَلَى الْحَقِّ لَا يَضُرُّهُمْ مَنْ خَذَلَهُمْ حَتَّى يَأْتِيَ أَمْرُ اللَّهِ

There will not cease to be a group from my Ummah manifest upon the truth. Those who forsake them will not harm them, until the command of Allah take place.²⁷

²⁵ One example out of literally thousands can be seen in a journalistic report found in the Guardian: “**Isis, a Salafi jihadist force, evolved out of a group founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian militant who moved to Iraq after the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2002.**”

²⁶ <http://www.salafimanhaj.com/?p=380>

²⁷ Muslim.

AND NOW WE CAN IDENTIFY THE TRUE SCHOLARS OF ISLAM

Now that we know the litmus test for identifying the people who adhere to Islam correctly, we can also identify the heads of these people, namely the scholars. In the classical treatise of Imam al-Barbahāri, *Sharh as-Sunnah*, who was born in the era of the *Salaf*, he states the following:

فانظر رحمك الله كل من سمعت كلامه من أهل زمانك خاصة فلا تعجلن ولا تدخلن في شيء منه حتى تسأل
وتنظر هل تكلم فيه أحد من أصحاب النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم أو أحد من العلماء فإن أصبت فيه أثرا
عنهم فتمسك به ولا تجاوزه لشيء ولا تختار عليه شيئاً فتسقط في النار²⁸

May Allah have mercy upon you - examine the speech of every one of the people of your particular time, and do not act hastily nor enter into anything until you enquire and observe; did any of the Companions of Allah’s Messenger speak about it or any of the scholars? So if you find a narration from them, then hold firmly to it, do not go beyond it for anything or give preference to anything over it and thus fall into the fire.

This paragraph teaches us how important it is to hold onto the rope of the *Sahābah*, it also teaches us how to recognise the true scholars of Islam. You will always find the true scholar of Islam referencing his religious understanding back to the first three glorious generations of Islam. You will always find him in times of dispute quoting from the early generations to solve all disputes. His books and lectures will be replete with the mentioning of personalities that herald from a time bygone; a time when Islam sat at the summit of civilisation. These are the people we need to seek out and cling to as if our very lives depend on it. Detaching ourselves from these people is akin to detaching ourselves from a life support machine when we are in a critical state.

STATEMENTS FROM THE IMAMS ON THE WORDS “SALAF” AND “SALAFI”

Imam Al-Awza'ee (d.157H) said: **“Patiently restrict yourself upon the Sunnah, stop where the people (i.e. the Companions) stopped, say what they say and refrain from which they refrained. Traverse upon the path of your *Salaf as-Saalih*, for indeed what was sufficient for them is sufficient for you.”**²⁹

²⁸ *Sharh as-Sunnah* (p.61)

²⁹ Tawhid of Allah’s Most Beautiful Names and Attributes p. 73.

Abu Haneefah (d. 150H) said: "Adhere to the *athar* (narration) and the *tareeqah* (way) of the *Salaf* (Pious Predecessors) and beware of newly invented matters for all of it is innovation"³⁰

As-Sam'aanee (d.562H) said in *al-Insaab* (3/273): "*As-Salafi*: this is an ascription to the Salaf and following their ways, in that which is related from them."³¹

Ibn Taymiyyah (d.728H) said: "There is no criticism for the one who proclaims the way (*madhhab*) of the *Salaf*, who attaches himself to it and refers to it. Rather, it is obligatory to accept that from him by unanimous agreement, because the way of the *Salaf* is nothing but the Truth (Haqq)."³²

Imaam adh-Dhahabee (d.748H) said: "It is authentically related from ad-Daaraqutnee that he said: There is nothing more despised by me than *'ilmul-kalaam* (innovated speech and rhetoric). I say: He never entered into *'ilmul-kalaam*, nor argumentation. Rather, he was a *Salafi*."

³⁰ <http://www.sahihalbukhari.com/sps/sp.cfm?subsecID=SLF01&articleID=SLF010001&articlePages=1>

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid