

Islam and Muslims

Wahhabism and Wahhabi Muslims

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) could be considered the first modern Islamic fundamentalist. He made the central point of his reform movement the idea that absolutely every idea added to Islam after the third century of the Muslim era (about 950 CE) was false and should be eliminated.

The reason for this extremist stance, and a primary focus of his efforts, was a number of common practices which he regarded as regressions to the days of pre-Islamic polytheism. These included praying to saints, making pilgrimages to tombs and special mosques, venerating trees, caves, and stones, and using votive and sacrificial offerings.

In contrast to such popular superstitions, al-Wahhab emphasized the unity of God (**tawhid**). This focus on absolute monotheism led to him and his followers being referred to as muwahiddun, or "unitarians." Everything else he denounced as heretical innovation, or **bida**.

Al-Wahhab was further dismayed at the widespread laxity in adhering to traditional Islamic laws: questionable practices like the ones above were allowed to continue, whereas the religious devotions which Islam did require were being ignored. This resulted in indifference to the plight of widows and orphans, adultery, lack of attention to obligatory prayers, and failure to allocate shares of inheritance fairly to women.

All of the above al-Wahhab characterized as being typical of **jahiliyya**, an important term in Islam which refers to the barbarism and state of ignorance which existed prior to the coming of Islam. By doing so, he identified himself with the Prophet Muhammad, and at the same time connected his contemporary society with the sort of thing Muhammad worked to overthrow.

Because so many Muslims really lived (so he claimed) in *jahiliyya*, al-Wahhab accused them of not really being Muslims after all. Only those who followed the teachings of al-Wahhab were still truly Muslims, because only they still followed the path laid out by Allah.

Obviously, Wahhabi religious leaders reject any reinterpretation of the Qur'an when it comes to issues settled by the earliest Muslims. In taking this position, they place themselves in opposition to a variety of Muslim reform movements which developed in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These movements worked to reinterpret aspects of Islamic law in order to bring it closer to standards set by the West, particularly with regards to topics like gender relations, family law, and participatory democracy.

Today, Wahhabism is the dominant Islamic tradition on the Arabian peninsula, though its influence is greatly reduced in the rest of the Middle East. As Osama bin Laden comes from Saudi Arabia and is Wahhabi himself, Wahhabi extremism and radical ideas of purity have obviously influenced him considerably.

Also, even though Wahhabism is a minority position, it has nevertheless been influential for other extremist movements throughout the Middle East. This can be seen with a couple of factors, first of which is al-Wahhab's use of the term *jahiliyya* to vilify a society which he does not consider pure enough, whether they call themselves Muslim or not. Even today, Islamists use the term when referring to the West and at times even to their own societies. With it, they can justify overthrowing what many might regard as an Islamic state by essentially denying that it is truly Islamic at all.

A second influence is demonstrated by the strict Wahhabi opposition to any reinterpretation of traditional Islamic law. Although Wahhabism allows for new interpretations when it comes to issues never decided upon by early jurists (say, for example, the relative morality of socialism or capitalism), many of the fundamental influences of the West don't touch upon them. Modern Islamists follow the Wahhabi example by opposing any attempt to reconcile traditional Islam with modern, Western notions regarding issues like gender, family, and religious rights.

It is worth observing that al-Wahhab was strongly influenced by the works of [Ibn Taimiyya](#), a medieval orthodox theologian who will reappear several times in this study. Taimiyya argued against the excesses of mystical Sufism and favored a return to more "orthodox" beliefs four hundred years before al-Wahhab.