

Variations within the Salafi Movement:

Introduction

My name is Jonathan Brown and I'm a professor of Islamic history at Georgetown University. I study Islamic law and Islamic intellectual history. By now, you've learned quite a bit about Islam. And you've probably heard a lot of foreign terms and confusing words. Sunni Islam, Shiite Islam, Sharia law. What exactly is Salafi Islam, or, as I'm going to call it, Salafism. Salafism is a brand of Sunni Islam. It's not a political movement or a institution. It's an approach to religion. It's an attitude. Actually, in Christianity there's a very good analogy, namely the difference between Catholicism and Protestant Christianity.

In Catholicism, it's the church that defines Christianity. For 2000 years, the Church has interpreted the Bible, adjusted the teachings of Christianity according to time and place, added to them, taken away. And in Catholicism, it's the church the decides what Christianity means. Protestantism, on the other hand, decided that at some point, the church had gone wrong, incorporating elements into Christianity that were inappropriate or going astray at certain points. Protestantism wanted to go back to the scripture, back to the Bible. It wanted to go back to the sources.

In Islam, Salafism is like Protestantism, and mainstream Sunni Islam is like Catholicism. Salafis believe that in the 1400 years since the Prophet Muhammad began the religion of Islam, mainstream Sunnis had gone astray, incorporating foreign beliefs, and corrupt practices into their religion. And Salafis call Muslims to go back to the original scriptures of Islam, to the Qur'an, the main revelation of Muhammad, and to the specific teachings of Muhammad. They also want to go back to the sources.

What this results in is a type of Islam that is particularly uncompromising and that is strictly tied to the worldview of Arabia in the seventh century, when the prophet Muhammad lived. Unlike mainstream Sunni Islam, which is adapted to changing times and arrived with compromises with various cultural and political realities, from wearing pants to democracy, Salafism called for Muslims to cling tightly to the original practice of Muhammad and the early Muslims. They are sort of like Muslim Amish. If you saw a Salafi Muslim, instead of having a tight, trim beard, for example, or maybe no facial hair at all, a Salafi man would have a long beard and probably no mustache, a mustache that was shaved, mimicking exactly the type of beard that the Prophet Muhammad had.

You might be wondering how many Salafi Muslims are there in the world, where do they live? The answer is we don't know, and they can live anywhere. A useful analogy might be to think about orthodox Jews. Anywhere there are Jews, there's going to be some orthodox Jews. They might be particularly concentrated in certain areas, like parts of New York. And, indeed, although Salafi Muslims live everywhere in the world, they tend to be particularly common in

countries like Saudi Arabia, as well as in certain cities, for example the city of Alexandria in Egypt. The second largest city in Egypt has a large Salafi population. But you can find Salafi Muslims in Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkey, Morocco, Senegal, the United States, and Canada. Salafi Muslims live everywhere that you find Muslims.