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### **Wahhabism (Dr Lars Berger, University of Salford/Manchester, UK)**

The term 'Wahhabism' is derived from the name of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-92) who lived and worked as a religious reformer in the heartland of the Arabian Peninsula. Many of those Muslims who are generally referred to as Wahhabis reject that term which for them implies that they confer a similar status to a human individual as they do to the one God. Given their particular concern with all forms of idolatry that could unduly distract from the worship of the one God they find the description as Wahhabis particularly insulting. Since 'tawhid', i.e. professing the oneness and uniqueness of God, is the central element of their thought, many Wahhabis thus prefer the term 'muwahhidun', i.e. the ones who profess God's oneness.

Abd al-Wahhab was born in the small town of 'Uyaina in Najd, the central part of the Arab peninsula. His father Abdalwahhab bin Sulaiman (d. 1740) was one of the most famous Hanbali judges of his area. After a period of studies in Mecca, Medina and Basra, where some argue he was shocked by what he considered 'Unislamic' Shiite practices, Abd al-Wahhab managed to persuade the ruler of his hometown, 'Uthman Ibn Mu'ammara, to adopt his ideas. Local uproar about Abd al-Wahhab's instigation to destroy the dome over the grave of Zayd ibn al-Khattab, one of the brothers of the second caliph, Umar Ibn al-Khattab, and other holy shrines, to cut down holy trees and to reintroduce the long ignored practice of applying Quranic punishments (huddud) forced Ibn Mu'ammara to expel Abd al-Wahhab. He managed to establish a similar, yet ultimately more durable partnership with Muhammad Ibn Sa'ud in nearby Dir'iyah.

Like most of his output, Abd al-Wahhab's central work, *Kitab al-Tawhid* (Book of Oneness), was rather short and full of direct quotations from the Koran and the Hadiths given the impression of a textbook. His understanding of religious reform rested on what he considered illegitimate innovations, bid'a. For him, the profession of the oneness of God, tawhid, in itself would not suffice. Whereas traditionally only the open renunciation of the Islamic creed would turn a Muslim into an apostate, the individual believer would now also have to demonstrate his belief through his deeds in the service of God. While he followed the Muslim consensus that only polytheism (shirk) warranted the accusation of unbelief (takfir), his understanding of what constituted shirk was much broader. According to Abd al-Wahhab, 'U-Islamic' innovations (bi'da) such as Sufi and other mystic practices, the celebration of Prophet Muhammad's birthday, the belief in holy trees and stones, the idea that the deceased might serve as intercessors with God and smoking tobacco whose effect he equated with that of alcohol would put a Muslim beyond the realms of Islam.

Given how common these practices were in Arabia at that time, Abd al-Wahhab's thinking provided a ready justification for condemning other Muslims as infidels and waging war against them in the name of a legitimate 'jihad'. His greater willingness to engage in takfir caused some of his Muslim critics to accuse him of adopting Kharijite thinking and unduly threatening the internal peace of the Muslim umma. At the time of his death, Abd al-Wahhab had thus helped the Saudi dynasty to conquer most of the Arab peninsula. The fact that Wahhabi troops, upon entering

Kerbela in today's Iraq in 1802, destroyed Shiite shrines, including the mosque containing the tomb of Hussein Ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet and son of Ali, the first Shiite Imam, negatively shapes Shiite impressions of Wahhabism up until today. When the Wahhabi expansion reached Mecca and Medina in 1805/06, the Ottoman rulers sent Muhammad Ali of Egypt to eventually defeat the Saudi forces, destroy their capital at Dir'iyah in 1818 and thus spell the end of the first Saudi state. It was not until Abdul Aziz ibn Sa'ud captured Riyadh in 1922 that the Al-Sa'uds were able to lay the foundations for the present state of Saudi Arabia.

Rewind:

One recurring theme of academic discussions of Wahhabism is the extent to which Abd al-Wahhab relied on and made use of the thinking of Ibn Taymiyya. Both Abd al-Wahhab and Ibn Taymiyya rejected the notion of an intermediary between the individual believer and God, rejected Sufism and embraced the idea of 'jihad' against 'false' Muslims. They also shared the conviction that the revolt against an unjust ruler would only become legitimate when the ruler was openly calling on his subjects to abandon Islam. What set both apart was the fact that Ibn Taymiyya, in line with most Muslim thinking, accepted the individuals' inner conviction as a sufficient criterion for belief and unbelief. In addition, while Ibn Taymiyya was not prepared to categorize widespread manifestations of popular Islam as requiring excommunication and was even willing to accept Muslim indifference and passivity in the face of unbelief, Abd al-Wahhab called for the active geographical separation from the mushrikun and the cessation of any form of support granted to them.

Fast forward:

Abd al-Wahhab's emphasis on ijtihad as a means of reaching back to the original sources and re-establish a more authentic form of Islam based on the role model of pious forefathers (al-salaf al-salih) bears some resemblances with the thinking of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Muslim reformers commonly associated with the term Salafiyya. Both rejected taqlid, i.e. blind imitation, and considered the development of different schools of jurisprudence (madhab) to have brought about the undue splintering of the Muslim community. These methodological similarities should, however, not distract from the profound differences between the Abd al-Wahhab's rejection of rationalist thinking and his more narrowly defined attempts to restore an 'authentic' form of Islam against more common popular manifestations in the rather isolated 18<sup>th</sup> century central Arabia and the efforts of Muhammad Abduh and others to reconcile Islam with the challenges posed by European influences in the cultural and political centres of 19<sup>th</sup> century Middle East.

See also Saudis, Sunni, Shia

Further reading:

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