

The Modernity of Neo-Traditionalist Islam

Mark Sedgwick

1 Introduction: Neo-traditionalism

The varieties of contemporary Islam that currently attract most attention are Jihadism, Salafism, and the *ikhwāni* Islam of the Muslim Brothers. There is, however, a fourth variety of contemporary Islam that deserves attention, represented by theologians and preachers who self-identify as exponents of “traditional Islam,” but who will be described in this chapter as “Neo-traditionalists,” as it will be argued that their traditionalism is, in fact, modern.¹

The Neo-traditionalists promote what they see as traditional Islamic theology and practice. They are organized in an informal network spanning both the Arab world and the West, incorporating educational and research institutions in Jordan, Yemen, California, and Cambridge, England. They are defined also by the understandings of Islam that they oppose, which they label non-traditional, and which, as this chapter will show, are mostly characteristic of what Peter Wagner (1994) calls “restricted liberal modernity” (which this chapter will call “early modernity”), and “organized modernity” (a term this chapter will use). To this extent, then, the Neo-traditionalists are a product of what Wagner would call a “crisis of modernity,” the reaction against one stage of modernity that gives rise to a new stage of modernity. As this chapter will show, they are also typical in other ways of other responses to what Wagner calls “extended liberal modernity” (which this chapter will simply call “current modernity”).

The analysis of Neo-traditionalism in terms of theories of multiple and successive modernities, following Wagner and also following Dietrich Jung and Kirstine Sinclair (2015),² serves two purposes. Firstly, it highlights the ways in which Neo-traditionalism is a wave of the future rather than a conservative

¹ William Shepard (1987: 319–320) also used the term “Neo-traditionalism” to refer to a somewhat broader phenomenon, in which he included some whom this chapter will call Guénonian Traditionalists.

² I would like to thank the other participants in the Modern Muslim Subjectivity Project, and especially Dietrich Jung and Kirstine Sinclair, for their help and support. I would further like to thank Usaama al-Azami for his comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

throw-back to the past. Secondly, it throws light on the conditions of current modernity in the Muslim world.

After first discussing multiple and successive modernities and their crises, the chapter describes the Neo-traditionalist movement and its relationship with Sufism, other forms of traditionalism, and Arab and Western governments. It then investigates the Neo-traditionalists' understandings of the non-traditional "modern" Islam that they reject, and their understandings of the modernity that is its context, which in some cases is simply identified as the End Times, but in one case is analyzed with reference to a Western theorist of modernity rather different from Wagner, Jung or Sinclair – Julius Evola (1898–1974), a controversial Italian philosopher. Finally, the chapter returns to the question of what theories of modernity tell us about Neo-traditionalism, and how the analysis of Neo-traditionalism expands our understanding of current Muslim modernity.

2 Multiple and Successive Modernities

Modernity may be understood in terms of progress made in the realization of the Enlightenment project, as Wagner (2010: 16) notes. This understanding has normative value, as liberty, equality and solidarity are important, but is of limited analytic use, since the Enlightenment project was only one of a number of responses to those new conditions and circumstances that can be called the conditions of modernity. The projects of the Soviet Union and of Nazi Germany were equally responses to conditions of modernity. There is clearly more than one modernity, as Jung and Sinclair (2015) argue, following Shmuel Eisenstadt (2000).

It is useful to distinguish between what this chapter will call "projects of modernity" and "conditions of modernity." Most discussions of modernity are in fact discussions of projects of modernity, and sometimes confuse projects with conditions. Projects often aim to manage conditions, and new projects arise to manage new conditions. As Wagner writes, modernity is "a situation, a condition, which human beings give themselves and/or in which they find themselves" (Wagner 2004: 42). "Under conditions of modernity," he continues, "there is always a range of possibilities... characterized by *problématiques* that remain open, not by specific solutions to given problems" (Wagner 2004: 42). Similar conditions give rise to similar *problématiques*; the conditions of modernity are finite. Projects of modernity, however, are more varied. There are multiple modernities more because there are multiple projects than because there are multiple conditions.

The distinction between projects of modernity and conditions of modernity is useful in understanding Wagner's successive modernities, which Jung and Sinclair (2015) also incorporate into their model. Wagner (1994) proposes three stages of modernity: the early "limited liberal modernity" of Herder and Jefferson, the "organized modernity" of the mid-twentieth century, and the current "extended liberal modernity" that began to succeed organized modernity in 1968. Wagner understands the transition from one form of modernity to another in terms of "crises," of "the perception of problems or shortcomings of [...] [established] practices in the light of principles, expectations or demands" (Wagner 2012: 36). In this understanding, Wagner is in effect holding the conditions of modernity constant and seeing the projects as varying. This can of course happen, for example when it becomes clear that particular solutions that once seemed to hold much promise have not in fact worked as hoped. But it is also possible that the conditions of modernity vary, and variation in conditions probably does a better job of explaining the transition from one form of modernity to another than does variation in projects.

If there are multiple projects of modernity reflecting changing conditions of modernity even within the West, it is hardly surprising that further multiple projects of modernity can also be identified in the Muslim world. Jung and Sinclair identify three major Muslim "attitudes in reaction to the colonial and indigenous confrontation with modern institutions and ideas" (2015: 31), that is to say, three major Islamic projects of modernity. They associate the reform movement represented by Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905, Mufti of Egypt 1899–1905) with early modernity, the Muslim Brothers with organized modernity, and lay preachers such as Amr Khalid (born 1967) with current modernity (Jung and Sinclair 2015). This is convincing, and also fits with some of the other major patterns already noted. The Muslim Brothers not only directed criticism against inequality, impoverishment and exclusion, to use Wagner's words, but also responded to the *problématique* of the increasingly powerful state, ultimately developing a project around using the powers of the state. Amr Khalid not only directs criticism against the standardization of practices and homogenization of life-courses, but also responds to the *problématique* of the decline of the state – as a provider of inclusion, equality and social security, if not as an authoritarian force. His project is individual, based around *akhlāq* (personal morality and good conduct).

Jung and Sinclair do not, however, consider the relationship with modernity of three major forms of contemporary Islam: Jihadism, Salafism,³ and

3 Used in the standard contemporary sense. They do consider the Salafism of Muhammad Abduh.

Neo-traditionalism. A separate chapter would be required for a full examination of each of these, so before devoting the remainder of this chapter to Neo-traditionalism it will simply be noted that while neither the Jihadi nor the Salafi projects correspond to the conditions of early modernity, the Jihadi project might be associated with either organized or current modernity, and the Salafi project might equally be associated with current modernity. Salafism focuses on the conduct of the individual, not the uses of the state, rather as Amr Khalid does. Although Jihadism does arguably focus on the individual jihadi, it also aims at the creation of a state.

The Neo-traditionalist project, it will now be argued, can be associated with current modernity, partly because it is a reaction against the projects of early and organized modernity, and partly because it is a response to the conditions of current modernity.

3 The Neo-traditionalist Movement

The Neo-traditionalist movement takes the form of a loose network of individuals and institutions that share a common approach to Islam, tradition and modernity. It has previously been identified by Jonathan Brown (2009: 243), who calls it Late Sunni Traditionalism, by Kasper Mathiesen (2013: 191), who calls it the Traditional Islam current, by Sadek Hamid (2016: 68–87), who calls it the Traditional Islam network, and by Thomas Pierret (2013a: 126–127), who calls it the “anti-Salafi international.” Pierret is right that it is anti-Salafi, as we will see, but it is better characterized by what it stands for: what it calls, in English and sometimes also in Arabic, “traditional Islam.”

There are, in fact, at least two overlapping Neo-traditionalist networks, one spanning Arab and Anglophone countries and one spanning Arab and Franco-phone countries. This chapter will focus on the Arab-Anglophone network, but the Arab-Francophone network is also interesting, and deserves further study.⁴

3.1 *The Neo-traditionalist Network*

Neo-traditionalism is present in the Muslim world, in the West, and in the global space that is increasingly replacing geographically-defined space. This global space is partly virtual, on the internet and especially on YouTube, but is also partly physical, created by the erosion of geographical distance. In 2015,

4 The key points in the Francophone network are two Sufi *ṭarīqas*, the very successful Boutchi-chiya in Morocco (Sedgwick 2004b) and the somewhat less prominent Alawiyya in Algeria, and King Mohammed VI of Morocco.

I attended a Neo-traditionalist meeting in Cairo that was addressed by a Sufi shaykh from Amman and attended by followers from Egypt and beyond. One man to whom I spoke had come for the occasion from the United Arab Emirates (UAE). His passport, however, identified him as a Canadian, and the passport of the shaykh from Amman identified him as a US citizen. The Canadian from the UAE who went to Cairo to listen to an American from Amman was himself, however, born to parents of South Asian origin (interview, Cairo, November 2015). This example shows one way in which Neo-traditionalism inhabits a global space.

The oldest key Neo-traditionalist based in the Arab world is the now-deceased Syrian scholar Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Buti (1929–2013). The most prominent Neo-traditionalist today is a resident of the UAE, *Ḥabīb* Ali Zayn al-Abidin al-Jifri (born 1971), a young and dynamic member of the Ba 'Alawi family or *sāda*, the hereditary leaders of a Sufi order that has operated internationally from its base in Hadramut for many centuries.⁵ A search for al-Jifri on YouTube produces 90,000 hits, 46,000 in Arabic and 44,000 in English.⁶ One Arabic video with English subtitles has now been viewed 3.3 million times (Al-Jifri 2013), and many others have viewing statistics in the hundreds of thousands. On Facebook (2018), al-Jifri has six million followers. Also important in the Muslim world is another Ba Alawi, *Ḥabīb* Umar bin Hafiz (born 1963), the founder and director of the Dar al-Mustafa in Tarim, Hadramut. The Dar al-Mustafa is the most important Neo-traditionalist educational institution in the Arab world. Also associated with Neo-traditionalism is Ali Gomaa (Jum'a, born 1952), Grand Mufti of Egypt from 2003 to 2013. Another important Arab Neo-traditionalist is Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal of Jordan (born 1966), a first cousin of King Abdullah II (born 1962, assumed throne 1999) and the president of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, a Jordanian NGO. Also based in the Arab world is the American shaykh I encountered in Cairo, already mentioned, Nuh Ha Mim Keller (born 1954), shaykh of the Shaghuri Shadhiliyya *ṭarīqa*.

The most prominent Neo-traditionalist in the Anglophone West is Hamza Yusuf Hanson (born 1958) in Berkeley, California, where he directs Zaytuna College, the most important Neo-traditionalist educational institution in America. Zaytuna's BA degree is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. Hamza Yusuf's most popular YouTube video (Hamza Yusuf 2014) has 600,000 views, and several others have hundreds of thousands of views. In Europe, there is Abdal Hakim Murad (born 1960) in Cambridge,

5 *Ḥabīb* is a title used by the Ba Alawi *sāda*, not a name.

6 In early 2018.

England, where he directs the Cambridge Muslim College (CMC), the most important Neo-traditionalist educational institution in Europe, previously studied by Sinclair (2016), and also discussed by her in this volume (2020). Abdal Hakim Murad has a smaller presence on YouTube, where none of his videos have more than 100,000 views, but still has a wide reach in cyberspace.⁷ He is also known by his original name, Tim Winter, in which capacity he is a lecturer in Islamic Studies at Cambridge University's Faculty of Divinity (Divinity ND). The Cambridge Muslim College thus has a geographical connection with Cambridge University and a personal connection through Winter, though its degrees are validated not by Cambridge University but by the Open University, a large British distance-learning institution that is considerably less prestigious than Cambridge, though still respected. Cambridge Muslim College, like Zaytuna, is attended primarily by Western-born students with family origins in the Muslim world.

Other Neo-traditionalists in the West include Faraz Rabbani (born 1974), a Canadian of Pakistani origin whose teachers include Keller, who runs *SeekersHub*, an online "Islamic Seminary" used, to judge from the numbers of study circles, mostly in the US and England, with a presence also in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, in Germany, and in Kuwait, Malaysia, Nigeria, and the Philippines.⁸ A similar Neo-traditionalist website offering formally-structured online courses, also connected to Keller, is *Qibla: Islamic Sciences Online*.⁹ The total number of full-time and part-time Neo-traditionalists teachers in the West is hard to estimate, but is probably in the hundreds rather than the thousands.

3.2 *Internal Connections*

These individuals and institutions all operate independently of each other, but all also refer to each other and cooperate with each other, and promote very similar understandings of Islam. Among numerous examples of cooperation are that al-Buti invited al-Jifri on preaching tours of Syria, while al-Jifri invited al-Buti to join him on preaching tours of Europe (Pierret 2013a: 127–128). Abdal Hakim's Cambridge Muslim College sent a delegation to the Ba 'Alawis in Tarim (CMC 2011: 3), while Ali Gomaa visited the Cambridge Muslim College (Cambridge Khutbas 2008). Al-Jifri, Abdal Hakim, and Hamza Yusuf all collaborated with the Radical Middle Way, a British Muslim group that ran a website and

7 For example, Abdal Hakim Murad (2016), discussed below, was delivered to about fifty people, but has been watched in YouTube 38,000 times (by March 2018).

8 <http://seekershut.org>.

9 <https://qibla.com>.

organized meetings as “an organic response by traditional Islam to challenges posed by extremist ideas” (Radical Middle Way 2006). Prince Ghazi, al-Jifri and Hamza Yusuf all met in Mecca (Ghazi 2013: 45), and Hamza Yusuf wrote the foreword to Prince Ghazi’s book *What is Islam and Why?* (Hamza Yusuf 2012a: 7). Abdal Hakim joins Hamza Yusuf and other prominent American Neo-traditionalists at the annual Reviving the Islamic Spirit Conference, a major event normally held in Toronto, Canada, over Christmas, and attended by many thousands.¹⁰ Finally, all the major Neo-traditionalists mentioned were signatories of the Amman Message, a statement issued in 2004 by King Abdullah II and arranged by Prince Ghazi’s Aal al-Bayt Institute, discussed further below. The Neo-traditionalist network is a network by virtue of these connections.

3.3 *External Connections*

The Neo-traditionalist network has important overlaps in three further areas. One is Sufism, as all the key Neo-traditionalists are also Sufis. Al-Buti was a Naqshbandi, and one of his last works was a *sharḥ* (commentary) on the famous *Hikam* (sayings) of Ibn Ata Allah al-Sikandari (Pierret 2015). Al-Jifri and *Ḥabīb* Umar are both representatives of one of Islam’s oldest Sufi families, technically not a *ṭarīqa* but behaving very much like one (Peskes 2011). Ali Gomaa is known as a Sufi and has written and spoken in defense of Sufism, though it is unclear which *ṭarīqa*, if any, he follows.¹¹ Prince Ghazi is a follower of the Maryamiyya *ṭarīqa* (Ghazi 2013: 70). Hamza Yusuf does not self-identify publicly as a Sufi, probably because he feels that “labeling people or groups as Salafi, Sufi, or Wahhabi... engender[s] animosity” (Hamza Yusuf and Zaid Shakir 2013: 30), but he originally became Muslim through joining a Western Sufi order, the Darqawīyya (Grewal 2014: 160), and is said still to follow a shaykh. Much of what he teaches (Hamza Yusuf and Zaid Shakir 2013: 12–26, 31–34) is, in fact, the Sufi path, though it is not identified in these terms. Abdal Hakim likewise refers to his shaykh and is known as a Sufi. Keller, as has been noted, is himself a Shadhili shaykh.

The second area with which the Neo-traditionalist network overlaps is the network of Guénonian Traditionalism,¹² an influential though low-key Western esoteric movement (Sedgwick 2004a), to which Prince Ghazi, Abdal Hakim and Hamza Yusuf are all linked. From 1990, while studying at Cambridge

10 RIS Convention, <https://risconvention.com>. See also the very glossy promotional video at https://youtu.be/_lhilRxKEU (last accessed 1 October 2019).

11 He may have been a follower of the Moroccan shaykh Abdullah al-Sadiq al-Ghumari (1910–1993).

12 A capital *T* is commonly used to denote this school of thought, as a capital *N* is used for Neo-Traditionalism.

University in England, Prince Ghazi followed Martin Lings (Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Din, 1909–2005) (Ghazi 2013: 70), the English Guénonian Traditionalist who was a close companion of René Guénon (Abd al-Wahid Yahya, 1886–1951) in Cairo during the 1940s and who succeeded Frithjof Schuon (Isa Nur al-Din, 1907–1998) as shaykh of the Maryamiyya *ṭarīqa* in England. Hamza Yusuf is not a member of the Maryamiyya, but is an admirer of Lings (Hamza Yusuf 2005) and often works with Seyyed Hossein Nasr (born 1933), an Iranian-American and the chief successor of Schuon as shaykh of the Maryamiyya in the US,¹³ and occasionally uses Guénonian Traditionalist terminology.¹⁴ Abdal Hakim is likewise not a Maryami but – as we will see below – is well-read in the Guénonian Traditionalist classics.

3.4 *Neo-traditionalism and Arab and Western Governments*

The third area with which the Neo-traditionalist network overlaps is that made up of Arab and Western governments. Al-Buti and Ali Gomaa were both government employees. Prince Ghazi is close to the Jordanian king, and al-Jifri has good relations with the UAE government and has been the honored guest of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (born 1954, assumed office 2014). The Radical Middle Way was supported by the British government under Prime Minister Tony Blair (born 1953, in office 1997–2007), receiving £1.2m (then \$2m) in government funding between 2006 and 2009 (Hope 2009; Jones 2013). This overlap is especially significant because both Arab and Western governments have their own agendas so far as Islam is concerned. An important concern of Arab governments is restraining the Islamist groups that have, since the 1980s, been their major political rivals. Similarly, since 9/11 and especially since 2005, Western governments have invested considerable resources in promoting “moderate” alternatives to “radical Islam.”

The consequences of the overlap with Arab governments are explicitly political. This is clear in the case of the Amman Message, which was eventually signed by the governments of almost all the world’s Muslim countries, as by Prince Ghazi and a number of other Neo-traditionalists and Guénonian Traditionalists (Aal al-Bayt Institute 2009: 23–83). The Amman Message is more of an intergovernmental declaration than a theological text. Its most important context was, as Michaëlle Browers (2011: 948–949) has argued, global tensions unleashed by 9/11 and the subsequent US invasion of Iraq, and Jordan’s own domestic difficulties with Islamist rebels in Ma’an. Although it was certainly an

¹³ They often publicly endorse each other’s books and projects.

¹⁴ Thus in 1997 he discussed the relationship between the esoteric and the exoteric in terms close to those used by Traditionalists (Kugle 2006: 15).

expression of the Neo-traditionalist understanding of traditional Islam, it was also a response to the call issued by Western political leaders in the aftermath of 9/11 for “moderate” Islam, and Browsers concludes that “the true or authentic Islam promoted in the Message is a regime-sponsored brand of ‘official Islam’” (Browsers 2011: 947, 953).

The connection between Neo-traditionalism and regime-sponsored official Islam extends beyond the Amman Message. Al-Buti was also closely associated with his regime. As an opponent of the Muslim Brotherhood, he became a supporter of the Syrian government during Syria’s 1979–1982 Islamist insurgency. He developed a good personal relationship with President Hafez al-Assad (1930–2000, in office 1971–2000), which gave him access to Syrian television and helped advance some of his social projects, such as the closing of the Damascus casino (Pierret 2013b). Up to this point, it might be argued, his political engagement was justified by its fruits. After the start of the Syrian Civil War, however, he became the only respected Sunni figure to remain faithful to the Assads, at one point comparing regime forces with the Companions of the Prophet and identifying the anti-Assad rebels with a global Zionist conspiracy against Syria (Pierret 2013b). He thus aligned himself with the Assads against the majority of Syria’s Sunni population. It is unclear who was responsible for his assassination in 2013. In Egypt, Ali Gomaa, too, was considered excessively close to the regimes of both presidents Mubarak and Sisi (Warren 2017), but survived an assassination attempt in 2016.

Al-Jifri has been criticized for his implied support of President Sisi and for his key role in a conference in 2016 similar to the one that was arranged around the Amman Message, but which was held in Grozny, Chechnya, Russian Federation. One issue with the “Grozny Conference” was that its declaration, which resembled the Amman Message, initially appeared to exclude Saudi Islam from its definition of Sunnism, a mistake that the Amman Message had not made. This provoked outrage in Saudi Arabia, including talk of a “cultural war” against the Kingdom (Al-Mutayri 2016). Even Muslims unsympathetic to Saudi Arabia were unhappy about prominent Sunni scholars accepting the hospitality of the Russian-sponsored Chechen government, as many saw the Russian government as hostile to Islam, given the Russian role in the Syrian conflict, and before that in the Chechen conflict (AFP 2016; Al-Jifri 2016).

The consequences of the overlap with Western governments are likewise political, explicitly so in the case of the Radical Middle Way, which was established in reaction to the 2005 terrorist attacks in London to support “Prevent,” the counter-radicalization part of the British government’s counter-terrorism strategy, by “strengthening the [British Muslim] mainstream,” which in terms of Prevent means strengthening non-radical Islam. It aimed to do this by

“providing a steady flow of ideas, digital content, programming, that created space [...] where real pertinent political issues could be raised and talked about” (McQueen 2017). The Radical Middle Way, it might be argued, was thus supporting what might also be called “a regime-sponsored brand of ‘moderate Islam.’”

British government understandings of what constituted “moderate Islam” changed in 2011 under the new government of David Cameron (born 1966, in office 2010–16), ending support for the Radical Middle Way, but the Neo-traditionalists’ pro-government positions remain controversial. The Radical Middle Way experienced what Abdul-Rehman Malik called “a big trade-off in terms of fighting for credibility and fighting for the money to operate” (Jones 2013: 559), and Hamza Yusuf was criticized for associating too closely with the Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11, to the extent that some then characterized him as the president’s “pet Muslim,” and others began to refer to him not as Hamza Yusuf but as “Hamza Useless” (Grewal 2014: 308). More recently, Hamza Yusuf’s relations with the Trump administration (from 2017) have led to him being described as “in an awkward and compromised position” (Birt 2017).

Neo-traditionalism, then, is associated with regime-sponsored official Islam in the Arab world, and with government-sponsored “moderate” Islam in the Western world. This association brings benefits, of which the generous financial support for the Radical Middle Way in 2006–09 is one example. It also brings costs, however, as Neo-traditionalism seems to some to be serving questionable political agendas. Political support for the counter-radicalization programs of Western governments arguably differs from political support for the anti-Islamist policies of Arab governments, as Western governments take an approach to political dissent that is very different from that taken by the Egyptian and Syrian governments, or even the Jordanian government. Similarly, no recent Western military action in the Muslim world has been quite as bloody as Russian action in Chechnya and Syria. Even so, the agendas of Western governments may still appear questionable.

4 Neo-traditionalist Thought

Neo-traditionalists use the term “traditional” in connection with “Islam” more often in English than in Arabic, partly because the connotations of the Arabic term *taqlīdī* (traditional) are less positive than the connotations of the English term “traditional.” The Amman Message was published in both an Arabic and an English version, and while the English introduction described the Message as “a consolidation of traditional, orthodox Islam” (Aal al-Bayt Institute 2009:

vii), the slightly different Arabic introduction described it simply as “a consolidation of orthodox (*ḥanīf*) Islam” (Aal al-Bayt Institute 2013: 15). In the Q&A section appended to the Message, authored by Prince Ghazi, the Arabic refers to “‘moderate,’ orthodox, traditional (*taqlīdī*) Islam” (Aal al-Bayt Institute 2013: 111), but this is unusual, and could be because Prince Ghazi may have composed the Q&A section in English – the English text refers to English “traditional, orthodox, ‘moderate’ Islam” (Aal al-Bayt Institute 2009: 88).¹⁵ More typically, the bilingual website of al-Jifri’s Taba Foundation refers in its English version to “traditional Islamic sciences” but at the equivalent point in its Arabic version refers to “Shari’a sciences by uninterrupted (*muttaṣil*) transmission (*isnād*)” (Taba Foundation ND).

This, then, is one Neo-traditionalist understanding of traditional Islam: uninterrupted transmission of Islamic knowledge.¹⁶ A related but slightly different Neo-traditionalist understanding of traditional Islam is found in the Amman Message: *taqlīd* (adherence) to one of the *madhāhib* (schools of interpretation), to the *‘aqīda* (doctrine) of Abu’l Hasan al-Ash‘ari (died 935–6), and to Sufism (Aal al-Bayt Institute 2013: 33). For much of the history of Islam, an individual’s adherence to a *madhhab* was the norm.¹⁷ This is probably the definition most frequently encountered in English, and is that used by Brown (2009: 261) and Mathiesen (2013: 199). It is compatible with the understanding of tradition as uninterrupted transmission of Islamic knowledge, since uninterrupted transmission is precisely what the *madhāhib* stress, and transmission is also central to Sufism. This definition is, however, perhaps more important for what it implicitly rejects than for what it endorses. The main significance of al-Ash‘ari is that he is rejected by Salafis, and the main significance of the *madhāhib* is that *taqlīd* to them is generally rejected by modernists in both liberal and Muslim Brothers strands, and also by Salafis.¹⁸ Sufism is likewise generally rejected by both modernists and Salafis, but, unlike al-Ash‘ari and the *madhāhib*, it does also have major positive significance for Neo-traditionalism, as most of the key Neo-traditionalists are Sufis, as has been noted.

15 The website of the Amman Message has English as its primary language and Arabic only as a secondary language. <http://ammanmessage.com/>. Prince Ghazi’s English is that of a native speaker.

16 As Usaama al-Azami (2015) points out, this form of transmission is also used by some of those the Neo-traditionalists condemn.

17 Although in principle a Sunni Muslim adhered to Islam and the shari’a, in practice this means adhering to a *madhhab*. See Hallaq 1984.

18 This rejection is not invariable or absolute, but the Neo-traditionalist perception that *taqlīd* is rejected by modernists and Salafis has a good basis.

4.1 *Guénonian Traditionalist Understandings of “Tradition”*

The Guénonian Traditionalist understanding of tradition is complex, and has been discussed elsewhere (Sedgwick 2004a), so I will only summarize it briefly here. It is, in essence, that the tradition is the same as the perennial *philosophia*, the single esoteric truth that once existed inside all the world’s multiple religions, and is now found primarily in the Sufi tradition of Islam, and also in the Hindu Vedanta, Buddhism, and some non-Protestant Christian traditions. The esoteric is, in this understanding, defined in opposition to the exoteric: the visible mythical, doctrinal, and ritual manifestations of all religions are exoteric, while their internal and mystical core is esoteric. Guénonian Traditionalists stress that perennial esoteric traditions must be practiced only within the exoteric frame of the religion that holds them, from which they are not properly detachable. Sufism is understood as the esoteric tradition of Islam. In the Guénonian Traditionalist understanding, then, the Ash‘ari *‘aqida* and the *madhāhib* are significant not so much because they constitute traditional Islam, but because they are the exoteric container of the esoteric perennial tradition. The perennial tradition is found in Sufism, not in exoteric Islam.

It is not clear to what extent Prince Ghazi personally understands tradition as perennial *philosophia*. I have found no public statements of sympathy with the perennialist position, but Prince Ghazi is presumably fully aware of the risk that outrage might greet such views if expressed too publicly by someone who is not only Muslim but also in the line of succession to the throne of a Muslim country. Prince Ghazi is, however, proficient in Guénonian Traditionalist theory, as can be seen from his article “The Traditional Doctrine of Symbolism,” published first in the Guénonian Traditionalist journal *Sophia* and then republished in an *Introduction to the Perennial Philosophy*, co-edited by Lings (Ghazi 2007). Given this, it is unlikely that he does not in fact accept the perennialist position. His engagements in inter-faith projects certainly suggests that he does. These include the composition and publicizing of two high-profile dialogue documents, “A Common Word,” a statement emphasizing the “common ground” between Muslims and Christians, and “Common Ground Between Islam and Buddhism,” doing the same for Muslims and Buddhists (Ghazi 2013: 57–61, 75–77). “A Common Word” attracted some attention in the West when it was released (Farouky 2007), though “Common Ground Between Islam and Buddhism” has attracted less attention. Neither dialogue document advances explicitly perennialist positions, but “A Common Word” was a joint Neo-traditionalist and Guénonian Traditionalist project, composed by Prince Ghazi with the help of al-Jifri and al-Buti on the Neo-traditionalist side, and of Seyyed Hossein Nasr on the Guénonian

Traditionalist side (Ghazi 2013: 57–61),¹⁹ while “Common Ground Between Islam and Buddhism” was the fruit of discussions between the Dalai Lama and Reza Shah-Kazemi (born 1960) (Ghazi 2013: 75–77), a British scholar who is almost certainly a Maryami Guénonian Traditionalist.²⁰

Prince Ghazi’s understanding of tradition almost certainly includes Guénonian Traditionalist perennialist elements, then, as well as uninterrupted transmission, the Ash’ari *‘aqīda*, the *madhhabs*, and Sufism. Guénonian Traditionalist perennialism is not, however, found among other Neo-traditionalists. Abdal Hakim is well-read in Guénonian Traditionalist thought, as we will see below, but has condemned “religious pluralism” (and by implication perennialism) as a form of paganism incompatible with Islam, which is the final and definitive revelation rather than just one way of conceiving truth (Winter 2013). Hamza Yusuf writes that he and al-Jifri once discussed perennialism with Lings, and concluded that “while Dr. Lings’ view on the subject was not mainstream, it was not a complete rejection of the classical Islamic position which holds that previous religious dispensations were abrogated by the final message of the Prophet Muhammad” (Hamza Yusuf 2005: 55). This is far from an endorsement.

The Neo-traditionalist who has been most critical of Guénonian Traditionalist perennialism is Keller, on the basis that perennialism proposes the validity of all religions, while Islam accepts the validity of only one religion, Islam (Keller 1996).²¹ Even so, Keller notes the importance for his own conversion to Islam of his readings in philosophy, which he studied at the University of Chicago, and of the books of Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Keller NDa).

4.2 *The Neo-traditionalists on Modern Islam*

Neo-traditionalists define themselves by what they oppose as much as by what they promote, and what they oppose is non-traditional, “modern” Islam. The context of this modern Islam is identified by many Neo-traditionalists simply as the End Times, but is also analyzed by Abdal Hakim with reference to the understandings of modernity of Evola, the Italian philosopher associated with Guénonian Traditionalism. I have found no comparable discussions of modernity by other Neo-traditionalists, but it is likely that Neo-traditionalists who

19 It was signed by these authors, all the main Neo-traditionalists, three Maryamis, and two non-Maryami Traditionalists (Aal al-Bayt Institute 2007).

20 I have found no clear statement of this, but given his career and writings it is highly unlikely that he is not a Maryami.

21 This position was slightly softened in Keller 2007.

are close to Guénonian Traditionalism (notably Prince Ghazi) subscribe to similar understandings.

The oldest Neo-traditionalist argument for traditional Islam was made by al-Buti in his now classic *Al-Lamadhhabiyya: Akhtar bi'da tuhaddidu al-shari'a al-Islamiyya* (Abandoning the Madhhabs: The Most Dangerous Innovation that Threatens the Shari'a) in 1970.²² This was originally written as a refutation of an argument against the *madhāhib* made by the Saudi scholar Muhammad Sultan al-Khojandi (1880–1959). Its target, then, is Saudi (and thus in effect Salafi) Islam. It argues for tradition (in the sense of the *madhāhib*) on the basis of the inherent difficulties of interpreting the Qur'an and Sunna to derive accurate rulings, which it illustrates with various examples (Al-Buti 2005). It also makes a comparison between the lack of competence of the untrained *fiqh* (jurisprudence) scholar and the lack of competence of the untrained medical practitioner:

A man has a child who suffers from some infections, and is under the care of all the doctors in town, who [...] warn his father against giving him an injection of penicillin [...]. Now, the father knows from having read a medical publication that penicillin helps in cases of infection. So he relies on his own knowledge about it, disregards the advice of the doctors since he doesn't know the proof for what they say, and employing instead his own personal conviction, treats the child with a penicillin injection, and thereafter the child dies. Should such a person be tried, and is he guilty of a wrong for what he did, or not?

Al-Buti ND

This becomes the standard argument against *lāmadhhabiyya* and for the *madhāhib*. It may draw on earlier works preceding the emergence of Neo-traditionalism such as Muhammad Zahid al-Kawthari (1879–1952) in *Al-Lamadhhabiyya qintarat al-ladiniyya* (Abandoning the Madhhabs: The Bridge to Atheism).

The closest that al-Buti gets to advancing a conception of modernity is when lamenting that intellectuals (*mufakkirīn*) have encroached on the field of the 'ulama', with the result that changes in the *fiqh* are proposed on grounds that circumstances have changed – even though the changes of recent centuries are in fact less major than the changes that came in the first centuries of Islam (Pierret 2013a: 110–11). Al-Buti is evidently criticizing liberal modernism. Al-Buti also criticizes the contemporary West as atheist and as the scene of “the

22 Most references are to the second edition of 1970.

destruction of culture, morality, and health, through drugs, venereal diseases, and neuroses,” and regrets that any Muslim should be attracted by “European progress” (Christmann 2000).

Although al-Buti’s arguments are not overtly political, they have clear political implications, especially when seen in the context of his own relations with the Syrian regime.

Al-Jifri (1999) repeats al-Buti’s arguments against *lāmadhhabīyya*, which remain the standard ones, also pointing to the inherent difficulty of interpretation, and also using the medical metaphor (Al-Jifri 1999). He goes further than al-Buti regarding the negative role of intellectuals, noting that since the replacement of the classic institutions of learning with institutions modeled on Western universities, “whoever has a doctorate is considered prepared, even if he is ignorant.” Methods that are appropriate for training students in the modern sciences are unsuitable for training people in the religious sciences. What is needed for this is “a path of reception linked to the chain of transmission [*sanad*], where we find interconnected a chain of transmission with a chain of knowledge and a chain of purification of the soul” (Al-Jifri 1999). The result is that Islam has been oversimplified, removing diversity and multiple perspectives, and so making many individuals “feel as though they are the only true representative of Islam.” Al-Jifri, then, understands modernity not only in terms of the lessened authority of the ‘ulama’ but also in terms of the popularity of alternative forms of knowledge production that are of Western origin and do not involve purification of the soul. He seems to be referring to both liberal modernism and the Muslim Brothers, who are presumably those who, he believes, think they are the only true representative of Islam.

Al-Jifri also understands modernity in terms of the End Times. He explains the loss of knowledge by citing the famous hadith that:

Allah does not take away knowledge by taking it away from the people, but takes it away by the death of the ‘ulama’ until when none of the ‘ulama’ remains, people will take the ignorant as their leaders, who will give fatwas without knowledge. So they will go astray and will lead the people astray.

Al-Bukhari ND

To this al-Jifri adds a further understanding of modernity in terms of disunity and dispute among the Muslims caused by their (unidentified) enemies. Turmoil results from “internal sectarian and exclusionist divisions” and “an ideology of *takfir* [accusation of unbelief] that shrouds itself in the garb of Ahl al-Sunna” (Al-Jifri 2016), evidently a reference to Jihadism, which its opponents

often term *takfīr*-ism. While on the one hand this is the result of “people appointing themselves to *ijtihād* [new interpretation] without the necessary qualities” (Al-Jifri 1999) and of Muslims turning away from God, it also results from the activities of “the enemies of truth [who] have been allowed to overpower us because of our sins and vices” (Al-Batati 2006). A similar argument is developed in a lesson in which al-Jifri attacks Wahhabis and Salafis (though without naming them) for their lack of love for the Prophet. This is not a mistake, he says, but a deliberate attempt to divide the Muslims from their Prophet and their religion. When the enemies of Islam failed in separating Muslims from their faith honestly, they planted among the Muslims those who would take religion from the hearts of the Muslims in the name of religion, using those who were happy to sell their religion for the price of the world (Al-Jifri ND). Al-Jifri, then, echoes two aspects of a discourse that is very widespread in the Arab world: the idea that Islam is under attack from unnamed enemies, generally understood as Westerners and Jews, and that the positions of one’s opponents can be explained and discredited by their association with the enemies of Islam.

Al-Jifri’s arguments, then, are more political than al-Buti’s. He attacks not just liberal modernism, Saudi Islam, and Salafism, but also the Muslim Brothers and Jihadism. He identifies these with the enemies of Islam and the forces of evil present at the end of time.

Keller and Hamza Yusuf both follow the classic arguments of al-Buti and al-Jifri, also drawing attention to the inherent difficulties of interpretation, and also both using the medical metaphor (Hamza Yusuf 2012b; Keller 1995). Keller (NDa) does not advance a detailed critique of modernity, beyond occasional comments such as one noting “our own plight in the twentieth century, which could no longer answer a single ethical question... as if this century’s unparalleled mastery of concrete things had somehow ended by making us things.” Hamza Yusuf (2012b) also makes the End-Times argument that al-Jifri makes. Knowledge is passed by transmission, and “as time goes on it gets weaker and weaker, that’s why it’s much easier to break towards the end,” “in these last days, in which Islam has become a stranger, just as it began a stranger.” This is, in his view as in al-Jifri’s, the result of inappropriate educational methodologies. Secular education has “undermined the spiritual authority of the scholars of Islam,” and “most of the schools that presently exist are more effective in stunting the intellectual, spiritual, and social growth of our youth than in nurturing them” (Hamza Yusuf and Zaid Shakir 2013: 4, 9). Also like al-Jifri, Hamza Yusuf draws attention to the consequences of turning away from God (Hamza Yusuf and Zaid Shakir 2013: 3), and also to the presence of conflict, but as effect, not as cause: if you “say everybody just work it out for yourself, you’re supposed

to be a *mujtahid* not a *muqallid* [...] if you open this, if you unleash it and let it out, well, welcome to the modern world! Welcome to the Islamic *dawla* [state] of Iraq!" (Hamza Yusuf 2016). This is an explicitly political statement.

For Hamza Yusuf, however, the central problem is not that Islam is under attack from unnamed enemies, but civilizational decay. In his view, although "angry youth" may use Islam as "a political platform to rage against the injustices of the West," in fact the problem is not the West, but "tyrannical governments" in the Muslim world, and "an indolence and lassitude that make Muslims among the least productive peoples on earth" (Hamza Yusuf and Zaid Shakir 2013: 5). There is, however, also a problem with Western modernity, where society is disintegrating into "reckless abandon regarding sexuality, tattooed, and even mutilated bodies, escapism via manufactured music and mass entertainment, and angst-ridden youth living in a nature-deprived world of mediated reality, their obsessive-compulsive addictions further alienating them from self and other" (Hamza Yusuf 2017).

A more complex argument is made by Abdal Hakim. Like the other Neo-traditionalists, he stresses the difficulty of interpreting hadith, and uses the medical metaphor. He also references al-Buti. His understanding of modernity likewise includes conflict among Muslims, the End Times, and the negative consequences of secular education, of "a Western-influenced global culture in which people are urged from early childhood to think for themselves and to challenge established authority." Just as the Enlightenment and its logic encouraged Westerners to reject hierarchy and authority, so it is having a similar impact on Muslims (Abdal Hakim Murad 2014: 2016). One reason that Ibn Taymiyya is now so popular, suggests Abdal Hakim, is that his understanding of *fiṭra* (nature) can be used to validate the sovereign human self. "The *jāhiliyya* [age of ignorance] is precisely predicated on the sovereign human self" (Abdal Hakim Murad 2016).

4.3 *Abdal Hakim on Modernity*

Beyond this, however, Abdal Hakim also sometimes proposes an understanding of modernity based in Guénonian Traditionalist thought. In 2016, for example, he devoted a two-hour lecture at the Cambridge Muslim College to a discussion of modernity that took both its title and general framing from *Ride the Tiger* (*Cavalcare la tigre*), one of the most famous books of Evola, the Italian Traditionalist who adopted much of Guénon's thought. Evola's point was that one way to survive the dangerous "tiger" of modernity was to jump on its back. Evola is little stressed by most Muslim Guénonian Traditionalists, partly because (unlike Guénon) he never became Muslim, and partly because of an association first with Fascism and Nazism, and then with the New Right.

A passing reference to Evola by President Trump's Chief Strategist Steve Bannon (born 1953) was enough to unleash a series of shocked articles in the American media in 2017. Abdal Hakim noted that Evola was indeed problematic because of these associations, and also "a tragic figure," as he had never discovered Islam. Despite this, however, "Evola is a point of reference for those who are seeking an alternative" to modernity, even if "much of his analysis is alien and difficult" (Abdal Hakim Murad 2016).

In his lecture, Abdal Hakim referred not only to Evola but also to the mainstream and generally respected philosophers Charles Taylor (born 1931) and Slavoj Žižek (born 1949), and also to the rather less mainstream Markus Willinger (born 1992), a young Austrian Identitarian, some of whose writing he read out approvingly. Identitarians such as Willinger, Abdal Hakim felt, were wrong in their often xenophobic and racist solutions to the problems they saw, but right in spotting those problems in the first place, unlike so many other people, who failed even to spot them (Abdal Hakim Murad 2016). Abdal Hakim's thought, then, is distinctly eclectic.

Abdal Hakim started by explaining the Guénonian Traditionalist understanding of modernity as the *kali yuga* (the fourth and final age of Vedanta chronology), an understanding on which he expanded, identifying modernity not only with the End Times but also as "the absence of the sacred" in a "bland consumer void." "Modernity lapses and limps into post-modernity," explained Abdal Hakim, "so that the very sovereign human subject which the Enlightenment thought that it could put in the space vacated by the Christian God is itself in a state of increasing crisis and anxiety" (Abdal Hakim Murad 2016). Like Wagner, then, Abdal Hakim has identified a crisis of modernity, and like Hamza Yusuf he notes general anxiety.

Under these circumstances, Abdal Hakim argued, one reaction to "anxiety about the loss of meaning, the confiscation of identity by modernity" was anxiety about identity that found expression on the European Right in such movements as Pegida.²³ It also found a parallel expression, however, among European Muslims, in very similar concerns about "identity and boundary issues," and in understandings of Islam that fitted this, and had little relationship to traditional Islam. This is why it was so important "to look at the *usul* [bases of jurisprudence], to see what is authentic here, rather than just panicking about making concessions to the *kuffār* [unbelievers]" (Abdal Hakim Murad 2016).

23 *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*, Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West, a German group.

Abdal Hakim's analysis of modernity, then, is compatible with that of the other Neo-traditionalists, but also owes much to Evola, Traditionalism, and other modern Western philosophers. It is implicitly political.

5 The Modernity of Neo-traditionalism

The Neo-traditionalists do not see themselves as modern, and the understandings of Islam that they promote are indeed generally pre-modern. The movement itself, however, is modern rather than pre-modern to the extent that it is a response to conditions of modernity and to other Islamic projects and movements that came into being under earlier conditions of modernity. It is also modern in that it focuses on the individual rather than the state, and that it uses media that are characteristic of current modernity – YouTube, Facebook, and the internet – and occupies a global space.

As we have seen, the Neo-traditionalist movement criticizes the liberal modernist project of early modernity, and the Muslim Brotherhood's organized-modernity project. Neo-traditionalists also criticize the Jihadis and Salafis, whose projects are less easy to locate in terms of modernity. The Neo-traditionalist emphasis on the *madhāhib* and the *ʿaqīda* of al-Ashʿari are, like al-Buti and al-Jifri, opposed to Saudi-Salafi Islam and liberal modernism. Al-Jifri further attacks the Muslim Brothers, and he and Hamza Yusuf attack Jihadism and the people of *takfīr*.

Al-Jifri, Hamza Yusuf, and Abdal Hakim also refer specifically to what they see as the crisis of modernity, and Abdal Hakim even uses the word "crisis." All see it as the End Times, a perspective that those influenced by Guénonian Traditionalism may be expected to share, given the Guénonian Traditionalist emphasis on the *kali yuga*. Hamza Yusuf and Abdal Hakim both identify angst and anxiety, for Hamza Yusuf "angst-ridden youth living in a nature-deprived world of mediated reality" and for Abdal Hakim the "sovereign human subject [...] in a state of increasing crisis and anxiety." Both, then, like Wagner, see a crisis of modernity, a crisis that perhaps has something in common with Wagner's "strong standardization of practices and homogenization of life-courses" (Wagner 2010: 14–15), though Wagner does not, of course, refer to the End Times.

In addition to this, the Neo-traditionalists generally also focus on the individual rather than the state, the exception being al-Buti, who as a protégé of the Syrian Baʿth Party unsurprisingly stressed the importance of the nation state (Christmann 2000: 76). This might in theory be characteristic of responses to current modernity or, equally, of early modernity, given that an emphasis

on the state is characteristic of organized modernity, and not found in other stages. In the context of an understanding of modernity in terms of “mediated reality” and a “bland consumer void,” it is more likely to indicate current modernity. Although Neo-traditionalists are associated with Arab and Western governments, as we have seen, this is not the same as the instrumental focus on the state that is characteristic of the projects of organized modernity, including that of the Muslim Brothers. Theologians and preachers routinely accepted support from rulers and states even in pre-modernity.

The Neo-Traditionalists use media that are characteristic of current modernity, and occupy the global space that is also characteristic of current modernity. Al-Jifri is the undisputed Neo-traditionalist star of digital media with 3.3 million views of one YouTube video and 6 million followers on Facebook, but other Neo-traditionalists have significant digital media presences, if not as great as Al-Jifri's. Keller, the American shaykh from Amman who addressed followers in Cairo who included a Canadian South Asian from the Emirates, is about as global as it is possible to get. Prince Ghazi, the Jordanian follower of an English shaykh, is also very global. This globalism brings with it a certain hybridity, but hybridity is characteristic of all stages of modernity, not just current modernity – Muhammad Abduh drew on the European liberal thought of his time, and the Muslim Brothers drew on European and Soviet organizational models. What is characteristic of current modernity is not its hybridity (though current modernity is indeed hybrid), but significantly increased globalization.

Finally, the Neo-traditionalists are also modern rather than pre-modern in that the understandings of Islam that they promote are not always pre-modern, if pre-modern Islam is understood in terms of the Islam that might have been found in Cairo or Damascus in the eighteenth century CE. One way in which the Neo-traditionalists differ from eighteenth century Islam is their emphasis on Sufism: many members of the eighteenth century ‘ulama’ were Sufis, but many were not, while all the key Neo-Traditionalists are Sufis. A second way in which the Neo-traditionalist understanding of Islam differs from the eighteenth century one is that some Neo-traditionalists use devices such as *talfiq* (joining) to “mitigat[e] the stipulations of Islamic law that seem incompatible with modernity” (Brown 2009: 261–62). This can be seen, for example, in the monumental *fiqh* manual published in 1991 by Keller, *The Reliance of the Traveler*. This is based on the *Umdat al-Salik* of Ahmad Ibn Naqib al-Misri (1302–1367), adjusted to incorporate other classic sources and sometimes the comments of Keller's teacher, Abd al-Wakil al-Durubi. As the introduction notes, Keller (1991: ix) did not translate into English “rulings about matters now rare or nonexistent,” a category into which he put most discussions relating to slavery (Ali 2016: 62–63). Thus, for example, the text relating to the requirement

for a slave to have the permission of his or her master to perform *i'tikāf* (retreat) is removed from the English translation, leaving only the requirement for a wife to have the permission of her husband for this purpose (Keller 1991: 296). This avoids the parallel treatment of wives and slaves found in the original.

On at least one occasion, Keller went further than selective forgetting. Kecia Ali has identified what appears to be a deliberate mistranslation, where in a discussion of circumcision the word *baẓr* is translated not as “clitoris” but as “prepuce of the clitoris” (i.e. the clitoral hood) (Ali 2016: 138). This mistranslation permits a reduced form of circumcision that fits current modernity better than do the standard practices of pre-modernity.

6 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at Neo-traditionalism in terms of the network that is Arab and, in its international and global forms, Anglophone rather than Francophone. It has identified this network in terms of certain key persons and institutions: Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Buti in Syria and Ali Gomaa in Egypt, Umar bin Hafiz and the Dar al-Mustafa in Tarim, Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad and the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Amman, and Nuh Keller, also in Amman, but with followers internationally. Then there is Abdal Hakim Murad and the Cambridge Muslim College in England, and Hamza Yusuf Hanson and Zaytuna College in Berkeley, California. Finally, Ali al-Jifri, like Hamza Yusuf, also inhabits global cyberspace.

These Neo-traditionalists have a common understanding of tradition, which they promote, and of modern Islam, which they condemn. All agree that tradition is the Islamic tradition, and that this is defined by uninterrupted transmission of knowledge, interconnected (according to al-Jifri) with “a chain of purification of the soul.” Put slightly differently, tradition is the Ash‘ari *‘aqīda* and the *madhāhib*, interconnected with Sufism. That it is wrong to attempt to dispense with the *madhāhib* is argued in terms of the inherent difficulty of properly interpreting the Qur‘an and Sunna, supported by the medical metaphor. Modern Islam, which the Neo-traditionalists deplore, is the Islamic projects of early and organized modernity – liberal modernism and the Muslim brothers, and perhaps also Jihadism. The Neo-traditionalists also deplore Salafism, which may be an alternative Islamic response to the conditions of current modernity, as indeed Jihadism may be.

The Neo-traditionalists are modern because they are responding to earlier projects of Islamic modernity, and also because they are responding to the

conditions of current modernity, focusing on the individual rather than the state, using media that are characteristic of current modernity and occupying the global space that is also characteristic of current modernity. They are also modern because the understandings of Islam that they promote are not always pre-modern.

Neo-traditionalism, then, is not a conservative throw-back to the past but a wave of the future. It suggests that the conditions of current modernity in the Muslim world include a shift from the state to the individual as they do elsewhere, and also a crisis of the projects of earlier stages of Islamic modernity. If Salafism is also a reaction to this crisis, which it may be, perhaps Neo-traditionalism is now its major rival.

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