ONLINE SALAFISM – THE TENSION TO (CO)EXIST IN RELIGIOUS AND IDEOLOGICAL PLURALITY

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Introduction[1]

In the age of social networks and digitalization, we are experiencing accelerated development in the globalization of religious ideas, one of the causes and consequences of which is the de-traditionalization of local religious characteristics. Parallel to this process, we can observe an ignorance and non-recognition of religious heterogeneity and diversification in the broader social reality within traditional religious world systems and an ignorance of the particularities of new religious transformations and mutations created by new technologies. More than two decades ago, the English sociologist Grace Davie problematized the idea of how the religious message is changing with the advent of information and communication technologies. She pointed out that the transmission of religious messages via various social networks and media reaches a much larger number of people than in physical form, but is perceived differently by the religious community. Religious memory is consolidated with the help of these different technologies, but at the

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same time, it also changes as religious messages are customized to the respective medium.[2]

The fact is that information and communication technologies have had a significant impact on changing the religious practices of individuals in recent decades, as many people, especially the younger generation, do not distinguish between *offline* and *online* life, since they combine both and see this as the basis of their social existence.[3] It is these younger generations, especially Generation Z (Gen Z, people born between 1997 and 2012), that we will focus on in this article.

It is perhaps good at the outset to distinguish between *religion online* and *online religion*, which is helpful when looking at different religious practices in the digital sphere.[4] The former concerns websites created to preserve the traditional authority of an already institutionalized religion. The information on these websites is conveyed according to doctrine, and with the help of the Internet, religious content is now available to a wide range of users anytime, anywhere. Unlike *religion online*, *online religion* creates a platform where individuals can express their opinions, communicate with each other, share their religious experiences, and even perform rituals together. *Online religion* therefore represents or establishes the Internet as a new way or medium in modern society.

The Internet represents "a highly competitive market,"[5] which reaches a much broader audience, including in terms of religious production and offering. In the age of digitalization and because of the emergence of new media cultures, that is why we must not ignore the fact that one of the reasons for the transformation of the physical form of religious dissemination toward digitalization is certainly competition. In that

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2 Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

3 Heidi A. Campbell, "The Rise of the Study of Digital Religion," in Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (London: Routledge, 2013), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203084861; Christopher Helland, "Ritual," in Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London: Routledge, 2013).

4 Helland, "Ritual."

5 Marcel Klapp, "'That's Where I Get Reach!': Marketing Strategies of a Salafi Influencer on YouTube and TikTok," *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 18 (2024): 12, https://doi.org/10.1163/22117954-bja10089.

way, individual online users choose their religious beliefs and practices according to what is on offer, from traditional, already institutionalized religions to new religious movements and modern spiritual trends. On the other hand, there is an opportunity for religious providers that offer traditional religious institutions and specializations, as well as religious innovations or interpretations of traditional religious models and ideas. One such example is the offering of online Salafism.

A particular contribution of this paper is to highlight the key factors that different Muslim communities in Europe, as well as European society more broadly, need to address in order to engage younger generations through the use of new technologies and to consider the changes in religious memory and the challenges these changes entail. This article refers to some of the existing materials on online Salafism in Europe. We have also examined publications on online Salafism in Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The analysis results from synthesizing the collected data with doctrinal content, using a socio-cultural methodological approach. This contributes to understanding the social challenges of moral and religious diversity and provides a basis for reflecting on how to design platforms for inclusive citizenship and creative coexistence. Such platforms can serve as a foundation for good practices and policies to regulate a morally and religiously plural society.

The Diversity of Salafism and its Entry into the Digital Sphere

Since Salafism is a complex phenomenon and it is difficult to reach a consensus on what the term itself means, we will first define the term as we understand it and as we will use it in our work. We will then show why it is important to consider this kind of issue in the light of religious changes and tensions with the wider European society. We will also draw attention to the tensions that digital Salafist platforms also bring to traditional Muslim communities in Europe, on the one hand, and to understanding their critique of secular regimes and liberal democracy on the other. We will review some of the important theories and research that have analyzed this topic in recent years and point to the content that confirms our thesis.

Online religious communities are a key to analyzing the transfer of religion into the digital sphere. These are interactive communities that promote two-way communication through various forms of information and communication technologies, such as chat rooms ("chat corners") and comments under online postings. The aim of these rooms is to ask questions and find answers on religious topics. The online religious community also plays an important role as an identity network, giving users a sense of shared identity and uniting them in a particular religious tradition.[6] In this sense, the Internet is becoming a key medium for maintaining a common religious identity, and Salafism has also found its niche in the digital sphere. Research into the discursive techniques used by Salafi preachers and/or Salafi influencers on social networks is very popular, particularly with regard to understanding the re-traditionalization and radicalization of religious thought. The research on this topic, which we will discuss in this article, is mainly concerned with their strategies and practices.

Since digitalization enables a global presence without physical contact, the traditionally defined physical boundaries of individual religious schools and practices are losing their validity for many. This is particularly true for younger generations, who participate in religious teachings online regardless of their geographical location and/or traditional affiliation with a particular religious school. In the search for meaning and belonging, the supplementing or shaping of religious truths results in ambiguous identities among younger generations of Muslims in Europe and beyond. Salafist opinion makers know how to utilize the Internet effectively.

In recent years, numerous interdisciplinary research studies and publications have appeared on the topic of Salafist online activists, focusing primarily on the role of the Internet in radicalization to jihadism or examining the representations of non-jihadist Salafist groups, individual preachers and social networks, digital media and online forums.

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[6] Asep Muhamad Iqbal, "When Religion Meets the Internet: Cyber-Religion and the Secularization Thesis," *Jurnal Komunikasi Islam* 6, no. 1 (2016): 19, https://doi.org/10.15642/jki.2016.6.1.1-28.

Of course, the interpretation of Salafist online activities also requires a precise knowledge of the dynamics, cultural contexts, and particularities in order to avoid falling into generalizations that lead to simplistic prejudices about Islam and Muslims and the potential conflicts that extremists and radical politicians harbor. However, it is right to take a critical look at certain forms of Salafism that develop a similar dynamic and seek to create sharp tensions with the wider society, in our case that of Europe.

In order to avoid these generalizations, it is necessary to explain the concept of Salafism itself, which is extremely complex and whose use and application depend on the contexts and interpretations. Very different movements are summarized under this common label, from apolitical religious movements to reformist political and activist, even violent movements.

Salaf, Salafis and Salafism

The word *salaf* itself means "to follow" – "to go before." *Al-salaf-al-salih* were the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, the orthodox founders of the religion, and the term itself encompasses the first three generations of Muslims.

The first Salafis (*al-salaf-al-salih*) developed a method (*manhaj*) to help them in their search for religious truth. We know that the Islamic tradition does not draw from a single source, namely the Qur'an (the book of revelation in which, according to Muslim belief, the angel Jibril (Gabriel) conveyed the word of God to the Prophet), but also from the Sunnah (the practices of the Prophet), the Hadith (the oral traditions attributed to the Prophet), the Fiqh (the jurisprudence) or Madahib (the schools of law), and the Sharia or code of law that governs various aspects of Muslim life.[7] Although these "sources" have contributed to

[7] In this paper, we try to distinguish between the so-called Islamic identity, which is a field of theology that focuses on the foundations of Islam with an emphasis on the primary sources of the faith, such as Islamic law, theology, philosophy, Islamic education, or the interpretation of the Koran. The specific forms and expressions of Muslim identity can be understood on the basis of the cultural, social and political background of Muslims and the transformation of religious thought into different socio-cultural environments in different periods of history.

the emergence of the so-called "Islamic traditions," they are not equally important. Of all the sources, the most important is undoubtedly the Qur'an, which Muslims regard as the first, most authoritative source of normative Islam, which of course also applies to the ideological construction of the first three generations of Muslims (*al-salaf-al-salih*).

This is also what the Salafist movements advocate today. The central point of reference is God and the Qur'an, and the desire of modern Salafists is to return to the original or so-called authentic Islam. As a result of this search for authenticity, Salafism today represents a movement within Sunni Islam that is extremely exclusivist and internally stratified. Salafists share with other Muslims the recognition of the Qur'an as divine revelation and Muhammad as the last prophet of God, but they generally reject development and change – be it theological, doctrinal, institutional, or ritual, which of course leads to many paradoxical situations in the modern world, such as the use of modern technologies and social networks to spread their influence, which seems to contradict the original idea of returning to the time and space of the first Muslim communities. But of course, things are not that simple.

As Stemmann points out, the modern Salafist movements entered the political arena as part of a project to revitalize Muslim thought based on the authors Jamal al-Din al-Afgani and Muhammad Abdo, who were impressed by the progress of the West at the end of the 19th century. They wanted to renew Islam on the basis of the modernization and rationalization of Muslim thought, while at the same time reviving the practices of the first Muslims and the companions of the Prophet Muhammad. This movement coexisted with a minority sect that followed the teachings of Saudi Arabia's Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and adopted the concept of Salafism, and the reformist Salafism of Afghani and Abdo gradually transformed into a nationalist movement.[8]

Salafism thus formed the ideological foundation of Saudi Arabia and spread the Salafist ideology throughout the Muslim world, partly thanks to the strong financial support of the royal court. Financial donations

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[8] Juan J. Escobar Stemmann, "Middle East Salafism's Influence and Radicalization of Muslim Communities in Europe," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 10, no. 3 (2006): 2, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/meria/meria_sept06/meria_sept06_a.pdf.

are used to finance the construction of mosques, pay religious employees, fund translations of important Salafi theologians and ideologues, provide scholarships for students of Islamic sciences, etc.[9]

The gap between reformist and academic Salafism and militant or "jihadi" Salafism, which emerged during the Gulf War when Saudi Arabia cooperated with the US on the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, leading to the radicalization of many Salafists, who until then had represented an apolitical pietism, is important for our understanding of the dynamics within the Salafist movements.[10] This radicalization emphasizes the fight against unbelievers (*kafir*) as a religious duty, and the concept of *takfir* (calling someone an unbeliever) becomes a source of conflict between Salafis and a model for the search for the "other," not only outside but also within the Muslim community.[11] This leads to tensions and friction among Muslims themselves, as *takfir* becomes an instrument with which any regime, including a Muslim one, can be fought. Later in the paper, we will relate this concept to the potential tensions that arise between Salafi movements and the wider European society.

Quintan Wiktorowicz offers a three-part stratification of Salafist movements. He identifies Salafists who are exclusively concerned with the transmission of religious teachings and avoid political activities on the one hand, and political activists and jihadists who legitimize the use of violence and violent means to achieve their goals on the other.[12]

Classifications may vary, but the purpose is to point out that there are different approaches that indicate heterogeneity in the understanding and interpretations of Salafi thought, so it is very important to analyze the individual cases in the context of socio-cultural, political and historical and theological relations. Salafism is not a monolithic category, and although Salafism is only a minority phenomenon among European Muslims, it has a major influence on various Muslim

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9 Peter Mandaville, *Wahhabism and the World: Understanding Saudi Arabia's Global Influence on Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

10 Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (London: Penguin Books, 2016); Stemmann, "Middle East Salafism's Influence,"2, also Olivier Roy, *L'Islamisme radical* (Paris: Hachette, 1987).

11 *Ibid.*, 2

12 Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): 207, https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100500497004.

communities in Europe and is increasingly appealing to young people as it represents a strong religious alternative.

The Appeal of Online Salafism for Younger Generations

According to Stemmann, Salafism in Europe appeals to that part of the population that has been bypassed by the reform-oriented Muslim movements in Europe. One such reform movement is the *Tabligh* movement, for example, which preached a sophisticated form of orthodoxy where the key was distance from non-orthodox society, visiting poor neighborhoods, appealing to migrant workers who had no cultural access to European society, etc. However, they did not succeed in adapting to the generations of young Muslims educated in Europe.[13]

Young Muslims in Europe often have problems finding their identity, as it is shaped by various directions, guidelines, and models that question traditional authorities and come into conflict with their dogmatic framework. It is obvious that the old traditional models of religious teachings and practices are not sufficient for the younger generations, nor is the method and transmission of knowledge, because it is the youth, especially Generation Z (Gen Z), whose social and political life is characterized by social networks. As already mentioned, in recent years, the innovative digital platforms of Salafi ideologues have provided new opportunities for communication with a virtual audience, leading to the formation of what Abdulmajid calls an "online religious-doctrinal ecosystem."[14]

A 2021 survey by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) found that the largest Salafist online accounts in English and Arabic have audiences in the tens of millions, "with cumulative cross-platform followings of 117 million and 109 million, respectively."[15]

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13 Stemmann, "Middle East Salafism's Influence," 6.

14 Adib Abdulmajid, "Salafi-Influencers on Social Media: Analytical Study of the Discourse of Neo-Salafi Preacher," *Living Islam: Journal of Islamic Discourses* 6, no. 2 (2023): 178, https://doi.org/10.14421/lijid.v6i2.4489.

15 Milo Comerford, Ayad Moustafa, and Jakob Guhl, *Gen-Z & the Digital Salafi Ecosystem: Executive Summary* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2021), accessed May 23, 2025, https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Executive-summary.pdf.

Last year (2024), the Institute for Strategic Development (ISD) analyzed a wide range of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, Telegram, and a number of standard websites in Arabic, English, and German. They recorded around 3.5 million posts on almost 1,500 networks and accounts and gained a comprehensive insight into what they call "the digital Salafi ecosystem" and the way it works. According to their data, Salafi profiles in English and Arabic have several million followers, with a total of 117 million international followers for Arabic profiles and 109 million for English profiles. Profiles in German have around 3 million followers. When investigating the servers, they found that six Discord servers alone have almost 5,000 accounts (member accounts), which function as "closed groups in which activists can discuss theology, coordinate attacks on other servers and open new accounts on other social networks."[16]

According to the MENA Research Center, the number of posts in Salafist online communities doubled between October 2019 and July 2021, an increase of 112 per cent. In German-speaking countries, the increase is 77 per cent.[17] According to their data, Salafist online forums are extremely successful in appealing to young people (Gen Z), which comprises around 1.2 billion people under the age of 30.

So what is it that appeals to young Muslim seekers that traditional institutionalized religious authorities can't answer or don't know?

It is typical for Salafists to network informally and globally or transnationally. According to Pall and De Koning, the informal nature of Salafi activism is important in order to understand why the global Salafi message has met with such a massive and positive response in different local contexts and has developed into a global trend involving preachers, scholars and laypeople whose aim is to revitalize Islam based on a utopian vision of the way of life and work of the first generation of Muslims.[18] It is this utopian version that clearly calls on young Muslims

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[16] Comerford, Moustafa and Guhl, *Gen-Z & the Digital Salafi Ecosystem*.

[17] MENA Research Center, "Online Salafists in Europe on the Rise," October 19, 2022, accessed May 23, 2025, https://www.mena-researchcenter.org/online-salafists-in-europe-on-the-rise/.

[18] Zoltan Pall and Martin de Koning, "Being and Belonging in Transnational Salafism: Informality, Social Capital and Authority in European and Middle Eastern Salafi Networks," *Journal*

to look for alternatives in order to face modern society and its challenges. When we speak of challenges, we do not only mean confronting the permissive behaviors that Salafi preachers know how to exploit (the issue of LGBTQ rights, sexual permissiveness, alcohol consumption, etc.), but also the negative consequences of social problems caused by racism, discrimination, Islamophobia, etc. A young European Muslim with roots in the Middle East, North Africa, or Central Asia, for example, finds himself/herself in a crisis of belonging and forms a kind of hybrid identity, as he/she is no longer "connected to the cultural environment of his parents or grandparents."[19] And this, of course, is the appropriate niche for the Salafists' altered interpretation of sacred texts, teachings, and practices, as well as their applications and interpretations of utopian Muslim society.

In his study of Salafist influencers on social media, Adib Abdulmajid highlights certain factors that favor the popularity of Salafist preachers. These include poor access to education, especially Islamic knowledge on practical and theoretical religious issues. The lack of this knowledge leads to frustration and allows seekers to cling to ideological advice, opinions, and instructions.[20] Those who do not receive answers to important theological and practical questions from their religion are forced to search the Internet. The problem is not only that there are no satisfactory answers offered by local religious experts in the field. Bad European policies are adding to the tension, as in the case of the headscarf affair in France, which led to discrimination against young Muslim girls who were not allowed to attend public schools because of their headscarves. Many of these young Muslim girls have chosen to attend religious schools that are not recognized (accredited) by the state, which means that the education they receive is not valid on the labor market. With such and similar ill-conceived measures and consequences, parallel systems of study or education are created that offer greater or lesser tensions with society in general, are ignorant of European democratization processes and are not in favor of ideological and religious

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of Muslims in Europe 6, no. 1 (2017): 77, https://doi.org/ 10.1163/22117954-12341338.

19 Olivier Roy, *Secularism Confronts Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 79.

20 Abdulmajid, "Salafi-Influencers on Social Media," 178.

pluralism. Of course, this is also carefully utilized by Salafist influencers on the Internet for their recruitment.

The Problem of Salafist Influencers and the Emergence of Tensions with the Wider Society

According to Tariq Ramadan, European Muslims experiencing a new society have no choice but to go back to the beginning and study the foundations of their religious tradition in order to delineate and distinguish between what is immutable (*thabit*) and what is mutable (*mutaghayyirat*) in their religion to facilitate reflection on the possible adaptation to the new society.[21] The search for the roots of the first Muslim communities on the basis of applied methods and new technologies is also skillfully exploited by Salafist influencers, and often leads to social tensions both in the Muslim communities themselves and in European society as a whole.

Salafists use a wide range of formats to informally engage with different groups through various platforms, broadcasts, preaching channels and informational videos that offer answers to questions of doctrine and prescriptions on the correct or ethical way of life, including the question of attitudes toward the public, questions on gender roles, family propriety, eating habits, dress, education, social interaction, child rearing, etc. In the following, we will point out their dualistic schemata of the clean-dirty, right-wrong type, as well as the usual Salafi opposition to the Islamic establishment, which is also of particular importance because it leads to tensions and division with other Muslim communities. In this context, it is worth mentioning the concept of *hākimīyā* (the question of God's rule of sovereignty), by which they only recognize the sovereignty of God at the political level and not that of nation-states.[22] Pall and De Koning cite as the main reason why Salafists rely almost exclusively on informal connections the fact that Salafist preachers view

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[21] Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 145, see also: Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), and Tariq Ramadan, *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2011).

[22] Abdulmajid, "Salafi-Influencers on Social Media," 187.

formal institutions as often causing divisions among Muslims, while Islam strives to unite Muslims into one body.[23] Salafism regards formal religious institutions as harmful religious innovations *(bida*) that did not exist at the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the first Muslims and therefore lead Muslims astray from the right path. They are then loyal to their organizations and not to God. Salafists, therefore, feel called to be the unifying transnational and global phenomenon that will unite all Muslims into a single unified Ummah. At the same time, they selectively pick out the apostate Muslims, and also problematize the nationalization of mosques and Muslim cultural centers, etc.

The aim of Salafi influencers is to present themselves as connoisseurs of true Islam, as role models who are close to the *Salaf* and therefore have a legitimate authority to interpret religious truths and rules. Salafi influencers on the Internet use various concepts that reveal the basic tenets of Salafi doctrine and that are linked to the fundamental sources of the Islamic religion, though they have developed their methodology, which deals with key doctrinal issues, in a peculiar way, in a kind of neo-Salafi style. What does this mean? The methodology is still based on the fundamental Islamic concepts of the early Muslim community, such as *tawhid* or the belief in the oneness and unity of God, and *bida* (invitation to believe), but the key concepts of the Islamic religion can be radicalized under certain Salafist interpretations to such an extent that they pose challenges to peaceful and creative coexistence with the wider society and can also be levers for violent action. There are certainly concepts that require caution and sensitivity in interpretation, particularly *kufr* (disbelief) and *tughyān* (idolatry). According to the MENA Research Center, the identification of and incitement against non-Muslim believers, such as Jews and Christians, takes place in the English and German-speaking Salafi communities. Among Arabic-language posts, however, Salafi forums focus on the search for Shiites and Sufis.[24]

Actual or perceived anti-Muslim incidents and debates (e.g. about banning headscarves) are used for this purpose and polarize or serve to

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[23] Pall and De Koning, "Being and Belonging in Transnational Salafism," 83.
[24] MENA Research Center, "Online Salafists in Europe on the Rise."

create greater tensions with the environment and the wider European society. It is about the problem of the religious illiteracy of the general public,[25] which generates Islamophobic discourse, and, on the other hand, the political illiteracy of many young Muslims who, due to the hybridity of their identities, search for solid charismatic personalities to show them how to deal with the "problematic nature" of European society (secularization, modernization, pluralization, Western liberalism, etc.). The adjustment difficulties of young European Muslims of Generation Z, who have been passed over by traditional madrassas or who are not addressed by traditional preachers who are unfamiliar with the dynamics of European society and culture, lead them to seek their role models on the Internet – and the newly emerging Salafi influencers know how to address the grievances of young European Muslims with populism and instant answers, but with enough charisma to be followed by the masses.

To avoid generalizations and simplistic interpretations, it is necessary to again address the split between reformists and militant Salafists that we have mentioned above. While reformist Salafism rejects violence, it still preaches a version of Islam that favors a complete break with "unholy Europe."[26] Both Salafist political activists and jihadists use social networks, especially YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, to recruit young people for their religious and ideological beliefs. The organization Kicksafe notes that Salafism draws on elements of pop culture to reach young people, using videos as a basic propaganda tool and even designing computer games (one such extreme jihadist form of computer video game involves beheading the enemy).

It is perhaps interesting to mention the example of the specific Salafi subculture called the "Islamogram" community, which is also considered extreme (radical) digital Salafism. It has more than 160,000 members and borrows from the culture of the extreme right, propagating the "Aryan interpretation of Islam" and creating a kind of neo-Nazi Salafist community, and Salafist jihadists adapt the language and aesthetics of

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[25] By the term "religious illiteracy," we mean the ignorance of diversities and dynamics within Muslim societies.

[26] Stemmann, "Middle East Salafism's Influence," 6–7.

neo-Nazis, including the fact that they call themselves national socialist Salafists. The "Islamogram" often attack liberal Muslims and democracy, LGBTQ+ and gender rights, is against feminism, and euphemistic concepts such as "cultural Marxism," "wokism," etc.[27] On the other hand, recent ISD research has shown how extreme white nationalists have adopted jihadist tactics such as fiqh al-dima (jurisprudence of blood).[28] It is more than obvious that this is a mutation of the memory and complete religious and political illiteracy of the new generations, who selectively choose their political and identity factors and combine them according to the modern "pick and mix" method, thus creating a religious bricolage identity that is paradoxically in complete ideological and religious opposition to the Muslims of the first generations (*al-salaf-al-salih*).[29]

To counter Salafist propaganda on the Internet, the Kicksafe organization has produced the brochure "Salafism on the Internet, Recognizing Propaganda Strategies – Escaping Manipulation," which is available online through open access.[30] This kind of approaches and tools are more than welcome, since Salafist influencers use clear black and white strategies, and value systems based on clear rules and commandments that have to be followed unconditionally; they advocate the consolidation of group identity and cohesion, but at the same time they are very harsh toward Islamic orthodoxy, the traditional models of transmission of religious knowledge and practices advocated by the

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27 Comerford, Moustafa and Guhl, *Gen-Z & the Digital Salafi Ecosystem*.

28 *Ibid*., see also: Pia Müller, Stefan Harrendorf, and Antonia Mischler, "Linguistic Radicalisation of Right-Wing and Salafi Jihadist Groups in Social Media: A Corpus-Driven Lexicometric Analysis," *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 28 (2022): 203–244, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-022-09509-7; Ineke Roes, "Should We Be Scared of All Salafists in Europe? A Dutch Case Study," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 3 (June 2014): 51–63, and Liselotte Weiten and Tahir Abbas, *Critical Perspectives on Salafism in the Netherlands* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)), April 2021.

29 Such ideological overlaps recently occurred with online influencer Andrew Tate, who converted to Islam due to his admiration for certain forms of conservative, patriarchal religious practice.

30 Klicksafe, Salafist propaganda online, accesed April 23, 2025, https://www.klicksafe.eu/en/salafismus; see also: Aida Kassaye and Anja van Heelsum, "Muslim Organisations' Response to Stigmatisation in the Media," *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 9, no. 1 (2020): 96–118, https://doi.org/10.1163/22117954-BJA10001.

religious establishment, and of course toward secularization, laicization, pluralization and other processes that European societies are facing. Whether and to what extent Salafi ideology can or wishes to join the casual consensus of all the social actors in European society is what we will try to answer below.

Salafist Influencers and the Social Challenges of Moral and Religious Diversity

What John Rawls calls "the fact of rational pluralism" is based on the realization that rationality has its limits in deciding issues of ultimate importance, though the so-called "overlapping consensus" on fundamental public values is a precondition for the existence of pluralistic societies.[31] The challenge for these modern pluralist societies, however, is to ensure that everyone can perceive the basic principles of the political community as legitimate. If this does not happen, we have parallel systems in religiously and ethnically plural societies that are in tension with each other (e.g. Salafists and their interpretation of European secular society, and the need for the implementation of the Sharia (code of law) to govern various aspects of Muslim life with no separation between private and public in terms of religious presentations). Regulating moral and religious diversity is therefore one of the most important challenges facing modern societies, and "laicization" is an essential component of a liberal democracy.

According to MacLure and Taylor, laicization is based on two major principles, equality of respect and freedom of conscience, as well as on two operational methods that enable the realization of these principles: the separation of church and state and the neutrality of the state toward religions.[32] The authors make a clear distinction between laicization and secularization. According to them, laicization is a process by which the state affirms its independence from religion, and one of the

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[31] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 4.

[32] Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor, *Laïcité et liberté de conscience* (Montreal: Éditions du Boréal, 2010).

components of secularization is the decline of the influence of religion on social practices and behavior in the life of the individual.[33]

However, the concepts that deal with the degree of separation of religion and state in Europe are very heterogeneous. With very different definitions of secularism and various theories of secularization, as well as historical and political backgrounds, we need to consider historical factors that have shaped the understanding, interpretation and practical implementation of a concept of the separation of "religion and state" in a particular time and space. Above all, we need to trace the application and dissemination of these concepts in practice, so that we do not maintain the interpretations of the concepts without analyzing their impact on social reality. According to Kerševan, the secularization of the state and state power is related, on the one hand, to the independence of absolutist rulers from the church and, on the other, to the requirement—arising from the Protestant Reformation—that state power be autonomous from the church. If there are several recognized religions in the country, then the state, law, and morality (at least in terms of fundamental questions) must be independent of any religion, because only then are they acceptable to all citizens.[34] Hashemi asks, for example, whether "secularism means anti-clericalism, atheism, deconstruction, state neutrality and equal distance from all religions, the rejection of religious symbols in the public sphere, the separation of public and private spheres, the complete separation of religion and politics, or a closer separation of state institutions from the influence of religion."[35] Secularism in Europe is usually measured and evaluated in comparison to the two most prominent models of the Western tradition: the French model, which is relatively hostile to religion, and the American model, which is relatively friendly to religion. Complementing what has just been said, Cesari defines secularism as the various Western political cultures that contextualize and historicize the two main principles of secularism: the protection of law for all religions and equidistance between

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33 *Ibid*.

34 Marko Kerševan, *Sociologija – Marksizem – Sociologija religije* (Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete, 2011), 81.

35 Nader S. Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 104.

state and religion. These two principles are constantly interpreted within specific political cultures that ultimately shape the societal expectations of the role of religion in the public sphere and in society.[36]

In the case of Europe, these expectations are above all (but not always) the separation of church and state and the privatization of religion. It is true that this Western experience is at the heart of most theories of secularization that refer to Western countries. But, although secularism has "Christian roots," as Charles Taylor writes, "it is a mistake to think that this limits the application of its formula to post-Christian societies."[37] It is therefore necessary to find alternative models and to take into account the religious experiences and processes of individual countries and societies. Each country can develop its own model, according to its interests and needs (priorities and norms), but with the awareness that it does not bow to "cultural relativism" when it comes to respect for human rights and religious pluralism (among other things). When we address the issue of Salafism in Europe, we are often confronted with interpretations of Islam as an alternative to secular politics. The idea of the "secularization" of Islam is often understood as a reformation of Islam. It seems that Islam is incompatible with secularization and democracy unless it undergoes fundamental theological reforms. According to Oliver Roy, such an understanding ignores the fact that Catholicism has never undergone a fundamental theological reformation (which would mean the "triumph of Protestantism"), but has nevertheless been able to adapt to modernity.[38] In Europe, we encounter various Salafi tendencies that oppose any kind of change and adaptation. They also often embody a dualistic (de)-vision, live in a parallel existence and have no need for social interaction with the broader societies, including with the majority of Muslims in Europe, who find what is mutable (*mutaghayyirat*) in their religion to facilitate adaptation and creative coexistence with others.

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[36] Jocelyne Cesari, *Why the West Fears Islam: An Exploration of Muslims in Liberal Democracies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 3–14.

[37] Charles Taylor, "Modes of Secularism," in *Secularism and Its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 31.

[38] Olivier Roy, "Islam in the West or Western Islam? The Disconnect of Religion and Culture," *The Hedgehog Review* 8, no. 1–2 (2006): 129.

Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, Salafism represents global Islam with its norms that erase cultural identity specificities and appeal to younger generations of Muslims. It does not use the same methodology for putting religious teachings into practice as traditional religious institutions and authorities. Indeed, Salafism challenges traditional authorities and traditional ways of disseminating religious knowledge and has replaced traditional mosques and religious schools with digital platforms due to its integration into the digital reality and the hybridity of its identity. Salafist religious influencers proclaim clear and unambiguous messages calling for a return to the original Islam, including reading and implementing the true sources of Islam and respecting the true tradition. They derive their charisma from the belief that they are in possession of the original Islamic knowledge, and due to the limited religious education of the younger generations (we have mentioned Gen Z), they are the most convenient reference as they use online networks and digital platforms. The rhetoric of Salafi preachers is aligned with the key questions posed by young people's hybrid identity, and their answers and examples of how to live as a true Muslim are accessible anytime and anywhere.

In the global community (ummahs), they offer new or fresher (refreshed) religious products to the new generations with the help of new technologies, which are alien or avoided by traditional authorities. In this environment, a broad spectrum of different groups inspired by Salafism has formed – from apolitical scholars to online activists and violent extremists. They have a monopoly on the online networks that the traditional religious establishment cannot achieve, or at least not to the same extent.

In this context, political and activist Salafism present a wide range of ideas, one of which is to offer an alternative to the secular state. The central problem for them continues to be the question of Islamic law in Europe. Conflicts such as the question of the introduction of Sharia law naturally seem insurmountable and defend the thesis of the "clash of civilisations." Therefore, it is equally important to be aware of the conflicts within the European Muslim societies caused by the challenges, social standards, and conditions of living in Europe. It is therefore

crucial to understand the heterogeneity and plurality of (among others) Muslim societies in Europe, with an emphasis on the distinction between different Salafi branches and their worldviews.

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