

I **The Evolution of Two American Species of Scripture People**

Oh, give me a home where the Buffalo roam
Where the Deer and the Antelope play;
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word,
And the sky is not cloudy all day.

“Home on the Range,” American folk song

The Kansas state song and unofficial anthem of the American West contains a zoological and taxonomic error: There are no antelope in North America, except in zoos or exotic game habitats. “Antelope” is a broad term encompassing a number of species from the family Bovidae (think: sheep and goats) native to Africa and Eurasia. What North America has is the pronghorn – an animal that looks remarkably like the antelope but belongs to the family Antilocapridae. The pronghorn is an evolutionary orphan, the last remaining member of the Antilocapridae that flourished in the North American continent a million years ago.

While the various types of antelope (Illustration 1.1) and the pronghorn (Illustration 1.2) are distantly related (both are cloven-hooved mammals), their evolutionary and genetic development has occurred in thoroughly separate ecosystems over many millennia. The pronghorn is actually more closely related to modern giraffes than to their distant antelope cousins. Yet the two species have evolved in parallel to occupy similar niches in different ecologies: antelope in what zoologists still call the contiguous “Old World” (Africa, Asia, Europe), pronghorns in the ocean-bounded “New World.” Both may be horned, fleet-footed, plant-eating herd mammals, but when you peek under the evolutionary hood, they are quite different genetically.



ILLUSTRATION 1.1 Antelope (Namibia)

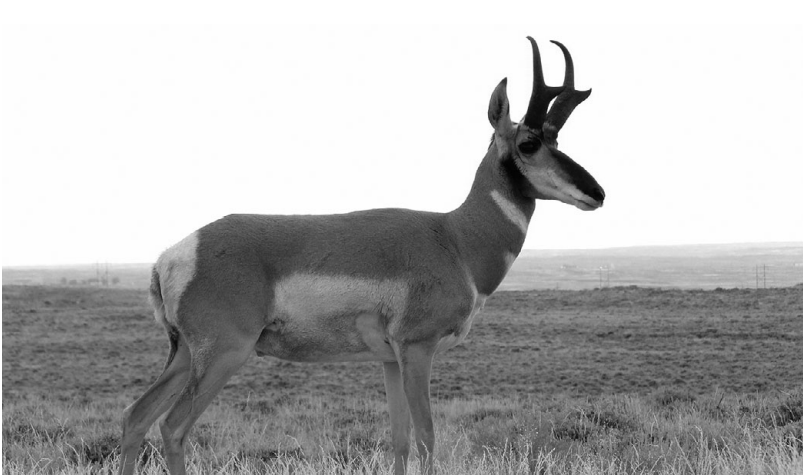


ILLUSTRATION 1.2 North American pronghorn

This raises some interesting questions: What if actual antelope came to live in North America alongside the pronghorn? What happens when convergently evolved species occupy the same ecosystem? Or, to drop the metaphor for a moment, what happens when a

religious movement – like Salafism – that evolved to fit a scripturalist niche in the majority-Muslim world comes to inhabit the same ecosystem as American Evangelicalism, an outwardly similar movement which evolved natively in North America?

At an elementary level, Salafism and Evangelicalism share some clear resemblances. Both are scripture-based, popular, global, modern, revivalist movements that make normative claims within their respective Sunni Muslim and Western Christian traditions. They are largely non-hierarchical and diffuse, with no single central religious figure or theological authority structure. And they are both, as a rule, proselytizing movements that seek to win over fellow Muslims and Christians, not to mention non-Muslims and non-Christians, to their understanding of religion. Simple enough – but when we peek under the hood at these movements, which emerged in very different scriptural, cultural, and religious contexts, we see that Islam and Christianity may share words and concepts, like “scripture,” “revival,” “reform,” and “tradition,” but these ideas function and interplay very differently in each religion.

So while most of this book dwells on the intriguing similarities and convergences I see between Evangelicals and Salafis in the USA, this more technical and historical chapter will introduce both movements with attention to difference: differences between Islam and Christianity, different bodies of scripture, different traditions of interpretation, and the different avenues Evangelicalism and Salafism have traveled to arrive in twenty-first-century America. Rightly done, comparison always entails a basic recognition of difference (if two things are the same, there is no need for comparison) and then “a playing across the ‘gap’ in the service of some useful end.”¹ As I retell here the stories of how Evangelicalism and Salafism arrived in their present forms in America, I will highlight facets of their evolutionary histories where similarity or difference are more evident. After establishing the taxonomy and evolutionary history of the homegrown American pronghorn (Evangelicalism), the rest of this chapter will trace the migratory path of how the more recently imported species of antelope (Salafism) entered the American ecology.

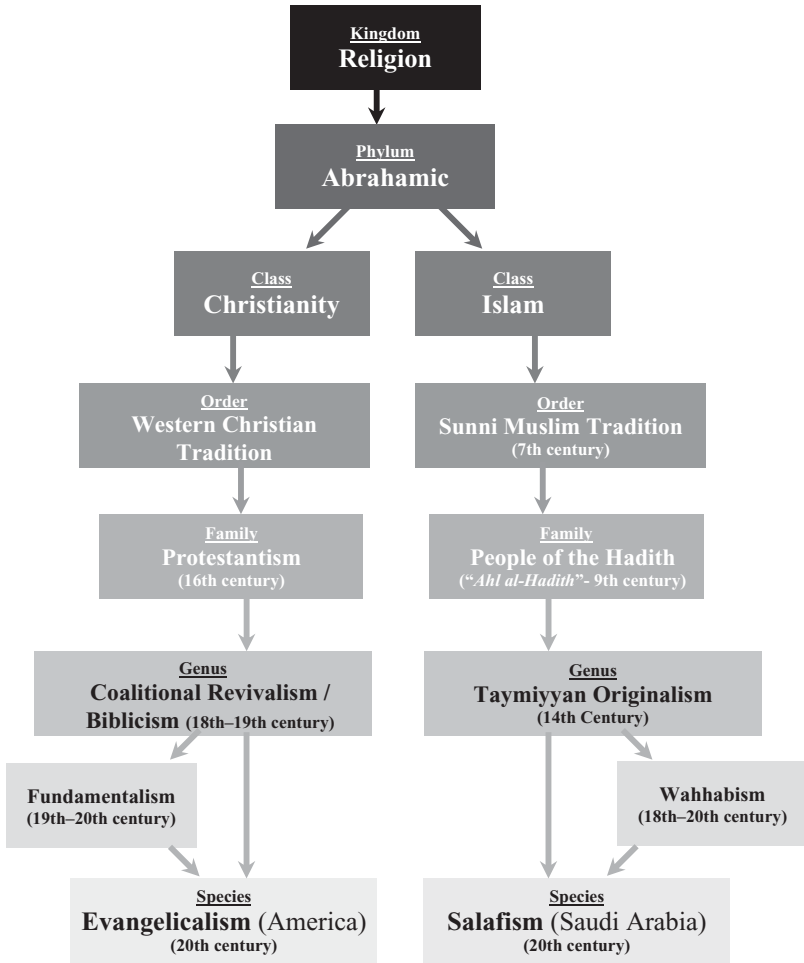


ILLUSTRATION 1.3 Evolutionary taxonomy: Evangelicalism and Salafism

Let me offer a diagram (Illustration 1.3) that I will unpack for the remainder of this chapter. Readers may want to return to this page for reference at different stages reading the chapter. In keeping with the evolutionary metaphor, I have playfully adopted the analogy of scientific classification – kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, species – as a way to quickly situate each movement and see their parallel (and sometimes divergent) evolutions.

EVANGELICALISM: AMERICA'S HOMEGROWN
SCRIPTURE PEOPLE

As with Salafism, the movement that falls under the contemporary title of Evangelicalism is a massive, multifarious global phenomenon. I have purposely subtitled this book "Salafi Muslims in Evangelical Christians' America" to keep the focus on the distinct dynamics among Salafis and Evangelicals in the USA and to signal how much Evangelicalism and its antecedents have been influential in and interwoven with American history. I am certainly not suggesting that Evangelicals have any more claim to America or being American than anyone else, but in order to understand Salafis' adaptive inhabitation of the United States' religious ecosystem, we must first recognize how a cognate Christian species has already shaped that ecosystem for generations. So where did Evangelicalism (our pronghorn) come from and how did it emerge interwoven with American culture?

*Order: The Western Christian Tradition and Scriptural
Primitivism*

It is customary to narrate the history of modern Evangelicalism beginning with the Protestant Reformation, and we'll get there, but, evolutionarily speaking, the heredity of what I am calling the scripturalist impulse in Christianity, a primitivism that espouses original Christianity and the direct appeal to the Bible over traditional or hierarchical authority, goes back much further. The Western Christian Tradition (which was originally simply Roman Catholicism and later came to include Protestantism and its derivatives) officially split with the Eastern Orthodox Church in the eleventh century, but shortly thereafter we see in this tradition a recurring tendency among some toward scripture-based renewal.

The twelfth-century Waldensians in the Lyon region of eastern France sought to "return to the life they believed the apostles had lived," encouraging educated lay people to read the Bible and challenging the authority of the official preachers of the Catholic Church.²

These were followed by the English supporters of Oxford don John Wycliffe (the so-called Wycliffites or Lollards) in the fourteenth century. The Lollards typified a tendency in some corners of late-medieval Christendom toward vernacular translations of scripture that made the text of the Bible available to literate people who did not have formal training in the official Latin of the church and who could then check the teachings of the church against the text. The Catholic authorities in England responded by banning the translation of the Bible or other unauthorized theology books into English. In the early fifteenth century, the Hussites of Bohemia, inspired by Wycliffe's program, joined their eponymous leader, Jan Hus, dean of philosophy at Prague University, in similar reforms, translating and popularizing the Bible. Hus was burned at the stake after being condemned at a church council in 1415.

These movements, which well predate the more famous Protestant Reformation, signal how deep-seated the scriptural-as-source-of-reform tendency is within Christianity. In the toolbox of renewal within Christianity, no instrument is quite as popular or as powerful as Bible access and fresh biblical interpretation. For reform movements who aim to counter what they see as ossified traditions or entrenched hierarchies, expanding access to and widespread utilization of scripture has a proven track record of success – or, at least, invigoration.

Family: Protestant (“Evangelical”) Christianity

Against this backdrop, the theological departures of the Protestant Reformations from magisterial Catholicism are evidently less a set of innovative ideas that happened to occur to Martin Luther, John Calvin, or Huldrych Zwingli in the early sixteenth century and more continuations of a persistent propensity toward scriptural primitivism.³ It is during the Reformation that the adjective “evangelical” (German: *evangelisch*) came into usage. Luther, Calvin, and the other Reformers did not actually call themselves “Protestants” – then a political designation for princes who took Luther's side against

the Holy Roman Emperor – but in their self-identification, they were evangelical Christians, derived from the New Testament Greek term *euaggelion*, which means “good news” or “gospel.”⁴ What connected these disparate evangelical reform movements across Europe was the belief that they were recovering the good news of the Christian message from what they saw as the corruption and deformity of the late-medieval Catholic church.⁵ They were also united in the assumption that through a realignment around the Bible as the preeminent authority for all Christian belief and practice (hence, *sola Scriptura*) they could return the church to its original vision.⁶

Yet even the common practice to speak of Protestantism as a movement or a branch of Christianity must be tempered with a recognition of the deep fissures that separated these different “evangelical” movements or confessions. While they might have all agreed on the supremacy of the Bible’s authority, the early Protestant family fought incessantly about the actual interpretation of the Bible; how and where to trust the authority of the Christian tradition; which conventional Catholic practices to maintain (i.e., eucharistic theology, children’s baptism, etc.); and how the newly forming “evangelical” churches ought to be governed. Early on, these different strands of interpretation coalesced into the four major currents of Protestantism: the Anglicans (Church of England), the Reformed/Calvinists, the Lutherans, and the more radical Anabaptists. But beneath that echelon of identifiable Protestant currents arose countless other subdivisions, breakaway churches, internal arguments, and political divides. The gushing forth of this fissiparous Protestant energy combined with the breakup of the Holy Roman Empire and the emergence of modern nation states splintered Europe and occasioned a century of chaotic wars, culminating in the Thirty Years War, as savage and frantic an era as any time in European history prior to the World Wars.⁷

All this intra-Protestant ferment and sectarianism made its way across the Atlantic into the European colonies in North America. Different confessions, European-nation aligned churches, non-

conforming movements, pacifist sects, and minority groups (not to mention a contingent of Catholics and some small communities of Jews) sought opportunity and refuge in the various colonies. The resulting potpourri of Protestantisms – Quakers, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Dutch Reformed, Lutherans, Lutheran pietists, Anglicans, Puritans, Amish, Mennonites, Baptists, Moravians, etc. – was one major dimension of the diversity that imbued early America. What the New World represented to many of these sectarian communities was a chance to start over and get away from the by-then entrenched post-Reformation religious hierarchies and established churches of Europe.

Genus: Coalitional American Revivalism and Biblicism

If the Protestant Reformers and the proto-Protestant movements of scriptural renewal were the distant ancestors of contemporary Evangelicals, their more intermediate forebears emerged in the revivalist upsurges of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in England and the American colonies. Fiery revivalist preachers – Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, George Whitefield – stirred up what historians call the First Great Awakening, an outpouring of passion for a shared piety among colonial churches. This “evangelical” (still in adjectival form) revival movement was, from the start, an exercise to counter the denominational cul-de-sac tendencies of Protestantism, to unite theologically disparate believers around shared experiences of conviction and conversion and being “born again.”

A paradigmatic episode from the 1739 colonies-wide preaching tour of the inimitable British revivalist George Whitefield captures this dynamic well. While he was frequently opposed or snubbed by institutional clergy or denominational leaders in cities like Philadelphia, Whitefield found great favor in the small settlement of Germantown, a few miles outside the city, where he preached to eager crowds of 6,000 people. Whitefield took a particular liking to Germantown, because the mass audiences there roused to his emotive preaching, but also “because the town had so many Protestant

refugees of one sort or another from the Continent. He thought that at least fifteen denominations were represented there, and yet to Whitefield they seemed remarkably cooperative and committed to true Christianity."⁸ Here is a quintessential scene of the Awakening that would become part of the evangelical DNA: a transdenominational multitude drawn to populist revival preaching and a sense of pious kinship.

History textbook-style summaries of the colonial Great Awakening sometimes miss that this newly activated religious passion was not only for personal responsibility, enthusiastic worship and prayer, or being "born again," but it was also a passion for and fixation with the Bible and the empowerment of everywoman and everyman to read, study, and apply the Bible to their own lives. Consider these exhortations from one of Jonathan Edwards's less literarily famous sermons,

Content not yourselves with this, that you have been taught your catechism in your childhood, and that you know as much of the principles of religion as is necessary for your salvation . . . God hath spoke to you in the Scriptures; labour to understand as much of what he saith as you can. God hath made you all reasonable creatures; therefore let not the noble faculty of reason or understanding lie neglected.⁹

Like so many other Awakening sermons, Edwards's words bristle with republican sentiment, suspicion of self-satisfied denominationalism, egalitarian Bible popularization, and Enlightenment optimism: You, the everyday human being, are rational, so don't leave religion to the specialists – pursue knowledge, and, for God's sake, study your Bible!

The Awakening fomented a revolutionary spirit in the colonies, as it "marked a transition from clerical to lay religion, from the minister as an inherited authority figure to self-empowering mobilizer."¹⁰ Across the spectrum of the different Protestant denominations, the revival experiences created networks of activated church members and moral agents, who would, in a matter of decades,

become activated citizens of the nascent American republic. In fact, the debates among the American colonists about whether and how to declare a bloody independence from England took up the biblicist rhetorical stylings of the Awakening and centered on direct references to the Bible to make the case for and against revolution.¹¹

As I briefly highlighted in the Introduction, the intra-Protestant conflicts also contributed to the famous American separation of church and state in two ways: First, no Protestant sect or denomination was so geographically predominant throughout the newly formed United States as to be a natural choice as the national religion. Second, the experience of Europe's religious wars and persecution of sectarian and non-Christian minorities by established churches left many in the founding generation hoping for a more *laissez-faire* religious culture.

What the First Amendment and the disestablishment of religion, in turn, created was one of the great democratic experiments of early America: a religious marketplace where Christian churches, leaders, sects, and even other religions would compete for attention, passion, and members. It was an ecosystem ready-made for "religious entrepreneurs . . . [and] no group has functioned more effectively in this marketplace than evangelicals themselves."¹² One central mode of this entrepreneurial, republican, populist appeal was an empowering biblical primitivism – getting back to the ethos and practices of the New Testament church through a commonsense reading of scripture.¹³

The revivalist and biblicist ethos that was inaugurated in the colonial Great Awakening became engrafted into the American character through wave upon wave of Protestant revitalizations from the 1820s to the 1840s, often called the Second Great Awakening. As Jill Lepore has noted, the antebellum Awakening entrenched evangelical and Protestant devotion as the principal segment of America's collective religious identity: "Before the revival began, a scant one in ten Americans were church members; by the time it ended, that ratio had risen to eight in ten."¹⁴

In the religious free marketplace, not everyone flourished. The “upstart sects” – e.g., agile, revivalist, biblical-populist Methodists and Baptists – fared far better than the more staid and elite Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians (Anglicans).¹⁵ Uncouth Baptist pastors built upstart churches where they expounded theatrically on the plain sense of the Bible, and Methodist circuit-riding preachers led iconic revival camp meetings on the American frontier. These upstart denominations had few educational standards for clergy, but that meant that their pastors’ rhetorical appeals were low-to-the-ground and fit the democratic spirit of the era.¹⁶ It was also remarkably expansive. For instance, in 1776, there were a meager sixty-five Methodist churches spread throughout the colonies. By 1850, there were more than 13,000 Methodist churches with more than 2.6 million members, making Methodism the largest denomination in the country by far with 34 percent of all religious adherents.¹⁷ Not coincidentally, this was the era of that champion of the “common man” Andrew Jackson, president from 1829 to 1837 – scriptural populism and political populism grew up together, twin saplings in the fertile, democratic American soil.

While the word “evangelical” was certainly in wide usage in nineteenth-century America, I would hesitate to label anyone in that century with the noun “Evangelical” or any movement as part of the species “Evangelicalism.” Indeed, “evangelical” is difficult to define in the nineteenth century, as its claimants could be liberal or conservative, Northern or Southern, theologically explorative or restrictively orthodox. When someone described themselves as “evangelical” in nineteenth-century America (as opposed to holding up a denominational identity or generic Protestant claim), it usually carried a connotation of “activist.” They were the busybodies of the American religious scene: defending slavery in the South or passionately promoting abolition in the North; creating temperance societies and Bible distribution schemes; campaigning for or against the death penalty; sending steady streams of missionaries overseas for the sake of world evangelization. In 1830, the combined budgets of the major evangelical

voluntary societies (The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the American Education Society, the American Bible Society, etc.) was greater than the budget of the US federal government.¹⁸

What connected all these efforts with the adjective “evangelical”? What tied together all of these disparate causes from education to temperance to abolition? For self-affirming evangelical Christians, the answer was simple: the Bible. As one mid-nineteenth-century chronicler of the movement put it, “evangelical Protestant churches [are those] churches whose religion is the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible.”¹⁹

The Fundamentalist Disruption

If the Second Great Awakening and antebellum America pulsed with the energy and idealism of this evangelical culture, the late nineteenth century saw its gradual deflation. The Civil War cleaved the movement, like the country, in two, and the evangelical believers who joined the Union and Confederate armies both claimed that the plain sense of the Bible vindicated their diametric causes.²⁰ In the aftermath of the war, many activist evangelical Christians became more pessimistic about reforming American society and building the Kingdom of God on earth.²¹

Beyond these cultural forces, evangelical Christians' straightforward, commonsense approach to the Bible was under increasing intellectual challenge in the late nineteenth century. Darwin's Theory of Evolution, while embraced by some progressive evangelical interpreters, left many believers feeling an increasing tension between the emergent scientific consensus and their own plain sense reading of the book of Genesis. So-called Higher Criticism (or historical criticism) of the Bible slowly migrated from German universities into American academia in the late nineteenth century, similarly calling into question the integrity and facticity of how most evangelical Protestants perceived their scriptures. And new strands of liberal Protestant theology, responsive to Darwinian science and critical

views of the Bible, threatened to undermine orthodox evangelical confidence and missionary zeal.²² The response for theologically and socially conventional evangelical Protestants, as they observed these looming perils and saw many of their fellow activism-oriented, ostensibly evangelical Christians embrace or accommodate such modern departures, was to reiterate and reclaim the basics, the fundamentals of Christianity.

These efforts to circle the wagons around indispensable Protestant doctrines proved to be a galvanizing and a divisive force in many denominations. People on both sides of these debates (liberal/modernist and conservative/fundamental) thought of themselves and their churches as “evangelical,” and, amid these intra-evangelical rhetorical volleys, a new word was coined in 1920 to describe the reactionary camp: Fundamentalists. The term caught on quickly as it denoted, for the self-ascribing Fundamentalists, their single-minded commitment to the core tenets of the Christian faith. If “evangelical” was an amorphous adjective, “Fundamentalist” was an unequivocal noun. It drew a line in the sand.

One of the defining sermons of that era, preached in 1922 by the liberal lion Harry Emerson Fosdick titled “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” captures the intra-evangelical feud:

Already all of us must have heard about the people who call themselves the Fundamentalists. Their apparent intention is to drive out of the evangelical churches men and women of liberal opinions . . . If they had their way, within the church, they would set up in Protestantism a doctrinal tribunal more rigid than the pope's.²³

For their opponents, like Fosdick, the epithet Fundamentalist summed up the doctrinaire and oppositional attitude that they found so distasteful in the group.²⁴

Fundamentalism had several overlapping proclivities: an apocalyptic ideology bolstered by the earth-shaking climate of two world wars; an interdenominational effort to build a Christian counterculture; and a reaction against the rapid scientific and technological

change of the early twentieth century. But at its core, Fundamentalism was about the Bible – defending the Bible; vindicating the Bible; relying on the Bible as the apex of truth. In point of fact, for all their rumored anti-intellectualism, Fundamentalists were practically obsessed with knowledge and education, though their pedagogical interests remained narrowly attached to the Bible. Consonant with their sense of cultural alienation, the Fundamentalists create a massive, alternative infrastructure of educational institutions – Bible colleges, Bible institutes, Fundamentalist universities – where they could send young devotees “to fortify them against secular ideologies and lifestyles.”²⁵

And yet, for all the Fundamentalists' impassioned safeguarding of the “literal truth” of the Bible, Fundamentalism intensified the already schismatic temper of Protestantism. Because the Fundamentalists put supreme importance on protecting the “fundamentals” of Christianity *but*, apart from the ardent defense of the truth of the Bible, there was never a fixed and agreed-upon set of clearly articulated fundamentals, the movement fractured in acrimonious disputes and theological eddies.

I have designated Fundamentalism (and, as we shall see, Wahhabism in the Salafi family tree) as an evolutionary disruption, in that it seemed for a few decades that the strong “evangelical” chord in the American symphony had fallen into disharmony.²⁶ Unlike the culturally confident evangelical Christians of the nineteenth century, the Fundamentalists took an antagonistic and militant stance toward an American culture they thought had turned against God. Where the coalitional, activist evangelical churches of the nineteenth century had defined the energetic Protestant mainstream, Fundamentalism was an enclave-building, culturally suspicious, and more bellicose variant that, for a while, dominated the evangelical landscape.

In reality, Fundamentalism and its ideological battle with more liberal forms of Protestantism (what Fundamentalists derisively called “modernism”) produced two major evolutionary shifts that marked the landscape of American Protestantism. First, in the eyes of many early twentieth-century Protestants, including people like Fosdick who were

still calling themselves “evangelical,” Fundamentalism was beyond the pale – a backward, intellectually bereft, head-in-the-sand avoidance of modern science and historical consciousness. These liberal Protestants would band together in an ecumenical coalition of their own, bent on recapturing the American Protestant mainstream. They would, eventually, come to call themselves Mainline Protestants, a cadre of genteel and old-school denominations that would confidently claim the American public religious sphere that Fundamentalists had abandoned throughout the mid-twentieth century.²⁷

Mainline Protestantism was the ideological foil to Fundamentalism, but Fundamentalism’s more potent competition would come from within. Starting in the 1940s, a group of disillusioned and ambitious Fundamentalists began repurposing the term Evangelical, now situated as a noun to stake out their own identity in between what they saw as the toxic rigors of Fundamentalism and the loosey-goosey ecumenism of the Mainline Protestants. It was from within and in reaction to this Fundamentalist impulse that contemporary American Evangelicalism was born, so we cannot understand the modern Evangelical movement without recognizing its parentage that comes both from the earlier optimistic nineteenth-century biblicist revivalism and the more culturally alienated, hard-nosed Fundamentalism of the early twentieth century.

Species: Evangelicalism in America

In our taxonomic history of Evangelicalism, we have finally arrived at the species that would define the scripturalist terrain of modern America. The early Evangelical leaders – they sometimes called themselves “Neo-evangelicals” in recognition of the earlier connotations of the term – in the 1940s centered on the rising star evangelist Billy Graham.²⁸ They founded the National Association of Evangelicals; they created *Christianity Today* as the premier Evangelical magazine; and they sloughed off the culturally disreputable and internally fraught identity of “Fundamentalist” in favor of a more positive culture-facing affect (see Illustration 1.4).

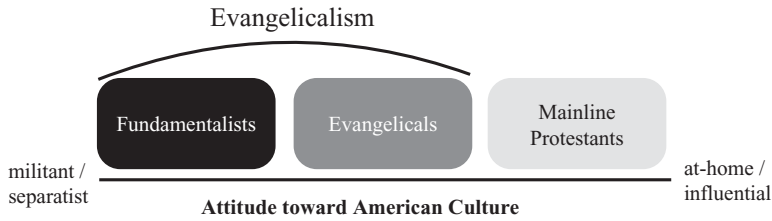


ILLUSTRATION 1.4 Spectrum of coalitions of twentieth-century American Protestantism

Recognizing the power and potential of Fundamentalist educational networks, the Evangelicals built Bible schools and universities of their own, including Fuller Seminary in California, my alma mater, where arguably this new Evangelical identity first took root.²⁹ Evangelicalism sought to be more big-tent, erudite, and inclusive than Fundamentalism, welcoming anyone who could affirm their biblicist values and intention to proclaim the gospel to the whole world.³⁰ As I show in greater detail in Chapter 2, the tensions and affinities that remained between Fundamentalists and Evangelicals left the two movements locked in a complicated dance – less “competing species” and more “two varieties of the species” Evangelicalism for the remainder of the twentieth century, until 9/11 brought an end to self-affirming Fundamentalism.³¹

This mid-century, organically American, culturally adroit, Bible-claiming, mission-focused coalition of theologically conservative Protestants (with some pugnacious Fundamentalists in the mix) is more or less the Evangelical movement as it exists today. But the movement underwent one more infamous shift in the second half of the 1970s and 1980s that is essential for understanding its current orientation and outlook. Like the social and theological ferment at the end of the nineteenth century that left the eventual “Fundamentalists” feeling dispossessed and combative, the Civil Rights Movement, sexual revolution, and cultural liberalization that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s caused a good deal of heartburn in Evangelical and Fundamentalist communities. Conservative White

Protestantism was losing its cultural power: Prayer and Bible reading were removed from public schools; abortion became officially legal and protected at a federal level; pornography seemed ascendant and unchecked; and gay people were beginning to step forward unashamedly to experience the same rights and privileges as everyone else.³²

The majority of Evangelicals and Fundamentalists perceived all of these atmospheric changes as a threat to their biblical interpretations and cultural power, and the movement did something that had not happened before in American evangelical history: They coalesced around one political party. The consolidation of the Evangelical/Fundamentalist bloc of voters in favor of Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party, first in 1980 and iteratively in each election thereafter, has made the Evangelical movement polarizing in a different way.³³ If the evangelical Protestants of the nineteenth century were the religious busybodies of that era, their busybody-ness was omnidirectional. Since 1980, Evangelical activism (with a few notable exceptions) has mostly aligned with Republican politics, and the name Evangelical has taken on political and partisan connotations.

This was the context of my upbringing. I was born in 1980, a few months before Reagan won the election. I attended Evangelical churches and Evangelical schools where to be anything other than a Republican loyalist or conservative independent voter was anathema. The Bible, as preached and taught, seemed to make the Republican policy platform obvious. Even living in the otherwise culturally liberal and diverse world of Southern California, I was in high school before I met someone who was (I suspected) a Democrat, and it took me a while to trust him.

To sum up: Evangelicalism is a modern, energetic, global – though America-inflected – fashion of scriptural piety. It is other things as well: an emotive spirituality that appeals to transformative experiences for life change; a political force and demographic bloc in America and elsewhere; an adaptive, missionizing movement; a marketable, consumeristic form of religion. But when you live among the

Evangelicals, when you listen to how they describe and orient themselves, what is unmistakable is their avowed fidelity to the Bible. As Stanley Grenz summarizes, “[E]vangelical self-consciousness embodies two central principles: the concern to be a ‘gospel people’ and the concern to be a ‘Scripture people.’”³⁴

Evangelicalism is like the pronghorn: a long-situated native of the American religious ecosystem. Though American Evangelicalism’s distant roots may go back to even before Old World Protestantism, its identity and genetic structure has been thoroughly formed in the New World. It grew up adjusting itself to the environmental transmutations and peculiarities of American culture but always with a fixation on the Bible as the communal lodestar. There are Protestants and churches who still name themselves “evangelical” in Europe, linking back to the old use of the word from the Protestant Reformations, but when they encounter the North American Evangelicals they tend to be struck by how eccentric the Americans are. They puzzle over how these distant cousins in the Protestant family tree read and claim the Bible and construe a form of Christianity that is simultaneously partisan, consumeristic, egalitarian, transdenominational, and unmoored from the past.³⁵ Evangelicalism evolved to fill and, indeed, define the scripturalist niche of American culture, but we turn now to another scripturalist species from distant lands.

SALAFI SCRIPTURALISM: FROM MEDIEVAL HADITH PEOPLE TO AMERICAN SHORES

As with the deep roots of scripturalism in Western Christianity, the Sunni scripturalist tendency goes back a long way. “Scripture” for Muslims, of course, refers primarily to the Qur’an. The Qur’an (Arabic for “recitation”) is not simply a parallel sacred text for Muslims to what the Bible is for Christians. For Muslims, the Qur’an is the directly revealed word of God, the divine communication preserved in book form. While certainly held as sacred, the Bible has almost universally been understood by Christians to have

a human element – multiple human authors in different eras have shaped the text with their personalities and perspectives. Not so the Qur'an – according to the Islamic tradition, the Qur'an is *through* Muhammad, not *by* Muhammad. Muhammad recites; it is God who speaks in the Qur'an. Thus the role of the Qur'an in Islam might more adequately be compared to the role Jesus plays in Christianity: directly exhibiting the divine message and divine character.³⁶

The challenge with interpreting the Qur'an is that most Muslims view it as simultaneously an eternal, heavenly corpus of divine communications and a text that was revealed in history to the early Muslim community during the life of the Prophet Muhammad. So from the earliest moments of Muslim reflection, the original context of the Qur'an was supremely important for understanding its meaning.

The Prophet Muhammad is, naturally, also very important in this interpretive endeavor as the one who received the Qur'anic revelation and as the revered leader of the early Muslim community. The Prophet was and is seen as the normative interpreter of the Qur'an and the one who knew best how to apply the principles and lessons of the revelation to everyday life, which brings us to the second body of literature that may be called "scripture" in Islam: the Hadith.

Order: The Sunni Muslim Tradition and the Sunna

The Hadith (Arabic for "stories," "narrations," or "traditions") are the remembered sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad and his early community. They were originally oral traditions, memories from the first Muslims passed down generation to generation. Some hadiths are simple sayings, for instance:

The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "A woman entered Hell because of a cat which she had tied [up], neither giving it food nor setting it free to eat from the vermin of the earth."³⁷

The Prophet famously liked cats. Other hadiths are short little stories that set a scene, like:

A funeral procession passed in front of us and the Prophet (ﷺ) stood up and we too stood up. We said, "O Allah's Messenger (ﷺ)! This is the funeral procession of a Jew." He said, "Whenever you see a funeral procession, you should stand up."³⁸

By putting all of these flickering images together, you get a sense of the personality of Muhammad – his principles, his community, his lifestyle, his interspecies and interreligious instincts. As a whole, this Muhammadan model – the right way to live as a Muslim – is called the Sunna ("path" or "way") from which Sunni Muslims get their name. Accordingly, this Hadith literature surrounds the Qur'an, offering context, explications, and practical applications of the Qur'an's more exhortative style, all filtered through the prism of the life of the Prophet and his model community. The Hadith include tens of thousands of narrations treasured by the early Muslim community, remembering the smallest details and profoundest insights of the Prophet and his Companions. Jonathan Brown observes that, by the logic of the early Sunni tradition, "The Qur'an and Sunna functioned in tandem. Like a locked door without a key, the Qur'an could not be accessed without the Sunna."³⁹ When talking about "scripture" in Islam, one must be careful to always note what sort of scripture is in view: the essential divine revelation in the Qur'an or the far more malleable and diverse Hadith.

Indeed, if we are looking for a somewhat parallel text to the Bible in the Islamic tradition, I would argue that the Hadith are more akin to the Christian Bible than the Qur'an is.⁴⁰ Unlike the Bible, the Qur'an was codified and collected into its present form relatively quickly – within a generation after the death of Muhammad. But, similar to the Bible, the Hadith had a more complex transmission history, only being written down and collected into their present form more than a century later. Like the Christian Bible, the Hadith entail a composite, multi-perspectival, multi-genre corpus of reflections and remembrances. This analogy, like every analogy, is not perfect, but it does help us keep in mind the asymmetries that occur in putting two different religions into conversation.

Muslims in general rely on both the Qur'an and the Hadith. But there is one family in the order of Sunni Islam that attaches itself first and foremost to rigorous, direct Hadith interpretation that will eventually lead to the species Salafism.⁴¹ This family of scripturalists actually began to emerge in Sunni Islam in the ninth century (in the Christian calendar), right around the same time as the Hadith were being codified and organized into their present form.

Before we proceed though, it's important to make note of another structural difference between the Islamic and Christian traditions that will pop up repeatedly throughout this book. Christianity is primarily a theological religious tradition, and the lines that divide different sects and denominations of Christians are historical, practical, cultural, ecclesiastical (i.e., arguments about how to govern the church), etc. but almost always also at some ground level *theological*. Islam certainly has theological debates about the nature of God, predestination, etc., but the primary concerns and central discourse of Islam are, like Judaism, *jurisprudential*. In other words, arguments among Christians tend to boil down to "What do you believe?" whereas disagreements among Muslims tend to boil down to "What should we do and how should we do it?"⁴² If we imagine the different traditions as meals, the main course of the Christian tradition is theology (creeds, statements of faith, biblical exegesis, confessions, etc.), and there are side-dish accompaniments of ethics, practical theology, canon law, political theology, etc.

The main course of the Islamic tradition is jurisprudence and the pragmatics of applying the teaching of the Qur'an and Hadith. The integral Islamic jurisprudential endeavor ("What should Muslims do according to the Qur'an and the precedents of the Prophet?") is what goes by the title of the Shari'a, the effort to discern and apply the will of God to everyday life.⁴³ The majority of Shari'a reasoning is rooted in the Hadith, brimming as they are with practical examples and clear precedents from the life of the Prophet. While Christians and Muslims both have scripture, the clusters of questions adherents bring to those scriptures differ widely. This can sometimes be simplistically phrased

as: Christianity is an *orthodoxic* religion (focused on right belief), whereas Islam is an *orthopraxic* religion (focused on right practice). It's more complicated than that, but as a shorthand, this distinction can help us understand the different core concerns each tradition brings to scriptural interpretation. Now let us trace the evolutionary family tree that leads to Salafis arriving in America.

Family: People of the Hadith

The two centuries after the death of the Prophet were filled with energy and expansion for the Muslim community. Within decades after Muhammad's death, Muslim armies had conquered most of the Middle East, toward the Indian subcontinent, across North Africa, and up into the Iberian Peninsula on the doorstep of Europe. This was the era, according to later Sunnism, of the Salaf (the "righteous ancestors," the first three generations of Muslims) held in high esteem for their proximity to the Prophet and his Companions. Jurisprudential and theological reasoning in this era was more ad hoc. Everyone was in agreement that the Qur'an and the Sunna (the example of Muhammad) were definitive for what it meant to be a Muslim, but the Hadith were still mostly an oral body of knowledge, hundreds of thousands of stories and morsels – some of questionable provenance – from the Prophet's life being passed from generation to generation, from scholar to scholar by memory.

Two major camps of legal scholars emerged in the late eighth century of the Christian Era. One group called themselves the *Ahl al-Ra'y* (the people of rational discretion), and they mostly accepted the reliability of the Hadith as a guide, but they were also pragmatic jurists, who thought the guidance of the Prophet was not only contained in the Hadith texts but also in the practical wisdom and legal methodologies of the scholars. Where the Hadith accounts were indeterminate or chaotic, these jurists saw it as their job to iron things out.⁴⁴

The other camp in this debate established itself as the hardline defenders of the Hadith. They even called themselves the "people of

the Hadith" (*Ahl al-Hadith*). These were, by and large, Hadith specialists, who spent their time memorizing and correlating and sifting and sorting individual hadiths.⁴⁵ For the Hadith People, the authority question was straightforward: *If you have access to the mind and the practice of the Prophet in the form of Hadith – jumbled and multivalent though they may be – how dare you elevate your pragmatic logic over scripture?*

The intellectual champion of the Hadith People in the ninth century was a jurist and Hadith scholar named Ahmad ibn Hanbal. Ibn Hanbal was a ram-rod straight sort of fellow. In one of the key theological debates of early Islam on whether the Qur'an was created in time or eternal, he took the unyielding position that the Qur'an was uncreated and eternal, and when three successive Caliphs took the other position, Ibn Hanbal endured repeated physical torture rather than even pretend to change his view. Given this firm conviction – and the fact that his view won out and became standard in the Islamic tradition as a whole – Imam Ahmad, as he's popularly referred to, has since been upheld as a heroic and exemplary thought leader in early Islam.

Ibn Hanbal was one of the first to create a written Hadith collection, and the two greatest Hadith collectors of all time, al-Bukhari and Muslim, were Ibn Hanbal's younger disciples. His students remembered him as having an encyclopedic knowledge of Hadith, claiming that he had personally memorized and could recite *one million* hadiths.⁴⁶ This might sound far-fetched, but multiple of Ibn Hanbal's disciples and his own son attest to his remarkable powers of retention, and he would play a key role in culling the disparate oral Hadith corpus into its more manageable, canonical form.

Imam Ahmad and his followers argued for the primacy and interrelatedness of the Qur'an and the Hadith. Authority and right practice were secured by these memories from the early Muslims and their pristine practice of Islam, and any departure from that model, any unprecedented human invention in the realm of religion was

labeled by the Hadith People with a dirty word: innovation (*bid'ā*). An anecdote from Imam Ahmad's life helps capture this worldview. One of his disciples remembered: "I asked Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal about what Abū Thawr [another respected scholar] had written, and he said: 'It's a work where he comes up with bad novelties!' He didn't approve of writing books. 'Stick to Hadith!' he said."⁴⁷ To be clear, Ibn Hanbal was one of the most learned and literate people of his time. Books aren't the problem in his evaluation; "bad novelties" in books are. For the Hadith People, there were sharp gradations of knowledge with revelation serving as the only firm basis for action. Since the teaching of the Qur'an was embodied in the life and practice of the Prophet, the Hadith took on a revelatory status as well. The Qur'an inscribes the will of God, and the Sunna/Hadith enacts it. Muslims didn't need to innovate away from the precedent of the Prophet or appeal to abstract human reason or to philosophically grounded theology – we have the text; let's stick to the text.

Ibn Hanbal and the Hadith People managed to mostly win this authority debate according to the mainstream Sunni tradition, and everyone came to agree that the Hadith were central to Islamic theology and practice. But that did not mean that all hadiths were equal. An entire field of medieval Islamic literary science evolved and matured among Hadith scholars in the ninth and tenth centuries, sorting and sifting the amazing variety of hadiths, organizing them thematically, and even tossing out, on the basis of correspondence and reliability of transmission, those that seemed to have been fabricated.⁴⁸

According to the Sunni consensus that emerged from this process (Illustration 1.5), the Hadith might be thought of as a scriptural canon with a clearly defined core and fuzzy edges. Certain hadiths are considered unshakably reliable – *sahih* (verified sound / authentic) – and beyond that there are various gradations of reliability (*ḥasan* – good, *ḍa'īf* – weak, *mawḍū'ī* – fabricated). There are six canonical Hadith collections, with two occupying preeminent status: the books of only *sahih* hadiths edited by those two disciples of Ibn

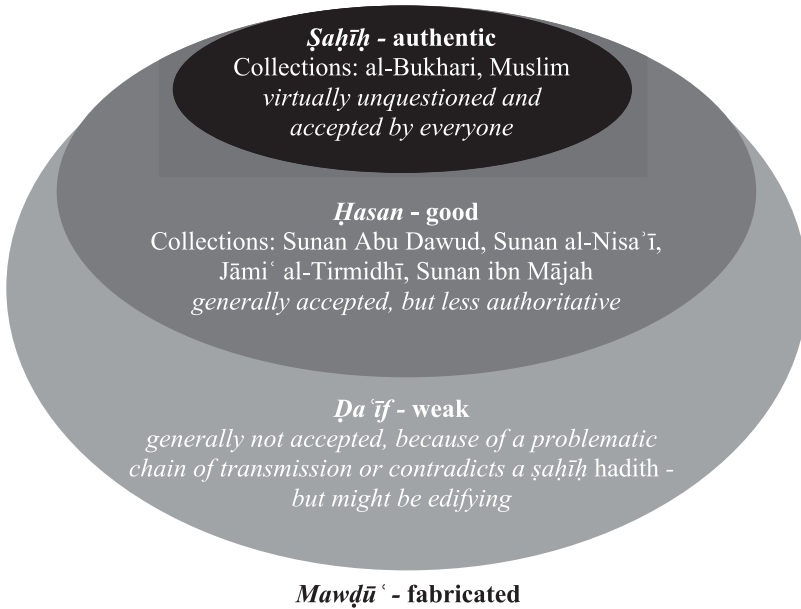


ILLUSTRATION 1.5 Authority/authenticity of Hadith collections

Hanbal – al-Bukhari and Muslim. If one imagines concentric circles of traditional Hadith authority, the *sahih* collections by Muslim and al-Bukhari are the innermost core, the other four canonical collections are the next (reliable, but not absolute) circle, and further lower levels of gradation expand out from there.

In this same era that the Hadith were becoming more canonically coherent and fixed, Sunni jurists and theologians were also becoming more systematic in how they organized themselves. Different regional or methodological *madhhabs*, or schools of jurisprudence, coalesced, each of them nominally attached to a great scholar from late in the Salaf period. There were a number of these schools early on, but ultimately four of them consolidated and became definitional for Sunnism: Hanafis, Malikis, Shafi'is, and, last but not least, Hanbalis (after Imam Ahmad). These *madhhabs* are the prime carriers of Islamic tradition, the vehicles of normative scriptural interpretation.

As with any legal tradition, each of the Islamic traditions includes a mix of jurists consulting the source texts – Qur'an and Hadith – then looking at legal precedents and the consensus of past scholars, applying their own reason and methods, and finally advising Muslims on how to live. The four *madhhabs* are not really sects, in the sense of competing with each other to be the *real* Islam; they, as a rule, recognize each other as valid ways of being Sunni. But true to Ibn Hanbal's "Stick to Hadith!" admonition, among the *madhhabs*, the Hanbali scholars have been the most scripture-bound, choosing to rely more upon direct appeal to the Hadith rather than allowing traditions of interpretation or legal precedents to create hard-and-fast intellectual superstructures around the scriptures.⁴⁹

This led to an interesting identification quandary: Yes, the followers of the *madhhab* or methodology of Ahmad ibn Hanbal admired his thought and approach to Islam, but in naming themselves "Hanbali" weren't they doing the very thing that he had counseled against, that is, lifting the view of Imam Ahmad above that of the text? Starting a few centuries after his death, we can see some Hanbali scholars beginning to use a new adjective for themselves in their theological texts: *salafi* (following the Salaf).⁵⁰ For the Hadith People, the Salaf were the *ur*-Muslims, who had access to unspoiled Islam flowing from the fountainhead of the Qur'anic revelation and wisdom of the Prophet. This new coinage was a means of solving the conundrum: We aren't following Ahmad ibn Hanbal; we are following the Prophet and his Companions. We aren't "Hanbali" in our theology, *per se*; we are "salafi."⁵¹

Genus: Ibn Taymiyya's Theological Originalism

The figure who most typifies this commingling between being juridically Hanbali and drawing his theological inspiration directly from the Salaf is an iconoclast polymath scholar of the fourteenth century named Ibn Taymiyya. Born into a respected family of Hanbali scholars, he began to learn Hadith interpretation and jurisprudence when today's children would be in elementary school. He quickly

gained a reputation as a brilliant scholar and a thorn in the side of the authorities.

The medieval Islamic world which Ibn Taymiyya inhabited was relatively religiously tolerant: The four official legal *madhhabs* accepted each other's different approaches; Sunnis and Shi'ites could usually coexist peacefully; all manner of orders of mystics and popular devotion flourished around the Sufi saints; various philosophers, inspired especially by Aristotle, brought older Greek ideas into conversation with Islam; whatever the official strictures of Islamic law, some Muslims casually visited brothels and wine shops. All of these trends were extremely troubling to Ibn Taymiyya. He was not interested in civil coexistence but in True Islam – capital T, capital I. And he wasn't bashful about his opinions.

Multiple times Ibn Taymiyya faced legal trials and imprisonment for outspokenly making his ideas known. "He was a relentless activist who engaged in social reform, even vigilante dispensation of justice and moral policing, which he did with his group of devoted fellow scholars and students."⁵² He stringently opposed those he called People of Innovation (*Ahl al-Bid'a*) who deviated from original Islam. He condemned the Sufis for venerating the graves of their saints (*bid'a!*). He wrote long treatises deconstructing Aristotle and upbraiding any Muslim foolish enough to incorporate Greek philosophical logic into their religion (*bid'a!*).⁵³ He was famous in Damascus for encouraging his followers to storm wine shops, break the bottles, and pour the wine on the floor.⁵⁴

In 1299, Ibn Taymiyya published a theological treatise that contained a creed he urged all Muslims to adopt. Typical of strict salafi theology, Ibn Taymiyya's creed hewed closely to the literal text of the Qur'an, condemning the various philosophical innovations and newer ideas that had entered into the Islamic discourse of his time. He stressed the utmost importance of *tawhid*, the unity and uniqueness of God. This simple creed prompted his theological opponents to put Ibn Taymiyya on trial, accusing him of heresy and anthropomorphism. The Qur'an and some hadiths describe God with physical

language, e.g., sitting on a throne, and most Muslim thinkers argued this is purely symbolic because God is not corporeal. Ibn Taymiyya rejoindered, who are you to question the revelation of God? If the text says God sits on a throne, then God sits on a throne. Maybe you don't and can't understand what the Qur'an means by that, but you're in no position to overrule the text.

After several months and several rounds of one of these trials, everyone except Ibn Taymiyya tired of the dispute, and his opponents offered him a compromise: They said, "you have compiled the creed of Imam Aḥmad; shall we just say, then, that this is the creed of Aḥmad? I mean, the man has merely compiled [a creed] according to his school (*madhhab*); he should not be molested for this. For this [Hanbali] school is a recognized school." Ibn Taymiyya's response was potent: "I have simply compiled the creed of all the Pious Ancestors as a whole; Imam Aḥmad has no special claim to this. Imam Aḥmad simply communicates whatever knowledge comes to him on the authority of the Prophet ... Indeed, this creed is the creed of Muhammad, God's blessings and salutations be upon him!"⁵⁵ He spent several months in jail after that, one of several such stints throughout his theologically controversial life.

In Ibn Taymiyya's time, the Mongol armies were advancing south, gradually conquering more and more of the lands that the Arabs had themselves conquered six centuries earlier in the initial spread of Islam. In 1258, just a few years before his birth, the Mongols sacked Baghdad, the intellectual capital of Islam at the time, largely bringing to an end the era that scholars today call Classical Islam. The aggressive Mongol rulers (the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Genghis Khan) had found a convenient hack in mainstream Sunni jurisprudence: The consensus among scholars of the different *madhhabs* was that Muslims should not declare war (jihad) or take up arms against a Muslim ruler. The Mongols outwardly declared themselves to be Muslims, hence any aggression against their encroaching armies was deemed impermissible by most jurists.

Ibn Taymiyya became famous, and quite popular with the common people, for bucking this consensus. He issued several *fatwas* (the learned opinions of a Muslim jurist scholar) sanctioning war against the Mongols on the basis, not of the scholarly discussions of his day, but on the precedent of the Salaf. He reasoned that the Mongols were not true Muslims in their behavior and, based on the precedent of the early Caliphs, therefore jihad against them was not only fair game, it was an obligation on all true Muslims.⁵⁶ Ibn Taymiyya put his money where his mouth was, joining a number of battles and skirmishes against the Mongols – a warrior jurist.

One of the most striking things about contemporary Salafi discourse is just how much they make reference to Ibn Taymiyya, this relatively obscure late-medieval, hard-minded scripturalist. For a religious movement that, like the medieval Hanbali theologians, eschews attributing their approach to any teacher other than the Prophet and the Salaf, the modern Salafis are constantly citing and referencing and drawing upon the thought of Ibn Taymiyya. He is for them a near irrefutable guide, an anchor point, a precedent from the past to validate the practices of the present – “Look, we didn’t make this up. We’re just doing Islam in our time the way Ibn Taymiyya did it in his time, and the Salaf did it in their time.” The fact that he was popular with the people but not his fellow scholars bolsters contemporary Salafis’ confidence in the face of disdain from many learned Muslims. The fact that Ibn Taymiyya was a political lightning rod vindicates Salafis’ own politically fraught presence in many Muslim societies. Put differently, to live by the way of the Salaf is to court controversy, whether in the fourteenth or the twenty-first century.

The Wahhabi Disruption

We have one more historic evolutionary waypoint to consider on our way to American Salafism, and it arose in a Sunni revival in the very decades that the preachers of the First Great Awakening were spreading evangelical zeal around the American colonies. Its leader was Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, an über-Hanbali who lived in

Arabia. Like Ibn Taymiyya before him, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab centered his theology and his jurisprudence on the principle of *tawhid*, the unity of God, but this simple point of departure had grave consequences in his construction.

For Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, *tawhid* flowed incontrovertibly out of the divine realm and into the human one: If there is only one God, then God has only one will and directive. Ergo, there is only one right way of worshipping and obeying God, only one societal model that is acceptable, and all other ways of worshipping or organizing society are therefore deviant, idolatrous, and in need of reprimand.⁵⁷ This meant, in his mind, that the righteous community of true monotheists – the *muwahhidun*, the proclaimers of divine unity – was justified in declaring war upon any other community (including self-ascribing Muslims) who did not fulfill “true” monotheism. Punishable idolatry could be anything from belief in magic to befriending unbelievers, from praying to saints to wearing a magical amulet.⁵⁸ Any departure from the model of the Salaf – according to Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s understanding of it – justified the prosecution of jihad against any community or society, including fellow Muslims, who refused to repent. You can imagine that, unlike Ibn Taymiyya, who endorsed jihad against the malignant Mongols, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, who endorsed jihad against anyone who substantially disagreed with him, was not very popular in his time.

Paradoxically, given the radical, globally ambitious nature of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s theological vision, he was relatively apolitical and even quietist when it came to governing. He believed that society should have a single, male, divinely sanctioned, political, and military ruler. As long as that ruler was theologically orthodox, he was exempt from criticism for injustice or even tyranny. Indeed, while Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab pitched himself as a reformer and re-interpreter of contemporary Islam by way of the Salaf, à la Ibn Taymiyya, he did not really depart much from conventional Hanbali thought and jurisprudence on most questions.⁵⁹ In 1744, he formed an alliance with a local tribal leader named Muhammad ibn Sa‘ud, the

progenitor of the Saudi royal family; both swore loyalty to each other, and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab deemed Ibn Sa‘ud the governing protector of *tawhid* – and more practically, the political and military guarantor against interference with the Wahhabis’ domineering religious reform program.

To call the Wahhabi-Saudi alliance a “theocracy” is not entirely accurate, given that the political realm remained mainly untrammelled by the reformer’s theological idealism.⁶⁰ So long as he and his followers had dictatorial power over peoples’ religion and outward morality, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab didn’t care much about the political machinations that externally guided society. He sanctioned Ibn Sa‘ud’s wars of expansion to spread the alliance’s realm of authority and the message of uncompromising *tawhid*.⁶¹

Wahhabism was an effort to imperiously de-localize Islam, to strip away the corruptions, accretions, syncretisms, and appendices – the *bid‘a* – of local cultures over the centuries, to return to the simplicity of *tawhid*, which the Wahhabis imagined guided the original Muslims. Their presence in Arabia, the locale of the Prophet’s paradigmatic emergence and conquests, only increased their confidence that they could recreate the polity and practice of the Salaf in Arabia. The political alignment between Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab and Ibn Sa‘ud allowed the movement to grow locally through proclamation (*da‘wa*) and warfare. In the first years of the nineteenth century, after Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s death, they even captured Mecca and Medina from the local Ottoman-backed rulers, and the Wahhabis quickly began imposing their decidedly anti-pluralist views at the heart of Muslim spiritual geography.

This was not a sustainable arrangement. The Ottoman Empire, which ostensibly retained its claim to power over the Arabian Peninsula, could not allow an upstart, rigorist reform movement to control the holy cities, particularly Mecca, the locus of the annual *hajj* pilgrimage. After a mere fifteen years of Saudi-Wahhabi rule, in 1818 the Ottoman armies pushed the movement out of Mecca and Medina and into the backwaters of the Arabian Desert – into the Najd

region, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s birthplace.⁶² The Saudi-Wahhabi alliance would remain there in relative obscurity, ruling over a small swath of desert for a century.

But Wahhabism did not stay forever in the Najd hinterlands. For the remainder of the nineteenth century after their defeat by the Ottomans, the grandsons and great-grandsons of Muhammad ibn Sa‘ud managed to maintain control over Najd by not further provoking the Ottoman sultans in distant Istanbul. Then in the 1920s, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn Sa‘ud, a fifth-generation member of the dynasty, took advantage of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and began a campaign of military expansion in imitation of his great-great-grandfather. He eventually conquered most of the Arabian Peninsula and established the present day Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the third instantiation of the Saudi-Wahhabi religio-political alliance.⁶³ This new, twentieth-century monarchical nation-state gave the Wahhabi clerics a larger platform for instituting their societal vision than they had ever had before. What’s more, with the discovery of massive deposits of oil under the Arabian desert early in the century, the Kingdom had the wealth and influence to become an international Islamic power center and build institutions and universities to export Wahhabi theology to the global Sunni community by the mid-century period. I explore in greater depth in Chapter 3 how these very institutions would become the locus of modern Salafism.

As we saw with Fundamentalism, I would characterize Wahhabism as a sort of evolutionary disruption that is simultaneously discordant with and also integral to later Salafism. This is not to simplistically equate Fundamentalism and Wahhabism, as so many proponents of “Islamic fundamentalism” have done explicitly and implicitly. The cultural contexts of twentieth-century American denominational struggles is a far cry from eighteenth- or nineteenth-century Arabian religio-tribal warfare. Protestant Fundamentalists may have been theologically militant within their denominations and had an austere morality, but the Fundamentalists weren’t waging literal wars with their enemies. No, the similarity lies in the

relationship between Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism: Wahhabism was a harsh predecessor that became a subspecies of Salafism.⁶⁴ Today, Salafism is a Hadith-renewalist reform movement, intellectually anchored in the Saudi Arabia that Wahhabis built, and some contemporary Salafis speak of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab as a theological forebear and ideological hero. On the other hand, Salafism is a “global intellectual current,” many sub-movements of which operate with little reference to or, as we shall see, stark critiques of the Saudi-Wahhabi religious establishment.⁶⁵ Wahhabism is but one influential faction among the many forms of Salafism today. One thing that can be said: Were it not for the eighteenth-century austerity and exclusivism of the Wahhabis, Salafism would be a very different phenomenon today.

Species: Saudi Salafism Comes to America

In 1994, at the eighth annual conference of the Qur’an and Sunnah Society (QSS), one of the first major American Salafi organizations, Abu Muslimah, an African American Salafi who had discovered Islam first through the Nation of Islam and then studied in Saudi Arabia at the Islamic University of Medina, got up to give an exhortative lecture. Consider this short excerpt:

The Messenger of Allah said, in a hadith collected by Muslim and al-Bukhari, that “The best of humanity is my generation, and the generation that followed them, and the generation that followed them.” This is what Allah – *subhanahu wata‘ala* [glorious and exalted is He] – is referring to when He says, “the path of the believers,” (Q 4:115) the believers that actually lived and understood properly the Book of Allah [the Qur’an] and the *Sunna* of his Messenger – *salla-llahu ‘alayhi wa-‘alihi wa-sallam* [God bless him and his family and grant him peace] – and not just any Muslim . . . We are to take into consideration [those first three generations of Muslims] . . . on that practical application of the Qur’an and the *Sunna* to the Day of Resurrection.⁶⁶

Take away some of the English phrasing, and this statement could have easily come out of the mouth of Ibn Taymiyya seven centuries earlier. Abu Muslimah goes on to criticize those “deviant groups who have left Islam . . . who still claim to be Muslim” including the Nation of Islam (“deviant” here is a translation of *bid‘a*). In the lecture, he fluidly moves back and forth from Arabic to English, quoting the Qur’an and Hadith, and then explicating the text to his English-speaking audience.

What is most fascinating to me about this scene is how enmeshed and integrated and unexceptional it is. Abu Muslimah was just one of many American Salafi lecturers that day at the QSS conference with the others offering similar messages and idiomatic exhortations. By the mid-1990s, there were thousands if not tens of thousands of African American Salafis, not to mention a multitude of other converts and Muslim immigrants to the United States who identified as Salafis.⁶⁷ They built institutions like QSS, hosted annual conferences, circulated tape cassettes of favorite preachers’ sermons like this one by Abu Muslimah, and networked mosques across different cities with lecturers going on speaking circuits from city to city. How do you get to this point nearly two centuries after the Wahhabi revivals in Arabia? How did the approach of Ibn Hanbal and rhetoric of Ibn Taymiyya reach American shores and become ingrained among distant American Muslim communities?

While scholarship on global Salafism is advancing rapidly, the full-fledged history of this American Salafi community has yet to be written. What is available in contemporary sources are oral histories, autobiographies, and discrete, intriguing data points.⁶⁸ There are at least two major twentieth-century shifts that converged to produce someone like Abu Muslimah and the American Salafi community of which he is emblematic: one a terminological shift, the other an American policy change.

First, a change in terminology. We have noted the perennial difficulty in naming this scripturalist strand of Islam. A tendency that started with the ninth-century Hadith People and Ibn Hanbal didn’t

necessarily want to call itself Hanbali, because their point of reference was the original Muslims. So, by the time of Ibn Taymiyya, the adjective *salafi* had come into vogue to describe a type of theological primitivism that roots itself not in intervening tradition but in earliest Muslim practice (as mediated by the Hadith).⁶⁹

In the early twentieth century, a series of societal and identity crises gripped majority-Muslim nations. Many nations were transitioning from colonies of Europe or vassal states of the Ottoman Empire into modern countries. In 1924, the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate, the nominal leader and point of unity for all Sunni Muslims, brought to the surface deep disharmonies and diverging interpretations of Sunnism and of that historic moment. It is not surprising then that there emerged in that period a welter of geographically diverse, radical and reformist movements seeking to rethink and reconfigure Islamic societies.⁷⁰ It is also in the same period that several of these revivalist movements embraced the noun Salafism (*Salafiyya*) to characterize their projects. As I show in greater depth in Chapter 3, suddenly you had multiple movements – all of them vaguely Taymiyyan, some progressive and modernist, some conventional and Hadith-centric – naming themselves *Salafis*. The word was vague enough in meaning and reference that different groups could adopt it to diverse ends.⁷¹ Like the various Protestantisms that arose in sixteenth-century Europe, all claiming to recover the primitive and true ethos of Christianity, many laid claim to the free-radical term Salafi in the early twentieth century.

This rise of a diverse spectrum of “Salafi” movements and the aforementioned instantiation of an affluent Saudi-Wahhabi theological kingdom flowed together and merged in curious ways. The ridiculously wealthy Saudi state soon realized that it could spread its purist and politically quietist vision of Islam (and its own international influence) through educational and international institutions. And the intellectual and physical descendants of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab happily adopted the Salafi moniker as they had always objected to being called Wahhabis (i.e., followers of a

controversial eighteenth-century reformer as opposed to restorers of original, pristine Islam).

The Saudi royals created and sponsored the Islamic University of Medina (1961), the World Muslim League (1962), and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (1972) to promote Wahhabi values internationally, form sponsorship alliances with like-minded groups, train Wahhabi missionaries, and engender Saudi-friendly, Wahhabi sentiment in other communities.⁷² Salafi-identifying scholars from around the world were funded and welcomed into the Kingdom. Sympathetic young Muslim men hailing from everywhere from Nigeria to the United States to Malaysia were given full scholarships to study Hadith, theology, jurisprudence, and *da'wa* (proclamation/missionizing) at the Islamic University of Medina and other Saudi schools.⁷³ For Salafis in particular, who were so focused on the earliest Muslim experiences and ideas, the inherent authenticity of the holy homeland of the Prophet was magnetic.

But the enactment of this grand Saudi strategy also subversively redefined Salafism: By making itself the intellectual nexus for all of these culturally diverse Salafi identities, the Saudi state diluted the cohesion and internal influence of Wahhabism. As Chapter 3 will demonstrate through the life of one paradigmatic Salafi scholar, the conformist and quietist scholars, who continued – in the vein of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab – supporting the Saudi royal family and never entering into political activism, were suddenly studying alongside more politically oriented Salafis and iconoclastic scholars who had Hadith interpretations that made old-school Wahhabis shudder.⁷⁴ Non-Saudi Salafi thinkers, who had no deep attachment to established Wahhabi jurisprudential mindsets, brought new ideas and questions into the very schools and institutions that were created by the Saudis to inculcate the Wahhabi perspective.⁷⁵ Salafi scholars with very different interpretations of the Hadith even came and taught at the ostensibly Wahhabi schools, creating controversies and developing student disciples, who, in turn, brought those ideas back to their global homelands.⁷⁶ The unitive alignment of Wahhabism (*tawhid*,

the requisite siloing of political and theological authorities, the demand for unanimity) was fractured and unintentionally pluralized through Saudi internationalism.

The second shift is one that is specific to American immigration policy. In 1965, the US Congress passed and Lyndon Johnson signed the Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act, which removed the National Origins Formula that had privileged northern Europeans (i.e., white people) immigrating to America since the 1920s. The 1965 act made immigration to the United States far more possible and attainable for people from parts of the world, especially Asia and Africa, that had previously been seriously restricted. And many of the Asians and Africans and Middle Easterners who established themselves as Americans after 1965 were Muslims. Due to the separation of church and state, the US Census and immigration officials do not ask about religion, but we know that “[f]rom 1966 to 1997, approximately 2,780,000 people immigrated to the US from areas of the world with significant Muslim populations.”⁷⁷ Today somewhere between 3.5 and 4 million Americans are Muslim (about 1.1 percent of the US population) with 76 percent identifying as either immigrants themselves or the children of immigrants.⁷⁸ It is very difficult to count the number of Salafis among these first- and second-generation immigrant communities in the USA (for reasons, I will unpack in the next chapter), but they easily number in the tens or hundreds of thousands.

All of these historical forces – the scripturalist DNA of the medieval Ahl al-Hadith, the non-conformist and originalist ideas of Ibn Taymiyya, the exacting monotheism of the Wahhabis – have fed into what we today call Salafism, a twentieth-century, worldwide, Hadith-revival movement in Sunni Islam, centered in Saudi Arabia. And it has arrived in America in the past fifty years with all of its global complexity in tow. Global Salafism today is an adaptive scriptural discourse that draws together Wahhabism and many other streams of thought. At the intersection of these new Muslim immigrant communities and the Saudi scholarship incentives for American

Muslims, the international currents of ideas and Hadith-centric Islam that flowed through Saudi Arabia also flowed into the United States.⁷⁹

To return to our evolutionary analogy, Salafism is like the antelope: an umbrella term for a diverse collection of identities that congealed in the twentieth century in various societies and nationalities. Salafism is native to Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and, archetypically, Saudi Arabia. Through government-sponsored Saudi missionary endeavors and American immigration policy, these global Salafis have come to reside in the USA. For all their diversity, there are certain features that unite all these “Old World” Salafis, most prominently a scripturalist, direct-to-the-source attachment to the Hadith, a close affinity with Ibn Taymiyya, and a quest to recapture the energy and vision of original, authentic Islam.

CONCLUSION

What would happen if the antelope came to reside in the native lands of the pronghorn? If Evangelicalism evolved and emerged in concert with American history, Salafism evolved and emerged across many centuries and in many different historical and intellectual biomes. Clearly American Evangelicalism has gone through many phases and permutations, but those different strata of evangelical history have been coordinated in subtle and obvious ways with American cultural and political shifts. Like the pronghorn, Evangelicals have developed over the past three centuries to fill a niche in the American ecology: the fleet-footed, populist, revivalist brand of American Protestantism, proclaiming the veracity and clarity of the Bible, an innovative and adaptive form of modern religion whose impulse toward activism has recently adjoined the movement to the Republican Party to create a powerful political bloc.

As these two side-by-side evolutionary histories make visible, Salafism is something quite different, proceeding organically from various originalist, Taymiyyan, Hadith-focused, theological and social currents in Sunni Islamic history. The Salafi relationship with the

Qur'an and Hadith resembles the Evangelical relationship to the Bible, but there are many eye-catching differences: The Hadith canon remains enormous and layered and complex; the Qur'an is a scripture without parallel in Christianity; and the orthopraxic, jurisprudential orientation of the Islamic tradition as a whole means that, naturally, the questions Salafis ask of their scriptures will be more focused on action and details of behavior than on abstract theological arguments (though Salafis have plenty of those too).

While Evangelicals may respect and sometimes quote figures like Martin Luther or Jonathan Edwards, there is no correspondent historical thought leader in Evangelicalism who holds a position of primacy like Ibn Taymiyya does for Salafis. The different strands of twentieth-century Salafism have emerged within a diverse array of majority-Muslim, post-colonial political orders all undergoing upheaval, but few of them are what we might conventionally call "liberal" or "democratic," and virtually none of them are religiously pluralistic (at least not in the American sense of separation of religion and state). And even at a very practical level of American reality: Most Evangelicals in America are white, with all the attendant privileges, security, and freedoms that white Christianity brings. Most Salafis in America, like most Muslims in America, belong to African American or first- or second- generation immigrant communities, and their experience of America is affected by racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and other forms of cultural alienation, often coming from Evangelicals and other white Christians.

In the post-9/11 American imagination, Salafism was depicted as something foreign, wild, and rigid – a Wahhabi-inspired, Saudi-exported Islamic animus that was medieval-minded and retrograde. Consider this passage from the 9/11 Commission Report:

Usama Bin Ladin and other Islamist terrorist leaders draw on a long tradition of extreme intolerance within one stream of Islam (a minority tradition), from at least Ibn Taimiyyah, through the founders of Wahhabism . . . That stream is motivated by religion

and does not distinguish politics from religion, thus distorting both . . . Bin Ladin and Islamist terrorists mean exactly what they say: To them America is the font of all evil, the 'head of the snake,' and it must be converted or destroyed.

It is not a position with which Americans can bargain or negotiate. With it there is no common ground – not even respect for life – on which to begin a dialogue. It can only be destroyed or utterly isolated.⁸⁰

After 9/11, Salafis who were in America, of both the African American and the immigrant variety, whether they were sympathetic to Bin Laden's sentiments about America or not, were designated as an invasive foreign species – ideological interlopers, exponents of an arcane and dangerous religious fundamentalism.

It's true that Salafism *is* native to many different locales, mostly spread throughout the Middle Eastern, African, and South and Southeast Asian lands where Islam has flourished. Yet, despite the divergence between the hereditary and cultural and racial experiences of Evangelicals and Salafis in America, the fact is that Salafis have managed in the last forty years to make a home for themselves in American society. Doing so, they have instinctively grabbed hold of many of the localisms and styles that Evangelicalism has long exhibited, in order to inhabit an often-hostile cultural milieu in which Salafism did not organically emerge. As we shall see in the coming chapters, this acculturation of a mature, diverse, and fluidly American community of Salafis bespeaks the profound flexibility and adaptability of Salafism.