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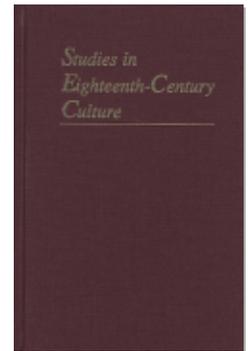
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Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture, Volume 47, 2018, pp. 265-268 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sec.2018.0026>



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Radical Islam, Tolerance, and the Enlightenment

FAYÇAL FALAKY

Although our principal subject is Voltaire and the shadow cast by his legacy following the Charlie Hebdo attacks, I would like to begin by addressing another eighteenth-century author whose legacy also happens to loom over the massacre that took place in Paris on 7 January 2015. This author is Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, a man who lived from 1703 to 1792, and was pretty much contemporaneous with the *siècle des Lumières*, yet whose philosophy can be traced to the fundamentalist ideology of contemporary groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda.

A native of the province of Najd in central Arabia, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab left his homeland in the late 1720s to study in Basra, and it was during his time in the Iraqi city that he started his religious mission, preaching against *bid'a* (innovations or cultural accretions), *shirk* (the act of ascribing partners to God) and any other practices that he believed were foreign to the original purity of Islam. His ideas were dismissed in Basra, and he was eventually expelled at the urging of the city's clerics for being too extremist; but ibn Abd al-Wahhab made his way back to Najd where a more fortunate fate awaited his crusade. In 1744, Muhammad bin Saud, the tribal ruler of the town of Diriyah, endorsed ibn Abd al-Wahhab's mission and the two swore an oath to establish together a state run according to true Islamic principles. For the next seventy years, until the dismantlement of the first Saudi State in 1818, the Wahhabis struck terror into people from

Damascus to Baghdad. In keeping with their belief that the veneration of saints and prophets is a form of idolatry, they destroyed various historical monuments, mausoleums, and shrines. They also prescribed upon the people they conquered a strict observance of their version of Sharia law, forbidding alcohol, tobacco, music, and chess, flogging men who shaved their beards or who failed to attend daily prayers, and stoning couples accused of adultery. Homosexuality, which had been largely tolerated in the Ottoman Empire, also became criminalized, and those found guilty were thrown to their deaths from the top of the city's minarets.

If all of these actions sound sadly familiar, it is because they are no different than those staged or spectacularized today by ISIS, or those still performed, under a veil of silence, by the current kingdom of Saudi Arabia. As Kamel Daoud recently noted in a *New York Times* article, Saudi Arabia is an ISIS that has made it: "one slits throats, kills, stones, cuts off hands, the other is better dressed and neater but does the same things."¹ It is for this reason that the presence of Saudi Arabia's ambassador to France at the Republican march on Boulevard Voltaire seemed hypocritical. While he was honoring the victims of the Charlie Hebdo attacks, back home, the Saudi blogger Raif Badawi was being ceremoniously and publicly flogged for "insulting the religious authorities."² The whole absurdity of the situation seemed straight from an episode of *Candide*.

Although most Enlightenment thinkers never heard or wrote a single word about Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, a few authors learned of the existence of the Wahhabis thanks to Carsten Niebuhr's *Beschreibung von Arabien* (1772). In his travel account, Niebuhr acknowledges the cruelty of the Wahhabis and the bloodshed they had caused, yet he depicts Wahhabism in a surprisingly positive light, as a revival movement that adhered to the Quran's principles more than the ersatz Islam of the so-called Muslims. Wahhabism, in other words, was a new religion seeking to revive the real spirit of Muhammad's message and set on reconverting "Sunni Muslims" to the faith from which they had strayed. Whereas the Muslim religion, as practiced by Sunnis, writes Niebuhr, "is surely far different from when it was instituted by Mahomet [and] has gradually adopted many pieces of superstition, which are condemned in the Alcoran," Wahhabism, he adds, deserves "to be regarded as a reformation Mahometism reducing it back to its original simplicity."³ If the Danish Niebuhr looked at the iconoclastic Wahhabis as the Islamic equivalent of Europe's Protestants, others considered their rejection of saints, amulets, miracles, and other superstitious beliefs through the lens of Enlightenment principles.

This is particularly evident in some of the early nineteenth-century texts that tried to make sense of the rise of the Wahhabis. In Louis de Corancez's

Histoire des Wahabis (1810), we find the same depictions of cruel, intolerant practices and barbaric war crimes. Yet, here too, Wahhabism is depicted as a simple and rational theology shorn of the superstition accrued over the centuries by misguided “Mohammedans.” Likewise, in his *Description du Pachalik de Baghdad* (1809), Jean-Baptiste Rousseau describes Wahhabis as pure deists who believe in only one God and who are sensible enough to reject miracles and prophecies: “ils refusent à Mahomet la qualité de prophète, et ne le regardent que comme un homme juste et vertueux.”⁴ The notion that Muhammad was a sage rather than a prophet for the Wahhabis is also present in Volney’s earlier *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte* (1787). Using Niebuhr as reference, Volney writes that the Wahhabis’s most important principle is that God alone should be adored and that “on ne doit faire mention d’aucun prophète en priant, parce que cela touche à l’idolâtrie; que Moïse, Jésus-Christ, Mahomet, etc. sont à la vérité de grands hommes... mais que nul livre n’a été inspiré par l’ange Gabriel, ou par tout autre esprit céleste.”⁵

How may we make sense of this relatively favorable light shed on the Wahhabis of the eighteenth century? One possible explanation may lie in the fact that for many philosophers, Islam was already considered a sensible and rational religion, especially when compared to Christianity. In Islam, writes Voltaire, belief in one all-powerful God is the only dogma. “Si on n’y avait pas ajouté que Mahomet est son prophète,” he adds, it would have been “le simple théisme, la religion naturelle, et par conséquent la seule véritable.”⁶ When we consider Volney’s assertion that the Wahhabis care very little about either Mahomet or the Koran, or Rousseau’s contention that they remove the last words of the profession of faith “et la réduisent à celles-ci, *il n’y a d’autre Dieu que Dieu,*” we can imagine how these Wahhabis could have come off as enlightened deists fighting superstition in the name of a *religion pure*, partners in a common, universal cause, achieving progress in Arabia the same way the philosophes of the eighteenth century had advanced their new ideas in Europe.⁷

But if this is the case, what does this partnership, which rests of course on a case of mistaken identity, say about the nonchalant dismissal of Wahhabi cruelty we find particularly in the works of Corancez and Rousseau? By way of conclusion, we could say that by fighting for a *religion épurée*, the Wahhabis of the eighteenth century (or of today) are at once enemies of superstition and proponents of a messianic universalism that is as intolerant as it is protean. This universalism may be invoked by religious fanatics who believe that there is no salvation outside their monolithic creed. It could also be invoked, as modern history has abundantly illustrated, by those who sought to spread enlightenment ideals through the barrel of the gun. The point of this parallel is not to indict the Enlightenment for promoting

a vision of universalism. The fact that Voltaire presented Islam as a model faith reflects a conception of the world where universal values did not presuppose a particular origin. Montesquieu's Persians, Rousseau's Caribs, and Diderot's Tahitians are all held up more or less as models to emulate; and we can argue that this sort of universal humanism may be the remedy to the politics of entrenchment and xenophobia that have spread recently through many parts of the world. What we see in the works of Corancez and Rousseau, however, is a universalism that, although speaking the language of the Enlightenment, heralds the hegemony (and violence) of the "civilizing mission." It is a eurocentric universalism in which the rest of humanity can be ally or foe, depending on its perceived modernity.

NOTES

1. Kamel Daoud, "Saudi Arabia, an ISIS That Has Made It," *The New York Times*, 20 November 2015.

2. Ben Hubbard, "Saudis Begin Public Caning to Punish a Blogger," *The New York Times*, 9 January 2015.

3. Carsten Niebuhr, *Travels through Arabia and Other Countries in the East*, trans. Robert Heron, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Morison and Son, 1792), 2:135.

4. "They refuse to see Mahomet as a prophet and regard him only as a just and virtuous man." Jean-Baptiste-Louis-Jacques Rousseau, *Description du pachalik de Bagdad, suivie d'une notice historique sur les Wahabis, et de quelques autres pièces relatives à l'histoire et à la littérature de l'Orient* (Paris: Treuttel et Würtz, 1809), 145–46. [All translations from French to English are my own].

5. "One should not mention any prophet in praying, since to do so would border on idolatry; Moses, Jesus Christ, Mahomet, etc. were in truth great men...—but no book was ever inspired by the angel Gabriel or any other celestial spirit." Constantin-François de Volney, *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie*, ed. Jean Gaulmier (Paris: Mouton, 1959), 213.

6. "Had Muslims not added that Muhammad was God's prophet," "a simple theism, a natural religion and therefore the only true one." Voltaire, *Examen important de Milord Bolingbroke*, ed. Roland Mortier in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire/Complete Works of Voltaire* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1968–), 62:338.

7. "And reduce it to *There is no god but God*." Rousseau, *Description du pachalik*, 146.