FEATURES OF SALAFISM AMONG LITHUANIAN CONVERTS TO ISLAM

Abstract

The paper focuses on multiple discursive spaces of Lithuanian converts to Islam. In these, mostly trans-national areas of discourse, the signs of Salafi ideology can often be discerned. Salafism, seeking to embody Islam in its purported pristine form, time and again corresponds to the attitudes of newcomers to Islam as they choose a (frequently totally) new way of life, submerge themselves deeply into painstakingly constructing their new identity, and search for pure practices. The combined methods of qualitative in-depth interviews, analysis of Lithuanian converts’ intra-community online forums and digital questionnaire reveal how deeply Salafi discourse has been internalized by the converts under investigation. The respondents of the research find themselves as participants in multiple Salafi trans-national discursive spaces that are connecting people of similar worldviews globally. At the same time, the researched group cannot escape its specific social and geographical boundaries, in other words, implications of the local context they hail from and have been socialized into. Therefore, the paper provides not only the analysis of manifestations of Salafi thinking found among Lithuanian converts to Islam, but also seeks to discuss if one can already talk of emerging Euro-Salafism as a new form of Salafi way of thinking, if not ideology, and living mixed with local attributes.

Keywords: Salafism, converts to Islam, Islam in Lithuania

Salafisms: grappling with the terms

Though two decades ago the term Salafism hardly ever appeared in texts on Muslim activism (Husain 1995; Eickelman and Piscatori 1996), research on it has recently become abundant. However, much of it appears to focus on organized Salafism in the Middle East, especially in the wake of political changes of 2011 in some Arab countries (POMEPS Briefings 2012), and elsewhere in Muslim-majority societies. Furthermore, in much of the research Salafism is associated with politically motivated violence, with Salafis accused of either actively engaging in it or at least endorsing it. More nuanced researchers (Meijer 2009), on the other hand, reflecting the complex world of Salafi ideas and activities, have already come up with classification of various trends within the Salafi camp, some of which are apparently not only non-violent, but even a-political altogether.
The standard typology is three-fold and divides Salafis into those who are primarily concerned with personal and communal piety (and as a rule shun politics), those who actively engage in politics and those who use violence. Wiktorowicz (2006) calls them respectively «purists», «politicos» and «jihadis». Amghar (2007: 38) has come up with an almost identical classification: «the first is revolutionary; it places ‘jihad’ at the heart of religious beliefs. The second is predicative Salafism, which bases its actions on preaching and religious teachings. The last is political Salafism, which organises its activities around a political logic.» Haykel (2009: 48–49) likewise talks of «three distinct categories», described by him very much along the same lines. Abdel-Latif (2007: 69) has come up with a slightly different classification:

a) *Al-Salafyia al-elmia*, or scholarly Salafism, which is concerned with the study of the holy text and Islamic jurisprudence; b) *Al-Salafyia al-harakyyia*, or activist Salafism, which describes both politically active Salafist groups and those groups that are not politically active but occupy a place in the public sphere through their charity work and networks of social support and religious education institutes. This current also includes *al-Salafyia al-Islahyyia*, or reformist Salafism; and c) *Al-Salafyia al-jihadyia*, a brand of jihadist Salafism that concerns itself with implementing jihad.

However, the distinction between politically active and passive Salafis remains. Reflecting on the context of research on Salafism, Sedgwick (2010: 76) argues that

at present, two very popular analyses are what may be called the socio-cultural and the security-political. The socio-cultural analysis understands Salafism in terms such as post-Islamism: the failure of political Islam has opened a space that has been occupied by a form of Islam that shares some characteristics with the political Islam it has replaced, and also responds to the circumstances of socially marginalized or even excluded Muslim minorities. The security-political school of analysis follows Quintin Wiktorowicz’s distinction between Purists, Politicos, and Jihadis: purists are not interested in politics, Politicos are but do not favor jihad, and Jihadis do favor jihad.

Yet both «schools» appear to draw heavily from earlier research on what has been variously called «Islamic revivalism», «fundamentalism», «political Islam» and «Islamism». Some authors, like Amghar (2007: 47), attempt to explain the purported distinction between Salafis and Islamists:

Salafism has many points in common with political Islam. But in contrast to Salafism, political Islam is based on the activism of groups that have a precise political vision and a political project (and not a messianic utopia), which are organised as social movements or political parties, with recourse to strictly political activities and initiatives (demonstrations, petitions, participation in elections, etc.), acting in a real political and institutional framework (of the state), and are non-violent in their methods of action.

Others, however, see them as one and the same – Fradkin (2007: 7), for instance, treats Islamism and Salafism as synonyms.
Labels apart, to those seriously interested in the study of Salafism it is clear that Salafism as a phenomenon is tremendously complex and multifaceted. Meijer (2009) argues that

[w]hat makes Salafism so difficult to define is its ambiguity and fragmentation. Although it is a movement with clearly defined characteristics, it is not a homogeneous movement but—especially in the modern era—has become a movement with mixed, and recently even contradictory tendencies which have sprung up in different regions (Meijer 2009: 3).

On the other hand, there is a common ground uniting Salafis, for all of them see themselves as (and most indeed are) «first and foremost religious and social reformers who are engaged in creating and reproducing particular forms of authority and identity, both personal and communal. Indeed, Salafis are determined to create a distinct Muslim subjectivity, one with profound social and political implications» (Haykel 2009: 34–35).

When compared with the other trends and especially the jihadis, purist Salafis, «[i]n opposition to revolutionary (aka jihadi) Salafism, which it sees as violent and heretical, (...) believe (...) that it is neither the jihad nor armed action that will allow the establishment of an Islamic society and state» (Amghar 2007: 42–43). It is further argued that this particular Salafi trend «reflects the traditional Salafist view that the real solution to the problems of the umma involves focusing on two main principles – filtering religion from all the bidah [innovations] and educating Muslims about the faith» (Abdel-Latif 2007: 72). Arguably, purist Salafis offer a (...) vision based on piety, which has its foundations in a faith that is both eschatological and apodictic, and in which the purification of belief and of Islamic education are written into human destiny. This means bringing an Islamic conscience back to Muslims, by returning to a religious practice purified of all additions subsequent to the last koranic revelation and to the apostolate of the Prophet. Through preaching, a new social movement would be created to lead to a world order in which Islam is accorded a pre-eminence place. Pious Salafis are thus not primarily concerned with politics but rather with the correction of belief and religious practices (Amghar 2007: 43).

In this regard, purist Salafism reminds of the Christian pietist movements of the past centuries, though, admittedly, its origins, the social context it operates in and the modus operandi itself differ significantly from the Christian pietists of the 17th and subsequent centuries. Therefore, terms like «pietism» and «quietism», if and when applied to Salafis, need not to be seen as synonymous with those used in the Christian context of a particular historical period but rather as qualitative designations signifying the believer’s relationship with the God and the surrounding world.

In Europe, purist Salafism, where it is purportedly the biggest of all the Salafi trends, «pursues the objective of conversion and predication» (Amghar 2007: 42–43). Though meant in general, in Europe particularly so,

the attraction to Salafism lies in the form of authority that it promotes, and reproduces, as well as the particular hermeneutics it advocates. It is not Salafism’s so-called «de-territorialised» and
«fundamentalist» qualities, nor the «globalised» condition of modern life, that make Salafism particularly attractive. Rather, it is Salafism’s claims to religious certainty that explain a good deal of its appeal, and its seemingly limitless ability to cite scripture to back these up (Haykel 2009: 37).

On the other hand, as noticed by Martijn de Koning (2013:72), who has studied the Dutch case, for the majority of people belonging to Salafi movement in the Netherlands, daily life «is experienced as a moral maze of conflicting loyalties, practical restraints, intra-Salafi politics, and tensions within Salafi thought».

There are also those who argue that the attractiveness and sudden spread of Salafi ideology can be best explained precisely through the notions of modernity, globalization and secularization. Salafi movements, according to Oliver Roy (2004: 6), in this sense are similar to New Age religions. Responding to general global trends, these religious movements share inclination to bring out individual commitment, reflections and expressions of faith, such as personal piety, to the forefront of religious life. Besides constant effort on self-improvement, New Age practitioners are focused on the spread of their message across society. Consequently, they are not afraid to take responsibility and often become self-appointed religious leaders. Bryan Wilson (1979: 193) points out that such «do-it-yourself techniques» are usually directed against established religious institutions and religious elite on top of them.

Within the broader framework, Salafism is reminiscent of New Age religions due to its contemporaneity and at the same time critical stand towards past traditions and interpretations of Islam. Indeed, what Wilson (1982) formulates as one of the main characteristics of New Age religions, e.g., «what new movements offer is a revitalization of religious culture, sometimes by purging the established and ossified religious system of accretions, and sometimes by restoring things lost by attrition» (1982: 124), seems to be neatly corresponding the current situation of the Salafi movement.

To summarize, Salafism seems to have come to signify Islamic revivalism in its fundamentalist form par excellence. Ultimately, though definitely not all Muslim revivalists and fundamentalists are Salafis, all purist Salafis are by default both revivalist and fundamentalist.

In this article only those Muslims who fall within the category of «purist» Salafis are dealt with. This is so foremost of all because in Lithuania no politicos (actively engaged in real national politics) or jihadis (engaged in politically motivated violence) have yet been observed – all of those among researched Lithuanian Muslims, who were found to either identify themselves with or could be assigned to the Salafi camp, profess an a-political and anti-violent path, corresponding to Wiktorowicz and others’ definition of the «purist» trend.

Methods and informants

The fieldwork research for this article, carried out in 2009–2013, consisted of face-to-face semi-structured in-depth interviews in Vilnius, Kaunas (two places with the biggest concentration of Lithuanian converts to Islam) and Plungė, applying the snow-
ball principle of selection, and questionnaires distributed in online forums and social networks, in total – 49 interviews. The study was enriched by visiting Kaunas mosque and the Islamic Center in Vilnius as well as by participating in female Muslim converts’ circles in one of the respondent’s home and in a Muslim pre-wedding party. The research was further enhanced through constant observation of islam-ummah.lt forum, its sub-forum Salaf kelias and the Lithuanian language Salafi Facebook group.

The research was limited to Lithuanian-born recent converts to Islam, among whom females overwhelmingly dominate, who, however, make only a fraction of the overall Muslim constituency in Lithuania. The deliberate choice to focus exclusively on converts was circumscribed by the state of affairs in the Muslim community in Lithuania – the biggest segment, the Lithuanian Tatars along with the Soviet-time immigrants and their progeny, who together make no less than two thirds of the total number of Muslims in the country, are heavily secularized, while the immigrant segment is still miniscule and fluctuating. Though the authors allow a possibility that some individuals within these segments, because of their convictions and way of life, might be ascribed to the Salafi camp, in the Lithuanian context they would be rather an exception than a rule.

On the other hand, after lengthy observations, the authors have come to the opinion that purist Salafism is a predominant discursive space among practicing Lithuanian converts to Islam, irrespective of whether they self-identify as Salafis or not. This working conclusion raises the question of the nature of European (Lithuanian, in this case) converts’ Salafism – is it merely a local variation of otherwise global Salafism, or does it contain features which could make it exceptional to the point of constituting something amounting to, even if only nascent, Euro-Salafism?

If Euro-Islam has been used as a technical term in the study of the Muslim presence in Europe, Euro-Salafism, admittedly, a neologism, can hardly if at all be found in academic literature. However, it has been argued that “Salafism in Europe reflects a transformation in society that enhances self-fulfillment, individual choice and assertiveness. It furthermore has the advantage that it allows for individual self-study of the sources of Islam to find out ‘what Islam really says’” (Meijer 2009: 15).

And indeed, the bulk of the Lithuanian converts to Islam, and especially those still living in Lithuania, are those who do not either formally or even informally belong to the traditional local Muslim community comprised mainly of the Lithuanian Tatars and rather make a parallel «virtual» community, albeit diverse in itself, separate from any formal Muslim authorities, either local or foreign. However, due to physical distance among themselves as well as other circumstances, such as the length of being a Muslim, educational and occupational background, living conditions, foreign language skills, each «member» of this imagined community is in fact very individualistic in his (or rather her) choices of sources and authorities which s/he shares with other neophytes. This all makes it even more interesting to analyze discursive spaces of Lithuanian converts to Islam. However, before doing that, it is worth to provide a background of the general Muslim presence in today’s Lithuania.
Composition of the Muslim community in Lithuania

Though Muslims, in the person of the so-called Lithuanian Tatars, have been an integral part of the Lithuanian society since at least the 15th century, the newly independent post-Communist Lithuania has been witnessing (re)appearance of Islam on its soil, where the revived indigenous Tatar Muslim community is gradually being supplemented by immigrant and expatriate Muslims and a steadily growing group of Lithuanian converts and their progeny (Račius 2011: 207–221). So far, however, Muslims in Lithuania form a very small minority and do not exceed several thousand in a total population of the country of three million. The 2011 census in Lithuania returned 2,727 residents of Lithuania as specifically Sunni Muslims (Department of Statistics 2013: 14, no data on Shii Muslims) and this is a decrease of some five percent in a decade from 2001.

Table 1. Number of Sunni Muslims, ethnic Lithuanian Sunni Muslims, Tatar Sunni Muslims and ethnic Tatars, by census

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census year</th>
<th>Total Sunni Muslims</th>
<th>Ethnic Lithuanian Sunni Muslims</th>
<th>Tatar Sunni Muslims</th>
<th>Ethnic Tatars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2,860</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>1,679</td>
<td>3,235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2,727</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>1,441</td>
<td>2,793</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Department of Statistics, 2002, Department of Statistics, 2013

Nominally, Lithuania’s Muslim community can be seen to be composed of four «cultural» groups, the biggest of which is the Lithuanian Tatars. The second oldest group is the «colonists» – descendants of immigrants from the Muslim Central Asian and Caucasian republics who settled in Lithuania during the Soviet period (around 1,400 in 2001 (Department of Statistics 2002: 204–205)). The third group is immigrants and expatriates of the past two decades. By the end of 2011, there were up to 2,500 foreign nationals of Muslim background living in Lithuania on various grounds – asylum seekers, businessmen, exchange and program students, and those on family reunion grounds (Department of Migration 2010). Finally, the fourth group is the converts – citizens of Lithuania who have converted to Islam in the past two decades.

Lithuanian converts to Islam: an attempt at a typology

Conversion of ethnic Lithuanians to Islam has been picking up pace and it is them who make up the «new» Islam in Lithuania, if not on the streets, definitely so in the discursive space, and articulate it in the Lithuanian language. And like immigration, conversion of Lithuanians (both ethnic and of other ethnic origins, like Polish, Russian) to Islam is a recent phenomenon – two decades ago there virtually were no Lithuanian convert Muslims. It is them, or rather the segment from among them, who either consciously or indirectly identifies with Salafism, who are the focus of this paper.
Estimates given below are based on two decades-long personal observation of the evolution of Islam in Lithuania by one of the co-authors of this article, recent fieldwork research by the other co-author (Norvilaitė 2011) as well as other authors (Markevičiūtė 2009), survey of the Internet and other sources (published media, conversations with Muslims) and private acquaintances of the authors. The authors have at least basic personal information on some 200 of Lithuanian converts to Islam. Although it is too early to talk about any noteworthy tendency, it is nonetheless already possible to offer a crude typology of Lithuanian converts to Islam.

One may speak of three types (or groups) of Lithuanian converts to Islam based on «motivational experiences» forwarded by Lofland and Skonovd (1981: 373–385): intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive, to which later authors added several more «motivational experiences», among them negativist (Lakh­dar et al. 2007: 1–15). In the case of Lithuanian converts to Islam, until recently the affectional «motivational experience» clearly dominated but in the past five years or so it has been matched by the experimental «motivational experience».

1. Probably the biggest group (up to 300 individuals) of converts are female Lithuanian citizens who have either married or maintain close personal relations with Muslims hailing from Muslim-majority countries. Most of these female converts may be assigned affectional «motivational experience». Or, to use Stefano Allievi’s (2002: 1) terminology, this type of conversion can be called «relational» and «conversion under these circumstances is a means to reach another aim (marriage), not an end in itself». Yet, many of such women married to Muslims become themselves devout Muslims though few gain any proper (and virtually none formal) religious education. Converts belonging to this type made a clear majority (around 70 to 80 %) of the respondents in the research.

2. The second group (between 150 and 250 individuals) of converts might tentatively be called «adventurers» or «lovers», what in part corresponds to the experimental «motivational experience», though negativist «motivational experience» is also often present. Usually these are young unmarried males and females. Many of them simply «stumbled» upon Islam by accidentally coming upon information on Islam on the WWW or meeting Muslims while abroad and became fascinated with it. According to Allievi (2002: 1), such conversions belong to a «discovery of Islam» type. After their conversion converts of this type painstakingly aspire to become as Islamic as possible: constantly repeat Islamic formulas in Arabic, use religious symbols, don «Islamic» attire or wear Islamic symbols in public. Converts of this type made the remaining 20 to 30 percent of the respondents.

3. The third, and by far the smallest (up to 50 individuals), group of converts might be called «spiritual seekers» (with intellectual «motivational experience») whose conversion, in Allievi’s (2002: 1) words, belongs to the «rational» conversion type. These are people who discovered Islam after having gone through several other religious traditions, movements and cults. As a rule, they are married middle-age males with families and careers in Lithuania. Sometimes they manage to pursue their family members to also convert. Such converts plunge into religious self-study: they analyze the Quran and Hadith and devour religious texts in search for what they believe is the essence of
Of them are fascinated by what Jensen (2006) calls «ethical» Islam, in which the mystical dimension of Islam – Sufism – is paramount. Though in the West converts of this type often become members of the Ahmadiyya movement (Valentine 2008: 211–227), this has not been the case in Lithuania yet.

Based on the available sources one may speculate that currently the majority (possibly up to two thirds) of Lithuanian converts to Islam are individuals younger than 25 years, a quarter between 25 and 40 years and less than a tenth older than 40. From a very simplified and schematized perspective one might provisionally say that a typical citizen of Lithuania who has converted to Islam is a young (up to 25 years old) female, very likely married, more likely than not residing outside Lithuania.

The fact of conversion to Islam in itself is not so much significant as the «type» of Islam converts choose. Most of the encountered, e.g. active on online forums and in local congregations of their own, Lithuanian converts to Islam appear to have opted for complete overhaul of their identity and have joined the ranks of Muslims who in the academic literature have been generally referred to as revivalists as opposed to traditionalists – that is, Muslims adhering to one of the so-called «classical dimensions» of Islam. As has been observed by researchers of European converts to Islam, «[M]any converts later come to adhere to non-explicitly defined forms of Sunni Islam, which they combine and reformulate in different ways within an overall reformist frame (Jensen and Østergaard 2007: 85). They generally share this approach with young revivalist Muslims» (Jensen 2011: 1159).

In their search for knowledge about their adopted religion, Lithuanian converts to Islam have been pulled into the whirlpool of the revivalist debates on the nature and composition of the «true» Islam in abundance and easily accessible on the WWW and through other advanced means of communication. Most of the converts who had been socializing on the online forum at islamas.lt and continue to do so on its reincarnation at islam-ummah.lt themselves tend to lean toward a sort of revivalist-type, deterriorialised (Roy 2004: 18–20) (not seen as bound by locality and its culture), Islam, as opposed to the traditionalist Islam of the Lithuanian Tatars, with an expressed «desire to follow the ‘straight path’, or even relocate it amidst the maze of alternatives generated through history» (Bunt 2003: 128). All this leads many of the converts to identify first and foremost with the transnational Umma or rather its best part, often seen in the person of Salafis, both historic and contemporary.

Converses wrestling with the meanings and use of Salafism

A growing group of Lithuanian converts to Islam describe themselves as strict believers following the path of «pure» Islam, often identifying as or sympathizing with Salafis. Nevertheless, the carried research, combining methods of qualitative in-depth interviews, analysis of Lithuanian converts’ intra-community online forums and digital questionnaires, divulges that respondents’ disposed understanding of Salafism is currently at an embryonic stage with only several of them having a clearer, albeit subjective, understanding of it. The main debates on Salafism (especially on the online forum
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Islam-ummah.lt, on which, as of February 2013, words «salafi» and «salafis» occurred more than 150 times) among the majority of the newcomers to Islam have mostly to do with the definition of Salafism, identifying its essence, comparing it with other Islamic «streams» as well as the abstract reflections in regards to the implementation of its ideological principles. Deeper independent theological/ideological and methodological insights, though present, are still rare, at least in this particular space.

Looking at the hierarchical structure of islam-ummah.lt forum, two main groups of the Lithuanian converts to Islam – the majority, consisting chiefly of recent converts, and a relatively small group of «advanced» followers – can be identified. Schematically the latter group, consisting of a half a dozen of converts, as a rule, living outside of Lithuania, has taken the position of gatekeepers who filter the outer information about Salafism and adapt it for the internal consumption of the community and especially those living in Lithuania, and thus potentially with a limited access, partially due to lack of knowledge of relevant languages, to varied information on Salafism. These «experts» of Salafism assist the «confused ones» by providing arguments and practical examples from their own experience, as well as directing the beginners to the «appropriate» sources of Islam. Besides, they perceive themselves as rehabilitators of the (true) Salafi ideology, pointing out the «correct» way of its comprehension and implementation. In the words of one of the founders-cum-leading members, UK-based Rimantė, «I hope this forum (islam-ummah.lt – authors’ insertion) will rehabilitate the notion of Salafi in a way which stops intimidating newcomers to religion and allows for correct understanding.» (Rimantė, online post 2012, May 15).

The dominant position of the «advanced» followers of the Salafi path and their ability to control the flow of information can be associated with the absence of local – Lithuanian-born or at least resident in Lithuania – Salafi ideological leaders and living examples. The top formal Muslim authority in the country, the Head of the Muftiät, though recognized by converts as a proper alim, is still seen by Salafism-inclined converts as wanting when it comes to his worldview. As Rimantė has reported, «our Mufti was the one who said that Lithuania is not a place to wear hijab. According to him, hijab is not supposed to attract attention and in Lithuania it clearly does. Such a fatwa could have never come from a Salafi sheikh» (Rimantė, personal communication 2013). Another convert has lamented that the current official authorities of the Lithuanian Muslim community supposedly have a negative attitude towards Salafism because of some outside influence:

it feels that the Lithuanian umma is being controlled. I think that all the financial help is coming from Turkey, in particular, Sufis. (...) At least, we have a virtual space, where everybody can find a niche (Gintare, personal communication 2013).

Indeed, the newcomers to Islam are usually using the online forum islam-ummah.lt as the Islamic source in itself and mainly following interpretations of the advanced users – self-proclaimed spiritual leaders. The fact that the majority of these leaders are females impels a question for future studies of how it feels to lead the co-believers being a young female convert Salafi.
However, none of the specified groups are satisfied with this status quo structure in the community. While the beginners are constantly posing the same set of questions (sometimes even trying to challenge the concept of Salafism per se), advanced followers are getting tired of «vain religious discussions» (Rimantė, Facebook post 2013, February 9). As expressed by Rimantė,

some users of the islam-ummah.lt forum, namely the liberal ones, Sufis and Shiites, are offended. They complain that it is impossible to discuss in this space anymore. They are angry that we (followers of the Salafi path – authors’ insertion) are monopolizing the platform with a one-sided opinion (Rimantė, personal communication 2013).

In response to this unsatisfactory situation, an initiative group of «advanced» followers in February 2013 launched a sub-branch of islam-ummah.lt forum called Salafkelias and a Facebook group exclusively for Salafis.

This particular development unveils a more general problematic aspect of Salafism when personal moral subjectivity is attempted to be resettled in a larger group of believers (de Koning 2013: 72). Community, being a social construct, requires active engagement in including/excluding peers, monopolizing resources of knowledge and passing understanding of what it means to be a «good» or «bad» Muslim (Brubaker 2002, quoted by de Koning 2013: 73). However, even then the doubt whether religious understanding shared among a group of believers has the same meaning on the individual level still persists.

Definitions of Salafism, its authorities and its divisions
The analysis of the discursive spaces of Lithuanian converts to Islam has shown that some neophytes find it difficult to understand not only what Salafism is but also how it can be applied in praxis, and how one can grasp the moment when one is already a Salafi and what sources one should rely on:

Could you please explain what do the proponents of Salafism rely on? What scholars or sheikhs are they following? The way I understand it, when you choose the school, you are following the fatwas of Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi and Hanbali. What should Salafi do? One simply cannot analyze each question of everyday life in the Quran and Sunnah as it requires profound knowledge and is time-consuming (Vivi, online post 2012, January 1).

This enquiry invited a stream of replies from several «advanced» converts. The aforementioned Rimantė reacted by writing that

In order to answer the question, who Salafis really are, I would like to provide contemplations in regards to who they certainly are not. Liberal Muslims and Sufis are inclined to accuse Salafis of being anthropomorphist. For instance, when we are talking about Islamic sources in which faces, hands or feet of Allah are disputed, Salafis approach this as a mere fact and do not concentrate on the details. Furthermore, they do not interpret the hand as a symbol of power or domination as the philosophers or Sufis do. […] This post is based on Ibn Taymiyya’s book Al Aqeedat il Wasitiyah which I recommend to all of you. […] So Salafism is a middle path – it is neither anthropomorphic nor philosophical (Rimantė, online post 2012, May 15).
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She further argued that

Salafi is a way to understand Islam and issue verdicts according to how the Prophet conveyed Islam and how the Salaf understood (it). Everything that is authentic is Salafi. Be it in the Hanafi madhhab, or Maliki madhhab, or Shafii, or Hanbali – all four imams themselves relied on the Salaf. The Salaf path does not reject or negate any of the madhhabs. The Salafi path is to pick the most authentic opinion from every madhhab. I believe that this ought to be every Muslim’s aim – to figure out the strongest opinion and to follow it rather than following a madhhab without getting into the issue or after getting into the issue rejecting the stronger opinion. To sum up, we can firmly claim that Salafi means the authentic, sahih. By saying that we are not Salafi, we do not rely on Salafi, we (indeed) are saying that we are not relying on sahih, not relying on authentic opinion (Rimantė, online post 2012, April 7).

In Rimantė’s line of argument «authenticity», indeed so dear to Salafis in their rhetoric, is the keyword. However, she fails to define the contents or criteria of this «authenticity» beyond a very fuzzy concept of «sahih» – «true». Another UK-based convert persists, very much along Rimantė’s line of reasoning, that «Salafis do not blindly choose one of the law schools. They follow only authentic hadiths and Sunnah» (Lidovskaja, online post 2011, February 20).

Yet another foreign-based (in Jordan) self-confessed Salafi, Umm Jumana, insists that Salafi is not a group, but a path, or, in other words, an understanding. As it is not a group, there are no particular scholars that one has to follow.

We try to find daleel from the Quran and Sunna. Fatwas of Salafi manhaj scholars are already supplied for us with a daleel.» (UmmJumana, online post 2012, November 24).

Umm Jumana speaks of «daleel», «evidence» or «proof» which could be seen as related to «authenticity». But once again, «daleel» as a term is not explained by her and leaves the reader (assuming that the majority of them are newcomers to Islam with little to none knowledge of Arabic) to come up with the precise meaning of the word him/herself.

The eagerness to deepen the knowledge at the level of «daleel» has been one of the major incentives to open a separate virtual space exclusively for the Salafi path followers among Lithuanian converts to Islam (with the forum language remaining Lithuanian). Asked what the method of finding «daleel» is, Rimantė explained that everything that is in Quran is daleel. However, she underscored that neither she nor her sisters-in-faith issue verdicts based on daleel due to the lack of religious knowledge. The WWW, full of Salafi sites, fatwas and speeches of Islamic scholars, remains the main source of religious guidance for the virtual group of the Lithuanian converts to Islam with Salafi leanings (Rimantė, personal communication 2013).

«Manhaj», another important term frequently referred to by Salafis world-wide as well as Lithuanian convert Salafis, however is not explained in any detail by those using it on islam-ummah.lt forum. There is an attempt to present «manhaj» on the new Salafi-focused forum Salaf kelias where a separate topic devoted to it is set. However,
most of the posts there are translated excerpts from purportedly Salafi authors and there is no original explanation or definition of «manhaj» by any of the converts themselves.

While the relationship between Salafis and adherents of classical jurisprudential traditions, according to Rimantė, remains vague, she does not appear to deny the general validity of classical jurisprudential traditions, at least Sunni. Umm Jumana, when identifying Salafi authorities, provides a list of «usual suspects» that most of Salafis regard as their authorities. However, she also includes the «eponyms» of the Sunni jurisprudential traditions:

As Salafi is not a group, but a method or understanding, it does not have a strict list of scholars one should follow. The scholars who adopted the Salafi path treat themselves as ordinary Muslims and understand that they can make the same mistakes. […] So, it is better to search for the right path rather than consciously embrace the untruthful course just because some of the schools say so.

There are many scholars who followed the Salafi path, for instance, Adnan Al Maliki, Abu Hanifa, Shafii, Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Ibn Kathir, Al Sadi, Al Askalani, imam Bukhari, Imam Maliki, Ibn Taymiyya, Al Albani, Ibn Baz, Ibn Utheimeen and uncountable many others. […] From among the contemporary dawa activists, Munajid, Bilal Philips, Piere Vogel in Germany, Abul Hussein (UmmJumana, online post 2012, January 1).

Umm Amara appears to agree with Umm Jumana, when she maintains that «Abu Hanifa and other imams were Salafis» (UmmAmara, online post 2012, April 7), however, she also considers all those who follow the Quran and Sunna to be in essence Salafis: «In general, we all are Salafis as we all follow the Quran and Sunnah» (UmmAmara, online post 2012, April 7). In her drive to identify the most trustworthy (e.g. Salafi) authorities yet another active member of the online forum islam-ummah.lt who introduces herself by a nickname «noralietu» (Nora the Lithuanian) provides a comprehensive list, taken from http://salaf-us-saalih.com/, of 23 of those whom she calls «shaykhs of the Salafi manhaj» (Noralietu, online post 2013, January 30); however, none of the early Sunni scholars are included in it.

As is evident from the above quotes, both Rimantė and Umm Jumana contend that Salafism is, or should ideally be, not a separate/ distinct group but rather a «path» or even a «way of understanding (the things)». In the words of Umm Jumana,

Salafis do not scream in the streets that they are Salafis because they are not a group or a party, like, for example, Ikhwan al Muslimin or Nursi. This term (Salafi – authors’ insertion) is used in order to dissociate from stray groups or to explain one’s manhaj or, in other words, path (UmmJumana, online post 2011, February 23).

On the other hand, there are attempts at critique of Salafis found to have become a mere «party», hizb. For instance, Umm Amara laments that

unfortunately, Salafis have become a separate group even though it shouldn’t be like this. Somebody may say that it is not a group, however, it is not true. Salafis prefer to reject previous imams and transfer to their own truths. (UmmAmara, online post 2012, April 7).
Some of the Lithuanian converts to Islam are even aware of intra-Salafi tensions that tie into Salafis having become, through rivalry, bickering and in-fighting, separate groups (ahzab). For instance, Rimantė, herself a staunch defender of the Salafi worldview, assesses some of the «Salafi» websites in rather uncompromising terms:

All these blogs can be traced back to online forum salafitalk.net, which, to tell the truth, instead of following the Salafi manhaj (path), leans toward a Salafi hizb (group). And dividing into groups is not from the Salafi manhaj. (…) Personally for me these blogs are reliable as much as there are translations of articles by sheikhs I know provided in them. All other publications, however, I would treat with caution (Rimantė, online post 2012, December 3).

She further concludes:

The tendency to jump to conclusions, exaggerated scrupulosity with a pre-set «agenda», as well as swelled judgments – this is what all these blogs, lists and arguments are full of. Audhubilah. Many people can call themselves Salafis, but it does not guarantee righteousness and infallibility; one is not to trust everybody who babbles he is a Salafi and a loving person (Rimantė, online post 2012, December 10).

With different members of the online forum forwarding different names of whom they consider to be trustworthy (Salafi) shaykhs, the discussion on the forum quickly became both heated and confused with the members arguing amongst themselves for or against including some of them, substantiating arguments being drawn from different online sources. Ultimately, Umm Jumana sought to cut the discussions short by stating that «manhaj is not so narrow as it may seem to be. Salafis and Salafi shaykhs are people and they can make mistakes. They can make even big and terrible mistakes – Allah forgive them.» (Umm Jumana 2013, January 31). In the end, she, as a moderator of the forum, was forced to terminate the discussion on who should be considered a proper Salafi authority. Soon after that an online forum islam-ummah.lt/salafikelias and a Facebook group exclusively for Salafis were launched, and the first post in the latter discursive space invited participants «to pay attention to the difference between the path of Salaf and the group called ‘Salafis’ (Skaisti Saule, Facebook post 2013, February 6).

The imperative of practicing the Salafism

de Koningen (2013: 77) argues that «to be part of the community of ‘true’ believers, the ‘correct’ knowledge of Salafi Muslims should lead a believer to having the ‘correct’ convictions and behaviour.» The moderators of the forum, foremost among them Rimantė and Umm Jumana, warned that to be a Salafi is not the same as to call oneself a Salafi. In the words of Umm Jumana, «the title is not as important as being. There are so many Salafis who have never heard the term of Salafism at all.» (Umm Jumana, online post 2011, February 23). The actual contents of being a true believer (indeed, a Salafi), however, remains undefined and thus potentially unclear to the neophytes searching for spiritual guidance on the online forum at islam-ummah.lt. Willing to
make things explicit, the more advanced practitioners of Salafism usually try to provide explanations enriched with practical examples:

Generally Salafis’ practice of Islam demonstrably illustrates their conception of Islam. For example, I could not imagine that a brother who shaves the beard or a sister who plucks the eyebrows could call oneself a Salafi. In addition, Salafi people put an eminent emphasis on Sunnah (Rimantė, online post 2011, February 22).

One of the topics in the online forum tackles a question of whether hanging photos on the walls is forbidden. In her response Rimantė expressed a strict «Salafist» position towards such a practice:

Last time when I was in Lithuania I took out all photos from the album where I am a teenager or an adult. I did this because I was not wearing hijab in these photos. (Rimantė, online post 2010, December 19).

It has been argued by researchers that «the newly converted often exhibit a so-called fanaticism with their new religion, which is generally expressed with very ritualized behavior, such as taking on the entire Islamic dress code and forming a preoccupation with Islamic rules of what is haram (‘forbidden’) and halal (‘allowed’), of doing things ‘right’.» (Jensen 2006: 646). Lithuanian converts’ intra-community online forums have been home to numerous regulations seeking to invoke the clear boundaries of what is allowed and what is forbidden in Islam. The predecessor of the islam-ummah.lt forum at islamas.lt was replete with «haram/halal fetishism» where concentration on distinguishing halal from haram was a focal point of discussions among the Lithuanian converts. In one of her posts Rimantė insisted that it ought to be every Muslim’s aspiration. Not only to reflect if we do not engage in haram but in general always to have in mind if what we say, how we act, how we judge things – is this all appreciated by Allah. (Rimantė, online post 2009).

Similar issues are also discussed in the newly emerged Salafi path Facebook group. The following post deals with poetry in Islam:

According to Tafsir of Ibn Kathir, Surah 5, ayya 90 is explained by this sahih hadith. Hadith witnesses that Abdullah bin Amr said that «Allah has sent down truth to eradicate falsehood, joyful play, flute or wind instruments, Zafan (dances) and Kibarat (referring to cabarets using the lute and bagpipe), tambourine, guitar, harp and lyric and love poetry….» (Tafsir Ibn Kathir, page 246). Therefore, we should include lyrics and poetry about love into the list of forbidden things in Islam (Sutema, Facebook post 2013, February 20).

This scrupulous approach can be associated with the majority of the respondents being recent converts to Islam and the European context where societies are lacking natural settings for Islamic knowledge and practices. The implementation of religious rituals and choosing a path of perception of what religion contains in itself are not culturally inherited here but have to be implemented almost mechanically reflecting the respon-
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dents’ previous non-Islamic socialization and ways of living. According to Dalia Markevičiūtė (2009), who conducted a field research in Kaunas mosque several years ago, Lithuanian Muslims that do not possess Islamic background are eager to raise their level of religiousness to avoid being rejected by the broader Muslim community (Markevičiūtė 2009: 42).

On the other hand, according to Rimantė, Lithuanian Salafis face a dilemma:

We (the converts – authors’ insertion) [initially] missed a cornerstone of religion – the pillars of belief. We take them for granted without even thinking. We do not believe that Jesus is a Son of God and we believe that God is One. But is it enough? I want to believe that there are more people besides Salafis who seek to deepen their spiritual knowledge. It is so difficult to discuss with liberal Muslims because they have so many sores. For instance, it is impossible to talk about the importance of hijab when a sister without it sits in front of you. This is a wound that is often too painful to touch. (Rimantė, personal communication 2013).

As put by Mohamed-Ali Adraoui (2009: 372), it is typical for Salafis to stress the difference between «us» and «them». And by «them» Salafis usually mean either the secular part of society or non-Salafi Muslims. In the interview Rimantė identified those female converts who have a negative attitude towards the Salafi path group as liberals:

Those who believe that the Salafi path is a separate group or something that is not Islamic are not newcomers to religion. Newcomers rarely have enough knowledge about groups in Islam. These are sisters that belong to the community for the longer period of time and have been living liberally. Some also feel pressure from their husbands not to radicalize and in most instances they are either Sufis or Shiites (Rimantė, personal communication 2013).

The task of guiding the perplexed fellow converts to the presumed right path of Salafism, or, as understood by Lithuanian Salafis themselves, engaging in dawa in the form of «good advise» seems to be the major concern and preoccupation of the most active converts through online channels. Though it is impossible to verify that they themselves adhere by what they preach, they certainly have already created a discursive space in the Lithuanian language where the imperative of becoming and being a Salafi looms large. To tell the truth, there hardly exists any alternative discourse, at least online.

Conclusion

Asked why Salafism is fairly popular among converts, Rimantė provided her explanation:

converts are more eager to practice and deepen their knowledge, of course, if they convert consciously. And if they really mean it, they easily find the words of the Prophet saying that the first three generations following him are the ones a Muslim should follow (Rimantė, personal communication 2013).

In any case, the Lithuanian converts to Islam who have chosen the Salafi path while building their religious identity have to spar on several fronts – with potentially hostile
non-Muslims (especially relatives and peers), reserved secular autochthonous Muslims (Tatars), often skeptical Muslim-borns, and, finally, non-convinced fellow converts.

Adraoui (2009: 378), speaking in the context of France, notes that for such inexperienced groups, as Lithuanian Salafis are, «the Salafist attraction comes from its ability to translate former social habits and ideals into sacred religious codes». In the case of the Lithuanian converts to Islam, who usually make a conscious effort to submerge themselves fully into the new religion, Salafism, due to its rigorous yet very clear-cut and seemingly easy to follow regulations, can be considered as one of the most convenient ways to submerge oneself fully into Islam.

This assumed easiness of Salafism is paradoxical because generally Salafis are conceived as literalists who dedicate their lives for meticulous analysis of the Islamic sources deemed authentic by them. Nevertheless, in this case, mainly due to the ignorance and lack of knowledge of the Arabic language, most of the researched converts appear to invoke a reductionist perception of Salafism. Converts can afford this simplified purist version of Salafism because in this way they risk little if at all – they do not put themselves in harm’s way like jihadis do, nor they potentially get sullied and corrupt by politics, which is a communal, if not a national, responsibility. Being a purist Salafi entails only personal ethics, often of a private nature. This begs the question of how sustainable such an ideological stand of respondents is? On the one hand, because of the often-frivolous discussions, it feels as if the group under investigation is enacting their religion mostly, or even exclusively, in the online environment. And this feeling leaves the authors wondering to what extent the claims of belonging to Salafi path are reflected in everyday practices of the respondents. However, yet on the other hand, directly expressed willingness for a deeper discussion symbolizes the transition to a new level of understanding and, consequently, opens a door for further observation.

The answer to the question of what if anything is European (or Lithuanian) about the Salafism of the Lithuanian converts’ remains ambiguous. Since the content of Salafism in Lithuania at the current stage of the development is at an embryonic level, it does not appear to contain any visible locally imbued renderings of it. The two factors – use of Lithuanian, a language hardly known among Muslims worldwide, and the leadership positions assumed by young female converts – make the Lithuanian case somewhat peculiar but not necessarily unique. On the other hand, if the rhetorical dimension of the Lithuanian Salafism does not reveal any evident signs of anything that could be tentatively called «Euro-Salafism», daily practices, due to specific circumstances on the ground, the chief of which is a still relative novelty of Islamic presence in public spaces, might push the practicing Salafis to adopt survival strategies that could potentially lead to compromising of their Salafism and onto something approximating «Euro-Salafism». But this yet needs to be explored.
Notes

1 It is still hard to talk about quantitative analysis of socio-cultural variables of Lithuanian Muslim converts apart from highlighting the observed tendency due to multiple reasons. First of all, because of blurry identities and anonymity that digital space provides, respondents might overlap in different segments of the research. Secondly, the group under investigation, being relatively small and fairly inaccessible (especially in the case of those who reside abroad), implicated the snowball method of selection as the most convenient. Therefore, participants of this research do not necessarily represent the entire segment of converts within the Lithuanian Muslim community. For example, it does not mean that every Lithuanian convert Muslim can be assigned to the category «Salafi»; however, the group the authors happened to investigate seems to fall under this category.

In addition, even though a considerable part of the research consisted of face-to-face interviews and participant observation activities, such as frequent visits of Salafis’ homes and religious circles, it is still difficult to make strong claims regarding some aspects of respondents’ identities, especially those manifesting in everyday life. There is always a possibility of inconsistency between discursive statements and individual day-to-day application of the declared principles. Nevertheless, as observed by the authors, the results of qualitative research and observations extracted from the Internet do not contradict but rather complement each other.

2 Since its inception in the spring of 2004, the Forum had by the Spring of 2010 accumulated more than 45 thousand entries on several dozen Islam-related topics ranging from theological-dogmatic to rituals-related to practical issues submitted by almost 700 registered members (of whom probably more than a half are non-Muslim) and scores of occasional visitors (Statistics taken from the main page of the online Islamas.lt forum at http://www.islamas.lt/forums/index.php?act=idx [accessed 21 April 2010]). However, on 25 May 2010, after six full years in operation, the Forum was removed by its administrators «due to server error (some hacking issue)». http://www.islamas.lt/forums/.

3 In October of 2010 a new website and an online forum at http://islam-ummah.lt/index.html/ were launched and by early 2013 the new online forum had accumulated over 34 thousand posts by over 270 registered users and visitors. As the majority of the registered users are the same as in the closed forum, one can consider the new forum to be essentially a continuation of the earlier discussions.

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