

The Authority of Silence

Constructing the Figure of the Salaf (7th-15th Centuries)

Call for Papers

While several contemporary Islamic movements emphasize the reference to the early generations of Muslims (referred to in Arabic as *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*, "the righteous predecessors") to the extent that they are commonly known as "Salafists," the authority of these early Muslims is much older. A famous *ḥadīth* attributed to the Prophet of Islam grants particular authority to the first three generations of believers: "The best of my community are those of my generation, then those who will follow them, then those who will follow the latter."¹ On this basis, the identification of the righteous predecessors with the first three generations (the Companions, the Followers, and the Followers of the Followers) became standard, despite the lack of consensus among scholars regarding when the time of the Salaf ends, or on a precise list of individuals who belong to it (since these generations also include opponents of the faith or unbelievers who cannot claim this status).

The authority attributed to the Salaf is elusive: little is known about their lives, actions, and even less about their thoughts. They left almost no direct writings, although some quotations have been reported by later authors. Perhaps this is why they are generally referred to as a collective: one speaks of "the doctrine of the Salaf," "the opinion of the Salaf," as if it were a structured school with unified beliefs, rather than a collection of very different individuals. The relative silence of the Salaf does not seem to have hindered the development of their authority. It is indeed recognized that they primarily had a role in transmitting prophetic memory, and the Salaf often becomes a metonym for the content of what they transmitted, beginning with the *ḥadīth*-s: the unobtrusiveness of the transmitter, who fades before what he transmits, is then a virtue. The silence of the Salaf can also carry doctrinal significance: thus, some traditionalist circles use the absence of writings on discursive theology to deny any legitimacy to the science of *kalām*. Finally, this silence allows various authors to use the authority of these early

¹ *Ḥayr ummatī qarnī, tumma allaḍīna yalūnahum, tumma allaḍīna yalūnahum* (*Ṣaḥīḥ* al-Buḥārī 3650, vol. 62, h. 2).

generations to support their own doctrines, in the absence of any text that might contradict them.²

The history of the Salaf as a figure of authority, and the gradual construction of this major authority in Islam, remains largely unwritten. A seminar organized by the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies between 2022 and 2024 has established some preliminary chronological markers: a gradual establishment from the 9th century, before the reference becomes widespread in the 11th century. Drawing on the authority of the Salaf was by no means limited to Hanbalite or traditionalist circles: different, sometimes competing, images of these first generations circulated at the same time.

The conference, to be held **in Cairo (at Idéo and AUC) in May 2nd and 3rd 2025**, aims to refine this initial work. Contributions will focus on the numerous areas where the Salaf are considered an authority: *ḥadīth* sciences, historical narrative, Quranic commentary, theology, law, spirituality... It will also look at the diversity of references to the first generations of Muslims, which are not confined to traditionalist circles. While the Sunni domain seems primarily concerned with the authority of the Salaf, similar phenomena may exist in Shiism. Particular attention will be paid to the various regional conceptions of the Salaf, beyond the walls of Baghdad. The conference will focus on conceptions of the Salaf from early Islam to the beginning of the Ottoman period.

Researchers wishing to propose a contribution must submit a title and an abstract (approximately 500 words) in English by **January 15, 2025**. To facilitate discussion, papers will be pre-circulated: participants will submit their drafts one month before the conference, facilitating written responses for each paper.

² This phenomenon has been studied particularly in the works of al-Ghazālī (Ovimir Anjum, "Cultural Memory of the Pious Ancestors (Salaf) in al-Ghazālī," *Numen* 58 (2011): 344–74) and Ibn Taymiyya (Jon Hoover, "Theology as Translation: Ibn Taymiyya's Fatwa Permitting Theology and Its Reception into His *Averting the Conflict between Reason and Revealed Tradition* (Dar' Ta'arud al-'Aql Wa'l-Naql)," *The Muslim World* 108, no. 1 (2018): 40–86). However, there is ample evidence to suggest that it is found much more broadly, particularly among Sufi authors.

Papers will be given in English. They will be published in the *Mélanges de l'Institut dominicain d'études orientales* (Midéo) after a process of peer review.

Travel and accommodation expenses will be covered by the conference if needed.

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