

Oppositionality from a different perspective: operationalizing the concept to ethnography in Al Da'awa Al Salafiyya in Alexandria versus Shubra Salafism

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ABSTRACT

This article responds to Richard Gauvain's recently introduced concept of "Oppositionality" as it aims to operationalize the concept in Al Da'awa Al Salafiyya (DS) and Al Nor Party (NP) case from the perspective of a western trained conservative Muslim female ethnographer in the period between 2013 and 2019. This article endorses Gauvain's observation about the lack of positionality on the part of ethnographers of Salafism, meanwhile it disagrees with his assumption that Salafi modes of oppositionality are quite identical in practice and that the forces of oppositionality must lead to the expulsion of Western-trained ethnographers from Salafi circles. The main argument in this article is that oppositionality is always possible, but its reasons and levels differ according to: the type of the movement and its application of Shari'a, the identity of the ethnographer, and the political context. In view of the identity of the researcher and the context, "Al Masaleh wal Mafased" (cost-benefit calculations) play a key role in the case of DS/NP.

Keywords: Egyptian Salafism; Al Da'awa Al Salafiyya; Al Nor Party; Shubra Salafis; Oppositionality; Ethnography; Ethnographic realism; Positionality; Reflexivity

INTRODUCTION

1. Oppositionality and Research on Egyptian Salafism

The present article responds to, and seeks to build upon, Richard Gauvain's recently introduced theory of "Oppositionality." Gauvain discussed this theory in relation to his ethnographic work within two Cairene Salafi settings, Shubra and Madinat Nasr. Gauvain defines oppositionality as: a set of attitudes (non-compliance, defiance, hatred) which are formally prescribed to, and informally generated by, Salafis in their dealings with non-Muslims, and often with lapsed and/or errant Muslims (Gauvain 2018: 204).

Gauvain's argument stems from his realization that, despite often encountering resistance from their Salafi respondents, Western-trained ethnographers tend to avoid writing about this aspect of their fieldwork. Gauvain argues that there are several potential reasons for such reticence. The main reason, he claims (borrowing from literary analysts, Marcus and Cushman) is the enduring tendency of political scientists to write from within the genre of "ethnographic realism," wherein the ethnographer seeks to remain "an unintrusive presence in the text," and "a dispassionate, camera-like observer" of his/her subjects (Gauvain 2018: 209). This approach has led to a regrettable lack of positionality on the part of ethnographers

of Salafism. And, as Gauvain observes, "without authorial positionality, there can be no [analysis of] oppositionality" (Gauvain 2018: 209).

In addition to a misplaced loyalty to the genre of Ethnographic Realism, Gauvain argues that ethnographers of Salafism may censor their fieldwork reports out of a well-meaning desire not to appear to be in agreement with common media portrayals of Salafis as "militant radicals" and/or "extremists" (Gauvain 2018: 208). While Gauvain does make exceptions he commends Joas Wagemakers and Anabel Inge on the ways in which they incorporate authorial positionality, and discuss oppositionality, in their analyses of Salafi settings (in Jordan and in Great Britain respectively) (Gauvain 2018: 205, n.6) his critique of the growing field of Salafi studies is aimed very broadly.

I worked with Gauvain as a research assistant over a decade ago when he was collecting data on Egyptian Salafism before the Arab Spring. The resulting monograph remains the most in-depth analysis of Egyptian Salafism. Trained as a political scientist, I recall that, at the time, I found Gauvain's emphasis on authorial reflexivity helpful and provided me with a wider and a more

¹Wiktorowicz, 2006, Lauziere, 2010, Lacroix, 2016, 2012, Awad, 2014, El-Sherif, 2015, 2014, 2012, Olidort, 2015, Hamming, 2013, Davis-Packard, 2014, Shalata, 2016.

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balanced perspective. Over the years, I have come to agree that the rapidly growing field of Salafi studies lacks reflexivity on the part of its contributors. This criticism may be applied to scholarship written in English and European as well as the Arabic language¹. As a matter of fact, when it comes to ethnography-based work, it is difficult to understand how certain ethnographers have gained sufficient access to arrive at their conclusions. By omitting details of their fieldwork and interview processes, the reader wonders how the ethnographer presented her/himself to his respondents. Finally, with Gauvain, I agree that too few ethnographers of Salafism demonstrate awareness of how their relationships with their informants develop, preferring instead to offer “static snapshots” of specific moments in time (Gauvain 2018: 212). As a result, ethnographic representations of Salafism often appear piecemeal and partial.

To guard against or at least know when one receives packaged, pre-prepared answers, it is important for more participant observation-based fieldwork to take place among Salafi communities. Through his study of Salafi oppositionality, Gauvain reminds ethnographers that readers want to know how, precisely, we gather our data so as to arrive at our conclusions. I agree with Gauvain’s call to action in this regard.

There are aspects of Gauvain’s argument, however, with which I cannot agree. My main problem is that Gauvain bases his argument on Salafi oppositionality on his own experiences within a specific context (in Shubra district). These experiences lead him to several assumptions regarding the fundamental nature of the relationship between Western trained ethnographers and their Salafi respondents. To my mind, the following three assumptions with considerable overlap between them are the most problematic:

- The epistemologies of Western-trained researchers (Muslim and non-Muslim) and Salafis are *always* fundamentally opposed;
- Salafi modes of oppositionality are more or less identical in practice (as they relate to Western-trained ethnographers); and
- The forces of oppositionality must lead to the expulsion of Western-trained ethnographers from (and/or the latter’s abandonment of) Salafi circles.

In section 3, I challenge each of these assumptions. I argue that Gauvain underestimates the flexibility and range of opinion that exists within both British and Egyptian academic settings; flattens out modes of oppositionality within Salafi circles; and overlooks key differences in the workings of different Egyptian Salafi communities. Having made these points, I conclude this article, in section 4, with a few basic reflections on the state of research into Egyptian Salafism. Before critiquing his theory, in section 2, I follow Gauvain’s advice by discussing my own position in relation to my Salafi respondents.

2. Reflections of an Egyptian Ethnographer of Salafism

Positionality Statement: I was raised in an observant Sunni Muslim family in Mohandessin, Cairo. From an early age, I understood that my family follows a “traditional” (*taqlidi*) and typical Egyptian form of Islam. This being the case, we celebrate all famous Egyptian Muslim festivals, such as Sham al-Nassim and the Prophet’s Birthday (*mawlid al-nabi*). While acknowledging the importance of Islam’s spiritual dimension, we do not identify as Sufis; but we also do not consider ourselves Islamists or Salafis (who object to these festivals). We do not follow the rules of one

legal school; but we respect the religious scholarship of al-Azhar. Growing up, I was sure that virtually all Egyptian Muslims shared our general orientations.

Before studying Salafism as an adult, I was suspicious and overtly critical of all Islamist and Salafi factions. To a significant degree, these attitudes are attributable to my early experiences and upbringing. In my family, the so-called “Islamic revival” of the 1970s was not viewed with optimism. When listening to the popular and overtly politicized preachers, such as ‘Abd al-Hamid Kishk (d. 1996), my father’s response was that we had always been good Muslims, and did “not need fanatics to teach us our religion” (transliterated as: *Ehna tool o’mrena musulmeen, msh mehtagen el mota’sebin dol ye’alemona denna*).

At the political level, my family adopted a mixture of leftist, Egyptian nationalist, and liberal ideas. Religion, they believed, should take place in the mosque and the home. During the 1980s and 1990s, when militant Islamist attacks rocked Egyptian society, I was attending a local Catholic school in Zamalek. Many of my friends were Christian. I blamed Islamists for what I saw as their bigotry (towards Christians) and chauvinism (towards women).

Increasingly interested in the political realities of my country, I attended Cairo University in 1999 to study for my undergraduate degree in Political Science. This is where I encountered representatives of different Islamist groups, who were never open about their specific affiliations but were just carrying out *da’wa* in a way that seemed different from the way I was brought up on. I understood that the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) had the most presence on campus². Its members engaged enthusiastically, often bullishly, in *da’wa* activities. They made me feel pressured to adhere to a form of Islam I did not recognize or enjoy. They wanted me to wear the veil (hijab). Women in my family used to put on the veil for social more than religious reasons. Only elderly married women usually wear it. At the time, I was neither elderly nor married. More to the point, I saw no reason for Islamists to dictate my choices of clothing to me. I refused to wear the *hijab* and rationalized this decision on the grounds that a simple change of clothes does not, by itself, make someone a better Muslim. At the time, I did not develop any interest in the studying the thought or history of Egypt’s Islamists and/or Salafis.

Studying Salafism in Egypt

As I graduated from Cairo University in 2003, I was appointed as a teaching assistant in the Political Science Department. I later applied for my master’s degree in the Graduate Institute of International studies in Geneva, where I started to study international relations from a cultural perspective, focusing on identity politics. My memoir was on Identity Politics and Peace Attitudes among Israelis. This was when I started to develop an interest in how politics is influenced by religion and culture.

In 2010, while working as an assistant lecturer in Cairo University, I was contacted by Gauvain, then an assistant professor at the American University in Cairo (AUC), who was researching his monograph on Egyptian Salafism. Aware that he could not realistically gain access to working and middle class female Salafi circles, Gauvain employed me as his research assistant to conduct fieldwork in Salafi teaching centers in Mohandessin and elsewhere. This was to be my first academic encounter with Egyptian Salafis.

²While not allowed to form a political party, MB were relatively tolerated in Mubarak’s regime and their presence was present in student unions, syndicates and even parliamentary elections.

Recalling my experiences of Islamists at school and university, I expected the worst. Gauvain asked me to keep an open mind. In fact, I was pleasantly surprised by the openness and warmth shown to me by many of the women I met.

In 2012, I began my Ph.D. at Birmingham University in the UK. Intrigued by my recent experiences with Salafis as Gauvain's research assistant, I chose to focus on Egyptian Salafism in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. I was most interested in the Salafis of Alexandria where the established *al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya* movement (DS) had just birthed a powerful and popular political party, Nor Party/Hizb al-Nur (NP). I soon returned to Egypt with the plan of carrying out several months of fieldwork among the Alexandrian Salafis. I did not have any contacts within DS before I arrived in Cairo on July 3, 2013, the same day that MB was toppled from power. A wave of instability struck the country. The Raba' sit-in started shortly afterwards.

This was a worrying time for Egyptians in general, and even more so for the Salafis of Alexandria. Early interviews with members of DS demonstrated their uncertainty as to whether or not their movement's *da'wa* activities would be shut down by the state, as had happened under Mubarak after 2001 (Selim, 2017). Given longstanding tensions between MB and DS shaykhs in Alexandria, people also did not know whether members of the former would unleash their frustrations against the latter. These observations were possible from informal interactions with Alexandrian Salafis who were open with me about such fears. At this stage, in the summer of 2013, I had little idea of the overall complexity of Egypt's Salafi map or of the place of the DS/NP Salafis on this map.

I wanted to know how the DS/NP Salafis viewed their past, present and future.

Looking for interviews with high profile DS members, I called DS headquarters in Alexandria, after getting their number from the telephone guide. I was given contact details for Mr. Mahmoud Shaltut, a young DS and NP member. Thinking that it would make him more comfortable, and aware that I would be doing so for my own research-related benefit (rather than because a shaykh had commanded me to do so), I put on the veil for my first meeting with Shaltut. This took place on July 20, 2013, during the month of Ramadan, in the Secretariat General of NP in the Cairene district of Imbaba where the party had recently established a base³. Despite the fact that both of us were fasting, Shaltut talked passionately for several hours on the history of the DS. He was especially keen to clarify the differences between DS and other Egyptian Islamist and Salafi movements.

This first encounter with Shaltut was extremely important. Calm, cheerful, open, confident and dressed in Western clothes (although, of course, bearded), he looked and behaved quite differently from – what I now recognize as the cliché of the Salafi shaykh. More importantly, he was genuinely interested in my academic project. In hindsight, there is no doubt that the friendship we established that day has allowed me to carry out fieldwork across a wide range of both DS and NP settings. Ironically (and unusually for DS/NP representatives), Shaltut does not expect me to wear the veil in our meetings.

Over the following months, often with Shaltut's help, my list of personal contacts within the DS/NP snowballed.⁴ Meetings were sometimes formal, in official DS/NP locations; and, at other times, they were informal, in people's homes. To meet with male Salafis, I was usually required to bring a *mahram* (chaperone). My husband

or my mother often tagged along. The fact that I came from an ordinary, recognizably religious Egyptian family helped to relax my interviewees. On occasion, they came to our house or had the intention to visit as friends. Most of our meetings took place in urban locations, in Cairo, Giza and Alexandria. I was also invited to speak to respondents, in the governorate of Al Fayyom, and Al-Buhayra (Abu Hummus and Kafr El Dawwar) which are not considered typically urban centers. In Alexandria, I carried out an exhausting day of interviews with all the women who belong to the DS and NP and they represented the different areas whether rural or urban in this governorate.

Throughout the data gathering process for my Ph.D., I was always clear regarding the academic nature of my research. I was careful, therefore, not to promise my respondents that I would represent DS in an unequivocally positive light. At the same time, it was soon apparent that many members of the DS, and particularly the movement's senior shaykhs, had come to see me as a potentially useful ally an Egyptian researcher ready to counter the negative portrayal of the DS in both Arabic and Western media. Within a comparatively brief period, I was able to interview the main figures in the DS/NP movement. This included two of the founders of DS: shaykhs Yassir al-Burhami (October, 2013) and Ahmad Farid (November, 2013). While al-Burhami remains the public face of Alexandrian Salafism and has spoken to numerous journalists and academics, Farid is much harder to get on record⁵.

Based on these months of research from July 3rd 2013 to January 4th 2014, my doctorate took shape. I started the writing up stage while keeping a close eye on the developments of DS and NP within the Egyptian political context through media, following their websites, and staying in touch with my contacts in NP and DS whom I got back to in order to clarify some issues while working on the analysis. Using critical discourse theory to analyze a range of texts from the established DS curriculum (*manhaj*), I argued that, following its entry into politics through the establishment of NP, the shaykhs of DS (al-Burhami in particular) sought to stay faithful to "its long-held discourse of social and political change." Some aspects of this original discourse, I conceded, have been modified during the transition process; but the "core content" – regarding the movements' plans to effect change in Egyptian society – had remained constant (Selim 2016: iii). The conclusions of my thesis emphasized the importance of analyzing NP within the much longer ideological and political history of the DS movement. They stand in tension with the claims of scholars, such as (Lacroix, 2016, El Sherif, 2015) among others who regard NP as a rupture in the historical trajectory of the movement.

³ The place was new and semi-furnished. At the time when I visited this headquarter, there were few staffers and there were no banners or any signals on the building to show that this is the secretariat general of NP. I learned later that the meetings of the supreme committee are held there and by 2017 the flow of staffers and work in this place increased.

⁴ Without this help, matters might have been different. For instance, when I interviewed Amr Mekki (NP Chairman of Foreign Issues, Member of the Supreme Committee of NP) on August 25th, 2013.

⁵ Farid made it clear that he has no political aspirations. He is, however, deeply involved in DS' *da'wa* activities. He spoke spontaneously and with affection for his peers. It bears noting that shaykh Muhammad Isma'il al-Muqaddam, perhaps the most influential of all DS figures, also agreed to meet with me twice. On both occasions (in 2014 and 2018), he cancelled the interview last minute. In 2014, he sent a representative to fill in for him.

⁶ The viva was held in December 2016 and I was examined by Prof. Bernard Haykel (Princeton) and Professor Scott Lucas (Birmingham).

Having obtained my Ph.D. in 2017, I returned to Egypt to take up the position of assistant professor in Cairo University⁶. From 2017, I have been involved intermittently in fieldwork among Alexandrian Salafis. Given the increased security concerns of some of DS' and NP's members, research became even more challenging. Members of the DS are now extremely cautious about who they meet. My fieldwork remained possible for two reasons. First, the title of "Assistant professor" at Cairo University is almost universally respected within these settings (DS followers generally respect academia and scholarship). And, second and more importantly, because influential figures within DS/NP have endorsed the findings of my Ph.D. The most important endorsement occurred recently, in February 2019. My husband and I met with Dr. Burhami in his clinic in the middle-class area of Sidi Bishr in Alexandria. The shaykh responded positively to the findings of my PhD and encouraged me to publish: "Lazem tnsiori ba'a da men motatalbat el gam'a a'ndoko sah? El wa't bey'addi" (it is "a requirement for your career in Cairo university. No? ... you should be aware that time passes).

By 2018, my reputation as a "*bahitha munsifa*" ("balanced researcher"), a term coined by Dr. Yunis Makhyon (chairman of NP) during a meeting in 2013 in Abu Hummus in his villa, had spread. When individuals block my research efforts because they are worried that I may have government connections, or because I might present them in a negative way as I am different and as they had unpleasant experience with other similar researchers – or, as also happens from time to time, because they have taken a personal dislike to me⁷ I have reached out to Dr. Makhyon who continued to support me in the field. The fact that I recently met Dr. Burhami and Engineer Abdul Moneim Al Shahhat was also helpful. In my experience, and by contrast to the fixed hierarchies of MB, individual members of the DS enjoy considerable freedom to follow their own paths. Following the intervention of these senior figures, however, I have been able to meet with the relevant individuals. With their help, despite shared concerns over security, I was able to continue my fieldwork among Alexandrian Salafis.

My "Comparative Insider" Status

I describe myself as a comparative insider because this is how both the leadership and the membership of DS make me feel in relation to the movement. By not wearing the veil and by holding problematic views (from DS perspective) regarding religion, I do not feel like a complete insider. I do not share with Islamists in general and with DS in particular neither the same understanding of citizenship, specifically as concerns rights of women and Christians, nor their definitions of Egyptian culture and identity. While being a Muslim, I do not share the same "practice and understanding" of *Al-walaa' wel baraa'* with Salafis and I do not consider Islam as my only cultural source and key component of identity, yet while one of my main sources, I still believe that I am an Egyptian Muslim not a Muslim who happened to be Egyptian. I enjoy the cultural legacy of Egypt (cinema, theatre, music, literature, monuments etc.) and do not consider them forbidden by Islam "haram". However, I would say that DS' members have a nationalist aspect and they consider the love and protection of one's country as a religious duty and that patriotism is respected in Islam. It is worth noting that our "Egyptianism" (being fellow Egyptians) influenced our interactions and their understanding of my religious positions⁸.

Moreover, while not being a feminist at all, and while believing in a traditional division of labor among women and men for practical reasons, I do believe that in light of Islamic teachings,

women and men should have equal opportunities and that they should be free to choose and to bear the cost of their choices, as long as, they do not commit sins, disobey religious teachings, or harm their families or the whole society. I also believe that there should not be any injustices based on gender or religion, yet I do believe that those who are fit and qualified should do the work and get the job without any discrimination for the sake of religion, ethnicity or gender. This goes with the Islamic idea of *Ahl Al-Hal wel A'qd*, and the stress of DS on the importance of specialization and qualification, which to my surprise would make them accept a Christian or a woman qualified manager or even a governor.⁹ However, I would not object to a Christian president in Egypt, but DS and all Salafis would refuse this idea, even if he is qualified, because he is a *dhimmi* and does not have the right for "*welaya*". All these factors make me very close to DS' members thought, yet I obviously remain an outsider, because our differences are still significant.

The fact that I will never be a complete insider has been made clear to me on numerous occasions. Some of my most interesting conversations have taken place with shaykh 'Abd al-Muna'im al-Shahhat, perhaps the most controversial figure in the DS. Something of a celebrity between 2011-2014, although prevented from making media appearances since, al-Shahhat took time to meet with me both in 2013 and, again, in 2019. In our more recent meeting, in his office at his IT company (February, 2019), al-Shahhat told me – and my husband, who was also in the room – in no doubt that he considers me an "errant Muslim" (*Mutabarijah*) because I do not wear the veil. As I still do not wear the *hijab*, he also teased us by suggesting that the husband's *hisba*-related duty (of "commanding right and forbidding wrong") was not sufficiently

⁷ For instance, the head of the DS Women's Committee in Alexandria is a medical doctor, a preacher and a political science Master's student at Alexandria university. As an unveiled academic who successfully relates to the women with whom she interacts, it seems that I pose a problem. Organizing interviews through this woman has resulted in several missed opportunities.

⁸ When I was attending a *Tarbiyya* lesson (pedagogy class), the instructor Om Sarah said "you should teach your girls to wear Hijab from the age of 8 or 9, some families suffer a lot to convince their girls to wear Hijab, if they grow up and are not used to it, they will not wear it and will be subject to other influences." I felt that she was referring to me with her example.

⁹ There were some clashes when the governor appointed in Al Buhayra was a woman for the first time in Egypt's history. However, I was informed in an interview in July 2018 with Dr Makhyon that further religious research took place and that they accept women's appointments in administration, but not ruling (*welaya*).

¹⁰ Al-Shahhat's media personality (abrasive and combative) – he famously characterized the books of Egypt's most famous modern author, Naguib Mahfuz, as "inciting promiscuity, prostitution and atheism" (AL-DEMER-DASH, M. 2012., AL-WARWARY, M. 2012.) – does not jibe easily with his character in our interviews, during which he tends to be calm, rational and systematic in his answers.

¹¹ I do not, of course wish to suggest that gender equality is the norm within DS circles. When I am treated with the respect due to my academic position, the idea that most women do not have such academic gifts was widespread. When some women did not agree to be interviewed by me, Makhyon observed that certain DS/NP leaders preferred not to allow women to speak to researchers: they are, in general, "too kind and spontaneous so that... [they] might say things that harm the whole movement (*al-kayan kullu*)."

¹² Usama's entire family works for/within the DS and NP: his mother works in the Institute of Jil al-Sahaba (a teaching institution for women to learn *Shari'a*); his wife also works at the Institute; and his sister in law is a doctor who provides free medical services on a weekly basis for the women visiting the mosque.

exercised in our house. However, what matters to him more than my religious commitment, al-Shahhat added, is that I demonstrate integrity and neutrality in my research¹⁰.

Al-Shahhat expressed doubts regarding the validity of my project. He chose, however, to cooperate with me anyway. Reflecting on our most recent interaction, I note that gender remains a significant factor in my ethnographic relations with my Salafi respondents.

However, in my experience and in contrast with Inge and others, female Salafi circles are not often intrinsically more welcoming than male Salafi circles (Inge 2016:55; Gauvain 2018:210). Interviewing Salafi women across Egypt, I have been able to empathize with my respondents, as a daughter, mother, wife and working woman. This has led to breakthroughs in my research regarding the workings of female Salafi DS groups in Northern Egypt.

Nevertheless, DS' men seemed confident and comfortable when I was around, and I did not feel discriminated against. Whereas for women, there were many instances when women were cautious, rejecting my presence, refused to tell their names, and suspicious (Imbaba, 2019, Alexandria 2018). I wish to say that, despite his teasing, neither al-Shahhat nor any other of the DS leaders or members has given me the impression that I am not the equal of a man in terms of academic research. By contrast, the conviction that *certain* women can contribute equally to academic research is here widespread. My Ph.D. in a British University and my position as an assistant professor at Cairo University are taken as proof of my academic credentials. Thus, I belong to this group of "certain women"¹¹

Perceptions of class and education sometimes impact (without greatly disturbing) my discussions with the DS/NP Salafis. One recent example serves to demonstrate this point. I have worked closely with engineer Usama, an NP parliamentary candidate in Imbaba's 2015 elections, since 2017¹². When I told him that I felt like a gap existed between Egypt's Salafis and the rest of ordinary Egyptian society, particularly as regards questions of "culture" and "citizenship," Usama dismissed my opinion as unfounded. He remarked that the cultural differences between ordinary Egyptians and Salafis are "trivial" (*tafhah*) everybody *knows*, he explained, that as Muslims we should not be watching television or listen to songs – but the Salafis "do not push people to do anything [that they do not want to do]." The subject of citizenship, he continued, is "important only to you, doctor!" (*da muhim liki inti bs, ya doctora!*) (Usama, 2018). I would argue that Usama's nonchalance regarding these matters is actually not typical, even (and especially) for Egyptian Salafis. His main aim, however, was to let me know that it is easier for those, like him, who live in Imbaba to gauge the opinion of "ordinary Egyptians" on these matters than it is for those of us sitting in Cairo University's ivory towers.

Regardless of questions relating to gender or class, the fact that I have been dubbed "*bahitha munsifa*" by the leaders of the party ensures that I feel more of an insider than an outsider within the DS movement. (I do not deny that this perception may change over time.) In this regard, the endorsement of the DS shaykhs solves more problems than it creates. With this simple observation in mind, I turn to Gauvain's arguments on oppositionality, according to which Western-trained ethnographers of Salafism are bound to clash with their respondents.

3.a. Epistemological Oppositions

Gauvain notes that "the ongoing charting of the 'Salafi world'" is

being conducted "for the most part by white, non-Muslim Western scholars relying on qualitative research methods" (Gauvain 2018: 205)¹³. While he could have added "male" to this list, Gauvain's observation is fundamentally correct. Plenty of Western-trained Muslim academics are willing to comment – usually critically – regarding Salafi political realities (famously, Khaled Abou el Fadl, Tim Winter, et al). To date, however, very few Muslim scholars have carried out fieldwork in Salafi settings.

Gauvain argues that, regardless of religious belief, the simple fact that s/he has been trained in secular Western institutions is usually sufficient to drive a wedge between an ethnographer and her/his Salafi respondents. "[T]he nature of 'this clash,' he explains, is "at this level, epistemological: Salafis and Western-trained ethnographers tend to hold fundamentally different ideas regarding what truth is, and how to arrive at it" (Gauvain 2018:211). This observation is derived from Gauvain's own experiences of interacting with Salafis in Cairo. A non-native Arabic speaker who grew up outside of Egypt and converted to Islam "primarily to marry," Gauvain necessarily stood out from the crowd in the Salafi settings in which he gathered data. His commitment to his research agenda (a study of Salafi ritual purity laws and practices) led to suspicions; so too did his reluctance to understand Salafi attitudes to Christians. Ultimately, he was asked to leave these settings.

I suspect that Gauvain's experiences will strike a chord for many of his non-Arab peers, most of whom are not Muslim¹⁴. Writing from the perspective of an Egyptian, Muslim, native Arabic speaking, female ethnographer, they do not do so for me. This is not to deny that, from time to time, I also pose a dilemma for my respondents. As noted, my refusal to wear a *hijab* outside of my interviews, for instance, certainly irritates some DS members, since I am open about this fact and about my identity and beliefs with my Salafi respondents. I do not, however, clash with my Salafi respondents *epistemologically*.

While he does not explain precisely what he means by an epistemological clash, the context makes it clear that Gauvain assumes that, simply by being trained in a secular institution, any ethnographer engaged in participant observation among Salafis is likely to find her/himself incapable of avoiding a showdown with his respondents. Competing truth claims make this clash inevitable. There are a number of problems with this assumption: does this not depend upon the personalities and cultural qualities of the individuals involved? Gauvain acknowledges the dangers in generalizing (2018: 209-10). One assumption that he does not acknowledge as problematic, however, relates to the question of who now passes through Western training in ethnography.

My Salafi respondents and I disagree on many matters. We both agree, however, that the Qur'an is the Revealed Word of God and that, as Muslims, we should do our best to follow the Prophet's

¹³ He refers to the work of Quintan Wiktorowicz, Roel Meijer, Laurent Bonnefoy, Stephane Lacroix, Terje Ostebo, Joas Wagemakers, Zoltan Pall, Andrew Thurston, Anabel Inge, Michael Farquhar, Noah Salomon and others.

¹⁴ It is difficult to know whether this is the case. However, Anabel Inge did automatically tweet her appreciation of Gauvain's "honest account": https://www.google.com/search?q=Gauvain+Inge&rlz=1C1GCEU_enEG820EG820&oq=Gauvain+Inge&aqs=chrome..69i57j0.5214j0j8&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

¹⁵ A recent conference on Salafism, involving many of the main scholars on Salafism (not Gauvain), took place at Cambridge

example. To my mind, these convictions do not impede my capacity to carry out fieldwork among my Salafi respondents. The latter, in turn, would argue that I am (likely to be) a reliable researcher because of my respect for the basics of Islam.

Gauvain's assertion that our main ethnographic challenge is likely to take place at an epistemological level underestimates the inclusiveness and flexibility of modern Western educational systems. I identify as a conservative Muslim. I am excluded neither from Salafi mosques, nor from Western universities. As noted, I obtained my doctorate from a British graduate institution (University of Birmingham). This fact does not threaten my Salafi respondents. Rather, when combined with their knowledge of my position at Cairo University, it tends to confirm the validity of my project in their eyes.

I agree it seems unlikely that many conservative Muslims have received graduate training in social science programs in secular Western universities. There is no reason to think, however, that more will not do so in the future. To this end, it is worth noting that Saudi Arabia's King Faisal Centre for Islamic Studies (KFCIS) regularly organizes conferences through Cambridge University and other prominent universities.¹⁵ The lines separating conservative (even Salafi) Islam and Western secular institutions are not, then, as clear-cut as Gauvain assumes.

3.b. IDENTICAL MODES OF OPPOSITIONALITY

Gauvain's past work on Egyptian Salafism focuses primarily on Salafi readings and applications of Islamic law (2013). For a good reason, he expects his Salafi respondents to express oppositionality by adhering to, and using the language of, their interpretations of Shari'a. When discussing Salafi oppositionality, he points to the direct relevance of three legal doctrines: *jihad*, *hisba* and *al-wala' wa'l-barā'* (Gauvain 2018: 206). Given his own experiences, Gauvain is most interested in the application of *al-wala' wa'l-barā'* as it relates to the ethnographer; and he points to the struggle and diversity of opinion within Salafi circles regarding this doctrine. Many Salafis, particularly those persuaded by the readings of the Saudi Arabian Salafi elites, interpret this doctrine to distinguish between themselves and their rivals from MB, as well as from all non-Muslims.

Although never accused of being non-Muslim, Gauvain was eventually ousted from the Shubra-based circles in which he carried out his research because of his reluctance to vilify Christianity/Christians (Gauvain 2018: 223 ff.). As Gauvain understands, relationships between Egypt's Salafi and Christian communities are complex and often (but not always) bitter. After noticing what he understood to be a perverse reluctance on the ethnographer's part to accept the "correct" nature of Muslim-Christian relations, Gauvain's shaykh apparently resorted to the principle of *al-wala' wa'l-barā'* to ostracise him from the group. Unless identifying as Muslim, most non-Arab ethnographers carrying out fieldwork in Arab Salafi communities will be seen as Christian (cf. Wagemakers 2016: 174).

It is easy to sympathize with Gauvain regarding the Salafi attitudes towards Christians. Nevertheless, as mentioned above DS/NP scholars know that I disagree with their view that a Christian man – simply because of his religion – cannot become president of Egypt. (They also know that I think women should be eligible for the same post.) As noted, I also agree with Gauvain that more ethnographers should reflect on how the doctrine of *al-wala' wa'l-barā'* may apply to their own persons during their fieldwork. Yet, we may also fault

Gauvain for giving the impression that all Egyptian Salafis naturally and inevitably resort to the legal strategy of *al-wala' wa'l-barā'* – and apply this in exactly the same way – when dealing with non-Arab ethnographers who wish to carry out participant observation based research within their communities.

In claiming that Egyptian Salafis adapt their strategies of interaction with ethnographers according to strict applications of legal principles (in this case, *al-wala' wa'l-barā'*), Gauvain generalizes from his experiences in Shubra to speak of Egyptian Salafism as a whole. My discussion of the major differences in outlook between the Salafis of Shubra and those of Alexandria will be left until the next section. At this point, I note only that, in Alexandria, the doctrine of *al-wala' wa'l-barā'* is arguably less relevant to this discussion than the doctrine of *maslaha wa mafsada*, according to which all decisions should be based upon careful consideration of their eventual cost (*mafsada*) and benefit to the wider community¹⁶.

This claim is made, first and foremost, by the DS shaykhs themselves. When I spoke to shaykhs Burhami and Al Shahhat about Gauvain's ostracism from his fieldwork circles, they clearly understood the logic by which he was excluded (February, 2019). They added, however, that they would probably have acted differently. Emphasizing that, without details, he can only speak hypothetically, al-Burhami observed that:

¹⁶ Gauvain is aware of the importance of the *maslaha/mafsada* principle within Salafi circles (Gauvain 2018: 219).

¹⁷ Ethnographic research in Ma'had Jeel Al Sahaba (Jeel Al Sahaba Institute) in Imbaba.

¹⁸ Islam is comprehensive "Good hearts, manners and Islamic dress." (Imababa 2019 and Mazghona 2018)

¹⁹ According to DS' followers narrative, there were periodical limitations during Mubarak's regime to DS but without complete eradication of the movement, so the state left some mosques under DS' influence, on condition that security personnel are fully aware of the details of its actions (int. Borhami, 2013). Thus, State Security had reports about DS' preachers, occasionally prohibited DS' educational hand-outs and entertainment trips, and put restrictions on the topics preachers can discuss. As concerns charity work and social services, DS' members had to carry them on individual basis not under the banner of DS and could not use any slogans. However, in all cases, they had their Salafi appearance, that distinguishes them. Meanwhile, to limit their influence, Salafis were subject to media defamation and accusations of being sectarian (Gawwad, 2014). Of course, this was how my Salafi respondent narrated their relationship with the state and with the secular powers within the Egyptian politics and society.

²⁰ On occasion, these arrests have taken place in dramatic style (for instance, according to his wife, my respondent in Imbaba, Usama, was taken to prison directly following his wedding, yet he was shortly released afterwards) (November, 2019). It is fair to say, therefore, that while the relationship between DS and the Egyptian state has seen far worse days, the memory of government repression lingers on in the memories of many of its members. When I spoke to Dr. Yasser Bourhami, about some members' reluctance to discuss the movement with me, he explained this in terms of paranoia: "you know, in authoritarian regimes, us doctors speak about paranoia – people are worried that they are being watched and spied upon all the time" (February, 2019).

²¹ NP leaders appeared in General Abdul Fattah Al Sisi meeting on July 3rd and proved to be part of June 30th revolution alliance. MB as a countermovement was an obstacle to DS and there were well known clashes between DS and MB over their history, however, the disagreements between MB and NP in 2013 leading to NP support to June 30th revolution represented the peak of such conflict.

²² One of the young leaders and a member in the supreme committee of NP told me "why should I let you in and make you meet the leaders and you might be used by security institution abroad without even you knowing it" (phone call to a Young leader, September, 2013).

“If he (referring to Gauvain) declared that he is not convinced with Islam as the only religion, this will not ban me from sitting with him and allowing him to attend the lesson. DS application of *Al wala’ wal baraa’* is different. I might ostracize the person if I expect that this will make him seriously reconsider. But if I find that this way will send him away more than before I will tell him come back. Dealing with a case like this (errants (mubtadi’ or a’ndoh ma’siyya) or non-Muslims) should be according to the logic of *masalih* and *mafasiid*, according to the diagnosis. I am a doctor, do I give the same medicine to everyone and with the same dose? The medicine and the dose depend upon the person and the situation. For instance, if someone did something really impolite (qal adaboh gamed gedan) I will say avoid him until he rethinks. My target is that he rethinks. I sometimes frown in his face to make him know that he did something wrong. What is prison? It is exclusion (hajr) in principle.”

For Burhami, it is not wise sometimes to reach to the extreme of sending him away for good, losing him or making him hate Islam. If what was applied in Gauvain’s case was *Hajr el mobatedi’*, then it is a means used within the circle of Muslims in an attempt to make them rethink and get back to the right path.

While trying to reframe what happened with Gauvain, Burhami excludes *al walaa’ wal baraa’* in explaining Gauvain’s case: “do you think that if I suspected that someone comes to me in a fishy way (*tari’a msh kowayesa*) I will apply *al walaa’ wal baraa’*? or other suspicions are the reason behind ostracizing him? I wonder what makes *al walaa’ wal baraa’* relevant here at all? You are a Muslim and your husband is Muslim too and you are a “mutabarijah” and many other people are mutabarijin. I will just advice you to put on the veil when you pray in the mosque or how come you pray without it? That is it.” He thinks that being mutabarijah or even a non-Muslim is not a good reason to refuse to sit with the person or to send him/her away from a lesson. It seems that he thinks that there might be other reasons to explain Gauvain’s case.

Based on my experience with DS’ followers, rather than explaining oppositionality in fieldwork situations solely or even primarily through the doctrine of *al-wala’ wa’l-bara’*, I would suggest that there are often other, equally influential rationales to be considered. To my mind, there are two key determinants. The first of these, as Gauvain would agree, is the identity of the ethnographer her/himself. During my fieldwork, I was never mistaken for a Christian, nor for a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood or any other competing Muslim movement. Whereas Gauvain (Muslim, but in a problematic way for Salafis) and other Western-trained ethnographers of Salafism (most of whom are not Muslim) may be kept at arm’s length through Salafi readings of *al-bara’*, I benefit from the *al-wala’* aspect of the same principle. As one of my teachers emphasized in a lesson on *tarbiyya* (ethical upbringing), directly after criticizing me for not wearing the *hijab*, I am still “a Muslim sister and am [therefore] owed all my rights”¹⁷. For Bourhami, he said that he would hate me for being mutabarijah and will not support me in my tabbaruj, but he will appreciate me for carrying out and abiding by other duties in Islam. So, for him *al wala’* is not taken for granted and that I do not enjoy it in all cases but there are circles and it depends where I am in such circles. When I asked Al Shahhat if I am for him like any non-Muslim researcher he laughed and said “of course not but being a Muslim or a non-Muslim is not my concern here”.

For this reason, my perceived faults – specifically my refusal to wear *hijab* – can be overlooked once the necessary criticism has been

made. As I have said, the reproach is articulated most of the time through the logic of *Hisba*, my fellow Muslims looking out for my spiritual welfare, and *al bara’*¹⁸. However, as mentioned above *al bara’* can be applied to me in a degree as I will be hated for being “mutabarijah”, yet this will not by any means lead to my exclusion.

The second determinant relating to the expression of oppositionality in the field is the political climate. Again, Gauvain would agree. He draws attention to the ways in which shifting political circumstances both hindered and helped him (Gauvain2018: 227). As the majority of my research has taken place after the Arab Spring in 2011, the political changes have been more significant. In my experience, Salafi concerns over security are perhaps the definitive factor in deciding whether or not to engage with my fieldwork. I am very aware that all of the men included in the previous section have been imprisoned at one time or other.

According to the conclusions of my PhD thesis, the relationship between the state and DS has fluctuated over the years. There have been periods of “repression”¹⁹ and periods of “facilitation” not in the sense of support to the movement, but rather turning a blind eye to its activities. State repression of DS during the 1990s and 2000s, involving the arrests²⁰ of the movement’s founders, such as al-Burhami and many others, is well known (Selim,2017). In the period in which I have worked with DS circles, and later, there have been few arrests (int. Thabet,2013). During the first stage of my research in 2013, after Morsi was toppled, besides the unclear state-movement prospects, there was fear among the DS respondents because of their movement’s long history of hostility with MB, as mentioned earlier²¹. I would also add to such fears that DS and NP followers always had bad experiences with secular or at least non-islamist media and academics. Due to such fears my fieldwork was affected on two levels, first, it was difficult for me at the beginning to gain their confidence and they had to make sure that I do not have any affiliations that can affect or threaten their entity, and it took them almost three months to let me in²². Second, DS and NP activities slowed down due to the transitional stage (Talibbya, 2013). This made my access to meetings, headquarters, and leaders difficult. When I started to update my fieldwork in 2017-2019, the security concern remained one of the key issues that influenced my access. They also told me that many of them might not trust how I am going to present them in my future work especially that while my thesis conclusions seem to be balanced, I did not publish yet. Their past experience with non-islamist researchers and media, their security concerns, and accordingly their *masaleh* and *mafased* calculations were projected on me in different ways depending on the individuals. In sum, while Gauvain is not mistaken in observing that Egyptian Salafis consider *al-wala’ wa’l-bara’* in how they deal with ethnographers in the field (particularly those engaged in participant

²³ While this was not a concern for Engineer Abdul Moneim Al Shahhat who told me “I do not care about what you are going to write about us when you leave. I will just say what I see and you write whatever you want”.

²⁴ Interview on October 30th, 2013.

²⁵ It is for this reason that, when the Shubra Salafis established parties (e.g. the Salafi Front) after January 2011, such entities evolved around individuals and disappeared with them after July 3, 2013 (int. Shaloot, 2013, int. Borhami, 2013).

²⁶ I collected this narrative of Shubra Salafi’s history from interviews with Mr. Shaloot (July, 2013) in the General Secretariat of NP, Sahykh Bourhami in (October, 2013 in his car and then February 2019 in his clinic in Sidi Bishr), and Shaykh Ahmed Farid in a small mosque (zawya) under his home (November, 2013).

observation), the Salafis of the DS also take into account other legal principles (such as *hisba* and *al-maslahah wa'l-mafasada*) as well as the political realities in which they live. Moreover, the application of such principles differs from one Salafi group to the other, and in Alexandrian Salafiyya, it depends on each case, on the nature of the ethnographer. To date, the decision to meet with me has depended primarily upon *masalah/mafasid* calculations in which security concerns and my position as an insider/outsider played a major role. The majority of DS members have decided to cooperate because they realize that my work represents a chance for the “bright side” of the DS *manhaj* particularly its capacity for social transformation to be known²³. It is worth noting here that taking a decision to cooperate with me or to exclude me depends on individual calculations also rather than leaders' commands.

3.c. THE INEVITABILITY OF EXPULSION FOR THE WESTERN-TRAINED ETHNOGRAPHER

By taking for granted the existence of a fundamental epistemological clash between Western-trained ethnographers and their Salafi respondents, Gauvain leaves the reader with little doubt that, in the end, ethnographers will be jettisoned from their research fields. For obvious reasons, I do not agree. This is not simply because I am more of an insider than Gauvain within Egyptian Salafi circles. Rather, it is because Gauvain and I have carried out our fieldwork within starkly different Egyptian Salafi communities and intellectual traditions. In his article on oppositionality, Gauvain introduces, and then elides information drawn from, his experiences with members of Salafi groups in Shubra.

Gauvain's past research on Salafi ritual practice takes us into the mosques and social circles of Shubra Salafism. Aside from the community's central Salafi mosque, he mentions coming across eleven different clusters of Salafism (schools and mosques) in Shubra (2013: 58). Gauvain is not interested in the formal school of “Shubra Salafism,” but describes his encounters with separate individuals, several of whom have links to the Qutb-influenced revolutionary movements of the 1970s and 1980s, as representative of a wider Shubra Salafi reality. Speaking to the founders of the DS in Alexandria, many of Gauvain's observations regarding the fragmented and sometimes combative nature of Salafism in Shubra are confirmed. It is worth telling the story of Salafism in Shubra from their perspective.

According to Bourhami, Salafism as a *da'wa* movement developed in the 1980s in Shubra²⁴. Unlike the DS movement, which had developed some years earlier, a comprehensive social movement with a shared dedication to collective action did not coalesce. While Shubra Salafis share many intellectual references, as well as the characteristic Salafi emphasis on the importance of *ijtihad*, with the shaykhs of DS, in Bourhami's view, there are certain, clear-cut differences between these two movements. This is the case regarding the subjects of collective action (the Shubra shaykhs prefer to work independently²⁵) and, more relevant to us, the declaration of apostasy (*takfir*). For Bourhami, Salafism in Shubra has emerged as a uniquely (within Egyptian contexts) “*takfiri*” phenomenon. In support of this view, Ahmad Farid also remarked that the Shubra shaykhs are well known for declaring *takfir* against Muslims simply for not praying. According to Shaltut, because of their conviction that ruling against Shari'a law is an act of major disbelief (*kufr akbar*), Shubra's Salafi shaykhs were prepared to denounce the previous president, Hosni Mubarak, as an “unbeliever” (*kafir*). By contrast, the shaykhs of DS/NP, Ansar al-Sunna and other non-revolutionary Egyptian Salafi movements

were content to describe Mubarak's actions (on occasion), rather than his person, as “intrinsically heretical” (*kufr 'ayn*)²⁶.

For the DS shaykhs, the *takfiri* nature of Shubra Salafism is due to a long-lasting debt to the Muslim Brotherhood and to the works of Sayyid Qutb in particular. Gauvain's reading of the situation confirms that Sayyid Qutb remains “a hero” within Shubra's Salafi circles; but his respondents are also clearly aware that this opinion is not popular among other Cairene Salafis: “[h]is [Qutb's] one mistake, I often heard, was that he was too willing to pronounce *takfir* on other members of the Muslim community” (Gauvain 2013: 41). It does not really matter here if Salafism in Shubra is quite as *takfir*-prone as the DS shaykhs suggest. What does matter is that, in their debt to Qutb, Shubra Salafis are recognized as more willing to enforce the dividing line between Muslims and non-Muslims than those belonging to other Salafi trends in Egypt.

Another Shubra-related factor is the relationship between Muslims and Christians. As Gauvain notes, within Shubra, relations between these two communities are stable, but also characterized by deep-seated distrust, as well as numerous stereotypes (2013:152-160). This is because, unlike elsewhere in Cairo, in Shubra, Christians outnumber Muslims. Simmering tensions led to riots between Christians and Muslims in Shubra after the Revolution. The marches that ended so tragically in Maspero, in 2011, began in Shubra. Gauvain carried out most of his research before the Arab Spring, but he was aware of these tensions between many of Shubra's Christians and Muslims. He reports how his own shaykh advised his students to stay away from Christians on the basis of *al-wala' wa'lbara'*.

According to the DS shaykhs, if Gauvain had carried out his fieldwork in Alexandria, it seems less likely that he would have been formally ostracized (through the logic of *al-wala' wa'lbara'*). Shubra Salafism has certain characteristics – the willingness of its shaykhs to declare *takfir* and a complex situation regarding Christians – that arguably made Gauvain's position more vulnerable than it would have been in other Salafi settings. This is not to say that he would have been able to carry out the kind of participant observation-based research in which he was engaged *ad infinitum*. Ultimately, such decisions come down to individuals. By contrast with the abovementioned opinions of Bourhami and Shaltut, al-Shahhat was quite clear that Gauvain's shaykh in Shubra took the right course of action: “Salafis do not like anybody who converts for a purpose other than Islam itself... being a Muslim is in the heart; it is not a matter of documents” (February, 2019). As noted already, describing me as an “errant Muslim” (Mutabarriyah) al-Shahhat was equally direct to my face. Bourhami explained the way *al-wala' wa'lbara'* is applied in DS in the circles of *kufr*, *ma'siya*, and *makroh*. Within the circle of Islam fellow Muslims owe each other loyalty, obedience, support, imitation (*tashaboh*), and love. Nevertheless, love is not absolute, for there are different types of love, love by instinct (Al Fetra), to love who loves and supports you, to love someone from one side and to hate from another. “I²⁷ Interview on 20. 7. 2019. Although he has returned to live in Egypt, Gauvain no longer studies Salafism and questions whether, given Egypt's present security conditions, it is uncertain that a non-Egyptian researcher can do so.

²⁸ Schielke mentions that his own attitudes to Salafism in Egypt have developed over time. As a result of his “previous immersion in Sufi circles,” he admits that the original rise of Salafism in Egypt as “the hegemonic, normal way of becoming a Muslim,” caused him “some affective discomfort.” For Schielke's opinion on Egypt's Salafis, see “Living with Unresolved Differences, a reply to Fadil and Fernando, *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5. 2. (2015): 89–92.

hate someone for cursing God, I do not hate his belief, but I hate him for cursing God. For instance, Shari'a law allows marrying Christian and Jewish women. I hate her from one side and like her for another side." Bourhami looked at my husband and told him your wife is not perfect, and he addressed me saying your husband is not perfect I am sure you hate some of his or her manners and you like others and the relationship continues. Prophet Mohamed PBUH said "love in God and hatred in God". However, according to the right application of *Al wala' wal bara'*, non-Muslims have the right of interaction, good manners, fairness, kind treatment, commerce, help and defence, partnership, talking, and mandating non-Muslims". Therefore, non-Muslims can enjoy all these rights even if Muslims do not approve of their belief (Burhami, 2019).

Burhami told me I will definitely sit and talk with a non-Muslim researcher, but I will not talk to her as I talk to you. "If a Muslim, yet *mutabarijah* researcher comes to me I will like the aspect that she vows that there is only one God and I will hate that she is *mutabrijah* and is not wearing a veil. I will like that she prays but I will hate that she is disobeying God in Hijab. Will I be angry at her only? No! I will hate her for this aspect. Hatred here is the work of the heart. I will let you sit with me, but I will not look at you. I look at you now because you are wearing the veil... "Al reda bel den" (approving religion). I do not have to accept sins, but I will not kill non-Muslims or sinners, because there are always other aspects. It is not necessary to approve of someone's religion if I want to treat him in a nice way. I declare your religion as void, and in the meantime, I will deal with you in a nice way" (February, 2019).

It is worth saying here that DS' circles of granting *al wala'* (loyalty) or *al baraa'* (detaching themselves from others sins or *kufr*) discussed above carved my insider outsider position through my field work, however the level of openness, trust, and cooperation of DS' leaders and rank and file depended on other factors driven mostly by *al masaleh wel mafased* calculations.

Conjecturing further on what could have happened to Gauvain in Alexandria with what did happen to him in Shubra is unnecessary. My point in making this comparison is simply to emphasize that Gauvain cannot assume that his identity as a Western-trained ethnographer carrying out research among Egyptian Salafis automatically led to his banishment. His choice of research context necessarily influenced the results. It is also worth concluding that, even within a uniquely *takfiri* context, where the subject of Christian-Muslim relations is also particularly vexed, Gauvain still managed to conduct research among Egyptian Salafis for several years.

FINAL REFLECTIONS: Alexandrian Salafism as Project for the Future Gauvain's theory of oppositionality, although helpful on some levels, exaggerates the importance of certain fieldwork relationships and ignores the possibility of others. Unlike Gauvain, I do not believe that it is impossible for a Western-trained ethnographer to identify as a conservative Muslim. Universities in England, and across the West, do not prevent me from studying the social sciences.

The epistemologies of my Salafi respondents and I may not be in perfect harmony, but they do not clash. I do not claim to be entirely neutral in my ethnography. (I do not believe that any ethnographer should make this claim.) However, I do believe that it is possible to carry out critical research within Salafi settings; in my experience,

not all Salafis are fearful of such research. Salafism in Alexandria (and among DS/NP Salafis) is not Salafism in Shubra.

I conclude this paper with another endorsement. I am happy to say that, in a recent communication, Richard Gauvain responded very positively to my arguments in this article. Recalling our original meetings, a decade ago, he was particularly interested in the opinions of the Alexandrian shaykhs regarding "Shubra Salafism."²⁷ During our conversation, Gauvain remarked that, in arguing for Alexandrian Salafism to be "taken seriously" as a popular movement that is likely to endure one that has, despite extraordinary social and political tensions, developed and implemented its program in systematic fashion my claims are in tension with those of most journalists and scholars who discuss Alexandrian Salafism.

By this Gauvain means that both journalists and scholars tend to dwell on the dwindling success of and the fractures within – the NP party as proof that Alexandrian Salafism has run its course. On another level, he refers to the general expectation that Egyptian Salafism is a transitory phenomenon. According to this expectation, people can only be Salafis for a short period before they inevitably "burn out." Gauvain himself spoke about the Salafi burnout phenomenon (2013: 64). But he was referring primarily to the work of Samuli Schielke (a scholar who, unlike most commentators on Salafism, positions himself very skillfully within his narratives). When Schielke writes about Salafism, he speaks with individuals *after* they have passed through their Salafi phase and are able to reflect, with Schielke himself, on why they no longer wish to be Salafis (2015)²⁸.

By contrast with both Gauvain and Schielke, my fieldwork involves men, women and children who have lived their entire lives within the Alexandrian Salafi movement. While the events of the Arab Spring did represent a dramatic shift for many within this movement, it did not fundamentally change the nature of the movement itself. The so called "political pragmatism" demonstrated by the NP is rooted in the *maslaha/mafsada* logic of the DS program. The Salafis of Alexandria are not worried by political correctness; and, in light of the current political situation), many of them are still willing to give interviews to many Western-trained ethnographers (Egyptian or non-Egyptian and Muslim or non-Muslim).

What makes my insider-outsider position interesting is that being an outsider rejecting their social and political views and questioning their effect on the Egyptian society and religious discourse, I am consistently trying to understand why they survived and succeeded in many instances, and how. Is it because they are a strong movement with a long-standing discourse? because their adversaries could not provide a counter-discourse? or because of both? So, I was looking at their points of strength to understand how they have such an influence, while trying to keep a distance and being critical. I believe that they appreciated this as it was different from the other approaches that focused on picking on their flaws, scandals and focus on their controversial statements only rather than discuss them, and this approach of taking them seriously and trying to be balanced was fulfilling for them. They even liked the fact that I am not a Salafi and that I criticize many aspects of the movement because this would make me more credible for a wider audience if I mention any positive point about them. For them, besides sharing the same belief, I seemed to be a safe outsider. With *al "masaleh and al mafased"* calculations my harm is never compared to the benefits. This, of course, seemed to

be more among the elder generation as I still encountered rejection and doubts among women and younger generations, in view of the intellectual independence of the movement's members.

Looking forward, however, I believe that fieldwork even participant observation-based research – will become possible again within Alexandrian, as opposed to other Egyptian Salafi circles. The desire to be known, and to be academically respected, persists within these circles. As 'Abd al-Mun'im al-Shahhat put it: "I am willing to talk to any researcher, whatever they want to say about me or my movement. I have nothing to hide" (February, 2019). To conclude, regardless of the motivation or the religious (shari'a) foundation that the different Salafi groups and members within such groups use in reaction to ethnographic research and that in many instances would lead to oppositionality, it is important to present such an autoethnographic account which involves the self that according to Wall (2006) "has been always there". Revealing the researcher's positionality and exploring the interaction between the researcher and the case study and its context would clarify many interpretations and takes on Salafis. This does not only apply to western and western-trained researchers but also researchers who came from different ideological backgrounds within the same culture and how this must have affected not only their interaction with the case study but also the access to, the material of and the answers that the Salafi groups will allow them depending on which Salafi group they deal with. Most importantly it helps guide the reader on why the researcher understood, interpreted and narrated such material in this particular way.

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- Interview with Ahsraf Thabet, 29.12.2013, 9.33-10.44 pm.
- Interview with Female Leader in Kafr El Dawwar, 31-10-2013, 12.52-2.33pm.
- Interview with Hanan Allam and Howayda Abdel Gawwad, 25-12-2013, 2-4pm.
- Interview with Mahmoud Shaltut, 20-7-2013, 2-5pm.
- Interview with Mohammed Usama, 14-11-2018, 8-9pm.
- Interview with wife of Sheikh Ziyad and Om Malek 14-11-2018, 4-6pm.
- Interview with Yasser Burhami, 27-2-2019, 1.30-3pm.
- Interview with Yasser Burhami, 30-10-2013, 1.37-2.45 pm.
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