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“The Concept of Authority in Muslim Societies:  
Political, Religious, Social and Literary”

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**ABSTRACT ONLY – WORK IN PROGRESS**

“Tug of War: Interpretive Authority between Salafism and Traditionalism”

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It could be argued that Islam is witnessing a reshaping similar to Christianity’s Protestant reformation, which stripped interpretive authority from religious institutions and empowered individual interpretation. Throughout the Muslim world, debates over the role of tradition in interpreting scripture are occurring in mosques, social gatherings, and online. Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani’s (d. 1999) brand of Salafism is a movement critical of Traditionalist institutions, and therefore, bypasses them in order to interpret the texts anew. Conversely, Traditionalism is a current within Islam that adheres to what is considered authentically rooted in revelation. It has crystallized under the banners of scholarly consensus (*ijma*) and passed on as Islamic knowledge (*ilm naqli*) in chains of scholarly authority (*isnad*). Traditionalists interpret scripture through the scholarly class, while Salafis believe scripture is clear and “speaks for itself.” Through a detailed reconstruction of the dynamically heated debates between Albani and his Traditionalist interlocutors, I analyze the context of the scripturally charged rhetoric against, and in defense of particular hermeneutical methods to explain the appeal and authority of modern Salafism. I contend that unlike Traditionalists who find authority in scholarly institutions, Albani’s brand of Salafism finds its authority in its simplistic teachings, and removal of the human element from the interpretive process by insisting that the texts must speak for themselves. In other words, this study demonstrates that the authority of Albani’s Salafism lies in the anti-hierarchical and individually empowering hermeneutics of this religious tradition, two facets that correlate well with specifically modern sensibilities.