Western imaginings: the intellectual contest to define Wahhabism

Greg Simons

To cite this article: Greg Simons (2019): Western imaginings: the intellectual contest to define Wahhabism, Religion, State & Society, DOI: 10.1080/09637494.2019.1586399

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2019.1586399

Published online: 01 Mar 2019.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 12

View Crossmark data
BOOK REVIEW


This book sets out to understand, through the critical deconstruction of text, how Wahhabism is understood and represented by western intellectuals. There is strong emphasis on the liberal and neo-conservative traditions of western political thought. The book sets out with the rather daunting task of challenging the largely monolithic representation of Wahhabism as posing a significant security threat to the United States, Israel and the ‘free world’ through the promotion of a radical version of Islam that is supported by the Saudi state.

Before analysing the content of the book, it is necessary to understand the background of the author, Rohan Davis, and his motivation for researching and writing this book. Davis holds a PhD from RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. According to the book’s biography, he specialises in the sociology of intellectuals’ tradition with a particular focus on liberal and neo-conservative intellectual currents. His motivation for researching and writing this book stemmed from his personal experiences as a student in Stockholm in 2008 at a beginners’ course of Swedish language where he met a Palestinian student taking the same class. Their newfound friendship led to discussions on Wahhabism that challenged his world view at the time (1–3).

The book is neatly and logically ordered into six chapters, an introduction and a conclusion. Chapter One introduces the reader to the idea and category of Wahhabism, with different lenses and perspectives used to view and understand the movement. Chapter Two follows with a critical look at the nature and root of prejudices and how they affect our understanding of the social world. As a progression, Chapter Three provides insights on analysing the use of language and dialectics. These three chapters provide the basis and framework for understanding the content of the next three chapters that engage in the task of understanding what motivates and drives liberalism and neo-conservatism, and how this influences intellectuals’ and commentators’ framing and message on Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia.

The first chapter provides an overview and a demonstration of Wahhabism as a highly contested category. It sets the tone of the book by illustrating the intellectual and perceptual problems in dealing with ‘fuzzy’ definitions. Davis shows that this stems from two things – one is the problem of clear definition and the other is the opportunity for influencers to create and shape a definition and reality that supports their agenda which may include attempting to influence the policy and/or decision-making process. A very strong brand association exists with this form of Islam: ‘Wahhabism is both conventionally and popularly understood to be an extremely conservative, fundamentalist, or radical version of Islam’ (25). However, the term Wahhabi is not universally accepted and is strongly contested; adherents prefer using the term Salafi, which is at least in part owing to the relationship and associated influence of Wahhabism on Islamic terrorism (al Qaeda for example).

There are a number of constant themes prevalent in the book. They are shown within the context of contrasting the hyper-realities and worldviews of the projected Wahhabi nature and the goals set against western nature and goals, as presented through the writings of the
selected intellectuals. On the one hand, Wahhabism is portrayed in some of these writings as a threat to ideas of ‘democracy’, ‘progress’, ‘security’ and ‘freedom’, as can be seen in popular and academic writing as well as in speeches by political figures including President George W. Bush. On the other hand, there is a critique of how liberal and neo-conservative intellectuals frame the West’s apparent desire to ‘export democracy’ and civilisational progress to what are characterised as ‘uncivilised’ or ‘barbaric’ lands and cultures.

Some of the recurring themes in Chapters Four, Five and Six, on the writings and logic of liberal and neo-conservative writers, indicate that Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia very much represent the ‘Other’ of the western world. They are seen as subversive to progress and individualism, to Israel’s security (for neo-conservatives rather than liberals) and to US interests and security. Chapter Six details the strategy of character assassination used to reduce empathy for Wahhabism through the use of animal or mechanical metaphors. This creates a cognitive environment that lays the blame on Wahhabism in particular for spreading hatred and subversion because, in the words of George W. Bush, ‘they hate our freedoms’. An effect of this is to discount other possible motivations for reactions to the western world and Israel, such as responses to US-led foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa, and the sensitivities of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Instead of the words and deeds of adherents of Wahhabism being seen through the sober earthly concerns of foreign policy and security matters there is a tendency to frame them as being based in emotional and spiritual concerns of spreading a conservative and violent religious vision and anti-Americanism.

This book is far from the mainstream literature and arguments, but it is a recommended read since it provides interesting and critical self-reflection and engages in critically thinking about ‘commonly held’ knowledge. It also provides some glimpses into alternative ways of how Wahhabism is conceived and represented.

This book is very well written and argued. It does fight an uphill battle in the quest for readers to rethink the nature of Wahhabism because the popular image has become the orthodoxy of knowledge on the topic. This is precisely the problem outlined in Davis’ work. One of the positive aspects in reading this work is that it encourages the reader to think outside the box, or at least in a more objective or alternative manner, about an aspect of modern life that is well known, but seems less well understood. It forces one to rethink what is taken for granted – something of great use and value in this day and age of mass-mediated imagery.

Greg Simons
Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University, Sweden
Department of Communication Sciences, Turiba University, Latvia
Greg.simons@ires.uu.se http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6111-5325

© 2019 Greg Simons
https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2019.1586399