PRE-PUBLICATION VERSION : Rejoinder to Alain Gabon's Critique of my "THE SALAFI WORLDVIEW AND THE HERMENEUTICAL LIMITS OF MAINSTREAM SUNNI CRITIQUE OF SALAFI-JIHADISM"

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Given that this exchange takes place in an academic setting I will have to start this rejoinder by pointing out that Alain Gabon¹ is neither an Islamic Studies nor Religious Studies scholar. This is important to keep in mind because if Gabon was such a scholar he would realise that much, if not all, of his purported critique, given the nature and aims of my article and all of my relevant scholarship in general, is simply misplaced to put in mildly or is aimed at intentionally trying to mischaracterize both my scholarship and intentions/motivations behind it (for reasons unknown to me) as will be discussed below. Given that my article focuses on the **hermeneutical** limits of mainstream Sunnism in countering the theological, epistemological, conceptual and interpretive (i.e. manhaj based) aspects of jihadist Salafism, its main argument can/ should only be critically evaluated /appreciated by those scholars who are either:

1. very well versed in the Islamic intellectual tradition, especially Islamic theology, Islamic legal theory (*usul ul fiqh /manhaj*), Islamic epistemology and Islamic hermeneutics or
2. more broadly those who work on religious fundamentalism and studies in religion and violence.

Gabon cannot claim any academic expertise in relation to any of these.

As someone who has been publishing on the hermeneutical aspects of (Neo-Traditional) Salafism, progressive Islam and various aspects of the Islamic interpretive tradition (e.g. maqasid al ahari'a, sunna and hadith) since 2007 and I am yet to come across any critique by scholars who work in these fields who have characterised my scholarship in such decidedly negative and inaccurate terms as Gabon has. Indeed, several scholars who work in these areas and who have read my article under discussion (and are familiar with my scholarship more generally) have commented both publicly (on an academic listserver) and privately (via email correspondence) very positively and recognised the significance and validity of my approach. Nonetheless, in the interest of further clarification I will explain why Gabon's critique is fundamentally problematic and misses the point. From the outset it should also be noted, in the interest of full transparency, that Gabon and I have been involved in many debates on an academic listserver for a number of years now on precisely the same issues and that Gabon has not always been able to keep the debates academic and has resorted to tactics that attack me as a person and what he considers to be my motivations rather than the relative merits of my scholarship. This is, in part, reflected in the very critique Gabon has offered

¹ Gabon has interestingly omitted the "Dr." in front of my last name (Duderija) despite the fact that it is a convention to refer to ones academic titles in such contexts. I will not here speculate the reasons for this but have decided to do the same.

here and which I will address first, the supposedly fatal flaw that informs my scholarship, namely the notion of “mixing scholarship with (academic)² religious proselytism”.

WHO IS MIXING SCHOLARSHIP WITH PROSELYTISM?

In the entire section titled “mixing scholarship with (academic) religious proselytism” Gabon, who has never met me face to face or knows anything about my life or me as a person outside of our exchanges on an academic listserver, takes the liberty to assume that I, as a major theoretician and proponent of progressive Islam (which I have no problem in affirming), am entirely motivated in some ulterior fashion to malign mainstream as ““medieval”, archaic, obsolete, even dangerous and toxic” in order to **convert** (non-progressive) Muslims to progressive Islam. Moreover, he argues that my commitments to progressive Islam in his words “puts great pressure on the scholarly thinking itself and orient[s] the analysis, depriving it of balance, caution, nuance, and objectivity, while introducing all sorts of biases, blind spots, and conspicuous “structuring absences”. First of all, in my numerous publications spanning over a decade I have never characterised mainstream Sunnism in such terms as my focus has always been on deconstructing the methodological and hermeneutical assumptions of mainstream Sunnism, Salafism and progressive Islam. These derogatory terms are, therefore, Gabon’s own projections and impositions onto my scholarship. Second of all, Gabon’s critique in this entire section must be recognised for what it is : a mere speculation regarding my motivations and not an engagement with my over decade long , extensive scholarship on the theory of progressive Islam(or Salafism for that matter),including the article under discussion, which is entirely focused on systematically identifying and deconstructing the various interpretive methodologies and assumptions that govern jihadist Salafism and mainstream Sunnism and, to a much lesser extent progressive Muslim thought. Indeed , scholars who work in these fields such as Professor Khaled Abou El Fadl, Professor Ebrahim Moosa, Professor Abdullah Saeed, Professor Hashim Kamali, Professor Amina Wadud , Professor Suleiman Mourad, Professor Abdulaziz Sachedina and others have constantly praised the rigorous and highly systematic nature of my theoretical and methodological approaches on precisely the grounds Gabon, who let us recall is a complete outsider in this respect , finds not only my article but my entire scholarship to be lacking.

Moreover, we could use Gabon’s speculative critique regarding my motivations to cast aspersions on not only any rivalling theological currents in Islam such as mainstream Sunnism or Salafism whose approaches are in fact, for those who have taken the care of studying them and publishing on them, decidedly much less theoretically and methodologically grounded and much less self-reflective/critical /academic in nature compared to the scholarship on the theory of progressive Islam. Interestingly, nowhere in his piece did Gabon even hint that mainstream Sunni scholars might have their own biases, agendas or what their motivations might be and how they affect their scholarship.

Furthermore, like feminist and liberation theology scholars, progressive Muslim scholars (who, as I explained in my *Imperatives of Progressive Islam* book, are both feminist and liberation theologians) are **scholar-activists** and they are acutely aware of hugely important

² Gabon sometimes omits “academic” suggesting perhaps that my scholarship should not even be considered as academic (as if he would know) despite my long and extensive publication record of some 80 individual academic, peer reviewed publications including 5 books.

ethical, legal, social, cultural and political implications of the issues they are dealing with in their scholarship, the rise of jihadist-Salafism, being merely just one of them. There is no clear-cut line between activism and scholarship as far as progressive Muslim scholars are concerned nor should there be if we, not just as scholars but as ordinary human beings, care about reducing needless suffering and promoting human dignity, justice and equality. To insist on complete objectivity in scholarship, as much as I share the ideal, is impossible and the nature of much of my scholarship on Salafism and progressive Islam is exactly aimed at identifying and understanding various theoretical, hermeneutical and methodological assumptions and biases that govern the worldviews of these two contemporary Islamic communities of interpretation of the Islamic interpretive tradition.

Moreover, it never crossed Gabon's mind that I, as a self- professed (progressive) Muslim, and as someone who has worked closely with and been active at grass roots level in various Muslim communities ever since my late teens (i.e. over 20 years ago) and as a father of two Muslim children, might be motivated, like mainstream Sunni Muslim scholars/ religious leaders, by the desire to help Muslim communities become **less vulnerable** to theological manipulation and ideological indoctrination of 10 000s of Muslims around the world who recognise³ (rightfully- if one accepts the "salafi worldview" inherent in mainstream Sunnism as normative Islam) in ISIS style caliphate and ideology not only authentic but best Islam. What I want to highlight here is that my theoretical interventions and its motivation should be seen and understood in this context as a concerned fellow Muslim who wishes them well and is trying to find ways to help.

The notion that my article published in SCT has been written for the purposes of conversion to progressive Islam is also undermined by the very structure and the content of the article itself. Indeed, as the title suggests, 95 % my article in terms of its content and arguments is dedicated to demonstrating the hermeneutical limits of mainstream Sunnism and not on why progressive Islam is the solution which constitutes merely one or two paragraphs of the entire article. If my motivation was indeed to 'proselytise' and 'convert' the nature, structure and the content of the article would have been very different.

In summary, the various unwarranted assumptions and projections in Gabon's critique about the nature of my motivations can themselves be seen as a case of mixing scholarship (although Gabon's critique is very thin on scholarship and it probably does not deserve that label) with kind of anti-progressive Islam proselytising.

WHO HAS A FAULTY METHODOLOGY?

Gabon considers that my non-engagement with mainstream Sunni theological critiques of jihadist Salafism is a fatal flaw in the article's methodology. However, this is not the case for several reasons. Let me , first of all point out that in my article published in 2015 in the journal Hawwa titled "The "Islamic State" (IS) as Proponent of Neo-Ahl ḥadīth Manhāj on

³ For one particularly insightful examples se : Ebrahm Moosa, My madrassa classmate hated politics. Then he joined the Islamic State., The Washington Post, 21st of August , 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/my-madrassa-classmate-hated-politics-then-joined-the-islamic-state/2015/08/21/b8ebe826-4769-11e5-8e7d-9c033e6745d8_story.html?utm_term=.dfc43cad6a3b

Gender-Related Issues”⁴ I engage with this literature directly, specifically the “Open Letter to Bhagddadi Document” and demonstrate that the same kind of hermeneutical affinity that I discussed in the article published in SCT is at work. Second, all of the literature penned by mainstream Sunni scholars that aims to refute jihadist-Salafi interpretations of Islam and that I am very familiar with, does not approach the issue from the perspective of hermeneutical affinity/reasonableness and the idea of a the “Salafi worldview” which was the main theoretical framework and heuristic underpinning my article and which is fully congruent with the article’s aims. Indeed, one of the main motivations behind my writing of the article was born out of a prolonged frustration with the mainstream Sunni refutations of jihadist-salafism which are not critically coming to terms with or even being oblivious to the kind of hermeneutical, epistemological and conceptual problems their sharing of the “salafi worldview” presents in terms of the ‘convincing power’ their refutations have over jihadist salafis.

Having read and pondered over these refutations by mainstream Sunni scholars for some years now, the ultimate conclusion they draw, based on primarily what I would call micro-hermeneutical and segmented arguments at the level of individual Qur’anic verses or ahadith and much less frequently at level of principles/ maxims that are still internal to their narrow theological, hermeneutical and ethic-legal interpretive parameters, is to wrongfully equate, for reasons discussed next, jihadist-Salafism with the early Muslim theological sect of the Khawarij. Such refutations are however not convincing, have very little conceptual/analytical/ heuristic value and are in fact inaccurate for at least three reasons. First, the Khawarij existed prior to the consolidation or even formation of Islamic theology, legal theory and ethics and they did not have a systematic methodology of interpretation (manhaj) akin to the four sources theory of classical mainstream Sunnism that was given its major contours at the end of the fifth century Hijri as defined in my article. The later incarnations of the Khawarij in form of ‘Ibadiyya sect were greatly influenced by the theological and juristic schools of mainstream Sunnism and would be unrecognisable by the early Khawarij. Second, even if we accepted this anachronistic imposition of the Khawarij onto contemporary Salafi-jihadists, the most we can safely say is that jihadist -salafis tend to develop a freer form of takfirism but there are many groups in what is considered as mainstream Sunni (and Shi’i) Islam that have episodically done so too in the past.⁵ Third, jihadist -Salafis, as evident in the Dabiq magazine itself, and as discussed in my article, often rely on established mainstream Sunni authorities primarily but not exclusively from the Hanbali school of thought on issues pertaining to gender, slavery, apostasy, governance etc. in terms of justifying their practices and beliefs. Hence, they cannot be accused of espousing a Khawarij manhaj because there is no such thing as the manhaj of the Khawarij in the proper sense of that term.

That mainstreams Sunni Islam, unlike progressive Islam, indeed has a high degree of hermeneutical affinity for reasons discussed in my article can be also depicted in the form of

⁴ Adis Duderija, The “Islamic State” (IS) as Proponent of Neo-Ahl ḥadīth Manhāj on Gender Related Issues”, Hawwa, 13,2, 2015, 198-240.

⁵ Suleiman A. Mourad and James E. Lindsay (2013), *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology in the Crusader Period: Ibn ‘Asākir of Damascus: The Forty Hadiths for Inciting Jihad*, Leiden: Brill. Camilla Adang, Hassan Ansari, Maribel Fierro and Sabine Schmidtke (ed.) (2015) *Accusations of Unbelief in Islam, A Diachronic Perspective on Takfir*, Leiden: Brill.

the two tables below. The tables below are based on my extensive scholarship in form of 4 (edited) books pertaining to various aspects of Islamic legal theory, Islamic ethics/jurisprudence, sunna/hadith, the theory of maqasid etc.) that combined have over 90 pages of references (font 12) and many other book chapters and journal articles.⁶

Table one is a comparison of mainstream Sunnism, Salafism, jihadist Salafism and progressive Islam at what I call the level of fundamentals and table two shows how this translates itself at the level of concepts and legal determinations. The tables speak for themselves.

TABLE ONE:

Comparison of mainstream Sunnism, Salafism, Jihadist Salafism and progressive Islam at the level of Fundamentals

Source	Mainstream sunnism(based on late fifth /early sixth century hijri version)	Salafism	Jihadist salafism	Progressive Islam
Quran interpretation	Semi- textualist	Heavily textualist	Heavily textualist	Heavily contextualist
Sunna	Hadith dependent	Hadith dependent; ittiba' based	Hadith dependent; ittiba' based	sunna independent of Hadith ;rationalist; dynamics and ethico-values driven
Ijtihad	Operates within the 4 source heavily textualist hermeneutics; taqlid based	Operates within the 4 source hierarchy; heavily textualist hermeneutics ; ittiba' based	Operates within the 4 source hierarchy heavily textualist hermeneutics; ittiba' based	Operates outside 4 source hierarchy of mainstream sunni ulul ul fiqh

⁶ The list of all the references can be accessed here:
https://www.academia.edu/32913861/references_in_my_books.docx

Maqasid al sharia	Heavily textualist	Heavily textualist	Heavily textualist	Heavily contextualist
Epistemology	Premodern and heavily textualist	Premodern and heavily textualist	Premodern and heavily textualist	(post)-modern, contextualist and rationalist
Approach to ulum ul hadith	Premodern , heavily textualist	Premodern, heavily textualist	Premodern, heavily textualist	Inclusive of premodern but applied also (post)-modern sources and in line with above
theology	Ash'ari cum Maturidi	Hanbali /fideistic	Hanbali fideasitc	Rationalist
ethics	Ethical voluntarism	Ethical voluntarism	Ethical voluntarism	Ethical objectivism

Comparison of mainstream Sunnism, Salafism, Jihadist Salafism and progressive Islam at the level concepts /legal determinations

Concept /legal	Mainstream Sunnism	Salafism	Jihadist Salafism	Progressive Islam
Caliphate	Premodern (bay'a to ruler elected on basis of traditional shura principles; patriarchal, elitist undemocratic; mainly quietist	Premodern (bay'a to ruler elected on basis of traditional shura principles, patriarchal, elitist undemocratic; quietist	Premodern, (bay'a to ruler elected on basis of traditional shura principles, patriarchal, elitist	Modern (compatibility with constitutional democracy principles and modern human rights discourses justified in Islamic terms)

			undemocratic; revolutionaly	
Criminal law and ethics (apostasy, theft, zina/adultery, homosexuality)	Premodern hudud; can not evolve; might be suspended under certain circumstances	Premodern hudud	Premodern hudud	Rationalist, contextualist and in accordance with modern ethical sensibilities (considered Islamic)
Human rights	Premodern; can't evolve	Premodern; cannon evolve	Premodern; cannot evolve ,	Modern, rationalist and contextualist; can evolve
Gender issues in Islamic law and ethics	Premodern; largely fixed	Premodern; completely fixed	premodern; completely fixed	Modern, rationalist and contextualist ; can evolve
al wala wa l bara	millet based	saved sect Muslims only	in group jihadist-salafis Muslims only	Non-confessional
Slavery	Legal until late 20 th century based on 'scholarly consensus' and abolished due to pressure from outside of tradition	Legal and valid	Legal and valid	Illegal and unislamic

Jihad	Premodern (basis for engaging in war - in Shafi and some Hanbali- kufr ; Hanafi and Maliki – aggression on Muslims	Offshoot of Shafi'I and Hanbali	Offshoot of Shafi'i and Hanbali	Builds on Hanafi and Maliki and goes beyond
takfir	relatively infrequent but present throughout Islamic history	more prone to takfir	very prone to takfir	endorse religious pluralism and very abstract and non confessional concept of a muslim /mu'min

Select few Muslims scholars have recognised this inconvenient truth.⁷ For example, Hussein Solomon, a South African lecturer in the Department of Political Studies and Governance, University of the Free State, South Africa, who has published extensively on the ideology of the Islamic State writes:

Religion, specifically Islam, is central to the identity of Islamic State (IS). It was on the basis of religious doctrine that IS separated from Al Qaeda. It is on the basis of his belonging to the same tribe as the Prophet Muhammed that Al-Baghdadi has legitimised his claims of leadership of the Muslim ummah. Moreover, each action undertaken by IS is justified on the basis of Islamic religious texts. Far from representing some sort of lunatic fringe, the ideology of IS finds resonance among mainstream Muslims.⁸

Elsewhere, he states:

The phenomenon of IS will continue to grow in the short to medium term. Part of the reason for this relates to the fact that the reformation of Islam has largely stalled on account of the fight back from more conservative clerics.⁹

⁷ Although their theoretical and interpretational methodology related arguments are not sophisticated.

⁸ Hussein Solomon (2016) The particular role of religion in Islamic State, South African Journal of International Affairs, 23:4, 437-456, p.437.

⁹ H. Solomon, Islamic State and the Coming Global Confrontation, Palgrave, 2016, p.101.

Given the above, it is incorrect to argue that the article is based on a faulty methodology. The existing approaches in from of mainstream Sunni refutations simply do not approach the subject matter from the perspective my article does in terms of its theoretical framework and methodology and do not ask the kind of questions my article is interested in exploring and are, therefore, of little or no value to the aims of the article. The only viable manner in which the arguments and conclusions of my article could be challenged or invalidated is by demonstrating that what I termed the “Salafi worldview” is not shared by mainstream Sunnism. However, Gabon does not even attempt to address this issue and the tables above clearly show the many very significant overlaps that exist between mainstream Sunnis and jihadist Salafism at the level of epistemology, hermeneutics, theology, ethics, major political, juristic and theological concepts from Islamic intellectual history that translate and manifest themselves at the level of actual legal determinations.

Another critique Gabon levels at my approach is based on the argument that it in an unwarranted and deterministic manner extrapolates behaviour from texts, an approach Gabon terms “theological-textualist approach”. Upon reflection, however, this is not only another example of Gabon’s unfamiliarity with the literature on religion and violence and religious fundamentalism but also the nature and aims of my article. Let me briefly address the former first. The initiated scholar is well aware of the wealth of literature on religion and violence and religious fundamentalism that indeed is premised on the idea that certain approaches to and interpretations of sacred texts can generate worldviews that result in religiously motivated violence. While I can refer to the scholarship of scholars like M.Juergensmeyer, S.Appelby , R. Girard and D. Pratt, to name but a few, for the purposes of brevity, I will first briefly discuss one work demonstrating the direct link between certain approaches to religious texts and how they determine one’s specific view of reality/worldview . This can be found in the work of R.W. Hood (jr.) ,P.C. Hill and W.P.Williamson who in their book “The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism”¹⁰ have developed a theoretical framework which convincingly explains the structure and the processes that lead to what the authors term fundamentalism in major scripture-based world religions that applies very well to jihadist Salafism and in many ways mainstream Sunnism (see tables above) as I approach them, namely as “communities of interpretation” that emerge from certain approaches to the interpretation of Islamic sacred texts, the Qur’an and hadith as well as the broader Islamic interpretive tradition.

The book’s heuristic is based on an approach to understanding the phenomenon of fundamentalism as a system of meaning¹¹ that relies exclusively upon a religious text in order to *interpret the world and give meaning to all life*. The fundamentalist model is based upon the principle of “intratextuality” in which the use of the sacred text as a point of reference for all thoughts and action is adhered to.¹² This quality of intratextuality by means of which

¹⁰ New York, Guilford Press, 2005. The books has received excellent reviews e.g. Sara B. Savage (2006) REVIEW: "The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism", The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, 16:3, 243-244;

¹¹ System of meaning is defined as “a group of beliefs or theories about reality that includes both a world theory (beliefs about others and situations) and a self-theory (beliefs about the self), with connecting propositions between the two sets of beliefs that are important in terms of overall functioning”, Wood, Hill and Williamson, The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism, p. 14.

¹² Ibid,p.21.

reality is interpreted through a sacred text refers to the process of reading a sacred text and is central to fundamentalist thought. Wood, Hill and Williamson argue that the logic of this principle refers not to content but to the process, namely the idea that text itself determines how it ought to be read”.¹³ Thus, the reading or deduction of what the sacred text means or intends to mean comes only from within the text. This is what Wood, Hill and Williamson understand by the term intratextuality. The principle of intratextuality is associated with two related components of fundamentalist thought, namely the existence of a sacred text and absolute truths. Based on the principle of intratextuality a certain text is considered sacred and, in turn, only this sacred text is able to specify absolute truths. As a result of this process a dialogic encounter between the reader and the text, based on the principle of intratextuality, emerges. An absolute truth, on the other hand, is that which is essential for maintaining the fundamentalist worldview. This worldview, in turn, is based solely on written, fixed authoritative text/s within the tradition and is constructed as objective fact or reality. Importantly, absolute truths derived from the dialogic process are not subject to any criticism outside the principle of intratextuality. The outside world is viewed through this lens based on the dialogic process of intratextuality. Any “peripheral beliefs” (of religious or non-religious kind) that fall outside the realm of absolute truths or any extra-intratextually derived interpretive processes are not allowed to penetrate the processes that produce and maintain absolute beliefs that characterise fundamentalist thought. Moreover, a crucial assumption of this fundamentalist thought, argue its authors, is that “one need not subject the revelatory text to “interpretation” in the sense that modern and postmodern literary explore”.¹⁴ They are rejected as “higher criticism” or forms of intertextual criticism considered to be fallible commentaries on an infallible text. Furthermore, another feature of this intratextual model is its claim to objective truth that is insisted upon that is not always based upon a literal reading of the text. Wood, Hill and Williamson assert in this context that “an objective understanding of the text requires an appreciation for when it is and when it is not appropriate to treat the text “literally”.¹⁵ Fundamentalists only insist that discernment must come from intratextual considerations. In short, the work of Hill, Hood and Williamson makes a clear connection between a particular scriptural hermeneutic (based on the principle of intratextuality) and the nature of the resultant perceived reality.

To defend the idea that non-violent forms of “passive fundamentalism”¹⁶ thought can give rise to violent extremist I will very briefly point to the work of D. Pratt who has developed a nuanced theoretical framework explaining the “phenomenon of fundamentalism” buttressed by numerous empirically grounded case studies in form of Jewish, Christian and Islamic fundamentalism and violent extremism/terrorism. What follows is the summary of his argument in this respect:

The fundamentalist paradigm of religious extremism is now complete. What began with ‘normative’ absolutism, that form of religious believing and concept that holds

¹³ Ibid, p.22.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, 193.

¹⁶ Pratt considers mainstream religious traditions such as mainstream Sunnism to be passivist fundamentalist in nature by default.

rigidly to a set of assumptions, presuppositions and ideas as absolute truth, then may evolve or emerge through a process of hardening assertion to becoming, in extremis, an impositional form of religious ideology that is expressed in terms of terrorizing behaviours and acts of violence. Many examples across different religions, both historically and contemporaneously, could be adduced to make the point.¹⁷

The idea that religious motivations can play a crucial part in justifying acts of violence, including acts of terrorism, for example can be gleaned from the following excerpt written by the world's leading expert on violence and religion, Mark Juergensmeyer :

Religion seems to be connected with violence virtually everywhere . . . Religion is crucial . . . since it gives moral justifications for killings and provides images of cosmic war that allow activists to believe that they are waging spiritual scenarios. This does not mean that religion causes violence . . . (rather) . . . religion often provides the mores and symbols that make possible bloodshed – even catastrophic acts of terrorism.¹⁸

The validity of insights from the works of Juergensmeyer, Pratt and Hill, Hood and Williamson are clearly seen in the textual evidence I proffered in my article in the form of excerpts in the magazine Dabiq which often if not always justifies certain types of actions and behaviours of ISIS fighters, including the killing of civilians by means of martyrdom operations (istishhad and or tatarus), or those living in its caliphate exactly on these “theological-textualist” grounds.

The same analysis would apply equally to Christianity or Marxist inspired terrorists that Gabon mentions. However, the manner in which I approach the problem of religiously inspired violence is not a crude call to reform the Qur'an or the Bible as Gabon thinks but in shifting the hermeneutical epicentre of what constitutes a reasonable interpretation of not only the Qur'an/Bible but also their respective dominant /mainstream interpretive traditions in order to make ‘extremist’ interpretations which are responsible for violence so interpretationally unreasonable and hermeneutically non-affinitive that they are not even considered as remotely authentic let alone the best. It is my contention and conviction that mainstream Sunnism fails to do so in relation to jihadist-salafism.

Moreover, the idea that what are considered to be authentic religious traditions and norms do significantly matter when it comes to understanding the motivations, the behaviour and the worldview of their adherents is too obvious for even needing to be explicitly stated. Why do mainstream (Sunni Muslim) religious leaders, scholars or everyday believers think,

¹⁷ D.Pratt, *Religion and Extremism: Rejecting Diversity*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017, p.47.

¹⁸ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3rd edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), xi.

behave and act in the manner they do? Their positioning and approaches to the textualist-based interpretive Islamic tradition have a lot to do with it. Indeed, the very existence of Islamic courts and fatwa issuing bodies in Muslim parts of the world, both past and present, would make absolutely no sense otherwise. Moreover, the existence of various Islamic schools of thought is primarily a result of their different discursive orientations to the textualist Islamic interpretive tradition. Finally, the mainstream Sunni approach to the Islamic tradition guides or places significant demands on the believers with respect to many aspects of their daily lives from most mundane to most religious (e.g. personal hygiene, general lifestyle, family relations, social engagements, ethics, fulfillment of various religious rituals, practices and norms). No wonder religious worldviews are often referred to in academic literature as sources of “thick morality” (C.Geertz) or as “comprehensive doctrines” (J. Rawls)

There is, however, an additional reason why the ‘theological-textualist’ approach is warranted, namely the very existence of numerous mainstream Sunni “theologico-textualist” refutations themselves (including those of Arnold Yasin Mol that Gabon praises profusely) that often run into hundreds and hundreds of pages that Gabon seems not to have problems with. Hence, if one was to question my approach on this ground one would have to apply the same reasoning to these other “theologico-textualist” approaches. Moreover, my article, and indeed my long-standing record of engaging with the Islamic tradition, focuses on the problem of (jihadist)-salafism from the lens of the interpretive Islamic tradition with specific focus on scriptural hermeneutics, hence it is only natural that it adopts the approach it does.

In summary, neither my methodology nor my “theological-textualist’ approach is flawed. In actual fact it is Gabon’s inability (or unwillingness) to recognise them for what they are that is in itself a major methodological flaw.

WHO IS IGNORING (RELEVANT) COUNTER “EVIDENCE”?

Gabon argues that my article ignores counter evidence on both empirical and theological grounds. I hope given what I have outlined above so far the theological element has already been addressed in general terms. More specifically, Gabon argues that the excommunication of Wahhabo-Salafi approaches to Islam at the recent conference in Grozny on what constitutes mainstream Sunni Islam that I made reference to in my article, somehow undermines my arguments. However, this is not the case. First of all, it is not clear on which normative grounds this excommunication took place and there is no evidence that it took into account the hermeneutical affinity argument as presented in my article and in the two tables above. The excommunication of Salafis from mainstream Sunnism has also been interpreted as a political rather than a theological position. Moreover, Wahhabo-Salafis themselves strongly rejected these claims which resulted in, among others, an apology issued by Ramazan Kadirov to the Saudi royal family that praised Saudi Arabia as the “vibrant heart of the Islamic world.”¹⁹

¹⁹ [Chechen Leader Kadyrov Apologizes to Saudis for Wahhabism Snub](#), The Moscow Times, Nov.28,2016. ; Bernardo Cervellera , [Conference in Grozny: Wahhabism exclusion from the Sunni community provokes Riyadh’s wrath](#), Asianews, 9th of June, 2016.;Liz Fuller, [Radio Free Europe. Analysis: Grozny Fatwa On 'True Believers' Triggers Major Controversy](#), 14th of September,2016.

The killing of Sunni scholars argument is not relevant as it does not tackle the issue of hermeneutical affinity that my article discusses and given what I said about the nature of takfirism in mainstream Sunnism in Islamic history. The critique that 99.99% Muslims have not joined the IS caliphate is also not relevant for the same and additional reasons. First and foremost and critically so, it also does not explain the tens of thousands of cases in which the joining of ISIS and migrating to the ISIS caliphate was done precisely on religious grounds by people who were genuinely convinced and recognised in ISIS caliphate authentic if not best Islam. It is my contention and considered view that this was only possible because of the affinities in the worldviews that are shared between mainstream Sunni Islam and jihadist Salafism as shown in the tables above and/or as explained in my article. Moreover, 99.99 % based argument is very crude as it does not take into account the diversity of Muslim scriptural/hermeneutical (non)- commitments (i.e. as specific communities of interpretation) which is crucial to my approach. It also does not take into account that most Muslims are not aware of which community of interpretation they belong to and why. Finally, it does not take into account cases of transition from non-jihadist-salafism into jihadist-salafism that is based on the grounds relating to scriptural reasoning (manhaj). This is particularly evident in cases of quietist Salafis either providing material and/or ideological support to or actually becoming jihadists on the basis of the hermeneutical affinity between the two communities of interpretation.

In summary, there are no valid reasons either empirical or theological that can be used to argue that I am ignoring **relevant** counter evidence because what Gabon considers to be **relevant** counter evidence is **not relevant** from the perspective of the methodology and aims of my article.

WHOSE UNFOUNDED HOPE?

Gabon's last point of critique is very interesting and is rather depressing. He argues that the efforts of progressive Muslim scholars like myself at developing alternative forms of Islam that make the Islam of jihadist -Salafis hermeneutically unreasonable are "unfounded" and based on "wishful thinking" because "they underestimate the fundamental and radical interpretational openness of the Qur'an and the Sunna". Now, some of these claims can only be assessed at the empirical level and Gabon does not offer us any. There are indeed some preliminary indications that more progressive-minded and/ or liberal approaches to Islam are gaining traction, especially but not only among Muslims in the West. As an activist minded scholar who keenly follows these developments I have witnessed the birth of several progressive minded Muslim organisations globally over the last decade or so in form of opening of women only/ inclusive mosques, study groups, social media groups or in form of progressive Muslim scholarship²⁰ and I, unlike Gabon, am optimistic about the future.

Moreover, it is precisely because of the interpretational openness of the Qur'an and Sunna that progressive Islam has a major contribution to make in helping Muslims (and non-Muslims) understand the complexities associated with naming something (un)-Islamic as it is highly methodologically and theoretically self-conscious and systematic. Progressive Islam, as evident in my two books on theorising of progressive Islam/Muslim thought, as a community of interpretation, highlights the huge importance in identifying and accounting for

²⁰ Some of them documented in Adis Duderija and Halim Rane, *Islam and Muslims in the West: Major Issues and Debates*, New York: Palgrave 2018.

various methodological and hermeneutical assumptions that underpin various approaches to the Islamic interpretive tradition. Hence the idea that progressive Islam “underestimate[s] the fundamental and radical interpretational openness of the Qur’an and the Sunna” is patently false and is evident to anyone who has read any of my scholarship on the theory of progressive Islam. Importantly, progressive Islam is not merely de-constructivist but is also re-constructivist in nature. It was precisely on these grounds that my scholarship on progressive Islam has drawn most praise by scholars. Hence, as much as I would like to categorically assert that jihadist -salafism is not Islamic for reasons above this approach would only continue to make Muslims and the Islamic interpretive tradition vulnerable to the same kind of critique of jihadist-salafism that I discussed in the article.

While progressive Islam will not be able to completely immunise Islam/Muslims from the curse of fundamentalism and violent extremism especially in the short term, it offers novel and conceptually and theoretically useful avenues of countering its religious narratives that mainstream Sunnism lacks. As such progressive Islam, I am convinced, can be used as a much more effective antidote, especially in the long term, against the threat of jihadist violence and the worldview underpinning it when compared to mainstream Sunnism.

In conclusion, Gabon lacks any credibility and authority on the issues my decade and a half long and extensive scholarship deals with including the article that he sets out to critique. Much of the critique he offers is based on mere speculation regarding my motivations that he not only assumes he knows but does not question in others. As the analysis above shows, he has failed to understand the nature and aims of my article in question and what it sets out to achieve and from what theoretical and methodological perspective it does so. In the rejoinder I have provided further evidence of the hermeneutical affinity between mainstream Sunnism and jihadist Salafism and have outlined several reasons why my “theological-textualist” approach is both warranted and valid. I have also pointed out the double standards and weaknesses in Gabon’s own reasoning and expressed disagreement with him on the issue why I think progressive Islam can provide us with a real foundation (from the perspective of the Islamic interpretive tradition and scriptural reasoning/manhaj) and therefore hope in making future generations of Muslims theologically less vulnerable to the ideology of jihadist-Salafism.