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What Do We Mean By “Salafī”? Connecting Muḥammad ‘Abduh with Egypt’s Nūr Party in Islam’s Contemporary Intellectual History

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In contemporary academic literature, the word “Salafī” has a variety of meanings. Most importantly, Western academics in the 21st centuries applies the word to (1) an Islamic reform movement founded by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897) and

1905) in the last decades of the 19th century and (2) to contemporary Sunni reform movements that criticize manifestos are based on Sufism, Ash‘arism, and traditional madhhab-affiliations to the Shāfi‘ī, Ḥanafī, and Mālikī schools. In this paper, I argue that the use of the word “Salafī” to describe these two movements is an equivocation based on a mistake. Neither contemporary Salafīs may be rightfully called by that name, al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh never used the term. Only Weidner, in the 1930s, most importantly Louis Massignon (1883–1962), called this latter movement “salafī”. This paper reevaluates the term and argues that Massignon did not make a mistake. The paper describes analytically both reform movements and their relationship to the history of the term and is a historic continuity that justifies calling them both “salafī”. The paper draws an analogy from the use of the word in Islamic history, which first applied to a wider movement of the late 19th century before its use was contested and narrowed.

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