

ETHNOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

Cool Guy or Doing *Shirk*?

How Salafis Feel about Andrew Tate

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Abstract: Since Andrew Tate's conversion to Salafism, the emergence of manosphere enthusiasts and influencers in Salafi discourse has sparked considerable debate among Salafis. Questions arise, including whether Andrew Tate and similar figures can be seen as welcome advertising promoting Islam, or if they are perhaps not true Muslims. This snapshot presents the latest field data to explore how these topics are discussed in segments of the Germanophone *salafiyya*. It shows how far-right, misogynistic, and populist movements like the manosphere reach out to hyperconservative and extremist religious groups and partially successfully fascinate their members – but partially fail to do so: not because of their extreme populist opinions, but rather because they lack theological competence and knowledge of the targeted religious groups.

Keywords: Andrew Tate, Germanophone Islam, loyalty and disavowal, manosphere, Salafism

Can't help but feel attracted

On the day of *Weiberfastnacht* (Women's Shrovetide, the first day of North Rhine Westphalian carnival celebrations), I took a train to Düsseldorf in the west of Germany that was packed with carnivalists to meet my interlocutor Sami (age 22). He was an online follower (though not a frankly self-declared fan) of the Instagram celebrity and accused human trafficker and rapist Andrew Tate, and also a Salafi. Moreover, Sami was really struggling on that day not to feel nostalgic about the time before his conversion, when he joined in that day's



local carnival ritual. This ritual consists of women using scissors to cut men's neckties, symbolically castrating the men, and afterwards excusing their deed with *Bützscher*, a kiss on the cheek. Men are usually eager to get as many kisses as possible and often invite the women by wearing numerous neckties.

In the course of our conversation, Sami stated that he wholeheartedly “must dislike” what he called the “men-despising (*männerverachtende*)” nature of the carnival ritual and that he, after all, as a “good Muslim,” was commanded to stay away from these situations for multiple reasons (heathen practices, being approached by strange women shamelessly uncovered, and so on). Some minutes later, however, he smiled and nostalgically remembered how he got his first kiss from a “sassy carnival dancer (*Funkenmariechen*) who did not care what others thought.” This happened a few years before he converted to Salafi Islam in which the essence of good female behaviour consists of modesty and caring what others think, and most certainly not of approaching strange young men and kissing them just for fun.

Sami's palpable ambivalence regarding how to feel about carnival-related majority-society transgressions of emotional and behavioural norms promoted in his current Salafi religiosity mirrored the ambivalence he showed a little later when we talked about Andrew Tate's conversion. Tate, the internet star and accused rapist (see below), is the most prominent and perhaps most controversial convert to Salafism of all time. “Somehow, he's a cool guy. Everybody knows him. But for the wrong reasons. . . . He has to stop doing what he once did and turn all to Islam when he wants to be one of us.” He added, “Of course, what he did makes him somebody that stays in people's minds.” *Funkenmariechen* and Tate seemed to possess a dangerous sexiness incompatible with Salafism, but that nevertheless spoke to Sami.

While clearly aware that, for him as a self-ascribed Salafi, neither sassy *Funkenmariechen* nor pre-conversion Instagram rape glorifiers were the correct persons to feel drawn to, Sami could not help but secretly still admire the respective personae and what they did, especially Andrew Tate. This snapshot explores how German-speaking Salafis perceive Andrew Tate and his conversion, and ultimately explains how Tate might be regarded as the world's most prominent Salafi by non-Salafis, yet not considered Salafi at all by many in the Salafi community. This exemplifies how global digital populism and far-right values sometimes reach their aim of provoking fascination among conservative or extremist religious groups, not least when it comes to shared detesting of what they imagine to be feminism, but also where their capability of attracting religious persons ends – precisely in their meagre interest in and lack of knowledge about theological specificities and differences between the groups that seek to draw in.

Andrew Tate and Germanophone Salafism: Background info

Andrew Tate, one of the most famous male Instagram celebrities and a former kickboxer, has a history of glorifying and allegedly practising rape, forced prostitution, psychological abuse, and other forms of misogynistic aggression. He is currently awaiting trial in Romania (Badshah 2024), where he is accused of using manipulation to coerce young women into participating in commercially distributed sex videos. Tate and three suspected accomplices were first arrested near Bucharest in 2022.

Despite – or perhaps because of – his history of abusing women, Tate is a prominent figure in the so-called manosphere. The manosphere is characterised as an online community whose main objective is (re)creating and justifying social structures that empower men over women, even to the extent of promoting the unpunished rape of desirable women (Ging 2019; Ging and Siapera 2018; Gotell and Dutton 2016; Hopton and Langer 2022; Lumsden 2019; Marwick and Caplan 2018). There are also women who advocate for revival of so-called traditional gender norms and partially share the manosphere's viewpoints, but disagree on certain issues or emphasise different aspects (see Deem 2023 for more on “trads”).

Before his arrest in late 2022, Andrew Tate converted to what he describes as Salafi Islam (see Zuby 2022). Salafis are individuals who strive to live the lifestyle of the first three generations of Muslims as nearly as possible. The exact number of Salafis in Europe is unknown because official statistics typically only account for Jihadis, who pose a security threat. Key religious concepts, interpreted heterogeneously, emphasise the oneness of God and the prohibition of devotion to anyone or anything besides Him, avoidance of religious innovation, adherence to the religious principle of loyalty to fellow believers and disavowal of those who might weaken one's faith, and a particularly literal understanding of the Qur'an and Hadith, at least as formally claimed (Damir-Geilsdorf et al. 2019; Haykel 2009; Meijer 2009; Wagemakers 2018). Salafis are classified as either reborn Muslims or converts. It is estimated that approximately 70–75 percent of Salafis living in Europe are reborn, and 25–30 percent are converts (Adraoui 2023; Inge 2016; Sheikhzadegan 2020). Andrew Tate's conversion places him in the latter category; he previously identified as both atheist and Christian (Valuetainment 2023).

What Germanophone Salafis think of Andrew Tate: Spotlights

Since Tate's conversion in the autumn of 2022, Germanophone Salafi groups have engaged in online and offline discussions about what to do with that information, and they seemingly developed different stances. With the aim of learning more about these opinions, I conducted fieldwork in early 2024

with Salafis from different groups (Madkhalis, traditional Salafis, and political Salafis; only some of the latter had ties to Islamic State [IS] sympathisers) in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. The research was generously funded by the University of Zurich's GRC grant. I began my fieldwork by re-establishing contact with various interlocutors I have known since 2013 with whom I had an established trusting relationship. They introduced me to other Salafis who belonged to a younger generation. This snapshot is based on repeated meetings with eighteen Salafis in total. For reasons of confidentiality, I refrain from using real names or specifying the locations where we met. (For more information on the necessity of these measures, as well as the ethical and practical challenges of conducting fieldwork with Salafis, see Damir-Geilsdorf and Menzfeld [2020]).

For some Salafis, Tate's conversion is a significant misunderstanding of Islam itself, occurring for the wrong reasons and likely to spread *bid'a* (religious innovation, which is considered sinful) because he behaves "like a lawmaker himself, while Allah is the only true lawmaker" (Nadiyya, age 26). His philosophy of degrading women is considered decidedly un-Islamic and a forbidden innovation, not least because he motivated women to earn him money through sexualised self-presentation: "It would be bad enough if he [only] sent his wife to earn money. But no, he sends many women to commit *zinā* [sexuality-related behaviour thought to be religiously unlawful] and earn money with this disgusting stuff [internet pornography]. How can he be a good Muslim?" (Rahim, age 38).

Additionally, the religious ideals of healthy jealousy and emotional self-restraint (Menzfeld 2023), both seen as guidelines that men should strive for to adequately discipline and counsel female partners, were completely lacking. Instead, Tate ordered men not to have emotional attachment to women and not to feel responsible for their modest behaviour. Even more dangerous was that Tate's significant deviation from the religious and gender-related behaviour and feeling ideals of Salafi men would, since his conversion, be labelled Islamic, implying that Tate not only commits *bid'a*, but also might inspire other Muslims to do the same. "What he does is *shirk* [idolatry, accepting other powers as God's associates]. What he leads young [Salafi] men to do is *shirk*" (Ali, age 40). Salafis in their thirties or older, in particular, said all of that would make Tate inherently heretical.

Other Salafis I spoke with, especially those who refrain from political activism and jokingly refer to themselves as "palace scholars' fanboys" (*die Fanboys von den Palastgelehrten* – those who follow so-called purist Salafi scholars or Wahhabi scholars – a mockery of how Salafis with different theological ideas would label them), had a very different view of Andrew Tate. These individuals were all younger than twenty-five, and most younger than twenty-one, in contrast to the elders quoted above, hinting at a connection between youth and sympathies for Tate and his followers, and also associated with exposure

to social media. These young interlocutors argued that Tate becoming Muslim could be the best possible outcome for his own good and the good of Islam. “Allah knows best; he knows what he does, right. He makes a person who lives very badly see the truth and makes his [Tate’s] fame now work for Islam. This brings people to reading the Qur’an” (Yasemin, age 19). Tate’s ideas about women and men are regarded as “formulated in a TikTok-able manner, but not completely out of order” (Yasemin). He would at least understand the difference between the sexes, though “he does not really get how men and women are connected to each other by Allah himself. But you need to give people time to learn” (Vasim, age 21). In general, the Tate-sympathising interlocutors claimed that it would be nice to see Tate promote a viewpoint on gender that opposes “what you read here [in Germanophone Europe] in the news. He has ideas that are not totally in line with feminism and so on; this is why everybody hates him here. But Allah does not want us to be feminists, too” (Zaid, age 20).

In fact, they said, if Tate managed to convince young men and women to be interested in Islam, it would greatly counterbalance the bad things he did in the past. Declaring *takfir* (i.e., accusing him of being an apostate) on him would be arrogant and possibly even blasphemous, for “only Allah looks inside the people and sees who is a Muslim and who will be a Muslim and who is not” (Layla, age 20).

Among my interlocutors, the complicated topic of loyalty and disavowal (Damir-Geilsdorf et al. 2019) was also hotly and heterogeneously debated in relation to Tate. Associating oneself with Tate was a matter of Muslim loyalty to some younger Salafis, while avoiding him and warning others not to listen to him was a concern of many Salafis who were a little older.

You have to make the boys see that following Tate means following a con artist and a man who loves punishing with fire [something reserved for Allah]. You should hate what he does for Allah. People can’t say, “Oh, I hate my sister for Allah when she has a boyfriend and dates him,” but then the same people go and cheer for a man who loves *zinā* and who makes people easily excuse things that Allah forbids. . . . By the way, does anyone really believe Tate does not drink anymore? (Saalim, age 37)

Tate’s conversion: Effects on *Salafiyya* or *Jihadiyya*?

When it comes to far-right populists, religious extremists, and conservatives reaching out to each other, a shared aversion to their image of feminism is often a connecting point – and perhaps it is currently perpetuated by the digitality of many of their recent encounters. Some scholars (Hurlbut and Tirosh-Samuelson 2016; Krüger 2019; Prohl 2023) argue that (post)digital

society¹ and transhumanism² possess decidedly misogynistic characteristics that align with religion-like promises of salvation. This would be the case because post-digital society and transhumanism are based on a digital–technological theology, which essentially promises technologically supported immortality and the permanent availability of over-sexualised, objectified women without consequences (the latter covering the entire spectrum from fatherhood to the prosecution of rape). It is from this promise that post-digital spaces and transhumanism draw their attractiveness to men in particular. If we follow this line of reasoning, we see that this attractiveness seems to indeed be realised in many forms, most strikingly at the moment in the “manosphere.” Post-digital and transhumanist visions and realities thus exhibit irritating parallels to the ideas of female availability in paradise that drive IS supporters to blow themselves up, but not to the strict ideals of relationship and emotion management prominent in classical *salafiyya*, which are quite regulative and restrictive for not only women but also men (Menzfeld 2023).

Some interlocutors I met welcomed the interest Salafi groups were receiving in the wake of Tate’s conversion, although they did not consider Tate and others like him to be true Muslims. Many felt ambivalent towards it, like Sami in the introduction – cautioning themselves not to feel too attracted to Tate, but at the same time, finding his way of life and views on gender somehow sexy. Other Salafis openly recommended staying away from all Tate supporters and, if possible, crossing the street if you encountered one so as not to run the risk of seeking the company of people who could be religiously misleading. But ultimately, none of the people I spoke with – not even the younger admirers of Tate – personally knew anyone who had converted because of Tate’s conversion, though some internet clips and comments (see, e.g., Kruk 2023) suggest otherwise. However, some had heard that IS and other violence-propagating groups (who are mostly not perceived by Salafis to be Salafis, and who hold theologically significantly different beliefs) saw a moderate influx of converts from the manosphere.

Curiously enough, therefore, Tate’s conversion is not univocally welcomed by the group to which he converted, nor does it ensure a notable influx to Salafi religious communities. Instead, groups that benefit function completely differently and are theologically miles apart from classical Salafism, namely, jihadist groups with local and global intentions that place armed struggle and military merits above rigid religious practices and theological qualifications in their leaders. These are likely the precise groups to which Tate is most sympathetic – in contrast to classical Salafism, which, with its rather extensive catalogue of requirements for men (Menzfeld 2023), runs counter to much of what Tate considers desirable for himself. Large segments of followers of some jihadist groups can now justifiably be described as completely areligious.

Why, then, did Tate say he converted to Salafism when he is more likely to flirt with some practices of jihadism? Probably out of sheer ignorance of theological details and differences between the groups. “And that,” said a Salafi interlocutor from Bonn, “is what particularly annoys me about him.” This reflects how Salafism is considered a classical conversion religion (see above), which typically includes the duty of showing ambitions to learn about religion (see, e.g., de Koning 2013). Learning about religion is precisely what Tate has apparently not done and is what would be expected of him by not only Salafis who are sceptical of him but also by those who consider him a cool guy. Ironically, Tate will most likely become one of the most prominent Salafis in the eyes of non-Salafis, while not being considered a Salafi by Salafis themselves. This shows one important limitation to fraternisation between far-right misogynist networks and conservative or extremist religious groups: As long as the manosphere and related movements do not dive deeply into the theological specificities of the religious groups they want to reach, there will always be a relevant number of very religious persons, such as Salafis, not taking them seriously and even doubting any basis for connection between them.

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Notes

1. Defined as a society in which digitality is deeply embedded in all layers of everyday life.
2. A term referring to a pro-tech perspective that suggests humankind and all biological life are becoming obsolete, and also to the primacy of digital life over non-digital life in group formation.

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