



# The Fundamentalist Factor

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S C O T T   A P P L E B Y

The people of the book have a gripe with secular modernity. Vocal and well-organized minorities within Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are disgusted with their “mainline” and merely orthodox co-religionists. Nurtured within the Abrahamic faiths, they have established their own alternative institutions, transnational networks, and fluid movements or cells. Whether lodged in Jewish settlements on the West Bank, schooled in madrasahs along Pakistan’s border with Afghanistan, or tuned in to the 700 Club studios in Virginia, these self-proclaimed “true believers” tend to demonize their enemies, manufacture or exploit moments of crisis, and challenge or compel their somnolent co-religionists to take a decisive stand “for God.”

By any reckoning, Islam has produced more contemporary fundamentalist movements than any other great religious tradition. Of course, it is inaccurate and wrongheaded to conclude that Islam is therefore inherently intolerant. Muslims have produced a variety of social practices and political cultures; both the Muslims of South Asia and the Muslims of Turkey, for example, have political cultures that differ from those of Arab Muslims. Any totalizing or essentialist description of Islam (Islam is always opposed to free markets, Islam is essentially socialist in nature) is bound to be misleading.

But it is also worth noting that it is the so-called Islamist or Islamic fundamentalist movements, in fact, that seek to essentialize Islam. They envision Islam as a comprehensive and stable set of beliefs and practices that determines social, economic, and political attitudes and behavior. Moreover, they interpret and would apply Islamic law in accord with the narrowest and most militant readings of Qur’anic concepts like tawhid (the unity of God), umma (the worldwide Muslim community), and jihad.

American journalists and officials have appeared foolish in their stunned reactions to “new” evidence — such as Mohamed Atta’s letter of instruction to his fellow hijackers — that these terrorists actually believe in God and would invoke His assistance before piloting planes into buildings. Long before September 11, Muslim extremists made no secret of their terror-legitimizing interpretations of Islamic law. In the mid-1980s, Islamist shaykhs (formally trained religious scholars, whose Qur’anic learning has attracted disciples) were already giving their blessings to suicide missions, strictly forbidden by Islamic law. They reinterpreted self-martyrdom as a legitimate act of self-defense against “an enemy whom it is impossible to fight by conventional means,” as Shaykh Sayyed Muhammed Hussein Fadlallah, the spiritual guide of Lebanon’s Hezbollah movement, told an interviewer in 1985. Such rulings are based in convictions that are widely shared by both Sunni and Shiite extremist cadres.

Why, then, does Islam produce so many viable fundamentalist movements?

First, the mass media have increased popular awareness of inequalities and injustices, as well as of the corruption and mismanagement that bedevil governments and state-run institutions. A growing sense among Muslims of “relative deprivation” compared with other societies has coincided with exhaustion and disgust at a string of failed secular “solutions,” from the Pan-Arabism espoused in the 1950s and 1960s by Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser to the Marxist leanings of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Islamists blame these failures (as well as their vulnerability to Western powers and, especially, military defeat at the hands of the Israelis) on the abandonment of Islam as the basis for the ordering of society. Their “solution” is fundamentalist rather than nationalist because the glorious Islamic empires and civilizations that serve as precedents antedated or resisted the rise of the modern secular nation-state. Indeed, Islam’s own religious vocabulary and conceptual repertoire conceive of a transnational, transregional spiritual community of believing Muslims as the basic political entity.

Second, Islam has been remarkably resistant to the differentiation and privatization of religion that often accompanies secularization. (In this Islam resembles Roman Catholicism, which officially retained a largely medieval worldview until approximately the mid-1960s.) It is often pointed out that Islam has not undergone a reformation like the one experienced by Christianity, which led to a pronounced separation of sacred and secular, religious and political spheres.

Finally, Islamist preachers and leaders have competed successfully with mainstream Islamic leaders for resources and respect. They have done so by avoiding personal corruption and demonstrating integrity in providing services to the needy. Their recruitment, training, and retention of core activists is exemplary. Their exploitation of Islamic theological and religio-legal resources has been by turns crude and sophisticated but always effective.

Ultimately, extremist Islam will fail. Its hope for conformity is doomed by the internal pluralism of the Islamic tradition and by the inability of extremists who reject cooperation with outsiders to meliorate the economic and social inequalities that haunt most Muslims. As a result of the extremists’ failure, however, they will continue to be a disruptive and destabilizing force in Islamic societies.

Under such circumstances, preachers and jurists who reject extremism and seek to strengthen Islamic political culture and civil society stand the best chance of undermining fundamentalism in its violent incarnations. Chandra Muzaffar of Malaysia and Abdolkarim Soroush of Iran, among other “progressive” Muslim thinkers who have developed popular followings, argue that political Islam is not destined to bequeath the mantle of the Prophet to the spiritual sons of bin Laden. While influential among youth, these progressive intellectuals are not currently positioned to bring about a transformation in their societies. One of the unintended consequences of September 11, however, may be that they or their disciples will find a wider audience.

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