



Fundamentalism: An Islamic Perspective

| Hussain, Asaf

A British symposium on the nature and role of Fundamentalism in the three monotheistic faiths. See also: A Cristian Response and A Jewish Perspective.

Fundamentalism

An Islamic Perspective

Asaf Hussain

Islamic Fundamentalism has been perceived as a threat to the Western world and its vested interests. Because the West has not understood Islamic Fundamentalism, this misperception persists. A Muslim has to follow the fundamentals of Islam, but Islamic fundamentalism is an artificial construct that has been created by the West. The sooner the West begins to understand Islamic fundamentalism, the better the prospects for peaceful coexistence between Western and Islamic worlds. An Islamic approach has to be developed which regards Islamic fundamentalism as a "resistance" rather than "terrorist" movement. This raises many important questions: what and whom are fundamentalists resisting? Why are they resisting? Above all, why do they arise in the first place?

Islamic fundamentalism is the search for Islamic authenticity in an age of postmodernism. Just as post-modernists question the authenticity of modernism and modernity so also fundamentalists question the contradiction of Islam that they find in the Muslim world. Why are there no Islamic states? Where are the practical admonitions of the Qur'an being lived in daily life? Where are Muslim countries conjoining religion and state?

The search for Islamic authenticity is therefore the search for a conceptual understanding of Islam. It is not an invention of new concepts. These were already in Islam but have become disused or distorted, often by Muslims themselves. In Islam there is no monarchy, but it has been the pattern of Muslim leadership right from the early times when the capital was shifted to Damascus under the Ummayyad dynasty. There was no priesthood in Islam, but that developed to legitimise monarchy. Islamic concepts were redefined to suit vested interests. More recently, powerful Islamic thinkers like Hassan al-Banna, Syed Qutb, Ali Shariati, Ayatollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Muttaharri and now Hassan Turabi and Shakyh Fadlallah, have developed new perceptions of Islam and inspired new generations of Muslims. From their thoughts one can cull five essential concepts which form the core of Islamic fundamentalist thought.

The framework of the Islamic paradigm of Islamic fundamentalism is formed by *Iman* (Faith) and *Amal* (Action). The common understanding of *Iman* was equivalent to "five pillars" (belief

in God, prayers, fasting, alms giving and pilgrimage), a private personal affair. The new Islamic redefinition of Islam is that there can be no *Iman* without *Amal*. Faith must lead to action.

Within this framework the question then arises: what should be the pattern of Islamic action and the reconstruction of Islamic existence? This leads to two other important concepts of Islam: *Ummah* (Community of Islam) and *Adl* (Justice). Islam is not just about praying five times a day but also about Muslim conduct in practical life and the unity of Muslims at local, national and international levels. In the Qur'an all Muslims are part of the *Ummah* because of their belief in one Allah, but the social reality prevailing in the Muslim world divides the *Ummah* on the basis of class, ethnicity, nationality and even sect.

Many injustices existed in Muslim societies in different countries: social (towards women, minorities etc); political (absolute power of the elite and powerlessness of the masses); economic (the rich became richer and the poor poorer); educational (education for the few and illiteracy for the many); and legal (different standards of justice for the rich and the poor). These unjust structures have come to be regarded as normal. To change structures is not easy but Islamic fundamentalist thought has taken *Adl* as its first priority after the establishment of the *Ummah*.

Islamic fundamentalists have been very critical of traditional Islamic thought and theology that created an *Iman* bereft of *Amal*, so the strategy of Islamic resistance has been to deconstruct the traditional and colonial structures that dominated Muslim cultures and created pseudo Islamic societies. The instrument of social change is *Jihad* (struggle). The Western world has been familiar with this since the Crusades, when it was understood to mean "holy war", which it still does in some quarters. But *Jihad* can range from the struggle for the eradication of poverty, illiteracy etc. to the declaration of war (*Jihad al-Kittal*). The *Jihad* which Islamic fundamentalist movements are undertaking is the transformation of their states into Islamic states. *Jihad* is the instrument through which *Adl* is operationalised by the *Ummah* in the arena of *Amal* inspired by *Iman*. Since the powers that are entrenched within the Muslim states and their Western allies are not inclined to change as they perceive a threat to their vested interests, conflicts have not only taken place but will also take place in the future.

Today many Islamic fundamentalist movements have declared war on their own people and are trying to transform their states on the model of the first Islamic state. But the conditions of the 7th century do not obtain today. A new model of the Islamic state has to be devised. The dominating civilisation of the present day is Western and its models control the Third World, including the Muslim world. Islamic movements have revolted against this, but their strategies have not been well thought out. They do not have to dominate Western civilisation but create a parallel which excels it. This will be a long, arduous task but the struggle has just begun.

Islamic fundamentalists therefore have to be judged by the criteria of the Islamic paradigm: have they succeeded in establishing the *Ummah*, transcending sectarian, ethnic, national boundaries? If not, why have they failed? What are the injustices they are targeting? What tactical and strategic measures are they applying in *Jihad*? Are they trying to establish an Islamic state or Islamic culture or Islamic civilization – and if so, how? How closely do they follow the *Sunnah* of the Prophet who sought to bring justice to his people through the eradication of the injustices of his times?

A new appraisal of all values is taking place for the reconstruction of Islamic structures and cultures. In some cases Muslims have got it wrong, in others they have got it right, while some have no idea and are on a reactionary trip. This turmoil will continue until it is sorted out and that may take some time. The transformation of the Islamic world is akin to the enlightenment and renaissance periods that the Western world experienced in its transition from the medieval to the modern age. The difference is that during that transition the West lost its religion and substituted secularism. In the Muslim world this enlightenment is taking place through Islam, which will not be marginalised.

The necessity of these times is that civilisations understand rather than confront each other.

Asaf Hussain is a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for the Study of History of Religions and Political Pluralism, Leicester University, UK

Used by permission of the [International Interfaith Centre](#), Oxford, England

See also:

Fundamentalism: [A Christian Response](#)

Fundamentalism: [A Jewish Perspective](#)