

## 7. Fundamentalism

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We are at war, declares an article in the *New York Times* published shortly after the attacks on the World Trade Center.<sup>1</sup> The author, Andrew Sullivan, argues that we are in a religious war, a war that threatens our very existence. Not only our lives, but also our souls are at stake. Who is the enemy? It is not Islam. It is a specific form of Islam called fundamentalism. In his essay Sullivan argues that fundamentalism constitutes a large section of Islam. The article explains that fundamentalism has ancient roots and has attracted thousands of adherents for centuries from different religious faiths, including Christianity and Judaism.

Sullivan's essay in the *New York Times* is only one of many articles and broadcasts in the U.S. media since the attacks on the World Trade Center that use "fundamentalism" as a category to describe those groups targeted as enemies of the American people. The term has been applied to the political and religious positions of Osama bin Laden and the Taliban, as well as a significant portion of the world's Muslims. "Islamic fundamentalism" has been used so frequently in the media since September 11 that publishers of history textbooks are now scrambling to revise their books to include discussions of the term. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* reports that in a rush to update textbooks, Prentice Hall, the publisher of *The American Nation*, the top-selling

U.S. history textbook for middle-school students, has begun to highlight the topic of Islamic fundamentalism, where previously the topic had not been included.<sup>2</sup>

When the term “fundamentalist” is used in the media in association with Islam, it is rarely defined. Such usage suggests a common understanding of the term. While most Americans are not familiar with the different schools of thought within Islam, they are acquainted with fundamentalism in the Christian context, where the term is used in common parlance to refer, often negatively, to a certain brand of Christianity. When the term fundamentalism appears as an appendage of Islam, the reading public can only assume that the same connotations associated with Christian fundamentalism must also apply. Fundamentalism becomes a blanket term, shrouding Islam in Western perceptions of fundamentalism. In using the term, the media manages to associate large numbers of Muslim people with certain attitudes and behavior of a backward and inherently dangerous nature. In instances where the term fundamentalism is defined, stereotypical images are only reenforced, without specific mention of historical, political, social, or theological developments within Islam. Fundamentalism is applied as an essential term, implying that there is a certain characteristic, a core essence of the phenomenon, which transcends distinctions of specificity.

In understanding the current usage of fundamentalism, it would be a good idea to examine the connotations associated with the term and how the media is employing these connotations. We would have to ask if fundamentalism is indeed an essential phenomenon that can be applied universally to all religions, or if it has a more restricted meaning associated with a specific time and place? Does usage by the media reflect an exact meaning of the term or vague connotations surrounding the term? Is it appropriate to use fundamentalism in association with Islam or elements of Islam? Can a single term characterize Islam,

or any religion, that includes within its fold many different interpretations of religious belief and practice? Finally, we would have to consider any distortions imposed by the current popular usage of fundamentalism by the media, possible political reasons for those distortions, and the possible ramifications of the continued employment of the term.

One of the few articles of late that actually attempts to define fundamentalism is Sullivan's "We Are at War." Sullivan defines fundamentalism as an element of many different religious faiths that is against freedom of thought and modernity. The author does not believe that all faiths are fundamentalist, but warns that there is an inherent tendency in monotheism, in the belief in one God, to foster oppression and terror against other faiths. Sullivan states that fundamentalism composes a large element of the Islamic faith. The reason many people embrace fundamentalism, he argues, is that it has a lot to offer:

It elevates and comforts. It provides a sense of meaning and direction to those lost in a disorienting world. The blind recourse to texts embraced as literal truth, the injunction to follow the commandment of God before anything else, the subjugation of reason and judgment and even conscience to the dictates of dogma: these can be exhilarating and transformative. They have led human beings to perform extraordinary acts of both good and evil. And they have an internal logic to them. If you believe that there is an eternal afterlife and that endless indescribable torture waits those who disobey God's law, then it requires no huge stretch of imagination to make sure that you not only conform to each dictate but that you also encourage and, if necessary, coerce others to do the same.<sup>3</sup>

According to Sullivan, in a world of absolutes, where truth involves the most important things imaginable—the meaning of

life, the fate of one's soul, the difference between good and evil—there is no room for doubt, dissent, or choice. The article explains that fundamentalists are against freedom of thought and modernity; they want to forcibly impose their values on the rest of the world. They are at war with our way of life.

The term fundamentalism, as it happens, is also a very modern term. Men like Benjamin B. Warfield and Archibald Alexander Hodge formulated the basic theological position of Christian fundamentalism in the late 1880s at Princeton Theological Seminary. What they produced became known as Princeton theology, and it appealed to conservative Protestants who felt that modern trends such as the social gospel movement, the historical and analytic study of the Bible, and attention to the theory of Darwin were a threat to their faith. In 1909 the brothers Milton and Lyman Stewart, whose wealth came from the oil industry, underwrote a project called the *Fundamentals*, a series of twelve paperback volumes published between 1910 and 1915. The *Fundamentals* drew up a bulwark of Christian beliefs to stand against onslaughts to the faith. Three million copies of the series were distributed.

The fundamental beliefs identified in the series can be reduced to five: (1) belief in the Bible as the literal word of God; (2) belief in the divinity of Christ and his virgin birth; (3) belief that Christ died on the Cross so that those who believe in him would be redeemed from sin; (4) belief in the literal resurrection of Christ from the dead; and (5) belief in Christ's return at the Second Coming. Fundamentalism as a unified and organized movement did not have a long life. People differing in their interpretations of certain aspects of fundamentalism departed from the movement and went their own way. Though the fundamentalist movement no longer exists, Christians who more or less agree on these fundamentals today are considered fundamentalists. You can find varying degrees of fundamentalist

thought in many major denominations, representing different ideas and interpretations about the essentials of the Christian faith. There is no longer a single, unified Christian fundamentalist position.

Applying the term fundamentalist to people of other religions is problematic. In discussions of modern political developments in South Asia, scholars often make worried comments about Hindu fundamentalism. There has, however, never been a fundamentalist movement within Hinduism. Hinduism has not been reduced to a simple, concise confession of fundamental Hindu beliefs. In other words, there are no fundamentals of Hinduism in which to believe. The religion is extremely diverse. Yet certain Hindus, particularly politically active Hindu nationalists, including members of the dominant Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and right-wing groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) are frequently referred to as Hindu fundamentalists. A leading scholar on such Hindu groups, Peter van der Veer, writes that though these groups claim to support a nationalism that embraces religion as the defining characteristic of the nation, they cannot be characterized as antimodernist movements.<sup>4</sup> Nationalism is part of the discourse of modernity and the project of Hindu nationalism is fundamentally modernist. Hindu nationalism, so-called Hindu fundamentalism, calls for interpretations of Hinduism based on Western understandings of religion in India and spring from Western conceptions of modernity.

If you apply the term fundamentalism to Islam, you would have to say that all Muslims are fundamentalists—that is, if you are defining fundamentalists as those who embrace certain essential beliefs of their faith. Every Muslim must accept five fundamental Islamic tenets, the five pillars of faith: belief in the one God and Muhammad as his prophet, the practice of giving alms to the poor, making the journey to Mecca at least once during

one's lifetime, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and prayer. So, to the extent that all Muslims accept the five pillars of faith of Islam, all Muslims could be regarded as fundamentalists. The five pillars of Islamic faith say nothing, though, against freedom of thought. There is nothing in the basic tenets of the faith, nor in the Quran, that prohibits the embrace of modernity. Modernity, like many issues that fall outside the five pillars of faith, is subject to debate among Muslims. There is not a religious leader in Islam whose proclamations tell all Muslims what to believe. There are different interpretations of Islam and many differing voices of opinion on many issues. There is no single Islamic stance either for or against such matters as freedom of thought or modernity.

Islamic debate over elements of modernity is not a new phenomenon. An instance of difference of opinion among Muslims on the influence of Westernization, which mirrors similar debates today, took place in the late 1880s in India. The issue at hand was whether or not Muslim youth should receive a Western education. Under British colonialism of the time, neither Hindus nor Muslims were allowed political representation. In comparison with the British rulers of their land, most Indians lived in a state of degradation. Muslim reactions to the colonial situation in India varied. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Muslims of the subcontinent, while sharing a condition of subjugation, did not constitute a single united body. Islam was much more of a homogeneous religion than Hinduism in that all Muslims held a common belief in the five pillars of faith of Islam, but nevertheless differences existed among Muslims in India in regard to region, class, lineage, religious authority, and interpretation of Islam. There were Shia and Sunni Muslims and followers of various schools of thought within those two divisions of Islam; there were aristocratic Muslims, descendants of the rulers and administrators of the Mughal Empire, and there were extremely poor agriculturalists and Muslims of every shade in between.

With such differences among them, a single and common approach to the political, religious, and social conditions of the Muslim community of India as a whole was lacking. In the face of Western domination, Indian Muslims fragmented into different schools of thought that represented the various segments of the Muslim population, seeking to remedy the plight of Muslims in different ways. As the education required for employment in the British administration was one that reflected Western values and culture, the proper course of education for young Muslims became a leading question of the day among the upper classes.

Many Indian Muslims regarded Western education as having an insidious influence even when institutions did not actively promote acceptance of Christian ideas. Muslims had been slow to partake of education in British institutions of higher education. For Muslims, whose first duty was to learn the Quran, a liberal Western education, the study of English literature and history, was not only unnecessary, but was regarded by some as a threat to the purity of the faith.<sup>5</sup> Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, a leading promoter of Western education among Indian Muslims, believed that Muslims could never improve the condition of their lives under colonialism unless the *sharif*, the upper classes of Muslim society in India, were restored to an elevated position in government. In order to achieve this goal, a Western education proved a necessary tool of advancement under British colonial rule.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan realized that for Muslims to be moved from their degraded status under colonialism, and for the Muslim community to be transformed into a vital force within the British empire, there had to be a theology that situated Muslims in the modern context. If Muslims saw their destiny as partners with the British in India, if they had faith that it was Allah's will that they achieve a dominant place in the secular administration of India, they could be moved to accept Western education as a tool for their success. But faith was the force through which

deeds were done, and a theology that gave the Muslims authority to function in the modern context was missing. Sir Syed provided this theology in his teaching that Western education did not contradict faith in Islam. On the contrary, it was the duty of Muslims under the law of God to take their place at the helm of worldly learning. Sir Syed undertook the writing of a new commentary on the Quran that supported this position. He showed how the acquisition of Western knowledge was the only viable means for Muslims to rise from their inferior status under colonialism.

Though the commentary was widely rejected by Muslims, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan continued his efforts to modernize Islam by introducing Western education to his community. In June 1875, he opened the first Muslim institution of higher education dedicated to Western education in India. The Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College was founded in Aligarh, about eighty miles from Delhi. From the founding of the college there were hopes for the establishment of a university, hopes that were realized in 1920 when the Government of India granted a charter to Aligarh Muslim University. Initially, many Muslims in India were strongly opposed to Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's plans for the college and few Muslims were interested in sending their sons to Aligarh. Many Muslims condemned Sir Syed to the extent that *fatwas* of *kufir* (declarations of infidelity to the faith) were issued against him from Mecca. Orthodox members of the community ostracized Sir Syed for his promulgation of Western education and for his association with the British.

Slowly the validity of the college came to be accepted by more Muslims. The British Education Commission of 1882 reported growing approval among Indian Muslims for Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's educational efforts. The report of the commission explained that as much as Indian Muslims venerated the traditions of their forefathers and prized the treasures of a copious and



elegant literature of Islam, they had gradually come to see that the only education able to lift their culture to a status of equality with the British empire and restore it to a position of influence was an “education frankly acknowledging the advance of science, catholic in its sympathies with all that was admirable in the literature, history and philosophy of other countries, broad in its outlines and exact in its studies.”<sup>6</sup> As acceptance of Syed Ahmad’s ideas grew, *fatwas* were issued, but they were now in his support. Maulana Shah Sulaiman Chishti of Ajmer, a major Islamic figure in India, issued a *fatwa* declaring that any contributions made to Syed Ahmad’s Muslim college would be considered meritorious. They would be considered gifts to the faith. After 1886 it began to be apparent that public opinion among Muslims had turned in favor of Syed Ahmad, the Aligarh College, and Western education.

The debate over the appropriateness of Western education among Indian Muslims could be considered a debate over modernism, as Western education represented the forces of modernism in India in the 1800s. There were differing opinions. There was not a fundamental Islamic stance on education. There was at first strong opposition to Western education. Considering that this debate took place during a time of Western political and ideological domination of India, under conditions of harsh colonial rule, it is no great wonder that Muslims might have rejected the education demanded by the British rulers. But the rejection of Western education was subject to debate among Muslims. The issue was not strictly religious. Nor was it simply a matter of rejection or acceptance of modernity. It was political and economic. On one side there was a position that held that Western education only served to strengthen the hold of Western imperialism. On the other hand it was argued that Western education would give Muslims access to economic and political power within the British empire. The very fact that there was a debate

should correct any misunderstanding that antimodernism is a fundamental Islamic position.

Muslims today are debating similar issues regarding the influence of Westernization on Islamic cultures. Often the issues are enmeshed in political and economic concerns. Other than the few basic religious suppositions shared by all Muslims, there is no fundamental Islamic stance for all matters, in all times, and all places. Contrary to various representations in the media, there is no such thing as a single worldwide Islamic nation, as there is not a nation composed only of people who believe in Jesus Christ or Lord Ram. There are differences of opinion between Muslims on issues of political and religious leadership, as well as a host of other matters. During the partition of India in 1947, for instance, two sections of India were lopped off and declared to be Pakistan, a Muslim-majority nation. It was not long, however, before a civil war ensued, resulting in the birth of the new nation of Bangladesh. Within both countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh, political rivalries between powerful interest groups are as fierce as they are in the United States. There is no such thing as overall political unity among Muslims in a single country, much less across the entire globe.

What is happening when articles in a highly respected and widely distributed U.S. publication like the *New York Times* reflect a perception of a single, homogeneous Islamic nation operating in the world, one that is described as largely composed of fundamentalists? An interview with Nobel laureate V. S. Naipaul, which appeared in an edition of the *New York Times Magazine*, further fuels this misunderstanding of Islam.<sup>7</sup> In the interview, Naipaul describes Islam as having an imperial drive to extend its reach and to root out the unbeliever, to destroy anything that does not conform to Islamic thinking. The interviewer understands Naipaul to be speaking only about fundamentalist Islam and therefore asks Naipaul what he thinks about nonfundamentalist

Islam. Naipaul responds that there is no such thing as nonfundamentalist Islam. It would be a contradiction. In clarifying himself, he states that the most important thing in Islam is paradise, heaven, and that no one can be moderate about wanting to go to heaven. Naipaul then adds that for this reason there are no moderate Muslim governments. They are all fundamentalists. The picture that emerges for the American public is that the face of the enemy is Islamic.

Fundamentalism is a Christian theological movement related to specific events, places, and people. Christian fundamentalism should not be applied indiscriminately to Christian charismatic movements, Christian conservatism, or evangelicalism, though it has connections with these. But fundamentalism has come to be employed very loosely. The term “fundamentalist” is seldom defined specifically, but it is almost always used derogatively. Implied in the term fundamentalism is all that is oppressive, bigoted, and antimodern in religion, regardless of the faith. Members of other religions such as Hindus and Muslims, erroneously described as fundamentalists in popular journalism, are thus depicted in a negative light. Vague assumptions regarding fundamentalism widely accepted in the West as descriptive of Islam, include the idea that fundamentalists are against freedom of thought and modernity.

The rhetoric that attributes a dangerous and oppressive characteristic to a large and specific group of people is the rhetoric of war. It is an inhumane rhetoric, portraying millions of innocent people as the enemy. Muslims have long been subject to this kind of portrayal. Most U.S. citizens have never lived in a Muslim country. They have never been intimate friends with Muslim storekeepers, farmers, grandparents, and children. They have most likely never seen a Muslim portrayed as a good and noble figure in movies, on television, or in Western literature. If a Muslim appears on the TV screen, he or she will appear as a menacing

character, wearing a gun belt and bearing a raised fist. The American public has long been subject to such negative portrayals, which severely distort and manipulate the lives of one in every five humans on earth (the approximate population of Muslims).

The use of the derogatory term “fundamentalist” to pinpoint the enemy in the current crisis is not too dissimilar from the rhetoric used in attacks throughout history. During the Cold War, all citizens of the USSR were dangerous “commies.” As most Americans did not know any citizens of the USSR and knew nothing about the politics of the country, we were not immune to such all-encompassing propaganda. All the Jews of Europe, every man, woman, and child, were characterized as rubbish, absolute rubbish by the Nazi regime. To the Spanish conquistadors, native American Indians were less than human; they had no soul. In all cases of such dehumanization of the enemy, the point is to legitimate nothing less than the extinction of another people.

Are fundamentalists our enemy in the current crisis? Fundamentalism loosely defined can refer to a great horde. There are millions of people in the world with deeply entrenched religious worldviews. If we include as our enemy everyone who fits into the vague stereotypical image of a fundamentalist, the enemy looms very large. As globalization brings competing worldviews closer and closer, there is a tendency, it seems, for people to want to affirm their distinctiveness. Where we might think others would welcome the flood of images, ideas, and products from the West, to many the onslaught of Westernization threatens to bring about a disintegration of their own culture and identity. Thus we see the rise of movements around the world that attempt to strengthen a collective sense of uniqueness.<sup>8</sup> Religion, which is closely interwoven with other aspects of society, is often held up as a badge of honor, as the defining characteristic of the culture. Should we regard all these people, including those Americans

who place religion at the center of their worldview and their politics, as enemies?

In defining fundamentalists as enemies, are we saying that such people have no place in the modern world? Are we denying them the right to self-identity and the right to embrace a worldview of their own selection? Must they embrace Western conceptions of modernity or else become branded as fundamental enemies? Can freedom of thought be applied only to expressions that correspond to the liberal Western ideology? Has liberal thought become so imperialistic? Questioning the boundaries of Western hegemony does not imply total relativity; it does not imply that the ideologies of totalitarian governments, for instance, have an equal right of expression. It certainly does not condone murder. But it should lead us to consider the implications of and the ideology behind the targeting of worldviews that do not correspond to our own, especially those that are branded fundamentalist. It should lead us to abandon the use of the term fundamentalist as a category into which we shove large numbers of Muslims.

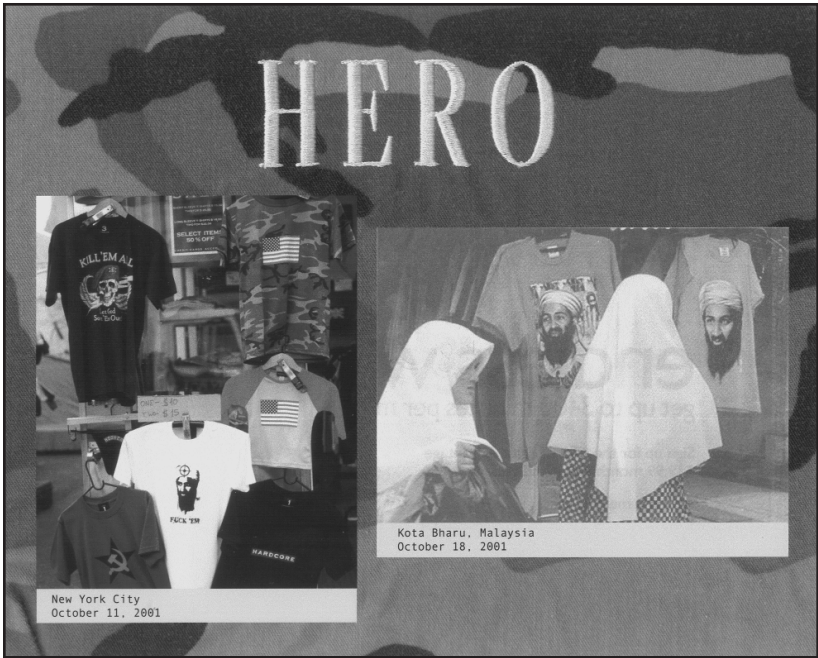
Are we in a war? That depends on your perspective. Life is a constant negotiation of boundaries. In a pluralist world, there are bound to be struggles. To be at war you have to identify a common enemy, someone wholly Other, whose very existence threatens your own. The media and political rhetoric clearly mark the enemy, dividing the world into two camps, theirs and ours. This is the language of terror, the rhetoric of war. The language of the media, speaking to a vast American audience, seems to mirror the stereotypical mind-set of the fundamentalist. It labels those whose opinions, beliefs, culture, and politics are dissimilar to our own as the enemy, stirring emotional fervor and calls for war. If we whip up a rhetoric of war in which not only our lives, but also our souls are at stake, we should not be at all surprised to see bombs falling in our name.

## NOTES

1. Andrew Sullivan, "We Are at War," *New York Times*, October 7, 2001.
2. Daniel Golden, "Rewriting History: Attack Causes Panic for Textbook Authors," *Wall Street Journal*, October 9, 2001.
3. Sullivan, "We Are at War."
4. Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 132–33.
5. David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 87.
6. Cited in *Morison's History of the M.A.O. College, Aligarh*, ed. Safi Ahmad Kakorwi (Lucknow: Markaz-e-Adab-e-Urdu, 1988), 17ff.
7. Adam Shartz, "Literary Criticism: Questions for V. S. Naipaul," *New York Times Magazine*, October 28, 2001: 19.
8. Thomas Hylland Erikson, "Globalization and the Politics of Identity," *United Nations Chronicle*, Autumn 1999 (<http://folk.uio.no/geirthe/UNChron.html>).

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Ford, Peter. "Why Do They Hate Us?" *Christian Science Monitor*, September 27, 2001 (<http://www.csmonitor.com/2001/0927/p1s1-wogi.html>).
- Jurgensmeyer, Mark. *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Keen, Sam. *Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986.
- Schiffauer, Werner. "Production of Fundamentalism: On the Dynamics of Producing the Radically Different." In *Religion and Media*, ed. Hent De Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).



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