



# *Journal of Religion & Society*

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The Kripke Center

Volume 12 (2010)

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## **Muslims, Fundamentalists, and the Fear of the Dangerous Other in American Culture**

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### **Abstract**

Beginning in 1979, people living in the United States began using a term, “Islamic fundamentalism,” which had not previously been a part of their standard vocabulary. This article examines the controversies produced by the creation of this category and uses those controversies as a springboard from which to reflect on the ways people who live in the United States think about Islam, religion, and “fanatical” beliefs and practices.

### **Introduction**

Almost all of the “fundamentalisms” we hear about, then, are not fundamentalisms, but only a variety of religious phenomenon that inspires horror. No faith has suffered more at the hands of this improper usage than Islam (Wieseltier: 193).

[1] On a cold Sunday morning in November 2006, a group of scholars assembled in Washington, D.C., for a panel sponsored by the Study of Islam Section of the American Academy of Religion to analyze the concept “Islamic fundamentalism.” The session was packed, with perhaps two hundred scholars in the room. The panel included scholars from Concordia, Emory, University of Nebraska, Temple, and Yale. Each panel member spoke briefly – twelve minutes or so – and then the audience asked questions and made comments. It quickly became apparent that the panelists and the members of the audience were not in

complete agreement. Differences of opinion were expressed, sometimes with a little warmth, as the discussion gathered momentum.<sup>1</sup>

[2] That was, of course, to be expected. What was surprising was what did not happen. Almost no one in that rather large group of scholars from throughout the United States and Canada was willing to mount a sustained defense of the category “Islamic fundamentalism.” While a couple of audience members and panelist Lynda Clark of Concordia University made it clear that they did not think the term was *completely* useless, the weight of opinion was clearly on the other side. Almost everyone seemed to be familiar with some of the arguments against the concept, and to have concluded that the category was not helpful. Some people critiqued it carefully. It seemed to this observer that others thought it was too patently ridiculously to be worth serious critique.

[3] In 2005, Mino Moallem published a brilliant analysis of Iranian culture entitled *Between Brother Warrior and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran*. She noted that there are several serious problems associated with analyzing Muslims as fundamentalists. Nevertheless, she announced – without explaining why – this was exactly what she was going to do. Moallem defined fundamentalism as “a regime of truth based on discourses identified with or ordained by God (understood metaphorically or literally) which binds observers to it” (10).

[4] A person who ruminates on Moallem’s book and on the meeting in Washington might venture several observations about the category “Islamic fundamentalism.” First, in some circles the category is now thought of as obviously not useful, and people have made very clear arguments to support this position. Second, the category continues to be employed by some very bright people. Third, those people do not, as a general rule, advance compelling rejoinders to the arguments that the term is not useful. They keep using the term in spite of their awareness that there are good reasons to believe that the term is unhelpful.

[5] In this article, I explore how this curious state of affairs came into existence. I hope to unpack some of the controversies that have circulated in recent years about how to make sense of religion and religious revivals.

[6] There is no universally agreed upon interpretation of Islamic fundamentalism. In general, however, the term is used to refer to twentieth and twenty-first century Muslim movements that have sought to revitalize the *umma* by reemphasizing the fundamental truths set forth by the prophet in the seventh century of the Common Era. Muslim movements that are seen as “anti-modern” are especially likely to be described as fundamentalist. The *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that fundamentalist movements are characterized by a “strict adherence to ancient or fundamental doctrines, with no concessions to modern developments in thought or customs.” Roxanne Euben’s *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism* defines fundamentalism as a set of “religio-political movements that attempt to return to the scriptural foundations of the community, excavating and reinterpreting those foundations for application to the contemporary social and political

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Levitt, Steve Conn, Kathryn Lofton, Leigh Schmidt, Simon Wood, Ann Pellegrini, and Rosemary Hicks all gave me valuable advice as I was studying this topic. I am very grateful to them for their assistance.

world” (17). In *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms Around the World*, Gabriel Almond, Scott Appleby, and Emmanuel Sivan encourage their readers to think of Islamic fundamentalism as a militant form of Islam in which self-styled “true believers’ attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors” (17; italics omitted). In “Is a Holy War Inevitable?” Karen Armstrong asserts that fundamentalism is “essentially a revolt against modern secular civilization” (98). In a seminal essay published in 1980, Martin Marty made a similar point, suggesting that Islamic fundamentalism is a militant reaction against “modernity and modernization” (37-42).

### The Christian Roots of Islamic Fundamentalism

[7] These days, Anglophones hearing the word “fundamentalism” are probably as likely to picture a Muslim – perhaps an Iranian women wearing a chador or a Taliban soldier in the mountains – as a Christian. Until 1979 or so, however, the word was used almost exclusively for a set of beliefs and practices associated with Protestant Christians such as Jerry Falwell, Carl McIntire, William Bell Riley, William Jennings Bryan, and Curtis Lee Laws. Laws, scholars agree, was the first person publicly to call himself a fundamentalist. In 1920 Laws, who was one of the leaders of the Northern Baptist Convention, was searching for a term to describe Christians who wanted to combat the influence of modernist theologians such as Shailer Mathews, Shirley Jackson Case, and Harry Emerson Fosdick. He suggested “that those who still cling to the great fundamentals [of the Christian faith] and who mean to do battle royal for the fundamentals shall be called ‘Fundamentalists.’” Laws and his allies never reached consensus on just what the fundamentals to which they clung were (Sandeel: xiv-xv), but the general shape of their doctrinal commitments was quite clear.

[8] Fundamentalists emphasized the inerrancy of the Christian scriptures, the virgin birth, the deity of Jesus Christ, the authenticity of the miracles he performed, the efficacy of his substitutionary atonement, and the imminence of his second coming. In doing so, they sought to distinguish themselves from other Protestants who had drifted away from the fundamental doctrines of orthodox Christianity. They saw themselves as defenders of the true faith and the others as heretics. Criticisms of Christians who did not share their views were often expressed in an extraordinarily polemical manner.

[9] Thus “fundamentalism” had from the outset a strong polemical charge. It was not intended to be a neutral or value-free descriptive term. It was used to divide goats from sheep, infidels from orthodox Christians, false prophets from true. The polemics, as fundamentalists understood them, concerned the fate of the Christian Church. With so much at stake, the fundamentalists felt free to denounce their opponents harshly. Their pronouncements could be scathing: fundamentalists sometimes identified themselves as the children of light and their opponents as the servants of Satan.

[10] Many non-fundamentalists were repelled by the tone of these polemics. For that reason and others the words fundamentalist and fundamentalism quickly acquired a great many negative connotations. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, fundamentalism was often thought of as a reactionary movement rather than as a crusade to defend the truth. A good example of this view can be found in a text, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” which John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and his allies distributed to ordained Protestant clergyman throughout the

United States (Miller: 117). Written by Harry Emerson Fosdick in 1922, the text argued that fundamentalists tended to be cantankerous, intolerant, and close-minded. Such men, Fosdick asserted, had a great deal in common with the Jews who persecuted the followers of Jesus (776).

[11] In a 1937 article on fundamentalism, H. Richard Niebuhr likewise argued that intolerance was one of the defining characteristics of the fundamentalist movement. Niebuhr, who was one of the most prominent American theologians of the twentieth century, presented fundamentalism as a dangerous form of Christianity whose power came, in large part, from Americans' lack of education. He defined fundamentalism as "an aggressive conservative movement in the Protestant churches of the United States which flourished during the decade after the World War" (526) and linked it to ignorance, emotionalism, provincialism, and racism. Niebuhr did not provide much empirical data to support his claims, and in subsequent decades careful students of fundamentalism in the United States have argued that his analysis was deeply flawed. Nevertheless, it seems to have been influential. His article was cited frequently, and the sorts of claims it makes have often been recited as though they were beyond dispute. His basic line of argument seems to have become, in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, a sort of orthodoxy among many educated Americans.

[12] Echoes of Niebuhr's analysis can be found, for instance, in the work of Talcott Parsons, one of the more influential sociologists of the twentieth century. Writing on the eve of America's entry into World War II, Parsons warned that Americans influenced by fundamentalism might turn into subversives (Parsons' analysis, preserved in his personal papers, was eventually published in 1993). He saw fundamentalism as a defensive, even irrational or pathological, reaction against modernization. Germany's National Socialism and America's fundamentalism were kindred movements – in some respects, two expressions of a single exceedingly dangerous social impulse. Fundamentalists (along with Roman Catholics and recent immigrants who had not fully accepted American norms) might well have sympathy for the program of National Socialism. People who wanted to see Hitler defeated should therefore take pains to make sure that fundamentalists did not form a fifth column that could be used to sabotage the efforts to beat back the Nazi threat.

[13] A tendency to see fundamentalism primarily in terms of the threats it poses to progress and freedom is also evident in Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, which won the 1964 Pulitzer Prize for Nonfiction. It presents fundamentalists as people who would "tolerate no ambiguities, no equivocations, no reservations, and no criticism" (119). As Hofstadter understood them, fundamentalists were men and women who wanted "to strike back against everything modern" (121). The fundamentalist movement was rooted in provincialism and ignorance (123). When Hofstadter described the men and women who had been influenced by fundamentalism, he made it clear that they were at best mistaken. At worst they were dangerous fools.

[14] The analysis of fundamentalism that Hofstadter's book advanced – a particularly virulent anti-intellectual form of evangelical Protestantism – left little room for calling Muslims fundamentalists. There is no hint anywhere in the book that the term might be applied to a variety of Islam. Indeed some passages imply that fundamentalists are likely to

view Muslims as having profoundly misunderstood the nature of the universe. In this respect, Hofstadter's thinking is congruent with that of Fosdick, Niebuhr, and Parsons. It was Christian, not Islamic, fundamentalism with which they were concerned. It is possible, I think, that Parsons would not have found the term "Islamic fundamentalism" oxymoronic, and Fosdick seems to have believed that the Christian fundamentalists he was battling had something in common with Muslims. For example, in "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" Fosdick connected the way fundamentalists read Christian scriptures with the way "Mohammedans" read the Koran (780-81). But Fosdick, Parsons, Niebuhr, and Hofstadter all seemed to have assumed that fundamentalism was, at its core, a Christian phenomenon. So far as I can tell, "Islamic fundamentalism" was not a concept any of them seriously considered.

[15] Indeed, until the outbreak of the Iranian revolution in the late 1970s very few English-speakers had anything at all to say about Islamic fundamentalism. Until the movement to topple the Shah of Iran came to the attention of observers in the United States, United Kingdom, and other English-speaking nations, the category was not well established. I know of no book published before 1979 whose title indicates that it explores fundamentalism as an Islamic phenomenon. The index to the *New York Times* archives lists fewer than twenty-five references to Islamic fundamentalism in articles that were published before 1979.

[16] People who wrote for the *Times* between 1920 and 1979 certainly did not produce a rigorous definition of "Islamic fundamentalism." Reporters who used "fundamentalism" to describe the Muslim world generally used it for beliefs and practices they thought were unhelpful. Edwin M. Hullinger used the phrase to describe provincial Muslims who insisted on covering their heads with fezzes or turbans, a commitment he seemed to think was irrational and a little silly. George Rapp used it for Muslims who wanted to "jealously guard the old religious ideas and beliefs in all their details." He made it clear that fundamentalists were committed to a less practical program than that of their "modernist" opponents. Russell Band declared that Muslim fundamentalists had a way of looking at the world that was clearly "fanatical."

### Marty's "Fundamentalism Reborn"

[17] I want to turn now to a fascinating article published in 1980 called "Fundamentalism Reborn: Faith and Fanaticism." Although the article was written for a broad audience, it was highly intelligent and written by the distinguished scholar Martin E. Marty. By 1980, Marty was one of the most famous church historians in the world. A devout Protestant clergyman, he was well known in church circles and his scholarly explorations of modern church history had earned him fame well beyond the ecclesiastical realm. He held an endowed chair at the University of Chicago and won numerous academic honors. In 1987, he became president of the American Academy of Religion. Ten years later President Clinton awarded Marty the National Humanities Medal.

[18] In "Fundamentalism Reborn," Marty observed that in recent years strong religious movements had sprouted up throughout the world, most of them "militantly anti-modern," "fanatical," and contemptuous of the principle of "separation of church and state." Under the leadership of men such as Jerry Falwell and the Ayatollah Khomeini, these

fundamentalist movements were gaining numerous adherents and seemed to be reshaping the world. Everywhere, “religious recalcitrants” were on the march (37).

[19] These movements were in large part, Marty asserted, a socio-psychological reaction to modernity (42). Drawing on Parsons, Marty argued that fundamentalism was an irrational backlash against modernization. In the 1960s, he said, it seemed clear that the world was headed toward modernity. Secularization was on the advance. The most vital forms of religion (such as those associated with Paul Tillich) had been deeply influenced by liberalism and rationality. It seemed as if religion would have to accommodate itself to modernity or be confined to the margins of society. But in the early 1980s, the forms of religiosity associated with liberalism and rationality seemed to be the ones that were losing power. In many parts of the world, fundamentalists seemed to be gaining ground. In the United States they were making a determined effort to affect the political system. In Iran, they toppled a government and created another one. Why had fundamentalism gained so much power? What had gone wrong?

[20] The answer Marty advanced was straightforward: “modernity and modernization.” He explained that modernization, especially under regimes such as that associated with the Shah of Iran, can be experienced as disruptive. It creates a world in which life feels “all chopped up” and “too full of choice,” in which facts and values have been torn asunder and the political and religious realms have been divorced from one another. In the wake of the modernization process, people experience a “hunger for wholeness.” The corrosive acids of modernity make some men and women feel uneasy. Fundamentalism builds on that uneasiness. It is a militant attack on modernity and the people who represent it (38-42).

[21] Marty found many of the developments he described in “Fundamentalism Reborn” disquieting. He clearly did not approve of the fundamentalists’ view of the world and was alarmed by their attempts to create direct links between religious ideals and governmental structures. But the tone of Marty’s article was not one of despair or resignation. Marty assured his readers that while fundamentalists were clearly on the march, it was also quite possible that a defensive alliance could thwart their attacks. The alliance Marty envisioned had two chief components: “humanists” and “open-minded theists” committed to the same ideals as Pope John XXIII, Mohandas Gandhi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Martin Luther King, Jr. If such an alliance could be created, Marty concluded, then the future might not have to be ceded to religious fanatics such as Falwell and Khomeini. Modernity and the forms of religiosity amenable to it might still prevail (42).

### Journalists and Scholars, 1979 to the Present

[22] The precise number of newspaper and magazine articles on Islamic fundamentalism published between 1979 and the present is not, of course, ascertainable. But that number is certainly far larger than the number of analogous articles published before 1979. The *Washington Post* index yields over three thousand references to “Islamic fundamentalists” in articles published between 1979 and 2010; the *New York Times* index records over four thousand. In recent years, many journalists seem to believe that it is self-evident that Islamic fundamentalism can be found in much of the world – Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, Chechnya, Egypt, France, Iran, Iraq, Israeli-occupied territories, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkey, Tunisia, the United Kingdom, and the

United States, for example. Journalistic accounts of the life of Osama bin Laden often present him as an example of fundamentalism at its worst.

[23] Scholars were, I think, somewhat slower than journalists to adopt the category “Islamic fundamentalism.” But many scholars did embrace it in the years after 1979. The topic has been taken up by historians such as Scott Appleby, social scientists such as Roxanne Euben and Martin Riesebrodt, and humanities scholars such as Bruce Lawrence and Minoo Moallem. Additionally, many articles from the famous Fundamentalism Project sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and housed at the University of Chicago focused explicitly on Islam.

[24] In early 2010, the catalog of Harvard University’s library system contained more than 1,300 records for texts on Islamic fundamentalism that had been published after 1978. Academic Search Premier listed over 1,600 such references; JSTOR listed over 5,000. Works on “Islamic fundamentalism” have become so numerous that at least one scholar, As’ad Abu Khalil, has called for a moratorium on the publication of such texts (110).

[25] Many scholars who have studied Islamic fundamentalism have been struck by how dangerous it can be. Haideh Moghissi, for instance, argued that no analysis of Islamic fundamentalism can be complete without taking into account the fact that it nearly always leads to the brutalization of women (2). Henry Munson, the noted anthropologist, linked it to “irrationality, bigotry and fanaticism” (100). Martin Marty asserted that Islamic fundamentalists are clearly a threat to other Muslims, Jewish and Christian fundamentalists, other human beings, nation-states, and civil society (1996: 27-28).

[26] Journalists, like scholars, seldom use the category “Islamic fundamentalism” to describe phenomena they see as positive. They associate it with events such as transgressions of diplomatic norms, bomb blasts, hijackings, plane crashes, attacks on U.S. military and foreign service members, murders, and assassinations. Newspaper and magazine articles often imply that it is dangerous. They also assert, fairly frequently, that it is an evil atavism. Consider, for instance, the 2006 *New York Times* opinion piece on what was at stake in the controversies surrounding a cartoon of Muhammad that many Muslims found offensive. The piece, ostensibly addressed to wrong-headed Muslims throughout the world, asserted: “You fundamentalists have turned yourselves into a superpower of dysfunction. . . We in the West were born into a world that reflected the legacy of Socrates and the agora.” Fundamentalists refuse to live in such a world but retreat into “an exaggerated version of Muslim purity.” The columnist said the contrast between “us” and “you” could not be clearer: “Our mind-set is progressive and rational. Your mind-set is pre-Enlightenment” (Brooks).

[27] In the years since 1979, men and women closely associated with the U.S. government have sometimes expressed a great deal of concern about Islamic fundamentalism. One might even say that in the 1980s and early 1990s “threats posed by Islamic fundamentalism” became a quasi-official governmental category. In 1985, Congress issued a report saying it had become “very clear” that Islamic fundamentalism posed a significant “problem” for the United States (U.S. Congress 1985: 149). In 1990, Vice President Dan Quayle, speaking before an audience at the Naval Academy, likened Islamic fundamentalism to communism and Nazism. The threat it posed to the world, Quayle asserted, was one of the primary

reasons the United States was obliged to maintain well-trained and well-equipped armed forces (Leff). A 1993 congressional report included warnings from foreign affairs experts about the threats fundamentalistic movements in the Muslim world posed to the United States. The United States, one expert said, ought to try to thwart such movements wherever it had the power so to do (U.S. Congress 1993: 41). In 1994, the Federal Bureau of Investigation went so far as to establish a surveillance unit on people associated with “Radical Fundamentalism.” The next year, Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich remarked that he had come to suspect that Islamic fundamentalism was “probably the largest single threat to civilized behavior in the next decade anywhere on the planet” (Elgindy: 86).

### **Modernity and Modernization**

[28] Of course, the usefulness of the category “Islamic fundamentalism” has been fiercely contested from its conception. I am not going to analyze the arguments of those scholars who believe that the concept is problematic in any detail here. Nor am I going to explore, except in an extremely cursory fashion, the arguments of people who defend the usefulness of the term. I am simply going to note a few of the more interesting arguments by scholars who find the concept unhelpful. Those scholars note that there is a tendency in the scholarly literature to define “Islamic fundamentalism” in terms of reaction against “modernity and modernization.” Yet there is, in principle, no indication why we have to assume that modernity is the key to understanding what Muslims who participate in revitalization movements are struggling against. One might as easily say that such Muslims are struggling against corrupt regimes that fail to meet the most basic needs of their citizens (Mahmood: 30), or against neocolonialism or hyper-capitalism. Critics assert that the term “Islamic fundamentalism” predisposes scholars to privilege analyses with little or no attention to political economy.

[29] Critics also argue that there is something very odd, in the present intellectual climate, about relying heavily on concepts such as modernity and modernization to define what Islamic fundamentalism is. Perhaps most scholars during Parsons’ heyday agreed about what modernization entails and about what modernity is. But that is certainly not so today. Indeed, in the minds of many scholars the terms seem to have no clear referent (Westerman) or are hopelessly teleological. Others assert that the thinkers we label post-structural or postmodern have shown that the clothes of the modernist emperor are tattered or simply nonexistent.

[30] Many scholars who object to the concept of “Islamic fundamentalism” are committed to “provincializing” Christendom and to contesting the tendency to use “the West” as a yardstick against which to judge the rest of the world (Mahmood: 29). In their view, using a concept with roots so firmly planted in Christian discourse to classify Muslims does nothing to provincialize Christendom (Hassan: 169-71). Asking which Muslims are and are not fundamentalists does not make much more sense, they aver, than trying to decide which Christians are Shiites and which are Sunnis.

[31] Critics of “Islamic fundamentalism” suspect that the category leads scholars to assume that it was somehow “natural” for religion to become less important as the world moved toward modernity. The conditions that characterized Western Europe in the modern era are often naturalized and valorized against the category “Islamic fundamentalism”; Muslim



fundamentalists are the people who have refused to accept the truths that modernity revealed (Sayyid: 15-16). Deeply devout Muslims' view of the world is portrayed as ludicrous; Western intellectuals' view of the world is seen as sane and sensible. But one cannot help but wonder what convincing justification could be presented to support the claim that the worldviews of pious Muslims in Iran are odd and the worldviews of intellectuals associated with modern research universities are normal. Might not it be the other way around (Berger: 3)?

[32] Critics also suggest that the concept implied that it was somehow natural for "church" and "state" and "religion" and "politics" to be separated. They are, of course, willing to grant that there had been a *general* move toward such a separation in post-Enlightenment Christendom. But they are not willing to concede that such a separation is natural or inevitable. Since it predisposes us to assume that attempts to draw on the traditions of Islam to build a more just social order are regressive and detrimental, the label "Islamic fundamentalism" is an inappropriate way to begin an analysis of Muslim societies (Mahmood: 29-30).

[33] Many scholars have asserted that "Islamic fundamentalism" is too polemical a concept to be of much scholarly use. Such scholars argue that describing someone as a fundamentalist is not much different from classifying the person as an extremist, a fanatic, or a radical (Esposito: 5). In this view, the term is far better suited to polemics and punditry than to serious scholarship. The category is "ideological" to the core (Sabet: 115). It leads scholars to lump together a set of extremely disparate Islamic movements (Mahmood: 30) seen as posing a threat to "the West" or "Enlightenment values" or both. It predisposes scholars who use it to assume that the phenomenon they are studying is "a problem" or even "a danger."

[34] Some scholars assert the concept "Islamic fundamentalism" has very little utility when one is trying to do empirical research. Even an apparently straightforward question such as, How many Muslim fundamentalists are there in the world today?, turns out to be unanswerable. Many definitions are framed in a way that makes it nearly impossible to tell the difference between a Muslim who is a fundamentalist from one who is not (Sayyid: 8-15). One person's "fundamentalist" turns out to be another's "liberal" and yet another's "modernist" (Hassan: 162). And, of course, telling a "fundamentalist" from a "traditionalist" is extraordinarily difficult. The concept is, in the lexicon of social scientists, difficult – perhaps even impossible – to operationalize.

### Defending "Islamic Fundamentalism"

[35] The scholars who developed and relied on the category "Islamic fundamentalism" were well aware that its usefulness was hotly contested. The arguments they advanced in support of the concept took several forms. First, they consistently emphasized that fundamentalism is not the only "Western" concept scholars use to analyze Muslim societies. Perhaps it does raise some special issues. But in general, fundamentalism – like nationalism or liberalism – ought to be seen as a Western concept that can be used to great effect in analyzing the Muslim world (Marty 1996: 32). It is, in any case, entirely possible to be too nervous about the dangers of cultural imperialism (Marty 1998: 376). Second, defenders of the term admitted that fundamentalism often carries a set of strong negative connotations, but argued

that they themselves were using it in a way that did not imply any negative moral judgment. They meant it purely as a descriptive and analytical tool, not a term of abuse (Marty 1996: 33). Third, defenders said the term had the great advantage of highlighting the similarities between neo-traditional Islamic and Christian movements. There really were, according to this line of argument, some important similarities between the way people like Jerry Falwell and Ayatollah Khomeini oriented themselves toward scripture, and no other term produced such clarity in identifying those similarities (al-Azm 1993: 88, 94-95). Thus for comparative purposes, the term was absolutely essential (Almond et al.: 16-17). Fourth, defenders argued that in spite of the problems connected with the term, it had the great advantage of being well established. When scholars spoke of “Islamic fundamentalism,” people knew what they were talking about. When they spoke of “neo-reformist radical revolutionary Islamism,” people simply got confused (Almond et al.: 16).

[36] Most of these defenses of the term “Islamic fundamentalism” have been penned by scholars deeply committed to the traditions of the European Enlightenment. Indeed Ernest Gellner, one of the most thoughtful scholars applying the label to Muslims and other non-Christians, has gone so far as to describe himself as an “Enlightenment Rationalist Fundamentalist” (80). Reading these defenses, one can often detect a fear that the critiques of the Enlightenment over the past five decades have been excessive. The defenders seem to believe that Said, Foucault, and Butler have disregarded some of its benefits in critiquing its failures.

[37] Of course, many critiques of “Islamic fundamentalism” have also been advanced by scholars profoundly indebted to, and deeply appreciative of, the European Enlightenment. But few if any of these critics would call themselves Enlightenment fundamentalists. For the sake of argument, we might say that an Enlightenment fundamentalist is a person who believes that the European Enlightenment discovered certain universal truths about reason; about which religious beliefs and practices are valuable and which are not; about the proper relationship between church and state, and between Europe and the rest of the world; and about science, progress, individualism, and free trade. Those truths, an Enlightenment fundamentalist would assert, are just as true in the twenty-first century as they were in the eighteenth. They are well established. There is no need for them to be interrogated or reexamined.

[38] Critics of the concept of “Islamic fundamentalism” are as a general rule deeply committed to reexamining the ideas associated with the Enlightenment. Few of them would call for a wholesale rejection of the traditions associated with the Enlightenment. Many of them would, however, argue that there is no reason to treat them with any special deference. They are simply one set among a very wide array of traditions to which we in the contemporary world are heir. Categories that frame scholarly inquiries in ways that make it impossible to denaturalize Enlightenment assumptions appear, from the perspective of many of the critics of “Islamic fundamentalism,” deeply problematic.

[39] So when scholars debate the usefulness of “Islamic fundamentalism” they are not simply arguing about the most useful ways of analyzing Muslim beliefs and practices. They are also arguing about the beliefs and practices associated with the European Enlightenment.

There is little reason to suppose that either of those arguments will be concluded anytime soon.

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