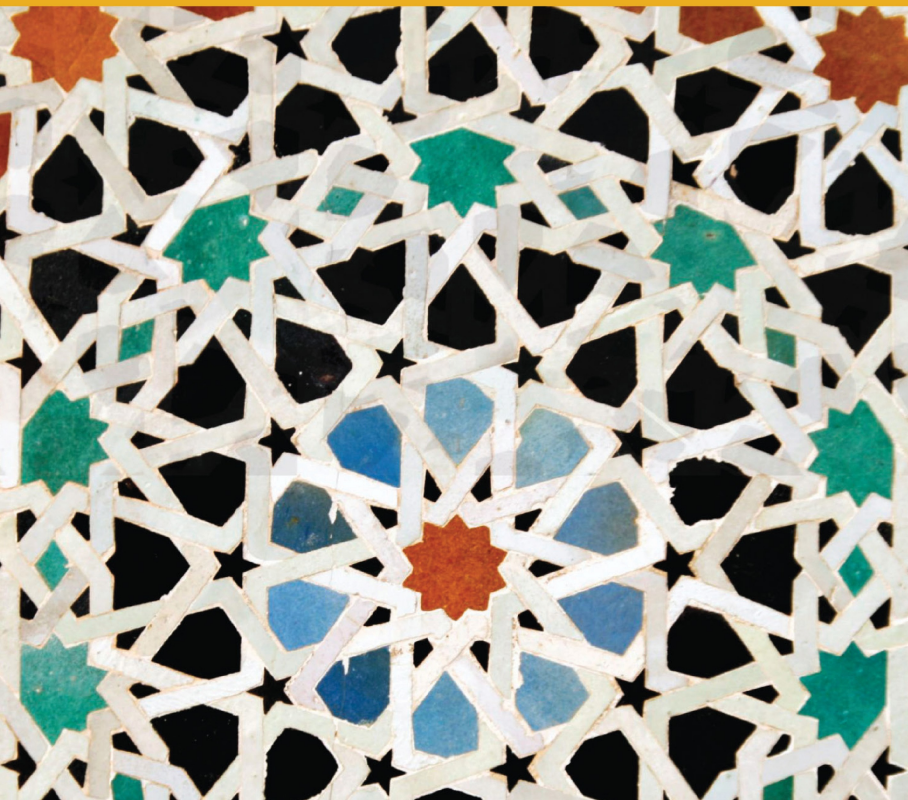


Discover Islam

ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM

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Islamic Fundamentalism

Islamic fundamentalism is a recent phenomenon. While studying it we must first of all understand that the term 'Islamic fundamentalism' has not been derived from the Islamic scriptures, nor does any group of Muslims approve of being given the appellation of 'Islamic fundamentalists.' This term is somewhat similar to that of 'Uncle Sam' as applied to Americans by non-Americans. Americans do not identify themselves with this term.

Though non-Muslims gave this term to Muslims, the phenomenon for which the term Islamic fundamentalism is used is indeed a reality. There is a considerable number of Muslims in the world of today whose thinking and actions add up to what is meant by the term fundamentalism.

That is why a detailed study of its principles and practices must be made in order to evaluate this way of thinking and the movements spawned by it, which are highly active all over the world under one name or the other.

Let us first of all find out what is commonly meant by fundamentalism. I would personally prefer to call

this phenomenon ‘Islamic extremism,’ rather than ‘Islamic fundamentalism,’ although those engaged in extremist activities would, like the fundamentalists, prefer not to be called extremists. However, what is important in this connection is that the phenomenon of Islamic extremism can be explained from a Quranic verse. It says: “Do not transgress the bounds of your religion (4:17).” One modern form of transgression, as forbidden in the Quran, is what is now called Islamic fundamentalism.

There are certain Muslims who say: “Yes, we are fundamentalists. And what is wrong with being fundamentalists?” They take the word “fundamentalist” in its literal sense of laying emphasis on the basic teachings of Islam. Thus, attaching importance to the basic teachings of Islam is to fulfill the very demand of Islam. So why should anyone have any objection on this score?

But herein lies a fallacy. That is, if one takes fundamentalism in its literal sense, then it should be the same basic teachings of Islam as are emphasized in the Islamic scriptures themselves. This cannot mean that any individual may declare, through personal interpretation, some self-styled teachings to be the basic teachings or the fundamentals of Islam, and then launch a violent movement aimed at establishing these so-called Islamic fundamentals. Unfortunately this is what these fundamentalists are doing.

Now what is the basic teachings of Islam? The principle concern of Islam is monotheism. According to an orientalist, “the central focus of Islam is Allah. That is to believe in one God; associating all one’s feelings of love and fear with Him; and worshipping Him alone. Then adhering strictly to justice in one’s dealings with other human beings, returning good for evil, and so on.

In Islam, according to a *hadith*, actions are judged by their intentions. That is why Islam lays the greatest of stress on the subjection of human beings to greater and greater degrees of purification. According to a *hadith* the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ observed: “Listen, there is a part made of flesh in the human body. If that is purified and therefore in good order, the whole body is in good order. And if rot sets in in this part, the whole body is defiled. Listen, this piece of flesh is the heart.” (Sahih Al-Bukhari, Hadith No. 52).

Through this symbol of the body, the example of Islamic reform has been expressed. This means that just as through the reform of the heart the human body is reformed, similarly, if a man’s thinking and his intentions are virtuous, in respect of his whole existence, he will acquire that character of virtue which is seen as desirable by Islamic standards.

What is Fundamentalism?

Fundamentalism is the laying of emphasis on strict adherence to the fundamental principles of any set of beliefs. The term was originally applied to a particular group of Christian theologians who gained prominence in the United States in the nineteenth Century. They published a series of booklets between 1909 and 1915 called *The Fundamentals: Testimony to the Truth*. In these booklets they defined what they believed to be the absolutely fundamental doctrines of Christianity. The core of these doctrines was the literal inerrancy of every word of the Bible. Those who supported these beliefs during the debate of the 1920s came to be called fundamentalists.

The term “fundamentalism” began to be applied to Islamic resurgence by the final quarter of the twentieth century. However this term was not used for Muslims in exactly the same sense as it was applied to Christians. There is also some difference of opinion on this point among scholars. However, without going into the details of this, I would like to say that the term Islamic fundamentalism is applied to two different kinds of movements. One is like that of the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwanul Muslimun*), which rose to bring about a political revolution. The other is the type, which advocates a return to the pristine fundamentals of the faith, for instance, those defined

by Ibn Taimiya in the fourteenth century. This latter aim is still the driving force behind the Salafia and Wahabiya movements.

Now the aim of the first form of the Islamic fundamentalism, that of Ibn Taimya is to put an end to additions and innovations (*bid'a*) in religious matters and to replace them with the *sunnah*, the original form of the Islamic Shariah.

The aim of the other form of fundamentalism is to put an end to non-Islamic political set-up and replace that with an Islamic political set-up. Both the forms of fundamentalism are totally different from one another. The sphere of the struggle against innovation (*bid'a*) is confined only to matters of belief and worship.

Violence does not, of necessity, accompany movements of this nature. Furthermore, it is aimed at and concerned with the internal reform of Muslims. Thus, in the relevant activities, there is no possibility of coming into conflict with non-Muslims. But so far as fundamentalism of the other kind is concerned, it has been directed from the very outset against political rulers, and whether the inevitable confrontations have been with Muslim or non-Muslim rulers, by its very nature such a movement has demanded the use of violence.

This is where the principle of *jihad* has been distorted and bent to political ends. It must be stressed that the word “*jihad*” has nowhere been used in the Quran to mean the waging of war. The Quran is imbued with the spirit of peace and tolerance. Its culture is not that of war but of mercy.

On Islam and Jihad

At the very beginning of the Qur'an, the first invocation reads: “In the name of God, the most Merciful, the most Beneficent.” Throughout the Qur'an, this verse is repeated for no less than 114 times. Even one of God's names is As-Salam (Peace). Moreover, the Qur'an states that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was sent to the world as a mercy to mankind (21:107).

The word '*jihad*' has nowhere been used in the Qur'an to mean war in the sense of launching an offensive. It is used rather to mean 'struggle.' The action most consistently called for in the Qur'an is the exercise of patience. Yet today, the 'Muslim *Mujahidin*' under unfavourable conditions have equated “God is Great” with “War is Great.”

In the light of on-going conflict, we must ask why so great a contradiction has arisen between the principles of Islam and the practices of Muslims. At least one root-cause may be traced to historical exigency.

Since time immemorial, military commanders have been accorded positions of great eminence in the annals of history. It is a universal phenomenon that the hero is idolized even in peacetime and becomes a model for the people. It is this placing of heroism in the militaristic context which has been the greatest underlying factor in the undue stress laid on war in the latter phase of Islam's history. With the automatic accord in Muslim society of a place of honour and importance to the heroes of the battlefield, annalists' subsequent compilations of Islamic history have tended to read like an uninterrupted series of wars and conquests.

These early chronicles having set the example, subsequent writings on Islamic history have followed the same pattern of emphasis on militarism. The Prophet's biographies were called '*maghazi*', that is 'The Battles Fought by the Prophet,' yet the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in fact did battle only three times in his entire life, and the period of his involvement in these battles did not total more than one and a half days. He fought, let it be said, in self-defense, when hemmed in by aggressors, where he simply had no option. But historians—flying in the face of fact—have converted his whole life into one of confrontation and war.

We must keep it in mind that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was born at a time when an atmosphere of militancy prevailed in the Arab society. But the Prophet always opted for avoidance of conflict. For instance, in the campaign of Ahzab, the Prophet advised his Companions to dig a trench between them and the enemies, thus preventing a head-on clash.

Another well-known instance of the Prophet's dislike for hostilities is the Hudaibiyyah peace treaty made by accepting unilaterally, all the conditions of the enemy. In the case of the conquest of Makkah, he avoided a battle altogether by making a rapid entry into the city with ten thousand Muslims—a number large enough to awe his enemies into submission.

In this way, on all occasions, the Prophet endeavoured to achieve his objectives by peaceful rather than by war-like means. It is, therefore, unconscionable that in later biographical writing, all the events of his life have been arranged under the heading of 'battles' (*ghazawat*). How he managed to avert the cataclysms of war has not been dealt with in any of the works, which purportedly depict his life.

Ibn Khaldun, the celebrated 14th century historian, was the first to lay down definite rules for the study and writing of history and sociology. He followed

the revolutionary course of attempting to present history as a chronicle of events centering on the common man rather than on kings, their generals and the battles they fought. But since war heroes were already entrenched as the idols of society, the caravan of writers and historians continued to follow the same well-worn path as had been trodden prior to Ibn Khaldun. When people have come to regard war heroes as the greatest of men, it is but natural that it is the events of the battlefield, which will be given the greatest prominence in works of history. All other events will either be relegated to the background or omitted altogether.

Ideological Hatred

Hatred is a crime and ideological hatred is the greatest crime. The so-called Islamic fundamentalism, if judged by its result, is the greatest crime of this kind against humanity. Any thing can be eliminated, but what is impossible to eliminate is the hatred produced by a sacred ideology: Hatred generates violence and ideological hatred generates unlimited violence. It can kill all of humanity without suffering any feelings of remorse or repentance. Hence the self-styled Islamic fundamentalism turns into an un-Islamic theory.

One type of movement is that which is based on love. Its aim is to reform human beings. Such a

movement awakens in its adherents, feelings of well-wishing towards other human beings. Its exponents strive peacefully to pass on the truth that they have discovered for the benefit of their fellow men. Such a movement, far from causing harm to society, becomes a driving force towards the moral and social uplift of people in all walks of life.

The other type of movement is one, which is based on hatred. The adherents of this movement consider those who are not like-minded to be enemies. They have an overriding desire to wipe them off the face of the earth. They hold that these “enemies” are obstacles to their success and that it is therefore necessary to destroy them altogether. Only then can a system of their own choice be set in place. Islamic fundamentalism—so-called— is a movement of this second type. As a result of this negative thinking they divide humanity into two camps, one consisting of their enemies, and the other of their friends. Once having made this division, they allow their aversion for their “enemies” to grow into virulent hatred. If the incentives for the members of the movement based on love are well wishing and the goodwill of the people, the incentives for the members of the movement based on hatred are ill will and animosity. Owing to this negative attitude, all the activities of Islamic fundamentalism take a pernicious direction.

To make matters worse, the hatred felt by the Muslim fundamentalists has become inseparable from their ideology. They hate others who think differently from themselves because they hold them to be ideologically in error. Experience shows that of all kinds of hatred, that based on an ideology is the most rabid. Personal hatred, on the other hand, arises from temporary factors, and seldom takes long to dissipate in the ordinary course of events. But there is little chance of ideological hatred abating. And its target is the obliteration of enemies. Not until this end is achieved will it ever die down. This is the reason that ideological hatred takes no time in assuming the shape of violence. When it is found that peaceful means of persuasion are showing no results, arms are then resorted to, so that all enemies may be removed from its path.

Terrorism in the Name of Islam

In the present time, Muslim fundamentalists are responsible for actions resulting from hatred and marked by violence taking place in the name of Islam. The famous poet Iqbal presents a justification of what they are engaged in in the following couplet:

To every vein of falsehood every Muslim is like a surgical knife. (*Shikwa Jawab-e-Shikwah*).

Conversely, however, we find a different picture in the Quran: “When it is said to them: ‘Do not commit

evil in the land,' they reply: 'We do nothing but good.' But it is they who are the evil-doers, though they may not perceive it" (2:11).

They hold that the aim of Islam is to establish an ideal society and an ideal state. But since, by their lights, this task cannot be performed without political strength, they feel justified in fighting against those who have captured the seats of power.

Violent movements with this aim were launched on a large scale during the second half of the twentieth century. Their targets were either the non-Muslim rulers or the secular Muslim rulers. But despite great losses in terms of life, wealth and resources, these movements failed to produce any positive results. Their having become counter-productive is in itself a proof that their activities were disapproved of by Islam. This is quite expressly stated in the Quran: "God does not love the transgressors" (2:205).

The fact is that the terms 'ideal state' and 'ideal society' have a wonderful resonance, but their use in the name of Islam is sheer exploitation of Islam. Verse ninety-nine of the 16th chapter is quite specific about this. It says: "God enjoins justice, kindness and charity... and forbids indecency, wickedness and oppression." Even more specifically the Quran says that God loves the charitable (2:195). And indeed

idealism and perfection are highly desirable virtues in Islam, but the direct target of Islamic idealism is not society, and not the state, but the individual. The perennial objective of the Islamic movement is to strive to make each single individual an ideal human being. Each individual has to be urged to become an example of the ‘sublime character’ as projected by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, and described in the Quran (68:4). So far as the ideal society or the ideal state is concerned, it is in no way a direct goal of Islam.

Society and the State are not in themselves independent entities, each being dependent on the mettle of the individuals of which they are constituted. According to a tradition, the Prophet observed: “As you will be, so will be your rulers” (Mishkat al-Masabih, 11/1097).

If the establishment of an ideal State were the actual target of Islam, there should, accordingly, be express injunctions to this effect in the Quran and *hadith*. For instance, there should be verses of this type in the Quran: “O Muslims, you are enjoined to establish an ideal State.” But there is no such verse and neither is there a single *hadith*, which could lead to this conclusion. The references put forward by the upholders of this concept are all inferential in nature, whereas according to Islamic jurisprudence, on the issue of any basic Islamic injunction, inferential

argument is in no way valid. Such argument is for peripheral matters and not for basics.

There is another important point in this connection. Those who uphold the establishment of an ideal State to be the goal of Islam ought to learn this lesson from the early period of Islam that this aim was neither achieved in this ideal period nor was it achievable. Those who present the first phase of Islam to be that of an ideal society or an ideal State have fallen prey to a fallacy. They present the example of ideal individuals, equating them with the ideal society or the ideal State. The truth of the matter is that both are totally different from each other.

It is undeniable that in every period of Islamic history, we find large numbers of ideal individuals, and this is true even today. But the ideal State is in no way the goal of Islam and neither has such an State ever existed in the ideal sense of the word. For instance, the first and foremost matter in the setting up of a state is the appointment of the head of a state. But there is no prescribed procedure for such an appointment. The Prophet was succeeded by four rightly guided Caliphs, but every one of them was selected by a different process, for the simple reason that no prescribed method existed at all. This also explains why no tradition could be established for the appointment of the Caliphs.

This does not mean, however, that there is something lacking in Islam, or in Islamic principles. The truth is that this very point serves as a proof of Islam being a divine religion, and not of human invention. Islam, according to its own claim, is a religion created by God, which is completely in consonance with nature. (30:30)

The Quran tells us that one proof of its being a book of God is that there is not the slightest inconsistency in its teachings (4:82). Another proof of this claim is that the target of the Islamic mission set forth by it is the building of ideal individuals and not ideal state.

In fact, man has been created in this world for the special purpose of being put to the test. According to the Quran, the present world is a trial ground and the *Akhirah* (the Hereafter) is the place of reward. As a necessary prerequisite, man has been given total freedom of action (33:72). That is to say that he is entirely at liberty either to submit to God or to become a transgressor. (18:29)

According to the creation plan of God, freedom, or free will is every man's birthright, and even if he misuses this power, it will not be taken away from him. It is not part of God's plan of creation ever to abrogate this free will. And it must be conceded that it is this freedom, which is the ever-recurring stumbling

block in the establishment of an ideal society or an ideal State. For even a handful of men, by misusing their freedom, can disturb the whole of society. That is why the target set by Islam is exactly in accordance with nature, that is, the reform of the individual.

If, on the contrary, the Muslims had been given the mission of establishing an ideal society, or an ideal State, that would have been so unnatural as to be quite impossible. Islam has, therefore, given Muslims a target which is practicable and which, in consequence, does not oblige them to come into conflict with nature. The violence, which marks the activities of Muslim fundamentalist groups, is the result of not keeping in mind this wisdom of Islam. If you aim at the reform purely of the individual, you will not need to resort to violence for the achievement of your goal. For the task of reforming the individual can be carried on, from beginning to end, in an atmosphere of peaceful persuasion. Whereas the struggle to change the system of the State, being a subversive activity, necessarily leads to war and violence.

Well-known examples of peaceful persuasion are the movements launched by the Sufis, the target of which was not the state, but the individual. Their task involved the spiritual reform of people's hearts and minds, so that they might lead their lives as new, transformed human beings. Thanks to their

adherence to this wise policy, the Sufis did not need to resort to violence. Another example in our times is provided by the Tablighi Jamaat, which has been working peaceably on a large scale in the sphere of individual reform.

Since Islamic fundamentalists target the Islamization of the State rather than the reform of individuals, their only plan of action is in the very first instance to launch themselves on a collision course with the rulers who hold sway over the institution of the State. In this way, their movement takes the path of violence from day one. Then all the other evils creep in which are the direct or indirect result of violence, for instance, mutual hatred and disruption of the peace, waste of precious resources, and so on.

It would be right and proper to say that Islam is a name for peaceful struggle, while the so-called Islamic fundamentalism is quite the reverse. From the foregoing details it is quite clear that violence, far from arising from the teachings of Islam, is a direct product of Islamic fundamentalism.

Fundamental Principles of Islam

If we are to put ‘fundamentalism’ in the correct perspective, we should be clear about what actually constitutes the fundamental principles of Islam. There is a hadith, which gives us clear guidance on

this subject. The Prophet observed that Islam is founded on five pillars: Bearing witness that there is no god but the one God and that Muhammad ﷺ is God's Messenger; the regular saying of prayers (*salat*); alms-giving (*zakat*); performing a pilgrimage to the Kabah, the House of God in Makkah (*hajj*); and fasting for the month of Ramadan (*sawm*).

These then are the fundamental principles, or pillars of Islam. The rest of the teachings fall into the category of detailed explanations of and elaborations upon the five basic principles. Holding any other precept besides these to form part of the basic tenets of Islam is misguided and unacceptable.

On further investigation, we find that these five basic teachings have a spirit as well as a form and, what is of real significance is that the true essence of Islam resides not in its outward forms but in its inner spirit. That is why our actions, according to a hadith, must be judged by their intentions alone. (Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith No. 1)

Let us take the first of the above principles, which is the article of faith (*kalima*). The form it takes is the utterance of certain words, expressing one's faith. But this verbal expression is not in itself sufficient. It is essential that at the same time, the concerned person should be imbued with the actual spirit of the

words he utters. As we find in the Qur'an: "The Arabs of the desert declare: 'We believe,' 'You do not.' Say rather: 'We profess Islam,' for faith has not yet found its way into your hearts'" (49:4). This shows that to God, the real faith (*iman*) is that which reaches into the deepest recesses of the heart; which awakens human consciousness in such a way as to bring to the individual the realization of God. That is to say that the concept of form here is relative, while the concept of spirit is what truly matters.

In the case of prayer (*salat*) too, we know that prayer has a fixed form and is to be observed at stipulated times. But here too it is not the adherence to form in the repetition of prayer, or the postures adopted, but the spirit pervading the performance of these rites, which is of overriding importance. That is why the Quran says: "Successful indeed are the believers who are humble in their prayers" (23:3). It is essential, therefore, that the ritual of prayer be imbued with the proper spirit.

The third pillar of Islam, alms-giving (*zakat*), that is, the payment of a fixed amount from one's earnings to others who are in greater need, is again apparently an act of pure formality, but according to the Quran, the inner spirit of *zakat* is fear of God. The Quran describes the believers as "those who dispense their charity with their hearts full of fear..." (23:60)

As we know, the pilgrimage to Makkah (*hajj*), the fourth pillar of Islam, is organized along particular lines, according to the rites and rituals of *hajj*. But believers are made aware at all times that it is not just mere presence in Makkah and the physical accomplishment of the rites which really matter, but the circumspect conduct accompanying each act, the restrained and disciplined behaviour which reveals the earnest intentions of the pilgrim to lead a righteous life then and throughout the rest of the year. Again it is the spirit of the thing, which counts.

The fifth pillar of Islam, fasting (*sawm*) for the whole of the month of Ramadan, is not concerned merely with abstinence from food and drink during each day from sunrise to sunset, but with the devotion and gratitude to God which self-denial teaches (2:183). Thus the essence of fasting is to produce the spirit of piety. In the words of the *hadith*, a fast without this spirit is only the experience of hunger and thirst. As such, it is not a true fast in the religious sense of the word (Mishkat al-Masabih).

That these are the five fundamentals of Islam has been made quite clear by the Prophet himself. Furthermore, what is desirable in the observance of all of these five pillars is the internal spirit and not the external form. Now if certain people take it upon themselves to revive these five fundamentals

of Islam, their endeavours will be confined to an entirely peaceful sphere of activity. At no stage would they ever reach the point of resorting to violence and aggression. The inner spirit which is meant to pervade all actions stemming from the observance of these principles can only be inculcated by advice, counseling and well-reasoned argument. There is no other viable way of achieving this objective save that of peaceful striving.

Islam and Politics

In making an assessment of Islam in relation to politics, one crucial point must be taken into consideration, which is that, politics is only a relative and not the real part of Islam. This difference between a real and a relative feature is that what is essential is relevant in all circumstances and at all times, whereas the relative is required only in relation to particular sets of circumstances. Wherever such circumstances do not exist, relative features lose their relevance and therefore their desirability. This difference between the real and relative is illustrated by the Quranic injunction to perform the Hajj pilgrimage: "Pilgrimage to the House of God is a duty to God for all who can make the journey" (3:97).

The wording of the command to perform Hajj shows that it is not obligatory for all believers in any absolute

sense. It is obligatory rather for those who have the means and the resources, and who are in good enough health to reach the place of pilgrimage. Neither does this injunction even imply that those who do not have the means should make superhuman efforts to find the wherewithal for the journey, so that they may perform this ritual worship. This injunction means that those who have the means should perform the pilgrimage and those who have not will not only be exempted, but will not even be held to account for having failed to do so.

The same is true of politics. That is, if a group of Muslims find themselves in a position to establish the political system of Islam by peaceful methods, and without any violence, then the Shariah will require them to do exactly that. But for those who do not find themselves in such a position, it is not their bounden duty to establish an Islamic political system, nor are they required to set in motion political initiatives calculated to create opportunities to do so.

That is why the Quran at no point gives the following command: "O Muslims, establish the political system of Islam." On the contrary, the Quran makes such clear statements about government and politics as prove that they are relative and not the real parts of Islam. For instance, addressing the believers the Quran says:

God has promised those of you who believe and do good works that He will make them masters in the land as He had made their ancestors before them, in order to strengthen the faith He chose for them, and to change their state of fear to a sense of security. Let them worship Me and no other gods besides Me. Wicked indeed are those who after this deny Me. (24:55)

From this it is abundantly clear that political power is a gift from God and is far from being a matter of a goal to be attained by human efforts. That is, it is not the Islamic way to launch movements with the aim of achieving political ascendancy. On the contrary, the objective of the Islamic struggle is to inculcate in people the Islamic character and the true spirit of Islam. And then, if, in any given society, a large number of people were to become imbued with this true spirit, a time might come when God in His wisdom saw fit to invest them with political authority.

Similarly, the Quran says for the benefit of the believers: "God is powerful and mighty: He will assuredly help those who, once made masters in the land, will attend to their prayers and pay the alms tax, enjoin justice and forbid evil." (22:41).

From the following verse also, we learn from God's injunction to the Prophet that the matter of political power rests entirely in the hands of God: "Say, Lord, Sovereign of all sovereignty, You bestow sovereignty on whom You will, and take it away from whom You please" (3:26).

That is why political power cannot be the goal to which believers direct their efforts. The first and foremost duty of the believers is for all of them, as individuals and without exception, to fulfill their personal obligations to the utmost extent. Afterwards, if circumstances are conducive, and they receive political power purely by the grace of God, the responsibility of moral governance will fall upon them, as is mentioned in the above-quoted verse.

It must be conceded that the establishment of an Islamic State is the responsibility not of individuals but of the society to which they belong. In Islam there are certain injunctions of an individual and personal nature, such as ritual fasting, which depend solely upon the will of the individual for their accomplishment. But the establishment of a political system on the basis of Islam depends upon the will of society as a whole. Only if there is a Muslim society possessed of the collective will to accept and institute Islamic government, can a political system based on Islam with all its social caveats, be established.

The Challenge of Fundamentalism

With reference to the Muslims of the present day, the news most highlighted in the media relates to Muslim fundamentalism. Experience has shown that there is nothing more destructive than fanaticism—the driving force of Muslim fundamentalism. However, it is not generally appreciated that Islamic fundamentalism, launched in the name of Islam, has been dealing a death blow to the image of Islam as a religion of peace and mercy. For it is this Muslim fundamentalism which, today, has converted the image of Islam into one tarnished by violence.

Let us place this form of extremism in a historical perspective. At the time of the emergence of modern western civilization, Muslims politically dominated the greater part of the world. The Ottoman empire at the western extremity and the Mughal empire on the eastern border had become symbols of glory for the Muslim ummah. These Muslim empires came into direct conflict with the western empires and, in the long run, the Muslim empires were vanquished. This brought to an end 1000 years of their political supremacy. People in general tend to accept what they see on the surface, so that Muslims all over the world came to hold that, in the break-up of their empires, the upholders of western civilization were

the oppressors, while the Muslims were the oppressed.

However, in actual fact, the internal degeneration of these Muslim empires had reduced them to the state of wood infested with white ants. It would only have been a matter of time before they collapsed on their own. It was only by a fortuitous concatenation of events that the military might of western civilization was ostensibly the cause of their fall.

Be that as it may, the upshot of this was that the entire Muslim world became averse to western nations. At an earlier period this aversion had already manifested itself towards the British and the French, and then somewhat later towards the U.S.A., for, in actuality, it is the Americans who have been leading the western nations since the end of the second world war.

Now, I should like to identify and analyze the origin of the present extremist aspect of Islamic fundamentalism, which has made such a rapid descent into violence. The principal reason for it having come into being in this virulent form has its roots in a certain defeatist mentality which has, unfortunately, been developing in the Muslims since the loss of their empires. A defeatist, or a besieged mentality inevitably opts for a negative course of

action. The possessors of such a mentality consider themselves as the oppressed, and those whom they see as setting themselves up against them as the oppressors. With this bent of mind, they are willing to engage themselves in any activity whatsoever, no matter how damaging to humanity or contrary to religion it might be.

What made matters worse—as a direct result of this negative psychology—was the emergence of certain Muslim leaders in the first half of the twentieth century, who expounded their own political interpretation of Islam, according to which Islam was a complete system of State and Muslims had been appointed by God to fulfill the mission of establishing this Islamic state throughout the world. Some well-known names associated with this interpretation are the following: Syed Qutub in Egypt, Ayatullah Khomeini in Iran and Syed Abul Ala Maududi in Pakistan.

This political view of Islam, in spite of being a grave misinterpretation, spread rapidly among Muslims. The only reason for this was that Muslims, owing to their defeatist mentality, saw nothing incongruous in its negativity. Given the circumstances of their past history, this political interpretation was in total consonance with their psychological condition. Thus,

due to their negative mindset and not due to Islamic reasoning, this false interpretation soon gained currency among them, and the activities which were an offshoot from this—paradoxical as this may seem—were backed by funding from America in a bid to stem the rising tide of Communism.

Prior to 1991, when the Soviet Union had assumed the position of a super power, and posed a continuing threat to America, one of the strategies adopted by America was to set off the Muslim fundamentalists against the Communists, because these fundamentalists were persistently writing and speaking against Communism as being the enemy of Islam. America also gave all kinds of help, to the fundamentalists. It provided them with weapons to set themselves up against the Soviet Union and assisted in the dissemination of their literature all over the world. But this enemy-of-my-enemy-is-a-friend formula ultimately proved counter-productive, in that it virtually amounted to replacing one enemy with another. The waging of this proxy war turned out to be only very temporary in its benefits.

Those who at a later stage felt the impact of extremist fundamentalism, took this to be a case of violence against them. So they opted for a policy

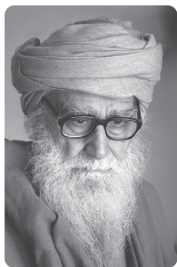
of gun versus gun. But subsequent events proved this policy to be a total failure, the reason being that the issue was not that of conducting a purely physical struggle, but of exposing and scotching the fallacies of a flawed ideology. You can win a fight with arms, but to defeat an ideology, a counter-ideology is a sine qua non. Without that nothing can be achieved.

There is no doubt about it that Muslim fundamentalism is a threat to peace, for, due to their fanaticism, its proponents do not stop short of resorting to destructive activity, even if it should prove suicidal. Now the task we must undertake is to make use of the media on all fronts in order to make people aware of the fact that this political interpretation of Islam is totally without basis either in the Quran or in the examples set by the Prophet in thought, word and deed. As opposed to this erroneous interpretation, the true values of Islam, based on peace, brotherhood and well wishing should be presented to the public. If this correct interpretation of Islam could be brought to people's attention, I should have high hopes that the majority of the people who have been misguided would abandon the path of hatred and violence and come back to Islam—"to the home of peace" to which God calls us in the Quran.

It is true that in these violent activities only a small group is involved. But this small group has the indirect support of the majority, who are no less swayed by the political interpretation of Islam. According to Khalil Gibran, “not a single leaf falls from the tree without the silent consent of the whole tree.” If then the majority were to withdraw its indirect support and condemn Islamic militancy, these fringe groups would lose their moral courage. That would be the first step. Then the time would come when the fundamentalists who are directly involved in violent activities would abandon the path of violence altogether.

Discover Islam

In this series, Maulana Wahiduddin Khan presents the fundamental teachings of Islam in a simple way. The series provides the general reader with an accurate and comprehensive picture of Islam—the true religion of submission to God.



Maulana Wahiduddin Khan (1925-2021) was an Islamic scholar, spiritual guide and an Ambassador of Peace. Having received international recognition for his work, the Maulana authored over 200 books and recorded thousands of lectures giving the rational interpretation of Islamic concepts, prophetic wisdom and the spiritual meaning of Quran and Islam in the contemporary style. His English translation of the Quran is widely appreciated as simple, clear and in contemporary style. He founded *Centre for Peace and Spirituality International* in 2001 to re-engineer

the minds of people towards God-oriented living and present Islam in the modern idiom based as it is on peace, non-violence and spirituality.

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