

Islamic Fundamentalism: Implications for Missions

Islamic Fundamentalism is a strange phenomenon that needs to be interpreted. The challenge is to enter the worldview of the Muslim Fundamentalist, share its consciousness, explore its interior beliefs and values and look at the wider world through its windows, while at the same time retaining our own.

by Nabeel T. Jabbour

Looking at a Picasso painting and finding out that it was sold for a huge sum of money is a cultural shock. Why would anybody pay so much money for such a “strange” painting? Of course it has a tremendous value as an investment, but where is the beauty in the art? I need someone to interpret the beauty and the art, so that I can begin to understand and appreciate Picasso.

Islam, like a Picasso, is a “strange phenomenon” to most Western minds while Islamic Fundamentalism is even more difficult to understand. There is a tendency to judge the Fundamentalists’ dedication as extremism, their willingness to lay down their lives for serving God as fanaticism, their holistic view of life as rebellion against the state, and their hatred of and desire to punish sin as blood-thirstiness, their convictions as dogmatism, their solidarity as exclusiveness and their sense of dignity and honor as haughty pride.

What are the implications as a result of the resurgence of Islamic Fundamentalism on missions to the Western world? There are important implications. There also are obstacles within the “messenger,” as well as within the “receiver,” as well as between the two. We might not even have the faith to perceive the Muslim Fundamentalists as a “receiver,” but there will always be a major obstacle between the “messenger” and the “receiver.” Our wrong attitude as a “messenger” to a great extent will determine how much we experience the Muslim Fundamentalists as a thorn in

our flesh, preventing us from being effective in our ministry.

If we come with our preconceived ideas and project our prejudices on Muslims, then we will experience fierce antagonism from them in general, but especially from the Muslim Fundamentalists in particular. We might not have a direct contact with the Fundamentalists, but their presence and their attitude will contribute to shaping and coloring the attitudes of the governments in the Muslim world to missionaries. The challenge for us is to dare to enter their worldview, share their consciousness, explore its interior and look at their world through their mind set while at the same time retaining our own perception and worldview.

In my book, *The Rumbling Volcano*, (Mandate Press, 1993 Pasadena, CA) I have attempted to study the phenomenon of Islamic Fundamentalism in Egypt and its implications on the Arab world, as well as on the wider Muslim world. Egypt is a strategic country in the Middle East, so in a sense what happens in Egypt greatly impacts the Middle East and has a ripple effect in Africa and the Third World. The revolution of Nasser in 1952 was followed by many revolutions in the Arab world and Africa. If Egypt should become an Islamic state similar to that of Iran, then sooner or later many other countries will follow.

The method of study in my book was phenomenology and hermeneutics. I wanted to research Islamic Fundamental-

ism as a phenomenon and attempt to see it from the perspective of its leaders, such as Al-Banna, Qutb, Faraj and Al-Khumeini. My desire was as much as possible to “get under the skin” and “in the minds” of these men and interpret my perceptions to the Western Christian reader. As you read, please be reminded that I’m attempting to stand in the shoes of the Muslim Fundamentalists and present Islam as *they* see it.

In two chapters of my book I examined the political, religious, economic, social and psychological factors that play a role in attracting young people to Fundamentalism. Unless we seriously attempt to understand the Fundamental Muslim and “get under their skin,” so to speak, we will end up with prejudices that contribute to erecting higher barriers. Before we can expect the “receiver” to overcome the obstacles within himself, we should expect from ourselves—the “messenger”—to overcome our own obstacles.

Therefore, in this article (by permission of the publisher), I have chosen to incorporate various sections from the two chapters of my book dealing with the factors that help young people become Fundamentalists. Although my references mainly relate to the situation in Egypt, the principles are applicable to a great extent in Algeria, Indonesia and other Third World Muslim countries.

Political and Religious Factors

According to the Fundamentalists, Islam is in a state of resurgence

because resurgence starts in the depth of the conscience and is later manifested in life and doctrine. Furthermore, Islam is in a constant state of change and progression demanding Muslims be committed to a continual revolution in the midst of changing circumstances. Therefore, from within Islam itself, the resurgence emerges because of its dynamism, comprehensiveness and relevance to man's basic needs (Ahmad 1989a:42). The evidence of this Islamic resurgence is seen in the following points:

The Speed of Its Expansion

Islam is not limited to national or racial boundaries, nor to certain political, cultural or economic environments. Islam has not only spread in the Arab World, but in Nigeria, Turkey, Pakistan, Iran and in Indonesia. Furthermore, its expansion has not been limited to Muslim countries, but also occurs in countries like India, the Philippines, the former Soviet Union and even some Western countries.

Diversity of Its Centers

Islam, in its resurgence, went beyond national and denominational boundaries. The spiritual dimension gave unity to this resurgence in the 1970s, as seen mostly in Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. These countries have a diversity of languages, denominations and cultural backgrounds.

Continuity

In Egypt there has been a series of ebbs and flows between secular waves and Islamic resurgence. The first wave started at the end of the 19th century, when Afghani, followed later by Muhammad `Abdu, responded to the westernization process which came as a result of the strong colonialism of the 19th century.

The second wave came between the two wars through Hasan al-Banna and the Muslim Brotherhood. This was in response to the westernization process, which came with colonialism and manifested itself in openness to Western

culture and education.

The third wave came in response to the secularization brought about by Naser's revolution, resulting in the humiliating defeat of the 1967 war with Israel. This third wave started right after that war and is continuing into the 1990s in response to the successive failures of socialism and capitalism, as well as in response to man's basic needs of which most Egyptians have been deprived. According to Ahmad, these repeated waves are sure evidence of Islamic resurgence (1989a:43-44).

Comprehensiveness of Islam

At certain times in the history of Islam, resurgence was seen in attempts made to defend the faith and attack heresies. At other times, it was seen in conquests of new lands and spreading Islam through the power of the sword.

However, in this century, whether in the Islamic League of Afghani, the Muslim Brotherhood of al-Banna and Qutb, or others who came throughout the 1970s and 1990s, the distinct characteristic of this resurgence is the comprehensiveness of Islam. Islam is *dân wa dawla* (doctrine, life, and politics) and it includes all the various aspects of the life of the individual and of the nation. Economics, politics, theology as well as the judiciary system, are part of an all-inclusive and comprehensive Islamic system. (Qutb 1987:36).

The Various Classes of the Society

In Egypt, the Fundamentalists are recruited mostly from active youth in their twenties and thirties. They are university students and graduates who tend to be conscientious and ambitious. Furthermore, most of these recruits spent their childhood in villages and little towns. Ahmad agrees that Fundamentalism in Egypt is most appealing to these groups, yet he states that in later stages of its development the resurgence will penetrate the various strata of the society. Iran, in its Islamic revolution, was not limited to the students and the young graduates, but appealed to a

wide spectrum of society (Ahmad 1989a:45). So resurgence is attractive and appealing. It gives the recruit a sense that he belongs to an attractive and powerful solidarity and gives him a conviction that his faith is the only true faith because it is alive and is in a state of growth and expansion.

The Return of the Caliphate

Since 1924, when Sultan `Abdul Majid II in Turkey died, the caliphate has been in a state of vacancy. The caliph, like the pope in Roman Catholicism was a symbol of unity and solidarity. Under the caliph, the Islamic nation *umma* spread from Morocco in the West to Indonesia in the East, reaching as far as parts of the previous Soviet Union in the North and some black African countries in the South. It was a grand *umma* indeed.

The dream of the return to the caliphate, where all Muslims unite together and live with dignity and social justice following the precepts of the Qur'an, is a utopia which appeals to the emotions of most Muslims (Amara 1985a :47-49).

In 1952, the Muslim Brotherhood bought a piece of land on Muqattam mountain in the suburbs of Cairo and intended to start an Islamic utopia with 30,000 families living there. Their plan was foiled when Naser took the land in 1954. Shukri took his people to the desert to live the utopian Muslim society, and he was able to make an appeal to the youth to join him, in spite of how absurd it looked.

The dream of the return to the caliphate and the establishment of the Islamic *umma* is an impossibility when perceived rationally. Yet, when perceived with the eyes of faith, supported by yearning emotions, it is possible. Who would have ever thought that the banished Imam would one day return to Iran, shaking the foundations of a throne. If it succeeded in Iran, it could succeed in other countries, and perhaps

one day Muslims around the world would forget their differences and agree on their caliph.

The Impact of the Gulf Countries

Waves of Egyptians returned from the Gulf countries to Egypt in the 1970s, carrying with them new convictions. While in the Gulf they saw how the petro-dollar that "God blessed the Muslims with" was used for the propagation of Islam. They became aware of how Saudi money was well spent in printing and distributing the Qur'an, building mosques all over the world, and training and sending Muslim missionaries. According to their beliefs it is no wonder God is blessing these countries with oil. Unlike Egypt, which is geographically located between Saudi Arabia on the one side and Libya on the other side, both countries have an abundance of oil. Why is it that the western desert in Egypt, which is the continuation of the Libyan desert, has no oil, while Libya "floats" on oil? Is this a coincidence, or is God punishing Egypt? Besides that, Sadat's efforts to take back the oil wells of Sinai as a result of the peace treaty with Israel were not blessed by God. By the time the oil wells returned to Egypt, the price of oil had dropped dramatically. It seems that God is punishing Egypt because it has not been faithful to Him. If Egypt returns to her God, He will then remove the shame and dishonor that has befallen her. If Muslims repent and apply the Shari'a then God will have mercy.

The other impact that came from the Gulf was Iran's model. Al-Khumeini, who dared to look at the "truth" and dared to call hypocrisy by its name, was endowed with courage similar to that of the prophet. He opposed corruption and unbelief and dared to stand against the stream. Al-Khumeini, who lived by the precepts of Islam and established

an Islamic country over the ruins of the Shah's empire, had the courage to stand alone against the super powers, the world, and even against the leaders of Muslim countries and their hired Imams who were living in hypocrisy (in `Amara 1985b: 230). Al-Khumeini was

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able to wage an expensive war for eight years against Iraq, in spite of the United States' blockage of Iranian capital in American banks, the low price of oil, and the damage to the oil industry as a result of the war. Al-Khumeini, who stood alone with the courage that springs from the faithful adherence to Islamic beliefs, was able to bring Islam to the front pages of the newspapers of the world.

Economic, Social and Psychological Factors

According to the prophet and Muslims throughout the centuries, Islam is the best economic, social, religious, legal and political system on earth, *khayru 'ummaten 'unzilat linnas*. Yet as Muslims look around them, they find a large gap between what Islam is and what it should be. Efforts have been made to bridge this gap by charismatic leaders like al-Banna and al-Khumeini, by ideologists like Qutb and Mawdudi, and by influential Islamic writers like `Amara and al-Ghazzali.

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Teaching, training and dedication are available to equip future generations. The places for teaching are available in popular mosques and apartments of members, scattered beyond the reach of the secret police. All that's needed is for youth to respond to

this challenge and become committed and available for the process of teaching and equipping.

On the front page of *Al-Ahram*, a Cairo newspaper, on May 6, 1990, the Minister of Interior declared that al-Jihad organization members are recruiting and training boys and teenagers to attack police stations with Molotov cocktails. Why is it

that even the young are so motivated to join the Fundamentalist movement? In a previous section we have considered the political and religious factors. In exploring an answer to youth involvement, we will now consider other causes, such as economic, social and psychological factors as they interrelate with each other.

In Egypt, from the beginning of the revolution in 1952, attempts have been made to give a blow to the feudal lords and to give members of the lower classes an opportunity to improve their economic and social status through upward mobility. University education was open and within reach of every person who could graduate from high school. University fees were minimal, almost non-existent. Furthermore, promises of secure jobs within the government and public sectors gave hope and motivation to the new generation. Later it was discovered that neither the degree nor the job were real solutions. Kepel, describing the disguised unemployment, states:

By law, every graduate in Egypt has the right to state employment. This measure, a powerful weapon against non-employment, is actually the purveyor of massive disguised unemployment in the

offices of a swollen administration in which productivity is as low as the employees are badly paid. If a state employee lacks an additional source of income, he can still manage to feed himself by buying the state subsidized products on sale in the cooperatives, but he is unlikely to rise above this level of bare subsistence. The price of anything determined by the market would be beyond his reach. Almost every state employee has a second or even third job. (Kepel 1985:85).

During Naser's time, the people were forced to live under these difficult conditions because there was a war to be waged for the liberation of Palestine. People were generally willing to sacrifice because Naser offered dignity and honor by making Egypt one of the leading countries in the World.

In 1971, Sadat inherited a heavy mantle from his successor. Conditions were going from bad to worse, especially when Sadat's promises remained unfulfilled, he had to delay the long awaited battle of revenge. Not only was there poverty, but there was also a sense of despair and self-ridicule among the Egyptians. The 1973 war with Israel was a surprise to many, but Sadat was finally able to fulfill what he and Naser promised to do.

Social Factors

The people who are attracted to the Fundamentalist movement are the lower middle class and the students. The basic reasons for their attraction to Fundamentalism lie 1) in their social and religious sense of despair and 2) in their being a class of the society that has no future. They see themselves as marginal in their impact on the history of the nation.

The lower middle class in Egypt does not see a place of significance, either in the religious sphere, or on the social ladder; therefore, they have a pessimistic perspective on life. Significant impacts on the history of a nation are made through individuals, and since the individuals belonging to the lower

middle class are deprived of their rights and the qualities which give the person a platform, they find that the only way they can enter history is through the Fundamentalism door. It promises to radically change this unjust social system and give the marginal population the opportunity to enter the heart of the history of the nation. These groups then not only play the normal roles which they were deprived of, but they even play a much bigger role, rejecting the values and the foundations of the existing social system. (Habib 1989:130).

Another group of people who go through a similar set of experiences are the university students. Education is compulsory and a long span of years is required to graduate from the university. In this type of educational system which offers no motivation, except to the few who enter the faculties of medicine and engineering, students become marginal as well. Students are forced to be marginal and look to the future with anxiety and despair because they know that what is waiting for them is disguised unemployment. They readily become an social group in the society with distinct cultural values. They, along with the young graduates who find no hope for upward mobility, become open and eager to respond to a invitation of Fundamentalism which promises involvement, significance and a role to play in making history.

Because the revolution of 1952 in Egypt made education free and available to all, lower class people were given the hope that they could join the upward movement of social mobility and reach the middle class. As a result, the universities grew, producing about half a million young men and women annually who were supposed to have become middle class people because of their education. The middle class became the huge tail on a disproportionate creature, with a small head and body.

People who belong to the tail are

basically the lower middle class. Many of these people came from the villages and small towns, migrating to the big cities to live in the suburbs, bringing along with them their rural culture. Most of these people arrive to a sort of self-actualization through jobs where both the husband and wife work. Many find it hard to make it in this difficult battle for survival. These disenchanting people are the ones who become good candidates for Fundamentalism. When this group of deprived people in the lower middle class becomes big enough, revolution then becomes inevitable (Habib 1989:133).

By comparing the poor suburbs in Cairo with the rest of the city, we see a tremendous contrast. Not only are the streets narrow and dirty, but the water supply, sewage system, telephones, electricity and all other necessities are under tremendous pressure because of the over-crowded situation. Therefore, in the suburbs of Cairo with its population of over 16 million, the message of Fundamentalism is very attractive and appealing to the youth. In these poor suburbs of Cairo, the young, the ambitious and the conscientious, yet marginal people, have nothing to lose and everything to gain by joining al-Jihad or other Fundamentalist organizations. Because they are young and idealistic, they tend to see issues from a black and white perspective. The solution for everything can be found in Islam and the application of the *Shari'a*. Although their families are not fully convinced of these idealistic views, in time they at least become sympathizers with the cause of Fundamentalism.

Psychological Factors

We have seen earlier that economic, social and even psychological factors interrelate to form the environment in which the candidate of Fundamentalism lives. The economic open-door policy at the time of Sadat, which was accompanied by manifestations of western life styles, resulted in estrange-

ment. The young people who belonged to the lower middle class, who had gained a university degree, discovered that they still could not find a way to work at the small companies of the private sector which pay good salaries. They looked at those “strange and westernized” young people who got the jobs and money with resentment and envy. That kind of perception made them consider themselves inferior to those who become westernized, they therefore withdrew from the society to increased marginalization (Abdul-Fadil 1982: 108).

This state of marginalization needed to be justified, and the justification came through the condemnation of the evil, injustice and corruption in their society. To stay pure, one must adhere to God and separate oneself from this polluted society (Husein 1982:207). The gap between the rich and the poor was greatly widened as a direct result of this open-door policy. The new class of millionaires, who owned the expensive and latest models of Mercedes, existed in the same city living next to the multitudes of poor.

The poor come not only from the lower middle class people, but rather from the lower classes who live at times below the subsistence level. It is quite common nowadays to hear of apartments which serve as a residence to more than twenty persons. Each family, of about eight members, takes one bedroom in a three bedroom apartment which has one bathroom. In the morning a queue of more than twenty are waiting to use the bathroom. The battle for survival is not only finding a place on the floor to sleep, but having enough to eat and riding the crowded buses to school. The battle goes on, and with it there is the growing conviction that life is a jungle. Survival is for the strongest and the most violent. It is no wonder that sayings such as “*Ma`ak irsh bitsawi irsh*” (Your value is by how much money you have) and “*Tghadda bi abl ma*

yit`ashsha bik” (Eat the other person for lunch before he eats you for supper) are becoming the convictions of the new generation.

In this jungle, the persistent question is, “Where is God, and where is the justice of Islam?” According to Allport, in *The Nature of Prejudice*, progression to violence might follow this path:

The challenge before us is to really believe that the power of God unto salvation is in the gospel and that this message is very relevant in the Muslim world.

1. A long period of categorical pre-judgments on the rich, the government, and the puppet Imams who serve as the mouthpiece of the government.
2. A long period of verbal complaint.
3. Growing discrimination. (E.g., the rich, through their connections and bribes, can get anything with the least effort, while the poor are treated like the scum of the earth).
4. The existence of social strain that results from economic deprivation, a sense of low status and fear of unemployment.
5. People have grown tired of their own inhibitions and are reaching a state of explosion. They no longer feel that they can or should put up with rising prices, humiliation and bewilderment. Irrationalism comes to have a strong appeal.
6. Organized movements such as al-Jihad and other Fundamentalist groups attract the discontented individuals.
7. From such formal or informal social organization, the individual derives courage and support. He sees that his irritation and wrath are socially and even theologically sanctioned. His impulses to violence are thus justified

by the standards and the *fatawa* (casuistics) of his groups or organization.

8. Some precipitating incident occurs. What previously might have been passed over as a trivial provocation, now causes an explosion. The incident may be wholly imaginary, or it may be exaggerated through rumor. A story goes around that a Christian man raped a

Muslim teenager, so leaflets are distributed about that wholly imaginary incident, and the spark ignites the fire of violence.

9. When violence actually breaks out, it is likely to happen when two opposing groups are thrown into close contact, such as Christians and Muslims living in the same neighborhood, or university students on the same campus. At such meeting points, the precipitating incident is most likely to occur (Allport 1958: 56-58).

The factors which help produce the type of environment where the youth become good candidates for Fundamentalism could be political, religious, economic, social or psychological. In this vacuum, youth looks for an identity, a place of belonging and an enemy to vent his hatred. In Fundamentalism, the young find their identity in following God, their place of belonging in becoming dedicated members in the various Fundamentalist groups, and their enemy in Satan and the hypocrisy of the so-called “Muslim society.”

Perhaps if the Egyptian people, the government and “official” Islam would listen, and attempt to understand and take the young Fundamentalist seriously, they might hear them say:

I am afraid and lonely, and you are all liars. I am sad and resigned, and you are failures and hypocrites.

I am committed to God, and I must have the opportunity and the right to live, but I am incapacitated and chained by you.

Any initiative or creative approach which I might take is going to be condemned by you as heresy and thwarted by you. There-

fore, I will resort to the already certain and proven, which is the inspired Qur'an... Since I came to the conviction that my deliverance is in my commitment to a solidarity of like-minded dedicated followers of God, my vengeance and anger is going to be directed against you hypocrites... Even if I do not succeed, that is not the issue. I might become a martyr and a model to be followed. After all, what is ahead of me is paradise, but as for you, the fires of hell are waiting to receive you.

In this scenario, we see emotions of loneliness, fear, despair, as well as idealism, purity, absolutism, dependency, martyrdom spirit, dreams, the revolution, surrender to God, aggression and suicide (Rakhawi 1982:146-147).

Fundamentalist numbers are growing rapidly because the environment is ripe for recruiting, discipling and equipping men who are willing to be commandos for Islam. After all, is it not true that "Islam is a tree which is nourished by the blood of its martyrs"?

Mission Implications

1. When we consider the mission field in Muslim countries, do we start with blueprints of western models and assume that we will communicate? The challenge is to look at Islam and Islamic Fundamentalism as phenomena and dare to study them without prejudice.

2. Are our methods and tools so western to the degree that we are perceived as coming with a Western plant along with its Western pot to plant Western churches in the Muslim world? The challenge for us is to study the gospel and dare to see it without our Western wrappings and present it pure, and encourage the Muslims to wrap it with what looks to them as authentic and genuine.

3. Does our gospel address issues such as poverty and injustice? The challenge before us is to dare to go to the Scriptures with a thorough study and

come up with answers to the real and felt needs of people we want to reach.

4. Do we go to the mission field with authentic identity and appropriate life style? Some tentmaking jobs are very hard to understand. Why would an American leave America and come all the way to Egypt to sell books in a bookstore? To the Egyptian, any young man with a high school degree can do this job. Why is this American in Cairo? Is he a C.I.A. or a missionary in disguise?

The challenge before us is to think through this whole issue of identity and life style and dare to come up with creative and new answers. Does Mother Teresa struggle because of her life style or identity?

5. Are we making good use of the radio and the television? Does the message have the ring of truth and authenticity? Or is it seen as something so western, so biased toward Israel and so Greek in its logic rather than Eastern in its mode of communication? The challenge before us is to dare to shed our culture and put on the culture of the "receiver" so that they can hear the message.

6. Are we willing and able to see the potential of the nationals and see ourselves as Western Christians as the servants of the nationals for Jesus' sake? The challenge before us is to see the value of the nationals and dare to trust them without manipulating or controlling.

7. We are in a race to reach the vulnerable people that are ripe for the message, either ours or the Muslim Fundamentalists. The challenge before us is to really believe that the power of God unto salvation is in the gospel and that this message is very relevant in the Muslim world.

8. Simon the Pharisee was an objective observer evaluating Jesus and the prostitute. Jesus in contrast was an involved and compassionate participant as He forgave the woman and in the pro-

cess transformed her life. The challenge before us is to listen from the depths of our hearts to the "strange" logic of the Muslim Fundamentalists. Not only to listen, but to attempt to understand them and to really take them seriously. Perhaps we might discover that we can have compassion for people that are so radically different from us, and in the process lead them to their Saviour.

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