

TRADITIONAL ISLAM IN THE MODERN WORLD

Syyed Hossein Nasr, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1987, pp.335,
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The labeling of the term “fundamentalist” by Western journalists and many scholars in describing the “revivalist”, “resurgent”, “revolutionary” movements in the Muslim world, which in the name of Islam, seek to re-establish Muslim political power, is most misleading. “Fundamentalism” originally meant those conservative Protestants in America who insisted on a narrow, literal interpretation of the Bible. Now it is commonly applied in a radically different context to contemporary movements in the Muslim world having a violently revolutionary, anti-Western and politically activist character. All of them believe that an Islamic order can be achieved through the rigorous enforcement of Shar’iah and the establishment of an Islamic state. All of them stress the outward, literal, Legal interpretation of Quran and Hadith to the almost total exclusion of its inner meanings and emphasize the supreme importance of action and constant agitation over contemplation, society over the individual and are unanimous in their intense hostility to the practice of Tasawwuf (Sufis). Devoid of any genuine aesthetic sense, beauty is regarded by them as a luxury they can ill-afford and all artistic endeavour, including traditional Islamic art, is scorned by them as “satanic” and “ungodly” unless directly useful to them for propaganda purposes. The more violent revolutionary movements in Iran and Lebanon, characterized by blind fury and hatred against all who disagree with them, incorporate Marxist ideas and methods into their programme while the milder ones in Egypt and the Indo-Pak sub-continent seek peaceful democratic forms of rule in an Islamic context.

All these Islamic movements today are the ripe fruits of the preaching and writings of Ibn Taimiya (7th/13th century) and the Arabian puritanical reformer (12th/18th century), Shaikh Muhammad bin Abd al Whahab. Condemning Sufi practices as mere pagan superstitions tantamount to Shirk (associating partners to the Divinity), the product of foreign influences contrary to Quran and Sunnah, and philosophy as Greek culture under Muslim names, they thought Sufism and philosophy were the causes for the

decay and decline of the Muslims. They sought to completely ban both as heresy. This prescription, for combatting the many abuses and deviations which had arisen to corrupt the Ummah or Muslim community, was tantamount to curing the disease by killing the patient! Both these reformers were convinced that only the literal Legal injunctions of Quran and Sunnah were binding on believers. According to them, Islamic history came to an end after the Khilafat Rashidun with the establishment of the monarchy and everything following that period was deviation, corruption and decadence. The remedy they prescribed for the Ummah was to return for its inspiration to the earliest years of Muslim history and hence a “pure” Islam. The repudiation of all later developments in the history and culture of Islam could be compared to acceptance of only the roots of the tree while its trunk, branches, leaves, fruits and flowers are all rejected and cut down! The wholesale rejection of the rich spiritual and cultural heritage of the later periods, resulted in a sterile mental vacuum, helpless to confront the invasion of the West, thus greatly facilitating the secularization and modernization of the Muslim world.

While the Islamic artistic heritage is condemned as “backward” and “stagnant” by the secularist and modernists, at best beauty is regarded by the revivalists as a luxury only the idle rich could afford under the “decadent” monarchies or at best a sheer waste of time and energy. Alien western architectural styles are enthusiastically adopted by both (even in the holiest sanctuaries of Mecca and Medina) which give our cities an uglier appearance year by year. In order to prove how modern and progressive they are, even the architecture of their new mosques has been radically changed (as can be seen here in Pakistan in the atrocious monstrosities of the Defense of Housing Society Mosque in Karachi and the Faisal Mosque in Islamabad), The fundamentalists are just as proud of them as the modernists.

The most conspicuous product of modern civilization is, of course, its science/technology which in its atheism, materialism, rationalism and humanism, is the deadliest enemy against religion, culture and all traditional spiritual and moral values. Today science/technology and modern civilization are synonomous with each other. Minus the former, virtually nothing of the latter is left! Yet fundamentalists welcome modern science/technology as enthusiastically as the secularists and modernists - from bulldozers to

computers, and waste much time and energy with far-fetched arguments to prove its conformity to Quran and Sunnah.

Hence the amazing phenomenon one sees of fundamentalists attacking and condemning the West on the one hand while simultaneously adopting its most important values and methods on the other! Fundamentalist criticism of the West is thus hollow, and superficial. Only the results and effects are condemned - never the root- causes. In their eyes, Islam is not Deen or religious faith at all but a “revolutionary, ideological movement” - concepts wholly unknown to our ancestors.

What is the end-result of “fundamentalism” but the destruction of the priceless remnants of our spiritual, intellectual, artistic, and cultural heritage? The importance given by Fundamentalists to social, economic and political goals above all else, is in fact, nothing but secularism in reverse! They have no sense of the holy. For them nothing is sacred. Yet in the name of Islam, fundamentalists continually defile the sacred (especially in Saudi Arabia) - which is much more dangerous than outright secularism.

“Traditional Islam” therefore is simply what Muslims throughout the world have always believed and practiced continuously for fourteen centuries or at least until the advent of European colonial rule and the imposition of modern Western education.

Such are the challenging views which one of the most eminent living Muslim scholars - Seyyed Hossein Nasr - expresses in this book.

The first section deals with various facets of the Islamic tradition including Jihad, the Islamic significance of work, sexuality, and Shi’ism in Safavid Persia, the latter revealing the glaring contrast between Shi’ism then and now so hideously distorted by Marxism in today’s revolutionary Iran.

The following sections of this book deal with Islam in the present-day Muslim world, Islam and modern thought, “development” and Islam, Islam and modern architectural city-planning, traditional Islamic education - which the author, unlike the fundamentalists, never condemns as obsolete and outdated but regards its sympathetic study of greatest value - and Islamic

philosophy which he is convinced is fully capable of responding to the modern age as well as solving its most acute problems.

Section IV, dealing with three major Western interpreters of Islam, is for the Muslim reader, the most controversial part of this book. However, since the imperialist Occident, culturally speaking has practically obliterated Corbin's "Orient of Light," if a non-Muslim orientalist speaks the Truth, we must not be so fanatical to reject his work just because he is a westerner. The criterion of Truth cannot be restricted to geography. Massignon and Corbin both pursued their studies out of genuine love for them. They never tried to refute Islam. Unlike most other orientalists, there is not trace of malice in any of their work. Contrast this with the numerous fundamentalists and modernists from the East who do not hesitate to distort Islam every single day!

In the concluding post-script, the author discusses present trends in the Muslim world as well as those most likely to persist into the future.

This book is essential for all scholars as well as the intelligent general reader who wish to understand the plight of Islam now.

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