# 13.

## *The Radical Muslim Discourse*

The previous chapter sought to explain the shift throughout the Muslim world toward religio-political radicalism by presenting quantifiable data (such as population increase and mobility, education, shortfalls in economic performance, and military defeats) as well as insights incapable of measurement (such as massive disorientation, a search for certainties, and a sense of vulnerability in facing hostile forces). That chapter set out the underlying factors preparing the ground for the religio-political movements thriving today throughout the Muslim world. It did not, however, address why Islamist movements emerged instead of other alternatives, secular or religious. Nor did it introduce the ideas and ideologues of today's Islamist surge. Adopting two broad-ranging comparative approaches may serve to establish a larger context for studying the question.

First, the case of Muslim fundamentalism in today's world is not all that distinctive. The economic, political, military, and social factors set out in the previous chapter have not been confined to Muslim states. This litany of woes sounds familiar for most of the Third World. Religio-political radicalism is a global phenomenon. Movements strikingly similar to those found in Muslim countries exist among Christians, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists.

From this many observers embrace the idea of a generic fundamentalism characterizing today's world. Such, for example, is the thrust of the multivolume fundamentalism project directed by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby. "Religious fundamentalisms," they write,

> thrive in the twentieth century when and where masses of people living in formerly traditional societies experience profound personal and social dislocations as a result of rapid modernization and in the absence of mediating institutions capable of meeting the human needs created by these dislocations. Occasioned by mass migration from rural to urban areas, by unsynchronized social, economic, and cultural transformations and uneven schemes of development, by failures in educational and social welfare systems, and ultimately by the collapse of long-held assumptions about the meaning and purpose of human existence, the experience of dislocation fosters a climate of crisis. In this situation people are needy in a special way. Their hunger for material goods is matched by a thirst for spiritual reassurance and fulfillment. If these needs are integrated and integral, so must be the power offering fulfillment. Religion presented as an encompassing way of life suggests itself as the bearer of that power.[1]

Yet this perceptive statement, emerging from an in-depth group research project involving scores of specialists, is not beyond challenge. Do the rubrics "formerly traditional societies" or "hunger for material goods" explain, say, Christian fundamentalism in the United States or Jewish fundamentalism in Israel? These American and Israeli exceptions suggest that explaining fundamentalisms too much in material terms may be faulty.

Other observers have favored the idea that the problem is essentially spiritual, that "man does not live by bread alone." Certainly, the spiritual message has always dominated the discourse of those fundamentalist movements we seek to understand. While it is necessary to look beyond what people claim to be doing, it is important to take seriously what they are, in fact, saying.

Perhaps a satisfactory overall explanation of fundamentalism as a global phenomenon could transcend the material-spiritual dichotomy by, first, identifying a people persuaded that their lives and their societies are marked by disorientation, uprootedness, lack of purpose, and (deliberately choosing an old-fashioned word that belongs in any serious study of this subject) sin. Then, one could move on to uncover in each particular case a different mix of quantifiable material factors plus factors not reducible to such quantification.

In this pattern of proceeding it can be shown that Muslim fundamentalisms do seem to fit into the larger category of third world fundamentalisms. The very intensity of quantifiable material changes and of severe expectation shortfalls, as set out in earlier pages, can explain the rise of system-challenging religio-political movements. At the same time, the exis-

tence of fundamentalist movements among peoples not experiencing such severe economic or political challenges and not being wrenched from radically different "traditional societies" to a disturbing modernity indicates that material factors are contributing but not determining causes. Put differently, radical religious movements exist today in the Muslim world, the United States, India, Israel, and elsewhere. All may be seen as efforts to give ultimate meaning to life in a context in which peoples feel adrift. To that extent, these movements grow up in the soil of material conditions but are germinated by the seeds of distinctive religious messages. The material and the message are both important.

The messages of different religious fundamentalism may well also share similarities, and this brings us to a second broad comparison. In this case the linkage to be suggested is not a synchronic contemporary comparison of the Muslim experience with that of, say, Christians or Jews or Hindus . . . It is, instead, across time, a diachronic comparison spanning the centuries—today's Islamist ideologues measured alongside the thought and action of Reformation leaders.[2]

Such a perspective has the advantage of shifting attention to individual men and to ideas, balancing thereby the previous chapter's concentration on anonymous social forces. Even the most Marxist interpretation of the Reformation must take the measure of Luther,[3] Calvin, Zwingli, Knox, and other flesh-and-blood human actors writing treatises and tracts, organizing churches and defying—or at times supporting—established political authority. Surely the likes of Hasan al-Banna, Abu al-A'la Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb, and Ayatullah Khomeini deserve no less attention.

Moreover, many today, and not just Protestants, are inclined to evaluate the long-term impact of the Reformation in positive terms. Even Catholic historiography tends to view the dialectic process of the Reformation/Counter-Reformation (to use the conventional rubrics) as bringing into being a strengthened Church and better societies. That the Reformation period in Europe is often classified in our simplified historical imagination as having been a "good thing" enhances the utility of comparing it to present-day Islamism, for the latter certainly has a "bad press" in the West and, for that matter, among many throughout the Muslim world. The suggestion that we are witnessing a Muslim "Reformation" may ensure a more judicious reading of these different leaders of today's Islamist movements.[4]

Although at first blush the comparison may seem strained, an impressive number of common themes binds together the Reformation and today's Islamism. Both emerge in a period bringing into existence powerful, centralizing nation-states with a concomitant fading away of broader imperial

regimes (the Holy Roman Empire for Europe and, for the Muslim world, the Ottoman Empire plus the alien European colonial empires—all alongside the lingering ideal of a common *Dar al-Islam*).

Both are marked by rapidly increasing literacy—Gutenberg and printing in Europe, the exponential rise in the numbers of students in state-directed educational institutions throughout the Muslim world.

This, in turn, for both sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe and today's Muslim world has shattered the centuries-old division between a small literate elite and the great mass of the population having scant contact or discourse with that literate minority. In Europe the Bible became more readily available in the several vernacular languages, e.g., Luther's German translation or Tyndale's English translation.[5] This, in turn, served to make "the priesthood of all believers" a meaningful concept.

Vernacular translations of the Qur'an had, of course, existed long before the 1960s, and the classical Arabic of the Qur'an, instead of being understood by declining numbers of Muslims (as is the case with Hebrew, Latin, and Greek among Christians), is being read and understood by more Muslims than ever before. This increase is to be accounted for largely in the Arab world where rapidly rising literacy has made it feasible for Arabic-speaking Muslims not so much to memorize the sacred texts without always comprehending them (as in past centuries) but to read and understand.[6] Rising literacy and schooling in other parts of the Muslim world may well have produced a slight increase in those capable of reading the Qur'an or other texts in the original Arabic, but the quantum jump making possible a Muslim equivalent of the "priesthood of all believers" has been not so much the enhanced availability of the scriptures in the vernacular languages as the general increases in literacy, schooling, and all media.

Broadened and intensified communication breaking down both the elite-mass dichotomy and the small-scale particularism characteristic of premodern agrarian society marked both the Reformation and today's Islamism, but the latter would appear to be exposed to even more vertiginous convulsions. Underlying the changes in Reformation Europe were increased literacy, the rise of printing, and the early stirring of exploration and entrepreneurship that would lead to capitalism. A case can be made that the Muslim world today is seized with the equivalent of all such factors plus more. Not only are the increases in literacy, publications, rural to urban migration, and economic interdependence greater for today's Muslims than for Europeans of the Reformation period. Not only is the time involved squeezed down for today's Muslims to a few decades as opposed to at least a century and a half, if not more, for Reformation Europe.[7]

In addition to all this, the present age of radio, television, cybermedia, and even such simple artifacts as tape recordings (which played a major role in the overthrow of the shah in Iran) has fostered a breadth and intensity of communication beyond the control of any political authority, however arbitrary.

Surely, the most important characteristic shared by the Reformation and today's Islamism is the basic thrust of their religio-political doctrines. Both are scripturalists. The scripture (Bible or Qur'an) is God's program for mankind. Its meaning is transparent and can be understood by all believers, without the need of intervening religious specialists or institutions.

Both adopt, to borrow Max Weber's classification, a stance of "inner-worldly ascetism."[8] They preach the moral obligation not only to make one's individual life conform to God's plan but to achieve that ideal for all, to bring into existence the divinely ordained society here and now. Both stress the omnipotent sovereignty of God. To both, government is necessary in order to control and guide the community in accordance with God's plan, but obedience is due only to those leaders who do not violate God's ordinances.

Both posit a golden age that stands as a reproach to and weapon against existing establishment doctrines and institutions.

Admittedly, there is an important difference between the two golden ages. That of the Islamists is squarely in the historical past: the time of Muhammad and those who knew him. For the Reformation leaders that golden age is more ahistorical, more paradigmatic: the "New Jerusalem." The difference is, of course, to be explained by the different historical development of the two religious traditions.

It can be argued, rightly, that none of the above is absent from the Christian heritage before the Reformation or the Islamic heritage before present-day Islamists. The scripture as God's word, the ineffable sovereignty of God, mankind's need for government, but government led by those who will heed God's divine plan, the historic age when God's message was, as it were, finalized, being exemplary for all time—these tenets are not new. What is distinctive, however, is that both Reformation Protestants and today's Islamists preach and practice with an oppressive rigor, a total commitment, and a Manichaean certitude that leave little latitude for morally neutral areas of human conduct.

These men and women of the Reformation and the Islamist movements see themselves as revolutionary saints.[9] They have enlisted in militant religious movements bent on changing the world. Their core ideology positions them to challenge existing established structures across the board.

This comparison between the Reformation and Islamism today reminds us of the force militant religious messages have brought to bear throughout history. One more ingredient is required: the message must resonate with those receiving it. The messenger must be, if not charismatic, at least credible. The Reformation had its messengers. Who are the Luthers and Calvins of today's Islamism?

Today's Islamist movements have to some extent transcended the divide separating Sunnis from Shi'is. Sunni Muslims were stirred by the Islamic Revolution in Iran and read attentively the writings of Ayatullah Khomeini, especially his famous treatise *Islamic Government*. Shi'is have studied the writings of Sunni theorists, perhaps especially those of Sayyid Qutb. Examples can be cited, as well, of governments cooperating across the Sunni-Shi'i divide, e.g., the Islamist government of Sunni Sudan and Iran of Khomeini and his successors.[10] Even so, the ideological roots of present-day Islamist movements are best traced by considering the Sunni and Shi'i cases separately. The Sunni case will be sketched here and in the following chapter. Chapter 15 will then treat Shi'i Islamism as demonstrated in the thought and actions of Ayatullah Khomeini.

Sunni Islamist doctrines are customarily seen as both growing out of and in reaction to the earlier ideological climate subsumed under the name of Islamic modernism. The best-known school of Islamic modernism was that of the Salafiyya, based on the teachings of Shaykh Muhammad Abduh as continued by his disciples, especially Rashid Rida. Abduh, as noted in chapter 9, represented the effort to establish the claim that Islam, properly understood, was completely in accord with the demands of modern life. Using one's God-given intellectual capacity was not just permissible. It was enjoined. Islam gave religious significance to both this world and the world to come. This world was not simply a vale of tears. One had a religious duty to make this world better for its inhabitants. Islam stressed the equality of all believers. It required governors to consult and, by extension, rule in accordance with the wishes of those ruled. Islam was tolerant, protected non-Muslims, and eschewed forced conversions. These tenets were then employed to accept scientific discoveries, economic activism and entrepreneurship, representative government, and an implicit acknowledgment of the world's diversity (i.e., Islam as one religion alongside others).

Abduh himself was building on the ideas and efforts of those Muslims

who, since roughly the latter years of the eighteenth century, had witnessed their vulnerabity to European incursions and had sought to borrow from this threatening but tempting Europe in order to "catch up." He was thus in tune with a spectrum of statesmen and scholars—such as Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi or Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan or the "Men of the Tanzimat"—who sought to reconcile their society and their religion to the world they confronted.

These intellectual exertions of Abduh and others provided an Islamic ideological justification for the effort at "Westernization," or "modernization," that has been a dominant theme in Muslim history these past two centuries. All told, it was an impressive performance. Still, just as with any ideology—and, even more, any theology—not all questions were satisfactorily answered. The efforts of Abduh and others were most effective in undercutting what might be dubbed Muslim scholasticism, which turned a blind eye to changing circumstances and embraced uncritically the traditional Muslim canon. To this extent, the Salafiyya may rightly be seen as setting in motion a Muslim "Reformation."

Two weaknesses, however, characterized the ideology of Islamic modernism. First, it was too much an effort to justify Islam to modernity. The presumed values of modernity (*à la européenne*) were implicitly taken as the standard against which Islam was to be measured. As the ideas of what constituted modernity changed, Islamic modernism had to adjust to this fluctuating alien standard. To insist, for example, at one time or another that Islam was compatible with—if not, indeed, mandated—capitalism or socialism or communism, exposed the defensive and derivitive nature of the Islamic modernist discourse.

Second, the Salafiyya movement argued that Muslims over the centuries had deviated from God's divine plan as transmitted to his chosen prophet, Muhammad, and as practiced by the early Muslim community. The solution, they maintained, was to use that earlier golden age as the needed model. This gave the modernists a powerful rhetorical weapon against established authority, whether religious or political (leaders of the Protestant Reformation, for that matter, enjoyed a similar advantage).

Yet, since their basic aim was to justify rejecting blind traditionalism and embracing new—and alien—answers to society's problems, the Islamic modernists could be outflanked by the scriptural literalists. If everything Muslims need to know and need to do is to be found in the Qur'an, the Sunna, and the actions of the early Muslim community, then why concern oneself with borrowing from the West?

Even the supporting argument—often used by the Muslim modernists—

that Muslims would only be borrowing back what the West, centuries earlier, had borrowed from the Islamic world could be turned to fundamentalist purposes. The modernists might well argue that the West's present strength was based in considerable measure on earlier European borrowings from their Muslim neighbors in the fields of science, philosophy, and technology. Modernists would advance this argument to justify empirical research and openness to new ideas, methods, and institutions. Fundamentalists, however, with equal logic, could retort that Muslims attained worldly superiority when they followed God's divine plan. Neighboring Europe, lacking—or rejecting—God's plan, could only be helped by borrowing from a superior (because God-guided) Islamic civilization, and Muslims could regain ground lost by getting back to their divine-inspired roots, not by seeking answers beyond the orbit that God has drawn.

It was these two characteristics (perhaps it is unreasonable to dub them weaknesses) that largely shaped the legacy of Islamic modernism. The argument that Islam, properly understood, not only was consonant with modernity but required acceptance of modernity provided a program for the Westernizers. The argument that to right their present plight Muslims needed only to get back to that golden age when God gave Muslims the comprehensive unchanging pattern for individual and communal living (valid everywhere and for all time—*li kull makan wa zaman*, in Arabic) was tailor-made for the scriptural literalists.

Accordingly, scholars have tended to see a bifurcated legacy left by the Salafiyya. On the one hand, they served to justify moves toward a de facto secularism in politics and government and a concomitant privatization of religion. On the other, they advanced the goals of a Muslim fundamentalist Reformation by emphasizing that all believers should rely on the scriptures, not on a Muslim "church" establishment of ulama who were often, to make matters worse, subservient to irreligious political authority. Even less should they heed secular authority that would make religion a private concern.

That second legacy leading to today's Islamists is best illustrated in the writings and actions of two Egyptians and one Indian Muslim who became a Pakistani after partition. They are Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, and Abu al-A'la Mawdudi. Many others could be mentioned, but these three have been the most influential. Moreover, in large measure the ideas and programs of other Sunni Islamists can be seen as glosses on the basic doctrines advanced by al-Banna, Qutb, and Mawdudi.

All three were sons of this century. Al Banna, born in 1906, was assassinated in 1949. Qutb, born also in 1906, was executed by the Nasser regime

in 1966. Thus, both Egyptians met a violent death at the hands of state authority (for the Egyptian secret police were involved in al-Banna's assassination). Only Mawdudi, born in 1903, died a natural death in 1979, but his life—like that of Qutb—was marked by imprisonment. These three, in short, were not closeted academic thinkers. They were—like Luther, Zwingli (who died in battle), Calvin, and others of the Reformation—political activists.

Al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brethren in 1928, was more nearly the charismatic leader and organizer. Mawdudi and Qutb left more writings and provided a more comprehensive and coherent body of doctrine. The ideological influence concerning these two ran largely from Mawdudi to Qutb, not the other way round, even though they were essentially contemporaries (Mawdudi born only three years before Qutb). This was because Qutb came to his radical Islamism only in the late 1940s, abandoning an earlier modernist orientation that included a passion for English literature. Al-Banna and Mawdudi, by contrast, had both been deeply involved in Islamist thought and activities from their earliest years. All three were from reasonably well-established but traditional families, examples of those most vulnerable to losing the limited social standing that traditional society gave them. The onslaught of modern, alien ideas and institutions challenged and, indeed, dismantled their way of life. All three responded with a Manichaean image of the divinely inspired in-group confronting the godless other.

Chapter 14 discusses these three principal ideologues of Sunni radicalism. Then, chapter 15 will treat Ayatullah Khomeini in the context of Shi'i Islamism.