

The Unholy Uses of the Apocalyptic Imagination: Twentieth Century Patterns

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Contrary to published expectations, the antiseccular, antimodernist religious movements that are sometimes compared under the term “fundamentalisms” are not passing gently into history. Radical cells with affinities to fundamentalism are among the leading perpetrators of guerrilla warfare or terrorism in Egypt, Algeria, Indonesia, Pakistan, Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, and elsewhere. Al-Qaeda spectacularly represents the violence of religious extremism on a global scale. Are these fringe groups, or do they represent the sensibilities and convictions of masses of their co-religionists?

Part of the answer lies in gauging the success or failure of extremists’ retrieval and manipulation of traditional religious cosmologies and doctrines. The use of myths, symbols and narratives familiar to their co-religionists is often a transparent attempt to enlarge their pool of potential recruits and to mobilize fence-sitters. But it is the choice of myths and symbols that interests us here. For radical “fundamentalists,” in their effort to justify violence that often targets or inadvertently strikes non-combatants, face a dilemma. They must recruit from among the population of orthodox and conservative co-religionists—precisely those elements of the community who understand that violence against innocents is strictly forbidden in the great tradition. How, then, do the radicals justify violence that bursts the seams of “just war” or the rules of jihad?

In this paper I examine what might be called the fundamentalist apocalyptic imagination as it is built upon, and shaped by, distinctive readings and reconstructions of the past. Along the way I examine the link between the violence perpetrated by religious extremists and their apocalyptic visions of time and time beyond time.

Fundamentalism, Apocalypse and Violence: General Remarks

The apocalyptic imagination of fundamentalists is shaped by a tortured vision of the past, a construction of history that attempts to cast the long and otherwise dispiriting record of the humiliation, persecution and exile of the true believers (punctuated by an occasional, atypical “golden age” of faith) as a necessary prelude to and prerequisite for the decisive intervention of God and the final vanquishing of the apostates.

That (tortured) sentence deserves several qualifications. First, the blanket use of the term “fundamentalism” may suggest, incorrectly, that Protestant fundamentalism—an early case of organized, militant religious opposition to secular modernity and its erosive accomplices (pluralism, relativism, feminism)—is the template for all other “fundamentalisms.” The scriptural inerrancy invented by the millenarian critics of the Higher Criticism of the Bible in the late 1880s, however, is hardly the defining mark of all such religious movements that arose in reaction against the various cultural and political manifestations of secular modernity—not least, beyond the American case, the rise of the modern nation-state with its absolutist pretensions and ever-increasing reach.¹

Almost a generation earlier, with the promulgation of the *Syllabus of Errors* (1864), by which Pope Pius IX condemned most aspects of modernity, the Roman Catholic Church inaugurated its own antimodernist campaign.² It was built on a platform of ecclesial rather than scriptural “inerrancy.” (The doctrine of papal infallibility was defined by the First Vatican Council in 1870.) “Scriptural inerrancy” is redundant when applied to Muslims’ traditional—not, that is, “antimodern”—belief about the Qur’an. And so on.

Second, Muslims, Christians and Jews have objected to the use of “fundamentalism” because it implies that their militant co-religionists are the true believers, the righteous defenders of the faith, when in fact they manipulate sacred texts and traditional teachings to serve political ends. Mainstream believers do not fail to note the irony in the posturing of self-anointed defenders of the faith who have little respect for the integrity of its “fundamentals.” Fundamentalism, in other words, is best understood as a particular mode of thought and action, an identifiable configuration of ideology and organizational resources—not, that is, as an “essence” or constitutive trait of any one or all of the host religious traditions. And even within the family of “fundamentalisms” reaching across time zones and religious traditions, the differences between these movements are far greater than their similarities.

Third, to describe the fundamentalists’ view or views of the past as “tortured” is to run the outsider’s risk of missing the full significance and function of history as it is learned, taught and re-enacted by various sub-groups of Muslims or Christians or Jews. Each of these groups, in turn, has succeeded in developing an enduring religious culture or subculture by discerning meaning and purpose from the farrago of its own particular and in some sense incomparable historical experiences.

Yet one ventures to speak of an “apocalyptic imagination” shared in broad outline by disparate militant religious movements composed of self-styled “true believers” who attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors.

No matter how expertly or awkwardly they imitate secular moderns, fundamentalists remain dualists at heart; they imagine the world divided into unambiguous realms of light and darkness peopled by the elect and reprobate, the pure and impure, the orthodox and the infidel. Many if not all fundamentalists further dramatize this Manichean worldview by setting it within an apocalyptic framework: the world is in spiritual crisis, perhaps near its end, when God will bring terrible judgment upon the children of darkness. When

the children of light are depicted in such millenarian imaginings as the agents of this divine wrath, violent intolerance toward outsiders appears justified on theological grounds.

“Apocalyptic,” “millennialist” or “millenarian” are technical and tradition-specific terms; a more inclusive way of describing this ideological trait is to say that fundamentalists tend to be “exceptionalists.” Whatever specific theological resources the host religious tradition may (or may not) have for legitimating a departure from normal operating procedures, that is, fundamentalists believe themselves to be living in a special dispensation—an unusual, extraordinary time of crisis, danger, apocalyptic doom, the advent of the Messiah, the Second Coming of Christ, the return of the Hidden Imam, etc. This “special time” is exceptional not only in the sense of being unusual; its urgency requires true believers to make exceptions, to depart from the general rule of the tradition.

Apocalypse as a Functional Doctrine

This provides one answer to the question, How does a religious tradition that normally preaches nothing but peace, compassion, forgiveness, and tolerance, adopt the discourse of intolerance and violence? The answer: these are not “normal times.” Fundamentalists, as mentioned, do not recruit from among the moderates or liberals in their religious communities. They appeal to those believers who are more likely to be offended by encroaching foreign norms and secular threats. But this pool of potential recruits constitutes a potential problem for the fundamentalists, for the sacred scriptures and traditions forbid indiscriminate violence and place specific constraints on any use of violence. What is a proponent of armed jihad or crusade to do?

Create a sense of crisis—indeed, of mortal threat or, better, apocalyptic dread. Thus the religious Zionist elders of the Ichud Rabbanim invoked the halakhic norm of *pikuach nefesh* in ruling that the Oslo accords threatened the very existence of Israel—and Judaism itself. This “fail-safe” option had the effect of subordinating all other laws to the requirements of survival. Similarly, Ayatollah Khomeini, in the last year of his life, made the extraordinary ruling that the survival of the Islamic Republic of Iran demanded that parts of the Islamic law putatively governing it were to be suspended in deference to the Supreme Jurist’s (i.e., Khomeini’s) own ad hoc rulings. The Sikh extremist Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, likewise claiming that the Sikh faith was under mortal threat, added the motorcycle and revolver to the traditional Sikh symbols, and recruited a ferocious minority of his fellow Sikhs into an updated version of the seventeenth century order of baptized Sikhs, the Khalsa Singh (the “purified” or “chosen” lion race).

The traditional Sikh teaching on outsiders is summarized in the legend attributed to Guru Nanak: “Take up arms that will harm no one; let your coat of mail be understanding; convert your enemies into friends; fight with valor, but with no weapon but the word of God.” How did the charismatic Bhindranwale legitimate the violation of this precept? In mobilizing his band of followers, Bhindranwale argued, in effect, that exceptional times require extreme measures. “The Hindu imperialist rulers of New Delhi” seek to annihilate the Sikh people, he warned; their intention is evident in their open support of “apostates” such as the Nirankari sect, and in their economic exploitation of rural and urban Sikhs. Thus Bhindranwale retrieved Guru Hargobind’s doctrine of temporal power wedded to spiritual authority (*miri-piri*) and Guru Gobind’s concept of righteous war (*dharma yuddha*). He defended this move by citing Gobind’s maxim that “when all else fails, it is righteous to lift the sword in one’s hand and fight.” In effect, Bhindranwale announced a new dispensation:

For every village you should keep one motorcycle, three young baptized Sikhs and three revolvers. These are not meant for killing innocent people. For a Sikh to have arms and kill an innocent person is a serious sin. But Kahlsaji [O, baptized Sikh], to have arms and not to get your legitimate rights is an even bigger sin.³

The traditional rituals and devotions which sacralize personal self-sacrifice become in extremist hands a means of preparing the devout cadres for physical warfare. The self-flagellation of Iranian or Lebanese Shi’ites during the Ashura ritual commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Husayn is a form of militant religiosity, as are the fasts, prayers, rosaries, and candlelight vigils of Christians who mount militant campaigns to protect the unborn fetus threatened by abortion. Neither of these rituals is inherently extremist; but they become sources of extremism for the Ashura penitent who exacts vengeance on Husayn’s contemporary persecutors, or the “pro-lifer” who guns down an abortionist. Such prescribed prayers and rituals, interpreted by an extremist preacher, locate the believer in a sacred cosmos that rewards martyrdom or imprisonment endured in a divine cause.

Horrendous Past as Prelude to Heavenly Future, Birthed by Apocalyptic Violence

Another key to the apocalyptic imagination of late modern religious extremism is found in the fundamentalists’ appropriation of history. Decidedly, history is not just “one damn thing after another.” Rather, it is the arena in which the divine plan is enacted, in which souls gain or lose their salvation, in which God’s elect—the dramatis personae in the passion play—take center stage. There they may perform in a passive, quiescent mode by building the religious enclave, converting, indoctrinating and gathering in the true believers, and awaiting the coming of the messiah or renewer. The Haredi, or Ultra-Orthodox, Jews of Israel occupy this niche prominently, as do premillennialist Christians of the United States and Europe who anticipate the Rapture, the coming of the anti-Christ, the great cosmic battle of Armageddon, and the thousand-year rule of Christ. For much of their history, Shi’ite Muslims adopted a quiescent mode, awaiting deliverance from the Hidden Imam.⁴

Or, conceiving themselves to be active agents of the almighty, they organize for cultural power, political takeover, or military conquest. The New Christian Right of the 1980s derived energy from a fundamentalist core who had decided that the United States was

becoming so godless that Bible-believing Christians could no longer wait privately for the return of Christ; the elect were required to “take back” the public schools, the Supreme Court, the Congress and the presidency.⁵ Shi‘ite ayatollahs awoke from their political slumbers to strive to transform Iran and Lebanon into an Islamic republic that would eventually merge into an “all-encompassing Islamic state” embodying the *umma* or worldwide Islamic community).⁶

The past has a double edge for many of the militant antisecular groups. On the one hand, it is filled with horrible suffering for the believers and apparent victories for the apostates—those who have fallen away from the true faith and succumbed to materialism, the corruptions incumbent upon sexual license and the lust for money, and the other spiritually enervating seductions of modernity. The enemy seems to control the centers of power. And yet—to the eyes of the true believer, even now God is bringing this dour history to an unexpected, dramatic and rewarding culmination. The Jews of Gush Emunim—the Bloc of the Faithful in Israel—combine in their one small movement a remarkable balance of the extremes of euphoria and expectation, on the one hand, and disgust with, or despair at, mundane realities, on the other, that are found less expertly blended in many other movements. The establishment of the state of Israel, in Gush “historiography,” is clearly a sign and instrument of the arrival of the messianic age, as were the several military victories over the surrounding Arab populations. Gush Emunim itself is the chosen agent of the divine plan to restore “the whole land of Israel” to its Biblical proportions.

By aggressively establishing settlements in the occupied territories and committing violence—the late Ehud Sprinzak described three patterns: vigilante, enforcement and defensive violence—the Bloc of the Faithful is coaxing the secular Zionist government to defend the Jewish presence and thus to restore the Jews to their rightful place as sovereigns over the Holy Land. But the confident and often ecstatic behavior of the Gush co-exists with bouts of severe depression when other “facts in the field” occur—such as the bulldozing of the Yamit settlement on the Sinai by the Israeli government, in compliance with the Camp David accords; or the “defection” of the late Prime Minister Rabin, who negotiated the Oslo Accords with Arafat and presumed to trade “Jewish” land for peace.⁷

Both the near-euphoria and the despair are rooted in what might be called a supernaturalist reading of history. Professional secular historians typically are reluctant to identify or even search for a transcendent meaning to the narratives they manage to piece together: ordinary time, with all its humbling ambiguities, is their métier. By contrast, fundamentalists seem not to be terribly bothered by the multivalent and often contradictory testimonies culled from archives and archaeological digs, or encountered within their own sacred scriptures and religious traditions.

Seldom is the “true believer” confounded by the multiple motives of historical actors, random occurrences and unintended consequences—ultimately, there are no random occurrences and unintended consequences in a providential universe. Details that reinforce the received worldview receive dutiful attention. Like all historians, fundamentalists select from the jumble of facts and events, prioritizing and weighing some few more heavily than all the rest; no attempt at narrative can avoid the sifting process. But fundamentalists often reach beyond the personal inclinations and biases that influence any historian, to an external source such as scripture that provides an inerrant—that is, a trustworthy—foundation for hermeneutics. Indeed, the proprietors of the cottage industry in Christian apocalypticism, including mega-selling authors such as Tim LaHaye (the wildly popular *Left Behind* series) and Hal Lindsey (*The Late Great Planet Earth*), endorse—and profit from—the fundamentalist preacher’s assertion that reading history through the lens of Biblical prophecy is a method more “objective” than being guided by one’s own subjectivity.⁸

Apocalypticism, in this sense, is a defining feature of violent religious movements. The expectation of a dramatic reversal of history at the hands of God or the messiah, in which the faithful or “holy remnant” are vindicated and their enemies brutally punished, is not confined to fundamentalists, of course—it is a deep strain within the pre-modern (and thus pre-fundamentalist) history of all three major monotheisms. But apocalyptic or millenarian fervor takes on a decidedly therapeutic role in the lives and imagination of the “modern anti-modernists.” The anticipated reversal of “ordinary history” is a source of great comfort for millions of true believers living in conditions of squalor, relative deprivation, or moral decadence. The fundamentalists’ present suffering is but a prelude to a profoundly satisfying reward for their perseverance, whether they live in the putrid refugee camps of Gaza or southern Lebanon, or amid the relative affluence of the spiritually sterile suburbs of Dallas.

Thus, the Persian Gulf War of 1990 provoked in the Christian fundamentalists of Dallas (and elsewhere) a complex sensation of dread mixed with rapturous joy. To these Christian dispensationalists—who believe God has divided history into several “dispensations,” or eras, the last of which, the apocalyptic End Times, is imminent—the reports of Saddam Hussein lobbing Scud missiles at Israel seemed to augur the outbreak of Armageddon. The Bible predicts, the dispensationalists believe, that the great and unimaginably bloody final battle between the forces of Christ and Anti-Christ will occur at Megiddo, a hill in Israel not far from where the missiles were falling. True believers, however, found reason to celebrate the approach of the End Times in their conviction that they would be taken directly to heaven (an event called “the rapture”) to escape the chastisement and conflagration awaiting the mass of sinful humanity.

In a book published in 1991 entitled, with intended irony, *The New World Order*, Pentecostal preacher and erstwhile presidential candidate Pat Robertson dutifully detailed the chaos to come for those left behind. Exploiting the military victory over Iraq, President George W. H. Bush, Robertson claimed, was leading a well-organized, well-financed, multi-generational “cabal” in a “conspiracy” to create a one-world socialist state, centered in the United Nations and eventually to be governed by the Anti-Christ of biblical prophecy. In seeking to demonstrate this thesis, Robertson took the history of the twentieth century as his text, pointing to events as disparate as loans made to Bolshevik Russia in 1917, the creation of the European common market and the “Euro,” and the Bank of Credit and Commerce

International (BCCI) scandal, to “prove” that the satanic conspiracy had been building for generations.⁹

Those self-styled “true believers” hardly fall into lockstep, however, in their methods of relating temporality to eternity. Sensibilities differ. Some attempt entirely to shut out developments occurring apart from, or subsequent to, sacred time. Ultra-Orthodox rebbes living in contemporary Israel, ensconced in their enclave known as Mea Shearim, consult maps of Eastern Europe marking villages, regions and place names that have not existed for more than a century. Others shut out every bit of data but what the sacred text provides. The sociologist Samuel C. Heilman reports that sixth grade boys studying in the upper school of a Lithuanian yeshiva in Jerusalem immediately prior to the Gulf War were unable to sketch the outline of a map of Jerusalem or to tell him the names of the surrounding countries. One of the youngsters, in reply to the question of what bordered on Israel, confidently answered that Israel was surrounded by “*chutz la’aretz*,” the Hebrew expression that most Israelis use to refer to the rest of the world. “In this boy’s mind the world was neatly divided,” Heilman writes. “Just as there were goyim and Jews, so similarly there was Israel and *chutz la’aretz*.” None of the boys could identify Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. None of the boys had ever heard of Saudi Arabia.¹⁰

By contrast members of Gush Emunim are a reliable source to consult for the latest news regarding the latest developments in Middle East politics; they follow unfolding events closely, using them to buttress their distinctive reading of modern (messianic) history. The radical Jewish settlers are not waiting anxiously on the messiah like their Haredi counterparts; rather, as we have seen, they are proclaiming a messianic era and forcing Israel’s hand by creating new settlements in the occupied territories of “Judea” and “Samaria.” History, as one of the Gush publicists, Daniella Weiss, once explained, is our currency.¹¹

Their different settings, beliefs and goals notwithstanding, Jewish, Christian and Islamic “fundamentalists” interpret the history of the modern period, especially the twentieth century, in remarkably similar ways. Above all it has been a period of dramatic and gut-wrenching decline—words like “erosion,” “alienation,” “isolation,” and “exile” typically characterize the weakened state of traditional religious observance, family life, and parental authority and patriarchal privilege. The atheistic or agnostic modern state is the recurring culprit, whether it be a United States Supreme Court which legalized abortion, an Israeli prime minister that attempted to trade land for peace with the Palestinians, or a Saudi monarchy that entered into military and business alliances with the Western infidels. “*The bottom line*,” concluded the influential Christian thinker Francis A. Schaeffer, who could have been speaking for the disgruntled Jews of Israel or the Muslims of Egypt, “is that at a certain point there is not only the right, but the duty, to disobey the state.”¹²

The treachery of supposedly orthodox co-religionists is another defining mark of fundamentalist history. Christian ideologues such as Schaeffer and Tim LaHaye point to the Christian foundations of the American republic and lament their erosion at the hands of secularized Christians. Jewish extremists see the peace movement in Israel as expressive of the fragmentation of Orthodox Judaism and the confusion wrought by that crisis. And Muslim extremists, whose reading of history—and plans to alter its course—has captured our attention in dramatic fashion, have their litany of traitors and heroes.

Violence Spiraling Beyond Calculation

Fundamentalists, who seek to create an alternative social and political order “for the long run,” are in the impossible situation of wanting to constrain apocalyptic violence after they have set loose its agents and unleashed its dynamics! The ideological father of Islamic fundamentalisms was Maulana Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi, the Indian-born Pakistani intellectual. Modern Muslim discourse on the social, political and economic teachings of Islam owes an enormous debt to Maududi, who coined and systematically defined terms such as “Islamic politics,” “Islamic ideology,” “the economic system of Islam,” and “the Islamic constitution.” More systematically than any other author, Maududi re-cast Islam as an ideological alternative to both Western liberalism and Soviet Marxism.¹³

Envisioning Islam as a comprehensive political system as well as a way of life, Maududi advocated the concept of *iqamat-i-deen* (“the establishment of religion”) the total subordination of the institutions of civil society and the state to the authority of the Shari’a. Islamic law and Islamic governance should extend, Maududi taught, “from the mosque to the parliament, from the home to the school and economy; from art, architecture and science to law, state and international relations.”¹⁴

This is hardly the framework for anarchism or even violent revolution, though the Jamaat-i-Islami at times has successfully harnessed the power and violence of the state in its causes.

Yet disgraceful social conditions and political malfeasance have a way of running ahead of reformist measures, inciting violent reaction in the young. The “humiliation and disgrace” visited upon “the Islamic nation” only deepened, reaching its apex with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and the first of several demoralizing military defeats suffered at the hands of the Zionists.¹⁵ The Arab and Muslim identities of that imagined, trans-national “nation” clashed violently in the 1950s and 60s following the ascent to power of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt. Nasser’s vision of pan-Arab unity buttressed by state socialism captured the imagination of the Arab Middle East. But his state-guided, state dominated plan to build the public sector of the economy suffered from a balance of payments crisis, domestic entanglements (including an alleged plot by the Muslim Brotherhood), and the excessive bureaucratization and overmanagement often associated with central planning.¹⁶ At the same time, Nasser’s political leadership of the Arab world suffered a mortal blow when Israel won the Six Day War of 1967 and occupied the West Bank, Gaza and the Sinai. Not least, Nasser also made the fateful choice to isolate and then outlaw the Muslim Brotherhood (which had become increasingly violent), arresting more than one thousand of its leaders and executing six, including Qutb.¹⁷

While in prison, however, Qutb penned a treatise which his followers disseminated across the Sunni world. *Milestones* (1960), also

known by the title *Signposts on the Road*, became the manifesto of Sunni extremism and the justification for terrorism.¹⁸ In *Milestones* Qutb developed an interpretation of jihad, Islamic holy war, that would become the core doctrine of the Islamic Liberation Organization of Egypt and Jordan, the Jihad Organization and Takfir wal-Hijra of Egypt, and similar cells in Egypt, North Africa, Lebanon, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the West Bank, and the Gulf states.¹⁹ Qutb's radical innovation was the application of the concept of Jahiliyya, "the state of ignorance of the guidance from God," to fellow Muslims (including Arab leaders such as Nasser) who had abandoned Islam, he charged, in favor of atheistic philosophies and ideologies. "Our whole environment, people's beliefs and ideas, habits and art, rules and laws is—Jahiliyyah, even to the extent that what we consider to be Islamic culture, Islamic sources, Islamic philosophy and Islamic thought, are also constructs of Jahiliyyah!" As a result, he charged, "the true Islamic values never enter our hearts . . . our minds are never illuminated by Islamic concepts, and no group of people arises among us who are of the calibre of the first generation of Islam."²⁰

Maududi's concept of *iqamat-i-deen* echoes in Qutb's exhortations from prison to his fellow Muslim Brothers. Significantly for our purposes, Qutb justifies "the establishment of religion" through a reading of history that posits a golden age or primordial state of purity, resolve and religious integrity, standards from which subsequent generations departed. ("No group of people arises among us who are the calibre of the first generation of Islam.") People of the calibre of the Prophet and his companions do not arise, in turn, because the vicissitudes of historical experience have in various ways eroded the social and institutional structures within which true belief flourished. True believers of the past have too often failed to seize the moment, and have let events—the normal course of historical developments—determine the outcome of the perennial struggle between the righteous and the unbelievers.

The remedy to historical erosion? "We must return to that pure source from which those people [the earliest followers of the Prophet Muhammad] derived their guidance—the source which is free from any mixing or pollution," Qutb wrote. "From [Islam] we must also derive our concepts of life, our principles of government, politics, economics and all other aspects of life."²¹

Qutb's dour reading of long stretches of the Muslim past informs and shapes the elements of fundamentalist ideology on display in *Milestones*: alarm over the perceived loss of religious integrity; the refusal to compromise with outsiders; the sense of apocalyptic crisis; the envy and imitation of secular modernity, juxtaposed with repulsion at its immoral excesses; and, finally, the desire to build a comprehensive religious alternative to secularism. Withdrawal from so-called Islamic society, for Qutb, was a prelude to an offensive jihad against infidels and apostates around the world. The Islamic fundamentalist movement would use the weapons and tactics of the secular world against it. "Since this movement comes into conflict with the Jahiliyyah which . . . has a practical system of life and a political and material authority behind it," he writes, "the Islamic movement had to produce parallel resources to confront this Jahiliyyah. This movement uses the methods of preaching and persuasion for reforming ideas and beliefs; and it uses physical power and Jihaad for abolishing the organizations and authorities of the jahili system"²²

Jihad is not restricted to defense of the homeland, Qutb insists. Rather, it is a command to extend the borders of Islam to the ends of the earth:

Islam is not a "defensive movement" in the narrow sense which is technically today called a defensive war. This narrow meaning is ascribed to it by those who are under pressure of circumstances and are defeated by the wily attacks of the orientalisks, who distort the concept of Islamic Jihaad. It was a movement to wipe out tyranny and to introduce true freedom to mankind, using resources according to the actual human situation, and it had definite stages, for each of which it utilized new methods.

If we insist on calling Islamic Jihaad a defensive movement, then we must change the meaning of the word "defense" and mean by it "the defense of man" against all those elements which limit his freedom. These elements take the form of beliefs and concepts, as well as of political systems, based on economic, racial or class distinctions. When we take this broad meaning of the word "defense," we understand the true character of Islam, and that it is a universal proclamation of the freedom of man from servitude to other men, the establishment of God and His Lordship throughout the world, the end of man's arrogance and selfishness, and the implementation of the rule of the Divine Sharia'ah in human affairs.²³

In *Milestones*, Qutb argues that the Prophet's prohibition against fighting was only "a temporary stage in a long journey" during the Meccan period, and he uses inflammatory language easily construed as legitimating lethal violence against Islam's numerous enemies. (It was construed in this way by Qutb's intellectual disciples, notably the Jihad group which assassinated Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981.²⁴) Yet Qutb himself disavowed any intent to harm individuals, claiming that the Islamists attack only institutions, and at least one sympathetic scholar describes him as "essentially a philosopher who shunned violence."²⁵

Be that as it may, Qutb's legacy includes the cadres of radical fundamentalist Muslims who created new forms of violent intolerance and religious resistance to the powers-that-be. Elements of his ideology have inspired fundamentalist movements and terrorist cells that grew up outside his original sphere of influence, including the Taliban, the Harkat Mujahideen of Pakistan, and the Armed Islamic Group [GIA] of Algeria, which has waged a terrorist campaign against the "jahili" Government of Algeria since 1992. Among the terrorist networks influenced by Qutb's notion of jihad are Al-Qaeda, which bin Laden founded in 1985.²⁶

Thus we return to bin Laden and his distinctive view of Western and Islamic history over the past eighty years. Like al-Banna and Qutb, bin Laden charges that mainstream Muslim clerics have been co-opted by dictatorial and compromising rulers such as Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, or by the monarchy of Saudi Arabia, which committed the unforgivable sin of allowing U.S. troops to be stationed near the holy cities of Mecca and Medina ("its sanctities desecrated"). Delegitimated in many circles of the Islamic world, the state-supported religious scholars have yielded popular authority to the religiously unschooled but disgruntled lay men, many of whom

come from educational backgrounds in engineering, applied science, or business. In the late nineties, for example, the engineer bin Laden began to refer to himself as “Shaykh” Osama Bin-Muhammad Bin-laden, as he did in the “fatwa” he issued on 23 February 1998, announcing his legal “ruling” that every Muslim now has the individual duty to “kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military.”

The justification for this tragic distortion of Islamic law and ethics? U.S. policy toward the Middle East and the broader Islamic world, the Islamists charge, has transparently served the narrow interests of an affluent and comfortable American public, which consumes a grossly disproportionate percentage of natural resources (oil-based products in particular) while the mass of humanity in the countries being exploited for their oil live below the poverty level. Muslim lives and livelihoods are routinely sacrificed to support luxurious American lifestyles. The United States is a great hypocrite, espousing democracy and freedom in its rhetoric, while providing critical financial and military support to Israel, the Zionist interloper in the Middle East, and to anti-democratic and repressive regimes like those of Egypt, Algeria and Saudi Arabia, where the voice of the Muslim people is silenced.

This narrative of humiliation and disgrace at the hands of the United States is all the more compelling to its aggrieved Muslim audiences, of course, because it conforms to the dispiriting pattern of “ordinary” history as narrated by the fundamentalists. The plot is familiar: the virtuous true believers are overwhelmed by a treacherous, invasive and insidious enemy whose conquest of the abode of Islam is abetted by the successful seduction of fellow Muslims who have relaxed their vigilance. Only the extreme measures and extraordinary heroism of radical religion can provide deliverance. Framing the struggles against external and internal colonization in this way thereby fulfills the apocalyptic expectations of the most revolutionary of the fundamentalists. For they look for final deliverance not from the world, but from God; not from quotidian political struggle against oppression and injustice, but from the self-sacrificing acts of true believers willing to risk everything to vanquish “jahiliyya society” once and for all.

Ambiguity and Apocalypse

A hallmark of the discourse of religious extremists is the calculated ambiguity of their leaders’ rhetoric about violence. An extremist preacher’s standard repertoire—the constant use of metaphor and veiled allusion, apocalyptic imagery, and heated rhetoric not always meant to be taken literally or obeyed as a concrete set of directions—allows the preacher to evade accountability for failed operations. Other activists in the movement, in any event, usually “operationalize” the broad “permissions” voiced by the extremist leader.²⁷

In fundamentalist movements a charismatic leader provides the vision and religious-moral legitimation for action, while his subordinates develop a specific program of action. The resulting distance between the words and intentions of a charismatic leader and the acts perpetrated by his followers affords a space in which violence may take on a life of its own, deviating from the original purpose and violating the restrictions set by the leader.

Regimented clandestine violence is difficult to maintain because it assumes its own unpredictable dynamism that defies the “logic” of even the most carefully nuanced theology. When the religious scholars of Hizbullah, the “Party of God” in Lebanon refused to legitimize acts of sheer terror, such as the indiscriminate 1986 bombings in Paris which killed people in shops and trains at random, the Lebanese Shi’ite plotters took care not to claim the bombings for Islam, and enticed a Tunisian recruit to plant the explosives. (On other occasions the religious leaders prevailed. Hizbullah possessed the capability to launch similar campaigns abroad and was reported ready to do so on many occasions, but the ulema failed to give permission for the acts.)

The killing of Shi’ites by Shi’ites in Hizbullah’s war with Amal presented another test case for the religious leadership. Some clerics were willing to rationalize the killing on the grounds that Amal had conspired with the enemies of Islam, had repudiated the leadership of Islamic Iran, and had protected Israel by barring Hizbullah’s route to the South. Others, however, were not persuaded that these deeds justified killing, and they labeled the conflict with Amal a *fitna* (“dissension”) rather than a jihad. The fighting nonetheless continued.

In the end, the religious leadership helped to inspire the violence and shaped its course, but could not completely control or contain it. “Hizbullah was Islamic by day, Lebanese by night. There were some principles, even of Islam, that the poor could not afford.” The oppressed nations “do not have the technology and destructive weapons America and Europe have, so they must thus fight with special means of their own,” Hizbullah’s spiritual leader, Shaykh Fadlallah, explained to a reporter. “[We] recognize the right of nations to use every unconventional method to fight these aggressor nations, and do not regard what oppressed Muslims of the world do with primitive and unconventional means to confront aggressor powers as terrorism. We view this as religiously lawful warfare against the world’s imperialist and domineering powers.”²⁸

Fadlallah, like other extremist religious leaders, sought to construe the violence as a moral and spiritual obligation within a religiously imagined world, the sustaining of which required its inhabitants to practice ritual prayer, compassion for the oppressed, service to the poor, and militant self-discipline in the pursuit of justice. Fadlallah liked to refer to himself as a liberationist. Yet he realized that sacred ends could be sullied by profane means, and urged his followers to cleanse their own impurities, even as they played an instrumental role in driving godless foreign forces out of Lebanon. By currying the favor of Islamic Iran by its abductions of foreigners, securing the release of many of its own imprisoned members, and defeating its Shi’ite rivals, Hizbullah’s program of violence served its political ambitions grandly. It also sparked a return to Islam among the Lebanese Shi’ite masses.²⁹ How faithfully it conformed to the moral norms of the great tradition of Islam, however, remains a matter of intense debate among Shi’ite Muslims, as well as outsiders looking in.

Conclusion

While it may be perfectly reasonable to dismiss fundamentalist readings of history as transparent manipulations of events and data, as mere projections of religious fanaticism and millenarian enthusiasm, it is important to underscore the fundamentalists' devotion to the narratives they have constructed, and their attention to the details they have imbedded in the narrative to reinforce its eschatological themes. More so than the general public, fundamentalists in the activist mode are engrossed with the events of history and spend significant time and resources indoctrinating recruits and educating the devout in its moral and political lessons.

Furthermore, the moral and political critiques that emerge from a historiography and historical method fundamentally different from that constructed and practiced by professional historians, are hardly incoherent or even unpersuasive. Rather, they shed a revealing light on what many historians consider "the real stuff of history," namely, the experience of suffering, injustice and alienation, mixed with and tempered by hope for deliverance, that characterize the human condition.

Endnotes

This revised text of my conference presentation is adapted from two previously published sources: R. Scott Appleby, "History in the Fundamentalist Imagination," *Journal of American History* 89/2 (September 2002): 498-511; and idem, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

The term *scriptural inerrancy* was coming into vogue in 1887 when William Hoyt, speaking at a major Bible conference on the "Inspired Word," declared that the Bible was in every detail "kept inerrant." George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York, 1980), 56.

¹ Pope Pius IX, "'Syllabus' or Collection of Modern Errors," in Henry Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma (Enchiridion Symbolorum)*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (St. Louis, 1957), 433-42. See also Roger Aubert, "The Church and Liberalism," in Aubert et al., *The Church in a Secularised Society* (Ramsey, NJ, 1978), 34-43.

² Quoted in Mark Tully and Satish Jacob, *Amritsar: Mrs. Gandhi's Last Battle* (New Delhi: Rupa, 1985), 114. See also Mark Juergensmeyer, "The Logic of Religious Violence: The Case of the Punjab," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 22 (1) (1988): 70. Juergensmeyer quotes a Sikh radical: "It is a sin for a Sikh to keep weapons, to hurt an innocent person, to rob anyone's home, to dishonor or to oppress anyone. But there is no greater sin for a Sikh than keeping weapons and not using them to protect his faith."

³ Abdulaziz A. Sachedina, "Activist Shi'ism in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon," in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago, 1991), 432-33; see also Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon* (Ithaca, 1986).

⁴ Jerry Falwell, "An Agenda for the Eighties," in *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon: The Resurgence of Conservative Christianity*, ed. Jerry Falwell with Ed Dobson and Ed Hindson (Garden City, NY, 1981), 205; Michael Lienesch, *Redeeming America: Piety and Politics in the New Christian Right* (Chapel Hill, 1993), 1-22.

⁵ Imam Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, trans. and annotated by Hamid Algar (Berkeley, 1981), 27-149. On Iran, see Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York, 1988); and Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (New York, 1985). On Lebanon, see Ayatollah Muhammed Hussein Fadl Allah [sic], "Islam and Violence in Political Reality," *Middle East Insight*, 4 (nos. 4-5, 1986), 4-13. An apocalyptic messianism animated Fadlallah's vision of a sweeping global triumph of Islam. "The divine state of justice realized on part of this earth will not remain confined within its geographic borders," one of his disciples predicted. That achievement "will lead to the appearance of the Mahdi, who will create the state of Islam on earth." To Hizbullah Fadlallah assigned the heroic role of purifying a province of Islam to create "the divine state of justice." The scope of its efforts would be accordingly grandiose. In order to rid Lebanese Shi'ites of their immediate tormentors, the Maronites and the Israelis, Hizbullah's manifesto called for "a battle with vice at its very roots. And the first root of vice is America. We will turn Lebanon into a graveyard for American schemes." Quoted in Martin Kramer, "Hizbullah: The Calculus of Jihad," in *Fundamentalisms and the State: Remaking Politics, Economies, and Militance*, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago, 1993), 545.

⁶ For a detailed account of Gush Emunim's worldview and practices, consult Gideon Aran, "Jewish Zionist Fundamentalism: The Bloc of the Faithful in Israel (Gush Emunim)," in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, ed. Marty and Appleby, 265-344.

⁷ Hal Lindsey with C.C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1970); Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Wheaton, 1995). On fundamentalist interpretations of scripture, see Kathleen C. Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So: The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism* (Albany, 1989).

⁸ Pat Robertson, *The New World Order* (Dallas, 1991), 6. Michael Lienesch, *Redeeming America: Piety and Politics in the New Christian Right* (Chapel Hill, 1993), 239. On the rapture and the events of the End Times, see Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875-1925* (New York, 1979), 5-26.

⁹ Samuel C. Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry* (Berkeley, 1992), 232-33.

¹⁰ Quoted in a film shown on PBS: *The Power and the Glory: The Land*, dir. Jane Treays (Jersey Productions, 1995).

¹¹ Francis A. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Westchester, IL, 1981), 93.

¹² Mumtaz Ahmad, "Islamic Fundamentalism in South Asia: The Jamaat-i-Islami and the Tablighi Jamaat of South Asia," in

Fundamentalisms Observed, ed. Marty and Appleby, 464.

¹³ *An Introduction to the Jamaat-i-Islami Pakistan* (Lahore, 1978), 5. Quoted in *ibid.*, 466.

¹⁴ Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi* (*Euromania*) trans. John Green and Ahmad Alizadeh (Lexington, 1982), 3.

¹⁵ John Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat: The Political Economy of Two Regimes* (Princeton, NJ, 1983), 100, 117.

¹⁶ Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967* (Cambridge, England, 1981), 138–200.

¹⁷ Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, trans. International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations (Stuttgart, 1978). The treatment of Qutb is adapted from R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation* (Lanham, Md., 2000), 91–95.

¹⁸ Amira El-Azhary Sonbol, “Egypt,” in *The Politics of Islamic Revivalism*, ed. Shireen T. Hunter (Bloomington, 1988), 30.

¹⁹ Qutb, *Milestones*, 32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 32–33.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 38, 117. Qutb broke with contemporary interpreters of Islamic law. Like “fundamentalists” in other traditions, he invoked the doctrines of a sage who had legitimated extremism, in this case Ibn Taymiyya (1268–1328), the medieval scholar of the Hanbalite school of Islamic law who had characterized Mongols as “false Muslims” and blessed those who fought them. Qutb also retrieved the practice of *ijtihad*, the use of one’s own judgment when no clear text was available from the Qur’an or the Hadith of the Prophet. Finally, he gave an extremist interpretation of a traditional precept—*jihad*—and justified the interpretation by recourse to “exceptionalism” (the argument that the onset of “Jahiliyyah” required extreme counter-measures). *Milestones* contains lengthy passages denouncing “minimalist” interpretations of *jihad*.

²² *Ibid.*, 111.

²³ Johannes J.G. Jansen, *The Neglected Duty: The Creed of Sadat’s Assassins and Islamic Resurgence in the Middle East* (New York, 1986), 30, 141.

²⁴ Sonbol, “Egypt,” 31.

²⁵ Al-Qaeda supported Muslim fighters in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Tajikistan, Somalia, Yemen and Kosovo, as well as training members of terrorist organizations from such diverse countries as the Philippines, Algeria and Eritrea. Bin Laden envisioned these operations as a step toward expelling the Western presence from Islamic lands, abolishing state boundaries, and creating a transnational Islamic society ruled by a restored Caliphate. In February 1998 he announced the creation of a new alliance of terrorist organizations and Islamic extremist movements, the International Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders, which included the Egyptian al-Gama’at al-Islamiyya, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the Harkat Mujahideen of Pakistan and other groups. John K. Cooley, *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism*, 2nd ed. (Sterling, Va., 2000), 120, 219.

²⁶ R. Scott Appleby, “The Measure of a Fundamentalist Leader,” in Appleby, ed., *Spokesmen for the Despised*, 19.

²⁷ Quoted in Martin Kramer, “Hizbullah: The Calculus of Jihad,” 551. On Fadlallah as an extremist leader, see also Martin Kramer, “The Oracle of Hizbullah: Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah,” in Appleby, *Spokesmen for the Despised*, 127.

²⁸ Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage*, 25–37.