The Burgeoning of Islamic Fundamentalism: Toward an Understanding of the Phenomenon

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This paper has been written from the perspective of a Muslim who has been much involved in Jewish-Christian-Muslim inter-religious dialogue in the last decade and who has striven earnestly, through personal interaction as well as through research, to break through the complex web of ignorance and fear which makes dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims so difficult. For me, engaging in interreligious dialogue with other Muslims and with "the People of the Book" (i.e., Jews and Christians) is not merely an interesting pastime. It is a life commitment which is deeply rooted in my faith in God, who is described in the opening statement of the Qur'an as *Rabb al-'alamin:* creator and sustainer of all the peoples. That God has willed not only diversity of peoples but also of religions is pointed out in a number of Qur'anic passages. A few examples are given below:

> To each is a goal to which God turns him; then strive together (as in a race) toward all that is good. Wheresoever ye are, God will bring you together. For God hath power over all things.[1]
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> To each among you have we prescribed a law and an open way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single People,

1. Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah:* 148; *The Holy Qur'an,* translated by A. Yusuf Ali (Brentwood: Amana Corp., 1983), p. 60.

but (his plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to God; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute.[2]

And (know that) all mankind were once but one single community, and only later did they begin to hold divergent views. And had it not been for a decree that had already gone forth from thy Sustainer, all their differences would indeed have been settled (from the outset).[3]

The God who has decreed diversity has also decreed dialogue in order that we may discover our common roots and journey together toward our common goal. The paths we follow may not be the same, but the agony of the quest, the passion of seeking, is the same. There is much in the Qur'an which relates particularly to the relationship of "the People of the Book"—Jews, Christians, Muslims—to God and to each other. I believe that if we could understand what the Qur'an is telling us, we would be able to overcome many difficulties which impede our dialogue. But much work has to be done—by Muslims, Jews, and Christians—separately and together, before we can comprehend and transcend all that separates us as human beings and as believers in the same loving, merciful, dialogue-oriented God.

One area which requires particular attention in the context of Jewish-Christian-Muslim interreligious dialogues is that of terminology. While it is a precondition of interreligious dialogue that each partner defines herself or himself,[4] it has been

2. Surah 5: *Al-Ma'idah:* 51; *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 258.

3. Surah 10: *Yunus:* 19; *The Message of the Qur'an*, trans. Muhammad Asad (Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus, 1980), p. 292.

4. This is the "fifth commandment" in "The Dialogue Decalogue" (Ground-rules for Interreligious Dialogue) by Leonard Swidler, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20 (Winter 1983): 2. The "commandment" reads: "Each participant must define himself. Only the Jew, for example, can define from the inside what it means to be a Jew. The rest can only describe what it looks like from the outside. Moreover, because dialogue is a dynamic medium, as each participant learns, he will change and hence continually deepen, expand, and modify his self-definition as a Jew—being careful to remain in constant dialogue with fellow Jews. Thus it is mandatory that each dialogue partner define what it means to be an authentic member of his own tradition."

the common experience of Muslims who participate in inter-religious dialogue in the West that such dialogues are dominated by Christian concepts and categories, and Muslims are required to "dialogue" in terms which are not only alien to their religious ethos but may even be hostile to it. One such term which is in great fashion today is "fundamentalism." Both in the media and in academic circles, there is much talk about "Islamic fundamentalism" and "Muslim fundamentalists," and scholars of Islam are constantly being asked to explain "the burgeoning of Islamic fundamentalism" in the contemporary world. As a person engaged in the study and teaching of religion, I certainly think that the phenomenon commonly referred to as "fundamentalism," which is of intense interest to many people in the present-day world, needs to be understood. But I have serious objections to the use of terms such as "fundamentalism" and "fundamentalists" with reference to Islam or Muslims.

Before I endeavor to explain why I object to the use of these specific terms, it is important to point out that these currently fashionable terms have been preceded by many other terms which have also been objectionable to Muslims engaging in interreligious dialogue with Jews and Christians. For instance, Muslims are all too often asked by Christians, "What is the Islamic concept of salvation or redemption?" Since "salvation" and "redemption" have no particular meaning in the Islamic tradition, which does not accept the Christian idea of salvation or redemption, the asking of such questions points to either an ignorance of Islam—a common problem—or an assumption that concepts which are important in the Christian tradition must necessarily be so in the Jewish and Islamic traditions, and that Jews and Muslims who dialogue with Christians should somehow be able and willing to find a content for these concepts from within their own distinctive—and different—religious beliefs and experience. Many Muslims, including myself, who, through a long history of being colonized not only politically but also intellectually by the Christian West, have internalized the vocabulary of our erst-

while colonizers, try—sometimes for years—to respond to such questions, not facing the fact that in many cases they stem not only from an ignorance of Islam but also from an attitude of religious imperialism. But there comes a time when we have to recognize that we cannot give authentic answers to inauthentic questions. There comes a time when, in faithfulness to our own basic integrity as Muslims, we have to refuse to answer such questions.

Religious imperialism, like other forms of imperialism, exhibits itself in a variety of ways. One way is to elevate one's own conceptions of reality or truth above those of the "other," having first assumed the right to define the "other" in one's own terms. For instance, it is not uncommon in Jewish-Christian-Muslim "dialogues" about the nature of God for a Christian to say to Jews and Muslims: "Your God is the God of justice, our God is the God of love." Since it is obvious that the speaker has assumed that "love" is better than "justice," such a statement reflects an attitude of religious triumphalism, even though, if pushed theologically, no one who professes to be a monotheist is likely to proclaim that there are two Gods—one of justice and the other of love. If God is one—and this is what Jews and Muslims as well as Christians affirm—then the reference in the statement is not to two Gods but to two understandings of the one God.

Here a number of critical questions arise. What is the meaning of saying, "Our God is the God of love" or "Your God is the God of justice"? How does the Christian who uses "love" and "justice" as antithetical terms understand these terms? While most Christians who use the formula "God is love" seldom elaborate on what is meant by "love"—whether it is a feeling, thought, or action—they generally tend to define "justice" narrowly in terms of what they believe to be the essence of the Mosaic law of "an eye for an eye," namely, the law of retribution. Rarely, if ever, are Jews or Muslims asked by Christians to tell them how they would define this "justice" which has been designated to be the primary characteristic of "their" God. If they were asked to do so, Jews may have the opportunity to

state that the Mosaic law is a limiting principle which emphasizes that "no more than" an eye may be taken for an eye, and Muslims may be able to point out that in the Qur'an, "justice" embraces both 'adl and ihsan. While 'adl requires that special merit be considered in matters of rewards and special circumstances be considered in the matter of punishments, ihsan requires that compassionate action be performed to make up the loss or deficiency suffered by those who are disadvantaged in society.[5]

It is important for Westerners to realize that Muslims feel angry and bitter when American mass media present the complex situations and issues which confront them in such oversimplified terms that the "truth" is seriously distorted if not lost altogether. They obviously feel much worse when they come across the same tendency to oversimplify even in assemblies of so-called dialogue-oriented Westerners. If interreligious dialogue between Westerners and Muslims is to be an authentic encounter, that which the latter perceive or conceive to be a multilayered, multifaceted religious reality or truth cannot be reduced to a simple formula by the former. Representing one's own religious beliefs in simplistic terms is dangerous enough. Representing the religious beliefs of the "other" in such a way, and then comparing them unfavorably with one's own, make interreligious dialogue a tool of religious polemics or politics and not a journey of faith.

In the last decade, the West has had a sudden explosion of interest in Islam. This was due, largely if not wholly, to events such as the Arab oil embargo of 1973 and the Iranian revolution of 1979, which shocked many Westerners into realizing that Islam—which they had long assumed to be dying, if not dead—was in the process of being "revived." Muslims living in the West, particularly those of us who participated in interreligious dialogue, were asked continually to explain the nature, mean-

5. For a more detailed description of 'adl and ihsan, see Riffat Hassan, "On Human Rights and the Qur'anic Perspective," in Arlene Swidler, ed., Human Rights in Religious Traditions (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982), pp. 56-58.

ing, and implications of "Islamic revival." Both elated and confounded by the West's unprecedented interest in Islam, we spent countless hours trying to do that, not realizing that while to many Christians terms such as "Christian revival" and "Christian renewal" are very significant, the term "Islamic revival" is a Western invention which has no corresponding reality in the life of Muslims in general. Something of great importance has, indeed, been going on in the Muslim world in recent times, but it is not the "revival" of Islam. Islam has never ceased to be a living reality to the vast majority of Muslims in the world, and it continues to give form and meaning to every aspect of their lives, even at a time when secularism has spread far and wide. In retrospect, it seems to me that our efforts to make Islam and Muslims more comprehensible to the West would have been better directed if, instead of answering questions which exist mostly in the minds of Westerners, we had endeavored to explain why Muslim societies are in such a state of ferment today and why certain issues appear to be so critical to contemporary Muslims.

Perhaps, if we had not been willing to answer questions on "Islamic revival" ten years ago, we would not be asked—in what seems like a replay of an old scenario—to answer questions on "Islamic fundamentalism" today. Many of the questions that Muslims are asked about "Islamic fundamentalism" are not very different from the ones they were asked about "Islamic revival" a decade ago. In fact, as many Muslims see it, in the West generally there is no clear-cut separation between "Islamic revival" and "Islamic fundamentalism." However, the obvious anxiety which many "liberal" and "dialogue-oriented" Westerners have felt in recent times on account of the so-called rise of fundamentalism, not only in the Islamic but also in the Jewish and Christian traditions, introduces a new element into the old scenario. Whereas, in the last decade, Muslims were on call to explain "Islamic revival" to their Jewish and Christian dialogue partners, now many Jewish-Christian-Islamic conferences are being organized where all three—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—are asked to "dialogue" about the emergence of

"fundamentalism" in their respective traditions. Some months ago, I was invited to such a conference, and as I began to gather my thoughts to write a paper on "Islamic fundamentalism," I was struck by the realization that I was about to do exactly what I had done ten years ago. In other words, I was about to accept the West's understanding of what it refers to as "Islamic fundamentalism" and respond to it as a Muslim, instead of telling my Western dialogue partners what "fundamentalism" means to the majority of Muslims in the world. My reflections on this subject led me to see that it was not only highly inappropriate to use expressions such as "Islamic fundamentalism" and "Muslim fundamentalists" as they are generally used in the West, but also highly dangerous.

Even a summary review of the way in which the West in general, and American media in particular, use the term "fundamentalism" with reference to Islam shows that this term is the equivalent of emotionally loaded terms such as "extremism," "fanaticism," and even "terrorism." For instance, when most Americans read an expression which has appeared countless times in daily newspapers, namely, "the fundamentalist Shiites of South Lebanon," they assume that the Shiites in question—about whom they probably know very little, if anything—are extremists, fanatics, or even terrorists. Thus the term "fundamentalist," when used by the West with reference to Muslim leaders or groups, clearly embodies a negative value judgment and evokes a powerful image of persons who are irrational, immoderate, and violent. While the term "fundamentalist" may be relatively new, the image is that of a ferocious-looking Arab, wearing a flowing white robe, riding a white charger, and flashing a saber. This image has a long history and derives from the Christian West's age-old perceptions of the Prophet of Islam and of Islam. For instance, Dante, the great poet of medieval Christianity, perceived the Prophet Muhammad as a "bloody" figure who "divided" the world of Christendom, and assigned him to all but the lowest level of hell for his grievous "sin." His description of the Prophet Muhammad is not easily forgotten:

A wine tun when a stave or cant-bar starts
does not split open as wide as one I saw
split from his chin to the mouth with which man farts.
Between his legs all of his red guts hung
with the heart, the lungs, the liver, the gall-bladder,
and the shriveled sac that passes shit to the bung.

I stood and stared at him from the stone shelf;
he noticed me and opening his own breast
with both hands cried: "See how I rip myself!"

See how mahomet's mangled and split open![6]

Alas, many Westerners who know virtually nothing about Islam still identify it with "Holy War," which, it is important to note, is not an accurate or adequate rendering of the Qur'anic concept of *jihad*.[7] It is, rather, a Christian term associated with the Crusades. Even those Westerners who know that one of the primary meanings of the very word "Islam" is "peace" seldom focus on the centrality of the concept of peace to the Islamic worldview.[8] Images of Muslims as barbarous and backward, frenzied and fanatic, volatile and violent, continue to pervade Western consciousness.

The terms "fundamentalism" and "fundamentalists" have been used extensively in the 1980s to epitomize the negative images of Islam and Muslims prevalent in the West, although they have been used also for expressing value judgments about other religious traditions, groups, or persons. As Patrick J. Ryan has observed:

> Labeling various people fundamentalists has become stock-in-trade in political and journalistic discourse in recent years. As

6. Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: Mentor, 1954), p. 236.
7. A classic on the subject of *jihad* is Moulavi Cheragh Ali, *A Critical Exposition of the Popular Jihad* (Karachi: Karimsons, 1977).
8. For a detailed discussion on the concept of peace in Islam, see Riffat Hassan, "Peace Education: A Muslim Perspective," in Haim Gordon and Leonard Grob, eds., *Education for Peace: Testimonies from World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), pp. 90-108.

long ago as the fall of 1980, the major American newspapers contained advertisements deploring the rising tide of religious fundamentalism on the political shores at home and abroad. The avowedly secularist signatories of these advertisements, citing specific examples of what they meant by religious fundamentalism, named such diverse figures as the Rev. Jerry Falwell, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Pope John Paul II. The term fundamentalism has been employed in the press in recent months, as well, to categorize the Sikh revolutionary separatist in India, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who was killed in the Indian Army assault on the Golden Temple of Amritsar early in June 1984.[9]

Many, if not most, who use the terms "fundamentalism" and "fundamentalist" as if they were generic categories with universal applicability do not know or have forgotten the particular Christian context in which these terms arose. The term "fundamentalism," which *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* dates to 1923,[10] emerged in the wake of the publication between 1905 and 1915 of twelve theological tracts entitled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth.*[11] These writings by biblical literalists denounced the adoption by other Protestant theologians of a scientific-critical approach to the study of the Bible.[12] As George Marsden has pointed out: "'Fundamentalism' is a subspecies of evangelicalism. The term originated in America in 1920 and refers to evangelicals who consider it their chief Christian duty to combat uncompromisingly 'modernist' theology and certain secularizing cultural trends. Organized militancy is the feature that most clearly distinguishes fundamentalists from other evangelicals."[13]

9. Patrick J. Ryan, "Islamic Fundamentalism: A Questionable Category," *America*, 29 December 1984, p. 437.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. George M. Marsden, "Evangelical and Fundamental Christianity," in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 5:190-91.

The fact that the terms "fundamentalism" and "fundamentalist" do not "quite apply" to Islam or Muslims is, of course, recognized by Christians, as well as Jewish and Muslim scholars. For instance, Fredrick M. Denny, a Christian scholar of Islam, states:

> The term "fundamentalism" was coined early in this century in an American conservative Protestant framework to characterize a Scripture-based doctrine embracing five key points (the virgin birth of Jesus, his physical Resurrection, the infallibility of the Scriptures, the substitutional Atonement, and the physical Second coming of Christ). The only point with which Muslims agree concerns the infallibility of Scripture—in the Islamic case, of course, the Qur'ran. In recent years it has become popular to refer to conservative militant Muslims as fundamentalists. The name *does not quite apply,* when taken at its original meaning.[14]

Bernard Lewis, a Jewish scholar of Islam, states:

> It is now common usage to apply the term "fundamentalist" to a number of Islamic radical and militant groups. The use of this term is established and must be accepted, *but it remains unfortunate and can be misleading.* Fundamentalist is a Christian term. It seems to have come into use in the early years of this century, and denoted certain Protestant churches and organizations, more particularly those which maintain the literal divine origin and inerrancy of the Bible. In this they oppose the liberal and modernist approach to the Qur'an, and all Muslims, in their attitude to the text of the Qur'an, are in principle at least fundamentalists.[15]

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a Muslim scholar of Islam, states:

> As far as fundamentalism is concerned, use of the term by journalists and even scholars to refer to a wide variety of phenomena in the Islamic world and currents in Islamic thought *is most unfortunate and misleading* because the term is drawn from the Christian context, where it has quite a different connotation.

14. Frederick M. Denny, *Islam and the Muslim Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 117; italics mine.

15. Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 117n.3; italics mine.

> Fundamentalism in Christian religious circles, especially in the United States, refers to conservative forms of Protestantism, usually antimodernist, with a rather narrow and literal interpretation of the Bible and a strong emphasis upon traditional Christian ethics. . . . The use of the term fundamentalism and the classification of a widely diverse set of phenomena and tendencies under such a name are misleading features of many of the current studies on Islam, and help to hide the more profound realities involved, including the essential fact that much of what is called fundamentalist Islam is anti-traditional and opposed to both the spirit and the letter of the Islamic tradition, as understood and practiced since the descent of the Qur'anic revelation.[16]

Why, when so many well-known scholars of Islam agree that the use of the term "fundamentalism" in the context of Islam is "unfortunate" and "misleading," should it continue to be used? According to Bernard Lewis, "The use of the term is established and must be accepted." If the logic of this statement is accepted, however, then how can one argue for the abolition, say, of sexist language or of racist language, which have also been long established in many places and cultures?

It seems quite obvious that the usage of the terms "fundamentalism" and "fundamentalist" even by outstanding Muslim scholars of Islam shows the extent to which the religious imperialism of the Christian West has penetrated the psyche of those whom it has colonized. Fazlur Rahman, one of the finest critics of modern Islam, was aware of this phenomenon even though he chose to accept its terminology, for he observed: "The colonial phenomenon is not something only of the past; it appears to be continuing indefinitely. Political and military imperialism was bad enough, but more heinous is the ethical, cultural, and intellectual arrogance of the West. In the past, all ascendant civilizations have had their moments of self-righteousness, but probably no civilization before that of the

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16. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Present Tendencies, Future Trends," in Marjorie Kelly, ed., *Islam: The Religious and Political Life of a World Community* (New York: Praeger, 1984), pp. 279-80; italics mine.

modern West has felt itself to be so universally and comprehensively valid that the mere questioning of some of its values can be tantamount to barbaric backwardness."[17]

While many Westerners, as well as Easterners under the influence of the West, have come to apply the terms "fundamentalism" or "fundamentalist" to all kinds of phenomena or persons, there is no logical or theological reason why any person—non-Christian or even Christian—needs to accept this usage as necessary or as mandated by heaven. In fact, the usage of highly emotive words such as "fundamentalism" or "fundamentalist" outside their proper historical setting is strongly to be discouraged, for it brings about, not enlightenment, but multiple forms of confusion and discrimination. The feminist movement has been insistent that sexist language be discarded because it leads not only to bias and injustice in this or that specific matter pertaining to man-woman discourse or relationship but also to the formation of what Mary Daly describes as "a universe of sexist suppositions."[18] Likewise, it is essential—in my judgment—to eliminate terms such as "fundamentalism" and "fundamentalist" from the discourse of interreligious dialogue since they not only smack of religious and cultural imperialism, but also create a negatively charged atmosphere in which authentic dialogue cannot take place.

That no term corresponding to what fundamentalism or fundamentalist means in the West has "traditionally existed in various Islamic languages"[19] demonstrates that such concepts are not integral or organic to the Islamic worldview, but are "outsider" categories which have been grafted "onto an Islamic development."[20] Though the Arabic term *usul* is used to refer to a fundamental or a principle, the term "fundamentalism"

17. Fazlur Rahman, "Roots of Islamic Neo-Fundamentalism," in Philip H. Stoddard, David C. Cuthell, and Margaret W. Sullivan, eds., *Change in the Muslim World* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1981), p. 34.

18. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 5.

19. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Present Tendencies, Future Trends," p. 280.

20. Patrick J. Ryan, "Islamic Fundamentalism," p. 437.

had no relevance for Muslims until it began to be applied to their tradition by Westerners or Western-conditioned Muslims. Muslims who know the English language and interpret the term "fundamentalism" literally, that is, as relating to fundamentals, would have little or no problem referring to themselves as fundamentalist since they do, with few exceptions, believe in the fundamentals of Islam set forth in the Qur'an in passages such as Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah:* 177:

> It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces towards East or West; but it is righteousness—to believe in God and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity; and fulfil the contracts which ye have made; and to be firm and patient, in pain (or suffering) and adversity, and throughout all period of panic, such are the people of truth, the God-fearing.[21]

From the perspective of many Muslims, therefore, a discussion on "Islamic fundamentalism" should be about the fundamentals of Islam, and the answer to the question "Is Islamic fundamentalism good or bad?" should be based on an objective evaluation of the fundamentals of Islam. In other words, if these fundamentals are deemed to be "good," then Islamic fundamentalism should be regarded as good; if these are deemed to be "bad," then Islamic fundamentalism should be regarded as bad. In the West generally, however, the very term "Islamic fundamentalism" triggers off a host of negative associations, many of them deriving from age-old stereotypes of Islam and the remaining deriving from ideas and images attached to fundamentalism by Western Christians. Prominent among these associations is the perception that fundamentalist Muslims are ultra-zealous, narrow-minded persons who tend to interpret the Qur'an literally and to implement its teachings by force, if necessary. These Muslims are seen as "backward" because they

21. *The Holy Qur'an,* pp. 69-70.

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are out of step with modernity not only in the way in which they read sacred texts but also in the way in which they disregard the separation of the religious from the secular (or "Church" and "State" to use "Christian" terms).

Here an important difference between the Western and the Muslim understandings of the term "fundamentalism" needs to be clarified and emphasized. One of the major assumptions underlying the negative perceptions of fundamentalism in the West is that fundamentalism is in stark opposition to "modernism." Support for this assumption may be found in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, which defines fundamentalism as "Strict adherence to traditional orthodox tenets (e.g. the literal inerrancy of Scripture) held to be fundamental to the Christian faith *opposed to liberalism and modernism*."[22] However, a review of Muslim thought in the modern period shows that instead of being in opposition to each other, the terms "fundamentalist," "modernist," and "liberal" are oftentimes applied to the same thinker. In the last three hundred years one can find a number of Muslim thinkers who were acutely conscious of the stagnation and decadence on Muslim societies in general and sought to re-infuse the dynamism of original Islam in them through application of "modern," "liberal" ideas. One of the most outstanding of these thinkers is Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), who has been a source of creative energy and inspiration to millions of Muslims in the twentieth century. Iqbal was a fundamentalist in that he strongly advocated a return to the Qur'an, which he regarded as the embodiment of what is fundamental in Islam, but he was also a "modernist" and a "liberal" in that he protested passionately against blind acceptance of a fossilized religious tradition and urged Muslims to understand the dynamic, evolutionary outlook of the Qur'an and to apply it to their own societies through a process of reasoning (represented by *'Ijma'* or collective thinking and *ijtihad* or individual

22. W. Little, H. W. Fowler, and J. Coulson, eds., rev. C. T. Onions, *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 762; italics mine.

thinking). How fundamentalism, modernism, and liberalism, as Muslims understand these terms, came together in the writings of Iqbal may be seen from the following excerpts:

> I know the Ulama of Islam claim finality for the popular school of Muslim Law.[23]
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> For fear of . . . disintegration, the conservative thinkers of Islam focussed all their efforts on the one point of preserving a uniform social life for the people by a jealous exclusion of all innovations in the law of Shari'at as expounded by the early doctors of Islam. Their leading idea was social order, and there is no doubt that they were partly right, because organization does to a certain extent counteract the forces of decay. But they did not see, and our modern Ulama do not see, that the ultimate fate of a people does not depend so much on organization as on the worth of power of individual men. In an over-organized society the individual is altogether crushed out of existence.[24]
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> The closing of the door of Ijtihad is pure fiction suggested partly by the crystallization of legal thought in Islam, and partly by that intellectual laziness which, especially in a period of spiritual decay, turns great thinkers into idols. If some of the later doctors have upheld this fiction, modern Islam is not bound by the voluntary surrender of intellectual independence.[25]
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> Since things have changed and the world of Islam is today confronted and affected by new forces set free by the extraordinary development of human thought in all its directions, I see no reason why this attitude (of the Ulama) should be maintained any longer. Did the founders of our schools ever claim finality for their reasoning and interpretations? Never. The claim of the present generation of Muslim liberals to re-interpret the foundational legal principles, in the light of their own experience and altered conditions of modern life, is in my opinion, perfectly justified. The teaching of the Qur'an that life is a process of pro-

23. Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1971), p. 168.

24. Ibid., p. 151.

25. Ibid., p. 178.

gressive creation necessitates that each generation, guided but unhampered by the work of its predecessors, should be permitted to solve its own problems.[26]

Contemporary Muslims are very interested in developing a hermeneutics of reinterpreting the Qur'an in such a way that the fundamentals of Islam which have universal applicability are separated from historical and cultural accretions which have impeded the growth of Muslim societies, keeping them shackled to a dead past rather than enabling them to move into a living present. Of pioneer significance in this regard is the work of Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988), who describes his own methodology as follows:

> This process of interpretation proposed here consists of a double movement, from the present situation to Qur'anic times, then back to the present. The Qur'an is the divine response, through the Prophet's mind to the moral-social situation of the Prophet's Arabia, particularly to the problems of the commercial Meccan society of his day . . . and for the most part consists of moral, religious, and social pronouncements that respond to specific problems confronted in concrete historical situations. Sometimes the Qur'an simply gives an answer to a question or a problem, but usually these answers are stated in terms of an explicit or semi-explicit "ratio legis," while there are also certain laws enunciated from time to time. But, even where simple answers are given, it is possible to understand their reasons and hence deduce general laws by studying the background materials, which for the most part have been fairly intelligibly presented by the commentators. The first of the two movements mentioned above, then, consists of two steps. First, one must understand the import or meaning of a given statement by studying the historical situation or problem to which it was the answer. Of course, before coming to the study of the macrosituation in terms of society, religion, customs, and institutions, indeed, of life as a whole in Arabia on the eve of Islam and particulary in and around Mecca—not excluding the Perso-Byzantine Wars—will

26. Ibid., p. 168.

have to be made. The first step of the first movement, then, consists of understanding the meaning of the Qur'an as a whole as well as in terms of the specific tenets that constitute responses to specific answers and enunciate them as statements of general moral-social objectives that can be "distilled" from specific texts in light of the sociohistorical background and the often-stated "rationes legis." Indeed, the first step—the understanding of the meaning of the specific texts—itself implies the second step and will lead to it. Throughout this process due regard must be paid to the tenor of the teaching of the Qur'an as a whole so that each given meaning understood, each law enunciated, and each objective formulated will cohere with the rest. The Qur'an as a whole does inculcate a definite attitude toward life and does have a concrete weltanschauung; it also claims that its teaching has "no inner contradiction" but coheres as a whole. Whereas the first movement has been from the specifics of the Qur'an to the eliciting and systematizing of its general principles, values, and long-range objectives, the second is to be from this general view to the specific view that is to be formulated and realized *now*. That is, the general has to be embodied in the present concrete sociohistorical context. This once again requires the careful study of the present situation and the analysis of its various component elements so we can assess the current situation and change the present to whatever extent necessary, and so we can determine priorities afresh in order to implement the Qur'anic values afresh. To the extent that we achieve both moments of this double movement successfully, the Qur'an imperatives will become alive and effective once again. While the first task is primarily the work of the historian, in the performance of the second the instrumentality of the social scientist is obviously indispensable, but the actual "effective orientation" and "ethical engineering" are the work of the ethicist. . . . This second moment will also act as a corrective of the results of the first, that is, of understanding and interpretation. For if the results of understanding fail in application now, then either there has been a failure to assess the present situation correctly or a failure in understanding the Qur'an. For it is not possible that something that could be and actually was realized in the specific texture of the past, cannot, allowing for the difference in the specifics of the present situation, be realized in the present context—where

"allowing for the difference in the specifics of the present situation" includes both changing the rules of the past in conformity with the altered situation of the present (provided this changing does not violate the general principles and values derived from the past) and changing the present situation, where necessary, so it is brought into conformity with these general principles and values. Both tasks imply intellectual *jihad,* the second implying also a moral jihad or endeavor in addition to the intellectual. . . . The intellectual endeavor or jihad, including the intellectual elements of both moments—past and present—is technically called *ijtihad,* which means "the effort to understand the meaning of a relevant text or precedent in the past, containing a rule, and to alter that rule by extending or restricting or otherwise modifying it in such a manner that a new situation can be subsumed under it by a new situation."[27]

As the foregoing extracts from the writings of Muhammad Iqbal and Fazlur Rahman show, a return to the fundamentals of Islam is seen by modern Muslim thinkers as the surest, if not the sole, hope of gaining liberation from internal and external bondage and impediments to physical, intellectual, and spiritual evolution. This fact, important as it is in understanding what has been happening in the world of Islam in recent centuries, has received scant attention in the West, which continues to assume that the term "fundamentalism" can have no meaning other than the one assigned to it by them. This situation is lamentable enough. It is made worse by the fact that Western media in general apply the term "fundamentalism/fundamentalist" so loosely to Islam/Muslims that it ceases to be meaningful even within the parameters of the popular Western understanding of this term. For instance, in an article entitled "Syria's Assad: His Power and His Plan," in *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* (19 February 1984), Stanley Reed showed surprise that Assad could side with Ayatollah Khomeini when the latter's "Islamic fundamentalism" was similar to that of Assad's domes-

27. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 5-8.

tic enemies, the Muslim Brotherhood.[28] In a penetrating article entitled "Islamic Fundamentalism: A Questionable Category," Patrick J. Ryan shows how the term "Islamic Fundamentalism" applies neither to Ayatollah Khomeini nor to the Muslim Brothers "at least if fundamentalism means orthodoxy reducible to a commitment to literal interpretation of Scripture."[29] In any case, the question arises: can Muslims as diverse as Ayatollah Khomeini and Muslim Brothers all be called by one name?

No phenomenon can be properly understood if it is not named correctly, for as the wise Confucius said: "If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language is not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success."[30] One major reason why Islam and Muslims have been so little understood in the West is that they have always been seen through the colored lens of Western concepts and presuppositions. Though it is natural to compare that which we do not know to that which we do know (or think we know), or to try to understand the "other" in our own terms, it is dangerous to assume that one's perceptions of the "other" (especially if the "other" is considered an "adversary") in fact define the reality of the "other." Many Western scholars of Islam got off on the wrong track when, thinking that Islam centered upon the person of Muhammad as Christianity centered upon the person of Christ, they called Islam "Muhammadism."[31] Trying to rectify the damage done by earlier "Orientalists," Wilfred Cantwell Smith, despite his erudition and sensitivity, fell into another trap when he said that, not Muhammad

28. See Patrick J. Ryan, "Islamic Fundamentalism," p. 437.

29. Ibid.

30. Confucius, quoted by Huston Smith in *The Religions of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 161.

31. That an Islamicist of the caliber of H. A. R. Gibb should have named his book, which has been widely used as a textbook, *Mohammadanism: An Historical Survey*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), seems amazing to Muslims.

but the Qur'an was to Islam what Jesus was to Christianity,[32] for in the final analysis, a book cannot be compared to a person. Now, those Western writers or journalists who are trying to figure out what "Islamic fundamentalism" is are, once again, on a wild goose chase. If they are genuinely interested in learning about and understanding the significant events, trends, and developments in the Islamic world, they will have to acquire knowledge of Islam and Muslim "from within" as it were. As an insightful Westerner remarks: "It is time for the Western press to learn more about the inner workings of the Islamic world, time to stop analyzing Islamic faith in Christian or Western secularized categories. One-fifth of the world's population is Muslim; before it is too late, the West must take it seriously."[33]

My personal experience of both intensive and extensive dialogue with a large number of Westerners in a variety of settings has shown me that, generally speaking, few of them— especially in the United States—know much about Islam or have any sense of the living reality of Muslims. They tend, therefore, to think of both Islam and Muslims in simplistic or reductionist terms. In this context, there is a certain aptness about the following remark by a Muslim graduate student about the Christian organizer of the Christian-Muslim dialogue group in which both participated: "He is really a well-meaning person, but the problem is that he believes Islam is a religion one can know all about over the weekend!" That such an attitude should exist even amongst those Westerners who are striving most sincerely to dialogue with Muslims makes the whole situation extremely depressing.

The seriousness of the crises which exist in our time in the Middle East alone, where adherents of the three Abrahamic faith traditions—Jews, Christians, Muslims—face each other in complex conflict, demands that all three make a determined ef-

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32. See, for instance, Wilfred Cantwell Smith's article "Is the Qur'an the Word of God?" in *Religious Diversity: Essays by Wilfred Cantwell Smith*, ed. Willard G. Oxtoby (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 24.
33. Patrick J. Ryan, "Islamic Fundamentalism," p. 440.

fort to subject to the most rigorous scrutiny the facile labels which we attach all too easily to each other, especially in times of trial and difficulty. These labels are not only misleading, confused, and confusing, but can also be dangerous. For instance, it is a common Western tendency to label Muslim leaders and groups perceived to be "anti-Western" (which becomes synonymous with "antimodern") as "fundamentalist." This label is meant to discredit these leaders or groups in the West. However, ironically enough, oftentimes it tends to serve an opposite purpose in the societies in which these leaders or groups are located. It is no secret that this is a time of great ferment in the Islamic world, and in every Muslim society numerous factions are vying for attention and allegiance. Some of these are so marginalized that they may even be considered to be "un-Islamic" in their orientation or agenda by the majority of people in that society. If once the label of fundamentalist is attached to them, however, they become associated in the minds of a number of Muslims with the fundamentals of Islam and thus acquire a sort of religious legitimization. Knowing what benefits accrue to them in their own societies once they have been labeled "fundamentalists" by the West, some unscrupulous Muslims deliberately appropriate the label which provides them not only with some social and political respectability but also the opportunity to act out the Western description of fundamentalism. Thus, there is a real danger that the loose application by many Westerners of a loaded term such as "fundamentalist" to a variety of Muslims, could, in fact, lead to the emergence of Muslims who fit the Western model of "fundamentalism."