

"Is Fundamentalism the Highest Stage of Islam?"

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By Jacob Thomas

The Internet has been a tremendous help to Arab intellectuals who are seeking to reform or critique their culture. It allows them that necessary freedom which is not available in other types of media, such as the newspapers, magazines, radio, and television; as these remain under the control or supervision of their authoritarian or dictatorial governments.

On 25 June, 2008, I was very impressed by a bold and thought-provoking article that was posted on www.kwtanweer.com and written by an Algerian who dared to ask: "*Is Fundamentalism the Highest Stage of Islam?*" (*Al-Usooliyya: Hal Heya Marhalat al-Islam al-'Ulya?*) This op-ed piece was a cry from the heart of an intellectual who has witnessed, for the last two decades, brutal and terrible acts of killings perpetrated by an Islamist group known as *FIS (Front Islamique du Salut)* i.e., *Islamic Salvation Front!* Between 1992 and 1999, 150,000 Algerians died as a result of the civil war that began, when the government annulled the results of the elections that would have brought *FIS* to power.

And to bring this information up-to-date, according to *The Guardian, of 11 December, 2007: "This year has been one of Algeria's most violent since its decade-long civil war wound up five years ago. There have been five bomb blasts with a combined death toll of over 100."* I may add that to date, 2008 has not been any less violent than the previous year.

I would like to quote from the *Tanweer* article, followed by my analysis, and comments.

"Both Arab and non-Arab commentators regard Fundamentalism as a *"crisis within Islam;"* however, I consider Fundamentalism as an *"Islamic crisis."* By this I mean that Fundamentalism is neither a distortion nor a perversion of Islam, as the reformers claim; but it originates from the *very core of Islam*, (in the Arabic original: *takhruju min sulbihi.*) Thus, Fundamentalism is not a simple malady that has infected a specific group within Islam. Being an incurable disease, it's rather naïve to imagine that it can be treated in a simple manner.

"When we understand the true nature of Fundamentalism, **it becomes rather difficult not to regard it as the highest stage of Islam.** Therefore, any attempt to draw a line separating a Fundamentalist from a non-Fundamentalist Muslim becomes extremely complicated. After all, to be a Muslim, has always implied a firm belief that Islam possesses the final and total answer to mankind's needs and aspirations. So in that sense, every Muslim is, without exception, a Fundamentalist.

"To gloss over this fact does not help Muslims to liberate themselves from the shackles of

their traditions. Some naïve writers claim that Fundamentalism is a new phenomenon, and give the exact time and place of its birth. I won't bother to discuss such repetitive claims. Fundamentalism is as old as the Arab-Muslim society itself; it must not be considered as a new or passing phenomenon; on the contrary it has its roots in the very structure of Islamic culture. Its existence and activity surface whenever it attempts to assume the reins of power. Fundamentalists have been known to influence, directly or indirectly, the decisions of the governments in most Arab countries. This may be observed in the fact that religious organizations happen to be the richest and most powerful in society, as in case of the ministries of *Islamic Affairs, Da'wa* (Religious Propaganda,) and *Islamic Publications*. What becomes disturbing to the governments is the attempt of Fundamentalists to assume power directly. The Algerian Regime, for example, has funded, over the last twenty years, a world forum for Fundamentalism known as "*Multaqa al-Fikr al-Islami*" (The Gathering of Islamic Thought.) And now, in spite of a bloody decade, the regime continues to grant considerable amounts of monetary aid to religious rather than to social organizations! As the Arabic proverb puts it: "*Dawooni billati heya al-Daa'u*" i.e. "*Treat my illness with a medicine extracted from the sickness itself!*"

"As they face this aggressive Fundamentalist danger, many Algerians have been asking: '*What have we done to bring about or merit this situation?*' A more accurate question should be: '*Have we ever refrained from doing the very thing that favored the rise of the Fundamentalists' cause?*' Haven't we forsaken reason, and promoted tradition? Don't we deserve this worn-out Fundamentalism? Since the early 1980s, Arab societies have been going through a violent stage of *Islamization*; and as a result, catastrophe has befallen us. So, the question that should be asked nowadays is not: "*Who is a Fundamentalist?*" Rather, "*Who has not yet become a Fundamentalist?*" Before it became a movement to take over governments, Fundamentalism has been a mentality; and its disastrous impact upon the people's daily life has been very evident.

"Every young Muslim who has not caught this contagious disease should write his autobiography under this title: "*Memoirs of one who has escaped the Flames of Fundamentalism.*" Actually, what deserves our admiration and surprise is to find one Arab Muslim who has managed to free himself from that web of fanaticism that has surrounded him from the cradle to the grave.

"As to the majority of the young men and women who have been afflicted with the virus of *Islamization*, they must seek to forget what they have learned in order to gradually return to a normal state of mind. This won't take place without a total pedagogical effort, accompanied by a complete reorganization of the educational system, and followed by a campaign for cultural immunization against this serious plague. Short of achieving this ideological security, Fundamentalism would remain as dormant amber, waiting for an adventurer to rekindle it, at a propitious time."

Analysis

The author defends his thesis that Islamic Fundamentalism is not an extraneous

movement in Islam; rather it is imbedded in the faith. To put it in his own words, "Fundamentalism is not a '*crisis within Islam*;' it is an '*Islamic crisis*.'"

Therefore, Fundamentalism is the "*Highest Stage in Islam*." Logically, Islam ends up as an exclusivist and aggressive worldview.

Comments

As we attempt to understand this rather difficult essay, we should bear in mind that the writer was expressing himself from within the context of a land that has been ravaged by the shocking crimes of the Algerian Islamists against their own people. In reflecting upon his experiences since the early 1990s, and drawing on Arabic and French sources, he brings to his reflections insights that are seldom expressed or heard in the Arab world.

So unlike many Arab and Muslim intellectuals, and some Western "experts" on Islam, who claim that Islamic Fundamentalism is a distortion of the true faith, the author stated categorically that this phenomenon has always been part and parcel of Islam. He put it this way: "**By this I mean that Fundamentalism is neither a distortion nor a perversion of Islam, as the reformers claim; but it originates from the very core of Islam.**"

Expanding on this thesis, he maintained that, in a certain sense, every Muslim who takes the sources of his faith seriously is a Fundamentalist. This is a far-reaching conclusion. He defended it by drawing our attention to the claims of Islam as being Allah's last and complete message for mankind. All other faiths and religions are outdated, and must give place to this perfect worldview.

As for his fellow-Algerians who wonder how they had reached this tragic state of affairs, he reminded them that, by **substituting tradition for rational thinking**, they have brought this unbelievable tragedy upon themselves. With respect to Muslims in general, the question should not be, "*Who is a Fundamentalist?*" Rather, "*Who has not yet become a Fundamentalist?*"

His final and most powerful indictment of the Islamic tradition is stated in these words:

"Actually, what should deserve our admiration and surprise is to find one Arab Muslim who has managed to free himself from that web of fanaticism that has surrounded him from the cradle to the grave."

Having liberated himself from that "*web of fanaticism that has surrounded him from the cradle*" the writer ended his article by offering his prescription that is capable of curing the young men and women of Algeria, (and of the entire Muslim world) from the

virus of Fundamentalism.

Great as that prescription may sound, I doubt that it can be "filled" anywhere within *Daru'l Islam*. I don't doubt his sincerity. However, where in the Muslim world can we find a government or institution that is ready or capable of initiating ***"a total pedagogical effort, accompanied by a complete reorganization of the educational system, and followed by a campaign for cultural immunization against this serious plague?"***

Unfortunately for him, as well as for Muslims throughout the world, this prescription will never be realized; short of a total re-interpretation of Islam, by separating its purely religious elements from its political agenda. What resemblance would that kind of ***"Islam"*** have with what Muhammad developed between 610 and 632 A.D.? The "modest proposal" advanced by this idealistic writer remains a utopian dream. Islam reformed, according to his prescription, is Islam no more!