

Fundamentalists of all stripes want to turn back the clock

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Shi'ite Muslims burn Danish, U.S. and Israeli flags during a religious procession in Karachi. Protesters in Pakistan are demanding for ties with Denmark to be severed over the republication of one of several cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad that led to violence in Muslim countries two years ago. (Photo by Athar Hussain/REUTERS)

Fundamentalists of all stripes want to turn back the clock

By **Marv Knox**

Editor

Despite all their theological and cultural differences, fundamentalists of every faith share at least one common characteristic—resistance to modernity.

That's the assessment of scholars and firsthand observers who have evaluated the varieties of religious expression.

"Fundamentalism worldwide is religious anti-modernism," noted Roger Olson, professor of theology at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary in Waco.

When Faith Turns Militant

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The battle with modernity raged on American soil about a century ago, when Protestant fundamentalism resisted “the liberal modernist effort to change theology in light of new scientific and rationalist theses,” said Bill Leonard, a church historian and dean of the Wake Forest University Divinity School.

So, the more recent rise of Islamic fundamentalism is neither unique nor surprising, he said. “Militant action against dissent and pluralism and certainly modernity has worked itself through major elements of Christianity worldwide. ... The Muslims are just now confronting that.”

And Muslims aren’t alone, said Rick Shaw, a former missionary who now is dean of Wayland Baptist University’s Kenya campus. He has seen radicalism not only among Christians and Muslims, but also Hindus.

In addition to the common denominator of anti-modernity, multiple factors or impulses transcend theological boundaries and propel adherents toward fundamentalism or militant religion. They include:

- **Dogmatic faith.**

“Fundamentalism begins not with militarism but with a particular dogmatism about defining the nature of faith over against heresy and secular unbelief,” Leonard stressed. “That then often, though not always, can lead to militant terminology and sometimes militant action.”

It’s like a theological call to arms, added Rob Sellers, professor of missions at Hardin-Simmons University’s Logsdon School of Theology in Abilene.

“When the guardians of orthodoxy begin to feel as if ‘heretical’ views are growing in popularity, the defense mechanisms begin to set in place,” he said. “One has to defend one’s own interpretations or faith and, consequently, one has to speak with certainty to the point of ‘unassailable’

authority.”

Entitlement to authority is easy to justify if you’re defending the Lord of the universe, noted Dan Stiver, a theology professor at Logsdon. Religious extremists may see themselves having “divine permission to attack and destroy someone else,” he explained.

“Ironically, the faith that should elicit a higher form of morality easily descends into giving one permission for the ends to justify the means, because one is fighting for God.”

The distinction between healthy faith and militant religion is narrow, Stiver acknowledged.

“A healthy crusader is focused and aggressive but is not so willing to let the end justify the means, keeps loving the enemy at the forefront—like Martin Luther King Jr.—and more quickly can identify with and have compassion even for the opponent.”

Religious people who make the shift toward extremism often do so based on how they read their holy writings, Shaw observed. “I’ve seen this in radical Christianity, Islam and Hinduism.”

Ironically, moderate followers of those religions are no less faithful to their scriptures, but the distorted, extreme interpretations propel some adherents to radical faith, he said.

That’s not so surprising, given the power of faith on people’s lives, Stiver reported.

“One of the aspects of religion is it’s very powerful, and people come to religion because they have legitimate needs that are met,” he said. “You would want to fill the God-shaped void in a positive way and not in a way that looks like hating your enemy instead of loving your enemy. But it can

get circumvented.”

- **Identity.**

People of faith often gravitate to extreme positions because of what they seek in and for themselves, the scholars stressed.

An external focus on “being against something” provides longed-for identity, Stiver noted. “It’s a defensive posture in the sense of often ‘circling the wagons.’

“It’s usually defined by a pretty tight system of labeling what’s right and wrong—black-and-white thinking. There’s good, and there’s evil.

“Out of that comes a great deal of energy that motivates one to fight. The sense is you get a lot of fulfillment, identity, purpose and meaning in one’s faith from fighting this good fight.”

While such behavior manifests itself as theological, “it’s more psychological or sociological,” Stiver asserted.

Similarly, Shaw pointed to one dimension of psychology—personality—as a contributor to radical religion.

“Among Muslims and Hindus, there is one subpopulation attracted to (radical) faith disproportionately—young men,” he explained. “It is rare that I’ve ever met a young woman who is a radical Muslim or Hindu.”

In the United States, young African-American males are disproportionately attracted to militant forms of Islam, he added.

In all the groups, “young men are attracted to masculine structures and disciplines that have been absent in the clan or extended family,” he observed.

In a related way, culture also provides a dimension of radical religion's identity.

"The culture clash is a major issue," Leonard said. "That still goes on. Particularly in Christianity in America in the last 30 or 40 years, you can see how that culture clash has surfaced—still opposing the world, but letting it in the back door."

Sometimes, militant religion seeks to bring back a culture that never was, Shaw said.

"Perhaps there's an element of nostalgic longing for a collective memory," he said, noting that memory often is selective. "There is desire for restoration, often for an empire that never existed in the first place."

- **Fear.**

"Fear is the basis of many forms of fundamentalism," Sellers stressed, citing "fear of difference, of change, of ambiguity or not having all the answers, of 'worldliness,' of radicality, of the future, of those who are different."

"This fear causes some other typical characteristics—a glorification of the past or of orthodoxy, a certainty about one's own faith or interpretation of one's own faith; an entrenchment mentality, a feeling that 'truth' must be guarded against encroaching heresy and difference, an unwillingness to fellowship with/cooperate with/tolerate those who see faith issues in another way."

Fear is a dimension of focusing on what Stiver calls "externals."

"Perhaps this is easier than dealing with the hard work of inner transformation," Stiver said. "Jesus seemed to be criticizing just such a tendency in the Sermon on the Mount where he kept pointing back to inner

transformation, which, of course, does ultimately result in change in the outer world. ...

“The problem is that the inner quest for peace can never be satisfied without inner transformation. Hence the pattern of defeating one enemy only to find another enemy as an outlet for religious zeal.

“There will never be an end of outward enemies in this cycle, because the religious quest is displaced from oneself to someone else. Ironically, such an obsession with defeating outer foes reveals a lack of faith in God ... that vengeance is God’s. Rather, militants have to do the work of God themselves.”

- **Politics.**

Radical religion “often is coupled with a political agenda,” Shaw insisted. The pressure can come from the right or from the left, and often it targets “present political structures,” he added.

And sometimes, religion provides a political excuse for more self-serving interests, Leonard observed.

“Some may have (adopted radical faith) because they didn’t get a piece of the culture,” he said. “You can make a case that while Muslims cite religion, another reason for their militancy is they don’t have a piece of the global pie.”

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