

The appeal of Islamic fundamentalism

*British Academy Lecture
read 26 February 2013 by*

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Abstract: In terms of its political appeal the Islamic revival of the last few decades is in some ways a unique phenomenon. We can plausibly understand this appeal to arise from the relevance of certain elements of the Islamic heritage to the predicament of Muslim populations living in Third-World conditions. At the same time we can argue that other religious heritages have less to offer their contemporary adherents in this context. Here the idea of fundamentalism can be helpful: on one simple definition it serves to highlight a feature of the Islamic revival that is particularly adaptive under contemporary conditions. Finally, it is worth noting that despite its exceptional features, the basic elements of the Islamic revival are familiar in contexts closer to home.

Keywords: Islamic revival, Islamic fundamentalism, Islamic heritage, religion and politics, Third World.

No one is in any doubt that one of the major changes in world politics over the last half century has been the Islamic revival—or, as it is often described and with some reason, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.¹ This is not a development that people socialised into the secular values of a modern Western society find immediately comprehensible: it is thoroughly religious, and it is often marked by a determination to bring about the integration of religion and politics. But as with most human activities outside one's own culture, some relevant information combined with a bit of imaginative effort can help to make its aspirations intelligible to those who do not share its premises.

The first obstacle we face here is simply that terms like 'Islamic revival' cover too wide a range of phenomena for analytical convenience. So we should start by breaking down this revival into more manageable components.²

¹ Towards the end of this article I will take up the question just what it is about the Islamic revival that we might want to call fundamentalist.

² Most of the analysis that follows is drawn from parts of my forthcoming book, where a fuller discussion and documentation may be found (Cook 2014).

WHAT ARE THE COMPONENTS OF THE ISLAMIC REVIVAL?

The first and most widespread component is the process by which large numbers of people in the Muslim world have been 'getting religion', as the American idiom has it, in other words becoming more pious and observant. This may happen outside any institutional framework, but one movement that has contributed to this aspect of the revival, on a large scale and across the Muslim world, is the expressly apolitical Tablighi Jama'at. Its headquarters are located in the town of Raiwind in the Pakistani Punjab, and it holds an annual gathering there that is said to attract a larger crowd than any other event in the Muslim calendar bar the pilgrimage to Mecca. Since this component of the Islamic revival is apolitical, it will not be at the centre of our attention; it nevertheless underlies the other components.

The second component, to be found in most if not all Muslim countries, is political Islam, or as it is often referred to, Islamism. Here we are concerned with people who, like the Muslim Brothers and many others, are at pains to construe their politics out of their Islamic heritage. But since politics is at the centre of our concern, we need to break down this category into subcategories.

The first such subcategory is the politics of Muslim identity, a form of politics based on the axiom that Islam is the only political identity worthy of a Muslim. The phenomenon is widespread, but by far the most conspicuous instance of it is the ideology that led to the partition of India and the formation of Pakistan under the leadership of Mohammad Ali Jinnah and the Muslim League. A significant point about this kind of political Islam is that it does not have to be associated with any degree of Muslim piety. Jinnah himself was perhaps too good a politician to make this point explicitly, but it was aptly expressed by Kasim Razvi, an admirer of Jinnah's who led an ill-fated Muslim militia in Hyderabad at the time of the partition: in emphasising his pan-Islamic sentiments during an interview, he remarked that 'even if Muslim interests are affected in hell, our heart will go out in sympathy'.³

The second subcategory of political Islam is the politics of Muslim values. Here pietists with no commitment to Muslim interests in hell rally to impose Muslim norms on their fellow-believers, be it by getting women to wrap themselves up when appearing in public or by preventing men from drinking. Such activities may take the form of direct action by concerned believers, but they may also be a function of the state apparatus, as with the efforts of the vice police of the Islamic Republic to rein in the display of naked hair by young women on the streets of Tehran.

The third subcategory is the politics of the Islamic state. In this conception it is not enough for a state, perhaps a pre-existing state under new management, to represent a

³ Guha (2007: 69).

Muslim identity or impose Islamic norms. Instead, the state must be an intrinsically Islamic one, constructed according to Islamic political doctrine from the ground upwards; for Sunnis this is likely to mean the restoration of the Caliphate.⁴ By no means all Islamists seek such a restoration, but many do; an example is the Indian—later Pakistani—Islamist Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi (d.1979).

The final component of the Islamic revival is, of course, Jihadism. Typically Jihad is violence, but not just any old violence practised by the adherents of a religious faith. What is distinctive about Jihad is that it is violence mounted in fulfilment of a formal religious duty.

These, then, are the components of the Islamic revival that we need to keep in mind. In summary we can list them as follows:

- 1 'Getting religion'
- 2 Political Islam
 - 2a The politics of Muslim identity
 - 2b The politics of Islamic values
 - 2c The politics of the Islamic state
- 3 Jihadism

Equipped with this rough and ready breakdown, we can now go on to tackle a series of questions. The first of these is whether the Islamic revival is something unique in the world today. Or should we think of it as more or less typical of the times we live in?

IS THE ISLAMIC REVIVAL UNIQUE?

To answer this question, let us try a comparative exercise. Taking each of the components of the Islamic revival one by one, can we find a significant contemporary parallel outside Islam?

We start with 'getting religion'. Finding a non-Islamic parallel to this is no problem. Recent decades have seen a remarkable rise of Pentecostalism in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa; in some Latin American countries today, over a fifth of the population is affiliated to Pentecostal and related churches. It is, moreover, a significant fact in this context that Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa are the regions of the Third World in which the religious market is most free. There is thus reason to

⁴For the main body of Shi'ites there can be no such restoration without the return of the twelfth Imam; in the meantime Khomeini's conception of 'the guardianship of the jurist' underpins the Islamic Republic of Iran, but is not universally accepted by the religious scholars of the community. The Shi'ite case thus bears comparison to the Jewish case, where it is unclear what would constitute an intrinsically Jewish state short of the advent of the Messiah.

think that religious liberalisation in other regions of the Third World would mean a rapid growth of Pentecostalism there too. There are, of course, differences, such as the much more prominent role of women in the Pentecostal context; but the basic phenomenon—a widespread increase in piety and observance—is the same.

We come now to Muslim identity politics, and again we have no problem finding a non-Muslim parallel. By far the largest phenomenon of this kind outside the Muslim world is the rise of Hindu nationalism in India, with its partially successful attempt to make being Hindu a political identity. Just as with Muslim identity politics, piety and observance are not of the essence: many members of the movement that stands guard over the ideological purity of the Hindu nationalist movement, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), are not religious.⁵

Next comes the politics of Muslim values. Here too we have no problem finding a parallel that plays a prominent role in the affairs of a major country: the Christian Right in the United States. At its core, this movement is about using the ballot box to enlist the state in imposing Christian values on those who would not otherwise conform to them. It differs from what we saw in the Islamic Republic of Iran in that the control of the state apparatus by the Christian Right is rather limited; and as anyone who has seen a photograph of Michele Bachmann will know, it has no hang-up about naked hair—abortion rather than naked hair is the signature issue of the Christian Right. But the basic concern with imposing religious values on the population at large is the same.⁶

So far we have had no problem finding our parallels in large-scale phenomena. But from this point on the going gets harder. Thus in the case of the politics of the Islamic state we can again find a parallel in the United States, but not in the mainstream of the Christian Right. Instead we have to go to the outer fringes of the movement, to an obscure group known as the Christian Reconstructionists. I regularly ask audiences of fifty or sixty students at my university how many of them have heard of this group; to date only one student has raised a hand in response. But without question we have here a politics of the Christian state: not satisfied with the idea of commandeering the existing American state for Christian purposes, this movement would replace it with an intrinsically Christian state, one based on the Israelite polity as it was before the institution of the monarchy.⁷ Yet even a group as small as the Christian

⁵Secular Zionists provide a further parallel, though a less satisfactory one to the extent that Jews are not just adherents of a religion but also members of an ethnic group.

⁶Again the Israeli scene provides parallels in the political activities of religious parties and the violence of vigilante groups.

⁷This points to a profound difference between the real-world implications of the Islamist and Christian Reconstructionist aspirations. The Islamist conception resonates with the strong modern state that Third-World nationalists would like to see, the Christian Reconstructionist conception with the weak state favoured by American libertarians.

Reconstructionists does not speak with one voice, and it is worth noting an internal disagreement regarding the current Constitution of the United States. Rousas John Rushdoony (d.2001), the founding father of the group, saw the Constitution in the manner of the mainstream Christian Right, namely as ‘designed to *perpetuate* a Christian order’.⁸ By contrast, his estranged son-in-law Gary North described it as a ‘demonic plan’, ‘an apostate covenant’, ‘idol worship’, ‘covenanting with a new god, the sovereign People’.⁹ Such rhetoric provides a stirring parallel to hard-line Islamist denunciations of democracy, but within the American context it is utterly marginal.

As to Jihadism, we can find violence all over the place, including violence performed by adherents of a variety of religions to further religious ends. But warfare as the performance of an express religious duty is not so common in the modern world. Perhaps the best example is the militancy of the Sikhs in India, originally directed against Muslims but more recently against Hindus. A couple of quotations from the 18th-century Sikh rulebooks will give the flavour of the Sikh duty. One states that ‘The Sikh who ventures out unarmed shall be doomed to continued transmigration’;¹⁰ the other declares that ‘The command of the Gurus is “Fight the barbarians, destroy them all!”’¹¹ But we are dealing here with the religion of a relatively small population—perhaps less than thirty million. That is vastly more than the number of Christian Reconstructionists, but still numerically insignificant in a country the size of India.

So is the Islamic revival unique? In one obvious way it is not: as we have just seen, we can find a parallel for each of its components somewhere else. But in another way it is indeed unique. Nowhere else do we find a parallel to the entire complex; instead we had to be distinctly energetic, not to say eclectic, in trotting around the globe to find parallels, and some of them verged on the *recherché*. Moreover, there is a rather telling point to be made about two of the parallels we identified: they come from India, and in historical terms both can plausibly be seen as cases of non-Muslims emulating Muslims—their solidarity in the Hindu nationalist case, their militance in the Sikh case. So all in all, it seems that in seeking to understand the Islamic revival we are indeed trying to make sense of something exceptional.

Why then is it exceptional? There are two obvious places to look for an answer: one is the conditions under which contemporary Muslims live, and the other is the values entrenched in their heritage. This brings me to my second question.

⁸Rushdoony (1978: 2).

⁹North (1989: 696, 691, 655, 702, 654–5 respectively).

¹⁰McLeod (1990: 77).

¹¹McLeod (1987: 150). The ‘barbarians’ are the Muslims.

HOW DOES THE ISLAMIC REVIVAL RELATE TO THE THIRD-WORLD PREDICAMENT?

Muslim populations and the political movements that seek to mobilise them may be concerned with any number of issues, and it is in the nature of this short article that it makes no attempt to cover them. But apart from Islam, the single most obvious thing that all substantial Muslim populations have in common is that they belong to the Third World. This means that in terms of the global rat race they are not doing well in comparison with the populations of the First World, where wealth, power, and prestige are overwhelmingly concentrated. This is not a reassuring predicament to be in, and if you have the misfortune to be in it, it pulls you in more than one direction. Take international politics. On the one hand you want to respond to your inferior status by being defiant; but on the other hand you need to be cooperative because you desperately need the rich and powerful to be your friends and do you favours. In terms of cultural politics, you face a similar dilemma. On the one hand you want to save your heritage from being inundated by the tides of Westernisation; but on the other hand you want to adopt Western ways because they work better or are too prestigious to resist. One way or another these are major issues for a Third-World population, and we should certainly see the Islamic revival as responding to them. To put it counterfactually, if Muslim populations belonged overwhelmingly to the First World, I doubt if the British Academy would have organised a lecture on Islamic fundamentalism.

But against all this we have to come to terms with the fact is that there is nothing distinctive about the Third-World predicament as it affects Muslims, nothing about it that would explain why the *Muslim* response should stand apart from those of other Third-World populations. After all, the Third World contains many more non-Muslims than Muslims, and broadly they live in the same relatively disadvantaged situation as the bulk of the world's Muslims do. So it seems unlikely that we would find here an explanation of what is exceptional about the Islamic revival.

If we now bring the religious heritage of Muslims into the picture, and look at the way in which it can relate to the Third-World predicament, we may begin to do better. It is not hard to show that Islam makes available to its adherents a number of ideas that are powerfully relevant to this context. For simplicity, let us present these ideas in terms of extremes—a rejectionist extreme that maximises defiance and preservation of the native heritage, and an accommodationist extreme that maximises having rich and powerful friends and adopting beneficial aspects of Western culture. Of course in practice real people tend to be somewhere in between, and just where they stand is affected by many factors beyond the purview of this article; but this does not detract from the analytical convenience of looking at the extremes.

At the rejectionist end of the spectrum, we have no trouble identifying values available in the Islamic heritage that can be invoked to articulate and inspire a profound and violent alienation from the modern world. If anyone opts to believe that Islam is the only political identity worthy of a Muslim, that a Caliphate ruling over all Muslims is the only legitimate political order, that Muslims must wage war on non-Muslims, that Muslims must not imitate non-Muslims, and so forth, they will have no trouble finding immediate support for all this in the heritage. With regard to the imitation of non-Muslims, for example, such support is available in a well-known tradition that the Prophet Muhammad said: ‘He who imitates a people is one of them.’¹² All this can readily be invoked to articulate Third-World rage, the sense of being involved in a struggle to the death against the prevailing world order, as no other ideology has done since the demise of revolutionary Marxism.¹³ Moreover it does it by appealing to the heritage of a religion that a large fraction of humanity actually believes in.

Meanwhile at the accommodationist end of the spectrum there are various clever ways in which the heritage can be invoked to neutralise the rejectionist elements. But one does not always have to be clever. There are also—and this is what I want to elaborate on—features of the heritage to which one can make direct and positive appeal in such contexts. For example, if one wants to neutralise at least some of the force of the tradition about not imitating non-Muslims, one can cite the Battle of the Trench, a battle that Muhammad fought and won in 627. His problem in preparing for the battle was to secure the northern perimeter of the oasis of Medina against enemy cavalry. One of his followers, who happened to be of Persian origin, recommended digging a trench, observing that this tactic was used in his home country. Far from denouncing such imitation of a pagan practice, Muhammad immediately adopted it, and to good effect.¹⁴ Here, then, we have Prophetic precedent for adopting beneficial aspects of non-Muslim cultures.

An accommodationist stance is also greatly assisted by what might be called the proto-republican values of the early Islamic polity. For example, when Muhammad Mursi gave his victory speech after being elected President of Egypt in June of 2012, this is what he told his fellow-countrymen: ‘I have been given authority over you, but I am not the best of you . . . Help me as long as I act justly and righteously among you . . . ; when I do not do so, you have no duty to obey me.’¹⁵ In other words, he recognised that his subjects had the standing to judge the rectitude of his conduct and act accordingly. He was not being original: this was just what Abu Bakr is reputed to

¹² Abu Dawud (n.d.: 4: 44).

¹³ Compare Che Guevara and Bin Laden as T-shirt icons.

¹⁴ Waqidi (1966: 445).

¹⁵ Anon. (2012).

have told the assembled Muslims in his accession speech of 632 when he was installed as the first Caliph following the death of Muhammad.¹⁶ What we have here is a typical articulation of the values of the early Muslim polity.¹⁷ It is not a democracy, nor is it a constitutional government, but it is very definitely a non-despotic form of rule. It is also anti-patrimonial, as another anecdote about the beginning of Abu Bakr's Caliphate shows. A day after he became Caliph, Abu Bakr was making his way to market with a pile of clothes that he planned to sell. He was, after all, a merchant, and he needed to feed his family. He was accosted by one of his supporters, who suggested to him that he could discharge his public duties more effectively if he applied to the treasurer for an allowance. He did so, and the treasurer proceeded to allocate one to him—not the highest allowance, but not the lowest either. The treasurer also equipped him with two suits of clothes, one for winter and the other for summer. 'If you wear something out', he concluded, 'you bring it back and you get another instead.'¹⁸ This is not, of course, how things were done at the time in such imperial capitals as Constantinople and Ctesiphon. Alongside this aversion to despotism and patrimonialism we also find a rough and ready egalitarianism. 'People are equals like the teeth of a comb', as Muhammad is reputed to have said.¹⁹ 'We Arabs are equals', as an Arab envoy to the Persians is reported to have told them within a few years of Muhammad's death.²⁰

All this resonates powerfully with modern political values, and it means that these values can be seen as an authentic part of the native heritage, rather than as something adopted from the West in grudging recognition of its cultural superiority. Of course these values do not add up to democracy, the single most prestigious political value in the world today. Indeed, a real problem arises if one wants to see democracy as Islamic: how is popular sovereignty to be reconciled with divine sovereignty? Thus Ayman al-Zawahiri roundly denounces democracy as 'a new religion that deifies the masses',²¹ in the same vein as Gary North condemns the American Constitution as 'covenanting with a new god, the sovereign People'. To find a way around this, one probably has to be clever—as Mawdudi was. He came up with the original—or perhaps Lockean—notation that God confers the Caliphate on each and every believer, and each of them in turn delegates his or her Caliphate to a single ruler whom the believers thereby appoint to rule over them.²² Divine sovereignty thus engenders popular

¹⁶ Cook (2013: 292). Different transmissions have different wordings, but the message is the same.

¹⁷ The question how far what we read in our sources is later back-projection is a fair one, but it does not affect the argument.

¹⁸ Cook (2013: 292).

¹⁹ Cook (2013: 292).

²⁰ Cook (2013: 289–90), and see Kennedy (2007: 111–15).

²¹ Cook (2013: 307).

²² Cook (2013: 302). Mawdudi is not known as a feminist, but in this instance his inclusion of women is unequivocal.

sovereignty, thereby creating a space for democracy. We see here ways to share some very attractive Western values without the indignity of borrowing them from the West.

What I have just laid out are, so to speak, ideal types, but it is not hard to find phenomena reasonably close to them in the real world. Towards the rejectionist end of the spectrum we have the violence of Boko Haram against polio vaccination and modern education in northern Nigeria, and the violence of the Taliban against polio vaccination and education for girls in Pakistan. Towards the accommodationist end we have the Muslim Brotherhood in its various local incarnations; even Hamas, which tends to be thought of as rather extremist, believes in Islamic art in a manner that would be anathema to the Taliban. As the Hamas Charter has it, ‘Man is a strange and miraculous being, . . . a handful of clay and a breath of soul. Islamic art addresses man on this basis.’²³

Obviously religious traditions do not speak with one voice, and indeed in the Islamic case the polyphony is currently a deafening cacophony. My point is that there is a lot in the Islamic tradition that lends itself both to relatively rejectionist attitudes and to relatively accommodationist ones. Either way it is relevant, providing rich resources for thinking, feeling, and talking. And all this is entrenched in a heritage that is part and parcel of a religion that is accepted by entire societies from top to bottom. But is there anything exceptional about Islam in this respect? Could not similar things be said of the religious heritages of other Third-World societies? That brings me to my third question.

DOES ISLAM HAVE POLITICAL RESOURCES THAT OTHER THIRD-WORLD RELIGIONS DO NOT?

I believe that Islam does have such resources, and that a series of contrasts with other religious heritages would establish this. But for reasons of space, I shall do no more here than touch on one example, the Hindu heritage. It is a convenient one for our purposes thanks to the existence of a major political movement that mixes Hinduism and politics, namely Hindu nationalism. Let us adapt the analysis of the components of the Islamic revival set out near the beginning of this article, and seek Hindu counterparts of each component. In other words, we are looking for the following:

- 1 ‘Getting religion’ in a Hindu context
- 2 Political Hinduism
 - 2a The politics of Hindu identity
 - 2b The politics of Hindu values

²³ See Article 19 in Mishal & Sela (2000: 188).

2c The politics of the Hindu state

3 A Hindu counterpart of Jihadism

With regard to ‘getting religion’, the literature on Hinduism over the last half century does not suggest that there has been a massive increase in piety and observance among Hindus. Though this is not central to the argument, it is well worth noting.

Turning to political Hinduism, the only form in which we find such a thing is the politics of Hindu identity. This is well developed in contemporary India; it is what Hindu nationalism is about, and it is accompanied by a strong antipathy towards the conversion of Hindus to Islam or Christianity. But it is not matched by anything we could call the politics of Hindu values, still less by the politics of the Hindu state. It is no doubt because of this almost exclusive focus on identity that we usually speak of the movement in question as Hindu *nationalism*—not Hindu revivalism or fundamentalism.²⁴ And even then, the movement is up against deep-rooted structural factors that make large parts of Hindu society unlikely to identify for political purposes as Hindu. In other words, they are up against caste.

As to violence directed at non-Hindus, there has been no shortage of this in recent decades. It is violence in support of a religious affiliation, but it is not normally violence as the performance of a religious duty.

If this is what we see in India today, how does it relate to the contents of the Hindu heritage?

Let us consider first one of the most pronounced features of the Hindu tradition: its resolute commitment to social inequality. Here are some typical pronouncements reflecting this tradition; they relate to Brahmins, who are at the top of the social order, and Shudras, who are at the bottom. First, choosing a name for a newborn child: ‘For a Brahmin, the name should connote auspiciousness . . . and for a Shudra, disdain.’ Second, the economic implications of the distinction: ‘Even a capable Shudra must not accumulate wealth; for when a Shudra becomes wealthy, he harasses Brahmins.’ Third, some everyday implications: ‘They should give him leftover food, old clothes, grain that has been cast aside, and the old household items.’ Finally, a general view of the role of Shudras in relation to Brahmins: ‘For the Shudra . . . the highest Law leading to bliss is simply to render obedient service to distinguished Brahmin householders.’²⁵ This commitment to social inequality affects the prospects of any politics that is based squarely on the Hindu tradition, and it does so with regard to more than one of

²⁴ Likewise in the Israeli context we are comfortable describing as nationalist both secular Zionism and the religious Zionism of the National Religious Party. Islamism is of course similar to nationalism in significant respects, but it is also categorically opposed to it in the sense that it rejects any attempt to accredit ethnic difference within the Muslim community as a basis for loyalty or statehood.

²⁵ Olivelle (2005: 96 (2:31), 214 (10:129, 10:125), 207 (9:334) respectively, transcription modified).

the components that we are concerned with. Thus with regard to identity politics, it means that the tradition articulates social divisions inimical to the requisite sense of community, a serious liability in a democratic environment where one cannot be successful if one systematically gives offence to the majority of the population. The same problem arises with regard to the politics of Hindu values.

There is more. Consider the political values enshrined in the Hindu heritage: in addition to its commitment to inequality, its political vision is exclusively monarchist, and has no overlaps with modern Western values.²⁶ There is accordingly no viable basis for the politics of the Hindu state. The tradition likewise provides no counterpart to Jihadism: it is marked by a law of war that talks at length and without any discomfort about wars between rival Hindu rulers, yet has almost nothing to say about war against non-Hindus. And as to imitating non-Hindus, this is a heritage that does not even allow a Hindu to learn their languages²⁷—a prescription that would undermine one of the most adaptive resources of Hindu society in the world today, the widespread knowledge of English among the elite.

In short, as a site for the construction of a modern political ideology, the Hindu heritage just does not have as much to offer as the Islamic heritage. So it is not surprising that the Hindu nationalists, who have done their best to articulate a Hindu identity with which they can hope to win elections, do not spend their time deriving their politics from the foundational texts of Hinduism.

This is not to say that the Hindu heritage has nothing to offer politicians active in the modern world. For example, it provides a rather precise territorial definition of India—something that religions with universal pretensions do not normally give their adherents. It makes available symbolic resources for mass mobilisation against Muslims—the Hindu nationalist enemy of choice—thanks to the sanctity of the cow (given that Muslims eat it) and the wide dissemination of the Ram cult (given the presence of a mosque on the site of Ram's birth). It supports the literal demonisation of the Muslim enemy thanks to the prominent role of demons in the *Ramayana*. Last but not least, its ritual practices, as modified by the Hindu nationalists with creative abandon, have a potential for political theatre unmatched by Sunni Islam.²⁸ All this lends itself to a politics of Hindu identity—but not to one of imposing Hindu values or creating a Hindu state.

²⁶ Gandhi took the traditional Hindu concept of non-violence (*ahimsa*) and gave it a new role as a political value, but the Hindu nationalists have not shown much enthusiasm for this notion.

²⁷ For the view that 'one should not study the language of the mlecchas' see Kane (1930–62: 2: 383).

²⁸ The creative abandon of the Hindu nationalists points to a deeper contrast with the Islamists. Virtually all modern adherents of ancient religious traditions tend to reshape their traditions in response to modern conditions, but the rules of the game will generally be found to be considerably more restrictive in the Islamist case.

If instead of Hinduism we were to turn to Buddhism or Christianity, the particulars would be very different but the upshot would be the same: neither provides its adherents with resources for modern Third-World politics comparable to those offered by the Islamic heritage.

WHAT PART DOES FUNDAMENTALISM PLAY IN ALL THIS?

Up to this point I have made little use of the term ‘fundamentalism’, and I have paid no attention to the question what exactly it might mean. As is well known, we owe the term to an American Protestant, Curtis Lee Laws (d.1946). Writing in 1920 about Protestants who shared his resolute opposition to what he saw as the corruption of religion by modernism, he launched the term in the following sentence: ‘We suggest that those who still cling to the great fundamentals and who mean to do battle royal for the fundamentals shall be called “Fundamentalists”.’²⁹ Laws had no intention of coining a term that would apply to non-Christian religions, but there is nothing in his definition that precludes that. So Muslim fundamentalists would be people who mean to do battle royal for the fundamentals of Islam, and the term is now in wide use in Muslim contexts. The difficulty, of course, is that it is not immediately obvious what we should count as the fundamentals of Islam. Laws had a clear idea what the fundamentals of Christianity were because he was a believing Christian with decided views; but a Catholic would hardly have agreed with him. The same indeterminacy affects the identification of the fundamentals in the Islamic case, and unsurprisingly those who use the term here do not display any unanimity about what they mean by it. So let me simply say what I propose to mean by it myself, without denying the right of others to mean something else. If your aim is to go back to the original source of your religion, by-passing what you think is its later corrupted form, and if you accordingly locate religious authority exclusively in the original source, and if you take this source seriously in a substantive way and not just as a symbol, then by my definition you count as a fundamentalist.

If this is what we choose to mean by the term, then the Islamic revival is not in general characterised by a doctrinaire fundamentalism, but it does display a marked fundamentalist tendency. Take the case of Mawdudi. As two of his disciples put it, Mawdudi was ‘emphatic that the normative and immutable part of the Muslim heritage consists of the principles of the Qur’ān and the *Sunnah*, and nothing else’;³⁰ the sources referred to here can readily be identified with the foundational texts of the

²⁹ Laws (1920: 834).

³⁰ Ahmad & Ansari (1979: 16).

religion. In other words, Mawdudi was indeed a fundamentalist in the sense that he wanted to go back to the original source of his religion, though in fact he was by no means doctrinaire or consistent about it. He himself catches the fundamentalist tendency of the Islamic revival very well in his remark that Muslims ‘are still enamoured of Islam in its pristine purity, as it was preached and practised by the Prophet, his first four Caliphs and his Companions’.³¹

What is interesting to us about this tendency is that fundamentalising Islam works to enhance, as opposed to diminish, the force of the various elements I have been discussing. By going back to the beginnings one goes back to a time in the 7th century at which Muslim political identity was not yet weakened by ethnic divisions between Arabs and non-Arabs, at which all Muslims were still ruled by a single state, at which Muslims still spent their time making war on non-Muslims without as yet fighting each other, let alone allying with non-Muslims against other Muslims. The effect is likewise to sideline the despotic and patrimonial style of government that came to prevail in the Muslim world down the centuries, and to by-pass the acceptance of steep social hierarchy that soon came to mark Muslim societies. In other words, fundamentalism in this sense is not just a form of theological obstinacy: it pays real ideological dividends that in some ways can make one more comfortable with the modern world. A Hindu fundamentalism would not deliver any of this³²—which is why, despite a 19th-century effort that went nowhere, Hindu fundamentalism in the sense in which I am using the term barely exists.³³ The same, I think, would hold true in different ways of other non-Muslim religions. Here again, Islam is different.

THE UNITY OF THE HUMAN RACE

In this article I have been concerned with showing how and why what we see in the contemporary Islamic world is exceptional. If we are to make sense of the political salience of Islam today, we need to understand this. But we also need to avoid over-emphasising the degree to which the Islamic case is exceptional. At the most basic level, there is nothing very arcane or mysterious about the ways of thinking we have encountered or the motivations behind them. Defiance, for example, is no monopoly of the Islamic world, or even of the Third World; anyone whose memory of British politics goes back to 1982 will recollect the message that the *Sun* reporter Tony Snow

³¹ Mawdudi (1989: 19–20).

³² It would also undermine the elements of the heritage I picked out above as politically serviceable.

³³ I should make it clear that I do not share the view that the nature of the Hindu tradition precludes the emergence of a Hindu fundamentalism; rather, it is a contingent historical fact, and a significant one, that the phenomenon was still-born. For more on this see Cook (2014), chapter 9.

inscribed on a missile about to be fired in the course of the Falklands War: ‘Up yours Galtieri!’³⁴ At the same time Britain provides us with a much more recent and decorous example of the kind of thinking through which fundamentalists are sometimes able to appropriate alien ideas by finding them in their own heritages. At the annual conference of the Conservative Party in Manchester on October 5, 2011, the British Prime Minister David Cameron admonished those who had pointed to India, China and Brazil as economic models for Britain: ‘We need to become more like us. The real us. Hardworking, pioneering, independent, creative, adaptable, optimistic, can-do.’³⁵ How truly fortunate that the *real* us turn out to have all the virtues of those enterprising Indians, Chinese, and Brazilians without the stigma of being foreign, just as the *real* Muslims already possess all those virtues that others have been telling them to acquire from the West. At a certain level, people don’t seem to vary very much across the globe: when push comes to shove, they can all be heard talking the same kind of nonsense.

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³⁴We would nevertheless have to admit that Bin Laden never descended to this level of vulgarity.

³⁵Burns (2011).

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Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
The British Academy—the national academy for the humanities and social sciences.
10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.britishacademy.ac.uk

