Research Approaches
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Making Sense of
Islamic
Fundamentalism

There is no doubt that what is called Islamic fundamentalism is one among many facets of the Islamic world which in itself represents a public phenomenon with many divergences. Just like colonialism and folk religion, this religious fundamentalism does not represent a monolithic system of cultural expression. Rather it is an outcome of colonial encroachment, as well as a negation or rejection of both folk-religious tradition and colonialism. This recent Muslim self-concept goes back to the evolution of an Islamic ideology that was only developed in the 1930s and arose out of the need to distance and distinguish its adherents from the politically dominant colonial sector as well as from the handed-down Muslim tradition. This new Muslim identity expresses the relationship of tension between what may be called colonial and indigenous life worlds. It is part of the multi-layered social relationships within modern Muslim society. I will try to explain the genesis and dynamics of this fundamentalist identity.

The incremental social complexity is, among other things connected to the establishment of the colonial sector that emerged parallel to the traditional sector in the 19th century: Colonial and indigenous sectors are, ideally speaking, socially coherent, being informed by what can be called an 'internal arrangement'. However, in between these two extreme – coherent – poles, areas of transition have emerged: People caught between the boundaries of the different milieus and social groups on the borders between traditional and colonial societies. It is important to note that these groups comprise far less definite, closed, social strata than segments of different strata or classes that overlap. They are chiefly to be found in the lowest to middle levels of the colonial hierarchy as well as in the intelligentsia. They oscillate between fixed positions and are ambivalent in their constitution – hybrids so to speak. While they work for the colonial or postcolonial economy, their area of reproduction is to be found in the traditional realm. In other words, social forces exist here, which are based on structural differences that manifest themselves, for example, in traditional and modern economic and social sectors and thus constitute completely different levels of identity that are not socially coherent. Rapid social change puts into question what has so far been obvious, leading to intense problems of identification and to reorientation. Having broken away from social ties, these identities are increasingly dependent on a network of social relations: It appears that the ordinary citizen, who is firmly bound by organization, profession and relations, is as little dependent on networks as members of simple societies. If one follows the postcolonial discourse, the hybrid view of the traveller-between-two-worlds, in-between two border conditions, basically allows a perspective on historical and contemporary reality and a re-definition of the world, not so much from the viewpoint of some authority outside but as the result of an inner consciousness. A double vision arises which lays the ground for a creative indigenous discourse that can enable a new construction of identity, towards one that asserts: 'I want to be different.' This desire for difference leads to a transformation of identity, a rebirth. The conflict which arises between a modern technological work context, such as the assembly line, and a traditional life-style, like the *biradari* system, can be negotiated in at least three different ways:

1. Integrationism, i.e., adapting or modernizing one's tradition which continues to be articulated in Islamic symbols and terms;
2. Isolationism, i.e., enriching or even replacing the world of modern production with tradition; or
3. the creation of a substitute culture – which provides at least a temporary refuge from the sharp contrast between modern and traditional, such as urban crime, consumption of narcotics, or the world of cinema. The veneration cult may also be considered here.

Each of these possible negotiations depends on the respective social position of the individual and the social prestige he relates it with. In short, the higher a person stands in the colonial and postcolonial hierarchy, the greater is the tendency towards modernization in which Islam serves as a frame of reference. Also, the higher the degree of social disintegration and the fewer the chances of upward social mobility, the greater is the inclination towards traditionalization and, in the medium term, even willingness for radicalism, hence isolationism.

The integrationist way is followed by leading Islamists like Abul Ala Maududi and other functionaries of Islamist organizations. They largely originate from this field of tension between identity and alienation, traditional and modern sectors. They are generally representative of middle range professionals bound up in the postcolonial system, and relatively highly placed in society. They live largely in a traditional world, but due to their integration into the dominant postcolonial system, they adopt and adapt main terms and ideas central to this system and recognize them as part of their own biography. Islamic terms such as *dastur* and *shura* are extricated from their religious context and given such new ideological values such as parliament and constitution, without, however, renouncing their Islamic identity. Party system and nation-state, for instance, are interpreted as having always been Islamic. With this normative replacement, these Islamic classicists can transcend traditional boundaries, legitimize modern developments within the Islamic semiotics and stabilize their own societal position. In this process of ideologization of Islam and re-invention of tradition, code or identity switching is most important. This switching, that is the reciprocal translation of symbols and terms, provides the ability of action on different societal levels. To the outsider – for example, to the colonial public – the Islamist argues ideologically, limiting the use of Islamic symbols to the indispensable. To the insider – that is the traditional society – he/she pursues the theological argument. The Islamic cult is reinforced. The theological discussion, however, is of debatable theological value. It is this network behaviour that is responsible for the particular dynamics of political Islam. Islamists usually promise a righteous society here and now through catharsis: a transformation from corruption to purity, from Jahiliya (pre-Muhammadan times, conditions of ignorance) to Islam. This Jahiliya was, according to Islamists, a result of the modernization policies of the State. The deviation from the right path and the neglecting of religious duties have resulted in the loss of religious and cultural identity. Hence, the Islamist concept of history is informed by the notion of constant decay. They call for the reconstruction of an idealized pure and pre-colonial cultural context – imitatio muhammadi. This radical re-invention of tradition seems to be grounded in a heritage under which the handed-down canon was blurred and lost, as in the obliteration and appropriation process of colonial power in the 18th and 19th centuries. Therefore, the only way to legitimate the necessary rebirth and revival is to go back beyond this obliterated tradition. Consequently, a new normative and formative past is created. These Islamists can thus distinguish themselves from other Muslims and from secular politicians. They are the avant gardes or the hegemonic identity which considers itself authorized to establish renewal – *tajdid*.

Aspects of their critique are systematized in the context of a history of salvation and formulated as an integristic programme that, however, has a clear integrationist character. In contrast to their slogan, *islamiser la modernité*, their own Islamic tradition is modernized, since the imagined Islamic society is to compete and correspond with Western achievements. This would only be possible in a centralized Islamic state over which they would wield control as the agents of God's sovereignty on earth, as with the Hizb Ullah (Party of God) or the Jama'at-e Islami (Islamic Society). The Qu'ran and Sunna would be the ideal basis for a universal, legally ethical monism. Up to this point of Islamist discourse, ideas such as pluralism, democracy and human rights have little value in an imagined Islamic territory, since the main concern is to establish a unique Islamic identity. On the other hand, these kinds of pan-Islamic ideas are always postulated within the boundaries of a nation state, with political Islam providing the imagination of the realization and reconstruction of a society within a nation-state. As is evident, fundamentalism preaches a traditionalism of solidarity, which is primarily oriented to life in the world and has certain ideas of reform. In closer view however, its postulates reveal mere prophecies, advice, threats and general desiderata with a little consistent programme. It fails to solve factual problems, offering mostly regressive attempts at solutions precisely because its orientation is mythical, hence restorative, and hardly utopian, that is social revolutionary. However, since the 1980s one can witness a clear change in the Islamist discourse. This is particularly true in postmodern times, when political Islam has failed, because Islamist promises were not realized. Analogous to this failure, new alternatives have emerged, reflecting the interaction of different social realities and cultural identities in a pluralizing society in which Islamists have also started increasingly using ideas of mythical re-establishments to mark out their social and political territories and to enlarge them, albeit within the existing nation-state. In this phase of post-Islamism their own position is constantly re-negotiated vis-à-vis the government, external patrons, other Islamist groups, and the masses or the target audiences. This involves competition and contest over interpretation of symbols and control of institutions, because symbols are an integral part of Muslim politics. They express the values and are constitutive of a political community. Hence, there is a constant struggle concerning people's imagination and, following that, about the objective chances and resources in a free market. Therefore, Islamic – even fundamentalist – principles must constantly be reinterpreted. The result is a flexibility of ideas and divergence over time and space. It is in the gap between divine plan – *sharia* – and human understanding – politics – that the perennially fertile space of critique can be found. This can intensify competition and conflicts. The alternative to fundamentalism is that multiple centres of power and contenders for authority come to certain accommodations. The recent rather peaceful change of the weekly holiday from Friday to Sunday in Pakistan can indeed be an indication of negotiation to the relative satisfaction of all. It is these different discourses that reflect the complicity of the Islamic public. This is particularly true in the field of the supposed latent and open tensions between Muslim scholars, sufis and intellectuals. There seems to be enough societal and economic overlappings and cross-connections or personal unions between, for example, Jama'at-e Islami and Barelwis so that both come to terms with one another, and given boundaries and norms are shifted, displaced, and extended. Thus, making sense of religious fundamentalism can be possible only if these complex and dynamic perspectives are contextualized. I contend that studies on Modern Islam therefore should be read in the light of articulations of particular social and cultural realities negotiating over boundaries between spheres of social activity and institutions. For, to approach Islamic culture normatively does not contribute to its understanding. Islamicity is merely the lingual and symbolic expression of this negotiation. Fundamentalism is one of the articulations through which Modern Islam is to be understood. ◆

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