

Debate

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A simmering issue in the Islamic world's relations with the West concerning the tension between the sacred and the secular took a particularly violent turn on 11 September 2001 when Usama Bin Laden and his Al-Qa'ida network launched a coordinated assault on the US in the name of sacred duty. The West reacted with stunned surprise. But given the long history of Islamic fundamentalist grievances, is not the West's surprise itself surprising?

Sacred and Secular in Islam

It is, for example, clear that Bin Laden is motivated by sacred rage against an infidel secular West, and yet the West has sought to dismiss Bin Laden's self-proclaimed struggle as bogus. President Bush has, notwithstanding, sought to portray his military campaign as a sacred contest with an 'axis of evil'. Bush believes that snapping the terrorist networks by driving their members into the sharp prongs of military reprisal, and combining that with closing their financial operations at home and abroad, will be enough for righteous vindication and for disposing of the fundamentalist scourge. That view, however, is sadly mistaken. The fundamentalist challenge, rooted in religious justifications, is unlikely to go away that easily.

In spite of that, the West seems reluctant to take the fundamentalists at their own word. The fundamentalists continue to put up a spirited defence of Islam against an ancient foe now ensconced in the United States. We should inquire into what they mean by Islam and why for them the United States has come to be a citadel of infidels. In a videotaped statement on 7 October, Bin Laden spoke of the moral injury stemming from the disgrace and humiliation Islam has suffered for almost eighty years, a reference to the end of the caliphate in Turkey in 1924 following the First World War. Turkey became a secular state, and the sultan ceased to be the political head of the worldwide community of Muslims. With the end of the caliphate went a potent symbol of Islam's global spiritual identity. Through historical ups and downs, and sometimes only in name, the caliphate lingered on as bearer of Islam's imperial impulse until 1924 when it unravelled. Memories of that demise continued still to rankle with Bin Laden, though most Westerners, being sanguinely pragmatic and un beholden to tradition in their daily lives, know nothing of that. It is tempting from Bin Laden's viewpoint to dig into history for the roots of his fundamentalist agenda of restoring Islam's glorious past, but for Americans that would be time wasting.

Divergent notions of religion

The West is impatient with history but also with religion, which it reduces to individual piety and subjective dispositions. It gives the sacred little or no public merit. The Enlightenment and the inter-religious wars of Europe decided people to establish the state on a non-religious basis. Religion survived as personal habit and subjective preference, framed by emotions, feelings, and states of mind appropriate to the phenomenon, as Rudolf Otto describes in his classic work, *The Idea of the Holy*. This point of view expresses well the spirit of individualism.

From the fundamentalists' point of view, however, this notion of religion is offensive because religion is the revealed will of God for the public order, and for the individual as a member of the community. This view of religion, however, conflicts with modernity, though, in that case, it sheds light on the nature of the fundamentalist grievance.

The fundamentalists assert that the believer and unbeliever alike are a subject of state jurisdiction, because the Prophet founded a state and a religion to go with it.

That makes the 'sacred' and 'secular' one and the same thing, and what distinguishes them is a matter of public will and religious interest. *Haram* means 'sacred' when used of the two holy sites of Mecca and Medina (*haramayn*), but carries a secular meaning as harem, the 'exclusive' women's quarter in the household, and when used of prohibited things or conduct. *Halal*, on the other hand, means lawful or permitted, such as concerns dietary rules or business practice. *Haram* carries the force of 'taboo' while *halal* speaks of the mundane, the unrestricted. 'Sacred' and 'secular', accordingly, touch on both religion (*din*) and the world (*dunya*). Bin Laden is on firm ground here.

Pursuing Al-Qa'ida and Taliban forces in the caves and tunnels of Spin Baldak and the Tora Bora mountains, the West has responded to this religious challenge by targeting the terrorists as a bunch of fanatics without any standing in Islam, a noble faith and a religion of peace, in the words of President Bush. Others assert that terrorism is not jihad; is not *sunna* after the example of Muhammad; is, in fact, not religion (*din*). True religion, the West believes, does not recruit or conscript, does not fight or thrive in caves and tunnels, does not compete or commit deeds as an international actor, does not own banks, and does not make political claims or laws, as the terrorists are doing. Only governments may act that way. It is difficult, though, to know what counts here as religion, except to say that whatever it is, religion has no public standing. The West had hoped to avoid assuming a religious role in the conflict, and has, accordingly, sought comfort in the convenient thought that it is only a renegade break-away group of Muslim fundamentalists who have struck out in violence.

Most Muslims do not share that view, and, instead of supporting the West's anti-terrorism strategy, have directed their prickly moral indignation at the threatened rights of Taliban and Al-Qa'ida captives under US control in Cuba. Condemnation of Bin Laden is muted by growing Muslim calls for his presumed innocence until convicted in a court of law, calls that resulted, for example, in Nelson Mandela retracting his support for Bush. Only generous economic inducement, backed by the amenable voices of exiled Muslims, has prevented this moral indignation from sparking large-scale anti-Western protests.

Americans and Europeans have a hard time understanding Islam, and the fundamentalists are not helping. Islam, for the radicals, calls for absolute surrender to the rule of God. The unbeliever for them has the rights only of a dependent client rather than those of a conscientious dissenter. For them, *kufr*, unbelief, is not just a theological matter of disavowing God; it calls for a policy of containment of those who refuse to submit. Without Islam, unbelievers, like nations, carry a 'secular', pejorative stigma. Fundamentalists seek the political kingdom first, and everything else is added to that.

The sense of divine efficacy in history, that God reveals but also commands, what the first Muslims called *jihad fi-sabil li-llah*, 'holy war in the way of God', (Qur'an 4:76, 91f, 94f;

9:5, 29, 36, 41, 122; 47:4) is demonstrated by the successful establishment of the early Muslim community in Medina, and that vision has inspired the fundamentalists.

Fundamentalists dislike the secular state for opposing the *shari'a* and for splintering God's *umma* into petty secular jurisdictions. They want instead to institute a divine social order. They have appealed to fellow Muslims to assume a state of *hijra* toward the secular state, to become what the Qur'an calls *hijra*-bound in God's cause, *al-muhajirin fi-sabil li-llah* (24:22). One such movement declared: 'All the Muslim people of Turkestan have lost their patience and have chosen the holy road to emigration for preparing for jihad-in-the-way-of-God' (*New York Times*, 'Qaeda Grocery Lists', 17 March 2002, p. 18). Ironically, the American perspective on separation of church and state may offer a compromise by ceding the religious ground without stripping it of public interest entirely.

That would be congruent, too, with a strand in Muslim thought that does not want to elide religion with politics, the sacred with the secular, even though worldly interests may serve the ethical purposes of religion. As Ibn Khaldun (d. 1405/06) put it in a fit of theological illumination, believers should resist the facile view that religion and politics belong together lest we 'patch our worldly affairs by tearing our religion to pieces. Thus neither our religion lasts nor [the worldly affairs] we have been patching.'*

The sacred challenge

The sovereign secular state, however, will not countenance a challenge to the sacred/secular distinction. Yet the events of 11 September showed that modernity is not impervious to challenge. For their part, Muslim reformers have supported a compromise solution where religion is adjusted, even reconstructed, as a matter of conscience and personal decision, with the state precluded from a statutory role in the free exercise of religion. Such a compromise would bring Muslims closer to the West, but would not deny a role for religion in public life on the grounds that religion is too pervasive to restrict it to a few designated areas of life. Religion is too important for the state to ignore, and equally too important for the state to co-opt. That implies the modification of separation to fundamentalist ideology, with religion qualifying the limits of state power without the state defining the scope of religious commitment. Under that arrangement the state would desist from interference with religion without being immune to religious scrutiny. It would prompt religious people to join political leaders to denounce Bin Laden's excesses as political terrorism and as religious transgression at the same time, making him deserving of the appropriate military response and of *takfir*, religious repudiation. (The argument by some that Bin Laden is engaged, not in a 'holy war' (*jihad*), but in an unjustified warfare (*hiraba*) against innocent people ignores the sacred/secular correspondence for him and other Muslims.)

The events of 11 September have breached the walls of secular invincibility, and also the

logic of secular claims as neutral and normative. The modern religious resurgence has revealed the dogma of secular primacy to be vulnerable to rude surprises, making it imperative that we recognize the role of religion in people's lives for what it is. Religious fanaticism will not disappear with military reprisal but only with religious self-criticism, if at all. The military instrument cannot settle the issue, and governments, especially corrupt ones, are really implicated in their own version of political fundamentalism in the use and means of power, and so they have ceased to be religiously credible; they have too long promoted secularism as a religious alibi to be trusted. As it is, most Muslims find few benefits in secularism enough to win their confidence. They are ready to turn to religious fervour instead. For the flourishing of human life, we need to transcend the sacred/secular cleavage and rise to the challenge of relating our worldly interests to our spiritual values without prejudice to either. In any case, we have less excuse to be surprised any more.

Note

* Ibn Khaldun, *Al-Muqaddimah, An Introduction to History*, vol. I, tr. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, 1967), 427.