The threat of fundamentalism?
Some Christian and Muslim Perspectives:

By TRISH MADIGAN OP

ONE OF THE GREATEST dangers of our time, some claim, is the threat of a clash of civilizations in an impending and inevitable confrontation between Islam and the West. However, scholars such as John Esposito believe that such visions of the future rest generally on an exaggerated and distorted understanding of Islam and a misunderstanding of the nature of diversity and the complexity of social change (Esposito 1992, 4-5). The long cultural interchange between Islamic and Western societies over many centuries has been too diverse, mutually enriching and, at times, too promising to be so easily abandoned now (Shboul 1995, 37). A real, though less immediately evident, danger is the distortion of two great religious traditions due to the ideologically driven objectives of a few—a threat that impinges dangerously not only on relations between the Muslim world and the West but on the well-being of the religious traditions and of the world itself.

Some clarifications are necessary before beginning any discussion on Islamic or Christian fundamentalism. There are many movements in Islam which, like Christianity and other world religions, is not a single monolithic entity. Some of these movements in recent times have been lumped together under the label 'fundamentalist'. Not all need to be thought of as dangerous or threatening. Indeed some movements that have been loosely labeled 'fundamentalist' are quite legitimate forms of addressing questions concerning religious identity in a changing world.

It is important also to note that there is an anomaly in using the term 'fundamentalism'—which is of Western Christian origin - in relation to Islam. In its Christian origins it was a term heavily influenced by American Protestantism and used pejoratively of those who emphasized the literally interpreted Bible as fundamental to Christian life and teaching and who were regarded by more liberal Christians as static, retrogressive and extremist. Applied in this way to Muslims the term could be taken to refer to all practitioners of Islam who accept the Qur'an as the literal word of God and the Sunnah (example) of the Prophet as normative for living, which indeed would be the whole Muslim community.

However, as Marty and Appleby (1995, vol. 2, 8) point out, crowded mosques, veiled women and bearded men are not in themselves reliable signs of Islamic fundamentalism. Rather, they are in keeping with a long Islamic tradition of tajdid (revival) and islah (reform) which includes notions of political and social activism dating from early Islamic centuries until the present day. To speak of Islamic fundamentalism in this context is to load the term with Christian presuppositions and Western stereotypes. So we need to distinguish between genuine religious movements of Islamic revivalism and renewal,

aiming at the recovery of an authentic Islamic spiritual tradition in the context of the challenges of the modern world (Esposito 1992, 8), which can often be misconstrued by non-Muslims as being 'fundamentalist', and a politically-motivated fundamentalist Islam that employs religious symbols as ideological weapons against what is judged to be a hostile world (Tibi 1998, 13).

All fundamentalisms, in whatever context they emerge, tend to share some common features. They can be described as 'a process of selective retrieval, embellishment and construction of 'essentials' or 'fundamentals' of a religious tradition for the purposes of halting the erosion of traditional society and fighting back against the encroachments of secular modernity' (Marty and Appleby 1995, vol. 5, 6). The social and political framework, the intellectual, symbolic and other resources of the host religion and its structures, as well as the 'trigger' that begins the process of fundamentalist reaction and reconstruction, which all play a part in determining the singular characteristics of a particular fundamentalist movement, will vary according to the place, time and sociopolitical context. Fundamentalism differs from various forms of conservatism, traditionalism or evangelicalism in that it is a movement in conscious and organized opposition to a perceived threat of disruption of the tradition or orthodoxy coming from a changing world. The diverse sociopolitical contexts in which Christian and Muslim fundamentalisms have emerged give a different shape to their individual expression although they share some of the same underlying dynamic.

Christian Fundamentalisms

Christian fundamentalism in its Protestant form developed as one response to a wide range of cultural changes associated with modernity which were taking place in late nineteenth century North America. Some Christians experienced their own beliefs and values becoming more and more marginalized to the extent that they were now 'outsiders' in their own culture and felt a need to defend their religious heritage. The movement is distinguished by its reference, even if unknowingly, to ideas, images and practices that were prevalent at that time. For example, the 'traditional family' is the middle class family that had emerged from nineteenth century industrialization with its 'two spheres' for men's and women's work; this explains its inability to accommodate the self-consciousness and aspirations of contemporary women. 'Traditional' music is likely to bear a copyright from late nineteenth century. The doctrines emphasized as most important, including the central concept of the 'inerrancy of scripture', are doctrines developed to defend against the inroads of 'modernism'. It draws on the Baconian scientific worldview, the dominant scientific orthodoxy of the nineteenth century, which understands the world to be organized by rational principles established by an all-knowing God that are objectively available to human beings through their use of 'commonsense reason' (Ammerman 1995, 8 – 10). There is little place for a female subjectivity in this schema.

Catholic fundamentalism differs in that it gained momentum in the context of the doctrinal chaos and challenge to ecclesial authority which occurred throughout the Catholic community in the years following the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) and the

promulgation of Paul VI's encyclical Humanae Vitae in 1968, although it was foreshadowed in Catholic Integralism of the early twentieth century. The aggiornamento (updating) of Vatican II came to signify for many conservative Catholics a radical and 'contradictory' departure from many of the doctrines, disciplines and symbols of spirituality that they held as constitutive of the Catholic faith (Dinges 1995, 80). Catholic fundamentalism therefore tends to uphold the centuries immediately before Vatican II as its reference point and 'golden age'. Centred around magisterial teachings from the Council of Trent, the philosophico-theological system of St Thomas Aquinas, and with a legalistic orientation, Catholic fundamentalism is a protest against the modern blurring of Catholic identity and the loss of Catholic hegemony in the social, cultural and political arenas of the twentieth and twenty-first century.

One of the most well known examples of Catholic fundamentalism is the movement of French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre. Prominent in his writings and public statements are reactionary right-wing themes emphasizing authority, social hierarchy, and obedience as well as condemnations of liberalism, the democratic ethos, the 'rights of man' associated with the legacy of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, together with the political and cultural ethos of modern liberal democracy. However, as Dinges notes, Catholic fundamentalism is distinguished not so much by the content of its orthodoxy or by its antimodernist, hermeneutical framework as in the priority it gives to 'correct belief' itself. In its strongly rationalistic orientation religion is based on a standardized objective knowledge of God. It follows therefore that doctrine is not the historical product of Christian experience but what determines Christian experience. Religious truth is a fixed body of eternally valid propositions and the theological task is apologetic rather than exploratory or critical (Dinges 1995, 82, 91).

It can be argued that the 'threat' in the case of Christian fundamentalisms would seem to be mainly to the Christian tradition itself. Fundamentalism inevitably results in a distortion of the religious tradition by the adoption of an ideologically driven selection of doctrines and practices which are emphasized to the almost total exclusion of balancing insights. For example, in Catholic fundamentalism the authority of the hierarchy in formulation of church teaching is stressed without due attention given to the essential contribution of the sensus fidelium. Similarly, in Protestantism new doctrines such as 'inerrancy' of scripture are used ideologically to support predetermined positions. In their exclusive and elitist orientations, by privileging one narrowly conceived set of doctrines over a broader perspective, and stressing one period of history over others, Christian fundamentalists fail to draw on all the many centuries of the lived 'wisdom' of the tradition which could usefully be brought to bear on the modern situation. They deprive themselves of the broader range of Christian ecclesiology and theology.

Islamic Fundamentalisms

The context for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism is somewhat different. Finding support in diverse early modern Islamic teachings of men such as the traditionalist Arabian Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703 – 92) or the radical thinker and activist Jamal ad- Din al-Afghani (1839 – 97) it emerged in both Sunni and Shi'ite Islam in the late nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries. At the same time Muslim rulers in the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, Tunisia and Iran looked to the West to develop military, economic and political modernization programs. The aim of the Muslim rulers was to emulate the strength of the West and to this end they sought out European learning and looked to apply Western models. However, this occurred in reaction to the external threat of European colonial expansion and not as a response to internal developments (Esposito, 1992, 54). As a result of changes that came from above, the traditional bases of social authority became altered as a new intellectual elite—modern, educated, usually male and Western-influenced—gained ascendancy. The traditional Islamic basis and legitimacy of these Muslim societies were slowly altered as the ideology, law and institutions of the state became increasingly secularized.

Part of the problem was that aspects of modernity were selectively appropriated. Although in the Western world technological development was usually accompanied by increased forums for popular participation in the process and balanced with legal and constitutional safeguards, in many of the newly developing Islamic societies political participation was not a priority nor was substantive political change. For example, when the Shah in Iran established a National Consultative Assembly in 1906 this move was not accompanied by an attempt to introduce serious constitutional reforms limiting the absolute power of rulers. A major result of modernization, therefore, in many Islamic countries was the emergence of new elites and a growing bifurcation of Muslim society (Esposito 1992, 55). Society became divided into two classes with divergent worldviews – a modern Westernized elite minority and a more traditional, Islamically-oriented majority.

Growing tensions came to a head in the late 1960s and 70s when Muslims in many countries experienced a sense of crisis and failure that gave rise to a new search for Islamic identity which served as a catalyst for a more visible reassertion of Islam. A significant factor in this was the Six-Day War (1967) in which defeat by Israel constituted an immense blow to Arab/Muslim pride, identity and self-esteem. Likewise, the loss of East Pakistan and its recreation as Bangladesh during the Pakistan-Bangladesh civil war in 1971 raised questions about Pakistan's Islamic identity and ideology (Esposito 1992, 11-12). These crises and failures of modernizing Islamic states had the effect of heightening a prevailing sense of inferiority borne of centuries of European colonial dominance. They seemed to be in marked contrast to an Islamic ideal which linked the faithfulness of the Islamic community with memory of a past history in which Islam was a dominant world power and civilization. Therefore it is no accident that Islamic revivalism or activism has taken place as an anti-Western movement especially in more modernized and advanced countries of the Muslim world. While Westernization and secularization are condemned, modernization is not, but the pace, direction and extent of change, it is held, need to be subordinated to Islamic belief and values (Esposito 1992, 17, 19). To the extent that there is an 'Islamic threat' to the modern world it comes from ideologically aligned, fundamentalist groups. Yet the threat would seem just as much a threat to Islam and to Islamic society itself as to the modern world.

As in the case of Christian fundamentalism, it is suggested by Bassam Tibi that the

greatest threat may be the threat to Islam itself since Islamic fundamentalism is not deeply rooted in Islamic understanding or tradition but instead 'invents' tradition (Tibi 1998, 165, 174). For example, Tibi asserts, fundamentalists show little awareness of Shari'a law as a post-Quranic construction which originated basically as a kind of civil law dealing with such affairs as inheritance and marriage. In Islamic history the Shari'a was never a constitution of the traditional Islamic caliphate which, in fact, was an absolute monarchy. Yet today, fundamentalists invent the tradition of shari'a as an Islamic constitution of the state and, in their attempts to implement Shari'a law, serve only to undermine the Quranic instruction 'There shall be no compulsion in religion'.

To take another example, in asserting that Islam was the first democracy on earth and in claiming shura/consultation as an Islamic alternative to secular democracy Islamic fundamentalists ignore the historical origins of shura which were in the pre-Islamic system of consultation among tribal leaders. Tibi (1988, 30) explains how, in stipulating that the Prophet must 'take counsel with them in the conduct of affairs' (Sura 3:159), the Qur'an honours this pre-Islamic tradition. He remarks on the fundamentalists' poor awareness of historical records and their lack of any vision of history which renders them unable to accommodate the more 'traditional' insight that Islam and the modern democratic system are not incompatible. As Halliday notes the fundamentalist view is based on the false premise that there is one, true, traditionally established 'Islamic' answer to the question and that this timeless 'Islam' rules social and political practice. He is adamant that there is no such answer and no such Islam. (Halliday 1995, 116)

The 'Threat' of Fundamentalism?

The irony is that, despite their critique of modernity, fundamentalist groups are thoroughly modern in that the concerns of their leaders are shaped and formed in reaction to the modern situation. They are directly opposed to cultural modernity and its democratic heritage, the political culture of pluralism, human rights and liberal tolerance, yet they selectively use the resources of modernity to promote their particular concept of political order. (cf Tibi 1998, 24ff, 33, 118 and Marty and Appleby 1995, vol 1, vii).

Islamic fundamentalism can largely be understood as the product of failed modernization attempts in which Western solutions were imposed on non-Western peoples and cultures that had not yet developed the requisite social understandings and political underpinnings on which to build effectively. These people were left with a sense of failure, disenchantment with the West, a quest for identity and greater authenticity and the conviction that Islam alone could provide a self-sufficient ideology for state and society—that Islam alone was a valid alternative to other twentieth century movements such as secular nationalism, socialism and capitalism.
Therefore while Christian fundamentalism is the product of a reaction, in the face of the forces of modernity and secularism, to a loss of Christian autonomy and social, cultural and political hegemony, the phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism, especially in its more violent expressions, is an appeal by non-Western Islamic societies for recognition of their sovereignty and social realities. To this end it is a cry to the world community to address serious questions of political, economic and social inequity.

Many scholars point to a contradiction that is at the heart of all fundamentalisms—that in their rejection of modernity fundamentalists are themselves unwilling reflections of the impact of modernity (cf Tibi 1998, 118 - 19). Their response to modernity is expressed to a great extent in clearly modern terms and their thought and actions are imprisoned in the world-time context designated by modernity. On the one hand they seek to accommodate instrumentally all or most of the material achievements of modernity (science and technology) into civilization; on the other they reject vehemently the adoption of the human-centred rationality that has made these achievements possible.

A fundamentalist orientation, then, lacks coherence and in the end cannot provide direction for an effective, life-giving religious presence in the world of the twenty-first century. The real danger for the religious traditions of both Islam and Christianity is that if they are unable to interact in a positive and productive way with new cultural, social and political realities they will have nothing of worth to offer to the future of a developing and evolving world.

Trish Madigan, a Dominican sister, is a member of staff at the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations at Turramurra, Sydney, and a member of the Australian National Dialogue of Jews, Christians and Muslims.

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