

# Islamic Fundamentalism: Implications for Missions

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Looking at a Picasso painting and finding out that it was sold for a huge sum of money is a cultural shock. Why would anybody pay so much money for such a "strange" painting? Of course it has tremendous value as an investment, but I have a hard time finding the beauty in that art. I need someone who understands the genius of Picasso to interpret his art for me.

Islam, like a Picasso painting, is a "strange" phenomenon to most western minds, while Islamic Fundamentalism is even more difficult to understand. There is a tendency "to judge the Fundamentalists' dedication as extremism, their willingness to lay down their lives for serving God as fanaticism, their holistic view of life as rebellion against the state, and their hatred of, and desire to punish, sin as bloodthirstiness, their convictions as dogmatism, their solidarity as exclusiveness, and their sense of dignity and honor as haughty pride..." (quote from "The Rumbling Volcano" page 8)

If we come with our preconceived ideas and project our prejudices on Muslims, then we will experience fierce antagonism from them in general, but especially from the Muslim Fundamentalists in particular. The challenge for us is to dare to enter their worldview, share their consciousness, explore its interior, and look at their world through their mindset, while at the same time, retaining our own perception and worldview.

## Resurgence in Egypt as Example

In my book, *The Rumbling Volcano*,<sup>1</sup> I have attempted to study the phenomenon of Islamic Fundamentalism in Egypt, and its implications for the Arab world, as well as for the wider Muslim world. Egypt is a strategic country in the Middle East. If Egypt should become an Islamic state similar to that of Iran, then sooner or later many other countries will follow.

This article is a summary of the political, religious, economic, social, and psychological factors that play a role in attracting young people to Fundamentalism. Although these factors mainly reflect the situation in Egypt, the principles are applicable to a great extent in Algeria, Indonesia, and other Third World Muslim countries.

In Egypt there has been a series of ebbs and flows between secular waves and Islamic resurgence. The first wave started at the end of the nineteenth century, when Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, followed later by Muhammad Abduh, responded to the westernization process resulting from the strong colonialism of the nineteenth century. The second wave, caused by the same factors and manifesting itself in

openness to western culture and education through Hasan al-Banna and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The third wave came in response to the secularization brought about by Gamal Abdel Nasser's revolution, resulting in the humiliating defeat of the 1967 war with Israel. This third wave started right after that war, and is continuing into the present, in response to the successive failures of socialism and capitalism, as well as in response to man's basic needs, of which most Egyptians have been deprived.

Characteristic of this resurgence is the comprehensiveness of Islam. Islam is *deen wa dawla* (doctrine, life, and politics, and it includes all the various aspects of the life of the individual and of the nation. Economics, politics, theology, as well as the judiciary system, are part of an all-inclusive and comprehensive Islamic system.<sup>ii</sup>

In Egypt, the Fundamentalists are recruited mostly from active youth in their twenties and thirties, university students and graduates who tend to be conscientious and ambitious. Furthermore, most of these recruits spent their childhood in villages and little towns. R. S. Ahmad agrees that Fundamentalism in Egypt is most appealing to these groups, yet he states that in later stages of its development, the resurgence will penetrate the various strata of the society. In Iran, its Islamic revolution was not limited to students and young graduates, but appealed to a wide spectrum of society.<sup>iii</sup> Resurgence is attractive because it gives the recruit the sense that he belongs to a attractive and powerful solidarity, and the conviction that his faith is the only true faith because it is alive and in a state of growth and expansion.

### **The Dream of Returning to the Caliphate**

Since 1924, when Sultan Abdul Majid II in Turkey was banished the caliphate has been in a state of vacancy. The caliph, like the pope in Roman Catholicism, was a symbol of unity and solidarity. Under the caliph, the Islamic nation (*umma*) spread from Morocco in the West to Indonesia in the East, reaching as far as parts of the previous Soviet Union in the North and some black African countries in the South. It was a grand *umma* indeed.

The dream of the return to the caliphate, where all Muslims unite together and live with dignity and social justice, following the precepts of the Qur'an, is a utopia which appeals to the emotions of most Muslims.<sup>iv</sup>

In 1952, the Muslim Brotherhood bought a piece of land on Mukattam Mountain in the suburbs of Cairo and intended to start an Islamic utopia with 30,000 families living there. Their plan was foiled when Nasser took the land in 1954. Shukri took his people to the desert to live the utopian Muslim society, and he

was able to make an appeal to the youth to join him, in spite of how absurd it looked.

The dream of the return to the caliphate and the establishment of the Islamic *umma* is an impossibility when perceived rationally. Yet, when perceived with the eyes of faith, supported by yearning emotions, it is possible. Who would have ever thought that the banished Imam would one day return to Iran, shaking the foundations of a throne? If it succeeded in Iran, it could succeed in other countries, and perhaps one day Muslims around the world would forget their differences and agree on their caliph.

### **Influence of the Gulf Countries**

Waves of Egyptians returned from the Gulf countries to Egypt in the 1970s, carrying with them new convictions. While in the Gulf, they saw how the petrodollar that "God blessed the Muslims with" was used for the propagation of Islam. They became aware of how Saudi money was well spent in printing and distributing the Qur'an, building mosques all over the world, and training and sending Muslim missionaries.

According to their beliefs, it is no wonder God is blessing these countries with oil. Unlike Egypt, which is geographically located between Saudi Arabia on the one side and Libya on the other side, both countries have an abundance of oil. Why is it that the western desert in Egypt, which is the continuation of the Libyan desert, has no oil, while Libya "floats" on oil? Is this a coincidence, or is God punishing Egypt? Besides that, Anwar Sadat's efforts to take back the oil wells of Sinai, as a result of the peace treaty with Israel, were not blessed by God.

By the time the oil wells returned to Egypt, the price of oil had dropped dramatically. It seems that God is punishing Egypt because it has not been faithful to him. If Egypt returns to her God, he will then remove the shame and dishonor that has befallen her. If Muslims repent and apply the *Shari'a*, then God will have mercy.

The other impact that came from the Gulf was Iran's model. Ayatollah Ruholla Al-Khomeini dared to look at the "truth" and to call hypocrisy by its name, and was endowed with courage similar to that of the Prophet. He opposed corruption and unbelief and dared to stand against the stream. Al-Khomeini, who lived by the precepts of Islam and established an Islamic country over the ruins of the Shah's empire, had the courage to stand alone against the superpowers, the world, and even against the leaders of Muslim countries and their hired imams who were living in hypocrisy.<sup>v</sup>

He was able to wage an expensive war for eight years against Iraq, in spite of the United States' blockage of Iranian capital in American banks, the low price of oil, and the damage to the oil industry as a result of the war. Al-Khomeini, who stood

alone with the courage that springs from the faithful adherence to Islamic beliefs, was able to bring Islam to the front pages of the newspapers of the world.

### **Gap between Reality and Ideal**

According to the Prophet and Muslims throughout the centuries, Islam is the best economic, social, religious, legal, and political system on earth: *khayru ummaten unzilal linnas* (the best nation revealed to humanity). Yet, as Muslims look around them, they find a large gap between what Islam is and what it should be. Efforts have been made to bridge this gap by charismatic leaders like al-Banna and al-Khomeini, by ideologists like Sayyid Qutb and Sayyid Abu al-Ala Mawdudi, and by influential Islamic writers like Muhammad Amarah and Muhammad al-Ghazali.

The youth of Egypt are being assured that they belong to the greatest *umma* on earth and that corruption, hypocrisy, and lack of dedication are the causes of the "catastrophe" which Islam is experiencing. Teaching, training, and dedication are available to equip future generations. The places for teaching are available in popular mosques and apartments of members, scattered beyond the reach of the secret police. All that is needed is for the youth to respond to this challenge and become committed and available for the process of teaching and equipping.

On the front page of al-Ahram, a Cairo newspaper, on May 6, 1990, the Minister of Interior declared that al-Jihad organization members are recruiting and training boys and teenagers to attack police stations with Molotov cocktails. Why is it that even the young are so motivated to join the Fundamentalist movement?

### **Education and Employment**

In Egypt, from the beginning of the revolution in 1952, attempts have been made to deal a blow to the feudal lords and to give members of the lower classes an opportunity to improve their economic and social status through upward mobility. University education was open and within reach of every person who could graduate from high school. Government university fees were minimal, almost nonexistent. Furthermore, promises of secure jobs within the government and public sectors gave hope and motivation to the new generation. Later, it was discovered that neither the degrees nor the jobs were real solutions. G. Kepel, describing the disguised unemployment, states:

"By law, every graduate in Egypt has the right to state employment. This measure, a powerful weapon against non-employment, is actually the purveyor of massive disguised unemployment in the offices of a swollen administration in which productivity is as low as the employees are badly paid. If a state employee lacks an additional source of income, he can still manage to feed himself by buying the state subsidized products on sale in the cooperatives, but he is unlikely to rise above this level of bare subsistence. The price of anything

determined by the market would be beyond his reach. Almost every state employee has a second or even third job”.<sup>vi</sup>

During Nasser's time, the people were forced to live under these difficult conditions because there was a war to be waged for the liberation of Palestine. People were generally willing to sacrifice because Nasser offered dignity and honor by making Egypt one of the leading countries in the world. In 1971, Sadat inherited a heavy mantle from his successor. Conditions were going from bad to worse, especially when Sadat's promises remained unfulfilled, and he had to delay the long awaited "battle of revenge," retaliation for the defeat of 1967. Not only was there poverty, but there was also a sense of despair and self.

### **Economic, Social, and Psychological Factors**

The people who are attracted to the Fundamentalist movement are the lower middle class and the students. The basic reasons lie in their social and religious sense of despair. They see themselves as a class of the society that has no future as having a marginal impact on the history of their nation.

The lower middle class in Egypt does not foresee a place of significance, either in the religious sphere, or on the social ladder; therefore, they have a pessimistic perspective on life. Significant impacts on the history of a nation are made through individuals. Since the individuals belonging to the lower middle class are deprived of their rights and the qualities which provide a platform, they find that the only way they can enter history is through the Fundamentalist door.

It promises to radically change this unjust social system and give the marginal population the opportunity to enter the heart of the history of the nation. These Fundamentalist groups not only help people fulfill the normal roles of which they have been deprived, but they even serve a much larger purpose, that of some organizing force that will reject the values and the foundations of the existing social system.<sup>vii</sup>

Another group of people who go through a similar set of experiences are the government university students. Education is compulsory and a long span of years is required to graduate from the university. In this type of educational system, which offers no motivation except to the few who enter the faculties of medicine and engineering, students are forced to be marginal, and look to the future with anxiety and despair because they know that what is waiting for them is disguised unemployment. They readily take the opportunity to become a social group in the society with distinct cultural values. They, along with the young graduates who find no hope for upward mobility, become open and eager to respond to the invitation of Fundamentalism—which promises involvement, significance, and a role to play in making history.

Because the revolution of 1952 in Egypt made education at government universities free and available to all, lower class people were given the hope that they could move up and reach the middle class. As a result, the universities grew, producing more than half a million young men and women annually who were supposed to become middle class people because of their education.

The lower middle class people came from the villages and small towns, migrating to the big cities to live in the suburbs, bringing with them their rural culture. Most of these people arrive at a sort of self-actualization through jobs where both the husband and wife work. Many find it hard to make it in this difficult battle for survival. These disenchanting people are the ones who become good candidates for Fundamentalism. When this group of deprived people in the lower middle class becomes big enough, revolution then becomes inevitable.<sup>viii</sup>

There is a tremendous contrast between the poor suburbs in Cairo and the rest of the city. Not only are the streets narrow and dirty, but the water supply, sewage system, electricity, and all other necessities are under tremendous pressure because of the overcrowded situation. Therefore, in the suburbs of Cairo, with its population of about 20 million, the message of Fundamentalism is very attractive and appealing to the young, the ambitious, and the conscientious, yet marginal, people.

They have nothing to lose and everything to gain by joining al-Jama ah al-Islamiyyah, al-Jihad or other fundamentalist organizations. Because they are young and idealistic, they tend to see issues from a black and white perspective. The solution for everything can be found in Islam and the application of the *Shari'a*. Although their families are not fully convinced of these idealistic views, in time they at least become sympathizers with the cause of Fundamentalism.

### **Justification of Their Plight**

These economic, social, and even psychological factors interrelate to form the environment in which the candidate of Fundamentalism lives. The economic open door policy at the time of Sadat, which was accompanied by manifestations of western lifestyles, resulted in estrangement. The young people who had gained university degrees discovered that they still could not find a way to work at the small companies of the private sector which pay good salaries. They looked at those strange and westernized young people who got the jobs and money with resentment and envy. As that kind of perception made them consider themselves inferior to those who become westernized, they withdrew to increased marginalization.<sup>ix</sup>

This state of marginalization had to be justified, and the justification came through the condemnation of the evil, injustice, and corruption in their society. To stay pure, one must adhere to God and separate oneself from this polluted society.<sup>x</sup>

The gap between the rich and the poor was greatly widened as a direct result of this open door policy. The new class of millionaires, who owned the most expensive and latest models of Mercedes cars existed in the same city, living next to the multitudes of the poor.

The poor come not only from the lower middle class people, but from the lower still, those who live at times below the subsistence level. It is quite common to hear of apartments which serve as a residence to more than twenty persons. Each family, of about eight members, takes one bedroom in a three-bedroom apartment which has one bathroom. In the morning, a queue of more than twenty are waiting to use the bathroom. The battle for survival is not only in finding a place on the floor to sleep, but having enough to eat, and riding the crowded buses to school.

There is the growing conviction that life is a jungle, with survival only for the strongest and the most violent. It is no wonder that sayings such as "*Ma ak irsh bitsawi irsh*" (Your value is by how much money you have), and "*Tghadda bi abl ma yit ashsha bik*" (Eat the other person for lunch before he eats you for supper) are becoming the convictions of the new generation.

### **Progression to Violence**

In this jungle, the persistent question is, "Where is God, and where is the justice of Islam?" According to Gordon W. Allport, in *The Nature of Prejudice*, progression to violence might follow this path:

1. A long period of categorical prejudgments on the rich, the government, and the puppet imams who serve as the mouthpieces of the government.
2. A long period of verbal complaint.
3. Growing discrimination. For instance, the rich, through their connections and bribes, can get anything with the least effort, while the poor are treated like the scum of the earth.
4. The existence of social strain that results from economic deprivation, a sense of low status, and fear of unemployment.
5. People have grown tired of their own inhibitions and are reaching a state of explosion. They no longer feel that they can or should put up with rising prices, humiliation, and bewilderment. Irrationalism comes to have a strong appeal.
6. Organized movements, such as al-Jihad and other Fundamentalist groups, attract the discontented individuals.

7. From such formal or informal social organization, the individual derives courage and support. He sees that his irritation and wrath are socially, and even theologically, sanctioned. His impulses to violence are thus justified by the standards and the *fatawa* (casuistries)
8. Some precipitating incident occurs. What previously might have been passed over as a trivial provocation, now causes an explosion. The incident may be wholly imaginary, or it may be exaggerated through rumor. A story goes around that a Christian man raped a Muslim teenager, so leaflets are distributed about that wholly imaginary incident, and the spark ignites the fire of violence.
9. When violence actually breaks out, it is likely to happen when two opposing groups are thrown into close contact, such as Christians and Muslims living in the same neighborhood, or university students on the same campus. At such meeting points, the precipitating incident is most likely to occur.<sup>xi</sup>

### **An Identity, a Cause, and an Enemy**

The factors which help produce the type of environment where the youth become good candidates for Fundamentalism could be political, religious, economic, social, or psychological. In this vacuum, youth looks for an identity, a place of belonging, and an enemy on which to vent his hatred. In Fundamentalism, the young find their identity in following God, their place of belonging in becoming dedicated members in the various Fundamentalist groups, and their enemy in Satan and the hypocrisy of the so-called "Muslim society."

Perhaps if the Egyptian people, the government, and "official" Islam would listen, and attempt to understand and take the young Fundamentalist seriously, they might hear him say:

I am afraid and lonely, and you are all liars. I am sad and resigned, and you are failures and hypocrites. I am committed to God, and I must have the opportunity and the right to live, but I am incapacitated and chained by you. Any initiative or creative approach which I might take is going to be condemned by you as heresy and thwarted by you. Therefore, I will resort to the already certain and proven, which is the inspired Qur'an. Since I came to the conviction that my deliverance is in my commitment to a solidarity of like-minded, dedicated followers of God, my vengeance and anger is going to be directed against you hypocrites. Even if I do not succeed, that is not the issue. I might become a martyr and a model to be followed. After all, what is ahead of me is Paradise, but as for you, the fires of Hell are waiting to receive you.

In this scenario, we see many emotions, such as loneliness, fear, and despair.<sup>xii</sup> Fundamentalist numbers are growing rapidly because the environment is ripe for recruiting, discipling, and equipping men who are willing to be commandos for

Islam. After all, Muslim fundamentalists believe that "Islam is a tree which is nourished by the blood of its martyrs."

## Implications

When we consider living in Muslim countries, do we start with blueprints of Western models and assume that we will communicate? The challenge is to look at Islam and Islamic Fundamentalism as phenomena and dare to study them without prejudice.

Are our methods and tools so Western that we are perceived as coming with a western plant (along with its western pot) to plant Western churches in the Muslim world? The challenge is to study the Gospel and risk undressing it of our western wrappings, then to present it pure, and encourage the nationals to wrap it with what looks to them to be authentic and genuine.

Does our gospel address issues such as poverty and injustice? The challenge is to dare to make a thorough study of the Scriptures and design answers to the real, felt needs of the people we want to reach.

Do we go to the mission field with authentic identity and appropriate lifestyle? Some jobs are very hard to understand. Why would an American leave America and come all the way to Egypt to sell books in a bookstore? To the Egyptian, any young man with a high school degree can do this job. Why is this American in Cairo? Is he C.I.A. or a missionary in disguise? The challenge is to think through this whole issue of identity and lifestyle, and dare to invent creative, new answers. Did Mother Teresa struggle because of her lifestyle or identity?

Are we making good use of radio and television? Does the message have the ring of truth and authenticity? Or is it seen as something so western, so biased toward Israel, and so Greek in its logic, rather than Eastern in its mode of communication? The challenge is to shed our culture, and put on the culture of the receivers so they can really hear the message.

Are we willing and able to see the potential of the nationals and see ourselves, the western Christians, as the servants of the nationals for Jesus' sake? The challenge is to value the nationals and dare to trust them without manipulating or controlling.

Simon the Pharisee was an objective observer evaluating Jesus and the prostitute. Jesus, in contrast, was an involved and compassionate participant as he forgave the woman and, in the process, transformed her life. The challenge is to listen from the depths of our hearts to what appears to us as the strange logic of the Muslim Fundamentalists, and not

only to listen, but to attempt to understand them and to really take them seriously. Perhaps we might discover that we can have compassion for people who are so radically different from us, and in the process communicate God's love.

## End Notes

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<sup>i</sup> (Pasadena, Calif.: Mandate Press, 1993).

<sup>ii</sup> S. Qutb, *Ma'alem Fi Tariq* (Cairo: Darsuruq, 1987), p. 36.

<sup>iii</sup> R. S. Ahmad, *Al-Harakat Al-Islamiyya* (Cairo: Sina Linasr, 1989), p. 45.

<sup>iv</sup> M. Amara, *Asahwa Al-Islamiyya Wa Tahaddi Al-Hadari* (Cairo: Dar Al-Mustaqbal Al' Arabi, 1985), pp. 47-49.

<sup>v</sup> M. Amara, *Tayyarat Al-Fikr Al-Islami* (Beirut: Dar Al-Wihda Littiba'a Wa-Nasr, 1985), p. 230.

<sup>vi</sup> G. Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh* (London: Al-Saqi Books, 1985), p. 85.

<sup>vii</sup> R. Habib, *Al-Ihtijaj A-Dini Wal-Sira' Al-Tabaqi* (Cairo: Sina Linasr, 1989), p. 130.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>ix</sup> Mahamed Abdul-Fadil. Zahiratatta taruf Al-Islami. *Anadwa Al-Rabi'a Libaht Al-Harakat. Al-Diniyya Al-Mutatarifa* (Cairo: 1982), p. 108.

<sup>x</sup> A. Husein. *Waraqat Mawaqef. Anadwa Al-Rabi'a Libaht Al-Harakat. Al-Diniyya Al-Mutatarifa* (Cairo: 1982), p. 207.

<sup>xi</sup> Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Book, 1958), pp. 56-58.

<sup>xii</sup> Y. Rakawi. *Waraqat Amal. Anadwa Al-Rabi'a Libaht Al-Harakat. Al-Diniyya Al-Mutatarifa* (Cairo: 1982), pp. 146-47.