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# Beware of the Men of a Single Book *

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> What all men speak well of, look critically into; what all men condemn, examine first before you decide.
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> *Confucius*

> The most serious disease that can attack a community is intellectual confusion and loss of overreaching purpose, which can only be provided by philosophy and religion.
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> *Plato*

The phenomenon of modern religious fundamentalism represents both a "siren's song" and a "swan song" for the world's great religious traditions. As a siren's song, it seduces many and leads astray; as a swan song, it gives the impression that religion as a whole is having its last and dramatic appearance on the stage of history. Traditional religion, with its rich intellectual and spiritual patrimony, is being confronted or threatened by modern fundamentalist movements, with their political activism and ideological radicalism. From the perspective of traditional religion, fundamentalism represents a deviation; it is an impoverishment of the religious message, leveling *par en bas* culture, theology, and mysticism. Modern fundamentalism, in fact, constitutes an amalgam of superficial, exclusivist, and xenophobic religious positions, conjugated with modern political ideologies such as nationalism; it is from this fusion that results its "explosiveness".

One of the most paradoxical aspects of the "militant" phenomenon in religion, whether it be in Islam, Christianity, or Judaism, is the unjustifiable disdain it shows for the rich intellectual, mystical, artistic, and scientific legacy produced by the civilization the fundamentalist activist purports to represent.

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* Originally published as the first chapter of the book *Men of a Single Book: Fundamentalism in Islam, Christianity, and Modern Thought* (World Wisdom, 2011).

Christian "fundamentalism", for instance, shows disdain for the literary and spiritual beauty of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, and it has no interest in the sacred architecture of the medieval cathedrals or in the subtleties of Thomistic philosophy; it has eyes only for the moralistic and literalistic sense of the Scriptures.

*Mutatis mutandis* the same applies to the Muslim "fundamentalist". The irate young man who cries against the West as the "great Satan" in the *campi* of Teheran or Islamabad scorns the artistic originality of fourteen centuries of Islamic art; he has no interest in the profundities of Avicenna's philosophy, while the Sufi art of purifying the heart is not included in his limited purview. The same can be said of the poetry of Rumi, the dance of the dervishes, and the art of Koranic illumination. The Muslim "fundamentalist" is only focused on the political and ideological battle against the so-called Western "Satan", a battle that is understood in the shallowest sense possible.

It is worth noting that the Koran preaches the legitimacy of the religions of the "People of the Book" (Christians, Jews, and later also Hindus), while the militants preach exactly the opposite, exacerbating politico-religious passions that denature their own faith and feed hatred. Militant fundamentalism believes that an unbridgeable abyss separates Islam from Christianity, but the Koran teaches otherwise: "And We [God] also sent Jesus, son of Mary, to whom We conferred the Gospel and infused compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who follow it" (57:27).

Another crucial point, misunderstood by the activists, is the *jihād*. Tradition teaches that there are two *jihād*s: the outward one and, more important, the inward one. This latter implies the "struggle" against the soul's passions: hatred, egoism, pride. This is the "greater holy war" of traditional Islam. As the Prophet says in a *hadīth*: "the most excellent *jihād* is the conquest of the ego." But the contemporary jihadist ignores this.

For traditional Islam, knowledge is sacred; it is a form of identifying the signs of the supra-temporal in time. Because of that, intelligence has always been respected in Islam. In the past, Muslim sages rescued the ancient wisdom; thanks to them, the Western world received the wisdom of Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle.

Foretelling, rather prophetically, these sad historical developments,

Saint Thomas Aquinas exclaimed seven centuries ago: "I fear the man of a single book". In our own time, this alarm should be raised not only against radical and blind readers of the Holy Book of Islam, but also against the literalist followers of the Torah and the Gospels. Above all, it must be sounded against the fanatics of *Das Kapital* and *The Origin of Species*. After all, one cannot overlook the unfortunate contemporary phenomenon of secular, or antireligious, fundamentalism, characterized as it is by mental narrowness, exclusivism, sectarianism, and an intolerance of religion—a case of secular fundamentalism itself turning into a "religion" (a pseudo-religion in fact). Proverbial examples of this "poorness of spirit"—not in the Evangelical sense, of course—are the notorious works of polemicists such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Samuel Harris.

Consequently, the concept of "fundamentalism" addressed in this book is used more comprehensively and broadly than usual. Marxism, Freudian psychoanalysis, Jungianism, and science fundamentalism are included under the umbrella of "fundamentalism", not, of course, as religious fundamentalisms, but as expressions of this new concept of "secular fundamentalism". Thus, as treated in this book, "fundamentalism" is a rather broad concept, including not only religious fundamentalism, but also certain expressions of non-religious and anti-religious "fundamentalisms", such as those quoted above.

There is also what one could term "old fundamentalism", predominant *grosso modo* until the dawn of the twentieth century, and this modality is rather less aggressive than the current form of modern fundamentalism due to its restriction to the specifically religious field. Examples of this form of "old" fundamentalism are Puritanism and Salafism. Understood in this way, "old" fundamentalism is not something that one should condemn intrinsically, despite its limitations in terms of "stubbornness", formalism, and literalism. The violent and aggressive character of modern fundamentalism derives, as the philosopher Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) has pointed out, from the fusion of religious elements with bellicose modern ideologies.[1]

Be that as it may, one has to take into consideration the fact that the

[1] See in this respect his books *Christianity/Islam: Perspectives on Esoteric Ecumenism* and *Understanding Islam*.

challenge of intolerance and extremism is nowadays worldwide, involving diverse civilizations, including, but not limited to, Islam and Christianity. One sees, paradoxically, in the wake of globalization, a sharpening of tensions between different cultures, due to misunderstandings and divisions whose origin is in the emotional and "militant" comprehension of the various religious perspectives.

The prerequisite for beginning to understand religion, tradition, and spirituality, especially in its Islamic form, is to cleanse our minds of all the hasty, superficial, partial, and oftentimes frankly prejudiced views through which the subject is in general expounded. Amidst certain distortions in the media, there exists a need to clearly distinguish between fundamentalist Islam and traditional Islam. After all, a good number of the persons and organizations that have been presented through the years as representatives of the Islamic world are anything but authentic spokesmen of Islam. This is the case for Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, Saddam Hussein and the Baath party, Ayatollah Khomeini and the "Islamic Revolution", the Taliban and others.

Some of these representatives are tyrants or demagogues, or both, who use religion for their own personal or political ends. Others are "reformists" or "revolutionaries", or political extremists and terrorists, who have a limited or distorted idea of traditional and spiritual Islam, against which they usually oppose themselves, while nevertheless taking full advantage of when their interests require it. For example, the Baath party of the Arab "renaissance" has in fact a kind of fascist platform with a pseudo-Arab face; it is very far from representing traditional Islam.

The same applies to Osama bin Laden, symbol *par excellence* of militant and intolerant extremism, who, according to Muslim religious authorities, has for long abandoned the contours of orthodoxy. The concept of *jihād* does not apply to terrorism against civilians and to cowardly attacks against churches or schools—all condemned in unequivocal terms by the Koran. Born in 1957 from a rich Arab family established in Saudi Arabia, Osama bin Laden studied at King Abdullah Aziz University, in Jeddah; there he was strongly influenced by the exclusivist ideology of the "Muslim Brotherhood", a militant organization established in 1928 in Egypt which, in some of its branches, and contrary to Koranic teachings, indiscriminately preaches the *jihād* against Christians and Jews, in a clear demonstration of

heterodoxy.[2]

In the view of Frithjof Schuon, movements such as this combine in a monstrous fashion, attachment to the Islamic "form" (not to its spirit) with modern ideologies and tendencies. Karen Armstrong has also understood that militant fundamentalism is a modern phenomenon that must be distinguished from the traditional religion which, on the contrary, emphasizes compassion, wisdom and virtue. "The term [fundamentalism] also gives the impression", Armstrong has written, "that fundamentalists are inherently conservative and wedded to the past, whereas their ideas are essentially modern and highly innovative".[3]

Besides the need to differentiate fundamentalism from traditional Islam, it is imperative that the religion and history of Islam be viewed in an objective manner. Islam has been presented in the media and academia as having been spread by force of arms. This opinion overlooks the fact that persuasion played a still more important role. In Africa and in the south of Asia, for instance, the religion established itself through the exchange of argument, through the example of the ordinary faithful, and especially through the Sufi mystics. Muhammad's armies never arrived in Indonesia, the most populated Muslim country of today.

In Spain and Greece, countries that lived under Muslim rule for centuries, the population continued to practice Christianity, and was not forced to convert. This means that Muslims conquered much territory militarily, but did not forcibly convert the "People of the Book" (Christians, Jews, and later also Hindus) who lived there. Moreover, there is no civilization that has totally dispensed with the "sword": the spread or diffusion of its message within a given territory was often contested and had to be enforced and defended. Even in Christendom, the use of the "sword" was not totally despised.

Unfortunately, positive aspects of the Islamic legacy, such as its millennial wisdom, culture, and art are hardly presented. The purpose of Islam as a religion is precisely to engender an *appeasement* in the soul of the faithful; linguistically, the roots of the Arab words *islām* (resignation)

[2] For more information on the "Muslim Brotherhood", see chap. 6.

[3] See her *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, xii.

and *salām* (peace), are the same. And the Koran says over and over again that the practice of religion produces peace in the hearts of believers—the Peace that is one of the ninety-nine Names of God in the sacred Book. Traditionally, Islam is associated with the mystery of peace, both temporal and spiritual. "And God summons to the Abode of Peace (*dār as-salām*), and He guides whomsoever He will to a straight path" (Koran 10:25).[4]

Militant fundamentalism, then, constitutes a deviation of traditional and integral religion. Although it is difficult to generalize since there are various manifestations of fundamentalism in the world, in our opinion the main tenets of Islamic militant fundamentalism are the following: an extreme politicization of religion, often in the direction of a violent change of the social and political status quo, with religion viewed more as an ideological weapon than as a means for the knowledge of God and of self-perfection; a literalistic and one-sided understanding of the doctrines and practices of Islam; sectarianism; dogmatism; fanaticism; a total ignorance of the meaning of the "greater holy war" (*jihād al-akbar*), the spiritual war against the ego, and of its superiority to the "lesser holy war" (*jihād al-asghar*), the temporal war against the enemy; a misunderstanding and contempt for the profound intellectual legacy of the civilization the "jihadists" claim to uphold; a disdain for the dimensions of compassion and clemency intrinsic to the Islamic message and a complete obliviousness to the meaning of *salām* (peace) which is central to it; an abandonment of the Koranic respect for non-Islamic religions, in particular Christianity; a complex of inferiority towards the scientific and technological achievements of the modern West while at the same time adopting modern technology.

Already in the nineteenth century, the renowned Muslim leader Emir Abd al-Qadir (1807–1883), simultaneously a mystic and the political leader of the North-African resistance against European colonialism, regretted the obfuscation of the true ends of religion among some of its followers. Incarnating both temporal power, as the leader of the Maghreb's Arabs and Berbers, and spiritual authority as a renowned Sufi of the Ibn Arabi lineage, Abd al-Qadir fought against the Europeans because it was his duty and his

[4] For the reader particularly interested in this point, see the clarifying book by Frithjof Schuon, *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, especially the chapter "Human Premises of a Religious Dilemma".

obligation to defend his land against foreign invasion. But he never felt hatred against Europe or the Christian tradition. One can say that the Emir's combat was in the spirit of the *Bhagavad Gītā*: the good fight is part of the "nature of things", and it should be fought without revengeful passions or rancor.

In now famous words, Abd al-Qadir affirmed the primacy of the spiritual and foresaw the great challenge that was beginning to appear in *Dār al-Islām*:

> When we think how few men of real religion there are, how small the number of defendants and champions of truth—when one sees ignorant persons imagining that the principle of Islam is hardness, severity, extravagance, and barbarity—it is time to repeat these words: "Patience is beautiful, and God is the source of all succor" (Koran 12:18).

An approach such as this shows that the problem is not a new one and that the authentic spiritual leaders of Islam, such as Abd al-Qadir, have been for a long time hard critics of what we now call militant fundamentalism, and that traditional religion as such cannot be confounded with it. A disciple of Ibn Arabi (1165–1240), one of the greatest metaphysicians of Islam, the Emir fought the French between 1832 and 1847, was arrested in France for five years, was released by Napoleon III, and then moved to Damascus, Syria. There he received the Brazilian emperor Pedro II, who thanked him for his defense of the Christians of Syria in a Druze revolt that put their lives at risk.[5]

Another example of this crucial point: The renowned commander Ahmad Shah Massoud (1953–2001), the "Lion of the North", played an important role in driving the Soviets out of Afghanistan and was the chief of the resistance against the Taliban in Afghanistan. He was affiliated with the Naqshbandiyyah Sufi Order, but was killed in a cowardly fashion by al-Qaeda commandos. Massoud's example shows that one of the main pillars of resistance to the excessive politicization in Islam, and to the intolerance of the militant organizations, has come from Sufism, which is in truth the

[5] See in this respect Reuven Faingold, *Dom Pedro na Terra Santa*.

heart of traditional and spiritual Islam.[6]

Many in the mass media speak with full voice against "fundamentalism", but in a certain sense they are also "fundamentalist" when they present journalistic coverage that is in general ahistorical, superficial, and unilateral. For instance, the main newspapers and television networks seldom take into account other currents—apart from the fundamentalist one— that are presently operating in the Islamic world. Militant fundamentalism is only one of those currents, and it flourishes in large measure as a reaction to the errors and biases of the West's policies in the Islamic world—for instance, its emotional and unrestricted support of Zionism. One proof of this, among many others, is the fairly recent origin of the majority of extremist movements in the Islamic world.[7]

Because of an erroneous interpretation of highly symbolical and complex passages from the Bible, some Evangelical Christians believe that support for Zionism must be given at all costs; for, in this bizarre interpretation, the Second Coming of Christ will only occur after the "ingathering" of the Jews in the Holy Land, and the construction of the "third temple" in Jerusalem—even if this means the destruction of two of the most revered mosques of Islam, the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa![8] As Jerusalem is the third holiest city for Islam (after Mecca and Medina), a place where tradition locates the starting point of the "Heavenly Journey" of the Prophet Muhammad, it would not be difficult for the reader to imagine what the Muslim world's reaction to this action would be. Besides, the fundamentalist Christian Zionists seem to forget that it was Jesus himself who predicted the destruction of the Temple of Solomon[9]—whose

[6] In this respect, see also chap. 6.

[7] Both Hamas, in the Gaza strip, and Hezbollah, in Lebanon, emerged in the 1980s as a reaction to the military occupation in these two areas.

[8] The "first temple" was built by the prophet-king Solomon, around a thousand years before Christ; the "second" was built after its partial destruction by the Babylonians, around five centuries before Christ; and it was this second temple that was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. The Western Wall in today's old city of Jerusalem is what remains of the second temple.

[9] John 2:13–22.

metaphysical reason is Christ's rejection, as a "false prophet", by the Jewish religious establishment.[10]

These religious-cum-political caprices of the "religious right" in the United States, together with the intellectual and spiritual narrowness of some Evangelicals and their highly polemical views concerning the "final battle" of good against evil (the Bible's Armageddon), have led them towards serious religious deviation and fanaticism; this fanaticism is translated into a hatred for Islam, seen as the principal stumbling block to their apocalyptic notions, and a blind and emotional support for the secular and anti-traditional state created by Zionism—as if this entity were the same as the sacred Israel of David and Solomon.

In our view, the basic characteristics of Christian militant fundamentalism are the following: a literal and superficial interpretation of sacred Scripture and of the principles and practices of Christianity; an incomprehension and disdain for the philosophical, mystical, and artistic patrimony of the tradition they claim to defend and represent most fully; a sectarianism impervious towards other visions of the same religious tradition; a non-acceptance of the other branches of the same religion; a modern politicization of religion; and an unsavory amalgamation of religion and vulgar patriotism, often accompanied by narrowness, exclusivism, and fanaticism.

As a matter of fact, the very term "fundamentalism" was first used by North-American Protestantism at the end of the nineteenth century and revolved around disputes concerning the evolutionist hypotheses of Charles Darwin. "Fundamentalists" were those Protestants who supported a return to the "fundamentals", literally understood, of the Bible. But in the general understanding of our day, fundamentalism has become an "omnibus term", encompassing distinct ideas whose frontiers are rather difficult to establish with any precision. In truth, one has to distinguish between fundamentalism, collectivism, communalism, and denominationalism, as William Stoddart has done in his Introduction to the present book.

This same writer has noted in a letter to the author:

[10] See in this respect Victor Danner's highly informative article, "The Last Days in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam".

> As regards Christians, the epithet fundamentalist is commonly applied to members of what is called "the American religious right". Here too a deeply spiritual appreciation of the fundaments (of Christianity in this case) seems to be lacking. It is often said nowadays that, for the public at large, Christianity has been replaced by humanism. In the case of the religious right (or a large portion thereof), it could be said that Christianity has been replaced by a vulgar and ignorant mass "patriotism". They seem to have completely forgotten that, in the Decalogue, Almighty God says: "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." This also means: "Thou shalt not create gods who are equal to Me." "For the Lord thy God is a jealous God; Him only shalt thou serve." For many of the religious right, the god "patriotism" has replaced the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
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> The above observations although, I think, true, are nevertheless something of a generalization. I do not seek to forget that some, even many, of the religious right are sincere believers in Christ. Likewise, the same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, in the case of some Islamists: those who are non-violent and wish to be loyal to the Koran, but are gravely limited in their understanding of it, and are thus capable of being misled by evil men.... To return to Christianity: I will not spare the Christian fundamentalists the following comment: these people, who (no doubt understandably) are looking forward to an imminent Second Coming of Christ, are nevertheless strong admirers of progress and modern technology! "Science and technology both arose only in Christendom!" "Progress has only occurred in Christian countries!" The fundamentalists do not fail in expressing their fidelity to Christ by attributing to Christianity the glories of science, technology, and progress. All this is quite grotesque.

Stoddart moreover alerts us regarding the important features which the two fundamentalist groups, the Christian and the Islamic, have in common, namely, intransigence, narrowness, and extreme superficiality in their interpretations of their respective Scriptures.

Islamic scripture, the Koran, for its part, inasmuch as it is a centuries-old

tradition, has emphatically condemned all fanaticism and gratuitous aggression. For traditional Islam, religious intolerance is an aberration; chapter 2, verse 256 of the Koran unequivocally states: "There is no compulsion in religion." In fact, throughout Islamic history, the "People of the Book" have had their rights respected and their founders, especially Jesus Christ and Moses, venerated. The quarrels between Arabs and Jews in effect started only with the advance of Zionism in the first decades of the twentieth century. Before that, the two peoples had in general an amicable relationship and the seven hundred years of Muslim rule in Spain is a testimony to this.

It is necessary, therefore, to correct the confusion that the so-called "militant fundamentalists"—whether they are political extremists of diverse shades or puritanical zealots—represent the totality of Islam. It is also necessary to recall that one of the most salient characteristics of militant fundamentalism is its disdain for the rich intellectual, spiritual, and artistic legacy of centuries of Islamic civilization.

To confound the traditional religion of Islam with militant fundamentalism would be the same as confusing the high spirituality of a St. Francis or a Meister Eckhart with a simplistic Evangelical fundamentalism. To accuse Islam for the errors and aggressions of the fanatics would be similar to accusing Russian Orthodoxy for the crimes of communism; or Taoism for the abuses of the Maoist "cultural revolution"; or Catholicism for the crimes of National Socialism in Germany. Needless to say, all of this is highly absurd.

Islam embraces all aspects of life, and politics is traditionally a domain of great relevance; it comes practically together with religion itself. In a certain sense, politics is "part" of Islam and is included in it. Islam arose in the desert, among nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes, among men whose main activity was commerce and shepherding, and whose lives were not integrally connected to an organized empire, with its laws, hierarchy, and territory. In this way, the first Muslims were simultaneously messengers of a new religion and founders of a new empire. The immediate successors of Muhammad were the *khulafah rashidun* ("rightly-guided caliphs"), Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali. They were the religious and political leaders of the Islamic world for three decades after Muhammad's death (in AD 632), and had of necessity to carry a sword beside the Koran, the new sacred

scripture, because they could not count on the protection of a *pax romana*, which was relatively speaking the case of the first disciples of Christ. The *khulafah* had to forge a new and original *pax islamica*.

If the first apostles, Saints Peter and Paul for instance, could in a large measure dispense with preoccupations of a political, social, and economical character in their preaching of the Christian doctrine, for of such "Caesar" took care, the Prophet's Companions, on the other hand, could not dispense with these temporal concerns.

One sees in this way that religion and politics go together in Islam, rather differently than what occurs in Christianity, where politics is relegated to a secondary, inferior plane, not intrinsically bonded to the spiritual plane. "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36), said Christ. And also: "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21). In Islam, politics is a "servant" or "helper" of religion, this latter providing it with principles for action, a "frame" within which political action as the art and science of serving the community is exercised. In traditional and normative Islam, politics serves religion; it is its collaborator. The challenge in today's world is that politics now wants to superimpose itself on religion; it wants to oblige religion to follow her own ways, wants to place itself in the place of its "master". It is this that one sees in the itinerary of merely political Islam: religion in the service of politics and ideology; politics as a "religion"—a pseudo-religion of course. This is contrary to what occurred traditionally.

Schematically, then, one can say that militant fundamentalism inverts the normal bond that exists between these two spheres; the immediate political interest finishes by monopolizing in some circles and milieux, religion as the practice of wisdom, mercy, and virtue. In short, traditional and spiritual Islam is synonymous with politics (necessarily "horizontal" and merely human) placed in the service of the "verticality" and transcendence of religion. In militant fundamentalism, on the contrary, the spiritual legacy of religion is forced to prostrate to "horizontal", superficial, and immediate interests.[11]

[11] For a profound and comprehensive discussion of this point, see Frithjof Schuon, *Christianity/Islam: Perspectives on Esoteric Ecumenism*, especially the chapter "Images of Islam".