Reevaluating Schools of Fundamentalism

Taqi al-Din Ahmad Ibn Taimiyya, Hasan al-Banna, and Sayyid Qutb were three prominent Islamic figures who contributed to the course of modern Islam, and especially to fundamentalist schools of thought like Wahhabism and the Muslim Brotherhood. But what defines fundamentalism? We shall adopt the definition discussed in class – it necessarily advocates for a return to an archaic version of the faith – and opposes some aspect of modern development, be it cultural, economic, or political. I will argue that while all three thinkers have qualms with their respective modern societies, none of them are inherently fundamentalist because they all do not advocate for an earlier, but instead different, version of Islam.

In ibn Taimiyya's case, we can see that his primary problem lies with Sufism and philosophy. He highlights their modernity and his opposition by labelling them as "heretical innovations," explaining that Sufis and philosophers respectively seek "desire [to serve God] without knowledge" and "knowledge without desire [to serve God]" (Gettleman, 298). Ibn Taimiyya also highlights the importance of scripture and its incontestable authority – "true Consensus cannot contradict the Quran…" (Gettleman, 299), thereby also criticizing the legal developments (the Consensus) he believes to be encroaching on the Quran. In this sense, he shares fundamentalist sentiments. In his call to action, however, he expresses that the knowledge and desire that are applied incorrectly are actually "indispensable" and that they must be applied under the right conditions - namely, more consideration of God's will (Gettleman, 298). In ibn Taimiyya's time, Sufism and philosophy had recently seen their greatest growth under the Abbasids' golden era, and there had never been a time before when Sufism and philosophy in the Caliphate was more religiously-oriented, as ibn Taimiyya prefers. What he describes as contemporary Sufism and especially philosophy are what they *always have been* – so he cannot

be calling for a revision to an earlier time of Islam. Since he also believes that desire and knowledge are "indispensable," he isn't advocating for a return to the early days of Muhammad *without* such "heretical innovations" either. Ibn Taimiyya wants to take Sufism and philosophy in a new, more spiritual direction – one where Islam hasn't been. In contrast, a fundamentalist must actively seek to take Islam back to where it had been before.

In our second example, we also recognize that al-Banna shares some sentiments with fundamentalists but is overall far from one. Al-Banna gives us an eloquent image of how the Islamic world is "corrupted" by the "power and prosperity" of the West due to "science, knowledge, and industry" (Gettleman, 301). He stresses the need to be freed from foreign domination, but at the same time still values modernity as he gives examples of Egypt's problems: "Egypt is still backward; … prisons put out more graduates than schools; … [Egypt] cannot outfit a single army division" (Gettleman, 302). Al-Banna's desire for non-backwardness, modern education, and modern military capacity are contemporary and progressive goals, and are not found by a fundamentalist return to some other period of Islam. Additionally, he clearly specifies his call to action: the need to have "deep faith, precise organization, and uninterrupted work" (Gettleman, 302) are not uniquely fundamentalist, and I argue that organization and work ethic are rather modern, libertarian, views on how to attain success. From thought to action, al-Banna does not appear to be reverting back to anything.

Qutb shares al-Banna's disdain for foreign domination, but actively embraces and values the progress produced by "Europe's Genius," stressing that the Islamic world cannot "neglect material progress" (Gettleman, 305). In this sense Qutb is eager to embrace modernity and its technology. At the same time, Qutb claims that while Europe has material superiority, only Islam has the means to fulfill human spiritual needs – citing the failure of Marxism and Western

capitalism as problems to be solved. We understand that Qutb progressively appreciates modernity and is also trying to apply the spiritual capital of Islam (the "vanguard" being the Quran) to ameliorate his political concerns. While he values a vague "original form" (Gettleman, 305) of Islam, in light of his emphasis on modern technological and economic development, it will never be "original" in practice; it also appears that his "original form" is simply the spiritual power of Islam itself, which exists currently – so Qutb is not calling for a reversion back to anything. In this sense, Qutb cannot be fundamentalist.

I have presented my arguments for why all three thinkers were not fundamentalist. While it is true that each has small hints of fundamentalism, all three are advocating for modern change that would result in historically-unique outcomes. No matter how much one criticizes the modern world, one can never fit the definition of fundamentalist if his call to action is intentionally aimed at distinctively modern outcomes.

Works Cited

Gettleman, Marvin, and Stuart Schaar, editors. *The Middle East and Islamic World Reader*. Grove Press, 2012.