The Secular Commitment to "Islamic Fundamentalism"

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For some time, I have thought that many secular intellectuals may be as invested in the idea of a "fundamentalist Islam" in conflict with the West as the so-called "Islamic fundamentalists" that they decry. This suspicion was confirmed by the proceedings of the Robert L. Bernstein Symposium on Fundamentalism and Modernity hosted recently by the Yale Law School to which I was invited. My task was to comment on a paper by historian Margot Badran and also to situate my own work on the Quran—*"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretation of the Quran* (University of Texas Press, 2002)—in the context of a discussion of modernity and fundamentalism.

In outlining its approach to Islam, the Symposium's description stated that "While scholars have repeatedly warned against seeing the terrorist attack of last fall as a manifestation of a deep clash of civilizations between Islam and the West, it undeniably points to a clash between a fundamentalist strain of Islam and the modern West." But whereas conventional wisdom asks "what it is about Islam that has produced this clash [the] Bernstein Symposium will begin by posing the question the other way around: What is it about modernity that has produced a fundamentalist reaction?" As clarification, the description added that fundamentalism is not limited to Islam and that it is as much a part of modernity "as the practices to which it responds."

This seemed to be a positive move given that the idea of a "civilizational clash" between Islam and the West, in spite of its recent currency, dates from medieval Europe's earliest attempts to decipher Islam and thus is entrenched deeply in Western consciousnesses. As I have argued elsewhere, it arises in a politics of misrecognition that confuses Islam with Muslims, disregards the role of political, economic, cultural, and historical factors in shaping not only Muslim attitudes and actions, but also their interpretations of Islam (thus also robbing Muslims of political agency because of its tendency to represent Muslim violence as always religious), and denies Western complicity in creating the conditions that are fuelling the growth of extremism, and not just on the part of some Muslims.

On the other hand, posing the issue as the Symposium did promised to open up different kinds of conceptual and conversational spaces in which one could argue, for instance, that whereas in the West, modernity brought the benefits of capitalism, industrialization, and representative democracy, for most of the world, it brought colonization, slavery, economic ruin, a militarization of politics, increased poverty, the extinction of indigenous people and cultural alienation. Similarly, the very secularism that freed "man"—in the masculinist language of the Enlightenment—from the alleged tyranny of religion, also opened up to doubt people's sense of themselves as purposive moral agents in the world. Hence, what some embraced as freedom, others experienced as profound loss.

I believe these are the kinds of issues that we need to consider if we are to contextualize the phenomenon of religious extremism, rather than assuming that cultures are fated to clash inevitably with one another. (This sort of apocryphal fatalism is espoused not just

by self-styled jihadis who then want to take it to its deadly conclusion by calling for a war against the West, but also by secularists like Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington.) And, yet, the symposium could not bring itself to break with the thesis of a civilizational clash altogether since it continued to pit Islam (albeit in its fundamentalist forms), against the West (in its modern incarnation). (I will, for now, not even comment on the silliness of contrasting a belief system with a geographic space). Deleting the word "deep" from in front of "clash of civilizations" and adding "fundamentalist" to Islam then seemed little more than a cosmetic move since the problem was still seen to reside within Islam.

Most of the Symposium's participants did not question this way of framing the issue and none of the male experts on Islam—none Muslim—thought it appropriate to engage the only two Muslims on the panel, both women (Nayereh Tohidi and myself). Perhaps they felt there was nothing to be learned from talking to live Muslims, and women, at that!

My point isn't that Muslims are not interpreting Islam in some very objectionable ways; rather, my point is that such interpretations are not foreordained and that we need to understand why and how Muslims read violence into the Qur'an rather than blaming the Qur'an itself for being violent. Thus, for instance, neither the Qur'an nor the classical Muslim doctrine of jihad propose going to war with nonMuslim states because they are nonMuslim, as popular myth has it. That many Muslims now view war and violence as the answer may have less to do with "Islam" than with the kinds of factors I have alluded to, as well as with the history of Western colonial oppression and the degeneracy of many Muslim regimes, seen by most people as neocolonial residues.

However, to pursue this line of inquiry would mean accepting mutual responsibility for mutual violence. It would mean recognizing that Western secularism, capitalism, and liberal democracy have all provided the framework within which extremist readings of religious texts have become not only attractive, but also plausible. Recognizing that modernity has had a hand in engendering fundamentalism may be a step in that direction. But perhaps we need to acknowledge that modernity needs its fundamentalist Other for displacing the violence of its "civilizing" project. Hence, the secular commitment to the idea of radical difference on the basis of which we differentiate between secularists and fundamentalists. Perhaps, then, we would be better served if a critique of fundamentalism began by interrogating secularism's own complicity in and commitment to it.