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# Response to Nasr

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# Response

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Dr. Nasr certainly has given us much to think about by covering a wide range of issues relevant to the future of Islam. His discussion of post-modernism and the challenge of the epoch is timely, particularly considering the way technology is facilitating and encouraging the flow of information, and thus increasing the traffic of modern science, American entertainment, and materialism from the West to the Muslim world. In order to spawn some debate, I have chosen to pose the following question: how can one discuss the future of Islam without seriously addressing the issue of religious fundamentalism? Underlying this phenomenon are forces that are truly revealing about the general structure of Islamic society and the sort of spasmodic behavior we have been seeing from the Muslim world. Modernization certainly underlies much of the current type of fundamentalism. Dr. Nasr's reflections are of immense value, but I find his inattention to fundamentalism a little surprising. Consequently, at this point, I would like to further elaborate upon what I believe is the critical relationship between Islam, religious fundamentalism, and modernization.

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Although the end of the Cold War and the dawn of the Information Age have ushered in a new era of possibilities for a freer, more peaceful world, they have also thrown up new dangers to peace, stability, and democracy. After forty-five years, the disappearance of the great ideological divide and the end of the balance of terror are forcing governments and nations to rethink their risky political, cultural, and economic strategies, considering that the enemies of civil liberty and development have drawn up their own plans for a new world order. Turmoil in the Islamic world, from Central Asia and the Middle East to North Africa and Southeastern Asia where the ominous specter of religious militancy looms, surely attests to this reality.[1]

As with all-powerful global changes in the course of history, the breakdown of the old order has created a new environment, with new rules and expectations. If political and cultural systems are to survive, they must adapt effectively to the world's incipient and dynamic framework. This is essential.

Unfortunately, the problem is that this new framework is still in an embryonic stage, and the amorphousness of this state of flux, inherent in any period of transition, has transformed the final decade of the twentieth century into a highly unpredictable and hazardous period. Today, the Persian Gulf region and Central Asia can be described as two of the world's most volatile areas. The tremendous impact of the Soviet Union's collapse has been felt, first and foremost, within its successor states, especially the Central Asian and Caucasian republics, which acquired part of the old Soviet empire's nuclear and conventional arsenals. Iran, with its extensive geography and enormous strategic and economic potential, is at the crossroads of the two trouble spots. Oil, arms, and deeply ingrained nationalist, ethnic, historical, and cultural hostilities, as well as profound religious and ideological conflicts common to both the Middle Eastern countries and ex-Soviet states of south-central Asia, have catapulted the entire region into combustible circumstances. Furthermore, the question we must critically consider is how exactly can the deep tensions within Muslim regions ever be appeased? In my opinion, the most important issue that faces Islam is the difficult task of reconciling religion with governance in the context of a modern and evolving world.

The problem of governance in Islamic states brings forth the two critical issues I wish to discuss: fundamentalism and modernization. Not only are both concepts critical in discussing the future of Islam at this point in time and establishing a stable relationship between Islam and civil society, politics, and economics, but I will also show that they are, in effect, very closely related.

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In the past two decades, an authentic cultural and religious revolution has spread through most Muslim lands. It has at times been victorious, as in Iran; sometimes defeated, as in Egypt; sometimes triggered civil war, as in Algeria; and sometimes formally acknowledged by the state, as in the Sudan and Bangladesh. Most times, however, it has created an unsteady coexistence in a formally Islamic nation-state, fully integrated into global capitalism, like Saudi Arabia and Indonesia. Overall, this cultural revolution is determining the identity and political fate of over a billion people around the world.

At this point, a brief definition of "fundamentalism" is in order. In the late 1980s, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences undertook

a major comparative project aimed at observing fundamentalism in various social and institutional contexts. The study concluded that fundamentalism is always reactive and reactionary. I found a particularly helpful definition of fundamentalism by Manuel Castells: "fundamentalism is the construction of collective identity under the identification of individual behavior and society's institutions to the norms derived from God's law, interpreted by a definite authority that intermediates between God and humanity."[2]

Although Islamic fundamentalism has existed in various forms for a long time, it is not a traditionalist movement. Although efforts have been made to root Islamic identity in history and the holy scriptures, many Islamists have modernized their cultural identity for the sake of social resistance and political insurgency. But if Islam is essentially redefining itself as a contemporary identity, why now? Why has it exploded in the past two decades, after being repeatedly overshadowed by nationalism in the post-colonial period, as exemplified by the repression of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt and Syria, the rise of Sukarno in Indonesia, and of the *Front de Libération Nationale* in Algeria?[3] It appears as though this new explosion of Islamic movements is related to both the disruption of traditional societies and the failure of the nationalist state to accomplish modernization, distribute the benefits of economic growth among the population at large, and develop the economy as a whole. Thus, Islamic militants appear to enter the fray in opposition to capitalism, socialism, and nationalism (Arab or otherwise), which are, in their view, all failing ideologies of the post-colonial order.

A classic example of this phenomenon is Iran. In 1963, the Shah launched the White Revolution, which proved to be an unprecedented attempt to modernize the Iranian economy and society. He had strong support from the United States and had the clear objective of tightening links with the global capitalist system. There is no doubt that this undertaking undermined basic structures of traditional society, from agriculture to the calendar. When Khomeini landed in Tehran to lead the revolution in 1979, he opposed simultaneously the institution of monarchy, the nation-state, and modernization "Western-style." What ensued was a radicalization of the Islamic regime which, after the costly Iran-Iraq war, led to the drastic restructuring of society, and the setting up of special religious judges to deal with impious acts such as adultery, homosexuality, gambling, treason, and sympathy for atheists. There followed waves of violence aimed at leftist critics and Marx-

ist guerrillas. This is the story of fundamentalist logic in Iran, and although it is an easy one to tell, other countries have had similar experiences.

In his groundbreaking scholarly trilogy entitled *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Manuel Castells suggests that "the social roots of radical fundamentalism appear to derive from the combination of successful state-led modernizations in the 1950s and 1960s and the failure of economic modernization in most Muslim countries during the 1970s and 1980s, as their economies could not adapt to the new conditions of global competition and technological revolution in the latter period."[4] Therefore, the young, urban population, with a high level of education as a result of the first wave of modernization, was frustrated in its expectations as the economy faltered and new forms of cultural dependency settled in. It was joined in its discontent by impoverished masses expelled from rural areas to cities by the unbalanced modernization of agriculture. This social mixture was made explosive by the crisis of the nation-state, whose employees, including military personnel, suffered declining living standards and lost faith in the nationalist project. The crisis of legitimacy of the nation-state was the result of its widespread corruption, inefficiency, and dependency upon foreign powers. As a result, the construction of a contemporary Islamic identity proceeds as a reaction against an alienating modernization, be it capitalist or socialist, the negative consequences of globalization, and the collapse of the post-colonial project. This is why the differential development of fundamentalism in the Muslim world seems to be linked to the capacity of the nation-state to integrate into a successful nationalist project both the urban masses, through economic welfare, and the Muslim clergy, through official sanction of their religious power under the protection of the state. Thus, Indonesia, until now, and Malaysia seem to be able to integrate Islamic pressures within their authoritarian nation-states by creating fast economic growth and providing glimpses of a promising future to their citizens. On the other hand, Castells asserts, "the nationalist projects of Egypt, Algeria, and Tunisia, some of the most Westernized Muslim countries, collapsed in the 1980s, thus ushering in social tensions that were predominantly captured by Islamists under moderate, radical, and democratic radical versions."[5]

In the 1990s, Islamism in politics and the new Islamic fundamentalist identity seem to be visible in a variety of different contexts and arenas—situations always related to the existence of social exclusion as a

result of failed or ineffective modernization. Thus, the disaffected youth, such as the Maghrebians in France, the Turks in Germany, and even the African-Americans here in the United States, appear to be redefining their Islamic identity as a result of social discrimination, cultural abuse, and unemployment. Through a wide range of political mechanisms, depending on the particular nation-state, and the global network of each individual economy, an Islamic fundamentalist project has emerged in most Muslim countries. Furthermore, it has even appeared among the Muslim minorities of developed non-Muslim societies.

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Now, I will briefly expound upon what I believe are the dangers of fundamentalism, particularly of the highly dogmatic type. In critically analyzing the history of Islam, experts have generally seen the Shi'ah versus Sunni conflict as the main source of strife between Muslim communities. This conflict has certainly continued at various times and to various degrees, whether in the form of scholarly debates and canonical discussion or bloody confrontations. Too often overlooked, however, is the essential antagonism between opposing interpretations of Islamic ideology and the message of revelation, tensions which have persisted for fourteen centuries, since the founding of the Islamic community in the seventh century by Prophet Muhammad.

On one side is the dogmatic outlook, which is unwilling to accept the essence of the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet of Islam — mercy, liberty, and guidance of the individual and society toward moral and material evolution. To the dogmatist, compassion, love, freedom, and progress are not absolute values; the tendency is toward brutality, vengeance, intolerance, ignorance, and superstition. These qualities not only contradict the approach and practices of the Prophet's original teachings, but have been responsible for a wide range of regressive actions in the Muslim world.

On the other hand, there have also been Muslims who have followed Muhammad's genuine message of mercy and liberty, rejecting dogmatism and fanaticism. This ideological clash has never been limited to Shi'ites versus Sunnis. In fact, it has persisted to varying degrees within many Islamic communities. Conflicting ideological interpretations are common to all religions, but with Islam the issues have immediate political overtones more volatile than theoretical dis-

cussions or academic disputes. The conflicts may last for centuries because Islam's distinctive characteristic is a model of life, not just of worship. Hence, differing interpretations of the teachings of Islam directly and immediately translate into political conflicts. Thus, when radical fundamentalists act up, repercussions are felt even at the state level.

A close look at this linkage of politics and religious sentiments of the Muslim masses is essential in understanding how religious demagogues and fundamentalists have tried to usurp power, and why Marxism, nationalism, and liberalism (especially in the anti-religious form) have failed to serve as alternatives to the religious forces in the Islamic world. Could it be, then, that the only viable alternative capable of countering dogmatic fundamentalism is a modern, democratic Islam that opposes the union of church and state? Furthermore, can the Islamic world ever be secular? Clearly, these are questions motivated by my Western upbringing, and I am not a steadfast supporter of the "Western" answers to these questions, but I do believe the questions bring up critical aspects of the relationship between Islam and governance that must be carefully examined.

In sum, I believe that without confronting fundamentalism in political and cultural terms, not much can be achieved. Furthermore, addressing issues of social inequity, Westernization, and post-modern thought will affect the nature of fundamentalism in Islam. I must now say two things. First, I do not wish to suggest that incomplete modernization and the nation-state crises are the only sources of fundamentalism. I fully realize the extent to which other cultural, social, and historical factors contribute to it. Second, I have attempted to keep my viewpoint about Islamic fundamentalism fairly neutral; that is, I don't claim it to be necessarily bad or good. Instead, implicit in my argument is that some forms of fundamentalism can be positive and rejuvenating while others can be destructive and repressive. I merely suggest that fundamentalism must be aggressively addressed in any discussion about the future of Islam.

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I conclude with a few short but more philosophical reflections on the fate and future of Islam. We are discussing more than just a clash of cultures, between Islam and the West; it is the conflict of two opposing philosophies. Under the great complexity of the structures involved—

the weavings of history, the mosaics of cultures — we can reduce the conflict to a basic contradiction: the West is secular and materialist and Islam is preponderantly faith-driven; one has marginalized belief while the other has placed it at the center of its worldview. Therefore, it is not just a clash between Islam and the West — it seems more foundational than that.

On the verge of the twenty-first century, the violent and passionate confrontation between Islam and the West poses internal predicaments for both. Muslims must struggle to preserve the essence of the Quranic message in a meaningful, profound way. They must look for ways to participate in the globalizing world without having their identities obliterated. This is truly a difficult test. One road will lead them to harmony, hope, and vitality, while the other will lead to strife, petty bickering, and disunity. The challenge for the Western world is to understand how to expand the Western notions of justice, equality, freedom, and liberty beyond their borders without appearing like nineteenth-century imperialists. At the core of this global dilemma and redefinition of identities lies one of the most important abilities of any society, nation-state, civilization, or religion since the beginning of time — adaptability. If Islam is unable to adapt to the growing pressures of the Western world and the West remains deaf to the arguments and viewpoints of Muslims, the world is destined to be a more divided and dangerous place.

**Notes**

1. Mohammad Mohaddessin, *Islamic Fundamentalism: The New Global Threat* (Washington, D.C.: Seven Locks Press, 1993), xxi.

2. Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, vol. 2 of *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 13.

3. Castells, 17.

4. Castells, 18.

5. Castells, 19.