# Understanding Modernity on One's Own Terms

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How can the movements fighting for an Islamic state in which Shari'ah (the Islamic Law) rules supreme best be understood—as part of a worldwide reaction against modernist thought or as a broad and diverse attempt to understand and tackle the problems of modernity through reconnecting with an indigenous system of references for producing meaning? This is the main question discussed in this paper.

## Revolt Against the Modern Age?

In his book *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern Age*,[1] the American historian of religion Bruce B. Lawrence surveys what he identifies as "fundamentalist" movements within the three major religions of Semitic origin: Judaism, Christianity (American Protestantism), and Islam. In seeking to understand how fundamentalists relate to the realities of the modern world, Lawrence makes a distinction between modernity and modernism. Modernity is seen as the concrete facts of modern life: the revolutions in production and communications technology brought on by industrialism and the concurrent changes in material life and, to a certain extent, in social organization. Lawrence's fundamentalists are not opposed to modernity, with the possible exception of the Naturei Karta group in Israel. They also are adept at utilizing the most modern means of communications in their campaign or organizing activities.

Modernism, on the other hand, is what characterizes the new way of thinking that has occurred in the West as a result of, or at least alongside, the industrial and scientific revolutions. It is marked by a strong belief in the powers of science and reason and by a basic skepticism toward any substantial, absolute truth. To the modernist mind no "truth" is immune

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to or exempt from scientific inquiry; consequently, it is always potentially subject to revision.

What Lawrence sees in the fundamentalist movements is a religious ideology out to defend the Absolute Truth as preserved in the Holy Scriptures from the onslaught of modernism—in other words, to defend God.

The core contest is between two incommensurate ways of viewing the world—one that locates values in timeless scriptures, inviolate laws, and unchanging mores, and another that sees in the expansion of scientific knowledge a technological transformation of society that pluralizes options both for learning and for living.[2]

Others have also tried to analyze the "last-ditch defenders of God" (to use Lawrence's expression), across religions. In his book on what he calls "the revenge of God,"[3] French political scientist Gilles Kepel examines much the same groups as Lawrence, although he also draws interesting parallels with certain movements within the Catholic church in Italy and France. Although Kepel is less concerned than Lawrence with developing a theoretical framework for understanding these movements, he seems to agree with the general analysis of the latter.

For Kepel, Islamists, ultra-orthodox Jews, American evangelists, and Catholic movements like the Italian Comunione e liberazione share the view that humanity was led astray by the ideas of the Enlightenment. Man, or human reason, was put on par with or in the place of God; thereby, the foundation was laid for the tyranny of man over man, ultimately leading to the gulag of Stalinist communism. The politico-religious movements in question oppose efforts at modernizing religion, advocating instead the Islamization, Judaization, or Christianization of modernity. They want to reconquer their secularized societies for religion, making the State and its citizens abide by the rules laid down in holy scripture.

## Is the Dichotomy So Clear?

Before I consider the usefulness of these comparative studies for understanding the Islamist scene, I would like to question the existence of a clear-cut line between secularism and reason on one side and religion and fundamentalism on the other.

In 1992, Ernest Gellner published a book titled *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*,[4] in which he identified three main currents of thought about the world: postmodern relativism, religious fundamentalism, and Enlightenment rationalism, of which he somewhat ironically declares himself a fundamentalist adherent. What the last two currents have in common is a belief in the existence of Objective Truth. But while religious fundamentalists think of this truth as being readily accessible to

us through revealed scriptures, rationalists consider that no person or group of persons will ever possess absolute knowledge of Truth. The only thing which they consider absolute, Gellner says, are the rules for seeking knowledge.

Gellner's division here might be quite relevant when looking at the subjectively held views of the groups in question on epistemology, that is, how they themselves would explain the sources of true knowledge and the possibility of achieving it. The division, I would argue, becomes far less clear-cut if we consider the practice of these same groups.

Consider the attitude to the writings of Karl Marx and Lenin among those in the communist movement and the attitude toward the thought of Milton Friedman among the aspiring young economists and politicians of Eastern Europe after 1989. These, I think, are extreme, but not atypical, examples of the very strong position of "scripture" in political cultures where science has taken the place of religion as the source of truth in the public mind.

It is obviously the case that in these examples truth is posited not as originating in God, but in the scientific work of outstanding human thinkers. But the difference can easily be overstated, for we must also consider the fact that among those defending God and the scriptures as a necessary basis for truth and (therefore) morality, there are important groups who do not stand for a literalist interpretation and application of the scripture. They argue that we must draw the essence from the scriptures in the form of certain general moral principles which should guide our individual and collective conduct on earth. This is a point I will come back to in greater detail regarding the Islamic scene. The important point to note here is that the degree of literalism in the attitude toward scripture varies greatly between self-styled secularist rationalists and those advocating a religious interpretation of life in this world.

Somewhat related is the question of the extent to which religion and politics are two clearly separate entities. Is religion—in itself apolitical—something that can be used or not used for political purposes? For at least 99 percent of human history this would have seemed an absurd proposition, since religion encompassed the sum total of human ideas about this world and the next, including the question of how to organize life in this world. Every political movement would also be a religious movement, or at least it would have to seek religious legitimization. A debate on the definition of religion is not within the scope of this paper, but it is probably safe to say that one important aspect of religion is that it gives symbolic expression to the unity of the individual with his or her fellow human beings.

Therefore the specific doctrines of different religions are also out to establish rules for conduct toward other people. The number and rigidity of these rules, and their centrality to the doctrine of salvation, differ

among creeds, but they are there. And such rules have political implications.

That those "defending God" have been pushed to the background of the political stage in many countries, and that versions of certain faiths have developed in such a way as to allow for the separation of religion from politics, does not mean that religion in itself has become apolitical.

And what about politics? In what sense can we really speak of nonreligious politics? In a country like Sweden, normally considered a secularized society, the Constitution continues to state that not only Christianity but a specific version of it remains the State religion. Sweden has a State church of which well over 80 percent of Swedes automatically become members at birth. In most Western countries there are important political parties with the word "Christian" as part of their name (the Christian Democratic Union in Germany, for example), claiming to follow a line based on the tenets of the Christian faith.

Even in openly secularist countries like France and political movements with no reference to religion in their program, one must specify in what qualitative sense do these differ from their religious counterparts. There is an obvious difference in that these groups or regimes do not purport to base their policies on scriptures transmitting absolute truth from a personal, transcendent God. However, if secularist politicians were pressed for the moral imperatives guiding their search for beneficial policies, they would most likely come up with basic tenets that do not in content differ principally from those claimed by religious groups on the basis of Scripture. And these basic tenets of the secularists would certainly not have been deduced through scientific reasoning. Rather, they would have been taken from values that are deeply rooted in the societies in question and which were, traditionally, understood religiously.

What comes out of all this is the following: We need to think again about the real significance of the "great secularist divide," the supposed separation of religion from politics. Religion as an explicit reference to a transcendent God and divine scripture may have been reduced to an obscure "back-bencher" as it were, but what remains central is the reference to an embedded set of values, which may be debated, but nevertheless are in the main given a priori through cultural heritage. And this kind of "religion" is not absolutely new in history. To mention one example, Confucianism could be considered a kind of overarching set of moral values not given by a god but by a great human being.

There are hardly any issues raised by religious movements which are optional and disappear from the political arena when the religious framework disappears. Conversely, what today's religious political activists are doing is not really to introduce new substantial issues into the political arena, but to change the language in which the issues are discussed.

Combined with our earlier observation that rigidity and flexibility of thinking are distributed rather equally among both secularists and those campaigning on a religious platform, this should discourage any secularist arrogance in our approach toward religio-political activism.

## Who Are the Islamists?

With these comments in mind, let us return to our main question: Do the Islamists of the Arab world fit Lawrence's analysis of the "fundamentalist revolt"? First of all, we need to know who the people under discussion are. I propose to delimit the Islamist movement here by three criteria:

1. They are those who refer to themselves as the Islamic (or Islamist) movement (*al-harakat al-islamiyyah*).
2. They call for the establishment of an Islamic State. The main criterion defining such a State is that it should be ruled by the Shari'ah, the revealed law of Islam.
3. They organize themselves into social and political movements in order to achieve this aim.

## Applying the Shari'ah

The central demand of the Islamists is the application of the Shari'ah to every field of society, including economy and government. According to their view, God has made the laws once and for all. Permitting the human being to prescribe the law is equivalent to placing man on a level with God and means weakening the security of the individual by making his or her safety hostage to the whims of rulers. In a part of the world which for countless generations has known autocratic rulers and military regimes, these arguments find deep resonance in the experience of the people.

Based on the idea of legislation as the sole prerogative of God, some Islamists declare that they are against democracy, since democracy gives sovereignty, and therefore the right to legislate, to the people. But the matter does not end here, for what is the alternative Islamic system of legislation in practice?

The Shari'ah is not a book of law. It is based on the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet Muhammad as recorded in the stories (singular *hadith*, plural *ahadith*) of what he said and did during his lifetime. These *ahadith* are collectively known as the Sunnah of the Prophet, and in Sunni Islam six collections are considered canonical. Traditionally, the functioning of the Shari'ah depends on the existence of a body of learned men (*'ulama'*), specializing in *fiqh* (jurisprudence), who issue *fatwa*s

(interpretations of the Shari'ah) and serve as judges. These experts, known in Arabic as *fuqaha'*, deduce the correct rulings in specific cases on the basis of certain principles that were fully developed by the ninth century. On issues where the Qur'an or the Sunnah give no unequivocal answer they proceed through reasoning by *qiyas* (analogy) searching for similar cases in which the scriptures provide clear rulings. This, for example, is the way in which the original ban on wine was extended to all intoxicants.

There is also a principle known as *ijma'* (consensus). According to a hadith, the Prophet once said: "My followers will never agree on error." This is taken to imply that if the whole community, or at least all *fuqaha'*, agreed on the legality (or illegality) of a certain practice, this constitutes a valid interpretation of the Shari'ah.

There are two important points about the way the Islamist movements of today view the introduction of the Shari'ah as effective law in their societies, points that distinguish them from a merely conservative, traditionalist reaction: the necessity of codification and the necessity of *ijtihad*.

## The Necessity of Codification

Traditionally, the Shari'ah is the corpus of interpretations of the holy books made by the *fuqaha'* through certain established principles and with due regard for an enormous corpus of earlier interpretations and commentaries made through the centuries. In Saudi Arabia, for example, this is still the situation—officially there are no law codes enacted by the State. Modern Islamists, however, clearly conceive the process of introducing the Shari'ah as one of formulating written laws in a modern sense, based on the principles of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. This is an important point, since written laws imply greater predictability in the rulings of courts and practice of government and some group of human beings has to make decisions with regard to the concrete formulation of these laws.

The question is, who should take on this responsibility, and the general answer of Islamists in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria is that it should be a popularly elected assembly. The *'ulama'* should play an important role either as members of the assembly or through some supervisory function.

But it is not universally held that they should have a monopoly over this legislation, or law interpretation, as the Islamists would like to call it. Some, such as Al-Bishri, speak of it as "legislation of the second order."[5]

## The Necessity of *Ijtihad*

Then comes the question: What is to be the scope of interpretation left to an elected assembly of lawmakers? Should they copy the old masters

of *fiqh*, or do they have the right to reinterpret scripture? These questions connect with the thousand-year-old debate on *ijtihad*. *Ijtihad*, is short for *ijtihad al-ra'y*, that is, "exercising the mind" in order to find the correct interpretation in cases where there are no clear rulings in the Qur'an and Sunnah

From the eleventh century on there has been a strong tendency toward seeing the "gate of *ijtihad*" as closed, meaning that past masters of *fiqh* have already found answers to all conceivable issues that might arise and these answers were strengthened through *ijma'*. Even so there have always been trends defending the right (or even the duty) of *ijtihad*, that is, for individual scholars to go directly to the scriptures and deduce concrete rules through independent reasoning.

The point to notice about the Islamists is that they strongly emphasize the need for *ijtihad* in applying the Shari'ah in today's societies. In this sense they are heirs to the central figures of the Islamic renaissance of the late ninteenth century, Jamal al-Din al-Afghan and Muhammad Abduh. These thinkers, and the somewhat later Rashid Rida, whose Salafiyyah movement was a clear inspiration for the first modern Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood (founded in Egypt in 1928) made a point of distinguishing between the essential message of the Qur'an and Sunnah and the concrete forms of its application. It was the first principles which were to be taken directly from Scripture. Concrete applications would have to be adjusted to circumstances of time and place. This is precisely the message emphasized by the important trends within today's Islamist landscape, such as the Labor Party in Egypt and Al-Nahdah movement in Tunisia.

To sum up, the Islamists, while never compromising on the idea of God as the sole legislator, nevertheless consider human agency a necessity for working out the principles of the Shari'ah into actual law codes for modern society. And according to most of them this agency should be popularly elected. Furthermore, the principle of *ijtihad* leaves considerable freedom of choice to legislators despite the basic constraint of having to conform to Scripture.

## Why Are the Islamists Growing in Strength?

Two factors should be borne in mind. First, the majority of the population in most of the Muslim world today is poor and has seen its situation deteriorate for the last decade while small groups at the top have greatly increased their wealth in a period of economic liberalization and opening up to the West. And the radical nationalism of the previous generation which in the 1950s and 1960s was seen by many as offering hope of a better future is now associated with corrupt oppressive ruling classes and with repeated defeat at the hands of Israel and the West.

Second, a dichotomy splits today's Muslim societies. On the one hand, there are the "modernized" elites, who have received a Western-style education, and have led nationalist, Marxist, or liberal regimes and opposition groups. Socially and ideologically, these elites have remained a tiny, rather isolated minority. The majority of the population in town and countryside is still solidly planted in the traditional Muslim worldview and way of life.

Linked to this until recently "silent majority" is another elite whose roots go back more than a millennium—the Islamic learned class of *'ulama'*. They have their distinct intellectual tradition, a common language in Arabic, and a tradition of traversing the Islamic world in search of education—especially the thousand-year-old university of Al-Azhar in Cairo, which is a meeting place for students and *'ulama'* from all over the Islamic world. Generally speaking, this "indigenous" intellectual elite has played only a secondary and belated role within the Islamic movements of Sunni Islam. But its very existence has meant the existence of an alternative discourse, an alternative language for expressing views about the world and society. Against this background the growth of the Islamist movement could be seen as an attempt to regain the identity and viability of Arab societies through two closely related processes which might be put in the following terms: reconnecting with an indigenous system of references for producing meaning as a framework for understanding and discussing how to tackle the problems Muslim societies face in the modern world.

## What is the Essence of Islamism?

The French political scientist Francois Burgat sees this as the essence of Islamism.[6] Even after the Muslim countries gained political independence, the model to be emulated was the European one—the indigenous tradition was considered by the dominant elite as obstructing the development of modern societies with a modern economy. Political debates related to ideals, theories, and ideologies were imported from the Western cultural sphere. In Burgat's view, the main function of the Islamist movement is to force those debates and the whole framework for interpreting society (and existence) onto local ground, so to speak.

Today, Muslims are heirs to a civilization and a culture that has lasted for over 1,400 years. For several centuries Dar al-Islam (the Realm of Islam) was, without a doubt, leading in material and intellectual achievements. But during the last 500 years it was gradually overtaken by the growing strength of the emerging capitalist centers of Western Europe. Through Western colonization and political and economic dominance Islamic culture was pushed to the background even in its own homelands, in vital fields such as education, government, legislation, and later

in the emerging mass media. What is happening now is a refocusing of attention on one's own roots and a countering of the rampant Eurocentrism of intellectual and political discourse with an energetic Islamocentrism. Concepts taken from Islamic tradition are adopted as tools of analysis in political debate.

In this connection, it is of course important to remember that the history of Islam is very rich with different political, spiritual, cultural, and philosophical currents. A basis could be found in this history for advocating a whole range of divergent ideas today. Even if leading "fundamentalists" might want to put forward one particular interpretation of Islamic history as the "correct" one, one effect of their political success is that believers, as well as not-so-firm believers, are stimulated to search in Islamic history for support of their points of view.

So the renaissance for Islam as a political force is not the expression of one uniform unchanging ideology. Those referred to here as Islamists constitute a broad many-faceted movement with views on important issues that vary from one country to another and from one group to another within the same country (for example, Egypt). Within this broad movement there is continuous debate and ideas are developing rapidly.

Furthermore, under the pressure of the advance of the Islamists the whole ideological stage has changed character, so that the general political and cultural debate in the Middle East today has, in a way, Islam as its basic premise. Islamic politics in the broad sense therefore now contain almost the whole spectrum of ideas on a traditional left/right scale. On the one hand, the Islamists are increasingly forcing public discussion to take place within an Islamic framework, but by the same token they may be contributing to a much greater plurality of ideas inside this framework, and potentially to some imported ideas gaining a stronger foothold by being formulated in a conceptual language which has a much broader popular resonance.

## Recreating the Moral Cement of Society

The Egyptian jurist and historian Tariq al-Bishri has emphasized the cohesive function of religion in society.[7] He claims that when colonial powers and/or modernizing regimes attacked Islamic law and reduced the social position of the *'ulama'*, Islamic institutions of learning, and the popular Sufi orders, they simultaneously destroyed the moral ties linking individuals and local communities to State authorities. The result was an atomization of society and a decline in public spirit. The trend was toward a society where groups and individuals belonging to smaller entities based on kinship or local origin, or religious sects tried to fend for themselves as best as they could without regard for broader interests. The vacuum left by religion has been filled by an increasingly corrupt bureaucracy and by police and armed forces, but without the decisions of

government being regarded as legitimate and morally binding by much of the population.

One might add that this alienation of the base of society from its top echelons is accentuated by the policies of the regimes. For instance, in Egypt, a certain degree of political pluralism is tolerated within the upper classes and the educated urban elite, while the lid is kept tightly on independent political or trade union activity among workers and farmers. Against this background the Islamist movements represent to Al-Bishri an attempt to reinstate what has been eroded, namely, the religious framework that held individuals and state power together in a divinely sanctioned societal order.

In this connection, the so-called Islamic investment companies merit a few comments. In Egypt, by offering interest-free services these companies were able in the 1980s to collect billions of Egyptian pounds in deposits from people who had kept their savings outside the bank system, mistrusting the practice of interest, considered to be explicitly forbidden by the Qur'an. In fact the argument for considering the services of these companies as interest-free is a rather subtle one. They also apparently operated by the "pyramid principle," paying profits to depositors from new deposits, a fact which the government used in order to break the neck of most of them. But none of this changes what is central here: the enormous mobilizing effect of people being offered an alternative kind of bank, purportedly operating in accordance with Islamic law.

In 1989, when the People's Assembly debated legislation regulating the Islamic investment companies, estimates of the deposits they had received varied from 8 to 18 billion Egyptian pounds ($3 to $7 billion). In a situation where lack of capital is a constant restraint on the development of Egypt's national economy this is no insignificant amount; in 1986–1987, total investment was in the area of 8 billion Egyptian pounds.[8] Do the Islamist movements stand for a return to the Middle Ages or an ossification of traditional values?

It is quite true that Islamists see the Islamic society led by the Prophet Muhammad and the first four caliphs who reigned after him, i.e., the Medina State (622–661), as ideal and it is true that some of them in their writings quote many *'ulama'* from the "Middle Ages" in support of their views on various questions. However, it hardly needs pointing out that, whatever the wishes of present-day Islamists, they act within societies fundamentally different from those of the Arabian peninsula in the seventh century, and therefore the practical results of their efforts must be different from those of the Prophet's time.

Moreover, it is often disregarded that the sword of the Islamists is double-edged: it strikes at the West, but equally it strikes at a passive, traditionalist, rigid Islam, only imitating the ideas of previous generations of

*'ulama'*, and not able to face the challenges confronting modern Islamic society.

As already noted, the Islamists support the right to make fresh interpretations of the Qur'an and Sunnah in order to formulate an Islamic law valid for today's society. Even if the allowed scope for such interpretation (*ijtihad* ) varies greatly among different Islamist trends, this opens an important door for change. The Islamist movements are also eager supporters of modern technology and have been pioneers in putting modern communications and media technology to use in spreading their message. In the universities, the Islamist students of science and engineering are particularly numerous.

## "Modernist Islamism"

An instructive example of the potential for developing quite modernist approaches within the framework of Islamism is provided by the Egyptian Labor Party and its leading ideologue, Adil Hussein. Through an alliance with the old-time Islamists in the Muslim Brotherhood the Labor Party has become the leading opposition party in Egypt. Since 1989 it has had a clear-cut Islamist platform.

Although a member of the nationalist Young Egypt Party in his early youth, Adil Hussein became a Marxist and an organized communist after 1952. He spent eleven years in prison under Jamal Abdel-Nasser. In the mid-1970s, he wrote an article on Islam and Marxism called "The Absurd Polarization of Contemporary Egyptian Politics,"[9] in which he argues that by opposing Marxism to Islam, Egyptian communists had unnecessarily cut themselves off from a powerful source of ideological justification. In order to reach the broad masses they should rather have sought to express their program of social reform in ways which were in harmony with the religious feelings of the people, instead of appearing to be representatives of an alien imported ideology.

This can clearly be seen to foreshadow Hussein's later switch to Islamism. This change is of course a matter of faith, but Hussein also argues more pragmatically for Islamism as the solution to Egypt's ills and to those of other Islamic countries.

His two main points are, first, that faith in God is the only solid and lasting basis for a strong public morality, which is necessary to bear the hardships of a fight for true independent development; and second, that any civilization can only progress as long as it is true to its own roots.

Adil Hussein speaks of his ideas as "enlightened Islamism." He favors applying the Shari'ah but emphasizes that it must be a Shari'ah for the twenty-first century. There are some clear rulings in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, but much is left for human reason to interpret the Law in order to keep it current with changing times and circumstances. Islam is

viewed more as providing some general moral principles, and as an imperative urging action for the common interest, than as a set of detailed ready-made rules and regulations. In taking this approach, Adil Hussein seems closer to the early Islamic reformers Al-Afghani and 'Abdu than to the Muslim Brotherhood, a point I will return to.

On the political level the Labor Party's first goal is democracy, ending the present one-party rule and the emergency laws, in place almost without interruption since 1967 and drastically sharpened in 1992, which severely limit the freedom of political activity.

There has been an interesting development in Adil Hussein's views. In his book *Nahwa fikr 'arabi jadid* (Towards a New Arabic Thought),[10] he argued that there should be free elections among several candidates. But he was very skeptical about a multiparty system under Egypt's present conditions. A one-party system, he argued, would probably better serve the purpose of national unity in the struggle for independent development. But from 1986, he unequivocally endorses a multiparty system as a necessary condition for stable democratic development.[11] He stresses that party pluralism is indispensable to avoid stagnation of political thought and links this stand to Islam.

According to Hussein, Islam leaves a lot of room for reasoning (*ijtihad*), and since it recognizes no priesthood with a monopoly on scripture interpretation, the existence of different interpretations is quite legitimate, and this may crystallize into different political programs and parties. In economic matters the party is a harsh critic of the "structural adjustment" schemes prescribed for Egypt by the International Monetary Fund. Instead, the party calls for a "grand strategy for self-centered development" focused on first serving the basic needs of the population for food, clothes, housing, and the like. As far as possible, this should be done through local production in order to secure independence and will involve strict regulation of imports. Private capital must accept working within the limits of such a plan.

As far as distribution is concerned, Adil Hussein emphasizes that just distribution is not only a question of collecting *zakat* (the Islamic tax) and using it to help the poor, but at least as much a question of deciding what is going to be produced. In fact, in its ideas about the conditions for development, the Labor Party can be seen to be quite close to the delinking strategy for self-centered development proposed by the radical Egyptian economist Samir Amin.

The Labor Party's ideas about economic reform reveal an interesting difference in approach when contrasted with those of the Muslim Brotherhood. The writings of the Brothers on economic matters have a tendency to proceed from traditional Islamic precepts such as *zakat*, prohibition of *riba* and so on, which they discuss in the abstract with numerous references to authorities of Islamic *fiqh* throughout the ages, in a

style reminiscent of Al-Azhar. It is typical that while perusing magazines associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, like *al-I'itisam* and *Liwa' al-Islam* from the late 1980s, the only articles I found touching on economic issues were those campaigning against importation of foodstuffs suspected of containing pig's fat. In contrast, the Labor Party proceeds from concrete analysis of Egypt's development problems. The party's newspaper *al-Sha'ab* (the people) gives broad coverage of current economic issues.

Islam is seen not so much as providing ready-made solutions, but as the moral force which will unite the population in enduring the toil and hardships of independent development and offers broad principles of social justice and harmony.

The electoral alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood and the opening of the pages of *al-Sha'ab* for the pens of the Islamist movement at large, express a central concern of the Labor Party: the establishment of the broadest possible unity both within and outside the Islamist movement vis-à-vis the Egyptian government. In particular, the party tries to bridge the traditional gap between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Nasserist tendencies within the Egyptian opposition.

The Muslim Brotherhood have been unwilling to see anything positive in the Nasser period, while the Labor Party maintains that although Jamal Abdel-Nasser made major mistakes, in particular with regard to democracy, there is another, positive, aspect of his reign: the serious effort at achieving national independence both economically and politically. This policy of unity implies that the Labor Party is willing to seek alliances across the Islamist/secularist divide.

In general, it would seem that whereas the Muslim Brothers tend to focus on the formal application of certain Islamic precepts expressed in the Shari'ah, the Labor Party emphasizes the need for more thoroughgoing economic and social reform, while probably being more flexible with regard to the concrete application of the Shari'ah. The Labor Party can be seen to be a modernizing factor within the Islamist movement, in the sense that it emphasizes a search for concrete solutions to modern problems based on a holistic understanding of the message of Islam.

## Conclusions

A number of critical questions may be raised regarding the usefulness of Lawrence's analysis for understanding the Islamists:

1. The choice of concepts. "Fundamentalism" would be a good name for the Islamists, in the sense that they do advocate a return to the fundamentals of the faith, to the holy scriptures. In this particular sense, the Arabic translation of fundamentalism, *usuliyyah,* is gaining a certain limited currency as a positive term sometimes used by the Islamists them-

selves. But this does not necessarily imply a conservative stand, since their attack is not only directed against the impact of modern Western ideas, but also against the *'ulama'*s repetition of old interpretations drawn up by scholars through the centuries.

Here, then, the problems with the use of the term "fundamentalist" become evident: linked to its original use in a Christian context, it evokes the idea of a literalist attitude to scripture. This is not necessarily typical of Islamists; on the contrary, many of them would emphasize the spirit and not the letter.

2. Lawrence's emphasis on the defense of the Absolute Truth also somewhat misses the point. If we accept Burgat's analysis of "reconnecting with an older symbolic system," we again see that although the Islamists indeed defend the existence of Absolute Truth, the main thrust of the movement is not defending any particular substantial truth about politics, but rather changing the rules of the political discourse. Solutions must be sought within what is conceived as an Islamic conceptual framework instead of a Western one. This is seen as a prerequisite for a cultural liberation without which political and economic liberation will remain a sham.

3. There is a related problem in Lawrence's comparison between religio-political groups in countries such as the United States and Egypt. The Islamist revolt is a powerful reaction against the cultural and ideological pressure from what is seen as dominant, aggressive outsiders, a fight for the right to understand modernity on one's own terms, whereas American Protestant fundamentalism is a reaction against an ideological enemy within the same cultural sphere.

4. In terms of "recreating the moral cement," obviously there is a common point between Islamists and Christian and Jewish fundamentalists, in the sense that they see belief in God as the only stable basis for a moral society. But again we have seen that in the interpretation of the Divine Law the Islamists include currents that tend to be quite flexible rather than literalist in their attitude. Arguably, what we are witnessing in the Islamic world is the intersecting of two phenomena. The struggle of the South for political and economic liberation from the power of the West is being continued in powerful movements for cultural liberation, challenging the West's monopoly of having discovered universally valid truths about how the world and society best should be understood and organized.

This attempt at cultural liberation focuses on the right to seek a basis in one's own culture and history. Nevertheless, in striving to liberate themselves from Western models, Islamists cannot avoid calling into question what is arguably the core of the cultural hegemony which the expanding, modernizing Europe spread over the world: the ideas of the

Enlightenment. This questioning comes at a time when these ideas, as represented by today's miscellaneous heirs to the Enlightenment, are in deep crisis in their homelands.

To this extent, Lawrence and Kepel are indeed right in seeing common ground between the Islamists and religious revivalist movements in the North. But the question is, How essential are these similarities? Indeed, it could be argued that the writings of 'Adil Hussein, the Tunisian Islamist leader Rashid al-Ghannushi, and his Sudanese colleague Hassan al-Turabi in many respects represent a rationalist approach to politics quite different from that of traditionalist *'ulama'*. To the extent that their ideas are read and debated widely they encourage a modernizing of political thinking among sections of the population drawn into national political life for the first time by the Islamist movements. To use one of Burgat's images, one might find in the end that the disturbing sounds made by the throat of Islamism come from the Muslim swallowing, rather than throwing up, modernity.

Within the Islamist movement, then, there is a wide range of attitudes toward scripture and a variety of views on the concrete policies to be followed. I would argue that the secret behind the amazing growth of support for Islamist movements is to be found in their being seen as truly independent of corrupt governments and imperialist outsiders, rather than in their "defense of God."

Although the defense of existence of revealed Absolute Truth is indeed a common denominator for Islamists, Lawrence's overemphasis on this point becomes a straightjacket in seeking to understand the present political and ideological scene in the Muslim world.

## Notes

1. Bruce B. Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern Age* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1990).
2. Ibid., 232.
3. Gilles Kepel, *La Revanche de Dieu* (Paris: Seuil, 1991).
4. Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1992).
5. Tariq Al-Bishri, "On state institutions in Islamic and Arab regimes," *Minbar al-Hiwar,* no. 14 (Beirut 1989), 78.
6. See, for example, Francois Burgat and William Dowell, *The Islamic Movement in North Africa* (Austin: Centre for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas, 1993), 41.
7. Francois Burgat, "Les conditions d'un dialogue avec l'occident, entretien avec Tariq al-Bichri," *Egypte Monde Arabe,* no. 7 (Cairo 1991), 95.
8. Heba Handoussa and Gillian Potter (ed.), *Employment and Structural Adjustment: Egypt in the 1990s* (Cairo: AUC Press, 1991), 128.
9. 'Adil Hussein, "Islam and Marxism: The Absurd Polarisation of Contemporary Egyptian Politics," *Middle East Studies,* no. 2 (London 1976).
10. 'Adil Hussein, *Towards a New Arab Thought: Nasserism, Development and Democracy* (Cairo: Dar al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi, 1985), 240.
11. For instance, in a pamphlet he explained party doctrine for the broader membership, see 'Adil Hussein, "Islam: Religion and Civilisation, Giza" (Cairo: Al-Manar Al-Arabi, 1990), 41.