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The Roots of Religious Fanaticism

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The terrorist attack on September 11, described in the State Department Report on Terrorism for 2001 as “[t]he worst international terrorist attack ever,” will most likely be a preview of even greater atrocities to come. It is an attack that is indelibly associated with Islam, although Ambassador Michael Sheehan, Coordinator for Counterterrorism (Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism) stated this on July 12, 2000 before House International Relations Committee: “There is unfortunately a misperception among some people that terrorism is driven by belief in Islam. In fact, terrorism is a perversion of the teachings of Islam.” Misperception or not, there is a sizable portion of the Muslim population that sympathize with such actions and do believe that it is condoned by Islam. In light of these observations, perhaps the more fundamental question to be raised is who determines Islamic teaching? Who is qualified to interpret the teaching? What is the relative validity of Islamic fundamentalism, militancy, and moderation? The answer must be determined within the Islamic Ummah, not by commentators on Islam. The image that the world of Islam presents to the non-Islamic world and to itself is the defining image of the religion, no matter what the wishful thinking on the part of its detractors or supporters declare. In one source, (*Islamic Fundamentalism* by Karm B. Akhtar and Ahmad H. Sakr, 1982), we find these observations in the chapter, “What Islam Is Not About” (51f):

1. “There is NO priesthood or nunhood in Islam.”

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2. "There is NO religious hierarchy in Islam which is called Mulla, or Moulvi. The concept of Wali as a wise man or as a saint is not from Islam. Whosoever goes to a Wali or to the grave of a Wali and asks anything is committing a sin against the teachings of Islam, and act is equivalent to polytheism or SHIRK."

3. "There is NO divinity in Islam attributable to any human being."

4. "There is NO sufism in Islam. Islam is Islam and sufism is NOT Islam."

5. "There are NO sects in Islam. Islam cannot accept its followers being called shiah or sunni."

6. "In Islam, there is NO monarchy. Islam never tolerated the existence of a monarchy in its homeland. Since there are monarchs presently in the Muslim world and in the heart of Islam, one has to realize that their presence is against the teachings of Islam."

7. "Islam is NOT and will not agree to the following socio-economic political systems: communist, socialistic, nationalistic, democratic, capitalistic and totalitarianism. The Islamic system of government is Islam, and it cannot tolerate having the foregoing systems within its land."

8. "Fanaticism does NOT exist in Islam, and Islam is against those who are fanatics."

9. "The idea of assassination of innocent people is totally against the teachings of Islam."

10. "A military Coup d'Etat is against the teaching of Islam."

From the perspective of scholars on religion, I believe that a reevaluation on the nature of religion is in order. Religions, especially religions with "cumulative traditions" are often construed as innately good,

innately ethical, innately life-supporting. This may be, but it is not always the case. How do we judge a religion when people in the name of religion do bad things? Do we blame the people? Or must we examine what in the religion motivated the people to commit such actions? Are views on what is good and bad flexible? Is there some underlying factor that separates the good from the bad? All these questions, not to mention many more, must be considered in order to gain some judgment on this matter.

Let's take some of the questions and examine them in the light of recent experiences. First, is there a relation between religion and violence? In his book, *Terror in the Mind of God*, Mark Juergensmeyer does not ask this question, he accepts the connection without question. The role of religion in many acts of violence, including terrorism, is to give moral justification for killing as well as for providing an image of "cosmic war that allow activists to believe that they are waging spiritual scenarios" (p. xi). Aside from the historical acts of violence waged in the name of Christianity—the Crusades, one of the most grievous affronts perpetrated upon Islam (in the eyes of Muslims) and even upon Greek Orthodox Christianity (which remains a sore point to this day among Greeks)—we have modern instances of isolated attacks upon individuals such as the killing of abortion doctor Dr. John Britton and James Barrett by Rev. Paul Hill in 1994, the bombings of abortion clinics, the violence in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants, the terrorist bombings of the militarist wing of Sinn Féin, the Irish Republican Army, and the firebrand Protestant leader, Ian Paisley, whose advocacy of violence is based on the notion that Christianity is "under siege by demonic forces embodied in the government and certain social groups,...Irish Catholics and apostate Protestants (Juergensmeyer, 40).

The connection between violence and religion, in this case within Christianity, is based upon theological and ultimately Biblical assumptions. Perhaps one story suggests that violence is appropriate under certain circumstances: the Flood (Gen. 6-9). Neither one person nor one group is destroyed but all of humanity. It is not a destruction brought about by a terrorist, or by a movement of nihilists, but by God Himself, whom I heard described by a devout Christian as the greatest mass-murderer in history. If

God is the perpetrator of the Flood, is then God evil? In this sense, we must know how “evil” is used. In the words of Kenneth Grayston (“Evil” in Alan Richardson’s *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*), the term is used in the descriptive sense for the Hebrew term *ra’*, which:

conveys the factual judgment that something is bad (e.g. figs., cattle), displeasing (e.g. a woman in the eyes of her husband), or harmful (e.g. wild beasts, poisonous herbs, disease). Quite generally it means anything that causes pain, unhappiness, or misery, including the discipline of punishment sent by God.

In the New Testament, besides the injunction to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44), there is another side of the Gospel that describes Jesus as anything but peace loving: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have come not to bring peace but a sword” (Mt 10:34; Lk 12:51-52). This passage has been highlighted by Juergensmeyer (25) as part of an explanation for the violence that is justified in the name of religion.

Words alone, however, do not motivate individuals to perform in ways that are perceived to be transformative or laden with power. There must be that ever-important presence of belief or absolute confidence or faith in the word as power. Reality is in the mind of the beholder; if believers accept the word as a powerful instrument, then it becomes a powerful instrument. In the sacred sphere are sounds, words, phrases, or even whole hymns which are perceived as laden with power that causes the speaker to project that power. Such are *mantras* in the South Asian context. The notion that there are forces in the cosmos—both micro- and macro—that can be manipulated and controlled by humans, is the basis of magic and ritual-magic. When one introduces the Ultimate Power and basis for all other powers into the mix—God—there exists a potential for absolute control, absolute power, absolute paternalism. In the language of religion, these are combinations of dogmas—expressions of absolute truths—coupled with injunctions to perform certain actions based upon the dogmas. In the secular realm, the study of words as performative is known as pragmatics. Commands, laws,

the use of certain modals (shall, should, must, ought to) transforms the utterance from a neutral verbal message to actions—mental or physical—that can affect oneself and others. The underlying dictum, “words are power,” has been recognized for thousands of years in a number of cultures. Indeed, world creation in many scriptures is spoken into existence; great truths are transmitted by the spoken word and not by “scripture.” What traditional societies have known all along has been either forgotten or dismissed by the Enlightened World governed by the Age of Reason. To dismiss it now is to do so at our own peril.

In the West, with the introduction of the Age of Reason, of experimental science, of secularism and scientism, and of humanism comes a reaction that we know as religious fundamentalism. What was once considered truth prior to these modern manifestations—often in a spontaneous and axiomatic sense—was challenged and rejected by the new intelligentsia. The Church, if it were to survive, had to become more like the modern and increasingly secularized community. In so doing, dogmas and injunctions were weakened to the point that they became compartmentalized at the least, rendered impotent and reduced to the level of myth or folktale at the most. The potent words of the religion no longer captivated much of the community as they once did, so now the religion becomes for much of the community more of a social or community phenomenon and less of a transformational experience *vis-à-vis* the Ultimate. One byproduct of this transformation was the Church’s growing temperance toward the outside world.

Of course, there was that other road mentioned above ago: religious fundamentalism. Named after a set of twelve volumes known as *The Fundamentals*, which appeared in print between 1910 and 1915, fundamentalism appeared through the efforts of that evangelical mindset that grew in Protestant North America in the nineteenth century. Evangelizing and revivalism through the popularizing tactics of Methodism was soon followed by dispensationalism, *i.e.*, the idea that time was divided into distinct ages and the way that God dealt with his people.¹ Furthermore,

¹ Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999) 168.

in the post-Civil War period came a resurgence of premillennialist thinking, i.e., the idea that Jesus would come before the millennium to inaugurate the period of one thousand years. This is a pessimistic approach to history, looking upon an evil world that will be brought to an end in some catastrophic manner. Of course, some will be saved from destruction, so accompanying this destruction is the idea that the Church will be brought to heaven by Christ sometime before the Millennium. According to some, that period of seven years prior to the onset of the Millennium, the period known as the Tribulation was significant. Was the Rapture or gaining of Heaven to come prior to the Tribulation (Pre-Tribulation Rapture), during (Mid-Tribulation Rapture), or at the end of the period (Post-Tribulation Rapture)? So further sub-divisions of the Pre-Millennialism came about. What is important is the mindset accepting this teaching. This life was no longer of utmost importance; it was the spiritual life to come. Should this be mixed with a nationalist or survivalist agenda, the outcome could be explosive. From this, many predictions of the End-Times, including the prediction of Theudas in 44 CE, mentioned in Josephus and well over 200 other incidents up to the present including numerous forecasts during the coming 50 years. One such example involves a report in the *Weekly World News* (Nov. 18, 1997) involving the testimony of a recently crash-landed space revealing God's destruction of his world and His anger with all His creatures throughout the cosmos.²

Fundamentalism, when applied to any religion, exhibits certain features that are identical despite their individual and distinct ideologies. It exhibits the following features:

1. a defensiveness against an alternate and opposing ideology that threatens its very existence. By its very nature, it perceives itself as under siege from an opposing worldview.

² "Library of Date setters for end of the world!"
http://www.sullivan-county.com/nf0/y2k/bible_ca.htm.

2. the immediate threat to the old-time religion is that modernistic and secularist world-view. There is nothing wrong with adopting and enjoying the fruits of technology. But when science becomes itself ideological, danger is perceived to arise. When this happens, the fundamentalist mind cannot control and interpret its discoveries.
3. Fundamentalism is Otherworldly directed and oriented toward the Ultimate. It is not as concerned with the present. It is under this rubric that a millennialism (pre- and post-) takes place.
4. What is perceived as a defining moment in the past—usually around the time of the origin of a religion—or some past time that is considered particularly significant by the religion, possesses equal significance in the presence. Samuel Heilman called this perception “traditioning” in his book *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry* (N.Y.: Schocken Books, 1992), but I regard this as simply the mythical vision (a “myth” referring to a story that discloses an ultimate truth) maintaining its hold on the religious community.
5. Another trait of fundamentalism is the emphasis on a division, and struggle, between good and evil. Part of this is an outcome of the original defensive mechanism between the faith community and the infidels.

Aside from this, Christian fundamentalism emphasizes individualist piety—exhibited through the “born again” experience—a commitment to an ethical life (which includes the avoidance of certain particularly onerous modes of behavior: homosexuality, abortion, prostitution, and adultery).

Generally speaking, Christian fundamentalism is not dangerous to the greater society as far as committing acts of violence, but we should be mindful of the power of ideas and unbridled dogmatism can have over individuals. The attitude on abortion is a case in point; nationalist movements are another example. Or so-called dangerous cults exhibiting fundamentalist and pentecostalist or evangelical tendencies may also

present a danger to individuals both inside and outside the movement: two case in points being The People's Temple and The Branch Davidians.

The People's Temple

On November 18, 1978, a murder-suicide of 914 members and leaders took place in Guyana. The organization, the People's Temple, often called a cult, was in fact an offshoot of the Pentecostal Movement and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The institution known as the People's Temple had its roots in Indianapolis as a small church established by James Warren Jones in the 1950s. An advocate of racial integration, Jim Jones was greatly influenced by the person and work of Father Divine, who established a racially integrated community in the 1920s and 1930s. He combined socially liberal activities within a Pentecostal framework, establishing care homes for the elderly and a free restaurant, which later led to his becoming affiliated with the socially active Disciples of Christ as early as 1960. After challenging the segregationist policies in Indianapolis, he decided to move his congregation to Ukiah in 1965. From that base, the Temple opened churches in San Francisco and Los Angeles in the early 1970s and served the needs of those communities in an exemplary manner. Around this time, Jones leased land in Guyana, which was to become Jonestown. The move came in 1977 with allegations of child abuse and violence against ex-members in the wake of the move. Attempts were begun to remove the children at Jonestown. The relatives of Jonestown residents continued pressure on Congress to examine the human rights situation. By 1978, a siege mentality developed and a relative reported in May 1978 that plans were being developed for a mass suicide. It was at this juncture that Leo Ryan, a California congressman, offered his active support for some of the relatives and ex-members, especially the ex-member Grace Stoen, who left behind her son, John Victor Stoen, and husband, Tim Stoen (the Temple attorney). This battle over the son was the most notorious of the custody battles to take place. The events became lurid because Jim Jones claimed paternity of John Stoen, and Tim Stoen eventually defected as well. Out of these events came a visit to Jonestown by Ryan and a group of staff and

reporters. The outcome of the negotiations with Jones was positive, but on his departure, Leo Ryan was shot dead together with three newsmen and a defector, Patricia Parks. The reason for the shootings was the refusal of Jones to submit to the powers that lay behind Ryan, the Concerned Relatives of Jonestown residents who kept incessant pressure on Jones and the People's Temple. What followed is history: the suicides and murders of 913 members, including Jim Jones, who probably committed suicide by a gun shot in the head, by means of cyanide-laced punch.³

The Branch Davidians

The Branch Seventh-Day Adventist group is a splinter group of the Davidian Seventh-Day Adventist Association founded by Victor T. Houteff (1885-1955). Houteff wrote a two-volume book, *The Shepherd's Rod* (the rod originating from Micah 6:9: "Hear ye the rod") in 1930 and 1932, which led to his dismissal (disfellowship) from the Seventh-Day Adventist Church for his views on reform in 1934. In 1934, he organized the Shepherd's Rod Publishing Association (later the Universal Publishing Association). In 1935, he moved to Waco, Texas, along with a few members and built anew headquarters, which he named Mount Carmel. In 1942, the name of the organization was changed to the General Association of Davidian⁴ Seventh-Day Adventists because of an alignment of ideas with the Seventh-Day Adventists on conscientious objector status during the war. After Houteff died, he was succeeded by his wife Florence. A crisis ensued because Houteff was considered to be the "Elijah" announcing the Second Coming. By 1957, Florence moved the property ten miles east of Waco. Florence firmly established the time of the new age as described in Houteff's

³ For an overview of the People's Temple and a bibliography, go to Jeffrey Hadden's "Religious Movements" web site, <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/Jonestwn.html>.

⁴ "Davidian" because Victor Houteff claimed the title "David" and his followers were known as Davidians.

teaching. She gave the date of April 22, 1959 when the Davidic kingdom in Israel would be established. People, in anticipation of the event, were urged to gather at the New Mt. Carmel, to sell their houses and businesses. Over 800 came, but for all their efforts suffered yet another Disappointment.

After Houteff's death in 1955, Ben Roden had organized another splinter group known as the Branch Davidians (based on his warning "get off the dead Rod and move into a living Branch"). Roden led the group from 1955 to 1978, succeeded by Lois Roden (1978-1985), George Roden (1985-1987) and finally by Vernon Howell (1987-1993), later known as David Koresh. After Mrs. Houteff's disastrous dating of her husband's prophecy, she and the other leaders eventually resigned in 1962, declared the Davidic Seventh-Day Adventists dissolved and sold the Mt. Carmel property. Davidians and Branch Davidians still exist today, all going back to the Victor Houteff.⁵

When Mrs. Houteff resigned in 1961 because of the failed prophecy, Ben Roden bought the property at Mt. Carmel in 1965. The Roden family remained in control until 1987, when George Roden was jailed for six months for contempt of court. Vernon Howell came on the scene in 1981, working at Mt. Carmel as a handyman, soon became a favorite of Lois Roden and actually declared to be the next prophet by Roden. A power struggle occurred Howell and Lois Roden on the one side, and George, her son, on the other. Eventually, Vernon did gain control and quickly moved to establish his unique identity. Howell began taking "spiritual wives" from among the young unmarried women in the group, which later included the married members. He introduced the "New Light" teaching in 1989, which stated that all female members of the Branch Davidians were his spiritual wives. Another purpose of the teaching was to produce a new lineage of God's children would be produced.

In 1990, Howell took the name of David Koresh, the latter name a form of Cyrus, the only non-Israelite to be given the title of "messiah." As a messiah, Koresh viewed himself as the Lamb mentioned in Rev. 5, which

⁵ A reorganized General Association of Davidian Seventh-Day Adventists was established in Los Angeles in 1961 with headquarters in Riverside. The Association moved from Riverside to Salem, South Carolina in 1970.

Koresh viewed as not Jesus but the rider of the White Horse (Rev. 6:1 and 19:7-19). The name David was to illustrate his spiritual descendancy from King David.

By 1992, Koresh assumed that the apocalypse would occur in the U.S. and not in Israel, so the group took a survivalist stance and becoming self-sufficient, including growing food, making clothing, operating an auto repair business. Among the group's activities was the purchase of guns. One member, Paul Fatta, was a gun dealer and so purchased the weapons for the group.

Allegations of misconduct were circulated among anti-cult groups, including child abuse and the illegal possession of firearms. There was nothing found incriminating relating to child abuse. Regarding illegal gun possession, a search and arrest warrant was issued on February 25, 1993 by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, resulting in a raid by 76 agents on February 28. One of the issues was the illegal conversion of semiautomatic weapons to fully automatic without paying the fees and following legal procedures for registration. So the whole issue was on paperwork, fees, and registration, not possession of weapon. Another issue was raised. According to the account of BATF agent Davy Aguilera, not only were weapons an issue but also the characterization of the group as a cult. Along with this were stories of child abuse and reports of unconventional sexual practices, none definitively proven. Besides demonizing the group as a dangerous and fanatical cult, the raid planned by the BATF was actually discovered at least 45 minutes before the raid. One day before the raid, a secretary working for BATF called the media to alert them of a weapons raid against a cult. A shoot-out resulted leading to the deaths of 4 BATF agents and to a siege of 51 days. After the raid, the FBI was brought in, leading to the attack on April 19 and the death of all 80 plus surviving members of the compound.

Just what happened at Waco is now being debated. Who shot first? Who gave the FBI authority to gas the compound and to ram the compound with tanks? Was the military involved? A reenactment of the raid was recently held but the results have not been released as yet. Recently, Janet Reno claimed that she did not give FBI permission to use military-issue

incendiary tear gas and grenades, nor did she issue orders to demolish the compound. The final answers have not been provided but one thing is certain. This was at least a misguided and inappropriate raid conducted by the BATF and the FBI. There is disturbing evidence that shows that as much as the government and Koresh's enemies disliked what was going on at Mt. Carmel, there was no justification for the initial raid and subsequent siege.⁶

Islamic fundamentalism agrees with the general description of religious fundamentalism that I described above. The one important difference between Christian and Islamic fundamentalism is the lack of a moderating influence imposed by the secular, post-Enlightenment Western society on Islam. Fundamentalism in Islam is not so much an attempt to recapture the old faith and mythology considered so prevalent in the early days of the religion. It is not the doctrinal approach that is emphasized but rather the imposition of Shari'a, Islamic law. In countries like Pakistan, Sudan, and Iran, Shari'a is imposed to restore the so-called traditional social order and society. According to Ann Elizabeth Mayer,⁷ Shari'a is interpreted not in its diversity but as a homogeneous body that is highly restrictive to both Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Many acts are absolutely forbidden, such as abortion, apostasy, fornication, alcohol, theft, leading to the use of cosmetics by women, "immodest" women's dress, women's participation in sports. In Nigeria, where Shari'a was imposed, there were mass protests by Christians against its imposition.

Non-Muslims oppose sharia because of its tough sanctions, including a ban on the sale or consumption of alcohol, amputation of hands for theft and death for convicted adulterers. (CNN on Nigeria, Nov. 2001)

⁶ The accounts of the People's Temple and the Branch Davidians are taken from my earlier CLE presentation, "Dangerous Cults, Mind Control Cults, Doomsday Cults."

⁷ "The Fundamentalist Impact on Law, Politics, and Constitutions in Iran, Pakistan, and the Sudan," *Fundamentalism and the State: Remaking Politics, Economies, and Militance*, ed. Martin E. Marty, and R. Scott Appleby (*The Fundamentalism Project*, vol. 3) 110-113.

In Egypt, there was a case known as the Saadawi Apostacy Case, in which the court had to rule whether it could forcibly divorce outspoken feminist Nawal el-Saadawi from her Muslim husband on the grounds that she is an apostate from Islam. According to Reuters,

Saadawi's writings against the oppression of Arab women by ancient traditions, including her very personal account of the pain of female circumcision, have touched a chord with many women around the world.

But in Egypt she is often depicted as an insensitive troublemaker who gained fame by confirming to Westerners their own prejudices about Arab and Islamic culture.

Some religious scholars say a Muslim found guilty of apostasy should face the death penalty, while Egypt's mix of secular and Sharia (Islamic) laws are not clear on the issue.

Enemies of Egyptian writers have sometimes turned to violence. A Muslim zealot murdered secularist Farag Foda in 1992. Novelist and Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz survived a knife attack in 1995.

It would appear from all the reports that I have read that Islamic fundamentalism is more centered upon the Islamic community and the strict adherence to the Shari'a of that community. If there is a sizeable non-Muslim community within the fundamentalist state, it is possible that it may fall under Islamic law. Such was the issue in Nigeria when Islamic law was imposed in 2001.

Islamic fundamentalism is supposed to promise a just and peaceful society according to its representatives. Returning to the book I quoted at the beginning of this paper, *Islamic Fundamentalism*, a list of benefits is cited:

1. "Equality among all people of Muslim society."
2. "Justice will prevail for all. Every member of society is equal before the Court of Justice."

3. "Religious minorities will be preserved and protected. These minorities are to prosper and to flourish within the Islamic country."
4. "Poverty will be eliminated through the systems of Zakat, charity, donations and hospitality."
5. Inflation will be reduced to a minimum through the system of Zakat and through the absence of monopoly that prevails in capitalistic societies.

We are now in a position to compare words with reality, not only with 9/11 but also with Afghanistan. How often is an ideal advanced regarding a religious or secular ideology that bears no relationship or resemblance to real world events. Although the objectives of Islamic fundamentalism are good and even inspirational, those who assume the responsibility and power to realize these objectives fail miserably due to personal ambition, lack of ability, megalomania, or, who suffer from psychopathy or come under the influence of psychopathic personalities. There are some difficult questions to be raised between the role of religion and those who suffer nihilistic and psychopathic tendencies, but one fact that is overlooked is the danger of painting any religion with a broad brush. Not all Muslims, nor all Christians for that matter, are fundamentalists or certainly all terrorists. We must recognize that the Islamic and Christian community is far from homogeneous.

One such minority within Islam, albeit an influential minority, is the Wahhabi movement that is prevalent in Saudi Arabia. Of comparatively recent origin, founded only in the eighteenth century by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahab (c.1703-1791), this fundamentalist movement asserts that all teachings and practices introduced in Islam after the 3d century of the Muslim era (*i.e.*, after c.950) are false and so must be eliminated. This includes the veneration of saints, pretension in worship, and luxurious living as the chief evils. This was al-Wahab's method of purifying Sunni Islam from the decay that ate its way into the religion. To make a long story short, it was al-Wahab who converted the Saud tribe, whose leader in turn took it upon himself to wage jihad against all other forms of Islam. After a

number of successes and failures—conquering Arabia by 1811 and suffering two separate defeats in 1818 and 1884—the Saudis regained Riyadh in 1902 and reconstituted the domain in 1932. From that time on, it became known as Saudi Arabia, a land where Wahhabism remains dominant to this day. The question that is important to many today is to what extent is the relationship between this fundamentalist sect and terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda.

If it is close, we have reason for concern. This sect does have influence among Saudis in the U.S.

“Wahhabism is identifiable only with American Muslims in Saudi religious organizations,’ said Sulayman Nyang, a professor of Islam at Howard University. ‘But it doesn't influence American Muslims linked to’ other branches of Islam. It reflects the strictest of the 4 schools of Shari’a and is actively supported by the Saudi royalty. It served a purpose by countering secular socialism, a common goal with that of the U.S., but obviously, the law of unintended consequences has taken affect.

This information comes from a report by Larry Witham (“Strict Wahhabism: A split branch or Islamic diversity?” (*Washington Times*, Oct. 30, 2001). Witham also quotes Azizah al-Hibri, a law professor at the University of Richmond, who states that there is Wahhabi influence in the U.S. although she downplays that influence. “It has a strong presence, and that makes it an issue for people who are not Wahhabi. But it’s not a split in Islam. It is part of the marketplace of ideas.”

However, Sheik Hisham Kabbani, a Sufi leader and founder of the Islamic Supreme Council of America as an alternative to Wahhabi influence, raised an important issue by stating in 1999 that 80 percent of the nation's mosques had been taken over by imams (Islamic clergy) with Wahhabilike loyalties. Estimates of the number of mosques, or prayer centers, in the United States range from 1,200 to 3,000.⁸

⁸ “Strict Wahhabism: A split branch or Islamic diversity?”

The Roots of Religious Fanaticism

To conclude, this whole subject is an extremely complex topic that will never be understood if we convert religions into stereotypes—good or bad. There is evil and violence in religion: that must be recognized as well as the recognition of the good, the uplifting, the Transcendent that gives hope and meaning to people's lives.