

Introduction

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Religious radicalism, sociologists teach us,¹ is a mode of thought and action that entails, first of all, the rejection of those surrounding cultural forms and values perceived as nonindigenous (or inauthentic) to the religious tradition. And in order to bolster this rejection, certain key components of the tradition have to be reinvigorated and intensified. While the essence of extremism is excess, the notion that “the more the better,” it is never excess for its own sake but for a higher goal: the defense of a tradition deemed to be under siege. Extremism, then, is linked inextricably to the nature of the specific religious tradition as well as to the character of the challenge. Extremists may very well differ from the rest of the believers of a religion because of the emphasis that they place on certain aspects of the tradition, even as they continue to share with the others a world view or system of meaning. They also differ from others, of course, in their perception of the danger lurking either within or without.

The study of extremism, therefore, is part and parcel of the comparative study of religion. To study the extremist forms of one religion alongside (or, if possible, in comparison with) those of another may enable us to highlight both the similarities and differences between the two.

With these aims in mind, the editors of this book embarked upon a pioneering effort in the study of the waves of religious extremism that unfurled in the Middle East over the last two decades: from the rise of Gush Emunim (GE) in Israel to the 1979 Revolution in Shi'ite Iran, from the expansion of the ultra-Orthodox (*haredi*) movements in Judaism to the spread of radical groups in Sunni Islam, culminating in the assassination of Egyptian President Sadat. The salience of the phenomenon in the Middle East is undeniable, as is its unmistakable impact on politics; for example, the Israeli settlements on the West

Bank or the Khomeini regime. But is it really the same phenomenon everywhere? Do not the various traditions involved produce movements that, although structurally quite similar, are different in certain key aspects? And, furthermore, are all extremist movements which are generated by one religion essentially the same?

Intrigued by these questions, the editors have invited six authors to join them in setting forth the gist of their expertise on the movements they know best. Almost all the essays deal with more than one type of radicalism within a given religion. The eight essays were discussed in a colloquium and then rewritten to incorporate insights gained from hearing about analogous movements in the Middle East, be they Islamic or Jewish.

We have concentrated upon Islam and Judaism, while ignoring extremist Christian movements in the Middle East (e.g., the Egyptian Coptic militancy inspired by Patriarch Shanuda, the Guardians of the Cedar among the Maronites in Lebanon) to preserve both unity of space (the Middle East region) and affinity of tradition. For, after all, Judaism and Islam share a basic affinity, having as a central goal the shaping of human behavior rather than belief; hence, the primacy of law (*Shari'ah* in Islam, *Halakhah* in Judaism) over theology, whereas the obverse is true of Christianity. It is small wonder that expanding the scope, detail, and strictness of religious law, or at least certain parts of it, is the ultimate aim of the various Jewish and Islamic movements prevalent in the contemporary Middle East. Moreover, both Judaism and Islam have strong messianic components, and the interplay between these two elements—the legal and the messianic— influences how the Islamic and Jewish religions in general and their forms of extremism in particular converge and differ.

The eight essays in this book deal with the varieties of religious extremism in the Middle East in the light of their authors' shared insights and, thus, aim to provide the reader with a map of this complicated field. It is a field rendered all the more complex by the inner-directedness of the various movements within each camp. For, since the first priority of these movements is the moral regeneration of their respective religious communities through battling the "forces of apostasy" within their communities, they have little interest in external enemies. This results in each movement being determined by the conditions specific to the country that spawned it. Only rarely are the extremists of one religion even interested in extremists of another.²

The unique, therefore, is highlighted more often than what is common (though the latter occurs too, as we have said, thanks to insights

gained by the authors from hearing about other types of extremism). The authors, especially Ravitzky, Liebman, Mayer, Kramer and myself, also endeavored to account for what unifies and differentiates forms of extremism within each of the two religious traditions. It would be presumptuous on our part to claim that a comparative framework for the analysis of Jewish and Islamic extremism can be proposed as a result of this undertaking. Still, it may be useful to sketch some outlines for such a framework as they emerge from the eight essays.

The essential impulse shared by all movements described here might be termed, following Said A. Arjomand,³ “revolutionary traditionalism;” that is, a political radicalism born out of a religious tradition, which transcends that tradition in an attempt to preserve its authenticity in the face of contemporary challenges. The tradition so defended is not a matter of desiccated bookish lore nor a marginal component (or set of long-forgotten precedents) in the history of that religion. In all the cases analyzed here, we deal with a *living* tradition, transmitted from one generation to another by scholars, mystics, or other religious activists; a tradition that is part of the *mainstream* of that religion. Sunni and Shi’ite radicalism was born of an antiaccommodative attitude toward political power that had always existed within these two strands of Islam. This attitude (as Chapters 2, 4, 6, and 8 make clear) was much more important in Shi’ite Islam, given its persecuted stance throughout history. But, even among the Sunnis, who are more accommodative on the whole, there had always been a legitimate, vigilante-type alternative that was defiantly antiaccommodative and was perceived as within the pale, an integral part of Sunni political lore. Some of this vigilante lore has been covered by historical dust (e.g., the writings of the school of Ibn Hazm in Muslim Spain), but other variants continue to this day (namely, the neo-Hanbalite school founded by Ibn Taymiyya in the fourteenth century). When in the 1960s modern Sunni extremists looked for a tradition to build upon they naturally turned to Ibn Taymiyya (see Chapter 2, pp. 49). Neither here nor in Shi’ite Islam does the phenomenon in any way represent a revival of ancient heresies, outside the pale of the legitimate religious discourse. All attempts made by the post-1952 Egyptian regime to brand the extremists as heretics inevitably failed.

Heresy likewise is definitely not the essence of Jewish extremism. The ultra-Orthodoxy of the Haredim and Neturei Karta, as Chapter 5 argues, is a successor to a long tradition of Jewish exclusionary

existence in an exilic phase of history, a tradition that until the Age of Enlightenment and secular nationalism (nay, even up to the Holocaust) was *the* major living tradition of Judaism, resigned to life outside of history (and politics) as long as God had not performed the miracle of messianic redemption. As for Gush Emunim (Chapter 7), they build upon the minor but legitimate tradition of Jewish activist messianism—exerting oneself to hasten the arrival of the Messiah and not passively waiting for him—a tradition that had played a key role in certain historical moments as late as the seventeenth century (with the mass movement of Shabtai Zvi which had deep roots in the Kabbalah). These medieval kabbalistic concepts were revamped by Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook in the 1950s to answer questions raised by the establishment of the State of Israel, in a manner no different in essence from the one used by Sunni thinker Sayyid Qutb to reinterpret Ibn Taymiyya’s political theory for the needs of the twentieth century. In a slightly different fashion (see Chapter 2, p. 50), this also is what Khomeini did with the *usuli* notion of ulama hierarchy and social responsibility. It should be stressed that the different traditions they build upon explain the divergent paths of Sunni and Shi’ite religious-political movements today. Despite all the “ecumenical” attempts at rapprochement (see Chapters 6 and 8), these paths are likely to remain as divergent as ever.

The divergence of opinion between Gush Emunim and the Haredim is not so much a matter of basic concepts—both accept the distinction between “normal,” diasporic time and miraculous, messianic time—as a matter of diagnosis. While GE believes that the messianic Age of Redemption actually dawned in 1948, the Haredim believe that they still live in a diasporic age, the establishment of the “apostate” State of Israel having changed nothing.

Their strong base in the religious tradition goes far to explain the initial appeal that all these movements have for “true believers.” This base also makes the believers’ task of transcending the living tradition while remaining true to it so complex and daunting. For, despite their deep roots in tradition, these cannot be called conservative movements, as they spring from a radical political mythology designed to galvanize people into political action aimed at delegitimizing and eventually scuttling the political or social orders.⁴ In the case of “revolutionary traditionalism,” the intellectual and affective justification for the myth—a dramatic story based on past or future events, true or fictional—is found not in a long-extinguished or brand-new set of values, but in values still cherished by at least parts of the society.

These values provide the extremists with a set of criteria for judging the present state of affairs as nefarious; nay, even irreligious, apostate. This is their most crucial function, for the primordial impulse of all these extremist movements is one of religiosity in a state of siege; that is, a defensive initiative designed to thwart the demise of either Judaism or Islam, undermined from within by “nominal (hypocritical) believers,” who are in fact Hellenized (*mityvanim*, in Hebrew), Westoxicated (*gharbzada*, in Persian). Both terms, and their plethora of synonyms, refer in Sunni, Shi'ite, and Jewish ultra-Orthodox militancy to the same phenomenon: people captivated by the ideals of the Age of Enlightenment in the broadest sense of the term (human-centered, progress-minded, scientific, rationalist, etc.). In the case of Gush Emunim, the modernity that is rejected is of a more constricted type: secular Zionism with its “defeatist propensity” for compromise over immutable values such as the sanctity of the Land of Israel, a propensity “laid bare” after the 1973 War. (GE, it should be stressed, was founded in the wake of the 1973 war and the resultant pessimism, not after the 1967 war with its messianic euphoria.)

In all four movements, however, the tools of modernity are accepted (media technology, military hardware, and so forth); rejection refers to goals and values rather than the means.

As befits religions predicated upon Divine Law, the Jewish and Islamic extremist militants deduce these goals and values from the *Halakhah* and the *Shari'ah*. And the Divine Law also provides guidelines for the construction of the future order: “a *Halakhah* state” or “a *Shari'ah* state.” These slogans, heralded by Haredim as well as by Sunnis and Shi'ites, refer to an ideal polity in which the religious code covers the public as much as the private realm, and usually according to the most rigorous exegesis, the obverse of the lenient one resorted to by modernist reformers. Here again, Gush Emunim differs from the rest: it concentrates the application of *Halakhah* on one major issue, the incorporation of the “still unredeemed” parts of *Eretz Israel* (the Land of Israel) in the territories governed de facto by the Jewish state. As Chapters 3 and 7 make clear, this characteristic is closely associated with the unique diagnosis GE believes in (see pp. 83; 165–166). The interplay between the legal and the messianic is quite evident here. For Jews, the Jewish state can be achieved only outside the historical time-frame. This is why the ultra-Orthodox who do not see the End of Days on the horizon (Chapters 2 and 5) deny the legitimacy of the State of Israel and aspire to reestablish the exilic type of closely knit, *Halakhah*-governed, autonomous community that had existed in the Eastern

European shtetl. The past they are fixated on (that is their “founding myth” in anthropological parlance) is the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the shtetl flourished, well before the onslaught of enlightenment, assimilation, and secularism. This is why they dress in the black garb so common in eighteenth-century Poland.

The Gush Emunim ultra-nationalists (see Chapter 3) legitimate the State of Israel precisely because they believe that the very existence of the state is proof that the process of Redemption has begun and that we are therefore already operating outside history. But, the ultra-nationalists continue, Israel can retain its legitimacy only if certain conditions related to messianic requirements—for example, settlement of the Land of Israel, which is the theater of Redemption—are met. Thus, the activity of these Jewish radicals is geared mainly toward furthering the process of Redemption by settling in the entire land. Their “founding myth,” accordingly, is fixated on a completely different past: the First and Second Jewish commonwealths (thirteenth to sixth centuries B.C.; second century B.C. to second century A.D.), which prefigure the Third Commonwealth now being created through the “pangs of the messianic Redemption.” It is no sheer coincidence that GE activists are dressed in an unabashedly contemporary Israeli garb, with a dash of a pioneering, military accoutrement. The skullcap and ostentatiously worn prayer shawl are the sole vestmental signs of their messianic obsessions. They speak modern Hebrew while the Haredim prefer Yiddish, the day-to-day language of the shtetl (Hebrew being the sacred language of ritual and Law). Gush Emunim followers choose fancy biblical names for their offspring and settlements; the Haredim opt for common “diasporic” ones.

The interplay between messianism, legal ideals, and myths of the past is operating along other lines in extremist Islam. The messianic element is tightly held in abeyance in almost all Sunni groups, the only exception being the *Takfir wa-Hijra* Sunni sect in 1977 Egypt, which declared its leader (who was later executed) as *Mahdi* (Messiah and caliph). But, unlike the ultra-nationalist Gush Emunim, this sect was antinomian in that it also rejected most of the *Shari‘a* as evil, because its evolution throughout Islamic history always had been contaminated by collusion with the powers that be. The exception proves the rule: the messianic element on the whole is quite irrelevant to the Sunni discourse on delegitimation. Sunni extremists hold that the present order must be toppled in “normal” (nonmessianic) historical time and a new legitimate order established without awaiting the Messiah (or *Mahdi*).

As explained in Chapter 2, this perception on the whole is true for Shi'ite extremists as well, but only on the intellectual level. On the affective level, whereas Sunnis are nonmessianic, the Shi'ites retain a powerful eschatological undercurrent that is especially prominent in the popular manifestations of the Karbala myth, an ancient vehicle for Shi'ite sensibility of persecution and victimization, which was transformed in this century into a pivotal means for articulating revolutionary aspirations.⁵ Nevertheless the *Shari'ca* myth, with its clearcut orientation toward the past, definitely reigns supreme even among Shi'ites, especially as the interpreters of the Divine Law, the *ulama*, lead the Shi'ite extremists and, in fact, constitute the revolutionary cadre (see Chapters 2 and 4).

It follows, then, that the Sunni, Shi'ite, and Jewish ultra-Orthodox myths are essentially past-oriented, in that they focus upon eras in which the Divine Law was effectively applied in "normal" historical time: the seventh century for Muslims and the seventeenth-eighteenth-century shtetl for the Jews. The ultra-nationalist Jewish myth is oriented toward both the past (the two Jewish commonwealths) and the future of the Jewish state, insofar as it applies the law (*Halakhah*) in accordance with tradition.

The functions of political myths are not merely cognitive and hermeneutic—interpreting past, present, and future and thereby defining group identity—but also behavioral; in other words, myths are supposed to lead to action. But as the eight case studies presented in this book show, whether that action will be directed toward drawing away from the corrupt present order into a state of internal or physical exile or toward taking the initiative to change the present state of affairs by whatever means are at hand—including violence—depends on circumstances. Still, here again, there is a broad common denominator between Jewish ultra-nationalists, most Sunni, and all Shi'ite radicals—all three rely on deliberate intervention in the sociopolitical arena to bring about change in the "apostate" rulers and civil society of their own camp and, if necessary, in foreign powers as well. Ultra-Orthodox Jews, on the other hand, defer all structural change to messianic times, and the few Sunni sects (such as the Samawiyya in Egypt) that despair of ever being able to defy the all-powerful modern nation-state retire into a self-imposed seclusion designed to save their own souls even if they cannot save the "apostate," hostile and alien environment in which they are fated to live. But, whether they choose withdrawal or activism, both Jewish and Islamic extremists endeavor to preserve their own versions of the tradition they cherish by

constructing “counter-societies”⁶ predicated upon values and patterns of behavior alien and inimical to their respective civil societies. These counter-societies serve two purposes. They are designed to serve as models for a future society based on the rigorous application of either *Shari‘a* or *Halakhah*. And, in the case of the more “interventionist”-minded extremists, they also view themselves as potential tools for subverting and toppling the present order.

This accounts for the sustained effort by the Haredim to maintain their distance from the “Zionist apostate state,” relying on funding from sympathizers in the Diaspora in order to maintain their own network of services; especially education, health, and welfare but also in internal policing, using services of the accursed state only in extremis (e.g., for external security). In like fashion, the Sunni extremists in Egypt, Tunisia, and Sudan, chastened by the recent failure of their revolutionary attempts, today rely more and more on developing near their mosques, outpatient clinics and educational establishments (including preschools, a novelty in Arab lands). Through these institutions, as well as through Islamic banks where usury is prohibited, they hope to minimize their followers’ contact with the state and prove that Islamic ideals of social justice and moral probity can be implemented in a modern setting.

The toppling of the present order remains the goal—however remote and elusive—of all the extremists surveyed in this volume. For the interventionist-minded this involves the possibility of active martyrdom, while passive martyrdom is all that can be envisaged for those who practice withdrawal, be they Sunnis or ultra-Orthodox Jews. The underlying motivation for both modes of behavior is an alienation that, although it is to some extent intellectual, is mainly emotional. It is this alienation that extremists not only aspire to but have generally succeeded in disseminating among both their own hard core followers and their ever-expanding periphery. That is how they come to exercise effective cultural hegemony in their respective societies. The spread of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, the growing impact of religious law in Israel (notably in personal status, leisure, and the closing down of state economic enterprises on Shabbat) are prominent examples in the Jewish sphere. Among Muslims, not only is the Iranian regime still in power, despite the setback in the war with Iraq, but Sunni extremists (some of them pro-Khomeini—see Chapter 6) launched the Intifada (uprising) in Gaza and the West Bank and continue to play a prominent role in it. Despite the tarnished image of Iran’s revolutionary message (see Chapter 8), Shi‘ite extremist groups, notably

Hizballah, are very active in Lebanon.⁷ The Sunni extremists are at the forefront of most social protest movements (in Tunisia in summer and fall 1987; in Algeria in October 1988). They have forced even secularist regimes like the Ba^cth in Syria, to make *Shari'a* the major source of all legislation. They brought about the application of the *Shari'a* by the state in Sudan (under Numeiri) and in Pakistan (under Zia ul-Haqq). In Egypt, Morocco, and the Arab Gulf emirates they had an impact on the school curriculum and television and radio programs as well as on public mores (women's dress, men's beards, high fertility among educated women, lower median age at marriage for both genders, etc.). It is indeed, above all, in setting the terms and priorities for debate in public affairs in Middle Eastern societies, rather than in the distant possibility of their seizing power, that all these Jewish and Islamic extremist groups play an important role in the future of this part of the world.