

Book Review: Religious Fundamentalism in the Contemporary World: Critical Social and Political Issues

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Saha, Santosh C., ed. *Religious Fundamentalism in the Contemporary World: Critical Social and Political Issues*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2004. 340 pp. \$75.00 (cloth).

This collection represents a pluralist approach to religious fundamentalism. No definitional order is imposed and a variety of theories are expounded. All the authors are engaged analytically in the attempt to identify and to comprehend the many faces of fundamentalist ideology in our contemporary world. There are ten chapters by authors representing a broad range of academic disciplines.

Those chapters focusing on methodological pursuit of religious fundamentalism include treatments of (1) the "Global Information Order" [ch. 1] as a transnational forum outside the control of states and corporations that is being exploited by fundamentalist groups, (2) the "nature of religious markets" [ch. 2] in a time when the "sacred canopy" of religion as social consensus is no longer a plausible reality for any society, and (3) the continuum along which both fundamentalism and pluralism are situated [ch. 3] in strong or weak versions determined by the interpretive handling of the "Collection" of writings held as sacred by the society. This last-mentioned study illustrates its points through an examination of the political role of religion in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. In each of the three instances, the cultural complexity and social particulars of the society are judged as too diverse for a fundamentalist ideology to be functionally dominant. In Singapore, a city-state dominated by ethnic Chinese, a compulsory religious education curriculum called "Religious Knowledge" that included pluralist choices foundered because of "student disinterest in Confucianism" which was the choice favored by the government. Abandoning the "Religious Knowledge" project, the government adopted a set of principles "intended to enshrine an 'Asian' set of values" (p. 62). In Indonesia, "the Islam of a large proportion of the population is too mixed up with other local religious beliefs and practices to allow a purist version of Islam to be enforced nationwide" (p. 65). The government has employed a "strategic ideological compromise" known as *pancasila*, five principles that were included in the Indonesian constitution and that "contain both religious and secular ideas" (p. 64). In Malaysia, with 61 percent ethnic Malay Muslims and 34 percent ethnic Chinese and Indians, "almost none of whom are Muslims" (p. 67), the government "must try to find pluralist accommo-

datations with its large non-Muslim populations, which greatly reduces the prospect of implementing a particularist national ideology" (p. 67).

A fourth chapter grouped with the methodological approaches claims that, with the collapse of communist ideologies in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, "religions quickly moved to the center of public discourse" (p. 74), providing continuity to cultural identities. At first, this discourse was pluralist and predominantly lay discourse. Later, clerical discourse came to the fore with a particularist slant (p. 76). The author claims that "a straightforward, ostensible particularism, shown by the Eastern European religions, turns out to be in fact the only tactic for them to retain a substantial symbolic power in the era of global culture" (p. 85).

The remaining six chapters are identified as treating regional fundamentalisms, though chapters on political Islam and the Islamophobia of the Western media are not so much regional as thematic. The regional chapters include two addressing Hindu fundamentalism in India, one focusing on the Islamization of Pakistan, and one recounting the emergence of the Shas party in Israel.

Hindu revivalist politics [ch. 6] is obsessed with establishing Hindu religious communalism as the basis for national identity in India. It assumes the homogeneity of a Hindu community in the form of the brahmanical Hinduism of the Vedas and it freely revises history into an Aryan golden age followed by a Muslim age of moral decline (p. 144). It advocates the compulsory teaching of Sanskrit, the inclusion of astrology in university curricula, and observance of traditions like *sati*, the self-immolation of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre. The author, who is also the editor of the volume, points out weaknesses in the ideology of the Hindu revivalists. Not only was the Hindu past always quite diverse and the history of India largely pluralist, but Saha claims that at the core of this revivalist movement "lay a secular ideology of the state and a modern approach to party politics" (p. 159). The revivalists, Saha asserts, created divisiveness, "but the majority of Hindus were in favor of a secular state because modernity would likely bring efficiency and material prosperity without jeopardizing Hindu norms and valued traditions" (p. 160).

Ideology supplants historiography according to a study subtitled, "The Islamization of Pakistani Social Studies Textbooks" [ch. 10]. History becomes a mere tool for creating heroes and villains suitable for teaching a Pakistani nation-

alism committed to the “Two-Nation Theory” which holds that “Hindus and Muslims in South Asia had always constituted distinct and irreconcilably separate communities” (p. 278). The rich cultural variety of peoples constituting Pakistan has been effaced by Islamization generated by the central government. “Islam has been the tool and Panjabi hegemony has been the rule” (p. 280). The Islamization of social science textbooks began in 1972 and reached full stride under General Zia ul-Haq, whose textbooks live on long after his assassination in 1988 (p. 290). “Denial and erasure are the primary tools of historiography as it is officially practiced in Pakistan” (p. 287).

Relatively short chapters on the Shas party in Israel [ch. 9] and the Bharatiya Janata Party in India [ch. 8] tell surprisingly similar stories. These parties are very pragmatic about wielding what power they can achieve, and they are both willing to manipulate political matters by use of religiously charged issues. Seeking political advantage, the BJP linked itself to the questionable tradition of Ayodhya as the birthplace of Rama which led to the razing of Babar’s mosque in Ayodhya by a mob on 6 December 1992 (p. 213). From its initial electoral foray in 1984, the Shas party has charted a political course that left its natural ally, Likud, in the lurch while allying with its original enemy, Labor, in the quest for favorable treatment toward its Sephardi constituents. The author claims that “both Labor and Likud failed to reach the voters through grass roots social and economic activities” whereas the Shas party concentrated on delivering the goods for the Sephardi cause (p. 256).

The chapter on political Islam [ch. 5] posits two phases of Islamist discourse. The first phase is identified as motivational and it consists of stereotypical denunciation of the immoral values of the West and of utopian claims about Islam as the answer to all political questions. The necessary second phase is analytical and directed toward pragmatic engagement with practical realities in order to implement desired political and economic changes (pp. 95–96). The author claims that the Ayatollah Khomeini is “the quintessential example of this (first) phase of Islamism” (p. 96), and that the current president of Iran, Mohammad Khatami, who “developed a very sophisticated worldview focusing on the need for progress in the Muslim world” (p. 95), represents the essence of the second phase of Islamist discourse. The author asserts that, in Khatami’s case, “both the essentialized ‘West’ and ‘Islam’ are viewed critically” (p. 106).

The chapter on “Islamophobia in the Western Media” [ch. 7] is the most volatile piece in this collection. Western phobia about Islam is cited as far back as Voltaire’s ignorant rant in a play he wrote about Muhammad. Samuel Huntington’s identification of Islam as the new “other” in his 1993 work, *The Clash of Civilizations*, is panned for its over-reliance on works by Bernard Lewis that employ simplistic reductions of Islam and point to fanatic Islamists as the real Muslims (p. 175). The co-authors conclude that “it is the scholarship of oversimplification that informs the West about Islam” (p. 176). The authors point out that there are no Jewish terrorists or Christian terrorists for the Western media—“only Muslims are ‘terrorists’” (p. 178). They note that “armed Zionists in the Hagannah, Irgun, and Stern Gang, fighting often ferociously for the independent state of Israel, were referred to not as Jewish terrorists but as patriots, nationalists, commandos, guerrillas, the Jewish underground, and freedom fighters” (p. 177). They further note that Serbs attacking Muslims in Bosnia were called “nationalists,” never “Christian terrorists” (p. 177).

The authors go on to present an instructive look at the media’s handling of the Rushdie controversy, concluding that his work was culturally treasonous and well outside the bounds of what the West permits to be published within its own cultural territory (p. 194). The authors contrast the coddling of Rushdie by the Western media to the treatment of Irish singer Sinead O’Connor when she tore up a photograph of the pope on *Saturday Night Live* in 1992. “No mention was ever made of O’Connor’s right to free speech while a mob cheered on a steamroller as it crushed hundreds of O’Connor CDs—a picture analogous to the burning of Rushdie’s books by a handful of Muslims in different parts of the world” (p. 194). The authors are equally lively in their exposé of Islamophobia in the media’s role in the Gulf War and in the War on Terror.

While there are nuggets of interest to be found in each of the ten chapters, the most valuable presentations are Saha’s chapter on Hindu revivalists and Yvette Claire Rosser’s chapter on Islamization of Pakistani ideology by way of textbooks. These authors both offer thorough knowledge about the leading figures, strategic shifts, and pivotal developments in the recent history of the two leading fundamentalisms of South Asia, and they provide sound, incisive critiques of these respective movements in India and Pakistan. The secular and pluralist traditions of India afford the reader some optimism, but the reader can only dread the future of Pakistan as a “failed state.”