



Fundamentals of Fundamentalism

by Shekhar Deshpande

There is a sense of exhaustion in public discourse in the United States. With its multi-billion dollar media enterprise and all the claims of democratic life, the public discourse, a way of conducting conversation about issues of concern, is shamefully thin and when it exists, it is pathologically superficial, abject and irrelevant.

Whenever an issue comes to the public stage, it experiences an overplay. From pundits to populists, everyone indulges in it, often for the sake of superficial engagement, and quite soon, the issue disappears from the public discourse. Whether it is political correctness, the O. J. Simpson trial, or Hugh Grant's indiscretions, everything disappears soon after it has tested the nerves of the public which is barely trying to keep attention between the commercials. Media forms like television and radio talk shows and roundtable ramblings that go on Sunday mornings or at other self-injected times, only help to put the issues on the back stage. Sometimes, Andy Warhol's blessed 15 minutes appear to be eternity for these short

lived public discussions.

There is one exception. That is the so-called menace of Islam. Since the disappearance of the old style Soviet dominance and the numerous "velvet" revolutions that ushered in "paradise" in Eastern and South Central Europe, Islam, as we well know now, has become a ready-made villain of American psyche. One would think it would disappear soon, or be overtaken by Madonna's baby-dreams. But no. That would indicate a pathology too normal and too predictable for our media age.

In the editorial sections of two newspapers in this area, *The New*

York Times (Sunday, January 21, 1996) and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Sunday, January 28, 1996), the central theme of the "menace of Islam" is played out. The telepathic journalism is not just amusing; *The Philadelphia Inquirer* piece is first in a series of articles couched under the theme: "Islam Rising: At Europe's Doorstep."

The return to the favorite theme could mean that Islam is really a threat and that the alertness of these journalistic endeavors is quite commendable. But take a closer look at the articles and there is nothing to warn us that Islam is really a threat, or that it could be threat. Both

pieces, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* article by a compassionate and sensible journalist, are simply a rehash, in the style of artificial objectivity — saying things to please both sides — of things we have known in the past.

The New York Times article, written by Elaine Sciolino, begins with the observation that Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman "played the role perfectly" after his life sentence was announced in the court nearly two weeks ago. The impending threat of Islam is more a matter of perception and when you balance the quotes in favor



"Tonight we will attempt to answer three metaphysical questions: 1. How did the universe come to be? 2. What is the meaning of life? and 3. What the hell are cats all about?"

ON THE OTHER HAND
IF THE WORLD WERE
PERFECT WHERE
WOULD I FIT IN?



an overt concern that Islam is a threat because it is now too close to Europe. Consider that for a moment. If and when it was a threat far away, it wasn't much of a threat. And, now that Europe is threatened by Islam (some 15 million Muslims in Europe), it is an entirely undesirable threat.

"Despite its proximity to Europe, cosmopolitan Istanbul truly feels a continent away," says Alan Sipress in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. This experience of distance is quite an existential dilemma as women in Turkey wear

boxy overcoats and head scarves. The iconography of the West is such a powerful embodiment of its continuity, that the Westerners wish to homogenize the world, indeed gloss over any diversity by a common iconography. Hence we have Disneyworld enterprises and MacDonald's sprouting all around the world. Nothing will feel a continent away.

Sipress's article does deserve some merit for its in-depth interviews and its mapping of the rise of local fundamentalism in several countries. He also provides a valid account of some of the "fundamentalist" maligned groups (such as Hamas and Hezbollah), about their faith in democratic process and their work in social awareness. It is an impressive piece of journalism, but without the editorial maturity or even political sensitivity toward its central subject: the threat of Islam to the West.

Why would we turn to Islam and perceive it as a threat? Why would we ignore the cautious and dignified pleas by Islamic thinkers

not to homogenize and demonize Islam? Why do we equate Islam with anything politically antagonistic? And, why don't we consider Islam and fundamentalism as two different, sometimes related problems, which are not any different from our problems with different labels and characterizations?

The complicity of the West in guarding values of human dignity is notorious. Those blinded by their own follies don't see it, yet. The West has allowed the slaughter of Muslims in Chechnya and Bosnia in full glare of its cameras. If Islam was such a global threat and the West had a universal compassion for human dignity, these two conflicts should have either flared up or controlled by the intervention of Islam or the West. Nothing happened. The Muslims, who are perceived as such a global threat, especially so close to Europe, were raped, tortured and killed by thousands, if not millions over the past three years. Which global threat would be expected to take that humiliation and not complain?

of and against it, it turns out that we can live with Islam as such, but the "fundamentalism" is the real problem. This can allow us to explain away the accord between the Palestinians and the Israelis. As Edward Said has been arguing for a while (especially in a collection of his articles on the peace accord, now published as a book *Peace and Its Discontents* by Pantheon), the peace maneuvers say more about the efficiency of the total domination over Palestinian lives and less about a possibility of respectful peace with anyone, even if we consider Palestinians as part of that thing called Islam.

The "deepening conflict" between the "aggressive Islam" and the "defensive West" is aggravating political situations in many countries which have been Western allies, argues this article. These include Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. With a clean sweep of political complexity in these countries, brought about not simply by the trouble caused by the indigenous fundamentalist parties, the Western journalist washes away the responsibility of presenting a balanced picture. Instead, the gross generalizations and a whiny account of how something called "fundamentalism" is on the rise (without any substantial example of what that exactly is) are slapped together merely to provide a motor force to the redundant narrative.

What is Islam, anyway? And what is fundamentalist Islam? Is any political opposition to the West's free market system and to Western political domination to be perceived as fueled by fundamentalism of any kind? And, if opposition happens to be Islamic, is it wrong? Is Islamic opposition necessarily fundamentalist?

The continuity between these telepathic articles is provided by