

## Book Review

### *Fundamentalism, Revivalists, and Violence in South Asia*

Edited by James Warner Bjorkman

Riverdale Company, Riverdale, MD 1988, 193 pp.

The volume under review is essentially a collection of papers presented at a two-day workshop on the changing division of labor in South Asia held at the University of Wisconsin in 1984 at which the two major themes were the emerging role of women; and the "increasingly violent role of religion."<sup>1</sup> The latter theme became the subject of this book.

Concerning this subject, the editor, Dr. Bjorkman, writes:

"If, then, you have been perplexed about the chronic religious violence in contemporary South Asian states, you need search no further for relief. The following chapters examine, explore, and explain aspects of religious fundamentalism, self-righteous revivalists, and murderous mayhem among the four major faiths of South Asia."<sup>2</sup>

Then, evincing his concern for the human situation in the area, and his own obviously painful experiences there, Dr. Bjorkman continues:

". . . one may justifiably conclude that a no-win situation characterizes the South Asian mosaic. Contemporary reality is depressing, if not gruesome; the daily documentation of death and destruction, cruelty and carnage, is sufficient evidence thereof."<sup>3</sup>

Candidly assessing the objective of his work, Dr. Bjorkman states:

"The aim of this book is to uncover some of the socio-political truths disguised by the frequent invocation of "fundamentalist" and "revivalist" claims in contemporary South Asian religions."<sup>4</sup>

And in order to prepare the reader for what lies ahead, the learned editor adds:

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<sup>1</sup>Bjorkman, *Fundamentalism Revivalists and Violence in South Asia*, Preface v.

<sup>2</sup>Op. cit., Preface, v.

<sup>3</sup>Op. cit., Preface, v.

<sup>4</sup>Op. cit., Preface, vi.

“One can come away from this volume wringing one’s hands in despair at the utter hopelessness of human foibles. Or one can catch glimpses of truth and possible points of leverage by which the certain slide into anarchy might be arrested and even reversed. Sigmund Freud once wrote: ‘The truths contained in religious doctrines are after all so distorted and systematically disguised that the mass of mankind cannot recognize them as truth (Freud 1928:78).’”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, before moving on to even the editor’s introductory chapter, the interested reader, in the sense of his or her faith or allegiance to one or the other of the four major religions of South Asia, will begin to feel queasy at the prospect of what lies ahead. Many such, I suspect, will put the volume down and start wringing their own hands at the utter hopelessness of human foibles in the guise of Western academic treatments of Eastern affairs of the spirit. But no, gentle reader, dismay not; the volume is not your average witch hunt. On the contrary, as food for thought it is immediately engaging, and as an opportunity for self-examination it is timely, thought-provoking, and welcome. Unfortunately, however, it does fall somewhat short of its target.

While Dr. Bjorkman’s discussion of fundamentalism would seem to suggest that he regards fundamentalists as a breed apart who “can and do ignore democracy and the rule of law,” who “require an enemy,” who “regard violence as an important vehicle,” who “condemn moderation as a crime,” and who “plow fertile ground and sow the dragonteeth of future violence,” his discussion of the phenomena in the South Asian context is an informed one. Indeed, anyone who has witnessed the insane carnage wrought by mob violence in the name of one creed or another can be forgiven for thinking of the perpetrators as a different species. The point that needs not to be lost sight of, however, is that fundamentalism does not necessarily lead to violence; or, to rephrase the statement somewhat, that violence is not an essential element of fundamentalism.

Nonetheless, fundamentalist passions may surely be easier to whip into a frenzy. And this is the political reality in South Asia that has led to the exploitation of religion for the benefit of the privileged few, the ruling cliques, the landed feudals, the military, the clergy or self-appointed defenders of the true faith. So, while these leaders have managed to obscure for the masses the truth behind their own “fundamentalism” they have also managed to obscure the true essence of that fundamentalism; so that those who seek to explain it look first to the crimes committed in its name, thus overlooking the true nature of the phenomena loosely known as “fundamentalism”.

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<sup>5</sup>Op. cit., Preface, vi.

In *Fundamentalism, Revivalists, and Violence in South Asia*, the editor, Dr. Bjorkman has included essays, in addition to his own introductory piece, by four Western scholars, and by four Eastern scholars, one each from the faiths discussed.

In *Fundamentalism and Revivalism in South Asia* by Dr. Robert E. Frykenberg, the reader will find a scholarly and fascinating epistemological study of the origins of the term, fundamentalism, and its subsequent usage in its particular Protestant Evangelist context. Later in his essay Dr. Frykenberg adds some important dimensions to the studies of several of the other essayists as well, shedding light on historical circumstances, and raising issues as topical as whether the close identification of the state in Pakistan with fundamental religion may prove counterproductive.

But, to return to Dr. Frykenberg's discussion of the term fundamentalism, the question for the readership of this journal to consider concerns the term "fundamentalist" that many Muslims object to as misleading and inadequate to describe what is happening throughout the Ummah today. Frykenberg points out that quite often, and particularly in the media, ideological kinds of concepts are confused with institutional kinds of concepts. By way of example, an institutional term like "radical" is ideologically neutral, and not necessarily antithetical to the term "conservative." Frykenberg writes:

"Therefore, when we say that revivalist movements have been radical in a particular way, we often mean that such movements have not only been "anti-conservative" but that they have also been radical in a special direction. That is, they have been "radical in reverse" or "reactionary". They have sought to "recreate" something which once was thought to be but which, in actuality, never existed. Moreover, if "romantic" (as distinct from but very similar to "utopian"), they have actually sought for something which can never be, something chimeric from a golden age. To be reactionary, in other words, is to be radical backwards. Such radicalism is often confused with conservatism. Going backwards to "the roots;" backwards to the rediscovery of what once was; backwards to the recapturing or to the trying to recapture past glory; backwards to presence the sense of what was there before what looks dangerous appeared; backwards to the time before some present sense of danger or threats to security came into existence; that is fundamentalism. That is what "Going back to Fundamentals!!" means. It can be, and usually is, extremely radical (or reactionary, as the case may be)."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Op. cit., *Fundamentalism and Revivalism in South Asia*, R. E. Frykenberg, p. 24-25.

Essentially, then, what needs to be discriminated between are elements of analysis and approach that are radical and revivalist, and between those which are restorist. Indeed, in the context of the teachings of Islam about reform, what is described as fundamentalism is actually the taking of steps forward, or development in response to contemporary social reality. So, the efforts of Muslim intellectuals and other modernizers represent more precisely the bringing forward of what remains vital and relevant, rather than "Going back to Fundamentals"; and if fundamentals are involved in the process, it is in the sense of their being brought forward as constants in the universal message to mankind.

But then, what's in a name? Try Mumtaz Ahmad's labels, from his paper, *Islamic Revival in Pakistan*. For example, Pakistan's early parliamentary regime subscribed to "Liberal-modernist Islam", Ayub Khan to "Developmentalist Islam", Yahya Khan to "Nationalist Islam"!<sup>7</sup>, Z. A. Bhutto to "socialist-populist Islam", and Zia to "Revivalist-fundamentalist Islam".<sup>7</sup> What does he say about Ms. Bhutto's brand of Islam? It's a pity that the book was delayed in the press for over a year. Otherwise we might have read of Benazir's benign neglect as "Laissez-faire-feminist Islam".

Otherwise, Dr. Ahmad's essay offers little but history. Not that in itself is not engaging; but one would have hoped that the Muslim contribution to this volume could have contained some attempt, at least, to deal with the socio-religious phenomena per se, particularly in view of the worldwide notoriety of "Islamic Fundamentalism". In this context, a discussion of the issue of violence becomes all the more essential.

Moreover, Dr. Ahmad's suggestions that the defeat of Pakistan's military forces in the 1971 war somehow acted as a propellant for Islam is specious at best. For one thing, the savagery of the Pakistan Army in the months preceding the formal "war" was anything but an expression of Islamic sensibilities on the part of all those involved, from the lowest of foot-soldiers to the highest levels of command. Secondly, several years passed before Islam reckoned in any but the most obvious sort of public considerations. It was only when Z. A. Bhutto had his back to the political wall that the state made any "Islamic" initiatives of its own, so to speak.

In any case, students of the South Asian scene will certainly appreciate Dr. K. M. DeSilva's article entitled. "Buddhist Revivalism, Nationalism, and Politics in Modern Sri Lanka." As an educationist, and a two year resident of Sri Lanka, I have long been fascinated with the Sri Lankan literacy rate, Dr. DeSilva's essay nicely chronicles the cultural and religious background for the Sri Lankan Buddhist preoccupation with the issue of education; and one is immediately aware of the circumstances under which the famous Egyp-

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<sup>7</sup>Op. cit., p. 92-93.

tian exile, "Urabi Pasha, joined hands with the local Muslim elite to establish an educational society and then the at-first-exclusively Muslim Zahra College in Colombo.

Likewise, while Dr. DeSilva tells us that Buddhist Fundamentalism is a contradiction in terms, his discussion of fundamentalism, though brief, is a rewarding one for the reader.

The other two essays by South Asians have substantively less to offer the reader than Dr. DeSilva's meticulous paper; but the material in each is handled well. Kuldeep Mathur, in *Rural Violence in South Asia: Straws in the Wind*, is essentially concerned with rural violence, taking Bihar as a case in point, as a consequence of socio-economic development in rural areas of India. Religion in his analysis figures only marginally, and fundamentalism is no where mentioned. The paper by Surit Maningh. *The Political Uses of Religious Identity in South Asia*, explores the "present day causes and patterns in the political uses of religious identity", and manages to spin off a great deal of potentially rewarding subjects for further study. One might disagree with the notion that "in the many conflicts that raged across the land between the raids of Muhammad of Ghur at the end of the twelfth century and the defeat of the Mughal-Marhata armies by Ahmad Shah Abdali in 1761, neither allies nor enemies were drawn along religious lines."<sup>8</sup> Yet certainly, the essay is rich in the material from which it draws, and touches upon a number of issues of obvious relevance and importance to those who would have a better understanding of the subcontinent.

All in all, while one may criticize this volume for often straying from the subject of fundamentalism and violence, such is the nature of seminars and, after all, the book was compiled from papers read at a seminar on a related but nonetheless altogether different subject. Under the circumstances, then, the editor has done us a great service in gathering the material he has. One would hope that his efforts will result in the stimulation of more research on the subject, and more understanding both among and between the communities involved in the day to day living of this often painfully misunderstood phenomena.

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<sup>8</sup>Op. cit., p. 175.