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# Jerusalem in radical Jewish and Muslim fundamentalisms

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## Introduction

The following two articles deal with attitudes towards Jerusalem of radical fundamentalism in Jewish and Muslim movements. Radical fundamentalist movements exhibit a number of characteristic 'family resemblances' across the religious divides which help us understand their specific actions and responses in their local contexts. There are various lists of such characteristics, but in the context of this study a few relevant ones need to be highlighted:

1. Radical fundamentalists use doctrine selectively. Selected traditional doctrines are picked out and used as ideological weapons against a hostile world. These are prioritized, made central to the faith, and taken to their logical extreme.
2. Extremism and radicalism are seen as a litmus test, separating true believers from unbelievers. Fundamentalists celebrate their distinctiveness, and consciously exhibit scandalous behaviour so as to shock outsiders and strengthen their own identity.
3. These movements require a worthy enemy who is identified, named, exposed and demonised. Confrontation, opposition and conflict are seen as essential. A cosmic evil enemy helps in boundary setting and in separation for purity and holiness, as the group identifies itself in total opposition to the enemy. Enemies are God's opponents and Satan's followers, who must be identified and exposed.
4. They exhibit an obsession with purity, and a dread of pollution, which includes a great concern for Holy Places. Ritual violence restores purity. Enemies that defile the holy shrines must be expelled and destroyed. A defiled and broken world needs healing and restoration through a purging violence.
5. They are characterised by utopianism, messianism, millenarianism and apocalyptic. Many fundamentalists see themselves as active participants in the dramatic convulsions of the last days, hastening the return of the Messiah or the Mahdi, and thus the inauguration of God's kingdom. Time is short, and the urgency to prepare for the end fuels their zeal and militancy. This activity gives meaning and purpose to their lives. History is seen as a staged process, inexorably moving to a climactic final act predetermined by God.

## The shift to millenarian apocalyptic

Traditional piety was willing to wait patiently for God to bring about the End in his time, and human interference in God's timekeeping was seen as sacrilege. However, cataclysmic events and deep crises can shift a passive millenarianism into an activist apocalyptic mode. There has been such a clear shift in both Judaism and Islam, and especially in their fundamentalist versions, from the traditional pietistic acceptance of God's will as revealed in the political contexts and events of the age, to a millenarian, messianic and apocalyptic activism.<sup>1</sup> Eschatology and millenarianism now play an important part in the worldview of most radical fundamentalist groups, encouraging separatism and justifying conspiracy theories and violent activism as they see themselves engaged in the final battle at the end of time.<sup>2</sup>

## Sacred space

Holy places are symbols, sanctified as representations both of the mythological founding time of religion and of a future and perfect world. They symbolise God's presence among his people, and God's awesome holiness. They inspire awe and worship, serving as a link to the divine windows into heaven, but they also tend to focus and concentrate passions. Coupled to the awe of the sacred place is the fear of its defilement by impure enemies. When the sacred is polluted then Satan's emissaries must be expelled in an act of ritual purification and sacrifice that will heal and restore. As the sacred symbol is confused with the reality behind it, the control, purification and defence of holy places become the main motivating forces for conflict.

## Violence as a necessary tool

Violence is well attested in the history of apocalyptic movements around the world. Millennial activists long to shatter the contemporary corrupt world order so as to usher in the perfect new world order. They view violent cataclysms as flashpoints for initiating the final eschatological battle, and accelerating the coming of the Kingdom. This conviction underlies the potential for violence

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- 1 A clear case of such a drastic shift occurred in the Shi'a world as evidenced by the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. Millennial expectations of the return of the Hidden Imam had been kept strictly within the realm of theological theory for centuries. It was only in the 1960s and 1970s that Shi'a activism developed, declaring that human activism was necessary for preparing the way for the Mahdi's return. See Amatzia Baram, 'Two Roads to Revolutionary Shi'ite Fundamentalism in Iraq', in Marty and Appleby (eds.), *Accounting for Fundamentalisms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 531-90.
  - 2 David Zeidan, 'A Comparative Study of Selected Themes in Christian and Islamic Fundamentalist Discourses', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 30:1 (May 2003), 70.

inherent in messianic movements, and makes terror, the violation of accepted conventions regarding the use of violence, seductive to such groups.

### **The significance of Jerusalem**

Messianic fundamentalists select, systematise and reinterpret source text passages on Jerusalem, prioritising and sharpening their significance. They endow them with a far greater weighting than does traditional religion, and try to suppress older and competing interpretations. They draw radical and violent new conclusions from the texts, turning the control of Jerusalem into a necessary condition for divine blessing and political success.

Jerusalem and the Temple Mount have always been central to both Judaism and Islam. They are important in piety, devotion and mysticism, but are also the geophysical centre of all end-times scenarios for both religions. What happens here is crucial as it impacts the deepest recesses of the religious subconscious of both camps. Fundamentalists infused with a millennial vision have recently focused even more on Jerusalem as a main identity marker of their faith. Jerusalem remains a potential flash point for a full scale world war, needing but the rash acts of a few zealots attempting to hasten the End to set it off.<sup>3</sup>

### **The convergence of secular national and religious interests in Jerusalem**

For both Israeli and Palestinian national movements, Jerusalem was and remains the main unifying symbol appealing to the emotions and loyalties of the vast majority of their constituencies. Both claim Jerusalem as the eternal capital of their independent states. In Jerusalem religious and nationalist interests converge, and magnify each other in a symbiotic vicious circle, making any compromise with the other side problematic.

### **Abstract**

There are common features shared by Jewish and Islamic fundamentalists, including an emphasis on holy sites, especially Jerusalem, and the incorporation of violence into an apocalyptic world view.

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<sup>3</sup> Gershom Goldenberg, *The End of Days: Fundamentalism and the Struggle for the Temple Mount* (New York, OUP, 2000), v-ix, 15.