“Revisiting Fanaticism in the Context of Wasatiyyah”

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Research Questions

• What exactly is fanaticism and what are some of the reasons for its occurrence?
• If all the world's great religions preach peace and the preservation of life, why do fanatics kill and maim in the name of their religion?
• How did this term come to be so closely associated with Islam rather than other major world religions, and most particularly in the last three decades?
• Is this connection justified academically or otherwise?
• What have contemporary and classical Muslim scholars written about this and other related terms?
Research Objectives

This paper will explore the following:

(1): Compare and contrast fundamentalism and fanaticism from the viewpoint of Islamic literature and scholarship.

(2): Examine the relationship between fanaticism and Islamic revivalism.

(3): Discuss whether fanaticism can be “cured.”
The term “fundamentalism” (Arabic equivalent: *Usuliyyah*)—originally a Christian Protestant term—developed in the early part of the twentieth century.

It was used to refer to Christian groups that believed in the perfection of the scripture as opposed to those who sought to make scriptural changes to accommodate the modern world.

In the Islamic context, the term is somewhat redundant; however, some scholars have been trying to understand the connection between Islam and fundamentalism.

Theoretically, the great majority of practicing Muslims are ‘fundamentalists’ since they believe that the Qur’an remains unchanged from its initial revelation.
Fanaticism is derived from the Latin word *fanum* which refers to “the sacred, the temple or the consecrated place.”

The full term *fanaticus* means “to be put into raging enthusiasm by a deity.”

In the modern sense of the word, a fanatic is simply an individual who goes to an extreme, is overly zealous or unreasonably enthusiastic regarding an issue, idea, opinion, or action.

These ideations do not have to be strictly of a religious nature, but may also be in regard to a personal or private matter, or a larger political, social, or economic issue.

Despite the broadness of its contemporary application, it is most commonly used in its traditional sense to refer to religious zealousness, intolerance and violence.
Characteristics of Fanaticism

Fanaticism in today’s literature stands not for the content of any particular religious position but for a mentality and attitude of radicalism and extremism.

A feature of this mentality is the “religious assurance of the establishment of belief through dogmatic and moral legalism…”

One would be hard pressed to paint a picture of the typical fanatic, since fanaticism transcends all racial, geographical, linguistic and religious boundaries.

The objectives, goals, methodology, interests and motivations of fanatics are as diverse as the means employed and results achieved.

A fanatic may operate in isolation or be a member of a group of like-minded individuals.

Even nation states have been known to engage in fanatical behaviour.
Some fanatics are of a criminal nature. Their goal is not to change the established order so much as to penetrate it then use it for deviant ends.

Other fanatics are nihilistic in that they desire the destruction of the established order just for the sake of destruction. Individuals with destructive pathologies such as the man with the gun who shoots at random, as well as many contemporary cult movements fall into this category.

Another group of fanatics can be classified as social activists of an issue-oriented type, such as the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), Christian Identity Movement.

Other fanatics are of a nationalistic nature that appeal to the disgruntlement of significant segments of any given population, be they minority or majority, i.e the Basque ETA (Spain), the IRA (Ireland).

Still other fanatics have a revolutionary agenda, like communism.
Two Important Questions

- How does one determine if an individual, group or nation is fanatical or engaging in such obsessive behaviours?
- What are the criteria for establishing whether or not an individual or group has extreme opinions, ideas and actions?
Causes of Fanaticism

The causes of fanatical behaviour are quite diverse. In some cases the reason is private and personal while in others it bears a larger socio-political goal.

In still other cases, there may be no goal at all beyond the act itself.

The individual is a product of their upbringing and the politico-socio-economic environment in which one lives.

The role of the family in shaping the personality, identity, and characteristics of the fanatic should not be underestimated.

The social environment in which one lives plays a strong role in developing an individual's identity, i.e. social media.

Another factor greatly influencing a person's identity is the political environment in which one lives.

When adding these qualifiers to the contemporary global political situation, the possible causes of fanaticism are magnified.
The “Islamicity” of Fanaticism

Contemporary Muslim scholars frequently have difficulty defining the terms ‘fundamentalism’ and ‘fanaticism’ since these concepts did not exist in early Islamic tradition, literature and scholarship.

There were a number of terms which did convey certain aspects of fanaticism as it is presently known in Western literature. They are:

*al-Assabiyah* or *al-Taassub* (excessive love of one's tribe), *al-Ighal* (beyond exaggeration), *al-Tashadud* (exceedingly restrictive), *al-Guluw* (excessiveness), *al-Tatarruf* (moving to the farthest point), while some scholars even include *al-Tasawwf* (mystical experience).
The “Islamicity” of Fanaticism

When Muslims wish to determine which criteria should be used for judging actions and behaviours of particular individuals or groups, they look first to the Qur'an as the main source for the specific criterion, and secondly to the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad as reported through his traditions.

The Qur'an addresses the Muslim community as an Ummah (global Muslim community), calling it “justly balanced” (2:143).

It was reported that, “whenever Muhammad (PBUH) was given the choice of two matters, he would choose the easier of the two as long as it was not sinful to do so, but if it was sinful, he would not approach it. (He) never took revenge over anybody for his own sake…”*

If Islam is religion of peace and moderation and the Prophet constantly advised his followers to take the middle path, why has the popular media so markedly identified Islam as a religion of fanatics?

If fanatics come in all shapes and colours, of both a religious and secular nature with varied motives and actions, why then the overwhelming linking of Islamic revivalist movements with fanaticism?

Since the majority of fanatics are no threat to the established geo-political order, it is easy to understand why revolutionary fanatics are the most feared.
While geo-political interests are largely responsible for the negative portrayal of Islam and Islamic movements, Muslims are not totally blameless.

Some Muslims, frustrated by what they perceive to be a lack of freedom to legitimately participate in the election process and to practice their religion and establish Islamic institutions, believe that only way to alleviate their oppression and lack of freedom is to make their point known "by any means necessary."

They increasingly use drastic measures such as suicide and car bombs, guerrilla war-fare, hostage taking, hijacking of airplanes and other offensive means in an attempt to destabilize the government.
In light of the apparent diversity among contemporary Islamic groups, how does one distinguish fanatical elements from those that are not?

The potential conflict of interest, an objective approach based on well-established academic research should be pursued as closely as possible so that groups under assessment are approached on a ‘case by case’ basis. Few questions need to be addressed:

1. The first question is whether the philosophy, goals, and methods of the group are in line with Islamic doctrine.

2. Secondly, are the means undertaken for achieving their goals consistent with Islamic teachings?

3. Does the group have sincerity or do they undertake activities merely for the sake of self-interest and publicity.
Cure of Fanaticism via Wasatiyyah

The cure for any problem is dependent on the nature of the problem. Accordingly, a diverse set of “treatments” need be administered in the context of Wasatiyyah:

A) Fanaticism of a criminal or social activist nature can be discouraged via the judicial-legal system, by utilizing stricter penalties.

B) Pathological destructive fanatics can be helped by mental health professionals.

C) The fanaticism of a nationalist nature can be reduced by the granting of greater political rights and freedom for those concerned; including greater autonomy and decision-making power.

D) The more serious issue is: can revolutionary fanatics be “cured”?

The End
Selected References


