Imperialism: The Civilizing Mission

One of the ideological motives for imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries was what has been called the “civilizing mission.” Western nations, believing themselves to be superior societies, felt it was their duty to bring civilization to other regions of the world. The following selection analyzes the success, or non-success, of these missions.

Already right after World War I, some British questioned the ability of Europeans to attain their goals.

One British correspondent for The Times of London in 1919 wrote:

“Many people ‘think the local inhabitants will welcome us because we have saved them’ and that the country only needs developing to repay our expenditure, but this is clearly wrong, since ‘we are asking the Arab to exchange his pride and independence for a little Western civilization’.”

T.E. Lawrence, a key British figure in the Middle East, said in 1920:

“in Iraq we have been ‘led into a trap from which it will be hard to escape with dignity and honor. …Things have been far worse than we have been told, our administration more bloody and inefficient than the public knows. …We are today not far from disaster’.”

Discussion Questions

1. What are the difficulties in implementing a “civilizing mission” in the non-Western world?

2. What are the differences between direct and indirect rule? What are the difficulties involved in each?

3. This article was written in March of 2003 when the American invasion of Iraq had just begun. Have the Americans and their coalitions allies been more successful than the British in the early 20th century?
Lessons of ‘Civilizing Missions’ A Mostly Unlearned

According to the latest official reports, the United States envisages a short, “necessary occupation” in Iraq, lasting months and intends to have “the structure of a post-Saddam society in place within a year.” If this occurs, the world will witness an exercise in social engineering on a scale of intensity never before contemplated, still less achieved.

Unfortunately, history demonstrates that there is room for skepticism. In the 19th century, when Europe’s great modern empires were assembled, Britain and France formulated “civilizing missions” that were equally wide ranging and optimistic. Having invaded occupied and annexed, they too had a peace to win.

Everything we know about the “civilizing mission” of the 19th century reveals how difficult it was to convert others to different ways of thinking, and how consistently the difficulties were underestimated.

After defeating Napoleon in 1815, Britain emerged as the strongest power of the day, and proceeded to launch the world’s first comprehensive development plan. The liberal ideals of free trade and constitutional government would transform the world. The British expected that, by showing the light, others in foreign lands would surely follow the way. Yet establishing a liberal, progressive order, even among congenial partners in areas of European settlement — like Canada, Australia and New Zealand — was an arduous task that took generations.

Elsewhere, in the non-Western world, optimism that the moral force of Victorian values would easily convert others, if not to Christianity then to free trade and constitutional government, faded as the century advanced.

When disillusion set in, the recipients were blamed, but never the plan. States that failed to conform were cordoned off or incorporated according to estimates of value and cost. The Ottoman Empire, which sprawled across the greater part of the Middle East, was one example of disappointed expectations. The Ottomans were exposed to the benefits of free trade and offered a program of what today would be called structural adjustment.

But the chance was missed. The empire fell into debt and became the “sick man of Europe.” It was propped up by the great powers, and staggered on until World War I brought its demise. The alternative was thought to be anarchy, which would have damaged foreign interests in the region.

Across the globe, brief occupations had the habit of becoming long-term commitments. Early in the 19th century, Egypt had pushed through a program of modernization that promoted export development and secured greater political autonomy from its Ottoman overlords. But the white hope of European improvers became a white elephant in 1876, when Egypt was unable to service its foreign debt.

Unlike the rest of the Ottoman empire, however, Egypt was judged to have potential that could be realized at little cost. In 1882 the British moved in for what was to be a short stay. They claimed to be reluctant to act, but had been compelled by irresponsible elements in Egypt that threatened the onward march of civilization.

Britain’s proclaimed motives were phrased in high-minded generalities. Prime Minister William Gladstone once said this was a “just war, a holy war.” Regime change was quick and easy. But the brief occupation lasted three-quarters of a century, and Britain’s initially limited aims
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reached the point where the security of Egypt required annexation of the Sudan too.

Even when installed, colonial rulers too often lacked legitimacy. They could command acquiescence but not consent. The gratitude they expected for bringing the benefits of the West to the Rest was either not forthcoming or was short-lived. So they devised alternative means of control.

One strategy, direct rule, had a strong military component; another, indirect rule, relied on local collaborators. Direct rule, which was more likely to be oppressive, usually created a focus for resistance, and even terrorism. It was also costly.

Indirect rule was less visible and far cheaper, but it obliged the colonial authorities to meddle in local society and to juggle endlessly with landlords, warriors, bureaucrats, merchants and peasants.

After a full century of endeavor, Britain’s development plan was no more than a qualified success, even when viewed light. And by the middle of the 20th century, when the idea of empire was fading, it was apparent that the coercion and the juggling had ignited the forces of opposition that fed into colonial nationalism.

It does not follow that the difficulties experienced by Britain’s attempt to manage the world will apply to the United States. Time and circumstance are different. The most striking difference is the unprecedented military might of the world’s first hyperpower.

It might be concluded that the United States possesses a level of technology and know-how that will enable it to overcome the obstacles that hampered the civilizing missions of the European empires.

But the problem can be looked at from a different angle. Recent experience does not suggest that the United States has developed a talent for bringing freedom and democracy to subject peoples. Reconstruction in Afghanistan still has a long way to go, and has run into familiar difficulties.

The same may be true of Iraq. Whatever the initial reception, it is inevitable that foreign rule will be resented, especially a postcolonial world. Proclamations of democracy and freedom may satisfy the public at home but will be meaningless unless made to work in Iraq.

How should this be done? Direct rule, as the British found, can be costly. Moreover, people cannot be forced into freedom: they have to grow into it. Opting for indirect rule will drag the United States into the complexities of local politics and will compromise the principles of reconstruction.

When the British occupied Iraq in 1918 and then ruled it under a mandate from the League of Nations, they quickly realized that they needed to cooperate with the Sunni minority, which had filled the senior ranks of the military and civil service. The British merely took over from the Ottomans; the United States may find itself reinventing Britain’s formula for indirect rule.

It is also important to consider the interests as well as the principles of the ruling power. Large contracts for reconstruction have reportedly already been issued to American companies. It is inconceivable that these companies will invest heavily in Iraq without adequate political security. That must come either from direct rule by Washington, which would be unpopular, or from a compliant government.

Can a compliant government also be a democratic one? If democracy means, minimally, one person one vote, then power is likely to shift away from the Sunni minority and toward the Shiites and the Kurds. The problem here is that the Shiites have close affiliations with Iran, which is on the axis of evil, and that the Kurds have their own agenda — and oil resources.

With its occupation of Iraq, the United States faces some longstanding imperial problems. Since it has yet to announce any novel solutions, is it possible that some of the old imperial remedies will be applied?
An important, though minority, feature of recent Islamic fundamentalism has been the use of the concept of jihad. Traditionally this idea has been seen in two ways: as the Greater Jihad and as the Lesser Jihad. The Greater Jihad is the struggle within every individual Muslim to bring his or her will into conformity with the will of God. The Lesser Jihad refers to a “holy war,” or morally justifiable war. The role of jihad in Islam has had a variable history; there have been times when it was hardly mentioned at all and other times when it became more prominent, but it was usually seen as defensive (of the faith or the territory of the faith). Normally a jihad, or a fatwa calling for a jihad or anything else, was the prerogative of some recognized authority such as a learned scholar or even a Muslim government.

The following selection is the fatwa proclaimed by Osama bin Laden and four other Islamic radicals in 1998 in reaction to the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What is the significance of bin Laden’s use of the term “crusade?”

2. What was bin Laden’s justification for calling for a jihad against the Americans?

3. What does he say is the purpose of a jihad?

4. How would you put this kind of appeal in a global and historical context? How does it relate to reading #18—the World Revolution of Westernization?
Praise be to God, who revealed the Book, controls the clouds, defeats factionalism, and says in His Book “But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the pagans wherever ye find them, seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war)”; and peace be upon our Prophet, Muhammad Bin-'Abdallah, who said “I have been sent with the sword between my hands to ensure that no one but God is worshipped, God who put my livelihood under the shadow of my spear and who inflicts humiliation and scorn on those who disobey my orders.”

The Arabian Peninsula has never—since God made it flat, created its desert, and encircled it with seas—been stormed by any forces like the crusader armies now spreading in it like locusts, consuming its riches and destroying its plantations. All this is happening at a time when nations are attacking Muslims like people fighting over a plate of food. In the light of the grave situation and the lack of support, we and you are obliged to discuss current events, and we should all agree to settle the matter.

No one argues today about three facts that are known to everyone; we will list them, in order to remind everyone:

First, for over seven years the United States has been occupying the lands of Islam in the holiest of places, the Arabian Peninsula, plundering its riches, dictating to its rulers, humiliating its people, terrorizing its neighbors, and turning its bases in the Peninsula into a spearhead through which to fight the neighboring Muslim peoples.

If some people have formerly debated the fact of the occupation, all the people of the Peninsula have now acknowledged it. The best proof of this is the Americans’ continuing aggression against the Iraqi people using the Peninsula as a staging post, even though all its rulers are against their territories being used to that end, still they are helpless.

Second, despite the great devastation inflicted on the Iraqi people by the crusader-Zionist alliance, and despite the huge number of those killed, in excess of 1 million... despite all this, the Americans are once again trying to repeat the horrific massacres, as though they are not content with the protracted blockade imposed after the ferocious war or the fragmentation and devastation.

So here they come to annihilate what is left of this people and to humiliate their Muslim neighbors.

Third, if the Americans’ aims behind these wars are religious and economic, the aim is also to serve the Jews’ petty state and divert attention from its occupation of Jerusalem and murder of Muslims there. The best proof of this is their eagerness to destroy Iraq, the strongest neighboring Arab state, and their endeavor to fragment all the states of the region such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Sudan into paper statelets and through their disunion and weakness to guarantee Israel’s survival and the continuation of the brutal crusader occupation of the Peninsula.

All these crimes and sins committed by the Americans are a clear declaration of war on God, his messenger, and Muslims. And ulema have throughout Islamic history unanimously agreed that the jihad is an individual duty if the enemy destroys the Muslim countries.

On that basis, and in compliance with God’s order, we issue the following fatwa to all Muslims:

The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any
country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque [in Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim. This is in accordance with the words of Almighty God, “and Fight the pagans all together as they fight you all together,” and “fight them until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in God.”

This is in addition to the words of Almighty God “And why should ye not fight in the cause of God and of those who, being weak, are ill-treated and oppressed—women and children, whose cry is ‘Our Lord, rescue us from this town, whose people are oppressors; and raise for us from thee one who will help!’ ”

We—with God’s help—call on every Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded to comply with God’s order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it. We also call on Muslim ulema, leaders, youths, and soldiers to launch the raid on Satan’s U.S. troops and the devil’s supporters allying with them, and to displace those who are behind them so that they may learn a lesson.

Almighty God said “O ye who believe, give your response to God and His Apostle, when He calleth you to that which will give you life. And know that God cometh between a man and his heart, and that it is He to whom ye shall all be gathered.”

Almighty God also says “O ye who believe, what is the matter with you, that when ye are asked to go forth in the cause of God, ye cling so heavily to the earth! Do ye prefer the life of this world to the hereafter? But little is the comfort of this life, as compared with the hereafter. Unless ye go forth, He will punish you with a grievous penalty, and put others in your place; but Him ye would not harm in the least. For God hath power over all things.”

Almighty God also says “So lose no heart, nor fall into despair. For ye must gain mastery if ye are true in faith.”

Shaykh Usamah Bin-Muhammad Bin-Laden
Ayman al-Zawahiri, Amir of the Jihad Group in Egypt
Abu-Yasir Rifa’i Ahmad Taha, Egyptian Islamic Group
Shaykh Mir Hamzah, secretary of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Pakistan
Fazlur Rahman, Amir of the Jihad Movement in Bangladesh
One of the most widespread phenomena of the twentieth century (and today) is what is often called “Fundamentalism.” In this selection, Karen Armstrong, one of the most prominent scholars of religion, places fundamentalism in its modern context and then turns to a brief discussion of its Islamic variant.

(She refers to “Afghani,” a late 19th century Iranian activist who feared the encroachment of the modern West, and to “al-Nasser” who was the ruler of Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s.)

**Discussion Questions**

1. Why is fundamentalism a distinctively modern idea? Where did it start?

2. What do all fundamentalists have in common?

3. What forms has Islamic fundamentalism taken?

4. Is fundamentalism, generally, destined to succeed or fail? Why?
Islamic Fundamentalism

Karen Armstrong

The Western media often give the impression that the embattled and occasionally violent form of religiosity known as “fundamentalism” is a purely Islamic phenomenon. This is not the case. Fundamentalism is a global fact and has surfaced in every major faith in response to the problems of our modernity. There is fundamentalist Judaism, fundamentalist Christianity, fundamentalist Hinduism, fundamentalist Buddhism, fundamentalist Sikhism and even fundamentalist Confucianism. This type of faith surfaced first in the Christian world in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. This was not accidental. Fundamentalism is not a monolithic movement, each form of fundamentalism, even within the same tradition, develops independently and has its own symbols and enthusiasms, but its different manifestations all bear a family resemblance. It has been noted that a fundamentalist movement does not arise immediately, as a knee-jerk response to the advent of Western modernity, but only takes shape when the modernization process is quite far advanced. At first religious people try to reform their traditions and effect a marriage between them and modern culture, as we have seen the Muslim reformers do. But when these moderate measures are found to be of no avail, some people resort to more extreme methods, and a fundamentalist movement is born. With hindsight, we can see that it was only to be expected that fundamentalism should first make itself known in the United States, the showcase of modernity, and only appear in other parts of the world at a later date. Of the three monotheistic religions, Islam was in fact the last to develop a fundamentalist strain, when modern culture began to take root in the Muslim world in the late 1960s and 1970s. By this date, fundamentalism was quite well established among Christians and Jews, who had had a longer exposure to the modern experience.

Fundamentalist movements in all faiths share certain characteristics. They reveal a deep disappointment and disenchantment with the modern experiment, which has not fulfilled all that it promised. They also express real fear. Every single fundamentalist movement that I have studied is convinced that the secular establishment is determined to wipe religion out. This is not always a paranoid reaction. We have seen that secularism has often been imposed very aggressively in the Muslim world. Fundamentalists look back to a “golden age” before the irruption of modernity for inspiration, but they are not atavistically returning to the Middle Ages. All are intrinsically modern movements and could have appeared at no time other than our own. All are innovative and often radical in their reinterpretation of religion. As such, fundamentalism is an essential part of the modern scene. Wherever modernity takes root, a fundamentalist movement is likely to rise up alongside it in conscious reaction. Fundamentalists will often express their...

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discontent with a modern development by overstressing those elements in their tradition that militate against it. They are all—even in the United States—highly critical of democracy and secularism. Because the emancipation of women has been one of the hallmarks of modern culture, fundamentalists tend to emphasize conventional, agrarian gender roles, putting women back into veils and into the home. The fundamentalist community can thus be seen as the shadow-side of modernity; it can also highlight some of the darker sides of the modern experiment.

Fundamentalism, therefore, exists in a symbiotic relationship with a coercive secularism. Fundamentalists nearly always feel assaulted by the liberal or modernizing establishment, and their views and behavior become more extreme as a result. After the famous Scopes Trial (1925) in Tennessee, when Protestant fundamentalists tried to prevent the teaching of evolution in the public schools, they were so ridiculed by the secularist press that their theology became more reactionary and excessively literal, and they turned from the left to the extreme right of the political spectrum. When the secularist attack has been more violent, the fundamentalist reaction is likely to be even greater. Fundamentalism therefore reveals a fissure in society, which is polarized between those who enjoy secular culture and those who regard it with dread. As time passes, the two camps become increasingly unable to understand one another. Fundamentalism thus begins as an internal dispute, with liberalizers or secularists within one’s own culture or nation. In the first instance, for example, Muslim fundamentalists will often oppose their fellow countrymen or fellow Muslims who take a more positive view of modernity, rather than such external foes as the West or Israel. Very often, fundamentalists begin by withdrawing from mainstream culture to create an enclave of pure faith (as, for example, within the ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities in Jerusalem or New York). Thence they will sometimes conduct an offensive which can take many forms, designed to bring the mainstream back to the right path and resacralize the world. All fundamentalists feel that they are fighting for survival, and because their backs are to the wall, they can believe that they have to fight their way out of the impasse. In this frame of mind, on rare occasions, some resort to terrorism. The vast majority, however, do not commit acts of violence, but simply try to revive their faith in a more conventional, lawful way.

Fundamentalists have been successful in so far as they have pushed religion from the sidelines and back to center stage, so that it now plays a major part in international affairs once again, a development that would have seemed inconceivable in the mid-twentieth century when secularism seemed in the ascendant. This has certainly been the case in the Islamic world since the 1970s. But fundamentalism is not simply a way of “using” religion for a political end. These are essentially rebellions against the secularist exclusion of the divine from public life, and a frequently desperate attempt to make spiritual values prevail in the modern world. But the desperation and fear that fuel fundamentalists also tend to distort the religious tradition, and accentuate its more aggressive aspects at the expense of those that preach toleration and reconciliation.

Muslim fundamentalism corresponds very closely to these general characteristics. It is not correct, therefore, to imagine that Islam has within it a militant, fanatic strain that impels Muslims into a crazed and violent rejection of modernity. Muslims are in tune with fundamentalists in other faiths all over the world, who share their profound misgivings about modern secular culture. It should also be said that Muslims object to the use of the term “fundamentalism,” pointing out quite correctly that it was coined by American Protestants as a badge of pride, and cannot be usefully
translated into Arabic. *Usul*, as we have seen, refers to the fundamental principles of Islamic jurisprudence, and as all Muslims agree on these, all Muslims could be said to subscribe to *usuliyyah* (fundamentalism). Nevertheless, for all its shortcomings, “fundamentalism” is the only term we have to describe this family of embattled religious movements, and it is difficult to come up with a more satisfactory substitute.

One of the early fundamentalist ideologues was Mawdudi, the founder of the Jamaat-i Islami in Pakistan. He saw the mighty power of the West as gathering its forces to crush Islam. Muslims, he argued, must band together to fight this encroaching secularism, if they wanted their religion and their culture to survive. Muslims had encountered hostile societies before and had experienced disasters but, starting with Afghani, a new note had crept into Islamic discourse. The Western threat had made Muslims defensive for the first time. Mawdudi defied the whole secularist ethos: he was proposing an Islamic liberation theology. Because God alone was sovereign, nobody was obliged to take orders from any other human being. Revolution against the colonial powers was not just a right but a duty. Mawdudi called for a universal *jihad*. Just as the Prophet had fought the *jahiliyyah* (the “ignorance” and barbarism of the pre-Islamic period), Muslims must use all means in their power to resist the modern *jahiliyyah* of the West. Mawdudi argued that *jihad* was the central tenet of Islam. This was an innovation. Nobody had ever claimed before that *jihad* was equivalent to the five Pillars of Islam, but Mawdudi felt that the innovation was justified by the present emergency. The stress and fear of cultural and religious annihilation had led to the development of a more extreme and potentially violent distortion of the faith.

But the real founder of Islamic fundamentalism in the Sunni world was Sayyid Qutb (1906–66), who was greatly influenced by Mawdudi. Yet he had not originally been an extremist but had been filled with enthusiasm for Western culture and secular politics. Even after he joined the Muslim Brotherhood in 1953 he had been a reformer, hoping to give Western democracy an Islamic dimension that would avoid the excesses of a wholly secularist ideology. However, in 1956 he was imprisoned by al-Nasser for membership of the Brotherhood, and in the concentration camp he became convinced that religious people and secularists could not live in peace in the same society. As he witnessed the torture and execution of the Brothers, and reflected upon al-Nasser’s avowed determination to cast religion into a marginal role in Egypt, he could see all the characteristics of *jahiliyyah*, which he defined as the barbarism that was for ever and for all time the enemy of faith, and which Muslims, following the example of the Prophet Muhammad, were bound to fight to the death. Qutb went further than Mawdudi, who had seen only non-Muslim societies as *jahili*. Qutb applied the term *jahiliyyah*, which in conventional Muslim historiography had been used simply to describe the pre-Islamic period in Arabia, to contemporary Muslim society. Even though a ruler such as al-Nasser outwardly professed Islam, his words and actions proved him to be an apostate and Muslims were duty-bound to overthrow such a government, just as Muhammad had forced the pagan establishment of Mecca (the *jahiliyyah* of his day) into submission.

The violent secularism of al-Nasser had led Qutb to espouse a form of Islam that distorted both the message of the Quran and the Prophet’s life. Qutb told Muslims to model themselves on Muhammad: to separate themselves from mainstream society (as Muhammad had made the *bijrah* from Mecca to Medina), and then engage in a violent *jihad*. But Muhammad had in fact finally achieved victory by an ingenious policy of non-violence; the Quran adamantly
opposed force and coercion in religious matters, and its vision—far from preaching exclusion and separation—was tolerant and inclusive. Qutb insisted that the Quranic injunction to toleration could occur only after the political victory of Islam and the establishment of a true Muslim state. The new intransigence sprang from the profound fear that is at the core of fundamentalist religion. Qutb did not survive. At al-Nasser’s personal insistence, he was executed in 1966.