

**Macalester College**

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**From the Selected Works of James von Geldern**

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## “Islam in the Coming Century.”

James von Geldern, *Macalester College*



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## Response

James von Geldern

The upcoming millennium of Christ's birth, a moment burdened with expectations, and an occasion that inspires us to reflect on the future, might, as Professor Nasr observes, be an odd time to reflect on the future of Islam. Yet he has shown that the exercise is not futile. All millennia are momentous, but the most recent millennium has been a mixed one for organized religion, at least in comparison to the preceding thousand years. The first millennium after the birth of Christ witnessed the staggering growth of Islamic and Christian civilizations. It saw the muscular if not pious states that ruled the world (above all the Roman Empire) yield to God's lieutenants, who brought church and sovereign closer together, to the point of merging. The first millennium saw Muhammed reign as prophet in Mecca. It saw the Christian church hold sway over the Holy Roman Empire to the West, and Byzantium to the East.

The second millennium after the birth of Christ saw the alliance of God and ruler questioned and overturned. It has been a millennium of schism and fragmentation. Within Christendom, the Roman or Catholic West and the Byzantine or Orthodox East split first. Four centuries later, Martin Luther initiated another string of schisms, resulting in seemingly endless breakaways into ever smaller churches and congregations. Islam had already begun its schisms in the seventh century, when the death of the fourth caliph Ali and the contested succession led to the birth of Shi'ite Islam. Even Muslims who thought of themselves as a single community found themselves divided by geography, language, culture, and political allegiance. Thus, communities that entered our millennium unified under God, found themselves increasingly fractured. Fractures in the congregation widened to encompass state structures. The last two hundred years has seen steady erosion of the role of religion in state life. Two revolutions of the late eighteenth century created avowedly non-religious states. The decline of the leading Islamic states brought secular, or at least impious, rulers into power. Throughout it all, societies looked less and less to religion and more to the tokens of secular life when they sought common ground.

In this millennial context, then, it is wise to ask what challenges the twenty-first century will be posing to Islam, parenthetically to orga-

nized Christianity, and to religiosity as a principle in world affairs. Had this Roundtable taken place twenty-five years ago, we might well have proclaimed ours an age of secularism, and perhaps even announced its final triumph, based on the experience of the millennium. We might still were it not for the odd and unanticipated events of the last quarter century, which have re-balanced, if not redirected, this historical process.

At this juncture, we might revisit the much abused and maligned term *fundamentalism*, which as Nasr reminds us, misrepresents the spirit behind the Islamic resurgence. Fundamentalism, in that it seems to imply return to a purer religious condition, suggests a greater orthodoxy and greater historical grounding than is proper. Contrasting fundamentalist Islam to what he calls traditional Islam, Nasr shows the movements to be rivals rather than synonyms. Though fundamentalist Islam (ignoring for the moment the appropriateness of the term) was a shock to many in the Islamic and non-Islamic world, it was part of a far broader shift in the relationship of God and humanity throughout the world. By the time of the Iranian events, fundamentalism was already a term familiar in American Protestantism. In America, as in Islam, the term was used to denigrate insurgent and somewhat ill-mannered believers, most obtrusively Jerry Falwell and other "televangelists" who chose to call themselves the Moral Majority, and who insisted on reintegrating God into the world. The attitude seemed militant, radical at times; one contemporary commentator even called them "the new subversives." Yet from another point of view, nothing has been more radical, if longstanding, than the partition of heaven and earth.

Fundamentalism is worth mentioning if only to point out that it is not a voice represented at the Roundtable, perhaps a voice not even welcome. We dedicate ourselves to the global moment, and seek moments of understanding, of commonality, to enrich our international and intercultural being. Fundamentalism, with its angry parochialism, its pugilistic attitudes, and its rejection of the ecumenical vision, has little place in such an enterprise. And yet if we are to interrogate the global moment of religion in many parts of the world, including our own, we cannot ignore it.

Fundamentalism or, more accurately, fundamentalisms, have been perceived as a threat because they reject the partition at the heart of the modern state. Events in Iran have confirmed the threat; and the foundation of the Moral Majority in 1979 seemed threatening enough for some in the United States. If, as Nasr shows, fundamentalism differs

profoundly from traditional Islam in its relationship to the world, critics in the West are no less apt to point out how far the fundamentalists have strayed from traditional Christianity. Bringing church, state, and society together can be a sign of decline, particularly if it signals a lust for power. Many have taken it to be so, and Nasr notes that "Despite or even because of the power of the fundamentalist impulse, the quality of the faith has diminished and its vision narrowed." In this context, he encourages us to talk about Islam as a civilization, just as we might speak of Christian civilization, as a complex of belief and culture that includes the arts and sciences. If religion addresses questions of fundamental consequence to all areas of knowledge, not just the divine, faith can animate its civilization as well as its worship.

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Nasr asks how Islam will respond to the challenges of the coming millennium. He speaks of new technologies and the search for a new Islamic *science*, in the original sense of that word. Islam is faced with the intrusion of alien lifestyles imported by mass culture, produced predominantly in America. Christian fundamentalists, too, feel that they are under assault by an alien culture, though one produced within a shared geographic entity. Fundamentalism, bound in a vision of the past, has been thought unable to respond to the challenges of the present. This would be a religion of decline. Nowhere is the checkered response to modernity more evident than in the attitudes of fundamentalist churches toward women. In the face of a longstanding world trend toward integrating women into public life, fundamentalists insist on what are deemed the traditional roles of women, endorsed by their God, and focused on the home and childbearing.

It would be rash to dismiss the fundamentalist vision without first probing the sources of its strength, and shortsighted for anyone interested in the global moment of religion. Faith, be it Islamic or Christian, is fundamentalist in its insistence in the fundamental import of our relationship to God in all spheres of life. It rejects the partitioned, compartmentalized version of life that has prevailed through much of the world for the last two hundred years. Faulted by many for turning away from the modern world, fundamentalism is in fact a vigorous response to the modern world, based in its contradictions and discontents. It is, however, not an accommodation. Fundamentalism insists on heeding God in the world even when such actions are inconvenient

and irrational to outside observers.

Religious faith can be manifest in many ways. It can be broad-minded, ecumenical, dynamic, and interrelated, as Dr. Eck states so eloquently in her keynote address. But faith, at least in Islam and Christianity (within Judaism, as well) emanates ultimately from moments of revelation, incontestable, awe-inspiring, and all encompassing. Moments of revelation are localized and personalized, and at the same time universal. They cannot be mixed and matched into a global religiosity. They insist on superseding other revelations. While we in the academy find the vision constricting, we must note its vitality at the end of the millennium, and acknowledge its successes.

We might also find the impulse in developments that have not commonly been termed fundamentalist, looking not only in the margins, in the guerilla movements of the faith, but in its institutional centers. Invested with power, the fundamentalist moment need not be angry and importune, as so-called fundamentalists are, but it is no less demanding. Such a moment can be traced to October 1978, a month when the Ayatollah Khomeini assumed his Parisian exile, soon to return triumphant to his homeland, and American fundamentalists hounded their fellow Christian Jimmy Carter in the White House. That month saw the elevation of the little-known Cardinal of Krakow, Karol Wojtyla, to the office of Pope. Some will remember what a shock that was; an enervated Catholic Church selecting the first non-Italian for almost five hundred years, one hailing from socialist Poland. The election was taken as a moment of liberation in his homeland, and ultimately served as a catalyst to the breakup of the Eastern Bloc. No less important, it was stimulus to a church that had experimented uncomfortably with its relationship to the world, allowing itself some reform in its rituals and congregational life, but drawing the line at Marxist-tinged liberation theologies. Surely there was something fundamentalist about the new Pope, who responded to the flagging fortunes of the faith not by further accommodation, but with a forceful belief that God's mandates are not negotiable, even when they are inconvenient or out of sync with the world. Nowhere has the fundamentalism of the Pope been more notable, nor inspired more controversy, than in his positions about women and sexuality, traditional in some senses, but militant and uncompromising as well. John Paul has woven longstanding policies — along with other pro-life positions against abortion and capital punishment — into a philosophy of the dignity of the human individual. Despite grumbling among many liberal Catholic clergy, the

Vatican has come very close to declaring the Pope's 1994 letter forbidding further discussion of the ordination of women *infallible*. The church's position on the sinfulness of homosexual activity and the consequent refusal to sanction same-sex marriages are even less likely to change.

The Catholic Church, like fundamentalist Christians and Muslims, has made the insistence on God's mandate the core of its missionary impulse, and has done so with great success. Where once liberation theology was the church's only response to the plight of the underprivileged, and a response unacceptable to the hierarchy, John Paul II has taken the fundamental message to Africa and Asia as missionary, accompanied by his own charismatic presence. For many who saw the future of the church in its response to the changing world, and in a dialogue of reform with new congregations, this has been a disappointment. The Pope has been seen as an illiberal presence, hostile to new influences. None, however, can deny his success as a missionary or, even more uncomfortably, deny that many believers have seen his theology to be liberational. The liberation is not political, nor has it overturned social hierarchies, yet its message of personal dignity through a direct relationship to God has attracted new congregations.

Islam has been redefining its relation to the world since Muhammed, so in that sense fundamentalism is traditional. This is no less true for fundamentalist Protestants or the Catholic Church. To dismiss these movements, as has so often been the response, would be a mistake, as would failing to mention them in a discussion of the global moment of religion. True, fundamentalism is a misnomer, and many fundamentalists have developed an unseemly taste for power. Power—political, social, and cultural power—has been part of fundamentalist agendas for many years, yet for most the ultimate goal has been to reassert the fundamental meaning of our relationship to God into all social activities. True faith, it would seem, can do no other.

Why the success of the fundamentalist impulse, and what does it suggest for the future? What do these movements offer believers they did not find elsewhere? Why the widespread support among the disadvantaged? One important factor has been an ability to address issues of social justice once ceded to more liberal and liberational theologies. Though fundamentalist positions correspond to what some would call injustice, or at least illiberalism (I would cite the fundamentalist stance on abortion here), the positions have mobilized believers previously excluded from politics. Liberals and leftists in Iran were

instrumental to the struggle against the Shah and assumed power in the first post-revolutionary government, yet were suspected of the same Western influences that had undermined the Shah, and were swept aside by popular agitation inspired by the fundamentalists. The Pope assumed his office with an indisputable record of resisting unjust power, both under the Nazi occupation and then under socialist rule in his homeland. His church has continued that record, extending it to criticize capitalist powers that once mistook him to be an unquestioning ally.

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Ultimately, by the standards of fundamentalists themselves, the measure of the movement will not be its social program, but the relationship of worshipper to God. While this involves a social, even political, element, its final test is as an experience imbedded in everyday life. There are several ways that fundamentalism shapes the experience of the faithful in the world. The first is in its sense of community. While all religions offer community, the fundamentalist community, cemented by a common reference to God, is united by an unquestioned orientation. Whether it be the rocking, singing congregation of a fundamentalist Baptist Church or an ultra-orthodox settlement on the Israeli border, such communities have common goals and codes of behavior that animate common activities. The community is strengthened by its alternative hierarchies. Fundamentalism models behavior on the world of worship. The moment of worship, which affords a direct link between worshipper and God, overturns or suspends everyday hierarchies. All congregants are equal in their relationship to God. Hence the attraction of fundamentalism to many of the disadvantaged, even when it does little to address their apparent social needs. You can change the world immediately around you—more so than in mainline churches, with their established and stable hierarchies.

Fundamentalism, second of all, provides a world of meaning and significance. This is a world of rituals and acts of faith, visible to the surrounding community and serving as a border. Rather than confining such acts to the sanctuary, it makes everyday life an act of worship. The decision can be reflected in language (in the mingling of scriptural quotations into conversation); it can be reflected in behavior (everyday rituals that sanctify all aspects of life); it can be reflected in relationships (when the presence of God is felt between two people). The prin-

ciple might naturally extend to politics as well, yet the impulse is not political. It is to make the world fully significant by manifesting the presence of God.

Finally, fundamentalism offers a sense of being situated in the world, of having a permanent point of reference. Perhaps the sense is most fully embodied in the Muslim prayers, spoken while turned towards the city of Mecca, so distant for many, as Nasr reminds us. That act of orientation—which is at once an orientation to the point of revelation, an alignment with all other Muslims praying at the same moment, and contact with a locality on earth—confirms the worshipper's place in the world. It identifies localities as points of reference to the awe-inspiring universe. Fundamentalism, recognizing God in his many forms and the divine as the ultimate reference point of human existence, allows for unending sense of situation.

One of the strengths of the Macalester College Roundtable over the years has been its insistence on raising issues of great contemporary import, contextualized in the globalization that is changing our world and is, not incidentally, reflected in our distinctive student body. This is a college where globalization means something on a personal level, and its opportunities have been of immediate benefit to us all. Thus, it has been an unanticipated development in the Roundtable series that the bright prospects surveyed in our earliest conclaves have been tinted, and surely deepened, by more somber tones. We might ask how Islam, particularly in its fundamentalist modes, will respond to the challenges of the modern world; we can cavil with the Catholic Church for its failure to change with the times. We cannot, however, fail to notice the strengths of these movements — and surely the last quarter century has shown their strengths above all — and that the strength rests on the insistence of being fundamental.

Despite the short-term unpopularity of such positions, and even more so its insistent tone and inconvenient demands, fundamentalism has reinvigorated faith by declaring that there is no sidestepping divine mandates, and that the dignity of humanity comes from obeying them despite the distortions to our daily existence. The ecumenical, philosophical readings of religion that are well represented at the Roundtable are one of the great traditions of religious thought, one shared by most religions. Yet this tradition should not obscure other traditions and the needs of other members of the congregation. One of these is the need for grounding, of situation in faith, a need that challenges our Roundtable in its discussion of the global moment of reli-

gion. It is embodied in the many fundamentalisms present in the world today. They are, in their ultimate locus, local, personal, and resistant to the global moment. They entail rituals of identification that bring inconvenience and difference. While we can with reason ask how these religions will respond to the twenty-first century and beyond it to the third millennium of Christ, we also need to ask how the twenty-first century will respond to the fundamentalist challenge.