

## **Understanding Muslim Identity: Rethinking Fundamentalism**

*Gabriele Marranci*

*Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 242 pages.*

Gabrielle Marranci seeks to shift the analyses of “Islamic fundamentalism/radicalism” discourses away from those focusing on cultural and political essentialism, scripturalism, and social determinism and toward that of exploring the dynamics of radicalization by examining the central role of emotions on identity formation. His main thesis is that fundamentalism must be understood as a process linked to identity and identification (not a thing) and that theories which take into account the crucial role of emotions, feelings, and the environment can explain fundamentalism, including Islamic fundamentalism, more accurately than social determinist and/or cultural constructivist theories can (pp. 77-80). The author thus sets out to “engage with an incredibly expanding academic literature [on Islamic fundamentalism] that tends to treat religious fundamentalism on the basis of culturalist or social theory discourse” (p. 153). He uses the same analytical lens adopted in his *Jihad beyond Islam* (London: Berg, 2006).

The first chapter, a very coherently written introduction, overviews the book’s major themes and aims. In the second chapter, he develops an impressively comprehensive engagement with and a critique of relevant existing literature on religious fundamentalism in general, ranging from scripturalism, social determinism, cultural and political essentialism, and, to a lesser degree, psychology. Marranci’s major criticism is that these methods assume that fundamentalism is “a thing” and not a process. He further argues that these approaches are marred by fundamental epistemological and methodological weaknesses called “comparative reductionism” (i.e., that somehow one can compare and contrast extremely diverse cultures in order to obtain a “macro-picture” as an easy object to test against the western Enlightenment parameters considered normative) and, as a corollary, “Eurocentric historical evolutionism” (i.e., that European history and its historical trajectories resulting in European-style modernity and secularism serve as the sole arbiter and the embodiment of progress and civilization).

In the third chapter, the author concentrates more specifically on various “Islamic fundamentalism” studies and laments the lack of anthropological

studies of it and the absence of the role of emotions and feelings in understanding the processes leading to it. In the fourth chapter, relying on the theoretical framework more fully espoused in his *Jihad beyond Islam*, Marranci uses ethnographic material to assert that justice, dignity, and other concepts become emotionally charged “acts of identity” due to “a certain context and environment” (p. 150) and become ideologies of the same, which make up part of the fundamentalist process formation. He cites Sayyid Qutb, a major Muslim Brotherhood ideologue, as a paragon of this type of dynamic at work.

In the fifth chapter the author avers, again on the basis of ethnographic material, that an ideology of justice is linked to the ideology of *tawhid*, the essence of which is also emotional and is to be associated with the individual’s “acts of identity.” In this context he asserts that the “ideology of *tawhid*” has dislodged the Islamic scholar’s individual charisma from that of the ummah, which then becomes the embodiment of a “diffused charisma.” By affirming this, he argues against other scholars’ views of the importance of charisma personified and exemplified by an Islamic religious leader/scholar to the radicalization process.

The sixth chapter’s main contention is that the same dynamics that have brought about an emotion-based or “emotional Islam” have engendered a discourse focused on the dichotomy between the “civilized” and “civilizable” that is embedded in the broader existential matrix of “how to be human.” This discourse has emerged among western Muslims who are trapped within this “emotional Islam” framework. According to this understanding, these Muslims’ most serious concern is to have the power to define themselves and to live out what it means to be a good human being solely by being a committed Muslim.

Due to space concerns, I will criticize Marranci’s main thesis concerning the role of the Qur’an and the Sunnah in identity formation, and thus radicalization/fundamentalism, among western Muslims. My main contention is that certain interpretations of what Muslims consider to be normative Islamic teaching plays an important (if not decisive) role in shaping the views, behavior, and, at times, actions, of western Muslims, including the processes associated with radicalization/fundamentalism. He strongly suggests that this is so. Take the example of the five young British Muslim male sympathizers of the “fundamentalist” Hizb-ul-Tahrir movement. The provided interview excerpts reveal their constant use Qur’anic terminology and concepts in a normative sense – *ahl al-kitab*, *karamah*, *jahiliyah*, *din*, *kafirun* (pp. 88-89) – while talking about Muslims living in the West.

The importance of acquiring knowledge of the Islamic tradition to the radicalization dynamic is perhaps best demonstrated by Mahir and Issam, two former associates of Omar Bakri, leader of the notorious radical Al-Muhajiroun. They state clearly that their main reason for joining was that Bakri gave them “the words, the verses [of the Qur’an] and the narrations [the hadith] which made sense” (p. 111) and assuaged their incredible thirst for knowledge. In virtually every ethnographic account presented by Marranci, his respondents, like the imprisoned born-again Muslim Ziyad (pp. 82-83) or the bareheaded to niqab-wearing Rija (p. 85), frequently employed Qur’an and hadith (derived) language and religious arguments to justify their opinions, behavior, and actions.

In some passages Marranci almost admits that western Muslims increasingly resort to “scripturalist normative Islam” to construct their identity (p. 149) or that the idea of Shari’ah is central to his respondents’ adopted views (pp. 90-92). Yet he concludes that “fundamentalist processes have little to do with Islam and everything to do with how human emotions, identity and self work” (p. 149). It is very difficult to reconcile this and similar statements with the evidence that he himself provides. My point here is that (1) western Muslims increasingly resort to “scripturalist normative Islam” when constructing their sense of identity and that (2) certain interpretations of what they consider to be normative Islamic teachings play an important – often the most important – role in shaping their views, behavior and, at times, actions.

This book is certainly a worthy contribution to identity formation/radicalization among western Muslims. My call for a larger and better recognition how various interpretations of religious tradition affect these processes will hopefully not be seen/interpreted as essentialist,<sup>1</sup> but rather as highlighting the need to improve our understanding of the mechanisms and processes that lead to different interpretational approaches to the Islamic normative sources; how they affect western (born) Muslims’ identity formation; and, as an essential part of that dynamic, how they contribute to radicalization and extremism throughout the Muslim world.

1. Adis Duderija, “Identifying Factors Determining Religious Identity Constructions among Western Born Muslims: Towards a Theoretical Framework,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 28, no. 3 (2008):371-400.

Adis Duderija  
Center for Muslim States and Societies, School of Social and Cultural Studies  
University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia