Aspects of fundamentalism
A selection of links

[Issues of definition](#)

[Historical background](#)

[Connections with terrorism](#)

[Return to list of topics](#)

Issues of definition

'Widely used as a pejorative term to designate one's fanatical opponents – usually religious and/or political – rather than oneself, fundamentalism began in Christian Protestant circles in the early twentieth century,' writes Roland Boer, senior research fellow in the Centre for Studies in Religion and Theology at Monash University, Australia. 'Originally restricted to debates within evangelical ("gospel-based") Protestantism, it is now employed to refer to any person or group that is characterised as unbending, rigorous, intolerant, and militant. The term has two usages, the prior one a positive self-description, which then developed into the later derogatory usage that is now widespread. As a phenomenon, fundamentalism is a specific cultural, religious/ideological, and political formation only possible in later capitalism.
http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/newkeywords/PDFs%20Sample%20Entries%20-%20New%20Keywords/Fundamentalism.pdf

'In many ways religious fundamentalism is a modern phenomenon, characterized by a sense of embattled alienation in the midst of the surrounding culture, even where the culture may be nominally influenced by the adherents' religion. The term can also refer specifically to the belief that one's religious texts are infallible and historically accurate, despite contradiction of these claims by modern scholarship. Many groups described as fundamentalist often strongly object to this term because of the negative connotations it carries, or because it implies a similarity between themselves and other groups, which they find objectionable.'
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundamentalism

See also Wikipedia's discussion and definition of Islamic fundamentalism.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamist

'Muslim extremists,' wrote **Karen Armstrong** in an article about fundamentalism, 'have given the jihad (which they interpret reductively as "holy war") a centrality that it never had before and have thus redefined the meaning of Islam for many non-Muslims. But in this they are often unwittingly aided by the media, who also concentrate obsessively on the more aggressive verses of the Qur'an, without fully appreciating how these are qualified by the text as a whole. We must all –the religious and the sceptics alike – become aware that there is more to scripture than meets the cursory eye.'
http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1546558,00.html

'Few things are more puzzling to the average citizen in the West' writes a reviewer of Karen Armstrong's *The Battle for God*, for the liberal Christian website **Radical Faith**, 'than what is loosely labelled "fundamentalism". Reactions to it vary widely. There are those who dismiss it with a shrug and perhaps with whatever local phrase matches the Yorkshireman's "There's nowt as queer as folks!" Some lump fundamentalism together under the general heading "Religion" - something old-fashioned to which all sorts of rather silly or weird people are attracted. A greater number are those whose reactions range from irritation to anger at what they perceive is wilfully vicious behaviour. How is it possible in our day and age, they ask, for people to latch on to such patently irrational ideas? More than that, how can these religious fanatics bring themselves to injure or kill others for the sake of their beliefs?
http://homepages.which.net/~radical.faith/reviews/armbat.htm

[Return to top of page](#)

Historical background

'After 11 September 2001,' wrote **Navid Kerman** in February 2002, 'I was frequently asked, as many scholars of Islamic studies probably were, why certain people are prepared to hijack an aeroplane and plunge themselves and all the other passengers to certain death. I do not have an answer. What I have done instead is to tell three stories – about the cult of martyrdom in Shi'ite Islam, about modern fantasies of salvation through self-sacrifice, and about power politics in the Middle East – which together assemble the elements of a fourth: the unfinished story of the modern world…'
http://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-islamicworld/article_88.jsp

In an article written shortly after 9/11 **Malise Ruthven** reported that 'a substantial body of research indicates that fundamentalist movements in the Abrahamic traditions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) are particularly attractive to graduates in the applied sciences (such as engineering, computer programming and other highly technical trades). Graduates in the arts and humanities who are trained to read texts critically may be less susceptible to the simplistic religious messages put forward by such movements. Technical specialisations discourage critical thinking.'
http://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-islamicworld/article_103.jsp

In an article in *The Guardian*, **Karen Armstrong** discussed issues of terminology. 'We need a phrase that is more exact than "Islamic terror". These acts may be committed by people who call themselves Muslims, but they violate essential Islamic principles. The Qur'an prohibits aggressive warfare, permits war only in self-defence and insists that the true Islamic values are peace, reconciliation and forgiveness. It also states firmly that there must be no coercion in religious matters, and for centuries Islam had a much better record of religious tolerance than Christianity…'
http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1525714,00.html

'What drives the bombers?' asks Bhikhu Parekh. 'How do they live with their deeds? Is there no alternative to the cycle of violence?' He adds: 'No one is better qualified to advise on this than Mahatma Gandhi, the great apostle of non-violence.' Parekh then imagines a dialogue between Gandhi and Osama Bin Laden and in doing so gives a fascinating account of Bin Laden's ideology.
http://9-11.haikolietz.de/backup/040400_Why_terror-_(Prospect).html

Return to top of page

Connections with terrorism

In an article entitled 'Tel Aviv first, then Manchester?' in 2003, **Fuad Nahdi** wrote: 'The combined forces of racial discrimination and Islamophobia have been awesome in the marginalisation and alienation of the community. As a result few, particularly young people, feel they have any viable stake in society … Our scriptures counsel endless patience. Were it not for Islam, the anti-western rhetoric and violence would be out of control. Yet, some of us have been tipped over the edge …'
http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,947851,00.html

The following links discuss these questions about motivation in further detail.

'What exactly is inside the mind of the Islamic suicide bomber? What impulse motivates a human being, who supposedly believes in God, to blow himself up alongside innocent people? To discuss these and other questions, **Frontpage Symposium** organised an academic symposium on 12 August whose members were **Jessica Stern**, author of *Terror in the Name of God: why religious militants kill*; **Theodore Dalrymple**, a prison psychiatrist with experience of treating Muslim patients; **Nancy Kobrin**, professor at the University of Haifa; and **Hans-Peter Raddatz**, a scholar in Islamic Studies.
http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=19110

'Why do suicide bombers do it?' Writing in *The Boston Globe* on 3 July, **Christopher Shea** reported briefly

on views and theories in recent academic writings.
http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2005/07/03/why_do_suicide_bombers_do_it/?page=fu

'Why they do it' was the title of a review article by **Christian Caryl** on the same theme, and discussing some of the same authors, in the *New York Review of Books*, 22 September 2005. The article reviewed *Dying to Win: the logic of suicide terrorism* by **Robert Pape**, *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* by **Diego Gambetta**, Suicide Bombers: Allah's new martyrs by **Farhad Khosrokhavar**, *Perfect Soldiers: the hijackers, who they were and why they did it* by Terry McDermott, *The Road to Martyrs' Square: journey into the world of the suicide bomber* by **Anne Marie Oliver** and **Paul Steinberg**, *Suicide Terrorism* by Ami Pedahzur, and *Dying to Kill: the allure of suicide terror* by **Mia Bloom**.
http://www.nybooks.com/articles/18256

Debates within Arab countries about the morality of suicide bombing were aired on 25 August by the **Middle East Media Research Institute** (MEMRI), quoting from a recent article by the former dean of the shari'a and law faculty at Qatar University: 'We are dealing with a new Islam, an angry Islam that is hostil to the world through its sons, whom we have not educated or taught well, and in whom we have not inculcated culture. [They] bear a hatred of life and of the living.'
http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=subjects&Area=reform&ID=SP96805

In the *New York Review of Books* on 11 August there was a substantial review essay by **Max Rodenbeck** discussing five academic books recently published in the United States about terrorist ideologies: *Globalized Islam* by **Olivier Roy**, *The War for Muslim minds* by **Gilles Keppel**, *Landscapes of the Jihad* by **Faisal Devji**, *Understanding Terror Networks* by **Marc Sageman**, and *Osma: the making of a terrorist* by **Jonathan Randal**.
http://www.nybooks.com/articles/18177