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*Fear of Modernity*  
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Over the past few months, one of the questions that has received extensive debate is, why? Why would they do this to us? What is it about us that attracted their hatred? One frequent answer is that this is the reaction of more traditional societies to modernity. That is, the more traditional societies of the Moslem world are being torn apart by modern culture coming from western Europe and America, and the United States is seen as the leader, especially since English is the predominant international language.

The media often portray this as modernity vs. fundamentalist religion, usually emphasizing Islam in the current context, but often extending to Christianity and even Judaism. A useful definition of fundamentalism is this: if a traditional religion is one that exists in a traditional society untouched by the pluralism of modernity, then fundamentalism is a traditional religion that rejects the choices that modern society offers to lead people away from their religion.

So what has fundamentalism rejected, whether Moslem, Christian or otherwise?

Technology, one of the key products of modern society, is widely accepted in Islamic and other fundamentalist religions. Most fundamentalist religions have Web sites. In modern Jerusalem, the Arab taxi drivers proudly drive Mercedes (while their Israeli counterparts can be found in Yugos). Fundamentalist Jewish groups in the heart of Jerusalem, those who still speak Yiddish rather than modern Hebrew, nevertheless use computers to do their bookkeeping and publications. In the United States, Christian fundamentalists have been among the greatest users of technology in worship and evangelism. So technology, however disruptive, generally has not been rejected by fundamentalist religions.

All fundamentalist religions reject modern pop culture. Since much of pop culture is created to shock or titillate jaded western sensibilities, it is not hard to imagine how it affects viewers from more

conservative societies. It represents modernity, especially modern western society, as overly interested in sex and violence. It shocks and confounds the ethical character and moral standards of more traditional societies. (Let's face it, it shocks the moral sensibilities of many members of our own society!) That fundamentalist Islam or Christianity reject pop culture should not be surprising.

But there is another area of modernity that fundamentalist religions see as even more dangerous, namely, the fields of the humanities and social sciences (also known as social studies). This is because these deal with ideas, rather than in the understanding of things, as do science and technology. Fundamentalists reject ideas such as the ability to debate and question the meaning of a text, as happens in the study of literature, and even sacred texts, as happens in religious studies. They reject the notion that the success of Paul or Mohammed in winning converts can be explained through the insights of anthropology. They won't accept sociological analyses in discussions on the status of people in society; they reject the analysis of notions of god or of truth as happens in philosophy; and reject the comparison of different ideas of justice, as happens in political science.

Fundamentalist religions are terrified by these ideas, which move from the clear-cut, correct or incorrect, black-and-white, study of the natural world and the application of that knowledge in technology and engineering, to the more gray areas of human and divine values. It is this aspect of modernity that they reject the most strongly, for it is these ideas that strike most deeply at their own ideas and beliefs.

So to say that fundamentalists fear and reject modernity is true, but much too vague. If we are going to understand what motivates them, we must identify which aspects of modernity cause which kinds of problems. That it is the areas that are innocuous to us that cause the most trouble should be a clue to further understanding of our differences.