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Fear of Modernity
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In the aftermath of the London bombing, western societies are once again debating the question, 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, people from the more traditional societies of the Moslem world, now living in the West and being inundated with Western (in this case, British) culture, find that their beliefs and moral values are being torn apart by modern culture.

In media punditry, this usually leads to the opposition of modernity vs. fundamentalist religion—usually emphasizing Islam in the current context, but often extending to Christianity and even Judaism. Here is a useful definition of fundamentalism: 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 has realized that modern society offers choices that lead people away from it, and the religion has rejected those choices.

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

Technology is one of the key products of modern society, what is the reaction to it? In Islamic and other fundamentalist religions, technology is widely accepted.

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, has generally not been rejected by fundamentalist religions.

One arena of modern society that all fundamentalist religions reject is that of 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! Fundamentalist Islam or Christianity's rejection of modernity's 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). That is because these deal with ideas, rather than in the understanding of things, as do science and technology. 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; the notion that one could explain the success of Paul or Mohammed in winning converts through the insights of anthropology, or discuss the rights and status of people in society through sociological analysis; the analysis of notions of god or of truth as happens in philosophy; or the comparison of different ideas of justice as happens in political science.

It is these ideas, where one moves 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 that terrify fundamentalist religions. It is this aspect of modernity that they reject 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.