'Christianity', it has been said, 'still needs to be rescued from the theologians.' I am not immediately concerned here with the value of that statement so far as Christianity is concerned, although what is said here may have some bearing on the matter. My more immediate interest is to discover how far it can justifiably be said of Islam that it, too, still needs to be rescued from the theologians. Few of us can have been unaware recently that fundamentalism is alive and well, not only in the West but in the Islamic world also, its other great home. That there are other attitudes which are equally characteristic of Islam is less well known. It is sometimes assumed in the West that the real opposition to fundamentalism comes from radical theology. What is more, radical theologians, as they observe the nature of fundamentalism in its European and American forms, are inclined to be impressed by its close alliance with right-wing political attitudes. Consequently there has been a fashion among radical theologians to adopt a political-theological stance, usually of a left-wing kind, and frequently having Marxist affiliations. In this paper I shall examine a different alternative to fundamentalism, one that is found in the Islamic world, but not necessarily confined to Islam.

Religious categories in Pakistan
A survey of the religious situation in Pakistan by Professor Leonard Binder of the University of California, published in 1963, identifies...
four major religious and anti-religious categories among the citizens of that country. Entrained throughout the rural areas, and to a lesser extent in the towns, are the medieval traditionalists, known in the Islamic context as the ‘ulamā’; these are the doctors of the law, and men of religious learning, since law and theology are inextricably intertwined; for ‘law’ in Islamic society implies ‘holy Law’ (shari'a). In contrast to these medievalists, with their differing schools of theological jurisprudence, are the biblical fundamentalists, found mostly in the towns and cities. Distrustful of the casuistry of those who represent the accretions of post-Qur'ānic tradition, the Muslim fundamentalist position can fairly be represented by the slogan, 'Back to the Qur'ān'. Their most characteristic representative is Maulana Mawdūdī, leader of a movement of revivalist fundamentalism known as Jamaat-i-Islam.

The third major type consists of the modernists, who regard themselves as good and faithful Muslims and believe that whatever is good in modern western life, such as democracy, is already comprehended within Islam, as well as a good deal more that modern western culture does not include. Finally, there are the secularists, 'small in number, but extremely powerful since they are the most highly Westernised and are often found in important positions in the civil service and military', and who include also the 'small but growing group of industrialists in Pakistan'.

The aims of the first three categories are in one respect similar; all seek in one way or another the promotion of Islam. The fourth, the secularists, have become what they are in the state of Pakistan at the cost of largely alienating themselves from Islamic tradition and culture. These are the westernized politicians, statesmen, and big industrialists who will make use of Islamic elements in the state when it is in their interests to do so, but who in their aims and methods and outlook are thoroughly secular, and, in the last resort, anti-religious. They, however powerful, are numerically a minority group, and the strength of numbers is with the other three types of religious Muslims; medievalists, fundamentalists and modernists. Development and modernization in

1 Binder, op. cit. p. 8 f.
Pakistan, as in other Muslim countries, entails in general the erosion of rural, traditionalist attitudes and the gradual spread of attitudes, ideas and values which have their characteristic locus in the towns and cities. It has to be emphasized that this is a generalization only, account has to be taken of the strength of reaction which in certain circumstances the traditional elements can muster, as they have done in other Muslim countries. However, in a general and long-term perspective the important categories are the two largely urban-based groups: the fundamentalists and the modernists.

Fundamentalism in Islam as in Christianity is an ideology of the Book as the all-sufficient guide in every condition and circumstance of life, in whatever century and for whatever purpose; 'the Book' being understood, of course, as the literally inspired word of God as it has been transmitted unimpaired in the received text; in one case in Arabic, and in the other in Jacobean English, most probably. The fundamentalists of Pakistan are serious, dedicated, earnest Muslims usually of the lower middle classes; small shopkeepers, traders, clerks and some students. They are often critical of the upper classes for their un-Islamic immorality and are, or would be, ardent fighters in the true cause of Islam as they understand it.

'Modernists' in Pakistan
It is among the modernists that one would expect to find a movement of a radical theological kind, if anywhere. Moreover, by dint of historical circumstances this is as likely to be found in Pakistan as anywhere in the Islamic world. Montgomery Watt, in his survey of Islamic philosophy and theology published in 1962, speaks of the need for 'intellectual renewal' within Islam in the modern world.1 But he finds few signs of it. He names three significant figures who have contributed towards such a renewal: one is an Egyptian, Muhammad Abduh (d.1905), a large part of whose achievement was the modernizing of the university of al-Azhar at Cairo, and who also produced a work of theology of a modernizing kind; the other two were men of the India–Pakistan

subcontinent, Syed Amir Ali and Sir Muhammad Iqbal. Both of these are remembered for their writings, which have been and still are highly regarded among English-speaking Muslims of the subcontinent; that is, Amir Ali’s *The Spirit of Islam* and Iqbal’s *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. In Montgomery Watt’s view, Pakistan is particularly significant as a possible source of ‘intellectual renewal’; because of the longer effective contact with Europe it has had compared with the countries of West Asia and the Levant.

The term ‘modernist’, when applied to Islamic theologians and writers, itself indicates a Western evaluation. Aziz Ahmad writes of ‘the modernist movement’ in India. I. H. Qureshi, in his history of the Muslim community in the subcontinent up to 1947, refers to Syed Ahmad Khan as ‘one of the earliest modernists in the history of Islamic thought’, and adds that ‘his path was not easy’. Qureshi refers to Amir Ali as one of those who walk in the footsteps of this early modernist. Percival Spear, in his popular history of India, writes of the lead given by Syed Ahmad Khan in the modern work of renewal within Indian Islam, whose work, he comments, ‘was as important for the Muslims as Ram Mohan Roy’s had been for the Hindus’ (referring here to the early nineteenth-century Hindu religious reformer who has sometimes been called the ‘father of modern India’). The representative Islamic modernists in Indo-Pakistan thus appear to be by general consensus: Syed Ahmad Khan, Muhammad Iqbal, and Amir Ali. There is one other whose name has been given prominence in more recent studies as being perhaps the leading Muslim modernist of Pakistan today and that is Ghulam Ahmad Parwez (born 1903), to whom Aziz Ahmad devotes a whole chapter of his account of Islamic Modernism in *India and Pakistan, 1857–1964*. Parwez is the subject of a number of other recent studies.

1 Revised edition, London 1922.
5 1967, ch. xiii.
These few, then, are the only incumbents of the role of 'modernist' in the theological scene in one of the two areas of the Islamic world which are considered most likely to engender such radical thought. Just how radical is the theology they have produced is, however, open to doubt. In the space available here I shall confine my attention to Parwiz, as the latest of this small number, and perhaps the most selfconsciously modernist. He certainly runs true to form in his sharp criticism of the 'absurdities of the traditionalists', and the 'niggling legalism' that so many of them uphold. He describes a sermon in a mosque, where the preacher is discoursing on the great blessings which will come to those who perform supererogatory prayers on the night of Shab-i-Barat. 'With tears in his eyes, the Maulana proclaimed the greatness of the divine mercy that is open to all. The only ones excluded were those who allowed their trousers to cover their ankles'.

This sort of criticism and caricaturing of the traditionalists may seem good fun to the young people of Pakistan who are wanting something better than the traditionalists have to offer, the young people to whom Parwiz consciously directs his writing. When one asks what Parwiz himself has to offer the answer appears to be, in Ahmad's words, that 'Parwiz has built up an entirely new and fantastic lexique technique to explain Qur'anic chapter and verse in modernist terms'. But no attempt whatever is made to go behind the received text of the Qur'an and engage in historical- and form-criticism. The text itself is regarded as sacrosanct. As the uttered word of God it has always been regarded by Islamic theologians as very close to God himself, and there was for a while, in an earlier period, a suggestion that it must even be regarded, like God, as uncreate, until the implications of this were seen and there was a hasty retreat from what would have been the emergence of a doctrine of two uncreate Gods. However, it has been said, justifiably, that in Islam the Word was made Book.

It is this attitude to the Qur'an which has inhibited critical study and evaluation of the text; the historical occasions on which

---

1McDonough, op. cit. p. 82.
2Ibid. p. 80.
different suras were received by the Prophet are acknowledged, of course; some suras in Mecca and others in Medina. But beyond this, critical Qur'ānic studies have been mainly the work of non-Muslim Western scholars. Islamic theologians have been concerned mainly with the exposition of the text as it stands. In other words, their activity has been mainly of a scribal kind, and has resulted in the building up of a vast body of scholasticism. Even the most modern of the modernists, Parwīz, is engaged essentially in this kind of activity. His modernism consists in his criticism of what he regards as outdated expositions, and for this he has attracted bitter opposition; over a thousand of the 'ulamā of Pakistan signed a statement declaring him an apostate. What Aziz Ahmad describes as Parwīz's 'exegetical neo-modernism' consists in giving to the text of the Qurān 'a far-fetched meaning and interpretation to suit the political or economic requirements of present day Islamic society'.\(^1\) One has to ask whether this kind of exegetical activity is in principle distinguishable from any other kind of Biblical fundamentalism. So, in the context of radical theology, one has to admit that the activities of these Islamic modernists are somewhat disappointing. In the last resort, it might seem, Muslims are imprisoned within a fundamentalism from which there is no escape.

In India attention has been drawn to the opportunity which 'educated and forward-looking Muslims' have in religiously plural modern India of undertaking a 'creative reinterpretation of their faith' and of looking afresh at the history of Islam and of its crisis in the modern world, not as the champions of an ideology, but as human beings concerned with the dignity of human beings.\(^2\) What biblical literalists in all religious traditions ignore is their own ideological bias. No one is entirely free from such bias, but the bias is more sinister when it is assumed not to exist. The fundamentalist asserts that the text which he has received consists in a set of eternal, living truths. Fundamentalism can be seen by the non-fundamentalist as the exploitation of a dead text in such a way as to tally with the interests of the 'interpreter' of the text. For the words of the text must always be 'interpreted'. This inevitably

\(^1\)Ibid. p. 233.

\(^2\)A. B. Shah, Challenges to Secularism (Bombay, 1968), pp. 35, 39.
entails the activity of an interpreter who comes with his own human presuppositions, and in their light offers an account of what the words are taken to mean. Those who are predisposed to accept his account will do so and for them his interpretation is the opening up of the ‘truth’; those who cannot share such a view are regarded as hard of heart and unbelievers. Every fundamentalism, Christian, or Muslim or any other, has thus a built-in guarantee of infallibility. The difficulty is that there are so many fundamentalisms. The difficulty disappears when you realize that all the others, except your own, are wrong.

If one rejects this kind of theory, then it matters that human beings should have access to some other means of knowledge concerning their nature and destiny, however imperfect and difficult to apprehend that knowledge may be; even if we have to confess, in good company, that now we see only διʼ εσοπρού αναιγματι. Radical theology can do no more than clear away some of the debris that has, in the course of time, come to obscure and obstruct our access to the roots or, if you like, to the heart of the matter. We need to see certain things more clearly. Whatever it may mean that where there is no vision the people perish, it can, I believe, be argued historically that where there is no religious alternative to a blind fundamentalism we are left with a secularism that is even darker. But is a radical theology the only, or indeed, sufficient alternative?

Let us consider a little more closely the nature of the problem. The tensions which must inevitably arise within a religious tradition that seems to acknowledge no other authority, in effect, than that of a set of documents, will at some point or other become unbearable, and some way of release from those tensions will be found. This, at any rate, is the evidence presented by the Islamic religious tradition. A classic case of this is to be found in the life and experience of Muhammad Al-Ghazālī born in Persia in the year 1058.

The Sufi tradition
Al-Ghazālī was, in more senses than one, a pilgrim. At the age of thirty-six he left his university post in Baghdad, the city of the Abbasid Caliphs, and travelled to Mecca and to various other
places in the Muslim world. As well as being a pilgrim he was also in a sense a refugee, a refugee from the orthodox scholasticism of Baghdad, which had become for him personally the city of destruction. In fleeing the city, and in the new vision of human life which he thereby gained, a vision later conveyed to others in his books, he ‘not only anticipated in a remarkable fashion John Bunyan’s Holy War and Pilgrim’s Progress,’ writes Idris Shah, ‘but influenced Ramón Martín, Thomas Aquinas and Pascal, as well as numerous more modern thinkers’. Or, in the words of Henri Corbin, ‘il abandonne l’université et sa famille, sacrifiant tout à la recherche de la certitude intérieure garante de la Verité. ... Il quitte Baghdad, s’engage dans la voie étroite conduisant à la certitude.’ He travelled alone, as he wrote later, ‘seeking solitariness ... trying to make clear my soul’. Twelve years passed, as he continued his search. It was, finally, among the Sufis of Islam that he arrived at what Professor Hitti has called the ‘mystico-psychological’ answer. This happened not as the outcome of a process of philosophical argument or reasoning, but, in his own words, ‘through a light which God (to whom be the Praise) cast into my breast...’. Indeed, he subsequently wrote a treatise which was directed against the Graeco-Islamic philosophy of Ibn Sina, which he entitled The Incoherence of the Philosophers. Al-Ghazālī as an orphan child had been brought up among Sufis, in a school in Central Asia. Now, as a theologian, a man in middle life, he came to realize that whatever might be meant by the term ‘God’ was not to be apprehended by scholasticism or formal reason: ‘the Sufis’, he said, ‘are not men of words, but of inner perception; I had learned all that could be learned by reading. The remainder could not be acquired by study or talk’. It is important to lay emphasis upon the firmly held position from which Al-Ghazālī became the outstanding figure in Islam as one who pointed the way out of the tensions which had been produced in the minds of Muslims by a rigid fundamentalism, and who reached the position where ‘he could represent

both the mystical and the theological worlds perfectly within their own contexts.¹

This balance between theological scholasticism and the inner apprehension of the reality to which religion attempts to bear witness 'saved Muslim theology from decay'.² The ethical and spiritual discipline of the Sufis paid proper attention to the moral prerequisites of the mystical way, by requiring conformity with the _s**a**ra**i**a_. In the Indian subcontinent the Sufi orders were active in the spread of Islam from the twelfth century onwards, and were in fact far more responsible for Islamic expansion among the people of India than were the Muslim political rulers, whose exercise of power was as often as not contra-productive in terms of mission. The writings of Al-Ghazālī had a great popularity in India from the thirteenth century³; in general the presence of the Sufis appears usually to have been a guarantee of that tolerant coexistence which characterized the relations of Hindus and Muslims in India (notably, for example, in Bengal) until the advent of nationalist Muslim and Hindu politics in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British India. The Sufi element then became weakened, and in some areas was largely submerged in fundamentalist orthodoxy. This may be one reason why Binder's survey of the religious types in post-independence Pakistan makes no mention of the Sufis. Like so much else that is on the side of the ennoblement of mankind, what was left of Sufism appears to have become a casualty to the twentieth century's excessive preoccupation with political activity.

**A time for contemplative theology**

The balance in Sufism between the tenets of the _s**a**ra**i**a_ and the way of the mystic which had been established by Al-Ghazālī and introduced into India can be compared with the conflict in twentieth-century Christianity between fundamentalism and radical theology. In making this observation one is fully aware of the extent of the mystical tradition within European Christianity until about the end of the seventeenth century. Nevertheless such was

---

¹Ibid. p. 149.
²Ibid. p. 150.
the enthusiasm with which the early radical attacks on Christian fundamentalism were received by some of the bystanders—notably in Protestant Germany—that early radical theology, associated with names such as those of David Strauss, Bruno Bauer, and Ludwig Feuerbach, was invested with an importance that it hardly merits in its own right. That is to say, the acclaim which it received from the Young Hegelians in Berlin was as much an indicator of the extent to which Christianity had become identified with political power in the form of the Prussian state, a fact which is demonstrated by the somewhat excessive reaction of the Prussian authorities to the kind of theological writings which had begun to appear. It was Feuerbach's radical philosophical criticism of theology which led one of the Young Hegelians, Karl Marx, to generate his so-called 'critique of religion'. By this he meant, it is quite clear, a 'critique of Prussian Protestantism' (at least, that is all that the data he produced would support), but it is as a 'critique of religion' that it has been blindly accepted by many of his followers as applying universally to all religious activity. Marx's own position was one which, in his early days, allowed room for an admiration of what he considered 'mystical' writers, notably Jacob Boehme. But in Marx's later pre-occupation with economics and politics (into which, as he has said, he was led by his investigations into the nature of Prussian state Protestantism), his earlier, spasmodic interest in mystical religion and popular religious movements disappeared altogether.

Whether modern radical theology, in the Christian context, shows as good a sense of balance between the destructive and the constructive, between formal argument and intuition, as did Al Ghazâlî's theology, is too large a question for even an attempt at an answer to be offered here. It is interesting to notice, however, that one's mathematical colleagues nowadays, when commending the work of a fellow-mathematician, will speak highly of his 'intuition', as well as of the reasoned argument with which that intuition is supported. If that is the case in mathematics, one is perhaps entitled to speculate whether it would not also be possible, and even respectable, for modern theologians to allow a place in their work for intuitive, even contemplative elements rather than, as appears to be the case with some, a
fascination with so-called scientific methods which appear, in the outcome, to be of a largely reductionist kind, and to be more likely to afford satisfaction to the many who still believe that the answers to most human problems are to be found in the political arena. One of the consequences of this exalting of the political element in human affairs is the easy assumption that theology, to be acceptable, has to be political theology. Those who do not believe that human problems can ultimately find a political solution will see in this trend a danger, that of division of all human concerns between the political extreme Left and extreme Right. The first casualty in that conflict is likely to be humanity—i mean 'humanity' as a quality of life. It is precisely at such a time of political polarization that a non-political, contemplative theology could play an important neutral role: providing a basis from which human beings could speak to, and for, other human beings in terms other than those of the inevitable political trap into which it now seems everything is moving.

For it is evident that political solutions to human problems are not proving universally satisfactory; this is evident even to those of us who are now over forty, nourished as we were in our youth on the idea that religion was a spent force in the modern world. For to look round the world in the 1980s is to see plenty of evidence of political-theological conflict, the type of conflict which the materialists of the thirties had thought belonged to the old dead world of the past and not to the brave new world into which we were moving, where religion was confidently assumed to be withering away.

The manner in which theological partisanship can be taken over and developed by contending political extremes will vary from one situation to another and from one century to another. To return to Pakistan, the situation there, politically tense no doubt, is also theologically fragmented, as we have seen, between, on the one hand, medievalists and, on the other, Biblical fundamentalists of whichever kind. This kind of tension has already in some parts of the Muslim world erupted into destructive violence. Biblical fundamentalists in other traditions and in other parts of the world are not noticeably found among the doves; neither are those of the extreme Left, whose quasi-
religious ideology the Biblical fundamentalists find such satisfaction in hating, and which radical theology therefore concludes that it must embrace, in a new-found unity called political theology.

In the case of India (of which Pakistan also was once a part, before politics took over Islamic religion and developed it into an Indian religio-political party), there was a time when the religious alternative to fundamentalist theology was still alive and well. This can be illustrated from the history of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century India.

Politics and religion in Mughal India
The history of the Mughal Empire in India is a history of politics, and a history of religion; the two spheres of activity are continually interweaving, as in so much of Islamic history from the days of the Prophet himself. In India governments came and went. But they were dynastic governments; sometimes they maintained their existence for a century or two; at other times they lasted only a decade or less. When a government fell it was not on election day, but on the day of a great battle, such as that in 1526 at Panipat, which raged from morning until evening, between the Sultan of Delhi and the invading Babur, king of Kabul. On that day, 'when the sun set Sultan Ibrāhīm lay dead on the field, surrounded by 15,000 of his brave men'. The political consolidation of the empire over which Babur that day gained control lasted the rest of his life and throughout the life of his son Humayan. It occupied also the first twenty years of the reign of his grandson, the great emperor Akbar. For each of them the political problem was that of retaining the loyalty of the nobles who supported them, and in anticipating any tendency these nobles might show to attach themselves to other centres of power within the empire, such as disappointed rival claimants, of whom there was seldom any lack. In addition Akbar, in particular, was involved in the reconstruction of the administrative system, and of ensuring by check and countercheck that the power of the state officials did not become too great for the emperor to control them.\(^1\)


\(^2\)Ibid. p. 345.
The religious dimension presented a different set of problems. Among the Muslim nobles, officials, and the body of the faithful continual grouping and re-grouping was taking place around various religious teachers and other venerated figures. By the time of Akbar (who was a contemporary of Queen Elizabeth I of England) the Sufis were a prominent feature of Indian Islam; Akbar himself held one of the Sufi teachers, Sheikh Salim, in great esteem.\footnote{A. Ahmad, \textit{An Intellectual History of Islam in India}, p. 38.}

Apart from the emperor and his Muslim subjects, however, there was the much greater number of non-Muslim inhabitants of the empire, the vast majority of whom were Hindus. Relations between Muslim rulers, administrators, and missionaries on the one hand, and the by no means always submissive Hindus had therefore to be given the most careful attention by any ruler who wished to retain his power. This Akbar certainly succeeded in doing; in spite of the magnitude of the task he was probably more successful at it than any Mughal ruler after him, not excepting the great Aurangzeb, whose imperial reign lasted for fifty years, into the first decade of the eighteenth century. In particular, Akbar contrived to keep in check the extreme orthodox wing of the Muslim religious professionals, the ulamā, critical as they were of what they saw as his over-liberal and sometimes heterodox religious views and practices. But after his death in 1605 they took the opportunity to strengthen their influence with his successor, Jahangir, and, on his death in 1627, continued to do so in Shah Jahan's reign.

By this time there were two fairly clearly distinguishable wings of the Muslim community in Mughal India: the orthodox, and the liberals. The emperor Shah Jahan had four sons. Each acted as viceroy to his father in one of the four regions of the empire; each exercised a considerable amount of independence in the control of his province, and each sought to maximize his own power within the empire at the expense of his brothers. The eldest of the four, Dara Shikoh, while he was a professed Muslim, was regarded as a virtual apostate by the others, particularly by the third son Aurangzeb, who was a strict and devout Sunni Muslim. The other two brothers, seeing the opportunity to increase their power at
the expense of Dara Shikoh, sided with their extremely orthodox brother Aurangzeb. Dara Shikoh was guilty in their eyes of a somewhat too accommodating attitude towards Hindus, and even of associating with Hindu philosophers as well as the Sufi Muslim teachers. He had even engaged in the comparative study of Hindu and Muslim scriptures and had sought to understand the Qur'an in the light of the Old and the New Testaments. The story is a fascinating one but there is no time for it here. It must suffice to say that at this stage in the history of Indian Islam, political alignments had come to coincide disastrously with theological. The immediate outcome was the trial of Dara Shikoh for apostasy, his execution, and thus the eventual succession of Aurangzeb to the imperial throne. The longer term consequence was the determined attempt by Aurangzeb throughout his long reign to suppress any theological or religious position other than that of the most extreme theocratic orthodoxy. He denied his non-Muslim subjects the social and religious rights they had enjoyed under Akbar, and at his death in 1707 relations between Aurangzeb and his non-Muslim subjects, which had been at their best during Akbar's reign, were now probably at the worst they had ever been. In short, therefore, the theological rivalries of sixteenth-century Mughal India had disastrous effects which have probably not yet run their course. If in Pakistan to-day modernism is ineffective, and the only other alternative to Qur'anic fundamentalism is medieval traditionalism, then it is not surprising that many young people there are now turning to the secular materialism of the oligarchy. Radical theology in the Christian tradition is similarly exposed to dangers which are inherent in alliance with political interests.

Sufism in Bengal

A further aspect of the check to Islamic fundamentalism provided by the contemplative element in Muslim religion has now to be considered. Binder's analysis deals primarily with West Pakistan, that is, Pakistan as it has been since 1971, but which between 1947 and 1971 was the western wing of a state which had two wings. The other, eastern wing, broke free from Karachi's rule in 1971 to

1 Ahmad, Islamic Culture . . . p. 192.
become Bangladesh. There the Sufi element persists, and has persisted through the centuries. The fact that by the beginning of the twentieth century the majority of the people of Bengal were Muslims was very largely due to the missionary activities of the Sufis there. Binder's analysis of Pakistani religious formations into medievalists, fundamentalists, modernists and secularists, omitting as it does any mention of the Sufis as a distinct element, does not hold good for Bangladesh and West Bengal. Sufism is found in the Bengali speaking region to a considerably greater extent than in most Muslim countries, and it has been estimated that as many as two-thirds of the people are in some way under the influence of Sufis.¹ This strongly Sufi element manifested itself, in the political activities of the Muslims of Bengal, in a spirit of diplomacy and statesmanship;² it can also be seen as the explanation for the generally harmonious relationship which existed between Muslims and non-Muslims in Bengal until the middle decades of this century when political ideologies from outside Bengal were injected into Bengali social and cultural life. The adherents of the type of Islamic religion found in Bengal were mostly ordinary men and women, not distinguished for education and refinement. 'But they had a natural intelligence and culture', writes Enamul Haq. 'For want of proper training, though, they were not always very accurate in their mystic speculations, yet the sincere and clear expression of their thought touched deeply the finer chord of human sentiment.'³

These various aspects of Muslim religion in Bengal constitute important evidence of the effect which may be produced by a strongly contemplative emphasis in theology, particularly its effect in terms of the avoidance of the more extreme kind of social polarization. A contemplative or mystical element is present in Hindu theology also, but the crucial difference between the Hindu and Islamic theologies is that the former sanctions social class distinctions of a deeply divisive kind, whereas Islamic

³ Ibid. p. 295.
theology has no place for social distinctions between Muslims. That fact notwithstanding, social distinctions are found among Muslims, especially in the Indian sub-continent. But they are less pronounced among Muslims than among non-Muslims; they are among Indian Muslims *situational* (that is, not of the Islamic tradition, but arising out of the local situation and surrounding culture), whereas among Hindus they are *traditional* (that is, they are embedded within the tradition itself).²

In Bengal the strength of the Sufi tradition has the effect of making the pattern of Islamic religion uniquely Bengali.³ This is the case in both Bangladesh and West Bengal: in both parts of formerly undivided Bengal the *Pir*, or Muslim religious preceptor and guide, is greatly respected and after his death is venerated, as saints are in Catholic countries. The Pir's disciple (*murid*) may be a householder who visits his preceptor from time to time to consult him and receive his guidance and spiritual counsel, and to make an offering to him. The *murid* may also become one of a permanent brotherhood living with the Pir (or *murshid* as he is known in Sufi tradition) in a day to day fellowship of contemplative piety.

Pirs are, in Bengal, ascribed the honourable status of Sayyids, the highest of the noble (or *ashraf*) classes in Muslim society, and are, in general, regarded as 'very religious people'.³ The Pir's tomb becomes a shrine, to which pilgrimage is made, and at which prayers and token gifts are offered on the anniversary of his death. The tomb of a Pir whose saintly reputation is very great may become a centre of pilgrimage for many miles around on the Pir's death anniversary. One such that I attended was at Patthar Chapri, in Birbhum District of West Bengal, where a nineteenth-century Pir, Shah Mahbub, or Data Sahib as he is known locally, lies buried. For a few days the country roads around this small Bengali village among the paddy fields are lined with parked country buses and smart Calcutta touring coaches in which large numbers of pilgrims have come to Data Sahib's tomb; Hindus as well as

³Bhattacharya, op cit. p. 117.
Muslims will come in order to visit the tomb of a holy man on his special day. Pedlars and side-shows of various kinds, and beggars of every degree, throng the roads, and yet there is a predominantly religious atmosphere. The number of pilgrims who attend is estimated at ten thousand.¹

The tradition of Muslim-Hindu harmony in Bengal

The attendance of Hindus at the shrine of a Pir is an indication of the generally good relations which were for centuries characteristic of Bengal and which only in the latter half of the nineteenth century became politicized and thereby soured. From late medieval times there was a tradition of generally harmonious co-existence between Muslims and Hindus in Bengal. For about six centuries Bengal was under Muslim rule, and throughout most of that time relations between Muslim and Hindu villagers appear to have been generally friendly. Muslim rulers were sometimes oppressive, as also Hindu rulers had been occasionally, but in these cases they were oppressive to both Muslim and Hindu subjects alike. On the other hand it was not unknown for Hindu poets, from the thirteenth century onwards, to praise their Muslim rulers for their beneficent government. One who received such tributes was Nasira Shah, who ruled Bengal from about 1285 to 1325. He is said to have sponsored a translation of the Mahabharat from Sanskrit into Bengali. Notable also for the patronage given to Bengali poetic literature was the reign of Husain Shah, in the fifteenth century.

It might be argued by fundamentalist Muslims that Hindus and Muslims have in the past had too much in common culturally and religiously. Muslim poets in Bengal in the medieval period took to using the forms and language of Vaishnava (Hindu) devotional literature. But in their use of ideas and forms familiar to Hindus these Muslim poets did not cease to be Muslim. Indeed, precisely because sympathy and understanding were shown for local cults and the mystical ideas which underlay them, converts to Islam grew in number.²

In a biography of Shri Chaitanya we are told of a Hindu named Haridas Thakur who was brought before Husain Shah on a charge of blasphemy. We are told that he said to his defence that the God worshipped by Muslims and the God worshipped by Hindus are one and the same, and that ‘the Koran and the Puran speak of the same ultimate reality’. The writer comments that the assembled Muslims ‘were pleased at these noble words’. Possibly there is some exaggeration here, but Hindu writers in the period of Muslim rule in Bengal would hardly be likely to make such statements, even though they were exaggerated, had there been a state of tension and conflict between Muslims and Hindus.¹

Hindu–Muslim relations in a changing world

Extreme Muslim orthodoxy may regard this tradition of Muslim–Hindu fraternity in Bengal as the erosion and corruption of the pure Islamic tradition by the uniquely Sufi quality of Bengali Muslim religion. Nevertheless the fact is that the sixty million or so Muslims in Bangladesh have inherited a tradition of Islamic religion accommodating itself to Bengali culture, a tradition which is of much longer standing in Bengal than the revivalistic exclusiveness of recent decades. The theory of religious professionals is that a religion is of necessity everywhere one and the same. The facts are that ‘religions’, or more accurately, theologies, everywhere adapt themselves to the culture of the region into which they have entered; the real situation is one of variety. The religion of Bengali Muslims is the religion of people who are Bengali as well as Muslim, and who have been and still are conscious of the common culture which they share with other Bengalis.

It was about the end of the nineteenth century that this tradition of Hindu–Muslim amity in Bengal began to be disrupted, seriously and widely. No doubt one can find instances from the preceding centuries of local Hindu–Muslim hostility or quarrelling. But the extent to which these two communities became avowedly and self-consciously hostile, and thus made necessary the invention of a new word, ‘communalism’, is something which happened under British rule.

¹Ibid. p. 342.
Some differential factors between Muslims and Hindus had been increasing in intensity gradually from the second quarter of the nineteenth century, particularly in the few urban centres, and most notably in the Calcutta-Hooghlyside area, where Hindus were availing themselves of English education and Western learning much more readily and enthusiastically than were their Muslim fellow countrymen. There is a marked difference in the attitudes of Hindu and Muslim to each other, as it is reflected in Bengali literature, between the beginning of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth. This has been illustrated by Rachel van der Meter, who has taken three representative works of Bengali literature each of which deals explicitly with Hindu/Muslim relations.¹ The first, written in 1801, was a novel, by Ram Ram Basu: 'The story ... is centred around the relationship between Hindus and Muslims at the political and social levels', and shows 'the almost total lack of evidence of Hindu–Muslim tension.' The unselfconscious style in which these matters are dealt with suggests that the period when the story was written 'was characterised by an acceptance of the fact among Hindus that Muslims and Hindus should live and work together'. The second example is Bankimchandra’s novel Sitaram which appeared in 1887. By this time it becomes clear that there is a much greater degree of inter-community hostility and the Hindus' extreme aversion to Muslims at all levels. 'Bankimchandra writes of two communities set in direct opposition to each other.' The third example, also by a Hindu writer, Saratchandra Chatterji, appeared in 1921. It is the story of the most appallingly callous treatment of a Muslim peasant and his motherless daughter by a hard and utterly unmerciful Brahmin landlord. Rachel van der Meter comments that 'Saratchandra's story is an unmistakable appeal to his own community for a return to reason, for peace and harmony in every-day life with men of the other community.'²

What had happened in the intervening years between 1801 and ¹Rachel R. van der Meter, 'Communal Attitudes in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in Bengal: Literature and History, ed. Edward C. Dimock, Michigan, 1967.
1921 was the growth of political consciousness; first a nationalist consciousness, the common opposition of both Hindus and Muslims to British rule, and then communal consciousness, as the political situation grew more complex. The novelist Bankimchandra Chatterji reflected the increased hostility between Hindus and Muslims in Bengal by the end of the nineteenth century. As Nirad Chaudhuri in his *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, recalled, concerning his own childhood in East Bengal, ‘We felt a retrospective hostility towards the Muslims for their one-time domination of us’, a hostility which, in his view, had been stimulated by the novels of Bankimchandra and of another Hindu writer, Romesh Chandra Dutt. ‘Even before we could read we had been told that the Muslims had once ruled and oppressed us, that they had spread their religion in India with the Koran in one hand and the sword in the other, that the Muslim rulers had abducted our women, destroyed our temples, polluted our sacred places.’

When the relationship between Hindus and Muslims had deteriorated to this extent, the smallest occasion of resentment could easily be magnified into a serious public issue. The more rapid growth in numbers of Muslims compared with Hindus was such an issue and it became increasingly sinister in the nineteen-thirties and forties when Bengalis were being introduced to parliamentary representation and electioneering. Such differential rates of population growth between the two communities are still continuing. A number of general explanations can be offered. One is the respective attitudes of the two communities towards widows. Muslim widows remarry and can thus continue to bear children, while Hindu widows may not. Moreover, a Hindu widow who, not being allowed to marry again, nevertheless has an affair and becomes pregnant, will out of shame abort the unborn child, whereas a Muslim widow in the same circumstances will proudly carry her child and regard it as an inducement to her lover to add her to any wives he may already have. A number of other explanations of the growth of Muslim numbers are offered, such as the generally more sickness-prone nature of Hindus, but these are sometimes unreliable. What is certain, however, is that conversion still occurs, mostly in favour of Muslims.

In Bolpur, in West Bengal, where I lived from January 1978 to
April 1979, such cases were known. Sometimes they occurred when a Hindu male wished to take a second wife, without the difficulties entailed in divorcing the first, but more often it is when a Hindu to whom his social order ascribes a hopelessly depressed position embraces Islam as a way of attaining 'a reasonably honourable existence'. One such convert in Bolpur remarked that 'the Moulavi is the only man who comes to us in times of distress, and in him we find a real friend of downtrodden people like us'.

However, it is in the cities and densely urban areas that Hindu-Muslim relations are more strained. In Calcutta, for example, young Muslims in the highly congested and very deprived areas, such as Ward 51, eke out a crowded existence; they are uneasily aware of their position as a minority group among predominantly Hindu surrounding neighbourhoods; and some of them in this Ward told me that they and the Catholics of the area (to whom they are able to relate more closely) 'have always a fear-complex', afraid of what always could happen to them, as it did in the violent riots of 1964 especially, and again in 1969. It is significant that even in such circumstances three young graduate Muslims (who lived in one small room) with whom I talked, did not resort to any extreme Muslim fundamentalist denunciation of Hindus. The exclusivism of those Muslims who hold that 'only Muslims are true believers and only they will be saved', and that all 'unbelievers' will be damned was, they said, 'very difficult to accept'. One of them volunteered the view that the 'holy books' were written for an earlier age and a different situation, and therefore have to be reinterpreted; that one must not confuse essential things with non-essential. Moreover, in contrast to Parwız's modernism their attitude was one of being prepared to question even the received text—and yet of still affirming their Muslim identity; they were not prepared to regard

1 See Chittapriya Mukherjee, Urban Growth in a Rural Area (Visva-Bharati, Santinkietan, 1972), p. 203.
2 In the central area of Calcutta, adjacent to the old Calcutta Madrasa, and southward from there to Ripon Street. In this Ward Muslims (66 per cent of the people) and Christians (17 per cent) are in the unusual position of forming the majority of the inhabitants of the area. In two other Wards (57 and 53) they together make a majority (62 per cent and 54 per cent, respectively). There were 75 Wards in the city of Calcutta in 1971.
themselves as secularists. They saw themselves, with the Catholics of this Ward, as two religious minorities, with a sense of community in the religious stance they shared. ‘You can believe in God, or not’, one of them said, ‘but you cannot deny him. You can doubt—and who does not? But after doubt, faith is doubly strong.’ It may be of some significance that these Muslims were not born in Calcutta; they had come here from the countryside of West Bengal, first to college, and then had stayed in the city. Their basic attitudes owed a great deal, perhaps, to the relaxed and tolerant Muslim religious life of the Bengal villages. I went with one of them, later, to visit his village in the rich green countryside of Murshidabad District, where one was constantly being reminded of the cordial relations which still existed between Muslims and Hindus.

I found a similarly relaxed attitude among those Muslims I talked with on various visits to the mosque in Bolpur, the small market town on the outskirts of which I was living in Bengal. Whether they spoke of the discrediting of Darwin, the inappropriateness to India of Marx, or the ultimate impotence of moonshot technology, it was without the fiery anti-Western emotion which might be found in some parts of the Islamic world.

As indicators of the degree to which the religious and social life of Muslims in Bengal remains characteristically Islamic, two examples may be mentioned (to which others could be added). One of these is the place afforded to the Qur’ān and to Qur’ānic teaching. The Friday noon-prayers which I attended in Birbhum District, whether in the mosque in Bolpur town or in a rural mosque at Kenddangel, a village some five miles away, were well attended; in the latter, fifty worshippers of all ages crowded into the small mosque, and that was all it would hold; the namāz was thoroughly traditional, in the important place that was given to the Qur’ānic discourse, with its practical application to the everyday life of the Muslim of some incident or passage from the Qur’ān. Moreover, even although in parts of rural Bengal ‘sound knowledge of Qur’ānic and other Islamic texts’ is not very frequently encountered, nevertheless, those who do possess such knowledge ‘are highly esteemed’.1 Second, although in the

1Ranjit K. Bhattacharya, The Concept and Ideology of Caste among the
predominantly Hindu environment there is a ‘situational’ tendency towards social hierarchy, this should not be exaggerated so far as Muslims are concerned. For, as Bhattacharya records (also with reference to Bolpur District):

Muslims of all castes, high and low, can enter the mosque provided their clothes are clean and can perform prayers shoulder to shoulder in the same row (locally called katad). No high caste person would mind saying his prayers behind a Julaha or Patua or Shah who may happen to come first and stand in the front row.¹

This same point was mentioned to me by Muslims of Ward 51 in Calcutta; social status, they said, does not make any difference, whoever or wherever it is, ‘from the President of India to an ordinary man, all will stand side by side’. In this respect the Muslims of India, including Bengal, have preserved their essentially Islamic attitudes somewhat better than Christians in India have in some cases managed to preserve theirs. What is more immediately significant is that these two features of Islam in Bengal are important in view of the allegation which was made by the Muslims of Pakistan in 1971 (at the time of the Pakistan–Bangladesh war) that Bengalis were, so to speak, inferior or even doubtful Muslims. Those who know both areas affirm that on the whole Bengal’s record is the better of the two, certainly so far as rural mosque attendance is concerned.²

Muslims without fundamentalism

Thus, while Muslim life in Bengal can be truly characterized as Islamic, one is aware also in Bengal of a relaxed and easy attitude which contrasts with the strict fundamentalism of the Jamaat-i-Islami and its literature, published mainly in Lahore. The Jamaat-i-Islami has never gained much of a following in Bengal (whether in West Bengal or Bangladesh). The theological liberalism which is characteristic of Bengali Muslims perhaps underlies not only the lack of appeal of the Jamaat-i-Islami, but also the decline of the Muslim League in Bengal after 1947. But this in no way indicates a withdrawal of Bengali Muslims, as individuals, from the political

¹Muslims of Rural West Bengal’, in Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims, ed. by Imtiaz Ahmad (Delhi, 1913), p. 118.
²Ibid. p. 296.
³Personal information from Dr Hamza Alavi.
arena, or of even the slightest lack of concern with political issues; it is rather that political parties were no longer formed along religious alignments. The two dimensions, religious and political, are respected each in its own right; neither of them is required to conform closely to the other. Why this is so in Bengal, in contrast with, for example, northern India, is an engrossing question, and one which does not admit of any simple answer.

However, until it is possible for more thorough research to be undertaken into this and other aspects of the religion of Bengali Muslims, some possibly significant factors may be tentatively mentioned here.

The religious characteristics of the Sufis can be seen to be of the same kind as those of the Prophet. First, his experience of encounter with the divine did not lead him to lay down particularist or partisan prescriptions for a certain, politically defined section of humanity. His attitude was universalist. A genuinely radical theology concerns itself with theos, and with what is universal. Political theology, on the other hand, is by definition the 'theology' of a politically defined interest group; it is therefore, in principle, tribal. Second, the Prophet's experience was of an eternally living divine presence. If the experience of this living divine presence was possible in the sixth century that experience will have become impossible in later centuries only if humanity has changed so totally: the eternal does not change. It is possible to see that where the divine voice is no longer heard men will excuse the fact, as they have done, by saying that the divine no longer speaks, that is, that the divine has changed. No wonder then, when this is asserted, the rumour gains ground that God is dead. It is very convenient too, for the fundamentalist, for there is no danger of his interpretations of the words found in an ancient text ever being contradicted by a living voice.

Radical theology is thus very close to the teaching of the Sufis; non-particularist, non-nationalist, non-tribal, non-exclusivist. It tends to lead men out of the tribal enclaves, to identify themselves with the human race, not with a self-proclaimed 'chosen' race. A theology which is partisan, even though it represents the interests of half the human race, is still exclusive, whether it is fundamentalist, or political.
Finally, the fact that the Muslims of Bengal have a closer affinity with the Sufis than with the fundamentalists may be not altogether unconnected with another fact about them, the significance of which can be only summarily mentioned here, that they are, proportionately, more rural dwellers than urban dwellers. In Uttar Pradesh the percentage of Muslims to the total population who are urban is 30 per cent, whereas the percentage of Muslims to total rural population is only 13 per cent. In Bihar, the corresponding figures are 18 per cent urban and 13 per cent rural. In West Bengal, however, only 11 per cent of urban dwellers are Muslims, but 23 per cent of rural; in Assam 11 per cent of urban dwellers and 25 per cent of rural. In terms of the actual distribution of the Muslim community in the state of West Bengal, 86 per cent of them are rural dwellers and only 14 per cent are urban. As I have tried to suggest, although rather impressionistically, even those West Bengal Muslims who live in Calcutta have, in many cases, rural origins and rural affiliations, and this is reflected in the kind of religious attitudes which are characteristic of them.

It is important also to notice that rural dwelling Muslims are not isolated; they do not live apart from one another; one of the features of rural Muslim life is the high degree of social communication which is found. Rural Muslims are Muslims living together, with communication between the different village or hamlet groupings, but living in a rural environment.

On the other hand, fundamentalism of the kind exemplified by the Jamaat-i-Islami has its characteristic base in towns and cities, and in what may be described as a small-town mentality, as Binder shows. The Prophet encountered the divine presence, not in the market place of the boom town of Mecca, but in the true, strong quietness of the mulassil. Contemplative religion recognises this, but the fundamentalist, in the countryside, too close to nature, is afraid of pantheism. But what does the fundamentalist really fear? Evidently, that he might hear some other voice than

1 Calculated from data provided in Census of India 1971, Series 1, Paper 2: Religion (Delhi, 1972), p. 74. The proportions of the total populations of West Bengal, rural and urban, are 75 per cent and 25 per cent; Muslims in West Bengal are more rural than the average for the West Bengal populace.
that which he hears from his incontrovertible text. And that that other voice, speaking to him where it can more easily be heard, away from the clamour of the market-place, might be strong enough to tempt him. For above all, the fundamentalist, whether Muslim or Christian, has been taught to fear temptation, to fear Nature, rather than to trust in prevenient grace. The temptation he fears is that this other voice might as easily be demonic as divine, and he might be tempted to give it credence. Above all, fundamentalism cannot afford to share its authoritativeness with words that are not to be found on a printed page, in black and white, whatever Moses or Jesus or Paul or the seer of Patmos or Muhammad may have done.

The possibility of a genuinely post-urban society, beyond the secular city, is beginning now to be taken seriously, here and there. But the idea will not appeal to the fundamentalist. There is too much life in it.