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Dear Colleague:

Islamic fundamentalism appears to be triumphant in Algeria and it is sweeping over Africa, even in those areas that now subscribe to native religions and Christianity. The movement is part of a general cultural revolt against the West that elsewhere--in the U.S., for instance--takes the form of chauvinism and ethnicity. The predominant feeling of the fundamentalists and chauvinists is one of injured pride and resentment, all the greater if they see glory in their past. This "glorious past" is often exaggerated or can even be fictitious. An exception is that of the Muslims: no one denies that the Islamic past was glorious. With the glory went, almost inevitably, arrogance. Who can match the arrogance of the twelfth-century Syrian nobleman Usāma ibn Munqidh? He had contact with the European infidels, whom he contemptuously dismissed as animals, possessing only the virtue of physical strength, and hence fit only to fight or carry loads (P. K. Hitti, An Arab-Syrian Gentleman...in the period of the Crusades, 1929). To think that these bellicose animals and beasts of burden have become the Lords of the Earth!

Other non-Western civilizations have also been humiliated. But, in the twentieth century, some of them have moved decisively forward to recover a measure of the lost ground. Japan is, of course, the outstanding example. It has more than once bested the West on the West's own terms. A united Korea may well become an economic superpower. Taiwan is booming and has, moreover, adopted democracy. India, for all its problems, remains the world's largest democracy. Indian academic institutions, like those of Japan, have produced some of the greatest scientists in the world. So, how does the Islamic world measure up against these recent non-Western achievements? The answer has to be, not well (See B. Lewis's article in American Scholar, Winter, 1992).

Fundamentalism would seem to be the answer, for it combines a return to one's own religious traditions, a possible source of pride, with discipline, a possible source of achievement. Unfortunately for Islam, neither result is likely to occur. History is an insecure foundation for pride. (When you have to dig deep into the family chest in the attic for self-confidence, you may as well give up). As for discipline, a suppression of the ego in the stringencies of science rather than in the rigid laws of society is the more likely route to a revitalization of culture.

Best wishes,

