Fundamentalism

Concept: Fundamentalism

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Date Entered: 2005-08-05

Description   The term fundamentalist was first coined by Baptists in the United States in the early twentieth century, designating those determined to defend the "fundamentals" of Christian belief against the perceived threats of political liberalism, academic interpretations of the Bible, and scientific models that contradicted scriptural teachings, most notably Darwin's theory of evolution. Beyond this movement within the Southern Baptist Convention, there is no religious group that refers to itself as fundamentalist. Nevertheless, the term has been used by scholars, journalists, and political observers with reference to a very broad range of "illiberal" or "extremist" religious movements, and it has even been extended to "non-religious" phenomena, for example, neo-liberal "market fundamentalism." The label Islamic fundamentalism first entered popular discourse in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution in 1979, and the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran under the stewardship of Ayatollah Seyyed Ruhollah Khomeini. This event, along with analogous cases of politicized religious activity in other geopolitical contexts (e.g., US, India, Pakistan, Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Algeria, Afghanistan, Chechnya), undermined many assumptions about the "secularizing" effects of economic and social modernization, and has given much credence to the argument that fundamentalism is endemic to the restructuring of religious identity and affinity in the modern world. Movements that have been called fundamentalist include:

- The panorama of fundamentalist, evangelical and "born-again" Protestants that make up the "New Christian Right" in the United States (including inter-denominational organizations such as the Moral Majority, and its successor, the Christian Coalition)
- Various politicized, jihadi groups throughout the Muslim world, such as Al-Ikhwan al-Moslemun [the Muslim Brotherhood] and Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya [the Islamic Group] in Egypt, Hamas in Palestine, the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria, Hizbollah in Lebanon, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and al-Qaeda
- The Haredim (or so-called 'ultra-Orthodox' Jews), both in Israel and in the Jewish diaspora
- The Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) movement in India and the Indian diaspora, and its family of organizations, including the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad, or "World Hindu Council"), and the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party)
- Various "ultra-conservative" movements within the Catholic Church, such as Communione e Liberazione and Opus Dei

There is considerable debate among scholars about the value of locating

such diverse movements under the rubric of fundamentalism. Some regard this term simply as a means of locating "culturally repugnant" religious identities, practices, and beliefs beyond the pale of liberal society. After all, any definition of "extremism" rests on contestable assumptions about what constitutes the legitimate religious mainstream. Nevertheless, to the extent that one can speak of a consensus in the literature, fundamentalist movements are said to possess some combination of the following characteristics:

- a fervently held commitment to a transcendent, unshakable and absolute "truth" (e.g., the will of God, Allah or Elohim)
- strong language about "sin," "blasphemy," "evil," "enemies," and "threats" to a divinely-prescribed order of things
- references to a lost "golden age," as a model for building a better society in the future
- use of apocalyptic or eschatological dramas concerning the imminent "end of history" (both in order to sustain the group during crises and also to justify "extreme" courses of action)
- strict (and even uncompromising) interpretations of scripture, religious law, moral codes, and/or conformity in religious practice (including ritual performance as well as rules governing everyday conduct, such as dress codes, eating habits, or public comportment)
- an authoritarian, charismatic, patriarchal male leadership
- missionary zeal, energetic outreach activity and highly disciplined activism at the grassroots level, often involving the use of advanced technologies, from computers and cellphones to portable munitions.
- a highly adaptable (and often transnationally dispersed) infrastructure encompassing both formal organizations (churches, political parties, schools, radio stations) as well as relatively informal associations (local fundraising and charity initiatives, neighbourhood watch groups, or adult study circles)

These features point to the fact that fundamentalist movements are thoroughly modern phenomena, quite distinct from "traditional" religious communities (and in fact, many religious traditions are criticized by fundamentalists for having diluted or otherwise strayed from the original, "pure" message of divine revelation or "authentic" forms of practice). Fundamentalists are especially distinguished from "traditional" religions by their reliance upon new forms of sociability and organization that have proliferated along with the rapid expansion of mass literacy, mass education, mass politics, and mass media in many parts of the world during the latter half of the twentieth century. In this regard, it is important to note that many fundamentalist movements did not emerge within traditional establishments of religious elites. Rather, adherents to these movements tend to be drawn from structurally comparable social sources consisting of ambitious yet relatively marginalized social groups. These include newly urbanized migrants, disaffected and underemployed youth, or lay professionals (such as teachers, accountants, engineers, and doctors) whose upward mobility has been frustrated by the combination of political

repression, governmental corruption, and conditions of economic hardship under structural adjustment policies. By the same token, it is a myth to suggest that fundamentalists reject modernity. Rather, they engage the modern world through complex patterns of negotiation, selective appropriation and strategic intervention, such as by developing innovative ways of reading sacred texts, or adapting technologies and media products to meet their own needs.

The political importance of fundamentalism can be attributed to the capacity of such movements to challenge the authority of modern nation-states, especially in the face of declining influence of post-colonial secular nationalist ideologies throughout the Global South, such as pan-Arabism or Nehruvian developmentalism. By denouncing secular national elites as illegitimate stewards of government, fundamentalist movements present themselves as viable alternatives through the creation of political parties, social welfare services, and even paramilitary organizations, many of which extend across national borders. Some fundamentalist movements have expressed their opposition to state legitimacy by asserting their prerogatives in the management of sacred sites (e.g., in Jerusalem, Mecca, or Ayodhya). Others have focussed on the control of public space (e.g., in the recent controversies over the posting of the Ten Commandments in public buildings in the United States, or the banning of public transportation on the Sabbath in Israel). Others still have sought to intervene in different domains of state policy, such as the regulation of immigration or foreign diplomacy. On these terms, fundamentalists not only come into conflict with "secular" society, but also with other religious communities, and even other fundamentalists, as is evident in the role played by fundamentalists in the perpetuation of conflicts "in the name of religion" both within and between countries (e.g., tensions within and against Muslim communities in the UK, the Netherlands, and France; the orchestration of Christian-Muslim violence in Nigeria, or in the Sudan, or Hindu-Muslim violence in India; the ongoing wars between India and Pakistan, or between Israel and Palestine; or the support for, and the opposition to, the recent military adventures of the United States and its allies in the hunt for al-Qaeda militants, and in the invasion in Afghanistan and Iraq).

Nevertheless, in most cases fundamentalist movements do not control key state institutions (such as the police, the judiciary, the military or economic planning), and therefore are often incapable of effecting large-scale or enduring political changes. Precisely for this reason, interpersonal —and especially familial — relationships become favoured targets for movement activity. The organization of domestic space, governance over the body (including the surveillance of women's bodies through dress codes), education (especially of young children), and the use of advanced technologies for controlling health, fertility, and communication (both interpersonal and mass media) can safely be described as key areas of fundamentalist concern. These sites are the focus of much attention because they are strategically significant for social reproduction of

fundamentalist communities: the enforcement of ritual observance and daily religious practices, as well as the successful transmission of religious knowledge between generations. In this respect, many observers have also commented on the patriarchal, anti-feminist orientation of fundamentalism, epitomized by such controversies as attempts to deny women access to reproductive technologies, or to mandate the wearing of the hijab (headscarf) for Muslim women. It should also be noted that, despite the evident concentration of authority in the hands of male leaders within most fundamentalist movements, fundamentalist women cannot uniformly be described as passive, or even unwilling objects of oppression. In fact, in certain contexts, and for certain groups of women, participation in fundamentalist movements affords them considerable opportunities for social empowerment. Places of religious congregation, educational institutions, charitable organizations, and other social networks constitute spheres of activity outside the home, allowing many women to "escape" from domestic segregation, and providing them with a range of tools to exert influence over wayward husbands, brothers, and sons.

Such ambiguities suggest that fundamentalist movements are related in complex and dynamic ways to what are often the contradictory goals of individual and collective autonomy. On the one hand, through their efforts to apply religious-legal norms of practice in various domains of everyday life, fundamentalists seek to secure and protect the autonomy (in the sense of sovereign authority) of their own communities, over and against what they perceive as threats of secularism, liberalism, or value-neutral science. On the other hand, the ideal of individual autonomy (in the sense of one's capacity to determine the conditions under which one lives) often sits very uncomfortably with fundamentalists, who fear that the language of individual human rights will undermine a higher authority invested in the divine order of things. Ongoing processes of globalization deepen these tensions between the individual and the collective, and between competing sources of collectivity, in dramatic ways, rendering fundamentalism a more visible and dramatic phenomenon in many parts of the world. Accelerating processes of intra- and international migration, and advancing technologies of transportation and communication compress experiences of space and time and engender new forms of cultural propinquity (and therefore new cultural tensions) across all levels of social life: from neighbourhoods to cities, regions, nation-states, and beyond. Under these rapidly evolving circumstances, there is little evidence to suggest that fundamentalist movements are going to disappear, although, by the same token, it is exceedingly difficult to determine what role such movements might play in the global future.

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