

Religious Fundamentalism: Causes & Remedies

Fazlur Rahman*, Farid Ullah Khan†

Abstract

In late 1970s, forces who opposed secular ideologies, bounced back. The opponents were hostile and tried to suppress the voices who spoke against the mainstream ideology presented by a specific group of people. People with identical mind-set were found in all the prevailing religions in various forms. Resultantly, militancy pounced at the beginning of the 20th century. As soon as it hyped, it was tried to patch-up the term 'fundamentalism' with religion, thus a new terminology of 'religious fundamentalism' was added to the literature. The wrong notion attached to this word resulted in loss of life and bloodshed in different parts of the world. The intolerant group who was least interested in politics exploited the widening gap between worshippers of different religions. The wavelength of fundamentalism peaked in countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq and Israel. However, it is wrong to address the phenomenon under the label of religion. In this descriptive research, it has been tried to identify the origin of word 'fundamentalism', unravel the phenomenon of 'religious fundamentalism', and to know its causes. This research compared Islam with Christianity to draw parallels of religious fundamentalism in both religions. After objective analysis, it has been concluded that religious fundamentalism is a universal phenomenon and it is unfair to attribute it to any single religion, such as, Islam.

Keywords: Fundamentalism: origin & types; religious Fundamentalism; Militancy & Fundamentalism; West & Fundamentalism; Islam, Christianity & Fundamentalism

Introduction

In late 20th century, a budding tilt was developed towards militancy and was tried to give it a notion of justification. Thus the word 'religious fundamentalism' emerged. However, it was misrepresented and resultantly incidents such as, gunning down eminent scholars, elders of tribes, renowned philanthropists and targeting innocent worshipers were reported in different parts of the world. The rise of sectorial killing adversely propelled the opponents of the ideology to cover themselves under the banner of religion and proceed with a wrong practice to taking innocent lives at the cost of practicing religion. The intolerance created by these fundamentalists lead to the demolition of Ayodhya Mosque and burning of Christian worshipers alive in India (Monshipouri, 1993). The wavelength kept growing, and similar incidents were reported especially in Iraq, Syria,

*Professor & Former Chairman, Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education (BISE), Peshawar, KP, Pakistan. Email: drfazlur@gmail.com

† Farid Ullah Khan is a Public Policy graduate of the Australian National University (ANU) and an Australian Government Endeavour Fellow. Email: fariduk.anu@gmail.com

Libya, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Pakistan, Palestine, and Israel. Among all these incidents, the religious fundamentalists tried to exploit the widening gap between worshippers of different religions. The people who are engaged in committing such kind of heinous acts are only a small minority of “self-righteousness” or in other words “ignorant” population of this society. These people lack interest in politics or any other activity and usually live a suppressed life to raise voice for their own fundamental rights. It has also been found that some of the people did speak about fulfilling their demands; however, they were not heard and thus they approached such elements to get their needs fulfilled. Christian fundamentalists are unable to cope with the changing circumstances of the society. According to them ‘Book of Genesis’ is applicable to every kind of situation and can explain the entire phenomenon which science could explain; however, the limitations of the book are reflective of the fundamental inputs from the Jewish teachings. It is even difficult to digest the fundamental upheaval amongst Muslims where certain elements are in disagreement to explore moon. Such Muslims deny any research that can lead to the progress of the mankind in entirety. Monotheist religious fundamentalists are not the only one drenched into such state of denial; Buddhists, Hindus and even Confucians are verily suffering because of deep rooted unorthodox cultural barriers. The exploitation of these cultural gaps has led to the bloodshed of millions over the past few centuries (Claudia & Andrea, 2010).

Many twists and turns were noticed in the religious fundamentalism over the past century. The secular forces dominated the mid of 20th century and it was believed that the concept of faith will lose its significance¹. The human rationality will develop to an extent that the belief of a ‘hidden force (God)’ will wither away. The daily routine activities and personal management will define the religious values of a person or a group and anything beyond this will cease to exist or survive². However, in late 1970s, forces who opposed these secular ideologies bounced back and ensured to restore ‘religion’ as a fundamental pillar of society which cannot be exhumed by any government or segment of the society without any justification or wilful imprisonment.

Research Background

The population, where access to modern education is difficult, easily indulge in evil acts because such people lack the ability to derive positive values from the society, and they are exploited due to ‘lack of attention’ and ‘freedom of speech’. The society yields ‘fundamentalists’ if left unattended and ignored for a longer period of

time (Armstrong, 2000). The term ‘fundamentalist’ has grown in popularity in recent past and have become part of the routine narrative. It can be encountered frequently in daily newspapers, articles, books, magazines, TV shows, table talks etc. In fact growing frequency of usage of this terminology is part of the problem. Definition of ‘fundamentalist’ is quite intrigue. Scholars of both Muslim and Christian origins have defined it in various ways.

However, Jeffery K. has divided fundamentalism in four groups:

- Theological fundamentalism – which is based on the Christian theological movement.
- Political fundamentalism – which is amalgamation of theological and personal fundamentalism. Political activism in shape of anticommunism of Gerald L.K. Smith’s writings is one of the popular forms of this kind of fundamentalism. It lost its momentum after Scopes Monkey trial³.
- Cultural fundamentalism – Scopes trial provided a passage to group a certain population of cultural reservists and the cynical reflections together. H.L. Mencken, Sinclair Lewis and William Jennings Bryan provided the foundation to this kind of fundamentalism.
- Global fundamentalism – religious groups with active political motives lead to this kind of fundamentalism (Jones, 1998).

¹The term “secularism” has its root in the Latin word *saeculum*, meaning present age. Its representation can be construed as an obverse of other worldliness, which may or may not exist, or a new age implying a process of history that distances the present from the past - a relativity of values that emerge with every new move in history. But whatever may be its connotations, secularism is exceedingly old almost deserving to be called decrepit.

Primarily hostile in its temper toward revelation based religions (as they are holistic), it has fed primitive animistic faiths, priestly classes, dynastic kingships and today’s scientism. (See for detail, Tarik Jan (1998), “Secularism the New Ideology” in *Pakistan between secularism and Islam*, Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad, p.3

²How much was that assumption logically true can be traced in the writings of Phillip K. Hitti. Phillip K. Hitti, *Islam in Modern World* as is quoted by Prof. Khurshid Ahmad (1995) in *New World Order: Western Fundamentalism in Action*, Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad, p.5

³Highly publicized trial of a Dayton, T., high-school teacher, John T. Scopes, *The Dialogue*

charged with violating state law by teaching the theory of evolution. On appeal, the state Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the 1925 law but acquitted Scopes on the technicality that he had been fined excessively. The law was repealed in 1967.

Research Questions

- What are the root causes of ‘fundamentalism’?
- Why does it attract a growing number of followers in all the world’s major religions; particularly in Islam, and how can societies deal with its violent forms - other than by trying to quash it with more violence?
- What fundamentalist groups and thought patterns in Christianity and Islam have in common?

Methodology

This is a descriptive research, where the term fundamentalism⁴ has been analyzed qualitatively in order to trace out the origin of this term and to find causes and remedies of religious fundamentalism. Though plenty of research is available, it gives little insight regarding fundamentalism embedded in other world’s major religions; particularly Christianity. After 9/11 twin tower incident in the US, and simultaneously US invasion of Afghanistan, the burden of fundamentalism is primarily put on the shoulders of religion of Islam.

This paper has two main elements;

- Literature Review
- Comparative Analysis of fundamentalism in Islam & Christianity

To fill the gap, literature and Christian religious leaders’ views were compared with perceived fundamentalism in Islamic ideology and were analyzed in detail.

Objectives of the Study

This paper will try to explore and analyse:

- The footprint of the concept of ‘fundamentalism’, and to know its real meaning, evolution and misinterpretation; particularly coinage of the word ‘religious fundamentalism’ in the context of Islam and Christianity.
- The agenda of the fundamentalists and the deep political forces using these marginalized people for their own vested interests.
- Whether the international community has rightly perceived the threat and has adopted a workable solution, and why the extremists are growing in number and what threat could it pose to the international

community in future?

Literature Review

It is hard to attribute ‘fundamentalism’ to any individual, group, sect, or a community. The word fundamentalism is used in English grammar both as a noun and as an adjective. Curtis Lee Laws is believed to be the first person who introduced this terminology in Watchman-Examiner. “The Fundamentals: A Testimony of the Truth” were a series of booklets that highlighted this terminology in its early days. These booklets were reflection of thoughts of Germans who disassociated themselves from American influence and were moving towards liberal ideology. The idea was also supported by the propositions put forwarded by Darwin in its ‘Theory of Evolution’. The booklets were distributed among the Christian religious scholars between 1910 and 1915 free of cost (Jones, 1998). Curtis believed that it was during 1920’s when this terminology took birth in US. Bible was adopted as a true testament and those who stood by the virtue of this book were termed as ‘fundamentalist’ - the proclaimed guardians of the teachings of this holy book.

⁴It is debatable whether militancy in various religions of the world can be classified as fundamentalism, extremism, ignorance or the self-righteousness. The term is misunderstood & misinterpreted by the media and politically misused in such a large scale that one becomes confused in allocating it the right place.

After continuous struggle and various religious movements in 20th century, the population of Christian faith with deep rooted ideology of Fundamentalism or Pentecostalism were recorded as many as 30 million in the US alone⁵. It is not fair to generalize the term ‘fundamentalist’ which was coined for Christians, who are more concerned to gain power and rule the people belonging to different faiths. For instance, the Muslim and Jews have different religious priorities and are less possessive of gaining power. *Usuliyah* is the Arabic translation of the word ‘fundamentalism’. It refers to various rules and principles of ‘Islamic Law’ and is altogether different from the meaning derived by the West (Sidahmed & Ehteshami, 1996). Therefore, the word ‘fundamentalist’ has been misinterpreted and wrongly associated with the Islamic faith of a particular group. Various scholars have tried to untangle this wrongly put association

with Islam; however, following have contributed a significant input and is important to highlight: Bruce Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age*, is one of the major contributors (Dawe, 1990). According to him, fundamentalists are group of people carrying a specific ideology and have strong underlying relation with cultural values. Lawrence defines fundamentalism as “the affirmation of religious authority as holistic and absolute, admitting of neither criticism nor reduction; it is expressed through the collective demand that specific creedal and ethical dictates derived from scripture that is publicly recognized and legally enforced.”

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences funded a project in which scholars from different faiths participated. The scholars were tasked to analyse and define ‘fundamentalism’. The discussions and views were compiled together and formed 5 volumes totalling 8000 pages. The scholars agreed that the ‘fundamentalists’ have strong religious idealism which is based on their own personal and communal identity mostly bounded by a specific culture. They try to unravel the truth and are reactionary and intentionally scandalous as embedded in their culture, somewhat like Lawrence observations. Such fundamentalists are less receptive to change in culture and power structures (Appleby & Marty, 1991).

Appleby, Emmanuel Sivan, and Gabriel Almond identified ideological and organizational characteristics of fundamentalism. Strong emphasis was placed on the authoritarian and behavioural leadership qualities. According to these scholars, fundamentalists oppose a set notion and challenge the authority in command. It is important for a fundamentalist to be possessive of charismatic leadership qualities to lead a group of people of similar ideology (ibid, 1991). When the Project of Fundamentalism was underway, another duo Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson Shupe were busy analysing the same phenomenon. They compiled their work titled “Secularization and Fundamentalism Reconsidered” and defined fundamentalism as “a proclamation of reclaimed authority over a sacred tradition which is to be reinstated as an antidote for a society that has strayed from its cultural moorings” (1989). Their research was based on public policy decision making.

The transcending nature of problems of reactionary groups is embedded in every religion. The attention was again reverted to religious-based fundamentalism with widened scope of globalization to draw solution to this problem. The seeds of fundamentalism are religious misinterpretations common to all religions and marginalized communities. 20th Century Fundamentalism is closely linked to the

liberation movement in the US, German encroachment, Darwinism and with the rise of the Christian clergy in the West.

⁵Charismatic religious movement that gave rise to a number of Protestant churches in the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries. Fundamentalist-Holiness branches of Protestantism that also originated in 19th-century America.

Despite a common belief in certain doctrines, such as baptism of the Spirit, speaking in tongues, and healing, Pentecostals have not united in a single denomination. Encyclopedia Britannica (1994-2001).

Religious Fundamentalism: Islam & Christianity – Comparative Analysis

Islamic ideology is strongly shaped to govern the affairs of the state. The religion of Islam is expressed in many forms. It is at time artistic and intellectual. On other occasions, the mysticism has scripted the foundation. However, despite all these forms, one thing which makes Islam different from the rest of the religions is its strong foundation of social structure. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was detrimental in setting the ethical code and organization of the state. The state of Medina was established in 1 A.H. It was religiously and politically sovereign and was governed by Prophet Muhammad (SAW) according to the Divine revelations of the God. With human ups and downs, many variations of fortunes and forms, many vicissitudes, both of achievement and of aspiration, however, Islamic ideology never vary far from its central theme. The community is still organized under the same principles. There are many illustrations of this fact; one is the superlative importance of Law in Islam. Islam has been social gospel from the beginning. Major sectarian differences in Islam have been concerned with divergences not primarily over dogma but over questions as to how the community should be organized.

While the Protestants seceded from the Catholic Church on a point of doctrine, the Shi'a seceded from the majority community on a dispute regarding political leadership. Islam is by tradition and by central genius a practical religion, a religion of ethics, including social ethics, and of organized, legalized ethics (Choudhury, 1969). Islam defines a comprehensive code of conduct that encapsulates spiritual, moral, physical and intellectual development. The West label the new wave of political resurgence in the Muslim World as fundamentalism, fanaticism, anti-Westernism, Islamic militancy, anachronism and with such other value loaded expressions. It seems that the West plunged in the old system of division by reintroduction of distorted categories of

thought. It is evident from the hate campaign of Christian religious leaders. For instance, Archbishop Makrios of Cyprus, Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, Cardinal Mendzeti, popes and Cardinals can be in politics, and political parties in Europe may be named as Christian Democrats, it is only the mixing of Islam in politics that is objectionable to the West (Koreshi, 1995).

No correct understanding of the current situation is possible if it is delinked from its historical background. Those who attribute “Islamism” to anti-Westernism hold that the starting point of their analysis should be the immediate past and not its historical nexus. John L Esposito is one of them. According to him “For many, the contemporary revival of Islam challenged the perceived wisdom and seemed to deal a death blow to reason and common sense... In a very real sense, Islamic revivalism has often been seen and experienced as a direct threat to the ideas, beliefs, practices and interests of the Muslim secularist elites as well as Western governments, and multinationals. The clash of world’s views has reinforced the Western tendency to see Islamic activism as extremism and fanaticism and as an anti-modern return to the past” (1992).

The Muslims, after 1991 and particularly after 9/11 twin towers incident in the US, were tortured for a distorted version of ‘Islamism’. The term ‘Islamism’ is invented by the west. Also, their reactions are determined by their perceptions of the recent history, which they consider humiliating. Without exception, their independence has been restrained through invisible hands, forcing them to follow the West through imposed Muslim leadership. This has given rise to anti-colonial feelings. Anti-Westernism must be understood first before Muslims are equated to the West and their colonialism.

To begin with, it will be useful if the chain of actions and reactions is viewed in the context of a conflict between the colonials and the Muslim peoples. The colonies were ruling the Muslims from distant lands. It is unfair to attribute the colonial impact of West (Christian community) to propagate power and promote terrorism in its own circles.

In South Asia, the “war of independence” (mutiny according to British) against foreign rule, nominally led by the last Mughal emperor in 1857-58, left a legacy of a sullen resentment in the Indian Muslims against the British rulers. The Muslims were ruthlessly suppressed. Sir Syed Ahmad’s the “*Causes of the Indian Revolt*” (in Urdu) and Sir William Hunter’s *Indian Musalmans [Muslims]* (1999) show how the Muslims were mercilessly removed from all important slots in political power and services by the British after the “mutiny”. The Balfour Declaration of Nov 2, 1917 and the creation of Israel were considered

by the Muslims as religiously motivated plans. Harold Wilson, a former British Prime Minister, in fact confirmed that the “Western Christian countries felt that supporting Israel’s creation was part of their commitment to the Bible” (1981).

On the other hand, the leadership was suppressed to promote independent policies. Nasser, Saddam, Ghaddafi, Mursi were dealt with either directly or through proxies. It seemed as if “a red line” existed somewhere, which was not to be crossed by native rulers. It is a strange coincidence that the two sponsors of the Islamic Summit, King Faisal and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, came to tragic ends. Iranian revolution was weakened through Iraq-Iran war from September 1980 to August 1988; and Yasser Arafat was tamed through Israeli raids into Lebanon in 1982 and later exterminated mysteriously. The same was the fate of Sheikh Yasin of occupied Palestine.

There is almost negligible change in the situation till date. In his book, *Seize the moment*, Richard Nixon wrote “Many Americans tend to stereotype Muslims as uncivilized, unwashed, barbaric, irrational people.... No nation, not even Communist China, have a more negative image in the American consciousness than those of the Muslim World...Some observers warn that Islam will become monolithic and fanatical geo-political force...will pose a major challenge and that the West will be forced to form a new alliance with Moscow to confront a hostile and an aggressive Muslim World” (Koreshi, 1995). In the same tone, John L Esposito, in his *Islamic Threat* writes “As Western leaders attempt to forge the New World Order, transnational Islam may increasingly come to be regarded as the new global monolithic enemy of the West” (1992). P.L. Buchanan goes one step further and writes “To some Americans searching for a new enemy against whom to try our mettle and power, after the death of Communism, Islam is the preferred antagonist” (1990). US invasion of Afghanistan is a clear example.

Broadly speaking, to the West any manifestation of Muslim nationalism even within the confines of their states is equal to Islamic threat to its existence. Interestingly, the Muslim idea of what the West means by “Islamic fundamentalism” is off the mark. They seem to be under a false impression that the West use of the term implies “religious fanaticism” or “bigotry”. This has focused their debate on a narrow angle, while unfortunately in the Western power elite; it has become a new hate word for Islam and Islamic societies, with political and strategic implications. Obviously there is a perception gap. The Muslim elite and commoners have hardly any idea that the West uses this word for carrying on an offensive against Islam itself. The people in general in the West are equally innocent of the broth their

establishment is cooking.

One can easily find the perception of the elite of the West about Islam in the report of Cheryl Benard on “Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies”, where a detailed strategy for “Democratising Islam” is laid down (2003). Interestingly the term “fundamentalism” is singularly applied for Islam and the Muslims. The US must clarify its position that their administration is not anti-Islamic, and it is positive in its intentions to curb radicalization.

The US must prove in its actions that they are not feeding Islamic radicalism. In fact, these actions are mentored to encourage development and groom democracy among the Muslim states⁶. Recent statement of Russian President Putin on 25 December, 2021 about Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is encouraging and can pave the path of coexistence of different religions (Ali, 2021).

⁶One can easily analyze the engagements of US in Pakistan, Iraq and Middle East in the context of these goals.

Remedies

We can summarise the remedial strategy in five points:

1. Dealing with imperialism through a unified strategy as exercised in the past to ensure long term peace and integrity.
2. Pluralism must be discouraged. The state-wide cultural and value system should be preserved in order to foster enabling environment for global peace.
3. ‘Terrorism’ should be delineated from ‘self-determination’. Global issues of common interest must be resolved through peaceful and meaningful dialogue under the umbrella of international law.
4. An equitable justice system should be established and all the states should be made accountable to follow the same laws. It can lay down foundation for long term global peace.
5. For peaceful distribution of wealth, happiness, solidarity and dignified life; international cooperation is necessary.

Since the upsurge in hatred and sectoral division after 9/11, it is extremely important for the Muslims, Christians and descendants of other faiths to sit together and resolve their issues through dialogue and learn to live in coexistence. “Christians and Muslims who live together should try to meet and dialogue to refute the talk about a clash of civilization” said Milan Cardinal, Dionigi Tettamanzi. He urged Italians to get to know the Muslims and their mind set. The transaction

of people from other faiths into Islam is due to the spiritual refuge. Muslim comprises more than 25million population in Europe – which is a Christian dominant society. This rise in number of Muslim population is being viewed as a threat by some of the Catholic leaders. But Venice Cardinal, Angelo Scola, believes that gradually the Muslim population will diffuse and the Muslim-Christian gap will lessen to promote peaceful coexistence and progress accordingly. According to the London Cardinal, Cormac Murphy O’Conner, dialogue is essential “to make inroads” in Islamic countries (Dawn, 2005). All this need determination and will-power for both the religions. Muslim Ummah cannot play any role in the international community until and unless it learn lesson from the past mistakes and change its behaviour altogether in the light of the teachings of Qur’an and Sunnah.

Conclusion

With the “fundamentalist” dark designs especially over the Muslim and generally the remaining world, one may ask if we can counter these designs. Do we really have options? Muslims can surrender, as some pro-West circles propose, but this would hardly find support among the masses, for this means a semi-independent Muslim World (in fact they are). The case for economic benefit, as touted by a certain Pakistani circle, can be analysed in the light of the past. The US itself is likely to be mired in economic difficulties from now onwards, especially after ignominious withdrawal from Afghanistan. And should we remain in the beggars club? Confrontation is not the order of the day as it will not find a sympathetic chord abroad, in the OIC, UN or elsewhere. A combination of firmness with pragmatism without compromising on vital issues, we should seek independence through self-reliance and creative diplomacy.

References

- Ali, K. (December 26, 2021). ‘Putin’s stance on sanctity of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) welcomed’. *Daily Dawn: News Report*, Islamabad. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1665782>
- Appleby, R. S., & Marty, M. E. (1991). *Fundamentalisms observed*, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1(1), pp. 854-888
- Appleby, R. S., & Marty, M. E. (1991). *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1(5), pp. 495-528
- Armstrong, K. (2000), *The Battle for God*, Harper Collins, London, p.ix

- Benard, C. (2003). *Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, resources, and strategies*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND, National Security Research Division, pp. 1-6
- Buchanan, P. L. (1990). Is Islam an enemy of the US? Newspaper Article (22 Dec, 1990) *Sunday News*, New Hampshire, US
- Choudhury, G. W. (1969). "The Islamic Concept of State" in *Constitutional Development in Pakistan*, Longman Group Ltd., London, pp.39-41.
- Claudia Derichs & Andrea Fleschenberg (ed) (2010). *Religious Fundamentalisms and Their Gendered Impacts in Asia*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), pp.5-107.
<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/07061.pdf>
- Dawe, D. G. (1990). *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern Age* by Bruce B. Lawrence San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1989. *TheologyToday*,47(2),183–186.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/004057369004700212>
- Dawn Daily (April 14, 2005). *Reuters Report*, Islamabad.
- Esposito, J. L. (1992). *The Islamic Threat*, Oxford University Press, New York, pp.5, 10
- Hadden, J. K. & Shupe, A. (1989). *Secularization and Fundamentalism Reconsidered*, Vol. III from series of Religion and the Political Order, New York: Paragon House, p. 109
- Hunter, W. W. (1999). *The Indian Musalmans*, Sang-e-Meel Publications, Lahore, Pakistan. pp. 1-138
- Jones, S. (1998). *Fundamentalism*. University of Virginia. Spring 1998. Last modified July 2001.
<http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/fund.html>
- Koreshi, S. M. (1995). *New World Order: Western Fundamentalism in Action*, Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad, pp. 191, 194
- Monshipouri, M. (1993). *Backlash to the destruction at Ayodhya: a view from Pakistan*. *Asian Survey*, 33(7), pp. 711-721
- Sidahmed, A. S., & Ehteshami, A. (ed) (1996). *Islamic Fundamentalism*, Boulder & CoIo, p.4
- Wilson, H. (1981). *The Chariot of Israel: Britain, America, and the State of Israel*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson: M. Joseph, p.7