Religious Fundamentalism – A Misleading Concept?

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Abstract

The chapter shows that Fundamentalism is more than an interpretative term. It does not describe reality but evaluates and even produces it. Therefore, it is a misleading concept with consequences for the addressees who discover themselves as being part of a global protest wave against modernity. Local reasons are thus totally neglected as it was the case in Iran, Algeria and Chechnya.

Keywords: Category Creation, Fundamentalism, Religious Fundamentalism

1.   Introduction

Florian Zemmin comes, in his article on *The Problem of Salafism*, to three important observations:

> "First, language does not only describe reality, but it also evaluates reality, since the central concepts we use hold a normative dimension, too: just consider "terrorism" or "freedom". Secondly, our language not only describes and evaluates a given reality, but also helps to produce it. For it should be clear, after the linguistic turn, that "reality" is always reality as interpreted and mediated by language. Scholars produce reality not least by grouping disconnected phenomena in certain categories. These categories, thirdly, have an impact on the social identification and self-identification of actors, as do narratives available for understanding and interpreting a given situation. Of course, it is not only scholars producing such categories and narratives, but also other societal actors. Moreover, the academy forms part of society, and thus in a dialectical process takes up and impacts on societal categories."[1]

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[1]   Florian Zemmin (2020). The Problem of Salafism, the Problem with 'Salafism'. An Essay on the Usability of an Academic Category to understand a Political Challenge. In Klaus Hock & Nina

The intention of this article is to show that Religious Fundamentalism is such a category which not only describes reality but also evaluates and produces it.[2] Therefore, the article starts with a reference to the original meaning of Fundamentalism in religion, and it then widens its use to a much broader understanding of the term in order to finally come to some of the consequences of such a narrative. Consequently, the conclusion expresses a strong warning to all not to be too quick with those general interpretative terms but to pay attention to local peculiarities as well.

2.   The original meaning of the term

In 1983 Wilfert Joest published his article on *Fundamentalismus* in the 11th volume of the "Theologische Realenzyklopädie (TRE)" wherein he exclusively deals with the American Protestant Group of the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Fundamentalism in this context refers to a collection of 90 texts published between 1910 and 1915 by the Bible Institute of Los Angeles under the title of *The Fundamentals. A Testimony To The Truth*, often quoted simply as *The Fundamentals*. The aim of these publications was to reject liberal tendencies in the Protestant theology of that time and to insist instead on the traditional teachings of the Christian creed. *The Fundamentals* are opposed to the idea of an evolution of the human being in line with other species of animals and primates as suggested by Darwin. They also maintain the classical understanding of the virgin birth of Christ and his bodily resurrection and physical return. They confess Christ as the Son of God and hold true all miracles as described in the Bible. Consequently they reject modern exegesis with its historical critical method and are opposed to all modern interpretations of the Holy Scriptures by insisting on the inerrancy of the biblical texts for which, according to them, there is no need for reinterpretation in order to reconcile them with modern natural sciences by giving up the literal understanding of the texts.

The Fundamentals were welcome and particularly successful in American Protestant milieus of those who were social losers in the process of modernization. They fight for the old vision of the world, of which the classical values and norms were put in jeopardy through modernization.

The fundamentalist vision of the world and of religion was thus an anti-modern attitude opposed to all kinds of modernization and addressed to those who felt left behind, and marginalized, in the modernization process.

Käsehage (Eds.). 'Militant Islam' vs. 'Islamic Militancy'? *Religion, Violence, Category Formation and Applied Research, Contested Fields in the Discourses of Scholarship*. Wien: LIT, p. 119.

2   For the following cf. also Peter Antes (2004). New Approaches to the Study of the New Fundamentalisms. In Antes, Peter / Geertz, Armin W. / Warne, Randi R. (Eds). *New Approaches to the Study of Religion, Volume I: Regional, Critical and Historical Approaches (= Religion and Reason)*. Vol. 42 [Paperback-Edition 2008]), Berlin-New York: W. de Gruyter, pp. 437-449.

3.   A broader understanding of the term

In 1995 the 4th volume of the 3rd edition of the "Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche" was published. There we also find an article on *Fundamentalismus*. Beinert and his co-authors have a completely different understanding of the term compared with *Fundamentalismus* in the TRE. They say that fundamentalism is a trend in all living religions. It is opposed to another more open-minded and liberal trend, so that contemporary religions embrace at least two opposite trends, an anti-modern and a modern one.

In comparing the two mentioned encyclopaedias, the question arises regarding how the term came to have such a difference in meaning. The answer lies in the Islamic Revolution in Iran when in January 1979 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini came back to Tehran from his exile in France in order replace the Shah of Iran as Head of State, after the latter had fled from the country leaving it to Khomeini and his followers.

It is noteworthy that the Shah's regime was fully supported by the West and equipped with the most modern weapons. Therefore, it was an enormous shock for the West that such a system could not survive against protesting masses led by Khomeini from exile. Neither politicians nor scholars of Islamic studies had foreseen that such a wave of protest could be successful. They all had confidence in the Shah's modernization policy, and they thus totally underestimated what was going on as a consequence of protest-encouraging sermons and pamphlets in the mosques. Khomeini's victory was therefore not only a surprise but a real shock for the West. For the first time in modern history, a revolution was successful based on a religion that, unlike revolutions in the name of nationalism, communism, marxism or socialism, had its roots not in Western thoughts but in a religious setting that seemed to reject modernization.

The predominant question of the time was how to cope with such a reality. Journalists in France began to see parallels in the anti-modern Christian thoughts of integrism while in the German and English-speaking worlds the reference to Christian Fundamentalism came to the minds of those in search for an explanation. The term fundamentalism was so successful that in France it replaced that of integrism and led in most countries to serious academic discussions, such that Martin Riesebrodt could write a PhD thesis to compare American Protestant Fundamentalists (1910-28) and Iranian Shiites (1961-79).

Thanks to the new meaning of the term, other protest phenomena could be identified and interpreted. This holds true for the "Islamic Salvation Front" (Front Islamique du Salut = FIS), which won parts of the general elections in Algeria in 1991, with the result that France felt the need to stop the elections in order to avoid an Islamist victory. Commentators like Gilles Kepel saw in all that a revenge of God, thus bringing religion back to the public floor by making a political factor out of it.

Kepel's and others' use of "fundamentalism" with reference to Islam along with similar references with regard to Christianity and Judaism opened the way to a broad use of the term so that for instance the Hindu fight against the Babri mosque in Ayodhya (India) in 1991 was also labelled as fundamentalist, as was the 1982-founded Shiite Hizbollah (Party of God) in Lebanon or the 1985-founded Sunnite Hamas in Palestine.

The few examples mentioned here show what Zimmer has stated saying that "our language not only describes and evaluates a given reality, but also helps to produce it." This means that it puts local forms of protest with very different local aspects into a general interpretative framework that makes a world-wide trend out of them

More concretely speaking, one might wonder what the Islamic Revolution in Iran from above might have in common with the resurgence of the FIS members in Algeria from below. The same applies to the comparison between the Hamas fighters in Palestine and the Hindu fundamentalists of Ayodhya. Yet, in spite of obvious differences in these forms of protest compared with one another, the term was ideally suited to inspire a large research project to study religious fundamentalisms worldwide. Martin E. Marty and E. Scott Appleby engaged a large number of researchers to show that "fundamentalists seek to replace existing structures with a comprehensive system emanating from religious principles and embracing law, polity, society, economy, and culture."[3] And this seems to be obvious for the editors although the contributions about Buddhism and Judaism in the book have difficulties seeing any similar phenomena in these religions. That, however, does not hinder the editors from claiming at the end of the book that fundamentalisms can be found in all world religions and thus represent a dangerous religious thread opposed to all attempts at modernization that might be needed in the religions.

The only relevant differences are in the strategies. So, we find groups that are in favour of democratic elections as long as they see chances to win while others reject elections if they think that majorities do not vote for them, others again try the long march through institutions to come to power whereas others declare violent acts legitimate in their attempts to reach their goals.

Samuel Huntington goes even one step further. He does not see two different trends in each of the religions but identifies religions as a whole with their role in the process of modernization. In his book *Clash of Civilizations* he declares that Islam is totally opposed to modernization and the modern world; it is thus in absolute opposition to what the West stands for. All the other religions are situated somewhere in between these two contradictory poles of Islam on the one side and the secular West on the other. According to Huntington, the clash of civilizations

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3   Martin E. Marty & E. S. Appleby (Eds.) (1994). *Fundamentalisms Observed*. Paperback ed. Chicago [et al.]: University of Chicago Press, p. 824.

is the most dangerous potential conflict after fights between aristocratic families, then nation states in the 19thcentury and the first part of the 20th century. Then came an ideological conflict between the East and the West after World War II. Its end does not mean the end of conflicts; on the contrary, the clash of civilizations could turn into an even more dangerous battle field where Islam is the most prominent enemy.

Looking at the battle fields in the Gulf region and the Near East one might come to the conclusion that such a clash of civilizations is indeed going on. Jan Joffe asked in an article whether Huntington is right or not. He came to the conclusion: "There is no war of religions, but of powers that fight for supremacy." And later in the text he says: "In Syria, the Tehran theocrats are fighting along with the Orthodox of Russia. The Saudis and their Sunni cronies are part of the US-led coalition, and the Muslim Turks are bombing Muslim Kurds who are not allowed to have their own state. A silent alliance connects Israel with Riyadh, Amman and Cairo. It's not about fervour, it's about interest."

4.   The consequences

There are at least four major consequences of such general interpretative terms: the addressees, protest as a moral claim against the economy worldwide, the local differences, and the historicity and ambiguity of terms and texts.

4.1   The addressees

A major research project like Martin Marty's and Scott Appleby's *Fundamentalisms observed* cannot be published unnoticed by those who are dealt with in these volumes. They thus understand that their protest is not a local feeling of dissatisfaction with certain developments in the area but is rather part of a much broader trend of protest typical of all major religions in the world. They thus see themselves involved in a worldwide protest wave due to the victory of capitalism after the break down of an alternative economic system as it was for decades propagated by the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, but had obviously failed and led to the end of the East-West confrontation in 1989.

Most willingly, the addressees took the external designation of fundamentalists over for themselves as a self-designation in the following years. And the books on fundamentalism moreover made it easy for them to make contact with other so called fundamentalist groups because all the addresses and their email connections were given in these books, so that contact only needed to be established to create a worldwide network of protest against all the injustices produced by the capitalist unlimited-exploitation policy.

The term fundamentalism was so successful that it was also literally translated into the different languages of the addressees. This led in Arabic to the consequence that the literal translation of *uṣūliyya* evoked in the context of religion an immediate association with *uṣūl al-dīn* (= the principles of the religion), the classical title of medieval manuals of Islamic theology. Thus such an originally negatively-connoted term as fundamentalism changed now into a positive meaning because pious people could not seriously oppose the principles of the religion. To indicate the negative implications another term was needed in internal Muslims circles. They therefore preferred Extremism or Islamism instead of the negative use of Fundamentalism. With these new terms, however, new realities were also produced. Florian Zemmin writes with regard to that:

> "Thus, it does make a difference whether scholars speak of, and thereby frame and to some extent construct, a problem as Islamic Extremism or Extremist Islam. The first wording suggests Islamic Extremism to be one variety of different types of Extremism. Consequently, it ought to be viewed together with other such types, and the competencies of experts on Extremism are central for understanding the causes of the problem of Extremism. The second wording suggests Extremist Islam to be one variety of different types of Islam. As such it is primarily to be understood as an articulation of Islam. And, in the last consequence, Islam is framed as the problem, for all articulations of Islam could potentially evolve into the Militant variety. The issue becomes ever clearer from the misleading wording of Radical Islam, in distinction from Moderate Islam. This distinction, voluntarily or not, suggests that the former is Islam in the fullest sense, whereas the latter makes certain concessions."[4]

These examples underline the importance of terms as reality-producers, and this holds true for Islamic Extremism and Extremist Islam or Radical and Moderate Islam as well as for Fundamentalism.

4.2   Protest as a moral claim against economy worldwide

Since left-wing politics had no chance anymore, their followers often changed into religious fundamentalists to formulate the same claims as before, but now in religious or more precisely moral claims against a world that marginalizes them and leaves no chances of participation to them.

The moral claim was particularly successful because the new economic situation produced a total change as concerns the groups struggling in the economy with each other. While the communist and Marxist ideologies were based on the

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4   Zemmin, 2020, p. 119-20.

opposition between exploiters and exploited who both were part of the production process, the new situation is the gap between those who are involved in the production and those who are outside. Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* of 2013 says: "The excluded are not the 'exploited' but the outcast, the 'leftovers'."[5]

Strikes are not the appropriate means to fight for more justice and participation. It seems that money alone reigns in the world and the individuals do not count in this economic system, or to quote once again the prominent headings of Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*:[6]

> "No to an economy of exclusion
> No to the new idolatry of money
> No to a financial system which rules rather than serves
> No to the inequality which spawns violence."

In this respect it is quite understandable that religious leaders join the protesters and support their moral claims against an economic system that appears to be the contrary of what human beings are expected to be.[7] So we find monotheists and polytheists in the same wave of protest. Hindus as well as Muslims and Christians wish to return to traditional moral values and classical ethics to avoid the negative effects of the prevailing capitalist system.

It is obvious that those protests are addressed against the system as such; they refer to general claims of traditional values and do not specify particular areas with their regional peculiarities.

4.3   The local differences

General interpretative terms like fundamentalism explain the ongoing processes as being part of a global phenomenon and consequently do not often see the local peculiarities of protest. In the case of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, for instance, the protest was mainly addressed against the oppression system of the Shah's regime, which imposed specific types of modernization on an Iranian people who preferred a much more moderate introduction of new mechanisms, while in Algeria the "Islamic Salvation Front" articulated the protest of the poor and of well-educated jobless intellectuals who did not see any chance of improving their situation.

Most striking is the unspecified explanation of terrorism for what happened in Chechnya over the last decades. Islam there is a quite recent phenomenon. It

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5   Cf. Pope Francis (2013). *Evangelii Gaudium, Rome.* November 24, Nr. 53.
6   Ibid., Nr. 53-60.
7   Cf. Peter Antes (1996). *Religions and Politics. Facts and Perspectives.* In Religioni e Società. Rivista di scienze sociali della religione. Nr. 26, Anno XI, Settembre-Dicembre, 5-13.

became the official religion in the country in the first half of the 18th century. It is a combination of traditional forms of law (*Ada*) and Muslim traditions in their Sufi form. Brotherhoods led by *Ustas* tell their followers or students (*Murids*) in their gatherings (*wird*) how to behave and what to do. The main purpose of those religious orders (*tarikat*) is to fight for the interests of the community and not to concentrate on one's individual desires. For centuries the Chechnyan population was engaged in a fierce fight for independence from the Russian dominance but suffered enormously under the devastating attempts of Russian troops to keep total control in the country.[8]

Two wars were thus led by the Russians against the Chechnyan people. Between the first war (1994-96) and the second war (1999-2009) Wahhabis from Saudi Arabia came into the country and, supported by former Muslim fighters in Afghanistan, tried to propagate their strict interpretation of Islam among the local Muslim population, so that it came to a split in Muslim circles. "The religious division triggered by Wahhabi extremists extends right into the families. Fathers curse their sons because they have joined the Wahhabis, and sons break away from their fathers because they live an 'impure' Islam according to Wahhabi understanding of salvation."[9] The Wahhabi's influence was such a bad one that this label soon became synonymous with terrorists.[10]

On the other hand, as concerns the second war,

> "Putin used the war to create for himself the image of the 'iron fist' in the fight against Russia's enemies. This helped him to win the presidential elections on March 26, 2000. After taking office as President of the Russian Federation, however, he let the campaign continue, even though he would have had several real chances of ending it."[11]

The continuation of the war was

> "lucrative for all involved. Everyone got their share. For the contracting's at the post offices, it meant ten to twenty rubles bribe money at every check, and that around the clock. For the generals in Moscow and Chankala [i.e. a district of Grozny, P.A.] it was 'skimming' money from the 'military budget'. For the middle-ranking officers it was the extortion of ransom money for 'temporary hostages' and for corpses. For the low-ranking officers, it was the looting during the 'purges'. And for all together

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8   Cf. for that the short history: Anna Politkowskaja (2008). *Tschetschenien. Die Wahrheit über den Krieg*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuchverlag, pp. 304-319.

9   Politkowskaja, 2008, p. 183.

10   Ib., p. 326.

11   Ib., p. 316.

(the Russian military plus a part of the rebels) it was participation in the illegal oil and weapons business. On top of that came promotions, awards, careers..."[12]

The examples of Iran, Algeria, and Chechnya show very clearly how important it is to have a close look at local problems and reasons for protest, in order to avoid thinking that all is embedded in the interpretative framework of global protest as a general trend typical of each of the great religions in the world.

4.4   Historicity and ambiguity of terms and texts

The last aspect to be mentioned here is the use of terms and texts. Schulze puts the terminology question in the following terms:

> "A major problem can be seen in the properties of macro-sociological theories. They are aimed at explaining causes and origins in a very general sense, they comparatively capture 'characteristics' of terrorism and extremism, and they are based on fixed, timeless definitions that are intended as a summary of the observed characteristics. As such, they are often theories about Islam: so, certain concepts such as Islam, Sharī'a, jihād, Qur'ān or the prophetic tradtion (sunna) are defined as real universals constituting Islam. [...] Terms like jihād, sharī'a or Islam are thus considered 'real' insofar as they have a reality that exists as a permanent idea and shapes Muslim identity and Muslim being. It is assumed that the meaning of the terms is fixed and unchangeable once and for all by their use in the Qur'ān or other Islamic canonical texts."[13]

Salafism is a very good example to show how different references to early Islam can be. While Muḥammad Abduh (1849-1905) and others of his time referred to the "pious predecessors" of the first three generations of Muslims in history to justify their modernist interpretation of Islam, Salafists today insist on very traditional teachings of Islam without any ambiguity. Here again is an important difference in interpretation. Thomas Bauer says in this respect:

> "Religious texts, which are the subject of this article, are much closer to literary texts than to factual texts. Literary texts, however, have a much higher density of ambiguity than, for example, instructions for use. Above all, however, their ambiguity is intentional, since polyvalence is virtually a defining characteristic that distinguishes literary texts from factual texts. The question whether ambiguity in

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12   Ib., p. 216.
13   Reinhard Schulze (2020). Beyond Religion - Beyond Islam. The Challenge of Ultra-Islamist Violence. In Klaus Hock & Nina Käsehage (Eds.). *'Militant Islam' vs. 'Islamic Militancy'? Religion, Violence, Category Formation and Applied Research, Contested Fields in the Discourses of Scholarship*. Wien: LIT, p. 108.

religious texts is also deliberately sought and desired is left open (for the Qurʾān, according to most classical scholars, it is definitely affirmative)."[14]

A good understanding of a religious text, therefore, needs an interpretation in its historical context for the meaning of its terms as well as being part of ambiguous interpretations syn- and diachronically.

Conclusion

As said in the beginning of this article, Florian Zemmin stated that "our language not only describes and evaluates a given reality, but also helps to produce it." This article has showed with regard to the concept of Religious Fundamentalism that this statement is really true. It explains how certain parallels between obviously highly-heterogeneous phenomena have been drawn and have produced an interpretative term used on a worldwide scale, which has made a global trend out of various protests in different areas, albeit for very different reasons. Moreover it also had an impact on the addressees who learned from these studies that they all belong to a global protest wave against modernity. The change from an external designation to a self-designation had moreover the consequence that the term was translated in other languages and produced the result, in the case of its translation into Arabic, that the term lost its negative connotation and had therefore to be replaced by other terms such as Islamic Extremism or Extremist Islam or Radical Islam in order to express the negative connotation of what was originally meant by fundamentalism in the context of religion and more precisely of Islam.

With reference to Iran, Algeria and particularly Chechnya it has been argued that a global concept such as Religious Fundamentalism runs the risk of interpreting every protest as a global phenomenon and thus does not see the local peculiarities that encourage protests, notwithstanding the global tendencies. The use of macro-sociological theories, finally, suggests fixed and timelessly-used terminologies that exclude historical changes in the vocabulary as well as ambiguous readings of the texts syn- and diachronically.

To draw the readers' attention to such a production of reality is very important in times, like those of the Coronavirus, when conspiracy theories are making the rounds and threaten to obscure the view of local formations and concrete regional differences. It is a strong call to engage in an always-needed reality check before one feels inclined to implement general explanations of a particular term, because the obvious connotations of such a term can inadvertently raise, as in the case of

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14   Thomas Bauer (2011). *Die Kultur der Ambiguität. Eine andere Geschichte des Islam*. Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen im Insel Verlag, p. 56.

Religious Fundamentalism, a misleading concept that impedes correct analysis of what is really going on.

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