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Religious Fundamentalism and Extremism: A Paradigm Analysis

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Introduction

Broadly speaking, the term ‘fundamentalism’ today names a religio-political perspective found in most if not all major religions in the contemporary world. At the present time it is associated with various expressions of religious extremism and, most worryingly, with religiously-motivated terrorism. In particular – though by no means exclusively – it is Islamic extremism and allied terrorist activities which are linked in our day to the idea of fundamentalism. Although both Christianity and Islam are susceptible to imperialist impositions of one sort or another, as history only too clearly has demonstrated, it is nonetheless the case that it is Islamic forms of extremism and terrorism which have presently taken centre-stage in current world affairs.

While there have been many studies undertaken on so-called Islamic fundamentalism, the fact remains that it and, indeed, religious fundamentalism, in general are much misunderstood. Generally speaking, Islamic ‘fundamentalists’ may be distinguished both from other Muslims as well as from Christian fundamentalists largely on the grounds of differing perspectives on the issue of political engagement. Nevertheless, across the board fundamentalism has become, it would seem, more politically engaged – and more extreme with it – than what would have been the ‘norm’ not so long ago. Yet a 1982 warning of fundamentalism becoming “a matter of concern for everyone” remains current. Today the term ‘fundamentalism’ tends to evoke a negative reaction of some sort; we none of us regard it with indifference. But what are we to make of it? And what about the apparent link to terrorism: how are we to understand that? How may we contend with and, hopefully, neutralise the current global threat of religious terrorism?

In my view it is imperative to attempt to understand critically any potential – let alone real – relationship between fundamentalism and terrorism. It is, I suggest, *the* contemporary religious challenge, without equal. International travel, national economies – the price we pay for our petrol – are all impacted today not so much by the convolutions of foreign policies and international relations, or even by global economic and political power plays, significant as they are. Rather it is impositional religious ideologies, taken to extreme and at times clashing competitively, that presently impinges upon all our lives and constitutes a defining feature of our times. An upsurge in the totalising claims of fundamentalist ideologues – in Islam, certainly, but also in Christianity, as well as in Hinduism, Judaism and other religious communities – together with the utilisation of globalized communication, transportation and related modern technologies, means that the issue of religious fundamentalism requires careful consideration and critical analysis.

How can we explain and understand the difference between the religious fundamentalist who, in essence, simply holds an absolute truth- and value-perspective, on the one hand, and the so-called fundamentalist who engages in the extremist and violent behaviours of terrorism, on the other? Given the contemporary need to be able to identify, predict, locate and so counter any potential terrorist extremism born of certain intense expressions of religion, usually identified in some way as ‘fundamentalist’, and often Islamic, then the task of analysing the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism so as to construct a paradigm capable of providing both interpretation and, perhaps, a measure of predictability, would seem an imperative task and, if genuinely applicable, then hopefully a useful contribution to the field of Counter Terrorism.

If the war on terror is a war of ideology – in particular, a war against the dominance of certain religious fundamentalisms – how are we to address the challenge of fundamentalism and terrorism? The primary component in any strategy aimed at countering religiously motivated terrorism, I suggest, has to be in respect to identifying, and addressing, ideological rhetoric and elements within communities from which potential terrorists are likely to come, and by which they are likely to be nourished. But to do that, to make sense of any potential data or evidence, we need a framework of interpretation, a lens of perspective. It is in respect to this that, I suggest, an analysis of religious fundamentalism offers a paradigm for understanding something of the origin of religiously-motivated terrorism, in comparison with terrorism that may be motivated by other factors such as economic pressures, political hegemony, social conflicts, or whatever. In such cases a form of the fundamentalist paradigm may indeed apply, but not the religious modality of it.

The phenomenon of fundamentalism: phase, feature, and factors

As a framework phenomenon that applies to more than just religion, fundamentalism comprises a series of key factors. Others may be adduced, but the twenty that I have identified, and the way they are interconnected in terms of denoting features and phases, needs to be carefully understood. The factors I have identified are analysed in terms of a progression of ten features, or sets, of paired factors. These are further sub-grouped into three ‘phases’ so as to distinguish between what may be termed passive, assertive, and impositional forms of fundamentalism.

My hypothesis is that all forms and expressions of religious fundamentalism begin with, or at least include, the sets of factors which denote the passive phase. Much conservative religiosity would identify with this phase and would not be overly troubled by that. Indeed, variant forms of reactionary conservatism across both Christianity and Islam, as well as other religions, would easily classify as expressive of passive fundamentalism. However, some religious groups or movements go beyond this such that we may identify them as belonging to the assertive, or hard-line, phase. Most typically sectarian movements such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Moonies, and the Exclusive Brethren (at least until recently) tended to fit within the more overt ‘hard-line’ phase. But there are some which, incorporating all the marks of hard-line fundamentalism, then go further to manifest what can be perhaps best described as variant forms of ‘activist’ or ‘impositional’ fundamentalism. It is here that we discover the propensity for fundamentalism to yield to terrorism.

Of course, it needs to be said that there will be other religious – and non-religious – groups and movements who likewise wish to influence wider society, to advocate policy and values, to effect change, in accord with their agendas; but they are nowhere near terrorism or even extremism, for they lie outside the fundamentalist paradigm. The desire for change, and active participation in socio-political processes, does not of itself equate with fundamentalism, let alone terrorism. It is not activism *per se* which is at issue, rather activist impositional fundamentalism.

A passive – ‘normative’ – fundamentalist group, to all intents and purposes, ‘minds its own business’ so far as the rest of society is concerned; an assertive hard-line group perhaps somewhat less so, but an impositional activist group does not. An impositional fundamentalism wants to see things change to fit its view of how things should be, and will take steps to make its views known and, if need be, to actively bring about change – by covert or overt interventions, including fomenting revolution or enacting terrorism. Hence the need to construct a paradigm that attempts to show a distinct progression whereby the sequential and correlative links between the ideology of religious fundamentalism and the propensity for extreme, even terrorist, action is made clear. It is this underlying dynamic of ideological development which the following paradigm attempts to map in some detail.

Phase I: Passive (Normative) Fundamentalism

Passive fundamentalism, I suggest, comprises six basic defining factors grouped in paired sets in respect to three features – principal presuppositions; authority derivation; implicit verification. These features, I suggest, denote the essence of fundamentalism *per se*, whether religious or non-religious.

1 – Principal Presuppositions

(i) *Perspectival Absolutism* and (ii) *Immediate Inerrancy*

The fundamentalist perspective is inherently absolutist. Fundamentalism is a mindset, first and foremost: only one truth; one authority; one right way to be. The fundamentalist perspective deems itself privileged, for it presumes superiority of knowledge and truth. Indeed, this is inherent to holding an absolutist perspective as such. Allied to absolutism is the view that the grounding text – be it political manifesto or holy writ – is to be read as conveying an immediate truth or value, without error; that is, ‘inerrant’. However, the assertion of the immediate inerrancy of the text – reading the text as being immediately applicable and providing direct access to ultimate or divine truth – in fact involves an implicit assertion that there is only one normative interpretive reading allowed, namely that which is undertaken through the fundamentalist’s lens. From the fundamentalist perspective, alternative and variant interpretations are deemed inherently false or heretical, and so are rejected.

2 – Authority Derivation

(iii) *Apodictic Assumption* and (iv) *Narrow Narrative Indwelling*

Building directly upon the preceding set, the third and fourth factors constitute the basis of authority claimed by fundamentalism. This involves the assumption that the authority source – most usually textual – is unambiguous; the meaning can be ‘read off’ directly. This is sometimes understood in terms of ‘literalism’. But for a fundamentalist the key issue is that the authority of the text is such that no interpretive framework is required; the text at hand is clear in its composition; the message conveyed by the text is apodictic – that is, it provides an adequately clear expression of truth.

Allied to the assumption of apodicticity is the factor of narrow narrative indwelling. Arguably all religious people ‘indwell’, to a greater or lesser degree, their respective religious narrative. The life references, points of meaning and frameworks of understanding which inform a religious individual’s existence are more often than not traceable to the paradigms, models, values and so on, that are given within the religious narrative – the scriptural record as well as accompanying histories/stories and so forth. Where the narrative base is broad, the religious life that indwells it

likewise reflects breadth. But where the base is narrow, the resultant indwelt religious life is correspondingly confined. So my thesis is that, in the case of fundamentalism, a distinguishing factor has to do with the narrowness of narrative indwelling. It is, indeed, this very narrowness which often marks a fundamentalist out from the wider religious tradition and community.

3 – Implicit Verification

(v) Narrative Correlation and (vi) Rhetorical Corroboration

The evolving fundamentalist perspective begins now to move from a variant conservative expression of a religious worldview to a more intentional advocacy of religious viewpoint as being, *par excellence*, the expression of authenticity and truth applicable for, or to, all. The fundamentalist's verification of their position marks the closure of the passive, normative, phase, and a point of transition to the assertive hard-line phase. A deepening of the correlation between the religious narrative espoused, and the lived reality of the religious community concerned, is the first of the pair of factors here. It is, of course, quite normal for a religion to offer some degree of correlation between its narrative and the 'real world' in which the followers of the religion live – otherwise religion would reduce to a simple and obvious fairy-tale. However, a distinction can be made between the broader traditions of a religion whose narrative correlation will be relatively loose, flexible or at least provisional, and the fundamentalist whose degree of correlation will be that much greater and intense. Indeed this factor sharpens – and is prefaced by – the factors of absolutism and inerrancy. For a fundamentalist the correlation will be such as to yield an unambiguous outcome – America *is* the Great Satan, ontologically, for example – whereas, for a non-fundamentalist critical of the West, America may be deemed or judged corrupt or inherently evil, or whatever, in a more general way. The difference is one of the degrees of correlation between the religious narrative and the external realities of the world in which the fundamentalist lives.

Allied to narrative correlation is the factor of rhetorical corroboration. Here the discourse of fundamentalism can be more readily tested, perhaps. For in the articulation of narrative correlation there is likely to be found a corresponding intensification of a corroborating rhetoric that situates, endorses, and justifies the fundamentalist perspective with respect to the judgements and assessments made about the external world. Rhetoric will be sharp and self-affirming; judgements will be clear and reflective of both the correlation factor as well as the corroboration factor. Thus the perspective of the fundamentalist derives implicit verification and the scene is set for the next phase.

Phase II: Assertive (Hard-line) Fundamentalism

This phase deepens and strengthens the ideology and its application, both real (in terms of fundamentalist groups) and potential (in respect to the wider society in which the fundamentalism concerned is situated). It involves the emergence of the features of its construct of knowledge, a distinct identity structure, a hardening of what may be called 'contextual scope', and evidence of a deepening condemnatory stance taken in respect to any opposition or competition, however that might be conceived.

4 – Epistemological Construction

(vii) Hard Factualism and (viii) Applied Necessity

Fundamentalism hardens, and becomes more self-assertive, as it tightens its own grip on what is knowable, and how what is knowable is known. In essence the range of what is admitted as

genuine knowledge is truncated: true knowledge is reduced to facts that are held to be true, for the most part – all else belongs to the realm of falsehood. Some hard-line fundamentalists, for example, reject scientific hypotheses and theories which, in their view, challenge or deny the ‘facts’ as they know them. Furthermore, however, the focus on facts – and so the reading of scripture as a compendium of God-given ‘facts’ to be relied upon implicitly – brings with it the dimension of the ‘necessary-ness’ of the fundamentalist’s construction of knowledge: alternative approaches to knowledge, to ascertaining truth and falsity, as well as to meaning and value, are necessarily ruled out. The fundamentalist’s own perception of knowledge is that of an applied necessity of perspective in respect to the focus on hard facts.

5 – Identity Structure

(ix) *Communitarian Intent* and (x) *Individual Constraint*

The fundamentalist mindset is not simply a matter of opinion and perspective as held by an individual, or by a collective of individuals. Rather it tends to embrace a particular dynamic: a ‘communitarian intent’, or set of normative community values and expectations, is juxtaposed with some form of ‘constraint’ placed upon the individual who is a member of that community. The identity of a fundamentalist individual is bound up necessarily with the identity of the fundamentalist community. Indeed, the stronger the fundamentalism, the tighter this relation. The factor of communitarian intent denotes the way in which fundamentalist movements place value, to a greater or lesser degree, upon membership of the community. The factor of ‘individual constraint’ is the necessary corollary, and the two go together to form the structure of fundamentalist identity, irrespective of the specific religion.

6 – Contextual Scope

(xi) *Ideological Exclusivism* and (xii) *Polity Inclusivism*

Ideological exclusivism refers to the fact that, for hard-line fundamentalism, no competing or variant ideological view is granted credibility. A fundamentalist perspective will exclude, virtually automatically, anything that relative to it appears ‘liberal’, that is, that admits of, for example, any limitation, provisionality, otherness, openness, or change. But alongside this exclusivity there may be discerned, as a tenth factor to fundamentalism, a form of inclusion, namely polity inclusion. This is the propensity to include, in respect to considerations of the policies and praxis of social organisation, all others that fall within the fundamentalist’s frame of reference or worldview understanding. This may still appear innocuous, especially if the fundamentalists concerned are a minor or marginalised group in terms of the wider society in which they exist, or where such an inclusivist stance finds a more benign setting within a normative or orthodox religious tradition. Excluding all other ideological variants and perspectives necessarily implies the wholesale inclusion of a society in terms of the outworking of polity considerations. It is at this juncture that the fundamentalist, for whom polity inclusiveness is a primary element, is poised to become activist – to act on this inclusivism in terms of polity, whether covertly (as in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints vicariously baptising the dead, for example) or overtly (as in the Taliban’s insistence that everyone in Afghanistan live according to their application Islam, and variations on this theme found currently in parts of Pakistan and Nigeria).

7 – Condemnatory Stance

(xiii) *Judgemental Values* and (xiv) *Pietistic Tyranny*

Hard-line fundamentalism is distinguished by strident assertions of a condemnatory or judgemental sort such that their expression amounts to an instance of what may be called ‘pietistic tyranny’. It is in the expression of judgemental values that a hard-line assertive fundamentalism displays its real

stance toward any who would dissent from within, or oppose from without. Inherent in this is often a deprecating attitude towards others, whether in regard to virtually any other (the world at large), or focussed on specific others (particular groups or categories of people such as Jews or gays). Such judgementalism can be found in the generalised sense of the Exclusive Brethren's dismissal of all outside its fold as 'worldlies', for example, or in the sweeping condemnation of western society found within some expressions of contemporary Islamic rhetoric. It can also be found in a more targeted sense, as in variant forms of both political and religious fundamentalism that dehumanise opponents, or in contemporary instances of Islamic antisemitic rhetoric and the deprecation of Israel.

It is in the inward application of judgemental values – that is, applying such values for the purpose of control and censure within the fundamentalist's own community – that the factor of pietistic tyranny may be discerned. This is where fundamentalism shows itself to be truly hard-line and self-reflectively assertive. The faith-values it espouses – its 'piety' – then becomes, in effect, a tool of tyranny: newly-won converts must cut themselves off from their family of origin (as with the Moonies, for example); or members of the community must have no social intercourse with anyone not in fellowship with them (as with the Exclusive Brethren). The advocacy by a particular religious community that its members should have no truck with those of another community of the same faith-family, for instance, may give evidence of a pietistic tyranny in action. This is perhaps the case currently in respect to the Sunni and Shi'a divide in Iraq.

Phase III: Impositional (Activist) Fundamentalism

Here we are brought into the third and final phase whereby what began, as it were, as 'merely' fundamentalist is now transformed, or has evolved, into something of a distinctly radicalized or activist nature such that extreme actions, including violent behaviours and even terrorism, may be contemplated, advocated, and engaged. The three features of this phase are identified as value application, explicit justification, and enacted extremism.

8 – Value Application

(xv) Otherness Negated and (xvi) Self-Superiority Asserted

At this juncture in the development of a fundamentalist's outlook, the sense of self-assertion and confidence is such that the values of fundamentalism are actively and intentionally applied impositionally. And these values are primarily two: the negation of otherness, or alterity as such, and the corresponding assertion of self-superiority over all opponents, real and putative. The negation of otherness is perhaps critical, for the scene set by the sixth set of factors – the contextualising exclusivism and inclusivism – together with that of the feature of condemnatory stance now emerge into a devaluing and dismissal of the 'otherness' as such, whether in terms of rival community or competing alterities, ideological or otherwise. Indeed, such alterities may be – and in fact often are – demonised.

The religiously 'other' on this view is often cast as 'satanic', or at least seriously and significantly labelled as a hostile opponent, and so hostilely regarded. In the process of negating the other, the self is asserted as inherently superior. My God is greater than your god. My Truth reigns over your ignorance. The authenticity of my faith contrasts with the feeble delusion you entertain. My laws express the divine reality directly which is infinitely superior to the laws which derive merely from human ideas. The salvation offered by my faith is the real thing by contrast to the lost way that you proclaim. And so we might go on. However expressed or referenced, it will be clear enough that

the fundamentalist is applying negative value to ‘otherness’ as such, together with a corresponding assertion of self-superiority. The scene is now well set for the next feature – the rendering of an explicit justification not just for a viewpoint but also for actions premised on that viewpoint.

9 – Explicit Justification

(xvii) *Sanctioned Imposition* and (xviii) *Legitimated Violence*

It should be clear that, once the preceding sets of factors are in operation, it is but a short step to the penultimate pair that signals the expression of fundamentalism in some form of direct socio-political action. The notion that the very imposition of the fundamentalist’s views and polity as being, in fact, sanctioned by a higher or greater authority, such as God, give powerful motivating support to extremist behaviours. This factor under-girds the imposed requirement to be, live and do in accord with the fundamentalist’s ideological dictates. And the higher sanctioning of the imposition of the fundamentalist’s programme leads naturally to the next factor of this analysis: violence is now legitimated; a platform of justification is established, at least in the mind of the impositional activist fundamentalist. Sanctioned imposition and legitimated violence are the two sides of the chief coin of justification in the currency of extremism. We are now brought to the final feature of the sequential paradigm of fundamentalism, enacted extremism.

9 – Enacted Extremism

(xvii) *Manifest Contempt* and (xviii) *Terrorist Events*

There are two interrelated factors that comprise this final feature. On the one hand there may be a manifestation of contempt as an expression of negative judgements and the negation of the ‘other’ instantiated in various contemptible behaviours – intimidation, coercion, violent and destructive actions directed at non-human symbolic targets (works of art, places of worship), and so on. The aim is to assert superiority, impose an ideology, or enforce submission; but not necessarily inculcate terror as such, at least not on too grand a scale. On the other hand there is an extremism that apparently knows no bounds: the terrorising and subjugation of a targeted populace is itself both means and end. For example, as we have seen in Afghanistan not so long ago, not only was it the case that all Muslims ought to submit naturally to the *Shari’a*, but according to the fundamentalist ideals of the Taliban, all of society should be made to submit, like it or not, for impositional submission is an inherent element of its extreme application of an otherwise comparatively passive Islamic ideal (viz., the peaceful submission to God by way of living according to God’s law). Submission to the dictates of the fundamentalist is at this juncture a matter of necessary imposition, as Afghani women found to their cost. And the alternative to even an involuntary submission is outright destruction: hence, from the Taliban’s extremist perspective, the Buddha ‘idols’ had to be destroyed. How else does the extremist ensure that the imposition that has been sanctioned can, in fact, be effected?

Terrorism, as a descriptor for extreme and violent behaviours, is by no means the sole province of fundamentalism. But it can be, and is, the end-result of a fundamentalist ideological trajectory. This is the issue that we are faced with today, in both localised and globalized modalities. An absolutist perspective does not necessarily result in terrorist events: not all fundamentalists are terrorists. Yet, given a progressive ideological development as hypothesised in this paradigm analysis, it is arguably the case that religious fundamentalism may – as indeed we know that it does – produce terrorists.

Conclusion

Fundamentalism is not simply a religious or even political option in terms of belief perspective. It is a package-deal phenomenon denoted by a sequence of factors whose cumulative impact once – or if – the final factor is reached, can be devastating. The Taliban, to return to this example of Islamic fundamentalist extremism, took an absolutist, inerrant and exclusivist line with respect to their religious identity and behaviour, which was extended to include all who were within their purview – namely, the inhabitants of Afghanistan. Actions taken to effect their aims were deemed sanctioned by the highest authority – *Allah* (or God) – and their extreme measures were in consequence deemed legitimated; their contempt of all who were different, or outside their ‘world’, was manifest and terrorising activity was the modality of coercion and control. Thus no opposition was brooked; all had to submit and obey, or face the consequences.

As this paradigm analysis has endeavoured to show, not all fundamentalist movements or groups necessarily become impositional and activist, and if they do they may not necessarily resort to violence and terrorism in the attempt to achieve their aims. But when they do we can, hopefully, understand better where it is they have come from, and how. To the extent my analysis is in any way apposite and accurate, and to the extent that empirical evidence – derived for example from speeches, pamphlets etc. – may be adduced such that there is a clear correlation with the paradigmatic elements of factors, features and phases as I have outlined them, then I suggest that this paradigm provides a basis, at least, for an empirical measure for the detection of extremist religious fundamentalism – Islamic as well as any other – likely to lead to terrorist activity.