

Portfolio Part 1_Lucenti

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Discuss the relevance (if any) of the term 'Islamic fundamentalism'

The use of the term "Islamic Fundamentalism" is somewhat controversial. To date, there is no unanimous agreement among scholars of the Islamic studies both in the West and in the Islamic world itself on which term is more appropriate. But what is meant by fundamentalism? Fundamentalism is taken from the noun "origin" of the thing. Fundamentalism in all languages means a return to the origin (Shboul, 2020). 'Islamic fundamentalism' commonly refers to the strict adherence by Muslims to ancient doctrines, the literal reading of the Koran and a certain resistance to modernisation (Watt, 2008). To understand the significance of this term on an ideological or analytical level, it is useful to briefly review its history within Western thought. The spread of the term fundamentalism occurred in the Protestant Christian sphere in America in the 1920s (Kramer, 2003). Feeling threatened by Biblical criticism and philosophical scepticism, Protestants defined themselves as "fundamentalists" or promoters of the "fundamental" beliefs of Christianity, including creationism. From that moment on in the American context the term took on a pejorative meaning, intended as anti-intellectualism, backwardness, and obscurantism. "Fundamentalism was a label that was affixed almost exclusively to Protestant Christians who were thought to stand in the way of progress" (Watt, 2008). It was only half a century later that the term began to be associated with Islam during the Iranian revolution. The use 'Islamic fundamentalism' spread rapidly. As Kramer pointed out by 1990, the "Concise Oxford English Dictionary defined it not only as 'the strict maintenance of traditional Protestant beliefs', but also as 'the strict maintenance of ancient or fundamental doctrines of any religion, especially Islam'. By sheer dint of usage, Islamic fundamentalism had become the most cited fundamentalism of all" (p.4). If the term became a systematic part of the media lexicon, scholars began to reject it and consider it as a synonym of extremism and therefore not suitable for the unbiased study of social and political changes within Islam. Esposito, for instance, argued that the term was often associated with extremism and fanaticism. Said, more than deconstructing the term, denounced its systematic use against Islam. But in addition to those who opposed, there were also supporters of the wording. Sadik J. al-Azm, for example (Kramer, 2003), sided in favour of the term by emphasizing how the Arab term *Usuli*, from *Usul* "the fundamentals" was used within the Arab world to designate the new Islamic movements that call for a return to basic Islam, to the original and fundamental principles of tradition. Even the Egyptian Hasan Hanafi confirmed the validity of the term to speak of the new political phenomena within Islam. For the unhappy, one of the main alternatives was the term *Islamism* for the phenomenon and *Islamists* for the adherents. The term *Islamism* was certainly not new. In the past it was used as a synonym for Islam. Initially used in France from the mid-eighteenth century, it was used for a long time together with the term *mahométisme* to define the Islamic religion. But while the term *mahométisme* was based on the erroneous assumption that the most important figure in Islam (therefore deserving of worship) was Mohammed in the same way that Christ was for Christianity, Voltaire used the term *Islamisme* which seemed to bypass this linguistic misunderstanding. At the beginning of

the twentieth century the term Islamism began to be replaced with Islam, the term used in the Islamic world to define the religion of Muslims. After several decades, the new use of the term Islamism occurred in France in the 1970s, together with the alternative *intégrisme*. However, the reminiscences of the old use of Islamism as a synonym of Islam were still at the basis of the reticence of some scholars in the contemporary use of the term Islamism to talk about political Islam and the new movements within it. Maxime Rodinson, a French historian of Islam said “In the dictionary, *islamisme* is given as a synonym for Islam” (Kramer, 2003). From 1985, thanks to a series of translations of French works, the term also took hold in the English-speaking world. Those who support the use of Islamism justify this choice for the negative connotation it has taken on “Islamic fundamentalism”, often associated with extremism. Despite the critical issues and some firm opposition, the term Islamism has established itself in common language and still has primacy, to the detriment of fundamentalism, even if the latter term has certainly not disappeared, far from it. In the Islamic world itself, opinions differ. Rashid al Ghannouchi, the former leader of Tunisia's EnNahda party, rejected the term fundamentalism as it reflects the negative connotations implied by Western usage (Kramer, 2003). Similarly, Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, the spiritual mentor of Hizbullah, rejected fundamentalism for the violent connotation that the term has taken. But even on the use of Islamism there are many doubts, some Muslim leaders or authors preferring to use the term Islam tout court. In short, far from being a resolved question, the choice of the right term continues to inflame the controversy between supporters and opponents of the use of “fundamentalism”. Among the first there is prof. Achcar Gilbert, who in an interview with ISR magazine, said he prefers the term “Islamic fundamentalism” for two reasons. The notion of fundamentalism applies to all religions. They all have common features, so “the notion of fundamentalism is useful in emphasizing the distinction between Islamic fundamentalism and Islam as a religion, since people are used to making the same distinction between other religions and their brands of fundamentalism. No one confuses Protestant fundamentalism and Protestantism, for example”¹. Another advantage of the term, in the author’s view, is that the notion of fundamentalism is more accurate to distinguish between different currents and groups that consider Islam a central element in their ideological identity. It is more precise than terms like “political Islam” or “Islamism” which tend to put in the same category very different movements. However, not everyone shares the author's argument and there are those who, speaking of “fundamentalist distortion of the Islamic message” (Abbas Zaidi, 2008), want to underline the ideological use that this term has taken on in language. “Even scholars of Islam have a difficult time deciding what to call the various followers of Islam. The terms political Islam, Islamism, traditional Islam, radical Islam, Wahhabism, Salafism, militant Islam, Islamic movement, and moderate Islam are all pregnant with meaning” (Connell, 2005). Pratt also underlines how the term “fundamentalism” is associated with different forms of religious extremism and religiously oriented terrorism, not favouring an understanding of the phenomenon itself (2006). My own research on the representation of Islam in textbooks (Lucenti, 2019, 2021) shows how the term is often used interchangeably with “extremism, terrorism” and even more dangerously “Islam” tout court. In all the texts in which the topic is treated it is represented only and exclusively in relation to the Arab-Muslim world and it is inserted not within a paragraph on international terrorism, but rather within the chapter on globalization (EcoGeo manual), on the world today (Geography manual. Territories and problems) and within a paragraph on religions in the world (Geography manual. Territories and

¹ <https://isreview.org/issue/103/islamic-fundamentalism-arab-spring-and-left/index.html>

problems). When it comes to religious fundamentalism as a general topic, no typology other than the Islamist one is mentioned.

The examples mentioned so far help us understand the historical semantization of the terms “fundamentalism” and its more popular counterpart “Islamism”. Regardless of individual preferences, it remains essential to contextualise the use of these terms starting from the reconstruction / deconstruction of the different meanings historically attributed to them and the ideological relapses of both.

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