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WHAT IS THE RELEVANCE (IF ANY) OF THE TERM ‘ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM’?

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Introduction

The term “fundamentalism” was coined in the 1920s to designate American, conservative Protestants who defended their basic beliefs and the literalist interpretation of the Bible and who rejected “the spread of philosophical scepticism”¹. In 1979, fundamentalists gained a new denotation, being used for *Shī‘ī* Muslims who ousted the *Shāh* of Persia and set up “an Islamic government under *Ayatollah* Khomeiny (1902–1989 CE)”². Today, however, when the term fundamentalist is used in the international press, one gets to think of *Sunnī* Muslims opposing Westernisation³. In turn, a perceived fundamentalist ensemble has been criticised by Western scholars and politics as being responsible for “civilisational conflict”⁴.

The fear of the fundamentalist menace crystallised after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001⁵ ⁶. While some would consider the ideology behind Islamic fundamentalism as self-evident, Muslims frequently consider the term to be insulting and falsely ascribed to Islam. The same goes for similar terminology such as “extremism” and “radicalism”, “political Islam” and “*Jihadism*”⁷. Other observers preferred to label the phenomenon “revival”, “resurgence” and “resurrection”, while in Muslim countries, one

¹ Kramer, 2003, 3; Chang, 2005, 58-59; see Vorster, 2007, 5; see Wallerstein, 1997, 3

² Antes, 2000, 260; see Lawrence, 1998, 40

³ see Chang, 2005, 58

⁴ Hence, Bernard Lewis warned in the 1990s of fundamentalist “irrationality” and Huntington “postulated [that the ultimate world order] would be contested ... by Muslims acting together on a giant scale” (Brasted & Khan, 2011-2018, 276 & 286).

⁵ Bukay, 2004, 13-19; Vorster, 2007, 5

⁶ In 2003 already, a Google quest for “Muslim fundamentalists” and Islamic fundamentalists” yielded 45,300 results, “Islamic fundamentalism” and “Muslim fundamentalism” were found 58,280 times, and “Islamism” 58,280 times (Kramer, 2003, 8).

⁷ Mozaffari, 2007, 18 & 30

perceived the words “rootedness” (*uṣūlīyah*); “origins” (*aṣlīyūn*); “Islamists” (*islāmīyūn*); “believers” (*mu’minūn*); “God-fearers” (*mutādayīnūn*)” on the one hand and “terrorists” (*irhābiyyūn*) or “extremists” (*mutatarrifūn*) on the other⁸.

Terms such as fundamentalism, “which became titles of numerous books and ... articles, [are] clear and ambivalent at the same time”, according to Mozaffari, although little doubt was left that these shapes of Islam were “more political, often violent” and a peril to the West, if not for governments in Muslim-majority states⁹.

Underlying Ideological Characteristics

Salafism – returning to the ways of the ancestors – declines “common law ... and rapprochement with other religions” and sects, among other things¹⁰. The *Qur’ān* is read literally and as a “sacred canon” instead of contextualising it historically¹¹. This goes for Salafists especially, who share the belief that “applying the principles of the past [might lead] to a successful ... present”¹². Returning to ancient times and to the societal example of the prophet Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh (ca. 570–632 CE) and the first four caliphs is hence considered a precondition for proper existence¹³. However, such is not the only characteristic of fundamentalist Islam. The latter also embodies proselytising and an inherent militancy directed against the West and everything ‘deviant’ from the fundamentalist interpretation of ‘truth’¹⁴.

Fundamentalists or “Islamists assert Islam as a revolutionary idea ... with the aim of utterly destroying the social structure of the world only to build it anew”¹⁵. The ensuing ‘War on Terror’ has, however, reinforced Islamist militancy, as it is depicted by their religious and political leaders as an onslaught “against Islam per se”, whereas Islam is considered a “totalising socio-ideological system”¹⁶. Essentially embracing such radical

⁸ Bukay, 2004, 13-19; see Wallerstein, 1997, 3

⁹ Mozaffari, 2007, 18

¹⁰ Chang, 2005, 59

¹¹ Nagata, 2001, 48

¹² Bukay, 2004, 13-19

¹³ see Ahmed, 2017, 43

¹⁴ see Chang, 2005, 57

¹⁵ Pratt, 2006, 7-8

¹⁶ *ibid*

ideas carry fundamentalists “far beyond the pale of normative Islam”¹⁷. Not least because *Jihadist* “insurgency” is marked by “intolerance” towards other “variants of Islam”¹⁸.

Fundamentalism not only attempts to take over religion but also politics¹⁹. This is a phenomenon best reflected, rather than in the term “fundamentalism”, in the French word “*intégrisme*”, originally denoting anti-modernism within the Catholic church in the beginning of the 20th century²⁰. *Intégrisme* denotes an integrity of religion and all other aspects of life.

Some Causes of Fundamentalism

The reasons for “fundamentalist discontent” are manifold and include political mismanagement, “uneven development”, either inside states or internationally, e.g. through “rapid urbanisation”, “psychosocial alienation” originating from the previously mentioned factors, as well as “psychosocial alienation” and the consequences of globalisation²¹.

Bassam Tibi, during the late 1990s, explained how globalisation leads to “uniform structures” around the world which he labels “institutional modernity”²². Globalised structures encompass technology and the economy, however “cultural aspects” are not assimilated and equalised to “universal norms and values”, according to the political scientist²³. However so, religious traditions are perceived to be threatened by Muslim fundamentalists^{24 25}. The young generations especially “are caught between a traditional past and a higher secular education” within a “modern urban environment”, all of which causes “bewildering contradictions” and frustrations²⁶. As a reaction, Western society is

¹⁷ Pratt, 2006, 7-8

¹⁸ Ungureanu, 2010, 144

¹⁹ see Vorster, 2007, 13

²⁰ Ternisien, 2001, 1

²¹ Hoffman, 1995, 207-212

²² Kingston, 1999, 696

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ Almond, Sivan & Appleby, 1995a, 403-404

²⁵ This is not a new development but harks back at least to the era of colonialism (Chang, 2005, 59).

²⁶ Hoffman, 1995, 210; Bukay, 2004, 13-19

distorted into a scenery of “modern bankruptcy” which, from the anti-secular viewpoint, is to be resisted²⁷.

Strangely enough, fundamentalism also spreads in societies where economic modernity has been successful or is rudimental²⁸. As a solution to this conundrum, Tibi postulates that “cultural differences”, especially that between secularity and the Islamist monism, are at the heart of the conflictual relationship “between civilisations”²⁹. Through the lenses of the culturalist critique, one can isolate the “component of reason” as one of the main factors of Western ascendancy³⁰.

Vorster, conversely, identifies a loss of cultural, religious and linguistic identity, whereas Bruce Lawrence, a professor of religious studies, takes a different view entirely, emphasising the “uneven distribution of global resources”³¹. Pratt stresses that the ideological “symbiosis” between religion and politics, or civilisation, under the label of Islam have been overlooked by Tibi, while van Bruinessen’s model contains mutual preconceived notions between the Islamic world and the West, which are “emotionally charged”³².

Final Appraisal

Fundamentalists seek to reinstitute their view of “original” Islam and to “purify” their concepts of religion³³. Fundamentalism is hence a “modern phenomenon” but directed backwards³⁴. Fundamentalists are bound to fight those whom they allege is marginalising them³⁵. As far as ideology is concerned, fundamentalists have been “retrieving and restoring neglected or soft-pedal[l]ed doctrines and practices, and creating others”, attempting to create an illusion of Muslim power in view of mobilising their disenchanted

²⁷ Ahmed, 2017, 41

²⁸ see *ibid*

²⁹ Kingston, 1999, 697; see Pratt, 2006, 4

³⁰ Eisenstadt, 1995, 272-73

³¹ Vorster, 2007, 13; Kingston, 1999, 700

³² Pratt, 2006, 4; van Bruinessen, 1992, 8

³³ Ahmed, 2017, 82

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ Marty & Appleby, 1995, 1

following³⁶. They often project a “harmonious, ideal state” as the goal of the “integral application of Islamic dogmas and practices”³⁷. But fundamentalism is not a unified struggle. In fact, it is the expression of “an ongoing competition between a variety of religious actors within ... Islam”³⁸.

The use of the term “fundamentalism” fails to highlight the complexity of the phenomenon³⁹. *Intégrisme*, while it does not encompass the literalist aspect, is better suited to explain but the totalising dimension of Islamism. Perhaps the most fitting term, and one which is less offensive than “Islamic extremism” and the like, is “political Islam”. It reflects the fact that Islamic scholars and leaders use religion “as a means [for achieving] power and control”⁴⁰ ⁴¹. As “fundamentalism ... is never quite able to encompass all the ‘fundamentalisms’” in an essentialist fashion, no term quite fits reality unless it is expanded upon, as a nominal definition, via other specific terms⁴².

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³⁶ *ibid*; see Chang, 2005, 59, 60-61

³⁷ Achcar & Drucker, 2004, 3

³⁸ Kingston, 1999, 701-702

³⁹ see Almond, Sivan & Appleby, 1995a, 403-404

⁴⁰ Eickelman & Piscatori, 1996, 55

⁴¹ Pelletreau advised to use the term revival, apparently for scholars to avoid a backfire on the part of Muslims (see Kramer, 2003, 7).

⁴² see Peacock & Pettyjohn, 1995, 115

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