

UWTSD

Muslim Politics (HPRS7017)

Name: Sharon Chua (Student ID: 2116272)

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

Introduction

The term “fundamentalism” has its roots in the Western world as a subset of Protestantism in the United States in the 1920s.¹ Broadly speaking, Wood opined that “fundamentalism is defined in terms of resistance to modern “threats” or opposition to modern secularism.”² Antoun described “fundamentalism” as focusing on several common themes such as the “quest for purity, the struggle between good and evil; the search for authenticity; totalism and activism,” scriptualism, and millennialism.³ Subsequently, the term “fundamentalism” became a global concept used in the 1970s and 1980s to discuss and analyze religious movements inter and intra major world religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism.⁴ “Islamic fundamentalism” became a category of study and a popularised term used by scholars to label various Islamic movements. This is especially so since the 1970s, which began with the meteoric rise of Khomeini and the establishment of an Islamic republic with him as both the political and the religious leader following the Iranian Revolution.⁵

To set the stage right for the discussion of “Islamic fundamentalism”, we need to understand the historical roots of Islam as a religion. The period prior to the advent of Islam in 610 CE is called “*Jahiliyyah*, or ‘Time of Ignorance’.”⁶ Nardo opined that this

¹ In the early twentieth century, fundamentalists were referred to a group of North American Protestants who upheld some fundamental truths of Christianity that modernists were abandoning such as “bible inerrancy and adherence to what was taken as the literal meaning of certain critical passages, such as those referring to the resurrection.” See Simon Wood, ‘The Concept of Global Fundamentalism: A Short Critique.’ In *Fundamentalism: Perspectives on a Contested History*, ed. by Simon A. Wood and David Harrington Watt, (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press. 2014), pp. 125-143 (p. 125).

² Wood, p. 125.

³ Richard T. Antoun, ‘Fundamentalism.’ In *The New Blackwell Companion To The Sociology Of Religion*, ed. by Bryan S. Turner (United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 519-543 (p. 520).

⁴ Wood, p. 125; Khalid Yahya Blankinship, “Muslim ‘Fundamentalism,’ Salafism, Sufism, And Other Trends.’ In *Fundamentalism: Perspectives On A Contested History*, ed. by Simon A. Wood and David Harrington Watt, (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press. 2014), pp. 144–162 (p. 144).

⁵ Blankinship, p. 144; Wood, p. 126.

⁶ Don Nardo, *Understanding Islam* (San Diego, CA: ReferencePoint Press, 2019), p. 9.

was “an age of religious confusion, the worship of multiple gods, social discord, and moral decadence.”⁷ With the coming of Islam to the Arab region in the seventh century, under the leadership of Prophet Muhammad based on the Qur’an as the source of authority, paganism was eradicated from the Arabs and monotheistic Islam grew to become a major religious and political power in the world. However, with the coming of the West and the corruption of Islamic values and influences, Muslims see Islamic societies as having lapsed into decadence, poverty, and stagnation. Thus, the study of Islamic fundamentalism would often involve the framework of calling Muslims back to practising the pristine and pure form of Islam performed by the Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslim community based on the Qur’an and the Hadith.⁸ For the term “Islamic fundamentalism” to remain relevant in the study of Islam, this paper proposes that it has to be studied from an Islamic lens and it needs to be rid of the negative connotations associated with violence and terror.

Studying Islamic Fundamentalism From Islamic Lens

Islamic fundamentalism needs to be studied from an Islamic lens. If one uses the term “Islamic fundamentalism” loosely and impose the Christian-centric model of the development of Christian fundamentalism on the study of Islam, it will not portray an accurate picture of Islam nor gives it a fair analysis in its own term. As Antoun opined, the study of fundamentalism should be treated as “an orientation to the world,” rather than a Western concept employed to “boost or denigrate” a religion.⁹ It would thus be more relevant and useful to study Islamic fundamentalism within the unique contexts of each Muslim-majority country and see how Islam respond to its local and international contexts to ensure its religious fundamentals are safeguarded. These contexts would include the social-political situations (e.g., colonialism and nation-building), onslaught of modernization and secularization, its positions on the separation of religion and state and its perceived threats to the survival of Islam.¹⁰

The use of the term “Islamic fundamentalism” should also not be constrained to be studied as a new modern phenomenon arising from the twentieth century western

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Geaves, p. 111.

⁹ Antoun, p. 519-520.

¹⁰ Geaves, p. 94-102.

concept and definition of fundamentalism. This is because Islam activism and call for a return to “pristine fundamentals of faith” were already evident throughout Islamic history and not a modern phenomenon.¹¹ Thus, perhaps, a more useful way to examine Islamic fundamentalism in Islamic terms would be to base it on patterns of revival (*ihya*), renewal (*tajdid*) and reform (*islah*), which has pre-modern roots throughout the history of Muslim civilization.¹² Western imperialism, colonialization and influence in Muslim majority countries heightened the call for Islamic revival, renewal, and reform from the eighteenth century onwards. Key Islamic figures who call for Muslims to return to a purity of Islam based on the Qur’an and Hadith and rid Islam of innovation (*bidah*) caused by foreign influence and values in their society would include Shah Wali Allah in India, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in Arab and Jamal al-Din al-Afgani in Egypt.¹³ They advocated the process of “interpretation of texts through *ijtihad*” so that Islam continues to progress and be relevant in modern times and be able to handle the issues and challenges brought about by Western civilizations into the Islamic world.

In the twentieth-first century, Bassam in examining the rise of political Islam categorised as a global phenomenon of religious fundamentalism, gave a new term “Islamism” to study this current dominant phenomenon from an Islamic perspective. In Bassam own words:

“the major creed of Islamism is *din-wa-dawla* (unity of state and religion) under a system of constitutionally mandated shari’a law. This is not faith but the imposition of a political system in the name of faith.”¹⁴

Thus, in giving political Islam a new term “Islamism” as a reference of discussion rather than a discussion of it under “Islamic fundamentalism,” it helps one to disassociate Islamism from Islam as “a religionized political agenda, not a spiritual one.”¹⁵ While

¹¹ John L. Esposito, ‘Fundamentalism,’ in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 88.

¹² John L. Esposito, ‘Revival and Renewal,’ In *The Oxford Dictionary Of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 265-266; Geaves, p. 102.

¹³ Esposito, ‘Revival and Renewal,’ p. 265

¹⁴ Bassam Tibi, ‘Why Islamism Is Not Islam.’ In *Islamism And Islam* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 1-30 (p.3).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Islamism might seemingly have the form of Islam fundamentalism, but in essence is a different thing from Islam and what Islam advocates.¹⁶

Battling The Negative Connotations Of “Islamic Fundamentalism”

Since the 1970s, the term “Islamic fundamentalism” has been used to discuss “the other” by the West. It is a term employed by the West to discuss the development of the Islamic faith and movements. Inevitably, as Blankinship puts it, the term becomes “a catchall term simply to refer to groups that one does not like” and which the West seeks to disparage.¹⁷ Primarily, in the West, the term “Islamic fundamentalism” has a negative connotation in its usage, and commonly associated with Muslims having “activist political agendas” or are “conservative practitioners” of Islam.¹⁸ An example would be Salafism, an Islamic reform movement which arose in the late nineteenth century in Egypt as a response to the onslaught of modernity in the Muslim world. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (Asadabadi) (1838–1897) and Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) were key proponents of this reform movement. Salafism (*al salafiyyah*) sought to draw inspiration from the “pious predecessors (*al-salaf al-salih*) of the first three or so generations of Muslims” and helped Muslims return to the Qur’an and Hadith as sources of authority and a return to a pure and pristine version of Islam.¹⁹ Within Salafism itself, there are modern religious reformers as well as conservatives who could be “political activists,” “quietists,” or “combative revolutionaries.”²⁰ Thus, one cannot simply generalize and categorize all Salafists as Islamic fundamentalists with violent tendencies.

In the post 9/11 era, because of the constant media portrayal of Islam as a violent religion and Muslims as “terrorists,” the term “Islamic fundamentalism” is now commonly associated with “repulsive terrorist violence and political agendas.”²¹ Ruthven commented that “the most spectacular fundamentalist atrocity of all was the suicide hijacking on 11 September 2001...a classic example of the ‘propaganda of the

¹⁶ For example, Tibi opined that “the notion of world order does not exist in the traditional Islamic doctrine. Its use by Islamists reflects an invention of Islamic tradition using ideas about world order that have been introduced through neo-Arabic terms not known to Islamic heritage.” See Tibi, p. 15-16.

¹⁷ Blankinship, p. 149.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

²¹ Blankinship, p. 148; Geaves, p. 88.

deed’.”²² The term has evolved to also become a black-white marker to differentiate between what is good and bad Islam. Loosely applied by lay people, the term “Islamic fundamentalism” refers to Islam that is violent, anti-modern, backward, intolerant, and reactive.²³ Thus, if the term “Islamic fundamentalism” is wrongly defined or understood as only referring to an extreme form of Islamic fundamentalism – religious violence, or a term of generalization for all Islamic groupings, it would not be a relevant term to be used to discuss Islam. It would not do justice to Islam and the variety of peaceful pious Islamic movements that have taken place over the decades since 1970s. For the term “Islamic fundamentalism” to be relevant for the study of Islam in a fair and meaningful manner, it has first got to be rid of the negative connotations and to be examined on its own term and definition.

Conclusion

According to Esposito, premodern Islamic renewal “was usually associated with a designated renewer (*mujaddid*) who, according to hadith, would come at the beginning of each century to renew Muslim faith and practice.”²⁴ This has become part of the Islamic belief that Allah will send a *mujaddid* to maintain the fundamentals of the Islamic faith and purify the faith by destroying any innovations.²⁵ Geaves opined that to the Muslims who advocates revival, renewal, and reform, “only by a return to a pristine Islam and a rejection of the materialist, consumer societies of the West can Muslim fortunes be restored” and Islam gain cultural and political hegemony in the world again.²⁶ Looking at the variety of Islamic revival, renewal and reform movements that have taken place throughout Islamic history, the term “Islamic fundamentalism” remains a relevant category to be used for analysis and discussion. However, as discussed earlier in the paper, “Islamic fundamentalism” must be examined through the lens of Islam and defined based on its own terms and not through the Western lens and definitions of fundamentalism.

(Word Count: 1509)

²² Malise, Ruthven, *Fundamentalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 2.

²³ Blankinship, p. 144; Geaves, p. 88.

²⁴ Esposito, ‘Revival and Renewal’, p. 265.

²⁵ Geaves, p. 92.

²⁶ Ron Geaves, ‘Islam and Fundamentalism.’ In *Islam Today*. Religion Today (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 105.

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