
UNIT 22 FUNDAMENTALISM

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22.1 INTRODUCTION

Religion has been traditionally one of the major components of national identity, and at times, its most prominent feature. Almost every state comprises of groups having faith in one religion or the other: Northern Ireland has Protestants and Catholics, Sri Lanka, Christian Tamils and Buddhist Sinhalese, India, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and many others, and even in a particular religion, there may be one sect or the other: the Sunnis and the Shias among the Muslims; the Arya Samajis, the Sanatan Dharmees and the Parnamis among the Hindus, for example.

In addition to religious fundamentalism, there is or what may be said, secularist fundamentalism, if fundamentalism is to be meant an uncompromising belief in the original and most basic thought frameworks of certain principles and a commitment to them. So understood, totalitarianism in the form of fascism or communism amounts to fundamentalism. Religious fundamentalism and secularist fundamentalism have much in common: conviction in the basic principles, commitment to beliefs and more or less, a fanatical zeal in methods. Fundamentalism is not necessarily always religious, it may be non-religious as well. Fundamentalism is rigid conformity to doctrines and this may be religious or ideological or both.

22.2 MEANING OF FUNDAMENTALISM

Fundamentalism is variously described by different scholars while emphasizing its one aspect or the other. This is why fundamentalism is religious as well as non-religious. Ideological fundamentalism may also be stated as one form of fundamentalism. Haywood (*Political Ideologies*) defines fundamentalism as "a belief in the original or most basic principles of a creed, often associated with fierce commitment and sometimes reflected in fanatical zeal". The implications of the term 'fundamentalism' from his definition are: (1) the belief either in the original creed or in its basic principles; (2) the belief takes the form of commitment and (3) the commitment takes the form of fanaticism. The word 'creed', denoting the accepting system of beliefs, becomes more or less, a religious term. If creed be taken as a religious concept, religious fundamentalism would therefore, mean, the belief in the original creed or in the basic principles of the creed together with commitment to those principles touching the

boundaries of fanaticism. In this sense, any religion may take the shape of religious fundamentalism: Christian, Islamic, Hindu and the like.

To be a man of religion and to be a fundamentalist are not the same thing, for religion is not fundamentalism. Faith in religion does not amount to faith in religious fundamentalism. Religion implies a moral order, a sublime faith and a spiritual end. Fundamentalism and especially, its religious aspect is the perversion of religion; it is the exploitation of religion, sometimes open and sometimes subtle; it is a tactical means to the wicked immoral end, converting religiosity into political/fanatical bellicosity.

Fundamentalism is opposed to secularism, rationalism, humanism and tolerance. It seeks to divide the civil society into numerous parts, pitting one against the other and preaching nothing but hatred. A fundamentalist knows his own religion and knows it in his own interest alone, and, therefore, to that extent, does not even respect his own religion. A true follower of religion is not necessarily fundamentalist; rather a fundamentalism is anti-religious. A religious fundamentalist is one who projects his religious community as distinct and separate from the others. He gives precedence to his interest over the common interest. He perceives and deals with citizens not individually but religion-wise. He, by looking at the citizens this way, distances himself from others and others from himself.

Fundamentalism is a system of beliefs; so is true about any ideology. If fundamentalism is regarded as an ideology of belief; if it is a system-belief, it is also an ideology-belief. In this sense, if there is a religious fundamentalism, there is also a non-religious, say, ideological fundamentalism. Communism, fascism, liberalism and to a degree, every ideology is also a system-belief. Every ideology to that degree is fundamentalistic. In every ideology, there are beliefs, theories, set of principles, foundational elements, followers who demonstrate faith as much as in any religion and there are people who readily accept martyrdom. All these features can be seen in any religious fundamentalism as well. Fundamentalism, in the general and relatively wider sense, means an ideology or belief system, commitment to which is more or less a matter of faith, both in words and deeds.

22.3 IDEOLOGY AND FUNDAMENTALISM

Ideologies are religions as religions are ideologies in their own right. Religion becomes a pin to fundamentalism, when belief in it becomes unchallengeable and the other religions are made to appear separate from it. Ideology, like religion, is a belief system against which all other ideologies become false. There is, thus, a common feature working in both, in ideology and religion and it is a system of beliefs. Rigidity in beliefs leads to fundamentalism, both religious and non-religious.

The relationship between knowledge and belief is, indeed, subtle, though the distinction between the two is very obvious. It is science that separates the two, Knowledge is all science or science leads to knowledge. Belief is only faith, and faith is always unscientific. But when knowledge ends up in belief, ideology and religion transform themselves into fundamentalism: ideological fundamentalism is as unscientific and bereft of knowledge as religious fundamentalism. When a religious precept says, truth shall win, it is knowledge, but when a man from a religion says that what he is saying is the truth, it is belief and therefore, has in it, all the essentials of fundamentalism. Likewise, Hitler, Mussolini or Stalin claim that their assertion alone is the gospel truth and when they want all others to believe so, it is secular or

non-religious fundamentalism. Faith, in any form of fundamentalism, is never questioned and it stays beyond the reach of any reason and enquiry. A fundamentalist of the religious type would never permit faith to be destroyed, of what he thinks to be a faith. No ideology and no leader of any ideology would ever allow to get its tenets challenged. Ganguly (*Faces of Fundamentalism*) points and rightly: "The result is that we decide about an invariant faith, whenever discrepancies arise, we have to reinterpret, modify, ignore or destroy the sources of discrepancies." As fundamentals become an article of faith, changes in the ideological belief become impossible and, it, then changes to fundamentalism.

Neither any religious nor any non-religious fundamentalist can afford any dissent, either of voice or word. Silencing of voice and pen is a significant pursuit of all forms of fundamentalism. With the development of ideological or religious thinking and the evolution of fundamentalism, a condition is created that is aptly described by Aldous Huxley: "At no period of world's history has organized lying been practiced so shamelessly...". The fundamentalist's demand is the surrender of individual consciousness to what he thinks is the basic principle of religion or ideology. With a fundamentalist, "God, Hitler, or Marx" are never wrong.

Fundamentalism need not be confused with revivalism. With the passage of time, there do arise rigidity and complexities in the evolution of any religion. When attempts are made to modify rigid rules or in the course of such movements, new sects appear, they do not constitute fundamentalistic activities. The rise of Buddhism and Jainism as a reaction to Hinduism, reformation movement as a reaction to the Roman Catholic Church or movements launched by the Muslim reformers can not be labelled as fundamentalistic movements. These and other religious revivalisms are attempts to reform religions, reinterpret the precepts or launch a new religion. Likewise, when Lenin was trying to reinterpret Marxism or Mao seeking to introduce Marxism – Leninism in China, they were making efforts not to deviate from the Marxian tenets, though such an assertion cannot be made about Bernstein. Hitler and Mussolini, on the other hand, were merely restating totalitarian fundamentalism.

22.4 CORE CHARACTERISTICS OF FUNDAMENTALISM

Fundamentalism, though used so frequently in the present day world, has never been clear in the minds of the people so far as its meaning is concerned. The word means different things to different people. At times, it is used in a deprecatory sense without assigning any clear-cut connotation. The word first received currency from a series of publications entitled, 'The Fundamentals' published in the United States in 1909. Originally it indicated a belief that the Bible or for that matter any holy book of any religion is infallible as it contains the words of God. A fundamentalist regards his own creed or religion or a system of belief to be necessary, sufficient and eternally/completely valid.

One of the basic characteristics of fundamentalism is that it goes back to the original and to the definite sources and interprets them in its own words, asserting in the correctness of what the interpreter is saying. A fundamentalist's position, in this regard, is that what he is saying is the correct interpretation of the original or that the source meant what his interpretation is; a fundamentalist would not accept the opposite interpretation nor would he like to change what he thinks to be correct. In his attitude, a fundamentalist is uncompromising in his nature, he is aggressive; in his conviction, he is a fanatic. Ideology too has these features: a Hitlerite is a Hitlerite whatever be the circumstance; a liberal is a liberal whatever be at stake; a communist is a communist whatever be the temptations.

Doctrinal conformity is another characteristic feature of all fundamentalism. The fundamentalist's conviction in the doctrine is unassailable, its principles are inviolable, indefeasible, literal and absolutely binding. He is absolutely certain that the essential care of his belief is capable of solving all problems; his faith is inerrant, exclusive to all other ideologies and thus self-sufficient and incommensurate with other philosophies or ideologies. Ganguly writes: "We can clearly comprehend why 'revisionism' is a deadly crime in communism and why apostasy is punishable by death in fundamentalist Islam."

Fundamentalism does not know the language of conversation, but only that of imposition. Believing in doctrinal correctness, a fundamentalist wants the rest of the society to conform to the doctrine. The fundamentalists, instead of participating in dialogue, control deliberations and do not hesitate to intervene, often forcibly, to ensure that society is compelled to conform to the behaviour their worldview requires. Scott Bidstrup (*Why the 'Fundamentalist' Approach to Religion must be Wrong?*) says: "The belief that they (the fundamentalists) are right, without any question, justifies, in their own minds, taking upon themselves the right to impose their point of view, by force if necessary."

Fundamentalism has its own doctrine, if not the creed; it seeks to institute a harsh set of roles as political law: the *Sharia*, as in Khomeini's Iran, becomes the law of the land; so was the case in Taliban's Afghanistan; and so was Hitler's word, (or Mussolini's word in Italy) a law in Nazi Germany, and that of Stalin in the former USSR. As one Mormon leader, in the case of religious fundamentalism, once said (and this is true about any non-religious fundamentalism as well), while addressing an audience of university students: "Do not think for yourself. The thinking has already been done." A fundamentalist is never an audience, he is always a speaker.

Chauvinism is another defining characteristic of fundamentalism. While a fundamentalist of a religious type talks in the name of God, he is one who denies himself the power of God; while he makes a full cry of equality, he is, by nature, a patriarchalistic; while he claims all life based around faith, he declares all science to be wrong. While he pays a great deal of lip service to the ideals, he ignores them in practice and occasionally is contemptuous of them in private. He plays foul with religion/ideology for which he claims to live and die, if necessary.

Fundamentalism is always without a base. It starts with a conclusion and, thereafter, searches for evidence of support for the conclusion and if the fundamentalist does not find any, he creates one. It is an evidence-less exercise. This sort of methodology is not exclusive to Christianity, but can be seen in other religions too: the Christian fundamentalists are as non-scientific as other fundamentalists: Islamic, Hindu and the like. Fundamentalism promotes ignorance. It does not permit 'why'. The followers of Marx whose life motto was 'challenge everything' do not give this concession to others, not even to the Marxists themselves. Bidstrup writes: "... Fundamentalism all too often justifies in its adherents' minds the prejudices, the zealotry, the intolerance and the hate mongering that are all the most base of human instincts". "Fundamentalism of any stripe", he continues, "is not progress: but rather I contend, is the impedance of progress,"

22.5 IDENTITY OF SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

Fundamentalism, either secular (say, non-religious) or religious, negates science and rationalism. Every religion and every ideology thrive on belief-systems where reasoning has

no place. It is, therefore, easier for some pseudo believers of any religion or ideology to turn to fundamentalism in order to seek the fulfilment of certain selfish interests. One need not be a true believer to be religious; a pseudo-Marxist need not be a true Marxist.

It is not necessary that one has to believe in God to be called religious. Many religions do not believe in a creator-deity. Buddhism, in its original form, did not postulate a creator-deity. Buddhist Japan has no word for 'God'. Confucius preached, if Confucianism is regarded a religion, it is basically a system of moral code of conduct. So is true about Taoism as well. Mussolini and Hitler were no regular visitors of any church. No Marxist believes in God or for that matter, in religion.

Many scholars see in communism (Marxism) almost all the features of a religion. The historian Toynbee says that a lasting contribution of Marx has been the historical re-affirmation of Christian moral conscience of Marxism: "Saint Augustine emphasised this through Christian theology. Marx did it through socialism." Russell has also shown that Marxism has the structure of a religion: "it has the Yahiweh which is the Dialectical Materialism, the Messiah that is Marx, the Elect that is the Proletariat, the Church that is the Communist Party." "It has the absolute source, of mystery", he continues, "the dialectical materialism, the revelation in the form of historical laws and its deterministic unfolding and also, it has its eschatology, that is, the withering away of the state, the coming of the Communist Man and the ultimate advent of trans-communism."

It is difficult to deny the scientific approach which Marx adopted; it is difficult to label Marx a utopian, especially when everyone knows his efforts at theorising socialism as scientifically as possible. It is also difficult to refer to his theory as deterministic when all through he fought against determinism. But as his philosophy came down to his followers, they made it doctrinal, Lenin closing it to fundamentalism and Stalin, after completing the progression, giving it the shape of a totalitarian doctrine.

Fundamentalism and totalitarianism, in the political context, go together. This means that a fundamentalist has to be, by nature, totalitarian: aggressive in mood; a totalitarian, on the other hand, has to be a fundamentalist, as oppressive as he can. Hitler or Mussolini were totalitarians and fundamentalists. They were, like fundamentalists, no friend of democracy; nor any lover of rationalism. Ganguly writes: "the irrational ideologies like fascism (or one may add Nazism), or religious fundamentalism go ahead without much ado to establish their hegemony by any means including large scale distortions of truth and lying." "The rationalist ideologies like Marxism developed further doctrinal justification for lying and terror." As Hitler once said in his *Mein Kampf*: "... the greater the lie, the greater the chance that it will be believed."

22.6 THE FUNDAMENTALIST MIND

The fundamentalists are invariably doctrinaire. As such, they are essentially uncompromising. Their doctrine (of what they think that it is) admits no contradiction, no qualification of what they think is the truth; no betrayal of the essentials, and no compromise with the enemy, making them anti-intellectual. (See James Warner Bjorkman (ed.) *Fundamentalism, Revivalists and Violence in South Asia*).

A fundamentalist's mind is one that does not permit the idea of unintended consequences to creep in. If anything happens, the happening must have a meaning. For a fundamentalist, the

meaning is found in the intentions of the person who has caused the act. Narrow as his thinking is, narrowly as he perceives things, the fundamentalist never thinks beyond his own thinking. For those who think the other way, it becomes a moral matter for the fundamentalist to defend and furthermore, impose his worldview over the opponents.

The fundamentalists seek to attain support of the enemies of the enemies, 'consolidating the bad people' as Bruce says. The US fundamentalists, Bruce explains, do not see themselves set against an array of different groups, operating with quite different and often incompatible agendas. The fundamentalists have always been enemies confronting them, or enemies always confronting fundamentalists. For the US fundamentalists, communism is not a general political philosophy, but is a single conspiracy. Referring to the US fundamentalism, Bruce writes: "Fundamentalists differ as to who is 'really' behind it all. Some think that communists are really Jews; others think that Jews are really communists. In the 1980s, with communism an obviously spent force, and the Jews suddenly elected as allies, the US fundamentalists hit on a new collective noun for their various enemies: 'secular humanists'. The Iranian Ayatollahs suppose that US imperialism, Judaism, Zionism and Christianity are all the same evil thing."

The fundamentalists are always secretive. They are liabitual in coding and decoding signs and discovering their hidden connections. "There is a long tradition", Bruce tells us, "in Protestant fundamentalism in decoding allegorical Bible passages." That the fundamentalists are close to terrorists or that they themselves are terrorists is a well-known fact in the context of Indo-Pakistan relations. They are ready to provide an all-purpose legitimization (say, 'Jehad' in the case of Islamic fundamentalism as also other terms in other religious fundamentalisms) for almost any act.

Fundamentalism, one may, therefore, conclude grossly over-simplifies, presents an underlying moral order to everything, readily demonizes its opponents and finds reds under everybed. (See Steve Bruce, *Fundamentalism*).

22.7 COMPARING FUNDAMENTALISM

Religions like ideologies vary. They differ in their potential for becoming fundamentalistic. The more monolithic a religion or ideology is, the more are the chances of it turning to fundamentalism. Islam and the evangelical Protestant strand of Christianity are monolithic religions; they believe that there is just one God; they are also dogmatic; they believe it is possible to express his (God's) nature and will in specific propositions: both these things are the necessary pre-conditions for fundamentalism.

Hinduism, as a religion, in the context of Islam and Protestant Christianity as they are, is less monolithic and dogmatic and hence, less fundamentalistic. There are a number of reasons for that: there is diffuseness in Hinduism, different deities, a variety of gods. So diffused is the society as well: a variety of traditions, groups, sects. It may be, Bruce says, "better described not as a religion, but as a loose collection of religions: that of the Shaivites, the Vaishnavas, the Shalcras, the Smartas, and others – that share some common themes but they tolerate a huge variety of expressions of these themes. As those expressions can vary from village to village and caste to caste, there is a little scope for enforcing conformity, criticising laxity, or vigorously rejecting moderate reconstructions of the tradition. Instead of the single Bible or Quran, there are a large numbers of holy books and holy traditions." Hindu fundamentalism is rare and arises only when anti—Hindu fundamentalism challenges it. Within itself, revivalistic

attempts have been at work in Hinduism: sometimes in the forms of Buddhism, Jainism or Sikhism at an early period of history or in the forms of Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission or Ved-Samaj during the greater part of the nineteenth century. Orthodoxy has always been met with revivalism in Hinduism. To that extent and arguably, monolithic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam offer relatively more fertile soil for fundamentalism than Hinduism.

Protestantism and Islam have much in common. Their potentials are the same: both can generate fundamentalism; their aims are similar: each wishes to assert the primacy of its religious belief systems and the patterns of behaviour each belief system requires. But both differ in their methods. The Islamic fundamentalists believe that coercion is proper; most of them believe that it is necessary as well, while others feel that it is required, declaring 'jihad' literally. The Protestant fundamentalists do not believe so. Christ preached against the old law of 'eye for an eye' and instead recommended to offer another cheek to the person who has already hit the first check. Though radical Protestants have created militant sects, the Protestants are relatively pacifists.

Protestants and Islamists differ in their attitudes to toleration. By and large, the Protestants are tolerant while the Islamists are less so; the USA, for example, permits freedom of religious expression and attempts to prevent the state promoting one religion as superior to any other. As against this, most of the Muslim countries are far less tolerant. Referring to this, Bruce writes: "Note that this is a matter of description and not value judgement. Nothing about what I have said requires us to believe that permissiveness is better than authoritarianism."

Differences in the two monolithic religions can be cited in abundance. But that apart, what is more significant here is that Islamic fundamentalism is more potent, and more severe than Christian fundamentalism. We can turn to them briefly.

Christianity and politics, for most of the time stayed apart. It became official religion of the Roman Empire in only AD 373, though it was officially tolerated from sixty years before, i.e., 313 AD. During the Middle Ages, the theory of the two swords kept the two domains, temporal and ecclesiastical, distinct from each other. The Reformation not only brought to the fore the two sects, Catholics and Protestants, it made religion a private affair of the individual. Liberalism, in the West, is not due to Christianity but due to its absence. Lewis says: "The distinction between the church and the state (is) rooted in Christendom".

This is not to say that Christians are not religious. They are as religious minded as the followers of any other religions: many of them live a life-style which is particularly godly. Bruce says, "... The core of Protestantism is correct belief, not correct action; orthodoxy rather than ortho-praxis." With the emergence of the modern state, century after century, Christianity remained aloof from the state, though most of the citizens in the western nations were Christians. Christian fundamentalists, in relation to the state and the law, operate in a more legitimate manner and largely in secular countries.

Islamic fundamentalism is more pronounced, more vocal and more action-oriented. From the beginning, Islam, unlike Christianity, remained political. The Prophet and the subsequent Caliphs were both spiritual and political leaders. The founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamic fundamentalist organisation, puts it as: "Politics is part of religion. Caesar and what belongs to Caesar is for God Almighty alone." The Islamic fundamentalist promotes a life-

style which is not only conformity to the creed, it demands actions also in conformity with what the fundamentalist wants. A hostage, held by Hezbollah, puts the case of Islamic fundamentalism, saying: "All our activities, from the way we slept to the way we entered a lavatory, were watched so that we could not violate the laws of Islam. Khomeini had written that on entering a lavatory, a believer must put his left foot forward first. We were taken to task for violating that rule." And Bruce adds: "For Islam, religion is a matter of obeying the Holy Law. As what God requires is obedience to the Law, then its imposition is not just acceptable but necessary." Most of the Muslim countries, especially in the Middle East, have not been able to shed their religion which is Islam, despite all their efforts to westernise themselves. Islam, for them, is more than a religion: it is their eye, it is their way. The Islamic fundamentalists in relation to the state, operate largely in theocratic countries and seek Muslim brotherhood and Islamic unity.

22.8 SUMMARY

Religion, as a basic urge of mankind, cannot be altogether ignored. But when it, along with any fundamentalist ideology, tends to get personalised in leadership and when the latter speaks for religion while ignoring all reasoning, it becomes fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is not religion; it is the perversion of religion. A fundamentalist is one who considers his religion separate from others, claiming its superiority. He is the one who has faith in what he thinks to be the creed. Instead of a devotee of a religion (or a follower of an ideology), he becomes its spokesman, its prophet and wants all the rest to conform. He is a doctrinaire to the extent of an impositionist; he is an impositionist to the extent of a terrorist.

Fundamentalism, of any type, is extremism. It has, as its strength, all faith, and no reason; all hatred for others, and no compassion; all doctrinal conformity, and no love. In the name of religion (or say ideology) it does all that which is irreligious. It misinterprets the precepts and the original creed. It ill-educates the disciples.

The fundamentalist, of any type, is rigid, uncompromising and aggressive: he never listens, he only speaks; he never follows, he only guides; he, himself, becomes the teacher, the philosopher and the guide; he has more enemies than friends; he is secretive in his activities – more or less a misguided fellow.

Fundamentalism has its base, its means and its objectives. Its base lies in untruth; its means are confined to violence, and its objectives are to let terror rule the world. It arises from time to time, but it has never seen victory and would never do so.

22.9 EXERCISES

- 1) Explain the meaning of fundamentalism. Who is a fundamentalist?
- 2) Do you think fundamentalism is confined only to religious faiths? If so, give arguments.
- 3) Discuss the relationship between ideology and fundamentalism. Bring out similarities between the two.
- 4) How does the mind of a fundamentalist work? Explain in detail.
- 5) Compare briefly the Hindu, Islamic and Christian fundamentalisms.