

Religion and Religious Fundamentalism: Today's Challenges

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Abstract

Religion can be considered as a historical, social or theological phenomenon. There are two main approaches connected with religious fundamentalism research: methodological maximalism or minimalism. We should also distinguish scientific approach from journalistic one. There is a noticeable tendency to identify religion as such with fundamentalism. At times it is manifested as a notion that religious thought, worldview in a way leads to fundamentalism. religion takes the role of the primary determiner of civilisation. Thus, it is notable that the importance of other determiners, such as ideologies or economic potential, is diminished when faced with cultural differences, which are in turn derivatives of religious divisions. According to Bassam Tibi the conflict between civilisations is a kind of a struggle between various sorts of religious fundamentalisms. We are dealing with particular religions, such as Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Confucianism, or Sikhism. It is the fundamentalisms basing on the above, however, that are responsible for creating political philosophies or political ideologies.

Keywords: religion, religious fundamentalism

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Introduction

Considerations concerning the condition of religion and religious fundamentalism necessitate the identification of the methodological problems involved in the definition of the two concepts. First, in relation to the concept of religion it can be observed that we tend to speak of religion as such or in general (Marczewska-Rytko 2001, 53-72). In fact, no such religion exists. We are always dealing with concrete religions existing in history (Bronk, 1996, 78). In the same way, civilisational-cultural conditions play an important role in the case of religious fundamentalism. Second, in the face of the ambiguity of both concepts no single satisfactory definition of the concept has been worked out so far.

In view of the above several aspects of religion and religious fundamentalism must be pointed out. As a result of the complexity of the problem religion can be considered as a historical, social or theological phenomenon. The Latin concept of religion was originally invested with a legal-administrative colouring. The dichotomous view of religion (Christianity against all other religions) had survived in the European culture until the eighteenth century. Under the influence of comparative ethnological studies the possibly broadest conception of religion has been formulated, encompassing all cultures and peoples. Religion tends to be treated as a set of features characteristic of its historical forms. Thus it is assumed that particular religions emerged at a certain time, when their history began.

Fundamentalism is in its nature a return to the source, the basis of a religion, as a return to its foundations. Such a definition makes any assessment hardly possible. The phenomenon, however, is rather that of preservation and protection of the original ancestral faith against any influences. In this sense, despite being bombarded with information and opinions about the Muslim fundamentalism, we can in fact observe the notion within any chosen religion. Therefore, we can safely talk of Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Sikh, or Confucian fundamentalisms (Sim 2005, 59-101).

Religion in scientific research

According to Mircea Eliade we are faced with the manifestations of *sacrum* in history and the ways of human communication with it: "Through the experience of sacrum the human mind has grasped the difference between what manifests itself as real, powerful, rich and meaningful and what is devoid of these attributes – a chaotic and dangerous stream of objects, a stream of their accidental, meaningless appearances and disappearances" (Eliade 1988, 1).

In another formulation, religion is seen as an essential part of the social system. Thus, it cannot be understood in isolation from society. Religion is identified as an important factor in solving crisis situations and protecting against chaos, anomy and alienation. In terms of the theological approach religion is a phenomenon of divine origin, the revelation of the Absolute, human response to the revelation of the divine. Religion is described here in a normative fashion, since it is declared what religion should be within the framework of the accepted revelation.

Zofia J. Zdybicka, a philosopher of religion, states that “Religion is a real and dynamic personal relation of man to the transcendental reality of the Absolute (God), understood in our culture as a person, from whom man feels dependent in existence and action and who is the ultimate aim imparting meaning to human life” (Zdybicka 1978, 271).

Taking into account the doctrinal aspect, Alfred N. Whitehead defines religion as a system of general truths capable of transforming our character when they are sincerely believed in and internalised (Whitehead 1997, 30). Thus, according to him, all conceptions claiming that religion is primarily a social fact should be rejected. Social facts are of major importance to religion, but in its essence religion is loneliness, because only the lonely can be religious. In this conception religion is a use that an individual makes of his/her loneliness (Whitehead 1997, 31). That is why different forms of religion in the shape of institutions, holy books, codes of behaviour, rituals or collective ecstasies can turn out to be both useful and harmful. Looking critically at history Whitehead points to the dark side of religion in the form of human sacrifice, cannibalism, orgies, superstitions, racial and religious hatred, hysteria, or bigotry.

The main features of religious fundamentalism

According to my point of view, on a sufficiently high level of abstraction, to enumerate the characteristic features of an ideal fundamentalist formula (Marczewska-Rytko 2005, 45-59; 2007, 215-223; 2015a, 35-46). The task has in fact already been undertaken – more or less successfully – by a number of authors (Joseph; Węclawski; *Fundamentalism Observed*, vii-xiii; Skidmore 2003, 33-41). My proposition can be brought down to six defining features of fundamentalism.

Firstly, it is strongly critical of the elite in power for having departed from religious law and order. The source of all evil is seen in neglecting the rules of the faith and accepting those originating from alien cultures and civilizations.

Secondly, there is the idea of a return to religion, religious rebirth, seen as a remedy to all evil that exists in the world. At the same time, the reference to tradition and its origins is to a large extent dependant on its reinterpretation, adjustment to the contemporary needs, conflicts and tasks. Most commonly it is an invocation of a holy book as the source of absolute knowledge.

Thirdly, the advocates of fundamentalism claim to grasp the intentions of the absolute, to have the monopoly for truth and the knowledge of all the answers.

Fourthly, everyone else is treated the enemy.

Fifthly, the rules characteristic of a religious order are extended to cover all other areas of human existence: such as economic or political. Simultaneously, it is seen as natural to submit the life of an individual and the formed social and political systems to the demands of religion. Both the political and legal powers are legitimised by religious order, acknowledge its superiority.

Sixthly, fundamentalism is highly active on the social and political stage in its attempt to abolish the existing social order and replace it with a new one. The use of violence

is justified by higher ends and – as observed by Peter Partner – the idea of a holy war is not restricted to the Islamic religion (Partner 2000).

Scientific approaches connected with religious fundamentalism

There are two main approaches connected with religious fundamentalism research: methodological maximalism or minimalism (Marczewska-Rytko 2010). The work edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby *Fundamentalisms Observed*, significant as it was, can serve as a valid example of maximalist approach. The complexity of the real world, however, demonstrates the specifics of each particular fundamentalism, which depends primarily on cultural and outlook differences, but also on the establishment of democracy or its lack. Therefore, I share the view presented by the authors of *Współczesny fundamentalizm religijny* [Modern Religious Fundamentalism], who claim that discussing fundamentalism “in the plural means respecting the specifics, differences, as well as variable motives represented by the phenomenon in each particular case” (Pace, Stefani 2002, 22). The minimalist approach on the other hand, cultivates the belief that the only legitimate – methodologically speaking - use of the term refers to the background of Protestantism in the United States. In other words, the classical understanding of the notion of fundamentalism is called upon. The advocates of the above tend to claim that the term is not valid when transferred to the background of other cultures or religions (Pace, Stefani 2002).

We should also distinguish scientific approach from journalistic one (Marczewska-Rytko 2010). Within the scientific point of view the focus is almost automatically directed at Protestantism. Nowadays, however, due to the increasing importance of Islam and its political predominance, particularly after the September 11th 2001 tragedy in the United States, fundamentalism has become almost exclusively associated with this religion and culture. On the one hand, the above leads to the emergence of voices against the limitation of the term solely to the Muslim context. On the other hand, however, a number of authors – while indicating relations with various religions – underline its credence in Islamic cultures.

It should be also emphasize, that there is a noticeable tendency to identify religion as such with fundamentalism (Marczewska-Rytko 2015b). At times it is manifested as a notion that religious thought, worldview in a way leads to fundamentalism (Bronk b; Mynarek 1996; Lewicka 2003, 195-200). It was Samuel P. Huntington who proposed the thesis that after the end of the cold war, culture and cultural identity have become the main determiners of peace and conflict in the global order (Huntington 1998, 14). In his opinion, universalistic aspirations of the Western civilisation are the main cause of growing conflicts with other civilisations. In the same, religion takes the role of the primary determiner of civilisation. Thus, it is notable that the importance of other determiners, such as ideologies or economic potential, is diminished when faced with cultural differences, which are in turn derivatives of religious divisions. Authors such as E. Pace or P. Stefani criticise Huntington, for – as they claim – “drawing the attention of scientists and the public opinion to the inevitable conflict between the West and Islam, particularly in the aggressive form observed in the latter, which is due to the actions of fundamentalist governments and radical movements of the same character. [...] he thus contributed to strengthening the stereotype that the danger comes solely from Islam, and that – as far

as fundamentalism is concerned – that is the direction we should be looking towards with anxiety [...]” (Pace, Stefani 2002, 157). In reference to the above quote, it should be stated that, even if Huntington’s theses can be read in the above manner, they should in fact be seen as prophetic (Kaczmarek 2001; Scruton 2003, 7). One has to notice also the fact, that the price of underestimating the importance of the millionaire Osama bin Laden (Usama ibn Ladin) and his actions to stimulate Muslim fundamentalists, by the government of the United States – as noticed at the margin of Gilles Kepel’s book – was extremely high (Kepel 2003). According to my point of view, the context of each of the fundamentalisms and their functioning seems to be particularly important.

Bassam Tibi poses a thesis, according to which “the conflict between civilisations becomes a struggle between various sorts of religious fundamentalisms, while it should be noted that it is not a struggle between religions” (Tibi 1997, 16; Tibi 1998). I agree with Tibi in opposing the notion to identify the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism with that of terrorism. In fact, we are dealing with particular religions, such as Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Confucianism, or Sikhism. It is the fundamentalisms basing on the above, however, that are responsible for creating political philosophies. Religious extremism, on the other hand, should in my opinion be defined as a specific expression of the political philosophy of fundamentalism. In this case, there are intermediate connections between religious extremism and terrorism. Tibi warns us not to confuse the notion of fundamentalism with growing religiousness or extremism. One should notice, however, that although fundamentalism is, as a phenomenon, much older than extremism, its values are in fact generating the latter.

I also share Tibi’s opinion that fundamentalism itself has rather little to do with a rebirth of religiousness. In my understanding, it is more an attempt to abuse religious legitimization in order to solve earthly problems, to stimulate the members of a given community, to justify political power (Marczewska-Rytko 2004b, 129-143). As rightfully noted by Hubertus Mynarek, “religious fundamentalism is the most powerful and attractive of ideologies, the most likely to drive a crowd into ecstasy, and therefore every dictator will always strive to get a religion or faith to work for his benefit” (Mynarek 1996, 33). Furthermore, while presenting the origins of the phenomenon, he insightfully observes that a person “longs for the absolute truth, undisturbed bliss. But also, without doubt, is unable to recognise it. This overwhelming chasm separating infinite desires and longings on the one hand, and finite abilities on the other, parting the heavenly, utopian ideals and their realizations always bringing us back to reality, as they are never close enough, is utilized by every instance of fundamentalism” (Mynarek 1996, 34). It would, therefore, seem to be a method of instrumental abuse of religion. Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek presents a similar opinion, when he notes that “people find it hard to distinguish religious fundamentalism from – as is the case with Christianity – evangelical radicalism. On the outside, both phenomena seem alike. The only difference being that one of them is good, the other evil. Evangelical radicalism never turns against people, while fundamentalism always does. In this sense it is also contrary to religion” (Czy w Polsce, 19).

One should notice that – contrary to popular belief – fundamentalisms represent an ambivalent attitude towards the contemporary (Motak 2002). They are not anti-

modernisation by definition. The Taliban may be an exception to the above (Rashid 2002; Modrzejewska-Leśniewska 2001). In general, they oppose only certain consequences of modernization processes, particularly such as lifestyle or the manner of dressing. They are however eager to utilize many of the latest advances, especially in the areas of communication or military technology.

Religious fundamentalism and the other phenomena

The growing importance of religious fundamentalism is linked with such phenomena as integrism, communalism, nationalism, orthodoxy, traditionalism. One must note, however, that synonymous treatment of the above notions can only lead to misinterpretation of religion as such. It will also promote attempts to classify religions as desirable or undesirable. The basic methodological mistake in this case, comes – in my opinion – from confusing the various orders which are to some degree related to the above notions.

Integrism, in turn, stands for a vision of superiority of religious institutions over their secular counterparts, supported by the rule of subordinating social life to religion. In his search for the origins of integrism, Ryszard Kapuściński observes, that “the world faces a man with almost heroic requirements. And many fear the needed effort. They prefer to withdraw back to the older system. Hence the tendency for integrism. For what is integrism? It is withdrawal. It is fear of the challenges of the contemporary. A man who refuses to accept them finds support in nationalism, provincialism, isolation. He does so, because he believes it to be safer. But integrism has two sides to it. An integrist might separate himself from the world, he might even want to impose his beliefs upon others. But whatever the situation, the moment of escape due to the inability to cope with reality is always present” (Z Ryszardem Kapuścińskim... 1997; compare Bartyzel). Pierre Chaunu also rightfully notes, that integrism “does not derive from religion, but rather from the void left after religion has locked itself within.” Later he points out that “it is not excessively absolute religion that threatens us, but the enormous empty space left after its, possibly temporary, withdrawal” (Chaunu, Integrizm).

Communalism is a term commonly used in India to describe a given group or organisation representing a caste or a religious community. It is most typically used in reference to Muslim or Hindu entities (Chandra, Mukherjee 1999). As rightfully observed by Jan Kieniewicz, the problem of communalism covers “social class-based conflicts manifested in the forms typical of a different social order. In India, social and political conflicts led to growing religious and caste discords. The 20th century saw intense divisions into separate religious communities, mainly Muslim and Hindu. Once initiated, the conflict begun to shape communities and their constitutive parts under the overwhelming influence of religious differences” (Kieniewicz 1985, 719). Bogusław Mrozek notices, that the notion of communalism should be defined as “political and social trends and movements which base their ideology and manifestos on religious, caste, language, or tribal divisions, while the principles find their expression in the membership in a communalist party or organization being limited to a given religion, caste, etc.” (Mrozek 1976, 144). It is symptomatic, that the definition arose only while the genesis and formation of Bharatiya Jan Sangh was being discussed. However, while discussing the problem of communalism in India in chapter one, the author points to the twists and turns of the development of the

national liberation movement and the Indian nationalism. The events crucial to the course of modern Indian history, such as the division of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan or the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by a Hindu extremist, had decisive influence upon the pejorative overtone of the term (Chandra, Mukherje, Mukherje 1999; Gupta 1991; Marczewska-Rytko 2004a).

Communalism is usually directed against a clearly specified enemy. Religious fundamentalism, on the other hand, is characterised by an attitude of a besieged stronghold, which means that anyone challenging the advocated truths is treated as an enemy, even within the home community. Only one, sanctioned way of interpretation (or as proclaimed by fundamentalists: exclusion of interpretation) is accepted when the holy book is concerned, as it conveys the absolute truth and is the source of the social order. An individual has but one option, and that is to fully submit.

It should be underlined, that fundamentalism is not synonymous to nationalism, orthodoxy or traditionalism. Nationalism (or nationalist fundamentalism) does not refer primarily to religion, but rather to the nation, and to negation of another community's right to autonomy. The same allows us, for instance, to distinguish between the religious and nationalist fundamentalisms in Israel (Paziński 1998; Jewish Fundamentalism... 1993).

Similarly, orthodoxy in itself, if not enhanced by additional elements, is not equal to fundamentalism. Such an element may be, for example, negation of the democratic rule and an attempt to replace it with natural order derived from a religious system. The indispensable requirement is that of extending the acknowledged values to the entire society and submitting all spheres of life to religion. The above also holds true for traditionalism.

Conclusion

It should be observed, that religion as such cannot be judged, but the consequences of the phenomenon of fundamentalism can. Those include the consequences for the functioning of modern civilizations. Undoubtedly, the primary feature of fundamentalisms is the desire for isolation within the boundaries of the advocated values, hence hampering the attempts for dialogue between particular civilizations and cultures. Furthermore, fundamentalism opposes the secular state and its drive towards development and modernisation. Religious fundamentalism seems to generate a certain political philosophy, which allows the use of extremist methods for the purposes of its implementation.

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