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RELIGIOUS
FUNDAMENTALISM

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Introduction: a controversial concept

The concept of ‘religious fundamentalism’ is very widely used, but also very controversial, for both theoretical and ‘partisan’ reasons. The term was coined in the context of American Protestantism, and was reportedly used for the first time in July 1920 by pastor Curtis Lee Laws. At the time, the term was not intended as a pejorative: the members of the movement themselves adopted it to indicate their desire to return to the ‘fundamentals’ of Christianity (which also implied the creation of an organization named World Christian Fundamentals Association, and the publication of a series of books entitled Fundamentals). However, to external observers, especially in the secular mainstream media, ‘fundamentalist’ gradually became synonymous with fanatic and obscurantist.

In the following decades, the term was thus applied to identify a conservative faction of US evangelicalism, without any comparative use of the concept. Before the Iranian revolution, only a few scholars, such as Hamilton Gibb (talking about Wahhabism and the Islamic movements of religious reawakening of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries),¹ used this concept in relation to a phenomenon outside the Protestant context. After the shock experienced by the Western world because of the Iranian events, the term started to be used with reference to different cultures and religions (gradually extending from Protestantism to Islam and, later, to other religious traditions) and with an increasingly pejorative bias. As we will see in the following paragraphs, it was only at the end of the 1980s that the term started to be adopted in academic research. More recently, there have also been attempts to introduce in academic literature the concept of ‘secular fundamentalism’, in order to describe the fanaticism of some outspoken opponents of religion in the public sphere, in contexts such as the US and Turkey.²

Today, the use of ‘fundamentalism’ in academic research is still very controversial. The following are the main objections against it:

- It belongs to the American Protestant tradition and cannot be applied to other religions. Quite interestingly, this position is supported both by scholars willing to preserve the term as a prerogative of Christianity,³ and by others rejecting it as a Christianity-related concept.⁴
- It is conceptually flawed, a too vague and ‘imprecise category for making comparisons across cultures’.⁵
• It is not suitable for the analysis of political phenomena because it allegedly does not carry any political meaning. According to Mark Juergensmeyer, for example, ‘to call someone a “fundamentalist” suggests that he or she is motivated solely by religious beliefs rather than broader concerns about the nature of society and the world’.6
• Its pejorative bias is too strong for an objective analysis, since it is ‘too partisan, usually in a pejorative sense, to be anything but damaging to some of the most important goals of religious studies’.7

A further factor, which is not precisely an objection to the use of ‘fundamentalism’, but which has prevented, up to a point, the development of the studies about this phenomenon, is its alleged regressive character, which – at least in the 1970s and 1980s – was against the values of a mainly progressive academic community sticking to the ‘secularization paradigm’;8 this community, rather than studying the phenomenon, would allegedly prefer to see its threat ‘evaporate, becoming a bad dream limited to the eighties’.9 This partly explains why literature about fundamentalism, especially in comparative perspective, has developed much later than the phenomenon, and relatively slowly.

The early scholarly works and the ‘Fundamentalism Project’
The first thorough comparative work about religious fundamentalism was Defenders of God by Bruce Lawrence, who probably was the first scholar to openly propose and defend a comparative approach to the study of the phenomenon, criticizing the idea that fundamentalism was ‘the special preserve of Protestant Christianity’.10 Moreover, although he agreed with the traditional idea that ‘scripture [is] a crucial, defining element’, he recognized the importance of other factors such as charismatic leadership. Lawrence clearly perceived the political side of the phenomenon, stating that ‘fundamentalists do relate to the public sphere. They do care about political power, economic justice, and social status . . . they are reacting against a notion of intellectual hegemony as well as sociopolitical privilege. . . . They are not granted access to the circles of the dominant ruling group; they are challenging their exclusion from such echelons of power.’11 He also set the frame for the interpretation of fundamentalists’ behaviour towards modernity, pointing out that ‘fundamentalists are moderns but not modernists’, since they accept the instrumental side of modernity, but refuse its values reorientation.

In Europe, some of the early comparative works about fundamentalism were produced in Italy, by Enzo Pace; and in Germany, by Thomas Meyer, and particularly by Martin Riesebrodt, one of the first sociologists to address the phenomenon in comparative perspective with the attempt at a thorough theoretical formulation. Riesebrodt defined fundamentalism in terms of ‘radical patriarchalism’, and more precisely as ‘an urban movement directed primarily against the dissolution of personalistic, patriarchal notions of order and social relations and their replacement by depersonalized principles’, caused primarily by ‘the dramatic reduction in chances of the traditionalist milieu to reproduce itself culturally under conditions of rapid urbanization, industrialization, and secularization’. Riesebrodt also proposed some typological distinctions, later echoed by other authors, such as those between ‘world-fleeing’ and ‘world-mastering’ fundamentalisms (this latter category further divided into reformist and revolutionary, according to the movements’ approach to power) and between book-centred (‘rational’) and experience-centred (‘charismatic’) ones. About the organization and the strategies of the fundamentalist groups, Riesebrodt discerns between fundamentalism as
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a public protest movement and fundamentalism as a secret society, as in the case of small terrorist groups.12

Among the seminal works about religious fundamentalism it is also necessary to include – although the author does not mention the concept explicitly – Gilles Kepel’s La Revanche de Dieu (the revenge of God), the first ‘popular’ book analyzing the resurgence of religion throughout the world since the late 1970s. According to its thesis, the new extremist religious movements were the product of the displacement – ‘a deep social disquiet’ – caused by the fast social and political changes marking out the contemporary era. Another broader work worth mentioning is Jose Casanova’s Public Religions in the Modern World, which frames the global resurgence of religions in a wider process of ‘deprivatization’ of religion, from the private realm back to the public sphere.13

In 1989, the University of Chicago, with the support of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, launched the ‘Fundamentalism Project’ (FP), which marked the end of the pioneering phase in the research on fundamentalism, and eventually gave birth to a series of five edited volumes (published between 1991 and 1995).14 It was in the last one, Fundamentalisms Comprehended, that real theoretical conclusions were carried out, providing a definition of fundamentalism through nine recurring features (five related to ideology, and four to organization):

1. Reactivity to the marginalization of religion, which can be the result of ‘the general processes of modernization, from other religions and/or ethnic groups, from a secular state (imperial or indigenous) seeking to secularize and delimit the domain of the sacred, or from various combinations of these’.

2. Selectivity. Movements are selective towards tradition (choosing and reinterpreting parts of it as the focus of their theology); towards modernity (adopting its technological innovations, but rejecting its values orientation); and they also select some consequences and processes of modernity (for example, abortion in the US), and single them out as targets for their campaigns.

3. Moral Manicheanism. In the fundamentalist worldview, reality is uncompromisingly divided into light and darkness, a pure world inside, and a sinful outside.

4. Absolutism and inerrancy, often connected to the literal reading of the sacred texts but which can also refer to ‘its analogues (e.g., papal infallibility, a privileged school of Islamic jurisprudence, etc.)’.

5. Millenialism and messianism. In the fundamentalist worldview, history has a miraculous culmination, with ‘an end to the suffering and waiting’ and the coming of ‘an all-powerful mediator’ (the Messiah, the Hidden Imam, etc.).

6. Elect, chosen membership, since ‘fundamentalist movements tend to have an ‘elect’, a chosen, divinely called membership, described variously as ‘the faithful’, ‘the remnant’, the ‘last outpost’, etc.

7. Sharp boundaries between believers and the external world: they can be physical, as in the case of the Israeli haredim, or symbolic and implemented especially through the media and education.

8. Authoritarian organization. Movements are usually structured in a charismatic leader–follower relationship, with equality among the believers and absence of ‘bureaucracy in the sense of rational-legal division of power and competence’.

9. Behavioural requirements that create ‘a powerful affective dimension, an imitative, conforming dimension’, with distinctive music, rules of dress, and rules about drinking, sexuality, appropriate speech and the discipline of children.15
Another well-known theoretical contribution proposed in the last volume of the FP is a typology of fundamentalist movements according to their attitude towards the world, which includes and widens Riezebrodt’s model, by classifying the movements in world conqueror, world transformer, world creator and world renouncer. The FP also provides a survey of the fundamentalist political strategies, which singled out a top-down strategy (aiming at seizing political power before achieving societal hegemony) and a bottom-up one (the opposite): the former (non-violent) one most commonly adopted within democratic regimes. In this case, however, they ‘find difficult to govern without resorting to the services of professional politicians and nonfundamentalist allies’, which often leads to ‘the politics of compromise and the distillation of the fundamentalist sociomoral message’.

Other theoretical perspectives

The FP, and particularly its definition of fundamentalism, has been widely appreciated and cited, but also criticized, as too influenced by the secularization paradigm, as too inclusive and arbitrary in the choice of movements, as too hegemonized by religious studies scholars, while neglecting the political side of the phenomenon (and particularly the importance of the enemy in the fundamentalist mobilization). In the following years, several other theoretical perspectives have therefore been developed, which can be classified as follows.

Fundamentalism as an effect of globalization

One of these clusters of works interprets fundamentalism as an effect of exogenous variables, related to international and/or transnational dynamics. Some authors, for example, maintain that the rise of fundamentalism is directly connected to the worldwide process of globalization. Roland Robertson points out that globalization – synthetically defined as ‘involving the compression of the world’ – unavoidably produces a global ‘search for fundamentals’ in terms of ‘tradition, identity, home, indigeneity, locality, community and so on’. Thus, ‘many forms of fundamentalisms . . . constitute ways of finding a place within the world as a whole’. The author, in his early works on the subject, maintained an idea of fundamentalism as a reaction to globalization oriented towards creating and maintaining peculiar identities: a vision also proposed by Misztal and Shupe, who define this phenomenon ‘global fundamentalism’. However, in his later researches, Robertson conceptualized fundamentalism no longer as a reaction against globalization, but as a direct effect of it. This change of mind is framed by the author in relation to the dichotomy global/local, which, according to Robertson, is usually seen as opposite concepts, while in reality they are two faces of the same coin. This process, defined with the neologism ‘glocalization’, prevents the communities from asserting their identity locally: therefore, they try to assert a reinvented version of it at the global level, as in the cases of religious fundamentalisms.

A similar point of view was chosen, some years later, by another American sociologist, Benjamin R. Barber, in the book Jihad vs. McWorld. With these two terms he highlighted two powerful forces acting within modernity: the regressive collective identities (including fundamentalist movements) and the forces of neo-liberal globalization. According to Barber, these forces ‘operate with equal strength in opposite directions, the one driven by parochial hatreds, the other by universalizing markets, the one re-creating ancient subnational and ethnic borders from within, the other making national borders porous from without’. However, they are only apparently opposite to each other: they are indeed strictly interrelated and need each other since ‘they both make war on the sovereign nation-state’s democratic institutions’.
Fundamentalism as a symptom of the clash of civilizations

Another strand of scholarship about fundamentalism interprets the phenomenon as a consequence of a ‘clash of civilizations’, a concept originally coined by Bernard Lewis and made popular by Samuel P. Huntington. This theory presupposes that ‘culture and cultural identities, which at the broadest level are civilization identities, are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War world’. Huntington defines a civilization as ‘the broadest cultural identity . . . the biggest “we” within which we feel culturally at home as distinguished from all the other “thems” out there’; its central elements are language and religion. Huntington singles out three possible reactions to the Western expansion in the world: total refusal of Westernization, Kemalism (complete acceptance of it), and reformism (which tries to merge modernization and preservation of the local values). Fundamentalism is defined as an extreme form of reformism, developed in the twentieth century, as ‘the surface waves of the much broader and more fundamental religious tide that is giving a different cast to human life at the end of the twentieth century’, and as a reaction to the feeling of emptiness engendered by the sudden adoption of Western social and political institutions and values.

A not so different theme is developed by Mark Juergensmeyer in his book *The New Cold War: Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (1993). Unlike Huntington’s, this book focuses not on the clash between civilizations, but on the clash within cultures and nation-states between the supporters of secular nationalism (inspired by democratic and socialist ideologies) and those of religious nationalism. This latter force is described by the author as struggling for a revival of religion in the public sphere against Western secularism and denouncing both the moral decline in the West (this latter is also deemed responsible for the moral decline in the rest of the world), and the failure of the political institutions imported from it.

Fundamentalism as totalitarianism

Another group of contributions interpret fundamentalism as a manifestation of totalitarianism (and, particularly, assimilate it to ‘left-wing’ totalitarianisms, such as Stalinism). Ernest Gellner maintains that fundamentalism ‘repudiates the tolerant modernist claim that the faith in question means something much milder, far less exclusive, altogether less demanding, and much more accommodating; above all something quite compatible with all other faiths, even, or especially, with the lack of faith’. The British philosopher is, however, convinced that all the great civilizations have almost irreversibly secularized, except Islam. Therefore, although ‘fundamentalism occurs in many religions’, it is today ‘at its strongest in Islam’. Gellner explicitly compared Islamic fundamentalism to Soviet Marxism, and also maintained that ‘Islam fulfils some of the very functions which nationalism performs elsewhere’, namely the transition to a modern society: what elsewhere ‘expresses itself as nationalism, expresses itself in the Muslim world as religious revivalism, as fundamentalism’.

Shmuel Eisenstadt, on the other hand, highlights the Jacobin face of fundamentalism, defined as ‘a modern Jacobin anti-modern utopia and heterodoxy’. According to the author, although promoting ideologies which are clearly opposed to modernity, fundamentalists don’t reject the technological and organizational features of this latter, as well as its totalitarian, especially Jacobin, sides, such as the nearly complete overlapping of centre and periphery which denies the existence of intermediate institutions, which also implies the sacralization of the centre, as well as missionary expansionism. In this perspective, he compares fundamentalist...
movements to ‘Communist ones, with whom they share some paradoxical and some mirror-like characteristics’ and to ‘the major types of nationalistic movements and regimes, especially fascist and national-social ones, that developed in modern societies’. Particularly, ‘communist and fundamentalist movements and regimes share the tendency to promulgate a very strong salvationist vision or gospel’, and their visions entail ‘the transformation of both man and society, and the construction of new, personal and collective identities’, demanding ‘total submergence of the individual in the general totalistic community’.33

**Fundamentalism as a niche of the religious market**

A more structured and methodologically coherent approach is provided by the ‘religious economy’ model. This school of thought, born between the 1970s and the 1980s with the work of Rodney Stark and other scholars, analyses religion with the tools provided by the ‘rational choice’ perspective. This approach regards religion (not unlike economy and politics) as an eminently rational field, wherein both the supply side (religious institutions) and the demand side (individuals) aims at maximizing its benefits and minimizing costs.34

According to Stark and to Roger Finke, religious demand can be arranged on a ‘tension [with the environment] continuum, with one end focusing on the supernatural to the fullest extent possible and the other accepting only a remote and inactive conception of the supernatural’. Religious demand thus takes the shape of a bell curve: the central niches (moderate and conservative), providing low benefits and demanding low costs, will appeal to more people, but also encourage free-riding.35 However, as we move towards both extremes (strict and ultra-strict; liberal and ultra-liberal), and the degree of tension with the environment becomes higher, we will find religious organizations with higher and higher costs and benefits, fewer followers, and a lower level of free-riding.36 Fundamentalist movements are included in the strict niche (while the ultra-strict is occupied by even more extremist religious groups, such as terrorist ones), whose organizations tend to grow and strengthen because, although imposing higher costs on individuals, they provide these latter with even higher, mostly identity-related, benefits.37

This approach, as well as the whole rational choice school, has attracted considerable criticism, because it reduces the individuals’ behaviour to its rational side, and neglects the idea of religious movements as collective identities.38 Moreover, the only factor which is taken into account to determine the individuals’ orientation is their official religious affiliation. This perspective, strongly US-centred, neglects other kinds of religious behaviour, not connected to institutional religions and to the dimension of ‘belonging’.39

**The case of Protestant fundamentalism**

As mentioned above, the concept of fundamentalism derives from a strand of American Protestantism developed between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, with the Niagara Bible Conferences and the publication of a book series named *Fundamentals*. This movement was partly the effect of endogenous developments of American Protestantism, and particularly the spreading of premillennialist and dispensationalist ideas, made popular in the first half of the nineteenth century by the British preacher John Nelson Darby. His theology was based on the idea that history was divided in different eras named dispensations, each marked by a different kind of God’s rule. Darby believed that the forthcoming dispensation would entail the rapture to heaven of the true believers, the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel, the battle of Armageddon, and the
Second Coming of Christ, with the start of his thousand-years rule. The focus of the early fundamentalists was therefore to save from damnation as many people as possible before the Second Coming.  

On the other hand, the birth of the fundamentalist movement was also a reaction to the modernization and secularization processes involving nineteenth-century American society, and particularly to the development of the higher criticism method, applying hermeneutics to the interpretation of the Bible, and the spreading among religious liberals of the Social Gospel, neglecting doctrine to focus on social activism. The early fundamentalists, however, regarded as their main enemy Charles Darwin’s evolutionist theses, which put into question the creationist idea of the origin of man derived from a literal reading of the Genesis book. The first massive mobilization of the fundamentalist movement, taking place in the 1910s and 1920s, was therefore a campaign in defence of the creationist creed, which found its culmination in 1925 with the Scopes trial (a lawsuit against a biology teacher who had violated Tennessee’s anti-evolutionism law).

In the following decades, Protestant fundamentalism entered a phase of quiescence and separation from the increasingly secularized mainstream American society. During these decades, from the 1930s to the 1960s, the movement developed its own organization, with separate congregations under the umbrellas of the American Council of Christian Churches (ACCC) and the National Association of the Evangelicals (NAE), a separate network of educational facilities, and its own media network. This latter significantly contributed to the development of the ideas of the movement, thanks to the use of radio, and (since the 1950s) television, which in the following decades made widely popular Evangelical preachers such as Jerry Falwell and Marion (Pat) Robertson. It was only since the late 1960s and early 1970s that Protestant fundamentalists (now commonly referred to as ‘Evangelicals’) became once more part of the mainstream public sphere, also thanks to the emergence of popular ‘moderate’ Evangelicals such as the preacher Billy Graham and President Jimmy Carter and to popular best sellers such as Hal Lindsey’s The Late Great Planet Earth. This new visibility was, however, mainly due to a massive mobilization against the liberal development of American society, and more particularly against the Supreme Court’s rulings such as Roe vs. Wade (which in 1973 made abortion legal in the US) and the attempt to include in the US Constitution an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) sanctioning complete equality between man and woman. This mobilization started at the grassroots level in the early 1970s, to become visible at the national level only some years later, when three activists of the Republican Party’s ‘new right’ faction, Howard Phillips, Richard Vigerie, and Paul Weyrich, started to meet the most popular Evangelical leaders to convince them to get engaged into politics. Evangelists such as James Kennedy, Tim LaHaye (author of the best-seller series of apocalyptic novels Left Behind), and Ed McAttee started a cluster of political organizations, among which Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority stood out in terms of size and popularity. The movement focused its attention on several issues: creationism, the battle against abortion, the opposition to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights, and the support for Israel (whose existence and territorial expansion were seen by Protestant fundamentalists as a precondition for the Second Coming of Christ).

Although Ronald Reagan’s rise to the presidency was hailed by conservative Evangelicals as a breakthrough, the movement did not obtain relevant achievements in terms of public policies, while in the mid-1980s some of its leaders were involved in financial and sexual scandals. Its reorganization, in the early 1990s, was led by Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition, which (mainly thanks to the involvement of a young former Washington lobbyist, Ralph Reed) turned the movement from a religious-based organization into a network of political activists,
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and reframed in ‘liberal’ language many Evangelical stances (for example, the opposition to abortion became ‘the protection of the rights of the unborn’). In this phase, grassroots campaigns were complemented by a strategy of conquest of the Republican Party from the inside: the Christian right became thus a sizeable faction among conservative republicans, whose role seemed to be sanctioned by the election of George W. Bush, a conservative, ‘born again’ Evangelical, to the White House.47

To date, despite its huge influence on the Republican Party and popular conservative media such as Fox News, the movement has not been successful in obtaining results in terms of public policies at the national level (which is not true, however, in relation to many local contexts, and particularly some conservative-oriented states, where controversial laws on abortion, education and LGBT issues have been approved, often to be repealed by the Supreme Court); on the contrary, in relation to issues such as same-sex marriage, the trend seems to favour the liberal side of the debate. However, the influence of the Christian right on the positions of the Republican Party and on the increased polarization in the national political debate – especially through the powerful conservative media – must not be underestimated.

The case of Islamic fundamentalism

Although the concept of ‘fundamentalism’ became widely used in comparative perspective only in the 1980s, in other religious traditions _ante litteram_ phenomena of fundamentalism had already developed. In the case of Islam, the forerunner of contemporary fundamentalism was a wave of uprisings and reform movements started in the late eighteenth century, often as a reaction to Western colonialism, but also to the attempts by many Muslim rulers to forcefully modernize and secularize their countries from above.48 While modernists believed that to compete with the Western powers Middle Eastern countries had to reject their traditions and adopt a rationalist perspective, these reformers, such as the Salafi movement, aimed at restoring the ‘golden age’ of the early centuries of Islam. Such movements, often facing authoritarian governments, mainly relied on a bottom-up approach to hegemony, at first focused on proselytism and education rather than the seizure of power by force.49 This was the case for the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna, an Egyptian religious and political leader and educator who sought in the sacred law the answer to the problems of society (as shown by the organization’s motto: ‘the Koran is our constitution’). The Brotherhood was not simply a religious group: it was designed as a wide social movement encompassing many sides of society, spanning from education to politics and business, with a social activism among the poorer strata of the population which resembled in some ways that of the European socialist movement. This model proved very successful and found imitations in several Muslim-majority countries.50 The movements had, however, to face the brutal repression of many Middle Eastern regimes, which did not hesitate to use the force against them: al-Banna himself was assassinated in 1949, while his successor Sayyid Qutb spent many years in jail before being hanged in 1966 by Nasser’s regime.

It was in this climate of repression that the main theoretical elaborations founding contemporary Islamic fundamentalism were created. Qutb himself produced his main works while in jail, in which he applied the concept of _jahiliyyah_ (pre-Islamic ignorance) to the Middle Eastern authoritarian secularist regimes: the struggle against them was therefore _jihad_, a sacred duty, for all believers. Another thinker crucial for the development of contemporary fundamentalism was the Pakistani Abu’l ‘Ala al Mawdudi (founder of the Jama’at-i Islami organization), who also extended the terms of the traditional use of _jihad_ according to the idea that God’s is the only legitimate sovereignty (_hakimiyyah_).51
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The rise of contemporary Islamic fundamentalism was further facilitated, in the second half of the twentieth century, by some historical developments. First, the 1967 Six-Day War, when Israel defeated an alliance of neighbouring Arab countries, significantly undermined the legitimacy of the nationalist and socialist ideologies which founded many Middle Eastern regimes, and favoured the return of Islam in the public sphere as a legitimate political ideology. It was, however, in 1979 that the Islamic revolution in Iran and the start of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan turned political Islam from an abstract political ideology into a viable tool for the conquest of power in the eyes of the Middle Eastern masses. The Islamic revolution in Iran represented a big surprise, since Shi’i Muslims had traditionally stood out for its political quietism, with their wait for the return of the ‘Hidden Imam’. Ayatollah Khomeini overturned this perspective, by declaring that in the absence of the Imam, its role could be surrogated by the Shi’i clerics, led by a ‘rightful faqih’. The ideology that justified the Iranian revolution also borrowed some of its tenets from Western revolutionary ideologies, mainly thanks to the elaborations of Ali Shariati, an ideologue who had been killed by the Shah’s secret police in 1977. On the other hand, the jihad in Afghanistan proved essential for the development of contemporary fundamentalism, since the tens of thousands of Arab fighters engaged in that struggle provided later the bulk of al Qaeda and other jihadi groups, while the mobilization of resources for the Afghani jihad represented a milestone in the creation of a wide network of charities and fundraising institutions which (mainly thanks to the wide resources available in the Gulf states) in the following decades became crucial for the spreading of radical Islam throughout the Muslim world.

Another crucial factor in this evolutionary process was the developments of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, particularly after the start of the popular uprising known as First Intifada (1987), which became a warhorse for the mobilization of the masses throughout the Muslim world. Israel and the Jews became thus one of the main targets of jihadi groups, and the opposition to ‘Zionists’ became one of the ideological tenets of a global strategy of struggle against the West and its values.

A final turning point of this process was the First Gulf War (1990–1), when the presence of foreign troops in the Arabian holy lands was seen as sacrilegious by al Qaeda’s leader Osama bin Laden (formerly engaged in the Afghan jihad) who in 1996 made public a ‘Declaration of War’ against the US. His anti-Western struggle, begun in 1993 in Somalia, went on in 1998 with the attacks against two American embassies in Africa, and culminated in 2001 with the 9/11 attacks. While in this phase al Qaeda showed a more or less coherent and hierarchical organization, after the War in Afghanistan (2001–2) and the closure of al Qaeda’s training camps in the country, the network increasingly worked on a ‘franchising’ principle, providing its brand and its resources to local groups with little contact with the mother organization (as in the cases of several attacks carried out in Europe and Asia in the 2000s). On the other hand, the transnational jihadi network since the early 2010s also had to face the competition of new groups claiming the restoration of the caliphate, such as the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and Boko Haram in western Africa.

The case of Jewish fundamentalism

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as mentioned above, is a particularly thorny issue in the contemporary Middle East, also because it is a clash of opposite fundamentalisms, with the involvement of Muslim and Jewish extremists alike.

Although Jewish history is traditionally marked by the presence of messianic and reform movements, the roots of contemporary Jewish fundamentalism must be traced to the late
nineteenth century, when the Zionist movement started to encourage the migration of European Jews to the ‘promised land’. Although the movement was mainly secular in nature, the idea of the return was supported in the nineteenth century also by some rabbis, such as Zvi Hirsch Kalischer, who thought that the time for Jews to return to Palestine had come. This perspective was deeply opposed by the mainstream point of view of European Jewry, according to which the Jewish people was bound by the so-called ‘three oaths’ not to ‘force the wall of exile’ and return en masse to Eretz Israel (the promised land) before the coming of the Messiah: thus, any human attempt to achieve redemption or “hasten the end” by taking practical steps to realize the Kingdom in the Holy Land, was abhorrent.

The religious Zionist perspective developed into the Mizrachi movement, officially created in 1902 in Vilnius by the Orthodox Rabbi Yitzchak Yaacov Reines. In the following decades the movement worked with secular Zionists to encourage Jewish migration to Palestine. It was one of its followers, the Chief Rabbi of Palestine Avraham Yitzchak Kook, who developed the religious Zionist theology, by interpreting Zionism – despite its secular nature – as an unconscious answer to God’s call, which represented the start of the Redemption process. This message was systematized by Kook’s son, Rabbi Zvi Yeduda Kook, who interpreted it according to a nationalist perspective, which sacralized the biblical Land of Israel, making the incorporation of the whole of it into the Israeli state a precondition for the Redemption process.

This identification between Land of Israel and Redemption process became a dogma of faith for Kook’s followers, gathering since the 1950s around his Merkaz HaRav yeshiva (religious seminary). These latter, such as Moshe Levinger, Yaakov Ariel, Shlomo Aviner, and Haim Druckman, later became the founders and the bulk of the main religious Zionist fundamentalist organization, the Gush Emunim (bloc of the faithful). The event which moved this faction from a marginal position to the centre of the public debate was the Six-Day War, which in the eyes of religious Zionists confirmed Kook’s thesis and was a ‘sign of the times’ showing that Redemption was imminent. In the following years, the members of the group started a campaign of establishment of illegal settlements in the occupied territories, while in politics its members managed to gain the upper hand within the National Religious Party or Mafdal, the traditional political party of religious Zionists, which became part of several centre-right cabinets led by the Likud party, giving birth in the following decades to other offshoots (the main party representing religious Zionists in today’s Knesset is Neftali Bennet’s The Jewish Home).

In the 1980s and 1990s, after the disappointment following the return of part of the occupied territories to the Arabs countries, the movement underwent a further radicalization process, also as a consequence of the emigration to Israel of the American Rabbi Meir Kahane, who avowed the deportation of Palestinians and the ban on mixed Jewish-Arab marriages, and some of its offshoots explicitly resorted to violence. Among them, the Machtaret, a group of Gush Emunim followers, which in the 1980s carried out several deadly attacks against Arabs and planned to blow up the Dome of the Rock mosque in Jerusalem; Baruch Goldstein, a Kahane follower who in 1994 killed twenty-nine Palestinians at the Cave of Patriarchs in Hebron; and the murderer of Prime Minister Rabin, Ygal Amir.

Alongside religious Zionists, during and after the twentieth-century persecutions of the Jews, many Orthodox religious people, ideologically opposing Zionism, chose to emigrate to Israel for security or economic reasons. However, since they refused to acknowledge as legitimate the existence of the State of Israel, they mainly preferred to live in a regime of separation from mainstream Israeli society, and mostly continued to adopt many customs of traditional European Jewry, also in terms of clothing, rejecting many aspects of modernity. Commonly known as haredim, they are regarded by some scholars as fundamentalists, by others as a mere
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traditionalist group (such as the Amish). In the latest decades, they have been increasingly involved in the Israeli political system (through their traditional party Agudat Yisrael and its offspring, such as the ethno-religious party Shas, which represents the Sephardi Orthodox community), mainly to preserve the privileges (such as the exemption from military service for religious students) that sanctioned their separation from mainstream Israeli society.

Other cases

Much of the literature about religious fundamentalism has focused on the three religious traditions reviewed above. However, a growing corpus of works has been taking into account the possibility of development of fundamentalist strands within other traditions. First, there is a lively discussion about the possibility that some Catholic movements, such as Communion and Liberation, or ultra-traditionalist groups, such as Marcel Lefebvre’s Society of Saint Pius X, can be labelled as fundamentalists. A widespread opinion, however, regards Catholicism as ill-suited to the development of fundamentalist movements, given the Vatican’s tight hierarchy.

Many of the residual works on fundamentalist movements focus on the religions of India’s sub-continent. A rather huge corpus of literature deals with Hindu fundamentalism, regarded as a kind of religious nationalism with some features similar to the Jewish movement. As in Israel, we have an ideology, commonly known as Hindutva (hindu-ness), and developed by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in the 1920s, which regards India’s land as sacred and regards the followers of non-Indian religions, such as Christians and Muslims, as intruders, giving rise to strong religious nationalist feelings. Savarkar’s followers turned these ideas into a concrete programme for political action through the creation, in 1925, of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS – national volunteers organization), a paramilitary religious nationalist group which significantly grew in the following decades to reach a membership of millions. Members of RSS and its affiliated organizations, such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, and the Bajrang Dal, have been involved in the following decades in a growing wave of interreligious clashes, mainly with India’s huge Muslim minority, whose most infamous events have been the 1992 destruction of the Babri Masjid (mosque of Babur) in Ayodhya and the 2002 riots in Gujarat. The right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP – India’s popular party), also close to the movement, has won the parliamentary elections in India in 1998, 1999 and 2014 and currently leads the national government.

While in the past decades several works have been written about Sikh fundamentalism (also because Sikhism is the only monotheism among the main Indian faiths), in recent years a growing debate has developed about Buddhism.Traditionally regarded as peaceful and quietist, this religious tradition was regarded by many as quintessentially antithetic to fundamentalism. However, the events taking place in Sri Lanka during the last decades have put into question this view, with the development of a fundamentalist orientation which juxtaposes religion, culture, land, and identity and defines the Tamil minority (mainly Hindu and Muslim) as ‘the hated other’. More recently, this trend has extended, according to some accounts, also to other South-East Asian countries, such as Burma and Thailand.

Concluding remarks

Religious fundamentalism, as shown above, is a phenomenon hard to define. However, in relation to both the state of the art and the description of the cases carried out in this work, it is possible to draw up a list of points which are common to all its versions:
Fundamentalist movements can be found within all major religious traditions.

Fundamentalism is not ‘simply’ a religious phenomenon: on the contrary, it is strongly linked to politics and to the search for the control and hegemony over society.

It is not a traditionalist phenomenon, not only because fundamentalists often use modern tools and techniques, but also because they usually select, reinterpret, and sometimes rewrite their own religious traditions.

Broadly speaking, we can find two main varieties of fundamentalism: one mainly targeting the secularization of society and the public sphere, and adopting as main issues cultural and symbolic matters and issues related to morality and sexuality; the other marked by a nationalist orientation and focused on the struggle against other religious communities for the control of the territory, and particularly of some sacred places.

Fundamentalists are not necessarily violent – especially when they adopt a bottom-up strategy focused on education, rather than a top-down one aiming first at the conquest of power – and can be part of a democratic political system. However, their activity often results in a higher level of polarization at both the social and the political levels – with a higher probability of violence – especially in the cases of fundamentalist movements with a strong nationalist orientation.

Notes

1 Gibb, Mohammedanism: An Historical Survey.
2 Conkle, ‘Secular Fundamentalism’.
3 Barr, Fundamentalism.
4 Esposito, The Islamic Threat.
6 Ibid., 87.
7 Shepard, ‘Comments on Bruce Lawrence’s Defenders of God’, 281.
8 Swatos, ‘Fundamentalism in the Islamic World’.
9 Lawrence, Defenders of God, 8.
10 Ibid., 6
11 Ibid., 1–7.
12 Riesebrodt, Pious Passion, 9–19.
13 Kepel, La Revanche de Dieu; Casanova, Public Religions in the Modern World.
14 In 2003, the most interesting theoretical chapters of the work were later reprinted in: Almond, Appleby, and Sivan, Strong Religion.
17 This model had already been proposed in 1984 by Gilles Kepel in his analysis of the Egyptian Islamism movement: Le Prophète et Pharaon.
20 Robertson, Globalization, 166.
22 Robertson, Globalization, 166–180; Pace and Guolo, I Fondamentalismi, 123–5.
23 Barber, Jihad Vs McWorld, 6.
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25 Ibid., 43.
26 Ibid., 59.
27 Ibid., 96.
28 It must be said that Juergensmeyer (as already explained earlier in this chapter) is a fierce opponent of the concept of fundamentalism. However, his work has been included in this review since the phenomena he deals with are mostly what other scholars label as fundamentalism.
29 Juergensmeyer, The New Cold War?
32 Quite interestingly, both Gellner and Eisenstadt use concepts such as stages of history and axial age, first proposed by Jaspers. Another, more recent, study based on these concepts, but with different conclusions, is The Battle for God, by the theologian Karen Armstrong. Her work – analysing fundamentalism in historical perspective, from the end of the fifteenth century – is based on the dialectical opposition between *mythos* (myth) and *logos* (rational thought). While these two principles were coexistent in the pre-modern world, in the latest centuries the first became more and more predominant over the second. Fundamentalists, in Armstrong’s theory, just try to adapt religion to modernity, by transforming *mythos* into *logos* (Armstrong, The Battle for God, 2001).
33 Eisenstadt, Fundamentalism, Sectarianism, and Revolution, 106–7.
35 For the concept of free-riding, see Olson, The Logic of Collective Action.
37 Introvigne, ‘Niches in the Islamic Religious Market and Fundamentalism: Examples from Turkey and Other Countries’.
38 Bruce, ‘Religion and Rational Choice’.
39 Davie, ‘Believing without Belonging’.
41 Larson, Summer for the Gods.
43 Lindsey and Carlson, The Late Great Planet Earth.
44 LaHaye and Jenkins, Left Behind.
45 Marsden, Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism; Brown, For a Christian America.
46 Reed, Politically Incorrect.
49 Kepel, Le Prophète et Pharaon.
50 Wickham, The Muslim Brotherhood; Rubin, The Muslim Brotherhood.
51 Moussalli, Radical Islamic Fundamentalism; Armstrong, The Battle for God, 2011.
52 Kepel, Jihad.
53 Khomeini, Islamic Government.
55 Rashid, Taliban; Kepel, Jihad.
56 Springer, Regens, and Edger, Islamic Radicalism and Global Jihad; Gunaratna, Inside Al Qaeda.
57 Stern and Berger, ISIS.
58 Ravitzky, Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism.
59 Armstrong, The Battle for God, 49.
60 Aran, ‘The Father, the Son and the Holy Land’; Ravitzky, ‘Religious Radicalism and Political Messianism in Israel’.
61 Ravitzky, Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism; Aran, ‘The Father, the Son and the Holy Land’.

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63 Friedman, Zealots for Zion.
64 Sprinzak, The Ascendance of Israel’s Radical Right; Sprinzak, ‘Kach and Kahane: The Emergence of Jewish Quasi-Fascism’.
65 Shahak and Mezvinsky, Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel.
66 Greilsmmer, Israel, les hommes en noir.
69 Ghosh, BJP and the Evolution of Hindu Nationalism; Madan, Modern Myths, Locked Minds.
70 Jaffrelot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics; Hansen and Jaffrelot, The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India; Andersen and Damle, The Brotherhood in Saffron.
71 Obeysekere, ‘Buddhism, Nationhood, and Cultural Identity’, 239; Pace and Guolo, I Fondamentalismi.
72 Keyes, ‘Monks, Guns, and Peace’.

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