RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

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A controversial concept

The last decades of the twentieth century brought about a global resurgence of religion in the public sphere, labelled by scholars as ‘revenge of god’ (Kepel 1991) or ‘deprivatization of religion’ (Casanova 1994): a development which seemed to contradict the tenets of the so-called secularisation thesis, accepted by most social science classical authors as well as by most nineteenth- and twentieth-century social scientists. According to this thesis, religion is a regressive phenomenon, incompatible with modernisation, and bound to disappear (or, in some versions, to be confined into the private sphere) with the advent of the latter (Haynes 1997; Swatos and Christiano 1999). On the contrary, religion not only did not disappear, but between the 1970s and the 1980s made a spectacular comeback on the political scene, with the creation of religiously oriented parties and social movements in diverse places such as the United States, India, Iran, Israel, Poland and Afghanistan (just to mention the cases with a greater influence at the international level). In many cases, moreover, this resurgence took an aggressive shape, with the development of fundamentalist religious movements and groups aiming at bringing back religion into the public sphere, in some cases with non-peaceful means.

The international social science community, which mostly regarded secularisation as a matter of fact, was taken by surprise by this development, and did not produce anything relevant on it for about a decade. In the words of one of the pioneers of studies on fundamentalism, Bruce Lawrence, many social scientists would have preferred to see this phenomenon ‘evaporate, becoming a bad dream limited to the eighties’ (Lawrence 1989, 8); in some cases, scholars even prematurely celebrated its demise (Bruce 1988). This resistance to carry out thorough studies on fundamentalism, however, was not only due to dependence on the secularisation thesis. There are other reasons, linked to the controversial nature of the concept itself.

First, the American academic world was reluctant to accept the idea of fundamentalism as a theoretical concept applicable to all religious traditions. Indeed, the term fundamentalism had been coined in the early twentieth century within the Protestant tradition (notably with the publication of a series of books entitled *The Fundamentals* (Torrey and Dixon 1994), to define a movement aiming at a reform of American religion, which could bring back the United States to the ‘fundamentals’ of the Christian faith (Ammerman 1991). Some American specialists of religious studies however rejected the application of the concept to other religious traditions,
seeing it as a sole preserve of American Protestantism (see, for example, Barr 1981). Moreover, the term was originally not intended to have a pejorative connotation, but in US popular culture it gradually became synonymous with ‘fanatic’ or ‘redneck’. Before the 1980s, only a handful of scholars used it to define movements from other religious tradition: Hamilton Gibb, for example, adopted the concept to include Wahhabism and other Islamic movements of religious reawakening of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Gibb 1962).

It was only after the Iranian revolution in 1979, and other events with international ramifications, that scholars generally grasped the global dimension of the ‘return of religion’ and started to widely use the term fundamentalism to define the new wave of extremist religious movements throughout the world. Notwithstanding, many continued to oppose the use of the concept, on different grounds. In some cases, the pejorative bias it often leads to is regarded as unhelpful when seeking objective analysis of relevant social and political actors. Therefore, some scholars propose instead more ‘neutral’ labels, such as ‘religious nationalism’ (Juergensmeyer 1993b). This orientation is particularly strong at the local and regional levels, where scholars are often reluctant to label movements as ‘fundamentalist’, and to engage in comparative analysis, often preferring terms such as ‘integralism’ (in Catholicism), ‘zealotism’ (in Judaism) or ‘Hindutva’ (in Hinduism).

Other scholars put forward instead criticisms on methodological grounds, rejecting the concept of fundamentalism as flawed. Particularly, since fundamentalist movements belonging to different traditions are marked by significant differences, they warn about the risks of ‘concept overstretching’ (Sartori 1970): to define the concept too specifically means not to make it applicable to different cases; on the other hand, if we make its connotation vaguer to widen its denotation, the concept becomes heuristically useless. Indeed, the attempts to single out the main features of fundamentalism, such as the one carried out by the Fundamentalism Project (see below), have often been criticised for being allegedly descriptive rather than analytic (Iannaccone 1997b).

**Early studies**

As already mentioned, the social sciences academic community was quite slow in acknowledging the new phenomenon. Only in the late 1980s did scholars engage thoroughly with the issue of religious fundamentalism and its political and social connotations. Probably, the first well-regarded comparative work to be published was Bruce Lawrence’s *Defenders of God*. Lawrence explicitly criticised the Protestantism-centred approach of authors such as Barr, and carried out an analysis of Christian, Muslim and Jewish fundamentalisms. Although starting from a philosophical perspective, his work set the pace for many subsequent contributions on religious fundamentalism. In methodological terms, Lawrence defends the primacy of the comparative approach to study the phenomenon. In philosophical terms, he cast light for the first time on the complex relation between fundamentalism and modernity, claiming that ‘fundamentalists are modern but not modernists’: they often accept the material benefits of modernity (in terms of technology, organisation, etc.) but reject its secular, pluralist and relativist orientation in terms of values (Lawrence 1989, 6). Finally, in sociological terms, he points out that

> Fundamentalists do relate to the public sphere. They do care about political power, economic justice, and social status … they are reacting against the 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.

*(Lawrence 1989, 1–7; emphasis in original)*
Lawrence’s view of religious fundamentalism as a modern phenomenon was however not shared by a German author, Martin Riesebrodt, one of the first sociologists to approach the topic with a view to elaborating a theoretical model. He defines the phenomenon in terms of ‘radical patriarchalism’, that is, ‘an urban movement directed primarily against the dissolution of personalistic, patriarchal notions of order and social relations and their replacement by depersonalized principles’, as a consequence of ‘the dramatic reduction in chances of the traditionalist milieu to reproduce itself culturally under conditions of rapid urbanization, industrialization and secularization’ (Riesebrodt 1993, 9). Riesebrodt also makes distinctions among different varieties of fundamentalism, later re-elaborated by other contributions, such as the Fundamenta[*Project: particularly, he distinguishes between ‘world-fleeing’ and ‘world-mastering’ fundamentalisms (the latter one further divided into a reformist and a revolutionary orientation), between experience-centered (charismatic) and book-centered (rational) ones; and between fundamentalism as social movement and as secret society (Riesebrodt 1993, 17–19).

Another pioneering European work, by the Italian sociologists Enzo Pace and Renzo Guolo, tries to compile a list of recurring features of religious fundamentalisms. The authors focus particularly on four principles: inerrancy of the sacred texts; a-historicity of the truth contained in them; superiority of divine law over human one; and primacy of the ‘myth of foundation’ (a real or invented tradition which at the same time absolutises the principles to be followed by the faithful and ensures the cohesion of the community) (Pace 1990; Pace and Guolo 1998).

**The Fundamentalism Project**

During the period the first books about religious fundamentalism – reviewed above – were written, at the University of Chicago a pool of scholars was planning a much more ambitious work, which marked the end of the pioneering phase of the studies on the phenomenon. This research project, involving dozens of scholars from all over the world, eventually gave birth to five huge edited books, published between 1991 and 1995 (a summary of their contents was published some years later with the title *Strong Religion*) (Almond et al. 2003). Although the volumes include dozens of case studies, the editors also took care to develop the theoretical side of their research focus. Particularly, in the last volume of the series, they attempt the first comprehensive review of the recurring features of the phenomenon, by singling out nine points (five related to the movements’ ideology, and the remaining four to their organisation):

1. **Reactivity to the marginalisation of religion.** The authors maintain that ‘to qualify as genuine fundamentalism … a movement must be concerned first with the erosion of religion and its proper role in society’. This perception of religion under threat is the consequence of ‘the general processes of modernisation, from other religions and/or ethnic groups, from a secular state (imperial or indigenous) seeking to secularise and delimit the domain of the sacred, or from various combinations of these’.

2. **Selectivity.** This is a feature of fundamentalist movements which draws them apart from traditionalist groups, illustrated in three different ways: by selecting and reshaping specific parts of the tradition rather than simply defending it; by selecting some manifestations of modernity ‘to affirm and embrace’ (particularly technological developments and organisational models); and by singling out some consequences of the processes of modernity to which they devote a special attention.

3. **Moral Manichaeism.** Fundamentalists perceive reality as uncompromisingly divided into good and bad, light and darkness, a world inside marked by ‘a minimum standard’ of purity and an outside one that ‘may be graded in different degrees of contamination’.

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Absolutism and inerrancy. These usually refer to a faith’s sacred texts but may also include their ‘analogues’ (e.g., papal infallibility, a privileged school of Islamic jurisprudence, etc). This monolithic view of sources and/or tradition also makes fundamentalists ‘steadfastly refuse hermeneutical methods developed by secularized philosophers’, as well as the canons of critical rationality.

Millennialism and messianism. Fundamentalists don’t perceive history simply as a succession of events, but they are convinced that it must have a miraculous culmination, with ‘an end to suffering and waiting’ and the coming of ‘an all-powerful mediator’ (such as the Messiah in Judaism, the hidden imam in Shia Islam, the second coming of Jesus in Christianity, etc).

Elect, chosen membership. The members of fundamentalist groups perceive themselves as an ‘elect’ group in opposition to a doomed world: a condition variously described as ‘the faithful’, ‘the remnant’, ‘the last outpost’, etc. In some cases, this dichotomy can be blurred with the presence of an intermediate circle of sympathisers around the inner group.

Sharp boundaries. As a consequence of point 6, fundamentalists tend to put in place a more or less strict separation between themselves and the outside world. Such boundaries are often symbolic in nature, implemented though rituals, the media and education; but they can also be material, as in the case of groups such as the Israeli Haredim, who live physically apart from the mainstream society.

Authoritarian organisation. Fundamentalist groups are structured according to a charismatic leader–follower relation, while the relations among common followers are based on equality. Groups are also marked by the absence of ‘bureaucracy in the sense of rational–legal division of power and competence’: a situation which often engenders fragmentation, in the absence of the possibility of a loyal opposition.

Behavioural requirements. These are represented by a set of rules (related to music, rules of dress, rules about sexuality, drinking, discipline of children, etc) which aim at creating ‘a powerful affective dimension, an imitative, conforming dimension’ (Almond et al. 1995b, 405–408).

Beside this list of recurring features, the editors of the project also elaborated on Riesebrodt’s and others’ previous typologies to propose a fourfold classification of fundamentalists’ attitude towards the world:

1. **World conqueror**. They try to get control over the social structures which have given life to the enemy.
2. **World transformer**. They do the same in a ‘softer’ way, by seeking to influence a society’s laws, institutions, structures and practices.
3. **World creator**. Their aim is not to control mainstream society, but to create new and alternative structures and institutions, alternative to the mainstream.
4. **World renouncer**. They privilege the research for purity and preservation of their way of life over hegemony, which prompts them to construct a fundamentalist world, separated from the threatening outside (Almond et al. 1995a, 438–439).

The above distinction between type 1 and 2, particularly, follows the classical dichotomy (already pointed out for example by Kepel (1984)) between a top-down strategy, aiming at seizing the power before social hegemony, even with violent means; and a bottom-up one, focused on social influence and education, usually preferred to the former in democratic systems (Almond et al. 1995c, 486). The authors also maintain that fundamentalists ‘are first and foremost men and women of religion rather than of government’ and have to resort to the help of professional politicians to engage in politics (Marty and Appleby 1993, 631).
The FP conclusions still remain a milestone in the literature on fundamentalism, since in the following 25 years there has been no other project so ambitious and encompassing. However, they have been criticised for many reasons and from many different perspectives. First, methodologically, their nine-points definition of fundamentalist movements has been criticised in relation to the above-mentioned ‘concept overstretching’ as too inclusive; their case choices (for example in relation to the exclusion of Jehovah’s Witnesses from the fundamentalist field) are also regarded by some as questionable (Introvigne 2005). Moreover, even a contributor to the project such as Rhys H. Williams disagrees with the FP’s view of fundamentalists as not fit for politics:

fundamentalists who actively engage public politics seldom approach it with modest, partial agendas. The attack on the distinction between the public and the private in social life is often explicit in fundamentalist programs for change … For these reasons periods of large-scale fundamentalist activity coincide with periods of generalized political instability often leading to ‘regime crises’.  

(Williams 1994, 802)

The editors of the project have also been criticised as too influenced by the secularisation paradigm, which allegedly made them see the movements as doomed to decline and to withdraw into enclaves and ghettos (Simpson 1994; Swatos 1993); finally, they are critiqued for their focus on Abrahamic faiths, which also makes their definitions scarcely fit for non-monotheistic religious traditions: a bias admitted by the authors themselves, when they declare that their ‘definition of the properties of fundamentalism has been derived from a focus on Christian, Islamic and Jewish cases, all of which have sacred texts and codified religious laws and share in a millennial–messianic cosmology’ (Almond et al. 1995b, 415).

To sum up, the categories used by the authors of the FP seem to be designed for small, charismatic and text-centred groups, marked by a problematic relation with mainstream society and by charismatic forms of control and transmission of power: which does not apply well to many cases of modern fundamentalist movements, which show a higher degree of internal differentiation and power relations, and nuanced relations with the external world (Ozzano 2009).

As already mentioned, after the FP no other project engaged in trying to provide an encompassing definition of the phenomenon. On the other hand, a number of authors have provided ‘partial’ explanations of fundamentalism, defining the phenomenon according to a single relevant feature. The following paragraphs will review the main strains of this wide and complex literature.

Other perspectives

Fundamentalism and globalisation

A number of works dealing with fundamentalism share the common idea – despite the differences in perspective and approach – that the rise of the phenomenon is intimately connected to globalisation processes. Roland Robertson, for example, points out that globalisation (defined as ‘involving the compression of the world’) inevitably brings about a global ‘search for fundamentals’ related to ‘tradition, identity, home, indigeneity, locality, community and so on’. According to this view, fundamentalisms ‘constitute ways of finding a place within the world as a whole’ (Robertson 1992, 166). The author also declares that at first he saw fundamentalism as a reaction to globalisation, with the aim to defend local identities: a perspective very similar to
that proposed by Misztal and Shupe, who propose the concept of ‘global fundamentalism’ as a series of interrelated responses to globalisation processes (Misztal and Shupe 1992).

On the other hand, Robertson admits that in a later stage he changed his mind, becoming convinced that fundamentalisms are not to be seen as a reaction opposing globalisation, but rather as a consequence of it. In relation to this, the author coins the concept of ‘glocalisation’, which represents the dyad local/global as two faces of the same coin. According to this perspective, when a community becomes unable to assert its identity at the local level, it reacts by asserting a new (often fundamentalist) identity at the global level (Robertson 1992, 166–180).

A perspective not far from Robertson’s was proposed some years later by the sociologist Benjamin Barber, in his book, *Jihad vs McWorld*. According to Barber, in the contemporary world it is possible to identify two opposing forces: neo-liberal globalisation; and a number of regressive collective identities which included fundamentalists, as well as other contentious phenomena. These forces ‘operate with equal strength in opposite directions, the one driven by parochial hatreds, the other by universalising markets, the one re-creating ancient subnational and ethnic borders from within, the other making national borders porous from without’. As in the case of Robertson, however, the author maintains that these two forces are only apparently opposed to each other, while in reality they are strictly interconnected, and ‘they both make war on the sovereign nation-state’s democratic institutions’ (Barber 2010, 6).

Fundamentalism is connected to globalisation and modernisation processes also in the work of Olivier Roy. In his view, the cancellation of local cultures engendered by globalisation implies the loss of religions’ roots: particularly, according to Roy, ‘two factors play a key part in the transformation of religion today: deterritorialization and deculturation’. As a consequence of these processes, which imply a detachment of religion from culture and local roots, ‘religion therefore circulates outside knowledge. Salvation does not require people to know, but to believe’. Which means, among other consequences, that fundamentalist movements which allegedly aim to restore a ‘pure’ version of religious tradition are, in reality, a phenomenon of ‘holy ignorance’ (Roy 2010, 6–12).

**Fundamentalism and the ‘clash of civilisations’**

A second group of contributions dealing with fundamentalism share the idea that the phenomenon is connected to the ‘clash of civilisations’: a concept first coined by Bernard Lewis, and popularised by Samuel P. Huntington. His 1996 book, which raised innumerable debates and became particularly popular after 9/11, in the years of the Bush administration’s ‘war on terror’, is based on the idea that identities and conflict of the post-cold war era are based on ‘culture and cultural identities, which at the broadest level are civilisation identities’ (Huntington 1996, 20). According to the author, civilisations are ‘the broadest cultural identity … the biggest “we” within which we feel culturally at home as distinguished from all the other “thems” out there’ (Huntington 1996, 43). Religion plays a major role in Huntington’s theoretical construction, not only because in his view it is one of the pivots (together with language and a few other factors) of a civilisation (not by chance most civilisations are named after the major world religions), but also because it plays a major role in the world’s answer to westernisation. An answer which can take the shape of total rejection, total acceptance (Kemalism) and reformism. When reformism extremises, according to Huntington, it becomes fundamentalism: a strong reaction to the feeling of emptiness engendered by the sudden adoption of western values.

While Huntington is particularly concerned about the anti-western fundamentalist movements in the Muslim world, the Syrian-born political scientist Bassam Tibi, who had participated in the FP, tries instead to merge the conclusions of this latter with Huntington’s theses, by proposing the
idea of fundamentalism as a global reaction to modernisation processes. In his view, Islamic fundamentalism is not to be regarded as the ideal type of fundamentalism, but only a variety of it among many. Broadly speaking, he defines fundamentalism as a political ideology, which fights the national state and aims at the creation of a theocratic state, in a context marked by a global clash of civilisations (Tibi 2002).

The idea that the main clash lies inside the nation state, between secular and religious forces (rather than among civilisations at the global level), has been developed by Mark Juergensmeyer. In his view, the political life of most countries will be marked by a ‘new cold war’ between the supporters of secular nationalism, and those of religious nationalism: a force denouncing the moral decline of the western world and, outside it, denouncing the failure of democratic political institutions imported from the west (Juergensmeyer 1993a).

**Fundamentalism and totalitarianism**

Another group of studies on fundamentalism interpret the phenomenon as a form of totalitarianism (seeing similarities, particularly, with the ‘left-wing’, Stalinist version of this latter). According to Ernest Gellner, 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.

\[\text{(Gellner 1992, 2–4)}\]

In his view, however, Islam is more prone to fundamentalism because of its alleged insufficient secularisation. For this reason, according to Gellner, ‘Islam fulfils some of the very functions which nationalism performs elsewhere’; particularly, the transition to a modern society, which elsewhere ‘expresses itself as nationalism, expresses itself in the Muslim world as religious revivalism, as fundamentalism’ (Gellner 1995, 285–286).

Shmuel Eisenstadt also regards fundamentalism as a form of totalitarianism, and defines it as ‘a modern Jacobin anti-modern utopia and heterodoxy’. Here he refers to the thesis (already mentioned above) according to which fundamentalism is inspired by anti-modern values but does not reject the material benefits of modernity. Particularly, he focuses on the Jacobin side of fundamentalism, which makes it deny intermediate social institutions, sacralise the centre and expand with a missionary zeal. He maintains that ‘communist and fundamentalist movements and regimes share the tendency to promulgate a very strong salvationist vision or gospel’, since both visions imply ‘the transformation of both man and society, and the construction of new, personal and collective identities’, which demand ‘total submergence of the individual in the general totalistic community’. At the political level, both of them are focused on ‘the active construction, by political action, of a new social and cultural order … aiming at transforming the structure of society in general, and of centre-periphery relations in particular’ (Eisenstadt 2000, 106–107).

Both Gellner’s and Eisenstadt’s contributions on fundamentalism are based on the concept of ‘axial age’ made famous by Jaspers. Another contribution adopting the same framework, although with different conclusions, is *The Battle for God*, written by the theologian Karen Armstrong, which carries out a comparative historical analysis, from the end of the fifteenth century, of Christian, Islamic and Jewish fundamentalisms. Armstrong’s work on the subject is based on the opposition between the two domains of *mythos* (myth) and *logos* (rational thought): while the two
principles coexisted in the pre-modern times, according to Armstrong with the advent of modernity the former has become predominant over the second. Fundamentalists try thus to ensure religion’s survival in modern times by regarding the mythos as if it was logos, a rational truth (Armstrong 2001).

Fundamentalism and the religious market

A very different framing of the fundamentalist phenomenon has been proposed by the ‘religious economy’ school, which analyses religion according to a rational choice model, in terms of supply (religious groups and institutions) and demand (individuals) (Iannaccone 1997a). According to Finke and Stark, the different religious orientations can be arranged according to their degree of tension with mainstream society, on a 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’. The shape of the religious demand is represented by a bell curve, with the central niches (conservative and moderate) providing low benefits, but also demanding low costs to the faithful; on the other hand, the niches closer to the side of the bell (liberal and ultra-liberal on the one side; strict and ultra-strict on the other) we will find religious groups marked by increasingly high costs and benefits (Finke and Stark 2001, 25–44), with fewer – but much more committed – followers and a low level of free-riding (Olson 1965). This is the case, according to the authors, of fundamentalist groups, which are situated in the strict niche, while the ultra-strict is occupied by small extremist and terrorist groups who often resort to violence to achieve their aims (Introvigne 2005).

Fundamentalism and political parties

So far, this chapter has focused on broad definitions of fundamentalism, often elaborated within the disciplines of religious studies and sociology of religion. As we have seen, in these literatures the references to the relations of religious fundamentalism with power and state institutions are scarce and not rarely contradictory. We find a particularly limited number of contributions if we look at the role of religion in political parties: which is not surprising when we consider that most classical studies on parties were written before the so-called return of religion, and often mostly refer to secularised Europe. However, because of the presence of Christian democratic parties in government in several European countries after the end of the Second World War, scholars had to take them into account. For example, Kirchheimer does so by creating the category of denominational mass party, as the religious version of the mass party (Kirchheimer 1966). In terms of parties’ genetic profile, on the other hand, the well-known Lipset and Rokkan’s cleavages thesis explains the birth of religious parties with a ‘religious vs. secular’ social cleavage, engendered by the formation of the national state and by this latter’s expropriation of the Church’s privileges (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). More in line with the secularisation theory and Comte’s idea of the three stages of social evolution (Comte 1864), Duverger connects instead the rise of totalitarian parties in the twentieth century to the decline of traditional religions in the west. He points out that totalitarian parties have developed particularly in countries, such as Germany and Russia, which were marked by a deep religious devotion before secularising (Duverger 1966).

It is only with the end of the twentieth century and the growing awareness among the scholarly community of the different roles played by religion in political affairs, that classifications become less dependent on old categories and more nuanced, acknowledging the existence of different kinds of religious parties. Gunther and Diamond’s quite elaborate parties typology, which
Religious fundamentalism includes 15 types of parties, does so by singling out religious parties marked by a ‘pluralistic’ and a ‘proto-hegemonic attitude’: the former identifies with the category of denominational-mass party already defined by Kirchheimer; the latter is labelled by the two authors as ‘religious fundamentalist’. This latter kind of party tries ‘to reorganise state and society around a strict reading of religious doctrinal principles’: therefore, in it ‘there is little or no room for conflicting interpretation of the religious norms and scriptures that serve as the basis of the party’s programme and the laws which it seeks to impose on all of society’. These parties don’t believe in the separation between religion and the state and require from their members and followers an intense level of participation, structured through ancillary organisations in the framework of ‘hierarchical, undemocratic and even absolutist’ relations within the party. In terms of social base, ‘they disproportionately attract support from the poor and downtrodden and the marginalized middle class’, because of both their ‘denunciations of injustice and corruption’, and their wide web of social and welfare activities (Gunther and Diamond 2003, 182–183).

An even more nuanced typology of political parties according to their religious orientation had been proposed by Ozzano, who singles out five types of religiously oriented parties (defined as ‘not only explicitly religious parties, but also formally secular parties that have significant sections of their manifestos dedicated to religious values, explicitly appeal to religious constituencies, and/or include significant religious factions’): conservative, progressive, fundamentalist, nationalist and camp. In relation to the fundamentalist type, Ozzano builds on Gunther and Diamond’s description, and adds that, in Neumann’s (1956) terms, fundamentalist parties are parties of ‘total integration’, aiming at radically restructuring society and at getting the full and unquestioning obedience of their members. As a consequence, in the author’s view,

they also have a strong anti-systemic orientation, and their commitment to democracy is at best questionable. This means that they might accept the pure mechanical procedures of democracy, but believe in very serious constraints in terms of liberal rights. Thus, it can be argued that they regard democracy as a means to conquer power (or at least get public recognition for their issues), not as an end. (Ozzano 2013, 818)

The debate on the compatibility with democracy of fundamentalist parties, particularly in relation to Islamist parties, is very wide and cannot be accounted for here. To sum up, many authors focus on the already mentioned distinction between moderate and radical religious parties: the former seeking ‘gradual reform within the existing system’, the latter seeking ‘revolutionary change often through the use of violence’ (Schwedler 2006, 8). A distinction further nuanced by Brumberg, who singles out reformist, fundamentalist militant, tactical modernist and strategic modernist positions, according to the different degrees and modalities of acceptance of democracy (Brumberg 1997).

The focus of many contributions is however not the static, but the dynamic, of fundamentalist parties: that is, the conditions and the paths through which a religious party can moderate or, the opposite, radicalise. The best-known strand of this field is the so-called moderation through inclusion literature, arguing that the participation of religious extremist parties in democratic institutions and electoral democracy can have a moderating effect (an idea already proposed for non-religious parties such as the Communists), because of the socialisation effect and the need to compromise in order to forge alliances. The focus, therefore, is the analysis of religious parties according to the notion of progressive moderation, and the different ways through which such a moderation can be achieved and understood (see, for example, Schwedler 2006 and Clark 2006).
The moderation through inclusion thesis has however been criticised by many. For example, Cavatorta and Merone argue that it has a significant shortcoming, which undermines in part its applicability and validity across all cases. Crucially, there is very little thinking about the possibility that exclusion might have led anti-systemic parties to revise their ideological tenets and political strategies towards moderation in cases where there was no inclusion to speak of.

Therefore, in relation to the path of the Tunisian Islamist party Ennadha, they provocatively put forward a ‘moderation through exclusion’ thesis, since ‘there is, at least in theory, the possibility that the vast majority of those who are repressed and rejected in large sectors of society might end up critically revisiting their activism’ (Cavatorta and Merone 2013, 864).

Conclusions

The short review above shows the richness and the complexity of the literature on religious fundamentalism, which has approached the subject from several methodological points of view and disciplinary perspectives, from theology, to social sciences and philosophy. However, a thorough assessment of the phenomenon in the context of the political science literature is still lacking. This need for further research is clearly shown by the scarce number of contributions about the relations between religious fundamentalism and political parties, a subject still understudied. In relation to this, a comparative assessment of the characteristics of religious fundamentalism-linked political parties and their paths towards either radicalisation or moderation, which can go beyond the focus on the Islamic world, is surely needed.

A more careful assessment of the political side of religious fundamentalism at large is, however, more broadly required, to better understand the strategies, the leadership dynamics, the power relations and the political perspectives of fundamentalist movements. This is surely very urgent, in order to better grasp the role played by religion in the domestic and international affairs of the contemporary world.

References


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