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RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM AND CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT: This study provides an analytical discussion for the issue of religious fundamentalism and its relevance to conflict, in its broader sense. It is stressed that religious fundamentalism manifests itself in two ways: nonviolent intolerance and violent intolerance. The sources of both types of intolerance and their connection to conflict are addressed and discussed in detail. Further research is also suggested on conditions connecting religion to nonviolent intolerance so as to cope with the problem more effectively.

Keywords: Religious Fundamentalism, Religious Conflict, Religious Extremism.

1. INTRODUCTION

As social beings, people are naturally linked with certain groups, objects, beliefs, and ideologies. This affiliation sometimes occurs on a conscious basis, in conjunction with the individual's personal choices, likes, and dislikes. It may also happen semi-consciously, so to speak, out of socialization and learning processes that are beyond the pure control of the person. In any case, all adults are supporters of certain "isms", such as liberalism, Marxism, nationalism, Hinduism, and so forth.

While natural, human affiliation in the form "ism" may be pathological at times. One of the most visible forms of "ism" pathology in today's world appears to be religious fundamentalism, as the phenomenon has frequently become related to conflict and violence. About a decade ago, in his famous "clash of civilizations" thesis, Samuel P. Huntington (1993, 1997) claimed that it is now culture rather than ideology that divides the world and that religion fuels the conflict in a special way by inspiring intolerant and irreconcilable images of identity and commitment among

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competing civilizations. Although we have not yet witnessed a major clash between competing civilizations resulting from religious differences, religious fundamentalism, nonetheless, has become a serious source of national and international conflicts in the post-Cold War era. Further, whether they are Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or other, many religious people throughout the world became involved in violence, brutal tactics, and even terrorism. In this regard, Islamic fundamentalism has especially become “popular”, so to speak, after the September 11 attacks on the US and occasional bombings of major Western countries, or supporters of them, by radical Muslim groups, although religiously-driven violence is not limited to one particular religion.

In the face of such a new threat to regional and even global security, a necessity arises to understand what religious fundamentalism is and how it is connected to conflict and violence. This article tries to come up with some answers to these fundamental questions by utilizing an interdisciplinary approach. The study will start with a brief discussion on the term religious fundamentalism and various manifestations of it in conjunction with the phenomenon of conflict. This will be followed by a more detailed debate regarding the possible causes of religious fundamentalism, with a particular attention on the violent expression of it. The areas requiring further research will also be addressed in debating the issue and its implications to conflict analysis.

2. RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM AND ITS CONFLICT-PRONE MANIFESTATIONS

Despite its extensive use in the media and in scholarly works, there seems to be no consensus on the definition of religious fundamentalism. The term is usually used to refer to extremism, fanaticism, and literal thinking in connection with a religious faith. When used by the West with reference to Muslim groups, religious fundamentalism also implies terrorism and oftentimes evokes a powerful image of persons who are irrational, immoderate, and violent.

A broader, and more scholarly, understanding of religious fundamentalism, on the other hand, reveals that the phenomenon is found expression mainly in two types of intolerance: nonviolent intolerance and violent intolerance.

2.1. Nonviolent Intolerance

Nonviolent intolerance refers to extreme self-identification with a particular religion. The world is believed to revolve around religious norms and whatever religion says, it is taken as final. Although religious norms are, in the final analysis, subjectively interpreted, an unquestioned submission to this interpretation is typical and no further inquiry is seen as necessary.

Usually, nonviolent intolerance is not directly associated with physical violence. Most religious people in this category live in their own world and indeed, they would be seen quite pacific from an outside perspective. However, strong self-identification with a religion inevitably leads to ethnocentrism, that is, exaggerated in-group centrality and discrimination of out-groups. This, in turn, breeds group stereotypes, a set of beliefs that a religious group is convinced are valid. Group members attribute desired qualities to themselves and unwanted ones to out-groups. They view themselves as good, successful, honest, virtuous, and peace-loving, while seeing out-group members with opposite terms; as evil, lazy, deceptive, bellicose, and so on (Yilmaz, 2005). This tendency inescapably harms inter-communal relations and gives rise to a societal tension, reducing, thus, the quality of civic life, even if there is no overt conflict.

A more extreme form of religiously-driven nonviolent intolerance manifests itself in the psychological process of dehumanization. Dehumanization can be characterized by a decline in empathy for out-group members and involves the removal of human facets. It systematically destroys the individual's tendency to identify himself or herself with other human beings. Thus, dehumanization psychologically justifies brutal tactics in situations of conflict (Maiese, 2005). Also, individuals dehumanizing out-group members usually become more conflict-prone against them. In

fact, a significant segment of religious people throughout the world – whether Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, or other – uses much of the language of militancy, the language of warfare and combativeness. They typically represent themselves in a fighting mode; they are “fighting back” or “fighting against” the enemies of what is true and right, fighting for the implementation of righteous beliefs. Such people do not necessarily take action, but nonetheless, nonviolent intolerance generates cognitive and emotional conditions whereby violent intolerance may take place whenever inter-communal tension arises.

2.2. Violent Intolerance

Apart from discriminating and dehumanizing out-groups, the most dangerous aspect of religious fundamentalism manifests itself in violent intolerance. Violent intolerance involves direct use of physical violence in pursuing subjectively-defined religious missions, including killing and destroying. There have been numerous widely publicized examples, such as the massacre by a Jewish zealot of two dozen Muslim worshippers in Hebron, the explicit blessing of violence by both Serbian Orthodox and Croatian Catholic Christians in the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, the September 11 attacks on the US, as well as the July 2005 bombings of the London subway and an Egyptian hotel by militant Islamic groups in which so many innocent people became victims.

Religiously-driven violent intolerance can also be connected to terrorism in many cases. In fact, some of the world’s most dangerous terrorist organizations today, such as Islamic Jihad, Hamas, and El-Kaida, are ideologically fed by religious fundamentalism. Most people in such organizations strongly believe that direct use of violence in the name of religion is obligatory. They are also convinced that if they die in their “holy struggle”, they will be rewarded in the next life; they will directly go to heaven. This belief removes fear and guilt feeling, making killing and dying much easier consequently.

Violent intolerance, thus, emerges as the most frightening appearance of religious fundamentalism and begs for careful analyses before coping with the issue effectively.

Several major reasons leading to religiously-driven violence will be addressed below, but it should be mentioned here, as a common characteristic, that violent intolerance involves a kind of sacred application of the notion of necessity. The idea is that a given group or “people” taken to be specifically chosen representatives of the divine order believe themselves to be catastrophically threatened by a sinister enemy. The “right to survival” warrants an extreme response against the enemy whose very existence constitutes a continuing danger. Therefore, violent intolerance mostly takes place as a broadly-defined “anticipatory self-defense”, even if no objective condition exists for justifying taking action.

3. WHAT CAUSES RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

Having identified two types of intolerance associated with religious fundamentalism, it is now time to explore the most essential issue: the causes of religious fundamentalism. In dealing with this issue, it must be noted that religious fundamentalism is a rather complex phenomenon that involves a wide variety of personal, cultural, and even situational variables that always require further research. But nonetheless, several factors seem to be common in the fundamentalist movements summarized as follows:

First of all, one aspect of religious fundamentalism is closely related to socialization process. It is usually the case that individuals coming from religious families are generally more religious than those brought up within more secular environments. Such people, like their parents and ancestors, tend literally to interpret religious text(s) in accordance with their traditions. Their behaviors are mostly fall in the category of “nonviolent intolerance”. They are usually ethnocentric, they would advocate language of militancy, but normally, they are not directly associated with physical violence.

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Some other people, albeit not so many, however, may consciously choose to be radically religious. The motives for these people may vary, mostly in accordance with personal variables. Many people, for example, may become devoted believers due to inner insecurity, caused by a real or perceived frightening or confusing environment. Social psychologists identify a basic need to reduce uncertainty or anxiety (Hogg and Abrams, 1993), construct meaning, and avoid confusion (Reykowski, 1982). Religious fundamentalism, as literal thinking, serves to these ends in many ways. First, by sticking to a religious belief and accepting it as the ultimate source of knowledge, the individual finds “satisfactory” explanations of puzzling or mysterious phenomena. Religion satisfies the desire to know and to understand, and is resorted to when more mundane means of explanation fail. In that sense, religion fundamentalism can be said to offer intellectual security by largely satisfying cognitive needs of the person. Inexplicable problems, which cannot be resolved by any other means, are unraveled by recourse to theological and religious sources of knowledge. Second, religion satisfies, so to speak, substantive needs of the individual in an imaginary way as well. Material needs which cannot be satisfied in other ways are believed to be eventually fulfilled, if not in this life, in the next life for sure. This belief, in turn, reduces anxiety by providing the individual with a sense of confidence. Finally, religious fundamentalism serves to reduce anxiety by promising justice. Indeed, structural conditions, over which the individual has little or no control, bring about many frustrations hard to bear with. The powerful use the underprivileged, some exercise power over others. In most parts of the world, economic and social conditions are such that some enjoy prosperity and well-being, while some others hardly survive. Thus, in the face of earthy injustices, religion functions as a palliative pill by promising that justice will be done and all sins will be punished eventually. In the next life, everyone will get what he or she actually deserves. This belief helps the individual face life’s difficulties with relatively comfort and confidence.

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Sometimes it is also the case that strong identification with a particular religion is caused by a desire to achieve a positive self-esteem. Since identification with a particular collectivity satisfies the need to belong and is a means of increasing self-esteem, then it is preferable that the group is seen to possess desirable qualities and is a success. That is, individuals would like to be identified with a grouping that appears worthy and prestigious. In this respect, many may become attached to a religion of the powerful and prestigious. Many Asian people living in the US, for example, become Christians in order to be more smoothly integrated into the community in which they live. These people tend to be more vigorous supporters of Christianity to be more easily accepted by their community, as well as to digest their new religious identity inside themselves.

But again, individuals in this category usually do not advocate violence. They typically approach to people with an “us” and “them” mentality; they up-grade themselves, while downgrading out-groups. They also do not care much about scientific knowledge and objectivity, but gives prior importance to religion-based knowledge, which may not always fit the requirements of modern life. Thus, their rationality may only be meaningful in the religious context and their acts may seem irrational at times from an outside perspective.

Religiously-driven violence, on the other hand, appears to be an even more complicated phenomenon. It often occurs as a complex interplay between subjective interpretation of religious norms and pursuit of certain interests or goals.

In this respect, sometimes violent intolerance may result from individual or group understandings of what religion says. For some religious believers, the direct use of violence is obligatory against any enemies. For instance, according to Kahane Chai parties in Israel, “they (the Israelis) in a state of war and in a war, there is no innocent people. The Palestinians are, thus, all guilty by association” (Cited in Kelsay 1994: 1). Likewise, some segments of Serbian Orthodoxy reinforced a violent Serbian nationalism against the Muslims during the Balkan conflict of the

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1990s. Many Muslims, too, believe that they are in a constant state of war against non-Muslims and Jihad, the holy war, justifies all means necessary, including violent means, in this struggle.

Although some individuals and groups would be motivated by such literal interpretation of religious norms, a larger-scale religious fundamentalism and related violence tend to be associated with real or perceived external threats to in-group identity. External threats, here, refer to both unwanted influences out-groups norms and real or perceived foreign domination or invasion.

This is especially evident in the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism as an occasionally violent political movement in many Muslim-populated countries. In the case of Algeria, for example, the first visible Islamic movement that emerged under the leadership of Ben Badis in 1931, the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema, was a reaction to French influences that were thoroughly woven into the fabric of the society, diluting indigenous culture and identity. The movement was soon involved in the initial nationalist demand for equal rights and preservation of a distinctive Muslim identity, rejecting the notion that Algerian Muslims could ever become Frenchmen (Yilmaz 2002: 212-231).

In the Egyptian case, likewise, the conflict between Islamic values and Western ideas runs deep in the political history of the country. Early attempts by the government in the nineteenth century to develop a “liberal Islam” that could assimilate Western ideas proved to be largely unsuccessful in the face of resistance by local religious leaders and by the majority of Egyptians. This was followed by a more radical establishment, the establishment of the Society of the Muslim Brotherhood (*Jama'at al-Ikhwan al-Muslimoun*) in 1928. The organization became the major mainstream Islamic fundamentalist movement and has remained so, with its adherents and branches in other Arab countries, making it close to being a transnational pan-Islamic movement. The founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan el-Banna, declared that one of the primary objectives of his movement was to get rid of foreign influences, referring particularly to the West. As the movement grew stronger and took a more activist turn in the second part of the twentieth

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century, bars, nightclubs, cinemas, foreign tourists, and Coptic churches, perceived as symbols of Western culture, frequently became targets for violent attacks (Rubin, 2002; Tal, 2005). The last example is the July 2005 bombing of the Sharm el-Sheik Hotel in which dozens of innocent people were brutally killed.

In Pakistan, the establishment of the Pakistani political party, *Jama'at-i Islami*, in 1941 by Abu'l A'la Maududi, the influential theologian of Sunni Islam, provides another example. Although the organization was set up as a reformist party employing constitutional and legal methods to achieve its goal of independence, it quickly became a radical movement as the dominant Hindus attempted to assimilate Muslim population in colonial India (Little 1996: 83-84).

Even in the Iranian case, there is much research to suggest that the emergence of revolutionary Islam was caused in part by the public desire to get rid of Western influences, spreading especially via the Shah's regime. Resentments regarding the presence of a large number of US and European corporations in the country, the Shah's attempt to Westernize the country, his repeated and costly gatherings with his Western guests, and his frequent appearance on American and European TV channels found a concrete expression in Khomeini's conservative religious uprising (Amuzegar, 1982; Keddie, 1996).

Religiously-driven violent intolerance would also be intertwined with unresolved past traumas. Such traumas refer to serious undesirable events in a group history that invoke in the members of the group intense feelings of having been humiliated and victimized by members of another group. The group does not, of course, choose to be victimized, and subsequently to lose self-esteem, but it does choose to psychologize and mythologize to dwell upon the event. The group members draw the emotional meaning of traumatic events, and mental defenses against it, into their social identity. Future generations share a conscious, and an unconscious, wish to repair what has been done to their ancestors to release themselves from the burden of humiliation (Volkan and Itzkowitz, 1994; Volkan, 1997). In this respect, religion motivates many people to

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engage in a harsh struggle that justifies violence against “historic enemies” even if the new enemy is not related to the original one. In fact, a careful discourse analysis of many violent Islamic groups today, including Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and El-Kaida, reveals that such groups frequently refer to past invasion or domination of the Arab Muslims by Western powers, making connection to the present unfavorable conditions as well. In their eyes, Western invasion still continues through economic means, as well as through force if a Muslim country fails to cooperate with the West, as exemplified by the last US invasion of Iraq. For many radical Muslims, the existence of Israel also symbolizes the continuation of foreign invasion of the “Arab land” as that state is identified with the West and Western domination. Hence, the feelings of past humiliation, combined with the perceived ongoing domination of foreign powers, appear to be translated into religious fundamentalism as the movement strictly values in-group unity against external hegemony.

Finally, in talking about radical religious movements and religiously-driven violence, the role of individual immaturity and social distress in these phenomena should be noted. To be more specific, the social profile of those involved in revolutionary religious groups and violent activities reveals that these people are, first of all, usually too young to think and act rationally. They are mostly minors with a young mind rather vulnerable to external influences and brainwashing. At the same time, because of their young age, they tend to pursue some sort of positive social impact through expressing their personal identity in violent ways. Hence, they think that they do the right thing, that they will gain acceptance and love of their society.

The age dimension aside, these people usually come from poor families and highly-frustrating social environments. Studies show that absolute or relative deprivation of human needs make people vulnerable to radical movements and violence (Burton, 1990, 1997; Gurr, 1971). Thus, for many unsatisfied people, religious fundamentalism and related violence may be an unconscious expression of accumulated frustration. In many cases, it may also be a consciously-chosen way to achieve better life conditions in the absence of an alternative way. Indeed, some studies reveal that

religious fundamentalism draws many of its followers from the lower-middle classes, mainly in urban areas. It is a protest movement but its support is volatile, as involvement in it offers opportunities for upward social mobility for some within its ranks who, once they have moved up the social ladder, are no longer its militants (Toprak and Sunar, 1993; Toprak, 1995).

4. CONCLUSION

As the above discussions attest, religious fundamentalism is intertwined with many different motives and can be a serious source of intolerance and conflict. This, of course, is not to argue that religion itself has no positive functions at all. In fact, a well-interpreted religion can foster inner peace, tolerance, and love, feeding, thus, outer peace and social harmony in their broader sense. In the final analysis, religion is a dual-sided sword. How it is interpreted depends on human mind, as well as social conditions.

In the above discussions, some of the psychological and social conditions leading to the pathological understanding of religion have been tried to be identified. It has been addressed, in this respect, that the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism could involve both value and interest-driven motives. It can be a reflection of subjective beliefs; it can be a vehicle of expressing accumulated frustration; and it can be a utilitarian activity aimed at certain changes for the better or desirable. Failure to understand such complexity and to emphasize the supposedly crucial role of a single factor may lead to under analysis of this “ism” pathology as a new threat in the new century. It has also been stressed that the factors addressed to be connected to religious fundamentalism in this work are not final. Further research is especially needed, through in-depth case studies, as well as large-n studies, on conditions motivating people to die and to kill in the name of religion. In sum, it is vital that religious fundamentalism be understood as much fully as possible so as to be effectively coping with this issue in the twenty first century.

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