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EDITORIAL

Editorial—Religious fundamentalism: new theoretical and empirical challenges across religions and cultures

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Processes of secularisation are taking place in many regions of the world, especially in the countries of Western Europe as well as in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, South Korea and Japan, but also in Iran and in some North African countries, and recently even in the United States, which had been thought to be particularly religious (Arab Barometer 2019a, b; Inglehart 2021; Pollack and Rosta 2017; Reader 2012; Voas and Chaves 2016). But the decreasing social relevance of religion, reflected in the decline both of religious beliefs and practices, and of membership of religious communities, is not unilinear. Alongside and running counter to these secularising tendencies are also movements of religious self-assertion that can be seen across the world. The most visible tendencies for European observers are perhaps those of radical Islamism, with its claim to superiority over secular interpretations of the world, its bizarre forms of social exclusion, and its transgression of boundaries, which can even entail violence. We read almost every day reports in the media about the use of violence against women in Iran who have allegedly violated the dress code enforced by the morality police, about the legal persecution of homosexuals in the United Arab Emirates, and about the exclusion of women from work and higher levels of education in Afghanistan. There are frequent protests. In Iran, thousands of women (and men) have been taking to the streets for months under the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom" to protest against the Mullah regime. In Afghanistan, many women are undermining the Taliban's prohibitions and its attempts to close schools and stop women from studying by secretly meeting to study and teach children. Some even dare to fight back publicly, with the Taliban responding with violence, firing their Kalashnikovs in the air and using water cannons.

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But even Christianity is not free of religious fanaticism. For example, evangelical groupings, weak in Europe but very popular in the USA and South America, claim that the Bible is inerrant, denounce dissenting beliefs as sinful, and use their alliance with political leaders to gain public influence and cultural dominance (Williamson 2020, p. 23–27). In Greece, the Orthodox Church depicts the path taken by Europe as a failure and humanism as godless, and claims that its own values are universal, and indeed the only values able to save the desperate people of the West from moral decay (Sakellariou 2021). Similarly, the Russian Orthodox Church also sees itself as a bulwark against the West in the metaphysical struggle between good and evil, and as the spiritual foundations of the Russian nation that has much to teach other nations (Stepanova 2021).

But tendencies of religious self-assertion can be found not only in Christianity and Islam. In Israel, ultra-orthodox Jews define the modern way of life as decadent, shut themselves off from outside influences, and fight to keep ‘true’ Judaism pure, as it is said to have once existed in an earlier golden age (Heilman and Friedman 1992, p. 254–258). Similarly, Hindu nationalists in India believe that Europeans and Muslims have contaminated the eternally valid *dharma* (natural law), and they advocate a pure Hindu state that is incompatible with the claims made by other religious communities (Baral 2020; Six et al. 2005). Hindu nationalism is gaining ground through its close association with the Indian People’s Party (BJP). And the case of Sri Lanka illustrates how Buddhist currents that see themselves as ‘chosen’ also seek to reshape society according to Buddhist principles, and are able to exert lasting influence on society with their political (and sometimes violent) commitment (Weiberg-Salzmann 2014).

Whether such religious groups and their followers can be considered fundamentalist is a matter of controversy, however. Having enjoyed its heyday in the 1990s (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1992; Kienzler 1996; Riesebrodt 1993), the concept of fundamentalism has recently declined in importance, not because the phenomena that it describes have become less socially relevant, but because more and more scholars deem the concept to be morally and intellectually discredited. For such scholars, it expresses a Eurocentric perspective of superiority over non-European religious interpretations, practices and values (Antes 2000), and is a Christian label that cannot be applied to other religious contexts. It is used to disparage religious currents that are anti-modern (Grünschloss 2009; Lehmann 2004, p. 11; Riesebrodt 2000, p. 51; Schäfer 2017). It is used imprecisely and in a way that is not distinct enough from religious traditionalism; it is confounded with a propensity to violence, and has a polemical bias. Most scholars agree that, for it to be scientifically useful, the concept of fundamentalism needs to be confined, given a concrete form, and made morally neutral.

It is precisely this that is the aim of the project ‘Religious Fundamentalism’, which is based at the Cluster of Excellence ‘Religion and Politics’ at the University of Münster. As part of this project, we have developed a definition of fundamentalism that gives the concept greater analytical sharpness, while making it more useful for empirical research in the social sciences. For this purpose, we distinguish between fundamentalism and orthodoxy (a), and between fundamentalism and tradi-

tionalism (b), before then discussing how the relationship between fundamentalism and the propensity to violence can be understood (c).

1 What is fundamentalism?

(a) The term 'fundamentalism' is a Christian self-designation first used in the early 20th century to describe a theological movement at Princeton Theological Seminary that set out fundamental and apparently unshakable principles, including the inerrancy of the Bible, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ and his Second Coming, and the belief that Jesus Christ died for our sins. Even though the adherents of fundamentalist groupings usually resist being assimilated to changing circumstances, their purportedly fundamental principles do indeed change over time. Today, it is often not ideas of the virgin birth or bodily resurrection that they fight to maintain, but principles such as the rejection of homosexuality and abortion (see Williamson 2020). Fundamentalism can obviously not be defined according to fixed religious *ideas*. Rather, the changing *content* of fundamentalist statements must be distinguished from the *forms* in which they are expressed. When certain religious ideas are laid down as binding beliefs, then we will speak of *orthodoxy* (see Fullerton and Hunsberger 1982, p. 318). Fundamentalism, on the other hand, will denote the absolute and unquestionable *way* in which people believe in these or other ideas. Fundamentalism thus refers to the *mode* of belief, and orthodoxy to its *content*.

Both sociology and psychology widely accept the distinction that is made to define the concept of fundamentalism between religious form and religious content, and the identification of fundamentalism with the former (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1992, 2004; Ethridge and Feagin 1979, p. 39; Hood et al. 2005, p. 22; Hunsberger and Jackson 2005, p. 809; Laythe et al. 2002, p. 625). Nevertheless, in practice, the two constructs are often confused.

In order to sharpen the concept of fundamentalism, we therefore need to determine more precisely the specific nature of fundamentalist religiosity. The beliefs of fundamentalist religiosity appear absolute and unquestionable when they are contrasted with other beliefs and singled out as the only valid ones. By asserting that what is to be believed has exclusive validity in an orthodox sense, these beliefs function as identity markers, which is clearly the purpose of focusing on such distinctive beliefs as the inerrancy of the holy scripture(s), the virgin birth, and the bodily resurrection. Such beliefs can be used to determine who belongs to a group and who does not (Ellison and Musick 1993, p. 381). Thus, the belief in the literal truth of the holy scripture(s) can function just as much as a test of belonging as the rejection of homosexuality. What counts is not so much *what* is to be believed, but above all that the statements of faith apply *exclusively*. Their exclusivity fulfils the function of differentiating the group from other social groups (Brandt and Reyna 2010, p. 715; Brettfeld and Wetzels 2007, p. 119; Koopmans 2014, p. 5; Riesebrodt 2005, p. 23; Rogers et al. 2007, p. 259; Taylor and Horgan 2001, p. 44). It is therefore no coincidence that recent sociological studies should treat religious exclusivity as a central

feature of fundamentalism: it is only the group's own beliefs that are true and pave the way to salvation (see Merino 2010, p. 234; Trinitapoli 2007, p. 452).

Exclusivity can still amount to two things of course. It can mean both escape from the world, avoiding contact, separation from the world, but also fighting the world, world domination, and vanquishing the world (Lohlker 2005, p. 121; Pratt 2010, p. 442).[1] Fundamentalism does not primarily take the path of withdrawal, although it does also integrate escapist elements. Its goal is *superiority* over the world, i.e. its conquest, domination and subjugation, and in this respect it has a revolutionary hue. The rejection of the world is linked to the demand for change and revolution (Riesebrodt 2000, p. 52).[2] What has been recognised as the true and all-superior should be made valid for the entire world and for all spheres of life (Antoun 2010, p. 520; Lincoln 2006, p. 5).[3] But the problem is that the truth has not yet prevailed and there are competing claims to validity. This is precisely what makes fundamentalism combative (Munson 1984, p. 20–21). The world must be transformed to conform to the ideals of pure doctrine. History is a time of transgression, apostasy and corruption, and the ideal primal states that history has obscured must be restored. *Returning* to these original states belongs just as much to the goals of fundamentalism as the commitment of all areas of social life to the one supreme truth (see Marty 1989, p. 7).

(b) The universal claim to superiority distinguishes fundamentalism from traditionalism. Each is concerned with preserving itself. However, while traditionalist groupings are content to defend and preserve themselves against the other, fundamentalist groupings also strive to make themselves the standard for others. Fundamentalism both claims exclusivity and superiority as well as *universality*, and demands compliance and obedience.

(c) Related to this is the strong tendency of fundamentalist groups to embrace political activism. They strive for the transformation of the world, for radical and all-encompassing social change (Lustick 1988, p. 6), and for the subordination of politics to religion (in relation to Islamism, see, for example, Brettfeld and Wetzels 2007, p. 59, 170). They sometimes even use force to impose their faith on others, which is why some academic approaches see a propensity to violence as belonging to the defining characteristics of fundamentalism (see, for example, Heitmeyer et al. 1997). However, most definitions of fundamentalism do not include the propensity to or acceptance of violence. Drawing on his 25 years of studying fundamentalist

[1] On this distinction, which follows Max Weber (1920, p. 536ff.), see also Antoun (2010, p. 527), who also identifies two different fundamentalist strategies of dealing with the impure and corrupt world ("to avoid that world, or alternatively, to confront and defeat it"). See also Grünschloss (2009), Schluchter (2009, p. 36), Schwinn (2020, p. 157).

[2] Lustick (1988, p. 6) in particular highlights political activism as a feature of fundamentalism, which he defines as "a style of political participation characterised by unusually close and direct links between one's fundamental beliefs and political behaviour designed to effect radical change".

[3] Lincoln (2006, p. 19–32, 60) speaks of *maximalism*, by which he means that faith is intended to permeate all spheres of life. Corresponding to maximalism is a dualistic division of the world into those who conform to this maximalist demand, and those who do not. Antoun (2010, p. 520) uses the term *totalism* instead. "Totalism is the orientation that views religion as relevant to all important domains of culture and society including politics, the family, the marketplace, education and law". Peshkin (1996) uses terms such as "the total world", "total atmosphere" and "full-time Christian" to denote similar things.

movements, Antoun (2010, p. 534) concludes that "only a tiny minority of fundamentalists resort to violence". And Emerson and Hartman (2006, p. 136) state: "Not all fundamentalist groups are violent. In fact, most are not". We therefore need to investigate empirically whether and how far fundamentalist groups tend towards violence, and we cannot include violence in the definition of fundamentalism.

2 A proposed definition

In summary, then, we define *fundamentalism as an attitude characterised by four components: the claim to exclusive truth (1), to superiority over all other positions (2), to the universal validity of exclusive truth (3), and the demand that the unadulterated past be restored through radical change in the present (4).*

Our definition is more specific and precise than the widely quoted and accepted definition put forward by Altemeyer and Hunsberger, who see fundamentalism as the belief

> "hat there is one set of religious teachings that clearly contains the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, essential, inerrant truth about humanity and deity; that this essential truth is fundamentally opposed by the forces of evil which must be vigorously fought; that this truth must be followed today according to the fundamental, unchangeable practices of the past; and that those who believe and follow these fundamental teachings have a special relationship with the deity" (1992, p. 118, 2004, p. 48).

Our definition argues, however, that the religious teachings that the fundamentalist believes in are not only an essential truth, but the only truth (1); this truth is not only opposed to other forces that should be fought, but is superior to them (2); this truth must not only be followed according to the practices of the past, but be realised by returning to the rules of the past and radically changing the present (4); and the followers of fundamentalist teachings not only have a special relationship to the deity, but also universally valid access to all things of the world (3).

As part of our project, we invited historians and social scientists working on fundamentalism in different religious and cultural contexts to an international and interdisciplinary workshop in March 2021 entitled "Religious Fundamentalism: New theoretical and empirical challenges across religions and cultures". This *special section* builds on that workshop and pursues a goal both historical-empirical and theoretical. First, empirical case studies will be presented that can be used to study fundamentalist tendencies in different religions and cultures. Second, we are concerned with examining these case studies to see how far the concept of fundamentalism can be applied to them. What also plays a constant role here is the question of how far our definition of fundamentalism can be a helpful analytical tool in the different religious and cultural contexts. On the other hand, the authors were not compelled to use our proposed definition as a yardstick for their analyses, and their articles therefore refer both positively and negatively to our definition, and use other definitions to make their arguments.

Further discussion is required of how far the definitions used here by the various authors are convincing as a heuristic tool, where the limits of their applicability lie, and where they need to be corrected or supplemented. The question must also be considered here of whether fundamentalism is a modern phenomenon that should be understood as a reaction to modernity, as Andreas Grünschloss (2009) suggests echoing Marty and Appleby's Chicago Fundamentalism Project (Almond, Sivan and Appleby 1995), or whether it is a phenomenon that can be found throughout the history of religion, as Tilman Frasch argues in his article here.

3 The articles

W. Paul Williamson opens with an article on Protestantism in the USA at the end of the 19th century. He uses phenomenological and psychological methods to analyse a religious movement, the Serpent Handling Sects (SHS), which have existed relatively unchanged since the turn of the century. Drawing on his model of intratextuality, he classifies them as fundamentalist (see Hood and Williamson 2014). After a brief historical outline, he presents the results of his qualitative study with active members of such sects, identifying in the process four fundamental beliefs, each centred around the issue of obedience: a mandate of obedience, power of obedience, overcoming through obedience, and confirmation through obedience. He also combines his historical and empirical analysis with an evaluation of our definition of fundamentalism: while he sees exclusivity, superiority and universalism fulfilled in the SHS, he can only affirm this for restoration to a limited extent. On the one hand, like other Pentecostal movements, these sects refer to the apostolic beginnings of Christianity; on the other, though, they do not strive to reshape the present radically by reverting to the past.

Jens Schlamelcher turns to the European continent with his historical analysis of two fundamentalist formations in Germany: ultramontane Catholicism in the second half of the 19th century, and National Socialism. The former constituted a non-violent milieu comprising traditional sections of the population in rural areas that felt the full force of modernisation, while for Schlamelcher the latter was a violent movement that combined religion (in the Weberian sense) with a national superstructure. Schlamelcher analyses both formations according to his definition of fundamentalism as forms of anti-modernism. Both ultramontane Catholicism and National Socialism attempted to re-establish a "sacred canopy" (Berger), were strongly shaped by exclusive beliefs, and saw themselves as superior to other worldviews, this being expressed, for example, in stark images of the enemy. Ultimately, both movements sought strong ties with politics. Even though Schlamelcher does not explicitly address our definition, we can apply to the analysis of the phenomena both our four definitional criteria of fundamentalism (restoration, exclusivity, superiority and universalism) and the correlation that sometimes but does not necessarily emerge between fundamentalism and violence.

Also drawing on the anti-modernism thesis, Alexandros Sakellariou turns his attention to the Greek context, which has been marked by increasing secularisation over the past 50 years. Following the Chicago Fundamentalism Project (Almond

et al. 1995) and our definition, he identifies *five* fundamentalist characteristics of the Greek Orthodox Church, which he examines by adopting a discourse-analytical approach to Holy Synod encyclicals and public discussions among (arch)bishops. For Sakellariou, the fundamentalism of this church is, first, a reaction to the social and political marginalisation of religion, with this reaction also containing, second, a moral dualism and strict behavioural requirements. Third, it uses modern means, such as mass media, to propagate a golden age that it wants to restore; fourth, the sacred texts are to be interpreted officially and without being translated into modern Greek so as to preserve them. Fifth and finally, this exclusive understanding of faith leads to a claim of superiority and universalism on the part of the Greek Orthodox religion, especially vis-à-vis the West. However, some of the features of fundamentalism listed by Almond and colleagues (e.g. millenarianism and an authoritarian organisation) cannot be found in the Greek Orthodox Church, Sakellariou thereby concluding that it is located between traditionalism and fundamentalism.

Two articles then deal with Eastern Orthodoxy or the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in contemporary Russia. Tobias Koellner discerns against the backdrop of a general religious renaissance in post-communist Russia an increasing spread of fundamentalist currents within the ROC as well as in society as a whole, and sees this development as being caused or nurtured by certain specific features of Orthodox Christianity. Following Makrides (2016), he identifies a central constitutive element in *rigorism*, which is expressed in the endeavour to be the only and true heir of the old apostolic church. According to Koellner, constitutive features of fundamentalism, such as the claim to exclusive truth, superiority and universal validity, emerge in this rigorist self-understanding, which he sees initially in terms of content rather than modality (and which, in this respect, is according to our definition related more to the principle of orthodoxy). Its rigorist orientation allows the ROC to distinguish itself from modern “Western” liberalism and to present itself as the guardian of Russian culture. At the same time, however, this also creates problems: not only does it provoke internal church tensions with moderate or reform-oriented forces; it also restricts the room for manoeuvre when it comes to realizing certain goals in practice, for example when forming interreligious or political alliances with other conservative religious groupings and the Russian state.

Meanwhile, Elena Stepanova uses central pronouncements made by church and political leaders since the turn of the millennium to analyse the importance for the ROC of the concept of traditional values, and how Russian politics deals with and uses these values. She concludes that recourse to traditional values is a core element in the construction of conservative Russian identity. Both political forces and broad sections of the public ascribe the role of a moral authority to the ROC here, even though, like Koellner, Stepanova leaves open the question of how far the ROC really influences the way that the Russian population thinks and lives. Although primarily concerned with the phenomenon of traditionalism, Stepanova also discerns in the ROC’s statements a claim to superiority over all other positions, as well as the belief that it possesses the exclusive and universally valid truth.

Two further articles deal with ultra-orthodox Judaism (Haredi) in Israel today. Eik Dödtmann looks critically at the relationship between the Haredi and the Israeli state, which is historically framed by the regulation of the status quo (concerning the

fundamental relationship between religion and state in Israel) implemented immediately before the founding of the state. He describes how ultra-orthodox Judaism has succeeded in the course of demographic changes and due to its organisational capacity in expanding its autonomy, strengthening its influence on Israeli society, and defending the status quo against challenges from liberal forces. Dödtmann illustrates this with three case studies on the Haredi education system, on their position in the labour market, and on the question of military service. Overall, he sees Jewish ultra-orthodoxy at the turn of the millennium as being marked by central components of fundamentalism.

Daniel Mahla focuses on the Hardalim, a sub-grouping of the Haredi that emerged from the settler movement of the 1980s and 1990s, and that combines an ultra-orthodox attitude with a national-religious orientation. He explores whether classifying it as fundamentalist helps work out its special position in Israeli society. His systematic analysis reveals that the Hardalim, whom he regards as a serious threat to Israeli democracy, fulfils all the criteria of fundamentalism that we propose. Overall, he sees our concept of fundamentalism to be useful in distinguishing the grouping both from purely traditionalist Judaism and from other currents within the Zionist milieu. At the same time, he argues for the phenomenon of fundamentalism to be understood more dynamically, since otherwise we risk losing sight of the social entanglements of such groups as well as their potential to adapt to social realities.

In his quantitative study using data from the World Value Survey (WVS), Cemal Öztürk explores whether Islam *per se* or fundamentalism can explain the high level of patriarchal values in majority Muslim societies. Using multilevel analyses, he shows that fundamentalism is the strongest predictor of patriarchal values across all 96,500 individuals and 69 countries both at the individual and national level. It is this latter effect—namely, the influence of the societal prevalence of fundamentalism on patriarchal values—that levels out the difference in terms of patriarchal values between majority Muslim countries and those with a different majority religion. He concludes that patriarchal values are so prevalent in majority Muslim countries or among Muslims, since fundamentalism is the norm in the majority Muslim societies that he analyses. Like Riesebrodt (2000), Öztürk characterises fundamentalism as a patriarchal protest movement that is rooted in the rejection of the modern value of relativisation and that aligns with our definitional criteria of exclusivity, superiority, universalism and restoration. However, whether restoration is covered in the three items of the WVS used here is questionable, and future validity studies could address this issue.

Finally, Tilman Frasch writes on an issue that has received little scholarly attention: namely, fundamentalism within Buddhism. Frasch uses the definitions of the Chicago Fundamentalism Project (for example, Almond et al. 1995), Riesebrodt (1990) and other scholars to deduce six features of fundamentalism, which he then applies to his case study of Theravada in ancient Lanka in the first half of the first millennium AD. This Buddhist movement saw a central role being played by Pali, the language of the sacred scriptural canon, which only Theravada monks understood in ancient Lanka. The strong adherence to Pali served among other things to preserve what was considered to be the infallible and unchangeable sacred scriptural canon, but also to distinguish the movement sharply from the outside world,

since mastery of Pali was deemed to be a distinguishing mark of Theravada. Early Theravada was also characterised by an attempt to restore the idealised past, as well as to impose on a political level, and sometimes even by force, the doctrines of faith that were understood as exclusive. Frasch thus challenges the widespread assumption that fundamentalism is a counter-movement to modernity, and questions whether the concept of fundamentalism can really be applied to pre-modern religious movements.

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