

---

# UNIT 15 FUNDAMENTALISM : SOME CASE STUDIES

---

## Structure

- 15.0 Objectives
- 15.1 Introduction
- 15.2 What is Fundamentalism
- 15.3 Fundamentalism in Iran
  - 15.3.1 Monarchy in Iran
  - 15.3.2 Impact of the West
  - 15.3.3 Resurgence of Islam in Iran
  - 15.3.4 A Return to Islamic Roots
- 15.4 Protestant Fundamentalism in the U.S.A.
  - 15.4.1 The Historical Background
  - 15.4.2 The "New Religious Right" Movement
- 15.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 15.6 Key Words
- 15.7 Further Readings
- 15.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

---

## 15.0 OBJECTIVES

---

After reading this unit you should be able to

- understand how fundamentalist ideas emanate and for what reasons
- analyse similar situations where fundamentalism is said to exist
- distinguish between fundamentalism in Iran and America.

---

## 15.1 INTRODUCTION

---

In the previous unit you have studied 'Religion : Social Stability and Change'. In this unit we want you to familiarize yourself with the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism by presenting two case studies. Our unit is divided into two main sections, of which one section is devoted to the rise of fundamentalism in Iran. We begin our discussion on this, by first giving you a background picture of the politico-economic condition of Iran, prior to the establishment of an Islamic state. This we hope will make you understand the reasons or the conditions in which Islamic resurgence has taken place. This will also give you an idea of the nature of fundamentalism. The second section in our unit deals with rightist religious movements in America which call to attention the fundamental or essential ideas of nation and its people. The nature of fundamentalism in America is quite different — there is no religious state in — America, yet the rightist religious ideals seemed to permeate the American political system and life.

By presenting these two case studies we want you to understand some of the social conditions which seemed to usher in fundamentalistic upsurges.

---

## 15.2 WHAT IS FUNDAMENTALISM

---

The very mention of the word 'fundamentalism' conjures up an image which came to characterise an especially militant brand of anti-modernism, anti-liberalism and anti-secularism.

Fundamentalism or revivalism is an effort by religious interpreters who like to go back to, what they believe to be, pure and original values and behaviour.

The forces of social change are important for the emergence of fundamentalism. Whenever there are drastic changes in society and change of pace which disturbs community life, very often there is a loss of identity and rootlessness among people. In such situations people clutch any support for solace. Fundamentalism promises certitude and restitution of an earlier better age. The psychological appeal of this is difficult for people to resist.

To achieve and reconstitute this earlier, better age the fundamentalist evolve a comprehensive and absolutist, rigid belief system and practice. This belief and practice which promises to bring happiness is capable of motivating intense commitment among its followers. So much so, non-believers are denied their rights. That is why fundamentalism very often takes on a rather aggressive, militant form where killing and terrorism are justified, since the end—usually the establishment of homeland (Israel, Khalistan are examples) justifies the means.

#### Box 1

George Marsden in a comprehensive study entitled **Fundamentalism and American Culture : The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism : 1870-1925**, explored the earliest use of the term fundamentalism.

He found that the term fundamentalist and fundamentalism came from the name for a series of books published which sought to bring out the fundamentals of Christian faith. These works constituted an attack upon science, especially evolutionism, liberal philosophy and liberal theology even. These they felt were destroying the 'Popular American Culture' which they described as the 'faith once delivered to the Saints'. The effort of these fundamentalists was to bring up the American Culture.

The **fundamentals**, in short, were a series of 12 paperback books published between 1910-1915 which were financed by a wealthy believer. They were edited by popular evangelists and teachers whose intentions were to mark down those basic 'truth' which constituted the foundations of faith. Some three million copies were distributed. While this distribution failed to bring serious public response, the books coined the term fundamentalist/fundamentalism for the analysis of various religious revival movements. (Frykenberg, 1988 : 21-22).

### 15.3 FUNDAMENTALISM IN IRAN

This section deals with fundamentalism in Iran. As you are probably aware, in 1979, the king or Shah of Iran was deposed and made to flee the land. In his place, an Islamic leadership, headed by Ayotollah Khomeini assumed the reigns of power.

The event stunned the world. One of the strongest monarchies which had extensive foreign backing had been overthrown by a group of clerics. Many anticipated total chaos and did not expect Islamic rule to last more than a few days. But it lasted. What were the factors that brought religion to the political centre-stage? Was Islamic fundamentalism in Iran a running away from modernity? Was it a return to medieval days? Could it become a creative force?

These are some of the issues which we will tackle. We will see how the recent history of Iran has been one of foreign domination and ruthless local leadership. We will see how development occurred in a very distorted form. And we will now see how religion has played a crucial role in social process.

### **15.3.1- The Monarchy in Iran**

The history of Iran's Monarchy dates back 2,500 years. It came to an end with the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty on 17th February, 1979.

We will speak of three dynasties because of their relevance to the political context.

- i) The Acheminds dynasty ruled pre-Islamic Iran. Two of its rulers, Cyrus (553-521 B.C.) and Darius (521-496 B.C.) had dreamed of extending their empire from North India to Greece. The dream was shattered when Alexander destroyed the Persian empire in 321 B.C. The Pahlavi kings were deeply inspired by the glories of pre-Islamic Persian civilization.
- ii) The Safavid dynasty (550-1779) ruled medieval Iran. Islam had come into prominence. The Safavids made Shiism the state religion and purged the leadership of Sunnis who were identified with the Ottoman Empire. The Shia-Sunni tensions were exploited by both, Safavids and Ottomans to enhance their political power, creating hatred between the two peoples.

To control the Islamic religious establishment, the Safavids claimed descent from Prophet Muhammad's family, and tried to take over both, religious as well as political leadership. The Pahlavis were to continue the Safavid play of keeping Islam as the state religion, yet curtailing its power.

- iii) The Qajar dynasty (1795-1924) comprised incompetent leaders, who murdered their political rivals at will. They were heavily dependent upon foreign powers who gave them loans at exorbitant interest rates and consolidated their own interests in Iran.
- iv) The Pahlavi dynasty had no aristocratic roots. Its founder, Reza Khan, an army colonel, deposed the government in 1923 and then, the Qajar Shah, and established himself as the new monarch of Iran in 1925.

Inspired by the Acheminds, he named his dynasty 'Pahlavi', an ancient Persian name. In line with the Safavids, he retained Islam as the state religion, and tried at the same time to check its powers. Following the Qajars, the Pahlavis made Iran more dependent on foreign powers than it had ever been before.

### **15.3.2 The Impact of the West**

The discovery of oil in Iran, as in the rest of West Asia attracted the economic interests of foreign powers. Russia and England were the main powers that struggled for economic and political supremacy in Iran. It was during World War I that the British Navy switched from using coal to oil and the British began to look for strategies to exploit the Iranian resource.

Even though Iran's oil production increased at a considerable pace, Iranis themselves could not benefit from it. Despite mass unemployment, oil workers were not hired from Iran but indentured labour was imported from India by Britain. British staff were appointed in all key posts in the oil industry, and all their requirement (clothing, food, fruit, cement etc.) was imported from Britain rather than purchased from Iranian merchants. This led to considerable resentment towards foreigners in Iran.

The British, to protect their interests, backed Colonel Reza Khan and helped install him as monarch. After World War II, the Americans gained a foothold in Iran. Their need for oil was even greater than that of Britain. Together, England, America, the oil companies and the Pahlavis cooperated and struck up an agreement which on paper, gave ownership of the oil industry to Iran, but in practice, gave full control

of the industry to foreign powers. Production, pricing and marketing were all in foreign hands. Iran, as a whole, suffered, both politically and economically. A consequence of the interference of foreign powers was that feelings of nationalism developed in all segments of society. Iranians had experienced nothing but exploitation and loss of autonomy at the hands of foreign powers.

Interaction with Western countries also ushered in ideas of secularisation or separation of religion from politics, leading to the establishment of various institutes of learning, like the Institute of Arts and Science (Dar-al-Fanun) in 1851. English and French classics were translated into Persian and its ideals were preached by leading intellectuals.

Pahlavi rule made strenuous attempts at westernisation and modernisation of the country. Western dress, the use of French and English, Western education were stressed. Reza Khan attempted to delink the political system from religious influence by means of educational and legal reforms. The 'maktab' (mosque school) and 'madrassa' (religious school) were brought under the centralised control of the state. This was a drastic break down from Islamic tradition. The 'Shariat' or religious laws were replaced by a new code of laws based on the French Civil Code.

During Muhammad Raza's reign, an American firm was employed to review the existing educational system.

The net result of the Pahlavi rule, however, was the creation of two diametrically opposed classes; the educated, secularized elite, on the one hand, and the mass of impoverished faithful Muslims, who had more faith in the village mullah than in the western-educated young men.

Its indigenous genius, traditions and life-style had been side-lined. Muhammad Shah Pahlavi, in particular, tried to force the process of modernisation from the top downwards. These policies and were elite-oriented. He had succeeded in alienating the majority of the population, who were ripe for an alternative system which was closer to their heritage and values. The Islamic revival provided this alternative.

### **15.3.3 The Resurgence of Islam in Iran**

According to Bernard Lewis, if we are to understand anything at all about what happened and what is happening in the Muslim world, we must grasp two basic points. The first is the universality of religion as a factor in the lives of the Muslim peoples, and the second is the centrality of their religion.

Lewis points out that unlike Judaism and Christianity which eventually became separate from the state, Islam, from the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad, was synonymous with the state. The history, experience and sacred writings of Islam bring out this point. Muhammad was not just a Prophet; he was a soldier and a statesman, and his followers were sustained by the belief that they could win God's approval by establishing his divine law all over the world.

For the Muslim's religion was not only universal but also central, in the sense that it formed the basis and focus of identity and loyalty. In Iran, as we have seen, the monarchy tried to subvert Islam because of its importance in the lives of its people, and because the clergy would always resist any measure which they felt would violate the divine laws.

It is against this background that we can comprehend the overthrow of Muhammad Reza Shah in 1979. As we have noted, the Shah had succeeded in completely alienating the masses. During his reign, the mosque had remained the only refuge

of political dissent, and the religious network was the only organisation of the people could turn to. The closeness of the 'mullahs' to the common people had made them well aware of the anger and frustration building up against the Shah. It was at this critical juncture that leadership was provided by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1900-1989). Khomeini had over the years spoken out against the policies and activities of the Shah. Here is an extract from a speech in 1964:

“How do you expect to modernize Iran when you imprison and kill the intelligents? You want to turn Iranians into docile and passive instruments in the service of the state and your foreign masters.”

### **15.3.4 A Return to Islamic Roots**

Strongly embedded in Islam is the notion of social justice (adalah). The vast disparities of wealth that existed in Shah's Iran were totally contradictory to the Islamic maxim of communal sharing of basic resources.

When we take into account the corrupt political leadership and distorted economic development that characterised, Iran, we can understand why Islam came to be viewed as an alternative that could bring about socio-economic justice.

To dismiss Islamic fundamentalism as an escape from modernism would be too simplistic. On the contrary, some Muslims see Islam as a means of bringing meaningful socio-political change based on social justice. On the other hand, some Muslims also invoke Islam to block changes. The challenge for Iran and other Muslim nations lies in achieving a balance; to return to those fundamental religious values conducive to the welfare of society rather than those that obstruct it.

#### **Check Your Progress 1**

i) Fill in the blanks

- a) Cyrus was a famous ruler of the ..... dynasty.
- b) ..... was overthrown in the year 1979.
- c) Strongly embedded in Islam is the notion of 'adalah' or .....

ii) Answer briefly

- a) Describe the impact of the discovery of Oil in Iran. Use five lines for your answer.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- b) How did the western idea of secularisation affect Iranian society? Use five lines for your answer.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

In the earlier section, we studied the upsurge of Islamic fundamentalism in a society which had been polarised by elitist socio-economic policies, and exploited for its oil-wealth by a lot of foreign powers. The Islamic revolution received mass support in day-to-day life and religion. We saw how the notions of universality and centrality of Islam made the establishment of an Islamic state possible. We noted the identity of religion and government throughout Islamic history.

In this section we will study the intimate relationship between the American political life and religious values and the underlying fundamentalistic ideals which exist in the American democracy. To have a better understanding of this we will first describe the background of American history. Then we will go on to the 'religious right' movement which shows how the fundamentalistic religious values have, in many ways, permeated the general life and the political life of America.

### **15.4.1 The Historical Background**

Christianity has had an ambiguous relationship with the State. In its early years, its followers were persecuted. Even after it established itself as the majority religion of Europe, its identity with governance was never absolute. In fact, the separation of the Church and State is a characteristic feature of European history.

The emergence of Protestantism in the 16th century challenged the Christian orthodoxy. The Protestant sects which sprang up asked questions about the enormous store of wealth the Church had accumulated. It signalled a return to the Holy Book, the Bible, and undermined the role of the clergy. Most Protestant sects advocated a one-to-one relationship between God and the follower without the help of intermediaries. Large numbers of Protestants left the shores of Britain and settled down in the American colonies, where they could peacefully practise their faith. In the course of time, America liberated itself from British rule, and the United States of America was born.

The U.S.A., over the past two centuries, has become a melting-pot of religions and cultures. People from all over the world, in search of a better livelihood or victims of religious and/or ethnic persecution have made the U.S.A. their home.

You are well aware that the U.S.A. became a "super-power" after World War II. It is immensely rich in natural resources, technology and trained manpower. Its citizens enjoy a high standard of living. Religion in the U.S.A. has by and large been conducted or practised at the private level. Being a land of so many peoples and cultures, religious pluralism has been a part of the American ethos.

#### **Box 2**

An interesting feature of religious life in America has been the high degree of religious mobility, or access to wide range of sects and denominations. It is not unusual to find members of the same family being affiliated to different Churches or denominations. For example, mother may be Baptist, father may be Pentecostal, the son could be a Buddhist and the daughter may renounce religion altogether.

It must be noted that there have been certain communities like the Amish and the Mormons to whom religion has formed the basis of community life. They have zealously guarded their values and life-styles and have avoided and resisted outside influences which could undermine their way of life.

1970's, a right-wing, conservative religious movement emerged in the U.S.A. Its spokesmen were certain Protestant evangelists or preachers who broadcast their message on television and radio. They succeeded in capturing the imagination of millions of Americans, who donated large sums of money to their cause. Soon, these evangelists owned and controlled television channels, publishing houses, schools and centres of higher learning. Their control and use of the mass media earned their brand of evangelism the title "television evangelism". We will now study the content of this brand of evangelism.

#### 15.4.2 The "New Religious Right" Movement

In his study of the recent conservative Protestant fundamentalists movement in America, Walter Capps (1990) highlights its main features.

- i) The New Religious Right gained national attention by speaking of the relation between individual piety and national patriotism. It compared the tenets of the Bible to the ideals of a democratic society. It visualised America as a "Christian nation" and tried to combine religious values and political commitment. This is what cast it as a conservative version of American civil religion.
- ii) Because of its conviction that religion and patriotism go hand in hand, it rejected liberal or progressive ideas which tended to keep religion in the private sphere, away from public life. The conservative religious leaders felt that liberalism was weak, ineffective and had sapped the nation of its vitality without religious conviction. American society could not hope to be revitalised.
- iii) It emphasised patriarchal values. The movement gained significance at the very time that the patriarchal ordering of American society was being challenged. Attitudes toward the roles of men and women were changing as were family patterns. Single-parent families, couples living together without marriage, homosexual unions, were very much a part of the social scenario. Most of the teaching of the movement dealt with the sanctity of traditional family values. Abortion, feminism, homosexuality, pornography, were all seen to undermine national values and mobility.
- iv) One of the slogans of the movement was to "bring America back again". In this connection, Clifford Geertz's definition of the social functions of religion becomes significant. Geertz speaks of the many and complex ways in which religious motivations and aspirations work to create cohesion and synthesis within a society. The New Religious Right deliberately and consciously speaks of a happier, bygone era when social cohesiveness is believed to have existed, an era when shared religious and patriotic ideals were one and the same.

The sermons of the New Religious Right frequently take the form of denouncing or condemning all those forces which upset or destroyed the unity and cohesiveness of American society. Such anxiety, they preach, can only be brought back when religion once more becomes a vital force in public life.

- v) The New Religious Right opposes some aspects of modernity. The new, conservative religious movement is aware that the secularising tendency in American society was pushing religion into the private sphere. According to these conservatives, the sacred values of American citizens were being undermined by the forces of modernity. American society has become a "permissive" society, it has deviated from what God intended it to be.
- vi) Earlier manifestations of American religious conservatism and extreme right wing groups tended to be marginal. They preferred to adopt an anti-intellectual and a political stance. They felt themselves to be outside of the national mainstream and

preferred to stay that way. In sharp contrast, the New Religious Right has tried to become part of the national mainstream. It wanted to be taken with intellectual seriousness. Jerry Falwell, one of its most influential preachers, established a college called Liberty University, which he boasts, ranks alongside the best colleges in America.

- vii) In addition, the New Religious Right is openly and calculatedly politically minded. It had the political patronage of the Ronald Reagan administration, and it was grooming a candidate for a future presidential election. Its political ambitions were rooted in the belief that religion was needed to revitalise society, that religiosity and patriotism were one and that America must be purged of permissiveness and take up its place as God's special country.
- viii) As has been mentioned earlier, the New Religious Right owes its widespread reach and influence to the mass media of communication. It is significant that its important leaders like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Fim and Tamacy Bakker are skilled television communicators first. As President Ronald Reagan who was described as "the great communicator" utilised television to communicate his most important messages, the New Religious Right used television as the primary medium through which it transmitted its ideological messages. It has moved into the nation's living rooms, where its emphasis on family values found an echo in the hearts of viewers.

The advocates of the New Religious Right have adopted a specific religious worldview which they communicate through images and stories from the Bible. The Bible is considered to be the source of absolute truth. This tendency promotes intolerance of other World views. Threatening conspiracies against the dictates of the Bible and the American way of life are identified and condemned. The ingredients of the world are arranged as polar opposites: something is either good or evil, represents light or darkness, embodies truth or error. There is no middle ground.

The United States is identified as God's chosen land, and American God's chosen people. This way of reading the Bible becomes a basis for contemporary political commentary. Distinctive attitudes towards national and international events are culled from the Bible. The movement thus positioned itself close to the centre of national political life.

- ix) The movement undermines the heterogeneity of American culture and stresses homogeneity. As earlier discussed, American culture has been fed by many and diverse ethnic and religious streams. Heterogeneity encourages a multiplicity of beliefs and ethical standards. The conservative movement, though, argues for absolutes. It cites the Protestant Christian way of life as the only one compatible with American democracy. Instead of celebrating the variety of religious experiences that are available to humans, the movement preaches correct teaching, correct values, and a distinctly Protestant life-style. It sees outside influences as threatening to the exclusive American way of life.

These, briefly, are the salient features of the new brand of conservative Protestant fundamentalism that spread all over America in the late 1970s and 1980s.

You have already studied Robert Bellah's ideas regarding "civil religion". In his article "Civil Religion in America", Bellah claimed that "there actually exists alongside, differentiated from the Churches, an elaborate and well-institutionalised civil religion in America". He referred to it as "the religion of the American way of life". He dismissed fundamentalism as irrelevant in the context of what he described. But, according to Capps, the religion of the New Religious Right has attempted to attain the status of a civil religion, by identifying its values with those of American life and democracy.



At the start of this section, we described how secularisation had permeated almost every aspect of American society. The growth of the movement paradoxically occurred in an era identified as “the secular age”.

This exemplifies the fact that secularisation cannot do away with the religious underpinnings of life. Reichley in his book *“Religion in American Public Life”* (1985) maintained that religious values are indispensable for the vitality of American democracy and the American way of life.

**Check Your Progress 2**

i) What do we mean by religious mobility in the U.S.A.? Use five lines for your answer.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

ii) How did the New Religious Right equate piety with patriotism? Use five lines for your answer.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

iii) What did the New Religious Right mean by the slogan “bring America back again”? Use five lines for your answer.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

---

**15.5 LET US SUM UP**

---

In this unit we have discussed fundamentalism. The word fundamentalism in literal terms means the belief in the original or essential truth of the religion, as it emerged and as it seems to exist in Iran and America. Iran is often cited as an example of Islamic resurgence against western modernism. America on the other hand is difficult to label as being any way close to the fundamentalistic state.

In this unit we have tried to show the background in which Islamic fundamentalism arose. The case of Iran shows that going back to the roots, in this case religious roots, is often out of a sense of alienation and rootlessness. Modernity brought in not only economic depravity in Iranian society but a social, psychological and moral depravity, so the call for fundamentalist state had an appeal for the mass.

The rightist religious movement in America is also hinged on a similar sense of rootlessness. This feeling of insecurity is very often exploited by the advocates of fundamentalistic ideals, whether it be in Iran or America.

---

## 15.6 KEY WORDS

---

**Clergy** : Holders of appointed office of the religious order. They are learned and knowledgeable.

**Cohesion** : A sense of unity which brings people together.

**Conservative** : An attitude which is averse to change and innovation.

**Liberal** : Broad-minded, not bound by traditions.

**Monarchy** : A government where there is a single hereditary head of the state and who has absolute power.

**Nationalism** : A belief and propagation of ideas where there is striving for unity of a nation or of national interest.

**Orthodoxy** : Belief in established doctrines or opinions.

**Protestantism** : The new religion which emerged in 1529 as a protest against the Roman Catholicism. It believed in the immediate link between God and man without the aid of Popes and Saints.

**Secularisation** : A process in which the religion is separated from political and civil life.

**Universality** : A state where all the people without exception are affected.

---

## 15.7 FURTHER READINGS

---

Capps, Walter H. (1990). *The New Religious Right*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, S. Carolina.

Curtis, Michael (1981) *Religion and Politics in the Middle East*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado.

Hussain, Asat (1985) *Islamic Iran — Revolution & Counter Revolution*. London : Frances Printer Ltd.

---

## 15.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

---

### Check Your Progress 1

i) Fill in the blanks.

a) Cyrus was a famous ruler of the **Acheminds** dynasty.

b) **Muhammad Reza Shañ** was overthrown in the year 1979.

c) Strongly embedded in Islam is the notion of 'adalah' or **Social Justice**.

ii) a) The discovery of oil in Iran attracted the interest of foreign powers. Russia and England were the main powers that struggled for economic and political supremacy in Iran. Even though Iran's oil production increased considerably

Iranians themselves could not benefit from it. Despite unemployment oil workers were not hired from Iran but imported from outside. All the key posts were in the hands of British. Later, Americans also moved into the picture. Together, England, America, the oil companies and Pahlavis Co-operated and struck up an agreement which, on paper, gave ownership of the oil industry to Iran, but in practice, gave full control of the industry to foreign powers. Production, pricing and marketing were all in foreign hands. Iran, as a whole, suffered both politically and economically.

- b) Interaction with western countries also ushered in ideas of secularisation — separation of religion from politics, leading to the establishment of various institutes of learning like the institute of Arts and Science (Basal-Fanun) in 1851. The ideas of Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesque, Bentham etc. were preached by leading intellectuals. The Pahlavi ruler Reza Khan attempted to delink the political system from religious influence by means of educational and legal reforms. The mosque school and religious school — the ‘maktab’ and ‘madrassa’ were brought under the centralised control of the state. The Shariat or religious laws were replaced by a new code of laws based on the French civil code. This was a drastic break from Islamic tradition.

### Check Your Progress 2

- i) An interesting feature of religious life in America has been the high degree of religious mobility, or access to wide range of sects and denominations. It is not unusual to find members of the same family being affiliated to different churches or denominations.
- ii) The relationship between individual piety and national patriotism was brought about by comparing the tenets of the Bible to the ideal of a democratic society. It symbolised America as a “Christian Nation” and tried to combine religious values and political commitment.
- iii) The New Religious Right deliberately and consciously speaks of a happier, bygone era when social cohesiveness is believed to have existed; an era when shared religious and patriotic ideals were one and the same. The sermons of the New Religious Right frequently take the form of denouncing or condemning all those factors which upset or destroyed the unity and cohesiveness of American society. One slogan the movement adopted to drive this point was to “bring America back again”.