

Unit 21

Communalism and Fundamentalism

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Learning Objectives

After you have studied this unit you should be able to:

- define fundamentalism;
- define communalism;
- outline the nexus between fundamentalism and communalism; and
- locate the targets of fundamentalism and communalism.

21.1 Introduction

There is a recent tendency, quite wrong though, to equate religious fundamentalism with communalism or to treat one as the synonym of the other. In fact, the two are quite distinct and different though they can become correlated and have many ideological and political elements in common.

21.2 Definition of Fundamentalism

Let us first take up the definition and basic tenets of fundamentalism. I am indebted to Sadik J. Al Azim's brilliant articles in South Asia Bulletin for my understanding as also delineation of fundamentalism. [the Bulletin, Vol. XIII, Nos. 1-2, 1993, and Vol. XIV, No. 1, 1994]. Though fundamentalism is not monolithic, it has enough common elements for us to try to define it. It is also not confined to the followers of any one religion and is to be found among Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus and Sikhs, though its strength among followers of different religions varies for historical reasons in terms of time and space and the formation and structure of different religions.

First of all, the fundamentalists argue for return to the fundamental tenets of a religion, for return to the original formulations and meanings given to a religion at the time of its foundation in its first texts. These texts have, moreover, to be literally understood, applied or implemented. There is to be no interpretation of or debate about their meanings. Consequently, all later developments, exegeses, interpretations, etc., are to be rejected and wiped out. Since the texts are seen as God's own

actual words, their meaning is bound to be clear and unambiguous as also changeless. How can then they be interpreted? And, of course, the question of later generations thinking originally does not arise. Thus for Christian fundamentalists, God's words are permanently given in the Old and New Testaments and for the Muslim fundamentalists in the Koran and the Sunnah (The Prophet's sayings). Some Hindus regard the Vedas as God's immutable words. Similarly, many Sikhs so regard the Gurbani. In fact the fundamentalists regard all efforts to interpret, not to speak to amend, the original texts in the light of modern social conditions and state of human knowledge as blasphemous, as acts of enemies within. And, of course, any effort to read them as mytho-realities or allegories is damned as worse than heresy.

Second, fundamentalists assert that all aspects and areas of life are to be governed by the true, revealed religion as embodied in the original texts. God's words and law are to be the basis of society, economy, polity, culture, and law and the entire domestic and personal life of the believer.

Some Examples

As Gary North, one of the American fundamentalists, has put it, the Bible contains answers to all problems a person faces today including "the concrete, day-to-day problems of economics, family relationships, politics, law, medicine, and all other areas of life". Similarly, Judge Abdul-Jawed Yasin rejects the modern secular notion that religion pertains only to one area of a person's life, that is, his personal spiritual life. It is wrong to hold, he says, that "just as there are economic affairs, social affairs, political affairs, foreign affairs, family affairs, legal affairs, administrative affairs... there are religious affairs too... confined to rituals and piety." This, he says, reduces religion to "a mere aspect among life's many aspects" and to "a mere specific need among man's many other needs". "Religion," he argues, "is not a side affair among life's many affairs, but the divine 'way' according to which man runs his individual and collective affairs of life. It is the method drawn by God for the community: for its economic affairs, social affairs, political affairs, legislative affairs, psychological affairs, internal affairs, external affairs and any other affairs that it may have." A Muslim fundamentalist has put this view as follows: "God's final religion contains all the legislations required

Essays 'on Contemporary India by any society, any place, any time and in all spheres of life". The fundamentalists consequently totally reject the pluralist principle of "many Gods, many moralities, many laws"

21.3 Politics Religion and Education

More specifically, the fundamentalists attack the separation of religion from politics and state, and therefore the idea of the secular state. If God is supreme over all, then the political rule is also His domain, and how can then the state be outside the religious realm? The state, in fact, has to be a theocracy.

Similarly, the fundamentalists insist on religious control over education so that not only is true religion taught in schools and colleges but nothing contrary to it is taught. The famous encyclical, The Syllabus of Modern Errors, issued by Pope Rius IX in 1864, and one of the first modern statements of religious fundamentalism, after damning the view "that from civil law descend and depend all the rights of parents over their children, and above all, the right of instructing and educating them", condemns those "most false teachers" who "endeavour to eliminate the salutary teaching and influence of the Catholic Church from the instruction

and education of youth, and miserably to infect and deprave by every pernicious error and vice the tender and pliant minds of youth". The fundamentalists, therefore, advocate boycott of modern state-run or state-supported schools and their replacement by schools where the traditional religious system of teaching is followed. Some even argue that only that much education is needed as is sufficient to read and follow religious texts or to meet "a practical and real need" in terms of worldly affairs.

In particular, all laws have to be derived from the earliest or founding texts. The Muslim fundamentalists, in particular, demand that all laws must be derived from the Koran and the Sunnah. Even here, the fundamentalists tend to emphasize primarily the harsh ancient penal codes, such as amputation of hands and feet, stoning of the guilty, public flogging, and death punishment for a large number of crimes, some quite petty. For example, some of the American fundamentalists advocate death penalty for the following crimes, among other crimes, on the basis of Mosaic, i.e., God's Laws in the Old Testament: "murder, adultery, unchastity, sodomy, bestiality, homosexuality, rape, incest, fornication, incorrigibility in children, Sabbath breaking, kidnapping, apostasy, idolatry, blasphemy, sacrificing to false Gods, propagating false doctrines, false pretension to prophecy, witchcraft and sorcery".

21.4 Fundamentalism and Equality of Religions

The fundamentalists do not believe in the equality of all religions or even the grant of liberty to all religions to exist, for how can false religions be treated as equal to the true religion or be given the liberty to preach and practise falsehood? The same logic leads the fundamentalists to oppose the concept of the unity of all religions. In fact, most of them urge the prohibition and suppression of religions other than their own in countries where 6 followers of their religion constitute the majority. One slightly different but in fact the same aspect of this is the demand of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad that all Islamic religious or cultural influences should be removed from the country. Of course, missing the irony or the absurdity of the situation, the fundamentalists demand the liberty to preach and practise their own religion where they happen to be in a minority. They also, in that case, often demand separation of the state from religion, i.e., the religion of the majority.

We may also take note of a few other features of fundamentalism. It is opposed to reason and rationalism, humanism and secularism. It is anti-science and denies the validity of all human knowledge which is outside the religious realm. As Prof. Sadik J. Al-Azim has pointed out: "Both (Christian and Muslim fundamentalists) invest efforts in what they call the re-Christianization and/or re-Islamization of human knowledge. As a consequence, both find themselves compelled to elaborate theories about and concoct recipes of Biblico-Christian and/or Koranico-Muslim foundations and principles of natural science, economics, history, law, government, politics, sociology, psychology, and so on." In India, the Hindu fundamentalists have been, in the last few years, making claims for Hindu mathematics and so on.

Sovereignty and Religion

The fundamentalists are also opposed to the idea of popular sovereignty and the resulting practice of democracy and

constitutional government. This is, in a way, inevitable, for if sovereignty belongs to God and all laws and policies should be based on God's words as

revealed in the holy texts, then where is the scope for constitutions and for the people to determine

Box 21.1 The True Believers

There can also not exist more than one party—the party of God or the true believers. In general the fundamentalists attack the basic ideas and values of the Enlightenment, especially modern science, reason and the idea of progress, often for being western, and, in the case of Christian fundamentalists, for being pagan in origin and for their claim to be independent of faith.

Before I take up the question of communalism I would like to enter a few caveats, though without elaboration. Even though sharing some common features, fundamentalism is different from devout belief, or religiosity or religious orthodoxy, or belief in the fundamental beliefs and values of one's religion. For the religiously orthodox are not intolerant of others' religious beliefs. Take, for example, both the firmness of religious belief and the high degree of catholicity towards others' beliefs among the Sufis and Vaishnavites in our own country. In fact, both would be declared to be 'practitioners of error' by the fundamentalists of their own religions.

21.5 Definition of Communalism

Let us now define communalism. This is best done historically, that is by a study of its development in modern India. Communalism in India developed through three stages, each stage providing its own definition of communalism and merging into the next stage.

Communalism developed during the last quarter of the 19th century when the view was put forward that followers of a religion in the whole of India have in common not only their religion and religious interests but also some political, economic, social and cultural interests. This view led to the notion that in India, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians form distinct communities and that India or the Indian nation is formed by these distinct communities. These communities have their own leaders, for example, Hindu leaders and Muslim leaders, who defend and fight for the interests of their communities. Unfortunately many nationalists accepted and began to use the terminology of religion-based communities even when they did not accept its basic communal content. Thus they talked and wrote about Hindu community, Muslim community, etc. Communalism entered a second stage in the beginning of the 20th century, when communalism proper made an appearance.

Action and Reflection 21.1

Differentiate between fundamentalisms and communalism on the basis of newspaper and media reports. Put down your findings in a notebook.

The communalists now argued that followers of a religion have, as a community, some interests separate from those of the followers of other religions; that is, many of the economic and political interests of the followers of different religions diverge and are sometimes opposite because of their following different religions. At the same time, the communalists agreed that Indians, belonging to different religions, also have many common economic and political interests, in particular vis-à-vis the colonial rulers. Thus, these communalists, who may be described as liberal communalists, accepted that Hindus and Muslims have common interests; but, they argued that, as communities, they have additional and separate interests of their own. They usually held that Indians can and should fight together for political freedom and economic development, once their

separate communal interests are recognized and adjusted or settled through mutual compromise and give and take.

Two Nation Theory

Communalists of the third stage argued that the secular interests of the followers of different religions were not only different, but mutually totally antagonistic. What was good for Hindus was bad for Muslims, what was good for Muslims was bad for Hindus and so on. Hindus and Muslims could never form one nation or live together as equals and fellow-citizens—there was nothing in life to unite them. Thus was born the two-nation theory in its two communal versions. According to the Muslim League and Mohammed Au Jinnah, Hindus and Muslims in India formed two different nations because they followed two different religions—and the two must separate and form two separate nation-states because their interests clashed totally.

21.6 Fundamentalism and Communalism

As pointed out in the beginning, fundamentalism and communalism have certain ideological elements in common. On the other hand, they also differ from each other. Both attack the concept of separation of religion from politics and the state. Both oppose the concept of equal truth in all religions or the unity of different religions. Both advocate control over education by the followers of the dominant religion. Both believe in restoration of the past values and 'greatness' rather than in progress towards the unknown so that 'greatness' and progress lie in the future. Both share the notion that their societies had achieved near-human perfection in the very early centuries when their religions were founded and were practised in their pristine purity and then declined and 'fell'. Both oppose secularism and believe that it corrupts society. Both oppose secular nationalism and the anti-imperialist and nationalist view of his

But these common features do not make the two the same. To take a very different example, it is clear that indigenism and post-modernism have many ideological positions in common with fundamentalism, especially opposition to science, reason, progress, secularism and nationalism, but they are basically poles apart.

Differences of Perception

The communalist and the fundamentalist differ in many ways, though in a multi-religious society a fundamentalist tends to be communal while communalists are quite often not fundamentalists. For example, in India, the Hindu Mahasabha, the RSS, the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Muslim League, and the Akali Dal were and are communal parties but they were not and are not fundamentalist. Similarly, Pakistan and to a certain extent Bangladesh are communal states but they are no fundamentalist states. If we look at the programmatic, policy or ideological statements and propaganda of the communal parties, the difference becomes clear, for not many of the fundamentalist tenets would be found in them.

Box 21.2 The Manusmriti

Let me take up a few examples, Modern science is quite compatible with communalism, though the fundamentalists see it as an enemy. The fundamentalists oppose any notion of reform or further development of religious beliefs and tenets or social structure, practices and institutions based on them. The communalists can and often do favour reform of inherited religions. and social structures. This is, in particular, true of Hindu communalists. The basic, fundamental tenet of Hinduism is the caste system and the basic social text is Manusmriti. There is little in the Vedas or Upanishads or Geeta on which a fundamentalist can build a full structure. Manusmriti is perhaps the only such text. Yet hardly any Hindu communalist is committed to it or to the caste system in a fundamentalist manner. In fact, except for a handful of die-hard priests, hardly any Hindu communalist today defends the caste system and its basic inequitable features or claims to live by the dictates of the Manusmriti.

The fundamentalists seriously urge the actual revival of the pristine past and its religious, social, cultural, legal and political practices. This is not the case with the communalists who may appeal to the past as ideology or nostalgia but whose gaze is clearly fixed on the modern world.

The relationship of the fundamentalists and the communalists to religion is also only superficially similar. The former are deeply religious, their entire ideology relates to religion and they want to base the state, society, and daily life of the individual on religion. The communalists, on the other hand, have hardly much to do with religion, except that they base their politics on religious identity and thus use religion for the purposes of struggle for political power. The communal state is thus not necessarily a theocratic state. For example, even when declared to be Islamic states, Pakistan and Bangladesh are communal states and not theocratic states. Interestingly, only a minority of the communalists in Pakistan or Bangladesh demand the literal application of the ancient laws (according to the Shariah), and hardly any Hindu or Muslim communalist does so in India.

Action and Reflection 21.2

Talk to some knowledgeable people about fundamentalism and communalism with reference to religion. Note down your findings and then compare with 21.6 above.

Similarly, the fundamentalists want to Christianize or Islamize or Hinduize the whole world. Not so the communalists; they only want to communalize and can only communalize their own society.

It is, therefore, not accidental that in our country the communalists have often not only not been fundamentalists but have not been even religious. Thus M.A. Jinnah or Liaqat Ali Khan or Feroze Khan Noon were not very religious; In pre-independent India only the followers of Maulana Maudoodi among the Muslim communalists were fundamentalists, and, interestingly, they were opposed to the demand for the partition of India.

21.7 Targets of Fundamentalism and

Communalism

The targets of fundamentalism and communalism are also very different. The fundamentalists basically target fellow believers who do not agree with them, while the targets of the communalists most often are the other religious communities.

There is a major critical reason why the communalists are seldom fundamentalists and can even oppose the latter. They make every attempt to communalize and unite the members of their religious community. That alone can bring them into political power, especially in a democratic polity. But it is in the very nature of fundamentalism to divide and constantly fragment the followers of a religion. This is for two reasons. First, not many can adopt fundamentalism in practice or even in belief. Second, by rigid definitions, they tend to exclude rather than include. Anyone who does not agree with their definition of true religion becomes a nonbeliever and, therefore, sooner or later an enemy. When they talk of annihilating the infidels, they are often referring to their own co-religionists. In fact, such is their extreme religious fanaticism that they constantly divide among themselves to split and fragment.

21.8 Conclusion

21.9 Further Reading

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