

FUNDAMENTALISM REVISITED: Fundamentalism as a Counter- Culture to Modernity and its Values

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ABSTRACT

One of the most prominent and haunting cultural phenomena in our times is 'fundamentalism'. Its prominence, complexity and negative impacts render fundamentalism worth revisiting. Beyond its definitions, forms and enigmas, the existence of fundamentalism compels us to reflect on some significant aspects of our age. I assume that fundamentalism is not a throwback to a tradition, but that it is in a dialectic relationship with modernity. I stress, therefore, the points of convergence between fundamentalism and modernity. The overlapping paradigms of fundamentalism and modernity are explored through a socio-cultural and philosophical approach. Through an elaboration of the function of fundamentalism as a cultural opposition, the paper concludes with a postmodernist approach toward a new sensibility for 'difference and diversity'.

Key Words:

- Fundamentalism •Modernity •Reflexive Modernity •Dialectics
- Postmodernism •Difference •Diversity •Tradition •Authenticity

I take some problematic features of fundamentalism as the starting points: First, many forms of fundamentalism, in fact, appear as counter-discourses to modernity. On the one hand, they call into question some of the most basic principles of modernity. On the other hand, they take us to the issue of more 'authentic' values behind modernization contaminated by secularization from the issues of morality to ecology. We must find ways to understand the meaning of fundamentalism so that we can review the basic and substantive questions of modernity.

Fundamentalism can be considered a counter-discourse as it discloses asymmetrical assumptions on contemporary culture and civilization. Fundamentalism mainly questions those assumptions of modernity concerning progress and development. Although there are similarities in response to modernity among modernists and fundamentalists, fundamentalists wish to save and restore the imperfect world based on revealed truth². In order to understand fundamentalism, we have to go beyond a positive-empirical approach and get into a philosophical reflexive approach to fathom the depth and the complexity of fundamentalism in its conceptual basis, in particular in relation with modernity.

Second, the context of fundamentalism is basically the struggle for power. Fundamentalism is a strategy to gain power against structures of domination and hegemony, as it has recourse to so-called 'absolute' values. Fundamentalism deploys 'difference', a distinctive identity as a power tool. Fundamentalists, therefore, use discourses and actions that are to be explained in terms of the language game of power with its forms of domination and hegemony. The 'difference' principle renders maximum power when it is integrated with the ultimate concerns as found in religious teachings and used vis-à-vis modernity. Religious elements become the sources of deconstruction and critique. The general objectives of the fundamentalists' deconstructions are actually power relations, or more precise, 'power sharing'. That is why "the secular nation-state is often the prime target of fundamentalism."³ The nation-state can be seen as a source of power.

Third, the 'negative experience' as the basis for struggle is common among fundamentalists. 'Experience' is more emphasized than 'system' and 'reason'. The value of 'experience' appears more powerful today as a new normative element and a new perspective for interpreting cultural identity and humanity. Experience is employed to understand the fundamentalist value systems. In their assault on modern reason, fundamentalists believe that Western culture uses 'reason' mainly as a covert weapon for cultural domination. The grand narratives, such as modernity, truth and objectivity, are then used to dominate other people's culture, other people's truth, other people's reason⁴.

Fourth, the perspective of the 'victim' is central. Fundamentalists often see themselves as the victims of modernity, secularization and globalization. The experience of Being a victim is an important access to comprehend the interplay between truth and power. Fundamentalists often regard themselves as victims of unjust global power structures. Here, 'truth' is seen from the perspective of victims.

Fifth, in Indonesia fundamentalists believe that Islam is the final ideology, the best solution for the crises brought about by secular modernity. The power of fundamentalism in Indonesia is gaining momentum today. This has resulted in a serious dilemma: is being a true Moslem really compatible with being a modern and democracy-minded Indonesian? For Indonesia, as the largest Moslem community in the world, the discourse of fundamentalism is very important. The main issue is that being a true Moslem and being a true Indonesian are not always in harmony. For Indonesian Moslems, socio-political movements can hardly be separated from religious ideas. This explains why the forms, the strategy and the activities of fundamentalism in Indonesia have always been associated with the utopia of Islam as the ultimate guiding ideology. It can be observed that, in this connection, the most common targets of criticism leveled by fundamentalists are the inhuman values of modernism, the secularization of culture, and the capitalistic modern state. The basic position of the fundamentalist view is the following: Religious elements are a significant factor in defining political identity. For many devout Muslims, 'secularism' indicates an orientation that fails to respect religiously sanctioned norms. "Secular regimes, defined as they are in terms of the unity of a certain race, class, or linguistic grouping, lack a universal moral responsibility. Their will to power leads to the kind of aggressive and exploitative behavior."⁵ For fundamentalists, the best alternative for all these bad traits of modernity would be no other than the unitary religious

state with Islam as the main pillar.

The phenomena and characteristics of fundamentalism

Historically Fundamentalism of some sort was a part of the dynamics of Modernity: a move back to what were considered the most fundamental. Contemporary fundamentalism is precisely a fundamental attack against modernity. It is a reaction toward the asymmetrical impact of modernity and its inequality of wealth and opportunity; a counter-paradigm toward excessive rationalism, materialism, individualism, liberalism and secularism.

Fundamentalism is both an asymmetrical reaction and a counter paradigm in unmasking the inherent problems of modernism. Contemporary Fundamentalism consists of at least two tendencies: spiritual fundamentalism and religio-political fundamentalism. The spiritual fundamentalism is a response to a spiritual crisis and existential void in the modern world⁶. It covers also various efforts to deconstruct dualistic concepts of reality, the assumed unrealistic primacy of freedom, the centrality of the human subject as well as unlimited growth and rationality perceived as totalitarian. These efforts are to liberate the world from modern destructive paradigms, to 'spiritualize' the world and to interpret human civilization in cosmic paradigm of wholeness. It includes a reaction and defense against secularization that has penetrated religious communities; fundamentalism can then be perceived as "reactivity to marginalization of religion."⁷

The politico-religious fundamentalism focuses itself more on the reassertion of a religion-based communal identity while criticizing the hypocrisy of the global power-games. Fundamentalism is part of the response to the problems of globalization and fragmentism. Fundamentalists see the world as 'fragmented'⁸. The result of the experiences of marginalization is the consistent inferiority in a globalized world. The reactionary counteract toward this situation is shown by fundamentalism in its "revolutionary character of anti-globalization."⁹

General Hypotheses of the Emergence of Contemporary Fundamentalism

The emergence of spiritualistic and religio-political fundamentalism cannot be separated from the discourse of modernity and secular

nationalism. The project and process of modernization has direct impacts to the experiences of the sacred. It involves the progressive detachment of traditional religious life from social institutions. It also involves a re-institutionalization of principles of life into new experiences of space and time. The radical features of the modern project can be described as following:

“Modernity is a *project* – or rather, a series of interlinked projects – that certain people in power seek to achieve. The project aims at institutionalizing a number of (sometimes conflicting, often evolving) principles: constitutionalism, moral autonomy, democracy, human rights, civil equality, industry, consumerism, freedom of the market – and secularism. It employs proliferating technologies (of production, warfare, travel, entertainment, medicine) that generate new experience of space and time. The notion that these experiences constitute 'disenchantment' – implying a direct access to reality, a stripping away of myth, magic and the sacred – is a salient feature of the modern epoch.”¹⁰

In reality this project of modernization has resulted in various forms of anomalies that can be read as uprootedness of the sacred from the midst of life. “[M]odernity is not primarily a matter of cognizing the real but of living-in-the-world.”¹¹ It is an anomaly because the sacred can be equated with giving meaning to life. It is this anomaly that has invited religious fundamentalism to return on center stage. And, fundamentalists translate their role in different ways according to their characteristics inevitably colored by political and economical interests.

Following Durkheim, we can propose “an equation of the sacred with the spirit of community (projection of communal spirit onto supernatural entity), so that in modernity, religion and nationalism are rival forms of communal solidarity, corresponding to the dialectical opposites of tradition and modernization, respectively.”¹² We can observe that nationalism provides an alternative series of public rituals and doctrines of sacrifice so that the position of nationalism itself can be secular competitor for religion. Secularization through nationalism, as a process of modernity, in fact does not necessarily result in atheism, but instead an attenuation of faith. Therefore it is not a problem of anti-theism. Fundamentalism thus arises: (1) where rapid modernization generates a need for more authentic spirituality rather than formal religion. This encourages primarily the

emergence of reflective-spiritualistic fundamentalism; and (2) as a reaction against the cultural structures of modernity (individualism, de-traditionalization, excessive materialism, etc.), this stimulates the reactionary religio-political fundamentalism¹³.

Some General Characteristics of Fundamentalism

One of the prominent characteristics of fundamentalism is its discourse on 'truth'. Fundamentalists understand truth as revealed and unifying. Fundamentalists emphasize the value of absolutism and inerrancy concerning the sources of revelation. Therefore, they have great concern for 'absolute truths'. The truths deployed by secular modernism are cursed as particular and fragmented. Fundamentalists envision themselves as part of a cosmic struggle to achieve such absolute truths. The cosmic dimension asserts the holistic character of the total and absolute truth. This gives their struggle a trans-historical hope. Therefore, when confrontation is framed as 'cosmic war' the fundamental characteristics of fundamentalism are:

1. The struggle is perceived as a defense of a basic identity and dignity.
2. Losing the struggle would be unthinkable. If a negative outcome of the struggle is perceived as beyond human conception, the struggle may be viewed as taking place on a trans-historical plane.
3. The struggle is blocked and cannot be won in real terms¹⁴.

In other words, fundamentalists seize historical moments (struggle, suffering, winning and losing, life and death) and reinterpret them in the light of cosmic meanings¹⁵.

Fundamentalist movements are also associated primarily with the erosion of religion and its role in society. In principle, fundamentalism contains selective elements of tradition and heritage and also parts of modernity itself which are accepted or chosen to react against. The elements of religious idealism are elaborated as the basis of personal and communal identity. Idealistic elements of religion, in turn, can be an ideology of struggle.

The 'ideological' characteristics of fundamentalism are in general: literalist interpretation, anti-reason and anti-culture. These elements can be translated into universal imperatives for political or spiritual struggle. Based on those ideological elements, fundamentalists usually demonize their opponents and are reactionary. They envy the hegemony of modernity and

try to overturn the distribution of power. However, the solidness of their ideological characteristics can reflect their fragility. The violent aspects of

modernity and secularism may become a significant cultural energy.

Conclusion

Fundamentalism may very well reveal the fact that the maximum usage of rational capacity in the form of instrumental rationality has destroyed the elements of wisdom and transcendence in regulating civilization and social order, and has also led to the de-sacralization of culture. This, in turn, establishes the strong ideological characters of fundamentalism, i.e. the defense of religion. "This defense of religion is the sine qua non of fundamentalism; without it, a movement may not properly be labeled fundamentalist."³⁴ The forms of fundamentalist violence are actually symbolic-radical expressions of that defense.

The response of fundamentalism takes on interior and exterior forms. The interior response is a spiritual attempt to transcend, transform and purify the evils of the world to a new consciousness, order and experience of unity. And the existential experience of the unity in one divine essence is considered necessary for a better civilization. This form is exercised by spiritual fundamentalism³⁵. The exterior response to modernity is by means of critiques toward the assumptions and agents of modernity. The modern world is considered a cultural burden for those who have no accesses to it. The injustices of the modern world do not lie in the fact that there is a wide gap between the rich and the poor, but rather in the fact that some countries are deliberately impoverished by the systems favoring the more powerful countries. Religious and spiritual elements become the ultimate concern and instrument to protect and to defend civilization from injustices.

For prospective humanity, fundamentalism provides a sharp criticism of constructive values. Fundamentalism discloses the asymmetrical assumptions in modernity and has fundamental criticisms. Therefore, the emergence of fundamentalism can at least provoke a serious speculation that something is wrong with our civilization. It also challenges to requestion the nature of modernity from the perspective of the victim and an attempt to rebuild a more coherent and cohesive worldview with a strong foundation. Rethinking the meaning of religiosity is also part of the universal responsibility among religious people as violence is committed in the name of religion. The existence of fundamentalism can in many respects trigger an autocritique toward claims of absolute values, along with

its violence, which are inherent in formal religions and modernity in general. It can also trigger formal religions to transform their holy mission in the world into humanistic movements striving for general justice and peace. Finally, the phenomena of fundamentalism asserts that humanity is something to be rearticulated where the nature of religion is actually a call for humanism.

Notes :

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