
UNIT 15 RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM¹⁷

Structure

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15.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will look at:

- the rise and growth of religious fundamentalism
- the different issues and concerns which has brought religious fundamentalism into existence
- the cultural, socio-economic and political milieu in which it has grown far and wide.

Once you go through this unit, you will be in a position to understand:

- What is religious fundamentalism
- What impact it has on the individual, society, nation and the world at large.

¹⁷ Mary Paul, Nirmala College, Ranchi.

15.1 INTRODUCTION

Fundamentalism is a clinging to values practices and selected doctrines or teachings currently perceived to be under threat by a group, a tribe or nation. These ideas and customs must be preserved at any cost, even by resorting to violence. It is a religious movement or point of view characterized by a return to fundamental principles and often by intolerance of other views and opposition to secularism.

The various fundamentalist groups in the world today owe their origin to some perceived threat, real or imagined to long cherish traditional values. New ideas, proposals for change are frightening when not understood and the conservative mind resists. Many examples can be found in the pages of history all around the world. Basic to all is fear of change, an insecurity that flows from ignorance of the other, a determination to preserve the familiar at all costs.

In this course we shall learn more about the various forms that fundamentalism assume, the history of its origins in different cultures, with emphasis on our Indian situation and we shall look at the definitions, origins and development of this phenomenon in various cultures, political philosophies and practices.

15.2 DEFINITION

“All fundamentalisms follow a certain form. They are embattled forms of spirituality, which have emerged in response to a perceived crisis” (Karen Armstrong). The response to such a threat is neither democratic nor tolerant. Dialogue does not figure in the response; instead there is denial, rejection, withdrawal into its own stronghold of conviction that the “old” is the only truth, the only good and that all that contradicts it is evil. So it can even be seen as a struggle between good and evil, good and evil on a cosmic scale. This “Good and evil is to be defined absolutely in terms of the group with no scope for compromise.” Such a struggle has often turned violent and is in some degree the root of World Wars. Karen Armstrong suggests that all fundamentalist movements have certain common characteristics: fears, anxieties and desires that they are a reaction against scientific and secular culture. Fundamentalism often leads to terrorism which is

the greatest threat to the peace and development of society in the present century. Greed for power, wealth and fame are the fuel that feeds violence in the 21st century and these are often disguised as religious movements, movements of social concern and justice. There are situations in which it is difficult to distinguish between fundamentalism and Idealism.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. How does fundamentalism lead to violence?

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15.3 CONTEXT

Fundamentalism develops in a situation that is at once political, social and religious and thrives on fear, insecurity and the determination to hold on to what it deems stable values. It opposes change if the new situation challenges its sense of security, but will reconstruct old doctrines to suit its purpose as it has done with Biblical texts. Similar adaptations have taken place in Marxism where strong fundamentalist doctrines have held sway since its inception. But political necessity and the demand of the ballot box have brought about changes, e.g., West Bengal. In Islam too political situations have been the tightening of shariat laws in some countries (Afghanistan) and their relaxation in other (Turkey). Both social and historical factors contribute to the growth and spread of fundamentalism. Poor and deprived people cling to whatever gives them a ray of hope and when change, especially hostile change, threatens this minimal security, they want to fight in whatever way they can. Leaders emerge with vested interests- social, political, religious or ambitious aims and draw on the fears of the poor and needy. This is where they can assemble the thousands who march in their protest demonstrations, who are in the fore front of clashes with police and are numbered among the victims of violence. This is how

fundamentalism breeds terrorism.

First of all, one aspect of religious fundamentalism is closely related to socialization process. It is usually the case that individuals coming from religious families are generally more religious than those brought up within more secular environments. Such people, like their parents and ancestors, tend literally to interpret religious text(s) in accordance with their traditions. Their behaviors mostly fall in the category of “nonviolent intolerance”. They are usually ethnocentric, they would advocate language of militancy, but normally, they are not directly associated with physical violence. Some other people, albeit not so many, however, may consciously choose to be radically religious. The motives for these people may vary, mostly in accordance with personal variables. Many people, for example, may become devoted believers due to inner insecurity, caused by a real or perceived frightening or confusing environment. Social psychologists identify a basic need to reduce uncertainty or anxiety (Hogg and Abrams, 1993), construct meaning, and avoid confusion (Reykowski, 1982). Religious fundamentalism, as literal thinking, serves to these ends in many ways. First, by sticking to a religious belief and accepting it as the ultimate source of knowledge, the individual finds “satisfactory” explanations of puzzling or mysterious phenomena. Religion satisfies the desire to know and to understand, and is resorted to when more worldly means of explanation fail. In that sense, religious fundamentalism can be said to offer intellectual security by largely satisfying cognitive needs of the person. Inexplicable problems, which cannot be resolved by any other means, are unraveled by recourse to theological and religious sources of knowledge.

Second, religion satisfies, so to speak, substantive needs of the individual in an imaginary way as well. Material needs which cannot be satisfied in other ways are believed to be eventually fulfilled, if not in this life, in the next life for sure. This belief, in turn, reduces anxiety by providing the individual with a sense of confidence.

Finally, religious fundamentalism serves to reduce anxiety by promising justice. Indeed, structural conditions, over which the individual has little or no control, bring about many frustrations hard to bear with. The powerful use the underprivileged, some exercise power over others. In most parts of the world, economic and social conditions are such that some enjoy

prosperity and well-being, while some others hardly survive. Thus, in the face of earthy injustices, religion functions as a palliative pill by promising that justice will be done and all sins will be punished eventually. In the next life, everyone will get what he or she actually deserves. This belief helps the individual to face life's difficulties with relatively comfort and confidence.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What are the factors that contribute to the growth and spread of fundamentalism?

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15.4 RELIGIOUS MILITANCY: THREAT TO PEACE, DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN SECURITY

Religion appears, no doubt, as a political force in the whole world. Politics gains at the cost of religion. It is equally evident that religious militancy develops from the practice of using religion to achieve political gains. Political use of religion begets intolerance, hatred, jealousy and terrorism. All religions in the world advocate peace, tolerance and brotherhood. The powerful vested interests often associate it with violence. Religious extremism and violence have become almost two sides of a coin, and thus throughout the world religious violence is spreading fast. All the major countries of the world have witnessed, over the past few decades, the rise of dangerous forms of religious militancy and extremism.

The growing extremism of religious militants has mounted crises of democracy in the world. Terrorism on the whole originated from extreme religio-political fundamentalism, from religious intolerance and from the cherished antagonism against secular, progressive and democratic ideals. The scourge of terrorism is alarmingly threatening peace and democracy and abusing

human rights leading to critical human security situation. The scourge of terrorism perpetrated by the home-grown religio-political groups of Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka in contemporary period have disrupted peace, made critical prospects of democracy and the state of human security alarmingly in the region. It has become imperative to seek measures to quell domestic violent movements grown out of religious extremism. Growth of terrorism never remains confined within one's own territory but has international ramifications. It transcends geographical boundary. Religious militants captured power in Afghanistan, and now they have developed their tentacles in neighboring countries. They might extend their dreadful claws across continents.

15.5 RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM AND TERRORISM

15.5.1 Definition

“Terrorism: the systematic use of terror or unpredictable violence against governments, public groups or individuals to attain a political objective.” (Encyclopedia Britannica 1999 on terrorism). Terrorism has been used by political organizations both right-wing and left-wing, by nationalistic and ethnic groups, by revolutionaries and armies and the secret police of governments themselves.

Terrorism has been practiced throughout history and throughout the world. 5th century B.C. Greece recommended psychological terror against enemy populations. The Roman emperor Caligula (1st Century A.D.) used banishment, confiscation of property and execution to discourage opposition to his rule. The Spanish Inquisition (16th century) used arbitrary arrest, torture and execution to punish what was perceived as religious heresy. Robespierre openly advocated the use of torture during the French Revolution 1793-4 during the period known as the reign of terror. After the American Civil War (1861-65) the Southerners who wanted to retain slavery, set up a terrorist organization the Ku Klux Klan to intimidate supporters of freedom and Reconstruction. Terrorism was adopted by the Anarchists in the later 19th century in Europe, Russia and the United States. They believed the best way to bring about social and political change was to assassinate persons in positions of power. From 1865 to 1905 a number of kings,

presidents, prime ministers and other government officials were killed by anarchists' bullets or bombs.

The 20th century saw great changes in the use and practice of terrorism. Automatic weapons and electrically detonated explosives gave terrorists a new mobility and more deadly accuracy and it became almost a state policy. Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler and the Soviet Union Joseph Stalin used arrest, imprisonment, torture and execution without legal guidance or restraint to create a climate of fear and to encourage submission to their repressive ideology and their declared goals of economic, social and political goals. This was known as Totalitarianism.

Terrorism is more often associated with individuals or groups, rather than with state policy, with groups attempting to overthrow existing political structures. This activity has been used by one or both sides in anti-colonial conflicts- Ireland and the United Kingdom, Algeria and France, Vietnam and France/United States, disputes between different national groups for possession of a homeland-Palestine and Israel, Tamils in Sri Lanka, conflicts between different denominations.

The ease and speed of modern communications has contributed greatly to the spread of terrorism. Television gives notoriety and a fatal attraction to deeds of terror and young, unemployed, vulnerable people can be drawn into the net. The World Wide Web can provide access to information, instant information during ongoing attacks as happened during the Mumbai attack. Terrorists may be from disadvantaged backgrounds, but they are trained by organizations with money, power and skills that can outwit some very highly educated and intelligent people. (The foregoing is drawn largely from the Encyclopedia Britannica 1999)

But why do people, men and women, take the terror route? Robert Young asks the pertinent question:” Under what circumstances and with what rationale do people kill and maim one another, in particular innocent people and children, in the name of a higher cause? The situation Young has in mind here can only be described as Terrorism which is best described as mindless violence against the innocent. Throughout history acts of terrorism have frequently been motivated by religious fundamentalism increasing to the pitch of violence. It can be traced back to the Bible where Cain killed his brother Abel out of hatred. And hatred is the key to most acts

of terrorism, though racism and fear also play an important role. No religion teaches violence, hatred or revenge against any persons or groups. Most of the time terrorism takes place because of the wrong interpretation of Holy Scriptures.

15.6 LET US SUM UP

There is no great ferment taking place in the world of religious ideas, beliefs, and rituals, or any marked increase in the sum of human spirituality. What we are witnessing today is less the resurgence of religion than of communalism, where a community of believers has not only a religious affiliation but also social, economic, and political interests in common. These may conflict with the corresponding interests of another community of believers sharing the same geographical space. The basic reason for supposing that religiously inspired reform movements may be gaining momentum in our time is that perceptions of inequity in human affairs and the tangible realities that provoke those perceptions are on the increase. Population growth on the one hand, and advanced means of communications on the other, more often than not disrupt accustomed ways of life. They help to create personal uncertainty, isolation, and disappointment. The resulting distress can and often does find expression in fundamentalist movements that attempt to counteract uncertainty, isolation, and disappointment by forming supportive communities of fellow believers. It is no accident that these movements are based in countries where the continuation of old village ways is becoming impossible for a majority of the population, where urban-based mass communications, by penetrating the villages, have begun to erode an age-old framework of peasant life. The problem in India is that the nation continues to keep religion and the state intertwined. In a country that has many religions, the government and the people must realize that religion and the state have to be separate. Mixing the two has never worked, and it never will. The stability of the state system depends critically on the state's role in balancing and mediating relationships between thousands of separate communities. Such balancing requires careful and measured degrees of impartiality, neutrality, syncretism, and tolerance. What has bound communities to each other has been the manufactured mechanisms and symbols of the secular state. These structures, while supportive of local religious and sectarian institutions, had to remain impartial, neutral, or secular. Future conflicts will be those of communal survival, aggravated, or in many cases caused by, environmental scarcity. These

conflicts will be sub national, meaning that it will be hard for states and local governments to protect their own citizens physically. This is how many states may ultimately die. As state power fades, peoples and cultures around the world will be thrown back upon their own strengths and weaknesses, with fewer equalizing mechanisms to protect them. The coming decades will see us more aware of our differences than our similarities. To the average person, political values will mean less and personal security more.

As we have already seen, Religious Fundamentalism is intertwined with many different motives which are often selfish and can be a serious source of intolerance, conflict and wars. Religion is meant to bring peace, good will, tolerance, love and social harmony among people. Thus religion becomes a doubled edged sword. What use we make of it depends on human mind and social conditions. We need to have better communal relations, tolerance and understanding of one another. Religion is a personal relationship between man and God. No one can or should come between the individual and God.

The modern and contemporary Indian Philosophers are very liberal and dynamic in outlook. They do not believe in sectarian religion. They advocate for cult less, non-dogmatic and non-ritualistic religion. Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Tagore, Gandhi and Dr. Radhakrishnan visualize a universal religion, which is open, dynamic and all embracing. Thus Mahatma Gandhi says, "My religion is Hinduism, which for me is religion of humanity and includes the best of all religions known to me." Ramakrishna Paramahansa emphatically says that all religions are true and they all serve as different pathways to the realization of God. The same truth runs in the heart of all religions. There is essential unity in all religions and yet there is diversity. While the reascent leaders have faith in the truth of all religions, they all hold that one particular religion should not be engrafted on another religion. Each religion has its value and serves society in a particular manner. The solace and satisfaction can be derived from religion only when it develops on indigenous lines. There should be growth in interiority and interiorization in all religions and they should flower independently on their own pattern. It will be harmful to reduce all religions to a colorless form of one particular religion.

Swami Vivekananda, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan and Mahatma Gandhi call on the Indian masses to break their narrowness and lead the life of *sanatana dharma*. The soul of religion is different

from its body. The myths and rites constitute the body of a religion which are perishable. The spirit of Indian religion is that of an open religion based on the intuitive experiences of God. A religious person is a social reformer and a true karma yogi like Mahatma Gandhi.

We have but one choice, the path of secular humanism based on the principles of logic and reason. Our founding fathers gave us a nation founded on the principle that power belongs to the people and set us on the path of a secular democratic state that respects religious freedom and human dignity. This alone can offer us the hope of providing every citizen with the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of excellence. Peace (Shanti in the Indian Scriptures) is fundamental to the Hindu way and view of life; in Islam beneficence and mercy (Rahman and Rahim in the Koran)

are the main attributes of God. With such profound similarities in mind, all Indians- Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and non believers- must re-examine their past, which can give them valuable clues on how to realize a more peaceful and cooperative future.

PONDER BOX-I

Think about the incidents where you feel that secular fabric of india hampered.

15.8 KEY WORDS

Antagonism: Feelings of hatred

Beleaguered: Experiencing a lot of criticism and difficulties.

Commitment: A promise to do or to behave in a particular way.

Communalism: A strong sense of belonging to a particular, especially religious, community, which can lead to extreme behaviour or violence towards others.

Conviction: A strong opinion or belief.

Doctrine: A belief or set of beliefs held and taught by a church, a political party etc.

Fanaticism: Extreme beliefs or behavior, especially in connection with religion or politics.

Incursions: Invasions, especially sudden or brief.

Inequity: Injustice.

Religious fundamentalism: The practice of following very strictly the basic rules and teachings of any religion.

Terrorism: The use of violent action in order to achieve political aims or to force a government to act

15.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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15.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

1. In fundamentalism there is denial, rejection, withdrawal into its own stronghold of conviction that the “old” is the only truth, the only good and that all that contradicts it is evil. So it can even be seen as a struggle between good and evil, good and evil on a cosmic scale. This “Good and evil is to be defined absolutely in terms of the group with no scope for compromise.” Such a struggle has often turned violent and is in some degree the root of World Wars. Karen Armstrong suggests that all fundamentalists’ movements have certain common characteristics: fears, anxieties and desires that they are a reaction against scientific and secular culture. Fundamentalism often leads to terrorism which is the greatest threat to the peace and development of society in the present century. Greed for power, wealth and fame are the fuel that feeds violence in the 21st century and these are often disguised as religious movements, movements of social concern and justice.

Check Your Progress II

1. Religion appears, no doubt, as a political force in the whole world. Politics gains at the cost of religion. It is equally evident that religious militancy develops from the practice of using religion to achieve political gains. Political use of religion begets intolerance, hatred, jealousy and terrorism. All religions in the world advocate peace, tolerance and brotherhood. The powerful vested interests often associate it with violence. Religious extremism and violence have become almost two sides of a coin, and thus throughout the world religious violence is spreading fast. All the major countries of the world have witnessed, over the past few decades, the rise of dangerous forms of religious militancy and extremism.