



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)
A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)
Volume-III, Issue-V, March 2017, Page No. 241-249
Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711
Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

“Overcoming Fundamentalism”: Review and Critique

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Abstract

Fundamentalism is a global phenomenon that has attracted the attention of scholars all over the world particularly in this twenty first century. There is a growing concern from all spheres with regards to fundamentalism. Economists, sociologists, anthropologists, theologians, philosophers and politicians among others seem to be overwhelmed by the phenomenon of fundamentalism and concerted efforts have been made to this effect with an aim of coming up with possible solutions on how to overcome fundamentalism. This review is one of such efforts that resulted from a conference and the efforts of Globethics.net. Such efforts illumined by faith and reason are of immense importance particularly in the modern or is it post-modern society characterized by the challenges of globalization, modernity, secularization and secularity, individualism, democracy, equality, social justice among other issues. The question however, is whether fundamentalism is the source or the solution to such challenges.

Keywords: Overcoming, Fundamentalism, Review, Critique, Development

1. Introduction: Fundamentalism in the onset of the diverse articles in the book has been given a number of definitions. The contention among the contributors however, seems to be the fact that there are fundamentalists not only in religion but in politics, development, economics, ideology and history as well. As such, I would adopt Dower’s first definition of fundamentalism as movement or attitude stressing strict and literal adherence to a set of basic principles (Dower, 2009: 20). I would include overemphasis on norms, ideology and values to this definition. Such a definition seems to locate fundamentalism outside the confines of religion as has been misconceived by many including some scholars.

With the above misconception, fundamentalism has been used with negative connotation particularly religious fundamentalism and perhaps this could be the reason why the scholars in this collection of articles thought of the title “overcoming fundamentalism.” It is common knowledge that the world is being challenged by extremists be it religious, political, cultural, social or democratic in all its corners. I think it has to be reiterated that fundamentalism as such is not bad though in its extreme end might be a hindrance to development particularly where necessary, developmental change is resisted by fundamentalists.

Nevertheless, we need fundamentalists to help us guard some of our core, incredible values and norms that might escape us in the face of secularization, modernity, development and globalization.

Fundamentalism has been rooted within American Protestantism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries where conservative evangelical Christians actively affirmed a “fundamental” set of Christian beliefs as a reaction to modernism. With such rooting, it is no wonder fundamentalism has been associated with religion, Christianity being among the most common. Does this mean that, prior to these centuries, fundamentalists did not exist. Definitely, not but the point is that the term was coined at such periods to describe the reactionists against modernism at the time.

Fundamentalism can thus be understood differently among different people of diverse cultures, beliefs, religious systems, epochs, ethnic groups, language among various diversities. A fundamentalist in an African economic or religious context would greatly differ from an American perception of fundamentalism.

This is why Mohammed’s analysis of the difference in conception of fundamentalism namely:- the Western conception and the African conception (Mohammed, 2009) are of immense importance as far as diversity is concerned. It brings about the whole debate on fundamentalism versus liberalism with a common assumption that the two terms are opposites. In the real sense however, they may not be since a fundamentalist may be a liberalist in some instance and the vice versa and sometimes none of the above applies in particular circumstances. If fundamentalism is equated with conservatism so that one who fights for the maintenance of the status quo, say morality in the case of religious fundamentalism in issues such as abortion or euthanasia is considered a fundamentalist then what about a situation where the same so called fundamentalist allows abortion as a result of the risk of death of the participant in the above case? Would such a fundamentalist be considered a liberalist? Indeed, the two may not necessarily be the case particularly among the Africans whose conception of the two terms differs greatly.

2. Causes of Fundamentalism: From the authors’ arguments, religious fundamentalism seems to be the core as far as fundamentalism is concerned. It affects the other pillars of culture such as politics, economy and development. To begin with, Fernando in his article analyses some of the causes of fundamentalism among them the growth of science, atheism, agnosticism, secularity and foreign rule. With regards to the growth of science, Fernando has argued that the fundamentalists have arose due to the fear of science replacing religion the very core of their life, living and interpersonal relationships (Fernando, 2009). Science has come and claims to provide the absolute truth through empirical investigation which religion may not offer. An example in this case is the evolution theory of Charles Darwin which is in opposition to creationism.

To religious fundamentalists however, creation theory is the norm and ideal with God as the Sole Creator and perfecter of life. To this end, Fernando borrows Auguste Comte’s tripplefold stages in the evolution of human society namely; theological stage, Metaphysical

stage and the positive stage to argue how science could have been a threat to religion resulting in the rise of fundamentalists. Science has seemed to replace Myths especially religious Myths nullifying them through empirical justifications and modification of the world to suit human needs. What is important however, as Fernando argues, is the complementarity between science and faith since there are certain metaphysical issues which science cannot answer through verification but faith (believe) alone can do. As such the growth of science ethically should not be the cause of religious fundamentalism.

As regards to foreign rule, religious fundamentalism could have arisen as a reaction of the natives of a particular nation to foreign rule. Fernando’s argument point to the West as being a foreign rule in most countries. Religious fundamentalists such as Muslim brotherhood in Egypt could have arisen as a reaction to West domination not only in Egypt but in other countries of the world where Western countries such as U.S.A seem to be introducing neo-colonialism. The past experience seems to be the reason why some religious fundamentalists have stood against encroachment by the West in their own internal affairs.

Secularism and secularity has been feared by some people who cherish their norms and values centered on human life. For some therefore, secularity comes in to replace their religious life since it has nothing to do with religion. This has caused religious fundamentalists who have stood against transformation of society towards secularity as they consider such a society distorted of basic values without which survival and existence is impossible. However, religious fundamentalists do not oppose a secular society as such but they fear the impacts and the place of religion in such a society.

The above serve as examples to some of the possible causes of fundamentalism with room for much more to be added. Indeed there are other possible causes of fundamentalism such as the world capitalism, globalization, growth in science and technology coupled with their effects on human life, society, communal interrelationships, environment, peace and harmony which have caused among other things the rise of fundamentalists, not only Muslim or Christian, but also economic, political or developmental fundamentalists.

3. Religious Fundamentalism: Religious fundamentalism which is of great interest to us as far as religious studies is concern is a world phenomenon. It is alive and kicking in all the world religions including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism to use Fernando’s terms. It is thus not the monopoly of Islam and Christianity as it has been presupposed by some, but it is a challenging and sometimes necessary in the major world religions. Fundamentalists in these various religions seem to share common characteristics such as insistence on strict conformity to the Holy Scriptures (written or oral), a basic belief system that is highly regarded and a moral code ostensibly based on it. Any conduct or ideology that seems to contradict and threaten the stability of the above core values is highly condemned, considered heretical and effective measures are constructed to deal with a peril at hand. This explains why some Muslim fundamentalist claim to be defending their faith (Islam) to the very end including fighting those who threaten the existence of Islam

directly or indirectly. Some of such acts have been justified in the name of *Jihad* which at times holds no basis at all as far as Islamic faith is concerned.

Such Muslims are those who Joseph I. Fernando categorizes as ultra – fundamentalist Muslims who are considered terrorists. It should be noted that not every act of terrorism is Islamic or of other world religion but terrorists undertake to carry out their extermination acts out of malicious motives other than that of *Jihad* or purgatory allusions among the Muslims and Christians respectively.

Even among particular religions in themselves, there are diverse fundamentalists. Such divergence could be as a result of differing stance on certain doctrines and belief system, subscribing to different religious teachers or founders of a religion, diverging interpretations of the Holy text among others. In general, inclination to a given pillar of faith at the expense of others could cause diverging fundamentalists within a religious tradition. For instance, among the Muslims, there are what we could name Wahabi (Arabian) Muslim fundamentalists and Shiite Iranian Muslim fundamentalist. The common known divisions in Islam as famously talked of are the Sunnis and Shiites. Each of these “brand” of Islam tend to claim to be the correct version of Islam and would want other Muslims in different countries, ethnic communities, cultural systems, socio-political and economic spheres to subscribe to their own version of Islam. This is also the case with Christianity which has witnessed a proliferation of religious movements across the world each claiming its own special revelation from God. It can be argued that each religious movement arise in the claim of correcting a particular incorrect doctrine, injustice, religious practice, social evils among other vices which they feel that the existing religious denominations especially the so called mainline churches have failed to provide. Such visions and missions can be said to be as a result of religious fundamentalism.

The same could be said of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Sikhism but the above cases of Christianity and Islam suffice as an example to illustrate the aforementioned point. This is something which seems not to have been captured well in this book so that while talking of religious fundamentalists be it in Islam, Christianity or Hinduism, we should take into consideration the above divergences.

4. Fundamentalism and Politics: Fundamentalism is also pushing itself rather strongly to politics. Religious fundamentalism plays a key role in the politics of a nation and more often the major religious system (faith) in a given nation seems to affect the politics of that nation. Kenya for instance, as per the 2009 population census can be said to be Christian with about 86% of the Kenyan population indicating to be Christians. As such it can be argued that Christian fundamentalists would have a better hand in influencing the politics of this nation as compared to Muslim fundamentalists who are minority. The same could be argued of a country such as Indonesia, Iraq, and Somalia among other nations that are predominantly Islamic. Muslims in such countries have an upper hand in influencing the politics of the day in such nations. When Kenya was adopting a new constitution that was promulgated in the year 2010, a number of clauses particularly on abortion was strongly

opposed by Christians. Christian fundamentalists thought that such a clause would open doors for abortion which is anti-life as opposed to the church’s pro-life policy. The debate of inclusion or recognition of Sharia law in the same constitution also arose opposition from the Christian majority.

In terms of elections, fundamentalism comes in handy and determines the winning party to some extent. U.S.A famous political parties could serve as an example particularly that of Republican and its opponent Democrat. Salkeld (Canada) has argued this case vividly using the catholic denomination. In such a case, fundamentalists in different religious affiliations would tend to support a particular candidate depending on how it sets out policies either to safeguard the fundamentals or norms of the society especially in religion or it goes against them. As Brett suggests however there is need to consider the impact of some of such political policies in totality rather than in isolation if fundamentalists would want to make positive impact on their country’s political system for the common good of all in the society.

Fundamentalists in such cases have sometimes sought to safeguard specific moral conducts, norms or values to their own end rather than the whole society. A case of this is Muslims trying to enforce Sharia law or its recognition in almost every country where Islam exists which is ideally impossible and malicious.

5. Fundamentalism and Economy: Economy is another important pillar of culture which is greatly influenced by fundamentalism. This could as well be argued with reference to development but nevertheless, let us have a look at economy in isolation first. Economic fundamentalists arise especially where economic structures and policies propagate social injustices, inequality and poverty. Wijaya (Indonesia) has argued his case though with particular reference to Christian and Islamic fundamentalist in Indonesia. His case is based on two types of Christian fundamentalism. “Book – centered ‘rational’ fundamentalism namely conservative – evangelicalism” and “experience – centered charismatic and Pentecostal fundamentalism.” (Wijaya, 2009: 132). Wijaya has shown how the phenomenon of “Gospel of prosperity” has forced its way to Indonesia and influence its economy. According to him, there is a close affinity between religion and Indonesia economy where business – oriented men and women of most of ethnic Chinese origin have founded religious movements or are they religious organizations, some of which are funded from America. Success and prosperity, a mission or motto to most religious organizations such as the Indonesian Bethany Church, seems to be a disguise of wealthy middle class people pursuing their own agendas in the name of religion. This is why he argues that such organizations attract the middle class people and business people. He also agrees with Brouwel et.al that those who convert to neo-Pentecostalism are already rich and that joining the organization means finding pastoral support as well as incorporating into a new business network thus increasing the strength and opportunity of doing business better (Wijaya, 2009). As he has argued, Christian fundamentalists are at peace with an existing economic system and structure as long as its emphasis is on the individual. This is particularly so for the so called Charismatic and Pentecostal movements. The mainline protestant

fundamentalists on the other hand would oppose existing economic system and structure which they view as evil mainly due to the influence of liberation theology.

As regard to Islamic fundamentalism and economy, there have been controversies on the Sharia law. Fundamental Muslims want the Sharia law be recognized and applied as far as economy is concerned. This is even more explicit in Muslim dominated nations such as Indonesia where Muslims believe that the moral problems and challenges facing a country such as Indonesia can only be solved effectively by implementing Sharia more comprehensively in the wider public sphere of politics, economy, media, civil law and education and not only in marriage and worship alone within the Muslim community as has been the case. Practically this may not be possible in a country such as Indonesia with Christians even if they could be the minority and the national principle of “unity in plurality” (Wijaya, 2009:139) rules out such fundamentalist approach to economic issues.

It is impossible to go back to the use of gold and silver in the world monetary system as some Muslim fundamentalists propose; a system they argue was used at the time of Prophet Muhammad. While fundamentalists, not only in Islam but in other world religions in whichever country, seek to streamline the society and seek solutions to problems be they economic, political or developmental by appealing to their faith, there is need to seek for practicable and universal solutions that can be applied with minimum cost (not only in terms of money) for the common good of all.

6. Fundamentalism and Development: Fundamentalism and development is another interesting title as noted by Dower (Dower, 2009). The two concepts have been perceived to be in conflict which holds ground to some degree especially where fundamentalists resist rudimentary developmental changes. Nigel does it well to begin by distinguishing between concept and conceptions of development since it can be conceived differently. As he posits, “a basic concept of development is something like a process of change – social, economic, political” (Dower, 2009: 18). He adds that it involves conceptions of human wellbeing, appropriate moral and political norms among others, coupled with a broad empirical understanding of how best to realize these norms. This clarity is important as it points to development wholesomely to include human development which some scholars tend to forget sometimes. The varied conceptions of development which Nigel highlights include libertarian, liberal and Marxist or socialist.

With such, fundamentalists may hinder development in various ways either socially, economically or politically. As Nigel has argued, fundamentalists allow changes in the society as long as it does not interfere with their way of life, religious beliefs, or norms. They would want such development that would allow them to live as they want and allow those who subscribe to their fundamental view exist and live as they should and not to be coerced in the name of development. The liberals on the other consider change as necessary and inevitable. Fundamentalism can therefore affect development since fundamentalists sometimes tend to focus on development from their own point of view and would want others and everything else be done on the basis of their own moral code, belief or values.

Nevertheless, there are those fundamentalist who do not necessarily want to be given a space or be recognized as such but only want a peaceful environment to exist and continue living peacefully and non-violently to those whom they do not necessarily want to subscribe to their ideology, belief or moral code. Such fundamentalists, as the Amish in the U.S.A may not be a hindrance to development but instead facilitate and contribute towards the nation’s development through their rich art, pottery, mechanics and moral codes among other skills.

If development is looked at in terms of economic growth and poverty reduction, which is really the case, then fundamentalists just like liberals play a key role in development. The means to achieve such an end in terms of poverty reduction and social justice and equality remains a challenge to many. For some fundamentalists such as in Islam, the end seems to justify the means. This has resulted to vices such as terrorism. There is need for an ethic of means which should not be violent. In addition, development should be looked at broadly outside the confines of economic growth. Fundamentalists may reject development in such sense due to a number of factors such as the materialist spirit behind development, impact on environment, injustices and inequality in such development which they may find as inconsistent with their fostering the spiritual nature of human well being properly understood. In such cases, fundamentalists, to me, are not hindrances to development looked at in terms of economic growth, but they become an eye-opener to those implementing change or economic policies.

7. Fundamentalism and Globalization: Globalization and fundamentalism has attracted the attention of scholars from all-over the globe. It is increasingly being asserted in almost every discipline that the world is becoming a global village. This implies easier and faster communication, sharing of information and knowledge, uplifting one another either economically, politically or even religiously. It is common knowledge however that globalization has come with its own impacts some of which are adverse especially with regard to human life. Animosity, environmental pollution and degradation, increased dependency ratio, high cost of living, oppression of the poor among other issues are example of the impact of globalization. As such, religion plays a key role in averting some of the above disastrous effects through religious fundamentalists who have opposed some policies which have been enforced in the name of globalization. Issues such as free market capitalism, consumerism and central power are as a result of globalization. In essence globalization presupposes equality as all are expected to share but the contrary of a centre drawing from the periphery seems to be the ideal. This is why religious fundamentalists have opposed globalization such as Muslim fundamentalists considering it as neo-colonialism. This is why some have considered globalization as a fundamentalist religion which Adeney – R. Kotta (Indonesia) clearly refutes by arguing that globalization encompasses several economic structures that seek to transform human relationships, of which religion is one, at an almost unimaginable speed. The questions that remains unanswered throughout this book is who globalizes who and to what end? What in essence should globalization mean for particular continents and countries of the world?

8. Overcoming Fundamentalism: The authors of this book have gone further each proposing an ethics as a way of overcoming fundamentalism. The most striking ones include an ethic of recognition, ethic of tolerance, economic ethic, ethic of science and ethic of means. An ethic of recognition which has been discussed broadly by Fernando (2009) includes recognition of the other. The other here includes persons, races, communities, cultures, nations, languages, traditions, ideologies among others which are different from one’s own (Fernando, 2009). It implies going beyond the self (egocentrism) to include others in the circle such that each, no matter minor, he, she or it may be, is recognized as part of the circle without whom the circle is incomplete and thus no longer a circle. At the same time an ethic of recognition implies recognition of oneself in relation to others. It is recognition of what it means to be human and how to discover the truth of oneself in the other person i.e. rediscovering the value and dignity of the human person both in oneself and others (Fernando, 2009). Fernando has went further to argue that lack of an ethic of recognition threatens peace, rejects pluralism, rejects history of scholarship, encourages intolerance and threatens progress and welfare.

Recognition alone however is not enough. We need to recognize and respect others belief, existence, moral code, ideology or principles and seek to enrich one another in love and tolerance. Fernando adds ethics of non-violence to ethic of recognition.

Ethic of tolerance goes hand in hand with ethics of recognition so that by recognizing others we learn to tolerate them and include them in our worldviews. It implies transcending the boundaries of indifference and allowing our strengths to enrich their weaknesses and our weaknesses be enriched by their strengths. There is something that each of the major world religions have to the other and to learn from the other.

Economic ethic will go a long way in overcoming economic fundamentalism and ensure that those who champion economic growth and change in terms of development are bound by the ethic of economy. This implies being ready to accept and take responsibility for our actions as far as economy is concerned especially in terms of economic policies and processes.

Ethic of science implies consistency of science with the ideal facts and empirical procedures involved. In essence, there is no science without ethics thus fundamentalism should not arise as a result of science. How such an ethic is developed and adhered to however, remains a challenge and unknown to most since science have emerge to claim the absolute truth verified empirically.

An ethic of means implies justification for the processes used to achieve an end. In terms of development, and fundamentalism, Dower proposes an ethic of means where the means should justify the end even though the contrary seems to be the ideal in reality.

9. Conclusion: The authors in the book reviewed have looked at fundamentalism in its broader sense though religious fundamentalism seems to take the bulk of the book. What does such a move point at? Probably it points at the significance of religion as an important

pillar of culture which affects the other pillars particularly politics, economy (democracy, globalization, development) and ethics. Indeed, religion is an indispensable pillar of culture and the mirror of society.

Most of the authors have focused in Indonesia as a Muslim dominated nation to illustrate the impact of fundamentalism particularly religious fundamentalism and its relation to other pillars of culture. It has to be noted however, that there are fundamentalists in other world religions which calls for further research. Again, fundamentalism is not only in religion but in other institutions of the society such as politics and economy. Africa is represented by Mohammed (Ethiopia) who does it well to distinguish the conception of fundamentalism in Africa from the Western conception. Fundamentalists are necessary though they could be hindrance to development.

It has to be appreciated, however that the proposal of an ethic especially that of recognition and tolerance are a great contribution from these authors. The challenge is how such ethical responses clearly outlined and proposed by the authors can be effectively implemented in the contemporary society where human life seems to be threatened by various forces of globalization, development, democracy, economics and politics. To lay down policies or to write down proposals is one thing and to implement is another thing. I wonder if such a call as an ethic of non-violence would make some sense in countries that have been in war such as South Sudan. I tend to think that such wars and indifferences could as well be addressed through dialogue where dialogue is participant involving the two groups willingly accepting to come together and dialogue and settling their differences without necessarily being coerced to.

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