

Dogma and Letter: at the roots of religious fundamentalism

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The "FBK Dictionary" feature articles go on with a historical and contemporary overview of the concept of fundamentalism.

Sept. 11, Bataclan, Gaza Strip, Bin Laden, ISIS: these are just a few of the names of places, people, events and organizations that gravitate to the semantic field of **"fundamentalism,"** a term that since the big watershed, i.e. the Twin Towers bombing, has become integrated as a disturbing guest in Western public discourse.

Yet, **the term has a more remote history;** its meaning today differs partially from the original one: when it appeared, it did not have a negative connotation.

Brief historical background

If one were to revitalize the original meaning of the term, one could speak of **"literalism"**: it was in fact to reiterate the importance of total adherence to the letter of the sacred text that **"The Fundamentals"** of the **Testimony Publishing Company of Chicago** was published and circulated throughout America, in **the 1910s**. Fundamentalism was a current of thought in Protestantism, born within the Baptist Church, that opposed theological rationalism, modernism and in general all those liberal reinterpretations of the sacred text that tended to accommodate Revelation to the needs and evolutions of contemporary society.

The appeal to the **Fundamentals** was felt to be necessary by Protestant traditionalism in that age of modernization and innovation, and in some respects represents one of the poles of a classic dichotomy in the exegetical traditions of the Abrahamic religions: to stick to what is said in Scripture as accurately as possible or to reread it as a model to be adapted each time to political and social contingencies.

However, fundamentalism itself is an interpretation. **Hans-Georg Gadamer** made it clear that it is **impossible to approach a text** and propose an exegesis of it **without personal biases and beliefs** that will influence the reading. To find the universal traits of fundamentalism, one must focus on two **aspects that are more formal than content: blind faith in dogma** and

the “totalitariness” of the sacred text over every aspect of life.

Dogmas

“Thus it is and thus it cannot not be”: paraphrasing **Parmenides**, this may be the belief underlying all fundamentalist thinking. From its origins, fundamentalism has opposed the activities of analysis and interpretation, the development of an individual critical spirit, by insisting on a **blind**

adherence to intuitive principles, usually easily understood, and clear-cut prescriptions: dogmas. To the modern eye, educated in a secularized or otherwise religiously liberal rationality, this might seem an antiquated remnant of remote and outdated times. However, this view does not explain the **resurgence of religious fundamentalism**: what drives a young person who is born, grows up and is raised in the Western world to adopt lifestyles and thinking of a religion of remote historical-geographical roots (in its most extremist declinations), which in some cases is not even part of his or her cultural background from birth?

The answer can be given on different levels: sociological, educational, existential. Certainly, any response must take into account the individual’s perceived **sense of failure** in what is the mismatch between their expectations of society and what it offers them. Social marginalization, meaninglessness, limited opportunities for socioeconomic mobility, and situations of isolation are some of the factors that help paint a picture of the unique lived experience of the individual who embraces religious fundamentalism.

Foundational fundamentalism

Another distinctive feature of religious fundamentalism is its **totalizing character** on every aspect of daily life. If one were to consider the different fundamentalisms “by degrees,” classification could be made on the basis of the degree to which the regulation of every aspect of one’s life is consistent with the sacred text.

A Muslim couple that decides not to be polygamous might have recognized the socio-historical value that this practice had in Muhammad’s time, which allowed a man to economically support multiple women. In contrast, a *Wahabi* might continue to legitimize polygamy, in accordance with the letter of the Quran.

Al-Qaeda and Isis, which are often considered in pairs, differ greatly in how they interpret offensive *jihad*. Al-Qaeda was conceived with the intent to drive out Western interference in Muslim countries and establish an Islamic government there. For ISIS, on the other hand, *jihad* is aimed at a restoration of the caliphate, and with it Islam’s expansionist aims. In one case *jihad* is mostly a liberation war, in the other an expansionist war.

Even among fundamentalist (and literalist) organizations, then, **interpretations diverge**. What remains is an **uncritical conformity** to that interpretation and the ways of life it dictates, and the consequent **unwillingness to engage in dialogue: dialogue** which – as we well know – is the antidote to these forms of violent polarization, and which it is incumbent on us to try to establish with these othernesses. Both to understand them better ourselves, but also to understand if, how and when, we too have been wrong in something.

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