

JAKOBUS M. VORSTER

## PERSPECTIVES ON THE CORE CHARACTERISTICS OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM TODAY

**Abstract:** The surge of religious fundamentalism is a present reality. This way of reasoning breeds ideologies that are both religious and political in nature and mount themselves against a perceived threat or enemy in order to protect their identities. These ideologies elevate certain fundamentals of a particular religion or life- and worldview to absolutes and interlace their ideas and methods around these absolutes. With a strong reactionary attitude, fundamentalist ideologies and religions easily resort to extremism, militancy, abuses of human rights and even violence. Religious fundamentalist movements share certain characteristics, although they also express features that are particular to the religious tradition from which they emerged. They have many characteristics in common, and this fact points to the possibility that fundamentalist movements emerge under the impact of rather similar processes of social transformation. The purpose of this article is to identify, by way of a comparative literary study, the most outstanding characteristics of religious fundamentalism as it appear in its most prominent manifestations in today's world.

**Jakobus M. Vorster**

is the Director of the School of Ecclesiastical Studies of the North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus) in South Africa. His field of research is Christian Ethics with special reference to the ethics of human rights and human dignity. Email: [Koos.Vorster@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Koos.Vorster@nwu.ac.za)

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### **Introduction**

The term fundamentalism was first used to identify a certain movement in Protestant Christianity which germinated in the United States in the 1920's and spread to other parts of the world.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays the concept is used to describe a certain form of religious belief which is characterised by extremism and an inclination to violence. I have defined this contemporary movement in a previous article in *the Journal for the study of Religions and Ideologies*.<sup>2</sup> In the article I concluded that contemporary religious fundamentalism can be defined as a way of reasoning which breeds ideologies that are both religious and political in nature and mount themselves against a perceived threat or enemy in order to protect their identities. These ideologies elevate certain fundamentals of a particular religion or life- and worldview to absolutes and interlace their ideas and methods around these absolutes. With a strong reactionary attitude, fundamentalist ideologies and religions easily resort to extremism, militancy, abuses of human rights and even violence. The clearest example of this is the current Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East and Africa.<sup>3</sup>

Riesebrodt raises a valid point when he says that these fundamentalist movements share certain characteristics, although they also express features that are particular to the religious tradition from which they

emerged. They have many characteristics in common, and this fact points to the possibility that fundamentalist movements emerge under the impact of rather similar processes of social transformation.<sup>4</sup>

The surge of fundamentalism is a present reality and it inhibits peace keeping and the maintenance of human rights in parts of the world troubled by violence and the violation of the principle of human dignity. How should this reality be managed in today's Liberal Democracies in such a way that human rights can be protected and peace be promoted? To answer this question, a clear understanding of the characteristics of fundamentalism and the way it operates is essential.

The purpose of this article is to identify, by way of a comparative literary study the most outstanding characteristics of contemporary religious fundamentalism as it appears in its most prominent forms in today's world. To my mind an understanding of these core characteristics can assist the management of this movement in Liberal Democracies and transitions from unjust systems to Liberal Democracies. The oldest feature of fundamentalism is the particular way in which this movement deals with religious texts or the basic tradition it stems from. Barr has done valuable research with respect to Christian fundamentalism regarding its use of scripture in his well-known book<sup>5</sup> and the summary in an article.<sup>6</sup> Recently, scholars such as Voll<sup>7</sup> and Esack<sup>8</sup> researched the same issue regarding the use of the Qur'an in Islam. For that reason, the use of religious texts in fundamentalist movements will be the first topic to be discussed in this article.

### The literalist use of religious texts

In general, religious fundamentalism rests on the claim "that some source of ideas, usually a text, is inerrant and complete".<sup>9</sup> Antoun defines this important trend in fundamentalism as scripturalism.<sup>10</sup> A source or a text is used in a literalist way, irrespective of its cultural, historical or literary background. Scripturalism is also heavily dependent on the use of proof-texts because proof-texts provide the fundamentals necessary for the formation of an own identity in the wake of a perceived threat.

As generally used, the term 'fundamentalism' (in Christianity – JMV) designates a form of conservative, evangelical Protestantism that, along with other traditional doctrines such as the Trinity, Incarnation, deity of Christ (Christology), original sin, human depravity, and justification by faith, lays an exceptional stress on the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible as the absolutely essential foundation and criterion of truth. Along with this emphasis goes the stress on personal involvement and appropriation of the grace of God.<sup>11</sup>

This doctrine disregards the human element and proclaims that God used people as instruments without the contribution of their human circumstances. Therefore, Scripture is verbally inspired, inerrant and in

toto the source of principles and norms applicable to modern-day life. On account of this theory, conservative fundamentalists usually limit their hermeneutical principles to the divine nature of the written Word of God and the grammatical and linguistic set-up of the biblical material. They believe in the inerrancy of Scripture and appreciate the divine inspiration as a verbal inspiration, which is the inspiration of every detail of the original text.<sup>12</sup> They utilise this mechanical inspiration theory which rejects the human element in the recording of the written text. They disregard the cultural and historical background, as well as the importance of the genre of the text and the relevance of the unfolding revelation history in the text. They use the biblical text in a “proof-text” manner and believe that every text has a bearing on modern day life.

A word more often used to describe this means of biblical interpretation is *Biblicism*. In his thorough study on the ethical meaning of the Ten Commandments in the modern society, Douma also warns against the dangers of *Biblicism* for the understanding and application of Christian ethics. He understands *Biblicism* to be an appeal to Scripture that uses the biblical texts in an atomistic (isolated) way by lifting them out of their immediate contexts or out of the whole context of Scripture.<sup>13</sup> Many examples of *Biblicist* interpretation can be mentioned, such as:

- The belief that the cosmos was created in six days of twenty-four hours and that history is calculatable according to the time frames provided in the Old Testament. This view disregards the results of paleontological and other scientific research totally;
- the belief that any form of international political or economic alliances run against the kingdom of God;<sup>14</sup>
- the justification of capital punishment with an appeal to Gen. 9:5-6;<sup>15</sup>
- the belief that women should be submissive in Church and society;
- the justification of a policy of land restitution according to the Jubilee in the Old Testament;<sup>16</sup>
- the justification of the use of violence in political liberation with an appeal to the Exodus in the Old Testament.

Many more examples of *Biblicist* interpretation can be mentioned that became sacred principles for many Christians and deeply influenced their life-styles and conduct. The literal use of a sacred text is not limited to certain traditions in Protestant Christianity. A certain view of the hermeneutics regarding the understanding and interpretation of the Qur'an and the Shari'ah in the modern-day society is at the root of Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>17</sup> According to Esack, a reader should understand the nature of the Qur'an in order to understand its message. The Qur'an refers to a revealed oral discourse that unfolded as a part of God's response to the requirements of society over a period of twenty years.<sup>18</sup> It is the revealed word of God and for Muslims, to invoke the Qur'an, is to invoke God.

The revelations forming the Qur'an can be divided in two parts according to the stages in the life of the prophet Muhammed. He received

his first revelations in Mecca, where he was born. The Meccan text focuses on the three essential elements of Islamic doctrine namely the absolute oneness of God, the prophethood of Muhammed and the final accountability of the people in the presense of God. In the face of persecution, Muhammed later fled to Medina. The Medinan revelations therefore deal with the issues of community building and the problems arising from them. Laws regarding the socio-political relations based on moral instructions revealed in the Meccan phase were now supplied in some detail. These contexts should be taken into account when interpreting the Qur'an.

Esack explains that the Qur'an presents God as actively engaged in the affairs of this world and of humankind.<sup>19</sup> The idea of progressive step-by-step revelation, with regard to the needs of the community, is reflected in two key notions connected to the revelation, occasions of revelation and abrogation. Occasions of revelation is a discipline within qur'anic studies that deals with the cause of the revelation, and abrogation means the elaboration of different modes of abrogation or cancellation of a text by another. Moderate Muslim scholars debate these hermeneutical principles, but agree, in general, that all exegesis of the Qur'an should study the time and place in order to understand how directives respond to the specific situations.<sup>20</sup>

Over against this view, Islamic fundamentalists argue that the Qur'an, as God's literal and eternal word, should be interpreted according to the literal meaning of the words and concepts. They use Islamic scripture as the filter through which all discussion passes.<sup>21</sup> Scripture is used in a proof-text manner, just as in the case of Christian fundamentalism. Islamic fundamentalists therefore tend to hold the Shari'ah in high esteem and aim to elevate the Shari'ah to the document that should form the foundation of all legislation in Islamic countries.<sup>22</sup> These countries value themselves as theocracies with the Shari'ah as the judicial basis. This is the reason for the harsh penalties against crime, the inferior position of women and the justification of capital punishment in Islamic countries ruled by the Shari'ah.

Amongst many others, two features of this way of reasoning in Islamic fundamentalism should be emphasised. These are the notions of *jihad* and *martyrdom*. According to this kind of hermeneutics, fundamentalist Muslims understand the concept of *jihad* as a militant agenda on the basis of the military language of scripture. In a well-argued article, Heck describes how this concept is used in the written tradition and how it was, and still is, translated into a form of violent struggle to promote Islam rule, ideas and culture. He says that:

The term in its various forms signifies a divine test (Q 47:31) to distinguish the lukewarm believers (Q 4:95; 9:81) from those who desire God's satisfaction (Q 60:1) and strive body and soul in His way (Q 9:41, 88). *Jihad*, regardless of sphere of action, is a means of separating true belief

from infidelity (Q 25:52) and ranking the intention and merit of those who believe (Q 8:72-75). It is the mark of those who take up the mission of God without fear of blame or doubt (Q 5:54 and 49:15). Primarily at stake in the qur'anic significance of *jihad* is not warfare per se but the degree of devotion to God's cause over concern for worldly affairs (Q 9:19, 24; 60:2).<sup>23</sup> *Jihad* in the Qur'an signals not military activity per se, but a righteous or right cause before God. Primarily at stake in the qur'anic significance of *jihad* is not warfare per se, but the degree of devotion to God's cause over concern for worldly affairs (Q 9:19, 24; 60:2), and a righteous or right cause before God.

In spite of these teachings, *jihad* was interpreted as military action to protect the Islam rule and culture in times of oppression or military aggression against the Islamic countries. The crusades incited *jihads* as defensive actions. Modern-day fundamentalist readings go back to these interpretations and find motivation in the idea that Islam territory and culture should be protected and even expanded by way of a *jihad* against the forces endangering Islam. *Jihad* is currently seen as a salvific and purifying act with the ultimate goal of establishing a messianic caliphal state encompassing all Muslims.<sup>24</sup> The state should be a theocracy that must be established and defended against "evil forces". These forces are westernism and globalisation. The current waves of terrorist actions against "the enemies of Islam" are the execution of a *jihad*, a legitimate war to uphold and protect Islamic values according to the fundamentalist way of reasoning. Terrorist groups waging a *jihad* against non-Muslims include *Al Qaida* and are currently active in Indonesia, Kashmir, Palestine, Egypt and Yemen.<sup>25</sup>

Due to Islamic fundamentalism's literalist use of scripture, *martyrdom* is seen as the pinnacle of *jihad*. In his illuminating article Cook explains that *martyrdom operations* are justified by many modern-day *fatwas* (legal opinions). Some condone *martyrdom operations* only against Israel, others for the advance of the *Al Qaida* cause and others for any form of promotion of Islamic ideals. In these *fatwas*, the current state of the Muslim world is usually painted in stark and humiliating terms for Muslims world wide, which are presented as those lacking all choice or volition in the contemporary world.<sup>26</sup> Although suicide is forbidden in the Qur'an (2:195, 4:29), radical Muslims use other texts as proof-texts to justify *martyrdom*, such as (2:207) which deals with giving one life for God, (9:110) which involves the believer giving up his life in turn for the promise of the Paradise, (2:96) which addresses the punishment of the "evil-doers" attached to this life and (2:249) which is the qur'anic version of the story of David and Goliath.

The same hermeneutics can be discerned in the Jewish fundamentalist traditions. Aran utilises the concept *torahcracy*, which indicates the ideal in these circles to create a state based on the laws and customs of the Torah. They wish to re-instate the ancient system of law

and justice, and even economics. A journal, the *Takdim*, promotes these ideas and a leading project on this front is: “Proposed Torah Constitution for the State of Israel,” opens with the statement: “The State of Israel is a Torahcratic republic”.<sup>27</sup> The fundamentalist movement seeks to bring its religious message to all society and even to impose it if necessary. It should be noted, however, that these groups comprise a minority of the Jewish population and not seem to influence Israeli politics at the moment. Still, they are active and a destructive force in the peace process in the Middle East.

The “three religions of the Book” namely Christianity, Islam and Judaism have, in spite of deep-rooted differences in theology and ethics, one remarkable similarity. All three are prone to fundamentalism because of the danger of a literalist use of the respective scriptures. Scripturalism meets the need for certainty and authority for many people and gives them confidence in their pursuits.<sup>28</sup> The appeal of these fundamentalisms is great because of the use of proof-texts that are easy to understand and to follow. Nationalism and patriotism combined with self-centric ideals create dangerous forces where violence for the sake of furthering a holy agenda becomes a romantic and even sacral strategy of change. Therefore, the literalist use of scripture can be regarded as the most important characteristic of fundamentalism. Scripturalism is usually accompanied by another driving force in the fundamentalist pursuits, and this characteristic can be termed as traditioning.

### Traditioning

While scripturalism reaches back to the ancient roots and professes the will of God according to a literal and a-historical use of texts in order to highlight the core fundamentals of religion, traditioning is an attempt to provide further authority to these fundamentals by indicating their stand and value in the tradition of the particular religion.

Consequently, fundamentalism has a strong inclination to the history of its tradition. Riesebrodt explains that tradition is transformed into an ideology in the sense of being a comprehensive system of explanation and agitation. In this process, tradition is expanded into a relatively systematic and consistent social critique and theory of history, society and salvation.<sup>29</sup> It glorifies the positive and outstanding events of its past and this glorification becomes simultaneously a foundation and guideline for its modern-day intentions. What Schutte says about the development of racism is, to my mind, also applicable to the development of fundamentalism. Just as racists, fundamentalists will start with a reconstruction of their religious tradition to stimulate the “we feeling” and to justify their position on certain issues.<sup>30</sup>

This is the reason why some Christian fundamentalists adore the Reformation and the glorious moments where martyrs resisted the Spanish



Inquisition. As was done in Geneva, they want modern society to legislate on the basis of the Ten Commandments. They single out the hymns, liturgical practices, church polity and moral codes of those times as examples for the churches today.

Muslim fundamentalists, on the other hand, relish the military conquests in the initial stages of Islam, as well as in the successes of the Islam invasion of large parts of the world. They use the *Sharia'ah* and the *Hadith* as the sources for modern-day legal systems in Islamic states and culture. They single out the achievements of the “big” spiritual, military and political leaders of the past and transform them into larger than life examples to be honoured and followed. They also applaud the current “successes” of Islamic terrorist groups as victories in the struggle against westernism.

In the same way, Jewish fundamentalists lionize the sacred history of Israel and see the modern state of Israel as the fulfilment of a messianic ideal as it was envisioned by the prophets of old. Fundamentalism in other world religions also elevates certain historical events, leaders and myths to absolutes that are then used to promote and strengthen the spirit of their movement today. Examples of such traditioning are provided in the informative articles of Gold regarding Hindu fundamentalism<sup>31</sup>, Swearer regarding Buddhist fundamentalism<sup>32</sup>, Wei-ming regarding Confucian fundamentalism<sup>33</sup>, Madan regarding Sikh fundamentalism<sup>34</sup> and Davis regarding political fundamentalism in Japan.<sup>35</sup>

The literalist use of religious texts and traditioning usually results in a particular manner in which ethical principles and norms are designed and implemented. Therefore, Religious fundamentalism becomes known for its adherence to casuistic ethics.

### Casuistic ethics

The term casuistry denotes the methodical process of bringing individual, real-life cases under the established norms of a discipline or a world-view or ethics.<sup>36</sup> Casuistic ethics points to a legalistic ethical system that is not controlled by applying principles and norms in every new situation, but which provide a fixed recipe for moral conduct. Casuistic ethics aims to control life with moral laws and to deny the individual the right of freedom of choice when it comes to the management of their behaviour and conduct. Usually casuistic ethics enforces and outwardly fixed life style instead of promoting guiding moral principles and norms for humans to realise in their lifestyles.

Casuistry is typical of fundamentalism. Just as fundamentalism elevates certain fundamentals to absolutes and interlaces its whole ideology around these absolutes, it promotes a legalistic lifestyle consisting of many outwardly ways of conduct, symbols and social structures. Their ethic is thus primary an ethic of law, which tends to be rather rigid because

of the concreteness of legal regulations.<sup>37</sup> In Christian fundamentalism for example, this way of reasoning will produce a list of rights and wrongs on the Lord's Day. In Islamic fundamentalism, the casuistic ethics surfaces in all kinds of laws, for example dietary laws.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, they underlie the custom of men wearing a beard and other strict laws regarding clothing. Such moral laws are also evident in other fundamentalist traditions.

Riesebrodt explains that this rigid moralism in fundamentalism usually rotates around certain facets of human conduct, and that is the case in virtually all the fundamentalist traditions.<sup>39</sup> These are:

- Gender relations. Fundamentalists all tend to idealise patriarchal structures in authority and morality. Males are valued as superior according to a creational order, and women should be submissive. This point of view results in many violations of the rights of women and girl children in many societies.<sup>40</sup>
- Family relations. The strict patriarchal structures also dominate families and households. Fundamentalists tend to hold strong views on the necessity of discipline and will give preferentiality to corporal punishment and other forms of authoritarian disciplinary action.
- Sexuality. Islamic fundamentalism's casuistry is also evident in its strange and inconsistent sexual morality. Women will be punished more severely for sexual offences than men. Sexual offences by males are treated more leniently. They regard the liberal standards of the modern world as "westoxication".<sup>41</sup>
- The application of law and order. Religious fundamentalists are very adamant campaigners for capital punishment. They propose death penalties for a number of crimes, and Islamic fundamentalists even approve of the deplorable practice of "honour killings" of female adulteresses.

Casuistic ethics usually results in a culture of rigid moralism where there is no room for any form of pluralism, differences of opinions on morals, or diversity in conduct. Religious fundamentalism opposes cultural pluralism, religious diversity and multiparty politics. The casuistic character of its ideologies causes a reactionary approach to other ideas, movements and structures and an intolerant attitude to opposing views and people of other faiths and conviction.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, they are known for their prejudice when faced with anything new or alien to their own strict ideas and morals.

### Reactionary nature, prejudice and intolerance

Religious fundamentalism is usually caused by the fear of a perceived enemy. Fundamentalists define themselves in large by what they are against. It is, therefore, reactionary in nature. They always have a very real and easily identifiable enemy.<sup>43</sup> It is this reactionary nature that



differentiate religious fundamentalism from mere orthodoxy, traditionalism or conservatism. Marty contends that the difference between religious fundamentalism and conservative or orthodox outlooks lies chiefly in the fact that religious fundamentalism is reactive.<sup>44</sup> In another article, he describes this characteristic of religious fundamentalism as “oppositionalism”.<sup>45</sup> Coreno says that most sociologists and historians agree that religious fundamentalism is a reaction to the effects of modernisation. They fear the onslaught of modern values, customs and institutions on their own identity.<sup>46</sup> Christian fundamentalism in the West fears the influence of biblical criticism and its perceived degenerative effects on Christian doctrine and moral values.<sup>47</sup> Preaching in these circles consists, more often than not, of a tirade against modernity and an explanation of the conspiracies of modern leadership in view of ingenious interpretation of biblical prophecies. They nurture the faith of their adherents by pointing to the constant dangers threatening true believers and the appeal to be steadfast in the face of all the onslaughts on the children of God. In ecclesiastical circles they tend to be schismatic, and many church denominations in Reformed, Presbyterian and Charismatic traditions experienced schisms because of the certain issues pushed to the extremes by religious fundamentalists.<sup>48</sup>

The reactionary character of Islamic fundamentalism is adequately expressed by Milton-Edwards when she explains that the Muslim identity is portrayed by emerging literature as: Constricted, anti-modern, anti-secular, anti-democratic, anti-globalization, anti-Semitic, anti-emancipation, anti-feminist, anti-plural, and consisting of followers enthralled by the promise of revolution that would put Islam in charge of the state again.<sup>49</sup>

While the argument of Bruce that religious fundamentalism can be confined to the terrain of the religious, and specifically to the Islam and Protestant Christianity, can be questioned in view of historical facts, he is correct in his assessment that religious fundamentalism can be seen as a response of religious traditionalists to local circumstances that threaten them.<sup>50</sup>

Religious fundamentalism is, therefore, well-known for its creation of “bogies” that are put forward as the arch enemies of the social and moral order. In Christian fundamentalism, “liberalism”, “modernism” and “post-modernism” are such bogies. In Islamic fundamentalism they are the “infidels, the “Americanism” and the “West” in general. Sometimes, religious fundamentalists even create caricatures of these enemies to muster opposition and to motivate people into action. In Apartheid South Africa the critics of Apartheid were stigmatised as “communists,” and this falsification motivated many people against any effort to change the system. Christian fundamentalism in the US used the same strategy. They branded liberal Christians and Roman Catholics as enemies of the true faith and Islam as the “anti-Christ”. On the other hand, Islamic fundamentalists

react with vigour against “Westernization” and its influence by banning wristwatches and television.<sup>51</sup>

The creation of these bogies and caricatures of what is perceived as arch enemies are typical of the methodology of religious fundamentalism. The reactionary nature of religious fundamentalism is the root cause for its prejudice against otherness and its intolerance towards other ideas in its own midst. Ellens indicates that prejudice is a subjacent tendency in our religions and can become a devastating force in our political and social order.<sup>52</sup> While it can be seen as a temptation facing all religious people, it is typical of religious fundamentalism.<sup>53</sup> In religious fundamentalism its adherents are trained to be prejudiced by leaders warning them against the people trying to destruct their identity and distorting the truth. Research has also indicated that religious fundamentalism is closely linked with homophobia.<sup>54</sup>

The reactionary nature of religious fundamentalism can furthermore be discerned in its intolerance towards people with other ideas and beliefs. Fundamentalists are seldom willing to enter into an open debate with others. They rather tend to attach themselves with their own group and to demonise other perspectives. They would even campaign for disciplinary actions against people critical of their cause. The inherent reactionary nature of religious fundamentalism and the attitudes of prejudice and intolerance give rise to another outstanding feature of the pattern of reasoning, and that is its inclination to form “in-groups” and to enter into a mode of “in-breeding”.

### Formation of the “in-group” and “inbreeding”

A common denominator in the various strands of religious fundamentalism is the consciousness of the destination and tension between us as the “in-group” and them as the “out-group”. Due to their common experience of fear for the loss of identity, their reactionary disposition, their prejudice and intolerance, fundamentalists develop a strong sense of an “in-group” frame of mind with a rigid homogeneous culture. The term “in-group” describes a group orientation where the sense of sameness, solidarity, mutuality and mutual destiny bind people to a close group where people are spiritually dependent on each other. Due to their closeness, the groups develop a strong “we-feeling,” which entails that they value and nurture their own interest and ideals in the face of the common enemies.

With the “we-feeling” and solidarity in the own group as measurement, a fundamentalist group can have the tendency to judge other groups by the standards and values of their own. According to Marger, this tendency produces a view of one’s own group (the “in-group”) as superior to others (the “out-group”).<sup>55</sup> This attitude makes communication and interaction between the “in-group” and “out-groups”

very difficult because they cannot design common ground as a starting point for dialogue and co-operation. Due to the prejudice and the intolerance of the “in-group,” mutual respect and collaboration become virtually impossible.

Furthermore, this dialectical principle eventually leads to the “us-them” social attitude and structure. Fundamentalists are champions in designing their modes of conduct, structures and ideals as a reaction to the actions of their perceived enemies. As has been proven historically, total division and conflict between fundamentalists and their “enemies” develop, according to a particular pattern with two zones, the “us-zone” and the “them-zone”. In the “us-zone” the uniqueness and the intentions of the own group are idolised. Over and against the bad, destructive and dangerous intentions of the other group(s), the sacred, divinely ordained ideals of the “in-group” are established and romanticised. This pattern of reasoning explains the moral blindness in fundamentalist groups for hate speech and the use of violence. The formation of the “in-group” with a strong “we-feeling” explains the joy and the dancing in the streets worldwide by fundamentalist Muslims after the events of 11 September 2001, while moderate Muslims deplored these terrorist actions.<sup>56</sup> Sutton & Vertigans term this division as the “contemporary ‘Islam and the West’ paradigm.”<sup>57</sup>

The “in-group” orientation with the potent “we-feeling” manifests itself in various ways in religious fundamentalist circles. Barr points out how Christian fundamentalist groups nurture their own ethos by the selection of speakers for meetings.<sup>58</sup> In addition to what he says, one can also point to the fact that fundamentalist groups usually establish journals and newspapers to promote their cause, and they will arrange meetings and conferences to further their ideas without taking cognisance of opposing views.

The “in-group” attitude motivates fundamentalists to establish parochial schools for their children. Some Islamic *madrassas* in the Muslim world is evidence of the way Islamic fundamentalist groups promote their ideas and muster youth support. In some of these schools, millions of young Muslims are studying syllabuses that the fundamentalists determine.<sup>59</sup> The same trend can be discerned in Christian fundamentalism. Many Christian theological seminaries in the US emerged as a result of fundamentalist resistance against the influence of modernism in theology.<sup>60</sup> It represents what Edwards terms a “close system” which delights in being different, includes doubt and hesitations, is static, which is obedient to an institution, appeals to written authorities, deduces consequences from a system of doctrine and sees Christianity as a creed that should be accepted or rejected as a whole.<sup>61</sup>

## Reliance on strong leadership

Strong leadership is very significant in religious fundamentalism. In fundamentalist movements the charismatic leader, able to motivate and encourage and willing to criticise and defend is important. Barr is thus correct when he says that religious fundamentalism emphasises the *guru*, the teacher, with his following.<sup>62</sup> The “in-group” leader keeps the group intact with charismatic leadership, clear vision and strong discipline, and nurtures the “we-feeling” in such a way. The image of the bearded *ayatollas*, since the appearance of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who took control of Iran in 1979, is reminiscent of this phenomenon in Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>63</sup> In Christian fundamentalism it is the charismatic televangelist, the faith healer or the outspoken cult figure who keeps the spirit of the fundamentalist movement alive. Beyer illustrates this feature of religious fundamentalism with his description of the development and actions of the New Christian Right in the United States.<sup>64</sup>

Strong leadership is essential to the well-being of a fundamentalist group. It is the strong leader who can interpret the sacred text and expose the ideals. It is the strong leader who can motivate and encourage. Without this leadership religious fundamentalist groups tend to disintegrate because the adherents do not live according to well-considered convictions and moral norms, but by constant impulses brought about by the leadership with their superior insight in the sacred text and their “inside information” of the conspiracies of the enemies. Therefore conspiracy theories are very popular in religious fundamentalism. For Islamic fundamentalists it is the Americans and the Jews who conspire against Islam. In the eyes of Jewish fundamentalists the foreign policies of all Muslim countries are part of the major plan to destruct the state of Israel. Christian fundamentalists toughen themselves against the conspiracies of the liberals and especially against the “enemies” from within the church.

In spite of its inclination to the informal enthusiastic leadership, religious fundamentalists are also heavily dependent on institutional leadership as long as this leadership fits into the fundamentalists’ own ideological framework and ideals. In Christian fundamentalism this leadership can be the infallible church.<sup>65</sup> Christian fundamentalist have a high regard for the decisions of their ecclesiastical institutions. However, these decisions must adhere to the fundamentals also held in high esteem by the fundamentalists themselves. The same trends can be discerned in Islamic fundamentalism. In their research Voll<sup>66</sup>; Sachedina<sup>67</sup> and Riddell<sup>68</sup> point out how many Islamic fundamentalist groups emerged and organised themselves under the influence of strong leadership and against moderate Islam. These groups are also responsible for deep divisions in Islam in Muslim countries. Strong charismatic leadership, schisms and group forming are also evident in Jewish fundamentalism.<sup>69</sup> Studies of the various forms of religious fundamentalism reveal that religious fundamentalism

relies on strong and charismatic leadership and flourishes as long as the cult leader or the institutional leadership nurture the absolutes of the particular group.

### Inclination to violence

Demonisation of the other serves the justification of violence and the killing of innocent people. Acts of violence to promote the “sacred” cause in obedience to God is one of the core characteristics of religious fundamentalism. The notion of a sacred cause on the side of God declares the “other” as enemies of God and the use of violence as a legitimate course of action.

Christian fundamentalism has limited its actions in the recent past to peaceful protest, but the ingredients of militancy are still part and parcel of its paraphernalia. Under the “right” circumstances it can spill over in actions of violence such as is proven by the attacks on abortion clinics in the US. Furthermore, Christian fundamentalism is known for its radical views when it comes to the execution of discipline on children, its promotion of capital punishment, its submission of women and its judgemental attitude in the cases of dissention of its own adherents. Raising suspicion, schism in churches and theological seminaries, establishment of radical political parties and pressure groups are part and parcel of its strategies. Christian fundamentalism has the ability to overstep the fine line between prejudice and violence, as it happens in the times of the religious wars between Christian communities in the past.

Jewish fundamentalism also expresses the inclination to violent actions.<sup>70</sup> Aran provides many examples of violent actions by Jewish fundamentalists. Although these pockets of Jewish fundamentalist violence can be identified, the main traces of this inclination to the use of violence become visible in the politics of the religious fundamentalists. They tend to support the radical violent options instead of peaceful negotiation between the Israelis and the Palestinians. This tendency towards the militant option is fuelled by prejudice and deep distrust in the opposition.

In Islamic fundamentalism, the use of violence has nowadays become one of its main characteristics. The public worldwide witnessed terrorist actions, suicide bombings and killings in the name of Allah. In the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism over the last four decades, violence in the name of Islam and Allah appeared to be an important feature of all the new fundamentalist movements in Muslim countries, and was urged on by their leaders and clerics. In her chapter on the resistance movements in Muslim countries and the way in which Islam states armed themselves, Milton-Edwards describes how the ideological romanticising of violence took root in countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Sudan and Lebanon. Eventually an intimate link between violence and global terrorism has been established.<sup>71</sup>

To figure out the Muslim fundamentalists' affinity to violence, it is necessary to understand the concept *Jihad* as it is used in Islamic fundamentalism today. As I explained earlier, *Jihad* in the Qur'an signals not military activity per se, but a righteous or right cause before God.<sup>72</sup> In spite of these teachings, *Jihad* is interpreted in Islamic fundamentalism as military action to protect the Islam rule and culture in times of oppression or military aggression against the Islamic countries. The theology of *Jihad* in this sense is one of the main characteristics of Islamic fundamentalism.

In his valuable description of the dual nature of Islamic fundamentalism, Jansen explains that Islamic fundamentalists reproach mainstream Muslims for underestimating the importance of *Jihad* as the "armed struggle against unbelief", and for not attaching great value to waging war against the enemies of God. Jansen continues to say that Islamic fundamentalists hold a radically different view on how to behave towards the world in which they live. They expect a better world to come, which, they believe, can only be reached through armed struggle. They are constantly at war with the world and may well be waging war against it and its unbelief. If they do, they will be compensated by being blessed in paradise and obtain an exceptional place in the other world.<sup>73</sup>

A holy war has no place for the protection of human dignity and human rights. This is the reason why people will be indiscriminately killed by fundamentalists in terrorist attacks. In their attack on the Kenyan Embassy in Nairobi, Al-Qaida killed 213 people of which Kenyan citizens comprised the majority.<sup>74</sup> The lives and rights of innocent people were of no concern whatsoever. With its inclination to violence, religious fundamentalism, in whatever form, can not respect basic human rights. To function, it must violate the core values underlying human rights and human dignity.

## Conclusion

Religious fundamentalism is a way of reasoning that can be active in all religions. This way of reasoning identifies certain fundamentals of the faith and elevates these to absolutes. In this way, religious fundamentalism breeds ideologies with certain common characteristics. The common characteristics can be summarised as follows:

- A source or a text is used in a literalist way irrespective of its cultural, historical or literary background. This method can be termed as "scripturalism", which manifests itself in Christian fundamentalism as "Biblicism", in Islam as "literalism" and in Judaism as "torahcracy".
- Religious fundamentalism typifies itself by the process of traditioning. While scripturalism reaches back to the ancient roots and professes the will of God according to a literal and a-historical use of texts in order to highlight the core fundamentals of religion, traditioning is an attempt to provide further authority to these fundamentals by



indicating their stand and value in the tradition of the particular religion.

- Casuistic ethics is also typical of religious fundamentalism. Just as religious fundamentalism elevates certain fundamentals to absolutes and interlaces its whole ideology around these absolutes, they promote a legalistic lifestyle consisting of many outwardly ways of conduct, symbols and social structures.
- Religious fundamentalism is usually caused by the fear of a perceived enemy. Religious fundamentalists define themselves in large by what they are against. It is therefore reactionary in nature. They always have a very real and easily identifiable enemy against whom they motivate and muster themselves.
- Another common denominator in the various strands of religious fundamentalism is the consciousness of the destination and tension between us as the “in-group” and them as the “out-group”. Due to their common experience of fear for the loss of identity, their reactionary disposition, their prejudice and intolerance, fundamentalists develop a strong sense of an “in-group” frame of mind with a rigid homogeneous culture.
- Strong leadership is very significant in religious fundamentalism. In fundamentalist movements, the charismatic leader, able to motivate and encourage, and willing to criticise and defend, is important.
- Religious fundamentalism is heavily inclined to the use of violence to further its causes. Acts of violence to promote the “sacred” cause in obedience to God is one of the core characteristics of religious fundamentalism. The notion of a sacred cause on the side of God declares the “other” as enemies of God and the use of violence as a legitimate course of action.

The management of religious fundamentalism in a Liberal Democracy, in order to protect human dignity and human rights and to promote peace, is a major challenge in the years to come. To meet this challenge, a clear understanding of these core characteristics of fundamentalism is essential.

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