

The Impact of Religious Fundamentalism on Places of Worship

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Abstract

Religion is a constant and integral part of humankind. One of the core principles of religious freedom is free and safe access to places of worship. This right cannot be guaranteed in all countries, as shown by recent events, such as violent acts and terrorist attacks that seek their main motivations in religion. This paper examines religious fundamentalism from a conceptual and theoretical standpoint. The typological elements that appear in many religious traditions are presented and explained with the scope of identifying common characteristics across all types of religious fundamentalism. The paper provides an overview of the need for consolidated efforts to combat religious fundamentalism present in most European countries at the moment, and protect places of worship, guaranteeing the free exercise of the essential right of religious freedom. In this light we present PROSECUW (an EU-funded project under the Internal Security Fund-Police programme) which aims to enhance the protection and security in places of worship through training of relevant professionals and knowledge exchange of good practices among EU stakeholders.

Keywords

EU, Good Practice, Places of Worship, Protection and Security, Religion

1. Introduction

Almost in every major faith, usually in monotheistic environments, there are groups identified as fundamentalists (Lehmann, 2006). Religious fundamentalism is a phenomenon that threatens the exercise to religious freedom. The concept of religious fundamentalism will be explored from a conceptual perspective with the

scope of raising awareness as to its dimension and impact in society. In this paper we explore religious fundamentalism and the importance of enhancing protection and security in places of worship in the context of the PROSEC UW project. The project aims to enhance protection at places of worship in European countries by setting up cooperation between public authorities (especially law enforcement agents), religious leaders and congregants.

2. Religious Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism is the religious phenomenon of the 20th century.

2.1. What Is Religious Fundamentalism?

Who is a fundamentalist? The way the term fundamentalist is presented nowadays by the media, at least in Europe, gives the impression that in most cases it refers to a soldier in the Islamic Hezbollah. “Fundamentalism” is a term which nowadays has predominantly religious connotations. In fact, it is a specific kind of religious ideology. Scholars themselves find it difficult to reach a consensus on what fundamentalism actually is. From a religious scholarly perspective, we could see it as a reactive movement whose members selectively retrieved some approved authoritative teachings from past times.

The Oxford Dictionary defines fundamentalism as the maintenance of the literal interpretation of the traditional beliefs of the Christian religion (such as the accuracy of everything in the Bible), in opposition to more modern teachings. (Cowie & Hornby, 1987) However, the concept of fundamentalism specifies a social phenomenon, a clear expression of a political, cultural and social totalitarianism.

As a term, “religious fundamentalism” is hard hitting and it is mostly considered as a word with negative connotations. Someone can hear even from the fundamentalists to accuse their rivals with the very same name which means that fundamentalism does not form a positive social phenomenon.

Almost in every major faith tradition, usually in monotheistic environments, there are groups identified as fundamentalists. Islamic fundamentalism is perhaps the most insidious and intolerant today as Christian fundamentalism from time to time has been in the past. It is also the most common case to examine, because it appears to be more militant than others and because it is connected with a contemporary form of theocracy (like the one in Iran) as to the fatal hit of the 11th of September 2001 to the twin towers of New York. That gives rise to two thoughts: firstly, that humanity cannot ignore the threat that comes from fundamentalism and secondly that not every Muslim or believer of Islam is an Islamic fundamentalist.

The consequences of 9/11 and other similar fatal attacks are unfortunately shown that religious fundamentalism can be extremely dangerous for society in cases where its followers seek militant means and dynamic actions to impose their fundamentalist views and objectives on other members of society or specif-

ic social groups. Religious fundamentalism is a phenomenon that cannot be overestimated or underestimated, and must be considered within the limits of its proper dimensions, like in cases where people in influential positions are able to manipulate a large number of its followers. Then it constitutes a great threat.

As a phenomenon of the modern world and at the same time an anti-modern movement, fundamentalism should not be equated with traditionalism. But when traditionalistic groups try to impose their beliefs by confusing religious practices with political ones, then they can be considered fundamentalist groups.

Fundamentalism was born in 1920's in North America by circles of Baptists and Presbyterians who founded the "World's Christian Fundamentals Association". To give a brief picture of American Fundamentalism¹ (Knitter, 2003) we outline some of its basic principles² (Pobee et al., 2002: p. 458).

- They believe that the Holy Bible is literally inspired by God and should be followed to the letter.
- They find modern theology and any science which contradicts biblical science, insignificant.
- They believe that anyone who does not live in accordance with their basic fundamentalist opinions is not a true Christian.
- They condemn by choice some modern beliefs, one among others being the basic belief of modern politics for the church and state separation.

2.2. Limits of Religious Freedom

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the United Nations Charter, and the 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion and Belief all recognize freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) as a fundamental human right. Today, that right is being put to the test by rising or ongoing violence against people based on their religion or beliefs; this threat is largely ignored by the international community, despite the fact that recent data indicate an increase in many different forms of such violence. As a result, there has been a glaring vacuum in the UN Security Council's and global human rights mechanisms' responses.

Government restrictions

A steady global increase in government restriction of religion or belief has paralleled a rise in government violence based on religion or belief. Government

¹Since the beginning of the 20th century there were 4 movements that took shape within American Christianity. Fundamentals, Evangelicals, New Evangelicals and Pentecostals. See more on Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, USA, 2002.

²In general, fundamentalism is only one expression among Christians to meet the needs for fundamental confidences in the face of modernity: the struggle to find a firm foundation in life; the longing to break through the bewildering variety of claims: religious, non-religious and anti-religious, moral, immoral and amoral; and to search for a buttress against social instabilities, marginalizations and dislocations. To this perceived disarray of modernity, fundamentalists believe God has provided the authoritative answer. With certitude in the use of chosen biblical words and doctrines, their leaders identify the actions of a strict God who is saving a religious elite from an evil world and from corrupt forms of Christian faith.

favoritism of religious groups (through funding for religious education, property, and clergy, for example) and laws and policies restricting religious freedom have consistently been the most common types of restrictions worldwide. Both types of restrictions have been increasing; between 2007 and 2017, the global average score in each of these categories rose by more than 20% (Pew Research Centre, 2019).

Interreligious violence & religious minorities

Other factors affecting religious freedom are religious violence by organised groups such as Neo-Nazi movements including the Nordic Resistance Movement and Islamist groups like Boko Haram.

What is evident is that both in Europe and around the world there is a rise in interreligious tension and violence (Halafoff, Lam, & Bouma, 2019).

The overlap of other identity markers with religion or belief, according to some study, is the key conflict risk for interreligious violence (Basedau, Pfeiffer, & Vüllers, 2014). Research also supports the hypothesis that increased violence between religious groups may be a side effect of the politics of religion (Basedau, Vüllers, & Körner 2013). Conflicts over religious differences run the risk of escalating into disputes over allegations of religious discrimination, violent instigation by religious leaders, and an all-around combative conversation about religion. In contrast to minority groups who take a private attitude on religious practice, minorities whose religion or belief practice is a prominent aspect of their public life are more inclined to focus animosity against their more powerful and advantaged peers.

Social Media and Religious Freedom

According to Grafanaki (2018) the first way platforms curate online speech is through their content moderation policies, which determine whether certain content items can be hosted and will continue to be hosted on the platform, and the second way is by facilitating navigation through the infinitely expanding amount of available content. Social Media platforms may limit the expression of religious beliefs or ideas for any reason, just as a provider can control the dissemination of false information or any other content it finds objectionable. Such views or ideas can range from sincere religious sentiments to usage that “weaponize” social media by vilifying particular communities, potentially veering into hate speech (Langos & Babie, 2021).

2.3. Typological Elements of Religious Fundamentalism

Even though Islamic fundamentalism is the most referenced one and is used to analyse the social and religious-political features of the phenomenon, we can note some common typological elements that appear in fundamentalisms of many religious traditions.

- The projection of fundamentalist groups is political with a religious “cloak”. They are searching to create enemies and the need to fight thus attracting and gathering followers.

- Religious fundamentalism is exclusivist because it believes to have guidelines for all aspects and questions of life, and conversely is anti-pluralistic.
- Religious fundamentalists are political activists and they consider themselves “warriors of God”.
- The fundamentalists are following literally sacred texts, but they use them selectively. Unaware, they lean towards modernism, despite the fact that they present themselves as antimodern. Based on those religious teachings can be potentially transformed into political programs.
- Fundamentalist groups are predominantly male oriented. Female leaders in fundamentalist religious groups are an exception. In any case, the key-position is always taken by a “gifted” leader. To avoid any misunderstandings, we have to underline that by saying “gifted leader” we do not mean a charismatic person with special gifts, but a person that is projected as gifted with questionable procedures and who usually acts authoritatively.
- In reality, they are half entered into modernity. They reject the philosophical rationalism and individualism that accompany modernity, but they take full advantage of certain technological advances that also characterize the modern age.
- Fundamentalism finds a creative space in the unfulfilled project of the promises of cultural modernity and the difficulties of secularization. As an alternative proposal it presents the de-secularization as contrary to de-“magicalization” of the world, which Weber described it as one of the characteristics of modernity (*Modernization—Secularization and Rationalization*, n.d.).
- Fundamentalism manifests itself in the politicization of world religions in local cultures and regional civilizations.

2.4. Key Issues of Religious Fundamentalism

Religious Fundamentalism represents a dogmatic and authoritarian approach to religious belief, and therefore it is anticipated that it can create negative and radical attitudes towards certain other religious groups. Hunsberger (1995) defined religious fundamentalism as an adherence to societal conventions and aggression towards people and ideas that conflict with the status quo. These aggressive and rigid attitudes and beliefs can threaten others security, display less openness to other religious groups and more hostile resistance to threatening ideas (Butler, 2000), as well as more intolerance of ambiguity (Preston & Shin, 2022).

2.5. The Importance of Protecting Places of Worship

The religious phenomenon in human activity has remained constant and an integral part of humankind since homo sapiens. There is no mankind without religion which has been established between people depending on beliefs and various groups they belong to.

The promotion of religious freedom is enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (*United Nations General Assembly*, n.d., Article

18; [Castan & Joseph, 2013](#), Article 18):

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion: this right implies the freedom to change religion or belief, as well as the freedom to manifest one’s religion, alone or in common, both in public and in private, by teaching, by practice, by worship and by rites.”

The development of this basic principle ensures individual private expression as well as public and collective expression of the cult of religion. One of the main concepts of the fundamental right to religious freedom is free and safe access to places of worship. This right cannot be guaranteed in all countries, as shown by recent events, such as violent acts and terrorist attacks that seek their main motivations in religion.

The religious phenomenon in human activity has remained constant and an integral part of humankind. If religious freedom is an integrating factor, religious fundamentalism, on the contrary, is extremely disruptive when combined with other harmful aspects. Besides promoting violence, the increased sense of insecurity, hate speech and disorder, cause immeasurable and irreversible damage to societies.

With the increase of hate speech, the growth of the far-right, especially in Europe, and the advent of new information technologies, such as social media, which facilitated the proliferation of fake news, it is remarkable that places of worship and sacred spaces have become targets of extremist attacks.

The United States, like many European countries, recognizes religious freedom and the “right to build temples”, but presents structural difficulties for religious denominations to obtain licenses to establish or maintain their places of worship. In addition to bureaucratic justifications, the discriminatory character, albeit hidden, or a certain fear of revealing the foreign presence is evident. For [Gonzalez-Varas \(2018\)](#) in many countries, it is possible to find authorities who suspect or defend that places of worship might become fundamentalist centres or even camps for the training of terrorists.

Therefore, it is essential that people and institutions work to combat discrimination, above all, which is very present in European countries at the moment, and protect places of worship, guaranteeing the free exercise of the fundamental right of religious freedom.

Still, there is no production of relevant scientific studies on the subject, despite its importance. On the other hand, there are a great number of texts, laws, directives and national cases that address the need to protect places of worship. The establishment of new places of worship is also a fundamental aspect of the right to religious freedom, both individually and collectively. In international legal literature, as well as the United Nations and regional spheres such as the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe, and the cases judged by the European Court on Human Rights give the dimension of the problem and the need for projects in all spheres to discuss the topic in question.

Since 2011, the United Nations have been recommending to the Member States the adoption of measures to guarantee the respect and protection of places of worship, be they temples, cemeteries, cultural spaces and places of meetings and religious expression. The General Assembly and the Human Rights Council adopted resolutions on combating religious intolerance, negative stereotyping, stigmatization, discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against people based on religion or belief (United Nations, 2011).

In the last version of the document, resolution 75/187 of December 16, 2020, are highlighted some central issues: the encouragement of dialogue and the creation of collaborative networks; the creation of mechanisms within governments to identify and address tensions between members of different religious communities to help prevent conflict; leaders encouragement to discuss the causes of discrimination in their communities and develop strategies to combat causes; the need to adopt measures to criminalize incitement to violence as imminent based on religion or belief, among others.

Another important point is the implementation of measures to prevent the desecration of places of worship, as well as the guarantee of its free access. Therefore, the General Assembly of the United Nations, over the last few years, has adopted numerous resolutions and recommendations to the states to pay bigger attention to acts of violence and to promote the protection of cultural heritage, in addition to the religious one.

It is worth noting that religious fundamentalism in the European context occurs with different religions. The rise of extremist groups financed by the extreme right is gaining more and more space and concerns international organizations, such as those mentioned above. The European Council warned of the growth of acts of extreme violence against minority religious groups (Vareikis, 2018) and expressed concern about the widespread defamation of religions in different places. According to the European Union and the Council of Europe, Christianity remains the most persecuted religion and with attacks on churches happening more frequently (Percoch, 2015).

The increase in religious violence against immigrants and refugees is remarkable (Vareikis, 2018). Once again, the European Council draws attention to the protection of human rights, combating racism, discrimination and the hate speech that has led to violence against immigrants. For example, the document cites Austria which in recent years has faced an influx of refugees, which has led to a popular rise in anti-immigration and anti-Islam (Abdou & Ruedin, 2021).

Intensifying the dialogue between different religions and beliefs, promoting social participation at all levels, especially women, is fundamental to promoting tolerance and mutual respect. In addition, since places of worship are the physical spaces where all multiculturalism and diversity meet, protecting these places and the individual manifestation of each person is an important step to mitigate religious fundamentalism. In any case, guaranteeing a peaceful and safe environment from the perspective of normality and giving visibility to the issues

surrounding conflicts remains an urgent need.

2.6. The PROSECUW Project—A European Initiative on the Protection and Security for Places of Worship

International organizations have called on states and society as a whole to think of strategies and solutions for each situation. The protection of places of worship involves a series of actions to raise awareness, educate, mobilize and reduce bureaucracy. Associating a religion with terrorism or limiting religious freedom will only increase conflicts and the path to be traced is above all to give visibility to religions in public space and not to eliminate or hide them.

“PROSECUW—Protection and Security for Places of Worship” is a project funded by the Internal Security Fund Police (ISFP) of the European Commission that runs from May 2021 to April 2023 (ISFP-2020-AG-PROTECT; Project Number: 101034232). The general objective of PROSECUW is to enhance protection at places of worship in European countries by setting up cooperation between public authorities (especially law enforcement agents), religious leaders and congregants. The cooperation will be established in various forms and through communication and information for a better understanding of hate speech/crime and terrorist threats that places of worship face in terms of security. Furthermore, security awareness raising activities will be designed EU-wide in order to inform the local community on religion-based crimes so citizens can be encouraged to report such experiences they might have.

Various tools such as campaigns, social media activities and training and the creation of manuals consist of the sharing of knowledge, relevant tools and good practices among the EU stakeholders. In the proposed project technology (production of a documentary and online training) will play an important role both in training sessions and the cooperation of public authorities and faith-based leaders in general. PROSECUW is expected to have both a short and long-term effect and consequently lead to the development of protective measures aiming to enhance security in places of worship and also strengthen future responses in such cases. Capacity building among professionals who work in the security field and religious leaders will make sure that the relevant material and guidelines that will be produced shall be spread across countries and utilized by hundreds of beneficiaries. The latter, after gaining new skills and competences, are expected to transform their local societies into more secure and safe places. The project will eventually increase security and protection in houses of worship of individuals, families, people in need of every single religion who can pray, and express their faith unafraid, EU-wide and also around the world. Even if the proposed project won't manage to fully eliminate hate crimes and terrorist attacks in places of worship it will definitely stop the augmentation of such cases in the EU through increased reporting, cooperation among various stakeholders, awareness raising in the affected communities and of course training that would include both training modules and digital storytelling in order to replace fear and insecurity with the sense of security and protection.

3. Conclusion

We conclude this paper by emphasizing the importance of conceptually detangling the notion of “religious fundamentalism” in all its aspects in order to create awareness. For the development of any prevention strategy against terrorist attacks driven by religious fundamentalist ideals, we must first identify and address tensions between different religious communities as well as enhance the knowledge and capacity of religious leaders and law enforcement agents to combat the causes. A long-term impact of the PROSEC UW project is to advance the capacity-building of relevant stakeholders working in the field of security in places of worship, thus protecting the rights of every single religion and empowering religious followers to express their faith unafraid.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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