7 Modernity, Nationalism and Religious Fundamentalism

The two terms most commonly used to describe the various forms of religious activism evident around the world today are ‘religious fundamentalism’ and ‘religious nationalism’. Some might prefer to use just one of these as an all-inclusive ‘umbrella-word’.¹ I am of the opinion that both are needed, each in its appropriate context; for each of these has connotations which the other does not; and, if the resurgence of religion, globally, is to be captured in its entirety, as far as possible, then both sets of the connotations need to be retained. I wish to start by talking about ‘fundamentalism’ first, postponing the consideration of ‘nationalism’ and ‘modernity’ for a little while.

‘Fundamentalism’ and ‘fundamentalist’ are terms used so frequently these days that it can be fairly safely concluded that some of these uses must, in fact, be abuses. But, beyond that, there may be other good reasons for suggesting that this term, ‘fundamentalism’, ought to be avoided altogether as a characterization of the many forms of the resurgence of religion outside the West, perhaps even outside America. In its primary sense, ‘fundamentalism’ meant ‘a recent movement in American Protestantism in opposition to modernistic tendencies, re-emphasizing as fundamental to Christianity the inerrancy of the Scriptures, Biblical miracles, especially the virgin birth and physical resurrection of Christ and substitutional atonement’.² Fundamentalism in this sense is certainly alive in America today, perhaps even thriving. But it should be clear that no Muslim, Jew, Hindu or Buddhist can be a fundamentalist in the primary sense just spoken of, for they are not even Christians, far less American Protestants. By extension, however, the term can be used to refer to a similar phenomenon in these other religions, if they contain individuals or groups of people who proclaim the inerrancy of their own scriptures, doctrines, traditions or myths. And there certainly are such instances to be found in them. What needs to be pointed out, however, is that, especially when it comes to countries outside the West – whether Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist or Jewish – it is the pejorative sense of the term that is most commonly used, sometimes explicitly, but often only in an insinuating way. One Muslim scholar, not wishing to have himself or other Islamic religious activists described as fundamentalist, pointed out that the reason he objected to that description was that the term referred to those who hold ‘an intolerant,
self-righteous, and narrowly dogmatic religious literalism'.

But that is not at all how he viewed himself or some of the other Muslims described as fundamentalist. A pejorative word does not help the task either of describing or explaining.

There are good reasons for thinking, too, that the many different kinds of religious-political activism across the world may not all be fundamentalist: some of them are much more accurately described as instances of what Juergensmeyer calls 'religious nationalism'. Certainly, looking across the world, it seems that what is happening in India, Sri Lanka, Iran, Tajikistan, Nagorno-Karabakh or Bosnia-Herzegovina is more the upsurge of religious nationalism than the emergence of fundamentalism: at best, the 'fundamentalists' in these countries, where there are any, may simply be a sub-group of the more numerous religious nationalists.

Thus while I appreciate the reasons why 'fundamentalism', and its cognates, have to be used with a great deal of caution and foreboding, I still think, on the whole, that such use may be unavoidable. In *Fundamentalisms Observed*, editors Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby advance several plausible reasons for settling on this controversial term to describe the 14 very different examples of religious activism occurring in very different parts of the world. I do not wish to reiterate all those arguments here; but the one I found most persuasive is the very first one given by them: namely, that "'fundamentalism' is here to stay". Almost all the indications seem to be in favour of that presumption – at least at this point in time.

Mindful of the differences among these 14 examples of activism, and of the consequent difficulties in precisely defining, 'fundamentalism', Marty and Appleby acknowledge, without explaining, that the similarities among the 14 may well be appropriately described in terms of the Wittgensteinian notion of 'family resemblances', that is, a network of similarities, criss-crossing and sometimes overlapping, among them, rather than a set of common features characterizing them all. The best way to view this 'network' may be provided by using the verb 'fight' and some of its customary prepositional suffixes. These family resemblances that justify the use of a single term, 'fundamentalism', then, to describe all of them are the following:

1. **Fighting back:** All of these movements are 'militant', and are setting themselves up against forces which might have so far considered themselves victors already.

2. **Fighting for:** They may be fighting for 'a worldview' central to which are views about intimate aspects of life, such as family, gender, sex roles, the nurturing and education of children, and so on.