

Three Reasons Why Fundamentalism Is A Modern Phenomenon

Fundamentalism, though usually used to describe people that are appealed to the past, is a modern phenomenon. There are three main reasons for this claim. First, there is no sign for the necessity of fundamentalism to exist in pre-modern time. Second, it is necessary, however, for certain religious groups to resist the secularization against the trend of modernization. Third, modernity, similar to many other phenomenon, does not exist with itself; fundamentalism took form as a response to, and a force against the mainstream modernity.

Before elaborating the reasons, it is important to define what fundamentalism and modernity really are. Fundamentalism is essentially a label for describing a group of people whose behavior, statements, and beliefs exhibit extraordinary adherence to the fundamental materials that founded their identity. Such identity is usually religious. Modernity, on the other hand, refers to a state where the society becomes more secularized, pluralism is embraced, and science is promoted. Moving “forward” in today's world generally implies moving towards modernity.

For a certain thing to exist in a certain time, especially an abstract label like fundamentalism, there needs to be external condition that motivates and necessitates its existence. However, in pre-modern era, the powers in the world were largely religion-driven, and there was no overpowering hegemony^[1]. In Europe, almost everyone believed in God; In the Middle East, the Ottoman Empire created a relatively stable, not territorial but communal region for Islamic people^[2]. Within each group, there was no sign of danger of losing their faith. Furthermore, we know that the vision of fundamentalists is monocultural; it rejects pluralism and diversity. Yet, pluralism was also not a topic within each power. Its contrary, homogeneity, was maximized due to the ruling system. Fundamentalism therefore did not find its seed.

As the world transformed to a more secular and modern age, Europe experienced the Nova Effect^[3] which saw dramatic development in science, technology and economics as a result of secularity. The Ottoman Empire also touched secularization briefly as it tried to catch up with Europe. Modernity

pluralizes, introducing choices of faith, and the conflict begins here. This spread of secularization movement called the religious extremists such as Qutub to protect their religion, and thus fundamentalism came into existence in the Middle East. As Ruthven pointed out, the fundamentalist movements are nationalistic by nature, and the Islamic leaders were at the forefront fighting against European colonialism in 19th and 20th century^[4]. It was the threat from European expansion and secularization that stimulated and necessitated the nationalism of protectionists of Islam religion.

When there is mainstream, there are always counter forces. Fundamentalism, in many ways, is a force against the mainstream secularization, against modernity. Modernity does not play with itself on the stage, and fundamentalism cannot happen without modernity. Besides Islam, in 1910-20s, America was on its way towards a more Jeudo-Christian secular society, and libertines supported several actions that outlawed areas such as racial segregation and sexual discrimination, embracing pluralism. Conservative Christians could not tolerate this trend of belief, as well as the State's encroachment of their religious communities^[5]. They sought to reaffirm the Christian fundamentals, including infallibility of scripture, in order to fight against the State. As a result they were the first to be literally labeled as fundamentalism. The similarity between the two religiously distinct groups, Islam and conservative Christian, shows that fundamentalism is a contradicting force against modernity and secularization. This means fundamentalism does not occur without certain groups feeling oppression and intrusiveness, and the source of these oppression is exactly modernity and secularization.

In conclusion, fundamentalism is modern, because there is rationality behind its existence in modern era but not in pre-modern era. The rationality is essentially the urgency of protecting the loss of faith, against the trend of secularity. In addition, the occurrence of fundamentalism is stimulated by modernity, due to the oppression and intrusiveness that certain religious groups feel when the surroundings are secularized. Although from a moral perspective, some actions that fundamentalists chose to take are indeed wrong, we need to reflect about what engendered fundamentalism – it is modernity, the bright light guiding humanity forward that sheds the shadow at its back. (*Kaiyu Zheng*)

Reference

- [1] J. H. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, pp.4
- [2] M. Ruthven, *Fundamentalism, The Search for Meaning*, pp. 138
- [3] C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 302
- [4] M. Ruthven, *Fundamentalism, The Search for Meaning*, pp. 137
- [5] M. Ruthven, *Fundamentalism, The Search for Meaning*, pp. 53