Fundamentalist Extremism and Politics

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I will be addressing the following questions:

• What is fundamentalism and what are its causes?
• What is the nature of fundamentalist politics?
• What is their agenda?
• When and why does fundamentalist extremism become violent?
• What can governments do to mitigate or prevent fundamentalist violence?
What is fundamentalism and what are its causes?

• The definition and causes of fundamentalism are interrelated:

• **My definition**: Fundamentalism, is a set of religious beliefs and practices that evolved or was designed to defend religion against secularism and modernity by rejecting both secularism and modernity.

• **Almond et. al. (2003) definition**: a discernable pattern of religious militancy by which self-styled ‘true believers’ attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors.
What is fundamentalism and what are its causes?

Characteristics of fundamentalism

- Anti-modern
- Boundaries
- Elect membership
- Inerrancy of and focus on religious texts
- Selective emphasis on some parts of religious texts
- Theological innovation
- Black and white view of the world
- Millennialism
- Persecution
- Authoritarianism
- No public-private sphere distinction
- Hierarchical and patriarchic relations between the genders
- Myth of the golden age
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What is fundamentalism and what are its causes?

- Fundamentalism is a reaction against rationalism, modernity, and secularism.
- Consequently fundamentalist movements often feel threatened by many aspects of modernity and actively oppose them.
- This determines much of their political agenda and behavior.
Fundamentalist politics

- Fundamentalist political agendas vary but they all have the following in common:
  - Designed to preserve the religion against the threats of modernity and secularism.
  - The world has left its proper course the following are to be blamed:
    - Secularists.
    - Members of other religions.
    - Members of their own religion who do not accept the fundamentalist ideology.
  - Their agendas matter deeply to them, so they are unlikely to concede or compromise.
Fundamentalist politics

• Fundamentalist have the following type of political agenda when they belong to a country's majority religion:
  • To bring society and politics in their country in line with their fundamentalists ideologies.
  • In many cases, the long term agenda is to transform the country into a religious state.
  • Often more modest goals are set in the short term because forming a religious state can under some circumstances be unrealistic as a short term goal.
Fundamentalist politics

- Fundamentalists have the following type of political agenda when they belong to a country's minority religion:
  - Set up closed homogeneous community for members only.
  - Seek equal treatment and government benefits.
  - Seek special privileges.
Fundamentalist politics

• Strategies
  • Strategies largely influenced by the political opportunity structure.
  • To proactively set the terms of political debate.
  • Seek to control or influence religious authority and institutions.
  • In democracies, if they have enough support, form political parties which pursue their agenda.
  • When they are shut out from the political process, violence is more likely (more on this later).
Fundamentalist politics

• Strategies

• Engage in community charity work by providing services such as education and welfare, especially in locales where the government provides inadequate services.

• International coordination and assistance.
Fundamentalist violence

- Violence is largely determined by structural factors
  - “World renouncers” rarely get violent when left alone.
  - Most violence is from those who have a political agenda to change the nature of a country’s politics and society.
  - Fundamentalists prefer peaceful and legal political tactics.
    - As long as these tactics are allowed.
    - As long as these tactics are seen as potentially successful in the long term.
Fundamentalist violence

• “War is the continuation of politics through other means”
  – Carl von Clausewitz

• When three factors are present violence becomes likely:
  • The political agenda cannot be achieved peacefully.
  • The political group is unwilling or unable to compromise, give up, or put off its agenda.
  • The group has the means to engage in violence.

• This structure makes fundamentalist violence more likely
  • Fundamentalists seek change which is often too radical to gain support from a majority.
  • Fundamentalists are unwilling to compromise or give up their agenda.
A political agenda to address fundamentalism

• Promote religious freedom for fundamentalists in return for fundamentalists guaranteeing that they will not infringe upon the freedoms of non-fundamentalists.
  • Simple in theory, difficult in practice.
A political agenda to address fundamentalism

- Religious freedom for fundamentalists mitigates their perception of threat.
- This freedom includes:
  - Allowing them their modes of behavior and dress as well as their institutions.
  - Fundamentalist control the education of their children.
  - A promise that secular agendas will not encroach upon their religion.
  - Government willingness to make religious exceptions to generally applicable laws which encroach upon their religious beliefs whenever possible.
- Essentially, limited internal autonomy.
A political agenda to address fundamentalism

• The government must be seen as having a clear and consistent policy of accommodating fundamentalists to whatever extent is possible within this framework.

• This is important because there will be instances where a religious accommodation is not possible.
  • it is critical that the fundamentalists perceive these instances as a minor exception within an agreement which in which they have a stake and from which they greatly benefit.

• This agreement requires active and explicit support from both the government and the religious leaders of the fundamentalist movement.
• This arrangement is similar to what exists with a number of “world renouncing” sects in a number of countries.

• It provides a framework and a tradition of cooperation to manage inevitable tensions.

• One of the best strategies to counter fundamentalists is to force them to defend their ideas in a free marketplace of ideas.
A political agenda to address fundamentalism

- In brief this creates a strategy with the following components
  - Remove as much as possible the perceived threat of secular encroachment.
  - Place fundamentalists in a situation where they must compete with religious moderates in a free marketplace of ideas.
  - Create a structural situation where fundamentalists see it as being in their benefit to cooperate.
    - Equal rights to other religious groups.
    - Equal benefits to other religious groups.