Global Problems: The Search for Equity, Peace, and Sustainability
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Third Edition
Resurgent Fundamentalism

Just as many believed that the power of ethnicity would decline in the modern world, some also believed that the influence of religion would decline. Writing in the 1960s, British sociologist Peter Berger (1967) believed that amid growing modernization and diversity, people would have to hold their beliefs more tentatively and tolerantly; they would become more secular, or at least more liberal, as the “sacred canopy” of religion was pulled back. Similarly, U.S. theologian Harvey Cox (1965) believed that the diverse cities of the world, with their international, cosmopolitan nature, would necessarily become examples of “the secular city.”

Berger may have been correct about London and Cox about Boston in the 1960s, but elsewhere, sentiments were changing. The end of the twentieth century saw a sharp rise in highly conservative, traditional, and literal expressions of religious faith. At times, they have also been militant expressions.

Perhaps it was the pressures of a cosmopolitan, globalizing world that drove the movement. In his book *Jihad vs. McWorld*, Benjamin Barber (1995) sees two opposing forces acting in the world. One, he termed *McWorld*: the capitalist, corporate-controlled, economic uniformity typified by McDonald’s and huge corporations. The other, he termed *jihad*, borrowing the Islamic word for “holy struggle,” in his usage, referring to all reactionary struggles against modernity and globalization, the fierce call back to tribe and tradition, to religion and noncommercial absolutes.

In the 1980s, the most prominent face of jihad, in this sense, was the Ayatollah Khomeini, religious and political revolutionary and leader of Iran, denouncing the United States as the “Great Satan” which dominated and tempted the faithful. In the beginning of the twenty-first century, the most recognizable face of this type of jihad is probably that of Osama bin Laden. To him, perhaps, the power of McWorld was best seen in the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Barber fears that both McWorld and jihad may be fundamentally undemocratic—one represents rule by money, the other rule by fear.

The collision between these two forces is not always violent. It may take the form of a cultural clash. Pakistani rock star Joonan fills auditoriums in his home country with people who want to hear his version of international rock and roll, while ultraconservative religious leaders denounce this worldly display, in some cases calling for a ban not only on rock but all music as “un-Islamic.”

What can be misleading in these current examples and in Barber’s choice of terms is that this reaction is not unique to Islam. What has been labeled “religious fundamentalism” has taken root around the world.

Fundamentalism originally referred to a type of very conservative, Bible-oriented, and largely rural American Christianity. Around the beginning of the twentieth century, U.S. Christians who rejected so-called liberal tendencies in many churches called for a return to the fundamentals of the Bible. These included not only fundamentals of belief but also often of lifestyle, such as prohibitions against dancing, drinking alcohol, watching movies, and playing cards. These “worldly” pursuits were believed to tempt and distract the true believer. For the most part, American Christian fundamentalism initially rejected political involvement as being worldly, although some southern politicians adopted its themes (and fervent style of preaching). Involvement in politics was largely limited to issues such as opposition to the teaching of evolution and to the selling of liquor on Sundays.
This changed in the 1980s with the rise to prominence of Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority. The early fundamentalists who had found a political platform were likely to be populist Democrats, but in the 1980s, fundamentalist support went to the Reagan administration and conservative Republicans. Falwell’s followers still avoided direct political campaigns and instead called Americans back to a more “moral” time, as characterized by traditional gender roles and family structure, traditional (i.e., nineteenth-century) attitudes toward sexuality, and opposition to other trends it considered unbiblical. More direct political involvement came with the creation of the Christian Coalition under Pat Robertson in 1984 and its expansion under Ralph Reed and during the presidential campaigns of Pat Robertson, Gary Becker, and others. What became known as the “religious right” became a major force in the Republican Party and the country as a whole.

Islamic fundamentalism may be an awkward hybrid term, but it captures the notion that many of these same ideas, backed by the Qur’an rather than the Bible, have gained prominence in parts of the Islamic world. This fundamentalism is seen in a form of Islam known as Wahhabism, which gained influence in Saudi Arabia and has been exported to other countries through Saudi-supported madrassas (schools) and religious organizations. This form of fundamentalism also looks to a literal interpretation of the scripture and its direct application to modern life. Like Christian fundamentalism, Islamic fundamentalism is also opposed to alcohol and smoking, to “lewd” publications and movies (and maybe to all movies and theater), to immodest dress, and to many forms of entertainment—in particular, dancing and popular music (in some cases, to all music). It also favors traditional gender roles and provides strict punishment for offenses. In its more extreme forms, this includes cloistering women in their homes, unless they must be out (and then a traditional veiled covering is worn), and forbidding them to drive and in some cases to work. Criminal punishments are based on the Qu’ran and include executions, stonings, and cutting off the hands of thieves and other offenders. Homosexuality and any form of extramarital sex are severely punished.

Many of these fundamentalist practices are seen in Saudi Arabia, although often moderated by local custom. They reached an extreme in Afghanistan under the Taliban, which means “student,” or one who strictly studies the Qu’ran. Many of these practices are ancient, although over the centuries, a number of Islamic rulers have been extremely tolerant of religious and social diversity. Of note, however, is the fact that Islamic fundamentalism, like its Christian counterpart in the United States, has grown more political. The Iranian Revolution installed a government based on strict Islamic fundamentalist principles. Many Muslim countries now have Islamic political parties that call for a strict Islamic state, based on fundamentalist interpretations.

Other religions also have their fundamentalist forms. Ultraorthodox Jewish factions also call for a particular type of modesty in dress, traditional gender divisions and family forms, a rejection of certain aspects of the modern world, and a strict and literal reading of the Torah, or Jewish law. In Israel, political parties that wed these beliefs to the conviction that God has promised them all the land of David and Solomon have gained influence in the government.

Hindu fundamentalism would seem to be an oxymoron, given that Hinduism is known as an incredibly diverse and highly tolerant religion. Yet within India, a movement is gaining political and social power that likewise stresses traditional Indian lifestyles, family forms,
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and gender patterns; rejects certain aspects of the modern, commercial world; and is suspi-
cious of secularists and non-Hindus in positions of power.

It is easy (perhaps especially easy in a cosmopolitan university) to condemn funda-
mentalist movements as shortsighted, anti-intellectual, antimodern, or just out of touch with
a changing world. Yet these movements are clearly speaking to the personal and spiritual
needs of many people and seem to represent a global hunger for a more stable and more
moral social order.

Global fundamentalism also poses some major problems. Barber (1995) suggests they
are fundamentally undemocratic. This perhaps remains to be seen. In the United States,
Christian fundamentalists certainly endorse the democratic ideals of the U.S. Constitution
and often speak of the “Founding Fathers” (even though most historians do not envision
George Washington, let alone Thomas Jefferson or Benjamin Franklin, as much of a fun-
damentalist). Their mix of religion and politics sometimes clashes with the constitutional
ideals of the separation of church and state. In addition, they have often objected to the
American Civil Liberties Union’s idea of free speech and have been vigorous opponents
of campaign finance reform.

Islamic parties have been big vote getters in many Muslim nations that hold elections,
but the commitment of these parties to continuing a liberal democratic tradition, as opposed
to a theocracy of religious leaders and laws, has been questioned. In Iran, a reformist elected
government has seen many of its proposals vetoed by religious leaders, who still hold the
final authority. African democracies have been more plagued by paternalism and tribalism
(i.e., favoring one’s own ethnic group), but now, they are seeing new challenges from a
fervent and possibly radical Islamic resurgence in Pakistan, Egypt, Lebanon, Algeria, and
Somalia, among others. Often these groups draw support from a populace tired of corrupt
or ineffective, and often Western-backed, governments, who see the Islamic groups as more
dedicated and sincere, in spite of often violent tactics. Whether the repression and outlaw-
ing of these groups is protecting democracy or subverting it depends on one’s view of the
intentions of these political entities. Often what results are cycles of revolutionary terrorism
and state repression that serve no one but the combatants.

Israel has functioned as a democracy since its founding in 1948. Still, the country’s so-
called religious parties have often sought to conform Israeli law to their version of Jewish
religious law and worry about the growing number of Israeli Arabs who can vote. Some
wonder if Israel can really be both a Jewish state, defined in religious and ethnic terms, and
a modern liberal democracy, with the expectations of pluralism. Likewise, India has been a
democracy since its founding in 1947, but the demands of Hindu fundamentalists may run
counter to the ideals of a pluralist democracy, which seeks to protect and include people
from many cultural and religious backgrounds.

This may be a problem of mindset rather than religion in itself. In American Fascists:
The Christian Right and the War on America journalist Chris Hedges (2007) looked at one
set of dangers. In a follow-up work, I Don’t Believe in Atheists, Hedges (2008) contends
that some of the new advocates of atheism share the same intolerance of other traditions
and heritage, as well as other ways of thinking, as religious fundamentalists. Amartya Sen
contends that to end terror we must rethink our basis of identity from a narrow single dimen-
sion used by ideologies of hate to a broader sense of identity that can encompass the many
things we have in common with others around the world (Sen 2007).
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The God of the Poor: Liberation Theology

Not all the mingling of religion and politics has occurred on the religious and political right. There is also a history of blending religious convictions and progressive politics.

Upon his conversion to Buddhism, the Indian leader Asoka (300 BCE) renounced warfare, embraced religious and ethnic tolerance, and sought to alleviate the suffering of the poor. Christian influence in the late Roman Empire restrained the excesses of the emperors and led to the abolition of the gladiatorial games. In the United States during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, many of the challenges to segregation, the demand for voting rights, and the Poor People’s Campaign were led by African American religious leaders. Latin American politics have likewise been influenced by liberation theology, a set of ideas coming out of the Catholic Church that, at the core of the gospel, is a message of liberation for the poor and oppressed. Pope John Paul II tried to restrain what he saw as too much political involvement by Catholic clergy, but progressive priests in many countries formed base communities of poor campesinos and workers and led campaigns for the poor.

The political landscape of the twenty-first century, however, has been most affected by religious fundamentalists, especially what some prefer to call religious extremists, who hold very strict interpretations of their faith traditions and sometimes appear willing to use force to enforce these ideas. Religion, in this case, is closely allied with nationalism, as in calls for fundamentalists to preserve the United States as a Christian nation, India as a Hindu nation, Israel as an orthodox Jewish state, and Muslim countries as Islamic states under Islamic law. “Hard-liners,” who combine religion, ethnicity, and nationalism, have been a force in the creation of repressive states, while “extremists” have combined the same elements into national and international terrorism in efforts to topple and remake some of these same states.

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Revolutionary and State Terror

Terror has a long history. It has been most often used to build states and empires. Cities that resisted Genghis Khan’s invading armies in the thirteenth century were often massacred en masse, while those who surrendered were shown leniency, creating a powerful incentive to join rather than oppose the empire. In the twentieth century, state-sponsored terror conducted against enemies of various regimes claimed more lives and inflicted more suffering than ever before imagined, even if the exact numbers are hard to tally. An estimated 6 million people were killed in the Nazi Holocaust, many millions in the Stalinist purges, several million in China’s Cultural Revolution, 2 million in Cambodia’s “killing fields,” and 1.5 million in Rwanda, and these numbers do not include terror in the pursuit of international war. Terror has also been used also to oppose rulers. The assassins used carefully planned murders to intimidate and oppose Christian and Ottoman rule. Their leader, an extremist Muslim, used both mind-altering drugs and promises of eternal paradise to motivate the killers.

Many troubled locations are trapped in cycles of revolutionary terror, opposing rulers and states, and state repression, including what some would call state terror. The classic case has been Israel and Palestine during the intifada. Palestinians fighting for groups such
as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Al-Aksa Martyrs Brigades all seek an independent Palestinian state, and many also seek the destruction of the state of Israel. They gain support from other Palestinians who may not share their complete political and religious agenda but who have a long history of grievances against Israel and its allies and who respect the utter dedication of these groups, as well as the charitable work they often do in Palestinian communities and refugee camps. Bombings and ambushes have been the favorite tools of their terror.

More recently, the dominant form of terror grabbing the headlines has become the suicide bomber, detonating explosives in crowded places that have been packed into a car or strapped to the bomber’s body. Suicide bombings have been a regular part of sectarian violence in Iraq, often used by radical Sunnis against majority Shi’a, who have at times responded with militia attacks of their own. They are a major tool of the Taliban resistance and its Al Qaeda backers in Afghanistan. An increasingly common response has been to attack these groups from the air with unmanned drones, a response that is both feared and deeply resented by many in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Attacks have spread around the world, with bombings in Russia, presumably by separatists from the Caucasus region, hitting apartments, subway systems, and the Moscow airport. They are typically responded to by calls for greater security, and with more repressive measures to attain that security.