



Religious Fundamentalism and Christian Response: Including the Debate on Religious Conversions

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Abstract

This paper examines the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism and its implications for interfaith relations in India, with particular focus on Hindu, Christian, and Islamic contexts. It traces the historical development, ideological roots, and contemporary expressions of fundamentalist movements, highlighting their impact on social harmony, national integration, and minority rights. The study also explores the sensitive issue of religious conversions, analyzing their causes, consequences, and legal responses in India. Special attention is given to Christian responses, emphasizing the need for inclusive approaches, dialogue, and constructive engagement in a pluralistic society. The paper argues that while fundamentalism arises from a desire to protect identity and values, it often fosters exclusivism and conflict, making dialogue and pluralism essential for peace and community building.

Keywords: Religious Fundamentalism - Hindu Fundamentalism - Christian Fundamentalism - Islamic Fundamentalism - Religious Conversion - Anti-Conversion Laws – Pluralism - Interfaith Dialogue – Communalism

Introduction:

Religious fundamentalism has become a central theme in both academic and public discourse, frequently discussed in media and research. It manifests across religious, political, social, and cultural movements. While some groups embrace the label of fundamentalism as a defense of traditional values, others use it in a derogatory sense. In the modern world, fundamentalism is visible across major religions, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and Sikhism. Christian communities are particularly affected by both internal fundamentalist movements and by reactions to the fundamentalist expressions of other faiths. This paper explores the meaning, origins, and nature of religious fundamentalism, tracing its historical development in different traditions, especially Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. It also addresses the challenges posed by religious conversions in India and evaluates Christian responses to these developments. The analysis is situated within the broader context of pluralism and the quest for interfaith harmony.

Objectives:

This study aims to:

1. Examine the origins, nature, and development of religious fundamentalism across major world religions, with emphasis on Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam in India.
2. Analyze the role of religious conversions in shaping communal tensions, social change, and legal responses in India.
3. Explore the Christian response to religious fundamentalism and conversions within the framework of pluralism and interfaith dialogue.

Methodology:

The research adopts a qualitative, historical, and analytical approach. Primary sources such as religious texts and foundational writings of leaders like Savarkar and Dayananda Saraswati were examined alongside secondary sources including scholarly books, journal articles, and reports. Case studies such as the Arya Samaj's Shuddhi movement, the Babri Masjid demolition, and the Meenakshipuram conversions were analyzed to illustrate broader trends. Comparative analysis was used to understand similarities and differences among Hindu, Christian, and Islamic fundamentalisms. The methodology also emphasizes theological reflections and ecumenical perspectives to evaluate Christian responses in a pluralistic society.

Meaning and Origins of Religious Fundamentalism:

The term "religion," derived from the Latin *religio*, signifies a system that binds individuals through shared beliefs, rituals, institutions, and traditions. For many, religion defines their worldview and way of life. "Fundamentalism" refers to a strict adherence to core beliefs and the rejection of modern influences perceived as threats to faith. The term "fundamentalism" originated in early 20th-century American Protestantism through a series of publications titled *The Fundamentals*, which opposed liberal theology and scientific modernism. Over time, the concept has expanded to describe movements across religions that resist secularism and modernity. Fundamentalist groups often interpret sacred texts literally and claim exclusive authority over religious truth.

Nature of Fundamentalism:

Fundamentalism is both a religious and socio-political phenomenon. It seeks to restore a perceived golden past and preserve ideological purity by rejecting pluralism and secular values. While its literal meaning suggests a return to religious basics, in practice it often involves exclusivism, intolerance, and political activism. Violence, communal polarization, and the conflation of religion with national identity are frequent outcomes. Fundamentalism has appeared in many forms globally, contributing to conflicts, revolutions, and religiously motivated violence.

Historical Development of Hindu Fundamentalism:

Hindu fundamentalism combines religious, cultural, and political elements. Its roots trace back to the 19th-century Bengal Renaissance, when exposure to Western education and missionary criticism spurred Hindu intellectuals to reform and defend their traditions. Movements such as Arya Samaj emphasized a return to

scriptural authority and social reform but also fostered exclusivist tendencies. Established by Dayananda Saraswati in 1875, it advocated a return to the Vedas and promoted re-conversion (Shuddhi) of Hindus who had converted to other religions. Dayananda also linked religion with nationalism, propagating slogans such as “India for Indians,” which implicitly meant India for Hindus.

Hindutva and RSS: V.D. Savarkar’s 1923 book *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* articulated a vision of cultural nationalism based on common heritage. This ideology was institutionalized by K.B. Hedgewar’s Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925. The RSS emphasized Hindu cultural unity, often excluding Muslims and Christians. Under leaders like Golwalkar, the RSS developed into a powerful nationalist force, later aligning with political parties like the BJP.

Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP): Founded in 1964, the VHP promoted Hindu unity and engaged in re-conversion campaigns. Its central role in the Ayodhya movement, culminating in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, highlighted the violent dimensions of Hindu fundamentalism. Subsequent communal riots and violence further illustrated its exclusivist agenda.

Hindu fundamentalism has increasingly been associated with communal violence, anti-minority sentiments, and efforts to redefine India as a Hindu nation. Its opposition to conversions, particularly to Christianity and Islam, has often been expressed through aggressive campaigns.

Christian Fundamentalism:

Christian fundamentalism originated in the early 20th-century United States as a conservative evangelical response to modernism. It emphasized biblical inerrancy, salvation through Christ, and missionary zeal. While not all evangelical Christians are fundamentalists, those who are often adopt exclusivist approaches and resist ecumenical or pluralistic engagement. In India, Christian fundamentalism has sometimes been associated with aggressive proselytization, leading to tensions with Hindu groups. Accusations of coercive or fraudulent conversions have fuelled hostility and violence against Christian communities. This has complicated the position of the church, as Christian fundamentalist activities contribute to broader interfaith conflicts.

Muslim Fundamentalism:

Islamic fundamentalism is typically associated with the belief that Islamic law (sharia) is the sole legitimate basis for governance and social order. It gained prominence with the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979) and has since influenced movements across South Asia and the Middle East. In India, Islamic revivalism has been shaped by global trends and historical experiences of marginalization. Groups such as Jamaat-e-Islami, founded by Abul Ala Maududi, advocated for Islamic governance through dedicated cadres. Militant expressions of Islamic fundamentalism have included terrorism, communal violence, and rejection of secular democracy. These developments have heightened Hindu fears of Muslim disloyalty, further aggravating communal polarization in India.

Religious Conversions: Problems and Prospects:

Religious conversion has been a constant feature of Indian history, from ancient conversions to Buddhism to more recent movements to Islam and Christianity. Conversions often occur as responses to social injustice, caste discrimination, or spiritual conviction. However, they frequently generate tension, as they disrupt traditional social and cultural structures. Mass conversions, such as the 1981 Meenakshipuram event where Dalits embraced Islam, highlight the role of conversion as social protest. However, conversions also create cultural alienation, communal tensions, and challenges to national integration. Gandhi himself viewed conversion as denationalization. Several Indian states, including Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Arunachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Gujarat, have enacted laws to regulate religious conversions, particularly those alleged to involve coercion or inducement. While justified as protecting religious freedom, such laws often reinforce majority dominance and restrict minority missionary activities.

Christian Responses:

The church faces the challenge of responding to fundamentalism without mirroring it. Christian leaders emphasize rediscovering discipleship as rooted in Christ, involving both personal faith and social engagement. In India's pluralistic context, exclusivist approaches risk exacerbating conflict. Instead, inclusive models that respect religious diversity while promoting justice and peace are encouraged. Ecumenical thinkers argue for dialogue and collaboration across faiths, focusing on building a shared national community rather than competing for converts. Conversion, in this view, should represent deeper dedication to truth and social harmony rather than mere numerical growth.

Conclusion:

Religious fundamentalism represents a major challenge to pluralism, democracy, and interfaith harmony. While rooted in genuine concerns about preserving faith and identity, fundamentalist movements often foster intolerance, violence, and social division. In India, the interplay between Hindu, Christian, and Muslim fundamentalism, combined with the contentious issue of conversions, has created a volatile religious landscape. The Christian response must emphasize inclusivity, dialogue, and service to society, avoiding reactionary fundamentalism. True religious witness in a pluralistic nation lies in fostering peace, justice, and mutual respect. As K.C. Abraham observes, commitment to Christ does not grant the right to condemn others; pluralism itself must be seen as a divine gift that enriches humanity.

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