NEWSTATESMAN

PRINT CLOSE

The F-word

Roger Hardy

Published 22 January 2007

From Afghanistan to the Bible Belt, fundamentalism is locked in a struggle with secular modernity. But it is more complex than shock headlines suggest

Fundamentalism: a very short introduction

Malise Ruthven *Oxford University Press, 176pp, £6.99*

ISBN 0199212708

Integrating Islam: political and religious challenges in contemporary France

Jonathan Laurence and Justin Vaisse *Brookings Institution Press, 342pp, £16.99*

ISBN 0815751516

"Lord save us," wrote the popular American evangelist Billy Sunday in 1916, "from off-handed, flabby-cheeked, brittle-boned, weak-kneed, thin-skinned, pliable, plastic, spineless, effeminate, sissified, three-caret Christianity."

Fundamentalism, as Malise Ruthven reminds us, is often macho. It fears and fights an emasculating modernity. For fundamentalists, whether in Afghanistan or the Bible Belt, modernity overturns traditional gender roles and dilutes time-honoured certainties. It saps manliness as well as godliness.

From the outset of *Fundamentalism: a very short introduction*, Ruthven acknowledges that the F-word is notoriously problematic. Coined to describe a back-to-basics version of Protestantism that took root in the United States in the early 20th century, "fundamentalism" is now used, rather loosely, to describe a wide variety of forms of activism, dogmatism or conservatism, usually with a connotation of disapproval. A Turkish friend of mine likes to call his country's generals, and other militant nationalists, "secular fundamentalists". How well the term is suited to describe the movements of religious revivalism that sprang up in the last century, and continue to haunt the present one, is a matter of hot debate.

Ruthven's book (first published in 2004 as *Fundamentalism: the search for meaning*) makes a stimulating addition to OUP's series of Very Short Introductions. In describing and comparing Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and other fundamentalisms, it does not gloss over difficulties of definition, but argues plausibly that, whatever the differences between and within these various ideological currents, they exhibit certain family resemblances. Fundamentalism is driven first and foremost by the desire to preserve a religiously-based identity in the face of the existential threat posed by modernity and secularisation. It is not the same as traditionalism or religious conservatism. Fundamentalists, with their this-world activism, invariably transform - indeed, unwittingly modernise - the thing they claim to preserve. As such, they find themselves under fire both from traditionalists (who cling stubbornly to fixed truths rooted in a mythical past) and from modernists (who seek some sort of compromise with secular modernity).

Ruthven is good at capturing fundamentalists' aversion to what he calls, ironically, the "scandal of difference". What they can't abide is pluralism, and pluralism - the acceptance of difference, including religious difference - "is as integral to modernity as cars, aeroplanes, television and the internet". For fundamentalists, pluralism is a deadly trap. If they resist it, they come into inevitable conflict with other faiths, other traditions. If they accept it, they relativise truth: their faith becomes simply one of many possible

paths to salvation.

All too often, the choice has been resistance. As a result, fundamentalism now colours conflicts in many parts of the world, not least in the Greater Middle East. Ruthven is surely right in arguing that Muslim and other fundamentalists are, in many ways, the new nationalists. Even though, in theory, they position themselves in opposition to (an essentially secular) nationalism, in practice the combination of piety and patriotism produces an unbeatable formula, whether in Muslim Gaza or Bush's America. Hamas and Hezbollah can be seen as "Islamo-nationalist". Even the "internationalist" al-Qaeda, with its stress on the umma, the worldwide community of the Muslim faithful, is not above appealing to nationalist sentiment: expelling the "infidels" from Palestine or Iraq or Afghanistan is at least as much a nationalist slogan as an Islamist one.

A constant theme in western discussion of violent Islamism, especially since the Madrid and London bombings, is that the problem is no longer "over there" but, increasingly, "over here". The European Union is now home to an estimated 15 million Muslims, of whom roughly 10 per cent are in Britain, 20 per cent in Germany and 30 per cent in France. Media coverage of Islam in France has been unremittingly gloomy. Home to both the biggest Muslim and the biggest Jewish community in western Europe, it has experienced the highly divisive "headscarf affair" (which has erupted periodically since the late 1980s), a rash of anti-Semitic attacks and the serious riots that scarred the suburbs of Paris and other cities in October and November 2005.

No one could deny that the relationship between a Muslim community now numbering some five million and a French republic firmly wedded to the principle of *laïcité* (French-style secularism) has been a troubled one. But a comprehensive new study from the Brookings Institution, a Washington think-tank, refuses to succumb to the prevailing pessimism. The thesis of *Integrating Islam*, by Jonathan Laurence and Justin Vaisse, will surely startle many in Europe as well as in (its target audience) the United States: that, slowly but surely, the integration of Muslims in France is taking place.

The authors accept that the social and economic indicators are grim, identifying unemployment as the single biggest obstacle to integration. As elsewhere in Europe, Muslims suffer from educational under-achievement and comprise a far higher proportion of prison inmates than of the population as a whole. In a climate where Islam is under a cloud of suspicion, for many Muslims "integration sounds more like disintegration".

Yet the study produces a wealth of data to show that integration has had successes as well as failures. It suggests that many observers have been too quick to see French Muslims as monolithic in their origins and their attitudes. In fact, although those of North African origin are the largest component, they are extremely diverse (with a startling 123 nationalities). And despite popular stereotypes, they are not particularly "fundamentalist" or even particularly pious. French Muslims are as inclined to go to the mosque as French Catholics are to go to church - which is to say, not much. A minority of the disaffected young are becoming "re-Islamised" and sometimes radicalised; worrying as this is, it should not mask the bigger picture.

This is one of the few books in English that set out, clearly, dispassionately and in detail, what the headscarf affair was all about, what the main French Muslim organisations are (and their affiliations with the wider Muslim world), what the role of influential but controversial figures such as Tariq Ramadan and Yusuf al-Qaradawi has been, and how successive French governments have sought, with great difficulty, to create a national body to serve as a Muslim interlocutor. There are lessons here for Europe as a whole, and it would be salutary to think that a book with a primarily American purpose might teach Europeans a thing or two as well.

Roger Hardy is a Middle East and Islamic affairs specialist with the BBC World Service