

# Religious Fundamentalism and the PROSECUW Project

Dr Nikolaos Dimitriadis,<sup>1\*</sup> Catia Cruz<sup>2</sup>, Ioanara Silva<sup>2</sup>, José Paulo Oliveira <sup>2</sup>, and Dr Eliza Patouris<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kentro Oikoumenikon Ierapostolikon kai Perivallontikon Meleton Mitropolos, Greece

<sup>2</sup>Lusofona University, Portugal

<sup>3</sup>Research and Education in Social Empowerment and Transformation, Cyprus

\*Corresponding author: Dr Nikolaos Dimitriadis

## Abstract

Religion is a constant and integral part of humankind. One of the core principles of religious freedom is free and safe access to places of worship. This right cannot be guaranteed in all countries, as shown by recent events, such as violent acts and terrorist attacks that seek their main motivations in religion. This paper examines religious fundamentalism from a conceptual and theoretical standpoint. The typological elements that appear in many religious traditions are presented and explained with the scope of identifying common characteristics across all types of religious fundamentalism. The paper provides an overview of the need for consolidated efforts to combat religious fundamentalism present in most European countries at the moment, and protect places of worship, guaranteeing the free exercise of the essential right of religious freedom. In this light we present PROSECUW (an EU-funded project under the Internal Security Fund-Police programme) which aims to enhance the protection and security in places of worship through training of relevant professionals and knowledge-exchange of good practices among EU stakeholders.

**Keywords:** EU; good practice; places of worship; protection and security; religion

## **1. Introduction**

Almost in every major faith, usually in monotheistic environments, there are groups identified as fundamentalists. Religious fundamentalism is a phenomenon that threatens the exercise to religious freedom. The concept of religious fundamentalism will be explored from a conceptual perspective with the scope of raising awareness as to its dimension and impact in society. In this paper we explore religious fundamentalism and the importance of enhancing protection and security in places of worship in the context of the PROSEC UW project. The project aims to enhance protection at places of worship in European countries by setting up cooperation between public authorities (especially law enforcement agents), religious leaders and congregants.

## **2. Religious Fundamentalism**

*Fundamentalism is the religious phenomenon of the 20th century.*

### **2.1. What is religious fundamentalism?**

Who is a fundamentalist? The way the term fundamentalist is presented nowadays by the media, at least in Europe, gives the impression that in most cases it refers to a soldier in the Islamic Hezbollah. "Fundamentalism" is a term which nowadays has predominantly religious connotations. In fact, it is a specific kind of religious ideology. Scholars themselves find it difficult to reach a consensus on what fundamentalism actually is. From a religious scholarly perspective, we could see it as a reactive movement whose members selectively retrieved some approved authoritative teachings from past times.

The Oxford dictionary defines fundamentalism as the maintenance of the literal interpretation of the traditional beliefs of the Christian religion (such as the accuracy of everything in the Bible), in opposition to more modern teachings. (Cowie & Hornby, 1987) However, the concept of fundamentalism specifies a social phenomenon, a clear expression of a political, cultural and social totalitarianism.

As a term, "religious fundamentalism" is hard hitting and it is mostly considered as a word with negative connotations. Someone can hear even from the fundamentalists to accuse their rivals with the very same name which means that fundamentalism does not form a positive social phenomenon.

Almost in every major faith tradition, usually in monotheistic environments, there are groups identified as fundamentalists. Islamic fundamentalism is perhaps the most insidious and intolerant today as Christian fundamentalism from time to time has been in the past. It is also the most common case to examine, because it appears to be more militant than others and because it is connected with a contemporary form of theocracy (like the one in Iran) as to the fatal hit of the 11th of September 2001 to the twin towers of New York. That give rise to two thoughts: firstly, that humanity cannot ignore the threat that comes from fundamentalism and secondly that not every Muslim or believer of Islam is an Islamic fundamentalist.

The consequences of 9/11 and other similar fatal attacks are unfortunately shown that religious fundamentalism can be extremely dangerous for society in cases where its followers seek

militant means and dynamic actions to impose their fundamentalist views and objectives on other members of society or specific social groups. Religious fundamentalism is a phenomenon that cannot be overestimated or underestimated, and must be considered within the limits of its proper dimensions, like in cases where people in influential positions are able to manipulate a large number of its followers. Then it constitutes a great threat.

As a phenomenon of the modern world and at the same time an anti-modern movement, fundamentalism should not be equated with traditionalism. But when traditionalistic groups try to impose their beliefs by confusing religious practices with political ones, then they can be considered fundamentalist groups.

Fundamentalism was born in 1920's in North America by circles of Baptists and Presbyterians who founded the "World's Christian Fundamentals Association". To give a brief picture of American Fundamentalism<sup>1</sup> (Knitter, 2003) we outline some of its basic principles<sup>2</sup> (Pobee et al., 2002, p.458).

- They believe that the Holy Bible is literally inspired by God and should be followed to the letter.
- They find modern theology and any science which contradicts biblical science, insignificant.
- They believe that anyone who does not live in accordance with their basic fundamentalist opinions is not a true Christian.
- They condemn by choice some modern beliefs, one among others being the basic belief of modern politics for the church and state separation.

## ***2.2. Typological elements of religious fundamentalism***

Even though Islamic fundamentalism is the most referenced one and is used to analyse the social and religious-political features of the phenomenon, we can note some common typological elements that appear in fundamentalisms of many religious traditions.

- The projection of fundamentalist groups is political with a religious "cloak". They are searching to create enemies and the need to fight thus attracting and gathering followers.
- Religious fundamentalism is exclusivist because it believes to have guidelines for all aspects and questions of life, and conversely is anti-pluralistic.
- Religious fundamentalists are political activists and they consider themselves "warriors of God".

---

<sup>1</sup> Since the beginning of the 20th century there were 4 movements that took shape within American Christianity. Fundamentals, Evangelicals, New Evangelicals and Pentecostals. See more on Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, USA, 2002

<sup>2</sup> "In general, fundamentalism is only one expression among Christians to meet the needs for fundamental confidences in the face of modernity: the struggle to find a firm foundation in life; the longing to break through the bewildering variety of claims: religious, non-religious and anti-religious, moral, immoral and amoral; and to search for a buttress against social instabilities, marginalizations and dislocations. To this perceived disarray of modernity, fundamentalists believe God has provided the authoritative answer. With certitude in the use of chosen biblical words and doctrines, their leaders identify the actions of a strict God who is saving a religious elite from an evil world and from corrupt forms of Christian faith.

- The fundamentalists are following literally sacred texts, but they use them selectively. Unaware, they lean towards modernism, despite the fact that they present themselves as antimodern. Based on those religious teachings can be potentially transformed into political programs.
- Fundamentalist groups are predominantly male oriented. Female leaders in fundamentalist religious groups are an exception. In any case, the key- position is always taken by a "gifted" leader. To avoid any misunderstandings, we have to underline that by saying "gifted leader" we do not mean a charismatic person with special gifts, but a person that is projected as gifted with questionable procedures and who usually acts authoritatively.
- In reality they are half entered into modernity. They reject the philosophical rationalism and individualism that accompany modernity, but they take full advantage of certain technological advances that also characterize the modern age.
- Fundamentalism finds a creative space in the unfulfilled project of the promises of cultural modernity and the difficulties of secularization. As an alternative proposal it presents the de-secularization as contrary to de-"magicalization" of the world, which Weber described it as one of the characteristics of modernity (*Modernization - Secularization and Rationalization*, n.d.)
- Fundamentalism manifests itself in the politicization of world religions in local cultures and regional civilizations.

### ***2.3. The importance of protecting places of worship***

The religious phenomenon in human activity has remained constant and an integral part of humankind since homo sapiens. There is no mankind without religion which has been established between people depending on beliefs and various groups they belong to.

The promotion of religious freedom is enshrined in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly, n.d., Article 18) (Castan & Joseph, 2013, Article 18):

*"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion: this right implies the freedom to change religion or belief, as well as the freedom to manifest one's religion, alone or in common, both in public and in private, by teaching, by practice, by worship and by rites."*

The development of this basic principle ensures individual private expression as well as public and collective expression of the cult of religion. One of the main concepts of the fundamental right to religious freedom is free and safe access to places of worship. This right cannot be guaranteed in all countries, as shown by recent events, such as violent acts and terrorist attacks that seek their main motivations in religion.

The religious phenomenon in human activity has remained constant and an integral part of humankind. If religious freedom is an integrating factor, religious fundamentalism, on the contrary, is extremely disruptive when combined with other harmful aspects. Besides promoting violence, the increased sense of insecurity, hate speech and disorder, cause immeasurable and irreversible damage to societies.

With the increase of hate speech, the growth of the far-right, especially in Europe, and the advent of new information technologies, such as social media, which facilitated the proliferation

of fake news, it is remarkable that places of worship and sacred spaces have become targets of extremist attacks.

The United States, like many European countries, recognizes religious freedom and the “right to build temples”, but presents structural difficulties for religious denominations to obtain licenses to establish or maintain their places of worship. In addition to bureaucratic justifications, the discriminatory character, albeit hidden, or a certain fear of revealing the foreign presence is evident. For Gonzalez-Varas (2018) in many countries, it is possible to find authorities who suspect or defend that places of worship might become fundamentalist centres or even camps for the training of terrorists.

Therefore, it is essential that people and institutions work to combat discrimination, above all, which is very present in European countries at the moment, and protect places of worship, guaranteeing the free exercise of the fundamental right of religious freedom.

Still, there is no production of relevant scientific studies on the subject, despite its importance. On the other hand, there are a great number of texts, laws, directives and national cases that address the need to protect places of worship. The establishment of new places of worship is also a fundamental aspect of the right to religious freedom, both individually and collectively. In international legal literature, as well as the United Nations and regional spheres such as the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe, and the cases judged by the European Court on Human Rights give the dimension of the problem and the need for projects in all spheres to discuss the topic in question.

Since 2011, the United Nations have been recommending to the Member States the adoption of measures to guarantee the respect and protection of places of worship, be they temples, cemeteries, cultural spaces and places of meetings and religious expression. The General Assembly and the Human Rights Council adopted resolutions on combating religious intolerance, negative stereotyping, stigmatization, discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against people based on religion or belief (2011)

In the last version of the document, resolution 75/187 of December 16, 2020, are highlighted some central issues: the encouragement of dialogue and the creation of collaborative networks; the creation of mechanisms within governments to identify and address tensions between members of different religious communities to help prevent conflict; leaders encouragement to discuss the causes of discrimination in their communities and develop strategies to combat causes; the need to adopt measures to criminalize incitement to violence as imminent based on religion or belief, among others.

Another important point is the implementation of measures to prevent the desecration of places of worship, as well as the guarantee of its free access. Therefore, the General Assembly of the United Nations, over the last few years, has adopted numerous resolutions and recommendations to the states to pay bigger attention to acts of violence and to promote the protection of cultural heritage, in addition to the religious one.

It is worth noting that religious fundamentalism in the European context occurs with different religions. The rise of extremist groups financed by the extreme right is gaining more and more space and concerns international organizations, such as those mentioned above. The European Council warned of the growth of acts of extreme violence against minority religious groups (Vareikis, 2018) and expressed concern about the widespread defamation of religions in different places. According to the European Union and the Council of Europe, Christianity

remains the most persecuted religion and with attacks on churches happening more frequently (Percoch, 2015).

The increase in religious violence against immigrants and refugees is remarkable (Vareikis, 2018). Once again, the European Council draws attention to the protection of human rights, combating racism, discrimination and the hate speech that has led to violence against immigrants. For example, the document cites Austria which in recent years has faced an influx of refugees, which has led to a popular rise in anti-immigration and anti-Islam (Abdou & Ruedin, 2021).

Intensifying the dialogue between different religions and beliefs, promoting social participation at all levels, especially women, is fundamental to promoting tolerance and mutual respect. In addition, since places of worship are the physical spaces where all multiculturalism and diversity meet, protecting these places and the individual manifestation of each person is an important step to mitigate religious fundamentalism. In any case, guaranteeing a peaceful and safe environment from the perspective of normality and giving visibility to the issues surrounding conflicts remains an urgent need.

#### ***2.4. The PROSEC UW Project- A European initiative on the protection and security for places of worship***

International organizations have called on states and society as a whole to think of strategies and solutions for each situation. The protection of places of worship involves a series of actions to raise awareness, educate, mobilize and reduce bureaucracy. Associating a religion with terrorism or limiting religious freedom will only increase conflicts and the path to be traced is above all to give visibility to religions in public space and not to eliminate or hide them.

‘PROSEC UW – Protection and Security for Places of Worship’ is a project funded by the Internal Security Fund Police (ISFP) of the European Commission that runs from May 2021 to April 2023 (ISFP-2020-AG-PROTECT; Project Number: 101034232). The general objective of PROSEC UW is to enhance protection at places of worship in European countries by setting up cooperation between public authorities (especially law enforcement agents), religious leaders and congregants. The cooperation will be established in various forms and through communication and information for a better understanding of hate speech/crime and terrorist threats that places of worship face in terms of security. Furthermore, security awareness raising activities will be designed EU-wide in order to inform the local community on religion-based crimes so citizens can be encouraged to report such experiences they might have.

Various tools such as campaigns, social media activities and training and the creation of manuals consist of the sharing of knowledge, relevant tools and good practices among the EU stakeholders. In the proposed project technology (production of a documentary and online training) will play an important role both in training sessions and the cooperation of public authorities and faith-based leaders in general. PROSEC UW is expected to have both a short and a long-term effect and consequently lead to the development of protective measures aiming to enhance security in places of worship and also strengthen future responses in such cases. Capacity building among professionals who work in the security field and religious leaders will make sure that the relevant material and guidelines that will be produced shall be spread across countries and utilized by hundreds of beneficiaries. The latter, after gaining new skills and competences, are expected to transform their local societies into more secure and safe places. The project will eventually increase security and protection in houses of worship of individuals,

families, people in need of every single religion can pray, express their faith unafraid, EU-wide and also around the world. Even if the proposed project won't manage to fully eliminate hate crimes and terrorist attacks in places of worship it will definitely stop the augmentation of such cases in the EU through increased reporting, cooperation among various stakeholders, awareness raising in the affected communities and of course training that would include both training modules and digital storytelling in order to replace fear and insecurity with the sense of security and protection.

### **3. Conclusion**

We conclude this paper by emphasizing the importance of conceptually detangling the notion of 'religious fundamentalism' in all its aspects in order to create awareness. For the development of any prevention strategy against terrorist attacks driven by religious fundamentalist ideals, we must first identify and address tensions between different religious communities as well as enhance the knowledge and capacity of religious leaders and law enforcement agents to combat the causes. A long-term impact of the PROSEC UW project is to advance the capacity-building of relevant stakeholders working in the field of security in places of worship, thus protecting the rights of every single religion and empowering religious followers to express their faith unafraid.

### **Acknowledgment**

This paper has been written in the context of the PROSEC UW Project (project funded by the Internal Security Fund Police (ISFP) of the European Commission. ISFP-2020-AG-PROTECT-Project Number: 101034232).

### **References**

- Abdou, H. & Ruedin, D. (2021). *The Austrian People's Party: an anti-immigrant right party?*, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, DOI: 0.1080/1369183X.2020.1853904.
- Castan, M., & Joseph, S. (2013). *The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Cases, Materials, and Commentary*. OUP Oxford.
- Cowie, A. P., & Hornby, A. S. (1987). *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (A. S. Hornby, A. P. Cowie, & A. C. Gimson, Eds.). Oxford University Press.
- Knitter, P. F. (2003). *Introducing theologies of religions*. Orbis Books.
- Gonzalez-Varas, A. (2018). International protection of places of worship. JusOnline, 1-27.
- Percoh, P. (2015). Violence and persecution levelled at Christians around the world. European Parliamentary Research Service. Available at:

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/572800/EPRS\\_BRI%282015%29572800\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/572800/EPRS_BRI%282015%29572800_EN.pdf)

Pobee, J. S., Wainwright, G., Webb, P., Lossky, N., Míguez Bonino, J., & Stransky, T. F. (Eds.). (2002). *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*. WCC Publications.

United Nations General Assembly (Ed.). (n.d.).

*Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly, Paris, December 1948*. Bodleian Library.

United Nations (2011). Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against, persons based on religion or belief. Available at:

[https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/a.hrc.res.16.18\\_en.pdf](https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/a.hrc.res.16.18_en.pdf)

Vareikis, E. (2018). Prevention of violence and discrimination against religious minorities amongst refugees in Europe. Parliamentary Assembly. Available at:

<http://www.assembly.coe.int/LifeRay/MIG/Pdf/TextesProvisoires/2019/20191202->

[ViolenceDiscriminationReligiousMinorities-EN.pdf](http://www.assembly.coe.int/LifeRay/MIG/Pdf/TextesProvisoires/2019/20191202-ViolenceDiscriminationReligiousMinorities-EN.pdf)

*Modernization - Secularization and rationalization*. (n.d.). Britannica. Retrieved November 25, 2021, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/modernization/Secularization-and-rationalization>