



**AUTHOR: Dr Keith Suter**  
Global Thought Leader  
Real Insights & Authority



## RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM



### INTRODUCTION

Globalization is a modernizing and destabilizing influence, which locks even more solidly a nation-state into the global order. Some people feel threatened by change and the influx of foreign influences. They often look to religious leaders or politicians for answers. There is nostalgia for the past, when life seemed less hurried, more ordered and less threatening. That golden era appears all the more golden; the further people move away from it, as time and change whisk them along.

There is obviously something going on in several countries but at this early stage it is not possible to state fully what that is. For it is impossible to untangle fully the threads which combine into a rope consisting of globalization, religious fundamentalism, political extremism, resentment by poor people at their poverty, and sheer opportunism and greed by some religious and political leaders who are looking for causes to champion for their own private purposes. In short, although there is apparently both a religious and a religiously-motivated political backlash against globalization, the precise chain of causation is not always clear.

The world is undergoing a massive change and religions are both affected by it and have an effect on it.

First, Religion is apparently looming as a new source of conflict. I say "apparently" because I am not sure just how significant are the religious labels which the mass media now give to the participants in so-called religious conflicts. In Northern Ireland, for example, the conflict is billed as a religious one but that there are also underlying economic problems which have caused much of the present conflict. Unemployed working class Catholics oppose unemployed working class Protestants. The comfortable middle classes of both communities seem to get along a great deal better. The Turkish Gastarbeiter (guest workers) began arriving in the then West Germany to do the menial work in the mid-1950s. They were denied German citizenship (a 1913 law defines German citizenship in terms of blood rather than location) but they were important for the German economic recovery and recognized as such. It has only been in the last few years, as the German economy has gone in to recession and the absorption of East Germany has turned out to be more difficult than expected, that there has been a sudden upsurge in racist violence against the Gastarbeiter.

Similarly, the so-called rise of Islamic fundamentalism may be due partly to poverty in many Third World countries. Governments react to the fundamentalism by extreme police and military measures (which bring about their own reaction within the Islamic groups) and in the meantime the governments lose sight of the underlying cause, which is poverty.

Second, there is the development of a global television system. Pictures can be televised "live" around the world. There is a tendency for television to reduce conflicts - and all other issues - to bland stereotypes. Television is by its very nature superficial and unable to convey the complexity of an issue. It deals with images and appeals to emotions; it is not a tool of rational discourse. Religion is often a label of convenience. Television reporters find it useful to reduce a complex issue to a matter of a few glib remarks as a "voice over" for some eye-catching film footage.

Global television coverage also enables alienated people to see how other people develop techniques to overthrow regimes. For example, Algeria's MIA - mujahedin (holy warriors) - are not only reviving the techniques developed by the National Liberation Front in its war against France (1954-62) but are also aware of the techniques of Afghanistan's mujahedin, who forced the USSR out of their country in the 1980s.

Third, there are the mass movements of people. This movement is not new. For example, 18 million people were forcibly sent from Africa to the US as part of the slave trade two and three centuries ago. What is new is the way that people in one country can see via global television what is happening in other countries. Thus, the Indian Hindu and Moslem places of worship in the UK have had to be protected when there was tension between Hindus and Moslems in India in the early 1990s.

Fourth, the world is moving into a new warfare state. The risk of a nuclear World War III has largely disappeared and conventional warfare is very rare. But there are as many conflicts going on around the world today as there were in the Cold War. This time, however, the wars are internal and being fought by guerrilla techniques.

Guerrilla warfare is the warfare of the weak. It challenges the thought patterns of conventional forces - which helps explain why so few of them win guerrilla wars (as the US found in Vietnam and the USSR in Afghanistan). Its outcome depends less on the availability of firepower and more on the ability to win the hearts and minds of people. Conventional military forces are often not so much part of the solution as part of the problem. Guerrilla warfare is a political and social activity rather than a military one.

Finally, there is the irony that religion should be on the list of "current world crisis" at all. American and other western sociologists in the 1950s predicted the death of religion. They argued that as people discovered the delights of consumerism, so they would have far less interest in traditional matters like religion. They predicted the triumph of modernism and scientific research, which left no room for "superstition". It was only a matter of time before all

the world's major problems could be solved by science. Half a century on, there is – if anything – a backlash against science, with widespread scepticism about science (such as the current controversy over genetic modification), while there are more “believers” than ever before in the history of the world.

## ✓ **RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM**

Religious fundamentalism defines people by what divides them. It focuses on the differences in humankind, rather than what unites them. It is often partly motivated by a form of xenophobia (against either strangers of another country or of another religion) and a loss of members to other causes (perhaps more secular ones).

But the chain of causation is not quite clear; there may be other motives involved, which enable leaders to exploit the fear of globalization for their own purposes. Here are examples taken from three of the world's main faiths: Hinduism, Islam and Christianity.

### ✓ **Hinduism**

There has been an upsurge of Hindu fundamentalism in India. One of its manifestations is the campaign against "foreign influences" in India. The Hindu fundamentalist party, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is leading a campaign against Coke and Pepsi, as part of a larger movement to boycott the sale of foreign goods in India. RSS officials claim that Coke and Pepsi are "the most visible symbols of the multinational invasion of this country" . The RSS campaign is called "Swadeshi", which is a term borrowed from the movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi against British-made goods during India's freedom struggle. The use of this term is political opportunism because RSS has otherwise little love for him - it was an RSS member that assassinated Gandhi in 1947 because RSS said that he was too close to the Moslem minority. But for RSS this is a useful slogan since it taps into a tribal memory of Hindus and enables the RSS to exploit Hindu fears about Indian Moslems.

The RSS is tapping into the concerns that Indians have about the globalization of their country. India is, for example, the largest maker of movies - much larger than Hollywood. But film-makers have to operate under strict censorship rules. Explicit sex scenes are forbidden; the camera moves off the lovers and looks at moving bushes. Pirated western sex videos, however, are gaining in popularity: Indians prefer to see Madonna full frontal rather than just moving bushes. Indian parents feel that they are losing control over the viewing habits of their children.

In early 1994, Time magazine reported on the pace of change and the Coca-Colonization of India:

Until 1992 outside firms were not allowed to control more than 40 per cent of a domestic enterprise; now they may acquire as much as 51 per cent and, with special government permission, even 100 per cent. That came home with a shock last September when Coca-Cola bought Parle, India's leading soft-drink company. Encouraged by Parle chairman Ramesh Chauhan, the government expelled Coca-Cola in 1977 for refusing to reveal its secret formula and to decrease ownership from 100 per cent to 40 per cent. Chauhan followed up with a five-year crusade in the press and in Parliament against Pepsi-Cola, trying to block its entry into India. Realizing in the end that he could not fight two giant multinationals, Chauhan sold Parle to Coca-Cola for an estimated \$60 million.

This is a facet of the anxiety about the pace of change. As Australian journalist Louise Williams has reported:

Political cohesion is a delicate balancing act between the different religious and ethnic groups, powerful trade unions and employers, and the underlying tensions of a majority Hindu society in which the ancient system of caste - which ascribes one's social rank at birth - is being challenged by the poorest and least powerful.

Supporters of India's economic reforms can already point to a string of successful joint ventures with foreign companies and a corresponding increase in productivity and quality in local industry.

But just as new modern industries are thriving, so are outdated industries dying, killing off millions upon millions of jobs in a nation with no welfare safety net. And increased economy activity is already worsening serious environmental problems as more cars pour onto the roads, more coal is burnt to produce electricity, and new factories spew pollutants into the air and waterways.

India is the world's largest democracy. This is a great achievement. Most of the other countries in the former British empire in south and east Asia have had (at best) only a partial record of democracy (while almost all the democracies the departing British created in Africa have long since gone). When Indira Gandhi's Congress Party government suspended some of that democracy in the mid-1970s, with the imposition of a 19-month emergency rule, the Indian voters turned against her government. Indians are very proud of their record of democracy. India's achievement is even more significant when it is recalled the large number of voters involved and the diversity of those people. Over 400 million voters take part in national elections. There are more voters in India than in Western Europe and over twice the number of the American voters.

82 per cent of the population is Hindu. At the time of independence in 1947, the separate country of Pakistan was created out of the British colony to be a specifically Islamic state and about 8 million Muslims fled into Pakistan. But many Muslims remained in India, partly because they did not want to live in an Islamic state. 120 Muslims now live in India, making it one

of the world's largest Islamic countries. There are also about 23 million Christians. India in 1947 saw itself as a secular state, with religious tolerance.

India has the world's second largest population. It is expected to overtake China's population in the middle of this century. With its growing economy, India also expects to be a major economic power this century.

The major party for most of Indian history has been the Congress Party, which has supplied almost all of the prime ministers since India obtained independence from Britain 1947. It has been particularly identified with the Gandhi family, with both Mrs Indira and her son Rajiv Gandhi being assassinated. Mrs Gandhi's death in 1985 (by Sikh nationalists) enabled her son to capitalize on the sympathy and brought about a stunning victory for the Congress Party. He was killed in 1991 by Tamil nationalists involved in the Sri Lankan civil war (in which India had become involved).

But the Congress Party has run out of energy and it has been tainted with corruption. This has created new opportunities for other political parties. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) exploited the Congress Party's problems. It sensed that Indians were getting tired of the Congress Party and that it could introduce a new flavour to electioneering: encouraging Hindus to vote as Hindus. Thus, the BJP introduced a specific religious fundamentalism into Indian electioneering.

In 1984, the BJP obtained only two seats in the general election. In 1989, the BJP obtained 86 parliamentary seats. It continued to grow in size. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee followed the BJP "Hindutva" philosophy. The "Hindutva" philosophy is very vague but it is based on creating a more specifically Hindu-culture in Indian policies, thereby replacing the secular policies followed since 1947.

But the BJP had to be careful in using Hindu religious fundamentalism. If it went too far, it would have shattered the coalition government. On the other hand, many people voted for the BJP because it said that it would introduce strict Hindu religious fundamentalist policies, and so there was a climate of expectation that it will do so. There was a great increase in religious-based violence by Hindu militants and in reprisals against Hindus.

Finally, the Indian economy needs foreign investment and it is seen as a good place to invest. For example, India has the world's second largest trained English-speaking scientific workforce (after the United States). California has its "Silicon Valley" and India now has the "Silicon Plateau" at Bangalore. But foreign investment would be halted if the country fell into religious-based community violence. There are many other countries in Asia (and elsewhere) that are seeking foreign investment and would offer greater stability. Therefore, the BJP-led coalition government had to tread a narrow path.

Some Hindus have argued that the rise in Hindu fundamentalism is a natural reaction to the growth of Islamic Puritanism. Thus this is a defence mechanism to protect the faith against militant Islam.

## ✓ Islam

Are we are moving from the red menace to the green menace? The tensions over Iraq and the massacre of foreign tourists in Islamic countries (including the death of 88 Australians in Bali in October 2002) have fuelled speculation that Islam is a threat to world peace. Fundamentalist Islam is a great problem within some societies but it is not necessarily a threat to international peace and security.

Islam is on the rise again. It has gone through three phases. The first (622-1683) saw the expansion of the faith from Saudi Arabia to Vienna (this period included successful Islamic defence of the Holy Land against the European crusaders of the Middle Ages). In the second phase (1683-1945) the West, having stopped Islam at Vienna, counter-attacked and colonized the Islamic areas; the defeats of the crusades were avenged. We are now in the third phase. Since 1945 there has been the resurgence of Islam. Moslems today represent about 18.5 per cent of the world's population, and Islam is the second largest religious group after Christianity. It is one of the world's fastest growing religions.

British writer Salman Rushdie, author of *Satanic Verses*, was issued with a death sentence by the late Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 (a fatwa). In 1994, Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasrin fled her country to Western Europe to escape legal charges and fatwas in respect of her own writing. Both Islamic episodes have globalization implications.

First, in neither case would the mobs calling for the deaths of the writers be familiar with the writings; in particular, *Satanic Verses* is extremely allusive and opaque. But religious leaders have been able to arouse the mobs into great frenzies - and they have used modern communications technology to do so. If books can become global property, so can the techniques to oppose them.

Second, *Satanic Verses* is an example of where people can think globally and act locally (albeit wrongly in my view). Time magazine in July 1993 put the *Satanic Verses* death toll at about 60: more than 20 Pakistanis and Bangladeshis were killed in riots in 1989; in July 1991, the Japanese translator of the book was stabbed to death in Tokyo; in July 1993, 36 people were killed in a Turkish hotel blaze when Islamic radicals tried to kill the person who had made a translation of parts of the book. Many other people have been wounded, such as the Italian translator of the book, who was stabbed in July 1991 but managed to live.

Third, the Rushdie case contains several ironies. He is a British subject living in London, who has been sentenced to death by an Iranian leader (who has since died and so apparently the fatwa cannot be revoked). He is being protected by British police, while the British government is anxious to expand trade with Iran, and so it plays down the fatwa issue. As Julian Barnes, one of Rushdie's friends has said: "The British Government is committed to the extent of wanting to avoid the embarrassment of having one of its subjects assassinated by an agent of a foreign power. That's the extent of the commitment. But there are just not enough votes in standing up for Salman". Rushdie has been helped by some non-governmental organizations that have been keeping his fate in the public eye, notably the International Committee for the Defence of Salman Rushdie and his Publishers, which is housed at the Article 19 (freedom of information) NGO in London.

But Islam is not necessarily a threat to western countries. First, the "Islamic world" is not a united monolithic bloc. One lesson from the Cold War is that the "communist bloc" was never the monolithic bloc stretching from Berlin to Beijing that some politicians claimed. The Eastern European countries resented the Soviet occupation, the Soviet Asian Republics resented the (communist) Russian occupation, and the USSR and China were never on good terms. Therefore, old nationalisms, historical grudges, racism and various other less pleasant aspects of human nature can all erode some form of global religion. We must not assume that Islam is a more unifying force than any other religion or political ideology.

Second, Islam has long been divided. There is, for example, the division between the Sunnis (about 800 million) and the Shi'as (about 110 million). In the Afghanistan civil war, for example, Iran supported the embattled Shi'as based in the north, Russia backed some of the northern tribes, while Pakistan and the US supported the southern Pathan Talibaan movement (which ironically, was notorious for keeping women at home, banning drugs and hanging televisions from trees). (This support ended on September 11 2001, when Osama bin Laden – based in southern Afghanistan - launched his attack on the US).

Third, there is no agreed manifesto with which to unify Moslems against the West. The Koran is not a recipe for waging wars against infidels. Apart from various degrees of hostility towards Israel, there are few issues which unite all Moslems.

Finally, some Moslems may yet succumb to the "vices" of the West, such as consumerism. In Iran, for example, some young people, who cannot recall the pre-1979 regime, want jeans and Coke. The thirst for Coke will bring its own splits within Moslem countries.

Islam presents three challenges to the West. First, the West has to recognize the diversity and complexity of the Islamic world. On Kuwait in 1990/1, for example, many people in the West did not realize just how hated is the al-Sabah regime in much of the Arab world; the Iraqi invasion was praised by many poor Arabs in the Middle East. But the West lined up with a fundamentalist dictatorship and was supported by another dictatorship in Saudi Arabia. This was not a crusade against Islam; Saddam Hussein was less fundamental in his beliefs than the

countries supported by the US. He was an Iraqi nationalist – not a Moslem fundamentalist. Osama bin Laden did not like him (other than for his capacity to stand up to the Americans). Iraq was not involved in the September 11 attack on the US. (Ironically, when the 1992 elections were held in Kuwait, women and stateless Arabs were still excluded from the poll).

Second, a sense of history is important. There is still a deep-seated resentment at the West's violence to Islam over the centuries. Many more Moslems have been killed by Christians, than Christians have been killed by Moslems. Colonial countries have tended to forget about their imperial pasts. But Moslems, as the underdog, have a deeper memory of being run by foreigners.

Third, many Moslems are missing out on the economic growth. Years ago, many of the leaders opposing governments in North Africa and the Middle East would have been communist; now they are Islamic. Communism has failed: Moslems have seen the collapse of the USSR and its eastern European allies. They have also derived little benefit from the quasi-socialistic regimes in places like Egypt that are large, inefficient bureaucracies, which cannot cope with rapid urbanization and population growth.

The attacks on tourists in Egypt are partly because tourism is a major source of foreign income and if tourism declines, the Egyptian economy will go into greater chaos (thereby, the Islamic groups hope, creating an opportunity for them to seize power). Additionally, the tourists visit pre-Islamic monuments, such as the Pyramids, and the Moslem extremists disapprove of the foreign attention lavished about these "pagan" places.

Poor Moslems are sceptical of the newfound eastern European passion for the market system of economics: they can see in Western countries how the rich get richer and the poor become more numerous. They are looking for a third way and Islamic leaders are promising them a better future. The West needs to be able to prove that capitalism is a better option.

Finally, there is the conflict in Algeria, which has taken about 90,000 lives. The conflict has been a great shock because Algeria was long seen as one of the most modern Islamic states. However, beneath the veneer of a modernizing state there were pressures building up from Islam groups that saw the modernization process as eroding what they perceived as the basic ideas of Islam. French political scientist Mahmoud Hussein has explained:

The dual upheaval undergone by Islamic societies - their forced entry into a market which is becoming global in ways and at a pace which are ruthlessly disrupting internal balances and hierarchies, and the advent of the autonomous individual into the political life of these societies in place of the traditional notables and feudal chiefs - is tending to increase the fragility of the national fabric, the psychic instability of individuals, and the unpredictability of events.

Algerian governments have, for example, sought the improved status of women. But in a 1989 speech, Abassi Madani, a leader of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), said a female should emerge from home only three times: "when she is born, when she is married, and when she goes



to the cemetery." The FIS has also opposed foreign investment in Algeria and the foreign mass media.

The FIS drew its support from the poorer sections of the country and exploited their various resentments. The Algerian Government annulled the election won by the FIS in 1991 on the grounds that the FIS was pledged to scrap the democratic constitution and introduce a theocratic constitution, which would have the country governed by Islamic religious leaders. The Government's decision paved the way for the violent response by the now-banned FIS and the military's harsh crackdown.

To conclude, there is the deeper issue of what globalization will do to Islam. Globalization is a modernizing influence. But many of the old men who control official Islamic thinking are traditionalists. It is a bit like the Catholic Church prior to the Reformation in the 15th Century. That church has had five centuries to ease itself in to the modern era (and it is still not ordaining women). But Islam is being assailed by a variety of modern influences simultaneously, such as consumerism, feminism, the commoditisation of sex, gay liberation, and youthful rebellion. Perhaps Islam could do with a Martin Luther-type figure to assist with the reformation.

## ✓ Christianity

Christianity also has some instances of reaction against globalization. Two of last century's most well known American Christian evangelists, Jim and Tammy Bakker, pioneered the use of television for evangelism purposes; people could stay at home and so avoid the inconvenience of going to a local church. They used a form of modern technology, ironically, to criticize modern developments. The Bakkers evoked a mythic earlier American era, away the present era of change and confusion, and just gave the folks "old time religion" with an American flavour. They tapped into the tribal memory of - or at least the nostalgia for - the pioneering days. July 4 (rather than Christmas or Easter) was traditionally the target date for the completion of new buildings at Heritage USA, the Christian Disneyland they created in North Carolina. Unfortunately, Jim Bakker was a crook and so went to gaol for the miss-use of money donated to Heritage USA.

Bakker avoided political controversy, though he had an underlying sympathy for conservative candidates, such as Ronald Reagan. Jerry Falwell of the Moral Majority and Pat Robertson, however, were overtly far more political (with Robertson - a son of a US senator from Virginia - in 1980 displaying vice presidential aspirations). Both saw the US as God's chosen country, surrounded by enemies (especially in the USSR and United Nations), and the importance of the US having its own set of priorities in international affairs, irrespective of the views of other countries.

The end of the Cold War robbed the religious extremists of an "anti-Christ" to oppose (in the USSR). But instead they have opted for opposition to Islam and so they publicize the

dangers of Islam, they have supported Israel's right to exist, and have called for tougher actions against Arab states (such as the wars in 1991 and 2003 against Iraq).

To conclude, Christianity – like Hinduism and Islam – is being challenged by globalization. The religious and political extremists may try to arouse the mobs - but their kids want Big Macs, Coke, jeans and Madonna videos. This is the problem the BBC encountered in the 1950s: given a chance, the young listeners preferred entertainment over education - and often so did their parents, really. However much an aesthete may be appalled at popular tastes, the fact is the tastes are popular. If people are to have large disposable incomes, then they will want to spend them on what they want - rather than on what a high-minded central committee or academic elite deem is good for them.

An additional problem for Christianity is coming to terms with the religion's new power base (in terms of members): the Third World. It is important not to assess the strength of the Christian church worldwide by what is seen of it in Australia (though even here there are more people in church on a Sunday than at sporting matches on a Saturday). There are more Christians worldwide than ever before. The church is powering ahead in the Third World. Of the 10 world's largest Christian parishes, seven are in South Korea. South Korean churches are among the world's most energetic, organized and efficient. South Korea – which half a century ago was wrecked by the Korean War – now has a gross national product equal to Australia's and is set to continue its high rate of economic growth. As trade takes South Koreans overseas (including to Australia) so they take their brand of conservative Christianity with them. Meanwhile, the Anglican Church has 70 million members worldwide – and 17 million are in Nigeria alone. The African members do not necessarily share the values of the liberal American Anglicans, notably on the issue of ordaining gay bishops. Therefore, Christianity will have its own internal difficulties to deal with.

Keith Suter

---

#### NOTES

1. Orthodox Jews in Israel have also been active in opposing some products and the advertising thereof because they believe them to be contrary to the spirit of the Torah; see: "Pepsi no Match for Rabbis", The Australian, June 5 1993 p 9; "Dinosaurs No Yo-Go for Strict Jews", The Sydney Morning Herald, August 14 1993, p 17.
2. "Hindu Boycott Hits Coke and Pepsi". The Sydney Morning Herald, July 9 1994, p 19.
3. "Running Scared", Time, January 10 1994, p 35.
4. Louise Williams "India's Consuming Passions", The Sydney Morning Herald, June 4 1994, p 7A.



5. "Death After Death", Time, July 19 1993, p 13.
6. Philip Weiss "The Fugitive", The Sydney Morning Herald, February 6 1993, p 38.
7. Mahmoud Hussein "Behind the Veil of Fundamentalism", UNESCO Courier (Paris), December 1994, pp 26-7.
8. "The Second Battle of Algiers", Time, January 9 1995, p 16.
9. See: Charles Shepard Forgiven: The Rise and Fall of Jim Bakker and the PTL Ministry, New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989.