

BOOK REVIEW

Competing Fundamentalisms: Violent Extremism in Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, by Sathianathan Clarke, Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 2017, 246 pp., £20.99 (paperback), ISBN: 9780664259884.

'Religious fundamentalism' is a term that has for several decades been a staple of writing about the involvement of religion in politics. Often treated as a generic issue in the context of the world religions, 'religious fundamentalism' is often associated with conservative or rightwing understandings of the world, articulated by people who appear to believe that the world would be a better place if everybody lived by the word of God as articulated in their particular faith's holy scriptures.

Clarke is interested in identifying what 'religious fundamentalisms' have in common, as expressed through Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Clarke takes the reader through competing theories for what he terms 'violent (religious) extremism', including cultural, social, political, economic, and psychological explanations. None of these, he claims, includes a specific role for 'religion'. For Clarke, however, religion is central to explanations for and the content of (violent) religious fundamentalism, as each of the faiths he focuses on have holy scriptures that at times extol the virtues of using violence to 'deal with' enemies of the faith or backsliders within it.

Having established that Christian, Islamic, and Hindu religious fundamentalisms are centrally connected to what is to be found in their holy scriptures, Clarke devotes a chapter to each of the 'religious fundamentalisms' identified in the book's title. Chapter 2 examines 'Christian fundamentalism' in the United States, and 'uncovers the strong religious beliefs often hidden beneath the political logic and operation of one of the most powerful nation-states in the world' (p. 5). Chapter 3 looks at the emergence and development of 'Muslim fundamentalism' beginning in Egypt in the 1920s with the Muslim Brotherhood. Chapter 4 turns to 'Hindu fundamentalism', with a focus on India.

In Chapter 5 Clarke identifies and explains what he sees as central components of these three religious fundamentalist expressions. According to Clarke, each of them 'highlights and interprets three theological themes': first, a conviction that God's will is revealed in the faith's sacred scriptures (what Clarke calls the word-vision); second, 'fixed and straightforward world-ways (mandated individual and group behaviour)'; and third, a shared desire to proselytize and 'dominate the rest of the world', 'an imperial global-order'. Globalization is a motor for these religious fundamentalisms, as one of its central characteristics, according to Clarke, is a 'spirit of fierce competition' (p. 5).

In the final chapter of this short book, Clarke asks what is to be done to counter violent religious fundamentalisms. He understandably concentrates on his own faith, Christianity, and argues that in order to counter violent religious fundamentalism within that faith, it is necessary to articulate and amplify its emollient and centre-ground-seeking tenets. While this is all well and good, I am very sceptical that this would be effective. While it is necessary, it is not, I suspect, enough to counter the views held by those convinced of the correctness and appropriateness of a fundamentalist worldview.

On the other hand, it is very difficult to come up with an approach that would be successful. As Clarke himself articulates, this is because it is not simply a case of using superior arguments to convince those attracted by religious fundamentalisms to change their tack. My own view is that there is very little, if anything, that can be done to convince those adhering to a 'violent religious fundamentalism' that they have got it wrong. This is because such people are unlikely to be convinced by the kind of arguments that one might employ to argue for the commonalities that people share, and which 'violent religious fundamentalisms' seek to drive us away from. Instead, what is needed is comprehensive religious education from an early age that would hopefully undermine the chances of people adopting fundamentalist worldviews in the first place.

Clarke's book is written in an engaging, attractive style that eschews jargon while providing copious and informative footnotes for readers wishing to dig a bit deeper. The book is also characterized by the authenticity of Clarke's experience as an Indian Christian theologian who now lives in the United States, and who has studied in depth the emergence and development of the Muslim Brotherhood from its Egyptian roots to becoming a global transnational movement. Many readers would benefit from Clarke's well-developed comparative approach to understanding these three 'violent religious fundamentalisms', articulated via what is evidently both a deep knowledge of the factors and actors that he is writing about and moulded by a concern to highlight and explicate what the author sees as the fundamental errors of the fundamentalists.

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