


# Nordic fundamentalism

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In 2018 we initiated a project concerning Wahhabi mission in Sweden. Consequently, we came to reflect upon and discuss the concept of 'fundamentalism', as Wahhabism arguably is the most typical expression of what is considered 'Islamic fundamentalism'. As the project progressed, we noticed how the preachers and groups in focus of our studies borrowed vocabulary and terminology as well as aesthetic expressions and techniques of communication from competing Islamic (and in many cases non-Islamic) groups or webpages. An arguably fundamentalist approach to sources and teachings was taken, where a literal reading and detailed imitation of the sources were the norm. This was done, however, amidst and through expressions and strategies which we do not necessarily associate with 'fundamentalist Islam'.

THIS OBSERVATION LED US into two trains of thought concerning contemporary 'Islamic fundamentalism' in Sweden, which may have a bearing on other national and regional contexts as well. First, how might changing environments or circumstances influence fundamentalist interpretations and practices? In the Swedish case this would take place within a secular and liberal-democratic context. If fundamentalist preachers adapt to new media as well as to new discourses, how might that affect the message they preach, and, moreover, the manner in which they spread their messages? Second, the project viewed fun-

damentalism analytically as an exclusivist approach to religious sources within an unfavourable surrounding society. This led us to consider to what extent we might find similar approaches within other, non-fundamentalist, religious groups operating in secularised societies. Even though this was out of scope for the project, we felt a desire to probe it further, and these questions are examined in this special issue of *Approaching Religion*.

Initially, we asked a handful of scholars in the study of religions who do *not* study groups considered fundamentalist to examine the extent to which the concept could be a useful analytical category within their fields of empirical interest, and to what extent new insights might surface through such an analytical approach. It soon became evident that 'fundamentalism' is not a self-evident concept. Nor was any analytical gain evident from applying the concept to some of the groups studied in this issue; some of the contributors were therefore confronted with comments from peer reviewers who called into doubt the benefit of the concept as related to the chosen source material.

Perhaps the initial hesitancy of both contributors and the anonymous reviewers towards the wider use of the concept

as suggested here is both sound and correct. It seems awkward to apply the concept in the analysis of material unrelated to the three monotheistic Abrahamic religions, or to currents within those traditions that are more open to ritual or interpretative creativity. The articles that make up this special issue do, we nonetheless argue, contribute some interesting insights on the concept of fundamentalism itself and how it might be developed, and how arguably fundamentalist approaches might be applied by groups generally not categorised as fundamentalist.

The current issue discusses a variety of empirical material in light of the concept described above. Måns Broo's article 'ISKCON and intelligent design: the case of Leif A. Jensen and *Rethinking Darwin*' presents a close reading of the Danish member of ISKCON, Leif A. Jensen, whose book *Rethinking Darwin* is an example of the negative views of the theory of evolution. Broo contextualises the book within the history of the ISKCON-movement, which is often regarded as fundamentalist. He problematises the book in relation to various conceptualisations of fundamentalism and further discusses how and why the term might be difficult to apply outside its original (Christian) context.

Karen Swartz's and Olav Hammer's article 'Soft charisma as an impediment to fundamentalist discourse: the case of the Anthroposophical Society in Sweden' proposes a definition of fundamentalism suitable for research on new religions. Their case study concerns the Swedish Anthropological Society; on the basis of interviews the authors highlight a fundamentalist response to a perceived crisis, where the informants look for answers in a sacrosanct historical legacy and in the texts and words of a founding figure, where the notion of charismatic leadership is of

importance for the analysis of the movement considered within the conceptual framework of fundamentalism.

Mercédesz Czimbalmos and Riikka Tuori present the history of Chabad in Finland. They have conducted interviews with Finnish Jews who have been in contact with the Chabad Lubavitch, a global fundamentalist and charismatic movement that actively works to reach out to non-observant Jews, using modern tools of communication. In 'Chabad on ice: Jewish encounters with fundamentalism in Finland' the authors examine the material using the concept of 'vicarious religion' and show that even though the Chabad has a fundamentalist approach to religious practices, many of the Finnish informants take part in their activities 'vicariously', but do not necessarily apply stricter religious observance outside the Chabad activities.

In "One of the most important questions that human beings have to understand": Salafism as Islamic deferentialist fundamentalism', Susanne Olsson and Jonas Svensson argue that the concept of fundamentalism in the study of Salafism could benefit from an analytical perspective, separating it into the modes of fundamentalist inferentialism and deferentialism. The authors make use of a case study that illustrates the importance of ritual purity in Salafi discourse, and argue that the concept of 'deferential fundamentalism' allows for comparative analysis, both cross-religiously and diachronically. It also allows for an analysis of Salafi thought and practice in relation to theories of how human beings in general process social information.

Simon Sorgenfrei and Simon Stjernholm address Islamic fundamentalism from an innovative angle, where a divide between fundamentalist Salafism and Sufi Islam has often been an uncritical norm. In the article, 'Salafi Sufism? Islamic border-keeping

in contemporary Sweden, the authors show that the Salafi critique of Sufism strongly affects local Sufi interpretations and practices, leading to a stronger presence of Islamic neo-traditionalist motivations in both dogma and rituals, in facing global Salafi criticism. Just as Wahhabi Muslims in the study mentioned at the beginning of this editorial made use of terms and techniques from their competitors, the Sufis analysed in this article were seen to use terminology and methods generally associated with Salafi Islam.

As this overview shows, the articles in this special issue wrestle with the concept of 'fundamentalism' in a number of different ways, seeking thereby to analyse a variety of empirical materials. It is our hope that, taken together, the articles, which are all interesting in their own right, will contribute insights into the concept of fundamentalism as such, and the benefits that can come from looking at familiar source materials from unexpected angles. ■

SUSANNE OLSSON and SIMON SORGENFREI  
Guest Editors



**Susanne Olsson** is a professor in the history of religions at Stockholm University in Sweden. Her main field of research is in Islamic studies, where she has conducted research on political reinterpretations of Islam in Egypt and Europe. In her research on Islam in Egypt she has studied socialist interpretations of Islam and new forms of preaching. A main focus related to the European context has been on 'traditionalist' Islam in a Hanbali tradition, expressed, for example, in contemporary Salafism, mainly of a pietistic and non-violent sort, but she has also conducted research into other forms of activist 'othering' methods. She has also published on Muslim minority jurisprudence that is developed to accommodate the current situation of Muslims in Europe.

**Simon Sorgenfrei** is a Professor in the Study of Religions at Södertörn University in Stockholm, Sweden. His main research interests are historical and contemporary Islam and Sufism.



In the spring of 2022 he published the book *'De kommer att vara annorlunda svenskar.'* *Berättelsen om Sveriges första muslimer* ('They will be different Swedes': The story of Sweden's first Muslims; Norstedts, 2022). Among his other recent publications might be mentioned 'Branding Salafism: Salafi missionaries as social media influencers', published in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 34(3), 2022: 211-37; a chapter on influences from Swedenborg and Sufism in the art and philosophy of Ivan Aguéli/Abd-al-Hâdî, 'Ivan Aguéli's monotheistic landscapes: from perspectival to solar logics' in a volume edited by Mark Sedgwick entitled *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi: The Politics, Painting, and Esotericism of Ivan Aguéli* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, pp. 55-68); in 2021 he also published an analysis of the origination and establishment of the Ahmadiyya movement in nineteenth-century India, 'Mīrzā Ghulām Aḥmad and the establishment of the Aḥmadiyya Jamā'at from a market theory perspective', *The Muslim World* 111(3), 2021: 534-48.