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### **Review of Cassandra Balchin, *Toward a Future Without Fundamentalisms: Analysing Religious Fundamentalist Strategies and Feminist Responses***

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## NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

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### **Toward a Future Without Fundamentalisms: Analysing Religious Fundamentalist Strategies and Feminist Responses**

Cassandra Balchin

Toronto, Association for Women's Rights in Development, 2011, xi + 107 pp., Digital.

Available at <http://www.awid.org/Library/Towards-a-Future-without-Fundamentalisms2>

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Cassandra Balchin's ambitious new book charts an important global trend – the rise of religious fundamentalist movements – and the effect they have had on feminist activism and initiatives to promote women's rights. Part of a larger series sponsored by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), the book is directed primarily at activists, feminists, and organisations dedicated to the promotion of human rights. It will also be of interest to students and researchers interested in the ways that religious ideologies are advanced at the practical level. Balchin is no stranger to the field, having previously published on Muslim family laws, and the interface of international development policy with gender and religion. She is also affiliated with Women Living Under Muslim Laws, the Muslim Women's Network – UK, and Musawah, a Muslim group dedicated to equality within in the family.

Based on information gathered from over 1600 activists and academics worldwide through an online survey conducted in 2007, a number of case studies, and interviews with 51 experts, the book synthesises a large body of data to chart global trends. It is divided into three sections. Part One tracks the rise in religious fundamentalist movements and explores the factors that have contributed to this shift. Part Two details the strategies that these movements have employed to advance their particular ideological agendas, which Balchin claims are invariably detrimental to human rights generally – and women's rights in particular. Part Three records successful responses that women's rights activists have employed to counter the influence of religious fundamentalists.

Fundamentalism across religions is characterised here as patriarchal, literalist, intolerant of other views (both within and outside of its religious roots), and generally opposed to democratic, egalitarian movements. What has caused the contemporary rise of such movements in diverse religions traditions across the world is a fascinating question. Balchin divides the causes into political, social, and economic categories, attributing the failure of the state to provide adequate social services as a key gap that enables such movements to flourish as service providers. She also identifies "identity politics" as a major influence, as the onslaught of globalisation triggers the reassertion of narrowly defined, oppositional religious identities. Local forms of alienation, especially racism in diasporic communities, may also contribute to the recruitment appeal of religious fundamentalism, with its offer of clear demarcation and moral certainty.

The book is seasoned with direct quotes from prominent scholars and activists, including Nira Yuval-Davis, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Zainah Anwar, Farida Shaheed and Jennifer Butler, who reflect on the nature of fundamentalism and ways of addressing it. It is also unique in the range of national contexts and organisations it includes, citing experiences from Eastern Europe, Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, as well as North America and the

UK. This brings together comparisons that would rarely be seen in the same text, and provides interesting leads that researchers may use for further inquiry.

Unfortunately, the ambitious scope of this book is also its weakness. In making the canvas of comparison global, the broad strokes inevitably brush over critical differences among various fundamentalist movements and contexts. Sometimes the comparisons can create inaccurate representations, particularly when readers do not know the contexts well. For example, Balchin advises that the profession of support for female education amongst some religious fundamentalists should be critically examined, because it often implies a type of education that reinforces female subordination and passivity. So far, so good. However, as examples she cites Southern Baptist universities in the US and Indonesian *pesantren*, on the authority of some of her respondents. Those who know something of the Indonesian education system will recognise that *pesantren* are simply a type of school, usually offering both primary and secondary education and in some cases university-level instruction. While religious in character, they are run by a wide range of organisations, differing drastically in their treatment of religion and women's rights. Indeed, as some scholars have noted,<sup>1</sup> religious fundamentalism often thrives more in the religiously illiterate secular universities of Indonesia than in the *pesantren*. It is grossly inaccurate to compare *pesantren* as a general category of diverse content, with the very specifically affiliated Southern Baptist universities of the US.

Another challenge facing the book is that of definition. Balchin acknowledges the difficulty of coming up with a definition of religious fundamentalism broad enough to use globally, without swallowing everything associated with religion, or with religious conservatives. But it would have been helpful to see this issue tackled at the beginning, rather than in Part Two, after a lengthy discussion of religious fundamentalist movements without any definition in Part One.

Nevertheless, the book raises some thoughtful and significant points. The rise of religious movements has refuted the overconfident expectation that modernity would leave religion in its wake. The renewed vitality of certain religious movements and forms of identity requires a reconsideration of old dichotomies. Support for secularism may be compatible with religious faith, and feminism does not necessarily mean that one has rejected religion. Indeed, the book is at its most interesting when it notes examples of religion being mobilised in support of women's rights. Although Balchin does not make this claim, the use of religious resources that support contemporary struggles for human rights, while often more challenging, has proved far more effective in many countries than the simplistic separation between religion (as backward and oppressive) and human rights.

Indeed, such divisions play into the hands of fundamentalists, who frequently assert that human rights – and especially women's rights – are foreign and anti-religious. Other terms can also be divisive: the words “secular” and “religious” seem to be obvious opposites, but as Balchin points out, the varied understandings of secularism often feed unhelpful polemic. In fact, religious and non-religious alike have reason to defend the notion of a secular state which provides space for pluralist co-existence by not championing any one religious tradition, nor excluding religion altogether.

Balchin thoughtfully suggests that feminist movements need to do more to understand and incorporate space for progressive religious voices in their organising. She quotes Jennifer Butler: “We need to support religious progressives and challenge fundamentalism

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<sup>1</sup> See Azyumardi Azra, “Bali and Southeast Asian Islam: Debunking the Myths”, in K. Ramakrishna and S.S. Tang (ed.), *After Bali: The Threat of Terrorism in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, 2003), pp. 39-58; and Robert Hefner, “Islamic Schools, Social Movements, and Democracy in Indonesia”, in R. Hefner (ed.), *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), pp. 55-105.

not by claiming religion has no place in public life, but by lifting up alternative voices and models for civic engagement; this resonates more and is actually more democratic than trying to exclude religious voices” (p. 75). In this, the book touches on issues of relevance to a large audience. Not only feminists, but human rights organisations and academics alike grapple with the place of religion in the public sphere, and the appropriate response to intolerant versions of faith which abuse democratic space.

Cassandra Balchin is to be commended for tackling a question as complex as the rise of fundamentalism, and attempting to draw answers from diverse national contexts. While the breadth of the examples sometimes sacrifices depth, her conclusions provide useful insight into the factors that may contribute to the rise of religious fundamentalist movements, and the similarities among the movements themselves. This book will provide a valuable starting point for all those interested in how human rights and civil society can frame the role of religion in public space.