

# DOUBT IN RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM: EDUCATION BETWEEN AUTHORITY AND RATIONAL AUTONOMY

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## Abstract

A fundamentalist religious practice determines daily life, personal beliefs, and interaction with fellow human beings. Children and adolescents who grow up in fundamentalist homes are often collaterally involved in their parents' religious practice. Therefore, a self-determined decision about potential religious participation is usually anticipated and exchanged for authoritarian patterns of upbringing. When this practice demands blind trust in the universality of the religion and its scriptures, this is mainly reflected in educational practices and how authority determines them.

The ability to doubt is fundamental, particularly regarding critical opinion-forming, social participation, and democratic involvement. But how does the possibility of young people learning to doubt situate itself in this field of tension of religious infallibility? To pursue this topic, the influence of multi-layered authority in a religious fundamentalist education on the emergence and handling of *doubt* is examined and compared to the requirements for developing an autonomous personality. A delegitimation of doubt in pedagogical practice can lead to difficulties in the child's autonomy development. It is, therefore, in the interest of society and institutions to promote the ability to exercise autonomy. This paper attempts to generate a broader and interdisciplinary understanding of the interaction of doubt in religious fundamentalism and the development of rational autonomy.

**Keywords:** *Autonomy, doubt, religious fundamentalism, educational authority, democracy education.*

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## 1. Introduction

The sense and the active act of *doubt* are part of each human life. At the same time, it is a protective function and a decision-making aid. Children and adolescents who have grown up in religious-fundamentalist homes tend to learn from an early age to answer moral questions based on sacred scriptures or the determinations of clerical authority figures (Peels, 2022). Worldly things can easily be differentiated into *good* and *evil* (Baurmann, 2007). This can guide a god-fearing lifestyle. In this paper, I aspire to examine how a fundamentalist lifestyle and an authoritarian upbringing in this sense are related to the learning of doubt in childhood and adolescence in an educational-philosophical way. It will address the consequences of (not) learning to doubt and whether and how an autonomous lifestyle can develop in this context. Therefore, I will begin by looking at infallibility in fundamentalist contexts and its impact on the authority exercised on children and adolescents. I then situate the emergence and handling of doubt in this environment. After a definitional sequence on the focus on autonomy and autonomy learning, I place this in the context of limited doubt in the second part of the paper. The aim here is to shape a view about upbringing and its influences on people in such circumstances. In particular, the paper contributes to the study of the limits of authority in education and fundamentalist education patterns per se, especially the aspect of dealing with autonomy (learning) in education (e.g., Giesinger, 2020/ Dietrich, 2021/ Westlund, 2021). The intention here is not to condemn educational concepts but to take a deeper look into the causes and consequences of doubt and emphasize the lack of doubt in relation to the shaping of autonomy. During the philosophical-epistemic investigations in this paper, I work with the defining assumption of fundamentalism that the infallibility of certain beliefs is a criterion for fundamentalist communities. Thus the condemnation of doubt is a necessary component. I do not thereby exclude the possibility that there are fundamentalist structures in other contexts that do not make use of the infallibility doctrine. The explanations are intended to draw connections between different academic working fields deliberately.

## 2. Belief in infallibility as a possible "pillar" of fundamentalism

Numerous explanatory approaches and attempts at definition, in at least equally diverse fields of research, deal with the foundations and effects of fundamentalist lifestyles. An issue repeatedly mentioned as a definitional cornerstone of this phenomenon is the infallibility of the respective religion, the relevant Holy Scripture (e.g., Malcolm, 2021; Baurmann, 2007 et al.), scholars, or prophets.

In his 'BicFam' definition of fundamentalism, Peels (2022, p. 13) describes the pillar "Literalism and infallibility" as "Fundamentalisms tend to confer total authority on certain texts [...]". These texts, in particular the *holy* scriptures of various religious communities, are *infallible* and to be understood literally. Any attempts at interpretation and hermeneutics are categorically rejected (Peels, 2022). Therefore any person who understands otherwise would have fallen into an aberration. The rules and teachings of the fundamentalist communities are "universal and absolute". Accordingly, the plurality of thought and social belief cannot be fruitful, but people can only be saved if they join the community (Peels, 2022, p. 13).

The guidelines believers can take from these infallible and universal religious dogmas are anchored in a "dualistic worldview" (Almond et al., 1995, p. 134). The world is thus divided into *good* and *sinful, righteousness* and *apostasy*. Emerson and Hartman (2006) describe this phenomenon further, saying that for believers, it is clear whether people belong to a fundamentalist community: Either one adheres to the strict rules or not. This diametrical view of the world has specific implications for the everyday lives of believers in fundamentalist communities. In particular, family and sexual life, food and dress codes, gender relations, and general behaviours are often predetermined (Almond et al., 1995). Thus, there is mostly a clear path of righteousness in fundamentalist constructs (Fulton et al., 1999). If we look at the difference between 'literal' and 'symbolic' understanding of sacred scriptures, it becomes apparent that, especially in times of increasingly flexible lifestyles, beliefs, and secularisation, the literal understanding gives believers continuity, certainty, and the assurance that for every problem there is a correct response (Fontaine et al., 2005). If one acknowledges these rules and guidelines, since they are taken from a scripture regarded as *infallible*, universally valid, and holy, it can be concluded that, on the one hand, doubt is not desirable and, on the other hand, it is sinful, since it doubts the holiness and is thus to be suppressed. I will explore this derivation in the context of education and autonomy in the following chapters.

## 3. Pedagogical authority in fundamentalism

In the previous chapter, I pointed out that the apparent *infallibility of faith* in certain fundamentalist structures can have a concrete and far-reaching influence on how people shape their lives. When institutions such as religious communities, scriptures, or other human constructs are presented and seen as infallible, they exert a particular authority on the recipients. Whether it is the interaction between employers and employees, in educational institutions, or individual education: authoritarian structures can be found everywhere. Authority sets necessary guidelines but can also become a limitation of development towards a self-reliant person. Thus, authority often arouses particularly negative associations, although it can be required in an educational context. For example, younger children with not yet fully developed abilities can learn from persons with trained intellectual and institutional authority (Westlund, 2021). Scholars widely distinguish between two forms of authority: practical and theoretical. First grants a person the legitimacy to give instructions, which in turn should be followed by others. The second recognizes people as experts in specific fields without the direct implication of following their advice (Schmidt, 2011; Giesinger, 2018). For example, in our case, fundamentalist communities could see the legitimacy of religious opinion leaders or, among others, *holy scriptures* as direct communication of *higher powers* to people as a practical authority. In contrast, a moderate and critical engagement with religion and faith could lead to involved scriptures or persons being seen as theoretically authoritarian.

In most social contexts and according to the ECtH<sup>1</sup>, parents have the right to educate their children according to their ideas and beliefs, as long as this education locates itself within the legal framework (EctH, 2022). It is, therefore, easy for parents and other adults in the adolescent's environment to exercise authority. Particularly in the case of younger children, however, the question always arises as to whether their individual moral and mental development enables them to distinguish between the illegitimate and legitimate exercise of power (Giesinger, 2018).

In many fundamentalist communities, parental and occasionally institutional education is based on faith and adherence to the prescribed rules of life. "In their view, strength in faith and strict obedience to God's commands constitute the primary goals of child education" (Dietrich, 2021, p. 563). Educators

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<sup>1</sup> European Court of Human Rights, Article 2, Protocol 1

thus exercise the authority of knowledge and truth as supposed transmitters of faith. This education tends to suggest to young people that they are not the creators of their own lives but that everything is predetermined (even before birth) and to be trusted so that no decisions should be taken outside this framework. (Dietrich, 2021).

This educational style takes its lead from an inherently strongly authoritarian construct (Peels, 2020), the fundamentalist practice of religion. It exerts an enormous influence on its followers through its authoritarian form of organization (rules of conduct, obedience to religious authorities) (Emerson & Hartman, 2006; Almond et al., 1995).

Parents in these settings seem to aspire to teach their children about the *truth* and *salvation* they have experienced in a way that is right and essential for them. One could speak here of a double exercise of authority. On the one hand, religious authority is exercised on the parents, who in turn transfer it to the children, usually from their best knowledge and convictions, through mostly strict rules and guidelines. At the same time, from a certain age, faith can also exert a direct authoritarian influence on children and adolescents, as they fear not only parental but also God's disfavor if they break any rules. It depends on the individual case, which influence weighs more heavily.

#### **4. The interplay of authority and doubt in education**

By formulating the double authoritarian dependence of adolescents, I have highlighted the extent to which they are clamped to clear guidelines. The following analysis is not primarily about self-*doubt* but about doubting and critically questioning one's environment, life plans, and designs. Doubt can therefore be seen as healthy skepticism toward one's environment (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022).

The ability to doubt or to question things critically is closely related to obedience relationships and, in the case of children and young people, to the authority exercised by adults and guardians. According to Giesinger (2018), one can only speak of obedience if it is not demanded through force; the individual thus "[...] voluntarily acquiesces in the normative demands of others"<sup>2</sup> (Giesinger, 2018, p. 611). This raises the question of whether children and young people in fundamentalist communities understand compliance with rules as coercion or whether this becomes an intrinsic habitus. This involves both the observance of religiously influenced parental rules and the direct divine regulations. On the one hand, humans must be able to trust to some extent. Without this basic trust, fundamental social interactions can hardly function if we just look at children's primary trust in their parents in their early development years. On the other, this essential trust should also show boundaries where the transition to critical questioning and reflection begins.

Children in fundamentalist groups are often kept away from anything that might distance them from following *God's Word* and, thus, the *truth*. There is, therefore, a particular attempt to draw a front to secular and progressive movements (Peels, 2020). Perhaps also out of fear, much is done to prevent doubts from arising. This one-dimensional worldview can also naturally limit the possibilities of being open-minded or even acting autonomously. It can be deduced from this that the over-exertion of authority on young people here leads to any doubt about these rules being understood as questioning God Himself. When one knows only one universal *truth*, doubting it is made difficult. Thus, in religious fundamentalism, children and adolescents are often not trained to make basic decisions, to choose critically between different concepts, and, therefore, to doubt. I imply that this can lead to a lack of ability to critically examine one's life concepts or even to doubt them.

This does not mean that people in fundamentalist structures are free of doubt. Studies show that even a critical view of one's faith does not necessarily lead to a rejection of the fundamentalist way of life but rather to the opposite (Schouten, 2018). This phenomenon can be mentioned as a possible explanation due to the narrow worldview discussed. Therefore, even the most plausible arguments against a person's initial worldview do not necessarily lead to a change of fundamental convictions and can only be adjusted with difficulty since, otherwise, the entire worldview could be overturned.

#### **5. Autonomy(acquisition) in the context of limited doubt**

As highlighted in the previous chapters, authority is often over-emphasized in religious fundamentalist educational constructs. When it is more difficult for adolescents to find a constructive relationship to doubt and critical engagement with life decisions, the question arises of how strongly these prepositions influence the acquisition of an autonomous way of life.

When we talk about autonomy, we also talk about the purpose of liberal education. Kymlicka (1989, p. 18) speaks of 'rational revisability', i.e., the ability to formulate one's values, beliefs, or goals. In aiming to achieve autonomy, various intrinsic and external essential prerequisites, which I will focus on,

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<sup>2</sup> Translated from German: "[...] freiwillig auf die normativen Ansprüche anderer ein."

are needed. According to Taylor (2017), among others, open-mindedness is a necessary, though not sufficient, factor. This, in turn, would consist of the prerequisites needed to learn something new, to question old convictions, and, if necessary, to revise them. Dietrich (2021, p. 565) speaks of similar prerequisites that must be fulfilled to constitute an autonomous person as “critically rethinking” or “[...] changing their most important projects and ambitions”. Without different options from which people can choose with reasonable grounds and without coercion, there would be no basis for autonomy. Intending to be able to act autonomously, indoctrination and thus an impediment to free and rational decision-making must also be avoided (Taylor, 2017). If parents take this decision away from their children, it has concrete consequences for their children's future prospects. (Dietrich, 564). Finally, autonomous individuals are the foundation of a democratic society (Taylor, 2017), so it is in the general interest of even this society to promote them. Of course, it must be remembered that all ideas and options are influenced by certain dogmas or political and sociological backgrounds. A democratic and pluralistic society must be able to tolerate this to a certain extent.

Interesting in this context is the argumentation of Giesinger (2018), who sees autonomy as uncoupled from simply following rules. An autonomous education process aims to encourage children to question rules rather than force them to obey. In this sense, a strong authoritarian upbringing can influence the development of autonomy skills in childhood. Assuming that compliance with fundamentalist religious rules is based on strict obedience, it can be concluded that children follow the rules not only because they make sense to them or are even plausible but because compliance is expected by the authority figure, even if coercion does not necessarily have to be involved. To a certain extent, adolescents are deprived of their decision-making power and, thus, of the chance to generate autonomy (Giesinger, 2018). According to Giesinger, another point that should be addressed is inherent moral education. Since adolescents are not involved in the decision-making process of the rules to be followed, they are more inclined to hand over moral responsibility to the person exercising authority. Ethical rules are therefore not questioned according to their purpose in themselves but are only examined concerning consequences by authorities.

Since indoctrination, in contrast to open-mindedness as a prerequisite for autonomy, tends to lead to close-mindedness (Callan & Arena, 2009), further research is needed to determine whether most fundamentalist attempts at teaching are indoctrination of adolescents and where the limits of education are crossed into indoctrination (e.g., Drerup, 2018). However, suppose one follows Peels (2020), who says that access to education is limited for members of fundamentalist groups and adds the above-average exercise of authority and demand for obedience in the lives of adolescents in religious fundamentalism. In that case, one deduction can be made: Through excessive authority and the attempted suppression of doubts through fear of (divine) disfavor and punishment, the educational support in learning a broad horizon and open-mindedness can at least be doubted. Therefore, my thesis is that the intensity of authority in religious-fundamentalist education, with the criteria applied in this paper, exceeds the scope of what is appropriate or even acceptable for adolescents.

I want to return to Dietrich (2021), who admits both the freedom from coercion and the prerequisite of having several options for autonomy formation. Both, as illustrated, are probably to be denied in some fundamentalist movements. Objectively, many young people would have the opportunity, even though challenging, to turn away from fundamentalist teachings. Still, those who are encouraged from an early age to follow the *path of truth* may not later recognize their full potential to evaluate alternative options (Dietrich, 2021). When interviewed, members of religious *high*-fundamentalist groups relatively rarely mentioned doubts about God or their religion. However, when doubts did arise, they tended to be interpreted in a pro-religious direction, strengthening the respondents' faith rather than challenging it (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). (Rare) doubts seem to move people as not questioning their faith and beliefs per se, but rather their attitude towards faith. The origin here could be that education did not lay the foundations for tools to deal with doubts that arise.

According to Vergote, one of the prominent origins of doubt in adolescence is the conflict between authority and autonomy (Vergote, 1997). One might think that this contradicts the thesis that adolescents in this context cannot sufficiently develop their doubts, let alone learn possible solutions for inner conflicts since this area of tension should become visible here. It should be countered that this tension most likely also occurs among these adolescents. The crucial point is another, namely: how these doubts are overcome. And in these cases, they are resolved in a supposedly faith-promoting direction.

Even given these deductions, it cannot be assumed causally that autonomy cannot develop in strong authoritarian relationships as total control is usually not exposed, and possibilities for own thoughts, therefore, can arise. Here, special consideration must be given to the type of school attended (e.g., public school or home-schooling) or the general living environment of the adolescents. In other words, to what extent do they come into contact with different people and thus also different opinions and lifestyles? However, as leaving the community would present individuals with enormous mental and

social challenges, many would choose not to do so (Dietrich, 2022). Going further, Taylor (2017) sees a governmental responsibility to ensure that adolescents have sufficient opportunities for critical thinking and, therefore, the possibility to make autonomous decisions and act democratically.

## 6. Conclusion

Doubts are a social corrective, part of every democratic society, and integral to adolescent development. However, due to a mostly strongly authoritarian style of education in religious fundamentalism, which is guided by ideas of obedience, it is suggested to adolescents that these doubts are harmful to their faith and their relationship with God and should therefore be avoided. Children and adolescents at this point experience difficulties in learning how to deal with doubts that arise despite all attempts to suppress them. The consequence of this can be difficulties in finding their individual autonomy. Fundamentalist structures can accordingly maintain themselves. To promote self-determination, autonomy, and the capacity for democracy in these parts of society, the research field of educational prevention and intervention, as in educational institutions or extracurricular activities, must be stressed more intensely in these contexts.

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