

Fundamentalism, Religion and Science

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What exactly is fundamentalism? To westerners, the obvious answer is that fundamentalists are Christian militants who take the Bible literally. They are so called because of an influential set of books – titled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to The Truth* – which appeared between 1910 and 1915¹. *The Fundamentals* had little early impact, but over time a powerful Christian movement developed with the fundamentalist label. If you ask, you will find that fundamentalists regard themselves as being heirs to a long tradition of religious truth, a small group of people keeping the true faith alive through the centuries.

Theologian James Barr spells out some of its key doctrines, and these are the kind of doctrines we might expect fundamentalists to espouse:

- (a) a very strong emphasis on the inerrancy of the Bible, the absence from it of any sort of error;
- (b) a strong hostility to modern theology and to the methods, results and implications of modern critical study of the Bible;
- (c) an assurance that those who do not share their religious viewpoint are not really ‘true Christians’ at all².

Historian George Marsden regards fundamentalism as being more like a social movement:

... a loose, diverse and changing federation of co-belligerents united by their fierce opposition to modernist attempts to bring Christianity into line with modern thought³.

However, one of the most noticeable features of the modern world is that there is more than just one fundamentalism. Christian fundamentalists often differ from each other on many points of dogma⁴, and it has become clear that closely similar movements exist in other religions. As we shall see, we can substitute the name of some other religions in Marsden’s formulation and it still tells us a great deal. The key issue is opposition to any compromise with modernisation.

What is it about the modern world which so appalls fundamentalists? In the intellectual world there is a great deal. Starting in the last century, scholars insisted upon treating holy scripture simply as texts to be analysed rather than as holy wisdom⁵. Recently, they have concluded that over 80% of the sayings attributed to Jesus were not actually uttered by him⁶. Scientists tell us that the earth is astonishingly old, and that we emerged from lower creatures through natural evolutionary processes rather than those described in the Bible⁷. Archaeologists report that many key events described in scripture – such as the Jews’ escape from Israel and their conquest of Canaan – never happened⁸.

These intellectual threats are not the only problem for devout Christians. There are also social changes which also seem profoundly godless – gay marriage, public

displays of sexuality, decline in religious observance – and so the reaction of conventionally religious people may be close to panic. In the light of this a fierce counter-movement, stressing the unchangeable nature of the basic faith, seems quite understandable.

We should note two other important points. First, fundamentalism is a fairly recent movement. It is little more than a century old. Fundamentalists regard themselves as heirs to an ancient tradition of correct faith, but they usually know little of their own history⁹. Second, fundamentalism is always at war on at least two fronts, and sometimes more. Since fundamentalists regard themselves as being the possessors of the one true faith, it is clear that they will always be opposed to those of other faiths and to those with no faith. In addition, fundamentalism is often in conflict with other people of the same faith. For example Christian fundamentalist literature is full of attacks on 'liberal Christians' who they doubt are really Christians at all.

In short, fundamentalists are people with strong religious beliefs who see their basic ideas under attack by massive changes in the modern world. We are all familiar with the concerns of Christian fundamentalism. There is great stress upon conversion and being 'saved.' Allied to this are a set of conservative moral positions, including opposition to abortion, sexual laxity, gay rights and scientific findings which appear to contradict the Bible.

On the other hand, there is no particular reason why fundamentalism should be confined to Christianity. Adherents of other religions may also be anguished by modern developments. The key difference, as we shall see, is that context and history causes different fundamentalists to focus upon different divine truths and to oppose different enemies.

Non-Christian Fundamentalisms.

In this section we will look at Jewish and Islamic fundamentalists, who are perhaps the most important from our perspective¹⁰. Jewish fundamentalists fall into two broad groupings. One, the haredim or God-fearing Jews, begin with the assumption that they are God's chosen people. Further, God has laid upon his people a mass of rules to live by. Many fundamentalist Jews seek to observe these rules, in the belief that God will eventually come and exalt them for their faithfulness.

Heilman and Friedman¹¹ stress that only a small minority – less than five per cent – of all Jews fall into this category. These Jews are much influenced by the lifestyles in the Jewish ghettos and villages of central and eastern Europe a couple of centuries ago. As Enlightenment thought burst upon Europe, people inside and outside the Jewish communities began to question whether Jews should be segregated in this way: weren't Jews people like anyone else? The possibility of leaving the Jewish way of life and becoming part of a larger community appeared.

Jews reacted to this change in different ways. Some opted for assimilation, leaving the ghettos and the restrictions of Jewish community life. Others fiercely rejected any compromise, and opted to follow, as closely as they could, the way of life God had prescribed for his chosen people. These formed the modern haredim, now very prominent in Israel and also in other major Western cities such as New York.

What do the haredim want? Above all, they want to be left alone to study and to pray, and to observe God's rules. They become angry if outsiders disrupt their efforts, but for the most part they are not belligerent, and do not threaten the rest of us.

The other type of Jewish fundamentalism is quite different, and far more aggressive. In the book of Joshua we read how God assisted the ancient Israelites to conquer Canaan – and, incidentally, to massacre many non-combatants – and promised that it would always be theirs¹². Therefore, some modern Jewish fundamentalists – known as the Gush Emunim, or bloc of the faithful – feel impelled to reoccupy the ancient land of Israel¹³.

The catch here is that the modern state of Israel does not occupy all of the land which, these people believe, God promised to the Jews. The West Bank territories, Gaza and other areas are believed by many fundamentalist Jews to belong to them. Of course, since God's authority far exceeds that of any earthly regime, this means that this type of fundamentalist Jew does not hesitate to occupy lands which they regard as theirs¹⁴. Opinions vary, but some members of the Gush Emunim (or GE) regard the territory of Greater Israel as extending all the way from the River Nile, in Egypt¹⁵ to the River Euphrates in Iraq¹⁶. Relentlessly, the GE supporters have set up colonies on the west bank of the Jordan, occupied buildings and sought to strengthen their hold upon the land.

The influence of GE settlers in this sensitive part of the world has been to inflame worldwide religious tensions. Perhaps the most dangerous event was when a plot to blow up the Moslem mosque upon Temple Mount in 1984 was foiled by Israeli Intelligence. Some observers judged that, if the plot had succeeded, a world war might have resulted¹⁷. It seems clear that this variant of fundamentalism is profoundly dangerous to the rest of the human race.

This brings us logically to the most terrifying brand of fundamentalism, the Islamic. On the face of it, though, there can be no fundamentalism of this type. How can we apply the term 'fundamentalism' to a religion which, by definition¹⁸, regards its sacred writings as the word of God? The answer lies in the history of Islam.

By the time that the Prophet Muhammed died, in 632 CE, the Arabian peninsula was Muslim. What happened next is one of the most astonishing events in history. Islam conquered a large section of the world, creating an enormous empire. Islam was spread by the sword, and many died. Jews, Christians and some others were tolerated, but the supremacy of Islam was not to be questioned¹⁹. Out of this empire Muslims created a glorious civilisation.

However, fearsome assaults from the outside – such as the Mongol conquests and the expulsion of Muslims from Spain²⁰ – severely disrupted the Muslim empire. Worse, in later centuries, the Christian countries of Europe and America began to outstrip the Muslim ones in virtually all ways. In science and technology, standard of living, military power and forms of governance they far surpassed anything the Muslims accomplished.

In these circumstances, it is logical that many Muslims – unlike most Christians or Jews – will equate religious correctness with success. They will argue that modern-day Islam has lost its early religious commitment, and will also note the early military successes of their faith, compared to its more recent savage defeats²¹. We might expect, therefore, that modern Islamic fundamentalists will stress a pure, unsullied faith and also the importance of being prepared to fight ferociously in defence of what they believe.

Muslim fundamentalists believe that westerners must be repelled, pure Islam recovered and the Muslim faith enshrined in law, and that this is essential to restore the glories of the golden age. In consequence, Islamic fundamentalists face at least four major enemies. We have already met two of them. All fundamentalists are profoundly hostile to the sinful, secular, modernising western world. In addition, they are hostile to less rigorous practitioners of their own faith, whom they regard as little better than atheists. However, fundamentalist Muslims face at least two more enemies. One is the state of Israel. The success of this small Jewish state – at the expense of Muslims -- is seen as an outrage and a humiliation. In addition, fundamentalist Muslims are equally hostile to westernisers in their own countries. Leaders of predominantly Muslim states often attempt to imitate governmental structures from Europe or North America. For Muslim fundamentalists this is to be opposed, as western structures often displace the focus upon Islam²².

How do fundamentalists see the world?

As we have seen, different types of fundamentalist have different priorities. In all cases, the fundamentalists portray themselves as maintaining the original sacred insights of their religion, whereas they are actually selecting and interpreting doctrines which suit them.

Fundamentalists are completely prepared to make use of modern technology to accomplish their goals. Khomeini travelled in aircraft, and spread his message through tape-recorded speeches. Osama Bin Laden used videotapes, and appropriated jet aircraft to use as weapons. Modern Christian fundamentalists use television programmes to spread their message, and have sophisticated databases to help them focus their message onto the right audiences²³.

At the same time, fundamentalists often see the world in very different ways from the rest of us. Sociologist Steve Bruce spells out some of the key differences. If we can grasp these, we have some insight into the fundamentalist way of thought. One difference is that fundamentalists believe strongly in active, intentional agency. If something undesirable is happening, somebody is causing it. The idea of unexpected consequences is not congenial to fundamentalists. So if church attendances are down, women are moving out of the home and gay marriage is becoming common, this is not a consequence of unplanned social trends: somebody is causing it²⁴, and behind that somebody is probably the devil. In this way, many complex issues are reduced to matters of personal morality and are simplified to the point where discussion is nearly impossible.

Another difference is that fundamentalists tend to lump all their opponents together²⁵. This is fairly common: most of us do not see the fine differences between viewpoints

we disagree with. Fundamentalists, though, carry this to the extreme. Muslims lump together the state of Israel and other western nations, although often the latter disagree strongly with what the Israelis are doing. Christian fundamentalists lump together atheists, liberal Christians, evolutionists, pornographers, feminists and many other groups, as being those responsible for bad developments in the world today.

Finally, fundamentalists live in a world of signs and secret symbols. They often regard God – and Satan – as constantly at work in the world around them. Given sufficient attention, they believe, these messages can often be decoded. The Devil's face can be seen in the smoke from the World Trade Centre, the number of the Beast, 666, can often be decoded from assorted texts²⁶.

As Bruce²⁷ points out, this set of mental blinkers radically changes the way that fundamentalists look at the world

It grossly over-simplifies, imputes an underlying moral order to everything, readily demonises its opponents and finds reds (or whoever the conspirators are) under every bed.

In short, fundamentalism creates a readily accessible bunch of people to hate, blames them for everything which is seen to be wrong and tells the fundamentalists what to do about it. The difficult and painful process of trying to understand the complex modern world is completely avoided.

What do fundamentalists want?

So far we have looked at the nature of fundamentalism and some of its characteristics. But what do fundamentalists want? To find this out, it is best not to take their public pronouncements at face value. Fundamentalists are quite shrewd at tailoring their statements to fit a broad audience.

Ultimately, what fundamentalists want is a godly society. They want religion restored to its primary place and for it to permeate all aspects of our daily lives. Fundamentalists are not primitives, but they do want 'sacred' beliefs and practises from the past to be given weight in the future. To non-believers, of course, this looks uncomfortably like a theocracy, and indeed many fundamentalists favour exactly this.

As we have already seen, exactly what these key doctrines are varies from time to time and group to group. Among Jews, for example, the haredim and the Gush Emunim have quite different views on what their religious duties are. In the same way, western Christian fundamentalism is an uneasy alliance of disparate groups whose disagreements often erupt into outright feuding. The issues vary, it is the attitude and the approach which remain the same.

So far, Christian and Jewish fundamentalists have not succeeded in taking over a state, so we do not know how they would behave. In the Muslim world, on the other hand, two fundamentalist regimes have taken power, and their conduct is most revealing.

In Afghanistan, after the collapse of the Russian-backed regime in 1996, a fundamentalist Islamic regime, the Taliban, took power. There was never any pretence of democracy, and indeed the Taliban appear to have had the support of units of the Pakistani army. Once in power, this regime proceeded to remove many civil rights, slaughter its opponents and to downgrade the possibility of girls being educated²⁸. They also destroyed historic statues because they were not Islamic and provided a base for Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda network. This led to the Taliban's downfall, as the network made terrorist attacks upon the USA and invited the inevitable – and ferocious – retaliation.

The other case where fundamentalists took power was in Iran. Here they were led by the astute Ayatollah Khomeini, and undoubtedly had much initial support. In the late 1970s, after a prolonged and savage insurrection, the unpopular Shah was deposed and the Islamic Republic took its place. In hindsight it is pretty clear that most Iranians had little or no idea what the new regime could be like²⁹. It has now been in power for thirty years, and looks more and more like an ugly, repressive religious dictatorship³⁰. There is still some support for the fundamentalists, but democracy seems to matter less and less: what holds the regime in place is force and terror.

It seems most unlikely that a fundamentalist regime of any description could sustain itself in power for a long period with democratic support. This is because the goal of fundamentalism is, at base, profoundly inimical to most human aspirations. Steve Bruce³⁰ aptly captures the deep, underlying goal of fundamentalism in this revealing comment: 'The goal of resistance is to recreate the excitement and commitment of the original believing community.'

This is an important insight, and it contains within it the key to why, in the long run, fundamentalism cannot succeed. Most of us could not live our lives in a continuous religious frenzy, even if we wanted to. Some people can achieve this excitement for a limited period, but most of us inevitably lapse into the ordinary world. Indeed, as Gellner³¹ shrewdly remarks, most of us need a profane, routinised area in our lives. Therefore, a state formed in a state of religious excitement, and embodying that excitement, is likely to find itself with profound problems. Most people will lapse from the ideals they espouse, and so the state will find itself having to enforce its will upon a less and less supportive public. In the long run, it appears, a fundamentalist state cannot survive and it is likely to be overturned, or to lapse into dictatorship. This appears to be happening in Iran, though whether the Islamic state will fail or simply become a dictatorship is not yet entirely clear.

Fundamentalism, Technology and Science.

Fundamentalism has a profoundly ambiguous attitude to technology. On the one hand, as we have already seen, they make copious use of the latest science-based technologies to spread their message. However, fundamentalist enthusiasm for technology wanes sharply when they consider the biomedical technologies. Often, Protestant fundamentalists join with Catholics in their fierce opposition to abortion, cloning and other reproductive technologies³². This sharp disjunction in their thinking probably has at least two causes. First, since God created man in his own image, it seems clear that tinkering with God's biological plan constitutes an attempt to topple God from his supreme position, something which is naturally anathema. Second,

many of these technologies threaten the traditional position of the family, and of the male and female roles within that family. Therefore, since fundamentalists believe strongly in the traditional household, with the man at its head, they are opposed to any developments which threaten this.

The fundamentalist view of science is even stranger. On the one hand, they do recognise that the material benefits which surround us are, to some extent, the product of science. For Christian fundamentalists, since God gave human beings the right and duty to control everything on Earth³³, science-based technology looks very much like a divine tool for achieving this goal.

On the other hand, science – some science, at least – makes fundamentalists uncomfortable. The historical sciences – notably cosmology, geology and evolutionary biology – paint a picture of the past radically at variance with that portrayed in the book of Genesis. In particular, fundamentalists find it outrageous that according to biologists, we are descended from the same ancestors as the modern apes and that, in the more distant past, we are related to all living things on Earth³⁴. Less noticed, but just as important, is the range of scientific findings which indicate that the Earth and universe are extremely old, and that they originated in a primeval explosion.

What are fundamentalists to do? A popular strategy is to seek to mould science into something compatible with the Biblical views. After all, if the Bible is completely correct, then eventually science must yield findings which verify its statements. This has led to the development of ‘Creation Science,’ and ‘Intelligent Design, attempts by fundamentalists to remake science into an enterprise compatible with their view of the bible³⁵.

However, at the most profound level, science’s lack of dogmatism makes it profoundly different from the immovable assumptions of fundamentalists. In addition, because fundamentalists wed themselves to a particular set of dogmas, it seems inevitable that at some stage they will find themselves unable to accept the findings of science. There is simply no way of reconciling scientific open-mindedness and rigour with fundamentalist dogmatism.

Some key points about fundamentalism.

This survey of fundamentalism has shown us some rather surprising features of these movements. First, fundamentalism is not a literal resurgence of ancient religion. It is a selective retrieval of older beliefs, repackaged in an attempt to recreate the original religious frenzy and to defend believers against the perceived threatening world.

Second, fundamentalists are usually at odds with other religious people, including those of their own religion. They regard non-fundamentalists as little better than atheists. If they cannot convert them to their viewpoint, they will struggle against them bitterly.

Third, fundamentalists are at odds with the entire legacy of the Enlightenment, which acknowledged the fallibility of human ideas, and made clear that by accumulating evidence and critical understanding we can better our understanding of the universe³⁶.

Fundamentalists believe that they know better than this. They believe that they have the truth, and it only requires a moral effort to accept it. Those who do not make that effort are to be condemned.

Fourth, fundamentalists live in a world which is often profoundly different from ours. They love their children, for example, but believe that they must protect them from hell-fire by indoctrinating them with fundamentalist precepts. They read signs and symbols into events around them, and believe that evil happens because evil people – and demons – desire it, rather than because of unforeseen events. Reasoning from this, they look for people to blame.

Fifth, fundamentalists are often unethical. This may seem strange, because their entire ideology is based around moral concepts. However, their stress upon certain beliefs means that most of the ethical rules that we live by are secondary, and may even be disregarded by fundamentalists. For example, years ago, I was staggered to find that creation scientists' references to science were often blatantly falsified: as far as I could tell, fundamentalist zeal completely overrode the elementary duty of telling the truth³⁷.

A far more dramatic case involves Muslim fundamentalists. Any Muslim scholar will tell you that Muslims have a religious duty to fight in defence of their religion. However, they are enjoined to spare the lives of civilians and non-combatants³⁸. Clearly, this is completely incompatible with flying aircraft (loaded with civilians) into buildings (packed with civilians) or exploding bombs in crowded trains and markets.

Some weaknesses of fundamentalism

Steve Bruce makes a number of points about the weaknesses of fundamentalism. These are all important as the fanatical, triumphalist nature of the movement can often create the impression that it is stronger than it really is.

One point is that fundamentalists are usually not a majority. In the west, Christian fundamentalists are strongest in the USA, but even there they do not constitute anything like a majority of the population. What is more, non-fundamentalist groups can, when the necessity arises, often out-campaign – and indeed outspend – the fundamentalists in political battles.³⁹

Another point Bruce makes is that by focusing upon personal morality – and often abusing their opponents for their lack of it – fundamentalists inevitably draw attention to their own conduct. The list of fundamentalists caught in immoral activities – often sexual or financial – is startlingly long.⁴⁰

Bruce also points out that fundamentalism's habit of dividing the world into 'them and us' means that they find it difficult to form alliances. After all, it is hard to form working coalitions with people who you regard as at best faithless and at worst motivated by the Devil. And, of course, people who have once been denounced by fundamentalists are unlikely to forget this and to become allies in the future. Bruce makes the point that fundamentalists find it hard to work with people from other religious groupings and then goes on to make two important points:

They are also not good at tolerating differences even within the camp of the faithful. There is also a problem with sustaining commitment. Zealots become quickly disillusioned. . . .Religio-political mobilization thus tends to come in waves that are as short as they are intense.⁴¹

This all suggests that the fundamentalist movements can create a great stir, can win local victories, but will find it hard to mount the kind of sustained, broad-based campaigns which will ensure that they gain full political power. In the one case where they have managed this – Iran – their regime seems to be increasingly repressive and unpopular.

What to do about fundamentalism.

In that context, what can we do about fundamentalism? We face the problem of being committed to democracy and freedom, yet having to deal with a powerful movement which believes in neither. In Western societies we are most likely to come up against Christian fundamentalism, so this is the one we need to know most about. Most fundamentalists are badly-educated⁴², so some points can be made which might shake them a little, or at least persuade them not to parade their ignorance quite so aggressively.

A first requirement, then, would be to acquaint oneself with the basic ideas of fundamentalism, and some of the major objections. I find James Barr's book *Escaping from Fundamentalism*⁴³ to be of especial value, and there are many others. This does not mean that everyone must become a theologian. It does mean that we should all have some idea why fundamentalism is wrong, and perhaps know where we can gain more information if we need it. An insight into the nature of fundamentalism is also useful, and Steve Bruce's book is an excellent start in this direction²³. For detailed understanding of fundamentalism, the results of the Fundamentalism Project – five volumes and 3400 pages⁴⁴ – are excellent, but perhaps more than most of us can absorb. From these tomes the paper by Ammerman on North American Protestant fundamentalism is a gentle and informative start.⁴⁵

In addition, we should be aware of what the fundamentalists are doing, and also should be aware that within the movements there is a profound anti-democratic impulse. Therefore we should be alert to fundamentalism's latest machinations, and be ready to counter those which undercut any of our precious institutions such as democracy and science.

What about other fundamentalisms? Since 9/11, it is clear that Islamic fundamentalism is generally more violent than its Christian counterparts. Although there is nothing in Islam which opposes democracy – rather the reverse – Muslims have little in the way of democratic traditions, and so Islamic fundamentalists are far less restrained by ideas like tolerance and constitutional action. Islamic fundamentalists are very aware of the history of humiliation and high-handed interventions which western nations have forced upon their peoples, and this accounts in part for the savagery of the backlash.

How should we handle Islamic fundamentalism? As Gellner³¹ argues, most Muslims, like the rest of us, do need stable day to day lives and the savagery of fundamentalism is as alien to them as it is to us. Because of the west's tradition of high-handed action, therefore, we must not intervene where it is not necessary. In addition, we can strengthen the hands of non-fundamentalists within Islamic nations, and this necessarily means making life better for their inhabitants. For example, the prosperous Muslim nations of South East Asia appear to be winning the battle against fundamentalist terrorism, while those elsewhere are doing far less well. Regardless of our own beliefs, we have a strong stake in a peaceful, prosperous secure Islamic world.

The reader will remember that one type of fundamentalist Jew – the Gush Emunim – was singled out for particular attention. There is a great deal of evidence that the encroachments of the GE and its allies are a profound source of rage for many Muslims, and a source of support for Islamic fundamentalists. This is because Palestine looms large in the consciousness of many Muslims. The actions of the Jewish state – which does not restrain the GE – are seen as outrageous, and the Christian states of the west are seen as supporting Israel.

The answer to this is fairly simple, at least in principle. We must make it clear that we support the existence of the state of Israel, and also of a Palestinian state next to it. The only viable goal is for both states to be peaceful and secure. We should therefore oppose the activities of all who seek to undermine this goal – which includes the Gush Emunim and the Islamic fundamentalists!

My last point is the most general. Most who read this article will be atheists or agnostics. I do not fall easily into either category. If there is religious truth, I would like to know what it is, and so far I have not found it. One thing I can see clearly is this. Undogmatic people of any persuasion have an advantage over the fundamentalists. As Bruce⁴¹ has pointed out, fundamentalists find it difficult to work with people of other beliefs. If there are issues where we agree with some people of religious faith then, in my view, we should be prepared to work with them on those issues. It should be clear from what I have said that not all religious views are the same. Some would destroy anyone who disagrees with them, others are tolerant. Some would undermine and destroy modern science, others would not.

Fundamentalism is not going to go away, and its supporters are numbered in the hundreds of millions. In my view, we should be prepared to co-operate with people with whom we may disagree on other issues. Moderate religious believers of all kinds may be our natural allies. In the grim struggles with fundamentalist bigotry which lie ahead, that may be one of our main advantages.

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