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Fundamentalism

In the study of religion, the term *Fundamentalism* generally refers to any religious ideology that militantly opposes the philosophical tenets of Western modernism by insisting on human access to an absolute divine authority. This general definition comes from an early twentieth century Protestant movement reacting to a perceived loss of connection with the divine in public discourse. The general definition is now used to refer to non-Christian religious ideologies that reject Western-style scientific inquiry and the secular values it suggests on the basis of a belief in human access to the divine. In media, Fundamentalists often use explicit citations of a text believed to be divinely authorized. Because the text is thought to be unquestionable, emotional and demonstrative assertions are often made without reasoned claims or appeals to broader standards of judgment. Because the pluralistic values of Western secularism appeal to standards of judgment beyond a single divine authority, they are often perceived as threatening by Fundamentalists. As a result, Fundamentalist media often seek to exclude or offer alternatives to mainstream secular media. This tendency in Fundamentalism has in many cases led to insular communities operating as radical activist subgroups in a more broadly inclusive society. As a result, Fundamentalist communities are often considered to foster intolerance for divergent beliefs, values, and perspectives. However, because they are often highly motivated subgroups, even minority Fundamentalist communities can exert significant political power.

The Rise of Christian Fundamentalism

The word *Fundamentalism* is historically associated with a series of twelve pamphlets called *The Fundamentals* published between 1910 and 1915 by the oil magnate and Protestant layman Lyman Stewart. The beliefs that developed from theologians and writers associated with this early form of Fundamentalism evolved from their shared belief in a strictly literal interpretation of the Bible. The complete authority and literal meaning believed to be contained in the divine texts of the Bible yielded the demonstrative and emotional norms Fundamentalist communication now exhibits.

Reacting to a perceived growth of secular influence both inside and outside Protestant institutions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, intellectual Christians became embroiled in heated debates. Particularly difficult was when Protestant leaders began to split on the proper Christian understanding of

Charles Darwin's (1809–1882) theory of evolution. For liberals, the Bible's description of Creation in the book of Genesis was figurative and hence not incompatible with Darwin's theory. For conservatives, Darwin's ideas replaced God's divine plan with random chance and human will. While liberal Protestant theologians like Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918) moved toward pluralism and social justice, conservatives like Lyman Stewart (1840–1923) focused on biblical literalism. For conservatives, an over-reliance on the authority of secular science was resulting in a worldwide decline in morals, rampant materialism, and growing militarism. In 1910, the year of the first issue of *The Fundamentals*, the conservative Presbyterian theologians at Princeton proclaimed the inerrancy of the biblical texts. By 1915, Protestant denominations in the United States were deeply divided into liberal and conservative camps.

In this environment, Lyman Stewart financed the publication and free distribution of *The Fundamentals*. One guiding editor of *The Fundamentals* was a minister named Reuben Torrey (1856–1928). Torrey's close friend was the most famous preacher at the time, Dwight D. Moody (1837–1899). Sometimes considered the progenitor of Christian Fundamentalism, Moody was a hugely successful Evangelical public speaker in the late 1800s.

Beginning in the early 1800s, the United States experienced a surge of interest in emotional expressions of religion. This tradition was associated with charismatic speakers like James McGready (1758–1817) and characterized by tent revivals or "camp meetings" that featured preaching, singing, and emotionally charged prayer. Bringing with him a more moderate style of preaching, Moody emerged into public view in the 1870s. Refusing to attach himself to any specific denomination, Moody did not alienate any segment of his audience. Instead, he offered a simple message that focused on personal morality, and he did so in a business suit and with a middle-class manner. As a result, he garnered a wide audience among many denominations of middle-class American Protestants. Because he also advocated a simple and literal approach to the Bible, a belief in biblical inerrancy, and a belief in an approaching apocalypse, Moody disseminated the underlying ideas that would come to unite themselves as Christian Fundamentalism in the decades after his death.

From 1914 through 1918, a series of huge conferences on "prophecy" attest to a growing interest in a literal understanding of the Bible. In 1917, the British government released a document that pledged support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Because the reestablishment of a Jewish homeland was overtly mentioned in the prophetic texts of the Bible, this doc-

ument seemed to confirm a modern End Times narrative and fueled the growing apocalyptic or "premillennial" thinking. Emboldened by these sentiments, in 1918 the radically conservative minister William B. Riley (1861–1947) formed the World's Christian Fundamentals Association (WCFA). The WCFA focused on a political campaign to rid the denominational institutions of officials who were felt to be too liberal. Attempting to harness Moody's legacy, the WCFA advocated for an apocalyptically tinged struggle against the secular values in modern discourse. Making a doctrinal point, the editor of a Baptist paper first coined the term *Fundamentalist* to refer to those "ready to do battle royal for *The Fundamentals*" (Marsden 1980, 159).

While this battle was raging at a largely institutional level, the well-known Presbyterian politician William Jennings Bryan (1860–1925) launched his now famous campaign against the teaching of evolution in schools. Although Bryan may have been more concerned about a link between evolutionary theory and German nationalism than he was about a literal interpretation of the book of Genesis, he brought the theological issue of biblical authority into general public discourse. When John Scopes (1900–1970), a small town schoolteacher, was charged with breaking a new Tennessee state law against teaching evolution, Bryan prosecuted him. The popular secular writer and journalist H. L. Mencken (1880–1956) sensationalized the trial and it became a national spectacle. As a referendum on the values of its time, Scopes' defense attorney, Clarence Darrow (1857–1938), put Bryan on the stand and cornered him into denying a "literal" reading of Genesis. Bryan emerged looking inept and Darrow emerged looking rational and heroic. Bryan died on the Sunday following his catastrophic loss.

During the Scopes trial, journalists took hold of the term *Fundamentalist*. With Bryan's defeat and sudden death, the term became associated with a caricature of a hopelessly backward and rural brand of Christianity. Inside Protestant institutions, conservatives receded and disappeared. However, the term and its ideological opposition to modernist values persisted at a popular level outside of any denominational affiliations. Many middle-class Christian Protestants who considered themselves Fundamentalist were left feeling alienated from mainstream society.

After World War II (1939–1945), the Fundamentalist ideology began to slowly reemerge into public view. Seeking ways to reduce the possibility of another worldwide war, the United Nations was founded and international laws began to form out of

a new conception of universal human rights. Concerned with the possibility of a single world government ultimately trumping the moral authority of biblical texts, conservative Christians again called for their literal interpretations of the Bible to guide public policy. Again finding cognates for their own times in ancient biblical prophecy, Christian Fundamentalists focused their attention on international politics and a perceived degradation of morality within the United States that pointed to an impending apocalypse.

By the 1970s, conservative Christian leaders like Jerry Falwell (b. 1933) and Pat Robertson (b. 1930) mastered a variety of media to locate and build support for their radically conservative and isolationist political agendas. In 1970, Hal Lindsey's (b. 1955) interpretation of biblical prophecy as foretelling cold war (1945–1991) politics sold 7.5 million copies and was the best selling nonfiction book of the decade. In the 1990s, the approaching end of the second millennium fueled a renewed interest in the End Times. In 1995, Tim LaHaye (b. 1926), another Protestant minister, began retelling the Fundamentalist prophetic narrative in the best selling *Left Behind* series of novels.

Today, expressions of Christian Fundamentalism can be found in a multitude popular press books, Christian music, cable television, movies, and on the Internet. Because of the emphasis on a literal interpretation of the Bible, Fundamentalist media often emphasize literal biblical quotations in support of political positions. Less political and more devotional or Evangelical media are often also often demonstrative. With a more emotional or sentimental tinge, this discourse tends to emphasize direct individual contact with the divine in prayer, personal experience narratives, and through stories of individual salvation. With this personal emphasis, Christian Fundamentalism can be thought of as a subgroup of Christian evangelicalism.

Because Christian Fundamentalism is nondenominational and has no single founding institution or text, it is difficult to differentiate from evangelicalism generally. Some Christians self-identify as Fundamentalists but may not be aware of the historical or ideological associations of the term. Others might reject the term but remain solid adherents to the ideological markers that are typically referred to as Fundamentalist.

After the collapse of the first wave of Fundamentalism in 1925, both mainstream Christians and Christian institutions largely rejected the term. Because of its negative portrayal during the Scopes trial and its subsequent rejection by Protestant institutions, the term has come to have a variety of often negative meanings. Thus, terming something Fundamentalist should be

done with great care. However, the basic ideas of Fundamentalism continue to evolve and develop at the popular level, and scholars have attempted to more rigorously define the term.

Ethnographic and experimental studies of Fundamentalism have yielded a descriptive definition based on manifestations of the religious ideology. Social scientists have defined Christian Fundamentalism as a "subgroup within evangelicalism that accepts biblical authority, salvation through Christ, and a commitment to spreading the faith" (Kellstedt and Smidt 1991, 260). Other researchers have more narrowly defined the term as "the conviction that the adherents have a special knowledge of and relationship to Deity, based either on a sacred and unquestionable text or on direct contact with and experience of God's message" (Perkin 2000, 79).

Sociologists have created a systematic catalogue of observable traits of existence of Fundamentalist discourse based on interviews with Christian believers. The following four traits can be seen as indicative of a discursive expression as participating in Christian Fundamentalism: (a) an "orientation toward biblical literalism," (b) "the experience of being reborn in faith," (c) "evangelicalism (or the obligation to convert others)," and (d) "an apocalypticism in its specifically end time form" (Strozier 1994, 5).

The discursive expression of these four traits can properly be termed Christian Fundamentalism. But even these relatively objective criteria do not wholly solve the problem of locating Fundamentalism in an example of human communication. Individuals often do not touch on all four of these definitive elements, even when all four ideas may be informing their expression. While locating some of these elements implies the others, this may not always be the case. Even when all four elements are present, different members of an audience may interpret the same communication very differently. Hence, naming someone or someone's communication as Fundamentalist should always be prefaced with a careful consideration of the term's meaning and an indication of its applicability to the case at hand.

Beyond the Christian Model

The complexity of defining Fundamentalism is nowhere more obvious than when it is used to refer to non-Christian religious ideologies or communication. Many researchers feel that when the term is used for a non-Christian ideological expression, the Christian history of the term prejudices our understanding of a wholly unrelated belief system.

While this probably is the case to some degree, the global surge in religious movements that seem to bear

a basic similarity to Christian Fundamentalism make the term useful to help English speakers understand non-Western religious traditions in the new global communication environment. As a result, the general definition of Fundamentalism has come to refer a variety of non-Christian ideologies, and the need to understand non-Christian religious ideas around the globe is nowhere more evident than in what many have termed "Islamic Fundamentalism."

Islamic Fundamentalism refers to an ideology that emerged out of mainstream Islam as a reaction against Western-styled pluralist government and values. The Ottoman Empire (1301–1920) ruled the majority of the Islamic world until the end of World War I. During this period, the Ottoman Empire was officially Islamic but exhibited a remarkable degree of religious tolerance. After its defeat in World War I, the empire was divided and ruled largely as colonial holdings of European governments. Western ideas about government and values were imposed on the formerly Islamic communities. In 1948, Britain, The United States, and the United Nations cooperated in the founding of a new national homeland for the Jewish people. Many Muslims felt betrayed by the West. What is often termed Islamic Fundamentalism today took on its extremist tenor in opposition to European and American influence in the Middle East.

Wahhabism is the most well known form of Islam associated with Fundamentalism. Wahhabism is associated with the teachings of Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1787). Wahhabi Islam emerged from a resistance to Ottoman rule by local political leaders in what is now Saudi Arabia. In Egypt, Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) is credited with founding the Islamic Brotherhood movement as a militant reaction against Westernization and political tyranny. Although these and other contemporary militant Islamic movements bear some similarities to Christian Fundamentalism, many individuals feel that terming them Fundamentalist encourages a prejudice against and a misunderstanding of Islam.

Similar concerns arise when terming other religious ideologies, movements, or communications as Fundamentalist. Still, researchers have located Fundamentalism in the Zionist movement Gush Emunim or "Bloc of the Faithful." This political movement emerged was original a mixture of secular and sacred beliefs. Later, however, it became radicalized based on the growing popularity of an aggressively Zionist Rabbi, Zvi Yehuda Kook (1891–1982), son of the very influential Rabbi Abraham Yitzhak Kook (1865–1935). In response to the Iranian Revolution in 1979 that brought Fundamentalist-

leaning religious leaders to power in that country, the Kookists emerged to argue for the expansion of Israel by settling lands currently occupied by Muslims.

The emerging Muslim governments in Iran and elsewhere were viewed by many Israelis as intent on the destruction of Israel. Kookists rejected the Israeli political system as an adequate means for addressing this threat. To pressure the Israeli government, the Kookists functioned as radical activists within Israel. Sometimes rushing their mobile homes onto hilltops in the dead of night, they would force the Israeli government to then forcibly remove them. With these sorts of aggressive tactics, Kookists advocated for a return to what believers felt was a more authentic form of Judaism than the government of Israel was exhibiting. This "authentic" Judaism included a belief that the Jewish people were chosen by God to occupy certain lands. As a result, the divine laws related to being God's chosen people trumped any adherence to international laws. This included the United Nations' ruling that forbade the expansion of Jewish settlements into areas already occupied by Palestinians. Although the Gush Emunim movement broke apart after the younger Kook's death in 1982, the aggressive tendencies in radical Zionism continue to be considered Fundamentalist by some researchers. In 1995, the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (1922–1995) was assassinated by an Israeli law student who seems to have been influenced by radical Zionism in this tradition.

Even movements in non-Abrahamic religions are sometimes considered to exhibit the basic characteristics of Fundamentalism. In Hinduism, the nationalist movement Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh aggressively advocates for a Greater Hinduism that would destroy or absorb other political and religious traditions. In Sikhism, researchers have found examples of an extreme rejection of modernist thinking and the advocacy of a return to more "authentic" life-styles. Even in Buddhism, researchers have located nationalism attached to a religious revivalism in Thailand and Sri Lanka that some have termed Fundamentalist.

The Future of Fundamentalism

While debates still rage about what constitutes Fundamentalism in the world's complex and rich religions, the growing economic power of the Western intellectual tradition still spreads the same values that inspired Lyman Stewart's financing of *The Fundamentals* in 1910. As new technologies have made global communication and travel more readily available, it seems that the

same sense of loss fosters a desire for a return to a closer connection with the divine. This desire has emerged as a militant ideology on the extreme fringes of all the world's major religious traditions. But these fringes cannot be ignored simply because they represent the minority of religious individuals. Instead, the intensity of the beliefs felt by many Fundamentalists renders their political activism potentially powerful whenever it emerges; even in communities or nations separated from these movements by vast geographic spaces.

After the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, the impact of Fundamentalist inspired violence can no longer be considered to be the problem of isolated nations. Instead, the technologies of global travel and communication have proven both to fuel confrontational religious beliefs and to offer avenues for very real confrontation. Global communication technologies brought Western values and culture to more traditional societies through television, movies, popular music, and the Internet. Access to representations of Western life has made some religious individuals feel threatened by the pluralist values of the Western democracies.

Meanwhile, these same technologies have made it possible for Fundamentalist activists to strike back at the very roots of the economic powers that fuel this Westernization. Through global travel, terrorist attacks can be carried out anywhere on the globe. Through global communication, extremist subgroups can seek to influence the political process of foreign nations when their acts of religious violence are portrayed in the global news media.

Global communication technologies have made it possible for individuals and groups to speak to each other with a speed and ease never before possible. In the coming decades, this exposure will surely continue to expand. In the global environment, the challenge presented by Fundamentalism remains the same even as it grows in scope. How will we as a global society find ways to manage our shared environment when our most fundamental beliefs are in conflict?

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, this conflict is unfolding at two levels. At the national level, each government is being forced to discover how to satisfy the concerns of a radicalized minority that feels its beliefs are divinely inspired even when those beliefs demand that the human rights of all citizens be limited. At the global level, international bodies of governance are struggling to develop equitable laws and systems of economic exchange that do not so deeply alienate re-

ligious conservatives that Fundamentalist activism devolves into global violence. Balancing the concerns of religion and secularism in this age of global information sharing will continue to present challenges for both individual nations and for international politics.

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See also Evangelicalism; Protestantism, Conservative

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