



Fundamentalism: A Christian Perspective

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A British symposium on the nature and role of Fundamentalism in the three monotheistic faiths. See also: Fundamentalism: A Jewish Perspective and Fundamentalism: An Islamic Perspective.

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The word fundamentalism was originally used to describe a development in American Protestantism which took place at the end of the last century. A number of conferences were held to voice opposition to critical study of the Bible and to the theory of evolution. A statement was issued at the conference at Niagara in 1895 containing what

came to be known as "the five points of fundamentalism":

1. Verbal inerrancy of Scripture
2. Divinity of Jesus Christ
3. Virgin Birth
4. Substitutionary theory of the Atonement (that is, that Jesus took upon himself the punishment that a righteous God inflicts upon sinners).
5. Physical Resurrection and Bodily Return of Jesus Christ.

Until the nineteenth century, most Christians, in believing the Bible to be "true" or the "word of God", assumed that this included historical accuracy. Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote that to most English people the Bible was "a theological text-book and rule of faith composed by Almighty God and dictated by

Him verbatim to the inspired writers". I think, however, it is important to contrast the traditional view of scripture with the view of fundamentalists, partly because the Christian church has traditions of interpretation which allow considerable flexibility, but also because, as Martin Marty argues, "oppositionalism" is a characteristic of fundamentalism – that is to say, fundamentalism is a position held in conscious opposition to other views, whereas a traditional or conservative position may be held either because it has not been challenged or the questionings are ignored.

Christian fundamentalism is primarily a rejection of a critical view of the Bible. Taking the Bible literally, fundamentalists, such as the Moral Majority in the USA, use it to uphold what is claimed to be traditional Christian moral

teaching.

At a deeper level, fundamentalism is, I think, a rejection of modern understandings of knowledge.

Leonard Swidler writes that our understanding of truth statements has been "deabsolutised". By this he means that all statements about reality are conditioned by their author's historical setting, intention, culture, class, sex, etc.

Further, knowledge is interpreted knowledge. Reality speaks to each person with the language he or she gives to it. We are, therefore, not in a position to make ultimate, unconditioned statements. There is, therefore, no one correct meaning of a text.

A fundamentalist is likely to claim that there is and that the true meaning of the text happens to coincide with his or her interpretation!

Further, fundamentalists adopt an ahistorical attitude to the central truths of a religion and many

Christians seem to forget that the creeds of the Church are themselves historically conditioned statements.

For fundamentalists, therefore, there is only one truth – which they possess. They cannot, in principle, accept a pluralist society in which equal status is given to a variety of truth claims. They are committed, by the logic of their belief, to work for the victory of their views.

I think it is important to see the logic that underlies fundamentalism, as I feel that many Christians who are not fundamentalists rather lazily go along with unquestioned assumptions that belong to a previous age, e.g. in the use of the creeds, and in a reluctance to take Biblical criticism seriously – but until this is done, we will not move

beyond the still quite common position that "because I think Christianity is true, I am bound to think other religions are false".

Yet, I do not think that fundamentalism is best met by opposition. Geiko Muller-Fahrenholz describes fundamentalism as a pathological phenomenon arising out of profound disturbances. As he says, "If fundamentalism is an expression of collective disturbance and hardening, any attempt to overcome it must begin with empathy and sensitivity. Fundamentalism cannot be fought against". This requires that we take seriously social injustice and the fear that "globalisation" is – in succession to the crusades, imperialism and the missionary movement – a new way of imposing Western values on other societies.

I suggest also that many of us may share the fundamentalists' concern at the growth of violence and the decline in moral values. In my view, however, such values should not, in an ethnically and religiously plural society, be imposed by one dominant ethnic or religious group. Equally, however, I do not think a society will be healthy which has no shared values. This is why the search for shared values as for example in the "Declaration Toward A Global Ethic" is so important for society. It may also help fundamentalists to see that there are other, and less divisive ways, of addressing their legitimate concerns.

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See also:

Fundamentalism: [A Jewish Perspective](#)

Fundamentalism: [An Islamic](#)

