



Fundamentalism in the three monotheistic faiths: A Jewish Perspective

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

Fundamentalism

A Jewish Perspective

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At the Niagara conference of 1895 conservative Protestants responded to the liberal new ideas on evolution, biblical criticism and the like by insisting that certain doctrines, including the inerrancy of scripture, the divinity of Christ and the second coming, were "fundamental," that is, non-negotiable; the terms fundamentalism and fundamentalist were coined in 1920 by the Baptist Curtis L. Laws.

As some Jews and Muslims defensively point out, the term fundamentalist in its strictest sense is applicable only to conservative Protestants. On the other hand, in its broader sense of regarding certain doctrines as non-negotiable, or not subject to refutation by rational means, the term perfectly fits conservative groups in many faiths and denominations.

"Fundamentals" is indeed a precise translation of the Hebrew "iqarim (literally, "roots"). The search for "iqarim, or Principles of Faith, by mediaeval philosophers such as Maimonides and Albo, is a search for that which is non-negotiable in religious belief; it certainly includes belief in God and in the inerrancy of scripture.

"Fundamentalist" is sometimes used just as a term of abuse for conservative theologians, especially of other people's religions. But this looseness of terminology should not be allowed to obscure the fact that conservative theologians, among Jews the Orthodox in particular, regard certain doctrines, including the inerrancy of scripture, as non-negotiable, or not subject to refutation by rational means.

The Bible does not itself give a systematic definition of faith, though clearly it demands belief in God (undefined) and obedience to his laws (more precisely defined). Likewise, Rabbinic sources such as the Talmud and Midrash take much for granted about God and Revelation, and define certain classes of heretics and unbelievers, but do not have systematic lists of articles of faith on the lines of those of the Church Fathers and Councils, to whose attempts to define precisely the nature of God they may have been reacting.

Mediaeval Jews formulated Principles of the Faith, perhaps because they wished to make clear the differences between Judaism and Christianity, or Judaism and Islam. Maimonides (1138-1204) formulated thirteen principles:

1. The Creator is Author and Guide of everything that exists.
2. The Creator is a Unity.
3. The Creator is not corporeal.
4. The Creator is first and last.
5. It is right to pray to the Creator, but to no other being.
6. All the words of the prophets are true.
7. The prophecy of Moses is true and he was the father [criterion] for all prophecy.
8. The Torah now in our possession is that given to Moses.
9. The Torah will not be changed, nor will the Creator give any other Torah.
10. The Creator knows the deeds and thoughts of people.
11. He rewards those who keep his commandments and punishes those who disobey.
12. Though the messiah delay, one must constantly expect his coming.
13. The dead will be resurrected.

Others, such as Joseph Albo (1380-1435), felt that Maimonides was too doctrinaire. Albo reduced the "roots" of faith to three: belief in God, belief in Revelation, and belief in reward and punishment. Contrary to Maimonides, moreover, he emphatically denies that a naïve believer who believes that God has some sort of bodily form can be regarded as a heretic or "denier"; such a person is in error, Albo concedes, but is not an unbeliever. Modern Jewish thinkers, such as Menachem Kellner, regard Albo's less doctrinaire approach as closer to the Jewish norm.

In recent times the old debates have erupted again in the conflict between Reform and Orthodox. At first, they debated the extent to which the rabbis' interpretation of scripture was definitive and binding; the Orthodox held that it was, but the Reformers rejected it. Then, under the impact of 19th century historical criticism, the authenticity of scripture itself was called into question. The specific doctrine under attack here was that of Torah min ha-Shamayim, or the divine origin of Torah, comprised in No's 7-9 of Maimonides' Principles.

Clearly, this is a matter not just of abstract belief, but of authority. Is scripture, as interpreted by the rabbis, the final authority for human behaviour, or should we allow greater sway to the individual conscience? Consequences of this difference reach all aspects of life, from private sexual activity to the public domain of international politics.

The term "fundamentalist" is directed in particular at those whose firm beliefs are instrumentalized for extreme positions, for instance against homosexuality or in support of West Bank settlers; others, who are equally committed to belief in the divine origin and authority of Torah, but who interpret Torah in a way that does not lend support to extreme views, are not castigated as "fundamentalist". This demonstrates that the term is an insult rather than a defined category.

Nowadays some, even amongst the Orthodox, reformulate the doctrine of Torah min ha-Shamayim so as to retain the theological aspects of earlier definitions while abandoning the strong historical claims that became intertwined with them. For them, Torah min ha-Shamayim functions as a "myth," an organizing concept that binds together many aspects of the way we interpret the world around us in continuity with our sacred traditions. The Conservative A. J. Heschel evaded the strong historical claim by emphasizing the concept of Oral Torah as an ongoing hermeneutic that reveals infinite meaning in the divine text.

On the other hand, many non-Orthodox theologians abandon the concept as misleading and dangerous and view the Pentateuch as an imperfect though hallowed record of Israel's encounter with God, not as a piece of divine dictation.

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See also:

Fundamentalism: [A Christian Response](#)

Fundamentalism: [An Islamic Perspective](#)