

Christian fundamentalism and the media

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The term Christian fundamentalism is generally used to describe the doctrines and attitudes of a number of Christian groups and sects who are united in their belief that Christian triumphalism is mandated in the Gospels and that, as such, Christians are duty-bound to translate this vision into political reality through the ballot box and by influencing the political agenda of their governments. The alliances between successive US Presidents and the Religious Right – Reagan, Ford, Bush Sr and Jr and the Christian Coalition – illustrate this tendency. The launch by the US government of its Arabic language satellite TV news station for Muslim Iraq on 2 May 2003 in collaboration with the US-based fundamentalist Christian organisation Grace Digital Media is a recent example of such an alliance.*

There are also less well-known alliances between state leaders in Africa and conservative Christian groups – Paul Mbiya (Cameroon), Frederick Chiluba (Zambia), South African government support for the US-based Trinity Broadcasting Network in the townships during apartheid, between conservative politicians and the religious right in different countries in Latin America. General Pinochet was avidly supported by the Chilean Evangelical Church and the Guatemalan President Efraín Ríos Montt was an elder of a mission of the California based Gospel Outreach network during his presidency.** In 2003 he campaigned for re-election using his 'born again Christianity' as a vote winner in impoverished rural districts where American evangelical churches are expanding fast among the Mayan population (The Guardian, 8 September 2003).

While the term Christian fundamentalism is generally reserved to describe those who have opted for an understanding of Christian mission as an aggressive crusade, it also used to describe the attitudes and doctrines of those who have opted for a softly-softly approach – for instance, the Summer School of Linguistics and the many 'charismatic' churches and 'neo-Pentecostal' sects involved in low-intensity forms of combative Christianity. 'Fundamentalism' is more easily sensed than defined. However, it is widely acknowledged in mainstream Christian circles that the globalisation of Christian fundamentalism has contributed to a rise in inter-faith tension, resulting in a backlash against minority Christians and curbs against the social witness of the church. This is the case in parts of Africa, Latin America, South Asia and the Middle East.

Furthermore, their media and public campaigns have contributed to a rise in anti-Christian actions in different parts of the world. See for instance, the well-documented web site – Indians Against Christian Aggression – www.christreview.org .

In contrast some of the conservative 'Pentecostal' churches that were once tarred with the

'fundamentalist' brush are now actively involved in the social witness of the church. There are groups and individuals allied with the Southern Baptists who take a different line to that of their mother church. While it is important to acknowledge 'complexity', there is no denying the fact that there has been a massive rise in Christian fundamentalism over the last two decades and a proportionate increase in their use of the media in support of aggressive Christian crusades.

Overt and covert struggles

It is one of the central paradoxes of our time that precisely when we have been told that we are moving forward to a qualitatively new era characterised by sisterhood, brotherhood, global unity and togetherness, aided by the technologies of networking, that our familiar world is perceptibly and imperceptibly breaking up into an unfamiliar, unforgiving landscape. This landscape is home to a variety of fundamentalists. Overt and covert struggles aimed at establishing the primacy of one religious worldview over another are commonplace today and unite the world in a fratricidal embrace. Such crusades link the most unlikely of countries – the USA, Sudan, Egypt, Israel, Italy, India, Pakistan, Indonesia – and have led to very untypical alliances between fundamentalist groups – for instance the Jewish and Hindu religious Right against Islam.

While other types of religious fundamentalism (Islamic, Hindu) and the media have been extensively written about, there is precious little material available on the relationship between Christian fundamentalism and the media, especially from the developing world.

It is a recognised fact that the media play an important role in the formation of identity – personal, religious, national. Religious fundamentalists have from time immemorial, assiduously used the media to proclaim the truth, mobilise the masses, protect the faithful and lay down the gauntlet to non-believers. Christian fundamentalists are renowned for their pragmatic use of the media. Broadcasting has traditionally been their forte and they have individualised the encounter between products, technologies and personal salvation. They are motivated by their belief that every successive technology is a manifestation of God's design to be used by fellow Christians to fulfil the promise of the Great Commission.

A characteristic feature of Christian fundamentalist organisations today is their use of broadcasting and web-based information strategies to conduct aggressive campaigns against non-believers. These communication campaigns support on the ground activities that include church planting, conversion, and development. The use of broadcasting (radio and television) and the Internet are core features of many of these organisations and networks.

There have been numerous studies in the USA that have explored specific uses of the media by the religious right – televangelism, the use of the media to communicate the Gospel of Prosperity,

media-based marketing of God, the relationship between ultra-conservative broadcasting and right-wing politics and their communication and media-based mobilisation strategies. One of the better, critical texts on Christian fundamentalism and the media in the USA is *Media, Culture and the Religious Right* (1998) edited by Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage. Stewart Hoover, Professor at the University of Boulder, Colorado, carried out some of the first studies on televangelism in the USA, in a Sage-WACC series of publications in the 1980s. That there is continuing interest in this area in the USA is not at all surprising given that much of the money and the direction given to global Christian fundamentalism stems from this part of the world. (For an A-Z of televangelists in the USA see <http://religiousbroadcasting.lib.virginia.edu/televangelists.html>)

As against the wealth of information generated in the USA, there is very little information on the use of the media by Christian fundamentalists in the South. And yet, countries in the South continue to be used as a staging post for aggressive, media-centred, Christian fundamentalism campaigns.

To Christian fundamentalists, the ecumenical movement is a sign of all that is wrong with Christianity. The social Gospel, tolerance of other faiths and life styles, rabid inclusiveness and the contextualisation of faith are all seen as antithetical to the original, Christian mandate, often cited as reasons for the decline of Christian civilization. WACC's understanding of mission as outlined in its *Christian Principles of Communication*, grounded in a vision of greater ecumenism, contains the kind of sentiments that Christian fundamentalists have difficulty in identifying with.

While little information is available on the impact of global Christian fundamentalism, it is generally acknowledged that there is a correlation between Christian fundamentalism and a breakdown in inter-faith relationships, a rise in inter-faith tension, to increasing levels of identity crisis among recent converts, the unravelling of cultural consensus at local levels, the rise of animosity against minority Christians, threats against the social gospel witness of mainstream churches – their development, health, education projects, a visible rise in anti-Christian lobbies and in their equally fervent anti-Christian activities.

What does 'fundamentalism' mean?

The term fundamentalism, meaning an entirely self-sufficient and self-referential doctrine or worldview, is often used to describe the worldview of an individual or a group and their interpretation of things immanent and eschatological. In common usage, it is specifically applied to the doctrinaire beliefs and action of religious zealots everywhere regardless of their religious affiliation.

In the aftermath of 9/11 and the war in Iraq we were treated to the routine demonisation of Islamic

fundamentalists by the media. In the words of Anthony Giddens, 'Fundamentalism is beleaguered tradition. It is tradition defended in the traditional way – by reference to ritual truth – in a globalising world that asks for reasons.' While fundamentalism may be beleaguered tradition from the point of view of sociologists, the fact remains that it has established itself as a dominant aspect of the world's leading religions, inclusive of Christianity.

While most Christian denominations believe in fundamentals such as the creed, virgin birth, trinity, salvation, only a fraction can be considered fundamentalist. The word fundamentalism was first coined in the USA to refer to Christians within the 'evangelical' movement, who, in addition to being 'born again', maintaining a direct personal relationship to God, and actively winning souls for Christ, advocate active opposition to liberalism (abortion, feminism, 'deviant' sexualities) secularism, communism and other religions.

Fundamentalists have an explicitly political agenda. They abide by a handful of Bible-inspired core tenets – evangelism and the salvation of souls, belief in the inerrancy of Scripture, belief in 'premillennialism' (Bible-based knowledge of the end times) including a belief in prophecy and the 'Rapture' (Mathew 24:37-41 'Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left'; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18 – 'caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air') and separatism.

They can be described as grateful ultra-conservatives who fervently believe that they must share the message of God's redeeming presence in their lives with others thus contributing to fulfilling the great commission and playing their part in saving the unsaved world. They fight against perceived lapses in Christian civilization, they fight for a Christian world order, they fight with resources that they use as weapons – for example broadcasting, they fight against others and they fight under a God-given mandate.

Lack of information

While there have been general writings on fundamentalism including a six volume series edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (see references), writings on Islamic fundamentalism and Hindu fundamentalism, there is a general lack of information on Christian fundamentalism written by Christians. Mainstream churches seem chary to take an exploration of Christian fundamentalism or to challenge their approach to Christian mission. Why is this the case?

1) Christians, who for one reason or another have been dissatisfied with the services and pastoral care offered by mainstream churches, have been drawn to the many mediated Gospels of Prosperity, to weekly encounters with an accessible, personal God, to events in which involvement is an intense spiritual experience. Healing, testimonials, prayer, free forms of worship

are the props that broadcasting has used to create symbolic dramas and spectacles around universal themes – the struggles between good and evil, the meaning of life, the spiritual basis for health and prosperity, the basis for sin and salvation.

The spiritual dimension, in the case of Neo-Pentecostals, is under-laid by ultra-Conservative worldviews related to politics and economics – obedience to market fundamentalism, to the established order of politics. In the words of Dennis Smith and Rolando Perez 'The Neopentecostals offer individualised consumer religion... consumers enter the marketplace and take from the shelf those symbolic goods they need to get them through the week: an ounce of self-esteem, a packet of hope, a portion of pardon, essence of encounter with the divine. All this is mixed according to one's personal recipe and used as needed.'

There is little doubt that these new forms of mediated worship have resulted in forms of community, strengthened personal self-esteem, and have given people hope in the context of the many disruptions caused by rapidly modernising societies throughout the world. The fastest growing churches in many parts of the world are those outside of the mainstream. Given the strength of these churches, their global remit, market-based acknowledgement of their services and the relative decline of the traditional power of the mainstream churches, the latter are not in a position to challenge the neo-conservative aspects of this tradition. In fact, rather than challenging this tradition, mainstream churches have opted to join the bandwagon and offer more of the same.

2) All religions adhere to fundamentals. This is probably more true of the Judeo-Christian religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) than Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism that allow for a certain leeway, ambiguities, options in one's journey towards understanding one's faith and attaining Godhead. In Hinduism you have a choice of your ishta daivam (preferred God/Goddess) and different paths to the knowledge of God – the path of knowledge, the path of action, etc. The rise of right-wing Hinduism is often described as an instance of 'revivalism' and not as an instance of 'fundamentalism'.

While mainstream Christianity's understanding of God's active, salvific presence in our world has undergone major changes as a result of the church's encounter with other faiths, economic and political structures, ideologies, issues of concern, such as gender justice, violence, sexuality, war, the environment, marginality, the further that one is away from the centres of denominational power, the more likely it is that understandings of faith are layered and informed by authoritative, received interpretations of tradition and culture. 'Progressive' understandings of Christianity adopted by a church synod, often take a long time to filter down to the level of the local parish. More often than not, the journey of a position or idea from centre to periphery is fraught and involves dilution, adaptation, reinterpretation, even rejection.

The recent furore in the Anglican church over the ordination of gay priests illustrates the point that Christian denominations often harbour a variety of theological positions on any given subject/issue. The India-based Mar Thoma church, a member of the World Council of Churches,

has a strong evangelical wing and tolerates separate churches for Dalits within its fold. The Roman Catholic church actively endorses its right wing arm – Opus Dei, and many charismatic movements within its midst – Father Rossi in Brazil, Mother Angelica in the USA, the Pota Movement in India.

3) The ecumenical movement in general and the progressive strands of mainstream Christianity have been in a crisis for more than two decades. A crisis of resources, vision, structures, interpretation, education, even credibility. In the context of crisis, while there seems to be a general willingness to dialogue with the conservative churches on certain controversial issues such as 'abortion' and 'women's rights', there is much less of an aptitude to take on the theology, the politics and the structures of the well-resourced ultra-conservative churches, for example those aligned to the religious right in USA.

While the more zany and explicitly brash intentions of Christian zealots are often criticised by the mainstream churches – for instance, Rev. Franklin Graham's triumphal entry into Iraq along with US troops, that critique was not sustained. The mainstream church neither has the political will nor the resources to challenge the ultra-Conservatives.

4) Fundamentalist positions are tolerated because in an increasingly divided world across religious lines, a world in which religious identities are at stake, there are implicit moves to stand by one's faith, warts and all. For example, the National Council of Churches of India (NCCI) consistently defended all Christians in India during inter-religious tensions – but failed to point fingers at members belonging to ultra-conservative Christian groups who had a hand in stirring up inter-religious tension. The NCCI would argue that this is not the time to engage in a Christian fundamentalism project in India – but that position begs the question – when is a good time?

There is a widely-held perception in ecumenical circles that the Religious Right, through its aggressive outreach programmes in the North and the South, has contributed towards fanning the flames of inter-religious conflict, made already fragile environments weaker, undone the good work carried out by a variety of faith-based organisation in the fostering of inter-faith dialogue, development, human rights, played a pivotal role in legitimising right-wing politics, wars against the enemies of the 'free world, advocated a return to patriotism and jingoism.

In many parts of the South these actions have led to heightened animosity and a fundamentalist backlash against Christians, who are often a minority group in most countries in the South, except in Latin America, Brazil in particular. Some of this angst can be put down to the inability of the ecumenical movement to 'compete' with the new kids on the block, and reflects the movements lack of will, resources and use of innovative and creative strategies to neutralise or combat this threat.

Relationship between the media and fundamentalism

From time immemorial, the media has been a fertile and well-used (manipulated) tool by religious fundamentalists. This is to be expected since one of the primary aims of the religious fundamentalist is to persuade people to accept the authenticity of an eternal message valid for all time and for all people. Fundamentalists have employed scribes and Pharisees, preachers and mullahs, used dance and drama, song and verse, edict and artifice to communicate eternal and unchanging Truths.

The modern-day fundamentalist however operates in a very different milieu to that which prevailed even half a century ago. The marketing of Paradise is big business today. God sells. There is a battle on for the souls of the global community as much as for its purse in a context teeming with a variety of communication options – video and audio, terrestrial, cable and satellite broadcasting, the Internet along with print and older forms of communication. Christian fundamentalists in particular rank among the world's foremost users of the media, for in their way of thinking, every medium of communication is a gift from God and a potential ally in the dissemination of God's truth. Instrumentalism, professionalism and pragmatism are typical attitudes underlying media use by religious fundamentalists.

Religious fundamentalists normally have a political agenda – and the media are used to further that agenda. The meticulous, systematic uses of the media by Hindu nationalist forces in India, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bharatiya Janata Party, by the Taliban, as much as by Pat Robertson and others of his ilk in the USA, backed by the technologies of marketing have played a key role in their ascendance in the public domain. The family and community as much as the nation are targets for the fundamentalist.

The fundamentalist message is simple, straightforward, literal and promises an important value-added extra – it guarantees all believers the promise of salvation. Fundamentalists do not have time for Irony, or subscribe to diversity. In fact in their way of thinking Satan lurks in every outsider opposed to their cause.

The use of the media by religious fundamentalists has varied from context to context. Hindu fundamentalists in India have used video to great effect and more recently satellite television. Their mass leaders such as Sadhvi Rithambara are what they are today because of their cassette ministries. A tradition perfected by the late Ayatollah Khomeini whose popularity was boosted by his sermons delivered via audiocassettes. In the USA Christian fundamentalists such as Pat Robertson control vast media empires and in addition have substantive interests in wealth creation activities such as banking and real estate.

Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Cable Network is one of the largest cable providers in the USA. Such synergies and links with secular media moghuls effected through the sale of his International Family Entertainment to Rupert Murdoch reinforce the point that it is very difficult to monitor the inroads made by fundamentalist media in the mainstream. Televangelism however, is a lot more than an adaptation of television for religious ends. It has also, perhaps in a fundamental sense, changed the way religion is experienced by vast numbers of people. More importantly, it is the vehicle by which conservative political views are given global legitimacy and aggressive forms of Christianity promoted.

Media and Christian fundamentalism

God TV Vision Statement: 'To recognize, source, create, package and present world-class anointed, prophetic, supernatural content in a spirit of excellence across the globe into every nation, reconciling man, woman and child with God by the power of the Holy Spirit' (<http://www.godnetwork.com>)

Christian fundamentalists use a variety of media to fulfil their mission. However, broadcasting – both radio and television remain their favourite tools. There are a number of defining characteristics of the media and Christian fundamentalism. These can be categorized in terms of structure, process, audience, policy, strategy, ideology:

1) While they have a massive presence in print, their core media is undoubtedly broadcasting, and of late, the Internet.

2) Since one of the key *raison d'être* of Christian fundamentalism is the Great Commission – the media have traditionally been used to further the goals of outreach including church planting, preaching, conversion and global evangelism. Print, broadcasting and new information technologies have been used extensively. Today, when we speak of Christian broadcasting, it refers almost exclusively to the networks owned by televangelists, most of whom are resident in the USA. However, their networks are global.

3) While the most ubiquitous expression of Christian fundamentalist media is represented by globally networked Christian television such as CBN and TBN, there are also local expressions of Christian fundamentalist media that are bounded by language, region, nation. Local Christian TV supported wholly by local entrepreneurs also plays a role in reinforcing a conservative politics and interpretation of Scripture at local, regional or national levels.

4) While the political economy of televangelism is of real concern, the deliberate manner in which content is used to marginalize 'others', the ways in which Christian symbols are manipulated for marketing ends, the ways in which technologies are adapted to fundamentalist ends and communication campaigns used to sow distrust and discord in multi-religious contexts are some of the more immediate concerns for ecumenical communication organizations.

5) The mainstreaming of Christianity, which is an on-going process, has been achieved through global marketing strategies. Christian broadcasting is a multi-billion dollar business and it is therefore not at all surprising that its strategies at profit and audience maximization mirror the objectives of mainstream broadcasting. (<http://godnetwork>).

6) Some of these networks, given their global operations, are no longer owned by strictly Christian interests. Today Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) empire is for instance connected through inter-locking directorships to a variety of secular institutions that are in agreement with his ultra-conservative views. In 1997, CBS sold International Family Entertainment Inc. to Rupert Murdoch and Murdoch merged his Fox Kids Worldwide with IFE. Pat Robertson remains co-chairman of the board. Brazil's Universal Church of the Reign of God is a major player in commercial broadcasting in the region.

7) Since mainstreaming Christianity is a key objective, many Christian networks also broadcast wholesome, family entertainment – Hill Street Blues, the Mary Tyler Show and the like.

8) Global evangelism is a key objective and CBN's WorldReach that was launched in 1995 and is seen in 200 countries is based on a combination of local production for terrestrial television and satellite and cable TV. The regions of focus include the USA, Latin America, the Muslim World, Europe, India, Indonesia, South-east Asia, the Philippines, China and the C.I.S. Similarly the UK-based God TV, transmits programmes via 10 satellites and numerous cable outlets to 212 countries.

9) Synergistic, multi-media strategies are a hallmark of contemporary Christian fundamentalist projects such as AD2003.

References and resources

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