

How do fundamentalists shape media agendas?

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The religion we see in the media today seems increasingly polarized and embroiled in emerging fronts of conflict and struggle. The media are also quick to tell us that the religious impulse most responsible for this polarization is the impulse to 'fundamentalism'. The origins of this term can be traced to U.S. Protestantism at the turn of the 20th century, but the fundamentalist idea has shown a protean tendency to expression in a variety of religious and cultural locations.

After public repudiation in the early 20th century, U.S. fundamentalism regrouped and resurfaced, both in its original form, and in the broader movement known as 'Evangelicalism'. Perhaps due to the global influence of American media and American culture, the term fundamentalism gained broad currency as a designation used to describe tendencies that seem to have become a feature of late modernity. This use has been particularly common in journalistic and media discourses, where simple and evocative labels are basic to conventions of treatment and coverage.

Some may still argue today that the fundamentalist label should only be applied in its original Protestant context, but that battle has long since been lost in the public and media spheres, where fundamentalism is a category used to describe a wide range of phenomena and movements around the world. For example, a different fundamentalism emerged in the world media arena during the 1978-79 Iran hostage crisis. Of course, this was also a major turning point in the West's understanding of Islam and of the place of religion in the 20th and 21st century.

Prior to 1979, it was easy for political and social authorities in the industrialized West to assume that religion was a fading dimension of public life. The Islamic Revolution in Iran, however, was a wake-up call to those who held that assumption and introduced a decades-long reappraisal of a seeming religious resurgence worldwide. Without a doubt, the place of fundamentalisms within this resurgence has been central. Thus, in the years since 1979, media coverage has had to contend with the increasingly complicated role of fundamentalist movements in local, national, and global conflicts.

Can fundamentalisms exist without the media?

Despite the success of fundamentalist groups in attracting media attention, their complicated relationship to public communication remains little understood and understudied by scholars of both religion and media. This problem presents itself as an important area of inquiry deserving of

greater attention. On one level, questions may be raised about the ways in which fundamentalisms use the media and the ways in which media cover fundamentalisms. On a deeper level, we might also ask whether fundamentalisms might actually be a function of the media age – in other words, we might question whether fundamentalisms could exist without the media.

The International Conference on Fundamentalism and the Media, held at the University of Colorado at Boulder on October 10-12, 2006, was conceived as an effort to bring scholarly and professional attention to this web of issues and stimulate interest in further research in that area. In his keynote address, Scott Appleby of The University of Notre Dame offered an excellent summation of the conference focus: 'What concerns us [...] is the fundamentalists' intriguing adoption and adaptation of the most powerful products of techno-scientific modernity, not least modern means of communication.'

The conference was jointly sponsored by The World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) and the Center for Media, Religion, and Culture (CMRC) within the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Colorado at Boulder. The three-day forum brought together over 80 religion and media scholars, media professionals, and members of the religious community. Participants attended a number of plenary addresses, delivered by a selection of prominent scholars of religion and the media.

Headlining the list of internationally renowned experts was keynote speaker Scott Appleby who, between 1988 and 1993, co-directed the Fundamentalism Project of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, which resulted in the definitive work on fundamentalism that he co-edited with Martin Marty. Other noted speakers included Annabelle Sreberny of London University's School of African and Oriental Studies, whose work focuses on the Middle East and Iran in particular, Pradip Thomas of Queensland University in Brisbane, Australia, who spoke about issues in South Asia, Ogbu Kalu of Chicago's McCormick School of Theology, who focused on West Africa, and Steve Rabey of Colorado's Fuller Theological Seminary, who discussed American Evangelicalism, among others.

Along with a report from WACC's Latin American consultation on fundamentalism, presented by Adán Medrano and Dennis Smith of the NARA and WACC-LAC organizations, the plenaries explored problems of religious fundamentalisms in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and North America.

The broad geographical and conceptual focus of the conference was intended to accomplish two main goals. First, it was intended to acknowledge the position that there is no single form of fundamentalism and that no religion is inherently more or less prone to fundamentalist tendencies. Second, as conference planners we were committed to creating intellectual and social spaces for productive conversations between the academic, religious, and journalistic communities. In this sense, the conference was intended as an invitation to future collaboration. It aimed to unsettle a number of binary divisions whose rigidity inhibits broader understandings about religion and the media.

These oppositions include essentialist distinctions between East and West, North and South, developed world and two-thirds world, as well as between religious and spiritual traditions. As an academic forum, the conference also crossed boundaries between a number of disciplines, including religious studies, media studies, area studies, communications, history, geography, languages, and cultural studies. Each of these was represented in the papers and plenaries, generating many opportunities for debate and reflection. Finally, the conference self-consciously attempted to identify points of contact where academic scholarship and professional and public discourse can inform each other.

An important element of the conference was the advance screening of *Knocking: Faith and Fundamentalism Meet at the Front Door*, a new documentary to be aired on U.S. public television in the spring of 2007. The film considers a specific religion – the Jehovah’s Witnesses – placing it in historical and social context. In particularly moving scenes, *Knocking* looks at how this religious movement, often thought of as an expression of the most closed and marginal tendencies of fundamentalist faiths, has actually been involved in important, even liberatory social action in history. As all good media can, *Knocking* also humanizes the Witnesses.

The co-producers and directors of the film, Joel Engardio and Tom Shepard, were in attendance and engaged in conversation with a panel of conference participants who had been invited to make formal responses. This discussion and the ensuing broader interactions with the full-house audience revealed fascinating questions both about the subject and the form of the film. Some audience members struggled to reconcile their personal impressions of the Jehovah’s Witnesses movement with the overall positive portrayal in the film. This enabled a deeper discussion of the role that media can play in either supporting or contesting religious traditions, and of the extent to which media frames condition our impressions of the religious world. The opportunity to think concretely about a specific case of religious mediation added an inestimable depth to the conference’s consideration of its subject.

Persistence of religion

Several areas of broad consensus emerged from the great diversity of voices and experiences represented at the conference. It was agreed that the scholarly tendency to see religion as a residual and fading dimension of public life under a regime of secularization is misguided. What might have once been viewed as anachronistic is now understood to be deeply active in history and, as such, warrants greater attention.

Recent academic work has been rushing to catch up with the persistence of religion and its emergence in the most modern or post-modern of contexts: the media. As religion finds its way in late modernity, it must contend with the media. The diverse range of conference papers demonstrated that there are a variety of ways that this contention takes place. There is the way that religions and religious movements themselves use media. There is the related but also distinct question of the historical mediation of religion and the changes that emerging forms of communication bring about in that mediation. There is the way that religion is represented in global media, both in journalistic and in entertainment forms. There is the way that religious symbols and ideas have become iconic tropes in media discourse.

There is also the role that the media have assumed in what we might call new 'civil religions' of nationalism, identity, and meaning. There is the fundamental role that media play in representing 'us' to 'them' and 'them' to 'us', that is, the role of media in religious understanding. And there is the way that media are active in establishing and maintaining global ethnoscaples in an era of global commerce and migration. Other ways are emerging, will continue to emerge, and will demand study and interpretation.

Another theme that persisted throughout the conference was related to the problems of defining and classifying fundamentalisms. Definitional debates, however, converged around a consensus understanding best expressed in Scott Appleby's notion that fundamentalism is 'a tendency, a pattern, a habit of mind rather than something that is definite and self-contained.' This understanding, in turn, encouraged a pluralistic approach among conference participants who agreed that fundamentalisms are inevitably situated within specific socio-historical, political, and cultural circumstances and are best examined in those terms.

At the same time, it was widely acknowledged that there are common trends among various fundamentalist movements that should be recognized. In his keynote address Appleby pointed out five such common ideological traits, including reactivity, selectivity, absolutism, dualism, and millennialism. Further, he observed the mutuality between fundamentalists and the media. Fundamentalist movements, he argued, use media, respond to media, are represented in media, and really could not exist without media. As Appleby put it, 'fundamentalist are "framers" of the highest order; they know instinctively... how to identify, select, portray, project and enhance the drama inherent in their religious/supernaturalist worldview.'

Appleby's observations, in a sense, tied together the diversity of conference discussions. As the gathered scholars, media professionals and religious leaders interacted, they were concerned to understand the sources, meanings, and implications of fundamentalists' attempts to shape media agendas. These concerns extended beyond academic analysis and involved the civic and humanistic positions held by conference participants. The questions asked were not simply about what could be learned about fundamentalisms but also what should be feared or greeted sanguinely about the work fundamentalists do in society.

Early in the conference, Steve Rabey summarized this sentiment well when he commented that, 'today, many young people around the world are becoming accidental fundamentalists, some of whom seek to save the world through violence. One of the challenges I have been wrestling with is the question: How do we engage them in positive ways so that they see signs of life outside their theological/cultural enclaves?'

For all of its breadth, there were some significant gaps in the conference coverage, something that should be addressed as the discourse progresses. Perhaps as a function of the particular moment in history, there was a notable tendency toward focusing on Christianity and Islam as themes among the papers. Having a conversation that brought attention to these two faiths was in itself an important accomplishment. There was, indeed, something historic about the fact that experts in these two religious traditions and their workings in a variety of global contexts were gathered together to consider the interactions between religion and the media. At the same time, other religious traditions, such as Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism, and other perspectives, such as those of women and minority groups, were represented less prominently.

In spite of its gaps, the conference could be seen as an indicator of the current state of affairs in research on fundamentalist movements as they interface with the media. One notable tendency was the number of studies that focused on analyzing the content of various media as they attempt to cover religious fundamentalisms. Such studies are important in documenting prevailing attitudes in public discourse. However, the analyses of content alone can tell little about the ways in which fundamentalist movements themselves act strategically to set the media agenda or take advantage of it.

To generate insights about these processes it is necessary to conduct ethnographic and culturally informed work. This is a particularly difficult task for researchers because fundamentalist groups are typically tightly closed to outsiders. It is, perhaps, in this direction that the collaboration between academy and the religious communities can help the most in creating opportunities for greater access and understanding.

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