

From 'bumpkins' to Baghdad: Fumbling with fundamentalism

Steve Rabey

In 2004, religion scholar Stephen Prothero wrote a review in The New York Times Book Review of James Ault's book Spirit and Flesh: Life in a Fundamentalist Baptist Church. In the review Prothero claimed that when it comes to American religion, 'the last acceptable prejudice is anti-fundamentalism'. That assertion may be debatable, but I think many would agree with Prothero's lament that, 'Fundamentalism has been scoffed at more than it has been studied.'

There are still plenty of people who scoff at fundamentalism, including some journalists and pundits, as the following two examples from 2006 press reports suggest:

- 'Putting the mental into funda' (a September headline in the Irish Independent about anti-gay activist Stephen Green) • ...aside from some fundamentalist leaders, even people who loved The Passion seem deeply dismayed [by Mel Gibson's recent drunken, anti-Semitic outburst].'

(a news report in Entertainment Weekly).

But today more than ever, such attitudes seem not only shortsighted but downright dangerous. Sure, some people still associate fundamentalism with an image of backwoods, backwards and backward-looking American Christians. But such imagery fails to provide an accurate picture of the origins of fundamentalism nearly a century ago. It also fails to make sense of the growing power and influence of fundamentalist movements in most major faith traditions around the globe today.

I am a 'recovering fundamentalist' who has written about religion for both the mainstream and Christian media for more than a quarter century. And no doubt, there are those who feel my recovery remains far from complete!

For the last 20 years I have lived and worked in Colorado Springs, a city that I (and others) have described as the 'Vatican' of American evangelicalism. (The analogy is far from perfect, but the city is the place Focus on the Family and dozens of other big, international, evangelical 'parachurch' organizations call home.)

I have continually struggled with how to cover fundamentalism in my own reporting and writing. I have also seen the term 'fundamentalist' used and abused by many other writers over the years.

In this article I will try to clarify portions of the historical record while offering some suggestions for addressing fundamentalism more appropriately in the future.

Coming to terms

The Associated Press Stylebook 2005 counsels caution when using the word 'fundamentalist':

'The word gained usage in an 20th century fundamentalist-modernist controversy within Protestantism. In recent years, however, fundamentalist has to a large extent taken on pejorative connotations....In general do not use fundamentalist unless a group applies the word to itself.'

And more recently, the Religion Newswriters Association's excellent booklet, 'Reporting on Religion: A primer on Journalism's Best Beat', urges reporters to exercise caution:

'BE CAREFUL WITH LABELS. Many – including pro-life, liberal, and fundamentalist – are loaded. Characterize beliefs with specifics rather than giving them general labels. Also, allow people to characterize their own beliefs, but be wary of allowing them to explain opposing views.'

Unfortunately, some writers merely echo the rhetoric of gay activist (and personal friend) Mel White, who issued this characterization in a fundraising appeal for his activist group, Soulforce:

'The fundamentalist Christian leader, Dr. James Dobson, founder and chairman of Focus on the Family, has become the primary source of misinformation about homosexuality and homosexuals in this country and around the world....With your help we can continue putting pressure on those with a 'Fundamentalist Agenda.'

Some of the relatively few journalistically appropriate uses of the word have been found in news reports about Warren Jeffs, the leader of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; and in the Christian press, where leaders such as Charles Colson have explicitly embraced the label, at least in part.

And thankfully, when The New York Times covered recent protests in Amish country staged by Fred Phelps and his notorious 'God Hates Fags' crew from the independent Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, editors had the insight to avoid the convenient 'fundamentalist' lingo

and use the more appropriate adjective 'fringe' instead.

One of the best uses of the term I have seen in recent months came from a singles ad in a September issue of London's The Times, which read: 'Christian fundamentalist, protestant, seeks tall white lady, 50-70, non-smoker. Not into drinking or dancing. You must live alone and want marriage.'

Origins of a movement

Today, many of us struggle to stay on top of developments in our changing world, including globalization, regular changes in the technology we use in our daily life, and scientific breakthroughs about both disease and the very nature of human life itself.

If you ever feel dizzy, perhaps you can understand the feelings of 'culture shock' and social dislocation experienced by the first people in the world to embrace the name 'fundamentalist'.

In the late 19th century, a series of destabilizing social transformations (like industrialization) and wrenching cultural conflicts (like the debates over higher criticism of the Bible and evolution) that threatened America's former Christian hegemony. So severe were the challenges of the modern age that historian Sydney Ahlstrom said they represented 'the most fundamental controversy to wrack the churches since the Reformation.'

Charles Darwin's Origin of Species was merely one of many troubling challenges to orthodox Christian assumptions. Higher Criticism subjected scripture to scholarly investigation, leading many to question the reliability of the Bible and its God. Protestant Liberalism gained a foothold in many denominations and seminaries. The science of geology wreaked havoc on long-accepted notions about both human and cosmic origins. Psychology and sociology subjected human behavior to unprecedented scientific scrutiny. And new religious movements like Spiritualism, Transcendentalism, Unitarianism, Christian Science and Mormonism introduced religious diversity on an unprecedented scale.

Immigration and industrialization unleashed drastic social changes. There was an influx of Catholic and Orthodox Christians, as well as Asians and European Jews. Many of these newcomers flocked to America's growing urban centers, where they fueled the industrial revolution and created unique cultural enclaves. Urban despair and poverty helped inspire a mainline Protestant "Social Gospel" movement which often placed greater emphasis

on meeting people's physical needs than on securing religious conversions.

Increasingly, some believers felt a deeper appreciation of the words of the old revival hymn: 'This world is not my home.' And the popular Scofield Reference Bible led many to believe that human history was in its final 'dispensation' and the end of the world was near.

Some conservative Christians responded to cultural change by redoubling their efforts to promote personal spirituality and morality, such as organizing more evangelistic crusades, promoting temperance, and lobbying for the passage of Sunday 'blue laws'. Meanwhile, other believers came to fear that modernist ideas and institutions were eroding the very foundations of Christian faith. In 1910, some of these defenders of the faith published the first in a series of books entitled *The Fundamentals*, which would serve as a rallying cry for the emerging fundamentalist movement.

The *Fundamentals* booklets featured articles by scholars (that's Jeffery L. Sheler's term, not mine, in his recent *Believers: A Journey Into Evangelical America*) like B. B. Warfield and were edited by Rueben A. Torrey and others. Twelve booklets were published between 1910 and 1915, and all are still in print (and available on the Internet). They covered everything from biblical inerrancy to personal testimonials about the efficacy of prayer in ninety loosely organized articles.

Though well-reasoned and polite in tone, the books did little to change culture, so defenders of the faith began building their own new institutions.

In 1919, some 6,000 conservative Christians gathered for the inaugural meeting of the World Christian Fundamentals Association, created to counter the more liberal Federal Council of Churches, which was founded in 1908. In 1920, a group of Northern Baptists called 'The Fundamentalist Fellowship' became the first to claim the name 'fundamentalist' for themselves.

As the fundamentalist movement gathered strength it sought to translate its ideas into action by taking greater control of Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational and Episcopalian denominations.

After these denominational efforts failed, separatist fundamentalists engaged in a flurry of institution building, founding many independent Bible colleges, publishing houses, and mission agencies that would create the foundation of America's present, massive evangelical subculture. In the long run, however, the self-defeating belligerence of leaders like Bob Jones, Sr., founder of an influential college, and John R. Rice, editor of a newspaper called *The Sword of the Lord*, led not to greater influence, but instead to increasing isolation.

The divisions within the fundamentalist ranks resulted in the creation of two competing organizations: the more activist (and now irrelevant) American Council of Christian Churches, founded in 1941 by Carl McIntire; and the more moderate National Association of Evangelicals, which was founded in 1942 and positioned itself between the contrasting extremes of liberal Protestants and conservative fundamentalists.

Assessing the impact of America's first fundamentalists

Although the movement didn't achieve many of its stated goals, it correctly perceived that profound changes were afoot in the world, and some of its leaders made a valiant effort to call America and its churches back to their earlier biblical moorings. Even more important, the movement left a legacy of institutions and networks that would help later evangelicals achieve even greater impact and influence.

Still, there's much to criticize about American fundamentalism, and evangelicals have been among the harshest critics, beginning with Carl F. H. Henry's 1947 book, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (reissued by Eerdmans in 2003). Henry criticized his brethren for condemning the evils of Communism while ignoring the evils of Capitalism, and wrote, 'Whereas once the redemptive gospel was a world-changing message, now it was narrowed to a world-resisting message.'

More recently other evangelicals have criticized fundamentalist failings:

- Historian George Marsden has called fundamentalism 'militantly anti-modernist Protestant evangelicalism.' Joel Carpenter describes it as 'a crabbed and parochial mutation of Protestant orthodoxy', and talks about the movement's 'cultural alienation, sectarian behavior, and intellectual stagnation.' Edward John Carnell, who had been raised a fundamentalist, later received degrees from Harvard University and Boston University and served as president of Fuller Theological Seminary. His critiques of the movement written during the 1950s and 1960s called fundamentalism 'orthodoxy gone cultic' and described the movement's creed as, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. don't smoke, don't go to movies...and you will be saved.' And Richard Mouw, the current Fuller provost, has frequently written about fundamentalism's tangled legacy.

Mouw and Carpenter both criticize fundamentalism for its many flaws, but they also acknowledge its accomplishments. In *The Smell of Sawdust*, Mouw mourns the fact that fundamentalism has left the evangelical movement with three common defects: anti-intellectualism, otherworldliness, and a separatistic spirit. But things are not that simple:

'Anti-intellectualism is a genuine danger, but so is a highly intellectualized packaging of Christianity. Otherworldliness is a threat to the Christian community, but so is a thoroughgoing this-worldliness. Ecclesiastical separatism is to be avoided, but we must also be on our guard against a vague inclusivism in our understanding of Christian unity.'

Carpenter issues the following warning in *Revive Us Again*: 'All Christian communities are profoundly shaped by their cultural situation, and revisionists who chide a prior generation for not seeing its own foibles and limitations should know that some day their descendants will say the same of them.'

Historian Mark Noll's acclaimed 1994 book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, detailed the continuing consequences 'the intellectual disaster of fundamentalism'. Alan Wolfe's article in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 2000 explored the continuing consequences of this disaster: 'Of all America's religious traditions,

evangelical Protestantism, at least in its twentieth-century conservative forms, ranks dead last in intellectual stature.'

Kenneth Kantzer, a former editor of *Christian Today*, discussed this problem in a 1996 interview for the magazine's 40th anniversary edition. 'Most fundamentalists believed that the life of the mind was important', he said, 'but they didn't know what to do about it.'

In recent years, some of these anti-intellectual tendencies have been reversed, as Wolfe and others have noted. And at the same time, many writers have praised the logistical brilliance of both Christian fundamentalists like anti-abortion activist Randall Terry and Muslim fundamentalists who carried out the 9/11 attacks on America.

So, who's fundy?

The term 'fundamentalism' is so problematic that scholars, including those who worked with The Fundamentalism Project (see below), have only reluctantly continued to use it. The following scholars have made important contributions in recent years.

Jeffrey Hadden has identified four types of fundamentalism: theological; political; cultural; global. Hadden and Anson Shupe gave us one of the best definitions of fundamentalism: 'a proclamation of reclaimed authority over a sacred tradition which is to be reinstated as an antidote for a society that has strayed from its cultural moorings.'

Both the Fundamentalism Project and author Malise Ruthven have explored 'family resemblances' among theologically unrelated groups.

My own definition would borrow the following concepts from the Fundamentalism Project:

- The importance of a wholehearted religious idealism; a belief that Truth (with a capital T) has not only been revealed but can be accurately grasped (at least by some male leaders) and effectively applied to contemporary problems; a robust counterculturalism that may seem inscrutable to outsiders but provides the only source of meaning for insiders; an innate sense of the reality of good and evil as well as the crucial role of the True Believers in the cosmic battle; and a selective appropriation of aspects of religious tradition.

A better way

As helpful as these tools are, I still think one of the most helpful approaches comes from Scott Appleby, who sees fundamentalism 'as a tendency, a pattern, a habit of mind rather than something that is definite and self-contained.' The beauty of Appleby's approach became apparent to me as I interviewed him for the Colorado Springs Gazette in 1994. People have been quick to apply the term 'fundamentalist' to many of the evangelical parachurch organizations headquartered in the Springs, but Appleby told me that most of the time the term does not fit. Discussing Focus on the Family, Appleby said: 'If you look at fundamentalism as a tendency rather than a definition, you can ask that question in terms of when Focus does certain things and when it does not. Most of the time, I would say they are not.'

Although Focus is a \$100 million-plus organization, most of its most controversial positions and newsworthy 'culture war' sound bites emerge from one of its relatively small departments: its Public Policy division. 'This organizational division allows Focus to play good cop/bad cop', said Appleby. 'This way, one side of the ministry can win ground by appealing to the mainstream, while the other side can engage in absolutist rhetoric and condemnations.'

As for me, I have tried to use the word 'fundamentalist' as seldom as possible in my own writing because I find that it typically generates more heat than light, leaving readers confused. And when I am trying to assess the theological position of people I meet or cover, I have increasingly tried to think of fundamentalism as tendency that most all of us engage in from time to time rather than seeing it as an iron clad category into which I can proudly pigeon-hole believers I consider less intelligent or less spiritual than myself.

Resources

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Steve Rabey is an adjunct professor with Fuller Seminary of Colorado Springs, and freelance writer/editor/consultant who has written more than 20 books and more than 2,000 articles for publications including The New York Times and Christianity Today. A version of this article was presented at the International Conference on Fundamentalism and the Media in October, 2006. And portions of the article were adapted from 'Fightin' Fundies', a chapter in Milestones: 50 Events of the 20th Century That Shaped Evangelicals in America by Steve Rabey and Monte (OP, but available at www.rabey.us).