



ST GEORGE'S LECTURES

6 - The Dynamics of Fundamentalism

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The Dynamics of Fundamentalism

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The academic study of fundamentalism is a phenomenon of relatively recent origin.

The Term Itself

It is often pointed out that the word *fundamentalism* (or *fundamentalist*) itself was coined only early in the twentieth century.¹

Actually, this “origin” is rather unimportant and is also misleading. The attachment of the common suffix “-ism” to the familiar word “fundamental” should hardly count as an “origin” or a “coinage”. It is more important to recognize that the plural expression “the fundamentals” had long been used, both in religion and in other connections, in the sense of the primary principles or rules that form the groundwork of a system or the essential parts of it. The usage goes back to 1637 (so the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*). In religion it was particularly used, both long before 1900 and long after it. I have often heard it, and commonly in no connection with what we now call fundamentalism. I remember a clergyman (in the 1950s) saying of another that “he’s not well grounded in the fundamentals”: in this case, he was not referring to matters of biblical authority but expressing his opinion that the other had an inadequate knowledge of Greek and Hebrew grammar. “The fundamentals” could thus mean anything, religious or irreligious, liberal or conservative, orthodox or unorthodox, that anyone considered to be basic principles for any scheme of knowledge or action. What “the fundamentals” of Christianity are would be a matter of opinion and disagreement. When the writers of the pamphlets called *The Fundamentals* (1910-15) used this expression, they were simply following a long-established usage, but restricting its meaning so as to make it apply to their own anti-modern, Bible-centred and anti-critical views. These views were, for them, “the fundamentals”. These same associations were, quite rightly, taken for granted by those who in the 1920s first used the derivative forms “fundamentalist” and

¹ The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* gave the date as 1923. It seems, however, that it was somewhat earlier. George Marsden in his *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 159 plus n. 19 on p. 274, says that the word was “coined” by Curtis Lee Laws, editor of the Baptist paper *The Watchman Examiner*, and used by him in an article published on 1 July 1920. He correctly explained the term as meaning those ready “to do battle for the Fundamentals”.



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“fundamentalism”. And certainly thereafter, throughout the twentieth century, the term has been used with this sense in religious discussion.

Increasing Literature on the Subject

In spite of much awareness, it was only occasionally that books of academic quality on the topic were published. Some histories of it were written. Many scholars in Bible and theology were irritated by fundamentalism and suffered from it when it met them in their students; but they hoped, perhaps, that it would simply go away, and they also thought that it was beneath their academic level to spend time on investigating so unworthy a phenomenon. From time to time there were notable periods of correspondence about it in newspapers such as *The Times* of London. Sociologists began to find research into sects and small religious communities to be rewarding. In the theological realm, the first significant book-length study in this period was Gabriel Hebert's *Fundamentalism and the Church of God*², to which a reply came in J. I. Packer's "*Fundamentalism*" and *the Word of God*.³ But the modern theological study⁴ of the subject can fairly be said to have been opened by the writer's book *Fundamentalism*,⁵ complemented later by the more popular and pastoral *Escaping from Fundamentalism*.⁶ One of the most succinct of many shorter articles by the writer was first published in Australia: "Religious Fundamentalism".⁷

Since then quite a flood of studies have appeared, culminating in the work of the Fundamentalism Project of the University of Chicago, directed by Martin Marty, a project of world-wide scope, carried out with the support and assistance of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. This project spent five years studying all aspects of the phenomenon and has published its papers in five massive and imposing volumes.⁸ Numerous other books, more closely pointed at particular aspects, have appeared: among distinguished examples we may name Nancy T. Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World*,⁹ Bruce B. Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The*

² London: SCM, 1957

³ London: Inter-Varsity, 1958

⁴ I emphasize the word "theological" here because there had already been some considerable historical and especially sociological study of fundamentalist movements during the previous decades. Nevertheless it is only from about 1980 that the steady flow of literature commences and grows.

⁵ London: SCM, 1977; later translated into German, Japanese, and Korean

⁶ London: SCM, 1984; American title *Beyond Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984)

⁷ In *Current Affairs Bulletin*, 59/1, University of Sydney, June 1982, reprinted with the title "Fundamentalism and Biblical Authority" in A. Linzey and P.J. Wexler, eds., *Heaven and Earth: Essex Essays in Theology and Ethics* (Worthing: Churchman, 1986), 23-37.

⁸ Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, *The Fundamentalism Project* (five volumes with individual titles; Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991-95). To say that it studied "all aspects" is, in fact, too generous: the massive five-volume study strikingly fails to provide substantial *theological* assessment. See the remarks of Harriet Harris, p. 330: "The Fundamentalism Project is ... lacking in theological analysis, which is a serious weakness in a programme which emphasizes religious and theological characteristics of fundamentalism."

⁹ New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987



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Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age,¹⁰ Kathleen C. Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So: The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism*,¹¹ and Harriet A. Harris, *Fundamentalism and Evangelicals*.¹² There is every likelihood that studies of fundamentalism, from many diverse points of view, will continue to proliferate.¹³

Reasons for Present Interest

Why is this so? What has happened that has made the subject of fundamentalism, though long existing as a somewhat vague expression of popular speech, into a matter calling for numerous books, articles, reviews, conferences and projects? There are, I suggest, three main reasons.

The first is the clear persistence of fundamentalism as a phenomenon within Christianity. In the earlier part of the twentieth century, it was common for people to depict fundamentalism as a product of ignorance and lack of education, a revolt against science and rational discussion. Wider education and exposure to science, it was thought, would cause it gradually to wither away. Now this diagnosis, in so far as it perceived an opposition to both science and rational discussion, may not have been wrong. But the expectation that wider education and greater exposure to modern science would cause it to wither away has certainly proved to be wrong. Fundamentalism is well represented among sophisticated persons of science, of medicine, of business, of political activity. University students form one of the areas that have been most successful in developing and fertilizing the fundamentalist convictions.

The second reason lies in the increased visibility of fundamentalism as a factor in *political* life. Around the mid-twentieth century it was common for the moderate central leadership of the churches to censure fundamentalists for being concerned only for the salvation of the individual soul and for being unwilling to be involved in action for the reform of society: the "social gospel" was something that they hated. And this perception on the part of the churches was not necessarily wrong. But later in the century things became different. Fundamentalism, at least in the United States, began increasingly to join with other forms of conservative religion in seeking to transform society into a pattern that it considered to be God-willed. Far from turning away from the political-social world, it turned towards activism within that world and towards the realization of power within it. And this did not mean political involvement in a *general* sense: it meant political involvement in an explicitly *conservative* sense. There are political and legal tendencies in the modern democracies which to the fundamentalist appear to be contrary to the divinely revealed will of God and to the pattern which he has made known for human life. Thus fundamentalism became not the only element, but certainly one of the most influential elements, in "the Religious Right". Important elections have been recognized to have been largely decided by the zeal, hard work, careful organization and unrelenting pressure of this large and self-conscious social group, with its highly influential leadership. Awareness of this fact has made the general consciousness of fundamentalism more active, and has led towards a more strenuous striving to uncover the motivations that underlie it.

¹⁰ San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989

¹¹ Albany, NY: State University of New York Press; London, SCM, 1990

¹² Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998

¹³ For examples of fundamentalist speech and attitudes I have in this paper relied particularly on evidence cited (for American fundamentalism of the late 1970s and early 1980s) by Ammerman.



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The third such reason is the extension of the term “fundamentalism” to religions and ideologies outside of Christianity, in which the use of the term arose. Some were always aware that in other religions, such as Judaism and Islam, there could exist tendencies that had some analogy with similar tendencies in Protestant Christianity. But only late in the twentieth century did this perception become common property. It was especially Islamic “fundamentalism” that came to be recognized and named as such, and through it the perception of fundamentalism as a potentially worldwide problem and a possible major danger became more general. “I would never have thought about writing such a book,” wrote Bruce Lawrence as the first sentence of his *Defenders of God*, “without the shock of the 1978-79 revolution in Iran.”¹⁴ In this book, he continued, he sought “to come to terms with the Khomeini phenomenon as but one expression of the global reactivation of traditional religious symbolism and values often called “fundamentalism””.

“Fundamentalism” in Many Religions?

This brings the whole question into a different perspective. The original Christian fundamentalism was an explicitly *Christian* affair. Other religions, like Islam and Hinduism, were considered to be pagan. Towards them Christianity had a missionary responsibility, but it had very little or nothing in common with them. Least of all did it have in common with them that unbending emphasis on certain truths, and especially on the inerrancy and infallibility of a sacred scripture, which – within Christianity itself – seemed to the fundamentalists to be the mark of their own identity and peculiarity vis-à-vis other Christians. What if this mark of identity should prove to be part of a conceptual framework which is actually shared with elements of other religions? Whether fundamentalists themselves recognize this argument or not, the mere fact that the term “fundamentalism” has come to be shared in common usage for both Christian and non-Christian phenomena makes a difference. It cannot be questioned that the presence of an analogy between the two is seen by the general public, at least as potentially present. Meanwhile, however, we should return to the Christian phenomenon.

A Protestant-Catholic Convergence?

I wrote above: “The original Christian fundamentalism was an explicitly *Christian* affair.” But we should add to this that the original Christian fundamentalism was an explicitly *Protestant* affair. Historically, it grew out of the evangelical revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Theologically, its central symbol and point of emphasis was the Bible. But Catholic Christianity, which had different symbols and points of emphasis, had also some tendencies which were quite similar. The symbol might be the Papacy or might be the Latin Mass; but the focus upon these might equally be fundamentalist in its nature and working. Thus it has become accepted usage, though still somewhat unusual and surprising, to speak of a fundamentalism within the Roman Catholic church.¹⁵ Though attitudes towards the Bible and the church’s ministry are vastly different, other aspects of fundamentalism may display a striking convergence between Protestant and Catholic attitudes.

¹⁴ Lawrence, p. ix

¹⁵ For examples, see the extensive article of William D. Dinges and James Hitchcock, “Roman Catholic Traditionalism and Activist Conservatism in the United States”, in Marty and Appleby, *Fundamentalisms Observed* (vol. 1 of *The Fundamentalism Project*), 66-141; cf. quotation below, p. 9.



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An obvious example is that of abortion in the United States. Nancy Ammerman writes: "Catholics especially, long seen as allies of the Antichrist by many fundamentalists, were embraced by those active in the pro-life movement."¹⁶ The emphasis on opposition to abortion in the United States seems to be a general cultural phenomenon in which Catholics, evangelicals, and political individuals and groups which may often be religiously indifferent, make common cause. It is puzzling to the student of fundamentalism since this particular conviction, so powerful in North America, is hardly noticed as a religious issue in many other countries.¹⁷

Relations with Judaism

Again, there is often a certain convergence with some currents of *Jewish* opinion: though regrettably failing to recognize Jesus as Saviour and God, Jews have a reverence towards scripture in its every detail that fundamentalists admire. Many of their scholars have a more conservative attitude to matters of biblical text and history than Christian scholars do. They are a people who seem somehow to belong within the Bible, and it is common for fundamentalists to extend greater acceptance towards them than that which they accord to non-fundamentalist Christians.

Fundamentalism therefore has an interreligious aspect which has become more evident in recent years and has helped to make the subject one of world-wide importance in a way that was seldom realized in the past. And we shall have more to say about that interreligious aspect. But for the moment we should return to the specific consideration of fundamentalism within Christianity.

Three Circles

1. Evangelicalism

The context within which we start is that of evangelical Protestantism. A useful way to express this, and one that I have used a great deal, is through the image of three concentric circles.¹⁸ The outermost circle is the context of evangelical religion. I see evangelical religion as a product of the collapse of the older Christendom, in which whole nations or populations had been considered to be Christian, excepting only Jews and other minorities. Eventually it came to be recognized, on the contrary, that within "Christian" peoples not all individual persons were genuinely Christian: many might be Christians nominally or "by name", but "in the heart" were not so. They were not aware of sin and the need for salvation. "Conversion" came to be esteemed as the path by which one might become "truly" Christian. In the English-speaking world, this recognition may be said to be best exemplified in John Wesley. Wesley had been an ordained priest for years before he experienced what he himself regarded as his conversion in 1738. One had to experience "*personal* salvation", to know the life of *personal* prayer as distinct from liturgical prayer, to dedicate oneself to the spreading of the gospel, personally and not only through institutions. It is a religion of the

¹⁶ *Fundamentalisms Observed*, 45

¹⁷ In Northern Ireland, for example, opposition to abortion (and contraception) has commonly been regarded by Protestants, many of them of fundamentalist leanings, as one of the many ridiculous sexual hang-ups of the Catholic-dominated Irish Republic. See Steve Bruce, *Conservative Protestant Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 226.

¹⁸ This image was, I think, first used by me in my article: "Religious Fundamentalism", *Current Affairs Bulletin*, 59/1, University of Sydney, June 1982.



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heart. Some of the older doctrines of Protestant orthodoxy came to be neglected, if not entirely denied: election and predestination form a good example, for these might suggest that only a limited few are to be saved, and, if this were so, then nothing could be effectively changed by evangelism. Evangelicalism was sure that conversion and salvation were possible for all, or almost all, and it thus unleashed a powerful expansive missionary effort. These are some of the essentials of evangelicalism – perhaps not all of them.

2. Conservative Evangelicalism

Within this outer context of evangelicalism there lies the narrower ring of *conservative evangelicalism* – not a term that I have invented, for it is the one most accepted and welcomed by those who belong to this category. Not all evangelicalism has been conservative: in the history of the matter, some evangelicalism has taken distinctly liberal directions – there was some of this in Wesley himself, and much in those who were called Evangelicals in the nineteenth century. Evangelicals of the nineteenth century “took a leading part in missionary work and social reform (abolition of slavery, factory laws)”.¹⁹ But in the earlier part of the twentieth century liberal evangelicalism lost ground,²⁰ and, as time went on, there was a growing constituency that felt that the basic religious convictions of evangelicalism – the sense of sin and need for conversion – could not be upheld except by a stress on what were believed to be the older orthodoxies of Christianity – especially the divine inspiration of scripture, the divinity of Christ, the historical character of the resurrection, and the expectation of a coming end of the world. Liberal sentiments were thought to be of secular or indeed pagan origin and derived from philosophies which left no room for God or the supernatural. All liberalism or “modernism” is thus regarded as an enemy, against which the older (hence “conservative”) religious verities and values were to be asserted.²¹

3. Fundamentalism Itself

Conservative evangelicalism, however, still does not amount to fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is the innermost circle of these three. It is the circle of those who are conservative evangelicals but who are convinced that the insights of conservative evangelicalism can be preserved *only* if the inspiration of scripture is made central to the whole doctrinal structure. It is not enough that the Bible should be accepted as inspired: it must be regarded also as *infallible* and *inerrant*. This principle of biblical inerrancy may be regarded as the touchstone of fundamentalism, as it has been for the last century or so. For fundamentalists, within the total structure of Christian doctrine, the doctrine of scripture is the essential cornerstone, surpassing the doctrine of the person of Christ and far surpassing the doctrine of the church. And in opposition to the rise of historical and critical studies of the Bible, the inerrancy of scripture – which in itself was not a new idea – was now defined in a much more

¹⁹ *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 486

²⁰ Cf for example the article of *ODCC* on the Anglican Evangelical Group Movement (2nd ed. 1974, p. 55f) which states that the heyday of influence of this particular manifestation was from 1923 to 1939, and “Attempts to revive the movement after the end of the Second World War were not entirely successful, and in 1967 it formally terminated its existence.” See also the article “Liberal Evangelicalism” in the same dictionary.

²¹ Cf. the attempt of a predecessor in this lecture series, A. McGrath, citing earlier work by Stephen Sykes, to argue that liberalism and Anglicanism are incompatible; *The Future of Anglicanism*, St George's Lectures, no.2, Perth, 1996, pp. 8-9. Many non-Anglicans, by contrast, would tend to see the Anglican as an excellent example of a liberal Church.



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historical mode. In this sense the emphasis on history, which is characteristic of much of the critical movement, very much coloured the conservative opposition as well. The truth of the Bible must entail that it is *historically* accurate. The inerrancy of the texts thus *proves* the historicity of the resurrection and of the Virgin Birth. In order for it to prove these elements, it must prove all other points within the Bible. This is not the only mode in which one can arrive at fundamentalism, but it is a very common and characteristic one.

Two points must be made before we go farther. First, in my image of the three concentric circles, fundamentalism is the central one, and in that sense looks the smallest. One should not thereby be misguided and suppose that fundamentalists are a tiny minority within evangelicalism. In this respect my image seems to break down. The image is meant to be understood logically, not numerically. In fact, as it is today, fundamentalism is doubtless the *largest* of the groupings I have used. Over a world scale, and certainly in the English-speaking world, a very large percentage of evangelicals assume the doctrinal position that we have characterized as fundamentalism; or, to put it in the opposite way, there is no widely held doctrinal position that is characteristic of evangelicalism and clearly marks it out from other positions, other than the fundamentalist one. Most conservative evangelicals thus assume, and work with, the fundamentalist opinion. Harriet Harris writes: "Many evangelicals this century share with fundamentalists basic assumptions about the nature of biblical truth and authority" and "a prominent feature of much contemporary evangelicalism is a fundamentalist mentality".²²

But, secondly, we should observe that it is not useful to characterize persons or institutions, organizations, as fundamentalist, unless they themselves identify fully with these characteristics. It is more important to see fundamentalism as an idea complex than to try to identify persons as being either fundamentalists or not. Fundamentalism is a structure of ideas and convictions. It is not important to characterize this or that person as being a fundamentalist. What is more important is that there is a large constituency of people who share most, sometimes all, of the fundamentalist ideas, or share them some of the time even if they do not share them all the time.

Church Relationships

It is important, therefore, to recognize that fundamentalism should not be identified with particular churches or denominations. There are, indeed, some churches that are fairly rigidly fundamentalist, but that is not the normal characteristic of fundamentalism as a phenomenon. For example, a church like the Southern Baptists in the USA is often said to be fundamentalist, but this is only partly true. A large proportion of the membership of a church of this kind is fundamentalist, but the same church has another side to it. The Baptists have also a free-thinking side which resists central authority.

What has happened in a church like this in recent times is that the fundamentalist group has been able to seize power in the denominational boards and agencies. Thus, for instance, it has been able to expel non-fundamentalist professors from the colleges or seminaries which are controlled by these central agencies. This does not alter the fact that there are numerous Baptists in that communion who are not fundamentalists and who resist the fundamentalist arguments.

Anglicanism

²² Harriet A. Harris, *Fundamentalism and Evangelicals*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998, pp. 1, 17



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This is relevant also to the question of how this stands in the Anglican Communion. In an earlier lecture in this series, in 1996, Dr Alister McGrath maintained that:

Historians are agreed that “fundamentalism” has never had any significant place within Anglicanism, which has thus largely been spared the traumas that shook the American religious establishment earlier this century.²³

But this depends on several variables. One is the definition of fundamentalism in general. And are historians the ones who can pronounce authoritatively on this question? And are they really “agreed” about it? What about the B.C.M.S. or “Bible Churchmen’s Missionary Society”, which found it necessary to withdraw from the C.M.S. in 1922, an event that sounds traumatic enough?²⁴ Another variable factor, which follows what I have just been saying, is the difference between a church or world-wide communion as a whole on the one hand, and what happens in particular places, groups and persons who belong to that communion. If we take the Anglican communion world-wide in all its richness and variety, it is obvious indeed that it as a whole is remote from the fundamentalist pattern. But this picture becomes different if we look at individual areas: particular persons and groups, particular churches and parishes, some theological colleges and seminaries, even some wider areas like whole dioceses, are dominantly fundamentalist in their point of view. In England, for instance, if we ask in what denominational context fundamentalism is to be found, one would have to answer: primarily, within the Church of England. Many of the leaders of fundamentalism today are Anglican parishioners or clergy. That same openness and inclusiveness on which the church rightly prides itself means that fundamentalism has its place within it. I know this myself, from the number of times I am asked by an Anglican priest to come and talk to his congregation about fundamentalism, precisely because of the difficulties of a pastoral and ecclesial character that he experiences as a result of it.

The place of theological colleges and seminaries was mentioned above. This to some extent tarnishes the otherwise valid claims of the Anglican communion to represent a *via media*, for Anglicanism tolerates the existence of expressly partisan theological institutions, something that many churches would not accept. That theological teaching institutions should, as a matter of fact, represent a particular theological point of view is one thing. Thus the theological faculty of a university may be known over a certain period as highly representative of Bultmannian biblical studies or of multicultural approaches or some other. But these, even when present, are not usually built into the absolute constitution of the place. As teachers die or move on to some other place, the character of the school will change. This is normal, as is the change of emphasis within individual parishes and congregations. But this is not so when a theological position is legally and constitutionally built into the fabric of an institution. And this is the case in some theological colleges, as well as other organizations.

Wider Explorations

²³ In McGrath, *The Future of Anglicanism*, p. 8.

²⁴ See Oxford Dictionary, p. 146; other cases in Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 82, 104, 178.



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Thus, though the view of scripture is central and dominant, it has to be placed in a wider context if we are to gain a good picture of the way in which fundamentalism functions. One needs to consider many other aspects, and consequences, in order to arrive at a sound description of what fundamentalism as a whole really is.

Fundamentalism, taken in a more general sense, is formed by the convergence of a number of features: a strong central symbol (in Protestant fundamentalism, the Bible), a strong in-group feeling, a strong conviction that the main line of the religion has gone wrong and is corrupt, a simple basic creed with almost complete common mind within the group, militancy and personal activism.

A good expression of the central realities is this (actually from a writer discussing “Roman Catholic Traditionalism in the United States”, though he realizes, rightly, that his characterization applies equally to Protestant fundamentalism):

Traditionalist religious self-understanding is ... marked by tendencies toward extreme religious objectivism and a heightened sense of supernaturalism. This type of extreme objectivity in the religious sphere means that the human person experiences religion as “something outside of himself”. Eternal truths are deposited in forms that stand apart from any other source of religion. They are superimposed, concretized, codified, fixed, and entirely outside the mediation of history or culture. In Protestant fundamentalism, the Bible is the most tangible and authoritative locus of this objectivist approach to sacred reality. The Bible is without error or imperfection and is the “only true testimony” of divine truth. Because the Bible is objective, unmediated, and superimposed, it is a closed hermeneutical circle; the Bible interprets itself. Implicit in this orientation is the understanding that faith is an object of knowledge (rather than trust).²⁵

There are, then, many implications that, starting from the view of scripture, ramify throughout the sphere of life in fundamentalism. It touches the configuration of ethics, of politics, of social questions, of individual psychology.

Social and Political Aspects

I already mentioned social interests, and something more must be said about this. Fundamentalism, viewed on the world scale, is often very much tied up with some sort of political stance. As always, it is wrong to generalize, and there are still plenty of groups that are fundamentalist but do not take up any political stance. Indeed, this was the criticism that more “progressive” Christians often advanced against fundamentalist Christianity in its earlier days: it wanted to save the individual soul but did not address the problems of society and politics. There have certainly been evangelical groups which kept apart from politics, not because their faith had no political implications, but because politics was a markedly divisive factor as between Christians and as between churches and was best addressed by the individual himself rather than by the evangelical group as a whole. Again, there have been evangelical groups that are socially activist and responsible, with something of a left-wing perspective.²⁶

²⁵ William D. Dinges, “Roman Catholic Traditionalism in the United States”, in the Chicago Fundamentalism Project volume *Fundamentalisms Observed*, p. 85.

²⁶ For examples in England, see Harris, p. 264 and note 24



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These last should be recognized, but at the same time it should be observed that they form very much a minority. There is no doubt that, on a world scale, fundamentalist Christianity is massively aligned on the far right wing. In the United States, as we see at election time, the “Religious Right” is a force that acts upon the Republican party, already a right-wing party, pulling it still farther to the right. Liberals often mistakenly believed that a politically and socially conscious Christianity would mean a liberal and progressive Christianity. Now we see the other side of that coin. Yes, say some fundamentalists, not all but many, we *are* interested in the achievement of righteousness on the social and political plane, but that leads us straight to a right-wing, conservative, anti-progressive world.

Christian, evangelical, fundamentalism ought perhaps, according to its name, to stand for the Gospel, the preaching of salvation freely given. But when we move to another stage we sometimes find not the gospel of free grace but something different: what has been well named “restorationism”, that is, the attempt to rebuild a Christian society constructed and governed upon the basis of the law of God. The saints are here not just to preach the gospel of grace, they are here to govern the world on God’s behalf, until in the fullness of time he takes over absolute control himself. It is this aspect of fundamentalism that appears in many modern manifestations within Christianity; and this aspect that has closer parallels within other religions, certainly in Islam and in Judaism, probably in many others. The rise to prominence of this political aspect of fundamentalism is, of course, the reason or one of the reasons why fundamentalism has suddenly become so important a question for public policy.

Ecumenicity

Something must be said also about ecumenicity, about the stance which fundamentalism generally takes towards the sheer *variety* of the organizational realizations of Christianity. Generally speaking, there is no question that fundamentalism is, at the least, cool towards ecumenical concerns, or, more likely, downright hostile towards them. Fundamentalists of course believe in principle that God wants all to be one in him, but they do not think that improving relations between the existing major denominations will contribute to this. To them the necessary prior step is to ensure that all the bodies concerned begin by accepting the essential fundamentalist conditions, especially the centrality and inerrancy of the Bible. Nothing is achieved, as they see it, by promoting institutional unity among churches that have large “liberal” elements, or that are essentially Catholic in doctrine and style.

On the other hand fundamentalists believe that there is already *among themselves* a certain real ecumenicity. A fundamentalist Methodist feels closer to a fundamentalist Presbyterian than he or she does to a non-fundamentalist of his or her own church. There is a sense of the oneness of all evangelicals, who feel they have the essence of the same faith. On the other hand, though this is a kind of ecumenicity, it does not lead towards much in the way of *institutional* embodiment: ideas of forming one universal evangelical or fundamentalist church do not seem to have got far. Fundamentalism when carried to extremes tends in the opposite direction, towards fragmentation into isolated independent units. The insistence on doctrinal correctness and purity, and the principle of non-co-operation with anyone of different views, leads easily towards quarrelsomeness and division. This has been manifest in many conservative churches, theological schools and other organizations.

One reason why ideas of institutional union cannot get far within fundamentalist Christianity is the fact that its ideal realization in the eyes of many, the summit of its ecclesial symbolism as it were, is the figure of the independent and itinerant evangelist – nowadays of course the television evangelist – who is under no sort of ecclesiastic discipline at all and really runs a sort of “one-man church”, which operates somewhat like a business, collecting money on the



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one side, dispensing salvation on the other, and dependent on no sort of discipline other than the approval of the (invisible) body of hearers or watchers. The high reputation (little damaged by the numerous well-publicized scandals that arise) and influence of this sort of evangelist makes it difficult for any fundamentalist vision of institutional union to be created, still less to be effective. In general therefore one may say: though fundamentalists often accept the principle that all Christians should be one, they feel that for fundamentalists and evangelicals this is already the case; when it comes to churches of other styles and doctrinal complexes, they do not see how it can be very useful or important, in comparison with the fundamentalist agenda of biblical inerrancy and its corollaries. For the most part therefore they act as a braking force upon all ecumenical relations between churches.

Theological Bases for Politics

It is not by chance that the political sympathies of fundamentalism, with limited exceptions, lie on the far right. The explanation must lie in deep theological convictions. One is the belief that God only must guide human affairs, and that human plans for reform or improvement must always be deceptive. Another is the eschatological picture of a world that is hastening towards its doom, so that any attempt to hold back that disaster is an opposition to God's own will. Indeed, the coming of catastrophe may be a good thing, a door of entrance into God's eternal plan. Doctrines of sin and responsibility underlie all this.

The Supernatural

When we look at this complex of viewpoints we see that fundamentalism is not a purely biblical entity but contains a variety of convictions, some of which are only distantly related to the Bible, or are *effects* from the inheritance of past interpretation rather than principles directly derived from the Bible in modern times.

One good starting point might be the concept of the *supernatural*, already mentioned above. To choose this term is not to use a concept that evangelicals and fundamentalists would reject: some of their leading figures have put it forward to me as a good expression of their position. What they offer is a supernatural view of the world, a supernatural interpretation of scripture. Thus there is no real difficulty in doubting long-range prediction, e.g. that a prophet in the ninth century BC would be able to tell the personal name of the future king who would destroy the altar at Bethel (1 Kings 13.2, cf. 2 Kings 23.15-20). Such prediction may not be a "natural" thing, but that does not matter. The whole point is that, apart from what is natural, there is a supernatural world where different things happen. People who doubt a prediction like the one mentioned above simply fail to reckon with the supernatural. The supernatural is different from the natural world, but it also impinges on the natural. Hence abnormal things can happen. The importance of the supernatural is thought to be supported from scripture, but it also provides a link with the undoubted fact that modern fundamentalism shows a certain coalescence with science fiction and such credulity.²⁷

The assumption of the supernatural fits in with other aspects. In much modern biblical theology there has been a question whether the Bible affirms the resurrection of the body or the immortality of the soul. Fundamentalist

²⁷ Cf. J. Barr, *Fundamentalism*, 2nd edn (London: SCM, 1981), xvi



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believers in many cases emphasize neither of these. What they emphasize is “going to heaven”.²⁸ This is a passage into the supernatural world.

Punishment

Ethically, an essential part is played by the emphasis on *punishment*. The opposition to abortion surely contains an element of this. Women who are requiring an abortion are commonly seen as trying to escape from the consequences of something they have done wrongly. It is not proper that they should evade these consequences, and still more improper that facilities for this evasion should be provided, and that by the state at the expense of the taxpayer.

This is not just a pragmatic moral view: it is more deeply based. Characteristic of much fundamentalism is a *penal* and *substitutionary* understanding of the atonement. Punishment is proper for misdeeds. Human sin requires punishment, and punishment by death. Jesus saves by taking upon himself the punishment that should apply to humanity. The side effect of such a view is that it validates a positive role for punishment in the moral universe. Many fundamentalists will be found to support capital punishment and to disapprove of modern criminological understandings of crime. Certainly the centrality of a penal/substitutionary view of atonement deserves further examination, for it may lie deeper in the fundamentalist psychology than any other factor, even than the inerrancy of scripture

A Static Universe

Of great importance is the picture of the world, and of the species within it, as *essentially static*: no doubt this is not the best interpretation of Genesis, but it is the one that has been left as an inheritance by centuries of interpretation. The opposition to evolution and evolutionary ideas is thus easily intelligible. The different “kinds” or species of living beings were fixed at the point of creation. The two sexes are totally distinct.

Opposition to the ordination of women is a natural, though not a universal or a necessary, consequence. Within families, the ideal for a wife is one of submission.

Nationalism

Nationalism is also closely associated. The nation is the essential collectivity. The destiny of the world is very much tied up with conflicts among nations. There are nations that are essentially good, even if they at times fall into sin and have to be recalled to their proper role; and there are others that are forces of evil. Anything like internationalism is regarded with hostility: this applies to the United Nations and other such bodies. This is not new. In 1918, Ammerman writes (p. 22), “the formation of a League of Nations and a new burst of ecumenism only heightened fears that the anti-Christ’s superkingdom was being prepared and that the Rapture must be at hand”. War and military conflict are perhaps regrettable but are to be expected.

The Coming End

Moreover, much more serious, war and military conflict are not only to be expected as something that will happen. They are prophesied in scripture; they are part of the scenario for the coming end of the world. This aspect of

²⁸ Cf. Ammerman, p. 69



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“eschatology”, as scholars call it, is very important for many evangelicals, but especially so for fundamentalists. Thus Mark 13 tells us: “when you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom” (vv. 7-8). There will be enormous tribulation (v. 19); the sun will be darkened (v. 24); and then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory (v. 26). War can thus be the harbinger of the end of the world which must come, and of the second coming of Christ. This picture is further complicated, not only by the much longer depiction of the end in the Book of Revelation, but by the inclusion of the Old Testament texts of Daniel and above all of Ezekiel, especially 38-39. These latter chapters increased in importance after the Second World War, when Russia became a superpower and a communist one at that, for this might well fit with the prophecy of God and Magog and the hordes “from the uttermost parts of the north”. Seen from this point of view, unrest of nations and impending war is not at all a bad thing, for it can be part of the actual process by which the end of the world and the entry of the saints into heaven are to be achieved.

The “Rapture”

Another complication is the idea of the “rapture”, in which the true believers will be snatched away out of this world before these events are completed. Not all fundamentalists believe all this, or lay much emphasis on it if they do believe it, but through fundamentalism it can have a very significant force in people’s understanding of the world. “‘Ideal-typical’ Fundamentalists”, Ammerman writes (p. 5, and see her fuller discussion, pp. 44-46), “believe that Christians will soon be raptured out of this world into heaven.”

Israel and the End of the World

Particularly striking is the involvement of the Jews and Israel in schemes of this sort.

According to a commonly held scheme, the kingdom to which the Bible looks forward is a restored Jewish kingdom, and the final events are set in the Holy Land and include the conversion of Jews (often 144,000 of them, after Rev. 14.1 etc.). This connects with the strong pro-Israel pressure exercised by the Religious Right and a corresponding antipathy to the Arabs, which is not lessened by the corresponding Arab hostility towards the West.

Future Prospects: Some Suggestions

In conclusion, we may ask what can be done, or what can be expected to happen in the future. What can we hope to see? What can be done by churches, by individuals, by educational institutions?

1. *Biblical Study*

The first thing is that the Bible should be studied, and studied more intensively, in the churches: not only by the clergy, but also by the membership. Fundamentalists use the Bible through ceaseless quotation of particular passages, but they also commonly omit all mention of passages which do not fit with their own ideas. They leave the impression that the Bible is their property, belongs to their party. This should be challenged. I do not suggest that everyone should become a biblical scholar. But certain practical steps can be taken. Studying the Bible is not an esoteric operation restricted to a small élite: it requires common sense and a willingness to explore how one portion relates to another. One can put into studying the Bible the same sort of common sense and critical ability that one



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uses in normal work, whatever it may be. To listen to the lections in church each week is not enough: the lectionary sets one passage, say from the Gospels, before you, but in itself it does not set before you the parallel passages in the other Gospels for you to compare. Comparison, which brings different biblical passages together in order to see what they say and what they do not say, how they differ and how they are alike, is the essence of real biblical study.

2. Expository Preaching

For the clergy, one can point in two different directions. On one side, more should be done to expound scripture in sermons. Scripture is often *quoted*, but quoting is not exposition. Exposition requires looking at a passage as a whole, seeing the relations of the parts to the entirety. Some simple indication of what scholarship thinks about the passage should be made. All in all, the more “biblical” the churches are seen to be, the less is the incentive for people to go off into the paths of fundamentalism.

On the other side, clergy have to maintain some sort of contact with biblical scholarship. When problems and disputes about the Bible became stronger in their modern form at the end of the nineteenth century, priests and ministers too often kept their uncertainties to themselves, wrestling over them in the privacy of the study: what they should have done is to share them with their congregations. The result of not facing them in the context of the congregation is that candidates for ordination today often come forward with ideas about the Bible, and uncertainties about it, exactly the same as they were over a hundred years ago.

3. Change in Biblical Study

It may be pointed out that biblical scholarship changes, and indeed it does. One of the phenomena of recent years has been that many scholars themselves have become more uncertain about the value of the “historical-critical” approach which has commonly been supposed to be basic to modern scholarship. There is more emphasis on seeing biblical texts “as a whole”, synthetically rather than analytically. This looks like something that might be welcome to fundamentalists, and indeed there are signs of a “neo-fundamentalism” forming around these changes.²⁹

And indeed traditional biblical criticism may emerge somewhat “chastened” by these recent movements.³⁰ But these same movements cannot in the long term prove to be acceptable to fundamentalists. If the newer currents treat biblical books as a totality, they also regard them as products of purely human ideology and artistry; if they avoid the selectivity alleged to be normal in the older criticism, they also in some cases go on to question the historicity of David and Solomon, of most of the Hebrew kingdoms, of the Babylonian Exile and Return; if they admire the literary genius of the writers, they also interpret the writings as products of nasty human partisan conflicts and politics. The more fundamentalists see of these newer movements, the more they may find they have to look back with admiration on the traditional criticism, in which there was still a David, a Solomon, and an Exile to Babylon.

²⁹ On these questions see J. Barton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1998), especially ch. 4, “Poststructuralist Approaches: New Historicism and Postmodernism” by Robert Carroll (pp. 50-66), and J. Barr, *History and Ideology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000).

³⁰ The new one-volume *Oxford Bible Commentary* edited by John Barton and John Muddiman, which may be commended as an excellent working-instrument for study within the church, uses the expression “chastened historical criticism” for the position of most of the contributors and of the volume as a whole.



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4. Avoiding Selective Fundamentalism

It is worthwhile, going more widely, to consider another possibility, namely that in mainline Christianity, and even where fundamentalism is most opposed, there exist attitudes which have something in common with it. One of these is what we may call *selective fundamentalism*. People will object to the fundamentalist insistence that *everything* in the Bible is free of error, but they will look in that same way on those biblical passages that are particularly important to them. Thus it is common to find people who are indifferent to the historical accuracy of Samuel and Kings but would be shocked if doubt were cast on the historical accuracy of details in the Gospels. Again, when lecturing on this subject, I often find people who are entirely against fundamentalism but who feel that so-called “liberal” Christianity is just as bad: not so focussed on the *totality* of the Bible, but quite fundamentalistic about the passages that appear to support liberal causes, and just as exclusive as against conservative opinion as the fundamentalist is towards “liberal” or “critical” opinion. This makes one wonder at times whether fundamentalism of some kind may be endemic to all religion, coming to the surface however in different ways in each different sector!

5. Liberal Support for Fundamentalism?

Another factor to consider is the fact that fundamentalism may be in fact to some extent stimulated or *promoted* by those who most oppose it – just as, for instance, Protestantism tends to be more fundamentalistic in basically Roman Catholic countries than in countries where Protestantism is strong: so for instance in Spain or Italy, or in Latin America - contrast the situation in Germany or the Netherlands. Similarly, in the present-day United States it seems obvious that the unrelenting devotion of many mainline churches to “liberal” social causes - egalitarianism, anti-discrimination, “inclusiveness” towards minorities, homosexuals - justified as in other regards it may well be, is an influence leading towards the loss of their own members to conservative and fundamentalist groups. Again, all weakness and uncertainty in the use of the Bible by mainline churches only encourages a fundamentalist reaction.

Conclusion

Fundamentalism is not a simple and easily-explained reality, but a very complicated reality with many profundities. Only limited aspects have been touched on in this lecture. It is not too much to say that the problems of fundamentalism are central to the entire position of religion in the modern world, and for this reason the churches have to engage seriously with them.