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## The Modernity of Fundamentalism

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# Review Article

## The Modernity of Fundamentalism\*

Pauline C. Westerman / University of Groningen

Since the 1980s, it has been common practice to extend the use of the term “fundamentalism” beyond the context of American Protestantism in which it originated. Images of angry flag-waving Muslims, Israeli settlers, American television preachers, and, more recently, kneeling and bowing men in one of the remote corners of the former Soviet Union, have given rise to the idea that fundamentalism is a phenomenon that pervades the entire modern world.

Yet, even for those whose eyes are accustomed to the combined presentation of these wildly varying pictures, it must come as a surprise to leaf through the 900 pages (index and glossary included) of the recent volume on fundamentalism edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby. This volume, the first of six projected volumes of the Fundamentalism Project, conducted by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, covers a wide range of religious movements not only within the well-known “religions of the Book” (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) but also within Hinduism and Buddhism. There is a chapter on fundamentalism in Japan and even on the revival of Confucianism. It is clear that the editors have taken “fundamentalism” in the widest possible sense.

Its fourteen chapters, each of them written by specialists in the field, may be read selectively and contain a mass of information concerning historical developments, social infrastructure, leading figures and their ideas, as well as the aspirations and motives of those who support them. As such they serve as a useful and nearly encyclopaedic overview. Reading the book as a whole is a dazzling experience. The naive reader who associates fundamentalism with veiled women in the streets of Teheran suddenly finds his or her horizon widened. He enters Sikh temples and discovers that their holy book was finalized as recently as 1962, but that no one knows exactly what it contains. He is introduced to the *dakwah* community of Malaysian fundamentalists, where, in contrast, lifetimes are spent in studying the precise contents of the Qur’an. He visits the

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Tokyo stadium and experiences the hopes and fears of a massive audience of believers in Japanese greatness.

Amidst the abundant variety of groups, movements, ideals, customs, aspirations, fears, and fights treated in this volume, it is difficult to keep track of some of the more theoretical assumptions underlying this enterprise and to assess the value of its chapters in the light of the main objectives of the editors. I will concentrate on some major themes that recur throughout the volume: after some short remarks on its methodology, I will focus on the question how fundamentalism relates to modernism and especially nationalism.

### THOUGHT-WORLDS

The editors have certainly succeeded in their intention to serve both the scholar and the interested unprofessional reader, to give a general overview of historical developments without neglecting the task of making the reader feel “at home” in fourteen disparate thought-worlds (p. xii). Both elements can indeed be found in all the chapters, although in particular those contributors who are asked to cover a whole range of movements (e.g., fundamentalist movements in the Sunni Arab world, or the various groups of Orthodox Jews in the contribution on the Haredim) visibly struggle to give an account—of *all* historical roots of *all* the movements involved—that is still readable. They succeed in giving an orderly and interesting presentation but face an impossible task in trying to convey to the reader a sense of what it is to be a fundamentalist.

In order to do that, images and a journalistic sense for telling details are required. The writers of the chapters on the Gush Emunim (Gideon Aran) and on the Sikhs (T. N. Madan) not only had an easier task but are clearly good reporters. It is in these chapters that one learns about the values of Sikhs, who consider their beards, motorcycles, and revolvers to be their main assets, and about the particular views of the Gush Emunim on the appropriate size of a kitchen for a real settler’s wife or the right cap to wear in the bare mountains of Judea and Samaria. If it comes to showing the fears and hopes of the people involved, these chapters are undoubtedly the best of the entire volume.

Yet, for all these qualities, the reader is left in some confusion regarding the relationship the authors maintain with their subject. The only one who reveals his own position toward the movement is Gideon Aran. He acted as an arms bearer and bodyguard for several of the movement’s leaders, and this is certainly the reason for his fascinating account of the group. But even here one is left in doubt whether he undertook this hazardous job for scientific reasons alone or whether he originally shared the aspirations of the group. As for the writer on the Confucian revival,

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Tu Wei-ming, the reader can only guess at his personal stance. His claim that traditional values can enhance the process of modernization (p. 746), together with his use of slightly derogatory phrases such as “the rhetoric of democracy and science” (p. 747) or “the social Darwinism game,” suggest that his assessment of the movement at hand is much more positive than those of the others. In view of this, the reader would like to know what sort of person he is. Unfortunately, we only learn that the author is professor of Chinese history and philosophy at Harvard University.

In accordance with the usual standards of academic neutrality, the authors keep themselves out of the picture. This is probably the result of the editors’ aim that fundamentalists “would recognize themselves in the portrait,” an aim that they seek to achieve by asking the authors to put “in brackets their own presuppositions” (p. x). The editors add that this “does not mean that they successfully leave them behind, but that they become aware of them, take them into consideration, and do some compensating for them” (*ibid.*). The problem is that, even if the writers have become aware of their presuppositions, the readers do not know what they are. If Max Weber was right in claiming that a certain amount of value neutrality can be achieved only by making explicit one’s own assumptions, the volume has failed in its objective to sketch value-free portraits in which fundamentalists would recognize themselves.

One might wonder whether this is a realistic aim, anyway. For already the title of the volume might alone be felt as an affront by fundamentalists. The mere application of the term “fundamentalism” to widely varying religious movements is in itself an act of comparison. Although the editors are aware of this difficulty, which they sought to overcome by modifying the title into its plural form, this will not mollify the feelings of fundamentalists. Plural or single, most fundamentalists resist a common label since they strongly oppose any form of comparison. Paradoxically, if they have one thing in common, it is their search for uniqueness, for the uncommon. So, in naming a movement a “fundamentalist-like movement,” the editors have already taken the major decision to dissociate themselves from the point of view of fundamentalists.

This is however an inevitable step for anyone who seriously wants to investigate fundamentalist movements. As the editors note in their conclusion, fundamentalists not only shun any form of comparison but also are reluctant to suffer any form of “reduction to the social, economic or psychological categories of credentialed unbelievers disrespectful or ignorant of the ‘sacred spark’” (p. 818). The effort to understand or explain fundamentalism is in itself regarded as an attempt to undermine fundamentalists’ values and beliefs. The book can be appreciated by many different audiences, but not by those who form the subject matter of the volume.

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## MODERNISM

The enterprise of putting many fundamentalisms together in one volume is justified by the claim that a genuine understanding of fundamentalism can only be achieved by comparative analysis. In this respect, it seems that the volume can be read as an attempt to put into practice the views of Bruce B. Lawrence, who wrote in his book, *Defenders of God*: “Comparison alone reveals what is common, and also what is unique in each fundamentalist cadre. First, one must displace the biblicist, Eurocentric notion that fundamentalism is, by nature as well as by origin, the special reserve of Protestant Christianity. Second, one must demonstrate, rather than merely catalog, which forces converge under which circumstances to shape various fundamentalist groups.”<sup>1</sup>

And, indeed, we see that the editors in their concluding chapter assert that “we have begun by emptying the term of its culture-specific and tradition-specific content [i.e., its Protestant connotations], before examining cases across the board to see if there are in fact ‘family-resemblances’ among movements commonly perceived as ‘fundamentalist’” (p. 816).

Lawrence thought that one of the most striking features shared by all fundamentalisms is “opposition to all those individuals or institutions that advocate Enlightenment values and wave the banner of secularism or modernism” (p. 6). Accordingly, we see that the editors treat fundamentalism as an exclusively modern phenomenon. “Modern,” they write, “is a code-word for the set of forces which fundamentalists perceive as the threat which inspires their reaction” (p. vii).

At first glance it is perfectly plausible to argue that fundamentalisms of all sorts react, in one way or another, against the prevailing modernist culture. Yet, reading all the different accounts of the various religious movements, one cannot but be utterly confused by that statement. To explain fundamentalism as a reaction to modernity or modernist culture is to explain a vague term by referring to an even vaguer term.<sup>2</sup> If “modernism” is loosely defined as “a preference for secular rationality, the adoption of religious tolerance with accompanying tendencies toward relativism; and individualism” (p. vii), what then for example is “modernism” in twentieth-century Protestant America? What is modern in a society where 72 percent of Americans believe that the Bible is the word of God and 44 percent are creationists (p. 2)?

<sup>1</sup> Bruce B. Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence explicitly distinguishes “modernity” from “modernism.”

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The writer on North American Protestant fundamentalism, Nancy T. Ammerman, is to my view certainly right in locating modernism elsewhere. In a skilled analysis of the nineteenth-century roots of fundamentalism, she points to the fact that the literalist reading of the Bible can be seen as a reflection of the nineteenth-century scientific ideology in which it originated. The Bible turned into a “storehouse of facts”: “Just as the scientist begins with facts, so does the theologian” (p. 15). The doctrine that the Bible cannot err is the logical outcome of scientific positivism applied to the religious domain.

Surprisingly, a similar analysis can be found in Donald K. Swearer’s analysis of fundamentalist movements in Theravada Buddhism. He points out that, in the reaffirmation of traditional values against the disruptive effects of modernity, the Buddhist heritage “became in effect a secularized civil religion expressed in a rhetoric of protest rather than in the richly textured myths, legends and tales of moral exemplars available in the classic texts and traditions of Theravada Buddhism” (p. 647). Here again we may conclude that the fundamentalist movement, despite its antimodern rhetoric, is thoroughly shaped by modernism itself.

### DISENCHANTMENT

Although Weber’s theory of modernization is hardly mentioned throughout the volume (only Winston Davis refers to it in his contribution on Japan), some cases seem to be designed to corroborate the Weberian concept of modernization as “rationalization.”

If we understand “modernization” as attempts to give rationalist versions of the religious heritage, most fundamentalisms can certainly be classified as “modern.” This is especially the case where fundamentalism is explicitly directed against existing practices of what is perceived to be idolatry and superstition. This is clear in the Islamic fundamentalist demand for *ijtihad*, the independent interpretation of the sacred texts. A similar tendency can be traced among the Sikhs disclaiming both Hindu “idolatry” and the caste system. Likewise, Dayananda, the founder of an influential fundamentalist-like movement in Hinduism, claimed that the Invisible One should replace the many gods of traditional Hinduism, whom he regarded as “figments of the human imagination” (p. 538).

All these examples show a predilection for what Weber called a “disenchanted” version of the religious heritage. Yet, as these latter examples show, attempts to rationalize the traditional body of myths and tales are not necessarily new. The demand for *ijtihad* originated in the eighteenth century. And the Sikhs’ insistence that the holy book was the only true object of veneration dates back as far as the sixteenth century. This raises

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the question whether it could not be argued that the Reform movement in sixteenth-century Western Europe can be equally regarded as fundamentalism *avant la lettre*.

But if we refrain from adopting the concept of modernity as disenchantment and turn back to a more confined definition of modernity as “secular, tolerant, and individualist” (as the editors would have it), we are still in the dark as to what exactly fundamentalists react to. It is commonly claimed that the majority of people who join a fundamentalist movement do so out of disillusionment with modern ideals. We have only to think of the many Egyptian intellectuals, former Nasserists or Marxists, who now turn to the Shari‘a as a rescue from squalor, poverty, and corruption. Yet, Aran, the writer on the Gush Emunim, asserts that fundamentalists do not respond to a *crisis* of modernity but to its *successes*. He claims that “revivalism also flourishes by drinking directly from the fruitful springs of modernity” (p. 331). And he arrives at this conclusion not only by referring to the use of modern technology in these circles (of which he provides fine examples, for instance in the genetic engineering of a biblical creature, the *heifer*; p. 318) but also by pointing to the modern elements within the ideology of these movements. Aran asserts that in order to understand Jewish Zionist fundamentalists one has to be aware of their “obsession” with, and “jealousy” of, modernism itself. If there is a family resemblance to be found in both the ex-Nasserist and the Jewish settler, it can apparently only be established in highly general terms, such as the claim that fundamentalism is an attempt to fight modernism by means of tools (not only technical but ideological as well) that are borrowed from the enemy itself.

Yet, there are several cases that to my view seem to evade even this general description. Islamic Sunni fundamentalism, for instance, originated in the eighteenth century as a reaction to neither crisis nor success of modernity. As the writer John O. Voll points out, these first manifestations of Islamic revival were reactions not to modernism but to the political fragmentation within the Ottoman Empire (pp. 348–49). Only later did the movement evolve into an explicit reaction against modernity. Although Voll does not explicitly deal with the relationship between modernism and fundamentalism, the question still arises whether it is justified to extend the term “fundamentalism” to any revivalist movement that reacts against current political or economic crises.

If so, then the term might be applicable to people who are commonly not considered to be fundamentalists. What to think, for example, of the Diola tribe in Senegal reported to return to old customs, such as cooking in clay pots instead of modern metal devices, thereby reconciling their ancestors in their demand for rain? Is this behavior to be classified as fundamentalist as well? If not, at what point can one say that the non-



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fundamentalist Sunni movement (which reacted to the Ottoman political crisis) evolved into a fundamentalist movement (reacting to modern society)?

### UNITY RESTORED

It is clear that any treatment of fundamentalism immediately launches the question what we are to understand by modernism. An attempt to draft a theory that accounts for both modernism and fundamentalism is provided by Davis in his contribution, "Fundamentalism in Japan." Defining modernism as cultural and social differentiation, fundamentalism appears as an attempt to dedifferentiate, to seek to restore unity. Although his theory is slightly spoiled by an evolutionist framework (his frequent use of terms like "symbolic regression" and "simpler cultural system" testifies to a historicist point of view which remains unfounded throughout the article), there are indeed indications that the desire for unity or "wholeness" can be found not only in Japan but also in other fundamentalisms, such as in Islamic varieties where cultural reintegration can be perceived in the emphasis on the concept of *tawhid* (the transcendent unity of God, p. 350) and where social reintegration of law, politics, and religion has top priority.

I think, however, that there are two problems with the analysis of fundamentalism as an urge to reintegration. The first is that most fundamentalisms seem to select one or several elements as a starting point for their unifying ideology, thereby obstructing the whole enterprise from the start. Aran convincingly shows that, although for the Gush Emonim "unity is the main thrust of the message" (p. 309) and although they denounced the ways of other orthodox Jews by claiming that they focus too much on the Torah alone, they could not escape the fate of overemphasizing the Land and the People of Israel at the expense of the Torah (p. 309). The tensions between the central concepts of Judaism could not be reconciled and were being fought out when it came to such concrete matters as the question whether one had to stick to the biblical command of keeping sabbatical years when it conflicted with a rapid cultivation of the land.

Equally, we see exactly the same tension within Hinduism. Whereas one "fundamentalist" group, the Arya Samaj, chose to emphasize the scriptural canon and revere the era of the Vedas (p. 543), its competitor, the Rashtriya Suayamsevak Sangh, opted for the concept of the "Hindu Nation" and "Hinduness." The latter group thereby turned traditional Hinduism, which was preoccupied with cosmic order, into an ideology that "demands staunch identification with the group" (p. 582).

Finally, even in the Sikh case "unity" is marked by tensions, as can be

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gathered from the decision of the sixteenth-century Hargobind, who is known to have worn two swords as “emblems of spiritual and temporal authority.” Today, the relationship between the two is not altogether clear. Some say that they symbolize the inseparability of religion and politics; others claim that the two swords point to separation or at least collateral-ity (p. 613).

Reading about the Sikhs, I wondered whether the idea that the past was marked by unity is not an illusion shared by the social scientist and the fundamentalist. Probably there never has been such a thing as unity or wholeness. It is perfectly plausible to argue that tensions between land/nation on the one hand and God on the other have always played a crucial role in any religious ideology. If so, the differentiation thesis shares the basic assumptions of fundamentalists themselves. Different as they may be in their evaluation of modernity, they both think that modernity is essentially fragmentation, a shattering of unity and wholeness. They both think that antimodernism is marked by an effort to restore this unity.

### NATIONALISM

The inherent tensions within most fundamentalisms not only testify to the fact that the ideal of unity is extremely difficult to achieve but raise another question as well: what is the relationship between fundamentalism and nationalism? Reading about the Sikh demand for State Khalistan, the Jewish demand for Eretz Israel, the Hindu aspirations to turn India into a Hindu Nation, the emphasis on truly “American values” in Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, and, finally, reading about Japanese fundamentalism, which is so intricately bound up with the ideal of Japanese Greatness that it can hardly be distinguished from downright nationalism, I became increasingly puzzled by the question how fundamentalism can be kept apart from nationalism.

As far as I can see, there are two conflicting statements on the matter. One theory, held by Lawrence, regards the rise of fundamentalism as a reaction to the failure of nationalism. He regards fundamentalism and nationalism as “incommensurate opposites: contradictories rather than contraries, both cannot occupy the same ideological space” (p. 83). The other, held by Aran, asserts that “the traditional definition of Judaism is broadened to encompass nationalism” (p. 296). Aran concludes that in the case of the Gush Emunim “religion usurps modern nationalism and presents nationalism as its own manifestation” (p. 297).

I tend to favor the latter interpretation. If we take a look at the “family resemblances” among fundamentalisms mentioned by the editors in their “Interim Report on a Hypothetical Family,” it appears to me that most of them apply equally to nationalisms. Both are marked by a search

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for identity, both tend to “dramatize their enemies” (p. 820), both are looking for a litmus test separating insiders from outsiders, both are marked by a “contra-acculturative orientation” (p. 821) and try to “protect the group from contamination and preserve purity” (*ibid.*), both can be said to arise in “times of crisis” (p. 822), both contain a “totalitarian impulse” (p. 824) and are “selectively traditional and selectively modern” (p. 825). The only features that seem to be exclusively religious are those that refer to sacred texts and traditions or eschatological expectations. But even with these, one has only to keep in mind the South African Boers in order to see how easily purely nationalistic aspirations can be blended with biblical rhetoric.

The volume provides us with some fine examples of the seemingly effortless transition between nationalism and fundamentalism. The writer on the Islamic resurgence in Malaysia, for instance, notes that, whereas in the early 1970s people would refer to themselves as “we Malay people,” they now say, “we Muslim people” (p. 698). The same has happened in Egypt, where the Sadat era was marked by a growing religious sentiment (with the figure of the “believing president” at its center; p. 378).

We might understand the nature of these changes better if we follow one of Davis’s suggestions and allow for a continuum between political and religious varieties of fundamentalism. The change from Nasserism toward Islamic revivalism then appears not as a revolutionary rupture (as Lawrence would see it) but as different formulations of similar aspirations. Finally, treating both political and religious fundamentalism as similar phenomena would enable us to come to terms with the undoubtedly “modern” elements within fundamentalism, that is, with modernity itself.

This is of course not to say that this volume should have been extended to political fundamentalism as well. In view of the abundance of material, the editors have been very wise to confine their volume to religious forms of fundamentalism. In every respect this is a tremendously rich volume: empirically for its valuable contributions to knowledge of history, ideals, and views of fundamentalisms; theoretically in the sense that it provides ample food for contemplation. It makes me look forward to the five volumes to come.