

**CATHOLICS AND  
FUNDAMENTALISTS**

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**UNDERSTANDING  
AND RESPONSE**

**Revised Edition**

**Rev. Martin Pable**

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PUBLICATIONS

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## WHAT IS FUNDAMENTALISM?

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My earlier work on fundamentalism was designed to help Catholics understand and respond to criticisms leveled at them from fundamentalist Christians. Since then, however, the phenomenon of fundamentalism has spread far beyond that particular tension. Most striking has been the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, which is often blamed for terrorist attacks and hate speeches directed at Western nations, particularly the United States. Some observers have also noted a certain fundamentalism among some Catholics who insist that only their beliefs and practices (especially liturgical) have the true mark of orthodoxy.

One of the purposes of this volume is to take a broader look at fundamentalism as it is manifested in today's society and how it affects many besides Catholics. Before proceeding any further, then, we need to define what we are talking about. I would like to propose the following definition of fundamentalism as the one I will use throughout this book:

*fundamentalism: a set of religious beliefs that moves the believer to reject all contrary beliefs and to attempt to convert others to the fundamentalist belief system*

This definition is deliberately broad, so as to include a plurality of forms of fundamentalism. Note that the first element is a set or cluster of religious beliefs—about the nature of God, human beings, and the universe—presumed to be divinely revealed. Moreover, this set of beliefs is exclusive; that is, it does not allow for the existence of contrary religious beliefs.

So far, this definition could apply to almost any group of religious adherents. What makes fundamentalism unique is two other distinct marks. First, *fundamentalism implies a certain intolerance*. Again, all religions may be said to be intolerant in the sense that they hold their belief system to be

the only completely true one. Yet most religions also respect the rights of others to believe and practice a different faith. For fundamentalists, however, such tolerance is categorically incompatible with their belief system. If their faith is the one true faith, all others must be false and should not be tolerated.

This leads us to the second mark of fundamentalism: *Fundamentalism implies a militancy that goes beyond normal and acceptable limits*. Many fundamentalists believe that if their faith is the only true one, then they have a mission to convert nonbelievers and bring them into the truth—the truth as understood by the fundamentalists. This is often done under the banner of “saving” people or preventing them from eternal damnation by insuring that they go to heaven. While it is true that most religions have a missionary or evangelizing aspect (the belief that faith should be shared with others), the difference lies in the intensity and methods with which fundamentalists pursue this aspect of their faith. Protestant fundamentalists will pressure—through friendliness, guilt, fear of going to hell—unbelievers and even other Christians to forsake their “evil” way of life and find salvation in the fundamentalist church. Islamic fundamentalists will embrace the notion of “jihad,” a form of spiritual warfare, to impose their form of Islam on others, including other Muslims. Catholic fundamentalists will denounce other Catholics as being unorthodox and demand that their bishop or the Vatican rein in those they consider too radical, or even excommunicate them.

There is one other problem with a fundamentalist approach to religion: *Fundamentalism lacks a historical perspective*. Protestant fundamentalists often talk as if there was no Christianity before the Reformation; and some seem unaware of the great sixteenth century Catholic reformers such as Francis and Clare of Assisi, Dominic, and others. They act as if there was some “great awakening” to Christ somewhere in the

last century or two and no one had ever been a believer before them. Islamic fundamentalists likewise show no awareness of the long history of their religion and its centuries of peaceful coexistence with Jews and Christians. Catholic fundamentalists speak as if the church existed from the very beginning in the form they experienced it in the 1950s; they seem unaware of how much and how often the church has changed throughout history.

Let's be clear: One can admire the energy, devotion, and passion with which fundamentalists practice their religion and try to propagate it, without joining their ranks or adopting their methods. In some ways the passion of fundamentalists is a refreshing contrast to the casual, laid-back, half-hearted, anything-goes mentality of many religious people today. At the same time, however, fundamentalism can be a dangerous form of religious zealotry. It forms the basis for the ideology that drove the Roman persecution of Christians, the Catholic persecution of Jews and Muslims, the excesses of the Crusades and the Inquisition, the Muslim "holy wars," and the Puritan witch hunts. It is the fundamentalist ideology that gives religion a bad name in every generation.

### **Origins of Fundamentalism**

Fundamentalism is not the same as traditionalism or conservatism. These tendencies are present in every major religion. Modern Protestant fundamentalism began as a reaction to major intellectual upheavals in the late nineteenth century. In biology, the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin seemed to contradict the biblical accounts of creation by postulating that the earth gradually evolved over a period of billions of years and that humans themselves have evolved from lower forms of life. In psychology, Sigmund Freud claimed that human freedom of the will is an illusion, that our choices are really determined by unconscious motives buried deep in our

psyche. And Karl Marx maintained that religion is a creation of the ruling classes to control the working class and the poor: “Don’t worry if you have to suffer in this life; you will be rewarded in the life to come.” He dismissed religion as “the opium of the people,” a drug to dull them to their oppression by the upper classes.

In response to these attacks on traditional religion, some liberal Protestant scholars tried to make some accommodation to the new scientific thinking. They began to study the Bible more critically, taking into account the various literary forms in which the Bible was written, as well as the findings of archaeology and cultural anthropology. They concluded that not all biblical accounts had to be understood literally, that evolution did not necessarily contradict the Scriptures, and that some of the biblical truths were open to various interpretations.

Understandably, this kind of thinking created a reaction in the minds of many Christian believers. Between the years 1910 and 1915, some conservative Protestant scholars wrote a series of booklets called *The Fundamentals*. In the series they rejected the “modernist” attempt to accommodate Christian teaching to the claims of science. They insisted on adherence to a number of doctrinal points, the main ones being:

- the absolute inspiration and inerrancy of the words of the Bible
- the virginal birth and divinity of Jesus Christ
- the substitutionary atonement for our sins through Christ’s death on the cross
- the bodily resurrection of Christ
- the literal Second Coming of Christ at the end of time

Since their publications, the first and third of these “fundamentals” have come to characterize modern Protestant fundamentalism. Because the Bible is the inspired and infallible

word of God, it must be accepted as the sole norm of religious belief and practice. Knowingly or not, fundamentalists have appropriated one of Martin Luther's most famous "protests": *sola Scriptura*. They believe that "the Bible alone" is the source of truth for Christians. There is no need for any church authority or hierarchy to mediate God's truth to the faithful. They will be guided simply by reading or hearing the Scriptures and allowing God's word to touch the mind and heart. Moreover, there is no need for anyone to "explain" or "interpret" the Bible, because it is clear and easy to understand. Fundamentalists are fond of quoting one of their own scholars, Charles Hodge: "The Bible is a plain book. It is intelligible by the people. And they have the right and are bound to read and interpret it for themselves; so that their faith may rest on the testimony of the Scriptures, and not that of the Church."

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As for the third fundamental, Protestant fundamentalism focuses on the personal acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. They believe that since we are utterly unable to atone for our sins our only hope is to trust in the redemptive death of Jesus on the cross for our sins (substitutionary atonement). This requires of the believer a deeply personal act of surrender and confidence in the power of Christ to save. Hence the defining question fundamentalists ask: "Have you been saved?" or "Do you accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?" In his now classic work *Catholicism and Fundamentalism*, Karl Keating expands on this notion:

This is unalloyed Christian individualism. The individual is saved without regard to a church, the congregation, or anyone else. It is a one-to-one relationship, with no mediators, no sacraments, just the individual Christian and his Lord. The Christian knows when he has been saved, down to the hour and minute of his salvation, because his salvation came when he “accepted” Christ. It came like a flash, never to be forgotten, the way it came to Paul on the Damascus road. (p. 23)

Keating goes on to note how this dynamic explains the evangelism of fundamentalists. If others do not undergo the same kind of salvation experience, they will go to hell. It is a matter of charity (and urgency) to save people from such a fate; so fundamentalists have a duty to spread their faith and convert others to it.

It should be noted that the mainline Protestant churches (Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, etc.) do not hold to the fundamentalist theology described above, at least in its rigid form. The doctrines and practices we have noted are generally found in churches like the Assemblies of God, Community Churches, Bible Churches, and Pentecostal Churches. Some also describe themselves as “nondenominational” churches. In recent years they have shown remarkable growth, and tend to attract large numbers, especially former Roman Catholics. We will return to this phenomenon later.



We turn now to the origins of Islamic fundamentalism. The founder and central figure of the Islamic faith is the prophet Muhammad. Beginning in the year 610 he received a number of revelations from God and were transcribed into the Qur’an, the Islamic holy book. Over generations, statements and ac-



tions attributed to Muhammad and transmitted orally by his followers were collected and written down as hadiths, something like oral traditions. Together with the Qur'an and the consensus of learned Muslim scholars, they form the sharia, Islam's sacred law. (Much of the following is based on material from *Islamic Fundamentalism: A Brief Survey* by Bruce Gourley and from *Islam: A Primer* by Clyde Mark).

After Muhammad's death, the community broke into rival factions over leadership. Eventually they evolved into what we know today as Shiites and Sunnis. There are fundamentalist tendencies in both groups, but they are more common among Sunnis. By the end of the ninth century Sunnis had established the Hanbali school of law, which held to the Qur'an as the literal, unquestioned Word of God. In the eighteenth century in Arabia, the Hanbali tradition gave rise to the strict Wahabbi school of Islam. The Wahabbis believed that modern Islam had become corrupted and polluted from within, and sought to return Islam to its pure roots. The movement became very influential, leading to the founding of other similar reform movements. In the twentieth century, Wahabbi Islam would provide the theological foundation for a political fundamentalist state, as exemplified in present-day Saudi Arabia.

The shift from revivalism to fundamentalism initially took place through the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood movement in the 1930s. Founded in 1929 by Hassan al-Banna, the Muslim Brotherhood tapped into popular unrest against British rule, local political turmoil, and the corrupting influence of the West. Al-Banna's movement was based on the Qur'an and the hadiths, and it translated doctrine into social action at a time when Egypt was in social unrest. The Brotherhood initially espoused nonviolence, but gradually took up violent action, especially after the assassination of al-Banna. A crucial event was the victory of Israel in the Six-Day War in 1967. Islamic fundamentalists claimed that the Arab world lost the war be-

cause of lack of religious faith. They called for the imposition of Islamic law (*sharia*) in Muslim nations and communities. When Anwar Sadat became president of Egypt in 1970, he established Islam as the official religion of the Egyptian state, and sharia law as the main source of legislation. However, Sadat's openness to the West and to Israel was scorned by the multiplying Islamic fundamentalist organizations. In September of 1981, he led the government in taking direct control of all mosques and arresting thousands of militants. One month later, he was assassinated by members of the Islamic fundamentalist group Tanzim-al-Jihad.

While the vast majority of Muslims are content to practice their religion freely without trying to impose it on others, there is a fundamentalist wing that, at the very least, wants all Muslims to conform to Islamic laws, including prayer, diet, dress codes, and restrictions on the activities of women. The fundamentalists have a particular disdain for nonpracticing, secularized Muslims. Their ideal is to establish political states where "the true Islam" will be embraced and vigorously enforced through sharia law. Likewise, while many Muslims might hope to convert the whole world to Islam, only the fundamentalists would be willing to do so by coercion. And from there it is only a short step to violence and terrorism.



Finally, we will address what is sometimes called "Catholic fundamentalism." As noted earlier, fundamentalism begins as a reaction. In the case of Catholics, the pivotal point was the Second Vatican Council. Very few Catholics were opposed to the calling of the council, mostly because of their high regard for Pope John XXIII and their awareness that past ecumenical councils had been beneficial for the life of the Church. But with the close of the council and the beginning of the changes in parish life, some Catholics were disturbed. They disliked the

change from Latin to local languages in the Mass, the rotation of the altar to face the congregation, and the removal of the Communion rail. Some resisted the stress on “active participation” in the Mass, feeling forced to pray and sing with the rest of the congregation. Others lamented what they saw as the poor quality of religious education for their children, especially the discontinuance of exclusive reliance in the United States on *The Baltimore Catechism* for religious education of children and even adults.

These Catholics, like all fundamentalists, felt justified in their criticisms. They pointed to the negative “fallout” from the changes: a spike in the number of priests and nuns leaving the priesthood and the religious life, ill-conceived liturgical “experiments,” disregard of Church authority (as exemplified by the widespread rejection of the encyclical on birth control), theologians openly dissenting from Church teachings, clergy and laity refusing obedience to their bishops, the steep decline in new vocations to the priesthood and religious life, and the disregard for previously held norms of sexual morality.

In reaction, these Catholics (both clergy and laity) banded together to try to stem the tide. They formed their own organizations. They wrote to and met with bishops, asking them to intervene and discipline those who appeared to be dissenting from approved teachings and norms. They created new periodicals (and eventually websites and blogs) to publicize their views.

For the most part, this fundamentalist response has been carried out in a relatively thoughtful and dignified manner. Sometimes, however, it has taken the form of diatribe, name-calling, harsh words, and punitive actions. Priests, nuns, lay leaders, and even bishops have received hate mail, threatening phone calls, and other kinds of harassment. Some have even been driven from their assignment. The level of anger and bitterness has at times been astonishing, if not scandalous.

## Some Consequences of Fundamentalism

It could be argued that every religion could use a fundamentalist wing. Because the religious sentiment is so powerful a force in human experience, it can easily be distorted. There is a natural tendency, after a burst of religious fervor, for the individual and/or the group to “settle down” into a more monotonous form of expression. That is why reform movements continually emerge in religious institutions. Someone stands up and says, “We have lost our initial inspiration. We have become complacent and listless. We need to return to our roots, our first love.” Prophetic voices like these have spurred genuine reform and renewal of many a religious enterprise. This is a positive form of fundamentalism.

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On an individual basis, fundamentalism can be “good for the soul.” What Protestant, Islamic and Catholic fundamentalism all have in common is a satisfying, personal conviction that “I have found the truth.” History is filled with examples of people who have wandered aimlessly and searched anxiously for answers to life’s persistent questions, and finally come to inner peace—whether through the Bible or the Qur’an or the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. They have no desire to question or to search further.

Problems arise when the reform movement or the personal faith conviction becomes rigid and inflexible. The human mind is made for truth, but it also seeks deeper understanding, as the medieval scholastic philosophers taught.

Thus, when a Protestant fundamentalist says, “I am saved because I have given my life to Jesus Christ,” would we not expect that person to inquire further, “What are the implica-

tions of that decision? How do I deepen it, how do I express it in daily life?" When a Muslim fundamentalist says, "Great is Allah," would we not ask, "Can you say what makes Allah great? What are some of his attributes that comfort or challenge you?" When a Catholic fundamentalist says, "I believe it because the Church teaches it," wouldn't it be right to ask, "What is the basis for the Church's teaching?"

Plato is supposed to have said, "The life which is unexamined is not worth living." So it may also be said that "the faith which is unexamined is not worth embracing."

Sometimes it seems that what "drives" fundamentalism is fear. If I allow my beliefs to be challenged or placed under scrutiny, what will happen? Will I lose my sense of serenity, my peace of mind? Will I lose the support of my like-minded friends? If I have to concede that some of my beliefs cannot be fully or rationally explained, can I still hold them as true yet mysterious? Or will I go into a panic and abandon them altogether?

When left unchecked, fundamentalism can breed intolerance. Sister Mary Frances Reis in her article "Fundamentalism on the College Campus" quotes a Catholic student as saying, "I came to Mass today (November 1), though it was the hardest thing I ever did. My roommates kept yelling at me and saying I was going to hell because I came to worship the saints." Another student, a former Catholic turned Protestant fundamentalist, tells her friends, "My mom and dad are going to hell. I tried to save them, but they wouldn't join my church." Fundamentalist attacks on Catholicism are not limited to college campuses. I myself have found pamphlets on my car windshield calling upon Catholics to renounce their "damnable" beliefs and their "devilish" rituals so that they can be saved from the fires of hell.

Islamic fundamentalism often shows its intolerance on a socio-political level. In her book *The Trouble with Islam*, Ir-

shad Manji documents the fierce strain of intolerance among some Muslims:

Recently, a Shia Ismaili Muslim testified to the U.S. Congress about what happened when the Saudis annexed his hometown of Najran: ‘Not only were the Najranis religiously subjugated,’ said Ali Alyami, ‘but the means of their livelihood were reduced drastically. Most of the fertile farmland was expropriated by the Wahabbi governors, emirs, and judges. In addition, Wahabbis forcefully took half of what Ismailis produced from their farms and animals...’

Manji explains that Saudis regard Shiite Muslims as heretics. Shiites cannot be represented in a Saudi court, and only Wahabbis are appointed as judges. Here religious intolerance has spilled over into political injustice: Shiites in Saudi Arabia have been stripped of their legal rights because their faith conflicts with the ruling fundamentalist group.

Finally, if you read Catholic publications, you are familiar with many sad examples of Catholic fundamentalist intolerance. How often has a small group or sect of Catholics been able to pressure a parish or diocese to “disinvite” a speaker from coming and making a presentation because he or she was unacceptable to the small group? Just one example of this type of censorship involves a well-respected priest I happen to know (for his sake I won’t use his name).

This priest was invited to conduct a four-evening mission for a parish. It seemed to be going well until after the second evening when the pastor cancelled the rest of the mission. He told the priest that it was because some of the attendees were disturbed by his emphasis on social justice issues and their implementation (or lack thereof) in the world as well as in the Church. Clearly, Protestants, Islamics and Catholics have their strains of fundamentalism to address.