

Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism

Widely used as a pejorative term to designate one's fanatical opponents – usually religious and/or political – rather than oneself, **fundamentalism** began in Christian Protestant circles in the eC20. Originally restricted to debates within evangelical (“gospel-based”) Protestantism, it is now employed to refer to any person or group that is characterized as unbending, rigorous, intolerant, and militant. The term has two usages, the prior one a positive self-description, which then developed into the later derogatory usage that is now widespread. As a phenomenon, fundamentalism is a specific cultural, religious/ideological, and political formation only possible in later capitalism.

Since the bombing of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, the term has gained a much wider currency, mostly derogatory. Thus, those believed responsible are **Islamic fundamentalists**, whereas the USA itself has been designated as **politically fundamentalist** (Ali, 2002). Israel's suppression of Palestinians is driven by **fundamentalist Jews**, while the Palestinians themselves are also fundamentalists. Often, fundamentalism is synonymous with terrorism, or at least has become in popular usage the basis for terrorism. Another significant usage is in neo-liberal dismissals of positions deemed non-pragmatic: **feminist fundamentalism** and **environmental fundamentalism** are the most common. In these cases, fundamentalism is interchangeable with “fascist.” The assumption is that anything that threatens liberal, Western culture and society is by definition fundamentalist.

The associations of irrational commitment, fanaticism, militancy, and terrorism make fundamentalism a useful term. It allows a dominant Western culture and society, aggressively led by the United States, to demonize its opponents as irretrievably antagonistic to the hegemonic values of “freedom” and “democracy.” The term provides a justification for the violent oppression of those who oppose such values. However, the use of “fundamentalism” is itself an imposition of a term that comes from within Western Christian culture. Thus, the way in which opposition is characterized within Christianity becomes a way of dealing with opposition in other situations, whether religious, political, or cultural conflict. Such usage is both an example of an effort to understand opposition and an attempt to deny the viability of that opposition.

The term began as a positive self-description, whose history lies in American Protestantism (Marsden, 1980). It was first used in 1920 by Curtis Lee Laws in the Baptist journal *Watchman-Examiner*: he speaks of those who “do battle royal for the Fundamentals,” those who believe and defend what were newly identified as the **fundamentals of the faith**. He was referring to a series of 12 pamphlets, published between 1915 and 1920, that isolated particular Christian doctrines, defending them against the inroads of theological modernism and liberalism: the inerrancy or literal truth of the Bible, the virgin birth of Christ, the substitutionary atonement of Christ, his bodily resurrection, the reality of miracles, Christ's deity, and the second coming of the savior at the end of history.

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Christian fundamentalism is unique since it selects certain positions and elevates them to absolutes. This fundamentalism is a subgroup of evangelical Christianity (Harris, 1998), often calling itself "conservative evangelical." Although related to the various revivals in Europe and the United States, it is suspicious of the enthusiastic and emotional nature of these movements, which now include Pentecostalism and the Charismatics.

Christian fundamentalism is also defined by what it opposes: Romanism, socialism, atheism, modern philosophy, Spiritualism, Darwin and evolutionary theory, liberal (Protestant) theology, and the use of critical methods to interpret the Bible. In response, the linchpin for fundamentalists is the inerrancy of the Bible, the belief that "Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching" (Boone, 1989: 26). Inerrancy marks the dependence on a text, in this case the Bible. It is an effort at a seamless ideology of power, a hegemonic drive that will not allow any deviation. Christian fundamentalism also includes dispensationalism (belief in seven stages or dispensations from creation to Christ's final reign), the Keswick holiness movement (personal victory over sin, witnessing about Christ and support of missions), emphasis on personal conversion, daily Bible reading and prayer, the growth of large churches, and public battles over evolution vs. creationism, abortion, and capital punishment.

How is it, then, that fundamentalism, with its own distinct history in American Protestantism, has become a blanket term that is readily ascribed to Muslims, Hindus, Jews, feminists, environmentalists, and even (in Australia) economists? The features of the term's wider usage began within the conflicts of Christian Protestantism, moving from self-description to describing opponents. The first stage of this shift was to other fanatical religious forms, and then to non-religious forms of political opposition.

The social, cultural, and economic context of Christian fundamentalism was the crisis following World War I. The era of swing jazz, the Russian Revolution, the socialist radicalism of inter-war USA, the revolutionary experimentalism in art, architecture, and music, and the rapidly changing sexual mores all played a role. Christian fundamentalism is one way of dealing with such changes, especially for lower middle and working classes, often rural, outside the mainstream Christian churches whose members were economically secure and could feel some measure of control. For those with less sense of control, the combination of economic insecurity – the monetary crises of the 1920s, 1930s, and later, the abandonment of the Bretton Woods accord in 1973 – with rural isolation produced a situation in which the certainties of fundamentalism provided an ideological resource against capitalism's perpetual change, disruption, and, to paraphrase *The Communist Manifesto*, the melting of all that is solid into air.

Similarly, fundamentalism was ascribed to Shiite sections of Islam and the followers of Rama within Hinduism. Both groups exhibited comparable tendencies: the response of the rural and urban working classes and petit bourgeoisie to the increasing presence of global capitalism and its associated cultures. This response is explicitly anti-American and anti-Western and cast in religious terms, but it would not have taken place without the presence

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of capitalism. Accustomed to the usage of the term in the West, commentators described these movements as fundamentalist.

Like Christian fundamentalism, these movements are politically militant. On the one hand, fundamentalists expect the end of the world, the immediate transport to "heaven," to be with Christ, or Allah, or even Rama; on the other, they intervene directly in politics. The Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the now defunct Moral Majority of Jerry Falwell or Pat Buchanan's run for presidential office, and the vast Hindu political movement of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) in India, all are part of the political mobilization that fundamentalism provides. The paradox is that whereas within the United States politicians must ensure the fundamentalist vote (presidential candidates often declare themselves to be "born again" Christians), when the fundamentalists are external they become a threat to Western society. Thus, terrorism against the United States, England, and Australia is the act of so-called fundamentalists, but internal terrorism is not.

The central place of the private individual, working itself out in personal piety and salvation, is also a legacy of the Enlightenment and liberal culture. However, such intense devotion at a private level works itself out in collective action, being seen as a fanaticism at odds with the presumed urbane tolerance of capitalist culture.

Although fundamentalism has associations of irrationalism it is a distinctly rationalistic development, heir to the Enlightenment as much as the spiritual beliefs and practices described as New Age. In Christianity this involves matching up the Bible with scientific positions on geological ages and evolution, and in the underlying assumptions that God's truths are propositional. Muslim and Hindu fundamentalisms are also rationalist, for they too operate with propositional truth, clear statements in their respective Scriptures that cannot be gainsaid.

Not only rationalistic, but also textual, each form of religious fundamentalism cannot exist without a sacred text. This text is understood in a new way, as the inerrant words of Muhammad, and therefore Allah, of God, or of Rama. In doing so, the various leaders can obscure their own claims to authority in terms of the authority of the texts in question.

Then there is pseudo-traditionalism, claiming a mythical, pristine, and organic community that fundamentalists seek to restore before the moral and political depredations of modern society. The deep contradiction here is that fundamentalism happily uses whatever technology is available to spread its pseudo-traditionalism: cable TV, video, Internet, and communications media. Yet such notions – the community of the New Testament, or of Muhammad's Medina, or of Hindu society before Islamic and British invasions – are myths that express an oppositional ideology, although the imagined communities are distinctly dystopian and repressive in terms of gender, race, sexuality, and morality.

The focus on and exacerbation of features of religious fundamentalism – opposition to some elements of capitalism, militancy, irrationalism, and fanaticism – enabled the application of the term to political and cultural movements that are not necessarily religious. Other features were left behind, such as the basis on a sacred text and pseudo-

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traditionalism, and the term has become one of dismissal. In this way, feminism, environmentalism, anarchism, and gay and lesbian movements could be characterized as fundamentalist. In each case, the use of the term marks recognition of opposition to the dominant forms of capitalism and liberal culture, whether patriarchies, environmental degradation, capitalism itself, or a dominant heterosexual culture.

Roland Boer

See: ***GLOBALIZATION, HOLOCAUST, WEST.***