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Facing up to fundamentalism

Simon Barrow - See <http://www.simonbarrow.net>

Simon Barrow is a theologian, writer, commentator, consultant, educator and trainer. He contributes regularly to the Guardian's Comment-is-Free and to Third Way magazine. From 2000-2005 he was global mission secretary for the official ecumenical body Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, which he also served as assistant general secretary until 2003. He was formerly adviser in education and training for Southwark Anglican Diocese (1991-1996) and has worked in current affairs journalism, theological education, development studies, and as the convenor of a national network of Christian social action groups. Simon has edited and co-edited a number of books, including *Consuming Passion: Why the Killing of Jesus Really Matters* (DLT: 2005), *Christian Mission in Western Society: Precedents, Perspectives, Prospects* (CTBI: 2001) and *Expanding Horizons: Learning to be the Church in the World* (SBCS: 1995). His articles and reviews have appeared in journals such as *Political Theology*, the *International Review of Mission* (World Council of Churches), the *British Journal of Theological Education*, *Christian*, *Crucible*, *Pro Mundi Vita*, the *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, and others. Simon sits on the council of the London Mennonite Centre and is a member of St Stephen's Church, Exeter. He is a member of both the British (BIAMS) and the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS). His research interests include religion and peacemaking, political theology and the conversation between post-modern faith and other viewpoints, including secular ones. Simon's regular blog can be found at: <http://faithinsociety.blogspot.com>.

Abstract

A description, analysis and overview (including guidelines for response) to Christian fundamentalism in particular and the 'fundamentalist mindset' more generally.

"Fundamentalism has suddenly become a matter of concern for everyone, whether or not they are personally religious. It affects education in science and history; it affects political elections in some countries, and through this it affects international relations; it may affect the question of whether [hu]mankind survives [far] into the twenty-first century. Therefore, if people want to understand the world in which they live, they may find it necessary to understand something about fundamentalism." ~ James Barr

INTRODUCTION

The fact that 'fundamentalism' is used as a general, often indiscriminate and imprecise form of abuse, does not mean that there is not a real problem behind it. But

getting to the nub of the issue in the context of media and public policy debate – where the desire for shorthand often overcomes the demands of clarity – is not easy.

In this paper we are addressing primarily the phenomenon of Christian fundamentalism in Anglo-American contexts, but with an awareness of global concerns and plural/secular pressures.

‘Fundamentalism’ is popularly used in two different, but overlapping, senses – (1) to denote a set of convictions which their adherents see as ‘fundamental’ and others as extreme or irrational dogmatism; and (2) to denote a procedure for arriving at convictions, often associated with ‘literalism’ in the reading of authoritative sacred texts.

Both these definitions are problematic, because they superimpose a term which actually arose in a specific setting (early twentieth century American Protestantism, in its response to the rise of modernism) onto the whole gamut of religious expression.

We must face the fact that the earlier, specific meaning of the word is now probably irrecoverable as a discreet definition – as Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby observe in their encyclopaedic *The Fundamentalism Project* (five volumes, University of Chicago Press, 1993-1995) - speaking instead of 'fundamentalisms', plural. But it is still worth noting.

1. OBSERVATIONS

The five ‘fundamentals’ announced by US Presbyterians in (and subsequently articulated in twelve volumes called *The Fundamentals, 1910-1915*) are: the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture, the virginal conception/deity of Christ, penal substitutionary atonement, Christ’s bodily resurrection, and the facticity of the miracles. The ‘personal return’ (second coming) of Christ is usually added.

It is worth noting that all of these feature in classic evangelical statements of faith (such as that used by UCCF) and that three of them are connected to foundational Christian doctrines – the nature of Christ, resurrection and parousia, making it impossible to regard the problem of fundamentalism as entirely extrinsic to the mainstream. Different interpretations of atonement and miracles have abounded in the churches, it should be recognised – *The Fundamentals* seeks to fix these (and other Christian convictions) in particular ways, based on a belief about the essential antagonism between God and humanity – one, ironically, which mirrors the assumptions of a certain strain of modernity.

The key to historic Christian fundamentalism is often taken to be infallibility/inerrancy, terms which can denote either similar or distinguishable ‘doctrines of scripture’ (that is, human propositions about the Bible) – with conservative evangelicals (often wrongly termed ‘fundamentalists’) seeing the biblical

message as unerringly truthful in all that it teaches, but not necessarily on all that it touches or describes (I. H. Marshall).

Biblical scholar James Barr – in *Fundamentalism* (1977), *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (1984) and *Beyond Fundamentalism* (1984) – has noted, with others, that Christian fundamentalism is mostly not, as its critics inaccurately claim, ‘literalistic’ in its scriptural references. Instead he shows that fundamentalism understood as a particular, authoritarian reading of the Bible is actually a surprisingly ‘modern’ phenomenon – a distorted version of rationalism which fits selected texts into a pre-determined ideology that it then reads back into them (eisegesis).

He demonstrates this by elaborating the ways in which fundamentalist interpretation resists the plain or surface meaning of the text for one which harmonises its irregularities in favour of a particular doctrinal outcome. He also shows that those who claim ‘only one possible meaning’ for the texts they use as knock-down authorisation for their opinions frequently come up with different or diametrically opposed accounts of what the ‘one truth’ is. Fundamentalism is notoriously sectarian.

The key word is ‘interpretation’. If fundamentalism is rendered coherent and is characterised by any one thing, it is its refusal to recognise that its reading of scripture is, like all textual reading, interpretative. Rather, it sees the authoritative text as being unmediated.

2. DEFINITIONS

It is this prior philosophical conviction (unacknowledged as such) about unmediated truth which perhaps gives us the best way of pointing to the problem of religious fundamentalism in the contemporary – given that the term is now inescapably used to describe similar features of different religious systems, including, notably, Islam. (Inter alia, inter-faith specialist Christopher Lamb noted how unhelpful this is to interreligious encounter in an article in the Autumn 1997 edition of ‘Christian’ magazine.)

Giles Fraser (‘Why legalism misrepresents the Bible’, *Ekklesia*, 27/01/07) observes a further twist: “When someone put in those nasty verse numbers, the lawyers started to feel it was their book — a set of regulations. Chapter and verse started sounding like paragraph 1, subsection 3 of a legal contract. That was the point at which some Christians began to reject the idea that the Bible could be read in various ways, and, worse still, that it might contain contradictions or poetry. Such things would undermine its status as the ultimate legal document.”

It is the belief that revealed truth is to be apprehended directly and in an unmediated (often legalistic) form by a privileged group which distinguishes the ‘fundamentalist mindset’ – and which makes it possible, despite the difficulties noted above, to use the term more generally. But its pejorative and abusive connotations often disable such descriptive usefulness with emotivism.

3. PROBLEMS

Emotion aside, however, it must be recognised that convictions about being the recipient of un-mediated truth, when combined with the view that ‘error has no rights’, leads frequently, if not unassailably, to totalitarianism. This can be the case in some forms of modern Christian fundamentalism, where the ‘classical’ formula has been further revised in the direction of a violent, vindictory apocalyptic that validates divinely mandated victory for the carriers of a particular viewpoint. And where the erosion of power and influence that flowed from Christendom has produced a victim mentality which equates loss of suasion or privilege with anti-Christian prejudice (something which may, it must be conceded, exist) and persecution (which, in the plural West, does not). In this sense, the fundamentalist mindset, reinforced by an all-encompassing, localised and inward-looking culture, can be profoundly damaging, corrosive and dangerous – not least to biblical faith, and to politics as a negotiation of power in the presence of difference.

Catherine Madsen (in ‘CrossCurrents’, the journal of the Association of Religion in Intellectual Life, USA) has made the following challenging observation: “To grow up politically is to understand that there are other points of view, and that you cannot erase them; that there are no shortcuts to respect, and that one must earn one's dignity; that our obligation to our fellow humans is to make our own point of view not unassailable but intelligible. What do you want so badly that you have to develop an impenetrable and threatening rhetoric to talk about it, or blow yourself and the bystanders to bloody shreds rather than ask for it sanely? The Buddhist monks who immolated themselves in protest against the Vietnam war did it one by one; they went into an open space where there were no people and sat in the flames.

“Like totalitarians of all ideological stripes and mystics of all religions, painstaking thinkers of all cultures know each other intuitively across the boundaries of opposition. Totalitarians do not like them; indeed they are always at risk from the totalitarians in their own culture as well as those in the enemy's. In spite of this—or because of it—they are determined to construct a trustworthy language, a language dense and durable enough to resist the corruptions of politics. That language, if any, is religious. We will be lucky if it ever finds its way into prayer.”

In his book *Faith and Politics After Christendom* (2006), Jonathan Bartley has outlined some ways in which Christian fundamentalism, routinely thought of as aggressively assertive but not violent, can spill over into the use of violence – and in some cases already has. See also ‘The end of Christendom as a political threat’, *Ekklesia*, 09/01/07, Karen Armstrong's study, *The Battle for God* (2001), and Leonardo Boff, *Fundamentalism, Terrorism and the Future of Humanity* (2005).

4. UNDERSTANDINGS

A confused diagnosis often leads to a confused understanding of, and response to, fundamentalism. As we have seen, although it has cognates from the past, the

fundamentalist mindset is inherently modern (in its approach to texts, and in its use of technology, we might add). To view it as a refusal of modernity in all its forms is incorrect. It is, in many respects, a perversion of modernity in primarily, but not exclusively, 'religious' form. (For a broader perspective on this, referencing Islam, see John Gray, *Al Qaeda and What It Means to Be Modern*, 2005.)

The terms 'conservative', 'traditional' and 'orthodox' – as well as 'evangelical' and 'radical' – are also frequently used, incorrectly, as definitive for an understanding of fundamentalism in contemporary discourse. In fact conservatism shows a respect for past traditions of reasoning and living which fundamentalism often eschews in its pursuit of unmediated truth in the here-and-now. Tradition, rightly understood, is about continuity through development, argument and change in community, not individualism and fixity. And orthodoxy originates, as the word suggests, from a disposition of praise – translated into the formularies which provide the grammar and syntax by which relationship to God (through the experiences, signs, actions, encounters, thoughts, traditions and texts which convey God) can be transmitted. It is, as Rowan Williams points out, inherently creative rather than rigid – seeking, as in the doctrine of the incarnation, to hold together as paradox things which a more eliminative mind would want neatly to distinguish or 'order'.

Meanwhile, an evangelical is one committed to the evangel, good news, contained in the biblical record and fully-fleshed in Christ, and radicalism (*radix*, 'root') means rooted in such a way as to be able to move to the risky frontiers. Of course, meanings are contested. But all of these dispositions can be clearly distinguished from fundamentalism. Some writers appear to miss these distinctions, or unhelpfully blur them (Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins) to serve ulterior polemical purposes.

5. RESPONSES

The following observations are offered as some initial guidelines toward more substantial responses. These might include a risk assessment of fundamentalist activity (including putative violence), further public policy information-sharing, more developed education programmes within the churches (and beyond), projects concerned with transitioning away from fundamentalism, and exchanges with other faith communities as they seek to address the challenge in their (different) contexts:

- Since fundamentalism involves claims about unmediated truth, perhaps the best and surprising response (for Christians) is the Bible itself – which proves to be, in its variety, subtlety and engagement of the reader in its broad range of understandings and practices – nothing like the book (mis)described by fundamentalism. Deep engagement with scripture and with the interpretative, communal and life skills it requires of us is something the churches generally under-emphasise. Interestingly, a survey by Christian Research has indicated that 'fundamentalist' churches are often among those where the Bible is studied least, contrary to general assumptions.

• Similarly, fundamentalism tends to reduce Christ to an ideological tool, de-emphasising the person of Jesus, the Jesus-movement in Christian history and discipleship – and therefore the central Christian conviction that the Word has become, first and foremost, flesh. It is the lively materiality of the Gospel to which the texts bear testimony, both by calling us to recognition, and by showing us how we fall short of the vulnerability of God in Christ. The religiously-sanctioned horrors and genocides of the Bible can and should be read this way, with the Spirit-impelled Jesus as the hermeneutical (interpretative) key.

• ‘Infallibility’ and ‘inerrancy’ are human constructs which stress the inviolability of something within human control. The Christian message, by contrast, is that God has chosen the ‘weak vessels’ of flesh, textuality, history, reason and tradition through which to address us. In this respect, as David E. Jenkins has observed, “fundamentalism is fatally flawed” from the perspective of a mainstream Christian orientation. The biblical language is of “inspiration”, divine wisdom working with, in and through the mind and the heart, rather than over and against these things.

• Fundamentalism as a mindset is a refusal of conversation. In most cases it cannot be out-argued or ‘reasoned with’, because its narrow premises are constructed in such a way as to eliminate critique and encourage self-affirmation. But this should not lead us to the dangerous conclusion that encounter with fundamentalists is unnecessary or unfruitful.

• On the contrary, many Christians pass through a ‘fundamentalist phase’, especially when they are young or new to the faith. Security and relationship are precisely what enable people to move beyond this stage, and to discover a rootedness which is about grace rather than self-assertion. Writing people off and labelling them reinforces the exclusive culture which nurtures the fundamentalist mindset. Encouraging Christians to mix and talk widely, both inside and outside the church, opens windows to closed minds if it is done in the right spirit.

• James Barr and others – including highly-regarded evangelical scholars such as James D. G. Dunn and I. Howard Marshall - are right to stress that ‘evangelical commitment’ and the mindset of fundamentalism are not the same thing – indeed they are opposites, since the former is a disposition of faith (reasonable trust) rather than certainty.

• There are very particular problems stemming from fundamentalism which churches and Christian organisations need to address much more directly than they are at the moment. One of these is ‘creationism’ and its cousin Intelligent Design, which posits a conflict between natural science and divine wisdom, and rejects the traditional Christian view that God creates ex nihilo (i.e. donates rather than manufactures) and upholds the whole world process rather than a part of it where ‘gaps’ can be identified. The problem of creationism stems in part from a blinkered reading of Genesis which ignores its varied and figurative expression and imposes instead the

refutation of a modern theory of origins (evolution) – which it mistakenly thinks of as a threat.

- Another challenge is that of ‘Christian Zionism’, which again reads selected biblical texts in a rigid and pre-determined way (as evangelical scholars Don Wagner, Stephen Sizer and Colin Chapman have demonstrated). The result is an ideology which divides the hope of Israel from justice for Palestinians, and turns Christian politics into a tribal identification with land claims, rather than a universal message about God’s gift of peace, justice and a ‘new creation’.

- Current arguments around sexuality within the churches are also infected by 'proof-texting' and other procedures reflective of, if not necessarily rooted in, the fundamentalist mindset.

- The violence inherent in, or attached to, notions of totalising communal inerrancy and penal substitutionary atonement are also issues which require much more debate. On the latter, see *Consuming Passion: Why the killing of Jesus really matters* (2005), edited by Simon Barrow and Jonathan Bartley.

- In the USA and elsewhere there are identifiable (and self-identifying) fundamentalist movements. In Britain most Christians eschew the term, but ‘the fundamentalist mindset’ can be seen in some non-denominational and ‘new’ churches, as well as within traditional denominations. Creationist ideas can be found within some Church of England settings, for example. It is not just a problem ‘out there’ for the historic churches, and it is clearly an ecumenical as well as an inter-faith challenge.

- Finally, Christians and others would do well to seek to re-evaluate and disarm a form of discourse which simplistically pits religious ‘conservatives’ against ‘liberals’, seeing fundamentalism as the purest form of the former and non-belief as the purest form of the latter – as if the choice was between Jerry Falwell and Richard Dawkins. It patently is not. The processes of conservatism and liberality are much more interesting than that, and indeed need one another. Responsible generosity towards the past, present and future go together with an attitude that we are not controllers, but recipients of the sheer gift that is God in Christ. A very different kind of theological and cross-community conversation is needed at the tail end of Christendom and in the continuing uncertainty that is post-modernity. One which questions our answers rather than reinforcing our stereotypes.

Simon Barrow
January 2007

[This paper was originally prepared for a consultation in Elizabeth House, Westminster, London. Further research and response may follow.]

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