

The term fundamentalism is usually used, in secular intellectual parlance, to refer to religious cultures or communities characterized by (a) intolerance towards those who depart from a strict version of one or another religious tradition, (b) codes of behaviour which, when compared with codes prevailing in the mainstream of one or another religious tradition, or in the mainstream of society, are particularly concerned with external details of the body such as dress and hair; with dietary regulations such as kosher meat and bans on alcohol, with unusually frequent attendance at religious services, (c) to ostentatiously stringent, meticulous, conformity to these external details; (d) to obsessive prudishness, and ferocious opposition to the permissive society or the 'commodification of the body'; (e) to persons with whom the speaker does not wish to be associated. In addition, there are many predominantly political perceptions in which fundamentalists are depicted as members or supporters of violent and secretive organizations bent upon the overthrow of secular, or simply Western, power and culture in the name of the establishment of a universal religious order. In the popular UK and US media the picture is a caricature, and is often associated exclusively with Islam, or at least with certain spokesmen for Islam or for certain Islamic tendencies.

In social science parlance, in contrast, fundamentalism is constructed in terms of aims, goals, ideology and structure, in the context of a social movement or set of movements. Social scientists prefer not to deal with the more violent fringes of religious fundamentalism, probably because they regard them as, precisely, atypical fringes, and also because, being conspiratorial organizations rather than movements or institutions, they are not readily explainable in the structural terms (viz. social structures, demography, migration and the like) which social science favours. When social scientists use the term they tend to underplay fundamentalist obsessions with sex, and fundamentalist intolerance, rather emphasizing issues of doctrine and enunciated purpose.

It is not possible to provide a definition of fundamentalism which would neatly include some and exclude other movements: attempts at such comprehensive definition in practice start out from an intuitive stereotype based on predetermined, named examples, and end up by enumerating exceptions and complications. The solution to such difficulties is to abandon the use of the term fundamentalism as a label defining *all the features* of particular movements, and instead use it as a description of certain characteristics which may appear in them.

Lists of characteristics such as those offered by the authoritative Chicago *Fundamentalism Project*, often amount to saying fundamentalist movements are the same as any religious movement 'but more so' (viz. Almond, Sivan and Appleby: 1997). World religious traditions (i.e. Christianity, Islam and Judaism) would not be religious if they did not concern themselves with morality, refer to holy texts, view their members in some sense as elect or chosen, surround themselves with boundaries and impose behavioural requirements, or if they allowed their leaders to be elected by their followers. The claim here, in contrast, is that fundamentalism and charismatic movements represent a new meaning of religion, a new way of being religious, which has arisen in the contemporary period. This means taking account of the pejorative connotations of fundamentalist movements by defining the field in relation to their evident *troubling* character – in short, by asking what it is in these movements which

unsettles the modern mind-set – for we know well what it is in the modern mind-set which so unsettles them.

The unsettling aspects of fundamentalist movements elements arise less because of frontal attacks on modernity, than because fundamentalists exhibit so many modern features. Fundamentalist railing against sexual permissiveness points to the evidence of the dangers of disease and family break-up which that permissiveness brings. Fundamentalist attacks on modern science proclaim that the discoveries of science are already present in sacred texts or consecrated commentaries on them, such as the Talmud. Fundamentalism claims that divine healing succeeds where modern science fails. Fundamentalism even wins elections – as it did in Algeria in 1992, and as it might in Egypt, Iraq or Tunisia (though not in Iran) if free elections were allowed. In Israel fundamentalism achieves a respectable share of the Jewish vote and the Islamist party achieves a decent share of the Arab vote. In the United States near-fundamentalist Christian pressure groups exercise great influence over the political parties because of the number of voters they can mobilize, and have influenced appointments to the Supreme Court, science research policy, US development aid policy (by more or less prohibiting funding of population programmes accused of promoting abortion), and US policy on Israel – this last because of their belief that Israeli victory will bring the Final Days.

The claim that fundamentalism is a product of modernity does not mean that its followers are predominantly poor and outcast. Indeed, the comforting implication that the influence of fundamentalism can be reduced by improving the lot of the disinherited is probably misguided. Likewise, the observation that fundamentalist movements use modern technology is incidental.

The modernist character of fundamentalism is also visible in the ability of the movements to develop a theory of history, for in so doing they are clearly distinguished from traditional or popular forms of religion (which so often they despise or attack as the work of the devil): such a theory is a prerequisite for the fundamentalist development of new versions of ‘original’ Jewish, Christian or Islamic society which is then implanted on varying scales in varying places. This fits in with the concentration of certain – but not all - Jewish and Islamic fundamentalists on bringing secularized Muslims and Jews back to their heritage, and back to a stringent version of that heritage – a quasi-conversion process which has evident similarities with Pentecostalism’s central concern with expansion and conversion.

Another feature shared with Pentecostal movements, and which further confirms fundamentalism’s modernity, is fundamentalism’s ‘globality’ – its ability to straddle geographical, political and linguistic frontiers, though this is more a feature of Islamic and Jewish movements than of Christian fundamentalists, who tend to remain within the US.

Israel and France are among the few countries in the world where hostility to fundamentalism is openly espoused in political programmes. In the United States political opposition to fundamentalism is directed only at Muslims: the Christian and Jewish varieties are off-limits for any politician seriously seeking election at any level. In Israel a successful party in the 2003 elections (Shinui) based its programme entirely on fierce hostility directed against Jewish ultra-Orthodox, and in France

hostility and fear directed against a variety of 'sects', led to the passing of a *loi anti-sectes*, in 2000, and underlies periodic rows over prohibition of headscarves in schools, on the grounds that they constitute 'up-front' (*ostentatoires*) symbols of religious affiliation by Muslim girls.

One reason why social scientists do not regard Pentecostals, or for example, Hindu Nationalists as fundamentalists, let alone Catholic traditionalists. is that they do not share the fundamentalists' esoteric approach to texts. By 'esoteric' is meant the use of a text to find meaning behind or within the letters and numbers: Jewish ultra-Orthodox pay particular attention to 'numerology' or *gematria* as it is called in Hebrew, building on the additional significance of the Hebrew alphabet as numbers. Also, fundamentalist interpretations of texts reject modern scientific or academic methods, which they regard as anti-religious, so there is no rational basis on which conflicting interpretations can be settled: the authoritative interpretation is that which is given by the most authoritative individual. Jewish Talmudists engage in a kind of ritualized disputing about obscure points, but when it comes to making a ruling, they follow their own Rabbi, just as Christian fundamentalists and charismatics rely implicitly on their pastor or senior authority. The direct access to the text by individuals, and the notion of textual inerrancy so often observed by sociologists and proclaimed by fundamentalists, therefore mean, paradoxically, that all followers share the same interpretation.

A second reason to separate fundamentalists from evangelical Christians is that the latter have a proliferating entrepreneurial approach to church organization, encouraging missionary and even fissiparous activity. Thirdly, evangelicals are expressive and encourage spontaneity in worship, whereas the culture of fundamentalism is much more controlling and austere. Also, fundamentalists concentrate spiritual power in a central leadership, while evangelicals spread spiritual gifts, albeit separating them from institutional power; nonetheless, the two share certain features such as concentration of institutional power, a rejection of established forms of religious power, and control of women's sexuality.

A further central and distinguishing fundamentalist feature is the constant pressure to multiply rules and prohibitions and to thicken frontiers. In contrast to mainstream religion, where these matters tend to stagnate, a fundamentalist community or movement is in a constant process of tightening up, of extending the scope of rules, thus maintaining followers in a state of uncertainty and enhancing the power of the leadership.

References:

Almond, G., Sivan, E. and Appleby, R.S. (1991), *Fundamentalism, genus and species*, Marty M., Appleby, R.S. (eds.) *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, Chicago.

Ammerman, N. T. (1987) *Bible believers: fundamentalists in the modern world*, New Brunswick.

Atran, S. (2003) *In Gods we trust: the evolutionary landscape of religion*, New York.

Boyer, P. (2001) *Religion explained: the human instincts that fashion gods, spirits and ancestors*. London.

Friedman, M. (1994) Habad as messianic fundamentalism: from local particularism to universal Jewish mission, *Accounting for Fundamentalism*. M. Marty and R. S. Appleby (eds.), Chicago.

Kepel, G. (2002) *Jihad: the death of Political Islam*. London.

Laurence, B. (1990) *Defenders of God: the fundamentalist revolt against the modern age*, London.

Sivan, E. (1991). The enclave culture, *Fundamentalisms comprehended*. M. Marty and R. S. Appleby (eds.), Chicago.

Soloveitchik, H. (1994). Rupture and reconstruction: the transformation of contemporary orthodoxy. *Tradition* 28(4): 64-130.