FUNDAMENTALISM

By ELAINE GRAHAM

. . . fundamentalisms should be seen as a societal feature just as much as a religious one. They emerge as reactions to the pressures of late capitalist development.[1]

Introduction

ONE OF THE FEATURES OF THE SO-CALLED 'post-modern' age, it is argued, is a resurgence of the sacred. The proclaimed secularism of modernity has, like many other features of the western Enlightenment, been thrown into question. One of the most visible examples of the re-emergence of religion and spirituality which apparently reverses the trend of secularization is the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism. Fundamentalism manifests itself in diverse forms and is increasingly a global movement. In their various forms, religious fundamentalisms may be seen as conscious protests against modernity; but this article will argue that it is more accurate to typify fundamentalism as occupying an ambivalent space between modernity and postmodernity. Fundamentalisms define themselves in opposition to the fruits of the Enlightenment; and yet, far from being an erasure of modernity, fundamentalisms paradoxically reinforce and confirm many of its characteristics. Therefore, although fundamentalism – like another product of the contemporary West, the 'New Age' movement – is an experience of the resacralization of the world, it is also inconceivable independent of the logic of science, rationality and humanism. If fundamentalism is an example of 'postmodern' spirituality, therefore, it points us towards the complexity and diversity of religion in contemporary society.

We tend to think of fundamentalism as entailing a literalist approach to Scripture and revelation, such as the insistence of Protestant Christian fundamentalist groups on quoting biblical references to support particular teachings. Such use of Scripture eschews any tradition of biblical critical scholarship.[2] However, strictly speaking, it would be inaccurate to talk of Muslim fundamentalism, for example, in this context, because no such equivalent tradition of critical exegesis exists in Islam. Thus, whilst literalist readings do figure largely, it would be more appropriate to consider the unifying feature of all fundamentalisms – diverse though they may be in other respects – as entailing a

reaction to western modernity. It is therefore the complex and intertwining links between modernity, postmodernity and fundamentalism which will form the core of this essay. How is it that many of the achievements of modernity, whilst categorically rejected and eschewed by fundamentalism, actually form a critical part of its self-identity?

In this article, I will concentrate on some key aspects of religious fundamentalism, sketching out its historical origins, its contemporary contours and implicit spirituality. However, I will also return to the blend of modernity, anti-modernity and postmodernity which fundamentalist spirituality exhibits in dynamic and perplexing forms.

Contours of fundamentalism

It may be helpful to begin with a few definitions. 'Fundamentalism' actually emerged within a particular cultural and religious context, that of North American Protestant Christianity in the early twentieth century. Prominent evangelicals such as Billy Sunday and Arno Gaebelein sought to return to the 'fundamentals' of faith: a simple and strict lifestyle which eschewed the cosmopolitanism of urban America. The literal truth of Scripture and an emphasis on personal salvation were proclaimed in contradistinction to the more theologically and politically liberal 'Social Gospel'.[3] The controversy between liberals and conservatives over the teaching of evolutionary or biblical accounts of creation culminated in the famous Scopes trial in 1925, which resulted in the humiliation of the traditionalists.

Following this, the first wave of Protestant fundamentalism retreated to the Deep South of the United States, and only re-emerged in the 1970s as a more powerful and credible political force in the shape of the New Christian Right, or 'Moral Majority'.[4] However, by this time the term had also been applied to other, non-Christian, contexts. Recent collections of academic surveys of fundamentalism record similar traits and characteristics across many religious traditions: Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism.[5]

John Stratton Hawley refers to particular 'family resemblances' within a diversity of fundamentalist groupings which delineate their essential characteristics.[6] A number of such 'contours' of fundamentalism may be discerned.

Religious idealism and resistance to the privatization of religion. Whilst adherents have a vibrant and genuine personal spirituality, fundamentalism also exhibits a conviction that the sacred – by which they mean their version of revelation – must be restored to the public domain. Reality and human existence are therefore not culturally contingent but innately, ontologically theocentric:

> . . . fundamentalists reject the notion that we know and believe and have our being within time and space as the sole arena of human agency; that belief and practice is therefore historically conditioned and contingent; and that, accordingly, as all belief systems and religions are thus bound, no one of them holds an *a priori* advantage over any other in terms of cognitive truth claims. Such assumptions threaten fundamentalist purchase on unassailable identity, as would any socio-moral system based on the post-Enlightenment notion that we cannot know revelation from a transcendent God . . . except and only through the radically limited capacities of the human mind.[7]

Direct and authoritative experience of divine revelation. This revealed truth is unified, absolute and unchanging. It may be revealed through sacred texts or through charismatic and inspired individuals. Christian and Muslim fundamentalists in particular defend the inerrancy of Scripture and reject the insights of western critical scholarship.

The demands of faith are unequivocal and unconditional. Marty and Appleby talk about the 'scandalous' nature of commitment; since human beings are subject to the absolute rule of a transcendent God, the standards and expectations of 'reasonable' belief represent a compromise to human standards. What may appear impossible or excessive to earthly, fallen eyes is simply further evidence of the mastery and otherness of God. The fragmentation of the modern world is to be replaced by unity and comprehensiveness; the human will to be subsumed under the all-embracing and total authority of God.

Similarly, the boundaries of the faithful community are clearly and strictly delineated. God is demanding, and human beings, as those who stray from his laws, must maintain constant vigilance and strive for moral perfection. Whilst doctrinal orthodoxy is a clear sign of such exclusiveness, distinctive dress or other practices may also be adopted.[8]

History as the unfolding of divine purpose, rather than temporal events. Fundamentalism is often explicitly eschatological or messianic, and present history is interpreted in the light of the forthcoming apocalypse which is forecast in Scripture (as a literal not allegorical event). The post-Enlightenment idea of human agency as the prime mover and subject of history is rejected.

A belief in the immanent presence of evil in the world. Whilst God is believed to be supreme in history, there is also a strong conviction that the contemporary world is the arena for the confrontation between good and evil. Sometimes such evil is personified; many Christian fundamentalists hold to a belief in the person of Satan. In other

contexts, evil is represented by a hated institution or opponent; during the cold war, many North American fundamentalists interpeted scriptural accounts of the apocalypse in terms which identified the Soviet Union as the 'Antichrist'. In the years leading up to the Iranian revolution of 1979, Muslim activists elevated their hatred towards the United States for its support of the Shah into mythological proportions. Islam provided the counter-force to an unpopular regime which represented the corrosive and corrupting evils of the West, and religion provided the resources for a campaign of opposition that was portrayed as moral and theological as much as political.

A dualistic view of the universe. Whatever the identity of its enemies, and however they may be personified, fundamentalism displays a profound dualism in its cosmology in such an epic struggle between good and evil. But in embodying evil in Satan or in an external source, fundamentalists effectively project evil away from themselves and deny their own inner ambivalence. It is the outside world, beyond the boundaries of the select group, which is perceived as hostile, a place of moral degeneracy and unbelief, in which Satan lurks to entrap the unwary. Opposition or resistance to the programme of fundamentalist groups is interpreted as the work of the forces of evil seeking to undermine the sovereignty of God as found in the one true religion.

Missionary zeal and proselytism. Some fundamentalist groups, such as the Muslim *dakwah* of Malaysia, and some ultra-Orthodox Jews, regard their mission as being to awaken the dormant and lapsed consciousness of their co-religionists in the name of a mass spiritual revival.

Whilst much of their self-understanding seems defined in terms of opposition to modernity, however, fundamentalism betrays a more complex and nuanced relationship. It is not a withdrawal from the public sphere; it is an attempt to influence public policy by direct intervention. In the West fundamentalism uses the techniques and institutions of secular democracy. Tele-evangelists and their successors use the sophisticated methods of the media.[9] In Bradford, West Yorkshire, Muslims broadcast during Ramadan on a radio wavelength under the auspices of 'Fast FM'. Ostensibly this is to support the faithful during their observances, but the broadcasts have also provoked significant political debate within the community in the wake of controversy over the provision of religious education in state schools. Modern means are therefore used to maintain the boundaries and identity of the community; and tradition is sustained and protected by recourse to up-to-date methods.

Modernity and anti-modernity

Fundamentalism is, therefore, as much a product of modernity as its enemy. It rejects the modern world and yet it is modernity which crucially defines the identity of fundamentalism. In this respect, as Marty and Appleby state, '. . . fundamentalism has proven itself *selectively traditional and selectively modern*'.[10]

Yet what does it mean to identify fundamentalism as caught between modernity and postmodernity? This requires us to ask questions about how to locate modernity and postmodernity in relation to one another. Is postmodernity a successor phase to modernity, a collapse and negation of the modern project? Or is it a critique and revision of modernism, drawing out ambivalences and contradictions present at the heart of Enlightenment thinking? I believe that it is important to place the current 'crisis' of modernity and debates about the possible existence of something called 'postmodernity' in historical and philosophical context. Both epochs are more than sets of ideas, and if we are to understand any postmodern spirituality we must appreciate the context within which it has emerged onto the public stage. I shall try to indicate how I regard modernity and postmodernity as the product of particular economic, technological, political and intellectual factors.

> Something has happened, is happening, to Western societies. The beginning of this transition can be dated somewhat arbitrarily from after the First World War in Europe and after the Second World War in the United States. Western culture is in the middle of a fundamental transformation; a 'shape of life' is growing old. The demise of the old is being hastened by the end of colonialism, the uprising of women, the revolt of other cultures against white Western hegemony, shifts in the balance of economic and political power within the world economy; and a growing awareness of the costs as well as the benefits of scientific and technological 'progress'.[11]

Between the years 1750 and 1848 a revolution occurred which radically transformed human society and human self-understanding in the West. One feature of this was the birth of a new intellectual and epistemological world, associated with the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. What distinguishes this particularly modern understanding and practice of science is primarily a commitment to empiricism. All knowledge about the natural and social world can be grounded in observable and verifiable facts, which can be seen as the reflections of an external and objective truth. A neutral yet self-evidently emancipatory reason is exercised via free and open enquiry,

and the application of a scientific method offers disclosure of the world as it really is, undistorted by superstition or speculation.

Philosophically, 'the Enlightenment' was the sum total of a philosophical commitment to the primacy and hegemony of human reason. The exercise of rationality would, it was believed, bring about the abolition of corrupt religion, facilitate the flowering of human knowledge and enlightenment, and set humanity on the path to unprecedented prosperity and justice.[12]

The genesis of the modern is also associated with the massive economic and technological developments which contributed to the emergence of industrial capitalism in Europe and North America. This entailed massive social movements such as large-scale factory production and a market economy. The huge demographic shifts associated with the intensification of factory production and the accompanying urbanization effected the decline of a social order founded on fixed and unchanging hierarchies and allegiances, and replaced it with a system characterized by the social and sexual division of labour. Finally, modernity may be characterized as an era of the dominance of secular forms of power and influence, especially notions of government, authority and the nation-state.

By contrast, postmodern science challenges positivist and mechanistic views of reality, arguing that objective truth is impossible. All knowledge is itself the product of the experimental process, reflecting the self-interest of its authors, so that knowledge is inseparable from the exercise of ideology and power.[13]

Postmodernity also questions the self-evidence and benevolence of human reason. Its limits and its totalitarian tendencies have been exposed in the atrocities of the Holocaust, in the environmental crisis and in the instability of the individual psyche. All these puncture the confidence of the moderns to foresee unlimited progress and emancipation in the unleashing of the powers of human rationality.[14]

In contrast to forms of liberal religion, fundamentalism brooks no compromise with modernity. Theological modernism emphasizes a view of revelation which stresses reason and human experience and a suspicion of the supernatural and irrational; its model of history rejects direct and miraculous divine intervention in favour of a God revealed in human agency and evolutionary change. However, fundamentalism refuses to modify its cosmology in the light of the insights of science and eschews literary-critical readings of Scripture. It espouses a God who is directly experienced in the lives of the faithful and may be manifest in glossolalia, signs and wonders and miraculous healing.

(Whilst many of the charismatic movements in Christianity are not fundamentalist, they too reflect a turn away from logocentric, reason-centred liberal religion towards a sharper definition of the Spirit as disruptive and subversive of human reason.) Fundamentalists, too, question the dethronement of the divine implied in the Enlightenment's proclamation of secular humanism, and stress the inaccessibility and mystery of truth to the human mind unaided by divine revelation.

Fundamentalism shares with postmodernism a sense of crisis, of one era passing away; both anticipate apocalyptic change. Whilst secular postmodernists envisage this as fragmentation and meaninglessness, religious postmodernists preach the restoration of divine rule and spiritual awakening. However, it is also important to emphasize that many aspects of such postmodern fundamentalism, whilst displaying a clear and vocal scepticism towards the principles of liberal humanism and secularism, are also themselves uniquely a product of modernity.

Unlike some contemporary religious sects – such as the North American Amish and the European Hasidic Jews – (post)modern fundamentalists do not seek a withdrawal from mainstream society. As I have already argued, a distinguishing feature of contemporary fundamentalism is its explicit interventionism in social affairs and its willingness to utilize the methods of mass communication and popular democracy to advance its aims. The political activism of religious fundamentalists has been a crucial element in their re-emergence onto the contemporary scene. Examples are the fundamentalist presence within the New Christian Right in the USA and within various groupings campaigning against liberal abortion legislation or on other 'pro-family' platforms; and the leadership afforded to anti-colonial theocratic governments by Muslim *'ulema* (religious teachers).

Fundamentalists also maintain a residual commitment to empiricism in their view of revealed truth, a perspective for which they are indebted to modernity and the scientific revolution. Positivism, a central element of the epistemology of modernity, claims that the 'real world' is available and accessible to rational enquiry. Fundamentalists make just this sort of claim about the sacred texts and scriptures of their traditions and about their apprehension of divine intervention in the form of miracles, prophecies or other forms of guidance. Yet the belief that a 'real world' exists independent of human enquiry, that objective truth is possible which transcends the particular and immediate location of its human interpreters, is not a postmodern idea, but a modern one. Thus, whilst fundamentalists perceive themselves as in direct conflict with modern science, they deploy a similar degree of rationalism:

> The religion-versus-science debate pits against one another groups who share a common intellectual style: each claims to possess the truth. Believers, like rationalists, stress consciousness, clarity, and control. Morality is codified; sacred narratives are taken literally and sometimes attempts are made to support them with 'scientific evidence'; all sort of truths are listed and enumerated; scripture becomes inerrant. Furthermore conscious consent to membership in the community of belief . . . becomes increasingly important.[15]

Fundamentalism is therefore a mirror image of post-Enlightenment modernity, emphasizing, just as positivist science and liberal humanism did, that the application of human reason will provide an infallible account of reality, and will ultimately offer a total perspective on everything. However, though fundamentalism rejects human rationality, it mimics modern rationality's claims to complete control. In stressing literal, empirical truths as the only true source of religious faith and spiritual enlightenment, fundamentalists negate ways of knowing which emphasize other dimensions of human experience: the mysterious, the symbolic and the sacramental.

Thus, when we talk about fundamentalism as a postmodern form of religion, we must see its deep ambivalence towards rationality, empiricism and totalizing systems. It is more than a simple return to the simplicities of a premodern past, for two main reasons. Firstly, it depends on the inventions and methods of the *recent* past in order to propagate its own articulation of the idealized *distant* past. Secondly, its nostalgia for the past is selective and invented – rather like postmodern styles of nostalgia and pastiche. The religious heritage upon which fundamentalists draw is partial and subjective, and does not attend to the historical context or cultural peculiarities of each component part of tradition. In stressing the unity and inerrancy of the authoritative past, therefore, fundamentalists are as eclectic and selective as those adherents of 'New Age' movements who mix and merge spiritualities from the supermarket of religions.

Fundamentalism and gender

Whilst most studies of fundamentalism treat gender as a secondary feature (generally focusing on the male-dominated leadership), some see the gender relations and gender representations within fundamentalist groups as a primary and essential aspect of their self-identity.[16]

Many of the favourite campaigns of fundamentalist groups display the defining self-identity of fundamentalism in reaction to modernity. Typically, fundamentalist pro-life and anti-feminist campaigns would

not be on the agenda if it were not for the medicalization of abortion and the political impetus and vocabulary of first- and second-wave feminism, both products of liberal humanism and modern science. Modern feminism would have been impossible without the impetus afforded by Enlightenment liberalism. The earliest modern feminists, such as Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill, used the rhetoric of secular humanism to advance women's claim to participate in the public sphere of politics, education and the law.

The chaos and moral degeneracy of modernity is, for many fundamentalists, epitomized by such trends as feminism, the legalization of abortion, gay and lesbian rights and the fragmentation of the nuclear family. The restoration of clearly demarcated gender roles and a return to traditional sexual morality will, it is argued, lead to a resurgence of proper values.

The segregation and differentiation of the sexes is seen as part of a divinely decreed order which has been disrupted by the advent of godless modernity, secularism and disobedience. In an attempt to restore control over lost certainties in the face of modernity, fundamentalists turn their attention to those groups who have most benefited from secular humanism: women and sexual nonconformists. Women in particular form a symbolic target. Yet the image propagated reveals profound ambivalence. They are characterized both as the symbols of virtue – thus requiring the protection of men from the corrupting forces of modernity and apostasy – and yet also the authors of sin and chaos, needing to be circumscribed and controlled.

Brown thus argues that the chaos of modernity is transferred to a more accessible moral project by being translated into anxieties about gender and sexuality. Her analysis offers a psychoanalytic interpretation, attributing to the male leadership of fundamentalist groups an unconscious motivation founded on the implicit control of women. Woman is conceived as the repressed 'Other' to masculine consciousness, representing that which must be controlled and/or denied in order for patriarchal culture to come into being. The feminine (m)other becomes the repository of the vulnerabilities of childhood – dependency, intimacy, the bodily and sensuality – which represent all that the adult male must deny in order to assume his place in patriarchal society. The idealized past of fundamentalism, associated with the unproblematic and unchanging domestic and familial role of women, is also therefore a recourse to nostalgia for the simplicities and securities of childhood and uncomplicated nurture.

Thus Brown argues that fundamentalist religions fulfil a psychological need and represent an attempt to control the repressed (m)other.

There may be a great deal of truth in this analysis, and it is attracting new interest through the work of neo-psychoanalytic writers such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. For them, the repressed unconscious and the identification of women with the (m)other are reflected in the marginal position of religion in secular culture. The return of the spiritual and the religious in this context represents another (post-modern) resistance to secular modernity. However, many of the other symbolic features of the repressed feminine which fundamentalism seeks to circumscribe are the very aspects of human experience which rational modernity would also repudiate: the bodily, the affective, the domestic. So once more the question arises: does fundamentalism reinforce or subvert Enlightenment rationality?

Brown is not attempting to explain fundamentalism entirely in reductionist psychological terms. Social movements are more than the sum of individual consciousnesses; they emerge within particular historical and cultural contexts. Brown's analysis may indicate a factor common to all fundamentalisms, but a full understanding would still need to address the issue of its re-emergence at this specific point in history. It is therefore important to explain the contextual differences and cultural peculiarities of fundamentalisms as much as their shared features.

Also, although Brown's contention is that 'fundamentalism will always involve the control of women'[17] it is crucial that any analysis does not portray women as merely the objects of gender stereotyping at the expense of focusing also on their active participation in fundamentalist religions. Failure to study this would, paradoxically, highlight the dynamics of gender as a category but marginalize women as agents in creating and sustaining the gender regimes of fundamentalism.

Thus, as Brown herself acknowledges, the attitude of fundamentalism to sexuality and gender is not an answer in itself, but merely serves as a pointer towards further enquiry. The deeper threats and uncertainties of modernity may be too complex for ready articulation; the human urge for control is thus transferred to the more accessible targets of sexual identity, morality and gender roles.

Conclusion: fundamentalism and spirituality

> In this period marked by the gradual breakdown of Enlightenment rationalism and Euro-American hegemony in the world, something more is necessary. We need help in accepting ourselves as organic creatures enmeshed in our world rather than continuing to posture as cerebral masters granted dominion over it. This requires that we learn to trust the wisdom of our mute flesh and accept the limitations

> inherent in our humanity. If we could do this, it would radically diminish our scapegoating of women and all the other 'others' who provide a convenient screen on which to project fears.[18]

The spirituality of fundamentalism envisages clear boundaries, fixed certainties and absolute truth. The objective appears to be to establish a firm and unchanging vantage-point from which clear faith can be unequivocally proclaimed in the midst of a changing and complex world. Is fundamentalism therefore, spiritually speaking, a defence against change, uncertainty and complexity? Its espousal of certainty and its closely circumscribed definitions of community seem to be means by which exposure to the challenges and contradictions of the outside world are kept to a minimum. The result is a spirituality which at some levels provides security for communities under threat or solidarity for those engaged in resisting a common enemy, yet remains inflexible and unresponsive to change or challenge. It is therefore a kind of spiritual blanket: comforting and warming, but potentially smothering too.

One of the future trends of our nascent postmodern era may well be a resurgence of the sacred, as many commentators have observed. However, such a refutation of the secularization thesis is no reason to assume a resumption of liberal hegemony. A more likely trend is one of religious fragmentation, leading to competing extremes with few points of compromise. The revival of postmodern spiritualities is manifested not in a return to old certainties but in a very uneven and patchy reinvention of selected elements of the past. Fundamentalism is a potent force within our modern democratic political processes; unlike sectarian premodern religious groupings, fundamentalists are highly visible and politically mobilized. In a culture where the majority remain religiously indifferent at the least or passively well-disposed at the most, those who are religiously committed draw clearer and tighter boundaries around themselves and exert an influence in the public domain which is disproportionate to their strength, simply because of the intensity of their conviction.

My own preferred interpretation of postmodernity is that it exposes the limitations of the totalizing claims of modernity, yet cannot disinvent the fruits of humanism, liberalism and science. We must proceed with a greater degree of humility, aware of the occlusions, limitations and destructive potential of the modern era. If the resurgence of religion in the postmodern age reveals to a great extent the *hubris* of Enlightenment modernity, then so much the better. But there is a danger of a fundamentalist reaction, unconsciously mirroring the

excesses of modernity in pursuit of certainty. Postmodern spirituality must find a way of responding creatively to the complexities, differences and mysteries of contemporary experience, and resist the impulse to posit too much certainty.

NOTES

[1] G. Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: believing without belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p 204.
[2] J. Barr, *Fundamentalism* (second edition, London: SCM Press, 1981).
[3] P. Beyer, *Religion and globalization* (London: Sage, 1994), p 118.
[4] Beyer, *Religion and globalization*, pp 114–134.
[5] See, for example, Beyer, *Religion and globalization* (as above, n 3); L. Caplan, *Studies in religious fundamentalism* (London: Macmillan, 1987); J. S. Hawley (ed), *Fundamentalism and gender* (Oxford University Press, 1994); M. Marty and S. Appleby (eds), *Fundamentalisms observed* (University of Chicago, 1991).
[6] Hawley, *Fundamentalism and gender*, p 19.
[7] Marty and Appleby, *Fundamentalisms observed*, p 818.
[8] Marty and Appleby, *Fundamentalisms observed*, p 821.
[9] S. Bruce, *Pray TV: televangelism in America* (London: Routledge, 1990).
[10] Marty and Appleby, *Fundamentalisms observed*, p 825.
[11] J. Flax, *Thinking fragments: psychoanalysis, feminism and postmodernism in the contemporary west* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p 5.
[12] S. Hall and B. Gieben (eds), *Formations of modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992).
[13] F. Barker, P. Hulme and M. Iversen (eds), *Postmodernism and the re-reading of modernity* (Manchester University Press, 1992).
[14] S. Hall, D. Held and T. McGrew (eds), *Modernity and its futures* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992); Marty and Appleby, *Fundamentalisms observed*, pp 824–825.
[15] K. McCarthy Brown, 'Fundamentalism and the control of women' in Hawley, *Fundamentalism and gender*, pp 175–201, at p 179.
[16] Brown, 'Fundamentalism', p 179.
[17] Brown, 'Fundamentalism', p 176.
[18] Brown, 'Fundamentalism', p 197.