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THE FUNDAMENTALIST PARADIGM AND ITS DILEMMAS

NIELS C. NIELSEN, Jr.

Contemporary Fundamentalist Phenomena

Recent decades have seen a worldwide increase in belligerency and rhetoric by fundamentalist parties in a variety of religions – Sikhism, Hinduism and Buddhism as well as Islam and Christianity. Claiming the authority of scripture, these conservatives of the far right do battle for the truths of their faith. Their absolutism and uncritical homiletical language often resonates with folk piety. Much is being written in criticism of “fundamentalist phenomena” by sociologists and even by historians.¹ Too little is being said in clarification of what is going on by theologians, as they judge it to be simply obscurantist.²

Harvey Cox, in his recent book, *Religion in the Secular City*, is an exception.³ Cox assigns Protestant fundamentalism – along with Liberation Theology – a dynamic role in the post-modern revival of religion. Of course, in the end he denies that fundamentalism will become at last victorious because of the dilemmas intrinsic in the position. Not only are its advocates unable to come to terms with the critical historical study of the Bible. Even in their intransigency, they are caught in the either/or between defensiveness and accommodation. Does this limitation extend to so-called fundamentalists in other religions?

James Davison Hunter in his recent study, *Evangelicalism, the Coming Generation*, suggests that it does in his summary discussion of the far right in Judaism, Islam and Japanese Buddhism.⁴ Classifying low church American fundamentalism as one type of Evangelicalism, he finds major similarities and differences crossculturally; among the latter, for example, is the greater emphasis on orthopraxis in both Judaism and Islam. Yet common dilemmas range across the board from family morals and social concerns to debate about who is included and excluded in salvation. Fundamentalists have become politicized worldwide. When fundamentalist exclusiveness and intolerance is carried over into politics, the outlook becomes a wider community concern.

Social and literary criticism of fundamentalism is not new. Mencken caricatured Bryan following the Scopes Trial and Sinclair Lewis wrote his novel, *Elmer Gantry*.⁵ Lewis' Elmer Gantry has been revived recently, in press attacks on the Bakers and their PTLs as well as the Pentecostal faith healer, Oral Roberts. Fundamentalist controversy about evolution continues in the United States and today centres on “scientific creationism”. Actually, it was a change of scientific model, occasioned by the work of Darwin, which forced a new religious orientation. Paley's natural theology became outdated. Today, the debate about creation myths (often set in obscurantist terms of scientism vs. fundamentalism) has not slowed the growth of the New Religious Right. Still, contact with new cultural and scientific world views cannot be avoided over a long period of time. This is the case in Islam and Buddhism as much as Christianity. The practical dilemma is one of some accommodation or increased defensiveness.

Hunter, in his sociological analysis, calls attention to the way that boundaries are shifting.⁶ Assuredly, fundamentalism has a new dynamic, fuelled, for example, by television evangelists who use computer technology to personalize correspondence with their supporters as well as by new oil riches in the Middle East. But in education the dilemmas of the position are more evident. In the United States, Hunter insists, even the most dedicated conservative institutions do not escape fully the dilemmas of secularization. Hunter's research, for example, shows that evangelicals attending secular private or state universities retain their conviction in a larger percentage than those who attend religiously conservative schools.⁷ The reason, oversimplified, is that even in carefully guarded orthodox institutions, the fundamentalist literalist model faces new challenges whenever epistemological and historical questions are raised critically in the teaching of the humanities.

Initially, fundamentalist conviction was as a reaction against evolution and higher criticism. The position has been inspired from the outset by the belief that essential tenets of the faith have been given away in compromise. It is interesting that in the second wave of American fundamentalism, following the second world war, Billy Graham and his entourage used the name “Evangelical” to distinguish their outlook from an earlier less open and more polemical stance. But his first premises remained premillennial dispensational. Graham explained:

If by fundamentalist you mean “narrow”, “bigoted”, “prejudiced”, “extremist”, “emotional”, “snake handler”, “without social conscience” – then I am definitely not a fundamentalist. However, if by fundamentalist you mean a person who accepts the authority of Scriptures, the virgin birth of Christ, the atoning death of Christ, His bodily resurrection, His second coming, and personal salvation by faith through grace, then I am a fundamentalist.⁸

Most recently, Jerry Falwell, taking over Graham's role as an adviser to politicians again has preferred the designation “Fundamentalism” in what he acknowledges as a “red neck” theology.⁹

Paradigm theory

Both Graham and Falwell appeal to religious conviction. Is there a theological reference – as distinguished from a simply sociological or psychological one – which can help to explain and illumine the “fundamentalist phenomenon”? Hans Küng in his recent book, *Theology for the Third Millennium*, develops a theory of religious paradigm or model changes which borrows from Thomas Kuhn's analysis of scientific revolutions. He invokes periodization of theological models together with a limited historicism against the growing conservatism in his own religious community, the Roman Catholic Church. Can it be applied more generally to fundamentalism?

On Kuhn's analysis, a given paradigm reigns in the scientific community during a particular era, until it is challenged by changed cultural circumstances, new data and ideas. Eventually, it is replaced by another model: for example, the Ptolemaic by the Copernican world view, Newton's physics by that of Einstein, or Paley's fixed teleological model by the evolutionary outlook of

Darwin. Scientists already initiated in the tradition of a particular model commonly resist change. It was biologists not just theologians who initially opposed the Darwinian revolution. Kuhn's point is not only that interpretative perspectives are not simply empirical or self-evident, but that paradigm changes are not brought about without radical discontinuity.

Hans Küng finds similar paradigm changes in religion – a thesis which Kuhn acknowledged was possible when he was asked about it by the theologian. Model shifts in religions' history bring discontinuity as well as continuity. Küng's examples include the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment and what he designates as the post-modern model, as well as the Theravada and Mahayanist Buddhist, and Sunni and Shi'ite Moslem perspectives. Thus, in Christianity, there has been an early apocalyptic-eschatological model, a Patristic model strongly influenced by Greek philosophy, medieval scholastic, Reformation and Counter Reformation models, as well as Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment models. Küng not only periodizes Christian history but the history of other faiths, Islam and Buddhism, for example. This periodization was welcomed at the Buddhist-Christian dialogue conference held at the University of Hawaii in 1984, by the distinguished Buddhist historian H. Nakamura.¹⁰ Recently, Küng has extended his analysis to Judaism and Chinese religion.

How would such periodization help to clarify the phenomenon of fundamentalism? Reference to its recent growth and development makes clear that the fundamentalist, too, has his paradigm, one which is historically conditioned. On Küng's interpretation, a model is not simply intellectual; it is rather both cultural and personal – a life-stance, a grid, through which the self and the world as well as deity are interpreted. Of course, this periodization challenges any absolutistic view of religion which premises a timeless absolutism – as in the case of fundamentalism. Truth is not denied, but any exhaustive description or formulation is challenged.

Arising in reaction against modernism and secularization, fundamentalism affirms a pre-Enlightenment paradigm in a post-Enlightenment era. When a past cultural synthesis is defended defensively – as in fundamentalism – the time bound character of religious knowledge becomes doubly evident, Küng argues. The way out is not the absolutizing of a particular model from the past, but at the very least a change of outer garments – in the words of Pope John XXIII whom Küng quotes so often. By its historicization, Küng's paradigm theory makes clear the indirect and symbolic character of knowledge in both science and religion.

The criticism is that fundamentalism is distinguished today by its ahistorical and literalistic paradigm. In many respects, it embodies retrogression to a pre-Enlightenment view, as we have already noted. In this model theory, fundamentalism need not be limited to a single culture, Christian, Islamic or Buddhist. In fact, it has a crosscultural outreach. To be sure there are significant differences between fundamentalisms in various religions, but also meaningful analogies. Their popular following arises in part from a revival of folk piety in a post-modern era in which secularization is no longer on the rise. But fundamentalism is only one

response, one model among others. How seriously ought it to be taken theologically?

Of course, the roots of religious models are not just intellectual but existential and emotional in life stance. Paradoxically, fundamentalism's non-symbolic type of religious language often has done more to invigorate symbolism than a more abstract appeal. In spite of all differences between fundamentalists belonging to major faiths, a common premise joins them. It is that hermeneutical subtleties such as the identification of symbol and myth are not to be allowed in interpreting the written Word of God. The plain evident meaning of the text is to be honoured. But this too is a theological model, and the perennial question is whether such a programme can be carried out without ambiguity with respect to religious meaning and symbolism. Most fundamentalists do not understand that symbolic language is not limited to religion, but takes many different forms, artistic and literary, political and even scientific. Our criticism is that they make a too literalistic – and thus reductionistic claim for religious truth.

An often unrecognized dilemma is to be found at the centre of such an outlook: on the one hand, a highly symbolic mythical world view dominates. On the other hand, symbolism is not recognized as such but treated instead with radical literalism. Put otherwise, fundamentalism seems to honour the major symbols of the tradition (creation, eschatology, Christology), but in fact destroys any gain from such recognition by a reductionistic dogmatism. A common paradigm or model, shared by fundamentalists in a variety of religions, at least analogically unites them. What is held in common is an intolerant absolutist and atemporal premise which ignores the history of religion, and in consequence allows no pluralism within religions or between them.

This much can be said in defence of the fundamentalist stance. Today, more than before, it has become apparent that secularization is not as far advanced in the popular mind as had been believed.¹¹ The death of the sacred – and with it the religious sense of life – has been announced prematurely. In fact, there is a large range of popular religious conviction which is not put off by literalistic piety. To be sure, fundamentalism's apocalyptic model at times has dramatic consequences which are not limited just to pious imagination. The destruction and killing envisaged so literalistically in premillennialist visions of the future have an all too real contemporary counterpart in Moslem and Sikh violence. Today, triumphalism of one sort or another belongs to much of the new religious right. In a variety of religions, "fundamentalists" can be distinguished by the conviction that their non-pluralistic form of religion will outlast and overcome "secular humanism". Bruce Lawrence, Professor of Islamics and the History of Religion at Duke University, observes:

Islamic fundamentalism is a major new departure in the most recent chapter of Islamic history. Fundamentalists, unlike their traditionalist counterparts, are determined to rekindle the glory of Islam, not by ignoring or retreating from the West, but by confronting, challenging, matching – and in God's good time, with His grace – defeating it.¹²

Fundamentalism and the history of religion

In this situation, fundamentalism is illumined significantly when it is viewed against the background of the longer history of religion. The late Mircea Eliade once remarked that for the first time – now in the latter part of the 20th-century – it has become possible to write a complete history of religion.¹³ Scholars now know, as they did not before, what the human religious past has been in virtually every era and place on the globe. To be sure, there are esoteric meanings – of myths as well as rituals – which remain closed for lack of written records. Yet thanks to modern archeological and anthropological research, there is a greatly expanded knowledge in the late 20th-century. In reflecting about even so historically unselfconscious a movement as fundamentalism, this past ought not to be disregarded as in the case of most of its adherents. Characteristically, they treat protohistory – indeed all of religious life before the advent of Christianity or Islam – simply from the point of view of their own paradoxically literalistic mythology.

Today, the fundamentalist like the secular humanist (to use these identifications very generally to identify the far right and the far left) finds little meaning in the early history of religion. The fundamentalist dismisses it summarily as idolatrous and without revelation; the secular humanist views it as in terms of natural evolutionary growth (if indeed he sees any meaning in it at all). In either case, the dogmas of revelation or scientific progress have replaced it. Eliade, by contrast, is convinced that there has been a significant loss of the sense of meaning in the later more secularized eras. His view, to be sure, is the reverse of any simplistic doctrine of progress or evolution – naturalistic or theistic – in the history of religion.

Part of the strength of Eliade's scholarship is that he called attention to meanings in the religious past which were often overlooked. He insisted, most of all, that mythology is vital to religious life. Modern man's resistance to the symbolism of the sacred has led to its impoverishment.¹⁶ Eliade argues that the human quest for salvation is at the same time a quest for being in the face of finitude and death. Moderns only reflect their own subjectivist bias when they suppose that the sacred – equivalent with the real on this view – is simply invented rather than encountered and discovered. "Secular humanism", by contrast, may be understood as an attempt to exclude religious symbols. Paul Kurtz, defending this position, argues that life has no intrinsic meaning.¹⁷ Fundamentalists – opposing such a point – have little difficulty in attracting a following!

It ought not to be overlooked that folk piety – with its long history – is a progenitor of fundamentalism. Of course, primitive and archaic eras did not make our abstract distinctions of natural and supernatural, immanence and transcendence. Dominant in their world view was the manifestation of the sacred, kratophany.¹⁴ The sacred was self-evidently the real. Eliade, himself Rumanian in background, took his cue from the German historian of religion, Rudolph Otto's pioneering study, *The Idea of the Holy*.¹⁵ Eliade saw in it a confirmation of his own phenomenological approach. Otto argued that if we wish to understand what goes on in religion – past and present – we ought not to turn first to dogmatic

theologies or the history of ideas. Explicit theological interpretation comes quite late in time and is often retrospective (a claim almost entirely ignored by fundamentalists).

Eliade is sure the evidence shows that homo sapiens has lived in awe of sacred power, conceived as the *mysterium tremendum*, virtually since the beginning of their life on our planet. In this setting, fundamentalist claims about "scientific creationism" become patently absurd. Creation myths are not just pre-scientific cosmology but an explanation of the world in terms of sacred power.¹⁸ Creation stories were re-enacted at the beginning of the new year, in the sacred season, in order to recover the power of the gods which had been present at the beginning. The universe was renewed through myth and ritual. New strength was given to life and the human situation in this way.

Actually, television evangelists – reviving mythology – at times appear to have a shaman-like quality. The theme of shamanism is explored in one of Eliade's major books.¹⁹ He views the shaman as a pivotal figure in the history of religion whose esoteric qualities loomed large in primitive and archaic religion. Is there a counterpart in modern television evangelists' emphasis on faith healing, ecstasy and glossalia? Eliade interestingly found similarities between the philosopher Heidegger's quest for being and shamanism. For himself, he was convinced that both are profound expressions of the quest for reality and the sacred.

Our claim is that Eliade's writing contributes to the present discussion of fundamentalism in his analysis of primitive and archaic religious models. His description of the way in which myth and ritual are linked to paradigms of sacred space and sacred time was innovative and illuminating. Eliade offered less help, however, in understanding the later religions with founders, particularly since what Karl Jaspers designates as the "Axial Period", from the eighth to the fifth centuries before the Common Era.²⁰ With respect to the latter, Küng's theory of paradigm changes is more helpful. Still, the conclusions of both scholars converge in measure in criticism of fundamentalism.

Fundamentalists expound the basic symbols of their respective traditions with singular literalness in order to maintain what they regard as the integrity of the faith. Our argument has been, however, that they do not avoid the dilemmas of religious language. The "hermeneutical question" – which fundamentalists do not ask – is what symbolic model will be used. The critical historical judgement must be that religion's past – in particular, its major symbols – are not the property of any single faith. Eliade argued that most if not all major religious symbols antedate the religions with founders. For the historian of religion, the question is not whether religions will borrow from each other, but only how and in what way. No doubt, earlier symbol systems were expanded and converted in terms of later faith traditions and conviction. But in this process, all symbols were not created *ex nihilo*.

To the present, major religions have a limited number of symbolic models from which they understand reality. Knowledge is never exhaustive conceptually, but identified in a variety of symbols, for example, deity,

creation, the fall, salvation and eschatology. In Küng's terms there are macro-, meso- and micro-paradigms.²¹ Particular doctrines fall under the second classification, their explication often under the third. In the case of Christianity, creation, Christology and redemption are meso- or micro-models in a larger macro-paradigm. Most important, it was first in the oral preliterate stage that creation, the new birth and passage into another life were symbolized in story. Actually, the preliterate stage produced the major myths and symbols which continue to have vitality to the present.

Today, the ahistorical mode in which the New Religious Right continues to view symbol and myth – literally – is the source of its dilemma. Fundamentalists' refusal to understand scriptural texts in terms of higher criticism leads to reductionism.²² From their point of view, anything short of biblicism does not speak to the central issues, and even if it happened to do so, it would distort them. Actually, religious knowledge has never been limited simply to written texts in the past. The language of the sacred has been recorded in scriptures. Its dynamic remains more existentially alive than the fundamentalist paradigm of verbal inspiration allows. Phenomenologically, there is a variety of models in the scriptures and tradition of a single religion as well throughout the larger history of religion.

What is clear, as Tillich emphasized, is that symbolic paradigms live and die.²³ Fundamentalism has grown because some modernist liberal as well as some more traditional ones have died. How much religious models are invented, how much discovered, need not be here decided. To say the least, there is a larger human interpretative element in both law and doctrine than fundamentalists allow. In the end, God must be described symbolically (or analogically) more than fundamentalists realize.²⁴ Our conclusion is that their literalism is one way, a very powerful one, in which popular piety invokes religious symbolism (generally without complete consistency or clarity). Fundamentalist language is not as simply scriptural or timeless as is claimed. It does not stand alone but has a historical background in revivalist developments in both Christianity and Islam. In both religions, its non-sacramental, highly verbalized model lives on in preaching, now conveyed through mass media.

FOOTNOTES

1. Scholarly studies include Marsden, George, *Fundamentalism and American Culture, the shaping of twentieth century evangelicalism, 1870-1925*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1981, and Peele, Gillian, *Revival and Reaction*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987. More popular commentary includes, Gritsch, Eric W., *Born Againism, perspectives on a movement*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1981, and Streiker, Lowell D., *The Gospel Time Bomb*, Buffalo, N. Y., Prometheus, 1984.
2. A serious theological attempt to appraise the new religious right – one which views it too optimistically – appears in Fackre, Gabriel, *The Religious Right and Christian Faith*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans, 1982.
3. Cox, Harvey, *Religion in the Secular City, towards a postmodern theology*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1984. Part One.
4. Hunter, James Davison, *Evangelicalism, the coming generation*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 214 *et seq.*
5. Lewis, Sinclair, *Elmer Gantry*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1927. Cf., Cairis, Huntington, ed., *The American Scene, a reader*, New York, Knopf, 1965, for a summary of Menken's ideas.
6. Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 157 *et seq.*
7. Cf., Gilkey, Langdon Brown, *Creationism on Trial, evolution and God at Little Rock*, Minneapolis, Winston Press, 1985.
8. *Look.*, February 7, 1956, p. 70.
9. Falwell, Jerry, *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon*, New York, Doubleday, 1981.
10. Nielsen, Niels C., Jr., "Buddhism and Christianity", *The Christian Century*, April 25, 1984, pp. 433-435, includes a report of the Hawaii Conference.
11. Cf., Cox, *op. cit.*

12. Lincoln, Bruce B., "The Fundamentalist Response to Islam's Decline", *Islam in the Modern World, The 1983 Paine Lectures in Religion*, ed. Raitt, Jill, University of Missouri-Columbia.
13. This comment was made at a session of the American Society for the Study of Religion of which Eliade was a member. Cf., Eliade, Mircea, *Histoire des croyances et des idées religieuses*, Paris, Payot, 1976, vol. I.
14. Eliade, Mircea, *Cosmos and History*, New York, Houghton Mifflin.
15. Otto, Rudolf, *Idea of the Holy, an inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*, tr. of 9th ed., London, Oxford University Press, 1936.
16. Eliade, Mircea, *Myth and Reality*, New York, Harper, 1963.
17. Kurtz, Paul, *The Transcendental Temptation, a critique of religion and the paranormal*, Buffalo, New York, Prometheus, 1986.
18. Eliade, *op. cit. Cosmos and History*.
19. Eliade, Mircea, *Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, New York, Pantheon, 1964.
20. Jaspers, Karl, *Origin and Goal of History*, New Haven, Yale, 1953.
21. Küng, Hans, *Theology for the Third Millennium*, tr. Peter Heinegg, New York, Doubleday, 1988.
22. Cf., Barr, James, *Beyond Fundamentalism*, Philadelphia, Westminster, 1984.
23. Tillich, Paul, *The Dynamics of Faith*, New York, Harper, 1957, p. 41 *et seq.*
24. *Ibid.*