

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Looking at fundamentalism

Texas governor Rick Perry recently announced that he will sponsor a gathering named “The Response” on August 6 in Houston. The event’s website calls it a nondenominational, apolitical Christian prayer meeting. However, Perry’s sponsorship right now, when he may decide to run for president, clearly makes it political. It’s evidently an attempt to collect names and rouse voters, whether for him personally or for political allies.



And although it’s not connected with any church denomination, it’s based only on one very narrow version of Christianity, which I see as a fundamentalist interpretation. The FAQ page of the event’s website, www.theresponseusa.com/faq.php, lists the beliefs it is based on, and they cover all six of the doctrines that American fundamentalism at its birth named as essential (those italicized at right).

Disturbing views

I find Perry’s stance and the rise of other politicians with similar views very disturbing. Like all states, Texas has many non-Christian residents as well as many Christians with a broader understanding of their faith. When any candidate or party promotes only one religion, and only in a fundamentalist version, they undermine not only that religion itself but also the religious freedom that we have cherished since the founding of our nation.

When I sent an e-mail about this to my *Connections* list, one responder said she felt we needed more people like Perry. Yet she also wrote, “I am not a fundamentalist but a United Methodist clergy person who believes in our church and nation.”



I find that disturbing. If she shares the beliefs that Perry’s prayer meeting says it promotes, she may be

A 20th-century invention

The term “fundamentalism,” explains theologian Lloyd Geering in his short book *Fundamentalism* ([free on the Internet](#)), derives from a series of twelve booklets entitled *The Fundamentals*, published between 1910 and 1915. Two wealthy U.S. oilmen had three million of the booklets distributed free to every pastor, Sunday School superintendent, and seminary student in America.



“The booklets were intended to counter the spread of liberal religious thought,” Geering reports, by reaffirming “what the writers took to be the fundamental and unchangeable doctrines of Christianity: *the infallibility of the Bible, the deity of Christ, the Virgin Birth, miracles, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the substitutionary view of the Atonement.*” Although these had never been seen as literal truths by all Christians, they came to define Christian fundamentalism.



As a result of the booklets, Geering tells us, the term “fundamentalist” was coined in 1920 by a Baptist journalist. He meant the word as a badge of honor, but because fundamentalists actively battled against modern knowledge based on scientific evidence, liberals soon came to use it as a term of abuse, a synonym for blind ignorance.

A loaded term—yet still necessary?

Today, conservatives and evangelicals are understandably sensitive to the tone of such criticism. Yet with anti-modern movements on the upswing in the nation and the world, the term fundamentalism may be more useful than ever, if we can only use it without hate or condescension.

We now recognize that there are Jewish, Islamic, and Hindu fundamentalists. We even use figurative phrases like “market fundamentalist” or “Constitutional fundamentalist.” As different as they are in some ways, these fundamentalisms all read their founding documents literally, hold them sacrosanct, and use them as weapons against modern social changes that feel threatening. So, rather than avoiding the word, perhaps we need to get clearer on what it represents.



failing to recognize the questionable roots and sometimes harmful consequences of those beliefs. This seems to be happening for many Christians who approach both religion and politics from a similar perspective.

What is fundamentalism?

These disturbing developments on the political scene have led me to review what constitutes religious fundamentalism, especially in Christianity.

In *Fundamentalisms Observed*, the start of a multi-volume study (Univ. of Chicago, 1991, Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds.), Nancy Ammerman cites features that set North American fundamentalism apart from traditional conservatism:

- *evangelism*: actively seeking converts for the salvation of individual souls;
- *inerrancy*: unwavering faith in the literal text of the Bible;
- *premillennialism*: a focus on the End Times, before Christ returns to establish a new 1000-year reign, in some cases implying the so-called Rapture of the born-again;
- *separatism*: uniformity of belief and withdrawal from those seen as sinners whom evangelistic efforts won't be able to convert.

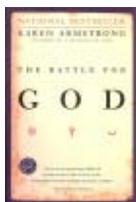


By this definition, the pastor who wrote me may indeed not be strictly a fundamentalist. But fundamentalism has other key traits.

Selective 19th-century nostalgia

Fundamentalists try to fortify their identity, Ammerman observes, by selectively retrieving certain doctrines and practices from the past. However, “when today’s fundamentalists speak of tradition or orthodoxy or ‘what Christians have always believed,’ they are most likely referring, even if unknowingly, to ideas, images, and practices that were prevalent in the late 19th century.”

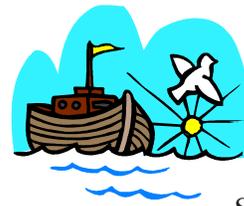
In *The Battle for God* (Ballantine, 2000), Karen Armstrong describes the development of fundamentalism in the three major monotheistic religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, and she also emphasizes how recent it is.



“There have always been people ...,” she observes, “who have fought the modernity of their day.” But Christian fundamentalism, she points out, is essentially a 20th-century movement, a unique reaction against the scientific and secular culture that first appeared in the West.

Reason and doctrine suppress myth

Armstrong explains that, unlike us, people of the ancient past saw two essential ways of thinking, speaking, and acquiring knowledge.



Myth, concerned with meaning, was primary. It directed attention to the eternal and universal, rooted in what we now call the unconscious mind.

Stories were not intended to be taken literally, but were more like an ancient form of psychology, bringing to light deep emotions that affect our lives. Myth became real when embodied in rituals of sacred significance. Narratives such as stories about the Israelites’ escape from Egypt were written to bring out this eternal dimension.

Logos, by contrast, was the rational, pragmatic, scientific thought that enabled people to function in the world. By the 18th century, Armstrong explains, Europeans and Americans saw logos as the only means to truth, so they discounted myth as false and superstitious. As a result, more and more of us, including fundamentalists, try to turn the myth of our faith into logos, making symbol into doctrine.

Fear of annihilation leads to militancy

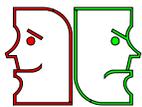
Marty and Appleby’s book describes fundamentalisms as embattled forms of spirituality that have emerged as responses to perceived crises. Because fundamentalists see life as a cosmic war between the forces of good and evil, they may see conventional political struggles as life-or-death issues. They fight back, using modern resources, even against people who merely seek compromise.

Armstrong sees fundamentalisms as a militant form of piety based on fear of losing oneself. She finds that the deep fear and anxiety in which fundamentalism is rooted cannot be assuaged by purely rational argument. She sees, too,



that under attack, fundamentalism invariably becomes more extreme, bitter, and excessive. In her view, this development leads to a defeat for the religious traditions the fundamentalists are fighting to preserve, because it leads them to overstress the more belligerent and intolerant aspects of their traditions, and to downplay *compassion*, which all world faiths insist is the primary religious virtue.

By the late 20th century, when Armstrong wrote *The Battle for God*, she was already seeing polarization and hostility in society, and a deep ravine running through American religion. Creationism and biblical literalism had become central to the Christian fundamentalist mindset. Polls showed the religious population of the U.S. divided into two almost equal, mutually antagonistic camps, with major denominations split down the middle and fundamentalists occupying the right of the political spectrum. Yet few Americans called themselves fundamentalists.



Definitions of fundamentalism vary

Even now, over a decade later, many U.S. conservatives and evangelicals don't see themselves as fundamentalists. Yet surprisingly many still fight for literal interpretations of certain doctrines and scriptures: especially, belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, his virgin birth, his unique supernatural divinity, and his unique ability to give followers access to heaven after death.

Many of these churchgoers fit a broader definition of fundamentalism, such as the one given by theologian Harvey Cox in *The Future of Faith* (HarperOne, 2009). He sees fundamentalisms as having these characteristics:



- insistence on obligatory belief systems;
- nostalgia for a mythical, uncorrupted past;
- claims to an exclusive grasp on truth.

Adding political “fundamentals”

By this broader definition, much conservative Christianity is indeed fundamentalist. And in practice, many conservatives seem to expand the definition, consciously or otherwise adding new “fundamentals” to the beliefs they treat as Christian. For many Americans today, these even include some political views that actually contradict the teaching and example of Jesus. I'm thinking of ...

- *Uncritical patriotism*—seeing America as uniquely good, uniquely deserving of God's favor, and uniquely called to act on God's behalf. The result of this American exceptionalism can be overt hostility to foreigners and immigrants.



- *Unfettered capitalism*. God's call to protect the poor, strangers, widows, and orphans goes almost unheard as companies become giant corporations and the market gains near-absolute power.



- “Family values” interpreted as *patriarchy* and unjust gender roles. Only one kind of family structure and sexuality is seen as Christian, and God is consistently portrayed as male.

- *Unchecked individualism*. Top priority goes to what will benefit the most fortunate individuals rather than to what will promote the common good.

This issue, many back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. For paper copies of any of the 18 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I'm a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

• A *selective focus* on side issues. Abortion is treated as evil, but denying health insurance and education funding is not. Assault rifles are allowed, but drug offenders get decades-long prison sentences.

I'm almost more concerned about Christians' mistakenly treating these opinions as Christian fundamentals than about their misinterpreting doctrines and scriptures literally.



What are the real fundamentals?

Fundamentalism is based on fear, say the writers I've read. It sees many aspects of the modern world as threats.

Reacting in fear is not always bad, but we can't lose sight of what really deserves fear and what doesn't. Aspects of modern life that we need to resist actively are those that cause real suffering or pose real threats to our continued existence.

When we focus on the fundamentals, we must be sure they're really fundamental. Christianity, along with the other major religious faiths, sees compassion as the central purpose of religion. If we want to be real religious fundamentalists, compassionate action should be our highest priority.

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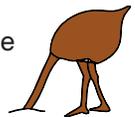
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What really threatens our existence? Perhaps ...



- Unjust distribution of food, water, education, and health care for the earth's inhabitants. Why should any basic needs be a privilege of the rich, rather than a universal right?
- Widespread causes of death and suffering such as war, poverty, and illiteracy. Surely God calls us to feel compassion for everyone on earth, not just for Americans.
- Environmental damage, leading to the destruction of earth and the natural world. Climate change and global warming already threaten future generations more irreversibly than financial debt.
- Ostrich-like behavior, refusing to hear or learn. If we pay attention only to family, friends, and personal enjoyment, and fail to seek out broader information, we can lose sight of the need for compassion.
- Apathy and inertia. Especially for those who are older or who feel more spiritually isolated, it can be hard to summon the energy to resist injustice. But if we support each other, we may be able to do more than we think.



What if defending against these threats is the really fundamental work that Christians need to do? Instead of drawing religious and political battle lines, how can we encourage each other to work *for* what is really important?