

Faith Pulpit

“Fundamentalism” Distorted and the Baptist Distinctives Resounded, Part 1

Christian “Fundamentalists” have traditionally defined themselves not only by doctrine, but also by a disposition of “earnestly contending for the faith” through persistent evangelism, ecclesiastical separation, and an aggressive confrontation of apostasy through spoken and written word. Recently, adherents have recognized a definite shift in the use of the label “fundamentalist” in the public media and popular culture (including frequent references made to “Islamic fundamentalists”), although few laypeople can explain the details of the noticeable alteration. This inability can be partially explicated through a curious irony: fundamentalists have generally avoided secularized institutions of higher education, and the shift in terminological definition began in academia without fundamentalists themselves present at the discussion table. Nevertheless, the change in meaning has trickled down from the cultural elite to the popular masses (as such matters eventually and inevitably do). The purpose of this two-part article is to explain the troublesome distortion of the term fundamentalist by many in our culture and to re-emphasize some “forgotten” Baptist distinctives within our contemporary context.

The 1993 edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica defined “fundamentalism” as a “conservative movement in American Protestantism arising out of the millenarian movement of the 19th century and emphasizing as fundamental to Christianity the literal interpretation and absolute inerrancy of the Scriptures, the imminent and physical Second Coming of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Birth, Resurrection, and Atonement.”¹ On the other hand, the 2007 edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica notes, “Once used exclusively to refer to American Protestants who insisted on the inerrancy of the Bible,² the term fundamentalism was applied more broadly beginning in the late 20th century to a wide variety of religious movements. Indeed, in the broad sense of the term, many of the major religions of the world may be said to have fundamentalist movements.”³

The 2007 edition continues by emphasizing that “fundamentalism” is not merely “traditional religiosity” but an “inherently political phenomenon” that is “inherently totalitarian, insofar as it seeks to remake all aspects of society and government on religious principles.” The article notes that many “fundamentalisms” “seek the violent overthrow of national governments and imposition of particular forms of worship and religious codes of conduct in violation of widely recognized human rights to political self-determination and freedom of worship.” Subsequent paragraphs describe “Christian fundamentalism,” “Jewish fundamentalism,” “Islamic fundamentalism,” “Sikh fundamentalism,” and “Hindu fundamentalism.”

One quickly notices several differences between the 1993 and 2007 descriptions of “fundamentalism” in the Encyclopaedia Britannica. First, the earlier edition reserved the term “fundamentalism” for a conservative Christian movement. The recent edition applies the term to reactionary movements in various world religions. Second, the earlier edition defined “fundamentalism” theologically, while the newest edition defines the term sociologically and politically. Third, the 2007 edition introduced the disturbing notions of physical violence and coercive terrorism into its portrayal of “fundamentalism.”

In June, 2006, the Marburg Journal of Religion published “Terrorism and Religious Fundamentalism: Prospects for a Predictive Paradigm,” by Douglas Pratt.⁴ The article states, “The term ‘fundamentalism’, broadly speaking, names today a religio-political perspective found in many if not all major religions in the contemporary world. Most disturbingly, it is associated with variant forms of religious extremism and thus religiously-oriented terrorism, in particular though by no means exclusively that of an Islamic ilk. Movements of a fundamentalist type are evident in Islam, certainly, but they may be found also in Christianity, in Hinduism, in Judaism and other religious communities. Contemporary fundamentalism is not the sole province of any one religion.”

Pratt goes on to list twelve interconnected and sequentially ordered “key factors” in his comparative analysis of “fundamentalisms.” He asserts, “Others may be adduced, but these twelve, and the way they are interconnected, need to be carefully understood. For it is these features, collectively and cumulatively that, I contend, move a fundamentalist mindset from the quirky to the critical, from atavism to aggression, from benign eccentricity to socially endangering activity.” The eleventh and twelfth “key factors” are “sanctioned imposition” and “legitimated extremism.” “The sanctioning of the imposition of the fundamentalist’s programme leads naturally to the twelfth and final factor of this analysis: extremist action is now legitimated.” Pratt provides the Japanese kamikaze pilots and Palestinian suicide bombers as two examples “of the outworking of the features of fundamentalism that culminate in extreme actions.”

It is interesting that the 2007 edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica and Pratt’s article both borrow heavily from the publications of the “Fundamentalism Project” (1987-1995). A failure to understand the cultural impact of the “Fundamentalism Project” is like the proverbial elephant in the living room:

immense and unacknowledged.⁵ The “Fundamentalism Project” was a highly influential, “decade-long interdisciplinary public policy study of antimodernist, antisectionalist militant religious movements on five continents and within seven world religious traditions.”⁶ The Academy of Arts and Sciences sponsored the extensive endeavor. Between 1991 and 1995, the University of Chicago Press published the results in five volumes, under the leadership of Martin E. Marty (University of Chicago) and R. Scott Appleby (University of Notre Dame). Paperback editions appeared between 1994 and 2004.

A good synopsis of the project is found in the introduction to the fifth volume, which will be further summarized here. The editors describe “fundamentalisms” as “contemporary militant and political religious movements which have organized in reaction to the prevailing patterns of modernization in their respective societies” (1). These movements demonstrate the “tendency of some members of traditional religious communities to separate from fellow believers and to redefine the sacred community in terms of its disciplined opposition to nonbelievers and ‘lukewarm’ believers alike” (1).

The first volume, *Fundamentalisms Observed* (1991), compiled “fourteen detailed studies of movements within Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, which, despite the substantive differences among them in terms of doctrine, cosmology, social composition, size, organization, and scope of influence, share certain general traits” (1).

“‘Fundamentalists’ within these historic religious traditions, convinced of the conspiratorial nature of secularists and liberal religionists, adopted a set of strategies for fighting back against what is perceived as a concerted effort by secular states or elements within them to push people of religious consciousness and conscience to the margins of society” (1). “The religious ideologues established new boundaries between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ and imposed a strict discipline on their followers; in many if not all cases, they were able to elevate their mission to a spiritual plane in which eschatological expectation and apocalyptic urgency informed even the most mundane world-building tasks of the group” (1). The project claimed to make a “powerful case” for “family resemblances” between diverse religious movements, “by virtue of the sheer cumulative weight of the separate testimonies by the regional and religious specialists the historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists who authored the various case studies.”⁷

The second and third volumes (*Fundamentalisms and Society* and *Fundamentalisms and the State*) were published as companion studies in 1993. They explored “the extent of influence of fundamentalist movements” in various “zones,” or spheres of human existence (2). The essays examined “fundamentalist” interaction with scientific research, the application of technology, family structures, education, domestic reform, politics, and economics. More importantly for the popular impact of the project, volume three also compared “a variety of militant fundamentalists in their use of violence as a political tool” (2).

The fourth volume, *Accounting for Fundamentalisms* (1994), explored “the dynamic character of religious radicalism as it moves into or away from a fundamentalist mode of relating to the outside world” (3). The collection of essays investigated “the conditions under which fundamentalist movements around the world change their ideological and behavioral patterns, resulting in either a greater or lesser engagement with people and forces outside the group or movement” (3).

The final volume, *Fundamentalisms Comprehended* (1995), summarized and interpreted the accumulated data. Early chapters included contributions by social psychologists, literary critics, anthropologists, and comparative rhetoricians. Chapters 16-19 formed the capstone of the entire project. They examined five ideological and four organizational properties shared by the various “fundamentalisms” as “family traits,” described four paradigms of “fundamentalist” behavior toward the outside world, and presented “a model for explaining the origins, emergence, growth, strategies, and decline of fundamentalist and fundamentalist-like movements” (4). The concluding essay summarized “matters of phenomenology, definition, theory, and comparative analysis” (5). At the same time, the volume acknowledged that “reality is often more complex and subtle than any ideal type will allow” (6).

The editors concluded, “Comparativists and theorists and polemicists on both sides of the question will continue to review the various usages of the word fundamentalism and continue to debate whether or not one (Western, originally Protestant Christian) term, even when emptied of its original connotations and used as a broad comparative construct, is sufficient to encompass the ‘family resemblances’ noted by scholars studying these phenomena” (6). “The central substantive similarity among the various movements we identify as fundamentalist is a process of selective retrieval, embellishment, and construction of ‘essentials’ or ‘fundamentals’ of a religious tradition for the purposes of halting the erosion of traditional society and fighting back against the encroachments of secular modernity” (6).

Furthermore, “The fundamentalizing process, shared by otherwise quite different religiously inspired protest movements, will continue to exist; and a knowledge of its dynamics will continue to be essential to informed discussion of global religiopolitical resurgence, even if the term fundamentalism itself fades from the discourse of journalists, scholars, and diplomats” (6-7). However, the “Fundamentalism Project” virtually guaranteed the reverse trend: the use of the label “fundamentalism” increased in public discourse and the media, especially in application to radical Islamic movements. The term “fundamentalist” (which had been coined by conservative American Christians who advocated “contending for the faith” through the spoken and written word) is now popularly applied to reactionary movements among various world religions, sociologically bound together by a (frequently violent) stance of anti-modernism.

The conclusion of this two-part article will emphasize the importance of historic Baptist distinctives in our social context with its distortion of the term “fundamentalism.”

Works Cited

1. "Fundamentalism." The New Encyclopedia Britannica. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1993. This definition emphasizes the doctrinal core without appropriately addressing an attitudinal stance, although some pertinent material appears in the tenth paragraph.
2. This, of course, is not a complete self-definition.
3. "Fundamentalism." Encyclopedia Britannica. 2007. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. 25 Jan. 2007
<http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-252662>.
4. Marburg Journal of Religion. Volume 11, No. 1 (2006).
5. The influence of the "Fundamentalism Project" is global. I recently conversed with a philosophy professor at a Portuguese university whose perspective of "fundamentalism" was formed by the publications.
6. Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby, and Emmanuel Sivan, Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5.
7. Strong Religion, 9.

Dr. Paul Hartog

Chair, Systematic Theology at [Faith Baptist Bible College & Theological Seminary](#) | hartogp@faith.edu | [Other Articles](#)

Paul A. Hartog (Ph.D., Loyola University) has taught at the Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary since 2001. He is now the chair of Systematic Theology for the seminary. He is an accomplished author and scholar and presents at conferences around the world. He and his wife, Alne, have three children.