

Faith Pulpit

“Fundamentalism” Distorted and the Baptist Distinctives Resounded, Part 2

In 2003, the University of Chicago Press published *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World*, a “revised and elaborated version” of the “Fundamentalism Project.” This accessible overview (281 pages) was written by R. Scott Appleby, along with Gabriel A. Almond (Stanford University) and Emmanuel Sivan (Hebrew University of Jerusalem). According to *Strong Religion*, “Fundamentalism” is a “hypothetical family,” “a reactive, selective, absolutist, comprehensive mode of antisectional religious activism” (14). Thus “the resistance to modern forms of secularization is a defining common feature of religious fundamentalisms” (20). “Fundamentalism qua fundamentalism” is “an aggressive, enclave-based movement with absolutist, reactive, and inerrantist tendencies” (242). “Fundamentalism,” in this usage, refers to a discernible pattern of religious militance by which self-styled ‘true believers’ attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors” (17; *italics original*).

The study brands post-revolutionary Iran as “the premier ‘fundamentalist’ state” (12). The authors concede, “Given the origins of the term [fundamentalism] in a 1920 edition of the Northern Baptist (U.S.A.) periodical, *The Watchman-Examiner*, whose editor described himself and a group of conservative evangelical Protestants as militants willing to do ‘battle royal’ to preserve the ‘fundamentals’ of the Christian faith from the evolutionists and biblical critics infecting mainline seminaries and colleges, it is ironic that today ‘fundamentalism’ is used frequently to refer to Islamist movements of varying size, shape, and social and ethnic composition” (1).¹ Yet the book only reinforces this unfortunate irony through its comparative analysis of “fundamentalisms.” “Is it correct to generalize?” query the authors. And they immediately respond, “*Strong Religion* argues, in effect, that while Islam has produced a particularly virulent and potentially global form of radical

fundamentalism, other major religious traditions have also given birth to movements that can be fruitfully compared with the Islamist movements (as well as to the original Christian case of the 1920's)" (6).

Since September 11, 2001, the phenomenon of "global fundamentalism" has acquired "unprecedented urgency in the minds of millions of people around the world" (2). "The terrorist attacks of September 11 signified much more, however, than merely another wake-up call to a somnolent U.S. public. They thrust into the international spotlight a web of concerns that have since become the preoccupation of the educated general public in the United States and Europe" (5). Strong Religion seeks to address three sets of questions that fall within a "web of concerns." First, "What are the local, regional and global contexts for, and triggers of, the emergence of fiercely antimodernist, antiseccular movements from within virtually every major world religion in the twentieth century?" Second, "What characteristics do these movements share across religious, cultural, and political borders?" Third, "Is fundamentalism truly a global phenomenon?" (6).

Strong Religion concedes "numerous problems" in applying the word "fundamentalism" beyond its "original historical use" (the American Protestant movement of the early twentieth century), and also acknowledges the oversimplification of equating "fundamentalist" and "terrorist" (14). Furthermore, "the extravagant use of the term 'fundamentalism' encourages nonspecialists to make facile generalizations, to ignore the details of individual movements and their contexts, and to conflate the vast differences between these movements" (15). Nevertheless, the authors muse that the combination of "extremist violence and intolerance," "while not inevitable, is a strong tendency in fundamentalist movements" (17). "Fundamentalist movements are the historical counterattacks mounted from these threatened religious traditions, seeking to hold ground against this spreading secular 'contamination' and even to regain ground by taking advantage of the weaknesses of modernization" (20).

Strong Religion continues, "As fundamentalist extremists have struggled to expand or secure their niche in a world in which borders are daily under assault and in which religious as well as secular enemies proliferate, they have turned increasingly to violence as a means of advancing their religious-cum-political objectives; hostage-taking, assassination, terrorist bombing, and the like" (234). "Fundamentalist violence, per se, is a response to government oppression and/or to the growth or empowerment of social groups deemed threatening to fundamentalist interests. Here we refer primarily to operational or strategic violence the well-planned and coordinated, timed, large-scale acts of terrorism or warfare, usually involving hundreds of conspirators, which are designed to destabilize the regime and/or eliminate roadblocks to fundamentalist takeover of sectors of a society or the state apparatus itself" (235). "We call our book Strong Religion because these movements are militant and highly focused antagonists of secularization. They call a halt to the centuries-long retreat of the religious establishments before the secular power. They follow the rule of offense being better than defense, and they often include the extreme option of violence and death" (2). The media and popular

discourse have latched on to such violent portrayals of “fundamentalisms.”

Many of the original “fundamentalists,” however, (using the historical origin of the term in “militant” conservative Christianity) were also Baptists, who by very declaration of the “Baptist distinctives” espoused the separation of church and state and refused to wield the power of government and of the sword to accomplish spiritual purposes. What if a new generation of fundamental Baptists clearly emphasized their own historical distinctives in the public forum of ideas? What if contemporary Baptists, like their predecessors, spoke often of those neglected Baptist “jewels,” religious liberty and the freedom of conscience?

After Roger Williams had experienced religious oppression among the Puritans, he wrote, “It is the will and command of God, that, since the coming of His Son, the Lord Jesus, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish [Muslim], or Anti-christian consciences and worships, bee granted to all men in all Nations and Countries, and they are onely to bee fought against with that Sword of God’s Spirit, the Word of God. True civility and Christianity may both flourish in a state or Kingdome, notwithstanding the permission of divers and contrary consciences, either to Jew or Gentile.” While Williams supported a “uniformity of civil obedience,” he maintained that an enforced “uniformity of religion” ultimately leads to “hypocrisy and [the] destruction of millions of souls.”

In the nineteenth century, Charles Spurgeon extolled the virtues of religious liberty before an audience of thousands of Baptists. The crowd applauded loudly as he reminded them that Baptists were one of the few great religious groups that had never persecuted others. Spurgeon then paused as the ovation quieted down before adding, “because we have never been able.” Spurgeon undoubtedly hoped that Baptists would never be able to persecute, not merely because they lacked the resources, but because they lacked the very intention.

Perhaps “Constantinianism” is dying a thousand deaths, and perhaps contemporary Baptists are being called to bury the remains. Instead of acting like a people who possess powerless truths, but yet insist upon being personally powerful, Baptists should conduct themselves as those who possess powerful truths but yet are willing to be personally powerless. The Savior accomplished His Father’s will not by inflicting persecution, but by suffering. And He desired that His followers walk humbly in His steps (1 Peter 2:21–23). According to the New Testament, if anyone desires to be a disciple of the suffering Savior, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow the sacrificial Lamb wherever He goes (Mark 8:34; Rev. 14:4). The cross is a reminder to deny ourselves, not a crusading banner to overpower others through violence.

Does this renewed emphasis upon the forgotten Baptist distinctives really matter? Consider the case of Karen Armstrong’s *The Battle for God*, a New York Times Notable Book and a national bestseller (2001).² The volume begins by asserting, “One of the most startling developments of the late twentieth century has been the emergence within every major religious tradition of a militant piety popularly

known as ‘fundamentalism.’ Its manifestations are sometimes shocking. Fundamentalists have gunned down worshippers in a mosque, have killed doctors and nurses who work in abortion clinics, have shot their president, and have even toppled a powerful government” (xi). Armstrong classifies the Iranian Shi’ite revolution, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the assassination of Israeli president Yitzak Rabin as acts of “fundamentalisms,” although she pronounces that “it is only a small minority of fundamentalists who commit such acts of terror” (xi).

On the following page, Armstrong traces the historical origins of the term “fundamentalist” in the early decades of twentieth-century Protestantism. She then concedes, “The term ‘fundamentalism’ has been applied to reforming movements in other world faiths in a way that is far from satisfactory. ...It has also been argued that this Christian term cannot be accurately applied to movements that have entirely different priorities. Muslim and Jewish fundamentalisms, for example, are not much concerned with doctrine, which is an essentially Christian preoccupation. ...The use of the term ‘fundamentalism’ is, therefore, misleading” (xii).

Nevertheless, in the very next paragraph, she asserts that “the word ‘fundamentalism’ is here to stay. ...the term is not perfect, but it is a useful label for movements that, despite their differences, bear a strong family resemblance” (xii-xiii). What are such “family resemblances” according to Armstrong? “Fundamentalists have no time for democracy, pluralism, religious toleration, peacekeeping, free speech, or the separation of church and state” (xi). “There are Buddhist, Hindu, and even Confucian fundamentalisms, which also cast aside many of the painfully acquired insights of liberal culture, which fight and kill in the name of religion and strive to bring the sacred into the realm of politics and national struggle” (xi). Yet, at the same time, Armstrong’s glossary defines “Baptists” as a seventeenth-century English movement that emphasized “religious liberty.”

Does not this conspicuous incongruity demonstrate the need for greater clarity in public discourse? Biblical Baptists must both resolutely defend fundamental truths and sound forth the Baptist distinctives. In the midst of religious apostasy and compromise, fundamental Baptists must “earnestly contend for the faith.” And in the face of cultural distortions, historic Baptists must unequivocally support the freedom of conscience, the voluntariness of religion, the separation of church and state, and the importance of individual soul liberty and responsibility.

Works Cited

1. American Christian fundamentalists spoke of “militancy” and the “battle royal” for the faith, but it must be emphasized within our contemporary context that this vivid language was not meant to advocate violent militaristic tactics, but stood in the New Testament tradition that used military metaphors in the uncompromising “championing of the faith.”
 2. Armstrong acknowledges her indebtedness to the “Fundamentalism Project” on page xiii.
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