

The roots of Christian fundamentalism in American Protestantism

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On 27 February 2013, the British Academy held a conference on 'What is Fundamentalism – and What Threats does it Pose to Today's World?' The event was convened at the suggestion of James Dunn, Lightfoot Professor of Divinity Emeritus at the University of Durham, and a Fellow of the British Academy. As well as examining the origins of 'fundamentalism' in early 20th-century American Protestantism (the subject of this article), the conference asked what are the conditions that cause fundamentalism to develop in different religions and cultures in modern times. Audio recordings of the presentations can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/events/2013/

IN THIS ARTICLE I describe the beginnings of Protestant fundamentalism, and go on to analyse its central characteristics, also drawing attention to its continuing influence on Christianity today and on the national politics of the United States of America.¹

The Fundamentals

We should begin, however, by at least noting some problems in any conceptualisation of 'fundamentalism'. An initial problem is that the term 'fundamentalism' may be too much of an abstraction from what are actually a wide range of traditionalist views in diverse ideological and religious systems. Is 'fundamentalism' a

universal phenomenon, or should we only speak of a diverse set of fundamentalisms?² Should we even speak of 'Protestant fundamentalism' as though it was a single, coherent phenomenon?³ Again, it is arguable that what we now refer to as a 'fundamentalist' attitude or mind-set can be found in earlier centuries.⁴ But if fundamentalism is defined as a reaction against Modernism, then it is itself a modern phenomenon.⁵ A third problem is that 'fundamentalist' has become a pejorative term in most public discourse, 'a synonym for bigotry, intellectual immaturity, fanaticism, and sometimes violence', 'an intolerant epithet for those we regard as intolerant ... a label that immediately delegitimises'.⁶ So is the discussion loaded against 'fundamentalism' from the start? Should we try using another term, like 'foundationalism',⁷ to describe the view that any system, religious or otherwise, needs some firm or fixed foundational truths on which to build?

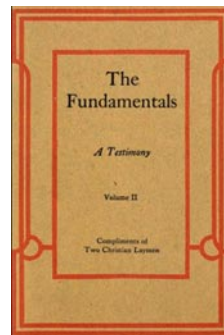


Figure 1. *The origin of 'Fundamentalism': the series of pamphlets entitled 'The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth', published in Los Angeles between 1910 and 1915.*

¹ The best account of American Protestantism is G.M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: the shaping of twentieth century evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1980, 2006); see also E.R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (University of Chicago, 1970, 2008).

² See particularly M.E. Marty and R.S. Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Observed and Fundamentalisms Comprehended* (The Fundamentalism Project, vols. 1 and 5; University of Chicago, 1991, 1995); also H.A. Harris, 'How Helpful is the Term "Fundamentalist"?', in C.H. Partridge, ed., *Fundamentalisms* (Carlisle, Paternoster, 2001), pp. 3-18.

³ See also H.A. Harris, 'Protestant Fundamentalism', in Partridge, ed.,

Fundamentalisms, pp. 33-51.

⁴ M. Ruthven, *Fundamentalism: The Search for Meaning* (Oxford University, 2009): 'In a sense Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other Reformation leaders could be described as "fundamentalists" many centuries before the term was coined, while the Council of Trent can also be seen as a "fundamentalist" or "integralist" response' (15).

⁵ J. Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London, SCM, 1977) 175.

⁶ Rightly noted by C. H. Partridge in his Introduction to *Fundamentalisms* xiv.

⁷ Harris, 'How Helpful' 14-16.

In fact, the actual origin of the term 'Fundamentalism' can be dated with some precision. As is generally agreed, the origin lies in the publication of a series of 12 small matching books, almost large pamphlets, entitled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, edited initially by A.C. Dixon, and subsequently by R.A. Torrey, and published by the Bible Institute of Los Angeles from 1910 to 1915. Each volume was made up of between five and eleven essays, the authors including well-known conservative Protestant scholars of the day. The authors were mainly Americans, notably the famous B.B. Warfield, Professor of Theology at Princeton Seminary, and the equally famous revivalist, R.A. Torrey. But they also included several eminent British names: for example, the highly regarded Presbyterian apologist James Orr, Professor at the Free Church College in Glasgow; G. Campbell Morgan, a noted British evangelist and minister of Westminster Chapel, London; H.C.G. Moule, an admired commentator on the New Testament and Bishop of Durham; and W.H. Griffith Thomas, formerly Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. Three million copies of the 12 volumes were dispatched free of charge to every pastor, professor and student of theology in America.⁸

The motivation behind the volumes is clear: the editors and authors perceived that their faith, what they would have regarded as the orthodox beliefs of Protestantism, indeed of Christianity, were under attack. The attacks were seen to be multiple and all the more threatening for that reason. It was a first order priority that these attacks should be withstood and opposed.⁹ One was the influence of Liberal theology which spread from Germany in the latter decades of the 19th century. This was perceived as undermining fundamental doctrines of Christianity. Hence the first two essays in the first volume of *The Fundamentals* are on 'The Virgin Birth of Christ' by Orr, and 'The Deity of Christ' by Warfield; and there is a later essay on 'The Certainty and Importance of the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the Dead' by Torrey.¹⁰

Here it is not unimportant to recognise that *The Fundamentals* were a Protestant equivalent to the Roman Catholic condemnation of 'Modernism' in Pius X's encyclical of 1907. For Modernism was expressive of the same Liberalism which sought to adapt Catholic faith to the intellectual Zeitgeist. In the Catholic hierarchy's view, Modernism was just another name for liberal Protestantism.¹¹ Ironically *The Fundamentals* riposted by asking 'Is Romanism Christianity?' and depicting Rome as 'The Antagonist of the Nation'. As a point more worthy of note, however, it is this sense that 'liberalism' inevitably involves a slackening of what should, or must be regarded

as firm and incontrovertible truths, which gives the term 'liberal' such negative, and indeed threatening overtones in conservative Christian circles to this day.

The Fundamentals also contained attacks on socialism and modern philosophy, all seen as threatening to undermine divinely revealed truths. But one of the most dangerous threats was perceived to be the spreading influence of Darwin's theory of evolution, undermining a biblical view of the cosmos as divinely created and of the human species as specially created by God. Hence essays in *The Fundamentals* on 'The Passing of Evolution', by the geologist G.F. Wright, and on the 'Decadence of Darwinism'. For the contributors to *The Fundamentals* it was not just the answers which were the problem; even to ask the questions, or to think that it was appropriate to subject fundamental matters of faith to questioning, was unacceptable. The most famous or notorious early clash between fundamentalists and modernists was the so-called 'Scopes Monkey Trial', in 1925, when a high school teacher, John Scopes, was accused of violating a Tennessee legal act which made it unlawful to teach evolution in any state-funded school.¹² The still on-going issue as to whether 'creationism' or 'intelligent design' should have a place in the school curriculum marks the current phase of the same debate.

However, the key threat perceived was the threat to the Bible and to its authority. In this case the great bogey was 'higher criticism', that is, the subjection of the Bible to critical question. Here again it was German theological scholarship which was seen as most to be blamed. The Enlightenment had encouraged the application of scientific method to the study of the Bible, its historical claims subjected to scientific historical scrutiny. But 'scientific criticism' had undermined the fundamental concepts of revelation and miracle. The influence of Baruch Spinoza and David Hume was seen as destructive of faith in the supernatural.¹³ To question whether Moses was the author of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, or whether there was more than one Isaiah, or whether all the letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament had actually been written by Paul himself – such questions were intolerable. Accordingly we find essays in *The Fundamentals* on the 'History of the Higher Criticism' and 'Fallacies of the Higher Criticism', and on such subjects as the 'Inspiration of the Bible' and 'The Mosaic Authorship of the Pentateuch'.

Inerrancy

This brings us to the heart of Protestant fundamentalism – the central role of the Bible as the infallible authority

⁸ K. Armstrong, *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (London, HarperCollins, 2000), p. 171.

⁹ Martin E. Marty, 'What is Fundamentalism? Theological Perspectives', in H. Küng and J. Moltmann, eds., *Fundamentalism as an Ecumenical Challenge* (Concilium Special; London, SCM, 1992), pp. 1-11, in an early conclusion of the multi-volume *Fundamentalism Project*, which he edited with R. Scott Appelby, sums up the character of fundamentalism as 'oppositionalism': 'Fighting back as a constitutive principle determines the shape of fundamentalist theological methods, principles and substance, just as it does the shape of fundamentalist group formation and political strategy' (1). See also Moltmann's essay in the same volume ('Fundamentalism and Modernity', pp. 99-105). George Marsden,

Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1991), characterises a fundamentalist as 'an evangelical who is militant in opposition to liberal theology in the churches or to the changes in cultural values or mores, such as those associated with "secular humanism"' (1).

¹⁰ The Wikipedia article on 'The Fundamentals' gives a full list of the volumes' essays. See also Ruthven, *Fundamentalism*, pp. 10-13.

¹¹ 'Modernism', *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (Vol. 10. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911) – available online.

¹² A fuller account in Armstrong, *Battle for God*, pp. 175-8.

¹³ See further Barr, *Fundamentalism*, ch. 8.

of Christian faith. As James Barr notes, in his devastating critique of fundamentalism, ‘the question of scriptural authority is *the* one question of theology, that takes precedence over all others’.¹⁴ Again we note the parallel with Roman Catholicism, in its similar, its similarly instinctive, conviction that for faith to be sure, for faith to be certain, the authority underpinning it must be infallible. The Catholic dogma on Papal infallibility, when the Pope speaks *ex cathedra*,¹⁵ mirrors the Protestant insistence on the infallibility of the Bible, while at the same time the distinction between Pope and Bible indicates the deep divide which conservative Protestantism sees between itself and Catholicism.

As the heart of Protestant fundamentalism this feature deserves more analysis. Its central importance is indicated by the fact that, for instance, the term ‘infallibility’ is soon seen to be inadequate. It can become a weasel word, taken as referring simply to the impact made by the Bible rather than to its creation.¹⁶ Likewise the term ‘inspiration’ can be taken as equivalent to ‘inspiring’, describing the Bible’s effect rather than how it came about. A stronger word is needed, and that is ‘*inerrancy*’. One can have complete certainty in what the Bible teaches, because it is without error, inerrant. ‘If the Bible contains errors it is not God’s Word itself, however reliable it may be. ... God’s character demands inerrancy’.¹⁷ The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978) includes Article XII – ‘We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit’.¹⁸ Again the parallel with the Catholic dogma is worth noting, since in the case of Papal infallibility too, ‘infallibility means more than exemption from actual error; it means exemption from the possibility of error’.¹⁹

In Protestant fundamentalism, the assumption of and focus on inerrancy leads, naturally, to reading the Bible *literally*,²⁰ to take literally the Reformation’s insistence on the primacy of the ‘plain sense’, the *sensus literalis*.²¹ The Reformation’s insistence on the plain sense, of course, was in reaction to the medieval Church’s assumption that the *literal* was only one of the *four* senses which may be read from scripture – the allegorical, the moral and the anagogical being the others. Martin Luther had strongly

insisted on the plain or literal sense and dismissed medieval allegorising as so much rubbish.²² But in Protestant reaction to Darwin’s evolutionary hypothesis, the ‘plain sense’ meant that when Genesis says the world was created in six days, that must mean six 24-hour periods of time. Or when one Gospel says that Jesus healed a blind man when he entered Jericho, and another that he healed a blind man when exiting from Jericho, and a third that he healed two blind men when leaving Jericho,²³ the only acceptable solution is that Jesus must have done all the healings, one on the way in, another on the way out, and another two on the way out – not one, or two, but four.

Here we see a basic flaw in Protestant fundamentalism, indicated also in the assumption that to maintain or to demonstrate the Bible’s *inspiration* is all that is needed. For the fundamentalist there is no distinction between inspiration and revelation.²⁴ But to focus attention on inspiration fails to see the larger problem of *interpretation*: how to understand what has been written.²⁵ Ironically, this was an issue which the medieval Church had seen all too clearly in its use of allegorical interpretation to explain difficult passages in the Bible, an issue which the insistence on ‘plain sense’ and on meaning without error had obscured. But for a fundamentalist, a ‘plain sense’ reading of the text is not in fact an interpretation.²⁶ This unwillingness to take seriously the issue of interpretation includes the unwillingness to press the question of whether the Bible has different genres. Fundamentalists would certainly bridle at any suggestion that the poetic imagery in Isaiah’s talk of the mountains bursting into song and the trees clapping their hands (Isaiah 55.12) should be read literally.²⁷ Nevertheless, the claim that the Bible teaches inerrant truth covers everything that the Bible teaches, whether doctrine, or history, or science, or geography, or geology or any other disciplines.²⁸ And many fundamentalists find it necessary to insist that the opening chapters of Genesis be read as straightforward history. Here the introduction of the term ‘myth’, to denote a different kind of literature, immediately causes fundamentalist hackles to rise. For to the fundamentalist, ‘myth’ can mean nothing more than ‘not history’, and so

¹⁴ Barr, *Fundamentalism*, p. 163. ‘Fundamentalists assume the need for a firm rational or empirical foundation upon which to rest faith, and on which to build up the doctrines of their belief system. They take the Bible to be that foundation. Their apologetic stance, therefore, is that we must know that the Bible is true before we can go on to say anything else concerning God. Without a reliable Bible, they fear either that we cannot get started in faith, or that our faith must surely collapse’ (Harris, ‘Protestant Fundamentalism’, p. 39).

¹⁵ See H. Küng, *Infallible?* (London, Collins, 1971), here pp. 81-2.

¹⁶ A complaint voiced by J.I. Packer in his Preface to J.M. Boice, *Does Inerrancy Matter?* (International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1977). See also Packer’s earlier defence of fundamentalism – ‘*Fundamentalism and the Word of God*’ (London, Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1958) particularly pp. 94-101.

¹⁷ Boice, *Does Inerrancy Matter?*, pp. 8, 20. ‘The inerrancy of the Bible, the entire Bible including its details, is indeed the constant principle of rationality within fundamentalism’ (Barr, *Fundamentalism* 53).

¹⁸ The claim to inerrancy refers only to the original autographs; see e.g. R. Nicole, ‘The Nature of Inerrancy’, in R. Nicole and J.R. Michaels, eds., *Inerrancy and Common Sense* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1980), pp. 71-95: inerrancy means ‘that at no point in what was originally given were the biblical writers allowed to make statements or endorse viewpoints which

are not in conformity with objective truth’ (88). And further N.L. Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1979).

¹⁹ P.J. Toner, ‘Infallibility’ in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*.

²⁰ G. Dollar, *History of Fundamentalism in America*: ‘Historic fundamentalism is the literal exposition of all the affirmation and attitudes of the Bible’ (quoted by Ruthven, *Fundamentalism*, p. 59).

²¹ Packer, ‘*Fundamentalism*’, pp. 102-6.

²² See e.g. W.G. Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems* (London, SCM, 1972), p. 23.

²³ Matthew 20.29-34 (two, exiting); Mark 10.46-52 (one, exiting); Luke 18.35-43 (one, entering).

²⁴ See e.g. E. J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth: Thoughts on the Biblical Doctrine of Inspiration* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1957).

²⁵ See also Barr, *Fundamentalism*, p. 37.

²⁶ Nicely illustrated by Harris, ‘Protestant Fundamentalism’, p. 40.

²⁷ Boice, *Does Inerrancy Matter?*, p. 11. As Barr points out, ‘the point of conflict between fundamentalists and others is not over *literality* but over inerrancy’. The Bible ‘must be so interpreted as to avoid any admission that it contains any kind of error’ (*Fundamentalism*, p. 40; also p. 46).

²⁸ Boice, *Does Inerrancy Matter?*, p. 13

'not true' as denying the historical facticity of the narrative so described. The conception of 'myth' as an unfolding of an idea, or a view of the world, by clothing it in narrative form, is anathema to them, or at least the interpretation of any biblical narratives in these terms. Similarly, even to raise the interpretative possibility that the Old Testament book of Jonah is a novelistic story and not a historical account is simply unacceptable.

Most striking, however, is the typically fundamentalist reading of the last book of the Bible, the apocalypse of John, or Revelation. That the normal argument for a literal reading of a text should not apply to a book of often bizarre cosmic symbolism might seem obvious to any who are familiar with the genre of apocalypses. A book of symbols should be read symbolically, or indeed allegorically. But fundamentalists continue to insist on what they regard as a 'plain sense' reading of Revelation, as providing a prediction of events building up to the end of this world. From the beginning of Fundamentalism as such, fundamentalists in the USA have typically believed in a pre-tribulation rapture. That is, they believe that believers will be raptured,²⁹ transported to heaven prior to the time of great tribulation predicted in Revelation, when those remaining on earth will be subjected to the evil rule of the Antichrist.³⁰ The Scofield Reference Bible, first published in 1909, with notes which saw in Revelation a timetable of events leading to the end of history, gave such views a considerable boost, particularly as it was published by Oxford University Press, and not least because the soon following First World War seemed an ominous portent of Armageddon.

Belief in the rapture is amazingly widespread in the United States. Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*³¹ has reportedly sold between 15 million and 35 million copies. Lindsey proclaimed that the rapture was imminent, based on world conditions at the time (1970), with the Cold War figuring prominently in his predictions of impending Armageddon. He suggested, for example, that the beast with seven heads and ten horns, referred to in the book of Revelation (17.7), was the European Economic Community, which indeed expanded to consist of ten member states between 1981 and 1986 (though now, as the European Union, it has 27 member states). First published shortly after the Six-Day War, the book has done much to explain and to boost American evangelical support for the state of Israel, whose foundation they see as in fulfillment of biblical prophecy and as part of the same divine plan, 'the greatest single sign indicating the imminent return of Jesus Christ', according to Jerry Falwell, founder of the

Moral Majority.³² And the popularity of the doctrine of the pre-tribulation rapture is further indicated by Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* series of novels,³³ 16 in number, which have sold tens of millions of copies; several of them reached number 1 in the best-selling lists and several have been made into films.

When it comes to different versions of an event or episode in recorded history in the Bible, the level of fundamentalist anxiety increases noticeably. The natural fundamentalist instinct is to deny that there can be any contradictions, and that any inconsistencies must be in the eye of the reader rather than in the text itself.³⁴ This applies to some Old Testament narratives, and to tensions between the accounts of the apostle Paul's activities in the Acts of the Apostles and references to the same episodes in Paul's own letters. But the main focus of concern is the different versions of what Jesus did and said in the four New Testament Gospels. Here the same natural response is *harmonisation* – not two or three different accounts of the same event, but three accounts of different events. I have already instanced the account of Jesus healing a blind man, or blind men, on entering or leaving Jericho. The fact that Jesus's 'cleansing' of the Jerusalem Temple is set at the beginning of Jesus' mission by John's Gospel, and at the end of his mission by the other three New Testament Gospels, simply means that Jesus 'cleansed' the Temple twice.³⁵ Another example is Peter's denials of Jesus when Jesus has been arrested for questioning by the High Priest.³⁶ The accounts of Peter's three denials are different, denials before different people and in different circumstances, so different that resolution of the problem by harmonisation results in the assertion that Peter must actually have denied Jesus six times.³⁷ Such a conclusion could be drawn, in defence of the dogma that none of the accounts could be inaccurate or wrong, even though each of the four accounts agree that Peter denied Jesus (only) three times.³⁸

A further aspect of the Protestant fundamentalist mindset is the sense that orthodox belief is a complete package, an interlocked system. If questions are allowed on the virgin birth, whether Jesus was or could have been born of a virgin, that does not simply cast doubt on the virgin birth, it also picks out a thread and begins to pull the thread so that the whole system quickly unravels. Indeed, so integrated is the system that even minor details become as important as central doctrines; if an error is detected in some historical detail, the whole system collapses. The image put before students from fundamentalist backgrounds is that of 'the slippery slope'. If a person puts a foot on the slippery slope, then

²⁹ The idea of the 'rapture' is drawn from 1 Thessalonians 4.13-17, where it appears in reference to the coming again of Christ and the final resurrection of the dead; but in rapture theology it is integrated with the different scheme of Revelation.

³⁰ Armstrong describes the belief as 'a fantasy of revenge: the elect imagined themselves gazing down upon the sufferings of those who had jeered at their beliefs, ignored, ridiculed, and marginalized their faith, and now, too late, realized their error' (*Battle for God*, pp. 138-9).

³¹ Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1970.

³² See further Barr, *Fundamentalism*, pp. 190-207; Armstrong, *Battle for God*, pp. 217-8 (quotation from p. 217); C. Chapman, 'The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A Case Study in the Clash of Fundamentalisms', in

Partridge, ed., *Fundamentalisms*, pp. 279-99, especially pp. 293-4.

³³ Wheaton, Tyndale House, 1995-2007.

³⁴ Classically illustrated in one of the foundation documents of Protestant fundamentalism – A.A. Hodge and B.B. Warfield, *Inspiration* (1881; Grand Rapids, Baker, 1979).

³⁵ Matthew 21.12-13; Mark 11.15-17; Luke 19.45-46; John 2.13-17.

³⁶ Matthew 58, 69-75; Mark 14.54, 66-72; Luke 22.54-62; John 18.15-18, 25-27.

³⁷ H. Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1976), pp. 175-6.

³⁸ See further Barr, *Fundamentalism*, pp. 55-72.

there is no stopping place and he will plunge directly into the abyss of disbelief or heresy. If you cannot believe all, you cannot believe at all.³⁹ One hears the same argument in Catholic polemics and apologetics. It is literally a case of 'all or nothing'. If a book can be fallible in what it says about astronomy or biology, how can you trust it in matters of religious faith and doctrine? If you cannot believe the story of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea on dry ground (Exodus 14.22), or in one of Jesus' healing miracles, then you have pulled the plug, and the cistern of faith will drain away completely. And, sadly, if inevitably, this presumption becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in several cases, the student concluding, 'If I can't believe everything the Bible tells me, then I can't believe anything it tells me'. Fundamentalism is antithetical to and disastrous for any open and inquiring mind.

Certainty

Underlying the rise of Protestant fundamentalism is the desire for *certainty*. If terms like 'inerrancy' and 'harmonisation' are key aspects of the Protestant fundamentalist mindset, then so also is the term 'certainty' – the assumption that if one is summoned to believe, then what is to be believed must be certain. Again, a similar observation could be made with respect to Roman Catholicism.⁴⁰ To be sure, this desire for certainty is in some ways admirable in its motivation. It wants clarity, because it wants commitment. How can we really be committed to a cause if we do not know, clearly and without doubt, what it is we are committed to? The desire is for a firm rock in a sea of otherwise constant change, for a truth unchanging in the face of so-called 'progress' with its seemingly endless confusion and dilution of moral standards. In a period marked by social, ideological and political uncertainty, the appeal of such fundamentalist certainty is obvious, and goes a long way to explain the success of conservative and fundamentalist churches in evangelism and church planting.

The focus in Protestant fundamentalism is on scripture, precisely because written formulations hold out the promise of such certainty, certainty of historical fact, certainty of worship practice and ethical prescription, certainty of theological proposition. Not least of fundamentalism's appeal for so many Protestants is this claim to honour scripture and to give it its due place as the definition and prime determinant of the religion to which it bears testimony. The assumption is that God the ultimate Absolute has revealed himself absolutely. 'What Scripture says, God says'.⁴¹ Failure to honour God's chosen means of self-revelation is failure to honour God. For the fundamentalist, such a failure

properly to acknowledge scripture is itself a kind of blasphemy. And a post-Modernism which disperses all such absolutes and makes certainty of any reading of the text impossible is simply anathema.

Where this desire for certainty, what Karen Armstrong refers to as 'this lust for certainty',⁴² becomes entirely questionable is in its basic confusion of *faith* with certainty. The assumption that faith deals in divine certainties has a long history. Notably John Henry Newman preferred the term 'certitude', but it came to the same thing. Faith had to do with certitude, because it was 'divine faith', it was faith in what had been divinely revealed, the acceptance of truth revealed by divine grace. As Newman put it, 'Certitude' or 'to be certain is to know that one knows'.⁴³ Ironically the most famously radical 20th-century New Testament scholar, Rudolf Bultmann, posed the issue of certainty of faith in antithesis to the uncertainty of historical knowledge.⁴⁴ But a crucial question was too little asked: whether we should expect *certainty* in matters of *faith*, whether an invulnerable 'certainty' is the appropriate language for faith, whether faith is itself an 'absolute'. It was the Enlightenment assumption that necessary truths of reason are like mathematical axioms, and that what is in view is the certain QED of mathematical proof, which has skewed the whole discussion. But faith moves in a totally different realm from mathematics. The language of faith uses words like 'confidence' and 'assurance' rather than 'certainty'. Faith deals in trust, not in mathematical calculations. Nor is it to be defined simply as 'assent to propositions as true' (in Newman's terms). Walking 'by faith' is different from what Paul calls walking 'by sight' (2 Corinthians 5.7). Faith is commitment, not just conviction.

Richard Holloway, former Bishop of Edinburgh, in his recent movingly honest autobiography, *Leaving Alexandria*, points out that, 'The opposite of faith is not doubt, it is certainty. Where you have certainty, you don't need faith'.⁴⁵ The fact, too little appreciated by fundamentalists, is that faith as trust is never invulnerable to questions. Rather, faith lives in dialogue with questions. Faith-without-doubt is a rare commodity, which few (if any) have experienced for any length of time. On the contrary, doubt is the inoculation which keeps faith strong in face of unbelief. Whereas, it is the 'lust for certainty' that leads to fundamentalism absolutising its own faith claims and dismissing all others.

The basic failing of fundamentalism here is the failure to recognise that human speech, all human speech, even if inspired by the Spirit of God, is simply inadequate to express divine reality. By definition, the God in whom believers believe is beyond human sight and human comprehension, and so also beyond human speech.

³⁹ See also Barr, *Fundamentalism*, pp. 68-9. Armstrong notes that the psychologist J.H. Leuba in his book *Belief in God and Immortality* (1921) 'produced statistics that "proved" that a college education endangered religious belief' (*Battle for God*, p. 175). See also her description of the Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina (p. 215).

⁴⁰ Cf. P. Hebblethwaite, 'A Fundamentalist Pope?', in Küng & Moltmann, eds., *Fundamentalism*, pp. 80-88.

⁴¹ Packer, *Fundamentalism*: what Evangelicals are concerned above all to

maintain' (73); 'To learn the mind of God, one must consult His written Word' (47).

⁴² Armstrong, *Battle for God*, pp. 140-1.

⁴³ J.H. Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1865), pp. 307, 318.

⁴⁴ L.E. Keck, *A Future for the Historical Jesus* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1971), pp. 55-6, 57-8.

⁴⁵ R. Holloway, *Leaving Alexandria: A Memoir of Faith and Doubt* (Edinburgh, Canongate, 2012), p. 184.

Inevitably, then, any attempt to express God's will in human terms, however inspired, will involve a degree of ambiguity and uncertainty. Words are rarely precision instruments, except when used as rigorously controlled technical terms, that is, in narrow specialisms or in legal documents; and even then the control often slips, and lawyers, QCs and judges earn their keep. Anyone who is familiar with the problems of translating from one language into another will appreciate the point at once.

What Christian fundamentalists have forgotten is the prohibition expressly emphasised from the beginning of the Old Testament, forbidding the making of images of God in wood or stone (Exodus 20.4). For God, we are thereby warned, is un-image-able, that is, literally unimaginable. And words about God and claims to God's revelation of himself and his will, are equally images, verbal images, which can never get beyond metaphor and analogy. The point of metaphor is that it is not literal. The point of analogy is that the nearest we can get to talking about the subject is that it is something like the analogous subject. The danger of fundamentalism, then, is that it takes the metaphor as literal, it takes the analogy to be the thing itself. In short, it makes the verbal imagery of words into idols. Fundamentalism, in the last analysis, is idolatrous. To be fair, classic Christianity has gone some way down the same road, in its creedal statements which try to define the indefinable, to insist that certain words are absolute, absolutely necessary in confessing faith in God – even though theologians are well enough aware that words change their meanings and that in some creedal statements metaphors are strained to breaking point. So Christian fundamentalism is actually only pushing to extreme a tendency evident in all Christian dogmas.

The craving for certainty also ignores the historical particularity of most of the biblical texts. Even poetic and wisdom texts reflect the culture of their age. But narrative and historical texts, prophecies and epistles all have a degree of historical particularity without taking account of which the texts cannot be adequately understood. But the Protestant fundamentalist wants to hear the biblical text as the word of God now. Indeed, Christian liturgy typically says after any or all readings from the Christian Bible, 'This is the word of God' – not, 'This was the word of God in the 8th century BCE or in the 1st century CE', but 'the word of God today'. A fundamentalist mindset takes this liturgical pronouncement with all seriousness. The text can be abstracted from its historical context, and its meaning and application given a timeless reference. God the absolute has spoken his word; his word shares the same absolute character.

This is nowhere clearer than in the current debate about the potential role of women in church leadership. It counts for nothing that Deborah was one of the judges of Israel during Israel's early settlement of Canaan (Judges 4-5), or that the woman Junia was eminent among the apostles before Paul and probably founded

one or more of the earliest churches in Rome (Romans 16.7). What counts decisively is that two passages in the Pauline corpus of letters seem to indicate clearly that women should be subject to men and should not teach or have authority over men (1 Corinthians 14.34-35; 1 Timothy 2.11-12). Accordingly, male headship is a prominent dogma in fundamentalist circles in the USA, with strong echoes among conservative evangelicals in this country, as the recent vote on women bishops in the Church of England Synod reminds us. In their view, no account is or should be taken of the strong patriarchal character of ancient society. On the contrary, fundamentalism can be categorised precisely as a protest against what is perceived as the assault on the patriarchal principles which fundamentalists believe should still determine the structure and operation of society.⁴⁶ Nor is the likelihood even worthy of consideration that the texts in view speak of wives and husbands, rather than of women and men in general. But the Greek word (*gynê*) can also mean 'wife': what Paul says is that 'If they (the women, *gynaikes*) want to learn something, let them ask their men (that is, their husbands) in their own home' (1 Corinthians 14.35). And the language of *submission* in both texts is the language of the standard household code of the time – the head of the household should be able to expect other members of the household, notably his wife, to be subject/submissive to him;⁴⁷ similarly children should be subject/submissive to their parents,⁴⁸ and slaves to their masters.⁴⁹ So in all likelihood, the Pauline counsel in these passages should be read not as church order but as household order, in a day when the household was regarded as the basic unit and building block of community in Greco-Roman society. In this context, the Pauline counsel is best taken as a way of affirming and reassuring all concerned that the early Christians did not want to be heard as challenging the pattern of household order which gave the ancient city its social stability. It has nothing to do with church order or a more general patriarchy as such.

There is equal or greater angst on the subject of homosexual practice. For the Christian fundamentalist, and not only the fundamentalist, the decisive fact is that Leviticus pronounces a death sentence on homosexual practice, as also on adultery and incest (Leviticus 20.10-16), and that the apostle Paul also condemns homosexual practice (Romans 1.26-27; 1 Corinthians 6.9). The possibility that this ruling was culturally conditioned, or that Paul was reacting against the uninhibited sexual licence of the Hellenistic world, or against pederasty in particular, is not to be considered, since it blurs what is otherwise a clear-cut ethical ruling. The fact that Christians no longer observe the practice of circumcision and animal sacrifice, even though they were equally fundamental to Israel's religious code, provides no precedent for fundamentalist antipathy to homosexuality. Similarly, the fact that the social mores, which took slavery for granted in both Old and New Testament, have been long abandoned by Christians,

⁴⁶ Ruthven, *Fundamentalism*, pp. 103-4, 113-4; see also G. McCulloch, 'Women and Fundamentalisms', in Partridge, ed., *Fundamentalisms*, pp. 202-19.

⁴⁷ Colossians 3.18; Ephesians 5.22; Titus 2.5; 1 Peter 3.1, 5.

⁴⁸ Luke 2.51; cf. Colossians 3.20; Ephesians 6.1.

⁴⁹ Titus 2.9; 1 Peter 2.18; cf. Colossians 3.22; Ephesians 6.5.

cuts no ice. Here again, even to raise the possibility that this ruling is other than an absolute is to undermine the absolute, the infallible authority which the Protestant fundamentalist vests in the Bible.

Intolerance

Equally disturbing are the consequences for the fundamentalists' attitude to others, including other Christians. As James Barr puts it, fundamentalists 'want to think of their own position as *the* or *the only* Christian position: there is, for them, no other truly "Christian" position that can be contrasted with their own'.⁵⁰ Because they have the truth, those who disagree with them are simply wrong. When a community recognises that the truth is often multi-faceted, that the truth is bigger than particular formulations of that truth, it also recognises that the coming together of differing perceptions of truth will inevitably involve compromise. That, after all, is what politics is all about. But for fundamentalists truth is univocal, black and white, and compromise is a denial of truth, of the truth that they cling to as the only truth. Where one has absolutes and universals, then no compromise is possible. To recognise the validity of other opinions is to relativise truth.⁵¹ Those who disagree are blind, devious, or mistaken; and in any case they are simply wrong. 'No compromise!' is a typical fundamentalist slogan and war-cry. Those who appreciate the extent to which the Tea Party and evangelical fundamentalists gained control of the Republican party in the States over the past five years will not have been at all surprised at the deadlock in US government for most of President Obama's first term of office. The Tea Party well illustrates Karen Armstrong's description of fundamentalism as 'a religion of rage'.⁵² As the Moral Majority in the early 1980s and the Tea Party in the past decade well illustrate, a fundamentalist religious mindset is all too likely to transpose into a fundamentalist political mindset. No compromise!⁵³

The next phase in fundamentalist attitude to the other, as again attested by the religious fundamentalism of the States over nearly a century, is *intolerance*. Since those who disagree with the fundamentalist are disagreeing with the truth, they are not only wrong, but their alternative views are a threat to the truth. They cannot be tolerated. The claim to certainty, even if only in religious truth, means that those who dispute that truth are blind or wilfully perverse. And even co-religionists who wish to believe and practise differently are all too readily treated as heretics or apostates to be

coerced or expelled. All religious systems have a tendency in that direction. Which is why when the religious system acquires political power, then look out! American fundamentalism is by no means the only one to provide warning cases in point.

The extreme phase of fundamentalist attitude to the other is the conviction that the other provides such a threat to the fundamentalist's truth and certainty that it should be suppressed. Part of the strategy here is to demonise the opposition. Here we see the root of President Reagan's categorisation of Russia as 'the evil empire', and George W. Bush's lumping together Arab nationalist Iraq, Islamist Iran and communist North Korea as the 'axis of evil'. Here too we see the root of the Republican right's dismissal of opponents as 'not really American', not truly 'one of us', or the refusal of a surprising proportion of Republicans to believe that Obama is truly an American citizen, born in America. Moreover, a typically fundamentalist view is that the opposition, the other, should not be given the privilege of free speech to spread its untruth. Instead the untruth should be suppressed. Preferably it should be extirpated, by violent means if necessary. Here we see the root of the policy of extraordinary rendition, whereby those suspected of dangerous untruth can be abducted and held in confinement for years without legal recourse. In the Christian West we no longer burn heretics, but we seem to think that it is somehow morally acceptable to send unmanned drones with their deadly armaments to hover over and occasionally strike at Pakistani villages, never mind the 'collateral damage'. The point I am making, of course, is that a fundamentalist mindset, born in the southern States of America, has reached far, not only into inter-church and inter-faith relations, but also into America's national politics and into the international politics which affect us all.

In short, I cannot avoid the conclusion that the Protestant fundamentalism of *The Fundamentals*, with its focus on inerrancy and literal interpretation of the Bible, with its confusion of faith with certainty, and with its intolerance and unwillingness to compromise, is indeed a threat in today's world. James Barr concludes by noting 'the frightening alienation of fundamentalism from the main stream of church life and theology'.⁵⁴ But the threat that Protestant fundamentalism poses in north America goes well beyond the ecclesiastical sphere into the realms of national policy and international relations. And it is by no means the only fundamentalism which poses such a threat.

⁵⁰ Barr, *Fundamentalism*, pp. 4, 14-15

⁵¹ Ruthven, *Fundamentalism*, pp. 44-9.

⁵² Armstrong, *Battle for God*, p. 216.

⁵³ See further Armstrong, *Battle for God*, pp. 309-16, on the Moral Majority. As she notes, 'a religious vision which sees certain principles as inviolable, and, therefore, nonnegotiable' will always find compromise

difficult (p. 316). In November 2011 the *New York Times* quoted Andrew Kohut, president of the Pew Research Center, speculating that the Tea Party position in Congress was perceived as 'too extreme and not willing to compromise' (Wikipedia, 'Tea Party Movement').

⁵⁴ Barr, *Fundamentalism*, p. 338.