

# Encyclopedia of Global Religion

## Fundamentalism

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The 20th century saw the rise of conservative politicized movements in the world's religions. Those movements have often been categorized together under the label *fundamentalism*.

[p. 418 ↓ ]

## American Protestant Fundamentalism

In the North American context, there were at least three social forces that gave rise to the movement that took the name *fundamentalism*: (1) sweeping economic changes with the industrial revolution, (2) restructuring of gender roles and expectations with the move from rural-agrarian to urban-industrial lifestyles, and (3) the intellectual-theological challenges arising from biblical criticism, historicism, and comparative religion. Nineteenth-century evangelicalism split into two camps, often called modernist and fundamentalist, divided over the proper relationship between religion and culture. Modernists saw religion as a part of culture that changes over time with the changing needs of a changing culture. Fundamentalists, on the other hand, saw religion as fixed and revealed once for all time. For fundamentalists, culture should be measured by, and should conform to, the truths revealed in religion. While modernists developed critical, historicized readings of the biblical texts, the opponents launched a series of booklets, *The Fundamentals*, defending teachings such as the inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, and literal readings of the miracles described in the Bible. The books were sent to pastors and Bible teachers all over the country, and it is from those books that the movement took its name. It should be noted that while fundamentalists lay claim to a literal reading of the Bible, this is, in fact, impossible and is a rhetorical move made by fundamentalists to claim authority for their reading. Fundamentalist Protestants, for example, claim to be reading the Book of Revelation literally when they interpret it to explain present-day events. And substitutionary atonement, as another example, is an interpretation of the biblical texts. This is a very complex movement, and it brought together various strains of antimodern Protestantism. There was the populist form discussed above, but there

was also an elite, intellectual form that found its home in the Presbyterianism of the Princeton Theological Seminary. Theologians such as John G. Machen, Charles Hodge, and B. B. Warfield built a philosophically sophisticated, Calvinist theological system that rooted fundamentalism in historical Christianity and laid the groundwork for the new evangelicalism that was to develop within fundamentalism a generation later. The populist form was overwhelmingly premillennialist. In fact, the historian Ernest Sandeen saw premillennialism as the point at which the strands of fundamentalism converged. But elite fundamentalism could be postmillennialist or amillennialist. Populist fundamentalism was also revivalist in character and decidedly separatist—some forms even advocating double separation (i.e., a believer must separate not only from nonbelievers but also from believers who don't practice separatism). This strong insistence on separation, coupled with premillennialism teaching that the world is about to end any minute, made the early fundamentalists opposed to involvement in politics. That opposition to political involvement, however, began to fall away by midcentury, after which the Religious Right became the public face of American fundamentalism.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, fundamentalists began laying the groundwork for a critique of American culture that led to the view that America had a special calling from God but that the country had fallen away from its special place in history as a Christian nation. Social changes in the 1960s and 1970s (integration, changes in the status of women, the sexual revolution, and the secularization of public institutions) led to the political mobilization of American Protestant fundamentalists. They first fought the Equal Rights Amendment, the Supreme Court's legalization of abortion, and the regulation of private Christian schools and home schools. Later controversies over the rights of gays and lesbians and battles over evolution and creationism in public schools anchored their political agenda and mobilized their followers. The political power of the Christian right ebbed and flowed into the 21st century, with the movement remaking itself every decade or so.

By the second half of the 20th century, a variety of movements developed around the globe in religious traditions other than Christianity, which scholars also labeled “fundamentalist.” In the early 1990s, the University of Chicago launched a major research project under the direction of Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby, *The Fundamentalism Project*, to examine the developing global movement. Because each of the movements is unique [p. 419 ↓ ] and dependent on its own cultural context,

there has been much debate about the use of a singular category as well as the use of a label that is so closely tied to the form as it developed in the North American context. Nonetheless, the movements do share some common characteristics, and it is undeniable that they have transcended their cultures of origin to become global phenomena in their own right.

## Examples in Judaism

Among Jews, there developed in the 19th century a movement known as *Haredim* (lit. “tremblers”), rooted in the culture and history of Eastern Europe. The Haredim is a blending of two forms of contra-aculturative orthodoxy (*Hasidic* and *Misnagdic*); they actively oppose acculturation and assimilation of Jews and advocate separation from assimilationists. In the years following World War II and the Holocaust, diasporic Jews, seeing themselves as the faithful remnant on whom the preservation of Judaism depended, sought to re-create Eastern European Jewish life in ethnic enclaves in America, Western Europe, and Australia. By midcentury, there were a variety of Hasidic forms of Haredim, the most well-known of which are *Lubuvitchers* and *Satmar*. In Israel, these Jews seek enforcement of Sabbath laws; exemption from military service, particularly for girls (boys could gain exemption by studying at a yeshiva); and other remedies to preserve tradition with public protests, sometimes ending in violence. Another important group of Haredim settled in Israel are Zionists, who believed that Haredim in other countries, including the United States, still assimilated too much and were no longer “real Jews.” These religious Zionists should not be confused with the secular Zionists in Israel. In fact, secular Zionists are, in many respects, the modernists against whom the orthodox Zionists resist, thus fitting the model of fundamentalists. Organizing in the 1970s, some of these religious Zionists took the name *Gush Emunim*, meaning the “Block of the Faithful.” The group is composed primarily of yeshiva students and graduates. Members of this movement seek to expand the boundaries of the state of Israel through a variety of tactics, most notably settling in Palestinian territories—exacerbating global tensions between Islam and Israel (and the allies of Israel).

## Fundamentalism in Islam

In the 18th century, Muhammed ibn Abd al-Wahab led a movement to cleanse Islam of influences he believed had corrupted it. In ways that followed closely the Protestant Reformation in Christianity, he advocated a return to the emphasis on the Qur'an (*sola scriptura*) and claimed that more recent developments had moved Muslims away from the true faith delivered by the Prophet. Foreshadowing later developments among North American Christian fundamentalists, he advocated that the Qur'an be read literally, opposing philosophical analysis of the text and efforts to place it in historical context. In the 20th century, Wahhabism underwent something of a revival during the early years of the establishment of Saudi Arabia. As Saudi Arabia became more powerful and wealthy, toward the end of the century, Wahabism spread around the Muslim world by claiming to be the orthodox form of Islam; at the same time, it spread dimensions of Saudi Arabian culture.

The Egyptian writer Sayyid Qutb developed an Islamic critique of globalism and the influence of the West on the Muslim world and on Egypt in particular. In the 1940s, Qutb traveled and studied in the United States and came to see American culture as corrupt and racist and the American government as dominated by Israel and powerful American Jews. His view that Jews dictated Middle Eastern policy and his recognition of the influence of the United States on his own government led to his work *This Religion of Islam*, in which he argued that religion is the force that divides humanity, and he advocated a return to Muslim law and put forth the notion that violence in defense of religious truth is justified.

## Examples outside Monotheism

Some scholars have argued that monotheism, with its inherent dualism and textual basis, lends itself to fundamentalism, but scholars of fundamentalism have identified movements in Hinduism and [p. 420 ↓ ] Buddhism as fundamentalist as well. The *Hindutva* movement links together the nation of India, the religion of Hinduism, and the language of Hindi (all of which share a linguistic root). This movement is a development

from Vinayak Savarkar's *Hindutva: Who Is Hindu?* (1928), in which he argued that Christians and Muslims in India are foreigners and are both religious and cultural threats to Hinduism. Critical of the forces of globalization as corrosive to Indian values and culture, the Hindutva movement today has gained political power with the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and seeks to establish India as a Hindu state.

Twentieth-century Theravada Buddhism gave rise to nationalist movements in Sri Lanka, Burma/Myanmar, and Thailand. As responses to the Christianizing and secularizing influences of British colonial rule, these movements developed simplified, moralistic Theravadan traditions, rooted in dualistic mythical histories and critical of Western immorality, and focused on restoring strong nationalist identities.

## Conclusion

None of these examples is intended to be exhaustive of the movements that can be labeled fundamentalist in the world's major religions. They are, instead, presented as a sampling illustrating the presence of some commonalities as well as the diversity to be found within the movements around the world. While violent sects exist across religious traditions, religious justification for violence is not present in all movements that can be labeled fundamentalist. Furthermore, though scholars have grouped these movements together under the label fundamentalist, that grouping is not without problems. Most followers of these movements do not consider themselves as fundamentalist, and many of the components of fundamentalism as they exist in Christianity are not present here. That said, the opposition to modernity, an aggressive form of nationalism, political efforts to protect traditionalism (albeit a traditionalism rooted in a mythical past) and a gendered world, and a strict division between those on the inside and those on the outside are all present.

All these movements developed as critiques of modern culture and secularism. They engage in political activity aimed at returning culture to what is envisioned as a time when it adhered more closely to the standards of religion; at the heart of that vision of the idealized past is typically a gender ideology that segregates men and women and subjugates women. While some scholars have seen the opposition to modernity as such a crystallizing force for fundamentalist movements that they have argued that

antimodernism is the central unifying quality of fundamentalism, the fundamentalist's critique of modern culture and secularism is selective. Other scholars have pointed to the degree to which fundamentalisms can exist only in the context of modernity and how, in fact, fundamentalists are very modern in the ways they fight modernity—using the Internet and the global transportation system, for example, to launch a terrorist attack against the modern world. Paradoxical, also, is the effort to return to an imagined ideal time, sometimes called traditionalism or traditioning. In the United States, for example, there is a political effort to return to “traditional family values,” which are not really all that traditional since they refer to the nuclear family that emerged in the West in the 19th century. Finally, the gender ideology, shared by divergent fundamentalist movements, warrants comment and theorizing. Though the severity of the limitations on women varies greatly, fundamentalists of all stripes exhibit concern over the status and roles of women; issues of purity and defilement, like those of order and chaos and the sacred and the profane, figure centrally. While Christian fundamentalists in the United States battle over women in leadership positions in religious institutions and advocate women's submission in the home, the Muslim Taliban in Afghanistan prohibited education of girls, barred women's presence in public when unaccompanied by an appropriate male, and enforced the most extreme form of women's veiling, in which the burka includes even a mesh covering over the eyes so that no part of the body is exposed.

Opposition to globalization as a form of colonialism divides fundamentalists in the United States from those in other parts of the worlds. American fundamentalists have opposed aspects of globalization such as multiculturalism and pluralism, but [p. 421 ↓] other aspects have been seen positively as the spread of American values. Around the world, however, that spread of American values has been the impetus for the rise of fundamentalist movements as it has been interpreted as cultural imperialism.

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See also

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