

**For Educational Purposes; Excerpts from  
WHY FUNDAMENTALISM WILL FAIL**

**A seemingly unstoppable force is being undone from the inside**

**By Harvey Cox | November 8, 2009 *Boston Globe***

**IN 1910, A COHORT of ultra-conservative American Protestants drew up a list of non-negotiable beliefs they insisted any genuine Christian must subscribe to. They published these “fundamentals” in a series of widely distributed pamphlets over the next five years. Their catalog featured doctrines such as the virgin birth, the physical resurrection of Christ, and his imminent second coming. The cornerstone, though, was a belief in the literal inerrancy of every syllable of the Bible, including in matters of geology, paleontology, and secular history. They called these beliefs fundamentals, and proudly styled themselves “fundamentalists” - true believers who feared that liberal movements like the social gospel and openness to other faiths were eroding the foundation of their religion.**

**Protestant fundamentalism was not an isolated impulse. The same tendency had already appeared in Catholicism; beginning with Pius IX, who issued his famous “Syllabus of Errors” in 1864, most popes severely condemned all liberal Catholic efforts. Muslims hate having the word “fundamentalist” applied to them, considering it a foreign term. Nonetheless, when some 19th-century Koran scholars sought to rethink their faith in the light of science and democracy, an angry opposition resisted these new ideas. Then, as European colonial powers tightened their grip on the region, other thinkers, like the Egyptian Sayyed Qutb, scorned any such reform efforts as imperialist pollution.**

**The expansion of religious fundamentalism in recent decades has been notable, as people around the world have sought certainty in the face of dizzying change. In the second half of the 20th century, old-time religion drew Americans jarred by their country’s setbacks in Korea and Vietnam, or disoriented by the civil rights movement and youth revolt of the 1960s. In Europe, American-style fundamentalism failed to make much progress, but highly conservative Catholic parties and groups, sometimes called “integralist,” gained strength in some countries. In the Muslim sphere, as oil funneled immense riches to the elite, it also drove hordes of village people into angry urban poverty. When secular solutions failed them, many were attracted to the promise of a more equal society based strictly on the Koran.**

**As the 20th century ended and a new one began, fundamentalism has taken on more formidable shapes, both politically and religiously. Though most of its adherents work through spiritual and educational channels, the small minority that turn to violence have caught the media’s attention. If some seem ready to die for faith, others are ready to kill for it, gunning down abortion doctors in church, hijacking planes, and exploding bombs at weddings. For plenty of thoughtful people, fundamentalism has come to represent the most dangerous threat to open societies since the fall of communism.**

**However, the truth is that for all its apparent strength, the fundamentalist sun is setting on all horizons. Throughout the Muslim world growing numbers of people are becoming impatient with violent groups that, in the name of Allah, seem capable of killing but incapable of producing jobs, food, or health care. Observers on the ground report that popular support for the jihadist wing of the Taliban is falling off as it fails to address the real life problems that afflict people in Afghanistan. (The other parts of the Taliban are inspired less by fundamentalism than by tribal loyalties and a traditional aversion to foreigners.) Al Qaeda faces a similar dismal prospect. Dr. Audrey Kurth Cronin, a professor at the National War College in Washington and author of a new book, “How Terrorism Ends,” says, “I think Al Qaeda is in the process of imploding. That is not necessarily the end. But the trends are in a good direction.” In Iran, the fact that the clerics have resorted to beating and imprisoning their critics reveals the shakiness of their hold.**

**In America, the religious right, which started as a crusade, is becoming a niche. Randall Terry’s Operation Rescue, which stages demonstrations at abortion clinics, has just announced that it is nearly bankrupt. The shrillest TV evangelists are losing audiences to more moderate “evangelical-lite” preachers. Fundamentalist**

congregations are ceding ground to Pentecostals and mega-churches, which embrace a wider social agenda and teach the spiritual authority - not the literal inerrancy - of the Bible.

Surveys have shown that the rapid growth of evangelical Protestantism in Latin America has not produced a replication of the American religious right, but rather a moderate leftward tilt. A majority of Brazilian evangelicals, for example, voted for President Lula, who ran as a Workers Party candidate. In South Korea, Christianity has grown faster than anywhere in the world and now accounts for over a third of the population. But its theology tends toward moderate evangelicalism with an ecumenical bent.

The fading of fundamentalism marks a decisive change in global society. It has already freed Christians, Muslims, and Jews to explore what all three have in common as they now begin to cooperate in confronting nuclear weapons, poverty, and climate change. Thus, when a hundred Muslim scholars invited Christians two years ago to join in a quest for what they called a “Common Word” on issues of justice, Christians from a wide spectrum of denominations responded favorably. Four important “Common Word” conferences have been held so far, involving hundreds of scholars and religious leaders. The king of Morocco has hosted a series of gatherings for mullahs, rabbis, and Christian clerics.

In the international political sphere, where our obsession with fundamentalism once prevented us from recognizing other developments, we can now begin to see the picture more clearly. With the more fanatical wings of their populations dwindling, countries where fundamentalists once wielded undue influence might become a bit easier to negotiate with. As the ranks of fundamentalists thin in the Muslim world, Western policy makers will be able to address insurgencies and terrorism as products of nationalist and tribal loyalties, amenable to political solutions, rather than as violent outgrowths of religion.

**THE VARIOUS MOVEMENTS** we lump together as “fundamentalist” differ from one another, but they bear some family resemblances. Each reaches back selectively into its own tradition and exhumes some text or rite or pattern, declaring it to be the bedrock of faith. For Protestant fundamentalists, it was a righteous society in which, they believed, a verbally inspired Bible had held sway. For Catholics, especially after Vatican II, it was the Latin Mass, the symbol of a changeless authoritative tradition. For Muslims it was the short era of the “rightly guided caliphs” who led Islam immediately after the death of the Prophet, before disunity shattered their community and outsiders warped their civilization.

But fundamentalist movements share another quality. They are inherently fractious, and this is one reason for their broad decline. When your view of reality is the only acceptable one, you cannot compromise. Almost from its inception, American Protestant fundamentalism split into warring factions. Its bellicosity toward “liberals and modernists” was quickly turned on fellow fundamentalists who were seen as not tough enough on the enemy. Since the Bible told them not to be “unequally yoked together with unbelievers,” the question of with whom one could properly associate became deeply vexed. The most ardent partisans seceded from their denominations, and soon began to quarrel about whether they should even fraternize with their fellow fundamentalists who wanted to remain in their previous churches to fight the “liberals.” The fundamentalists organized new seminaries to protest the older ones they thought had become “modernist,” but soon these new institutions split over fine points of doctrine.

Similarly, the modern religious right, the political arm of fundamentalism, foundered on its inability to compromise or build coalitions. Local branches of the Christian Coalition became furious with national office staffers for cooperating with others in order to pass legislation.

The same fragmenting logic eats away at Jewish “land fundamentalists,” who base their claims to the West Bank on a literal reading of the biblical book of Joshua (“conquer and settle”). They despise the Jews who disagree with them even more than the Palestinians whose terrain they claim. Some ultra-orthodox Jews still refuse to accept the legitimacy of the state of Israel, since only the Messiah is supposed to reclaim the Promised Land.

**In Islam, a tendency to fractiousness appeared in the first years of its history when a dispute arose over who was to succeed the Prophet, who died without a male heir. This division between Shiites and Sunnis simmered for centuries, and burst into flames with the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism. The Wahabist sect, now centered in Saudi Arabia, and the rise of political Islam reopened old wounds. Today this internal strife fractures the Muslim world, and the vehemence it generates is directed first of all against fellow Muslims, and only secondarily against the West.**

**This tendency toward factionalism exists in other religious movements, of course, as it does in political, artistic, and cultural ones. But in religious fundamentalism such breakups become especially lethal because the stakes are so high: eternal salvation or damnation hang in the balance.**

**ANOTHER REASON WHY fundamentalists are faltering today has to do with the world outside. The fundamentalist world view is unbending and monochrome, but today's world is variable and multi-hued, and the plurality is more and more visible. Thanks to the increase of immigrants from Asia and the Middle East, mosques and pagodas now share streets with churches and synagogues in Europe and America. People of the previous generation could retreat into a culturally isolated community and pull down the shades, but their children live every day with a heightened, web-enhanced awareness of a diverse world.**

**Their college roommates and office colleagues represent a range of religious backgrounds, and inherited prejudices can soften and melt when confronted with good, morally upright people from different belief systems. Virtually anywhere on the planet, it is hard to imagine the grandchildren of fundamentalists reconciling themselves to their tightly constricted spiritual world.**

**Fundamentalism is defined by its one-way-only exclusivism. But today spiritually inclined people view the once-high walls between religious traditions as porous. They borrow freely. Synagogues and churches incorporate Asian meditation practices into their services. Instead of a single churchly allegiance, people now assemble "repertories" of elements from a number of sources. They may attend Mass, take a yoga class, and keep a Buddhist devotional book on their bedside table. Clerics often denounce this as "cafeteria style" religion, but the current of religious history is flowing against them.**

**Father Thomas Merton, the leading Catholic contemplative writer of the 20th century, died while staying at a Buddhist monastery in Bangkok. Martin Luther King attributed his commitment to non-violence to Gandhi, who in turn said he learned it from Jesus and Tolstoy. The Dalai Lama has written a reverent biography of Jesus. For none of these profoundly religious men did the appreciation of other faiths weaken their anchoring in their own. In fact each said that it enhanced it.**

**The very nature of human religiousness is changing in a way inimical to fundamentalist thought. The most rapidly growing spiritual groups today focus not on someone else's authority, but on a direct encounter with the divine. Whatever else it may mean that so many people call themselves "spiritual but not religious," it suggests they still yearn for contact with the sacred, but are suspicious of the scaffolding, the doctrines, and hierarchies through which it has often been conveyed.**

**In Christianity, the fastest-growing wing of the church is the Pentecostal/Charismatic wave, which is spreading swiftly around the world, even in mainland China. It now numbers about 600 million, accounting for one in every four Christians. One writer has called them "main street mystics." Young Jews have a growing interest in their Hasidic and mystical heritage. Among Muslims, it is the gentle but ecstatic Sufi version that is growing fastest, not the suicide bomber cults. All these movements, especially since they seem particularly attractive to the young, represent a fatal threat to fundamentalism.**

**The plethora of emerging new spiritualities has its own problems, of course. They are often intellectually incoherent or melt into a self-centered narcissism. They can become vacuous and faddish. (Madonna and other Hollywood celebrities are now "into Kabala," the ancient Jewish mystical tradition.) They can become highly individualistic, lacking any vision of social justice. Esoteric and snobbish at times, they often fail to**

reach the poor and dispossessed people for whom Jesus, the Buddha, and the Jewish prophets had such concern.

**But a tectonic shift in religion is underway, and the fundamentalist moment is ending. A new and promising chapter in the long story of human faith is beginning. Its untidiness often reminds me of the exuberant earliest years of Christianity. Maturity comes with time. Future historians may look back on the 20th century as a time when something called “fundamentalism” interrupted, but only briefly, the age-old human search for a way to live in the face of mystery, and to envision what Martin Luther King called a “beloved community.”**

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