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Modernity, Religious Fundamentalism and the Secularization Thesis

Victoria S Harrison*

Religious fundamentalism is often regarded as an attempt to recreate the past by allowing religious believers to inhabit a pre-modern worldview. This paper seeks to demonstrate that this is a highly misleading picture of religious fundamentalism. By examining some of the key characteristics of religious fundamentalism within the Abrahamic faiths, the paper argues that, far from being a throwback to the past, religious fundamentalism is a distinctively modern phenomenon. Finally, an examination of the secularization thesis and its failure to account for current patterns of religiosity, provides further reason to believe that religious fundamentalism is dependent upon other features of modernity.

Introduction

Many have reacted to modernity with a self-conscious refusal to adjust or to assimilate their religious ideas to its demands, with an attitude, that in other words, appears to be characterized by rejection. Moreover, those who reject modernity also tend to vigorously reject the religious thought that has developed as a constructive response to it. To what extent, though, do those who seek to reject modern ideas succeed in sustaining pre-modern religious worldviews within the modern world? This paper argues that, ironically, and as implausible as it might initially seem, the systems of religious belief promoted by those who seek to reject modern thought are no less the product of modernity than are the explicitly modern religious ideas that they typically reject.

The author refers to those who seek to reject modernity and to preserve traditional religious views as 'religious fundamentalists', although this term cannot be employed without considerable qualification. Many writers avoid the term 'religious fundamentalism' (along with the term 'religious extremism') because of its supposedly negative connotations, preferring alternative terms such as 'religious revivalism' or 'religious resurgence'. The difficulty encountered in selecting the term that most accurately identifies the phenomenon under consideration is compounded by the diversity of the religious traditions in which it is apparent. Nevertheless, despite the difficulties, the term 'religious fundamentalism' enjoys wide currency. It is commonly used to refer to groups within the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions (as well as groups within other non-monotheistic faiths), who, despite their obvious differences, appear to share a similar approach to their respective faith traditions, and who, moreover, also seem to espouse a similar assessment of modernity.

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The following is an examination of some of the key characteristics of the worldview motivating religious fundamentalism within the Abrahamic faiths, with a view to demonstrating that, far from being a throwback to a previous era in religious history, it is a distinctively modern phenomenon. Then, the failure of the once popular secularization thesis is considered in order to account for current patterns of religiosity, thereby suggesting that this failure provides further evidence that religious fundamentalism is dependent upon modernity.

Key Characteristics of the Worldview of Religious Fundamentalism

Religious fundamentalists can often be recognized by their distinctive perspective on many issues. They tend to prescribe strict limits, for example, to the scope of human reason in criticizing religious beliefs. They also emphasize a view of the meaning of religious texts that minimizes—or even excludes—the need for interpretation. They accept science only insofar as it does not threaten their religious beliefs. They reject religious pluralism, typically preferring some form of religious exclusivism. They tend to resist the separation of religion from politics, and, unlike more liberal religious thinkers, are inclined to side with the political right rather than with the left. And finally, they are prone to adopt a negative attitude towards feminism in general, and, in particular, towards demands by women that religion be reformed in order to accommodate gender equality. This set of views is clearly opposed to many of the positions on these issues defended by liberal religious thinkers. To the extent that religious fundamentalism is a reaction to the more liberalizing ideas which circulated in 20th century religious thought, it might be viewed as dependent upon those particular modern ideas.

Throughout the 20th century, many religious thinkers became increasingly receptive to non-exclusivist views of religion. Clearly, one does not have to be a religious pluralist in order to be sympathetic to the view that religious traditions, other than one's own, possess value. For many who remain deeply committed to their own faiths, nevertheless seek rapprochement with adherents of other traditions. But religious plurality does not exist solely at the level of world faiths; it has also arisen within religious traditions themselves, as different groups have tried to differentiate themselves from each other. Within Christianity, for example, the ecumenical movement arose within the post-war West as Christians sought to enhance understanding and fellowship between the various Christian denominations that had grown increasingly estranged in the course of the 20th century. This resulted in the founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948. Many saw the council as a force for progress. Christian fundamentalists, however, were unanimous in their condemnation of it. Two key fundamentalist leaders, Ian Paisley, a Northern Irish Protestant Minister, and Bob Jones, a North American Evangelical Pastor, founded a rival organization: the World Congress of Fundamentalists. In 1999, at a meeting of the Congress, a delegation ratified the following resolution:

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The resolution the ecumenical di Christians on the Fundamentalists a opposed to all eff

This opposition thrive by demarc distinction between and inauthentic fundamentalism. integrity of their deemed to have str groups, irrespective which only those v

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¹ Resolution of the W resolutions/10-ecum

² Don Cupitt (1984), 3

We deplore and denounce the ecumenical movement in all its forms and ramifications, exhorting each other to a greater fidelity to the Word of God, to a more vigorous preaching of the Gospel of Christ, and to a thoroughgoing exposure of the satanically inspired movement which is producing the worldwide confederation of religions of the end time.¹

The resolution also makes clear that what these fundamentalists particularly object to is the ecumenical dialogues taking place between Evangelical Protestants and Eastern Orthodox Christians on the one hand, and Evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics on the other. Fundamentalists are, then, not only opposed to all forms of religious pluralism, but also opposed to all efforts at enhancing relations between different Christian denominations.

This opposition highlights an important feature of all fundamentalist movements: they thrive by demarcating themselves from others within their own faith-tradition. A clear distinction between true believers (the 'saved' in the language of Christian fundamentalism) and inauthentic believers (the 'unsaved') lies at the core of all forms of religious fundamentalism. Fundamentalists, moreover, believe that it is essential to the religious integrity of their community that they distance themselves from those who have been deemed to have strayed from the one and only correct form of the faith. Thus, fundamentalist groups, irrespective of their religious tradition, tend to form exclusive communities within which only those who share their beliefs and their lifestyle are welcome.

Moreover, religious fundamentalists, while not necessarily in possession of a unique religious worldview that enables them to be clearly distinguished from non-fundamentalists of the same religion, tend to focus primarily on selected aspects of their religion—religious law, for example. And, because fundamentalists emphasize selected facets of a religious tradition, they, thereby, isolate themselves from those of their co-religionists who do not share their particular emphasis. Thus, what to an outsider may appear to be a minor theological disagreement, may be the cause of a group of fundamentalists consolidating a subculture that separates them not only from the wider secular world, but also from others within the same religious tradition. This process of isolation from those holding different views encourages the development of a distinctive atmosphere within such groups, and this, in turn, reinforces the fundamentalists' sense that their particular interpretation of their faith-tradition is exclusively correct. For, as Don Cupitt remarks:

Vivid religious faith often tends to shut one up in a subculture of like-minded people. Within that world the truth of the faith seems obvious and unquestionable, so much something taken for granted that it is rarely mentioned. A tacit consent of this kind creates a strong and distinctive atmosphere that works to exclude sceptical outsiders and their uncomfortable questions. And the more we are able to assume that our truth is *the* truth and our world *the* world, the less we shall be aware of any world outside our own world.²

¹ Resolution of the World Congress of Fundamentalists, Internet publication (http://www.itib.org/resolutions/10-ecumenical_movement.html).

² Don Cupitt (1984), *The Sea of Faith: Christianity in Change*, p. 160, BBC, London.

Furthermore, religious fundamentalists characteristically perceive what they tend to think of as the 'outside world' as extremely threatening. The nature of the perceived threat does, however, vary according to the religion in question and to the local circumstances with which its adherents are attempting to cope. Jonathan Sacks, currently Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth (a modern orthodox organization), identifies what appears to be a common pattern, when he observes that Jewish fundamentalists fear assimilation, Christian fundamentalists fear secularity and Islamic fundamentalists fear westernization.³ Despite these different objects of fear, trepidation is, in each case, a response to some aspect of modern life, and it frequently results in an attempt to isolate the religious community from the impact of the modern world. Such distinctive communities form discrete pockets that co-exist in tension with modern secular culture. In the 20th century, such communities demonstrated that they had the power to unsettle and influence the world outside the boundaries of their own particular group. Religious fundamentalism within the Abrahamic faiths, has exercised a growing influence worldwide since the 1970s. As explained below, religious fundamentalism's increasing prominence has challenged the 'secularization thesis'—the theory that predicts that, as societies modernize, they inevitably become less religious.

The Origins of 'Religious Fundamentalism' and the Character of Fundamentalist Movements

The term 'religious fundamentalism' was coined shortly after the publication of a series of pamphlets called *The Fundamentals* in the US between 1910 and 1915.⁴ The authors of these pamphlets were Evangelical Christians⁵ from a range of Protestant denominations, who expounded what they regarded as the 'fundamentals' of Christian belief, as well as responding to the threats they perceived modernity posed to those beliefs. One especial focus of the pamphlets was the defense of the Bible against those who would interpret it by means of the so-called 'higher criticism' promoted at that time by the more liberal Christians. The authors rejected higher criticism, and, instead, advocated an approach to the Bible grounded in, what they regarded as, 'common sense', for only such an approach, they argued, was genuinely rational and scientific. Moreover, one of the key concerns of many of the authors was to defend the inerrancy of the Bible—some appealing to 'dictation theory'

³ See, Jonathan Sacks (1991), *The Persistence of Faith: Religion, Morality and Society in a Secular Age*, p. 78, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London.

⁴ *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* (1910-15), 12 volumes, Testimony Publishing, Chicago.

⁵ 'Evangelical Christians' are Protestants who emphasize Evangelism, the 'plain' message of the Bible, and the saving power of Jesus as a personal Lord. At the beginning of the 20th century, Christians of this type could be found in all the major Protestant denominations in the US: Episcopalian, Lutheran, Congregational, Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian, for example. Although Evangelism had precedents in the pietist forms of Christianity that developed in medieval Europe, its modern form took shape in 18th century England, from whence it spread to the US with successive waves of immigrants. The distinction between Evangelical Christians and fundamentalists has always been a hard one to define, as many, although by no means all, Evangelicals are also fundamentalists. Indeed, from the 1940s, in reaction to the fundamentalist movement, a Neo-Evangelical movement developed in many parts of the US. Billy Graham is the most well-known figure associated with Neo-Evangelism.

in support of this claim.⁶ In addition to this defense of a pre-critical reading of the Bible, there was also a marked emphasis on 'soul-saving' and on the importance of personal religious experience, with discussion of ethical, social or political issues being conspicuous by its absence.

The huge impact of these pamphlets was largely due to the substantial financial backing behind them, which allowed them to be widely and freely distributed throughout the Anglophone world. The high public profile that they achieved made them the reference point by which the Evangelical Christian fundamentalist movement in the US initially came to be recognized. However, this movement soon developed far beyond its original roots. Hence, while the term 'religious fundamentalism' was first used to refer to those Evangelical Christians within the Protestant churches who were associated with the views promoted in these pamphlets,⁷ its reference became much broader in the last quarter of the 20th century, expanding eventually to include movements within every major religious tradition. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are now recognized as host to their own fundamentalist groups.

Irrespective of which religion we consider, fundamentalists are united in urging their co-religionists to return to the original sources of their tradition. They aim to revitalize their tradition so that it can become the foundation of society. For example, when the original pamphleteers argued for a return to the fundamentals of the Christian religion, they tended to portray this as a return to the past—in other words, to the era prior to modernity, when Christian belief was relatively unchallenged and when Christian moral principles were the foundation of western society. However, given the common orientation towards a better future that is to be shaped by the revitalized religious tradition, it is perhaps misleading to regard religious fundamentalism simply as a wish to reinstate the past and an attempt to resist modernity. In fact, within each of the Abrahamic faiths, religious fundamentalism displays features that suggest that it is a distinctively modern phenomenon.

Because fundamentalists feel compelled to resist secular culture, they are often involved in an ongoing struggle with its most visible representatives (for example, with government officials and educators within secular institutions). Hence, Jonathan Sacks claims that, at root, religious fundamentalism is simply the "common-sense defense of Orthodoxy in a highly secular age, a reaction against what is seen as a liberal intelligentsia's subversion of established beliefs".⁸ Ironically though, this defensive engagement actually requires fundamentalists to present their faith and values in a way that will appeal to those

⁶ The Bible was thought to be inerrant because it was an unmediated account of what was in God's mind, dictated by God to those who served as his agents in writing down the text. Indeed, the Bible was thought to have always existed in the mind of God (given that the divine mind is unchanging). This view explains why any notion of the Bible requiring interpretation was anathema to these thinkers. For attempting to interpret the eternal Word of God is tantamount to changing the message. Moreover, strictly speaking, the whole Bible, in this view, has only one author—God. For an account of fundamentalist ideas about the Bible, see, James Barr (1987), *Fundamentalism*, Chapter 3, SCM, London. The remarkable similarity between this view of the Bible and the view of the Qur'an that came to dominate the Muslim tradition should not go unnoticed.

⁷ On the consolidation of this denominationally disparate group into a single movement, see, George M Marsden (1980), *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelism, 1870-1925*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford.

⁸ Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith*, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

immersed in modern secular culture, which of course, implies some changes to the tradition. Indeed, this dynamism was already evident in the US during the first decades of the 20th century when Evangelical Protestant fundamentalism was first evolving. For, as Karen Armstrong argues, the attempt to return to the 'fundamentals' of faith undertaken by those involved within this movement was "in line with other intellectual and scientific currents in the early 20th century", with those behind this attempt being "as addicted to scientific rationalism as any other modernists".⁹ Why is this so? This is because going back to the fundamentals was perceived as a way of grounding religious faith upon facts, rather than upon mere speculation. These facts, it was believed, could be arrived at by anyone if they were sufficiently observant and used their God-given reasoning powers. And, this project, if successful, would have modernized theology, and thereby demonstrated that it was no less legitimate than any other science. Clearly, then, the fundamentalist's program, as originally conceived, was actually a response to modern standards of science and of knowledge, more generally. Similarly, 'fundamentalist' movements within 19th century Islam, such as Wahhabism, were attempts at rendering faith more rational, and hence more modern, by returning to its sources without the aid of centuries of commentary and interpretation.

It is noteworthy that fundamentalists, irrespective of their religious tradition, insist that sacred texts and 'tradition' can be appropriated without interpretation. There are a variety of arguments that suggest that this aspect of the fundamentalist project is doomed to fail. Indeed, if one considers the uses to which fundamentalists press sacred texts and traditions, it soon becomes evident that their approach relies just as much on a specific interpretation of them, as does that of any more explicitly progressive religious thinkers. This would not, moreover, seem to be the only inconsistency in the fundamentalist worldview.

A further seeming inconsistency lies in the stark contrast between the emphasis fundamentalists place upon an unmediated reading of their scriptures, and their tendency to rely on the guidance of their religious leaders for detailed instructions regarding an acceptable lifestyle—this reliance being another common tendency exhibited by most fundamentalist groups. And, the ease and frequency of contact with a religious leader that one might enjoy in the modern world is likely to exacerbate any tendency that members of fundamentalist groups might show towards relying on that leader's advice and guidance, rather than on their own judgement.¹⁰ Not only does this increasing tendency sit uneasily with the fundamentalist's insistence that the 'truth' can be accessed by each individual by means of a literal reading of the scriptures and without the aid of religious experts, but

⁹ Karen Armstrong (2001), *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, p. 178, Harper Collins, London.

¹⁰ With the aid of modern methods of communication, the leaders of fundamentalist movements have much greater control over their adherents than they had in the past. Satellite links, telephones, faxes, webpages and e-mails allow religious leaders to remain involved in all aspects of an individual's life. In the pre-modern world, this degree of communication between a religious leader and his or her followers would have been unthinkable. In some cases, where religious believers lived in very remote villages, for example, it might have been possible to confer with one's religious leader only once a year. Now, however, given modern methods of communication, the religious leader is, for many, only a phone-call or, at most, a flight away. This aspect of modern life has been embraced by many fundamentalist groups with a vigor that is all the more remarkable, given their rejection of most other aspects of modern life. As David Landau puts it in his study of Jewish fundamentalism: the world of the late 20th century Jewish fundamentalist 'is a global shtetl'. David Landau (1993), *Piety and Power: The World of Jewish Fundamentalism*, p. 51, Hill and Wang, New York.

it also clearly runs counter to what might be thought of as one of the most important injunctions of modern thought: namely, the injunction to think for oneself. And, thinking for oneself, at the very least, would seem to imply that one must not let one's opinions and choices be determined exclusively by others.

The intellectual tradition that developed from the Enlightenment stressed that a refusal to think for oneself, and thus an unquestioning deference of one's opinions to those of others or to one's religious tradition, constitutes a lapse of personal responsibility. And, in the 19th century, many Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious thinkers took to heart the injunction to think for oneself. They were led to reassess their religious traditions and to change many facets of those traditions that the light of reason showed to be inappropriate, especially given the changing circumstances of the modern world. Such transformations were undertaken most thoroughly within the Jewish Reformed tradition and the Christian Liberal Protestant tradition.¹¹ The modernist tradition within Islam also proposed such reforms. However, it was less successful than the reform movements in Judaism and Christianity, insofar as it failed to attract any large following, remaining a 'movement' of somewhat isolated intellectuals. Nevertheless, prominent figures like Fazlur Rahman have ensured that modernism remains an important intellectual movement within Islam. Not surprisingly, fundamentalists within each of the Abrahamic faiths find themselves at odds not only with non-religious thinkers, but also with those religious thinkers from within their own faith-traditions who endorse progressive views.

Given that all religious believers in the west have to cope with the encounter between their religious beliefs and secular culture, it seems that some explanation is required as to why some religious groups are more prone to embrace fundamentalism than others. Steve Bruce argues that, if fundamentalism is to develop, there is one basic requirement that the religious group must meet: it must be at least plausible for them to claim to be the genuine guardians of an orthodoxy from which their co-religionists have strayed. As he remarks, this condition is met in many Evangelical Protestant denominations, but not, or at least not easily, in Roman Catholicism, for example (where a centralized ecclesial hierarchy determines orthodoxy for an international institution). In this respect, he argues, Evangelical Protestantism and Islam are two of a kind, insofar as they "both suppose that authoritative knowledge is democratically available. Any right-spirited person can discern God's will by reading the scriptures or studying the Qur'an".¹² But this can easily lead to a plethora of rival 'orthodoxies', and each could then evolve into a form of fundamentalism, thereby giving rise to a potentially fractious situation.

¹¹ Modern Orthodox Judaism and all types of conservative Christianity also made concessions to the Enlightenment principle, that one is enjoined to think for oneself. However, as their names imply, they did not go as far as either the Reformed Jewish tradition or the Liberal Protestant Christian tradition. Rather, they sought a compromise. And, this is why the dividing line between Modern Orthodox Judaism and Ultra-Orthodox Judaism, on the one hand, and Conservative Christianity and fundamentalist Christianity, on the other hand, is not always clear-cut. With respect to each faith-tradition, care is needed, if one is not to confuse fundamentalists with conservative believers. While there may be considerable overlap, the groups are by no means co-extensive. In fact, Jews, Christians and Muslims, who might be happy to call themselves 'conservative', can feel just as threatened by fundamentalists as can liberals.

¹² Steve Bruce (2000), *Fundamentalism*, p. 98, Polity, Cambridge.

Perhaps surprisingly, fundamentalists of all traditions regard their conservative non-fundamentalist co-religionists in much the same light as they regard the more liberal religious groups. For, in the fundamentalists' view, all but their own group have made far too many concessions to modern times. This polarity between fundamentalists and the rest can be clearly seen in the case of their divergent responses to scientific claims. For example, a mainstream Christian who was either liberal or conservative would probably have no major difficulty in accepting Darwin's theory of evolution, while a fundamentalist Christian might be prepared to go to court to prevent the theory from being taught to his/her child. One reason for this extreme difference is that, unlike religious fundamentalists, non-fundamentalists often hold that certain religious doctrines are provisional, and that they can change as the human understanding of the world and of history advances. Consequently, many believe that revelation has to be interpreted anew by each successive generation, albeit in the light of the past tradition.

Crucially, then, it is this view of revelation and interpretation that the fundamentalist refuses to accept. For fundamentalists assert that revelation is timelessly true, and is thus not relative to historical epochs or cultures. Everything that God is believed to have said in the scriptures is presumed to be valid for all time, with the prevalent Islamic view of the Qur'an being typical of this conception of revelation. Traditional Muslims believe that the Qur'an is eternal. It has always been with God in its present form—the form in which it was dictated to Prophet Muhammad, who simply recounted what he had heard. Fundamentalist Christians similarly believe in the literal truth of the 'Old' and 'New' Testaments. The Jewish fundamentalists' version of this literalism applies not only to the Hebrew Scriptures but also to a whole tradition of commentary, as well as to the sayings of sages stretching from the distant past to the present. Given such a view, it is not surprising that fundamentalists resist any attempt to alter the text of their scriptures. Christian fundamentalists, for example, claim that even altering the pronouns used in the text in order to make them gender-neutral is nothing short of falsifying the word of God.¹³ Not surprisingly, feminists and fundamentalists tend to be at odds.

Because of their view of revelation as timelessly true, religious fundamentalists not only seek to read their scriptures literally, but also, and not surprisingly, display a deeply conservative attitude—one that tends to make them very resistant to social change. This is particularly evident with regard to the position of women within society. Fundamentalists in each tradition are, moreover, inclined to their own reading of scripture to dictate government policy. Thus, the connection between religious fundamentalism and political conservatism is often a function of the fundamentalists' theory of revelation.

Another common feature of fundamentalist groups, which is linked both to their distinctive theory of revelation and to their particular manner of responding to modernity, is that they claim to provide clear and unambiguous answers to metaphysical and moral questions. In short, they claim to offer certainty in the midst of a modern world, that many

¹³ A resolution to this effect was passed by delegates of the World Congress of Fundamentalists in 1999.

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experiences as riddled with uncertainty.¹⁴ This may explain the edge fundamentalism came to acquire over more liberal forms of faith as the 20th century advanced. In an increasingly uncertain world, many people began to look to religion to provide the security missing elsewhere in their lives. The qualified and changing faiths of more liberal religious thinkers appear hard-pressed to satisfy this particular psychological need. If their views are correct, why do they need to keep changing them in the light of new scientific discoveries and other intellectual developments? The conservatism of fundamentalist thinkers adds to their projected image as defenders of the one and only truth. Thus, the trend in the late 20th century was that, while the more (intellectually and politically) liberal groups within the Abrahamic religions continued to decline in numbers—a decline that had begun earlier in the century—those groups that were less accommodating to modern society grew in strength. As we shall now see, the fact that the religious movements which made no effort to keep pace with modernity should have been the ones to flourish, flies in the face of the secularization thesis—a thesis that had become almost axiomatic in academic circles by the mid 20th century.¹⁵

Religious Fundamentalism and the Secularization Thesis

Many have found it puzzling that while western society has become increasingly secular, in the sense that religion has lost the influence on civic life that it traditionally enjoyed, there seems to have been a simultaneous increase within it, of religious fundamentalism. The secularization thesis had predicted that religion would disappear as society modernized. Until the closing decades of the 20th century, few intellectuals doubted that, as societies became more modern, they simultaneously became more secular—in other words, less religious. A corresponding transformation was envisaged on the individual level: the more an individual was exposed to modern secular culture, the less religious that person would be. Prior to the 1970s, these assumptions had seemed to be corroborated by the facts. Whatever form secularization took—a Marxist form in Eastern Europe that sought to eliminate religion, or, in Western Europe and North America, the institutional separation of Church and State—the results seemed to be the same. Religious beliefs seemed to drop away the more people were assimilated into the modern, secular society. Moreover, the shedding of religious beliefs could be witnessed vividly in the case of immigrants into western cultures during the early to the mid 20th century. Each successive generation seemed to retain fewer of the religious beliefs held by the generation that preceded it. This observation led many thinkers to predict that, before long, religion would die a natural death.

This prediction, however, has not been fulfilled.¹⁶ Nor has the related assumption that modernity is synonymous with secularization been borne out. It now seems that those who supported the secularization thesis failed to anticipate the force of the religious counter-movements that would develop in response to secularization. In fact, after a period

¹⁴ Cf. Walter Lippmann: "No mariner ever entered upon a more uncharted sea than does the average human being born into the twentieth century. Our ancestors thought they knew their way from birth through all eternity: we are puzzled about the day after to-morrow". Walter Lippmann (1985), *Drift and Mastery*, p. 112, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison.

¹⁵ The work of the sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) was influential in the promotion of this thesis.

¹⁶ See, Peter Berger (1997), "Against the Current", *Prospect*, pp. 32-36, March 17.

of decline, the Abrahamic religions would seem to have recovered in strength. In many cases, religious believers appear to have been stimulated to reassert their faith aggressively. Instances of what we might call a 'religious resurgence', such as that which took place in London's Jewish communities towards the end of the 20th century, provide striking counter-examples to the claim that modern societies are secular ones in which religion has no place. Again, contrary to the secularization thesis, fundamentalism within Islam has been most prominent in the more westernized states such as Egypt and Iran. What is more, rather than people losing their religious faith after moving into modern urban environments, it now seems that they are no less likely to become more religious than they were before.¹⁷

Those who held the secularization thesis also assumed that the forms of religion that were most antithetical to modernity would be the first to disappear, while those that were prepared to adapt to modernity would be most likely to survive longest. The first signs that these predictions were inaccurate were observed in the 1960s. In 1965, Charles Liebman challenged the assumption that Jewish Orthodoxy was in terminal decline.¹⁸ As he pointed out, Ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups, contrary to what the secularization thesis had led people to expect, were growing at the expense of those forms of Judaism that had made significant concessions to modernity (that is, Modern Orthodox, Conservative and Reform groups). A similar phenomenon to that noticed by Liebman in the Jewish community was subsequently recorded in the Christian community. While the decline of mainstream Christian groups, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, continued as predicted, there was a notable resurgence of groups such as the Southern Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. In contrast to what advocates of the secularization thesis had predicted, therefore, those religious movements that took an uncompromising stand against modernity were the ones to flourish, while those that compromised and adapted their claims and institutions to modern values went into decline (at least in terms of numbers).¹⁹ Indeed, since the 1960s, fundamentalist religious groups seem to have been growing from strength to strength.²⁰

It is possible to regard the surprising resurgence of religion in modern times as a temporary deviation from the trajectory predicted by the secularization thesis. However, in

¹⁷ Why might people become more religious in modern urban environments? Perhaps, they seek to replace the network of communal relations that had supported them in traditional communities, and that is not readily available in the modern city. People might turn to the synagogue, church or mosque to provide a new community and a new social identity. With respect to immigrant communities, in particular, it has been argued that religion plays an important role in preserving their cultural identity. The effort to preserve this identity may explain why some become more religious in their adopted country than they were in their homeland. On the religiosity of immigrant communities in the US, see, Will Herberg (1994), *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

¹⁸ See, Charles Liebman (1983), "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life", in Reuven Bulka (ed.), *Dimensions of Orthodox Judaism*, pp. 33-105, Ktav, New York.

¹⁹ In keeping with this pattern, the Roman Catholic Church began to lose ground against other denominations in the wake of the liberalizing Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. However, later in the 20th century, under the leadership of the conservative Pontiff John Paul II, it exhibited a greater ability to attract converts and to keep its existing members.

²⁰ See, Paul Kurtz (1988), "The Growth of Fundamentalism Worldwide", in *The Academy of Humanism, Neo-Fundamentalism: The Humanist Response*, p. 7f, Prometheus Books, Buffalo and New York.

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view of the increasing prominence of fundamentalist religious groups within all of the major world religions, it seems more plausible to conclude that the standard view of the relation between modernity, secularization and faith ignores something important. Hence, by the end of the 20th century, many scholars had come to reject the secularization thesis and to seek new ways of explaining the relationship between religion and modernity. Liebman, for example, proposes an alternative theory claiming that, in the modern world, religious fundamentalism is the norm, and religious moderation is, rather, the phenomenon requiring explanation.²¹ He attempts to support this thesis by means of a study of Judaism within Israel (although he believes that his account of religious fundamentalism also applies to other religions elsewhere). According to Liebman,

a propensity to religious extremism does not require explanation since it is entirely consistent with basic religious tenets and authentic religious orientations. It is religious moderation or religious liberalism, the willingness of religious adherents to accommodate themselves to their environment, to adapt their behavioral and belief patterns to prevailing cultural norms, to make peace with the world, that requires explanation ... If our description of the extremist orientation is correct, then extremism is a tendency to which every religiously oriented person is attracted.²²

Essentially, then, Liebman argues that all religions tends to push people towards fundamentalism. In pre-modern societies, this tendency was counter-balanced by the many interconnections that existed between culture, communal life and religion. After the Enlightenment, however, these connections were broken as religion became increasingly isolated from other aspects of life. Thus, argues Liebman, the attraction of religious believers towards fundamentalism was no longer balanced by other factors, and was therefore allowed to attain its full expression. Moreover, religious fundamentalism is typically expressed in the drive to expand religious law, in the desire to increase the social isolation of the religious community, and, conversely, in the rejection cultivated by the fundamentalist group of the dominant culture. Let us consider each of these dimensions of religious fundamentalism in turn.

Religious law does seem to be an especially attractive focus for many fundamentalists within the major religious traditions.²³ This might be due to the fact that law is traditionally conceived as objective, unambiguous and authoritative. In discussing several aspects²⁴ of the Jewish fundamentalists' focus on Jewish Law (*halakha*), Liebman notes that the two most

²¹ Charles S Liebman (1983), "Extremism as a Religious Norm", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 22, pp. 75-86. Whereas Liebman uses the term 'extremism', here, in this commentary on his ideas, the author retains the term 'fundamentalism' because of the connotation of the use of violence that is typical of the former term, unlike the latter.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²³ Judaism, Christianity and Islam, each have their own version of religious law. Christian fundamentalists (with the exception of those who follow reconstructionist theology) do not usually pay much attention to religious law, possibly because it is perceived as Roman Catholic law, and the majority of Christian fundamentalists reject Roman Catholicism. However, by contrast, religious law is an important focus for Jewish and Islamic fundamentalists.

²⁴ These particular aspects would also seem to be of special significance to Islamic fundamentalists.

important are the desire to expand the scope of religious law and the desire to elaborate on its details. Regarding this first aspect, religious fundamentalists seek to expand the scope of religious law because they want it to legislate over all aspects of public and private behavior. Furthermore, expanding the scope of religious law would provide the fundamentalist group with its own social standards to criticize existing social institutions. Religious fundamentalists may then try to impose their program on the whole of society, and their effort to impose religious law on society as a whole often embroils religious fundamentalists in political conflict. However, in some cases, their primary political demand may simply be for political autonomy.

The second important aspect of the religious fundamentalists' focus on religious law concerns their preoccupation with the details of the law. Liebman provides the example of the *halakhic* requirement that people, particularly women, dress modestly. This requirement is, as it stands, fairly vague, for it leaves open the possibility that each community or individual can decide what would count as modest. Jewish religious fundamentalists, however, prefer not to leave this question open. Instead, they elaborate on the law in order to specify the exact length of sleeves or hemline, say, that is consistent with modesty. A similar tendency is prevalent within Islamic fundamentalism.

These two aspects of the religious fundamentalist's attitude to religious law are linked by a common thread. For, they both seek to emphasize the overriding priority of law over the individual's choice and judgement. And, in so doing, both seek to limit personal authority, expecting the individual to defer to religious leaders in even, what appears to outsiders to be, the smallest and most trivial matters—such as the length of one's sleeves or hemline.

Whereas religious law constitutes the first dimension of religious fundamentalism, as discussed by Liebman, the second dimension, as noted above, consists of a tendency towards isolation from the rest of society. For a characteristic response of religious fundamentalists, to those who do not accept their religious values, is to separate themselves from them. This attitude may be tempered by a desire to convert others, in which case fundamentalists may go to considerable lengths in order to mitigate the dangers of contact with those perceived as outsiders. This trend towards increasing social isolation is particularly evident in the case of religious education. Religious fundamentalists usually insist on their children being educated in their communities' own schools. Typically, these schools give their pupils only as much secular education as is deemed necessary, in order to remain within the law of the land. In the case of Hasidic schools, most of the pupil's time is spent learning the scriptures from memory (and traditional Muslim schools display a similar preoccupation with learning scripture by rote). One result is that children who have been educated in this way enjoy few points of intellectual or physical contact with children from non-religious schools.

The third dimension of religious fundamentalism, according to Liebman, is the tendency of religious fundamentalists to reject all cultural forms and cultural values that are not perceived to be intrinsic to their religious tradition. In practice, this often means that

This would have encouraged self-interested people to become religious leaders in order to promote their own or their family's interests, with the notorious corruption among Roman Catholic leaders during the middle ages being a case in point. Such self-interested individuals enjoying positions of religious leadership would, Liebman maintains, have had an interest in keeping fundamentalist tendencies at bay, and within a traditional society, they would have had more power to do so.

The claim, then, is that the current rise in religious fundamentalism can be explained by the disappearance of such regulatory factors—factors that, Liebman argues, formerly restrained any fundamentalist tendencies within society. Clearly, one feature of the modern world is the compartmentalization of religion. Since the Enlightenment, religion has become increasingly distanced from other areas of public life. Consequently, religious leaders rarely attain the public status they once enjoyed, and this perhaps means that self-interested individuals are less likely to strive to become religious leaders.²⁷ Hence, the two factors that, if Liebman is correct, were previously paramount in checking the tendency of religious people towards fundamentalism, have been significantly attenuated within modern western society.

It may be, then, that Liebman's theory can explain why religious fundamentalism is a distinctively modern phenomenon, and not simply an expression of a desire to return to a pre-modern state of mind in which one's religious beliefs are seemingly immune from challenge. The theory also appears to offer a persuasive explanation as to why religion has not died the natural death that had been predicted by 20th century social science.

Despite Liebman's claim that the three dimensions of religious fundamentalism—the desire to expand the scope of religious law, the wish for isolation of their community from the rest of society, and the rejection of the dominant culture—have always been an intrinsic part of many religions, he admits that only under conditions typical of modernity has religious fundamentalism reached its full expression. Indeed, his argument suggests that religious fundamentalism requires modernity to reach such expression. In this sense, it seems fair to claim that modernity provides the conditions of possibility for religious fundamentalism—a claim which also explains the failure of the secularization thesis to account for patterns of religious commitment in the late 20th century and beyond.

Whether or not we should accept Liebman's theoretical explanation, the secularization thesis, which was virtually unquestioned in the 1950s and 1960s, does seem to have been critically undermined by the unexpected religious revival that occurred during the second half of the 20th century.²⁸ The relationship between religion and modernity is thus, far more complex than the thesis allows. Even within Western Europe, in those areas—such as the

²⁷ Although, an obvious counter-example that Liebman does not anticipate, is provided by the 'televangelist' media personalities that dominated Christian broadcasting in the US during the 1970s and 1980s.

²⁸ Nevertheless, the thesis continues to stimulate vigorous debate. See, for example, the collection of essays in Steve Bruce (1992) (ed.), *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

United Kingdom and the Netherlands—where the thesis has come closest to being borne out, the situation is more nuanced than had been predicted.²⁹

Conclusion

While religious fundamentalism is often regarded as an attempt to recreate the past and return religious believers to a pre-modern worldview, this article has sought to demonstrate that this is a deeply misleading picture of religious fundamentalism. By examining some of the key characteristics of religious fundamentalism within the Abrahamic faiths, it argues that, far from being a throwback to the past, religious fundamentalism is a distinctively modern phenomenon. Moreover, an examination of the secularization thesis, and its failure to account for current patterns of religiosity, has provided reason to believe that religious fundamentalism, at least in its full expression, is dependent upon other features of modernity. ☒

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²⁹ See Victoria S Harrison (2007), *Religion and Modern Thought*, SCM, London, Chapter 2.