

Religious fundamentalism: Aspects of a comparative framework of understanding

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ABSTRACT

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The article presents the outline of a comparative framework for the understanding of religious fundamentalism. The argument is developed around the interrelated aspects of macro-historical religious context, socio-religious context, and the context of religious tradition as a primary dimension of religion. In those overlapping contexts, the possibility of fundamentalism is explained with reference to pre-disposing, precipitating and perpetuating conditions. In terms of the dimension of religious tradition, fundamentalism is expounded in terms of the following three aspects: education, interpretation and identity-definition. Fundamentalism emerges as an awkward mix (not a creative synthesis) of traditional and modernist elements in the present breach - with its peculiar characteristics, crises and threats - between epochs.

1 PARADIGMATIC AND CONTEXTUAL PARAMETERS

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the development of a framework for the comparative understanding of religious fundamentalism. What follows, is presented in a broad Religious Studies paradigm, which I take to include at least the following incremental dimensions:

- (a) establishment of empirical 'reality' (overlapping with history, sociology, etc.);
- (b) phenomenological understanding of intentionality;
- (c) theory formation (overlapping with sociology, psychology, etc.);
- (d) critique (overlapping with philosophy and theology);

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- (e) constructive thought (overlapping with philosophy and theology);
- (f) mystical silence;
- (g) morality and ethics (overlapping with philosophy, theology, etc.).

(Krüger 1995:97-137).

The article will touch on some of the above in various degrees. I shall not base my argument on any religion-specific normative scriptural or theological tradition, and I shall not evaluate fundamentalism from such a point of view. Of course, much work has been done from such a perspective since Barr's analyses a quarter of a century ago (Barr 1981, 1984).

The argument will be grouped around the following three perspectives that may be distinguished analytically, even if the strands they refer to, occur as inextricably interwoven in actual socio-historical reality:

- (a) macro-historical religious context (the large historical framework in which religious fundamentalism is to be understood);
- (b) socio-religious context (the kind of social environment conducive to the occurrence of fundamentalism);
- (c) the context of religious tradition (how religious traditions work).

2 TERM AND CONCEPT

Currently the term 'fundamentalism' has a very broad application. However, its specific ancestry is well known. A historical marker was a Bible Conference held in New York in 1895, where five points (the 'five fundamentals') were confirmed as non-negotiable for the integrity of the Christian faith:

- (a) the verbal inerrancy of the whole Bible, implying a rejection of the historical-critical study of the Bible and its results;
- (b) the divinity of Jesus;
- (c) the virgin birth of Jesus;
- (d) the substitutionary atonement by the death of Jesus;
- (f) the physical resurrection and return of Jesus.

Since then, these 'fundamentals' have remained close to the core of what may be termed 'Christian fundamentalism'. Other aspects that have entered the orbit of this term during the twentieth century include

- (g) cosmology (the age and manner of coming into being of the cosmos);
- (h) biology (the age and manner of coming into being of life, particularly of the human being);
- (i) society (e.g. the social position and status of women).

Since those beginnings, the term also seems to have taken on a life of its own, being applied to religions other than Christianity. As has happened often in the academic study of religions, a concept has been borrowed from its original context and extrapolated to other religions. At present the most visible example of such an application may be Islam. I will not trace further either the history of the term 'fundamentalism' as such, or the history of fundamentalism in Christianity or any other religion.

What I shall understand by 'fundamentalism' is something else than mere 'conservatism', 'traditionalism' or 'orthodoxy' but rather: *the selective combination of traditional and modern/post-modern cultural and religious elements to protect and promote collective identity and interests in contemporary society*. In fact, fundamentalism has a much closer affinity to modernity with its peculiar set of ideas and attitudes, than to traditionalism. This socio-religious contextual understanding of fundamentalism is aligned to approaches such as those of Marty & Appleby (1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1994, 1995), Kaplan (1992) and Van Vucht Tijssen, Berting and Lechner (1992).

'Fundamentalism', thus understood, implies not only a set of substantive ideas, but also a particular cognitive style and stance, as well as a style of social positioning. In the perspective adopted in this article, fundamentalism appears as a syndrome symptomatic of epochal social, cultural and religious crises. It needs to be understood clearly and sympathetically, and non-judgmentally yet unsentimentally, with reference to predisposing, precipitating and perpetuating causes and conditions, symptoms, and results and sequelae. The upshot of the analysis is that, given the present set of epochal conditions, the disappearance of religious fundamentalism

must, for the foreseeable future, not be expected. From the point of view of institutionalised historical religions, successful containment should, under present conditions, count as victory.

3 MACRO-HISTORICAL, EPOCHAL CONTEXT

Since the emergence of modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) around 200,000 years ago, this species expanded as people migrated to all the extremes of climate on this planet since about 120,000 years ago, adapted their diet, started to conquer the world and gave birth to thousands of languages, cultures and social forms – and religions². From Africa it spread out on a trip of globalisation, as if deliberately, covering earth with its layer of civilization (in Teilhard de Chardin's concept: noosphere). However, the final expansion of technology over the last five hundred years, largely associated with Western society and culture, started a process of contraction in the sense of global homogenisation.

For purposes of convenient synopsis, this entire process can be presented as a series of epochs, in which an 'epoch' may be understood as a quantum of time, in which at least the following three complementary aspects concur:

- (a) the technical-manipulative stance vis-à-vis the material conditions of life (mainly food-production and other technologies);
- (b) societal relationships and structures;
- (c) meaning-providing systems (culture).

Religion has always intrinsically been part of those developments. We cannot attach a date to the beginning of religion, but may assume that it developed in tandem with the process of hominisation as such. For all the permutations it may allow, each epoch has had its own

2 Numerous models to account for the development of religion, which I will not begin to list or enumerate, were developed in the modern period. The early attempts such as those of E B Tylor (from animism to polytheism to monotheism), R H Codrington and R R Marett (mana), Herbert Spencer (ancestor worship), James Frazer (magical to religious to scientific), Herbert Spencer (ancestor worship), Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud (totemism), were succeeded by recent models such as those of Lenski et al (1991 [1970]); Stone (1978); Schmidt (1988); Platvoet (1993); and – the most elaborate and comprehensive synoptic map-maker of all – Ken Wilber (for example 1995, 2000).

style: its unique, characteristic combination of the above three aspects. In other words: human history is the unfolding of human relationships with nature and with society, motivated and justified by culture (including religion), and allowing more or less freedom for the individual.

These epochs were differential in the sense that they did not start everywhere at the same time. We cannot investigate the conditioning factors here. Enough to mention that they include geographical and climatic circumstances, and social isolation or its opposite, the opportunity to be influenced by technological and other developments elsewhere. In this sense, some human groups entered recent epochs thousands of years after other groups in the long process of historical change. These epochs were not marked by sudden beginnings and ends. Generally speaking, they overlap. However, in some groups such changes took shape more gradually, as conditions present in a previous epoch changed gradually, allowing the older epoch to transcend itself almost imperceptibly into a next one. In other groups new epochs were forcefully imposed on older ones with sudden, traumatic effect, without sufficient preparation to allow for an evolutionary change. None of these epochs was left behind completely. An archaeology of the human spirit – including religion – uncovers layer under layer of old, ancient, archaic and primitive sediments as Mircea Eliade (1958), more than anybody else, argued.

The point of this argument is that fundamentalism is an epochal phenomenon, the conditions for the arising of which steadily emerged through various epochs, and finding their culmination in epochs V and VI (see graph below).

| Epoch | Type of society | Technological developments | Socio-cultural developments | Religious developments | Fundamentalism |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|---|---|-----------------------|
| I 200000 yrs ago | Hunting-Gathering | Simple tools | Small groups Some division of labour Equality | Primal religions | Category not Relevant |
| II 10000 yrs ago | Early food-producing Herding | Plough Other more advanced tools Metal | Larger communities Inequalities (men & women) | Beginning separate institution Religious specialists | Category not Relevant |

| | | | | | |
|--|------------------------|--|---|--|--|
| III 6000 yrs ago | Advanced horticultural | More advanced tools Writing | Larger communities (empires) Increasing complexity Increasing inequality | Large imperial religions More Specialisation | Category not Relevant |
| IV 4000 yrs ago | Advanced agrarian | New technologies Role of writing increases | Increasing urbanisation More stratification Extreme inequality Individualism | Advanced religious thought Founders Sacred books Voluntary association World religions Mysticism | Conditions for Fundamentalism emerging clearly |
| V 16 th c onwards | Modern | New technologies Central role of the printed word | Science, Secularisation Historicity Human constitution of culture Technological society Industrial society Globalisation | Positivism/scientism Secularism Religion as historical product Religion as cultural product New religions Mysticism | Fundamentalism emerging strongly |
| VI 19 th c onwards | New epoch | Even more technology | Extreme Ambivalence | Extreme Ambivalence | Fundamentalism well established |

It is submitted that the emergence of what would become fully-fledged 'fundamentalism' in the twentieth century, was associated with various predisposing factors, including the increased use of writing since advanced agrarian society. In a wider context, the seamless whole of traditional societies (and the associated religions) started to rupture quite seriously. Thinkers who would attract followers voluntarily associating themselves with their teachings, and whose thoughts would soon be become enscribed for broad consumption and study, came to the fore. Zoroaster, Lao Tzu, the founders of the orthodox Indian philosophical schools, Siddartha Gautama, Mahavira, Isaiah, Parmenides, Empedocles, Plato, Chuang-Tzu, Jesus, Plotinus, Mani, Nagarjuna, Asanga, Vasubandhu and Muhammad were some of these unique figures. Some of the enscribed teachings produced during this epoch have become part of

the tradition of whole cultures. Some play a significant role in the collective consciousness of the world of today.

The best known and most influential of these figures were men. This testifies to the conditions of extreme social inequality (for example, slavery and discrimination against women) in which life was lived. If not these men themselves, then at least their followers could not escape from the pull of the type of society in which they lived and against many features of which the founders had protested. That was the epoch in which the formation of early Christianity and Islam occurred. Gradually the visions of such figures, as laid down in scriptures and interpreted and reinterpreted by generations of followers and solidified in codes subscribed to by millions, were absorbed into the fabrics of states and empires, and remain influential to this day.

Roughly from the sixteenth century onwards, and on an increasingly global scale, the chain of events took a turn which seemed to reduce all attempts at reconciliation with the source of being to irrelevant non-sense. The epoch of modernity – driven by reason and science – announced itself clearly. As science and technology developed to levels undreamed of in previous generations, first industrial, modern Western society, and then increasingly other cultures and societies, became trapped in a one-dimensional level of thinking. Old-style theologies and philosophies, unaligned as they were with modern science, appeared as relics from a by-gone era. Intellectual fashion, including the scholarly norms in the human sciences, seemed to demand the denial of the metaphysical urge. In this ambivalent epoch the large historical religions of the last three millennia with their enscripted messages encoded in a by-gone epoch, found/find themselves in a serious crisis. Originally going back to the insights of creative individuals, they have fallen behind the cutting edge of modern culture, and, forced to interact with the forces of modernity, they were pushed out of the central cultural and social position they once had.

As traditional religions were hit by the new forces, the protest against the spirit of the times took at least three significant forms (that is, apart from attempts at meaningful reconciliation or harmonisation from within the heart of the traditional religions themselves):

- (a) new religions (for example, the Baha'i Faith) and new religious movements, often picking up ancient religious strains, sometimes harking back to the times before the various triumphs of the large institutionalised religions;
- (b) mysticism (and, in a weaker form, spirituality), seeking the silence on the other side of institutionalised religion;
- (c) fundamentalism as defined above.

Today, according to many observers, the wider socio-religio-cultural context is in the throes of new beginning with all the ambivalences and ambiguities associated with such an epochal shift. For the purposes of this article, it is not necessary to analyse this epochal shift in any detail, except stating that its peculiar uncertainties contribute to the strong presence of fundamentalism. At this present time of the difficult crossing from one epoch to the next, fundamentalism is well established, a child of these difficult times. It occurs across the board in all traditional religions, in Buddhism and Hinduism as well as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. However, it does not seem to be applicable to, for example, African religion, for the reason that African religion is not the product of the process portrayed earlier in the same way as the other religions mentioned are.

4 TRADITION AND ITS CENTRAL MECHANISMS

Some of the singular torrents of insight that befall creative visionaries on high mountains of the spirit cascade down and become, at the lower slopes, long, broad, deep, slowly meandering rivers. The precious cargoes of water and silt carried by rivers bring life to all that live in them or on their banks or on the wide plains through which they move. They pick up all sorts of things on their ways and leave much wealth and debris on their shores as they move on and on and on. That may serve as a useful analogy for the function of traditions.

Tradition has a trans-subjective ('objective') dimension. It carries itself forward, and carries people along, with a momentum of its own. Its words, languages, conventions, codes create people, cast them in their social roles of man, woman, parent, citizen, believer. Yet it also has the seemingly opposite, a subjective, dimension, in the sense that it is created by people, collectively and individually. Both sides are simultaneously operative, although one or the other

may dominate at a given time. Highly original times of tradition-creation, more conformist times of cautious tradition-interpretation and decadent times of insipid tradition-repetition alternate as epochs take over from previous ones, unfold their own inner dynamics and pass into others. What is more, all three orientations can occur and compete at the same time.

Religions work no differently. They are societies with cultures, that is, traditions. Tradition now becomes sacred. In wider society the untouchability of tradition may be implicit fact. In religion the sacredness is explicit fact, underpinned by principle. Religious tradition tends to eternalise itself.

The self-perpetuation of tradition proceeds through the inter-related mechanisms of:

(a) education

Tradition is transmitted, normatively entrusted, by one person to a next, one generation to the next – that is, it is caught and taught, in a process of education.

(b) interpretation

Each particular river has to adapt, seek – in the way of water – the easiest route downwards, as the landscape through which it moves, changes and presents new difficulties at every turn. Negotiating such ever so often occurring difficulties requires constant re-interpretation of the tradition.

(c) self-definition

In the process of treasuring its cargo and carrying it forward, the essence of a particular tradition, a particular stream of culture, its uniqueness, its differences, similarities and overlaps with other streams, must be protected.

On their historical courses religions have to contend with ever-shifting constellations of geographical, climatic, technological, social and cultural conditions. In recent centuries, in some parts of the globe no two successive generations lived in the same world. Such inevitable adventures include the encounters with other religions. So in religion as much as in wider society, the cardinal mechanisms of successful transmission of established tradition – namely (ped-)agogy (education), hermeneutics (interpretation) and protective logistics (self-definition) – are always present in

interactive mutuality. Once sedimented in tradition, the precious message must be transmitted and communicated successfully to insiders, both young and not so young; interpreted and re-interpreted as it negotiates new challenges; and maintained and protected successfully against threats to its identity from inside and outside. All three demands have to be met simultaneously. Teaching is interpretation is affirmation of some things and rejection of other things. Small wonder that religious leaders cannot satisfy everybody, as they are invariably seen to be too strict or too lenient, too advanced or too lagging behind in their approach.

Tradition is the collective memory of society. The significance attached to it may vary from one group to another, from one time in a culture's history to another. Sometimes it is seen as just the way things are done, saving time and energy, and minimising friction in a group. Sometimes it carries heavier meanings. It may be solemnly sanctioned, positively and negatively. Upholding the tradition may be strongly rewarded or, when authoritative tradition becomes authoritarian tradition, tolerating no deviation, breaching it may be heavily punished. Fundamentalisms tend towards an authoritarian style of tradition maintenance.

This dynamic of tradition maintenance has an individual as well as a social dimension. By temperament and position in life some individuals take the bit between the teeth as they surge forward at the forefront of the creation or adaptation of tradition; less creative or less motivated, others nevertheless move forward more or less cautiously with other progressives; others hang back as part of the conservative mainstay of society; others, protecting what was at all costs, are washed forwards with their backs turned to the future and the inevitable, necessary recreation of tradition. In different societies, or at different times in a society's history, different stances are rewarded. The pull backward and the pull forward is part of tradition, of the rope of continuity of a society. At times the rope lies slack; at times it is taut, even to breaking point. At times these ropes, tying the future to the past, break.

5 TEACHER, WORD, TEACHING, SCRIPTURE, CANON

Successful transmission of the religious message requires *education, teaching*. Early on in religious traditions stand great teachers, such as Confucius, the Buddha, Plato, Jesus, Plotinus, Muhammad, with not only a substance but also a style and method of teaching that

profoundly affected the history of the world. These geniuses were invariable also charismatic re-interpreters of a past that they had inherited. Confucius was a life-long student of the historical tradition, including poetry and music, of ancient China, and channelled that into his own teaching; for all the creative novelty of his teaching, the Buddha stands in the great tradition of Indian religious thought from the Vedas onward; Plato built on and consolidated the ideas of his predecessors among Greek philosophers; Jesus received and moulded the Jewish Torah and prophets; Plotinus was a Platonist with a unique turn of thought; Muhammad was versed in the traditions and scriptures of Jews and (particularly Nestorian) Christians, and adapted them to serve his own understanding. Go back as far as you please in history, and never will you find an absolutely original religious beginning; there is always an older tradition. The founders of (relatively) new traditions do not necessarily erect barbed protective barriers around their teachings. That usually happens lower downstream, with lesser figures acting as armed guards.

A telling historical distinction needs to be made between oral and written religious teachings. This distinction does not merely refer to different modes of transport and transmission of actions, sentiments and ideas, but to different kinds of tradition as such. As the technology of writing became more prevalent in epochs III, IV and V, it increasingly entered into the texture of tradition itself. Tradition became more fixed, harder, more rigid, as can be seen in the 'religions of the book' (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). Oral traditions, that may run parallel to written traditions, at least for some time, are much more fluid, but once they have been written down, they too become fixed yardsticks of measuring rightness and wrongness. So in a sense epochs III, IV and V increasingly provided a significant condition for present-day fundamentalism (at least some forms of it). However, the enscripting of traditions was neither the only nor a necessary nor a sufficient condition for fundamentalism, but it certainly proved to be a fundamental and contributing condition. By and large Indian and Far-Eastern religions tended – in spite of the writing down of tradition – to have stronger built-in religious and philosophical checks against the hardening of the arteries through which the inherited message passes. Recall the Zen advice: if it is very cold, use the religious book for fire.

Holy words – whether in the form of an articulate prayer or just a vague, flitting concept – mostly remain, private and intimately-individual, between a person and his/her God and perhaps a few friends, but otherwise recede into silence again. That is their destiny. Sometimes they are *written* holy words of various kinds (prayers, vows, formulas, stories, systematic teachings, and so on) straight-away. Sometimes they only become written after a shorter or longer period, from hours to centuries. Holy words sometimes become *transmitted* holy words, tradition, whether oral or written – but not always: they may also endure for only a brief period of time, be shared by a small number of people, and then disappear without leaving any trace. In the case of becoming holy written transmitted words on a large scale, they belong to the genre generally known as Holy Books, usually part of a holy canon. Such holy books are intricately interwoven with tradition: they arise from a tradition, as I pointed out above; they give rise to tradition, otherwise they would not have acquired the status they have; and they become part of a tradition, which surrounds and protects and interprets them.

Holy oral traditions and scriptures such as *Vedas*, *Tripitaka*, *Gathas*, *Torah*, *New Testament*, *Qur'an*, *Granth* and *Kitab-i-Aqdas* are extremely powerful capsules, containing and regulating all the dimensions of religion. As condensed cultures of various societies, such heritages are normative traditions, herding multitudes, appropriated by individuals. Containing views about ultimate reality that sometimes need to be teased out from myth to satisfy adherents' need for system, they present normative morality, normative ritual, normative feeling and normative thinking.

Whereas epochs III – IV tended to harden religious traditions, the epoch of modernity (epoch V) (at the end of which we are, according to many observers, tottering) brought about something else and quite threatening to all traditions, religious or otherwise. Today, in the brave new world of global technological homogenisation, we are witnessing the end of tradition. This means more than the swallowing up of smaller traditions by more powerful ones. It also means that the very sense of tradition, of being indebted to a dignified, meaningful socio-cultural and religious past, is petering out in the new technocratic world. The threat to tradition, particularly heavily sanctioned, enscripted tradition, is thus also a precipitating and perpetuating condition for the rise of fundamentalism. A tremendously heavy investment is felt to be threatened, and severe counter-

measures are taken. Fundamentalism is therefore a typically modern phenomenon, in which seeds that were present in ancient cultural epochs came to fruition under the typical conditions of modernity. The term should not be restricted to the way that religious texts are read, that is, rejecting the implications of historical scholarship. Rather, it may be used for a total strategy of reactionary dealing with what is considered to be the overall threat of modernity to ancient traditions. This has implications for all three mechanisms of the maintenance of tradition:

- (a) education becomes backward-looking and authoritarian;
- (b) interpretation becomes narrow and intolerant;
- (c) the style of socio-cultural and religious self-definition becomes isolationist and exclusivistic.

6 INTERPRETATION

Interpretation is the means by which the appropriation and re-appropriation of tradition by new people, in new sets of circumstances, is effected. Interpretation serves the teaching and the protection of the identity, thus the integrity, of a tradition. Highly developed scriptural religions developed branches of commentaries, interpreting the primary scriptures by spelling out their implications and fruits. The distinction between the primary and secondary corpuses of writings is not always equally clear in various religious traditions.

In Hinduism absolute metaphysical priority is awarded to the creative power of the original sound of the spoken word. However, the lines between originally revealed, 'heard' writings (*shruti*), and more secondary, 'remembered', derived, humanly composed writings (*smriti*), such as philosophical interpretations, are not clean-cut. The *Brahmanas* and *Upanishads*, for example, although commentaries and interpretations of the most original collections, are included in the *Vedas*. Further down the line from original to derived, are the various classical philosophical schools (*darshanas*) (Nyaya, Vaishesika, Sankhya, Yoga, Purva-Mimamsa, and Yoga). And so the continuum of the tradition was preserved over millennia, with ever so often innovative and authoritative commentators/re-interpreters, such as Sankara and Vivekananda, acting as an avant-garde leading the tradition forward into changing times, revitalising it.

In Buddhism, Hinayana from its earliest time produced an ever-growing body of commentaries on the canonical tradition, alongside the canon and continuing for centuries after the completion of the canon. Prior to becoming written up, the canonical tradition had for centuries been transmitted orally. In Mahayana there is also a distinction between primary scriptures (*sutras*) and secondary commentaries and philosophical interpretation (*sastras*), often linked to individual scholars and schools, such as Madhyamika. In various schools various texts received an enormous status as foci of religious orientation and emotional veneration (such as the *Saddharmapundarika Sutra* in the case of the T'ien-tai school). But philosophically and religiously the distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' texts remains a relative one, and nowhere are scriptures seen as divine dictates. All *sutras*, Hinayana as well as Mahayana, begin with the words 'Thus have I heard'. This stock-phrase suggests historical continuity and authority. But never does it function as a literal-historical 'fact', on the acceptance of which one's eternal destiny hinges. Particularly in Mahayana *sutras*, the mytho-poetical being constructed of such texts as useful *bodhisattvic* tools to promote enlightenment, is perfectly obvious. In an enlightenment/discovery model of text and tradition, there is no absolute split between divine revelation and mere human interpretation.

On the other hand, in the 'religions of the book' the distinction between primary and secondary, divinely inspired and humanly reflected, tends to be much stronger than in the religions of Indian origin. But even here it is not a clear-cut case. What was ultimately accepted as revelation, as divinely inspired writings not arising from human initiatives, as primary and normative source of the tradition, more often than not arose and obtained that elevated status in the process of tradition (education-interpretation-identity protection) itself.

In Judaism the primary scriptures are collectively known as the *Tenach* (*the Torah, Nebi'im* and *Kethubim*). Of these, the first group had enjoyed canonical status by the fifth century BCE; the second, since the third century BCE; and the third was finally accepted into the canon in the last decade of the first century CE. This corpus of scriptures was decided on by scholars, after careful deliberation, as being the revealed Word of God. Other books (called *Apocrypha*) were left out as instructive but not divinely revealed. The multivalent relationship between divine revelation, tradition, protection of social

and religious identity, upbringing of the next generations and interpretation in this process is obvious. The canon came to be supported, but on a strictly secondary, derived level, by the collection of commentarial interpretations, the *Talmud* (consisting of the *Mishnah* and the *Gemara*), which was completed by the end of the fifth century. On a third tier are further detailed oral, rabbinic explanations of the Torah, the most important of which were written down (*Midrash*). Somewhat aside stand the *Kabbalah*: another, derived circle of commentary – yet esoteric, mystic, in intent, seeking a direct relationship with *En Sof* (the infinite, the limitless) behind the letter of the enscripted words.

In spite of differences in religious content, Christianity reveals the same pattern in the unfolding of tradition. Christianity accepted the Hebrew tradition (encapsulated in the *Tenach*) and re-interpreted it from its own religious perspective. In turn, it compiled its own collection of texts, accepted as divine revelation (the *New Testament*). Immediately after the life and death of Jesus the good news concerning his person and his message was transmitted orally. However, within the first two decades, quite a large number of gospels were written down and circulated in the young movement. As the developing tradition of Christianity was forced to define its essence and boundaries against heresies and teach its truth, it was deemed necessary to fix its corpus of absolutely true, divinely inspired writings. The fixing of the Christian canon was a tortuous process which was only finalised towards the end of the fourth century. The first apostles were seen to be the source and guarantors of the tradition of its truth. However, on victorious tradition the fingerprints of later interpretation, conditionalistically tied to circumstances of time, place, and socio-cultural and religio-political context, are clearly observable. The absolute truth of Christian revelation, the historical process of tradition and the determining input of interpretation (including translation) are inextricably intertwined in their mutual constitution. Christianity also had its sets of totally rejected and of lower-order, non-canonical *Apocrypha*. And throughout its history the vital functions of protection, teaching and commentarial interpretation were carried out by bishop, synod and scholar.

Of all religions, Islam takes the perfect enscriptedness of divine revelation to its furthest extreme. The *Qur'an* (itself generally seen to be a perfect copy of an original, eternal, enscripted tablet in

heaven) is accepted as having been dictated *verbatim* by the archangel Gabriel to an illiterate Mohammad, copied down by his early followers, and compiled in its final form shortly after his death. Although the Jewish and Christian scriptures are accepted as divine revelation and hence as part of the Muslim tradition, they are seen as having been corrupted by men, and finally corrected in the *Qur'an*. Here too a hierarchy of scriptures became necessary. The perfect book with absolute authority was followed by collections of other sayings of the prophet and examples from his life (collections of *hadith*: 'traditions'). These traditions were traced via a chain in which attestors with pedigree were assumed to be absolutely authentic links to a true past. This in turn is followed by authoritative commentaries, interpretations and applications by the various schools of law and the *ulama* (the learned teachers, jurists and theologians).

Here lies another root of fundamentalism. In some of its forms (in the religions of the book), it is an expression of terrified anxiety and explosive anger about what it sees as the blurring of the strong distinction between absolute 'Word of God' and mere relative 'words of men'. Whereas liberals/progressives in those traditions see the discovery of the human, historical constitution of all meaning as a given, to be negotiated for the sake of the protection of the integrity of the tradition and its teaching, fundamentalists see it as a deadly threat, to be ignored or militantly swept aside.

In the process of interpretation, the relative emphasis on various elements in the tradition at any time may be different than they were in a preceding time, with some elements receiving more and some less emphasis than previously. Some novelties may be taken on board. Some awkward old baggage, jeopardising the journey, are thrown overboard. The twisting and turning of individuals and groups in negotiating the safest route between the rocks in the white waters never stops as long as the river itself lasts. This re-appropriation is done deliberately and consciously, or involuntary and unconsciously, and reflectively or intuitively. But it is done. No matter how conservatively the integrity of a tradition, for example in its primary scriptures, is protected, an element of change is inevitably introduced at every new turn of the river. Even the most literalistic *verbatim* repetition, in a different context than the original, amounts to interpretation, ie adaptation: the alignment between old word and its two different surrounding contexts (the original one and

the new one) is simply not the same, so the original word functions differently.

The borders of what is tolerable within a tradition must constantly be patrolled. When – that is, saying what? or doing what? – would ‘Judaism’ no longer be ‘Judaism’, ‘Christianity’ no longer be ‘Christianity’, ‘Buddhism’ no longer be ‘Buddhism’, ‘Islam’ no longer be ‘Islam’, and so on? Is Shaivism part of ‘Hinduism’, or has the elasticity of the concept ‘Hinduism’ been over-extended? Suppose some group, insisting that they are Christian, would widen the Christian trinity to a quaternary by the inclusion of Maria? Would their insistence on being ‘Christian’ have any leg to stand on?

In very broad terms, overarching all religions and hermeneutical procedures, seven basic strategies for the valid reception and interpretation of the tradition are particularly interesting (for the first three, cf Pye and Morgan 1973). They may come in all sorts of combinations. They occur not only in religious contexts, but in wider society as well. We stay with the ongoing and unstoppable interpretation of religious traditions.

(a) The earliest, oldest, stratum in tradition may be presented as more potently normative than what appeared later. This was the case in Theravada Buddhism, Islam and Protestant Christianity. ‘The earliest is the truest’, is the call.

(b) The tradition as a whole, as the developing sum of its historical accretions through time, becomes the leading idea. Then ‘Christianity’ is the totality of whatever developed organically as ‘Christian’ through the ages.

(c) The true identity of a tradition may be sought in the future, as the blooming of the best latent tendencies in a tradition, as work still in progress.

(d) Whatever has been determined as particularly binding some time in the past by some official sanction, carries heavy authority. It could be a person, or an office (such as the Roman *curia*), or a collective body (such as a synod). This strategy could, in spite of all protestations to the contrary, in effect provide a secondary, interpreting tradition (e.g. Confessions) with exceptional authority, allowing it to determine what in the primary tradition is more binding than other elements (this was and is, for example, the case in forms of Lutheran and Reformed orthodoxy).

(e) Another norm within the norm may be what is considered as the most basic tendency in a tradition, its most basic direction. Christ may be such a point of reference, in terms of which the whole Bible is understood. Everything must be understood from that point of view.

(f) Following a logic of exclusion, the integrity of a tradition - that which makes it unique and binding – may be found in how it differs from other traditions. ‘See, we are the only ones who say this!’

(g) Following a logic of inclusion, the authority and essence of a tradition may be found in its similarities to other traditions. ‘See, we are not alone in this!’

Typically, fundamentalism would favour (a), (d) and (f) of the above strategies.

Religions also devised complex hermeneutical tactics – sets of rules at a more applied level – for the interpretation of traditions, particularly those condensed in writing. Oral traditions (such as traditional African religion), being far less fixed, have far less use for such hermeneutical procedures. Such text-interpreting strategies are quite religion-specific. But there are also certain continuities, such as allegorical interpretation – that is, the interpretation of real things, events or stories as symbolic of spiritual realities. This type of reception of enscripted tradition is used in the more ‘liberal’ or, in the current cultural situation, ‘progressive’ sectors of religions (and note that ‘liberal’ and ‘progressive’ are not necessarily the same). It is also a possibility in the mystical transcendence of religion.

Fundamentalism is an interpretive strategy occurring across religions. It is a startlingly dramatic illustration of the Janus-head of all religious tradition. One face looks backwards. The other face looks at the contemporary world as it moves into a future. If fundamentalism only looked backwards, it would hardly be distinguishable from plain conservatism. There is something more to fundamentalism. It is also consciously, and often smartly, contemporary. It is a clever, selective mix of elements from the past with elements of the most up-to-date present. It is of course not restricted to religious discourse. In the wider social sphere it can as easily appear, as a reactionary stance dressed in fashionable intellectual costume.

By way of illustration: all religious traditions presently labour heavily under the weight of the social conditions of thousands of

years ago, in which women were severely discriminated against. In stead of re-interpreting or even ditching such parts of the tradition, however difficult it may be, fundamentalists in various religions put such arrangements forward as absolutely normative for today. Not because of naivety, but because such a stance fits what is perceived to be the identity of the tradition, laced as it is with power and privilege. Fundamentalism goes well with wealth, high social status, scientific training, and the trappings of state of the art technology. Treating religious documents rationally as quasi-legal texts, it may also be very comfortable with the cognitive attitude of ‘hard’, positivistic science and philosophy. Certain parts of various scriptures are selectively under-played and others pushed hard, claiming that everything depends on their literal repetition and acceptance. Some forms of philosophy, such as varieties of analytical philosophy, and even forms of positivistic science, may indeed be embraced, simply because they do not challenge fundamentalist tenets which may be perfectly clear linguistically and consistent logically. The problem of fundamentalism does indeed not lie in its logic, which may, from a formal point of view, be quite correct, but in its inadequate assumptions and presuppositions. It could engage in clever mental gymnastics without addressing the key problems of contemporary religions, such as the historicity of the religious process, at a sufficiently profound philosophical or religious level. Science is treated selectively. Knowledgeable of the theory of evolution, for example, fundamentalism may attempt to reconcile selected aspects of it with selected parts of creation narratives. In spite of its appeal to The Past, fundamentalism has no real historical sense – that is, no appreciation, neither empirically nor philosophically nor religiously, of the changes, more precisely, the inherent changeability, the historicity, of all events and processes. Some unchanging Verbal Substance is assumed to exist, untouched by the vicissitudes of time, place and circumstance.

From the perspective of this article, fundamentalism – uncritically – congeals open process into solid substance, inserts closure, stifles criticism, a questioning attitude, and innovative thought. It takes exceptional courage, strength and intelligence for the individual person to liberate oneself from its constraints.

7 IDENTITY-DEFINITION

Patrol of the borders of *self-definition* of a tradition has always been seen as necessary. Preserving a tradition and its codes ensures socio-

cultural and/or religious identity, perhaps even laced with profound metaphysical significance. Equally inescapable is the mutual involuntary influencing by what may be perceived to be very different religious traditions. There are no pure religious traditions, uncontaminated by others, no matter how unique the founding experience higher upstream may have been. And now we are not referring to deliberate syncretisms. Two typical examples: by the time of the high Medieval period – in the works of Thomas and Dante – the awkward relationship, even old antipathies, between classical culture and Hebrew-Christianity of a thousand and more years earlier had become a friendly, seamless hierarchical synthesis; Ch’an was a synthesis of Buddhism and Taoism. Similar patterns of interaction repeated itself and will keep on repeating itself in future in all religions sharing cultural space with others, particularly in circumstances of intimate proximity. Nevertheless, the need to maintain tradition also always remains, and here the dimension of power reveals itself particularly clearly. Identity-maintenance empowers some members of society and religion. In religions, priests, the knowers of the ancient lore, have always been a privileged class. Once in power, tradition (including enscribed holy tradition) readily becomes a tool – even weapon – in the hands of the powerful, not easily relinquished, as the history of religions show.

In the style of its contra-stance against the broad, dominant stream of society, culture and religion, fundamentalism is, *mutatis mutandis*, an apt illustration of Troeltsch’s classic analysis of ‘sect’ (Troeltsch 1960 [1911]): outnumbered, striving after perfection, aiming at a high level of direct personal fellowship among followers, the typical sect engages the hostile world forcefully and even aggressively and militantly. This stance may find expression in the aim to replace the powers that be in broader society and culture. In our present context, fundamentalism is the mindset of groups alienated from the religio-socio-cultural mainstream of modernity: sensing their socio-religious identity to be under heavy threat; attached to the ideal of absolute purity of understanding and application of such understanding; committed to a very high level of conformity in understanding; and setting itself up as isolationist in its indifference to or mere toleration of or active opposition to the dominant cultural forces. The last stance may find expression in various ways, not excluding militant action. All for the sake of the

protection of what is perceived to be an absolutely true, non-negotiable tradition.

In conclusion, the following table provides, in summary, ideal-typical fashion, ten salient characteristics of fundamentalism as they emerge from the framework of understanding sketched in this article.

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| 1 | In the present socio-cultural breach between epochs, fundamentalism remains a possibility in all institutionalised religions. Its emergence and growth are determined and stimulated by conditions of contemporary cultural, social and religious crisis. It is an unhealthy, indeed pathological – albeit unavoidable – side-effect of the contemporary situation. |
| 2 | Fundamentalists see themselves as pushed out of modern society, or into its margins, misunderstood, even persecuted victims. The ‘others’ are portrayed as infidels, sell-outs, unbelievers, liberals (intended as an invective name), decadents, communists and so on. |
| 3 | Fundamentalism is not a creative integration or synthesis (comparable to the Medieval synthesis of a Dante), but a mix (like oil and water) of elements from the normative tradition with elements from modernity. The result can be ingenious, but does not represent the creative cutting edge of cultural and religious developments. |
| 4 | Fundamentalism is particularly possible in ‘the religions of the book’. Then the Book is presupposed as infallible to the last iota. However, it is not limited to these religions. |
| 5 | Fundamentalists have difficulty dealing with plurality, ambiguity and ambivalence. Fundamentalism tends to over-simplify complex issues and to reduce them to moral or character deficiencies of their adversaries. Gordian knots are not unravelled patiently, but cut with the sword of recited Word. |
| 6 | Fundamentalism reduces the various levels of traditional-religious language and discourse to a single level, with minimum allowance for the mytho-poetic dimension of such discourse. Religious language is reduced to the status of quasi-rational or –scientific discourse of ‘fact’. |
| 7 | Fundamentalisms cannot deal positively with modern insights of the historicity of cultural and religious meaning, and its being a humanly constituted cultural product. It is an expression of extreme anxiety and anger about what is regarded as the weakening of a strong distinction, even division, between Word of God and words of human beings. |

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| 8 | Fundamentalism tends towards a dualism between light and darkness, and assume that God, Truth and Justice are exclusively on one (its) side, thereby immunising itself to open dialogue and criticism. |
| 9 | Fundamentalism tends to enforce internal consolidation and conformism to existing group norms and power relations with strict controls of mind and behaviour, which often leads to the charge of hypocrisy. |
| 10 | Fundamentalism gives preference to an adversarial, oppositional stance. Violence – emotional, verbal, institutional and even physical – remains a strong possibility. |

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