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Why fundamentalism?



Sergio Simino Serrano

Maybe some of you will ask yourselves what is the reason for writing another article on fundamentalism.¹ I am not in the mood of contributing to the polarization between liberalism-fundamentalism, like two trenches from which to fight those opposing you. Neither do I wish to give solely a description of what fundamentalism is, although the educational factor imposes a certain level of explanation of such movement. Nor we will talk about fundamentalism as a common movement to different traditional religions. Only Christian fundamentalism in general and Protestant fundamentalism in particular are an object of discussion of this article. Basically, the ambition of reflection I present here is the understanding about how a religious phenomenon, which apparently contains undeniable negative aspects, can become popular and sustain an unquestionable vigor in some sectors after more than a century since it was born.

There are those who think that the only valid presentation for the Gospel is a pre-modern understanding of it. However, we will see below that even though Christian fundamentalism is nourished programmatically from the rejection of Modernity, it is actually connected to it by many more points that one would expect. This is why the first thing we ought to do is to define what we mean when we talk about fundamentalism.

What is fundamentalism?

First of all, I believe we need to distinguish between fundamentalism as a mere theological stance and fundamentalism as a sociological phenomenon with religious and political implications, referring, as I already mentioned, always to Christian fundamentalism, and above all to the one that is formed within the Protestant sphere.

Fundamentalism as a theological stance was a reaction to liberal theological stances in the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. Since then, a dichotomic confrontation would emerge between fundamentalism and liberalism in which there is



"American Fundamentalists" by Joel Pelletier
Source: americanfundamentalists.com

no room for disagreement in any of the two sides; either you are automatically a liberal or a fundamentalist. Even though there exists a wide range of theological stances in between these extremes.

In any case, fundamentalism makes reference to what is considered "the fundamental". In fact, the term was adopted when a series of articles were published in the United States which expressed "the fundamentals of the Christian faith". These fundamentals were defined into five points, which are:

- The Bible is literally the truth and does not err.
- The virginal conception and deity of Christ, in his double divine and human nature.
- Jesus' substitutionary atonement at the Cross.
- Jesus' bodily resurrection.
- The authenticity of Jesus' miracles as accounted for in the Scriptures, and the literal second coming of Christ.

As we can see, fundamentalism as a theological stance would be a reductionism, as every theological position actually is, of what is considered to be "fundamental" in Christian faith. The reason why these fundamentals are pointed out and not others is that these were the red-hot issues at the beginning of the 20th century in the North American and European theological scene, due to the approach of liberal theology.

Now, what I would like to point out is that I find fundamentalism as a theological stance to be possible, legitimate and respectable. It is an important task of theology to understand the faith and explicit what is important and why. In this, I don't see any problem, nor I consider there should be one, so long as there is an acceptance, at least as a possibility, of the existence of other theological approximations that are equally possible, legitimate and respectable.

Fundamentalism as a Sociological Phenomenon

However, theological fundamentalism is transmuted into a sociological phenomenon. At this stage, we are not before theological and biblical arguments that can be discussed, opinable, thought of, studied and refuted, but before a sociological phenomenon that creates an identity that, as such, is meant to define groups, congregations, and even wide sectors of society. What happens then? It happens that theological principles turn into identity elements and, therefore, of exclusion or inclusion to the group they belong to. Theology lays itself at the service of politics in the most restrictive meaning of the word, that is, of the Parties. In this sense, what is theological is secularized, and so fundamentalist or liberal defines no longer just theological thoughts. Rather, they classify people into the accepted or the rejected by the simple act of wearing a label.

I have made the distinction between a theological and a sociological fundamentalism because I consider that the second one is potentially dangerous, while the first one is only potentially debatable.

How does the step from a theological fundamentalism to a sociological fundamentalism occurs, then? Basically, I think that fundamentalism can be defined as that part of Christian thinking which Modernity made it suffer from indigestion. And this does not pretend to be a joke or a caricature. Rather, it is the graphical expression of what is essentially behind fundamentalism.

Since the 19th century, when scientific knowledge began to grow and reached high levels of popularization, and the century was also influenced from the dominant philosophical movements of the context that emerges from the Enlightenment, there was a necessity to rethink the understanding of the Christian faith. This is what the liberal theology tries to do, with a different degree of results, as it can be opinable. However, there is a conservative component inside Christian thinking that opposes itself to any type of change in the understanding of the Christian faith. It is this Christianism to whom Modernity made it suffer from indigestion, which becomes fundamentalism.

As fundamentalism rejects Modernity without criticizing it, fundamentalism also rejects the society that emerges from Modernity. But as the society in the beginning of the 20th century is, in its majority, modern, fundamentalism distinguishes from it by creating its own socio-cultural identity based on theological principles. As the reality of the society that is observed and lived is unwanted, then a parallel reality is created.

This is why fundamentalism as a sociological phenomenon creates a parallel reality to society as a whole. If the universities teach, develop and produce a certain scientific and philosophical knowledge to which fundamentalists do not agree ideologically, they create their own universities and they classify them as "Christian". Likewise, schools and high schools are created which are also "Christian"—all of them driven by the fundamentalist agenda. In the same way, thematic parks are created, which are dedicated to creationism theses. At the same time, an entire "Christian" industry of culture and entertainment is created, in which all the movies, music, and books are "Christian", so as to distinguish themselves from the rest of the liberal and secularized society.

Fundamentalism, Modernity, and Cognitive Dissonance

However, as we pointed out earlier, fundamentalism, with its biblical literalism, owes much more to the Modernity of the Enlightenment that it assumes in the first place. To equalize truth with historical truth, by saying that only what is historically verifiable is true, as well as to have a positive understanding of truth, by saying that only what is scientifically verifiable is true, are inherent parts to fundamentalist's theses. And evidently, this is a consequence of its crossing through Modernity, for whether we want it or not our society and way of thinking are shaped by such era. That we have a critical capacity towards it is a different thing.

This incoherence in fundamentalism thinking, a reaction against Modernity from modern patterns that are not consciously assumed, can be explained from a sociological model that is called "cognitive dissonance", which we will consider briefly.²

“Cognitive dissonance” is produced when two elements within a system of thought or beliefs are revealed as incompatible. Let’s give an example: if we start our reasoning from the premise that only what is historically and scientifically verifiable is true, and science discovers that the Universe is not 6500 years old, like an alleged biblical chronology would seem to be establishing, but rather 13700 million years old, only one can be true; either the Bible is wrong or science is wrong. Thus, we see how this “cognitive dissonance” is produced in fundamentalists’ thinking, due to the relevance he confers both to science and to the Bible; but according to the understanding he has of both a conflict is produced, so this tension must be resolved somehow.

Evidently, “cognitive dissonance” is not something that occurs only in those that think of themselves as fundamentalists; we are only using this model to try to explain how it is possible that elements that at first are antagonistic can coexist in fundamentalist’s theses.

As we have mentioned, the tension that is produced in a system of thought when two or more elements contradict each other must be resolved. If not, the coherence of the entire system is endangered. The habitual strategy to resolve any sort of cognitive dissonance is to acquire and amplify new knowledge that can modify one or both of the elements which have entered into conflict. If there seems to be a contradiction between the Bible and science, such contradiction might be resolved if the knowledge of the Bible is amplified or modified, which is what critical-historical studies have been doing for more than two centuries; or else through the acquisition of new scientific knowledge, which is typical to science as it advances; these things should be sufficient to resolve any contradiction between both.

However, to the fundamentalist, this is not possible, because the Bible is a stable and enclosed set of knowledge whose understanding cannot be altered. And everything that science affirms must match with that which was previously said by the Bible, whose status, coming from divine inspiration, is superior. How does the fundamentalist resolve his cognitive dissonance? By taking away the scientific label of those things that he wants to discredit, branding them as ideological or religious.³ Thus, they manifest that evolutionism is not science, but rather a mere ideological stance that borders on religiousness; and yet, on the contrary, the argumentative construction they use to support creationism theses are qualified as true science. Thus, cognitive dissonance is resolved by saying that part of the science practiced at “non-Christian” universities is pseudoscience, if not “mere philosophy”, with all the pejorative meaning of the expression (see again what has been said, that philosophical statements are rejected because they do not match with a positive understanding of science), while the science practiced at “Christian” universities, in accordance to what the Bible affirms, is true science. And in this way we have created a parallel reality to which only those that hold fundamentalist’s premises can enter.

Is fundamentalism dangerous?

Theological fundamentalism, when it becomes a sociological phenomenon, contains in itself some elements that can turn it potentially dangerous. The element that makes fundamentalism problematic is its exclusion trait. Fundamentalism, by being an enclosed set of knowledge, does not admit correcting itself, which is indeed present in any academic-scientific discipline. Fundamentalism premises cannot admit that any of its premises be false or wrong, because their presuppositions are completely aligned with divine revelation, and they do not make any sort of distinction between interpretation and the Scriptures, or between these and the Word of God.

When this exclusion trait, which does not allow the presence of elements of balance, is installed in a social environment with monetary and political capacities, capable of moving the consequences of their ideological presuppositions into practice, the exclusion of those that are not identified properly is applied. Here lays the dangerous potentiality of any fundamentalism.

Why does someone turn fundamentalist?

Evidently, I do not desire to bring out an explanation of all the elements that could answer a question such as this one, but basically what we want to do here is to analyze how it is possible that some people accept a system of thought that does not allow them to wander off of it at any moment. As Max Weber said, "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun."⁴

Those that could identify themselves as fundamentalists will not, in many occasions, identify themselves as such, due to the fact that in many occasions labels are given from the outside; but by constructing an enclosed system of thought what is desired is to safeguard it from possible external attacks. That is, the fundamentalist seeks above all, psychological security. Before a social world that is constantly changing, in which traditional certainties seem to stagger, in which it is difficult to substitute our old fidelities by some new ones, or in which the habitual identities are being constantly questioned; a system of thought is sought that, above any other consideration, offers security.

In fundamentalist thinking, it is clear what needs to be believed and thought of; it is clear who is the enemy: liberalism; and it is clear against what things you need to react to: the Modernity they mean to fight.

The problem is that ordinary life is not made exclusively of ideas and patterns of thought; but rather, our daily life is made mainly of people, and this also applies for the life inside churches. Given that in fundamentalist's lines there is no disagreement, what is at stake essentially is who are those which are admitted and who are those excluded – and this can occur either in the scene of the church or of society–, but in the end those who suffer are flesh and blood people. Ideas do not cry, only people do.

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1. Broek, H. *La disonancia cognitiva y los creacionistas estadounidenses*, pp. 177-190.¹
2. Harris, M. *Antropología cultural*, p. 15.²

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