

# Back To Basics

Think of religion and these days one thinks of fundamentalism.  
**Don Cupitt** reflects on the rise of religious fundamentalism

**W**hat is fundamentalism? Historically, it was a neo-conservative movement in American protestantism that began just after the first world war. More generally, it is the extremity to which more than one religion has been driven in the 20th century by the way Western culture has developed. There is a world of difference between a society in which your religious beliefs are supported by reason and confirmed by daily experience, and a society like ours in which the truth of religious beliefs is no longer a matter of common knowledge and, what is worse, the religious consciousness itself has come to be regarded by many people as deviant. Fundamentalism is a defensive and defiant reaction to the modern West's severe pressure against faith.

The key intellectual events happened roughly from 1830 to 1890, between the Young Hegelians (Strauss, Feuerbach, Marx etc.) and Darwin and Nietzsche. It took a little time for the mass of ordinary believers to grasp what had happened. When the dust settled the enemies they identified were - in order of prominence - biblical criticism, darwinism, secular humanism and relativism.

Biblical criticism was enemy number one, because protestantism, a scriptural faith from the age of printing, needs a definite bible with a definite meaning, and had always believed it had one. But the lower criticism (looking at what the text is) showed that neither the canon nor the text of scripture can be fixed incontestably, while the higher criticism (looking at what the text says) showed that in different ages an immense range of different meanings have been ascribed to scripture. Nor is there any stable real meaning, waiting to be discovered by scholars. Neither what really happened, nor what the text originally meant, nor even what the text *is*, will ever be beyond dispute. So the bible as a clear argument-setting rule of

faith broke down. We just have not got any longer a clearly-fixed bible with a clearly-fixed meaning.

Darwinism was and remains the second enemy, because it seemed to have shown that we are nothing but the transient products of an amoral universe. The older theology had distinguished between an originally perfect and paradisaical state of the world, and its present state in which it had become infected with natural and moral evils since the Fall, 6,000 years ago. Originally God had made the world good, so he was not to be blamed for the evils that our sin had spread throughout it. But darwinism showed that the evils - abnormal births, predation and so on - were built in. It was no longer possible to claim either that the forces which had made us were morally all-good, or that we had ever been so ourselves. There never was any Garden of Eden, or unfallen world.

Secular humanism, the third enemy, was a natural corollary of the progressivism of the 19th century. Under the older religious outlook, the basic conditions of human life were seen as having been fixed by God, and people lived subject to the rule of an unchanging divine law. Only God could bring about any radical change in the human condition. After the French Revolution, however, it became common to think that the whole set-up under which we live has been evolved by us. We have made our world what it is. We can criticise it, and we can struggle to change it. We can become the makers of our own history. The contrast with the older theological and 'dispensationalist' view of history could not be more complete.

Finally, relativism was a corollary of the new general awareness of worldwide cultural diversity and rapid linguistic change. The traditional timeless norms by which human life had been guided - norms of belief, value, meaning and truth - now appeared to be

merely local and temporary human postulates whose validity, if any, was merely pragmatic. It seems then that we must from now on be improvisers, who have to live without any absolutes.

These four cultural movements, if their main theses can be sustained, are sufficient to destroy all traditional religious belief-systems (with the possible exception of Buddhism). Why then shouldn't people simply abandon religion and become purely secular liberals, socialists or whatever? Much of Enlightenment thought presumed that as time passed people would indeed leave their ancient religious and ethnic allegiances behind them, and become more rational and more universal in outlook. This was because the deep assumptions of the Enlightenment, and even of marxism, remained firmly platonic - for example, in presuming that human beings could become completely rational, and in equating rationality with universality. But, as everyone knows, it has not turned out like that. People's attachment to their local ethnic, religious or national identity remains today as fierce as ever. You cannot reason people out of nationalism, and it is not easy to reason them out of religion, either. A very substantial proportion of people are going to go on being religious, even if their religion is at odds with modern knowledge and actually disadvantageous to them.

Still more important is a second consideration. Religious fundamentalists share with Nietzsche the recognition that the four movements (biblical criticism, darwinism, secular humanism and relativism) threaten to wipe out everything that human beings have hitherto lived by. Life has no objective meaning; there is only the human battleground, on which ignorant armies clash by night. Nothing says that our life has to make sense, or that history is going anywhere. The real spectre haunting Europe is the spectre of nihilism.

The fundamentalist then argues that nihilism is utterly untenable as a public creed, and is also untenable as a private creed for any except a minute group of way-out artists and suchlike. For society in general, the only way to secure order is by a strong affirmation of authority. Reason and liberalism, we are told, have failed. What is needed is dogmatic certainty and strict discipline.

It is at precisely this point that the mutual antagonism between fundamentalism and liberalism is at its most intense. Just like the Nietzscheans, the fundamentalists are convinced that where faith in God is lost, everything begins to collapse. They are convinced that liberalism is out-of-date and radically unstable, and they see in the condition of modern Western culture convincing evidence of liberalism's unstoppable slide into nihilism. Fundamentalists say that our life cannot be lived except from the starting-point of pure dogmatic faith in a God who reveals to us the moral and intellectual norms we are to live by. The universe has got to



have a centre, and only God can be that centre. This outrages the liberals, who detest the all-or-nothing style of argument. All the liberals' moves are made upon just that middle ground which the fundamentalists and the Nietzscheans say has disappeared.

**T**he fundamentalists argue that people cannot live without religion, just as they cannot live without a language and a national identity. The universe has got to have a centre. The thinkers of the Enlightenment supposed they could recentre the universe around humanity, but this has now obviously broken down. As Dostoevsky said: 'If God is dead, everything is permitted' - meaning, roughly, that we humans cannot hope to make the natures of things, or the moral order or knowledge as well-founded and stable as God used to make them. Without the old God we cannot fix the reality of anything, not even ourselves.

So it's back to God. Fundamentalism is right-wing postmodernism, one of the many strands of counter-Enlightenment thinking which have flourished so greatly since the 1960s. It was in the 60s that the old Western humanism and belief in reason began to run into difficulties. A sign of the times was the fact that in France the agenda-setting thinker ceased to be Marx and became Nietzsche instead. The fundamentalists agree with Nietzsche's diagnosis of the breakdown of Enlightenment rationality; but they then go their own way. In fact, they become totally blind to Nietzscheanism thereafter, and refuse to consider the possibility of a Nietzschean Christian practice. On the Nietzschean view, since there are no given natures of things, and since there are no objective norms to guide us, we are in the void and we make the lot. We are called to a life of continual self-creation and self-overcoming, unguided except by our perpetual dissatisfaction with yesterday's efforts.

That is what Nietzsche sought; a fresh start every day, continual self-overcoming, heroic energy, and pure creative joy in face of the tragedy of the human condition. Tremendous. It is what fired the Paris students in May 1968. It is the kind of final emancipation of human beings, after the end of religion, to which the bible looks forward and which it calls 'the kingdom or God'. Unfortunately fundamentalism is too nervous and repressed to be able even to contemplate such awesomely final liberation of human beings. Indeed, it is opposed to human emancipation, for it battles to prolong the age of religion. Under religion a human being is what Zarathustra calls a camel, a beast of burden staggering under the lash of an external Law. Fundamentalism says that camelhood is all that we are fit for.

**Some of these issues were briefly highlighted in the American death-of-God controversy of 1961-1967. The leading figure was probably TJJ Altizer, a thorough-**

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going Christian humanist who in his work often refers especially to Blake and Hegel, as well as (of course) to Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. Altizer reacted sharply against those who proclaimed God's utter transcendence. The objective God, out there, is not the Christian god. He's more like Satan. The god of Christianity is a dying god, a god who has become human and who dies, really dies, to liberate us. The historic fulfilment of Christianity will come only when it fully appropriates 'the Gospel of Christian Atheism'.

Recently Altizer has published an article in which he looks back on those heady years of controversy, and discusses the upsurge of fundamentalism which has happened since then.<sup>1</sup> 'Several of our most astute critics said at the time', he remarks, 'that what our movement really represented was the end of modern theology, an ending marking the end of Christianity as anything but a sectarian or historically marginal movement, and this surely seems to have occurred in the intervening generation.'

That indeed looks right; no theological controversy since the one about the death-of-God has been able to attract serious intellectual interest. Indeed, intellectuals no longer seem to know what theology is, or was. People are certainly not aware that Altizer is now outflanked on the Left by a still more radical generation of postmodernist theologians. Nobody has heard of them. The theo-

gical tradition still just survives, but only as something that has dropped out of sight. All that remains in public view is fundamentalism.

Altizer himself recognises that his optimistic Christian atheism is now out-dated. As he puts it: 'One reason that the death-of-God theology drew such wrath from its theological critics is that it tended to insist that there is now no alternative for the Christian but Christian atheism or Christian fundamentalism. Has this now become a public and manifest truth? Or is the Christian choice now either Catholic or Protestant fundamentalism or no Christian faith or praxis whatsoever? For Christian atheism has seemingly vanished from view, and so have Christian thinking and culture...'

Altizer is still not prepared to regard fundamentalism as a serious religious movement to which, one day, we might want to ascribe some intellectual weight. He thinks that what is going on is the involution of Christianity - and perhaps too of Islam, and of other faiths as well. At its zenith in northern France around 1260, Christianity was a magnificent civilisation with an epic vision. Similarly, Islam was once intellectually grand, producing superb literature, architecture and decorative arts. But now, by one of those great movements of return that are often found in the history of religion, the faiths are circling right back into their own origins.

They are quite deliberately cutting themselves off from history and culture and thinking, making themselves into marginal apocalyptic sects again, choosing oblivion.

Fundamentalism, on this analysis, represents the suicide of faith. Perhaps religions oscillate, as cosmologists speculate the universe may do, and faith can only be renewed by first being completely negated.

The irony of the rival analyses is very nice. Fundamentalism sees itself as the pure gospel, and as a reinstatement of faith. Radical theology sees in it an implosion of faith and a *Gotterdammerung*. 'Nothing so characterises the death-of-God theology as its determination to find a Christian meaning in an anti-Christian reality', writes Altizer. He means that the approaching extinction of faith is itself an event that was scheduled in the original Judaeo-Christian apocalyptic vision, and can be joyfully welcomed as such.

There is no reason to accept fundamentalism at its own self-valuation. It is not a restoration of faith, but rather a symptom of the precipitate decline of what is left of the old religious order. We may however read this as a sign of hope: radical religious change cannot now be long delayed.©

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1. Religious Humanism (USA), Winter 1990

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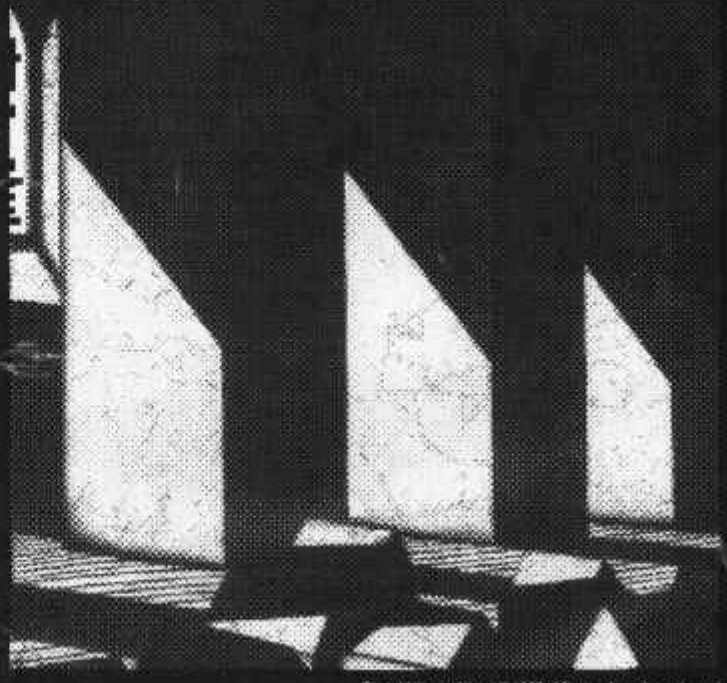


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