Review Essay

The Great Revival

Understanding Religious "Fundamentalism"

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Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms Around the World. BY GABRIEL A. ALMOND, R. SCOTT APPLEBY, AND EMMANUEL SIVAN. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003, 281 pp. $19.00.

Within hours of the attack on the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001, the final letters of hijacker Muhammad Atta, discovered in the trunk of a rental car parked at Dulles International Airport outside Washington D.C., were being dissected by journalists and TV pundits. As the new book *Strong Religion* tellingly observes, commentators almost uniformly characterized the mindset revealed in these notes as "chilling," "eerie," and "haunting." Once again, it seemed, Americans had been caught in a state of incomprehension: what kind of religious beliefs could propel people to murder thousands of innocent civilians?

Americans had experienced that same incomprehension, drawn out over a longer period of time, in 1979, when militant Iranian students took 52 American citizens hostage within the U.S. embassy in Tehran. Who were these people? What strange religious and political sentiments motivated them to do such things?

An almost identical sense of bewilderment must have struck many highly educated Americans during the early 1980s, when activists on behalf of the Moral Majority and other Protestant Christian groups suddenly became rather visible on the American political scene. This confusion, however, may have been followed by a collective, simultaneous "Aha" moment: of course, "fundamentalism"

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explained it all. After all, the Reverend Jerry Falwell, who founded the Moral Majority in 1979, actually proclaimed himself a fundamentalist, and those who supported the new upsurge of Christian conservatism seemed to share many of his religious views. Surely they must be fundamentalists too.

The five-volume, decade-long Fundamentalism Project was a major scholarly effort to see if there was such a sociological phenomenon as fundamentalism that might explain similarities, or at least "family resemblances," among so-called fundamentalist groups within several major world religions. A total of 75 different movements were examined by historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists on several continents. The groups included had emerged from all of the world's major religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam (both Sunni and Shi'ite), Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and neo-Confucianism. *Strong Religion* amounts to a concluding summation of the project's work.

FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

The volume's title is itself telling. The word "fundamentalisms" appears only after the colon. One reason, no doubt, is the plain inadequacy of the word. As the authors rather defensively admit, there are strong reasons for objecting to the term "fundamentalist." First, it has tended to be used in a pejorative way, denigrating almost anyone of convinced religious viewpoint. In addition, it is often carelessly linked to the word "terrorist," as though being a fundamentalist almost inevitably leads to violence. Moreover, strictly speaking, the name "fundamentalism" should be applied only to one particular movement within Protestantism that came into existence in the early twentieth century, inspired by a series of booklets that attacked theological modernism called *The Fundamentals*.

Another difficulty lies in applying the word "fundamentalist" to people of Muslim faith. That begs the question of the extent to which their beliefs are somehow more archaic than the beliefs of those with a supposedly more modern Muslim outlook. For this reason, *Strong Religion* agrees that Muslims who have been rather cavalierly labeled "fundamentalist" should instead be referred to as "Islamist," a more neutral term that has been carefully defined by scholars examining the phenomenon of Islamic radicalism or revivalism in different parts of the world.

The question remains: Can the family resemblances discerned in differing varieties of religious revivalism be described usefully as a "fundamentalist phenomenon"? This book argues forcefully that they can. It examines with some insight different aspects of religious communities that are commonly called fundamentalist. It refers to the "enclave culture," the tendency of so-called fundamentalist movements to see themselves as beleaguered minorities in an alien and hostile world. Some of the specific studies of religious movements are fascinating and informative, almost providing digressions from the sociological narrative. Readers who are not immediately familiar with militant Sikhism, or Buddhist "extremism" in Sri Lanka, or the *haredi* and Gush Emunim movements in Israel will learn much. There is also a pithy dissection of the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini and his

followers in Iran. And the analysis of the distinctiveness of Sunni Islamic revivalism in contrast with the Shi'ite variety is genuinely useful.

TRUE BELIEVERS?

The larger issue raised by this effort to understand fundamentalism is the premise of the entire project: that such religious movements are "militant and highly focused antagonists of secularization." Many so-called fundamentalist movements are undoubtedly hostile to much of modernity. But the word "secularization" seems a bit loaded. It implies that increasing global secularism is somehow the natural order of things. In fact, the global upsurge of religion in recent years suggests otherwise.

As sociologist Peter Berger argues in *The Desecularization of the World*, "the notion that we live in a secularized world is false." Secularization theory, derived from Enlightenment views of religion and popular in American academia in the 1950s and 1960s, held that the world would gradually abandon religious faith and free itself from the shackles of religion and superstition. But as Berger notes, "The world today is massively religious, and it is anything but the secularized world that had been predicted (be it joyfully or despondently) by so many analysts of modernity."

One of the difficulties of attempting to determine family resemblances among different types of fundamentalism is deciding whether what is at work is a political ideology garbed in religious terminology or a religious movement defining itself largely or entirely by religious values. *Strong Religion* at times seems to opt for the political definition but at other times seems more interested by the messianic, even eschatological, content of different movements. One insightful aspect of the book is its attempt to categorize the interaction of fundamentalists with the world outside their enclave in four ways: as world conquerors, as world transformers, as world creators, and as world renouncers. Those in the first category are for the most part predictable: al Qaeda, Iranian Shi'ite radicals, Hamas, Sikh militants, and, rather incongruously, the Moral Majority. But it does not seem self-evident that world transformers should include Pentecostalists in Guatemala and Hindu nationalists, or that Lubavitcher Hasidim and South Indian Christians should be lumped among the world creators.

A more serious difficulty with the book is an undercurrent of distaste that runs through parts of it for many of the groups under examination. It is as though the researchers had to don chemical-protective suits even to investigate the phenomenon of fundamentalism, as though it were a dangerous microbe that might harm them. This impression is reinforced by the title of Chapter 2, "Fundamentalism: Genus and Species." The references to Protestant Christian fundamentalism, moreover, seem to display both inconsistent terminology, on the one hand, and an unmistakable whiff of disdain on the other. At different times, "North American Protestants," "U.S. Protestant fundamentalists," and "New Christian Right" seem to be used synonymously. In discussing the American variety of Protestant fundamentalism, the authors include a scathing reference to an "upbeat American patriotism"

that is supposedly "xenophobic (anti-German in the earlier twentieth century, anti-Soviet following World War II) and saturated with the rhetoric of manifest destiny." One does not have to have any interest in religion to conclude that "upbeat American patriotism" just might have had something to do with the Cold War or to know that "manifest destiny" was coined in 1845 not by a fundamentalist but by a thoroughly secular newspaper editor, John O'Sullivan, who sought simply to articulate the emerging American national doctrine of continental expansion.

The scholars also display something approaching intellectual dishonesty in their discussion of "martyrdom" in the Christian and Muslim contexts. "Christians, like Muslims," *Strong Religion* asserts, "have considered martyrdom a prime opportunity for holiness, and indeed, a direct ticket to heaven." This grossly distorts the difference between the Christian and the Islamic concepts of martyrdom. Within Islam, martyrdom is what happens when a person dies in jihad. Thus Palestinian suicide bombers, who try to kill as many civilians as possible while blowing themselves up in Israeli buses or discotheques, are praised by many fellow Muslims as martyrs. Christians are only martyrs when killed purely and simply for what they believe. Although Muslim "martyrs" may indeed enter paradise immediately, martyrdom within Christianity has nothing to do with entrance into heaven.

SPREADING THE WORD

Almost anyone interested in the rise of Christian conservatism (to use a nonpejorative term) as a cultural and political concept in the United States will quickly discover that although Protestant fundamentalism is indeed an identifiable movement in American history, it was numerically superseded by the late 1950s by what is now called "evangelicalism." Evangelicals believe as ardently as Protestant fundamentalists in the need to propagate the gospel, but they were determined to break out of precisely the enclave mentality into which the fundamentalists had chosen to retreat from the 1920s onwards. *Strong Religion* refers a few times to Bob Jones University, certainly a bastion of American fundamentalist thinking, but overlooks the important point that Bob Jones, Sr., virtually excommunicated evangelist Billy Graham from fundamentalism in 1957 because Graham wanted evangelicals to work with any Christian church that would accept them.

This fact is important to understand because the evangelical, not the fundamentalist, brand of Christianity seems to be expanding faster than any other religious movement in the world today, including Islam. (It is worth noting that fundamentalist Protestant Christians generally oppose strongly the Pentecostalist or charismatic experience, which is at the heart of much of the Christian growth in the developing world.) The evangelical Christian phenomenon in the southern hemisphere has been thoughtfully examined by Philip Jenkins in *The Next Christendom*. Jenkins argues that the southward expansion of Christianity in Africa and Latin America will have more profound consequences globally than the ongoing phenomenon of Islamism.

Although perhaps uncomfortable with going into what particular Christian groups

believe, the authors of *Strong Religion* are certainly aware that it is the evangelicals who are expanding their influence both in the United States and around the world, whereas those Christian groups that have sought to accommodate secularism are in decline. Interesting statistics cited in the book for the United States include the rise of Southern Baptists from 10 million in 1960 to 17 million in 2000, a fourfold increase in the adherents to American Pentecostal denominations, and a massive decline in the Episcopal Church from about 3.5 million in 1960 to 2 million in 2000. The Southern Baptists and the Pentecostals have been much more supportive of positions such as biblical inerrancy than the Episcopalians, many of whom appear to have abandoned much of the historical Protestant orthodoxy.

Strong Religion is undoubtedly correct in noting that it is their response to modernity that generally determines whether fundamentalist groups prosper or wither. But how helpful is the book's definition of fundamentalism as "an aggressive, enclave-based movement with absolutist, reactive, and inerrantist tendencies"? This strongly negative depiction does not capture the nuances of modern religious groups. In Indonesia, for example, the Islamic revivalist movement Nudhat'ul-Ulama is both pro-democracy and pro-pluralism. But it is probably also in favor of "inerrancy" in the Islamic context, thus fitting at least one of the authors' criteria for a fundamentalist group.

Or take the role of religious revivalists elsewhere in the developing world. In Guatemala, many sociologists have observed that communities where Pentecostalism is strong usually manifest what German sociologist Max Weber

a century ago defined as "the Protestant ethic": self-discipline, frugality, hard work, and saving. A similar pattern can be seen in China today, where there may be more than 60 million Protestant Christians (compared with 700,000 in 1949). Some Chinese sociologists have noted the "coincidence" that the most significantly Christianized city, Wenzhou, where some 14 percent of the population is now Christian, is also one of China's top performers in domestic commerce and foreign trade. Wenzhou's Christians would probably not describe themselves as fundamentalists, but some of the Fundamentalism Project experts, on hearing what they believe about inerrancy, miracles, and the End Times, might want to jam them into that category.

Efforts to analyze and seek commonalities among fundamentalist groups can certainly be helpful. The authors of *Strong Religion* have done a fine job in examining many often obscure groups. The sociological approach offers considerable insights. But in the end, it is hard to escape the feeling that the authors need to take more seriously the notion that it is what people believe, or do not believe, that determines their actions quite as much as their income level or their street address. If fundamentalism merely denotes strong belief in core doctrines of faith, what distinguishes an ardent churchgoer or mosque-attender from a "reactive" terrorist? The concluding paragraph of *Strong Religion* offers a revealing insight into the researchers' mindset as they affirm the need to understand fundamentalism "for politicians, diplomats, educators, and scientists, including those who continue to wonder ruefully how militant religion inherited a new lease on life in our supposedly postreligious age."

What sort of people have been supposing that our world was ever postreligious? Berger wryly proposes that the faculty dining hall at the average U.S. college might be a more interesting topic for the sociology of religion than the Islamic schools of Qum. Perhaps one should merely recall what an anonymous New York lawyer said on learning of the emergence of the Moral Majority in the 1980s: "Millions of people out there believe what nobody believes anymore."