

Title

Psychological Pathways of Christian Fundamentalism: A Mixed-Methods Study of Cognition, Upbringing, and Sociopolitical Behavior

Abstract

Religious fundamentalism remains one of the most powerful drivers of sociopolitical identity and intergroup conflict. This mixed-methods study focuses on Christian fundamentalists (Evangelical, Orthodox, and strict Catholic) ages 30–49 in the United States. The project combines survey data ($N \approx 400$) with in-depth interviews ($n \approx 30$) to identify the psychological, developmental, and interpretive pathways that reinforce fundamentalist belief. Confirmatory statistical methods such as regression, factor analysis, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) will test theoretically grounded hypotheses, while exploratory machine learning will detect hidden predictors and themes. Natural language processing (NLP) will be applied to interview transcripts to identify recurring linguistic patterns and metaphors. Findings will illuminate how fundamentalism is sustained across subgroups and highlight potential “exit ramps” from rigid belief.

Background & Significance

Fundamentalist belief has long been associated with cognitive rigidity, authoritarianism, and intolerance of ambiguity.

Altemeyer & Hunsberger (1992) demonstrated that religious fundamentalism correlates strongly with authoritarian personality traits, while Granqvist & Kirkpatrick (2008) found that insecure attachment and adverse childhood experiences often predict rigid religiosity. Terror Management Theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) suggests that religious belief buffers existential anxiety by promising order and meaning in the face of mortality.

Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt, 2012) shows that fundamentalists often emphasize purity, loyalty, and authority foundations, while more liberal believers emphasize care and fairness. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) explains how in-groups (fundamentalist Christians) and out-groups (other faiths, seculars, minorities) are polarized to strengthen group identity.

Yet, less is known about whether Evangelical, Orthodox, and strict Catholic subgroups converge on similar psychological patterns, despite differences in culture and class background. Adults aged 30–49 are especially important to study, as they hold influence in families, workplaces, and

politics, while also undergoing midlife transitions that can either reinforce rigidity or open the door to change.

This study addresses a key gap: identifying whether fundamentalism produces consistent psychological “signatures” across subgroups, and how those signatures manifest in language, cognition, and scripture interpretation.

Research Questions

1. Do fundamentalist Christians across subgroups (Evangelical, Orthodox, Catholic) share common psychological and interpretive patterns?
2. What life experiences (trauma, upbringing, community, media) predict rigidity versus openness?
3. Which scriptural passages are most salient to fundamentalists, and how do literal versus metaphorical interpretations differ?
4. What hidden patterns emerge when applying machine learning to survey and interview data?

Methods

Design

Explanatory sequential mixed-methods design: quantitative survey (Phase 1) followed by qualitative interviews (Phase 2).

Phase 1: Surveys

Sample size: N≈400, recruited from Evangelical, Orthodox, and Catholic congregations, along with matched non-fundamentalist Christians as controls.

Instruments:

- Religious Fundamentalism Scale
- Right-Wing Authoritarianism (short form)
- Social Dominance Orientation
- Need for Closure Scale
- Big Five Openness subscale
- Disgust Sensitivity (Three-Domain)
- Attachment (ECR-12)
- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE-10)
- Moral Foundations Questionnaire
- Scripture Salience Task (literal vs. metaphorical interpretation)
- Demographics and media exposure

Phase 2: Interviews

Sample size: n≈30, purposively sampled from survey participants to represent both high and low fundamentalism scores across subgroups.

Procedure: Semi-structured interviews will explore upbringing, trauma, scripture interpretation, community identity, and personal turning points. All interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized.

Analysis

- **Confirmatory statistics**

- *Regression analysis* will test direct predictors of fundamentalism.
- *Factor analysis* will validate whether clusters of survey items form coherent latent dimensions (e.g., purity beliefs).
- *Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)* with AMOS, Mplus, or lavaan in R will test hypothesized causal pathways, such as:
ACEs → Need for Closure → Authoritarianism → Fundamentalism → Prejudice.
- Model fit will be evaluated using indices such as CFI, RMSEA, SRMR, and χ^2 .

- **Machine learning**

- *Random Forest/XGBoost*: Identify most important predictors of fundamentalism across many variables.
- *Clustering (k-means, Gaussian mixture)*: Discover subtypes of believers not apparent from theory (e.g., “Punishment Literalists” vs. “Community Seekers”).
- *Natural Language Processing (NLP)*: Topic modeling (LDA, BERTopic) and embeddings (BERT) will analyze interview transcripts to identify recurring themes, metaphors, and frames (e.g., “lake of fire,” “purity,” “obedience”).
- ML results will be triangulated with SEM to integrate theory-driven and data-driven insights.

Recruitment

Participants will be recruited via partnerships with congregations, alumni networks, and community organizations. Flyers and online postings will emphasize anonymity and confidentiality, with incentives for both surveys and interviews. Recruitment will ensure diversity in denomination, gender, race/ethnicity, and geography. SES will be measured for context and control but will not be a primary grouping variable.

Expected Outcomes

- Identification of psychological and developmental pathways into fundamentalism.
- Evidence for whether subgroups (Evangelical, Orthodox, Catholic) converge on similar patterns despite demographic and cultural diversity.

- Typology of belief subtypes generated through both SEM and ML clustering.
- Insights into recurring scriptural interpretations that sustain rigidity.
- Practical implications for dialogue design, education, and polarization reduction.

Timeline

- Months 1–2: IRB approval, preregistration, finalize instruments
- Months 3–5: Survey data collection ($N \approx 400$)
- Months 6–7: Quantitative analysis; identify interview sample
- Months 7–10: Interviews ($n \approx 30$), transcription, initial coding
- Months 10–12: Qualitative + ML analysis
- Months 12–18: Integration, manuscript preparation, dissemination

Budget

- Survey incentives: \$3,200
- Interview honoraria: \$1,500
- Transcription: \$1,700
- Software/licenses: \$1,000
- Dissemination: \$2,000

Total: \$6,000–10,000 (scalable to \$50–100k depending on grant scope)

Team & Environment

I bring a unique blend of academic preparation and lived experience. I hold a diploma in counseling hypnotherapy, thousands of hours of meditation and yoga training, and extensive interdisciplinary research experience. I have written books on self-actualization and a paper on quantum coherence and flow states. Growing up around gangs and high-risk environments gave me firsthand insight into rigid group identities and survival systems, while later training in psychology and cognitive science gave me tools to analyze these systems academically. This perspective allows me to connect with diverse populations and translate lived realities into testable research questions.

The faculty mentor (PhD, clinical practice and research experience) will provide methodological oversight, ensure IRB compliance, and guide grant submissions. The university environment provides participant access, secure data storage, and the necessary analytical tools.

References

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Epilogue

As comedian Dave Chappelle satirized in his “blind KKK member” sketch, it is possible to inhabit—and zealously defend—a worldview without recognizing its contradictions. That metaphor underscores the challenge of this research: understanding not only what people believe, but why they cling to rigid frameworks that shape politics and society. By combining classical psychology methods with modern machine learning, this study aims to reveal both the predictable pathways and the hidden patterns of fundamentalist belief, ultimately contributing to a more self-aware and less polarized public sphere.