PROTESTANT FUNDAMENTALISM—CATHOLIC TRADITIONALISM AND CONSERVATISM

REVIEW ARTICLE

BY

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This is the first volume of "The Fundamentalism Project," a monumental, six-volume, interdisciplinary study of religious fundamentalism, funded by the MacArthur Foundation, conducted under the auspices of the American Academy of Arts and Science, and directed by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby. Religious fundamentalism, a term historically associated with a branch of American Protestantism and later applied to various Islamic movements, has been and is likely to remain a highly controversial and ambiguous concept, more often abused as an epithet for its pejorative connotations than properly used in social scientific analysis. As they make clear in their "Introduction," however, the directors of the project came to the, in my view, correct conclusion that, all objections and uneasiness notwithstanding, there is no better alternative term to cover or rather to begin to map various phenomena sharing some "family resemblances," that have emerged recently within all major religious traditions.

The central premise of the project is, therefore, that while fundamentalisms are indeed plural one may also speak of fundamentalism as a global phenomenon, insofar as there are some generic traits found across all major religions and civilizations. In the "Introduction" and the "Conclusion" the editors stress three key features. Fundamentalism is, first of all, distinct from traditionalism, conservatism, or orthodoxy in its militancy, radicalness, and highly selective attitude toward tradition. Further, fundamentalism lives in antagonistic symbiosis with modernity insofar as it defines itself against modernity while borrowing selectively also from modernity some of its ideological, technological, and mobilizational means. Finally, fundamentalism is mobilizational and, while it proclaims pristine restoration as its goal, the outcome is likely to be innovative adaptation to modern social conditions if not outright revolution. Eschewing more precise definition or direct comparison, this first volume offers fourteen separate, richly textured narratives of different religious movements and their historical and phenomenological contexts.
 Appropriately, the collection begins with Nancy Ammerman’s discussion of “North American Protestant Fundamentalism,” the movement which coined the term and adopted the name as a separatist badge of honor. Given the particular historical connotations associated with the term, other non-Protestant religious movements have protested being christened with such an evangelical name, while sympathetic scholars have questioned the interpretive wisdom of grouping American Evangelicals together with such disreputable religious radicals as revolutionary Shi’ites or violent separatist Sikhs. It would seem as if only biased liberal academics and secular-humanist journalists feel confident in lumping together what they view as religious fanatics and intolerant hotheads as the fundamentalist “other.” The Fundamentalism Project has consciously tried to avoid such a perspective, and while being well aware that as a general phenomenon fundamentalism can only be defined in contradistinction to modernity, the stated purpose of the project has been “to bring scholars with the best credentials in the several areas and cultures under study, and to ask them to present as inclusive and fair a presentation as possible” (p. xi). Ammerman’s contribution amply meets this task. It offers both a fresh interpretation and the best available synoptic introduction to the fundamentalist wing of Evangelical Protestantism. The essay traces the history of the movement from its origins in the denominational battles at the turn of the century with liberal, modernist, progressive Protestantism, through its consolidation as a separatist, sectarian enclave within American Protestantism and American culture, to its public re-emergence in the late 1970’s as a social movement and as an electoral force. It offers a balanced synthesis of the available literature. But above all, it provides a phenomenological window into the lifeworld of American fundamentalists. What the essay fails to do is to address the fundamental question, why here and not elsewhere? Namely, why is it the case that among advanced Western industrial societies only in the United States did there emerge a religious fundamentalist movement of societal importance? A proper answer to this particular question is in my view the key to the more general question, what is modern religious fundamentalism? Phrasing the question differently, can American Protestant Fundamentalism serve as the paradigmatic form of all modern fundamentalisms or are the various so-called “fundamentalisms” really incommensurable? Without addressing this question head on, the Fundamentalism Project cannot give an adequate answer to skeptic historicists and hostile critics who argue that the very application and generalization of the term fundamentalism to other culture areas and religious traditions is misplaced and misused, perhaps just another indication of the arrogant hegemonic cultural claims of secular humanism and Western modernity.

While eschewing any essentialist definition, one could still argue that, in general, fundamentalism is not defined so much by the particular fundamentals of any religious tradition or even by the particular internal relationship of any religious group to its own religious tradition, but rather by the external relation of any religion to hegemonic or established culture. Neither “the fundamen-
tals" of the faith nor "inerrancy" can serve, for instance, to differentiate American fundamentalists from their coreligionists, since those doctrines may be shared by non-evangelical conservative Protestants. Doctrinally, white fundamentalists may also be indistinguishable from evangelical black Protestants. But as Ammerman points out, besides the distinctive style of African-American worship, "the distinctive relationship of African-Americans to society make[s] the label fundamentalist less than apt" (p. 3). One could infer, then, that it is the distinctive relationship of WASP evangelicals to American society that is the key to American fundamentalism. Despite the constitutional disestablishment of the Protestant churches from the American state, evangelical Protestantism became in the course of the nineteenth century the publicly established civil religion of American civil society. The emergence of fundamentalism at the turn of the century was a reaction against the loss of hegemony of evangelical Protestantism not only within the main Protestant denominations but within American culture. The mobilization of fundamentalism took place not only to do battle with liberals and modernists within evangelical Protestantism, but also to battle against Darwinism and the teaching of evolution in the public schools, the temples of the American civil religion. Fundamentalists also joined the nativist battle of Prohibition, the last of the pan-Protestant crusades able to mobilize conservative and progressive, fundamentalist and modernist, rural and urban Protestants in defense of the Protestant ethic and the American way of life against Catholics and Jews, the immigrant other who were laying claim to urban America.

From such a perspective, fundamentalism can be understood primarily as a militant reaction to processes of modern secularization—either to the differentiation of the religious and the political community, or to the differentiation of religion and culture. Fundamentalism may appear whenever a particular religious (or civilizational) tradition feels threatened by modern processes of differentiation, i.e., secularization, and tries either to defend, restore, re-establish or perhaps establish for the first time political and cultural hegemony through mobilization of the faithful. When mobilization ends in failure, as it happened with Protestant fundamentalism in the 1920's, one of the likely outcomes may be sectarian separatist withdrawal into a cultural ghetto where the fundamentalist lifeworld can be reproduced and protected from outside encroachment. Underneath the theological debates in the fundamentalist controversy of the 1920's, as well as in the family quarrels between evangelicals and fundamentalists later on, there was the basic question whether American Protestantism should accept graciously and embrace, or rather reject and oppose its disestablishment from modern, urban, secular America. It is nothing less than the proper relation between "Christ and Culture," between religion and world, that is at stake here.

Fundamentalist sectarian withdrawal should not be confused, however, with the rigid, ultra-orthodox defense of one's particularist ways in utter indifference to the dominant culture, something akin to a quaint "reservation." The Amish, for instance, despite their strict separatism and rigid attachment to the
“fundamentals,” should not be confused with modern fundamentalism. Separatist, sectarian fundamentalism lives in antagonistic yet symbiotic relationship with its external cultural environment. The fundamentalist enclave must view itself, and to a certain extent must still possibly be recognized by others, as “the faithful remnant” with an eschatological mission to transform the entire culture and bring its millennial regeneration. Under such symbiotic conditions the sectarian separatist strategy may be quite advantageous for the reproduction of a fundamentalist lifeworld. Thus, paradoxically, fundamentalism may thrive in symbiosis with modern secular culture, continuing a well-established evangelical tradition of instrumental-rational use of modern means of communication, mobilization, and resocialization.

Abandoning its quietist, diaspora-like seclusion, such a fundamentalist sect may again reactivate itself, mobilize and burst publicly and unexpectedly upon a larger cultural environment that lived in self-complacent ignorance of the existence of such a thriving fundamentalist lifeworld at the margins. Fundamentalist mobilization may be provoked either by the continuous and threatening encroachment of the external culture upon the fundamentalist lifeworld or by some fundamental change in the external culture that seems to threaten the more or less stable symbiotic relationship. For American fundamentalists the threat comes from the perception of the cultural hegemony of “secular humanism” and its penetration of the fundamentalist lifeworld through administrative and court rulings as well as through control of public schools and mass media. From the mid-sixties it became increasingly obvious to fundamentalists and other cultural critics that a “third disestablishment” of Protestantism from American culture was under way. First there had been the constitutional disestablishment of the Protestant churches from the American state. Then there came the disestablishment of evangelical Protestantism from educational institutions and mass culture. Now fundamentalists were witnessing with alarm the disestablishment of the very Protestant ethic, the most endearing and enduring contribution of Puritanism to the American self and the American way of life. The disestablishment of the Protestant ethic was bringing in its wake the secularization of public morality and the emergence of a pluralistic system of norms and forms of life. From now on, “the American way of life” would be increasingly characterized by the plurality of ways of life, by what could be called moral denominationalism. Fundamentalists, however, viewed this change as the displacement of the true Christian-American morality by moral relativism and secular humanism. Viewed from this perspective, therefore, fundamentalist mobilization is always either a reaction against disestablishment or a proactive move toward establishment.

The second chapter in the volume is a dual entry by William D. Dinges and James Hitchcock on “Roman Catholic Traditionalism and Activist Conservatism in the United States.” For me, as a student of Catholicism, the great puzzlement presented by this entry and indeed by the volume as a whole is the fact that apparently the editors could find nowhere in the world a Catholic movement of large societal relevance worth the name “Catholic fundamen-
talism.” The puzzlederives from the fact that for centuries Catholicism had offered the most spirited, principled, fundamentalist, and apparently futile resistance to modern processes of secular differentiation in all the spheres. It fought militantly capitalism, liberalism, modern science, the modern secular state, the democratic revolutions, socialism, the sexual revolution. In brief, it has been the paradigmatic form of anti-modern fundamentalist religion. The clerical counter-revolutionary mobilization of Catholic peasants, Integralism, Action Française, Franco’s Spain, “national-catholicism”—all may be viewed as prototypes of the kind of fundamentalist movements flourishing today throughout the world. The fact that today in an era of global fundamentalisms there is no societally significant Catholic fundamentalism anywhere is perhaps the best illustration of the amazing success of the official Catholic aggiornamento. In any general comparative study of fundamentalism the absence of the phenomenon where one should have expected it could be as revealing as its presence elsewhere. By failing to address this question, the Fundamentalism Project may have made more difficult its task of developing some approximate general theory of modern fundamentalism.

Dinges and Hitchcock also fail to address these issues in their contributions. Dinges offers a well-informed and insightful reconstruction of post-Vatican Council II Catholic traditionalism, particularly of the life-history of the Lefebvre movement, its reception in America and its relation to other forms of American Catholic traditionalism. But despite its intrinsic scholarly excellence, in the context of a general comparative study of fundamentalism the article has two major shortcomings. First of all, it offers primarily an intellectual and doctrinal account of Catholic traditionalism, something perhaps not surprising, given the relevance of doctrinal orthodoxy for Catholic traditionalism. But there is very little phenomenological analysis of the broader worldviews and lifeworld of Catholic traditionalism. How was it formed as a movement? How is it reproduced? What are its social bases? Without addressing these questions one cannot answer the crucial question, why does traditionalism appear to have so little general appeal throughout the Catholic world?

Of course, part of the answer lies in the inherent nature of Catholicism as a hierarchic religious organization based on the “charisma of office.” Dinges shows how the “official endorsement and legitimation of positions previously condemned as Protestant and modernist heresies” (p. 81) pulled the rug from under traditionalist dissent. It is hard for an authentic Catholic traditionalist to deny the charisma of office by accusing the occupiers of that office of apostasy without contradicting its own traditionalism. It is equally hard for a traditionalist Catholic group to assume the mantle of doctrinal orthodoxy accusing the official church of being a false, errant church without becoming a schismatic sect and thus contradicting Catholic doctrine and praxis. Dinges is, therefore, correct in arguing that “a movement claiming legitimacy as the ‘true’ Roman Catholic Church while simultaneously asserting that the See of Peter is occupied by the Antichrist is inherently self-limited” (p. 98). But the real clue to the success of the Catholic aggiornamento or to the contemporary
weakness of Catholic fundamentalism cannot simply be that Rome became modernist and thereafter Catholics everywhere followed suit out of traditional loyalty to Rome. Only an analysis of the radical transformation of the Catholic lifeworld that took place both before and after the Council can account for the apparently inevitable success of the aggiornamento.

A second related shortcoming of Dinges' account is that Catholic traditionalism is viewed solely internally as a religious movement in terms of internal ecclesial dynamics within the Catholic Church. But if my argument is correct, without taking into account the relationship of religion to the external secular environment, one cannot grasp the differentia specifica of modern fundamentalism. By viewing fundamentalism "as a highly radicalized and deviant form of conservatism rather than as a genetically distinct religious orientation" (p. 101), Dinges cannot explain the absence of a truly fundamentalist impulse within world Catholicism and particularly within American Catholicism. But Dinges never addresses the issue of the relationship of Catholicism to American culture. Minority religions which structurally have a sectarian relationship vis-à-vis the dominant culture are unlikely candidates for fundamentalist movements. At best, they can construct defensive sectarian ghettos, as American Catholicism did after the official condemnations of the Americanist and Modernist heresies. After the Second Vatican Council's declaration of religious freedom, Dignitatis Humanae, by which the Catholic Church abandoned officially the model of church establishment, and after the Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes reformulated the relationship with the modern secular age and the modern secular world, de facto lifting the doctrinal anathema still hanging over modernity, American Catholic fundamentalism became even less unlikely and certainly less viable.

Dinges notices rightly that "traditionalism is a protest against ... the loss of Catholic hegemony in the social, cultural and political sphere" (p. 67). Not surprisingly, such a protest is likely to have a greater appeal in a place like France, where there is a long tradition of traditionalist movements trying to restore the Catholic hegemony of the ancient regime. Marcel Lefebvre grew up in the socio-historical environment of Action Française and French colonialism. Dinges points out that, "Lefebvre's supporters have been openly allied with French monarchist-nationalist tendencies and the reactionary movement of Le Pen" (p. 91). Once it crosses the Atlantic and takes roots in America, the same traditionalist movement has an altogether different character, even when it becomes allied here also with right-wing sociopolitical causes. In refusing to sign the Second Vatican Council's documents, Dignitatis Humanae and Gaudium et Spes, Archbishop Lefebvre was doctrinally consistent with the Catholic tradition he had inherited and wanted to pass on to others. The scant success of the Lefebvre movement in Catholic Western Europe shows the inviability of this tradition today even in the historical lands of the Counter-Reformation. Without the sociopolitical baggage of the Counter-Reformation, the defense of the Tridentine liturgy—the essence of the Lefebvre movement in America—other than the understandable expression of compulsive attach-
ment to a personal, identity-forming habitus, can only mean a protest against the blurring of Catholic identities that resulted from the collapse of the Catholic cultural ghetto. In fact, the Vatican aggiornamento only accelerated and gave official respectability to a process of dissolution of a separate American Catholic subculture that was already well under way.

In his discussion of “Catholic Activist Conservatism” James Hitchcock shows that conservative Catholics blame the Vatican Council for the dissolution of that subculture which they viewed as “an internally stable American Catholic community” (p. 104). Their attitude of incredulous shock toward the Council’s actions derives from their assumption that “the identity and solidity of the Church” was based precisely on “those things which non-Catholics found most difficult to understand, most ‘scandalous,’” such as unplanned parenthood, unquestioned priestly celibacy, and the use of Latin in the liturgy. Hitchcock points out, however, that unlike most conservative Catholics who are “politically quiescent” and more concerned with internal problems in the Church, conservative Catholic activists are primarily concerned with problems in the larger American society. Out of such concern they have crossed denominational lines to get organized with fellow conservative Protestants and Orthodox Jews into a New Religious Right. But such a mobilization into a transdenominational Moral Majority presupposes a fundamental change in relations between the Catholic subculture and the larger American culture.

In his seminal study Protestant-Catholic-Jew Will Herberg showed that by the mid-fifties American Catholicism had already become one of the three denominational forms of a new American civil religion that had the Protestant ethic and faith in America’s millennial role as its moral and doctrinal core. As the disestablishment of this civil religion got under way in “the sixties,” conservative Catholics began to join fellow Americans in defense of the American civil religion. But it would be inappropriate to characterize such an activism as a form of “Catholic” fundamentalism.

Hitchcock’s additional discussion of other conservative Catholic movements, such as Opus Dei, Comunione e Liberazione, and the Charismatics, while intrinsically interesting and informative, adds little to an understanding of Catholic fundamentalism or even of the struggles taking place today within the Catholic Church over the meaning of aggiornamento and over the “authentic reading” of Vatican Council II. Clearly, none of these movements are openly anti-aggiornamento and, therefore, none is fundamentalist. Comunione e Liberazione may work with full papal support toward “overcoming the division between the Gospel and culture” and in this sense “opposes secularization in politics and culture” (pp. 123–124). As politically and ideologically conservative as they may be, however, these are movements of civil society which want to work in and through the public sphere of modern civil societies and no longer advocate either a confessional Catholic state, or the restoration of Catholic establishment through the mobilization of the laity in a hegemonic movement such as Catholic Action or through a Catholic or Christian party. Moreover, all of them are typically transnational movements
which are no longer oriented toward the nation-state as the place where one may reproduce the lost medieval Christendom. In orientation at least, these are movements of an emerging global Catholic civil society that actually feel quite at home within modernity.

No less puzzling than the absence of a discussion of Catholic fundamentalism in Catholic Latin America is the presence in the volume of a chapter on “Protestant Fundamentalism in Latin America.” Upon reading Pablo A. Deiros’ contribution, it is evident that the chapter is much more than a discussion of Protestant fundamentalism, since it offers a comprehensive historical survey and contemporary review of Protestantism in Latin America in its three main variants—mainline or historical, evangelical, and Pentecostal. Those names indicate the extent to which the world of Latin American Protestantism and the analytical categories used to study it are Anglo-Saxon transplants. Simultaneously, however, the chapter is less than a proper discussion of fundamentalism, since it never comes to terms with the fact that fundamentalist religious doctrines once transplanted to a foreign soil may lose their “fundamentalist” character. The number of doctrinally fundamentalist Protestant Christians in Latin America may have increased dramatically in the last two decades. But the essay offers little evidence of the emergence of a Protestant fundamentalist movement in Latin America which would be sociologically comparable to North American fundamentalism. Deiros points out that what he refers to as fundamentalism in Latin America is not an “institutionalized movement” or even an “interdenominational distinction,” but rather an “impulse,” an “ideological trend,” an “intradenominational line of identity” that cuts across historical, evangelical, and Pentecostal churches. He attributes this trend to “a new generation of high-profile media evangelists from the United States” whose work led to “an adroit blending of the fundamentalist world view of the faith missions, the community-organizing methods of the Pentecostals, and the right-wing politics of the American televangelists” (p. 162).

But in Latin America even the adroit blending of such fundamentalist ingredients cannot yet constitute a fundamentalist movement when the essential feature, namely, the particular relationship to a traditionally established hegemonic culture being threatened by processes of modern secular differentiation, is missing. Protestantism in Latin America can never be a fundamentalist restorationist movement. Despite its blatantly anti-modernist and anti-liberal theology, Deiros himself interprets Protestant fundamentalism in Latin America not as an anti-modern reaction against the secularization of culture but rather “as a protest against the Hispanidad values of traditional society and as a rejection of the influence of the Catholic Church” (p. 179). The anti-establishment and anti-elitism of evangelical Protestantism also has a radically different connotation in Latin America. There it brings “a message of liberation from . . . Catholic spiritual hegemony” and its traditional historical alliances with the state and local oligarchies. Similarly, in the Latin American context the evangelical call to restore the pristine purity of “primitive Christianity” means even less than in North America the imitation of an ancient past, but
rather the identification with something as modern as "the American way of life." Even when transmitted by fundamentalist preachers from the United States, to call such a phenomenon in Latin America fundamentalism is necessarily misleading.

In the review so far I have given inordinate attention to problems in the analytical uses of the category of fundamentalism perhaps due to the conviction that the contributions to this volume offer enough empirical evidence, positive as well as negative, for the development of a more systematic theory of modern religious fundamentalism. Clearly, and perhaps wisely, the development of such a theory was not a high priority of the editors. Certainly, the scholarly quality and the relevance of the contributions both individually and as a collection surpasses their possible instrumental use for the development of such a general theory. Given my limited expertise in those religious traditions and geographical areas, I am not in a position to review the rest of the contributions in detail. The volume includes two chapters on Jewish fundamentalism, four on Islam, and one each on Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikh fundamentalism, Confucianism, and fundamentalism in Japan. I can only assert that reading each and all the monographs has been a most rewarding intellectual experience. Becoming immersed in such a superior guidebook to all the major world religions and civilizations and their complex histories of relations with modernity matches the sense of excitement and discovery that accompanies the first explorations and systematic encounter with a world atlas. In this sense, certainly this first volume and most likely the other volumes of the Fundamentalism Project as well are bound to become indispensable reference texts for the informed public, the specialist, and college students alike.

From my own vantage point as a comparative sociologist of religion I may anticipate that even if at the end the Fundamentalism Project does not contribute to either a general theory or even an agreed-upon definition of fundamentalism, it is likely to serve as the impulse and foundation for a revival of the kind of comparative-historical sociology of world religions and civilizations that was pioneered by Max Weber. As this volume proves, however, such an endeavor can now proceed at an empirically more sound and hermeneutically less ethnocentric base. But above all, this volume makes evident that one cannot hope to make sense of the ongoing global construction of a modern world order without taking into account the role which religious traditions continue to play in such a construction.

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