

RELIGION

Reynolds C.L. (1993) "The New Fundamentalism", *ICE*, Newcastle University Press, Newcastle, Australia

Fundamentalist Christian preachers have become familiar to Australians over the past decade through their television shows. People like Rex Humbard, Pat Robinson and Jimmy Bakker typify the image most of us have of the fundamentalist TV evangelist. Some, of course, receive notoriety for other things such as an affair with the secretary, running for President or praying for large sums of money.

In the main, fundamentalist Christians are the subject of popular humour, it is only when they dare to speak out against 'deviant' moral behavior that they become the object of scorn.

The word 'fundamental' pertains to the basics or parts of a whole; it refers to the substance of things. Perhaps it is a strange coincidence that at the time Henry Ford introduced automation into the car industry by a reductionist one-piece-at-a-time production line process, a group of conservative Christians were publishing tracts to reduce the Gospel message to its essentials. These conservatives were to be called "fundamentalists".

Today, it is hard to define what the Fundamentalists believe are the essentials as they have such little theology to evaluate. The term has somewhat lost its original meaning and become synonymous with 'conservative'. Perhaps what distinguishes them is their fanatical and aggressive pursuit of what is morally "right", demanding that others accept their point of view. Consequently, one might conclude that Fed Nile is a fundamentalist. Perhaps we should ask him!

Fundamentalism, however, is not an approach that is restricted to Christians. And it would appear that tertiary education is currently going through a phase fundamentalist growth.

Professor Barry Leal, Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Macquarie University recently spoke on the rise of fundamental thinking in our universities. He pointed out how things seem to be constantly reduced to the simplest form in much of tertiary education. In contrast to the past, we now think not in general terms but in fractions. Courses are divided into semesters, and we now speak of multi-subject disciplines.

It would seem at first sight that the scientific model of learning has won the day and we will soon have to start thinking in terms of true/false answers to life. While this inevitably might be true, there seems to be a fair influence in our education coming from America, as well.

American society appears too many outsiders as an ethical confusion of "right" and "wrong" and "good" and "evil" but philosophically it is essentially Aristotelian: If you have the statistics and good reasoning you can win the argument. Things are done for an "end" there is an object to the debate. And in this sense, education is seen as a means of enabling people to take their productive place within the economy society. Does it sound a bit familiar Mr. Dawkins?

Under this system of reductionism education, people are trained to "process information" or "retain data" and respond to commands. Information taught in one course is seen to be unrelated to another. Students are rarely taught the art of generalization any more.

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This environment of reductionism combined with a fanatical desire for "right" thinking has led to the emergence of the New-Age Fundamentalists, who, with the same passion of a TV evangelist, are just as sure that we should all adopt their new moralism.

In an article by John Taylor, republished by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 2, 1991, we are told that; "The new fundamentalists are an eclectic group; they include multiculturalists, feminists, radical homosexuals, Marxists (and) New Historians. What unites them is their conviction that Western culture and American society are thoroughly and hopelessly racist, sexist, and oppressive."

Like the Christian fundamentalists, this new group has its deontological ethic built upon a sense of right and wrong. That is, they believe they are the keepers of the law of social and individual behaviour that everyone must learn to obey. The Christian fundamentalist fixation with sexual behaviour and moral sin is replaced by other fixations, such as white male oppression.

Fundamentalists can appear in any arena. During the Reagan years, it was the fundamentalist foreign policy approach to Russia that scared half of Washington and the rest of the world as well. It took Gorbachev's unpredictable moves that led to a recent descent of this political perspective into the basements of right-wing think tanks.

What makes these people, whoever they are, fundamentalists is not the validity, or otherwise, of their arguments, but their fanatical belief that they are the ones with the truth. Regardless of the moral issue, they are dualists in their approach to life reducing morals to black-and-white, right – and-wrong positions. They, of course, are always right.

The demand of the fundamentalists is for intellectual conformity. One must adhere to a set of doctrines – Christian or not. To gain it, they are not afraid to cause harassment and intimidation. The enemy is in reality intellectual freedom.

Yet, one has to ask, why the passion; what is it that the fundamentalists fear?

Perhaps it is change. Perhaps it is the unknown. While there is truth in both these propositions, it is essentially the fear of losing control that controls them. Control of one's sense of reality, social order, and even one's sense of the future.

Apart from any role our education system may play in inviting reductionist and even fundamentalist thinking, fundamentalism also speaks of people's fear of their social environment.

While many despair and some even take their life (Australia has the highest teenage suicide rate of any Western country) others look for simple ways to cope with the pressure of modern life. The desire is to take control of one's life and to restore some order. Fundamentalists, in particular, see that control of one's own life means enforcing control over others in society. To make the world perfect or pure, sin has to be purged out. Thus, the fanaticism.

Many turn to religion and look for leaders and preachers that will give simple answers to life. It is particularly tragic when religion or God, is put up for sale. It becomes scandalous however when a religion, such as Scientology, is sold through a series of courses on self and spiritual control in order to take hold of life. The fact-to-God school. If you have found the TV evangelist type fundamentalist disturbing, wait till you see the

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new religious fanatic. Their trade mark is heavy metal Christian music – mostly out of California. Here, is a return to the dualism of spiritual forces doing battle over the fortunes of the world – as in the Book of Daniel. Conflict and tribulations are its trade marks.

But it is a misnomer to call this philosophical or theological approach Christian. Jesus spent quite some emotional energy abusing people who would reduce life to rules. His main adversaries were the Pharisees. In Mark's Gospel the conflict comes to a head over Sabbath observance and whether it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Mark reports that Jesus' anger rose to rage with their inability to recognize the precedent of good action should overshadow the right action. (Mark 3:5)

The lesson we are being taught by the Liberation Theologians is that the emphasis of the Christ message is on right action rather than on right doctrine: it is by charity and compassion (love) that one is to be recognized as a follower of Christ.

While our universities will continue to see Christians advocating fundamentalist doctrines and philosophy, they are not the only fundamentalists on campus. They all seek converts to their intellectual position, but people who confine themselves to reductionist processes are easy pray.

Life is full of ambiguity and is never successfully reduced to simple manageable facts. Fundamentalism is oppressive because it denies the process of life and, at the same time, our opportunity for spiritual and social growth.