

LARGER EARS AND SMALLER HORNS: TOWARDS DISTINGUISHING CONSERVATIVE FROM FUNDAMENTALIST THEOLOGY

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Abstract

The term 'fundamentalism' is often used to ridicule any strong religious conviction and greater conceptual clarity must be achieved to do justice to conservative and evangelical approaches that are decidedly not fundamentalist. This contribution attempts to distinguish between conservative and fundamentalist modes of theological reflection and how this distinction is important within a South African context. Special attention will be given to the different interpretations of the Bible and history in response to Modernism. One of the main arguments is that conservative and evangelical theology become fundamentalist when it refuses to listen to or engage in dialogue with alternative points of view (the need for larger ears). This lack of tolerance becomes dangerous when it triggers the increase of the vehemence with which the own point of view is defended as 'the only' truth (the need for smaller horns).

Key words: Conservatism, Evangelical Theology, Fundamentalism

Introduction

Why bother to discuss 'fundamentalism' at all? Die hard adherents to fundamentalism do not seem to be interested in any discussion other than wholehearted agreement. Moreover, 'fundamentalism' seems to be such a slippery term that despite extensive research no consensus has been reached as to what it entails in different religions across the globe.

One of the more generally accepted definitions of fundamentalism was suggested by the scholars taking part in the extensive Fundamentalist Project conducted on behalf of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. They described fundamentalism as "a discernible pattern of religious militance by which self-styled 'true believers' attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors" (Almond, Appleby & Sivan 2003:17). Numrich (2007:10) takes this definition as point of departure to argue that "Fundamentalists are distinguished from other religious conservatives by their militance."

Without necessarily resorting to violence, adherents to fundamentalist religious convictions are depicted by Marty and Appleby (1996:328-332) as 'fighters.' It seems as if this pugnacious attitude is one of the most important reasons for the general concern caused by fundamentalism. Susan Harding (2000:268) is probably correct in her observation

that religious groups that are identified as being ‘fundamentalist’ seem to have as common denominator a “capacity to alarm the managers and agents of modern secular nation-states.”

Since the destruction of the World Trade Centre in 2001 ‘fundamentalism’ has been a popular term to describe religious conservatism in a pejorative way. This contribution will argue that religious conservatism does not necessarily equal fundamentalism and that in the aftermath of 9/11 academic reflection must be acutely aware not to resonate with or amplify the self-satisfied but fearful criticism of religious conservatism as fundamentalism (Watt 2007:272).

It should be made quite clear that the following discussion does not intend to be advocacy on behalf of conservative theology or evangelical spirituality. The prime intention is to contribute towards conceptual clarity in the volatile debate about the impact of fundamentalism on society and to be able to distinguish between fundamentalism and evangelical conservative theology.

Fundamentalist Theology as a Theology with big Horns

During the 20th century fundamentalist theology did not receive much favorable press. Initially it was considered to be prevalent amongst the less educated, with a subsequent anti-intellectual predisposition. More recently it has been perceived as being contrary to the basic principles of liberal democracy (Harris 1998:10-25).

The fundamental doctrines articulated at the 1895 Niagara Falls conference were elaborated in a series of booklets published between 1909 and 1915, known as *The Fundamentals*. Ken Badley (2002:138) summarized the five fundamental doctrines as follows:

- *the Bible is God’s verbally inspired and inerrant word;*
- *Jesus is virgin-born;*
- *Jesus is Divine, the Christ, God incarnate;*
- *Jesus Christ accomplished substitutionary atonement for our sins;*
- *Jesus Christ rose bodily from the dead and will return.*

Some scholars have attempted to explain the emergence of fundamentalism due to the religious and social circumstances at the beginning of the 20th century. George Marsden (2006:3) considers fundamentalism to be a *distinct version of evangelical Christianity uniquely shaped by circumstances of America in the early twentieth century*. Rooted in the revivalist traditions of the 19th century, fundamentalism developed a militant opposition against modernist thinking as manifested in the theory of evolution in natural science and higher criticism amongst biblical scholars. These sociological explanations of fundamentalism presupposed that with the improvement of education, as well as societal changes, fundamentalism will gradually wither away. Since the demise of fundamentalism was not evident as the new millennium drew nearer, other explanations for the persistence of fundamentalism were sought.

Scholarship has also considered the political dimensions of fundamentalism. Despite a reluctance amongst some fundamentalists to engage in politics as a worldly activity, others became involved in championing *temperance, Sabbath legislation, anti-Masonry* – not to forget the vehement reaction against Bolshevism or Communism (Marsden 2006:207-209). Fundamentalism in its political guise also developed a whole conglomerate of conspiracy theories reflecting a prejudice against Jews, Catholics and Communists. Looking back at

the previous century Marsden (2006:232) argues that the *most striking feature of fundamentalism since the 1970s that distinguishes it from its forebears is its deep involvement in mainstream national politics.*

Historians of religion during the latter part of the 20th century preferred a more theological explanation of the emergence of fundamentalism. Harriet Harris (1998:15) has defined fundamentalism in terms of a realistic and rationalistic understanding of the Bible with the following characteristics:

- a) a commitment *that Scripture cannot contain any error because it is inspired by God,*
- b) a circular argument *that Scripture is indeed inspired because it contains no error,*
- c) a reluctance to consider any reformulation of the first two points since it will constitute *making concessions to modern scholarship,*
- d) a concern that any detraction from the authority of the Bible *will threaten the very foundation of the Christian faith.*

In a more recent study of the theological roots of Christian fundamentalism, Harriet Harris (2008:816-818) emphasized the foundational nature of Scripture:

- i) The authority of Scripture is based on the doctrine of *(full) verbal inspiration* and therefore the understanding of the Bible is unmediated.
- ii) The Bible is perspicuous and readily accessible for everyone, with a *plain sense* that requires no or little interpretation.
- iii) The Bible is self-authenticating or self-justifying and thus allows for circular arguments that Scripture verifies its own authority and inspiration.
- iv) The Bible as a reliable foundation also necessitates it being inerrant.

It must be clearly stated that fundamentalism is not a religious trend confined to Christianity. A monumental study funded by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences from 1988-1993, *The Fundamentalism Project*, identified the following list of characteristics found amongst fundamentalist groups in different religions (Marty & Appleby 1995):

- reactivity to the marginalization of religion
- selectivity
- moral dualism
- absolutism and inerrancy
- millennialism and messianism
- elect membership
- sharp boundaries
- charismatic and authoritarian leadership
- behavioural requirements

Most of the abovementioned characteristics will be found in religions across the globe and not necessarily be fundamentalistic. The combination of many of them and being closely linked to an attitude that allows for no disagreement is more prevalent amongst fundamentalists than conservatives.

In one of the few studies done on fundamentalism and conservatism in South Africa, Christopher Stones (1978:155) argues that the conservative in an insecure context

characterized by uncertainty *will be resistant to change, except when the proposed change is perceived to be in the direction of increased security*. It seems as if the ongoing high levels of anxiety and insecurity in South Africa provide a societal environment within which conservatism and fundamentalism thrive because it offers *moral absolutism, traditional social roles and the certainty of faith* (Boucher 2006:1).

When fundamentalism became a recognizable trend in the 1920's its prime focus was on the defense of traditions such as the literal understanding of the creation narrative in Genesis 1 and 2. Recently fundamentalism has moved from maintaining tradition at all costs to selectively reinventing tradition – here the amplification of the biblical creation narratives by the formulation of the theory of *intelligent design* is a good example.

In 21st century South Africa one is confronted both by die hard opponents to evolution that propagate creationist views reminiscent of the USA during the early 20th century, as well as advocates of intelligent design – examples of the rational reinvention of creationism. One is thus tempted to consider the possibility that part of South African society is experiencing a belated “enlightenment” triggered by the advent of democracy in the 1990's, while a relatively small section has moved on to a more postmodern mode of reflection. Ruthven (2004:210) came to the conclusion that developing countries such as Iran and India (as well as South Africa) “*have moved from the oral to the audio-visual era without experiencing the revolution in literacy that generated both Protestantism and the Enlightenment in Europe.*” This development might also explain the anti-intellectual stance amongst most fundamentalists in their vehement resistance of enlightenment modernity.

Therefore caution is advised when investigating the role of fundamentalism in South Africa since the different modes of fundamentalism stretches from hard core anti-modern thought to a more erudite and intellectually sophisticated postmodern version. (This calls for urgent further investigation but is not possible within the parameters of this contribution).

3. CONSERVATIVE THEOLOGY AS A THEOLOGY WITH LARGE EARS

Conservatism as a distinctive philosophy was described by Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France as feudal aristocracy's reaction to the French revolution* (Akron 1983:33). During the past two centuries it has been alluded to as a frame of mind elicited by radical change that tends to accept the status quo as point of departure for gradual development. It has been attempted to associate conservatism with a pessimistic view of humankind that is rooted in the related doctrines on sin, original sin and the fall of humankind. Vierecka (1965:37) has even referred to conservatism as the secularization of the idea of original sin.

Where the underlying principles of liberalism and socialism seem to be respectively *freedom* and *equality*; conservatism seemed to be based on *order* or as Scruton (1984) echoing Aristotle has suggested *happiness* (as a form of harmony or order). Given the existing predominance of capitalism one might also suggest *prosperity* as a currently preferred form of *happiness*!

Soon after World War Two *neo-evangelicalism* came to the fore with the establishment of Fuller Theological Seminary in 1947, the journal *Christianity Today* in 1956 and *Youth for Christ* that has as its motto: *anchored to the Rock, but geared with the times* (George 2007:282). Carl FH Henry, a founding member of Fuller Seminary and the first editor of

Christianity Today, challenged American conservatives to leave their intellectual ghetto to pursue social and cultural engagement in view of their faith conviction (1947).

For the purpose of this discussion Evangelical Theology will be considered to a mode of Conservative Theology that can be distinguished from Fundamentalist Theology. As argued in the previous section *militant opposition to modernism* was considered to be the characteristic trait of fundamentalism that distinguished it from other related traditions *such as evangelicalism, revivalism, pietism, the holiness movements, millenarianism, Reformed confessionalism, Baptist traditionalism, and other denominational orthodoxies* (Marsden 2006:4). Badley (2002:145) concludes that despite the common roots of fundamentalists and evangelicals they eventually *have gone their separate ways*.

Before scrutinizing the track record of conservative and evangelical theology in South Africa, a brief glance at Africa as a continent is required. For quite some time Byang Kato was considered to be the quintessential African evangelical (De la Haye 1986). Tienou (2007:218) considers the two most important theological characteristics of Kato as an evangelical to be: *the trustworthiness of the Word of God against all theological liberalism and the proper contextualization of theology in its African setting without adulterating the Gospel*. Clarity about what *proper contextualization* entails has been a perennial bone of contention and respected African theologians such as Kwame Bediako (1992:386) has asserted that Kato and his fellow evangelicals have been predominantly influenced by their *deep roots in the conservative evangelical tradition* and being less appreciative of its *African pre-Christian heritage*, resulting in a lack of integration of Christian faith and African tradition.

Although an evangelical and conservative religious disposition can be found in most South African Christian denominations the remarkable growth amongst charismatic churches during the last three decades must receive special attention as one of the more telling examples of the local impact of conservative evangelicalism. Glen Thompson (2004:136) describes the religious ethos of South African charismatics as a *religious conservatism which merged with a conservative (a)political consciousness and a spirituality that focused on the self and God*. Despite a reluctance to become involved in party politics one must be appreciative of the role many charismatic churches played during the unraveling of apartheid in the 1990's by promoting *personal and racial reconciliation within a charismatic mission spirituality at the grassroots level* thereby enabling a *new vision of South African society based on the understanding of the kingdom of God as reconciling black and white* (Thompson 2004:140). What many mainline churches struggled to achieve in terms of reconciliation was manifestly visible in the charismatic churches. In many ways the conservative evangelical message, somewhat ironically, mirrored the secular vision of a *rainbow nation*.

A clear conservative orientation can be detected in the emphasis on *justice, reconciliation and peace* and echoed by the mobilization of public opinion towards *legislating morality, encouraging welfare evangelism, and maintaining the status quo of the middle classes by stabilising crime, violence and opposing political agendas* (Thompson 2004:141). The ongoing debates about abortion, the death penalty and gay rights, as well as the propagation of a prosperity gospel are but a few examples of the impact of conservative evangelicalism on South African civil society.

In South Africa many a theological argument was developed during the second half of the previous century to undergird the maintenance of law and order as opposed to the

recognition of the aspirations of the majority of South Africa's population that demanded freedom and equality. The first decade of the third millennium was characterized by the longest period of economical growth in the recent history of South Africa and this contributed to the predominance of capitalist economic growth strategies, as well as the reformulation of *order* as *prosperity* – part of the mantra of conservative evangelicals prevalent amongst many of the new black elite and white *yuppies*.

During the past decade South Africa has experienced an influx of *conversionist evangelicalism* as a form of conservative theology that grew out of the mega-church movement with its emphasis on evangelism, mission and spirituality – reaching out to the unconverted on a local and global scale, as well as the focus on personal spiritual growth (Marsden 2006:252). The huge popularity of Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Church* (1995) and *The Purpose Driven Life* (2002), as well as Bill Hybel's model of church growth exemplified by his Chicago based Willow Creek Community Church, are significant South African manifestations of *conversionist evangelicalism*.

In what has been depicted as the *therapeutic age* local bookstores have been flooded by spiritually orientated and biblically based guides for combating depression, losing weight, establishing functional families, achieving a more beneficial lifestyle and even a better sex life (Marsden 2006:254-255). The evangelical predilection for a biblical approach to issues of the day can lead to *proof-texting and the unrealistic expectation that complex contemporary issues can be resolved by the study of Scripture alone* (Dyrness 2007:156).

Since religious conservatism is by no means unique amongst Christians, a brief survey will be provided of conservative religious trends in South African Judaism and amongst Muslims in South Africa.

Jocelyn Hellig (1986:233) argues that the characteristic feature of contemporary Judaism in South Africa is *its conservative traditionalism* – a feature that she describes as being *a respect for tradition, a strong attachment to Zion and, an overall 'comfortableness' with the condition of being Jewish*. Contrary to trends in the United States, four out of every five Jews in South Africa will be broadly affiliated to a more Orthodox position while the remaining 20% can be considered to be Reformed (Hellig 1986:235). The roots of this conservative trend can be traced to the British and Lithuanian background of many Jews who settled in South Africa during the 19th century – *a case of pouring Litvak spirit into Anglo-Jewish bottles* (Saron 1965:21). Although the majority of South African Jews are affiliated to Orthodox synagogues, they can be depicted as *non-observant Orthodox* – the so-called *three-times-a-year Jews* that will only attend synagogue during Passover, *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* (Hellig 1986:237-238). Against this backdrop it is not surprising that despite the Orthodox or conservative majority amongst South African Jews there are very few examples of fundamentalist Judaism since this type of conservatism or Orthodoxy is a *widely accepted form of identification rather than a system of disciplined observance* (Ascheim 1970:218-219).

Ebrahim Moosa (1989:73-74) is convinced that *a rigid conservatism remains grounded in the Muslim community* in South Africa and that it is perpetuated by the *ulama* – groups (Councils of Theologians in different provinces), whose conservatism is attributed to *their legalistic training* and a religious tradition that is legitimated by *invoking the immutable authority of the past*. The age-old tension between Sunni and Shi'i factions sporadically flares up within the South African Muslim community – the periodical vigilante activities

of Pagad and Qiblah are examples of a more fundamentalist trend amongst a minority of Muslims.

Two of the principal concerns amongst the majority of conservative Muslims in South Africa are the deterioration of religious (*Sharia*) authority, as well as the breakdown in parental authority – exacerbated by high levels of crime and drug abuse (Moosa 1989:79). The acceptance of capitalism and free enterprise amongst the majority of the Muslim community indicate that the conservative resistance against modernity is selective and does not entail a blanket rejection of modernity.

There also seems to be an important difference between the extent to which fundamentalists and evangelical conservatives rationalize religion. Karen Armstrong (2004:xiv-xvi) makes a strong argument that fundamentalism converted the *muthos* of religion into a rationalistic *logos* and thereby reduced the scope of religion and the creative interpretation of its sacred texts. Conservative evangelicals, especially in its charismatic guise, remain open to being *moved by the Spirit* thereby resisting being straight-jacketed by a rationalistic fundamentalism.

The debate about the reinstatement of the death penalty in South Africa is a good example of how religion becomes rationalized by the strict adherence to the doctrine of retribution – not only an eye for an eye, but also a life for a life is called for. With a society as a whole feeling very insecure due to high levels of violent crime, segments of the South African society that under other circumstances would by no means be described as being fundamentalist now resort to a fundamentalist view of capital punishment. This is another reason for raising the consciousness of believing communities by establishing conceptual clarity to maintain non-fundamentalist positions despite their daily insecurities.

Conclusion

The ability to distinguish between conservatism and fundamentalism is one of many similar distinctions that need to be made – not only amongst Christians but also amongst members of different faith communities. Greater conceptual clarity and some mutual understanding can be achieved through multi-disciplinary research and interfaith dialogue.

Marsden's (2006:235) shorthand distinction between fundamentalism and evangelicalism is that a fundamentalist is *an evangelical who is angry about something*. This operational distinction between evangelical and fundamentalist *involves their relative degrees of militancy in support of conservative doctrinal, ecclesiastical, and/or cultural issues*. How can theological thinking refrain from using anger or its flipside fear as point of departure? Faith seeking understanding must be revisited as the starting point of theologizing that embraces constructive critical thinking and dialogue (not aggressive confrontation!) with those who one disagrees with (Witherington 2005:250-251).

It has become clear that Christian fundamentalism can be distinguished from conservatism in the way it combines the militant defence of what it considers to be foundational with the view that the Bible is inerrant. Part of the militant defence of fundamentalist foundational thinking entails *the effort to make religion into the cultural cement of the social foundation*, while *inerrancy invests the sacred text as a practical manual for political action* (Boucher 2006:5).

Although it is inevitable that religion develops culturally formed ideals and values, the critical scrutiny thereof can be a constructive enterprise that enables the adherents to a religion to distinguish between the cross and the gold (Marsden 2006:260). Although

conservative theology in its evangelical guise increasingly engages with culture it does not necessarily listen to culture. The need for a conservative theology with bigger ears goes beyond dialogue with communities of faith since it also implies an acute sensitivity for the cultural context within which the theological reflection takes place.

With the phenomenal growth Christianity has recently experienced on the African continent the increased conflict potential with other contending faiths, such as Islam, must be addressed. Constructive interfaith dialogue rallying to the cause of religious freedom require bigger ears and smaller horns, undergirded by conceptual clarity about the difference between fundamentalist, conservative and evangelical modes of theological reflection.

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