
REVIEW

The Fundamentalist Mindset: Psychological Perspectives on Religion, Violence, and History. Edited by Charles B. Strozier, David M. Terman, and James W. Jones, with Katharine A. Boyd. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. xxi + 274 pp. \$99.00 hardcover, \$19.95 paperback.

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The Fundamentalist Mindset is the culmination of a project that began as an online discussion and then grew to include a conference and monthly seminar. The current text is a compilation of papers collected on the various topics. The first two sections of the book focus on definitional issues and the underlying psychological characteristics of the mindset. These include the developmental antecedents of fundamentalism and associated characteristics such as the “paranoid gestalt,” dualistic thought, and apocalypticism. The third and fourth sections of the book focus on Christian and American contexts, and global and historical contexts, respectively. For example, James Jones draws connections between the Left Behind series of books and video games and the extremist themes of dichotomization, purity, and violence. Similarly, Charles Strozier analyzes the book of Revelation and its themes of revenge and paranoia. David Redles describes the quasi-religious nature of “conversions” in Germany to the Nazi ethos, with an emphasis on racial purity rather than religiosity. The global and historical section provides chapters on global jihadism and Hindu nationalism.

The term *fundamentalism* has clearly evolved (no pun intended) since its origin in the early 20th century as a reaction to encroaching secularism and liberalism (e.g., the Scopes Monkey Trial). Originally, a series of pamphlets called “The Fundamentals” referred to a set of bedrock doctrines for Protestant Christians, but currently the term is used in common parlance to refer to denominations or religions stressing orthodox beliefs or textual literalism. In the present collection, Strozier and Boyd define the fundamentalist mindset as involving dualistic thinking, paranoia and rage in a group context, an apocalyptic orientation with distinct perspectives (on time, death, purity, and violence), reliance on charismatic leadership, and a totalized conversion experience. A similar conceptualization in the social sciences by Bob Altemeyer has had success using empirical methods of validation and questionnaire development. Like Altemeyer, Strozier et al.’s focus is less on belief content and more on the way in which beliefs are held. However, Altemeyer’s conceptualization does include some emphasis on textual literalism and inerrancy and would probably include a wider segment of the U.S. population or even the majority of

sects (Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses). In contrast, the present collection includes many phenomena under the heading of fundamentalism with less of an emphasis on literalism or even lacking specifically religious elements.

The authors make clear that they wish to cast a wide net in the definition and manifestation of fundamentalism. Strozier and Boyd suggest that "it is dangerous to be more concrete" and argue for the "benefits of ambiguity, which makes for a larger conceptual umbrella" (p. 11). But therein lies a danger. When so comprehensively and vaguely defined, the mindset in question could characterize virtually everyone, thereby becoming meaningless. This problem is exacerbated by the authors' tendency to focus extensively on one facet of the mindset and omit others, an approach that leads to a nearly unfalsifiable manner of dealing with individual and historical phenomena that may not even include religious elements. Long stretches in some chapters pass with no mention of religion at all; Strozier and Boyd's chapter on analytic theories of group psychology, for example, focuses on violent extremism without the religious component rather than religious fundamentalism. In fact, their chapter might have been more aptly titled "The Extremist Mindset." David Jordan's history of the French Revolution and John McLane's history of Hindu nationalism, although historically interesting, contain little of either psychology or religious fundamentalism.

Another example of problematic generality is the notion of narcissistic rage triggered by a traumatic humiliation. There are few individuals, nations, or societies that have not had some humiliation or traumatic injury. The "trauma" of 9/11 may have resulted in a temporary spike in religiosity, but how are we to explain the rise of the religious right in the 1970s and '80s, one of the most stable and expansive periods in history? The topic would be better served by discussing why some societies shift to a fundamentalist mindset following trauma and others do not. Setting the boundaries of the fundamentalist mindset so broadly as to encompass a "heightened sense of danger" and "apocalyptic energies" makes it difficult to think of a movement that would not be so characterized. Is the Tea Party fundamentalist because it contains paranoid elements, dualistic thinking, obsessions with ideological purity, and prophecies of apocalyptic events?

Clearly, one of the core problems of a psychoanalytic approach in clinical psychiatry, beyond the generality issue, is the lack of reliance on more empirical concepts, a neglect that leads to the usual problems with formulating testable hypotheses and providing definitive, nonspeculative evidence. For example, the suggestion of Kleinian analysts that groups have unconscious wishes and that the roots of paranoia lie in the fact that "infants project their own sadism onto the breast" (p. 22) is not very helpful. It invites unfalsifiability when theories are allowed to encompass dualities such as "the suffering that lies beneath the often angry, arrogant, and superficially confident exterior of a paranoid person" (p. 65). A related problem is alternating between individual, psychological phenomena such as developmental psychodynamics and group level or historical phenomena, such as "collective rage." Although problems in such group formulations of the unconscious are acknowledged by Terman—"where would such an unconscious reside?" (p. 20)—many readers may ask then why these ideas should be covered at all, and why similarly vague notions are not questioned as well. The authors might have utilized potentially useful research from contemporary experimental social psychology instead. Rather than employing such concepts as infantile fixations, for example, they could have drawn on the more productive and empirically sound body of work that has focused on distinctive childrearing attitudes and practices among religious fundamentalists: obedience, corporal punishment, and negative views of human nature.

Thus, there is only partial integration of the authors' ideas or concepts with the theories and research in the social psychology of religion and extremism that center on such constructs as dogmatism, cognitive dissonance, intolerance of ambiguity, uncertainty avoidance, compensatory conviction, and terror management. In a section that discusses the phenomenon of total conversion to a fundamentalist belief system, for instance, Strozier, Boyd, and Jones briefly allude to the avoidance of uncertainty, concluding that more empirical research is needed (pp. 42–43). In fact, however, there is a large and growing literature on uncertainty using sophisticated experimental methods. The induction of uncertainty in the laboratory has been shown to lead to increased religious zeal (McGregor, Nash, & Prentice, 2010). Similarly, the induction of a loss of control, feelings of loneliness, and mortality salience (in terror-management studies) have all been shown to lead to reactive increases in religious certainty, particularly in those with strong convictions; a high need for structure; and, of course, marked fundamentalism. The absence of such literature in a discussion of psychological characteristics of fundamentalists therefore seems remiss.

Another problem of the analytic approach is the tension and implied contradiction between suggesting that the etiology and manifestation of the fundamentalist mindset is nearly ubiquitous and rooted in universal mechanisms and, on the other hand, suggesting that extremism—by definition, atypical—is a pathological condition distinguished by paranoia, rage, and narcissism. In Strozier's chapter, "The Apocalyptic Other," for example, the notion of paranoid projection on the part of individuals or groups is said to be at once pathological but also latent in everyone and present everywhere. Although Jones states explicitly in the conclusion that the authors are "committed to not pathologizing," the use of analytic terms and symptoms actually leads to an "over-pathologization" in which organizations such as Christian liberation theology, the environmentalist group Earth First!, and the animal rights group PETA, are said to have an "apocalyptic nature" (p. 67). Why not Al Gore's global warming coalition? Or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention? Again the danger of identifying and expanding one element of fundamentalism is that the overinclusiveness renders it of little utility. Given that a substantial proportion of the U.S. population believes in the imminent return of Christ, it would be useful to know what differentiates mainstream apocalypticism from the extremist form.

Beyond problems with the unfalsifiability of many analytic concepts, numerous pieces of information cited by various authors are at odds with current empirical research. While discussing Christian apocalypticism, Strozier, referring to Frank Kermode's work, suggests that "of all the world's religions Christianity is the most anxious about death" (p. 113). However, Morris and McAdie (2009) have found that Christians had lower death anxiety than both nonreligious and Muslim groups. The reliance on Kohut's theory of narcissistic rage leads the analytical authors to conclude that "some individuals or groups are more narcissistically vulnerable" and hence more likely to react with rage when they have been "narcissistically wounded" or humiliated (p. 77). This type of generality is unhelpful and seems to be part of the "narcissism is actually low self-esteem" theory. However, as it is later mentioned in Jones's chapter, Bushman and Baumeister (1998) found that, although narcissists are prone to violence when their egos are threatened, low self-esteem in general is not a precursor to violence. Similarly, in Muenster and Lotto's chapter on humiliation and revenge, the theme of surface confidence masking latent insecurity also renders a variety of contradictory phenomena unfalsifiably similar. Do the characteristics of "humiliated," "shamed,"

and “socially rejected” seem at all characteristic of the typical Christian fundamentalist in the United States?

In a section on infant attachment and regulation theory, Daniel Hill suggests that fundamentalist attributes are “manifestations of a transient mental state in which their god assumes the characteristics of a caretaker who generates an insecure state of anxious attachment in those who are dependent on him” (p. 80). He further states that the harsh image of God among fundamentalists renders Him only inconsistently and “conditionally available as an attachment figure” (p. 85). It is true that empirical work, such as Kirkpatrick’s (1997), has found that those with a poor history of attachment to their parents shift to an attachment to God via a sudden conversion. But contrary to Hill’s claim that fundamentalists experience an “anxious attachment organized around a fear of abandonment” (p. 86), empirical evidence does not indicate that fundamentalism co-occurs with, or leads to, anxiety. In fact, current evidence suggests that fundamentalists have a *more* secure type of attachment (Schwartz & Lindley, 2005) and *greater* self-esteem (Sethi & Seligman, 1993). Furthermore, religion seems to function to reduce, rather than increase, anxiety. Kagan and Snidman (2004), for example, have found that those who had highly reactive temperaments as children and who had become religious as teens had lower apprehensiveness, implying that religion alleviates anxiety or uncertainty in the temperamentally reactive. So once again, there are plausible connections and hypotheses in analytic theory, but in this work they often remain partial and have received mixed support in the literature.

In addition to the overinclusion problem previously mentioned, there is also one aspect of underinclusion or omission that stands out in contrast. It is striking that, in a text focusing largely on Christian and Islamic fundamentalism but also corraling together ethnic Hindu nationalism, National Socialism, and revolutionary France, something less than one or two pages in total is devoted to Jewish fundamentalism—material that is scattered among the chapters rather than forming a sustained topic of interest. The “new millennialism about Jewish land” of the settler movement is mentioned briefly and then forgotten. If apocalypticism and millenarianism are characteristic of fundamentalism, then it seems tendentious not to include Hasidic messianism (e.g., the Chabad-Lubavitch movement) as well. If a historical narrative of humiliation and grievance drives a reactive sense of being “the elect,” does not being “God’s chosen people” and the exceptionalism of the “promised land” in Mosaic narrative also characterize Zionists and right-wing settlers? If an obsession with group-boundary-enforcing purity characterizes Christian fundamentalists, would not a literalistic, scrupulous observance of cleanliness rituals as outlined in the Torah also serve the same function?

In his summary of the concepts presented in the disparate chapters, Jones concedes that the themes “do not constitute a linear argument” (p. 217) regarding fundamentalism. Nevertheless, he sums the book up by concluding that “attachment patterns, unconscious dynamics, and social learning predispose some to embrace this sensibility” (p. 219). A reasonable claim, perhaps, but many questions still remain. How are the psychological underpinnings informative for combating the fundamentalist or extremist mindset? What does the literature say about those who resist or leave fundamentalist milieus as apostates and deconverts? How might religion itself mitigate the negative factors or promote empathy rather than demonization? Again, the psychological literature does address some of these questions, but its leads are by and large absent from the present text.

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