

HELLO
my name is

The “Fundamentalist” Label

We regularly hear people from different religious backgrounds referred to as “fundamentalist.” Is this labeling appropriate?

In 2007, amid much fanfare, CNN broadcast “God’s Warriors.” Spanning three nights, this special report featured “God’s Jewish Warriors,” “God’s Muslim Warriors,” and finally “God’s Christian Warriors”—namely conservative North American Christians. As happens quite a bit in American media, the term “fundamentalist” was used frequently to refer to a certain brand of Jew, Muslim, and Christian. But is this labeling appropriate? From where did it first arise? And how should we as evangelicals think about this? Trinity Magazine discussed the topic with TEDS Research Professor of Church History and the History of Christian Thought Dr. John Woodbridge (MDiv ’71).



Trinity Magazine: What do you think the word “fundamentalist” means to people today?

John Woodbridge: I think it's important to say something first about the power of words before attempting to give a definition of the word “fundamentalism.” Words can heal, words can hurt, words can inflame, words can inspire, words can scar, words can soothe, words can provoke, words can praise. The power of words is really quite enormous.

People's perceptions of a religious movement are often shaped by their understanding of the words commonly used to describe the movement. Those of us who are evangelical Christians have a vested interest in advocating the choice of winsome words to describe faithful Gospel movements. The use of negative descriptors can lead non-Christians to think they need not bother to consider the truth claims of a particular Christian movement.

As we saw in the special report, CNN used the word “fundamentalist” variously to refer to conservative Christians who self-identify as fundamentalists, other Christians who would not so self-identify, and more broadly to religious groups deemed “militant,” whether Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, or Jewish. Some scholars have loaded up the word “fundamentalist” with connotations these religious groups allegedly share in common. First, “fundamentalists” evidence a commitment to an infallible authoritative word of God (the Bible, the Koran...), which they also believe they can interpret infallibly. Second, “fundamentalists” attempt to retrieve past doctrines of the faith they think existed at their religion's founding. Third, “fundamentalists” feel obliged to defend these recovered fundamentals of their faith against the challenges of modernity. Fourth, “fundamentalists” possess a militant mindset. They will strike back at those who would challenge the fundamentals of their faith. These are a number of the traits some scholars claim unite world religious “fundamentalisms.”

TM: Where did this concept of “world fundamentalisms” come from?

JW: A few of these principles are enunciated in a large project that was funded by the MacArthur Foundation, called *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, edited by Professors Scott Appleby and Martin Marty. Toward the year 1980, the use of the word “fundamentalism” to describe various militant world religious groups [beyond its original referencing of Christian fundamentalists] entered into the vocabulary of the media. The specific context was the application of the word “fundamentalist” to Muslims during the Iran controversy with the Ayatollah Khomeini.

TM: Were there any other significant contributing factors?

JW: In a 1980 publication, Professor George Marsden expressed his opinion that it was appropriate to extend the use of the word “fundamentalist” to Muslims. He wrote: “Muslim fundamentalism, for example, resembles American Protestant fundamentalism in a number of striking ways. In view of its militant opposition to modern culture, it seems appropriate to borrow the American term to describe this Islamic phenomenon.”

Also in 1980, Professor Marty penned a piece in the *Saturday Review* in which he approved the application of the word “fundamentalist” to militant world religions. With the backing of these distinguished scholars, members of the media embraced these new connotations for the word.

TM: Is it legitimate to use the word “fundamentalist” for Muslims?

JW: Once an expression is in common parlance, many people will use the term whether we think such is “legitimate” or not. Nonetheless, if we mean by “legitimate” an historically accurate term, then there are good reasons to refrain from using the term to describe militant non-



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Christian movements. Its original meaning referred to conservative American Protestant Christians. Moreover, toward 1980, Professor Marty acknowledged that Muslims might not like the expression applied to them. Some Muslims might think this linguistic development represented another sign of American imperialism if the media used an American Christian term to describe Muslims. Furthermore, if the word “fundamentalist” bears the connotation of militancy, its application to all Muslims is not generous or accurate. Many Muslims around the world are not caught up in radical militant behavior. They are in fact gracious and hospitable persons.

TM: How does this usage misunderstand actual American fundamentalism as well?

JW: An understanding of the history of American fundamentalism reveals that it is not generally appropriate to use the movement as a foil from which to draw up characteristics of a militant non-Christian religious group.

In the United States, the word “fundamentalist” was used for the first time in 1920 by Curtis Lee Laws as a reference to Christians in mainline denominations who wanted to uphold the fundamentals of the faith. The early fundamentalists were ecumenical Christians who joined in a common cause with other like minded conservative Protestants (irrespective of denominational distinctives) in a struggle to defeat the growing challenge of Protestant Liberalism (or Modernism). They engaged in the Fundamentalist/Modernist Controversy that especially affected Northern Presbyterians and Northern Baptists. The Fundamentalists were largely defeated by the Modernists who gained control of several denominations and many academic institutions. In a very important book, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923), the Princetonian J. Gresham Machen claimed that Protestant Liberals had essentially abandoned orthodox Christianity and were naturalists.

Later fundamentalists, particularly by the 1950s, placed a tremendous emphasis upon personal ethics and their perception of doctrinal purity. Unlike the early fundamentalists of the 1920s, they included the doctrine of “second degree separation.” Second-degree separation means that if you find someone whom you think is theologically or ethically compromised, you must separate from that person, as well as from other people who have not separated from the first individual. These post-1957 fundamentalists separated from evangelical Christians who accepted the principle of cooperative evangelism [a willingness to work with theologically liberal Christians to share the gospel], which vexed fundamentalists.

It is important to note that in its core teachings, American fundamentalism post 1957 didn't include any advocacy of a spirit of violence toward one's enemies. It did not include the element of “striking back,” or picking up a weapon to use

against a perceived enemy. Consequently, linking American fundamentalists to violent non-Christian religious groups by the use of the term “fundamentalist” does a genuine disservice to these conservative Christians. To avoid this confusion, it would be far better to designate violent non-Christian groups with a name other than “fundamentalist.”

TM: I think what happens in the media is that they end up thinking about the kind of people who bomb abortion clinics, then assume that that's really where this type of Christianity leads.

JW: Right. The fact of the matter is that one can find illustrations of people who have used high-octane rhetoric in the name of Christ against other folks. I'm not denying that. And one can find exceptional cases of people doing violent things. But if you're talking about evangelicalism or fundamentalism in a responsible way, it is an abuse of their teaching to cite what a small minority of people do and say as representative of evangelical and fundamentalist beliefs and actions.

TM: What can happen because of this popular misuse of “fundamentalism”?

JW: Well, several years ago, I got a call from Swiss Radio, the equivalent of National Public Radio, to talk about American fundamentalism as compared to Muslim fundamentalism. A reporter from Swiss Radio came into my office and said, “Could you explain to us particularly as Europeans what American fundamentalism is?” A poll in France had revealed that something like two-thirds of French people believed that there was going to be a third World War, which would be precipitated by American fundamentalists fighting against Muslim fundamentalists. The commentator wanted me to explain what “fundamentalism” meant here in the United States. For the next two hours we talked. An hour of the interview was played on Swiss Radio. In it, I tried to explain the history of fundamentalism and why one should not say that President George Bush or the American government is fundamentalist (meaning militant religious fanatics). The misconceptions that many Europeans apparently had about this matter were huge. Many did not understand that American fundamentalists, regardless of how they may on occasion lapse into harsh rhetoric, do have a motif that they are to love their neighbors as themselves, they are not to kill, they are to follow the teachings of Scripture. Due to the clumping of American fundamentalists with violent non-Christian religious groups, many Europeans entertained negative misperceptions of American fundamentalism. The media's use of the expression post 1980 needlessly created a perilous sense of alarm among many Europeans regarding the nature of American fundamentalism.

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For Wes, the success is in the life change. "What brings me the greatest joy and satisfaction is to see when a kid, or family, or parent finally gets it. It's not about their selfish wants and desires. Instead, they see that there is a relationship with Christ out there that is waiting for them, and that He has been there all along and really can change their lives and bring them out of the darkness and the pit they were in. To be any part in that process—whether I am the key figure that leads them to Christ or one of a hundred voices in their lifetime—there is just such a rewarding feeling of knowing eternity has been changed for people because of the work that we are doing." ▲



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TM: Has anyone challenged the assumptions of Fundamentalisms Comprehended?

JW: It needs to be acknowledged up front that there is much helpful analysis in this large project. At the same time, the reputable sociologist Peter Berger had serious reservations regarding its import. He indicated that it could be a "book weapon—the kind that could do serious injury."

Moreover, a French sociologist pointed out that one can badly misunderstand various radical religious groups if one uses American fundamentalism as a foil for understanding them. Each religious movement needs to be understood in its own terms before one attempts to engage in the study of comparative religion. A one-size-fits-all approach [i.e. imposing external criteria upon the intricacies and particularities of world religions] can lead to significant misunderstandings of religious faiths.

TM: There is a challenge in all this for us as evangelical Christians as well.

JW: Yes. We can get into difficulty if we use the word "fundamentalist" as a slur. This apparently took place in the CNN presentations when President Carter, a notable Christian, criticized the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention by calling the leadership "fundamentalist." This was a hurtful use of the expression because a few moments

earlier President Carter had employed the same expression in referring to the Ayatollah Khomeini.

As evangelical Christians we need to be very generous and careful in how we use words. We might want to place a moratorium on the use of the word "fundamentalist" for groups that do not self-identify with the expression. To avoid unfair comparisons with American fundamentalists, we might refrain from applying the word "fundamentalist" to violent Muslims, Buddhists, and others.

Moreover, we might want to avoid using the word "fundamentalist" as a slur for conservative Christians whose lifestyles or theological views we do not ourselves embrace. Many self-identified fundamentalists are in fact quite wonderful Christians. Our use of slurs to describe them can actually reveal a prideful attitude on our part. It may indicate that we haughtily look down on these other Christians and do not respect them. This can create alienation between us and these other Christians which then, in turn, can make it difficult for non-Christians to know that we are Christ's disciples. Didn't Jesus teach that people will know that we are his disciples by the love we demonstrate to each other? As evangelical Christians, we do not have the luxury of using slurs in referring to Christians and non-Christians alike. We do have the joy and responsibility of treating them with respect and Christian love. ▲