

Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism describes a religious impulse that militantly resists many aspects of the modern world, including the scientific worldview, pluralism, and cultural diversity. Fundamentalism is an attempt by religious people to retain what they regard as traditional beliefs and values and to do so by rejecting those features of the modern world that threaten those beliefs and values.

Fundamentalism is, accordingly, found in many religions today. However, this article will focus on Christian fundamentalism in America. With respect to the relation of science to theology, the principal importance of fundamentalism is its alliance with creation science. However, it is important to keep in mind that American fundamentalism's agenda is much larger than promoting creation science. Doing so is part of a much larger goal of realizing their vision of a Christian America that is faithful to their understanding of the Bible.

Key Points and Challenges

- The driving force behind American fundamentalism is the collapse of the biblical worldview in American culture and in academic disciplines. Early nineteenth century America was in important respects a biblical culture. This means that biblical doctrines and ethics were both widespread and respected. Many university disciplines were accommodated to the Biblical portrait of reality. But in the late nineteenth century American universities began disengaging their disciplines from this Bible culture. The result was not only the autonomy of the disciplines but the fostering of theories directly at odds with the widespread beliefs and values of America's biblical culture. In this volatile environment, biological evolution emerged as the great symbol of the collapse of the biblical worldview and its replacement by an alternative theory that was both unscientific and the result of atheism. Fundamentalists sought to restore America's biblical culture. One of their main strategies was to attack the theory of evolution.
- Fundamentalist anxiety about evolution was accompanied by alarm at the application of historical criticism to the Bible. Many biblical scholars in the nineteenth century devoted themselves to the task of examining of the Bible using the methods applied successfully in other areas of historical inquiry. The result was that, by the early twentieth century, the traditional notion of the Bible's inspiration had been rejected by a substantial portion of the community of biblical scholars. Instead of seeing the Bible as a divinely authored book of important information, the Bible was regarded as a collection of writings by an ancient people. Consequently, in an era of scientific discovery, theologians saw no compelling reason to affirm that the opening chapters of Genesis described historical events. Fundamentalists consistently rejected the assumptions, methods and results of the historical criticism of the Bible. They insisted on interpreting the Bible as a faithful and inspired narrative of historical events.
- Fundamentalism has been challenged in many ways. An overt attack on creation science was offered by the National Academy of Sciences in its 1999 publication *Science and Creationism*. Perhaps the principal challenge has come from theological and sociological analyses that place fundamentalism in its historical context, present it as a reaction to the forces of modern culture, and thereby relativize its claims.

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Marsden, George M. *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980. An important historical examination of the roots of American fundamentalism. Asserts the thesis that fundamentalism is a reaction to the modern world.

_____. *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991. Another contribution to the portrait of fundamentalism in the context of the decline of biblical culture and the rise of evolutionary theories.

Science and Creationism: A View from the National Academy of Sciences. 2d edition. Washington: National Academy Press, 1999. A defense of the theory of biological evolution and a response to some questions about that theory posed by creation science.

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