Fundamentalism: The Possibilities and Limitations of a Social-Psychological Approach

Jacques Janssen, Jan van der Lans and Mark Dechesne
(Department of the Psychology of Culture and Religion, University of Nijmegen)

Abstract. A common theme running through the historical, sociological and psychological studies of fundamentalism is defensiveness against threats. The question is, why do people choose that strategy and why do they react so vigorously? A new approach in psychology, called Terror Management Theory, is presented as a possible explanation. But the limitations inherent in any social psychological approach are also discussed.

Introduction

Fundamentalism stands out for the tendency to treat one’s own worldview as the absolute representation of reality, and to defend this representation vigorously even in the face of formidable counter-evidence or critique. Although this tendency is universal and found in all times and cultures, as a tradition and general term “fundamentalism” was invented rather recently in the United States of America. In 1910 the brethren Lyon and Milton Stewart, two successful Los Angeles businessmen, started the publication of a series of twelve pamphlets, entitled The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth. A great number of theologians and ministers contributed. As point one of the publisher’s note mentions:

[A]ll English-speaking Protestant pastors, evangelists, missionaries, theological professors, theological students, Y. M. C. A. secretaries, Y. W. C. A. secretaries, Sunday School superintendents, religious lay workers, and editors of religious publications throughout the earth, who so desire, are entitled to a free copy of each volume of THE FUNDAMENTALS.

When volume XII completed the series, in 1915, 3,000,000 copies were published and circulated, with "compliments of two Christian Laymen." The humble brethren just supplied the money. Their names were never mentioned, in contrast to the names of the, mostly "reverend," writers who in more than 150 articles diagnosed the culture of progress and modernism, based on science and technology, as being the cause of all evil that should be fought uncompromisingly. The scientific study of the Bible, in which the Bible was subjected to textual and critical analysis and placed in its historical context, was refuted. The literal interpretation should be restored and defended against modernization and secularization: the divinity of Christ, the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection, the natural depravity of man and all the miracles of the Bible had to be taken literally.

So the term "fundamentalism" was first used by Protestant ministers. At the outset it was a Northern American affair that arose from the clash between evangelical, pietist and awakening movements and modern American culture as pushed forward by industrialization and urbanization. Evangelical movements had played an important social role in combating slavery and promoting social reforms. But the world had changed. Liberals and modernists diluted the doctrines of Christianity by propagating a relativistic, naturalistic "social gospel." The attack of fundamentalism was not so much directed against other religions or atheists, but primarily against "the drifters of one's own tradition." Fundamentalism tried to restore the basic doctrines of evangelism combining them with more recent revivalist innovations. The most important was "dispensationalism": "a systematic scheme for interpreting all of history on the basis of the Bible," which was to be taken "literal where possible." The future of society should be based on biblical prophecies, culminating in the nearby coming of Christ. However, fundamentalism, as Marsden emphasized, was not just a set of doctrines and institutions, it was also the expression of a "mood of militancy," combating modernist theology and relativism. From the outset the issue of evolution was a central topic. It was disputed as a scientific theory and crusaded against as an educational subject in

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4 Marsden, "Evangelical and Fundamental Christianity," 192.
public schools. But in 1925, the internationally ridiculed court case against John Scopes, a teacher of biological evolution, was lost by the fundamentalist lobby. It marked the fading influence of the fundamentalist movement. Modern culture had won a battle.

But it hadn’t won the war. Fundamentalism never disappeared. It regrouped in all kinds of movements and was born again in the seventies as the basis of the “moral majority movement.” At the same time, social scientists began to use the term “fundamentalism” to describe other cultures and non-Christian religious traditions. In the voluminous sociological studies edited by Martin and Scott Appleby, fundamentalism is described in Protestant and Roman Catholic Christianity, Judaism, Sunni and Shi’ite Islam and Hinduism. These studies demonstrate that fundamentalism is universal, though culturally and historically bound, and that the nature of the host religion is crucial. Differences between fundamentalist movements should not be overlooked. Martin and Scott Appleby prefer a plural term: “fundamentalisms.” As a general term, fundamentalism is broadened into a sociological concept and defined as “historical counterattacks mounted from threatened religious traditions, seeking to hold ground against the spreading of modernization and secularization.” Several ideological and organizational characteristics of fundamentalism can be distinguished. The most important characteristic is the “reactivity,” or “defensiveness” against the processes and consequences of modernization. Although it is wise to use the plural term, an underlying concept that unites several kinds of fundamentalisms seems conceivable. Let’s turn to psychology to study this concept at an attitudinal level.

Fundamentalism as a Psychological Concept

Psychology was founded on the very rules and procedures that were attacked by fundamentalism. In its turn psychology attacked all kinds of fundamentalisms, especially religious fundamentalism. After World War II, with the introduction of the so called F-scale by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson and Sanford, religious affiliation itself was interpreted as an indication of rigidity and narrow-mindedness. Rokeach disclosed what he called the “incompassionate” orientation of

religious people, which he interpreted as "hypocrisy." Later on, religious affiliation was found to be correlated with a lack of cognitive complexity and a low level of spiritual maturity. There are important empirical indications that support the case of psychology against religion. David Wulff concluded in his well-known handbook on the psychology of religion that "using a variety of measures of piety—religious affiliation, church attendance, doctrinal orthodoxy, rated importance of religion, and so on—researchers have consistently found positive correlations with ethnocentrism, authoritarianism, dogmatism, social distance, rigidity, intolerance of ambiguity and specific forms of prejudice, especially against Jews and blacks."19

Yet, can one pronounce judgements about religion as such? Gordon W. Allport already tried to be more specific by introducing the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic religion.10 Extrinsic religion is functional as a means to an end, as a way to protect the inhabitants of God's own country from the people outside who are led by the devil. Religion is claimed to be an asset in the struggle for life. For intrinsically religious people, religion is central as such, as the disinterested worship of the Almighty. Allport tried to keep an open eye on the "seamy side" of religious belief, as Pruyser11 called it, without closing the other eye for the beneficial and positive effects of religion, as shown in the lives of saints and adherents of all kinds of religion. Indeed, Allport and Ross demonstrated in their now famous article that people with intrinsic religious affiliation show substantially lower scores on prejudice than extrinsically motivated believers.12 The highest scores are found among people who are indiscriminately pro religion (scoring high on both the intrinsic and the extrinsic scales). These findings have been corroborated in several studies.13

Daniel Batson, in turn, criticized and refined Allport's typology. In his analyses, intrinsic religious belief is shown to be associated with all

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kinds of pro-social attitudes (helping others, low on prejudice), but only apparently. In experiments it could be shown that, with respect to social behavior, intrinsically religious people (religion as an end) and extrinsically motivated people (religion as a means) react in the same antisocial way. Batson constructed a third religious dimension, which he called “the quest orientation.” A quest scale was designed to measure “an open-ended, responsive dialogue with existential questions raised by the contradictions and tragedies of life.” Batson and his colleagues conclude: “the quest dimension is related to reduced intolerance and increased sensitivity to the need of others, whereas the intrinsic, end dimension is related to the appearance of these social benefits.” So it is not religion as such but the specific religious style that is associated with intolerance and prejudice. To summarize: indiscriminately pro-religious people show high prejudice and low tolerance; then follow extrinsic believers (means-religion); then intrinsic believers (end-religion); last in line are the quest believers, they show low prejudice and high tolerance.

Altemeyer and Hunsberger, in a study among university students and their parents, equated the non-questing attitude and religious fundamentalism at a conceptual level and showed the two to be correlated with authoritarianism and prejudice. By fundamentalism they mean:

the belief that there is one set of religious teachings that clearly contains the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, essential, inerrant truth about humanity and deity; that this essential truth is fundamentally opposed by forces of evil which must be vigorously fought; that this truth must be followed today according to the fundamental, unchangeable practices of the past; and that those who believe and follow these fundamental teachings have a special relationship with the deity.

15 Batson, Schoenrade and Ventis, Religion and the Individual, 363.
16 Batson, Schoenrade and Ventis, Religion and the Individual, 364.
19 Altemeyer and Hunsberger, “Authoritarianism,” 118.
In a subsequent study Hunsberger extended these conclusions to several non-Christian groups, with Muslim, Hindu and Jewish backgrounds.\textsuperscript{20} The fundamentalists in these religions "seem to be the same kind of people."

In psychology fundamentalism was primarily studied as an attitudinal style. A complex set of scales (e.g. authoritarianism, dogmatism, rigidity, non-questioning attitude) was used to describe and correlate several aspects of fundamentalism empirically. However, the relation with the ideological and historical aspects of fundamentalism is seldom explicitly studied and not always clear. Different operational strategies can lead to different conclusions. Kellstedt and Smidt showed that three different measures of fundamentalism (denominational affiliation, doctrinal assent, and self-identification) lead to substantially different findings.\textsuperscript{21} For instance, the correlation of fundamentalism and political conservatism was only strong in the case of self-identification. Psychology may clarify the attitudinal aspects of fundamentalism, but cannot give a final and complete explanation.

\textit{A Terror Management Approach to Fundamentalism}

A common theme running through the historical, sociological and psychological studies is defensiveness against threats. Fundamentalists tend to be defensive in a militant way. The question is why people become fundamentalistic and why they react so vigorously? A general answer in psychology reads: because people want to preserve their self-esteem. Several studies have shown that the defense of self-esteem is a central motivation in human behavior.\textsuperscript{22} But why is self-esteem so central in the first place? This question is hardly ever asked but it constitutes the central issue in the so-called Terror Management Theory, TMT.\textsuperscript{23} This psychological theory is rooted in a genuinely


The starting-point of the TMT is the well-known socio-biological axiom that human beings want to survive. As a species, humans are eminently equipped to survive. Consciousness gives them the ability to create culture and to plan and organize their own survival. At this level of so-called direct, biological-homeostatic motives humans are masters at survival. But consciousness, the very basis of our socio-biological success, creates a major problem. It saddles us with the understanding that our central pursuit will not succeed: in the end, and the end is near, we will die. In the words of Pascal, who designed a full-fledged TMT in his *Pensées*, as demonstrated elsewhere\(^{26}\): "the only thing I know is that I will die soon",\(^{27}\) "the last act is bloody, how beautiful the play may be. They throw a shovel of earth upon a head and then it is over, forever."\(^{28}\) This remarkable, morbid lucidity leads to an intense feeling of terror which, according to the TMT-group and Pascal, is unbearable for humans because they long for survival. To overcome this feeling of terror, people seek what Pascal called *divertissement*. For instance, they go out hunting, not to get the hare, which would be a direct motivation, but primarily for the thrill of hunting itself. In that way, they forget about the immanent finiteness of their lives. As Pascal said: "The only way to endure the human condition is to be busy, to look for distraction, to play, to fool around, to work, to study, to chase."\(^{29}\)

TMT supplies a more general account of the psychological process involved. People create meaning in culture and religion, and prepare

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\(^{29}\) Pascal, *Pensées*, nos. 139–144.
for themselves a meaningful position in a meaningful world. In this way they repress the feelings of terror. This process develops predominantly irreflexively and at an unconscious level. Religions promise eternal life and thereby offer a direct solution to the existential threat.\textsuperscript{30} “I know my Redeemer liveth,” said Job, and he adds that he almost longs for death. In Johann Sebastian Bach’s Christmas Oratorio (fourth cantata) it reads: “Mein Jesus! wenn ich sterbe, so weiss ich, dass ich nicht verderbe, dein Name steht in mir geschrieben, der hat des Todes Furcht vertrieben” (“My Jesus! When I die, I know I shall not perish. Thy name is graven in my soul, it has cast out the fear of death”). Numerous quotations can be given\textsuperscript{31}. However, psychology is primarily about process, not about content. According to TMT, to believe in life hereafter can indeed give meaning to life, but the firm and socially shared conviction that there is no such thing as life after death and that we have to answer our calling on earth, within the confines of our life-span makes for an equally meaningful position in a meaningful world. From the perspective of TMT, both types of conviction—belief and unbelief—are functionally equivalent. Being symbolic, man-made and therefore fragile constructions, they have to be shared, repeated in rituals, carved in stone, published, broadcast and practiced regularly. Besides, they are constantly threatened by the different and often contradicting constructions that members of other cultural groups make. We have to preserve, protect and defend our convictions, to have them available when terror overtakes us. Therefore in TMT the second motivational level is called “defensive.” People not only need food and shelter for their immediate existence, they also need the overarching canopy of symbolic meaning to repress feelings about the finiteness of life that creep up at night. People will polish the shield that protects them, and keep it intact at all costs.

Several experiments have been conducted, based on these assumptions. The basic hypothesis is that people will defend their world-view, especially when they are reminded about death. In the experiments, the experimental group is primed with death anxiety, while the control group is treated with a neutral stimulus (for instance

\textsuperscript{30} R. Hood et al., The Psychology of Religion, 158.

\textsuperscript{31} The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski was one of the first in the social sciences who stated that the inability to accept individual extinction is at the heart of religious belief. In his view belief in immortality is one of the two universally held religious affirmations. “The main entrance to religion is death,” he concluded. Bronislaw Malinowski, Magic, Science and Religion, and Other Essays (selected and with an introduction by R. Redfield; Boston, Mass.: Beacon, 1948).
TV watching). It was shown that people react more defensively when death anxiety has been triggered. In one experiment respondents were asked to solve a problem in which they had to hang a crucifix on the wall. Several tools were available, but the only way to fix the nail was to use the crucifix as a hammer. It turned out that, while both groups were affiliated Christians, the members of the experimental group needed significantly more time to come to this impious conclusion. They hesitated to use as a profane instrument a symbol that directly protects them from their feelings of terror.

In TMT, religion is reduced to a coping strategy for managing terror. The existential perspective of the theory is as gloomy as Pascal's, without the perspective of salvation he ultimately saw. According to Becker and TMT, humans are constantly and unconsciously managing fear. Religion, as a spiritual hunt, is just an effective way to do so. If that's all there is, and if we are doomed to defend our cultural roots, fundamentalism, either religious or secular, seems a basic and unavoidable trait. It is part of the human condition.

TMT finds an escape from this deterministic, dead-end theory in two ways. The classical way out in psychology is differential or cross-cultural psychology. Differences in attitudes and behavior can be explained in function of psychological or cultural variables. For instance Greenberg, Pyszczynski et al. found that while high authoritarians derogate dissimilar others, low authoritarians don't. Tolerance is a part of a liberal world-view. So it was predicted that liberals will become more tolerant under the condition of mortality salience. In research among liberals and conservatives this hypothesis was corroborated. Under mortality salience, conservatives became more conservative and anti-liberal, but liberals grew more tolerant towards conservatives. As such, this phenomenon can be interpreted as a general tendency towards a more closed belief system. It is true that liberals become significantly more positive about conservatism, but their attitude towards liberalism becomes only slightly less favorable.

Their reaction can be therefore interpreted as an increase of tolerance (towards their political adversaries) without a decrease of their liberal world-view. There are world-views that encourage peaceful reactions even under mortality salient conditions.

TMT offers a second way out by introducing a third level of motivation. People not only defend their world-view, they also construct it. A strictly functional explanation of culture and religion is insufficient. In addition to direct biological-homeostatic and symbolic defensive motivation, a third level of a self-expansive motivation is static and thereby distinguished.\textsuperscript{35} It is characterized by catch words like “curiosity,” “exploratory behavior,” “intrinsically motivated behavior,” “thrill-seeking and flow.”\textsuperscript{36} To survive, people need to explore and develop new possibilities, they need to grow and expand. These “expansive activities are motivating because of the pleasure that such engagement produces.” This is quite another explanation of religious behavior that harks back to interpretations given earlier by Durkheim, Huizinga and Staal. Religion, then, can be interpreted as “a thing on its own,” “a voluntary activity,” “connected with no material interest.”\textsuperscript{37} This looks very interesting but, from a scientific point of view, two explanations within one theory is one explanation too much. The theory should at least specify under which condition which explanation will hold. Elsewhere it was argued that this third level can be interpreted as functional par excellence, that is: reduced to the second level of motivation.\textsuperscript{38} When people lose themselves in doing what they especially like to do, the thought of death is diverted automatically and completely. As far as the expansive motivation is directed at a higher moral level, the argument goes beyond psychology. As Pascal jumps to a religious and theological discours, by recommending his readers to discard \textit{divertissement} and to turn to God, so does TMT in a modern, humanistic, philosophical way bring in higher values when expressing the hope that “some new emerging forms of secular humanistic, artistic, religious, or spiritual conceptions


\textsuperscript{38} Janssen and Dechesne, \textit{The Come-Back of God in Psychology}. 
of things will better provide meaning and value and the sense of identification with the continuity of life that are so sorely needed."

Let us conclude here that from the perspective of TMT fundamentalism is a coping mechanism that makes the burdens of life bearable. The tendency to become fundamentalistic should therefore be quite general, but it is not the only way to survive. Liberalism and anti-authoritarianism offer alternative survival strategy. In religiosis the alternative would be the quest orientation.

Discussion

Psychologists, and also psychologists of religion, intend to clarify behavior by means of description, generalization and explanation. Unlike the history of religion, psychology aims to describe a specific religious event so that it becomes clear to which more general category of human behavior this event belongs. Classification of a particular behavioral event as a special case of a more general human behavioral process helps to "understand" the event. The psychology of religion is a science in the sense that, in the words of one of its founding fathers: "scientific explanation is nothing more than classification—it consists in saying: this is a case of that."

The description of the fundamentalist religious way of life from the social-psychological perspective of the TMT appears to offer a psychological explanation. Conceiving a fundamentalist attitude as a kind of coping strategy would appear to help us understand the psychological dynamics underlying this mode of religiosity. Fundamentalists are people who feel threatened. They see that their religious world-view is under siege due to social and cultural change. Since this world-view has always served them as a buffer against death anxiety, they want to protect it at all costs. In the perspective of this psychological perspective, religious fundamentalism is extrinsically motivated.

It remains a debatable question whether it is enough to classify religious fundamentalism as a coping strategy and whether such a classification does justice to the religious inspiration that is typical for

many fundamentalist believers. It may be that in many cases the zeal of religious fundamentalism has the psychological function of a defense against an unconscious existential threat, associated with death anxiety, as the TMT assumes. However, is death anxiety a universal and static characteristic? It may be true that every living organism is driven by the need to survive, but in humans death anxiety is a variable, not a constant. Under the influence of a stoical philosophical attitude or of the religious belief in a hereafter, the prospect of death may gradually lose its ominous meaning. Even if death-anxiety has been brought under the control of the ratio or religious faith, religious fundamentalism is still possible. Not every religious fundamentalist is necessarily driven by self-interest. One should also reckon with the possibility that a fundamentalist attitude is the expression of a sincere effort to live according to the radical demands of the Gospel. Or else of the zeal to defend orthodoxy and orthopraxis against demolition in a changing culture. That such a persuasion may involve the exclusion of dissenters is understandable. But it does not necessarily involve intolerance or worse. Fundamentalism may also be intrinsically motivated by a feeling of responsibility for the maintenance of the fundamental values of the community to which the believer belongs. A psychological study that leaves such aspects of the phenomenon out of consideration is biased and only quasi-empirical.

Another point to mention in relation to the psychological study of religion is the hidden value orientation that may sneak in and interfere with a purely scientific, objective evaluation. Since Freud rejected religion as wishful, childish thinking, the debate on religion has acquired a moralistic undertone. Simplistic overall conclusions have been drawn. For instance, the original version of the famous MMPI (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory) employed some very crude measures of religious behavior (praying, for instance) to indicate pathology. Years later, in the seventies, Hood showed that the correlation between religiosity and pathology disappears once the religious items are removed.41 This operation even seems to lead to a reverse relationship: “persons high in psychological strength are more likely to report intense religious experiences.”

But recently, miracle of miracles, psychology seems to be in the process of rehabilitating God. The general conclusion nowadays seems to be that religion is on our side, that it pays off and offers several

advantages in the struggle for life. Biologists openly discuss the possibility of a religiosity gene (New Scientist April 1997). In psychology, the positive effects of illusions—basic to all religions, according to Freud—are stressed. To be a realist is to be a pessimist. In order to survive, we must all believe in a just world. In several studies, religion is shown to have positive effects on health and well-being. Nowadays religious people seem happier, healthier—in body and soul—, they live longer with fewer psychological and social problems, they are more successful. Idler and Kasl even showed that the mortality rate among elderly Christians drops significantly in the days prior to Easter and Christmas. The anticipation of religious holidays apparently has a beneficial effect. The same was shown for Jewish males in the days before Passover and Yom Kippur. Religion seems to be on our side. It is, as Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger and Gorsuch conclude, “an important resource in the coping and adjustment of many people.” Faith can be a significant cause for optimism. Sethi and Seligman even revealed a direct correlation between optimism and fundamentalism.

Does this about-turn in the psychological discourse about religion not indicate a general change of value orientations if not of the standards for mental health? It is remarkable that for decades religious orthodoxy had a bad reputation among psychologists because of its correlation with social intolerance. Pro-social behavior was associated with mental health, social prejudice with mental immaturity. In this respect one can say that the critical attitude of psychologists like

47 R. Hood et al., The Psychology of Religion, 402.
Adorno and Allport towards the intolerance and prejudice of religious believers flowed from their concern for the well-being of society. Hopefully, the more positive attitude towards religion does not indicate that present-day psychologists attach less importance to social prejudice than to personal well-being, optimism and self-enhancement, for this would mean that they have given up their socio-critical function.

It may be true that, after a long period during which they associated religion with pathology, psychologists are now discovering the adaptive function of religion. But the approach remains functional and reductionist. What is still mostly left out of consideration is the motivational role of religion as an intrinsic value that enables people to forget themselves and to reach for something beyond. As Allport defined it, "Religion is chiefly a matter of reaching for more than we can grasp. It is a matter of stretching ( . . . ) beyond the knowledge now available to us."\(^{49}\) Psychologists and even psychologists of religion are generally blind to the fascination of the sacred, that which Rudolf Otto has called the sensus numinis and Schleiermacher the feeling for the infinite.

As a final point of discussion, attention should be drawn to the apparent contradiction between the finding from empirical research that at the individual level orthodox religiosity is often associated with social intolerance and prejudice, while religious institutions, orthodox denominations not excepted, advocate social justice and solidarity with the socially disadvantaged. Recently, Billiet concluded on basis of his national survey among Flemish Catholics that their "sociocultural Christianity" mitigates fundamentalism.\(^{50}\) He observed that when religious institutions proscribe solidarity and social justice and, for instance, favor the integration of immigrants, believers follow their leaders. The same may be true for the Netherlands. On the basis of the national surveys of the Social and Cultural Planning Bureau, De Hart has pointed out the direct correlation between church attendance and readiness for social commitment.\(^{51}\) He called religion the cement, the social capital of society. Religious people report spending more leisure


time and more money for the benefit of others. How to understand such reports, in relation to the findings of Batson and colleagues that church attendance and intrinsic religiosity are highly correlated? In explanation it may be stated that the pro-social behaviour of intrinsic believers is motivated by social desirability, as Batson and colleagues have observed time and again:

While at an individual level, intrinsic religiosity is not related to induced tolerance and increased sensitivity to the needs of others, religious institutions, primarily backed by intrinsic believers, really are concerned about the downtrodden in society and helping in several ways.\(^{52}\)

Intrinsic believers conform to what their leaders proclaim as socially desirable. So Batson and colleagues tend to be positive on religion from a sociological point of view and critical from a psychological point of view. In their view, we are faced "with an irresolvable dilemma between the more laudable action at the individual level associated with the quest dimension and the more laudable action at the institutional level associated with the intrinsic, end dimension."

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