Chapter 6

Will the Real Fundamentalist Please Stand?
Scholars and the Category of ‘Fundamentalism’

Leslie Dorrough Smith

If there is anything that we might gather from news reports about fundamentalists, it is mostly that they are not us. While few ever utter this forthrightly, the fact that conversations on fundamentalism almost endlessly reiterate what they believe, where they live, and how they are unique presumes that such information does not describe the person on the other end of the analysis.

The fact that fundamentalists are almost always depicted with a prominent air of sensationalism seems to drive this perspective. “Fundamentalism is a blue-chip stock in that massive industry of symbol production known as journalism,” Bruce Lawrence (1989, 3) notes; the result is that its adherents become “marketable symbols” who are, “above all else, the quarry of journalists, mined for the combination of fear, awe, and ridicule that they evoke in the minds of modern readers.”

Despite the frequent media coverage of fundamentalism as a social spectacle, scholars often see themselves as agents of culture critique who can cut away these lurid portrayals to reveal a more objective and analytical perspective. Yet because the term itself is so heavy with political possibilities (having determined everything from civil rights to foreign policy to zoning laws), how scholars choose to both construct and use the category merits close investigation. Consider, for instance, the following three definitions of this thing that we commonly call ‘fundamentalism’:

– ...movements [that] are militant and highly focused antagonists of secularization. They call a halt to the centuries-long retreat of the religious establishments before the secular power. They follow the rule of offense being better than defense, and they often include the extreme option of violence and death (Almond, Appleby, and Sivan 2003, 2).
– ...the desire for religion to colonize all aspects of culture... [and] ...the desire for the other aspects of culture – specifically, a group’s distinctive ethical and aesthetic preferences – to secure themselves by grounding themselves in religion (Lincoln 2003, 56).
- ...contemporary religio-political movements that attempt to return to the scriptural foundations of the community, excavating and reinterpreting these foundations for application to the contemporary social and political world (Euben 1999, 17).

Although these definitions bear some significant overlap, the scholars behind them represent the gambit of opinions on the worth and utility of the category itself. Some contend that the word ‘fundamentalism’ has been used so freely, or in the wrong contexts, that its use can lead only to misapplication (if not meaninglessness); to many of this persuasion, abandoning the term seems to be the best path (as examples of this perspective, see Lincoln 2003; Blankinship 2014; Wood 2014). Others argue that we need to have some sort of way to describe a consistent set of traits that span time, place, and cultures, and so even though it may have been used a bit too loosely by a number of different parties, the term is already ubiquitous enough that its overall gist is generally helpful (as examples of this perspective, see Almond, Appleby, and Sivan 2003; Lawrence 1989; Euben 1999).

What is most interesting to me about this discussion regarding the parameters of the term ‘fundamentalism’ is its focus. Like many examples of what is described as methodologically-oriented scholarship, most scholars participating in this conversation believe themselves to be strapped with a dual task: to gaze outward at the thing being studied while, at the same time, looking to themselves to examine the scholarly lenses through which the concept is created and achieves intelligibility. However, might we consider the utility of a much less popular (but sorely needed) approach, wherein the scholar’s often unseen agendas and presumptions create the very subject, thus rendering the subject as something uninteresting or even non-existent apart from its scholarly creation?

Indeed, many of us interested in methods of studying religion are increasingly turning our attentions to the undeniable fact that certain blips of data on our collective scholarly radars would not register as blips at all were it not for our own intellectual categories overlain on the static of cultural activity. Jonathan Z. Smith has been endlessly referenced for his observation that “there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study” (Smith 1999, xi), but for the purposes of my own argument, I might turn this observation on its ear while suggesting a virtually identical proposition (one that Smith himself indicates): there is actually plenty of data for religion, so long as we recognize that how we define religion may encompass an incredibly broad category of social events, which, because they are so ubiquitous, render