REVOLT AGAINST MODERNISM:
A note on some recent comparative studies in fundamentalism

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Review article


Scholars are paying more and more attention to fundamentalism. The notion itself is vague. Invented and self-applied by a party of American Protestants in 1920 it referred to a theological position promulgated between 1910 and 1915 in a series of booklets with the title "The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth". In addition to its established theological sense, journalists, in the last decade, have employed it as a label for describing the revival of Islam. Even though the non-theological concept of "fundamentalism" is problematic it can be refined for use in comparative studies.

Recently Th. Meyer condemned fundamentalism as the revolt of unreason against the "modern" world. According to Meyer, the claim of the enlightenment to create the autonomy of thought has become an unbearable burden for many. In particular those people subject more to the disadvantages than to the advantages of modernization seem to cling to the security and dependency of former times. In fact whenever the balance between the gains and the losses of modernity is upset, fundamentalism raises its head. Meyer’s argument depends on a highly complex notion of the
enlightenment: he regards it at the same time as a nearly religious promise of future happiness by means of the use of pure reason and as the abandonment of all the certainties of life and thought. An impressive picture indeed. But by this philosophical interpretation the concept of fundamentalism loses entirely its distinct historical place in the twentieth century. Such a view will not increase our knowledge of fundamentalism. Instead we should draw a distinction between a criticism of enlightenment and social movements of the twentieth century reconfirming the fundamentals of religions in a struggle against modern social structures such as industrialization, bureaucratization, and pluralism. The first item mentioned, the historical phenomenon of intellectuals criticizing the standardization of human life under the impact of modernization can be traced back to the eighteenth century when philosophers (and theologians) defended religion (medieval and "primitive") against the charges of ignorance and ideology launched against them. Instead religion was called upon as witness against the conviction that progress and reason govern history. Partially due to the fact that this critique became part of western culture secularization did not cause a decline in religion but, on the contrary, resulted in its increasing influence. In fact, religions competed for potential participants in search of meaning. Though the official religions lost their institutionally privileged positions they responded to human needs by supplying systems of meaning. Secularization led to pluralism. Quite some time ago Berger and Luckmann elaborated on this subject ("Secularization and Pluralism", *Internationales Jahrbuch für Religionssoziologie* 2, 1966, pp. 73-86) and it may be worthwhile to take up their theoretical framework in analyzing fundamentalism rather than the approach suggested by Meyer because accusing fundamentalism of relapsing into unreason makes it all too weak and foolish an enemy.

We have to make a distinction between a religious critique of reason and progress and the social movements of the twentieth century supported by people in defense of their traditional way of life and their communal interactions. The interrelation between modern revolutions and traditional communities was analyzed a short while ago by C. J. Calhoun in an essay "The Radicalism of Tradition: Community Strength of Venerable Disguise and Bor-