

Fundamentalism and Liberalism: Towards an Understanding of the Dichotomy

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The upsurge of fundamentalism that has occurred in many different religions and countries of the world has gained a great deal of attention in recent years. Disagreements between fundamentalists and liberals appear to affect almost every religious community to one extent or another. This paper explores a number of questions related to this phenomenon. Are the various social movements popularly called fundamentalism in different cultural contexts all truly different expressions of the same social phenomenon? What are the features distinguishing fundamentalism from its putative counterpart, liberalism? Can we distinguish any underlying basis for the fundamentalism/liberalism dichotomy?

Some may prefer to use the term “traditionalist” or “conservative” rather than “fundamentalist”. I have preferred not to use “traditionalist” because this would seem to exclude those fundamentalists, such as most Protestant groups, who tend to be radical and opposed to tradition. I am aware of the counter-argument that the term “fundamentalist” has historically been closely identified with radical Protestantism and may therefore seem to some to be inappropriate in a more general context. Overall, it seems to me that the term “fundamentalist” is now, in popular terms being used in a more general way about other religions and is therefore the more suitable word.¹

Although the word fundamentalism date from the publication of a series of radical Protestant pamphlets, *The Fundamentals*, in the United States in 1910 to 1915, the phenomenon has a long history in religion. It is a mistake to see fundamentalism as a reaction to modernity and thus limit its occurrence to modern times (although it must be admitted that modernity has brought fundamentalism very much to the fore). Nor indeed should fundamentalism be limited

¹ NOTES

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W. Shepard, “‘Fundamentalism’ Christian and Islamic”, *Religion*, Vol. 17 (1987) pp. 355-78; and “Islam and Ideology: Towards a Typology”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 19 (1987) pp. 307-36, suggests the term “rejectionist neo-traditionalist.” One feels, however, that what-ever advantage such a term may have is more than counter-balanced by its unwieldiness.

to Christianity or even to the western religions.² As fundamentalism and liberalism are defined in this paper, the split can be seen to have been operating at many times in the histories of different religions. In the Islamic world, for example, we can see elements of it in the Ash'ari-Mu'tazili disputes in 'Abbasid Empire in the ninth century; in the dispute between the philosopher-mystics and the orthodox jurists in Safavid Iran during the sixteenth and seventeenth century; in the opposition to Sufism and "religious laxity" by such persons as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and Ibn 'Abdu'l-Wahhab (d. 1787); as well as in the upheavals of the present-day Islamic world.³

The original definitions of fundamentalism made by writers such as Niebuhr included what has since become the stereotype of the popular view of fundamentalists: that they take the words of their Holy Scripture literally and are opposed to science. This is a view that dates back to the time when Christian fundamentalists were trying to fight the implications of Darwinian evolutionary theory.⁴ However, as with all stereotypes, it has become less and less valid as the years have passed. Fundamentalists have changed and adapted since that time. They no longer oppose science, and indeed take great pride in the extent that they can advance scientific proof for their positions, nor are they strictly bound to a literal interpretation of the Bible.

I will here try to present the main features of fundamentalism and liberalism and where they differ. Of course, in order to show up the differences, it has been necessary to depict the extremes of the two positions. I may characterise the differences as follows:

The Scriptures

Fundamentalist looks to the scriptures of their religion as absolute and unchanging truth. The first concern of the fundamentalist is to establish that the Holy Scripture is "the word of God". Therefore, it is impossible that there be any error in it. All laws and commandments in these texts are to be applied inflexibly and to the letter. Even religions that have no concept of a

² For a survey of fundamentalism across the world in Eastern as well as Western religions, see Lionel Caplan, ed., *Studies in Religious Fundamentalism* (London: MacMillan, 1987) and Marty and Appleby, *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991).

³ For accounts of these, see G. Makdisi, "Remarks on Traditionalism in Islamic Religious History" and Osman Amin "Some aspects of Religious Reform in the Muslim Middle East" in C. Leiden, ed., *The Conflict of Traditionalism and Modernism in the Muslim Middle East* (Austin: Texas University Press, 1966); M. Momen, *Introduction to Shi'i Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) pp. 115-16. See also, E. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (Chicago University Press, 1970). Sandeen has shown how the fundamentalist movement in the early twentieth century grew out of, and represents the continuation of the concerns of, the millenarianism of the nineteenth century.

⁴ It particularly relates to the "Monkey Trial" in Dayton, Tennessee in which J. T. Scopes, a teacher, was prosecuted for teaching the theory of evolution. The definition seems to have been first formally advanced by H. Richard Niebuhr in "Fundamentalism," *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (London: MacMillan, 1931) pp. 526-27.

Scripture revealed by God—Theravada Buddhism, for example—may nevertheless have a similar attitude towards their Scriptures.⁵ The liberal looks to the Holy Scripture of his or her religion more as a source of guidance for how to lead one's life. As such, the liberal accepts that the meaning, the "truth", of the scriptures may change as the circumstances of the individual and society change, i.e. it is a relative, rather than an absolute, truth.

However, the usual idea of the fundamentalist's literal understanding of the Scripture requires some degree of elaboration. Where the text is clearly meant to be symbolic, in the parables of Christ for example, even the most extreme fundamentalist does not, of course, believe that these parables actually occurred physically. In addition, where there are inconsistencies in the text, the more sophisticated fundamentalist (the fundamentalist scholar for example) is willing to allow for symbolic or other interpretations. But the important point is that the fundamentalist always regards the Bible as referring to real existent situations and facts. The main criterion for scriptural truth is correspondence with empirical reality. For example, even if heaven and hell are acknowledged not to be physical places above and below the earth, these two words nevertheless do refer to existent realities. Barr has pointed out that the importance of preserving the first principle, the inerrancy of the text, will often compel the fundamentalist to relax the second principle and allow some degree of non-literal interpretation.⁶ The liberal, on the other hand, is prepared to see other types of truth—typological, metaphorical or mythological—in the Scripture. The truth lies in the significance of the statement rather than its correspondence with any external actuality.⁷

The principal concern of the fundamentalist appears to be to extract an exact meaning from the text of the Scriptures. The millennialists of the mid-nineteenth century were certain that their calculations pointed to the return of Christ in 1843 or 1844. When the "Great Disappointment" occurred and there was no literal fulfilment of their expectations, the group that became the Seventh-Day Adventists resolved the problem by formulating an explanation that the prophecy had been fulfilled but that on that date, Christ had entered the Most Holy of the heavenly sanctuary, and that he had a work to perform there before coming to earth. This is a clearly non-literal explanation of a prophecy that most other Christian denominations expect to occur literally and on earth. The Seventh-Day Adventists are nevertheless a fundamentalist denomination.⁸ Their interpretation of the "Great Disappointment" has the ability to give an exact meaning to the Scripture when a literal meaning has been ruled out in their history. Another instructive example relates to the question of Noah's flood. Some Christian fundamentalist scholars are willing to accept that this may have been a local flood in Mesopotamia rather than a world

⁵ King, *A Thousand Lives Away* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1964) pp. 53-57.

⁶ Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM Press, 1977) pp. 40-50.

⁷ Barr, *Fundamentalism*, pp. 49-50; Bruce, *Firm in the Faith* (Aldershot: Gower, 1984) pp. 3-4.

⁸ At least traditionally they have been, although there is now a marked movement back to the center ground of Christianity.

flood (which the literal text would imply), as this would be less problematical scientifically. Nevertheless, the story of the flood does, for these scholars, refer to an actual physical event—any non-physical interpretation is ruled out.

Much modern Christian fundamentalist literature is taken up with detailed explanations of how the events of the Bible can be explained scientifically. Scientific explanations are desirable as they are considered to provide a guarantee of certainty and exactness of interpretation. The liberal, however, is willing to allow that the texts of the books are open to more than one interpretation. External factors in society may influence the way that the Scriptures are interpreted. Allegorical and symbolic interpretations may be used particularly of passages that appear to contradict human reason. Traditional interpretation may be examined for whatever useful insights it may present but has no binding force on the present.

The liberal is much more willing to acknowledge that the Holy Scripture is a historical document. This often means that it has been written down by fallible men sometimes many years after the events portrayed. Therefore almost certainly errors and myth-making have crept in; almost certainly theological ideas current at the time of writing have been read back into the past. If the fundamentalist does accept the historical nature of the Scriptures, he will insist that they were divinely protected from the intrusion of alteration or error. Certainly no external factors, such as the social conditions at the time that the Scripture was written down, can be allowed to influence the understanding of the texts. Another characteristic fundamentalist attitude is that the whole of the scripture stands or falls together. This view maintains that since the scripture is the word of God and therefore infallible, the inerrancy of every single sentence of the Scripture must be maintained. Otherwise, the slightest error in even the smallest part casts doubt on the whole. The liberal will, on the other hand, be much more willing to accept that parts of the scripture are more “true”—in the sense of being more likely to have actually occurred physically—than other parts.

Another way of expressing the difference between fundamentalists and liberals would be to say that for fundamentalists the meaning of the Scripture is inherent in the text and can be apprehended directly without interpretation, while for the liberal, the Scripture is something that must be applied to one’s life, i.e. it must be interpreted in accordance with the context in which it is being applied.⁹

Religious Traditions

The traditions of the religion are looked at differently by different types of fundamentalists. In this paper, I propose to describe two types, although others have identified additional sub-groups.¹⁰ The first group of fundamentalists are conservative and traditionalist. These regard

⁹ Bruce, *Firm in the Faith*, pp. 186-93.

¹⁰ I have here sub-divided fundamentalists into two groups, traditionalists and radicals, while keeping liberals as one group. Other writers have created even more sub-divisions. See for example Shepard

tradition as an element in the religion that is as authoritative as the Scriptures themselves. In Christianity, there is very little in the Bible to act as a basis for most of the Church structure and ritual, and therefore the major source of authority for this is tradition.¹¹ In Islam, the concept of the *sunna*, the deeds and words of Muhammad as the perfect example for all Muslims to follow, and the doctrine of *ijm 'a*, the concept that whatever the whole of the Muslim world agrees upon as a consensus view must be correct, act as powerful forces for maintaining traditional attitudes and positions. If any of the religion's structures or doctrines seem to be in conflict with society then it is society that must change to conform with what is perceived to be the Divine. These fundamentalists are very concerned with building up bodies of doctrine and dogmatic statements as well as elaborating the Holy Law and its provisions. This enables the true believer to be sorted out from the waverer and the potential heretic. Doctrines and dogmas must, like Holy Scripture, be understood literally, while the Holy Law must be followed to the letter.

The second group of fundamentalists are of the evangelical, radical, revivalist type. These regard the traditions of the religion as the main obstacle to a return to the "pure" original religion which they consider can be reconstructed from the texts of the Holy Scripture. They would like to see all traditional structures swept aside in favour of the Scriptures themselves.

Radical and traditionalist fundamentalists only differ in the boundary of what they consider to be unalterable and inerrant—the radicals place the boundary around just the Scriptures while the traditionalists extend this to the traditions of the religion also. Whether fundamentalists are of one type or the other appears to depend on the basic tendency of their religious background. Thus, for example, a religious background that stresses tradition seems to produce fundamentalists mainly of the traditionalist kind. In the Christian world, Roman Catholicism holds that the traditions of the Church are of equal authority to the scripture¹² and the fundamentalists among the Catholics tend to be traditionalist. At the extreme of the fundamentalist wing among the Catholics we find the followers of ultra-traditionalist Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre.¹³ Radical fundamentalists in the Christian world are to be found among the Protestant sects, Protestantism being a movement that arose as a reaction to the traditionalism of Catholicism. In the Muslim world, most fundamentalists are traditionalist since Islam is a religion in which tradi-

("Islam and Ideology: Towards a Typology") who has developed a typology for Islam with eight subdivisions. See also Smart's classification in *Religion and the Western Mind* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1987) pp. 52-53.

¹¹ Although, of course, many Protestant Churches, especially the Calvinists, tried to base the whole of their church structure and ritual on the Bible.

¹² This has been the official Catholic position since the Council of Trento (1563). The Orthodox Church also has a high regard for its traditions.

¹³ Lefebvre advocated a return to the traditional forms of the Catholic Church and in particular the Latin Mass. He claimed to have had several million followers and sympathizers among Roman Catholics, especially in France.

tion plays an important part, but there are a few modern radical groups—for example, the followers of Rashad Khalifa¹⁴ and of ‘Ali Shari’ati in Iran.¹⁵

Mutual recriminations

Fundamentalists tend to blame liberals for allowing into the religion dubious ideas and doctrines which have no basis in the religion itself but are accommodations to the secular world, the intrusion of secular views or ideas from other religions. In the context of the modern world, a good example is the liberation theology which originated in Latin America and which fundamentalists regard as being no more than a back-door method for introducing Marxism into Christianity. Similarly, fundamentalists tend to blame liberalism for a moral laxity in society in general.

A more basic criticism levelled by fundamentalists at liberals concerns the arbitrary nature of those parts of the Scriptures that liberals regard as being the religious core, and therefore to be preserved, and those parts that are culturally determined, and therefore can be dispensed with or interpreted liberally. From a fundamentalist viewpoint it appears that the line dividing the two is not defined by any discernible logical rules but rather by whatever happens to be the current social fashion. In one decade, feminism is to the fore and so the liberals dispense with those parts of the Scripture which seem to give a low status to women; the next, championing gay rights is fashionable and so the liberals jettison that part of the Scripture too. Are fashion and current secular sensibilities to be the arbiters of the stand-point of faith? If so will the inevitable result not be to jettison everything eventually?¹⁶

Liberals consider that the harsh, intolerant attitudes of the fundamentalists are both contrary to the true spirit of religion and doing religion a great deal of harm in the modern world. The liberal tends to see the traditions and structures of the religion in relation to society and is always asking the question: does the religious tradition and structure serve the needs of society? If any part of religious structure or doctrine is not relevant to society, then it is necessary to see how it can be adapted in order to become relevant. The traditions, doctrines and dogmas of the religion, as well as the Holy Law, are all guidelines for action that can be interpreted according to circumstances.

¹⁴ Rashad Khalifa put the Qur’an into a computer and discovered that the entire book revolves around the number nineteen and its multiples. He regarded this a proof of the miraculous nature of the book and asserted that Islam should be based on the Qur’an alone with a downgrading of the traditions. This has been strongly advocated by proponents of his ideas in countries as far apart as the USA, Egypt, and Malaysia.

¹⁵ Shari’ati, during the period just prior to the 1979 Revolution in Iran, advocated a return to Islam. By this he did not intend the traditionalist Islam of the ulama but rather a radical reinterpretation which he considered to be the original Shi’i Islam.

¹⁶ See S. Akhtar, “The Virtues of Fundamentalism,” *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 10 (1989) pp. 41-49; P. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (London: Collins, 1980) pp. 116, 118.

Attitude to religious diversity within the religion

The fundamentalist is intolerant of wide divergences of religious expression within his or her own religion. All divergence from the main orthodox tradition is suspect. There is an ever-present prospect of heresy insidiously creeping in under various seemingly-innocent guises. The religion must be protected from it at all costs. The history of religion points to numerous episodes in which much suffering and bloodshed has been caused by those wishing to impose a narrow interpretation of their religion on their fellow-believers. In Christianity, this was seen in the past in the Inquisition and the numerous bloody suppressions of heresies. It also operates in the present.¹⁷ In Islam, there have been periodic persecutions of marginal sects as well as such groups as Sufis.¹⁸

The liberal will tolerate the existence within the community of a wide variety of viewpoints. As long as a viewpoint does not explicitly deny the veracity of the Prophet/Founder or the Holy Scripture, it can usually be accommodated within the community of believers. Even if a viewpoint is considered too extreme to be acceptable, the preferred method for trying to counter it will be argument and persuasion rather than compulsion.

Attitude towards religious pluralism

The fundamentalist sees other religions as being the result of error. Since they are in open competition with the true religion, the usual response is to regard them as the work of the devil, to be strongly opposed to and even persecute them if necessary. The only possible exception to this is those religions which the Prophet/Founder himself showed respect towards—these must, by definition, be religions that preceded the Prophet/Founder. Thus, for example fundamentalist Christians will tolerate Judaism but reject Islam; fundamentalist Muslims will tolerate Judaism and Christianity but reject the Bahá'í Faith. But even this toleration wears thin at times and merges into persecution—as witnessed by past persecutions of Jews by Christians, and Jews and Christians by Muslims. A related phenomenon in modern times is the linking of a xenophobic fundamentalism to a strident nationalism in many parts of the world. This can be seen in Arya Samaj Hinduism in India, in some forms of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism in Japan,¹⁹ among Sin-

¹⁷ See also Barr, *Fundamentalism*, pp. 316-17, for a reference to the manner in which fundamentalist coerciveness operates today in the Christian world.

¹⁸ See, for example the activities of Mulla Muhammad Baqir Majlisi in seventeenth-century Iran (Momen, *Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, pp. 114-17).

¹⁹ See G. B. Sansom, *Japan* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1976) pp. 334-35; Takakusu, *Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 3d ed., 1965) pp. 178-81.

halese Buddhist supporters of the Sri Lankan Freedom Party,²⁰ in the Gush Emunim movement in Israel,²¹ and in the Moral Majority in fundamentalist Christianity in the United States.²²

The fundamentalist's conviction of possessing the truth leads to a strong tendency to try to correct the errors of the unbelievers. Thus, the inter-religious activity of the fundamentalist is typically evangelism and missionary work. The inter-religious activity of the liberal, on the other hand, tends towards ecumenicism and inter-faith dialogue. The fundamentalist has no time for such activities. Since his own religion already possesses the absolute truth, there is no point in looking elsewhere for it. The liberal will look to other religions as alternative views of religious truth. Many liberals will give their own religion some form of priority. An example is the Catholic theologian Rahner's concept that truly religious persons of other religions are "anonymous Christians".²³ Nevertheless, they are willing to admit some legitimacy and "truth" in other religions. Other liberals are willing to go even further and regard other religions as being of equal validity as their own but, perhaps, more suited to their own cultures.²⁴ A liberal society such as Muslim Spain in the medieval period, allows the efflorescence of intellectual and artistic excellence from whatever quarter, Christian, Jewish or Muslim.

Social and political differences

With regard to social and political differences, we are treading on the most difficult ground in our enquiry. This is because there appears to have been some degree of change in the modern period, compared to the characteristic features of these groups in former times. Historically, there does not appear to have been any characteristic political stance from either fundamentalists or liberals. If anything, both parties often tended to political quietism. Socially the majority of fundamentalists have tended to be isolated either by forming separate communities, such as the Hutterites in North America, or by minimising contact with the rest of the society through associating as much as possible only with fellow fundamentalists (fundamentalist trade and vocational associations, clubs, colleges, holiday centres, etc.). Personal asceticism and rejection of wealth characterised many fundamentalists, while liberal views were often found among the wealthy. Recently, much of this has greatly changed. Both sides have taken on characteristic

²⁰ Donald Taylor, "Incipient Fundamentalism: Religion and Politics among Sri Lankan Hindus in Britain" in *Studies in Religious Fundamentalism* (ed. L. Caplan) pp. 146-150.

²¹ See Lustick, "Israel's Dangerous Minority," *Foreign Policy*, Vol. 68 (1987) pp. 118-39.

²² Erling Jorstad, *The New Christian Right 1981-1986: Prospects for the Post-Reagan Era* (Lewiston: Edward Mellen Press, 1987); Bruce, "The Moral Majority: The Politics of Fundamentalism in Secular Society" in Caplan, *Studies in Religious Fundamentalism*, pp. 177-94; idem, *Firm in the Faith*, pp. 171-73.

²³ See Rahner, "Observations on the problem of the 'Anonymous Christian,'" *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 14 (New York: Seabury, 1976) pp. 280-94.

²⁴ See for example Hick, *God Has Many Names* (London: MacMillan, 1980) and *Problem of Religious Pluralism* (London: MacMillan, 1985).

political attitudes and fundamentalists have left their social isolation and entered social and political life in every part of the world.

During the modern period, fundamentalists have tended to be found at the right of the political spectrum,²⁵ encouraging individual self-reliance, and stressing such social teachings of religion as justice. Some fundamentalist groups have even reversed the previous trend by tending to adopt a positive, encouraging attitude towards the accumulation of wealth. These groups have become actively involved in politics, advocating capitalism and a laissez-faire social philosophy while raising communism to an almost mythological level of evil. The best known example of this is the Moral Majority movement in the U.S.A., which contributed to Ronald Reagan's electoral success.²⁶ An important social and political feature of fundamentalism is the tendency to promote a traditional role for women in society, i.e. confinement to home and children rather than coming out to work and taking a political role. This tendency to try to control women applies as much to Christian fundamentalism in the U.S.A., where the Moral Majority campaigned against the Equal Rights for Women Amendment, as it does in the Islamic and Jewish world.²⁷ 27

Liberals, on the other hand, have politically tended to the left in modern times, due to their concern with social issues. Some groups have even engaged in Christian-Marxist dialogue. They tend to stress such religious teachings as showing love towards one's fellow human beings. They have also reversed their previous tendency and are now inclined towards asceticism and have a negative attitude towards the accumulation of wealth. They are supportive of the emancipation of women.

The extreme wing of fundamentalism holds the view that existing political structures, because they are products of man's thinking and efforts rather than divine revelation, should be overthrown in favour of a political structure based on the Holy Scripture. Khomeini advocated such a programme and the Iranian Revolution of 1979 was intended to inaugurate such a theocracy.²⁸ It should not be thought, however, that it is only in Islam that such positions are being advocated. In Christianity, there are groups such as the Christian Reconstructionists in the United States which, under the leadership of Rousas J. Rushdoomy, advocates an overthrow of democratic institutions in order to establish a theocracy under Biblical Law. In Israel and India there are several extreme Jewish and Hindu religious parties that advocate a similar position.

²⁵ During the nineteenth century, however, a fundamentalist position was not incompatible with social reformism. See Bruce, *Firm in the Faith*, pp. 12-13, 147. But see below for a possible reason for this.

²⁶ Bruce, "The Moral Majority."

²⁷ See Caplan, *Studies in Religious Fundamentalism*, pp. 18-19; Bruce, *Firm in the Faith*, p. 155.

²⁸ It should be noted that, in practice, Khomeini had to retreat from the theoretical positions advocated in his writings, and Iran still possesses many of the political institutions derived from the Western political systems that Khomeini so despised.

Bruce has pointed out that the social manifestations of fundamentalism and liberalism are, to a large extent, a consequence of their doctrinal or ideological positions. The fundamentalist rejection of all doctrinal positions outside their own leads to highly demarcated, tightly knit, highly committed, socially isolated communities. Liberals, on the other hand, consider the beliefs of the rest of the world sympathetically and are socially much more integrated. The great diversity of beliefs amongst them, however, hinders the formation of coherent groups and also reduces the possibility of a high degree of commitment.²⁹

Towards a definition of Fundamentalism

Put succinctly, we may characterise the fundamentalist as having turned inwards to the centre of the religion—the Scripture, doctrines and traditions—and seeking to protect these from the intrusions of the modern, secular world, while the liberal has turned outwards, seeking to break down the barriers between the religious world and the secular world. For the fundamentalist, the secular world must adapt to and come under the control of the religious world, while the liberal considers it the job of the religious world to adapt to and become relevant in the secular world. For the fundamentalist, religion is addressed to the individual and individual salvation comes first; social salvation and ordering may then result from a collectivity of individual salvations. Liberals, on the other hand, are primarily concerned with society as a whole. Religion is for social salvation; individual salvation is best achieved within an enlightened society. To strive for individual salvation when society itself is not saved is egotistical and reprehensible.

The differences described above between fundamentalists and liberals have purposely been wide-ranging because the same phenomenon re-appears in slightly different ways among the different religions. None of these differences is sufficient by itself to identify an individual as a fundamentalist or a liberal. With Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, the inerrancy of Scripture is not an important issue. On the other hand, among Muslims almost all believe in the inerrancy of their Scripture, the Qur'an, but this does not make them all fundamentalists. To differentiate between fundamentalists and liberals in the Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim worlds, one must go to the sphere of social relations and examine the attitude towards modernity and religious diversity. This may also account for the phenomenon that, in the nineteenth century, when an uncritical acceptance of the inerrancy of the Bible was much more in the main stream of Christianity (i.e. a similar situation to Islam today), it was possible for individuals to hold to Biblical inerrancy while at the same time advocating liberal social principles.³⁰ It would appear that our ideas about fundamentalism and liberalism should be sufficiently flexible to allow for such individuals not to be classed as fundamentalists.

Thus the arguments presented in this paper appear to be moving towards a position wherein fundamentalism and liberalism are defined not in any absolute terms but in terms that are relative to the particular situation of the individual religiously and in time. In other words,

²⁹ Bruce, *Firm in the Faith*, pp. 78-89.

³⁰ See note above.

fundamentalism and liberalism must be identified through a pattern that changes from one religion to another (partly as a result of the different emphases within each religion) and also changes with time. It would seem therefore that a satisfactory definition of fundamentalism or liberalism at the social level can only be achieved on a multi-factorial basis.

Fundamentalism and Modernity

Although I have in the above presentation given examples of the way that liberalism and fundamentalism have manifested themselves in the past, it should be borne in mind that the contrast between the two has been emphasised and brought into stark relief only in modern times. This is for three reasons.³¹ First, in most of the world until the present century and in the West until the Age of Enlightenment, the religious and secular worlds were not sharply defined and separated. Religious metaphysical assumptions and ethical values pervaded all aspects of society: family life, social mores and customs, intellectual life and politics. Therefore, there was not so much opportunity for the secular world to challenge the religious. Second, we can postulate that the complexities of modern life and the mass of problems that face mankind (the nuclear threat, drug/alcohol problems, environmental threats, the North-South divide, etc. which are brought to the immediate attention of all through modern means of communications) have induced great uncertainty and anxiety. One response to the fear induced by this state is to retreat into the greater certainty offered by fundamentalism. It presents a retreat from the confused maelstrom of modernity. Third, until the nineteenth century, the religious world was not so acutely challenged by genuine competition from other religions. At that time, the colonial powers took Christianity to every part of the world, while during the present century, we have seen an increasing flow in the opposite direction, both as a result of migration and of missionary activity by Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, etc.

Therefore previously, the fundamentalist was rarely challenged with intrusions into the religious world while the liberal had only occasional opportunities for seeking to adapt the religious world to new external circumstances. Thus it has been the phenomenon of secularisation and religious pluralism in the modern world that has brought the liberal- fundamentalist split to the fore of religious life. In country after country, the arrival of modernity resulted in a traditionalist fundamentalist backlash. In the United States, the challenge laid down by modern science, and the theory of evolution in particular, was one of the most important factors leading to the rise of fundamentalism. In Iran, in the early years of the twentieth century, the liberal reforms advocated by the Constitutionals were opposed by the fundamentalist traditionalist 'ulama led by Shaykh Fadlu'llah Nuri.³²

³¹ For further discussion of this point, see Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, Ch. 1 ; Berger, Berger and Kellner, *The Homeless Mina* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974) pp. 75-77, 140-42, 165-67.

³² See Lahidji, "Constitutionalism and Clerical Authority" in Said A. Arjomand, ed., *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988) pp. 133-58. Bayat, *Iran's First Revolution: Shi'ism and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-9* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) pp. 6, 57, 134-35, 174-76, 206-207.

It is perhaps in India that we find the best example of this pattern. Under attack from the Christianity of the colonial power as well as the challenge of Western science, a number of liberal reform movements arose among India's Hindus in the nineteenth century—the Brahmo Samaj founded by Rammohan Roy in 1828 and the very similar Prarthana Samaj. These movements adopted many of the ideas of the Christian West into a Hindu framework. This development produced two types of reaction among Hindus corresponding to the two types of fundamentalism described above. The radical fundamentalists, such as Dayananda Saraswati, who founded the Arya Samaj in 1875, felt that Hinduism could best be revitalised by returning to its Vedic roots. Thus they opposed the inclusivist social reform movements that accommodated Christian Western ideas and rejected what they considered to be the accretions of ritual and tradition (such as idol-worship) that had been added to “pure” Vedic Hinduism. Secondly, there were traditionalist fundamentalists who rejected both the inclusivism of social reform movements and the radicalism of the Arya Samaj and wanted to maintain Hinduism as it was with all of its rituals, traditions and social structures, such as the caste system. They formed themselves into numerous groups (such as the Sanatana Dharma Sabha) which came under an umbrella organisation, the Bharata Dharma Mahamandala in 1902.³³ 33

Social and Intellectual Basis

Although little research has been done on the psychological and social bases of the fundamentalist-liberal dichotomy, those that have observed these categories are agreed that we must go beyond the old view that fundamentalism represents an anti-scientific backlash of the old rural, agriculturally-based communities against the urban, scientific culture. In the next few paragraphs I shall review the evidence that, first, fundamentalism is not necessarily anti-scientific and, second, the sociological observations tend to discount any significant social differences between fundamentalists and liberals.

Fundamentalist writers often go to great lengths to show that their positions are in accordance with science. However, critics would maintain that this is a veneer of pseudo-science applied in order to increase the plausibility of the fundamentalist worldview³⁴ and that fundamentalists remain inherently opposed to the inductive approach of the scientific method.³⁵ Among many fundamentalists there remains a strong advocacy of anti-evolutionary (anti-

³³ Charles Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform* (Princeton University Press, 1964) pp. 317-21. J. N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India* (London: MacMillan, 1929) pp. 316-23.

³⁴ Because science has become such an overwhelmingly important guarantor of plausibility, everyone wants to think of themselves as being in line with it. On this factor of science and the plausibility of the religious worldview, see P. Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, pp. 17-22, 105.

³⁵ It may also be said that although fundamentalists are not against the traditional Newtonian view of science, there are much more substantial grounds for a conflict between modern relativistic science and fundamentalist thought. But this issue has hardly yet been tackled by fundamentalist writers.

Darwinian) positions under the name of Creationism. However even this position bows to science, in that it claims to use scientific method to prove its case. Indeed, religious critics of fundamentalism argue that by striving to adapt the Bible stories so that they conform to science, the fundamentalist is in fact effectively adopting a materialistic stance and placing science above God's word.³⁶ But whatever the strengths or weaknesses of fundamentalist science, it remains true that fundamentalists no longer see themselves as intellectually opposed to science. Their argument, as it has been re-formulated in recent decades, is at least with historical and literary criticism.

Even outside the Christian West, where fundamentalism is often centred on a reaction to the intrusion of modernity into traditional societies, the fundamentalists are not against science and technology itself. They are quite happy to utilise these. Ayatu'llah Khomeini's success in overthrowing the Shah, for example, owed a great deal to the skill of his supporters in utilising such modern inventions as the telephone and the cassette recorder to disseminate the Ayatu'llah's speeches. What they are against are the alien values and morals (and in particular the sceptical and critical approaches to religion) being imported along with the science and technology.

We may also state that there is no justification for the commonly held view that the fundamentalist is against logic and rationality. On the contrary, the fundamentalist mentality is much predisposed to using very precise logical argumentation. Shi'i Islam is an interesting example to consider further in this respect. Both the theology (kalam) and the jurisprudence of Shi'i Islam are built on foundations of rationalism and logic. From the ninth century onwards, Shi'i scholars have prided themselves on being able to derive their doctrine, as well as their legal judgements from logic as well as from the traditions. Indeed, the study of logic forms an important part of the academic curriculum at the religious colleges of Qumm and Najaf.³⁷ ~~This then is the intellectual background of such persons as the Ayatu'llah Khomeini.~~

Also to be questioned is the view of fundamentalism as mainly a phenomenon of poor rural areas. In fact both fundamentalists and liberals are likely to come from similar social and educational backgrounds. Many modern fundamentalists appear to arise from educated middle class backgrounds—precisely the same background from which the majority of liberals come.

³⁶ Barr, *Fundamentalism*, p. 93-96; Bruce, *Firm in the Faith*, p. 128.

³⁷ Momen, *Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, pp. 79-80, 159-60, 185-87, 201.

This has been asserted for British fundamentalist groups,³⁸ and for Americans.³⁹ Similar conclusions have also been drawn about the Muslim world whether in Egypt, Iran or West Africa⁴⁰.⁴⁰

It is as yet premature to dismiss social factors entirely but the evidence certainly does not support a blanket association of fundamentalism with any particular social category or factor. These findings, if confirmed by further research, point to the likelihood that the fundamentalist-liberal difference comes not so much from social differences as from differences in psychological types.

Psychological Basis

In psychological terms we may characterise fundamentalism and liberalism as two different ways of thinking, two cognitive styles. Cognitive style refers to the individual's characteristic and consistent manner of organising and categorising perceptions and concepts. It is a value-free term in that the variety of cognitive styles are not judged to be good or bad in themselves, although any particular style may be more or less favourable in a given situation or for the purpose of achieving a given goal.⁴¹ 41

The fundamentalist mentality is characteristically one that sees things in terms of black-and-white, in terms of clear-cut boundaries which determine what is and what is not acceptable belief, who is and who is not in the community. Any person, situation or object belongs either within the orbit of the "saved" or is outside it; there are no intermediate stations. No matter how good a life a person may lead, if he or she is not among the "saved", then he or she must be among the "damned". The lines between good and evil are clearly drawn and there are no intermediate positions. The liberal is more inclined to allow for "grey areas", intermediate situa-

³⁸ Barr, *Fundamentalism*, p. 91, and Walker, "Fundamentalism and Modernity: The Restoration Movement in Britain" in L. Caplan, ed., *Studies in Religious Fundamentalism*, pp. 203-204.

³⁹ Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, pp. xi-xii and Ch. 6-10 *passim* but see in particular pp. 152, 163-64, 250-69; Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, pp. 199-205.

⁴⁰ E. Davis has surveyed the membership of the Muslim Brotherhood, a fundamentalist Muslim group in Egypt, over a period of fifty years and found that the typical active member was an urban, middle-class, well-educated professional man—much the same group that liberals come from; Davis, "Ideology, Social Class and Islamic Radicalism in Modern Egypt" in S. A. Arjomand, ed., *From Nationalism to Revolutionary Islam*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984) pp. 141-45 and tables. See also Amselle, "A Case of Fundamentalism in West Africa" in Caplan, *Studies in Religious Fundamentalism*, pp. 81-82. For further evidence of the middle class background of Muslim fundamentalists, see the survey in Munson, *Islam and Revolution in the Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) pp. 95-98.

⁴¹ See N.A. Haynie, "Cognitive Learning Styles," *Encyclopedia of Psychology* Vol. 1, pp. 236-38. H. A. Witkin, "Psychological Differentiation and Forms of Pathology," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, Vol. 70 (1965) pp. 317-36. Idem, "A Cognitive-style Approach to Cross-Cultural Research," *International Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 2 (1967) pp. 233-50.

tions. Although a person may not be a believer, if his actions are good then he cannot be totally bad. In pursuing this line of thought, we are gradually coming to the point at which it is possible to see that the fundamentalist-liberal split is not something that affects religion alone but rather is one facet of a much larger phenomenon in the psycho-social life of mankind.⁴²

Another way of describing this would be to say that one of the underlying differences between fundamentalists and liberals is that the former are driven by a desire for certainty. Hofstadter has called this the “one-hundred per cent mentality”. Such a person will “tolerate no ambiguities, no equivocations, no reservations, and no criticism”.⁴³ For the fundamentalist, certainty is only to be found in objectivity. The indecisive world of the liberal who is willing to see some truth in all opinions, the uncertain field of historical and literary criticism where different opinions abound, are all tainted by personal opinion, and therefore by subjectivity. This is deeply unsatisfactory to the fundamentalist psyche. The only way of achieving objective truth is to take a standard that lies outside of the human subjectivity. While a liberal Christian would be happy to accept just a statement of belief in Christ from someone, this is not sufficient for a fundamentalist. It is too liable to the whims of subjectivity. It might include all sorts of doctrinally objectionable positions. Acceptance of the Bible as inerrant, however, is considered by fundamentalists to constitute objectivity, for one is not forming a personal view of the Bible but rather accepting the Bible’s own view of itself. This, the fundamentalist considers, gives one a standard of absolute truth⁴⁴ and hence objectivity, and hence certainty.

This desire for certainty probably accounts for the enthusiastic adoption of scientific (or, as their critics would maintain, pseudo-scientific) approaches by fundamentalists. Scientific method acts, for the modern mind, as a guarantor of the correctness of one’s conclusions. It also accounts for the fact that fundamentalists are often very keen on building up elaborate logical arguments. The mathematical certainty of logic appeals to such minds. The fundamentalist favours absolutes while the liberal favours relativistic styles of thinking.

One cognitive style that has been described appears to be of particular interest with regard to the fundamentalism-liberalism dichotomy. It is called “field-dependence versus field-independence”. It relates to the way that an individual relates a figure in his or her perceptual field to its background. Field-dependents tend to see the figure only in relation to its background while a field-independent tends to isolate the figure and extract it from its background.⁴⁵

⁴² It is easy to see how any point of view, such as communism or nationalism, that is strongly held by a group of people can become the basis for the development of such a mentality. Barr, for example, hints at parallels between fundamentalism and the Cultural Revolution in China, *Fundamentalism*, p. 327. The Tappers point to similarities between fundamentalism and secular nationalism in Turkey, “Fundamentalism in a Turkish Town.”

⁴³ R. Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1964)pp. 118-19.

⁴⁴ Barr, *Fundamentalism*, pp. 312-13.

⁴⁵ H. A. Witkin, “Psychological Differentiation and Forms of Pathology.”

There seems to be some provisional similarity here between field-dependence and liberalism (in that liberals tend to see religion only in terms of its social background) and field-independence and fundamentalism (in that fundamentalists tend to see religion as an absolute isolated from its social background).

There are also some similarities between what psychologists call the convergent style of thinking and fundamentalism while divergent thinking corresponds with liberalism. Convergent thinking focuses down from the general to the particular, dissecting and analysing. It prizes rational, deductive thought and aims towards certainty. It tends to be found among certain types of scientists and engineers in particular. Interestingly, we find that when scientists (especially from the physical sciences) and engineers become religious, they often tend towards fundamentalist religion.⁴⁶ Divergent thought, on the other hand, goes from the particular to the general, integrating the particulars into a general picture. It prizes inductive, intuitive thinking and aims towards inclusivity rather than certainty. It tends to predominate among artists and social scientists. These two modes of thinking have, in experimental psychology, been linked to the two halves of the brain. This paper is not the place to give a detailed account of the research leading to these findings, but suffice it to say that evidence from patients who have had damage to the brain or a division of the corpus callosum (which joins the two halves of the brain) have shown that analytical, rational thought is associated with what is called the dominant or verbal (usually left) hemisphere, while spatial and other non-verbal experiences as well as intuitive thought are associated with the other.⁴⁷

Although fundamentalism can be defined in terms of a particular cognitive style, there is a problem as to which phenomenon causes which. Does a particular cognitive style cause a person to be attracted to the fundamentalist worldview or does the ideology of fundamentalism and the pressures of a fundamentalist community induce a particular cognitive style? This is probably a question of the chicken-and-egg variety that has no answer.

⁴⁶ Barr, *Fundamentalism*, pp. 90, 349 n.1. Bruce, *Firm in the Faith*, p. 128. Davis found a disproportionately large number of engineers among the leadership of the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood. See note above.

⁴⁷ The classical work on the split-brain was done by Sperry and his associates at the California Institute of Technology. See R. W. Sperry, "Cerebral Organisation and Behaviour," *Science*, Vol. 133 (1961) pp. 1749-57; M. Gazzaniga, et al., "Some Functional Effects of Sectioning the Cerebral Commissures in Man," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, Vol. 48 (1962) pp. 1765-69. On the functions of the two halves of the brain see R.D. Nebes, "Hemispheric Specialization in Commisurotomed Man", *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 81 (1974) pp. 1-14. A useful summary can be found in Robert Ornstein, "The Two Sides of the Brain" in Richard Woods, *Understanding Mysticism* (London: Althone Press, 1981) pp. 270-85.

Fundamentalism, Liberalism and the Bahá'í Faith

What has all this to do with the Bahá'í Faith? It must be clear from the above that both fundamentalism and liberalism are wide-spread phenomena. They are part of peoples' constitutional make-up. While a cognitive style may not be as fixed a thing as the colour of one's eyes, if it changes, it only does so very slowly. Therefore if the Bahá'í Faith is to be truly a universal religion, it must be able to incorporate people of all types; not just all types of races, and cultures but also all types of cognitive styles. The Bahá'í community has to be wide enough in its outreach and flexible enough in its workings to enable it to contain both types of person without fragmenting into schisms and conflict. It cannot, however, be denied that the presence of fundamentalists and liberals does cause a certain amount of tension within the Bahá'í community. There have been numerous episodes and situations known to the author of this article, and no doubt to any other person who has been a Bahá'í for any length of time, where this tension has caused problems and even damage.

Historically, it could be said that the situation in the West in the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá tended to favor the liberals. The cultic milieu out of which many Bahá'ís came was a tradition in which a very liberal interpretation of religion was inherent. However, there was also a fundamentalist tension present, possibly as a result of those who came into the Bahá'í community from a millennialist background—because they considered that Bahá'u'lláh had fulfilled the prophecies of the Bible. During Shoghi Effendi's time the balance swung in favor of the fundamentalists. Shoghi Effendi's concentration in the early years of his ministry on building up the Bahá'í administration would have tended to favor the tidy administrative mind of the fundamentalist. The concentration on missionary expansion in the later years of Shoghi Effendi's ministry would also have favored those with a fundamentalist stance—fundamentalists wish to convert others to their view since they know that it is the correct view and there can be no other truth. In more recent times, we may discern the beginnings of a new balance. The recent emphasis from the Universal House of Justice on qualitative goals, social and economic development, and dialogue with other religions and organisations is likely to bring people of a more liberal stance to the fore in the community.

Within the Bahá'í community, there are several factors that alleviate potential tensions between those of a fundamentalist bent and those with leanings towards liberalism and that encourage dialogue between them. As the Bahá'í Faith is a young religion, it addresses many of the features of the modern world which have caused so much pain and discord in other religions. Its scriptures already deal with most current issues in relevant ways. Since there are scriptural endorsements of such matters as the equality of men and women and the abolition of extremes of wealth and poverty, these matters cause few problems of principle—whatever problems they may cause are with regard to their implementation. The rigid desire to follow the text of the scripture forces those in the Bahá'í community who tend towards fundamentalism to adopt what would in other religions be considered a liberal position on these questions. Thus many of these issues, which cause much heart-searching and a fundamentalist/liberal split in

other religions, are the subject of clear pronouncements in the scriptures around which both fundamentalists and liberals can unite.

Second, the main mechanism of public discourse and decision-making in the community is consultation. Baha'u'llah has exhorted his community to "take counsel together in all matters."⁴⁸ The process is regarded as a spiritual responsibility, and it is a duty incumbent upon all to ensure that virtues such as fairness, integrity, forbearance, respect, and courtesy are brought to bear upon the process.⁴⁹ To succeed completely in establishing consultation on such grounds is of course difficult, but to strive towards it is incumbent upon the participants.

Third, the Baha'i Faith has no real dogma. There are a number of statements regarding Baha'u'llah, his station and relation to previous prophets, as well as the concept of the Covenant, which may be regarded as dogmatic positions—but these are in fact matters of establishing authority rather than establishing theological doctrine. And whatever dogma one may consider exists today in the Baha'i Faith, it is unlikely to increase, as there are no mechanisms for establishing any new dogma. Baha'is are, and they remain Baha'is, not so much because they share the theological positions of other Baha'is, but because of their common vision of the direction that humanity is taking.

A fourth factor in the Baha'i Faith that helps in the dialogue between liberals and fundamentalists is the overriding command to unity in the Baha'i teachings. This imperative is higher than all other considerations. Thus Shoghi Effendi, referring to a dispute that occurred in Baha'u'llah's lifetime that was typical of the sort of disagreement that occurs between fundamentalists and liberals, related: "During the days of Baha'u'llah some of the prominent teachers of the Cause in Persia were divided as to the station of Baha'u'llah and at last wrote to Him for arbitration. In answer Baha'u'llah said that if they were united both sides were right and if they were divided both were wrong."⁵⁰ In summary then, being united is considered a higher truth in the Baha'i Faith than being right. This has obvious implications for a dialogue between liberals and fundamentalists. Whatever sincere disagreement there may be between the two sides, there should be an overriding concern to maintain unity. This unity does not mean uniformity. In other words, individuals are entitled to hold different views, but these should not become the basis of the creation of parties and platforms within the community. Indeed, the formation of such factions is expressly forbidden and can result in administrative sanctions against individuals trying to carry out any such program.

Closely connected to this teaching of unity in the Baha'i Faith is the concept of the Covenant. This concept means that the primary focus of loyalty and unity in the Baha'i Faith is not

⁴⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992) Notes, p. 190.

⁴⁹ On consultation in the Bahá'í community, see John Kolstoe, *Consultation: A Universal Lamp of Guidance* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1985).

⁵⁰ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi in *Lights of Guidance* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2nd ed., 1988) no. 1350, p. 405.

towards any set of doctrines or dogmas—and these are, of course, the usual focus of disagreement between fundamentalists and liberals. A Baha’i is free to hold whatever opinion she or he pleases: “At the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views.”⁵¹ The source of unity in the Baha’i Faith is a focus on and loyalty towards the designated center of the Faith—at the present time this means the Universal House of Justice, which is an elected body. That body was created by Baha’u’llah to administer the affairs of the Baha’i Faith and to make rulings in any areas of law that are not covered in the writings of Baha’u’llah. It is not a body that makes definitive rulings on theological and doctrinal matters. This means that Baha’is are not asked to subscribe to a creed as a precondition of membership, but rather to express their loyalty to a body, which administers the Baha’i community. They express their loyalty by submitting to the decisions of the Universal House of Justice, which are usually of an administrative and functional nature rather than doctrinal or interpretative. This is a matter that again does not divide fundamentalists and liberals: the fundamentalist because the provisions of the Covenant are unequivocally laid down in the scripture; the liberals because they can see that only through united action can the liberal social agenda of the Baha’i Faith be realized.

The net effect of these factors is to give both liberals and fundamentalists a large degree of freedom to hold whatever views they wish and to voice their opinions. If they disagree with a decision of their local or national administrative bodies, they are free to appeal this ultimately to the highest level, the Universal House of Justice. If the decision of the Universal House of Justice goes against them, they may, if they wish, continue to hold the opinion. What they may not do, under the terms of the principle of unity and the doctrine of the Covenant, is to try actively to create a party for their opinion. In this way, the Baha’i Faith tries to maintain a wide range of opinions and personalities within the community. Both liberal and fundamentalist views can coexist within the community, both groups being united in their overriding aim, the effort to promote the Baha’i message of peace and unity.

⁵¹ Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá’í Administration* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1928 [1968]) p. 63.

Ethnonational) radicalism and fundamentalism. In the modern world there is an aggravation of the contradictions between human rights and the collective rights of national, cultural, linguistic and other minorities. The contradiction between the people's right to self-determination, up to the creation of an independent state, and the principle of preserving the territorial integrity of the state is aggravated. For many ethnic groups separatism and the requirements for the creation of independent ethnic states became slogans of the day. In this context, it should be noted that the surge of Extremes of religious belief an attempt to understand their distinctions and commonalities. (Updated version.)

• Fundamentalism and Liberalism: Towards an Understanding of the Dichotomy. by Moojan Momen. published in Reason and Revelation: Studies in the Babi and Bahá'í Religions, 13, pages 129-154 Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2002. Download: [momen_fundamentalism_liberalism_2002.pdf](#). [PDF help].

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