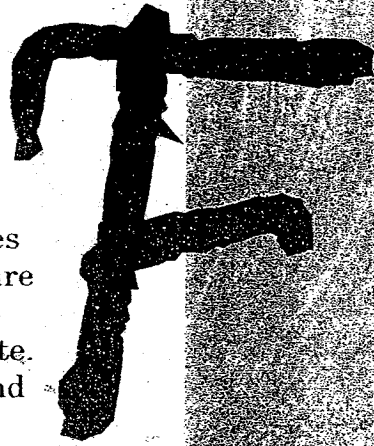




by
D. Larry Gregg

Fundamentalists come in all shapes and sizes. They are liberal, conservative, and moderate. They are male and female. They are heterosexual and homosexual. They are religiously orthodox and heretical. They are pro-life and pro-abortion. They are proponents of radical anti-firearms legislation and they are members of the NRA. Fundamentalism knows no racial, ethnic, cultural, political, religious, or gender constraints. While most are commonly associated with extreme religious conservatism, this writer maintains that "fundamentalism is a mindset—not a theological position."

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the late twentieth century is a sharp rise in fundamentalist ideologies. While most tend to think in terms of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority or single-issue crusades that appear in all denominations, these are only religio-cultural instances of a much wider phenomenon. Whether one explores the emergence of survivalist groups and underground militias, the movements of major political parties to purify their ranks, or the many calls for economic, educational, and social reform, one finds the fundamentalist phenomenon manifesting itself throughout our culture.



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Often periods of time are identified by a primary phenomenon that gives shape to the era. Thus we often refer to the eighteenth century as "The Age of Reason," or to the period from 1920–1950 as "The Totalitarian Era." In this vein it may be said that since 1970 the world in general and American culture in particular have experienced the "Era of Fundamentalism."



The Fundamentalist Personality

Given this broad-ranging diversity, how does one go about identifying a fundamentalist? Too often we look in the wrong place. We tend to examine core beliefs and values. This causes us to focus upon those who hold highly conservative or traditionalist points of view. The end result

is that we identify only the "fundamentalism of the right" and fail to recognize the fundamentalisms of the "left" or the "center." Our mistake is that we associate fundamentalism with the core beliefs and values of persons rather than in their mindset. Thus we need to explore the identifying characteristics of the fundamentalist mindset, regardless of the particular flavor of the fundamentalism we are examining.

The fundamentalist personality is one who is threatened by any challenge to his or her world-view. Various factors have led to the selection of a particular lens through which all reality is filtered. It matters little what the content of the underlying presupposition happens to be. It may be that "capitalism is the only viable economic system"; or that "America is destined by God to be the most powerful nation in the world"; or that "the Constitution guarantees every citizen the right to possess an assault weapon." The fundamentalist senses that whenever her or his world-view is questioned at any point, the one doing the questioning is seeking to undermine the order of the world as it should be.

This first characteristic leads logically to a second. The fundamentalist personality tends to demonize anyone who appears to disagree with her or his position. The adversary is painted in broad, bold strokes as the most insidious creature imaginable. One has only to look at the rhetoric of politics to see this demonization of the adversary at work. The fundamentalist's need to claim the moral, or theological, or political, or social "high ground" leads to the caricature of the other as the polar opposite of all that is good and right and true. Those today who decry the "politics of personal destruction" have first-hand experience at this fundamentalist tendency to demonize the adversary.

A third identifying characteristic of the fundamentalist mindset is its tendency to focus upon a few major points that are seen

as free-standing truths beyond examination or challenge. On behalf of fundamentalists, regardless of flavor, it must be said that they can simply and clearly articulate their views. The fundamentalist assumes that his or her basic conclusions about reality are axiomatic. The sheer assertion of them demonstrates their validity. Any and all "right-thinking" persons will recognize their inherent truth.

The fundamentalist recognizes that all do not subscribe to his position, a fourth characteristic. This reality is dealt with by marginalizing those holding an alternative viewpoint as dishonest, deluded, dumb, or deceived. To not hold the viewpoint of the fundamentalist is to be lacking in integrity or intelligence or both. Obviously all honest and right-thinking persons see things as the fundamentalist does.

The tendency to demonize those who disagree and to question the integrity of their personhood leads to a fifth characteristic of the fundamentalist mindset. The loyalty or orthodoxy of others is always interpreted in personal terms. Fundamentalists essentially say, "If you love me, you will agree with me." They tend to hear phrases such as "I don't agree with you" or "I don't think your conclusion is correct" as assertions of "I don't like you" or "I don't trust you." Fundamentalists, because they are essentially insecure persons, need continual reassurance that others hold them in high esteem.

This leads logically to a sixth, and possibly the most dangerous, characteristic of the fundamentalist mindset. If a fundamentalist feels forced to make a choice between conceding some point or sacrificing some person, it is the person who is sacrificed. The need always to be right forces the fundamentalist to adopt a "my way or the highway" approach toward others. To use another analogy, the fundamentalist is perfectly willing to allow a person to ride his train. But the person must remember that it is the *fundamentalist's* train. And it goes

where the *fundamentalist* wants it to go. And if you don't want to get hurt, you don't forget, not even for a moment, whose train you are riding.



Fundamentalists I Have Known

Once one understands that fundamentalism is a mindset, one learns to pay less attention to ideology and more to personality. Among the fundamentalists I have known are the president of a theologically moderate denominational college, a small town brick mason, a highly placed executive in a major international corporation, the director of a church choir, the manager of a restaurant, and a town drunk. These women and men illustrate a wide range of social, economic, cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity. Yet they are all fundamentalists. They are fundamentalists not because of what they subscribe to as core values and beliefs, but because of the manner in which they maintain their personal point of view against all alternative ways of perceiving and understanding. They are fundamentalists, not because of what they think, but because of *how* they think and *how* they relate to others who think differently than they do.



Lessons From John Locke

The noted seventeenth-century philosopher and essayist, John Locke, wrote his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, his *Two Treatises on Government*, and his *A Letter Concerning Toleration* in response to the *absolutisms*, another word for "fundamentalisms," of his day. Locke saw the fundamentalist mindset asserting itself in three primary expressions: epistemological (the science of knowledge), absolutism, political absolutism, and religious absolutism. In the first work Locke protested against the claims of certainty of

knowledge in his day. His conviction regarding the role of personal experience in our interpretation of knowledge caused him to counsel caution to all who claimed to have absolute handles on the truth. While there may be absolute, free-standing truth, human subjectivity knows only "truth as I (we) see it." Fundamentalists of all flavors tend to forget their own subjectivity.

In the *Two Treatises on Government* Locke called for the abandonment of government by divine-right monarchy in favor of a consensual social contract where the ruler ruled with the consent of the governed. The tendency of fundamentalism to ally itself with rigidly hierarchical decision-making needs to hear Locke's assertion that the role of any governing structure (religious, political, educational, and so forth) is that of serving the needs of its constituency, not that of exerting manipulative control over the governed.

In *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Locke argued that no religious group is justified in forcing its beliefs upon others. This is a good caution for those today who espouse religious intolerance or coercion; or who tend to present their political, social, or ethical agendas as religious articles of faith.

Indeed, this writer, after long observation and painful experience, has concluded that "fundamentalism is a mindset." It is a mindset that, without restraint, most often expresses itself in meanness. And whether we consider "mean conservatives" or "mean liberals" or "mean moderates," it is the "meanness" of fundamentalism that is to be deplored because of the sadness and the hurt it engenders. **MY**

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