

Some Ways that Religion Interacts with Modernity: Christian Fundamentalism vs. Traditionalism

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Obviously, modernity has features that seem very unfriendly to anything that might count as religious. Individualistic empiricism and associated ideas form such an important core of modernity, but these undermine religious authority and promote a naturalistic, mechanistic understanding of the universe and of human life in which there often *seems* to be little room for recognition of any role at all for a divine being, supernatural powers, human souls, genuine values, or anything like a meaning for life. Even modernity's emphasis on the nation-state as a form of social organization works against the traditional role of religion in defining a people, particularly when the nation-state is thought to be thoroughly modern only when it is secularized – that is, when its policies are determined by secular considerations.

In what different ways has Christianity (especially in the US) actually dealt with these challenges from modernity?

I think it can be useful to think mainly of three different possible ways that Christians have responded to modernity:

1. Fundamentalism
2. Traditionalism
3. Liberal reform

Please do keep in mind, though, that just as real people don't fall neatly into categories, real religious commitments of real people similarly resist tidy boxes. So, the following category descriptions should perhaps be seen as caricatures – cartoon versions of religious worldviews – but nevertheless useful for emphasizing major tendencies or trends.

This essay discusses the first two categories. The liberal reform approach will be discussed in a separate essay posted later.

1. Religious fundamentalism¹

You are encouraged to get details about Christian Protestant Fundamentalism from the text by Marty and Appleby. They are very good at developing the themes mentioned below.

Fundamentalism in relation to modernity, might be termed “hard-line” religion for its uncompromising stances and sharp criticisms of anyone who disagrees with its stances. US Christian fundamentalists have gotten a lot of press over the last three decades – so much so that an outsider might think that the fundamentalist position is the only Christian viewpoint. However, that ignores the traditionalists and liberal

¹This account of religious fundamentalism agrees with the account given by Marty and Appleby. In fact, much of it is derived from the work of Marty and Appleby. See *The Glory and the Power* for details.

reformers. There is not a completely sharp dividing line between fundamentalism and traditionalism – one can shade into the other. However, by putting together a list of features that characterize Christian Protestant fundamentalism, we get a picture of an important contemporary way of being Christian that has enough distinctiveness to be distinguished from traditionalism. Some of these elements taken by themselves could just as easily belong to a version of religious traditionalism, but when combined, the whole package of elements forms a religious outlook that is in fact not very traditional.

Here is a list of the features that make up the Christian Protestant fundamentalist package. (Not all fundamentalists will embrace all of these features.)

The Christian Protestant fundamentalist...

1. Sees Christianity as based on a set of *essential* elements – the “fundamentals.”
 - These fundamentals include specific religious *beliefs*, and specific *rules* that are seen as divinely-ordained.
 - These fundamentals are *viewed by the fundamentalist as* coming from the heart of the Christian tradition, even though objective history usually does not support the claim that these elements have traditionally been central.
 - Since these elements are seen as essential, anyone who weakens in their commitment to any of them is seen as slipping away from Christianity. Such people are seen as “lax,” or “backsliders,” or “unfaithful,” or even “unbelievers”.

2. Identifies and focuses considerable attention on various *serious modern threats* to Christianity.
 - These threats are specifically seen as having taken shape because of fairly recent cultural trends – that is, the threats are not simply the age-old human evils that have always been with us.
 - These threats are especially grave because they have penetrated the thinking or practices of many people who see themselves as Christian. (For example, some Christians think the theory of evolution is true.)
 - Modernity as a whole is *not* seen as evil. It is not the aim of the fundamentalist to live and think as tribal people did, or to reject science and technology. The Christian fundamentalist is in some ways quite modern.

3. Takes aggressive action to *fight back* against the threats arising from modernity, with the aim of *reclaiming* any religious and cultural “territory” lost to these “bad” aspects of modernity.
 - Fundamentalist tactics for fighting back vary. Some fundamentalists work publicly with nonfundamentalists to achieve social and political

goals, while others don't.² Some think political action is the key; others think that political action is a distraction from the point of the church.

- Fighting back typically puts special emphasis on specific issues relating to the perceived threat from modernity: the theory of evolution, secularism in society, the women's rights movement, etc. The issues are *not* ones that have been central ones in the history of Christianity. The fundamentalist in this regard is an innovator, a creator of new emphases to fight modern threats.
- By focusing on these selected issues, fundamentalists declare war on objectionable aspects of modern thinking in the broader culture, and simultaneously call out to nonfundamentalists within Christianity to "wake up" and notice how they have been "seduced" by modernity into becoming "lax". This is what Marty and Appleby refer to as "scandalizing".
- There is a mental picture of an imagined golden age or ideal state that existed prior to the time of the influence of the perceived threats from modernity. Back in the good old days, things were much better, but lately bad aspects of modernity have started to take over. In creating this picture of the past, the fundamentalist does not coolly and objectively create a fair and balanced complete picture of how things were; rather, the aim is to focus on certain desirable features of the past that the fundamentalist aims to return to.

4. Bases the above-mentioned aggressive stance on firmly held views about having obtained the pure unchanging truth from the Bible, which is the "inerrant" Word of God.

- The fundamentalist feels certain of being right, and thus that others are wrong.
- This certainty rests on the conviction that the fundamentals are derived directly and unproblematically from an absolutely pure, absolutely truthful source – the Bible.
- There is a strong tendency to read the Bible literally, so as to avoid the possibility of alternative interpretations of its meaning.
- Revisions of the belief structure are not allowed. Even when fundamentalists are in fact creating new Christian doctrines, they do not see it that way. They see it as revival of old doctrines.

²Marty and Appleby refer to those who work politically with nonfundamentalist allies as "activists". The others they call "separatists". It is a mistake to suppose that separatists are inactive, just sitting back and doing nothing. They have their own ways of being quite active in their fight for the truth as they see it, but they don't engage in that activity with people who don't agree with their religious outlook – they are more "pure" than the activists.

5. Seeks to gain sufficient control over people so as to be able to thwart the advances of objectionable modern thinking – either within religious communities or in the broader public sphere.

- Some fundamentalists aim primarily to control their own Christian community, by ostracizing those who refuse to agree with them on essential points, by demanding correct preaching and teaching, or by political maneuvering within religious organizations to gain control of publications, professors, seminaries, and the like.
- Other fundamentalists are active in the public arena, vying to get school boards, legislatures, governments, newspapers, and so forth, to adopt stances that the fundamentalists see as correct, based on religious arguments.

Putting this all together, we see that religious fundamentalism is a modern phenomenon, because it occurs as a response to modern pressures. It has become a prominent feature on the religious landscape only in the 20th Century, as the force of modernity has grown, and the determination of some within religious communities to fight back has grown. Thus, one should not confuse fundamentalism with a strict traditionalism which simply adheres to long-standing tradition, even if that tradition is very harsh in its assessment of outsiders and very strict in its observances of law and ritual. In other words, even though fundamentalism is aggressive and therefore “hard-line” religion, not *all* “hard-line” religion is fundamentalist. Fundamentalism’s aggressiveness is directed against specific threats from modernity, and is aimed at returning the religious tradition to a former state of influence or supposed purity.

Because of its aggressive, fighting stance, justified by claims that the stance is required by God, fundamentalism sets up an “us” versus “them” picture of the world, in which “they” are “wrong”, “deluded”, “evil”, “Satanic”, “doomed by God”, and the like, while “we” are “godly”, “faithful”, “the believers”, and “right”. The world is seen in stark terms, where the forces of God are arrayed against the forces of evil, and the forces of God are threatened, but will prevail if they remain true to God. Military metaphors and military language are commonly employed: the forces of evil are the enemy, and we must conquer them.

Nevertheless, despite the aggressiveness with which they fight modern threats, fundamentalists are in many ways quite modern. They do *not* oppose modernity as a whole, but only those aspects of modernity that they see as threats. Christian fundamentalists in the United States, for example, are typically quite supportive of scientific research, and some of them are actively engaged in doing it. They do not question the validity of the nation-state as a vehicle for social organization, but the Christian *activist* fundamentalists seek to ensure that their own nation, the US, takes on a decidedly Christian flavor. The Biblical literalism that typifies Christian fundamentalists can be seen as a very modern approach to reading a sacred text, as if that text were something like a technical book or a modern law book. So, fundamentalism is a blend of modern ways of thinking with an aggressive fight against some aspects of modernity. I see it as a way of trying to create a new religiously

acceptable form of semi-modernity. *It is a mistake to suppose that fundamentalism is simply a desire to return to the past; rather, it is an attempt to create a future that contains crucial elements from the past.*

In order to create that future, the fundamentalist needs to respond to modern threats, and that means finding something within Christianity to use against those threats. This typically results in creating a new theological emphasis; at this point the fundamentalist approach to modernity differs significantly from traditionalism which avoids creating new emphases. The traditionalist maintains standard emphases; the fundamentalist creates new ones. For example, if the women's movement for equal rights is seen as a threat, then the fundamentalist finds the most patriarchal statements in the Bible, and brings them to the forefront, insisting that those statements elements are essential to the tradition and that to ignore them is to weaken the whole of Christianity. In this way the fundamentalist draws attention to the threat, calls upon everyone to choose sides, and points the way to how to fight back against the threat. Anything less is seen as a retreat, a caving in to creeping modernity.

2. Traditionalism

Christian traditionalism might be defined simply as *commitment to whatever the believers see as the standard views and practices that they have been taught as being Christian*. The traditionalist finds those standard, traditional ways of thinking to be correct and meaningful, and is not interested in pushing to change them, even if he or she is aware that the traditional worldview seems to others to be somewhat out of touch with modern times. The traditionalist is not generally much concerned about the historical fact that what is now seen as traditional Christianity in fact has resulted from gradual change over the centuries. So, the traditionalist is typically not trying to return to some long-lost, purer version of the religion. Rather, the traditionalist is simply carrying on the tradition as it has been passed along to him or to her. For example, most Christian traditionalists are happy with the Great Compromise. That is simply part of the Christian tradition as far as they are concerned. They probably are not aware of the tremendous historical upheaval that produced that Compromise after the time of Galileo.

The traditionalist basically remains untroubled by the deep challenges that modernity raises to all traditional religious worldviews, and simply continues seeing the world through traditional eyes when it comes to religiously significant matters. In this respect, religious traditionalists are not fully modern people. They may live in a relatively modern cultural environment, but they don't see the world in fully modern terms. They don't buy into modernity when it comes to their deepest convictions about how to approach the Big Questions, because they approve of traditional Christian answers to those Questions.

On the other hand, many traditionalists don't feel at all uncomfortable with modernity so long as it is not allowed to take over everything about them. There is, then, a kind of tug-of-war inside many Christian traditionalists between modern tendencies and traditional Christianity, but the individual involved in this tug-of-war may not be terribly concerned about it or even be aware of it.

I believe the majority of Christians today are traditionalists of one form or another. (But I admit it is hard to pin this down.) This way of being religious is usually ignored by the media; traditionalists don't make huge public waves. But don't get the impression from lack of publicity that traditionalists don't care about their religious convictions. A traditionalist can be just as committed as someone who falls into one of the louder, more noticed religious categories. Some traditionalists are not very interested in thinking about their Christianity, and it may not mean much to them, but others are quite committed, finding Christianity to be the core of their way of life.

Traditionalists might be quite interested in converting others to Christianity and might be quite aggressive about it. Or not. In other words, the degree to which a Christian is interested in pushing his or her views publicly is not relevant to whether they count as a traditionalist.

2a. Traditionalism that withdraws

Some traditionalists withdraw from modern culture in order to avoid conflict with it, and form isolated communities of similar-thinking people. It seems these folks are aware that society is changing along modern lines, they sense that these changes in ways of thinking and living conflict with their cherished traditions, and they choose to withdraw in order to remain faithful to their traditions.

Probably someone who thinks in this way will not be familiar in detail with modernity. They don't need to be, because they are not fashioning a detailed response to modernity, or an analysis of it. All they need to know is that the general flavor of the modern world is inhospitable to their worldview, and they choose to keep their worldview. Since they know their ways of thinking that undergird their ways of living are out of step with the world around them, they have little choice but to withdraw.

The degree of withdrawal varies. For some, it might just be that they only form friendships with like-minded people, they shun educational institutions that they don't operate, they don't watch television or go to secular movies, and form their entire social lives around their religious group. For a few, it might mean something more extreme – living in a particular place, where only like-minded people are in the majority, and rejecting the use of recent technologies, such as electricity and the automobile. Not many such communities exist any longer in the US today, although there used to be a number of them. The Amish people living around Arthur, Illinois, represent one such group. It is difficult to maintain this level of withdrawal – even the Amish need to drive their horse-drawn buggies along the sides of paved county roads, where they contend with automobile traffic.

Whether they withdraw to separate communities or not, these traditionalists are not modern people. They feel apart from their more modern-thinking fellow citizens. In a sense, they live in a different world – a pre-modern world.

2b. Traditionalism that stays embedded in modern culture

Religious people who fit into this category have one foot in each of two worlds. Sometimes, particularly in dealing with the Big Questions they take most seriously, they take a very traditional religious stance, using traditional religious language to talk about life and the world. At other times, they sound very modern in outlook, taking the

results of science quite seriously, relying on modern medicine to cure their diseases, using the latest technologies, and relying on mostly secular arguments to determine what economic and social policies they favor. They may even allow some aspects of their religious traditions to be changed or influenced by modern thinking – especially when those aspects seem less important.

Religious people who fall into this category may jump between modern and traditional religious worldviews, depending on the topic of conversation. They may have become so comfortable doing so that they never notice that there are some deep problems with making the modern and the religious worldviews genuinely harmonize down to the deepest levels. However, the typical Christian traditionalist in this category does have *some* things to say about how to resolve the tensions between modern thinking and traditional religious thinking. For instance, they are likely to support the Great Compromise. These traditionalists are not seeking a fight with modernity, but they will stand their ground against modernity when they become convinced that they must.

Christian traditionalists who keep one foot in the modern worldview tend to be optimistic about the prospects for combining aspects of modern thinking with the religious tradition, and they don't go looking for trouble. So, it is tempting to say that this type of religious traditionalist – that is, the type with one foot in each of two worlds – does not have the same sense of purity of thought and careful attention to all the implications of cultural change that the withdrawing sort of traditionalist exhibits. From the point of view of the withdrawing sort of traditionalist, there is really no ground for optimism about combining modern worldviews with a religious outlook.

This form of optimistic religious traditionalism is extremely popular among United States Christians, as far as I can tell. It is also popular in other parts of the world where modernity has taken hold and challenges traditional cultures: a great many educated people around the world maintain their traditional religious outlook while simultaneously becoming partially modern in outlook.

Note that it doesn't matter in all this whether one adopts a new style of religious observance, or continues with an older style. Quite traditional Christians, for example, may be attracted to the use of Christian rock music, which often uses very traditional mythological language to express its point of view, despite its contemporary musical style. It's not musical style or style of worship that makes one a traditionalist in the sense that I'm describing – instead, it's a way of thinking about life and the world that counts.

Even though this sort of traditionalist does have one foot in modern culture, we should not lose sight of the possibility that he or she may nevertheless be highly critical of some aspects of modern culture, on the basis of religious concern. When modern ways of thinking clash in an obvious and dramatic way with the religious tradition, the traditionalist gives preference to the tradition. For example, the traditionalist simply rejects the modern contentions that life's decisions must all be made on secular grounds, and that divine revelation does not exist. The traditionalist with one foot in modernity continues to believe in the power of prayer, the authority of the Bible (properly interpreted), the value system that belongs to the tradition from which he or

she comes, all while simultaneously maintaining as much of modern thinking as possible.