

A Cautionary Tale for Interreligious Studies from Comparative Fundamentalism: Who is at the Table?

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Interreligious studies is a promising new arena for collaboration in religious studies. This paper proposes that we read the recent demise of the comparative fundamentalism endeavor as a cautionary tale for what can result when religion scholars shape an interdisciplinary and intertraditional discourse. The key structural inequity of that framework was its assumed ideological identification with a non-fundamentalist, “normal” religious outlook. Fundamentalists were treated as a global crisis to be comprehended, leading scholars to caricature the communities, particularly the “Islamic fundamentalists,” they studied. Through careful attention to whom we include in our interreligious conversations, interreligious studies might avoid these same pitfalls.

Keywords: comparative, Fundamentalism, inclusion, other, lessons, interdisciplinary

Interreligious studies is a relatively new and undeniably promising subfield within the broad, disciplinary-boundary-defying world that is religious studies. This subfield consciously brings interdisciplinary resources to examine intertraditional religious encounters. It positively engages the de facto religious diversity of our societies and the inevitable collisions and discussions that occur between religious identities. I deeply value the way interreligious studies can bridge the divides between religious studies and theology, between emic and etic approaches. That brings the possibility of opening up conversations that are not simply among arms-length observers about their data but that allow insiders in one religious tradition to speak to insiders in another. Scholars who may or may not belong to those traditions can bring their expertise as full participants. There is probably no more exciting arena of religious studies today.

It is precisely because of my admiration for, and eager participation in, interreligious studies that I would like to offer what I am calling a cautionary tale. It is a case study from another burgeoning field of religious studies that flourished in the late twentieth century. This field was also interdisciplinary, gathering scholars from a variety of academic specialties. It too facilitated collaboration across the divide between religious studies scholars and theologians. Scholars in this field studied and theorized among a wide variety of religious traditions to develop new paradigms of interreligious understanding. The field I am referring to is sometimes called comparative fundamentalism (or just the study of fundamentalisms). It was the attempt to deploy the terminology and framework of “fundamentalism” as a way of understanding the apparent rise of reactive and militant religious movements in the twentieth century.¹ This was perhaps the last and

¹ The locale of my overview is primarily America, and I will be principally surveying the history and expansive uses of the English term “fundamentalism.” I am aware that the English term has occasioned a neologism in Arabic (*uṣūliyya*) and has been associated in French with a term (*intégrisme*) that had prior connotations with Catholic anti-modernism.

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greatest comparative religion project of the twentieth century, and the fact that today it is largely moribund is testament to its rapid decline.

I will offer a brief overview of the etymological origins and growth of the comparative fundamentalism field, its surge of scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s, and the sharp criticisms that contributed to its recent dissolution. I will then draw out some lessons that I believe are relevant for interreligious studies lest it run into some of the same pitfalls.

The Original Fundamentalists’ Notoriety

The original Fundamentalists coined the term in a distinctly tumultuous moment. The nineteenth-century American Evangelical movement included a wide range of political and theological views, but, late in that century, a faction of self-described Evangelicals grew increasingly bellicose about what they perceived as a tripartite threat to Christian orthodoxy: changes in the practice of the physical sciences (most notable in Darwin’s theory of evolution), Biblical criticism (also known as higher criticism), and the responsive rise of liberal Protestantism. They grouped these developments under the heading of “modernism” and set out to oppose any accommodation with these trends within their churches and denominations. One particularly positive expression of this oppositional perspective came in the form of a twelve-volume, paperback series published from 1910 to 1915, entitled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*.² For those familiar with the later anti-intellectual stereotypes of the American Fundamentalist movement, the essays in *The Fundamentals* are markedly urbane and learned. Though intended for an audience of educated laymen and pastors, the volumes were written and edited by some of the most respected and prominent theologically conservative Evangelical scholars and pastors in the U.S. and Britain. Evangelical heroes like Professor B. B. Warfield of Princeton Seminary and Rev. Dr. G. Campbell Morgan, pastor of Westminster Chapel in London, were recruited to write about each of the freshly delineated core teachings (i.e., fundamentals) of the Christian faith, which included “The Deity of Christ,” “The Virgin Birth of Christ,” and “Foreign Missions, Or World-Wide Evangelism.” But the hinge upon which all the other fundamentals turned was the total reliability of the Bible as a source of knowledge and divine truth. For all their ambition to present a rousing public defense of a conventional Evangelical faith, *The Fundamentals* made a small splash in the cultural and religious discourse, as “neither theological journals nor popular religious periodicals seemed to take more than passing notice.”³

The volumes’ impact would be more terminological than cultural or theological. As this vocabulary of “fundamentals” exerted influence in various intra-denominational debates, a Baptist pastor and journalist coined the term “fundamentalists” in 1920 to describe those Baptists who

Naturally, these words have acquired undertones and nuances in local linguistic contexts and scholarly discourse that are not in the scope of this article. For more, see J. J. G. Jansen, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Uṣūliyya,” (Leiden: Brill, 2012), and Peter Antes, “Fundamentalism: A Western Term with Consequences,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 12, no. 1 (2000): 260–266. For the sake of clarity, I have chosen to maintain the capitalized “Fundamentalism” in reference to the original Protestant movement and used the lower case for other uses of the term.

² Reuben A. Torrey and A. C. Dixon, eds., *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, Vol. I–XII (Chicago: Testimony Publishing, 1910–1915).

³ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 119.

were ready to “do battle royal” against their more theologically liberal counterparts.⁴ The term caught on quickly across denominational lines as it seemed to capture, for the self-ascribing Fundamentalists, their single-minded commitment to the core of the Christian faith. It also set them apart from the then diffuse usage of the title “Evangelical” in the 1920s to cover a wide spectrum of politically and theologically liberal and conservative views. For their opponents, Evangelical and otherwise, the epithet “Fundamentalist” summed up the ideological and oppositional attitude that they found so distasteful in the group.

The adversaries of Fundamentalism were quite vocal in their disdain, and perhaps the most prominent early refutation came in liberal Evangelical Protestant Harry Emerson Fosdick’s 1922 sermon at New York’s First Presbyterian Church provocatively titled “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” He contended, “Their apparent intention is to drive out of the evangelical churches men and women of liberal opinions. . . . For in the Middle West the Fundamentalists have had their way in some communities and a Christian minister tells us the consequences. He says the educated people are looking for their religion outside the churches.” In Fosdick’s telling, Fundamentalist intolerance was rupturing Evangelical churches as they took doctrinaire stances on matters non-essential to the Christian faith.⁵

A different “battle royal” between the early Fundamentalists and scientific American culture materialized a few years later in the proceedings of *The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes* in 1925, popularized and mythologized as the Scopes Monkey Trial. Scopes was a biology teacher attempting to controvert a recent Fundamentalist legislative victory in Tennessee outlawing the teaching of human evolution in public schools. Popular media portrayals and perception at the time presented the Scopes trial as a showdown between the culturally-powerful-but-boorish biblicism of the Fundamentalists and the arrayed and embattled defenders of science, modernity, and American pluralism. The trial involved the first utilization of the new technology of a national radio hook-up and was broadcast nationwide as an unprecedented “spectacular media event.”⁶ For two weeks, hundreds of reporters converged on the little town of Dayton, Tennessee to cover the phenomenon. Setting aside the question of whether the trial truly was representative of core Fundamentalist concerns (the early movement was more focused on denominational purity than societal education reform, and several essays in *The Fundamentals* take a more conciliatory approach

⁴ Curtis Lee Laws, “Convention Side Lights,” *Watchman-Examiner* 8, July 1, 1920, 834. Quoted in David Harrington Watt, “Fundamentalists of the 1920s and 1930s,” in Simon A. Wood and David Harrington Watt, eds., *Fundamentalism: Perspectives on a Contested History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 20. As Watt notes, the new term was little more than an aside, and Laws’ own feelings about the Fundamentalists were unclear.

⁵ Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?,” sermon at First Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, May 21, 1922, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5070/>, accessed December 28, 2016. Fascinatingly, in 1922, Fosdick was still calling himself and his church “evangelical.” He calls attention to the diversity of Evangelical opinion on “the historicity of certain special miracles,” the “theory of the Atonement,” “the inspiration of the Bible,” and “the second coming of our Lord.” The fact that liberal Protestants were still identifying with the term Evangelical in the 1920s demonstrates the flexibility of that title and why the Fundamentalists embraced a new terminological identity. By the mid-century, many of these theologically liberal and moderate Evangelicals would abandon that title in favor of calling themselves “historic” or “Mainline Protestants.”

⁶ Susan Harding, “Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other,” *Social Research* 58, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 382.

toward the specific question of evolution), the episode was important for widely introducing the term “Fundamentalism” to popular American culture.⁷

While the Fundamentalist-led prosecution actually did win the trial—the jury deliberated for a mere nine minutes, and Scopes was fined a meager \$100 and then given a scholarship by a group of scientists to study at the University of Chicago—Susan Harding has compellingly argued that the lasting image of the trial was mediated by the elite, big-city media who relayed accounts of the event that were not even remotely neutral or sympathetic to the Fundamentalist side. H. L. Mencken, an acerbic columnist for the *Baltimore Sun*, attended the trial and fired off trenchant dispatches to the metropolitan elite. He caricatured rural, Fundamentalist Tennesseans as “*Homo boobiens*,” adding that a person “is a fundamentalist for the precise reason that he is uneducable. . . . What impressed me most, watching that trial through long sweaty days, was the honest bewilderment of the assembled yokels. They simply could not understand the thing that Scopes was accused of teaching.”⁸ This became the dominant remembered narrative of the trial; indeed, many Fundamentalist Christian newspapers or periodicals hardly mentioned the trial at the time and did not send reporters to cover it. The largely secular or progressive, pro-science press who did cover the trial portrayed the famed prosecutor William Jennings Bryan and his Fundamentalist supporters as artless, unsophisticated Bible thumpers, unable to adjust to the demands of modernity.

Likewise, the mid-century Broadway play and hit Hollywood movie *Inherit the Wind* further propelled these images of Fundamentalists into the collective American consciousness by transforming the Scopes trial (lightly fictionalized) into an allegory for McCarthyism’s prosecution of enlightened free speakers and pluralists.⁹ The resulting popular image of Fundamentalists is, in Harding’s condensation, one of people who are “militant, strident, dogmatic, ignorant, duped, backward, rural, southern, uneducated, antiscientific, anti-intellectual, irrational, absolutist, authoritarian, racist, sexist, anticomunist, reactionary, bigoted, war mongers. You cannot reason with them.”¹⁰ In Harding’s sharp analysis, the Scopes trial becomes a mythic victory created by an anti-Fundamentalist, urban media, so that Bryan and the Fundamentalists were “‘othered,’ internally ‘orientalized’” both in real time and in remembrance.¹¹ Fundamentalists were not persuadable fellow citizens in a pluralistic democracy; they were the benighted enemies of enlightenment.

As these negative connotations accrued, many Fundamentalists, beginning in the 1940s, opted to return to the more irenic and ecumenical “Evangelical” (or “neo-evangelical,” as they originally preferred) moniker. Hence, “Fundamentalist” and “Evangelical” acted for the remaining decades of the twentieth century as attitudinal poles in a shared theological and ideological

⁷ See James Orr, “Science and Christian Faith,” *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, Vol. IV (Chicago: Testimony Publishing, c. 1912), 91–104, and George Frederick Wright, “The Passing of Evolution,” *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, Vol. VII (Chicago: Testimony Publishing, c. 1913). For analysis, see Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 122–123.

⁸ H. L. Mencken, “Fundamentalism: Divine and Secular,” *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, September 20, 1925. Excerpted in S. T. Joshi, ed., *H. L. Mencken on Religion* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002), 120–121.

⁹ Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, *Inherit the Wind* (New York: Bantam Books, 1960). See Marvin Olasky and John Perry, *Monkey Business: The True Story of the Scopes Trial* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005), 133ff.

¹⁰ Harding, “Representing Fundamentalism,” 373.

¹¹ Harding, “Representing Fundamentalism,” 390.

movement, separated only by “degree[s] of militance,” rather than discrete or separable qualities.¹² Famed Fundamentalist preacher and political mobilizer of the late twentieth century Jerry Falwell used to joke: “A fundamentalist is an evangelical who is angry about something.”¹³

The Orientalists’ Analogy

In a lexicological irony, in the same decades that the American media were, in Harding’s expression, “orientalizing” Protestant Fundamentalists, actual Orientalists—the preferred term for Western scholars who studied Islam until Edward Said’s scathing book *Orientalism* led to the term’s abdication¹⁴—were beginning to expand the use of the term to Islam. In the 1940s and 1950s, several Orientalist scholars of Islam at the University of Chicago began applying “fundamentalist” to various figures and movements within Islam, principally as an analogy to help Western audiences understand the complexities of Islamic history. Rosemary R. Corbett has recently and witheringly surveyed this mid-century lexical expansion of the concept of fundamentalism in its earliest connection with Islam.¹⁵ Her analysis is useful in its etymological tracing of the original idea of Islamic fundamentalism, which she credits to the famed Islamicist H. A. R. Gibb and then follows through the work of two of Gibb’s students: the comparativist Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Fazlur Rahman, a liberal Muslim reformist. For introducing the concept of Islamic fundamentalism into the academic discourse, Corbett accuses Gibb of “ahistorical conjecture” that is “analytically imprecise,” and, through his students, he contributes to a “false universal classification” of generic fundamentalism.¹⁶ In her telling, the Orientalists’ casual analogy “helped to foster the idea that fundamentalism is something common to all traditions.”¹⁷ My own assessment of these figures aligns with Corbett’s on several fronts, but I would like to draw a few distinctions and clarify a few of her points.

Several features of the Orientalists’ analogy are worth highlighting. First, fundamentalism appears in their writings alongside a number of imported Christian terms—“puritanical,” “catholic,” “the Muslim Church,” etc.—that these Western scholars of Islam metaphorically employed to explain Islamic debates to a mostly Christian audience.¹⁸ They appear keenly aware

¹² George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 149. Use of the term Evangelical (or “neo-evangelical”) was re-pioneered in the 1940s by disaffected Fundamentalists clustered around Fuller Seminary, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the revivalist Billy Graham. They sought to differentiate themselves from the more factional and culturally antagonistic Fundamentalist modes of the 1920s and 1930s.

¹³ Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 16. See also George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 1.

¹⁴ Edward Said’s sweeping critique of Orientalism was directed not only at the Western religious studies conversation about Islam, but also at the artistic and literary depictions of “The East” that infantilized, patronized, sexualized, and generally Othered non-white peoples as an imagined foil to Western identity and became embedded in academic discourse. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

¹⁵ Rosemary R. Corbett, “Islamic ‘Fundamentalism’: The Mission Creep of an American Religious Metaphor,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83, n. 4 (December 2015): 977–1004, accessed December 29, 2016, doi: 10.1093/jaarel/lfv056.

¹⁶ Corbett, “Islamic ‘Fundamentalism,’” 988, 989, and 980.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 981.

¹⁸ For instance, Sir Hamilton Alexander Rosskeen Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), x, 14, and 32. See also Fazlur Rahman, “Revival and Reform in Islam,” in P. M. Holt, Ann K. S. Lambton, and Bernard Lewis, eds., *The Cambridge History of Islam*, Vol. 2B (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 637.

that they were drawing an analogy to this particular Christian vocabulary and movement. Moreover, the Orientalists, surprisingly in retrospect, had many positive things to say about the imputed Islamic fundamentalists. Gibb and Rahman wrote about it as a scripture-based reformist/revivalist tendency that arose periodically throughout the Islamic centuries.¹⁹ Gibb commented that the much-maligned, and oft-fundamentalist-labeled, eighteenth-century Wahhabi reform movement “in its ideal aspect . . . had a salutary and revitalizing effect, which spread little by little over the whole Muslim world.”²⁰

Rahman, operating as both a Pakistani Muslim reformer and a scholar of religion, does not categorically dismiss or dislike what he labels as fundamentalist. He thought that the Wahhabis had “done good work by bringing into relief the principles of Islamic egalitarianism and co-operation.”²¹ He sought to articulate a “mature and vigorously Qur’anicly based vision of authentic Islam for this age.”²² In this process, he seemed to find some empathy for and identification with so-called Muslim fundamentalist movements and thinkers. At the time of his death, he was writing a monograph on the topic of Islamic fundamentalism. Ebrahim Moosa, the posthumous editor of that volume, wrote:

In [Rahman’s] vocabulary, a genuine “fundamentalist” was a person who was committed to a project of reconstruction or re-thinking. Such a person must recognize that one lived in a “new age” and with honesty, as well as with both intellect and faith, encounter the message of the Qur’an through the mirror of that historical moment.²³

This does not sound so different from Rahman’s own project, albeit with his added insistence on historical consciousness.

Smith—who, though younger than Gibb, was actually the first of the Orientalists to apply the term fundamentalism to Islam in print²⁴—would argue later in his life that the various

¹⁹ Gibb casts Islamic fundamentalism as the revivalist/textualist half of a Hegelian dialectic countered by mystical Sufism (“the tension between transcendentalism and immanentism”) that reaches an occasionally sublime synthesis in figures like al-Ghazali and Muhammad ‘Abduh. Gibb, *Modern Trends*, 31–32. Rahman traces the trajectory of ‘Abduh’s reformist thought as “it developed a fundamentalist character” in his disciple Rashid Rida. But even then, “it was essentially a throw-back to eighteenth century [i.e., Wahhabi] pre-Modernist fundamentalism.” Rahman, “Revival and Reform in Islam,” 648.

²⁰ Gibb, *Modern Trends*, 26–27.

²¹ Rahman, “Revival and Reform,” 638.

²² Frederick Mathewson Denny, “The Legacy of Fazlur Rahman,” in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, ed., *The Muslims of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 98.

²³ Ebrahim Moosa, “Introduction,” in *Revival and Reform in Islam: A Study of Islamic Fundamentalism* by Fazlur Rahman (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 8. This borderline affinity undermines Corbett’s parenthetical statement that Rahman was “often using [fundamentalist] to describe his opponents” (“Islamic ‘Fundamentalism,’” 990–991).

²⁴ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Modern Islam in India: A Social Analysis*, 2nd ed. (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946), 150. The first edition was published in 1943. Corbett attributes the conception of the analogy to his teacher, Gibb, in his 1945 Haskell Lectures in Comparative Religion at the University of Chicago (published in 1947). She papers over Smith’s earlier use of the word and concept before Gibb’s with a footnote: “While Smith technically used the term in print before Gibb, he did so while writing as Gibb’s student and it is Gibb’s dialectical schema that has exerted the lasting influence on the discourse” (Corbett, “Islamic ‘Fundamentalism,’” 991 n.14). Is it not equally possible that Gibb got

fundamentalisms of the world were not products of unenlightened or pugnacious religiosity. Rather, Smith wrote:

[They] should be understood only in terms of the failure of modern liberalism. . . . An increasing number of people around the world, responding to the shallowness of negative secularism [i.e., a secularism that is anti-religious] and its complete inability to make room for spirituality, are taking recourse to the only clear alternative that they seem to be offered: the various forms of fundamentalisms.²⁵

Smith saw Islamic and other “fundamentalisms” not as a generic militancy against modernity but as the natural reaction that occurs when the human instinct toward meaning and transcendence is pushed to the cultural margins.

Against Corbett’s genealogical thesis of the Orientalist’s analogy—that Gibb started the sloppy comparison and his inheritors carried on using it uncritically²⁶—I would offer a more generous assessment. Gibb, Rahman, Smith, and the other scholars who developed the concept of Islamic fundamentalism in various fashions from the 1940s to 1970s appear keenly aware that they were drawing an analogy to a particular Christian movement. Theirs was an exercise in translation, in comparative religion and interreligious intelligibility, making sense of the unfamiliar by way of the familiar. Islamic fundamentalism, in their composite view, was not irrational, irretrievable, or simplistically anti-modern. The term was not intrinsically negative or even reactionary. It was a metaphor—a non-native term imported to facilitate a comparison. Over the middle decades of the twentieth century, other Orientalists tentatively picked up the term as a generic shorthand for scripturalist or political Islamic reform movements.²⁷

By the late-1970s, then, fundamentalism had come to occupy a fairly stable place in the American vocabulary: some American Protestants were still self-applying the word. And, in the Western scholarly discourse about Islam, the term had begun to slip the bonds that tied it to the

the idea of using the term from Smith’s prior publication or that they collaboratively noticed a parallel between certain trends in Islam and twentieth-century Christianity?

²⁵ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Fundamentalism in the Modern World,” *India International Centre Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 41. Corbett puzzlingly casts Smith as a prescient, conscientious scholar, who in the 1960s, “had ceased to use the term fundamentalism and would later argue that to apply this term to Muslims was to confuse the histories and cultural essences of East and West” (Corbett, “Islamic ‘Fundamentalism,’” 993). I can find no place where Smith made this argument against fundamentalism’s use with regard to Islam in any of his publications, and Corbett offers no citation for it. I can find several instances of Smith using not only the term but the categorical idea of generic religious fundamentalism well into the 1990s. If anything, Smith helped expand the application of the concept of fundamentalism to other traditions beyond Islam and Christianity. He continued to use the term and even the plural (fundamentalisms), albeit with some qualifications, in this essay and elsewhere. In fact, in one of Corbett’s few citations of Smith’s broad corpus from a book of essays published in 2000, the year of his death, he explicitly says that Muslims’ “disillusionment has led them to the sort of right-wing fundamentalism and religious reactionary stance that I myself certainly decry.” Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Islamic Resurgence,” in Sayyid Jalal al-Din Ashtiyani, et al., eds., *Consciousness and Reality: Studies in Memory of Toshihiko Izutsu* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 13.

²⁶ She argues, “At the very least, continual usage of the label outside of Protestant contexts is intellectually lazy” (Corbett, “Islamic ‘Fundamentalism,’” 995).

²⁷ John O. Voll, whom Corbett critiques for participating in the 1990s Fundamentalism Project, tells the story of a gathering of American Islamicists in the 1970s where Barbara Stowasser “tried to convince us all to stop using this term (fundamentalism), and we all agreed that it was a bad term, and then went on using it in our publications the next year anyway.” John O. Voll, “Al-Qa’ida” (lecture, Georgetown University, Washington D.C., October 23, 2013).

Protestant tradition. If you search American academic databases for uses of the word fundamentalism prior to 1978, you discover hundreds of articles analyzing the Protestant movement with a smattering of other religious and non-religious analogies derived from that movement. Interestingly, “farm/agricultural fundamentalism” occurs far more frequently than any sort of non-Christian religious—including Islamic—fundamentalism.

Comparative Fundamentalism

The academic conversation about fundamentalism, particularly in Islamic studies, that was at a low hum by the 1970s, grew to a roar in 1979–1980 when the mostly unrelated occurrences of the Iranian Revolution and the dramatic Republican political mobilization of American Evangelicals and Fundamentalists to elect Ronald Reagan catapulted the term fundamentalism again into American and Western consciousness and vocabulary.²⁸ Pundits and scholars, analysts and liberal elites cast about for conceptual handles to explain the ostensibly sudden resurgence of mettlesome religion, and fundamentalism became the catch-all word to describe newly assertive faith.

This surprised, visceral awareness of fundamentalism was quintessentially captured just a few months before Reagan’s landslide election in an essay by Martin E. Marty, a liberal Protestant and one of the most widely read religious commentators in America, in *The Saturday Review*. Entitled “Fundamentalism Reborn: Faith and Fanaticism,” the short article avers, “there is no denying that in the 1980s religion is back with a vengeance—and not just in Iran.”²⁹ Marty profiles Jerry Falwell and Ayatollah Khomeini, while also pointing to various religious uprisings in Japan, India, and Israel to illustrate the menacing return of regressive religion confronting the new decade. Channeling Harry Emerson Fosdick, the essay is one part categorical analysis and two parts rousing call to action to join the battle. In the coming skirmishes between liberal modernity and the arrayed forces of militant fundamentalism, there is no doubt whose side Marty is on. In his prescient and martial conclusion, he notes, “If ‘the fundamentalists are coming,’ it is important, this time, to understand both their grievances and their impulses. Some reconnaissance, to determine who is in their camp and who is not, is strategically wise.”³⁰ Marty was one of many voices championing a new comparative religion effort to categorize and combat the global fundamentalism phenomenon.

What ensued was an explosion of academic and popular, American and international discourse about fundamentalism in the 1980s and 1990s.³¹ With the rise of the Religious Right

²⁸ There is no shortage of scholarly and media attempts to make sense of the “Rise of the Religious Right” of the 1970s and 1980s. Good analysis can be found in Nancy T. Ammerman, “North American Protestant Fundamentalism,” in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Observed*, The Fundamentalism Project, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 1–65. A primary-source collection edited by Matthew Avery Sutton is also illuminating: *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2013).

²⁹ Martin E. Marty, “Fundamentalism Reborn: Faith and Fanaticism,” *The Saturday Review* (May 1980), 37.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

³¹ See especially Simon A. Wood and David Harrington Watt, “Introduction,” in Wood and Watt, eds., *Fundamentalism: Perspectives on a Contested History*, 1–17. Douglas Long, *Fundamentalists and Extremists* (New York: Facts on File, 2002) has a decent chronology of the events that were labeled as deriving from fundamentalism (pp. 97–107) and an annotated

fueling Republicans' three consecutive terms in the White House, the sudden existential awareness of militant groups in the Middle East and elsewhere, and several high-profile attacks by Christian and Muslim terrorists, the American and European media and the liberal scholars of the academy generated a vast discursive endeavor to analyze and reconnoiter this seemingly ubiquitous, revived fundamentalism. In the 1990s, the Library of Congress created a new subject heading (BL 238) for Religious Fundamentalism, leaving intact the historic BT 82.2 for the topic of Protestant Fundamentalism. There are today nearly 200 books under the BL 238 heading with numerous languages and countries represented. The earliest entry is from 1986. Some of these books and articles have been written from emic perspectives, with theologians and religious thinkers defending against the fundamentalist barbarians at the gates.³² Others are written by religious studies scholars, and, despite the efforts expended at dispassionately understanding fundamentalism, the combative tone exemplified by Marty shines through. The deeper one plumbs this massive corpus of scholastic output, the more one gets the sense that there is never a considered option of defending or integrating fundamentalism. It must be fought. The Orientalists' ambiguity toward the "Islamic fundamentalism" skews toward tacit hostility among the comparative fundamentalism scholars.

This veritable eruption of scholarship and conversation about fundamentalism reached its peak in the publication of *The Fundamentalism Project*, a five-volume series, from 1991 to 1995. Under the editorship of Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby, the series gathers scholars from a variety of fields (anthropologists, sociologists, historians) to contextualize, analyze, and even "comprehend" the global development of fundamentalism.³³ Virtually no major religious tradition is exempted from the fundamentalism's thesis. Marty and Appleby are cognizant of the heavy connotations that come with applying the fundamentalism concept beyond its Protestant origins. But, even if the word fundamentalist were abandoned, they argue, "the public would have to find some other word if it is to make sense of a set of global phenomena which urgently bid to be understood."³⁴ The editors are mindful of the word's Protestant roots, but they argue that fundamentalism can be elevated above its origins to become a universal category: "all words come from somewhere and will be more appropriate in some contexts than in others."³⁵ They cite

bibliography (pp. 143–160) of the ensuing discourse. See also Gabriele Marranci, *Understanding Muslim Identity: Rethinking Fundamentalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1–14.

³² A few examples will suffice: Fisher Humphreys and Philip Wise offer an analysis of generic fundamentalism but with special attention to the concerns of progressive Baptists—*Fundamentalism* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2004). G. Elijah Dann, ed., *Leaving Fundamentalism: Personal Stories* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008) sticks to the Christian tradition but extends the meaning of the term to include stories of those who have survived conservative Catholic or Pentecostal/Charismatic upbringings. Within the Muslim tradition, Bassam Tibi has been one of the leading voices countering and refuting "Islamic fundamentalism," see especially, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism: Political Islam and the New World Disorder* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).

³³ The final volume is triumphantly titled *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, though Marty and Appleby are quick to note in their introductory essay that they intend the term to mean "the more modest goal of taking in or embracing a variety of movements in one inclusive analytical statement," rather than the more ambitious sense of completely understanding or knowing. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, "Introduction," in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, *The Fundamentalism Project*, Vol. 5 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 3.

³⁴ Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, "The Fundamentalism Project: A User's Guide," in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, viii.

³⁵ *Ibid.* They apparently felt the need to reiterate nearly word-for-word this argument against their detractors in the introduction to the fourth volume of the series. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, "Introduction," in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms*, *The Fundamentalism Project*, Vol. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 8 n.1.

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examples (“modern,” “religious,” “liberal,” and “secular”) where a word’s etymology does not control all future usage.

Echoing the contentious forces that arose against the original Fundamentalist moment in the 1920s and the chorus of anti-fundamentalist voices in the early 1980s, the editors acknowledge that “The Fundamentalism Project issues from the world called Western, the sphere in which the ‘modern,’ ‘liberal,’ and ‘secular’ achievements are most readily experienced, and where fundamentalisms had appeared to be recessive, if not waning.”³⁶ In other words, ingrained in the very structure of the project’s analysis are a certain oppositional identity and a certain taken-aback posture. Fundamentalism is a problem to be solved. And yet, none of the contributing authors to the volumes self-identifies as a fundamentalist. Fundamentalism is the object of study, the phenomenon to be explained, the global crisis to be comprehended. For the remainder of the 1990s and into the early twenty-first century, comparative fundamentalism flourished as a field. Hundreds of scholars wrote hundreds of books in numerous languages, thousands of scholarly articles were published, and the word fundamentalism became entrenched in the analytical religious and popular vocabulary as the preferred byword for bad religion.

One conspicuous characteristic of the massive interreligious comparative fundamentalisms enterprise, exemplified but by no means isolated to Marty and Appleby’s series, is its intensive focus on Islam. In his slightly sardonic review of the entirety of The Fundamentalism Project’s five volumes, Earle Waugh notes that of the 106 articles included, “thirty-one are explicitly concerned with Islamic fundamentalist expressions, and many of the others use interpretive data drawn from Muslim phenomena.”³⁷ This is particularly striking given that the term fundamentalism was coined in a Christian context, the editors of the five volumes are both professed Christians, and the project itself emerges from a Western, Christianity-imbued, American society. Well before 9/11, “fundamentalism,” a word that was of Christian parentage and had been occasionally used analogically for Islamic movements, had not only been transformed into a universal religious category but had found a new native locale in the analysis of Islam.

Criticisms and the Decline of Comparative Fundamentalism

Comparative fundamentalism was *the* great comparative religion project of the late twentieth century, and its analyses have not held up well over time. The surge of fundamentalism scholarship in the 1990s has dwindled in the subsequent decades. The word and concept are still a part of the American lexicon, still used by journalists and, occasionally, scholars (especially in reference to Islam), but new comparative projects juxtaposing different forms of fundamentalism are vanishingly rare. Critics have justly and unjustly piled on the concept of a generic fundamentalism taxonomy, on the specific arguments and conclusions of The Fundamentalism Project, and on the ideological assumptions that undergirded the whole effort.

A few samples of these critiques will suffice: Jay M. Harris and many others challenge the circularity of the category of fundamentalism, namely that in labeling a group fundamentalist, we

³⁶ Marty and Appleby, “The Fundamentalism Project: A User’s Guide,” xiii.

³⁷ Earle Waugh, “Fundamentalism: Harbinger of Academic Revisionism?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 162, accessed December 30, 2016, doi: 10.1093/jaarel/LXV.1.161.

“necessarily presuppose that we know what fundamentalism is,” and then by delineating the common characteristics of fundamentalist groups, we reify the prior definition.³⁸ It is a self-reinforcing comparison. David Harrington Watt highlights the Protestant assumptions that lingered with the term and argues that “labeling Jews or Muslims fundamentalists is somewhat akin to labeling Christians Sunnis or Shiites or labeling Muslims Methodists.”³⁹ In other words, lurking in the background of the American study of comparative fundamentalism are the Scopes Monkey Trial, the Rise of the Religious Right, and intra-Protestant debates that may or may not have analogues outside Christianity. Khalid Blankinship critiques the normative Western and liberal ideology behind the word fundamentalism, such that, like the term Wahhabi, it is deployed “primarily as a term of abuse.”⁴⁰ In a surprisingly personal essay where he contrasts his “Fundamentalist Baptist upbringing” with his later scholarly perspective, anthropologist Daniel Martin Varisco admits, “Fundamentalist rhetoric, because it thrives on intolerance and hate, is the religion many of us love to hate. So how can we really understand it?”⁴¹ And, echoing Foucault, Juan Campo holds that the Western academic and media conversation about fundamentalism is “a mode of hegemonic discourse” that has become “embedded in the ideologies of Middle Eastern states, among ruling elites as well as among their subjects.”⁴² “Fundamentalist” is what autocrats label a community they intend to per- / prosecute.

Many of these criticisms of the broad-brush comparative fundamentalism enterprise are fair and well-deserved. The participating scholars attempted to encompass so many movements that the bigger the fundamentalism umbrella became the lower the common denominator among the movements analyzed became. As Waugh comments about *The Fundamentalism Project*, “Throughout the articles there appears to be a constant awareness that the realities do not fit the frames applied.”⁴³ This unwieldy breadth ultimately caused the entire endeavor to collapse under its own weight. Nearly any religious movement could, from the right angle, be labeled fundamentalist. Moreover, the participating scholars’ presumed opposition to the object of their study did, indeed, color their analysis.

Marty and Appleby are correct that all words and categories come from somewhere. It is true that the word fundamentalism might have transcended its etymology. It might have become a trans-religious ideological orientation—like secularism, liberalism, modernism, or feminism—that grew beyond its original context. The original Orientalists’ use of the term analogically with Islam did not betoken some intrinsic disapproval toward those so labeled. Had Marty and others followed Gibb and Rahman’s lead, fundamentalism might have come to be seen as a complement to modernity, a synonym of revival or reform, with its own negative and positive aspects.

³⁸ Jay M. Harris, “‘Fundamentalism’: Objections from a Modern Jewish Historian,” in John Stratton Hawley, ed., *Fundamentalism and Gender* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 167.

³⁹ Wood and Watt, “Introduction,” 5.

⁴⁰ Khalid Yahya Blankinship, “Muslim ‘Fundamentalism,’ Salafism, Sufism, and Other Trends,” in *Fundamentalism: Perspectives on a Contested History*, 158.

⁴¹ Daniel Martin Varisco, “The Tragedy of a Comic: Fundamentalists Crusading Against Fundamentalists,” *Contemporary Islam* 1, no. 3 (2007), 227, accessed December 27, 2016, doi:10.1007/s11562-007-0019-6.

⁴² Juan Eduardo Campo, “The Ends of Islamic Fundamentalism: Hegemonic Discourse and the Islamic Question in Egypt,” *Journal of Contentious: Debates in Society, Culture, and Science* 4, no. 3 (Spring 1995), 177. This analysis is by and large echoed in Corbett’s “Islamic ‘Fundamentalism’” article, though she does not directly reference Campo.

⁴³ Waugh, “Fundamentalism: Harbinger of Academic Revisionism?” 167.

Millions of people in contemporary society hold the identity of being secular or a secularist, liberal or an advocate of liberalism. These terms are contested and polemical, aggressively affirmed and constantly reinterpreted. But who speaks as a fundamentalist? Who contends for a positive reading of fundamentalism? To call someone a fundamentalist today almost says more about oneself and one’s own implied adversarial identity than about the person being labeled. As Laurence Iannaccone puts it, “A group may thus earn the ‘fundamentalist’ epithet less because of what it *is* than because of who it *scares*.”⁴⁴ For theologians and religious studies scholars who analyzed them, the fundamentalists were objects of study, ideological foes, and almost never fellow travelers, conversation partners, or friends. The negative connotations that have attached to “fundamentalism” make it similar to the word “weed.” No plant is objectively a weed; to call it a weed is to name it an irritating intruder, a threatening interloper in the garden.

It is predictable that the more scholars and commentators employed the word fundamentalist as a negative category to describe Christian and other religious movements, the more it declined in usage as a self-description. The Protestant Fundamentalists themselves were sensitive to the shifts in the term’s cultural undertones, and, over time, the coalition found a range of alternate identifying terms (“Evangelical,” “born again,” “Bible-believing,” “conservative Christian,” etc.) to avoid the word Fundamentalist. The attacks on September 11th, 2001 proved the death knell of self-ascribed Christian Fundamentalism. The al-Qa’ida attackers were constantly called “Islamic fundamentalists” in popular media, and demographers show a sharp decline in use of the self-appellation among American Christians as these further loaded connotations accrued.⁴⁵ Less than a century after its coinage as a positive identity marking one’s vigorous Protestant orthodoxy, the self-ascription of Fundamentalism has virtually disappeared in America.⁴⁶

There has also been a noticeable decline in academic use of the term fundamentalist as an analytical category over the past decade and a half since 9/11. It is still used by media and bloggers, at cocktail parties, and by progressive religious believers to denounce unsavory co-religionists; and it still pops up in the occasional academic article, but there has seemingly been a collective recognition by religious studies scholars that, as a categorical term, it has outlived its usefulness.

⁴⁴ Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Toward an Economic Theory of ‘Fundamentalism,’” *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics* 153, no. 1 (March 1997): 101. Emphasis his.

⁴⁵ No demographer seems to have been observing this shift in real time, but there are numerous data points. In the mid-1990s, Christian Smith found that, among American Protestants, 19.4 percent self-identified as “fundamentalist” when given four options (the others were evangelical—20.9 percent, mainline Protestant—27.3 percent, and liberal—20.4 percent). *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 236. Anna Greenberg and Jennifer Berktold discovered in 2004 that 24 percent of white Evangelicals (a much smaller demographic sample than Smith’s American Protestants) identified as fundamentalists. “Evangelicals in America,” Greenberg, Quinlan, Rosner, Research Inc., *Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly*, April 5, 2004, accessed July 5, 2017, <https://www-tc.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/files/2008/10/results.pdf>. By the time Pew began its landmark U.S. Religious Landscape Survey in 2007 (to be repeated in 2014), “fundamentalist” had almost vanished with only 0.5 percent of the U.S. population, and 1 percent of Evangelicals identifying with “Other Evangelical/Fundamentalist” churches. Pew Research Center, “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic,” February 2008, accessed July 5, 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2013/05/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>.

⁴⁶ An exception that proves the rule: the *Fundamentalist* Church of Latter Day Saints is a widely reviled polygamist sect, notorious for caring little about the opinions of outsiders.

The sour taste left in my mouth having surveyed the comparative fundamentalism endeavor is this: the people who were labeled generic fundamentalists, be they Muslim or Hindu or Christian, were rarely given a voice in the comparison. The category was invented and deployed by Marty and others as a means of separating good religion from bad religion, “normal” modern religion from dysfunctional (anti-)modern religion. Eventually, with no one positively self-ascribing it, the word has become a libel not an identity, a put-down not a perspective.

Conclusion

As we come full circle back to applying our cautionary tale, I would like to suggest that the comparative fundamentalism effort offers a set of pointedly negative lessons for the field of interreligious studies. Obviously, comparative fundamentalism and interreligious studies are very different academic endeavors. The comparative fundamentalism scholars sought to extend an encompassing category, a theory, and a framework to explain a huge variety of contemporary religious movements. Interreligious studies, to the degree that a cogent definition exists for the field, begins from below and focuses the lens of analysis on the multitudinous encounters between religious traditions and identities. It studies, theorizes, and, in some arenas, facilitates such boundary encounters, borrowing from the interfaith movement a hope that mutual understanding and cooperation can defuse the cross-religious tensions that characterize many modern contexts.

But the two fields are also similar in significant ways: like comparative fundamentalism, interreligious studies is an academic discourse uniting outsider (etic) religious studies scholars and insider (emic) theologians and (interfaith) religious practitioners in collaborative projects. Interreligious studies is, like the comparative efforts of the last century, an interdisciplinary endeavor, drawing together psychologists, sociologists, historians, philosophers, political scientists, and more. And, like the collaborative comparativists of yesteryear, interreligious studies scholars inevitably hold a shared set of assumptions. These assumptions may well be defensible—and arguably far more defensible than those of the comparative fundamentalism discourse—but they must be acknowledged. We would all agree that interfaith peace is better than outright hostility, that conversation and collaboration across religious borders can be productive. And most of us would hope, in Eboo Patel’s phrasing, that we “can work with diversity to build pluralism.”⁴⁷

The lessons I take from the cautionary tale of comparative fundamentalism are threefold. First, it demonstrates how collaboration across religious traditions and fields of study can rather easily be facilitated by a shared academic culture and outlook, but that shared outlook can also create perilous blind spots. In many important respects, Christian and Muslim and Buddhist and Hindu (and agnostic) academics may have more in common with each other than with their co-religionists. The institutions we inhabit—colleges and universities, interfaith centers and institutes, academic journals and publishing houses—by their very nature provide our common ground and reinforce our inclusive worldviews and hopes for harmony.

Second, while our shared assumptions might be entirely plausible and humanistic and defensible, they can have collateral effects—tempting us to castigate and, potentially unfairly,

⁴⁷ Eboo Patel, “Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies,” *Liberal Education* 99, no. 4 (Fall 2013), accessed July 27, 2017, <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/toward-field-interfaith-studies>.

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label our seemingly uncooperative neighbors. The scholars of the various comparative fundamentalism projects were apparently united in disdaining or being alarmed by the phenomena they studied, seeing them as a threat to a modern, normal, liberal, and, yes, often Western and Christian order. Similarly, it would be easy for interreligious practitioners to amputate and interreligious scholars to ignore significant movements and groups within any given religious tradition that do not immediately warm to our pluralistic, interfaith ethos. When elite theologians and elite religious studies scholars collaborate, our conversation can quickly shift from analytical to normative, to assume that that which does not align with our program is bad or abnormal or disordered. Like comparative fundamentalism, interreligious studies risks becoming a conversation among “liberal modernists” (or “academic elites” or “religious pluralists”) across traditions that marginalizes traditionalists, exclusivists, scripturalists, and conservatives.

Third, relatedly, constant attention must be paid to those voices we might not remember or desire to include in our conversations and our studies. It is crucial to consider who is welcome at and invited to the table of interreligious discourse, recognizing that every religion has elements that do not “play well with others,” and those elements are perhaps the most important to be included in interreligious outreach and invitation. I am not naïve about this: I realize that conservative Evangelical Christians and Salafi Muslims and Hindutva activists will not be sitting around the interfaith table chitchatting congenially anytime soon. But as scholars who care about interreligious conversations, we must resist the impulse to excise those parts of religious traditions with sharp elbows. Many interreligious encounters are not harmonious or collaborative or warm, but those encounters can be studied and theorized and, perhaps, improved as well. These groups often make up a not-insignificant fraction of the religious landscape, and our admirable pluralistic and inclusive projects for our societies cannot succeed without them. The moral of our cautionary tale is that the voices who aren’t in the room aren’t voices. And the people who aren’t at the table are vulnerable to caricature.

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