



BY GREG ALBRECHT

# The Gathering Storm of FUNDAMENTALISM

**I**t is one of the most explosive issues facing our world in the early years of this 21st century. Political and religious agendas around the world are bullied and coerced, reacting to a virus-like spiritual plague of religious fundamentalism. The Islamic fundamentalist reaction to Western imperialism and decadence is said to be a counter-attack on the “great Satans” of our culture (materialism, immorality, secularism, humanism, science and technology), all of which are blamed for taking our world to hell in a hand-basket.

Though the eyes of the world are currently focused on Islamic fundamentalism, the seeds of radical religious fundamentalism are found in virtually all of the world’s major religions. Fundamentalism, whatever its outward attire might be, is convinced that society wants to wipe out its faith and practice. Fundamentalists tend to see the world as “them” and “us”—they feel trapped, with their backs against the wall, and obligated

and present spiritual danger. Fundamentalism is fostering dramatic changes, forcing us to rethink our moral priorities, whether we like it or not.

## When Calls for Peace Are Dismissed

Hate-filled rhetoric and passionate appeals for bloodshed in the name of God are not accurate reflections of Christianity or Islam. They are instead the manipulative interpretations of teachers who are war-mongers thirsting for blood, yearning for revenge and violence. Terrorists who torture and maim, fueled by anger and lust (James 4:1-3) hide like cowards behind the skirts of God (or Allah), desperately trying to remake divinity into their own violent image.

Jesus, by contrast, called for his followers to pray not only for their friends, but also for their enemies (Matthew 5:43-45). While loving one’s enemy does not require Christians to be filled with warm affection for those who seem determined to an-

their own agenda, and it involves trading on fear and ignorance. Insisting that radical beliefs and practices are the only way to please God, fundamentalism preys on the irrational fears and superstitions of its followers.

Religious fundamentalism, in its efforts to both gain and keep its followers:

- Corrupts and perverts human freedom, decency and dignity.
- Impoverishes the lives of its followers in a downward spiral of poverty and ignorance, marginalizing them, making them more embittered and disenfranchised “true believers.”
- Creates a fertile breeding ground for hatred and prejudice.
- Fosters human misery through religious bondage. Extreme religious fundamentalism encourages and commends isolation within colonies and communes, sponsoring education and training (also called brainwashing) that is dominated by propaganda. By severely restricting freedoms, fundamentalism effectively limits options for escape from its oppression.

- Interprets its holy writ through wooden literalism, leading to illogical and fanatical views and contributing to the intellectual bankruptcy of its followers.

Love and compassion are often demonized by fundamentalists as soft-headed responses to situations they believe demand “tough love” at the very least. When confronted with a choice between love and compassion or conformity to its rules, rituals

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to fight for their faith under their fundamentalist flag.

Extreme Islamic beliefs and practices are, without a question, a dangerous, turbulent storm of fundamentalism that overshadows our entire western world. But while it lurks in the shadows, extreme fundamentalism in the name of Jesus also portends a clear

nihilate them, Jesus did teach peaceful co-existence. The teachings of Christianity call for Christians to leave vengeance to God (Romans 12:19) and to renounce retributive justice (“an eye for an eye”—see Matthew 5:38-42).

Hate spewing, war-mongering radical religious fundamentalists have

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and regulations, fundamentalism inevitably defaults to its law codes.

### **Fundamentalism—The Polar Opposite of Jesus' Teachings**

From a Christian perspective, it is necessary to understand that *fundamentalism* within Christendom is not one and the same as the fundamentals of our faith. The fundamentals of our faith include biblical teachings such as:

1) One God who exists eternally as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

2) Jesus, the second Person of the Godhead, the God-man, took human flesh, becoming one of us, to help us come to know God.

3) The Bible constitutes the accurate, infallible and divinely inspired word of God.

4) The body of Christ, the church, is universal. No single denomination or group is all of the church—only part of it.

5) Salvation is God's free gift, not earned by any combination of human deeds, ceremonies, rituals or performances.

Fundamental teachings of the Christian faith are based on God's love and the love he gives to us that we might, in turn, share with others.

These, among others, are core teachings of Christianity—they are the foundation, the fundamental beliefs, upon which our faith stands. *Fundamentalism*, however, has nothing at all to do with the fundamentals of Christianity. The fundamentals of Christianity point followers of Jesus to one inescapable conclusion—that God alone is holy, that God loves us because of his goodness and not our own and that human merit and devotion cannot earn God's favor.

Fundamental teaching about God's grace is the divine safeguard against *fundamentalism*, but the *fundamentalism* that thrives within Christendom often minimizes God's grace, dismissing it as a weak and even potentially permissive teaching.

*Fundamentalism* is all about keeping the right rules in the right way in order to please the right people. Fundamen-

*talism* is rigid, uncompromising teaching and practice about the absolute necessity of being in the right place, at the right time, wearing the right clothing, singing the right songs and saying the right prayers.

*Fundamentalism* is the fanatical pursuit and exaltation of human performance, insisting that everyone else perform the same religious rituals and rules while arbitrarily and irrationally giving blind loyalty to religious authority.

Thus, to be a religious Christian fundamentalist is an oxymoron, for religious *fundamentalism* is the enemy of Jesus Christ. *Fundamentalism* (fueled by legalism) and authentic Christianity—based on God's grace—are mutually exclusive. Religion, including much that masquerades within Christendom as Christianity, insists that human performance of religious duties and obedience to religious laws gains humans a higher standing with God than they would have otherwise enjoyed.

Authentic Christianity insists that no human may boast before God, that no human deed is good enough to obligate God to treat them differently than he would have, apart from human behavior. Authentic Christianity is all about Jesus—religious *fundamentalism* is all about human performance.

*Fundamentalism* is actually a denial of the God of the Bible and of the gospel of Jesus Christ, for it proposes that God needs our efforts. Of course, when *fundamentalism* convinces its followers that God is on their side if they do what he wants (in the guise of that particular form of *fundamentalism*) then fundamentalists feel good about themselves. They feel that God needs what they can humanly produce and that they alone are God's chosen people.

It is critically important to make a distinction between fundamentalists, who have been bewitched and deceived, and the religious methodology called *fundamentalism* that has them in its grip.

We must not demonize unfortunates who are trapped by oppressive religion, but we must not shrink from identifying the cause of their misery and suffering. In so doing we are reflecting God's love to and for them, for their eventual freedom will be based

on a clear picture of their current religious enslavement.

### **Taking Our Eyes Off Jesus**

The big sin of *fundamentalism* is that it attempts to take God off his throne and replace him with human attempts at righteousness. *Fundamentalism* includes several distinctives that place the focus of faith and practice on human efforts, including:

- Uncompromising insistence that its rules and regulations are the only acceptable practice and belief.

- Distrust of logic, reason, scholarship and knowledge—the mortal enemies of *fundamentalism*.

- Absolute, unflinching demands on its followers to obey all cultural, traditional and accepted rules and regulations.

- Creation of its own in-house vocabulary and terminology, symbols and codes which only initiates and true believers can fully understand.

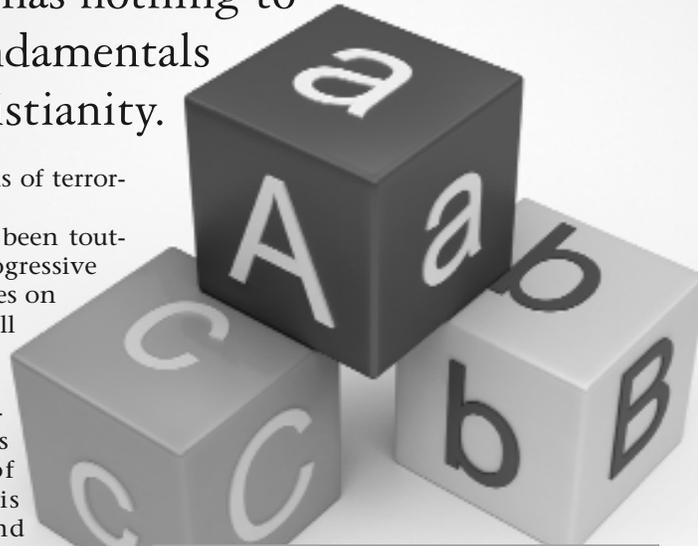
- Ongoing and unceasing efforts to proselyte and evangelize, so that outsiders who do not now believe can somehow be convinced to do so. Within Christendom many fundamentalists confuse evangelism to faith in Jesus with conversion to their own performance-based religion. Jesus condemned the rabid evangelical efforts of the religion of his day, "You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are" (Matthew 23:15).

*Fundamentalism* is a sworn enemy of authentic Christianity and the gospel of Jesus Christ. *Fundamentalism* within Christendom is truly a wolf in sheep's clothing, preying upon the sheep of God's pasture.

Sadly, many who are not Christians believe that religious *fundamentalism* stands for all of Christianity, and having seen or heard several examples, want nothing to do with real Christianity. The 18th-century English poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge astutely observed, albeit with some cynicism, that "he who begins by loving Christianity more than truth will proceed by loving his own sect or church better than Christianity and end in loving himself better than all."

*Fundamentalism* attempts to recast "truth" as synonymous with its own vision and message, while demonizing those who hold differing views—

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casting them as enemies to be overcome. Reasonable discussions are difficult with hard-core fundamentalists for the simple reason that fundamentalism is adversarial and views anyone outside of its belief system as suspect.

Truth, of course, is not an enemy of authentic Christianity. In fact, Jesus is “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). While there are those who, in the name of God, encourage church-goers to check their brains at the door, such mindless indoctrination is not a hallmark of grace-based Christianity. There are those who are known as Christians who are not Christ-centered, and, as one consequence, can come to love their religious group more than Jesus, who is Truth personified.

## Religious Fundamentalism Meets Tolerant Secularism

Religious ideas have consequences. The toxic impact of religious fundamentalism is not limited to the four walls of a church or a mosque. Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was murdered in Amsterdam on November 4, 2004 by Mohammed Bouyeri, a radical fundamentalist Muslim. Bouyeri was the child of Moroccan immigrant workers who moved to Holland in the 1970s. Born and raised in Europe, Bouyeri was a Dutch citizen who was angered by van Gogh’s movie, *Submission*, which exposed the abuse of women in Islam.

The brutal murder of van Gogh, called Holland’s 9-11 by some, provid-

dates through various forms of terrorism.

Holland has for decades been touted as one of the most progressive democratic and free societies on earth, a culture in which all were welcome and all lifestyles accepted and tolerated. No one would suggest that the Netherlands is a hotbed of any form of fundamentalism, but it is a country whose laws and civility are historically based in Christian values. The Dutch have historically welcomed large numbers of immigrants—of recent date huge numbers of Muslim immigrants. Muslims today represent slightly over 15 percent of the population in Holland.

The historic Dutch multi-cultural acceptance of religious and cultural tolerance was shaken to its core with the murder of van Gogh. Before November 4, 2004, criticism of Muslim culture was generally regarded as outright racism in tolerant Holland.

Theo van Gogh was a harsh critic of religion in general, and his rhetoric against immigrant Muslims in Holland was, beyond a doubt, inflammatory. But his treatment of his subject in *Submission* was well within the acceptable freedoms given and expressed in a democratic society.

*Submission* addressed the abuse of Muslim women under the guise of radical religious teaching. *Submission* included scenes of Muslim women being beaten as a narrator read Muslim teaching about the need to subjugate and control women.

While van Gogh has been accused of inciting Muslim passion, with some suggesting that he even deserved the brutal gang-like execution he received (multiple stab wounds with a note explaining the necessity of his death), his murder provides an example of the lengths to which extreme fundamentalists will go to protect their faith.

Whether in Holland, France, Germany, Belgium or England, European countries whose Islamic populations have mushroomed are learning that

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radical fundamentalism seeks to take advantage of democratic freedoms in order to eventually obliterate them. The western world at large, since 9-11, has learned that religious fundamentalists are more dangerous than secular counterparts, for religious radicals rarely change or moderate their views.

Religious fundamentalism can easily turn into religious fascism—in the case of extreme Muslim extremists like the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Hamas and Hezbollah, it certainly has.

Characteristics of religious fascism include:

- Glorification of religion which is seen as above question, beyond accountability.
- Utter disdain for individual needs or rights—the religious empire is the only reality that matters.
- Sexism—the rights of women are minimized or ignored.
- Demonizing of the enemy—the “Great Satan” is scapegoated, providing a means to divert attention from other problems.

## The Solution

As a Christian who believes that every human being (Christian and non-Christian) is loved by God and equal before the cross of Christ, I see the

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ed a stark contrast of cultures, a culture war that is today simmering around the world, as Islamic values collide with Christian-based culture.

It’s a story of the social earthquake that takes place when a liberal and tolerant anything-goes secular society is challenged by rigid, rabid religious fundamentalism. And it’s a story of how religious fundamentalism intimi-

## On the Lighter Side

You might be a fundamentalist if:

- When your pastor says he has studied the text “in the original language” you think he means the King James Version.
- The announcement bulletin for your church services includes a time to put the snakes away.
- The mere sight of a KFC bucket makes you think of taking up an offering.
- Your pastor sweats when he preaches.
- Everybody sweats when your pastor preaches.



4) This passage is about “his servant”—the Servant that God raised up—Jesus, who came to be one of us, who died on the cross and was raised from the dead. It is only in Jesus that all nations can be blessed.

It is not in the Jews or Arabs, in Islam, Judaism or even in Christendom that all nations will be blessed. Spiritual corporations and denominations don’t fulfill this blessing. Political ideologies don’t fulfill this blessing. Religious empires don’t bless all people on earth. They usually do just the opposite. Religious legalism chews people up and spits them out. Religious fundamentalism “despitefully uses” people.

Humans are blessed as they individually realize who Jesus is for them personally, the relationship they can have with him and how he can transform their “wicked ways.” When that happens in many lives, then the people of the entire earth are blessed, both directly as they live in Jesus and he in them, and indirectly by believers who, as they yield to Jesus, bring peace and love to the lives of others.

There is no doubt that the fruit of religious zealots and radical religious fundamentalists—whether they are acting under the guise of Islam, Judaism or Christianity—is wicked. Terrorism, bigotry, suicide bombers, racial hatred and murderous mayhem are wicked. Jesus, by contrast, brings us his rest and his peace.

Jesus triumphed over fundamentalism. He did so ultimately, of course, by his cross and the glorious victory of his resurrection, which demonstrated that torture and death, the ultimate weapons of fundamentalism, are powerless in the face of the power of God’s love and amazing grace. While fundamentalist extremists scoff at grace as weak and inferior, Jesus’ cross and empty tomb stand as stark contrasts to hatred and religious authoritarianism.

While Jesus proclaimed and practiced love, he repeatedly engaged one particular segment of his society in spiritual combat. Jesus consistently resisted the religious leadership who preferred confrontation and condemnation over relationship and grace—Jesus never allowed legalistic religion

to emerge spiritually unscathed. Jesus always clearly delineated false religion over against the gospel he brought—and in that model we as authentic Christians today can find heart and a mandate.

While we are outnumbered and overwhelmed by hate and condemnation, we must not cave in. We must not fail to spiritually confront the enemy of fundamentalism as it assails our own communities and it infiltrates our own churches. We must not join forces with hatred, deceived into thinking that we are “taking back” America.

Instead, we must encourage and foster peace and reconciliation. As a Christian, do you personally know any Muslims? Have you talked with (as opposed to talking about) a Muslim?

I find myself talking to fundamentalists—of all stripes—all the time. As an irreligious Christian, many fundamentalist Christians can’t wait to argue with me about...religion!

I have found *listening* to be absolutely necessary in such situations. Real listening—not politely waiting for someone to stop talking so you can grind on your axe.

Real listening involves trying to hear and feel and imagine the real issues which cause another person to believe what they do. I believe Jesus was and is a real listener.

Reconciliation involves meeting people where they are and trying to understand them, rather than blindly accepting stereotypes. Reconciliation means listening and learning. As Christians, we are reconciled to God because of Christ. We are reconciled to God because God the Son became one of us so that, among other things, he might know us. Jesus came to this earth to serve us, rather than seeking our service. Having been reconciled to God, we are now ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19-20).

We must not stoop to the level of crass emotionalism driven by lust and jealousy, but bow before Jesus and ask that he use us to help shine the light of his heavenly kingdom into the dark places of fundamentalism. We must reflect the love of God to those who are trapped by the dark forces of fundamentalism. □

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