

## 📖 Topic Page: [Fundamentalism](#)

Definition: **fundamentalism** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Movement within some Protestant denominations, particularly in the USA, which originated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a reaction against biblical criticism and contemporary theories of evolution. The name is derived from *The Fundamentals*, a series of 12 tracts published in 1909-15 by eminent US evangelical leaders. The term "fundamentalism" is also often used to refer to any extreme orthodox tendency within a religion.



Image from: [Israel's right-wing Ariel Sharon met with a... in Encyclopedia of Politics](#)

### Summary Article: **Fundamentalism**

From *Encyclopedia of Social Problems*

Fundamentalism is the strict maintenance of ancient or fundamental doctrines of any religion. The term *fundamentalism*, though, was originally an Anglo-Saxon Protestant term applied to those who maintained that the Bible must be accepted and interpreted literally.

In popular usage, the term *fundamentalism* connotes both religious conservatism and traditionalism, and by extension, various strands of thought in politics, economics, government, and also scientific and academic perspectives that advocate strict adherence and maintenance of traditional perspectives in reaction against secularism and modernism. Although the term came into popular usage in the early 20th century, the concept and ideology trace back to early Christian and European history.

### **Origins and Purpose**

As a movement, fundamentalism began in the United States as a Protestant movement to repel liberalism and developments perceived as threats to the purity, integrity, and authority of God's word as found in the Bible. In 1878, the Niagara Bible conference drew up 14 fundamentals of the faith, later reduced to five central doctrines: the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth, the physical resurrection of Jesus, the death of Christ as atonement, and the physical return of Christ to preside on Judgment Day. The resulting controversy ranged across all denominations, but it was most intense among Baptists and Presbyterians.

In the so-called monkey trial of 1925, a Tennessee teacher, J. T. Scopes, was found guilty of teaching evolution in public schools; other attempts to banish modernism and evolution from schools and society were unsuccessful. Unfavorable press reports quickly turned public opinion against fundamentalists, rendering their victory a short-lived one. Many dissociated themselves from the movement, not wanting to be labeled anti-intellectuals and fanatics. Gradually, the movement lost its cohesiveness and degenerated into splinter (independent) groups. From the late 1940s through the 1960s, fundamentalists redefined themselves in a movement known as neo-evangelicalism and sought broader participation within the U.S. political system. Billy Graham epitomized this new trend in evangelicalism.

Since the 1970s fundamentalists have reaffirmed their beliefs and initiated political actions to shape the nation accordingly. They used the ballot box, the airwaves, the mega-churches, and the power of the purse to restore what they saw as the unquestionable role of religion in society. Their position is that most social institutions of today's secular society and most contemporary social issues—such as

abortion, same-sex marriage, family and divorce, the spread of pornography, the ban on school prayer, homosexual lifestyle, feminism, gender equality, priesthood for women, and ordination of gay and lesbian ministers—are incompatible with religion. Consistently, they seek to include the teaching of creationism or “intelligent design” theory in public schools alongside evolution and to defeat politicians they view as liberals contributing to moral decadence in the nation. In their effort to reconstruct society, fundamentalists developed strategies that transcended borders. For example, Jerry Falwell, a fundamentalist Baptist minister, founded the Moral Majority in 1979, which enabled fundamentalist organizations to become a formidable force in U.S. politics. Together with other New Christian Right groups and political conservatives, fundamentalists supported the candidacy of Ronald Reagan and helped elect him president in 1980. Ever since then, they have influenced the U.S. political process.

Fundamentalism has its parallels in Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism in attracting followers reacting against secularization and modernism. Fundamentalism in Islam has a strong political component as Muslims view Islam as a comprehensive way of life, making their religion an integral part of politics, state, law, and society. The most influential fundamentalist movement was the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna as a reaction against the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and emergence of European imperialism. Sayyid Qutb was its most prominent thinker. A similar ideology underlines today’s fundamentalist movement Al-Qaeda, headed by Osama bin Laden. Originally established in 1988 in Afghanistan as a resistance movement against Russian occupation, it had the support of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United States. In recent years Al-Qaeda has expanded globally and seeks to rid Muslim nations of all foreign elements and to reestablish the primacy of Islam.

### **Global Fundamentalism Today**

Although fundamentalism has been a recurrent phenomenon in religious history, its recent characteristics are strident militancy, confrontation, and all too often, violence. Increasingly radicalized, fundamentalist extremists thus pose a serious threat, especially to developing nations and those experimenting with democracy.

The past 2 decades have witnessed continuous but steady growth in religious fundamentalism and revivalist movements. The growing Arab and Islamic presence in Europe, especially in Germany and France, once a bedrock of Christianity, has prompted concern among European Union nations. While seeking understanding of the emergence of fundamentalism, militancy, and extremism among many European Muslim groups, some Western nations also are asking if the time has come to take a defensive position.

Fundamentalism in the 21st century is a complex phenomenon characterized by several factors that combine socioeconomic and religiopolitical dimensions. Many traditionalist and conservative believers, including some of the better educated, deeply believe that they are in danger of losing their identity and culture because of the erosive forces of secularism and modernism. Thus, sparking today’s resurgence in fundamentalism is a reaction against the social upheaval caused by globalization and technology. Fundamentalists view their world and belief system as falling deeper into moral and social decadence and believe that a return to the true religion in its orthodoxy would solve all social problems.

Because fundamentalism offers a simple solution to the complexities of many contemporary moral and social issues, it appeals to certain individuals and has the potential of mobilizing groups for action. As a movement attracting devout adherents, fundamentalism must be recognized as a major social force. Many fundamentalist groups view contemporary problems from a perspective quite different from

other observers in their society.

*See also*

Religion and Conflict; Religion and Politics; Religious Extremism

**Further Readings**

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