Fundamentalism as Disorder
A Case For listing it in the APA's DSM
By
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Let me begin by saying I don't consider fundamentalism linked to any particular set of ideas and beliefs. Fundamentalism, rather, is a mindset, a state of mind, a way of thinking and relating to others and the world. This mindset has certain characteristics that can accompany many different ideologies. There are certainly Christian fundamentalists, but Christianity isn't a fundamentalist religion. There are also Muslim fundamentalists, and Jewish fundamentalists, and Hindu fundamentalists, and so on, but this mindset can also be demonstrated by those with modern secular, political, and economic ideologies, like those historian Yuval Harari calls, "natural-law religions, such as liberalism, Communism, capitalism, nationalism and Nazism."[1] So, in short, there is a fundamentalist personality and mindset that can be expressed through many ideas, but not a specific set of fundamentalist ideas.

So I want to make it clear I am not criticizing any specific beliefs today, religious or otherwise. My intention, rather, is to outline the characteristics of a particular mindset and to explain why I think it is symptomatic of a psychiatric disorder and ought, therefore, be considered and treated as such. But let's begin by briefly looking at the history of this term, *fundamentalism*. As Karen Armstrong explains in her book, *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism*, "American Protestants were the first to use it. In the early decades of the twentieth century, some of them started calling themselves 'fundamentalists'[2] to distinguish themselves from the more 'liberal' Protestants, who were, in their opinion, entirely distorting the Christian faith."[3] In so doing, they were referring to what they considered the "fundamentals" of the Christian faith, which Armstrong says, "they identified with a literal interpretation of Scripture and the acceptance of certain core doctrines."[4]

So in 1920, when the term was first coined, fundamentalists were simply Christians who were extremely literal and dogmatic and didn't mind saying so. This began to change, however, in the late 80s, and even more so after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, when it became imperative to understand the thinking and motivations behind such horrors. This is when scholars and researchers began to broaden their use and definition of fundamentalism, a change that has not been entirely without criticism. As psychoanalyst, Charles Strozier says in his anthology of

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[1] Harari, Yuval Noah, *Sapiens: A Brief History of* Humankind, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 2015, (Kindle version), loc., 3522.

[2] Coined by Curtis Lee Laws (1868-1946), a Baptist preacher, in 1920.

[3] Armstrong, Karen, *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism*, (Random House, New York, NY, 2000. 2001) p. xii.

[4] Ibid.

essays on, *The Fundamentalist Mindset*, "Many feel it is absurd to extend something so specifically Christian to analogous developments in other faith traditions."[5]

Nevertheless, scholars have now broadened their use of the term, with a special emphasis on Islamic fundamentalism ever since the events of 9-11. Again, as Karen Armstrong explains, most scholars now accept, "that 'fundamentalism' has surfaced in most religions and seems to be a world-wide response to the peculiar strain of late-twentieth-century life."[6] That strain refers to fundamentalism's general disdain of secularism. Today, however, scholars are not the only ones using the term more ubiquitously. It's now commonly used by most of us to refer to any form of religious extremism, and, since 9-11, those once proud to call themselves Fundamentalist Christians have shied away from its negative associations by referring to themselves as "Evangelicals" instead.

So that's a bit of quick history. Unfortunately it would take too long to go deeply into all the research and reasons scholars ascribe certain characteristics to the fundamentalist mindset. So, in order to move more quickly into the reasons I argue it ought to be considered a psychological disorder, allow me to summarize these characteristics in my own condensed terms. Keep in mind, however, I'm basing my synopsis upon efforts like, *The Fundamentalist Project*, an eight-year, six-volume study led by Martin E. Marty at the University of Chicago Divinity School, and the anthological work of psychoanalyst, Charles Strozier, among other reputable sources on this matter.

Briefly put, the fundamentalist mindset is dualistic, paranoid, authoritarian, and, punitive. This description is so oversimplified it's worth repeating; *the fundamentalist mindset is dualistic, paranoid, authoritarian, and, punitive*. With this as our working definition, I'd like to spend the rest of our time examining this mindset in terms of Developmental psychology, Regulation theory, and Evolutionary Threat Assessment System's theory (ETAS), all of which I'll explain a bit about as we proceed.

To begin, it was during my initial study of Developmental Psychology many years ago, while still working on my Masters degree, that I noticed what was for me a blaring similarity between the first stages of moral and cognitive development and the fundamentalist mindset, between the thought processes of young children and those of fundamentalists. A few years later, while proposing the thesis for my Doctoral dissertation, which I'd initially entitled, "Distinguishing Between Functional and Dysfunctional Religion," I argued that the similarity between these two mindsets, "has led me to conclude that *fundamentalism* (mental-ism) is a form of institutionalized fixation that promotes an infantile state of mind and way of responding to the world."

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[5] Strozier, Charles B., Terman, David, M., Jones, James W., & Boyd, Katherine A., *The Fundamentalist Mindset*, (Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2010) p. 11.
[6] Armstrong, Karen, *and Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1992, 2002, p. 11.

What seemed so obvious to me, however, troubled my advisors who cautioned (in other words, "required") me to tone it down a bit. They didn't want me to offend or sound intolerant of fundamentalists. I must admit, I used my words more judiciously afterward, but today, having earned my Doctorate, I'm now free to say exactly what I mean. In honesty, I believe the unease my advisors had around this subject demonstrates one of the ways the fundamentalist mindset has impacted our society at large. For nowadays, by and large, saying things others disagree with is considered intolerant, which turns the notion of intolerance on its head. For intolerance is not expressing ideas that are different from others; it's not allowing others to express ideas that are different from our own.

This intolerance of different ideas is part of the dualistic thinking that's characteristic of the fundamentalist mindset. Dualistic thinking, in brief, thinks in extremes like black or white and right or wrong, but has trouble grasping relativistic concepts like "it's a gray area," or, "choosing between the lesser of two evils." For the dualistic thinker something is always right or always wrong, regardless of the situation, and, because of such absolutism, they are unable to entertain another's point of view.

Interestingly, Jean Piaget, the founder of developmental psychology, suggested this is also true of very young children. "[Their] greatest difficulty," he said, "[is] entering into anyone else's point of view. Consequently, [their] judgment is always absolute, so to speak, and never relative, for a relative judgment involves the simultaneous awareness of at least two personal points of view."[7] So, like the fundamentalist, young children think in extremes and absolutes. "A child uses 'big' and 'small' without confusion," Piaget explained, "since they imply one single comparison, whereas 'bigger' and 'smaller' have meaning only in a sequence."[8]

Fortunately children usually grow out of this and begin to understand relativistic terms like darker, lighter, better, worse, and so on, but when fundamentalists continue such extreme thinking, which abhors and dreads doubt and contradiction, the consequences can often be grave. Throughout human history we have shunned, silenced, imprisoned, tortured, enslaved, burned, beheaded, and gone to war with those who have different ideas than our own. Even today, in our pluralistic society, that's supposed to guarantee freedom of speech, there's still tremendous social pressure to conform to what most everyone else thinks. The result is an unconscious sense of shame for having different ideas, and the belief we are intolerant of others for expressing them.

Dualistic thinking isn't the only characteristic fundamentalists share in common with young children. They are also both punitive and authoritarian in their morality. "The young child," according to psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg, "is not oriented to the

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[7] Piaget. Jean, *The Essential Piaget*, eds., (Gruber, Howard E. and, Voneche, J. Jacques, Jason Aronson, Inc., Northvale, NJ, 1995) p. 98.
[8] Beard, Ruth M., *An Outline of Piaget's Developmental Psychology*, (A Mentor Book, Basic Books, Inc., New York, NY, 1972) p. 76.

bad as 'being selfish,' 'Being deceitful,' etc.; [the young child] is, rather, oriented to the bad as being punished (stage 1)…"[9] Kohlberg's protégé, James Fowler says that at this earliest stage of development morality isn't determined by anything more than, "the probable degree of punishment it would entail."[10] In other words, something is wrong because one will get punished for it, not because it is unjust or harmful to others. Young children are, thus, also authoritarian in their thinking, meaning they believe something is right based upon what some external authority tells them, like a parent or teacher, without need to further question what makes it right (having the qualities of compassion and equality, for instance).

For the fundamentalist this authority figure can be something impersonal, like sacred scripture or a system of beliefs passed on from ancestors or handed down from a divinity, or an actual person, like a charismatic politician, guru, priest, and so forth. Researchers, thus regard, "a relationship to charismatic leadership,"[11] as one of the basic characteristics of this mindset. As religion professor, James W. Jones writes, "The image of a vengeful, punitive, and overpowering patriarchal divine being is found in virtually all religious texts of terror…"[12] What's really interesting about the charismatic figure is that she or he need not be charismatic at all, merely someone to project upon. For this reason, "…charisma is," as Stephen O'Leary points out in his book, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, "best conceived as a property attributed by an audience."[13] In the same way the fundamentalist cannot distinguish one's own will from that of the charismatic figure one is projecting upon, Piaget said, "the little child cannot differentiate between the impulses of [its] own fancy and the rules imposed… from above."[14]

Although there are other similarities between fundamentalism and stage 1 development, what has already been said about the *dualistic, punitive,* and *authoritarian* thinking common to both is enough to make my case. In fairness, most developmental psychologists admit that no person is ever "entirely at one stage,"[15] but, psychologically speaking, the development of an adult who habitually demonstrates such immature ways of thinking has been arrested (alt, become fixated). And since this mindset is usually manifested in a group context, I feel it's accurate to regard fundamentalism as a form of institutionalized fixation.

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[9] Kohlberg, Lawrence, *Stages of Development as a Basis for Education*, see Munsey, Brenda, ed., *Moral Development, Moral Education, and Kohlberg*, Religious Education Press, Birmingham, AL, 1980, p. 80.

[10] Fowler, James W., *The Stages of Faith*, HarperSan Francisco, HaperCollins, New York, NY, 1981, 1995, p. 58.

[11] Strozier, ibid., p. 11.

[12] Ibid., p. 94.

[13] O'Leary, Stephen, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*, (Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 1994) p. 53.

[14] Beard, ibid., p. 80.

[15] Kohlberg, ibid., p. 31.

Fortunately the paranoia, often inflated to apocalyptic proportions—fear that the whole world is going to be judged, punished, and destroyed—is not associated with childhood development. It would be tragic if most children had to live with such anxiety as part of their normal development. Yet such fear, in my opinion, is rooted in the dualistic thinking common to both children and fundamentalists, since it so easily lends itself to puritanical notions of good against evil and the dread of conflicting ideas. Psychoanalyst, Robert M. Young suggests such black and white thinking is actually a defense mechanism against the anxiety caused by such conflict. "What people do when they feel under threat is to simplify," he says, "To simplify in psychoanalytic terms is to regress, to eliminate the middle ground, to split, dividing the world into safe and threat, good and evil, life and death."[16]

According to Regulation Theory, furthermore, persistent states of paranoia are caused when, as infants and toddlers, individuals have unreliable caregivers. As psychoanalyst, Daniel Hill explains, "Consistently sensitive caretaking generates secure attachments patterns in which affect is regulated and the brain-mind-body maintains a homeostatic state. Inconsistent or neglectful caretaking generates insecure attachment patterns in which affect is dysregulated and the organism functions suboptimally,"[17] by which he means the individual develops "either a rigid or chaotic state."[18] With both a dualistic and paranoid mindset, it may be that the fundamentalist develops both.

Chicago Psychiatrist, David M. Terman says the range of such paranoia can be anywhere from, "the world is out to get me," to a belief that some mysterious "they" is in control over jobs, money, power, etcetera; to the feeling one is being victimized or persecuted, accompanied by general hostility and suspiciousness toward the world; to psychotic states of paranoid schizophrenia with delusions and hallucinations of persecution.[19] In light of this, it's difficult to imagine a compassionate society that doesn't recognize and work to help individuals suffering such mental torment ease their minds, let alone one that does nothing in light of the potential threat from entire groups of people who feel they are in a moral, if not holy, war against the world. Instead of proving them right by simply going to war with them, however, we ought to be diagnosing and treating those who suffer from this unfortunate mental dis-ease.

Finally, I'd like to spend a few moments discussing the fundamentalist mindset in terms of Evolutionary Threat Assessment Systems Theory. ETAS, for short, was first introduced just a few years ago, in 2007, by mental health researcher, Kevin J.

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[16] Young, Robert M., "Fundamentalism and Terrorism," in *Terror and Apocalypse: Undercurrents in History*, vol. 2., ed, Jerry S. Piven, Paul Ziolo, and Henry W. Lawton, (Writer's Showcase, San Jose, CA, 2002) p. 210f.
[17] From, "Fundamentalist Faith States," by Daniel Hill, in *The Fundamentalist Mindset*, ibid., p. 80f.
[18] Ibid., p. 81.
[19] Ibid., p. 48.

Flannelly. As a branch of Evolutionary Psychology, ETAS considers how fear helps optimize our species' chances of survival and reproducing. Thus, as Cognitive therapist, Paul Gilbert says, "the most important question faced everyday by all animals, including humans, is whether their immediate environment is dangerous or not."[20] In most cases, in most species, once the environment is determined to be safe, the organism self-regulates, returning to a relative state of calm and equilibrium. If the environment is safe, however, and the organism still remains in a heightened state of anxiety and fear, there's a problem. For, as Flannelly explains, "A central feature of psychiatric disorders… is a primitive concern about one's own safety and the dangerousness of the world, with different psychiatric disorders representing the response of threat assessment systems in the brain to different kinds of potential threats."[21]

Flannelly and his team have conducted several interesting studies regarding how these heightened states of fear express themselves theologically. In one study, for instance, Flannelly and his team compared the relative mental wellbeing of those who believe that God is *close and loving*, that God is *Approving and Forgiving*, and that God is *Creating and Judging*.[22] "A meta-analysis of these studies," the report says, "suggests that feeling one has a positive relationship with God is associated with better psychological adjustment, whereas feeling one has a negative relationship with God is associated with poorer psychological adjustment."[23] A more recent report looked at the correlation of psychiatric symptoms with those who believe in a *Benevolent God*, a *Punitive God*, and a *Deistic* or *Absent God.* "In general," the report says, "the research has found that belief in a benevolent God is associated with better psychological well-being, whereas belief in a punitive God is associated with poorer psychological well-being."[24] The study found "no significant association between belief in a deistic [or absent] God and any of the five psychiatric conditions"[25] (paranoia, phobia, anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsion, and psychosomatic conditions). This may be because deists tend to value human agency, whereas, "…people who believe human nature is basically evil," the report concludes, "have

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[20] Flannelly, Kevin J., and Galek, Kathleen, *Religion, Evolution, and Mental Health: Attachment Theory and ETAS Theory,* **Journal of Religion and Health** (2010) 49-337-350, Published online, March 17, 2009, Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, 2009, p. 340.
[21] Ibid., p. 344.
[22] Flannelly, Kevin J., Ellison, Christopher G., Galek, Kathleen, Koenig, Harold G., *Beliefs about God, Psychiatric Symptoms, and Evolutionary Psychology*, **Journal of Religion and Health**, (2010) 49:246-261337-350, Published online, March 27, 2009, Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, 2009, p. 246.
[23] Ibid., p. 248.
[24] Silton, Nava R., Flannelly, Kevin J., Ellison, Christopher G., Galek, Kathleen, *Beliefs about God and Mental Health Among American Adults* , **Journal of Religion and Health**, (2013) Springer Science+Business Media, New York, p. 2.
[25] Ibid., p. 8.

higher levels of general anxiety than those who believe human nature is basically good…"[26]

Given that the fundamentalist mindset is proven to be paranoid, punitive, and authoritarian, which translates theologically into apocalyptic thinking, hellfire and damnation, a punitive judgmental deity, and a distrust and disdain of human nature, the findings of ETAS theory give further cause for us to consider this mindset symptomatic of psychological problems.

And because fundamentalism often occurs in a group context, many of these problems are not confined to the tormented, fixated mind of the individual, but impact society at large in ways that can be extremely violent and oppressive. In some parts of the world right now, fundamentalist groups are blowing up their neighbors, destroying ancient artifacts, and beheading those with whom they disagree. Here in the U.S., similar groups continue to oppress those with whom they disagree, those who are different, by preventing them from being treated as equals, like denying them equal access to birth control and medical care, or to simply use the public restroom of their choice, to name a couple of current examples. They claim to do so upon moral and religious grounds, doing battle against the secularization of the world in the name of a puritanical, punitive, and authoritarian deity. But what they are really doing, in my opinion, is reacting to the tremendous anxiety and fear their tormented souls have never learned to cope with.

If, as a society, if not as a species, we are finally going to move beyond the tragedies caused by this mindset and become the compassionate and just society we all long for, then we must begin by naming the fundamentalist mindset for what is, a psychological disorder that needs to be properly diagnosed and compassionately treated.

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[26] Flannelly, *Beliefs about God, Psychiatric Symptoms, and Evolutionary Psychiatry*, ibid., p. 249.