

## **Fundamentalism and the Politics of Intolerance**

*Peter Lineham*

Typically, Fundamentalists are hard to love. They are so intolerant, so insistent that they are right. And so we find that our own normally tolerant outlook, which can cope with extremes of behaviour of various kinds, is strained to breaking point by their insistence that they and they only are right, and because their argumentation is so unreasonable. In one way or another we become intolerant ourselves as we react to them!

What is it about Fundamentalists that has made them a by-word in our society, and makes them so hard to cope with? Firstly, they are conservative Protestant Christians, and that is the problem. Incidentally, the term *Fundamentalist* is sometimes used to describe conservative Catholics and about conservative Muslims and Hindus. But such descriptions need to be used carefully. For a start, all Muslims take a very literal and conservative view about the Quran and its authority. Although some accommodate the world better than others, in effect Islam has not entered the contemporary world of interpretations yet. So 'liberal Muslims' in effect create a divide between their religion and their approach to life and society.

Conservative Catholics or other Christian minorities should be divided between those who accept the authority of the Pope or their religious leader, and those who know better than the Pope. Only the latter equate to Fundamentalist Protestants. A key aspect of Protestant fundamentalism is that its authority is vested in the Bible, and not in some current authority figure who can guide them. Although often Protestants have strong local pastors who are like little popes, there are enough contrary figures that they easily develop a degree of detachment from their leaders. Thus in effect, Protestantism encourages independence of thought as well as incorrigibility. There is no harder person to debate with than the person who knows what the bible means and will not listen to anyone else's opinion.

Fundamentalism as a form of Protestantism has a very distinct history. The name began to be used in America about leaders of independent Protestantism protesting about the growing influence of 'Modernists' in the traditional Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist denominations.

Fundamentalism is distinctly on the rise today, in two forms. One aspect is the gradual takeover of the mainstream churches - those in their decline - by more conservative people. The second is the huge rise of separatist and independent Christian groups, mostly Pentecostal varieties. With the advantage of flexibility and lack of institutional baggage, these churches are able to combine contemporary styles with traditional beliefs. So although the total proportion of believers in the society is in decline, the proportion of those who remain with conservative values is ever on the rise.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, Destiny Church is the highest profile form of this sort of church, but it does sit at one end of the spectrum, with most other conservative Protestant Christians cautious about its absolutism and politics. And this is an indication that most so-called fundamentalism is rarely quite as culture-denying as it is portrayed in the press. There is a great deal of flexibility today about traditional taboos, in particular the traditional isolationism from wider society. This is why young members of Pentecostal churches frequently are found active in media, the music scene and in social welfare and development agencies. Their outlook may be very different from others in the same professions, but they have learned how to live and act alongside people with whom they disagree.

Some people get very annoyed about this. How can such primitive beliefs exist in the twenty-first century, they complain? They are horrified when they discover that their colleagues don't believe in evolution, or sex out of marriage. But what we need to recognise about religion is that it is rarely neat and tidy, rarely fitting into our prescriptions of what is acceptable and nice.

Another factor needs to be considered. Religious behaviour is often what rationally dominated people may call 'superstition'. The expression says a great deal about both sides. For the 'rational' person operates on a basis of empirical reality; of what can be seen and felt. But supposing we are wrong? Supposing there is 'more on heaven and earth than is dreamt of in our philosophy?' This is the challenge to the so-called ordinary people in our society. We are all people with beliefs. Usually we hold these with a degree of irony and detachment and exploration. But conviction that 'I've found it' as one well-known evangelical lapel button proclaims, should not be derided. The very questing character of modern life gives strength to the person with conviction, but they have to live with the challenge to their beliefs and values every day, much more than the majority does. Intolerance cuts both ways.

**Peter Lineham is Associate Professor of History at Massey University's Albany Campus, having previously taught at that University's Palmerston North Campus. He has written extensively on aspects of British and Aotearoa New Zealand religious history. His book, *Bible and Society*, discusses the impact of the publications and work of the Bible Society in Aotearoa New Zealand.**

To comment on this article, and for the opportunity to be published in the next edition of *Just Change*, write a Letter to the Editor at [justchange@dev-zone.org](mailto:justchange@dev-zone.org).