

Introduction

Religious fundamentalism is the rejection of secular policy making. While a quietist rejection turns away from the evil and godless public scene, active fundamentalism aims to shape politics, in a religious occupation of political space. Both are symptoms of a crisis in democratic communication. Religious language and theological categories and concepts are used to define politics: faith and unfaith, orthodoxy and heresy. Political opponents are marginalised and repressed as dissidents. Active fundamentalism is a modern movement aiming to resolve, at any cost (though not necessarily through violence), the ambivalences of modernity. To do so, fundamentalism uses the methods of modern policy making, namely the shaping of public opinion, and social engineering. Sometimes religious fundamentalism even aims at transforming society in a revolutionary way.

This paper focuses on the active type of fundamentalism, since it is the more spectacular one.

Fundamentalism appeared among Protestants in the USA in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The very concept of 'fundamentalism' was forged by those who considered themselves to be returning to the roots of the Christian faith, lost to view over time. Society and 'the world' were considered corrupt, evil and godless: a threat to salvation. The Bible became in an extreme way the centre of life, and was taken literally.

Characteristics of the American Christian right

Fundamentalists aim for de-institutionalisation. They have a critical attitude to all forms of 'establishment', which they consider to be corrupt, and infected by the forces of evil whose ultimate incarnation is 'the cosmopolitan Jew', the symbol of rootless individualism. Fundamentalists have a profound mistrust of, even aversion to, traditional churches and religious denominations, the state, the UN system, the Federal Reserve system, the CIA, the FBI, the military-industrial complex, universities, traditional media, and so on.

US fundamentalists perceive reality in Manichean terms, and have a preference for conspiracy theories. They conceptualise events in terms of good and evil. They interpret structural realities as the result of demoniac forces conspiring to combat Christian America and dominate the world. Manichean worldviews have a negative impact on women, since they shape gender relations according to a system of irreconcilable antagonisms, the female one being always negative, valueless and deficient.

American fundamentalists are profoundly convinced that they have been chosen to accomplish a specific historical mission, and that their nation, America, has a special role to play in God's salvation plan. They are super-patriots, and see themselves as incarnating the 'real' American identity. The group is emphasised over the individual, which leads to a denial of human rights. Women's only, or at least main, function is the responsibility to reproduce, both biologically and ideologically, the group.

A fundamentalist is not born as such, but makes a choice to assume his 'prophetic' role. Through conversion, a person is re-born as a 'real' Christian. This is a voluntary act that each individual decides upon and bears the responsibility for.

Christian fundamentalists in the USA are anti-intellectual and anti-rationalist. An emotional and personal experience of God is at the core of their religiosity. Although mostly very keen about using modern technology, they reject scepticism, relativism, and the critical questioning of all views, including their own.

Fundamentalists have a profoundly patriarchal worldview. They believe in the 'One', the only legitimate model for human beings. And this 'One' is white, male, adult, heterosexual, healthy, in the prime of life; has a good job, is economically successful and Protestant. All other forms of the human condition are considered deviations from the One. Those who do not meet the criteria are by definition inferior beings, and their inferiority increases the fewer of the criteria they meet. Racism, sexism and anti-feminism are consequently further characteristics of US Christian fundamentalism.

At present there are two main types of active Christian fundamentalists in the US: the televangelists, and the Christian militias.

Pat Robertson and the Christian coalition: co-opting politics

Pat Robertson is certainly the most popular representative of the American televangelists who, like Jerry Falwell with his 'Moral Majority', have succeeded in transforming a community of auditor-donors into a political organisation that promotes the public proclamation of conservative Christian moral thinking, highly patriarchal and based on a profound hostility to women's rights. In this view, women are inferior to men, born to bear children and to serve.

To a significant extent, Pat Robertson's success is due to his virtuoso use of modern media, in particular TV. It is difficult to know the extent of his audience. He claims to attract seven million auditors for his '700 Club', a mixture of revivalist celebration, talk show and entertainment. In the late 1980s he created the Christian Coalition, and launched the process of co-opting US political structures and the political agenda. In 1994, members of the Christian Coalition gained control of the Republican Party in thirteen out of fifty States, and they claim to have helped fifty-two members of Congress to be elected. They distributed 33 million electoral guidelines in churches throughout the country. Now the Christian Coalition claims to have some 1.6 million members.

Pat Robertson is an ideological pre-millenarian. Millenarianism is the belief that the Messiah will come, install his universal kingdom on Earth and reign for a thousand years before the world comes to an end. Robertson's pre-millenarianism makes him reject any human norm, on the grounds that God's Word and God's salvation plan are the only and absolute authorities. This attitude is incompatible with the concepts of democracy and a legal system. His pre-millenarianism makes him an unconditional supporter of Israel, since he considers it a necessary piece of God's plan: the Jewish people must 'recover' their terrestrial Kingdom

before they will convert to Christianity. He is thus a Zionist, although he also believes that God does not listen to the prayers of Jews, and shares a visceral anti-semitism with most other fundamentalists.

Robertson's success is due to the conservative revolution that took place in the US in the 1970s, when Richard Nixon implemented his 'Southern Strategy'; as a result, the Republican Party recruited many more electors in the South, marginalising the traditional East Coast elites within the party and changing its political culture.

His success is further due to an important re-configuring, at around the same time, of the religious landscape of the US: mega-churches appeared, which assembled people beyond denominational barriers. They are a result of the anti-doctrinarian and anarchic evangelicalism so characteristic of the USA, where the absence of the institutions and traditions that characterise Europe means the ever-growing individualisation and voluntarisation of religion cannot be slowed down.

Robertson's success is finally due to the radical social transformations that have occurred since the 1960s, that have alienated a number of ordinary Americans from the political institutions of the state. The civil rights movement resulted in what some fundamentalists consider to be an attack on the ideal order of social life through the 'pluralisation' of culture and lifestyles. Pat Robertson presents this evolution as the premeditated plan of a worldwide leftist establishment to deprive the individual of political power and propagate 'salvation through society', which tends to multiculturalism, anti-Americanism and anti-capitalism, and opposes attempts at historical revisionism.

Pat Robertson does not hide his aim of dominating the whole world in order to impose an order based on the biblical ethos to prepare for the return of Christ. His theology is pre-millenarian, but his political strategy is post-millenarian, meaning that it moulds itself to the structures of the US Constitution, playing the game of 'human rules and laws'. For electoral purposes he knows how to keep silent on issues like creationism, the return of Christ, and religiously-motivated anti-semitism, and to promote those issues that obtain broad electoral consensus, like tax reduction, school politics, and of course the criminalisation of abortion. Attacks on women's rights are a cheap and productive way to obtain consensus and alliances amongst very diverse conservatives.

Pat Robertson has not been able to gather support as a presidential candidate for the Republican Party, but his agenda and his conspiracy worldview do play a significant role within the party.

Five types of fear nurture the conspiracy nation

The first is the fundamentalist fear of deviating from the path of 'Christian America'. This produces all sorts of *ad hoc* coalitions with Mormons, conservative Catholics and communitarians, all groups who value membership in a community over the rights of the individual. The second fear is the idea that America will stop being the exceptional society,

the 'city upon a hill', and will lose its role as world leader. The third fear is of losing 'republican virtues', which include patriarchal morality and a pre-modern social ethos. This is the communitarian fear, that the rights of the individual could become more important than the survival of the group as a whole. Women will cease to be providers, including of reproduction, and will become victims or (even worse!) agents of moral debauchery. The fourth fear, of central elites, is the expression of anti-state and anti-federalist attitudes. The fifth fear is the racist-biological fear of the 'Other', felt by those who consider themselves 'natives'. This is the anxiety that the 'superior' identity of the group will be 'diluted' through exogamy, and eventually disappear. Here again the threat is that the women of the group will give birth to children from 'inferior' fathers, thus weakening the superior identity of the group.

In a world of growing complexity, the attraction of fundamentalist conspiracy theories is that they reduce complexity and appear to explain what is going on.

Austin Ruse and the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute

One interesting example of American Christian fundamentalism is Austin Ruse and his Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute. A convert to Roman Catholicism, Ruse has specialised in monitoring the work of the United Nations on matters related to the family and marriage, women's rights, sexuality, and sexual and reproductive health and rights. He collaborates closely with those institutions of the Vatican which specialise on this agenda (in particular the Pontifical Council for the Family, the Pontifical Council for the Laity, the Pontifical Council for Health Workers), and with the whole diplomatic service of the Holy See, coordinated and supervised by the Secretary of State. Although on other issues like the death penalty, war etc., the attitudes and teachings of the Holy See diverge from those of the Christian right in the US, they are in perfect harmony on the issues of disempowering women and combating sexual and reproductive rights. Austin Ruse serves as a civil society representative of the Vatican's positions on these matters, and forms a bridge to the Protestant Christian right in the US. Here again, a post-millenarian political strategy is used to promote pre-millenarian religious agendas.

'Christian identity' as an expression of violent Christian fundamentalism

With the terrorist attack on a Federal building in Oklahoma City, America and the world discovered, to their great perplexity, the existence of a fundamentalist Christian sect called 'Christian Identity'. It has some 50,000 members, most of whom are also members of the militia that carried out the attack.

This sect is based on a pre-millenarian and conspiratorial worldview. They believe that the Anglo-Saxon race is the descendant of the lost tribes of Israel, and their destiny is to play a central role in God's salvation plan. During the 1930s, under the influence of the racial theories of the time, what started as 'Anglo-Israelism' mutated to 'Christian Identity'. Openly-expressed and profound anti-semitism characterises the sect, as well as anti-Black racism.

The militias are composed of men some thirty to fifty years old, who feel themselves threatened by a monolithic state. They tend to isolate themselves from the rest of the world and prepare, in the form of survival training, for the day when Christ will return and they will have to fight 'evil'. The group called 'White Supremacy' has founded a separate community in the northwest. Some militia members do not even register newborn babies, in order to avoid being controlled by the government. The use of violence and of arms is glorified and weapons are hoarded. The members tend to paranoia.

Conclusion

Whereas these militias want to attack and destroy the American federal state, the Christian Coalition and organisations like that of Austin Ruse seek to co-opt the traditional political system.

Although they operate in very different ways, the existence of these different groups undermines the authority of the democratic system, which operates through public discourse and finding consensus. Women are the first to pay the price.

How can we counterbalance this development?¹

Endnotes

¹ For further information, see Heiner Bielefeldt and Wilhelm Heitmeyer (eds, 1998) *Politisierte Religion*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, in particular Bernd Ostendorf, 'Conspiracy Nation. Verschwörungstheorien und evangelikaler Fundamentalismus: Marion G (Pat) Robertsons Neue Weltordnung', pp. 157-187, and Susan Zickmund, 'Reliöse Verschwörungstheorien und die Milizen in den USA', pp. 301-319. Also Catholics For a Free Choice (2001) *Bad Faith at the UN. Drawing Back the Curtain on the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute*, Washington, DC.