6
FUNDAMENTALIST APPROACHES TO RELIGION

Harriet A. Harris

What are fundamentalist approaches to religion?

Fundamentalism and philosophers of religion

Nicholas Wolterstorff answers a charge that those practising ‘philosophical theology within the analytic tradition’ are ‘religious fundamentalists, employing the techniques of philosophy for apologetic purposes without displaying anything of the critical spirit of the true philosopher’ (Wolterstorff 2009b: 156).

The exact charge that Wolterstorff addresses is not clear. Is it that philosophers like him are apologists who know already where they want their arguments to go? If so, this would not be a uniquely fundamentalist trait: philosophers usually are apologists for their beliefs, and know where they want to take their arguments. But the charge contains the accusation that Wolterstorff and others like him fail to test their arguments with sufficient critical scrutiny. This is reminiscent of Tolstoy’s lament that there are very few freethinkers:

Freethinkers are those who are willing to use their minds without prejudice and without fearing to understand things that clash with their own customs, privileges, or beliefs. This state of mind is not common … A man may be a Catholic, a Frenchman, or a capitalist, and yet be a freethinker; but if he put his Catholicism, his patriotism, or his interest, above his reason, and will not give the latter free play where those subjects are touched, he is not a freethinker. His mind is in bondage.

(Tolstoy 1943/1950: xvi)

As Tolstoy suggests, many people, of any religious, philosophical, or ideological persuasion, might lack free-thought in Tolstoy’s sense. But if we use the term ‘fundamentalism’ this broadly, then we will not be as sharp as we might be in attempting to understand particular approaches in religion that have arisen in the last 150 years. Moreover, a number of religious thinkers, philosophers, and ideologues would mount a philosophical case against regarding reason as so independent or neutral a facility. Wolterstorff would have much to say in response to Tolstoy about the ways in which commitments and reason shape one another, and much to say theologically about the nature of freedom and bondage.
A difficulty with many accusations of ‘fundamentalism’ is that they close down rather than open up conversation, and are intended to divert us from giving serious attention to a position. Philosophers of religion might justifiably be termed fundamentalist if they are massaging research findings to make invulnerable that which they, perhaps mistakenly, regard as fundamental to their belief system. But one would be hard-pressed to find Wolterstorff guilty of this. Fundamentalism is by nature strongly foundationalist, and Wolterstorff is wary of strong forms of foundationalism. Or is the charge that Wolterstorff addresses to do with the content of the beliefs held by analytical philosophical theologians, which is usually orthodox and Christian, in some cases Jewish or Muslim, and less commonly from other world faiths? If so, the charge would need detailed substantiation. Holding to orthodox belief within any religious faith would not qualify one as ‘fundamentalist’; fundamentalism is a modern development. Being ‘orthodox’ may even disqualify one from being fundamentalist where ‘orthodoxy’ implies on-going recognition that divine mediations are mediations and should not be elevated to another status (Farley 2005), and that human perspectives, even when they are religious human perspectives, are not to be identified with God’s seeing of the world (Williams 2012: 16).

We could consider other possible meanings of the charge that philosophical theologians, or analytical philosophers of religion, are fundamentalist, but usually such charges of ‘fundamentalism’ are made without a definition of terms, without justifying arguments, and in order to discourage rather than encourage exploration and understanding.

There is a more thoughtful way in which some philosophers of religion accuse other philosophers of religion of being ‘fundamentalist’. Jaco Gericke (2011) suggests that Eleonore Stump, Alvin Plantinga, William Lane Craig, and Richard Swinburne treat scripture in fundamentalist ways in developing their philosophical arguments. He seems to mean, following the characterisations of fundamentalism by James Barr and Harriet Harris, that they read biblical texts in naïvely realist ways, as though biblical narratives give us direct historical reports of events. Gericke is himself both a philosopher and a scholar of the Hebrew Bible, and his historical-critical training in the interpretation of biblical texts causes him to blush at the uses to which philosophical colleagues put the Bible. His sensibility is similar to that of the theologian Maurice Wiles (1987: 48), who said of Richard Swinburne in the 1980s: ‘I do not see how any theologian who has given serious attention to the work done by biblical scholars could begin to pursue the work of Christian theology in the way that Swinburne proposes’.

There is more content to Gericke’s assertion, which concerns usage of scripture, than there is to the charge that Wolterstorff addresses. Yet, it remains an assertion that Gericke has not justified by argument, and one that may not hold up to scrutiny. By the end of this chapter, readers should be in a position to test it, and to use the term ‘fundamentalism’ in ways that enhance, rather than discourage, understanding of particular religious trends.

**Sharpening how we speak about fundamentalism**

We need ways of speaking about fundamentalism that can capture the breadth of fundamentalist tendencies, but also the specificity of this modern religious phenomenon.

Fundamentalist approaches to religion share features that religions have displayed in diverse ways down the ages. Depending on the particular religious tradition under consideration, these features may include: belief in the plenary verbal inspiration of sacred texts; literalism (a charge that always needs qualifying); apocalyptic expectations; evangelistic or proselytising enthusiasm; militant attitudes or behaviour; a sense of adhering to ‘true’ religion whilst co-religionists are somehow ‘false’; emphases on leaders and authority figures, prescriptive gender roles, and ethnocentric orientation.
All so-called religious ‘fundamentalists’ exhibit some of these traits. All of these traits also exist (not always altogether) in forms of pre- and non-fundamentalist religion. Yet, fundamentalist approaches to religion are distinctively modern. A popular route for explaining why this is so, is to see fundamentalism as a product of shifts of thought that occurred through the Protestant Reformation and subsequent European Enlightenment.

This chapter will indeed come round to exploring fundamentalist approaches to religion through lenses of Protestant-Enlightenment thought. Such exploration uncovers the epistemological anxieties that motivate Protestant fundamentalism, which is the original form of fundamentalism. The term ‘fundamentalist’ was coined amongst Baptists in Boston in 1920, as a rallying cry to those who would battle against theological modernism within their denominations, and who would defend the fundamentals of their faith: ‘We suggest that those who still cling to the great fundamentals and who mean to do battle royal for the fundamentals shall be called “Fundamentalists’”…(Laws 1920: 834). The doctrine of biblical inerrancy quickly became the most fundamental belief for fundamentalists, in that it became the foundation upon which all other beliefs were made to rely. As the following quotation from the popular fundamentalist-evangelical philosopher Francis Schaeffer reveals, epistemological anxiety is key to understanding Protestant fundamentalism:

Unless the Bible is without error, not only when it speaks of salvation matters, but also when it speaks of history and the cosmos, we have no foundation for answering questions concerning the existence of the universe and its form and the uniqueness of man. Nor do we have any moral absolutes, or certainty of salvation, and the next generation of Christians will have nothing on which to stand. Our spiritual and physical children will be left with the ground cut out from under them, with no foundation upon which to build their faith or their lives.

(Schaeffer 1984: 46–47)

This stating of the anxiety, and its resolution in an inerrant Bible, serves as well as any definition could, in capturing what is involved in a fundamentalist approach to religion. ‘Fundamentalisms’ within Roman Catholicism and in many of the world faiths have been influenced by Protestant fundamentalist patterns of thought; they may not require inerrant scriptures, but they require some touchstone whose reliability, or purity, is guaranteed as giving un-mediated access to what is divine or true.

We shall focus our philosophical gaze on how Enlightenment philosophies nurtured both the epistemological quandary felt by fundamentalists, and their endeavour to resolve it. But before we proceed, it is important to make three asides.

A broader context

First, we note that a philosophical enquiry that focuses on the epistemological drivers for fundamentalists is a narrow approach. It is a worthwhile approach, for the depth and clarity of understanding that it yields regarding the aspiration to have a fundament for faith. But it is not wholly satisfying for attempts to understand, for example, fundamentalist tendencies towards gender-segregation, or why some fundamentalists are militant and others are not, or why some are apocalyptic in outlook and others are not. Historical and social-scientific enquiry is better equipped to address such questions. The philosophical enquiry that we will pursue concerns the ways in which a fundament of faith is identified and protected, regardless of whether such protectors are militant, or apocalyptic, or controlling of gender-roles.
Even so, we can house this philosophical enquiry within historical and social-scientific theories about religion in the modern world. The theologian Ed Farley employs Peter Berger’s account of the disappearance of the ‘Sacred Canopy’, in offering an insightful account of fundamentalism across religious traditions (Farley 2005).

In Berger’s terms, a religious ‘sacred canopy’ overarched pre-modern cultures; a canopy that has now been removed such that each religion must find a way to survive amidst institutions, world views, and everyday life practices that are utterly emptied of divine import. Farley identifies diverse responses that religions have made to this secularising trend. One response is to become culturally isolated, to repeat traditional formulae and to avoid self-conscious apologetics. Another is to modernise, to de-absolutise traditional forms of authority and use them to criticize and revise traditional religion. Farley sees fundamentalism as a third response.

He describes the fundamentalist response in terms of the mediating entities of religion. All religions have mediating entities that both mediate the sacred power and presence, and deliver the ‘traditioned material’ to the next generation. These entities include texts, rituals, cosmology, authorities, figures, laws, and ethical teachings. Religions, like any other institutions, have processes of self-preservation that enable them to give human beings what they need and desire, and also to pass down what is important through the generations. Since these processes can fuel exclusivist and violent forms of self-preservation, religions also have within them self-critical modes that radically and prophetically undercut their own institutions, such as the prophetic voices of the Hebrew Bible challenging the priestly tradition. The mediating entities themselves – the scriptures, rituals, structures – contain within them clues for transcending their authority; clues which point to the irreducible holy. The body of Christ is and is not to be identified with the consecrated bread at the Eucharist; the will and acts of God are and are not to be identified with any of the institutions that mediate them.

In fundamentalist forms of religion, Farley argues, the mediations have come to be overly identified with the divine, so that it is problematic to regard them as self-conflicting or in any way fallible. Fundamentalists, depending on their tradition, cannot tolerate the possibility of errancy in scripture, or fallibility in the Papacy, or deviation in whichever mediation they put at the base of their faith.

Farley’s theory needs slight modification. Farley holds that when the sacred canopy is removed, then ‘religion’s mediating foundations (the supernaturally given inerrant Scripture, the infallible church leadership, the unambiguous originating figure) begin to shake’. As regards Western Christianity, it would be more accurate to say that the seeds for belief in the inerrancy of Scripture and the infallibility of the Pope were there, and that when religious foundations seemed to be under threat, the doctrines of inerrancy and infallibility became formalised. This happened within Protestant Christianity and Roman Catholicism, respectively, in the late nineteenth century.

However, Farley rightly captures the sense of alarm that was, and is, created by challenges to religious authority: ‘This shaking of religion’s mediating and “divine” foundations can be experienced as a removal of religion’s very contents’. We see this in the Protestant fundamentalist fear, as voiced by Francis Schaeffer, that without the sure foundation of an inerrant Bible, the whole faith comes tumbling down, and the future of society is imperilled.

Farley is also right that a sacramental orientation protects against the fundamentalist impulse: ‘In its sacramental orientation, religion’s content is never simply its mediations but the mysterious activity of the holy itself; the presence and activity of the holy bestow mystery and ambiguity on the mediations. But when the secularizing momentum of the modern removes the sacred canopy and imperils the mediations, religion in a self-defensive act can transform the mediations into its very contents’. Then we get a total identification between what God willed
or caused, and the mediations themselves, be they an inerrant Bible, an infallible Papacy, or a fundamentalistically conceived Rabbinate or Sharia Law. The radical and prophetic dimension of religion is suppressed, which would otherwise enable believers to call these mediations in to question.

Farley’s is the most insightful general account of religious fundamentalism available. Because it is general, sometimes the case is overstated in relation to particular religious fundamentalisms. For example the claim that, ‘Once the mediations themselves become the focus and very content of faith, faith’s sense of the limitation, ambiguity, and potential corruption of all finite entities is compromised’, does not work for Protestant fundamentalists, who need only their one foundational entity, the Bible in its original autographs, to be uncompromised. Protestant fundamentalists are not traditionalists, and will judge both tradition and church institutions against (their readings of) Scripture. Farley’s characterisations need qualifying for any particular fundamentalism under discussion, but they are helpful for conveying the general pattern by which a fundamentalist apologetic takes shape, and which Farley captures succinctly in this paragraph:

To assert an unqualified identity between the holy and something like a cosmology, practice, or text gives rise to tendencies to eliminate from those things history, context, process, perspective, and fallibility. Since its status has become the status of the divine itself, the mediating entity is placed beyond criticism, assessment and open inquiry. Accordingly, the literalist and factual strand always present in ordinary religion develops into a self-conscious and even ‘rational’ apologetics whose aim is to demonstrate the plain truth of the contents of the mediations.

**Fundamentalism, empiricism and atheism**

Shortly we shall look in more detail at the development of fundamentalist rational apologetics, but before we do so we might note some parallels with new forms of atheism. Interestingly, Farley regards fundamentalist approaches to religion as akin to atheism, for the ways in which they try to reduce the irreducible, or comprehend the incomprehensible.

New Atheists tend to divide religious believers into two camps: those who are fundamentalist and those who are disingenuous. For example, A.C. Grayling (2013: 6) holds that non-fundamentalist religion is hypocrisy, presumably because it does not make a direct identification between words and the things that the words are said to represent, and does not aim to justify its claims with empirical evidence. Grayling suspects non-fundamentalist religion of hiding behind mystery, and complains that ‘explaining something by something unexplained amounts, obviously, to no explanation at all’ (Grayling 2013: 77). Along similar lines, Jonathan E. Adler (2007: 272) accuses religious believers of special pleading: ‘Exceptionalism is the norm for religious faith’, he writes, citing as an example the refusal by religious believers to apply chemical testing to the wine at the Eucharist.

Adler is more insistent than religious fundamentalists that religious claims ought to be empirically tested. Religious fundamentalists do not wish to test for chemical change in consecrated wine. Most Protestant fundamentalists would understand Christ’s presence at the Lord’s Supper to be spiritual, and not bodily located in the bread and wine, and so they would not expect the physical elements to be in any way changed. Roman Catholic fundamentalists would
accept the sacramental teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that the ‘substance’ of the elements changes while the ‘species’ or appearance remains unchanged, in which case they, too, expect no change of a kind that could be discerned through chemical testing. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the signs of the bread and wine become, in a way that surpasses understanding, the Body and Blood of Christ. This is the kind of ‘special pleading’ that riles Adler, and the kind of move decried by Grayling, namely explaining something by something unexplained. But then Grayling and Adler become interesting as extreme examples of what it is like to have no time for, and perhaps no capacity for, a sacramental orientation: no sense, for example, that consecrated wine both is and is not the blood of Christ; that it is changed not by human prayer but by divine promise; that chemical testing is irrelevant (similarly irrelevant to testing a piece of paper for chemical change once it has become a note of monetary value according to the promise of the bank); that its being the blood of Christ is neither verifiable nor falsifiable, and this does not render the assertion meaningless. Christ being present in the bread and the wine at the Eucharist is heavy with meaning, and full of implications and practical outworkings, the understanding of which is enhanced by belief that sacraments are visible signs of an invisible grace.

New Atheists are interesting for our purposes in suggesting how religious fundamentalists might think if they lost all sense of how religious language works. Some evangelicals and fundamentalists share Adler’s view that it is worthwhile to run experiments in order to test the efficacy of prayer, such as prayers for those who are sick (Harris 2010: 228–32), and so they forget certain matters that Adler has never understood, including: that God cannot be put to the test, and may not wish to cooperate; that prayer is unquantifiable (in practice and perhaps also in theory); and that prayers for the sick are said continually, and generically, around the world, which complicates attempts to run controlled experiments.

Farley’s point of correction to both religious fundamentalists and the New Atheists is that religion’s causality discourse is only apparently and peculiarly empirical: ‘Almost all of religion’s empirical claims turn out to be convictions about the hidden presence or operation of sacred or divine power in some event, omen, historical figure, or text. … Nor is the divine causality itself even imaginable. “God created the heavens and the earth” is not on the same plane of discourse as “the cosmos originated with the Big Bang”.’ Religious discourse ‘meshes divine activity and presence into ordinary events and figures’, and therefore it is a sacramental discourse, and ‘it is this sacramental discourse that prevents empirical states of affairs from constituting the very content of religion.’

New Atheists and religious fundamentalists share in common a tendency to interpret religious discourse too empirically. New Atheists thereby attempt to show that religious claims are either empirically wrong, or else unverifiable or unfalsifiable and so meaningless (according to a logical-positivist philosophy). Religious fundamentalists are not quite so positivistic, but they make an over-identification between empirical entities, be they texts, leaders, events, or omens, and that in which they place their faith. Hence, they develop doctrines about these empirical entities that would eliminate error from them. Francis Schaeffer is an exemplar of fundamentalism as Farley describes it, for he fears that unless the Bible is inerrant, Christians have no foundation upon which to build their faith or their lives. Moreover, Schaeffer makes the stakes very high; the Bible must be without error even in matters of history and the cosmos. No people have made the Bible, and by implication their faith, so vulnerable to empirical testing as did the Protestant fundamentalists of the twentieth century.

Fundamentalism and evangelicals

The third aside is crucial for averting potential misunderstandings.
In quoting Francis Schaeffer, we touch on the contentious issue of the relationship between fundamentalism and evangelicals. Schaeffer had a fundamentalist lineage, but most people would regard him as ‘evangelical’. He studied and was ordained within militant-separatist-fundamentalist institutions in the 1940s and ’50s, but he came to regret their ‘harsh and ugly’ nature (Schaeffer 1981: 189). He subsequently became a much-loved evangelical philosopher and apologist. Like many evangelicals of his generation, he retained belief in an inerrant Bible, and it is in this respect that he is an exemplar, for our purposes, of fundamentalist approaches to religion, and not in respect of his cultural attitudes, which became irenic and inclusive.

A brief history of how the term ‘fundamentalism’ developed in American Protestantism will help to guide responsible usage today. As stated above, the name ‘fundamentalist’ was first used in 1920 amongst Northern Baptists in the United States of America. It was soon adopted by Presbyterians and others in a coalition against liberal theology and Higher Criticism of the Bible. A coalition of diverse evangelicals had been growing since the late nineteenth century, as evidenced in a series of pamphlets called ‘The Fundamentals’, that were produced in 1909–15, with authors as varied as B.B. Warfield from Princeton, British evangelical biblical scholars, some members of pre-millennialist prophetic conferences, and a few anti-evolutionists. These pamphlets were relatively irenic, but in the 1920s self-proclaimed fundamentalists became militant. Curtis Lee Laws, who had rallied people together under the name ‘fundamentalist’, soon regretted the schismatic tendencies of fundamentalists within his own and other denominations, notably the Presbyterians, who wished to silence or break away from the modernists. Ironically, Laws himself did not subscribe to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy (that the Bible in its original manuscripts contained no errors, and that any errors we may have in our transcripts have providentially been kept to a minimum), which soon became a hallmark of fundamentalism.

There are Protestant groups who continue to claim the fundamentalist label for themselves. They are mostly in the USA and more in the southern states, although fundamentalism originated in the northern cities of Boston, New York, Chicago and Philadelphia. In the 1920s fundamentalists lost the battle for their denominations and withdrew into newly formed churches and denominations. They came to distinguish themselves from evangelicals by holding to a doctrine of separation: that they must keep themselves separate from worldly activities and attitudes, from non-fundamentalist Christians, and even from anyone who mixes with non-fundamentalist Christians. In the mid- and late-twentieth century, they denounced both Billy Graham and the politiced (neo-) fundamentalists, such as Jerry Falwell, for being ‘unequally yoked’ with ‘unbelievers’; Graham for accepting sponsorship from people who are not ‘born-again’ and ‘Bible-believing’; Falwell for working with Catholics, Jews, Mormons, and ‘Protestants of every stripe’ in forming the lobbying group the Moral Majority (Rasmussen 1966; Jones 1980).

Since the early 1920s there have been evangelicals, particularly in Britain, who have resisted the label ‘fundamentalist’ because of its unwelcome connotations of militancy, cultural backwardness, and anti-intellectualism. In the USA in the 1940s and ’50s, a group calling themselves ‘new-evangelicals’ rejected the separatism of their fundamentalist forebears. Over time they also came to question particular ways in which the doctrine of inerrancy was defended. Billy Graham was the leading evangelist of the new-evangelicals; Carl F.H. Henry their leading systematician; and Fuller Theological Seminary their flagship institution. However, and to their chagrin, evangelicals are often regarded as fundamentalist, regardless of their level of social or indeed intellectual activity, if they retain a commitment to inerrancy. This is because, insofar as the ideal of an error-free Bible, and all that it implies theologically, is still in their bloodstream, their view of scripture does not differ significantly from that of their fundamentalist cousins, and their apologetics and approach to faith are driven by the same epistemological anxieties.
Debate on this matter is still live; evangelicals feeling that they are held in a Catch-22 situation by critics who regard them as fundamentalist however much they protest or develop; critics holding that biblical fundamentalism is present wherever people are governed by a commitment to inerrancy. The term ‘fundamentalism’ is applied to evangelical defenders of inerrancy (although ‘biblical fundamentalism’ would be clearer and more precise in such instances), and by extension to other Christians and members of other faiths, insofar as they share inerrantist or equivalent ways of thinking. Farley’s theory is helpful for gauging what equivalent ways of thinking might involve: over-identifying divine mediations (be they scripture, traditions, leaders, institutions etc.) with the divine; regarding these mediations as unlimited by historical process or error; and building upon them a rational apologetic for the faith.

When we use the term ‘fundamentalism’ and privilege a focus on ‘biblical fundamentalism’, we are being relatively narrow and specific, and are not commenting upon political or social ethos. Being clear on this matter may save us much confusion. People can be fundamentalist about scripture without being militant or separatist, or sharing other traits that may be properly associated with fundamentalism within more sociologically-oriented studies. Taking a narrow and specific focus, which scrutinises inerrantism and invites comparison with equivalent developments in other religions, is valuable for philosophical and theological study. When philosophers such as Gericke accuse fellow philosophers of being fundamentalist, they are not commenting on their social or political stance, but on their use of scripture and structure of argumentation. By adopting the same relatively narrow focus, we are able to say that Gericke is using the term ‘fundamentalism’ too broadly. The philosophers whom Gericke names, such as Swinburne and Stump, are not committed to the ideal of an inerrant Bible. They use the Bible as a source of theological propositions with which to furnish their philosophical arguments, and in doing so they read the Bible according to what fundamentalists and evangelicals might call its ‘plain sense’, or what we might call ‘realist’ readings (see below). But they do not over-identify scripture with the divine, and they do not suggest that the Christian faith stands or falls according to whether the Bible can be said to contain errors.

Fundamentalist characteristics and Enlightenment philosophies

It is time to explore fundamentalist approaches to religion in more detail. We will do so using Protestant fundamentalism as the classic, because original, form, and by taking what Farley regards as a narrow approach, namely focusing on the philosophical currents at work in the emergence of fundamentalism. This approach will bring into sharper focus both the insightful and the over-stated aspects of Farley’s analysis.

We are not here plotting direct lines of influence between Enlightenment philosophies and fundamentalist developments, though direct lines can be drawn, particularly between Princeton scholars and the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid (Marsden 1980; Bozeman 1977; Vander Stelt 1978; Harris 1998). But we are looking for the shaping of thought, or for the development of an ethos to which both fundamentalists and their liberal opponents subscribed. The English philosopher John Locke was arguably a more formative, though less overt, influence than Reid upon the notions of reason, faith, belief, and knowledge that affected the development of religious fundamentalism. It is also important to note that while fundamentalist apologetics were developed in sympathy with aspects of British Enlightenment thought, they were developed in conscious rejection of German Enlightenment, or Kantian, thought. In particular, Reid’s realism was regarded as a helpful antidote to Kantian idealism.
Establishing a right to believe

Fundamentalists are children of the Enlightenment in this crucial regard: they accept, in principle, that if they cannot establish that they are justified in their beliefs, then they lack the epistemic right to believe. Nicholas Wolterstorff would be a very unlikely fundamentalist in this respect, for much of his philosophical agenda has been to question the notions of justification, epistemic duty, and epistemic right that have been imbibed in modern thought; notions that he attributes to John Locke (Wolterstorff 1996).

Locke’s rendering of the relation of reason to revelation was formative for the later milieu in which fundamentalism developed. In An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Locke maintained that ‘Whatever GOD hath revealed, is certainly true’ (Essay IV.xviii.10), even if it is a belief that we would not be entitled to hold according to the unaided use of our reason. However, that God is the source of some supposed revelation is a matter that we must judge according to reason and evidence. Thus, reason, particularly as it is employed in gathering and assessing evidence, gains the upper hand over revelation in Locke’s philosophy: ‘our Assent can be rationally no higher than the Evidence of its being a Revelation’ (Essay IV.xvi.14). The tests that Locke thought fitting for revelation were those of miracle and prophecy, because, as shall be discussed below, Locke regarded these as matters of outer rather than inner evidence. The public verifiability of evidence is an important theme to which we shall return. For now our focus is on the prescription that we must test the evidence for a revelation.

Evidence that would count against a purported revelation being really from God would include its contravening ‘the certainty of our intuitive knowledge’; in short, Locke wrote, ‘Revelation cannot be admitted against the clear Evidence of Reason’ (Essay IV.xviii.5).

Reason must be our last Judge and Guide in every Thing. I do not mean, that we must consult Reason, and examine whether a Proposition revealed from God can be made out by natural Principles, and if it cannot, that then we may reject it: But consult it we must, and by it examine, whether it be a Revelation from God or no: And if Reason finds it to be revealed from GOD, Reason then declares for it, as much as for any other Truth, and makes it one of her Dictates.

(Essay IV.xix.14)

The biblical scholar and proto-fundamentalist, Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, accepted the principle, strongly promoted by Locke, that reason must first test whether a purported revelation really is divinely revealed. He wrote an article in 1911 ‘On Faith and its Psychological Aspects’, arguing that faith and knowledge alike ‘rest equally on evidence and are equally the product of evidence’ (Warfield 1988: 330). The only difference that he acknowledged between faith and knowledge was that knowledge is based on perception and faith on testimony, so that faith involves a greater element of trust. Although faith is a gift from God, Warfield argued, in an encyclopaedia entry on ‘Apologetics’ in 1908, it ‘is yet formally conviction passing into confidence; and … all forms of conviction must rest on evidence as their ground, and it is not faith but reason which investigates the nature and validity of this ground’ (Warfield 1908: 15).

In 1881, Warfield formulated the classic doctrine of inerrancy together with Princeton theologian A.A. Hodge. The notion was growing, and was reflected and furthered by Hodge and Warfield, that in order for revelation to be established as revelation, it need not only be supported by miracle and prophecy, but must be shown to be without error of any kind.
Judging revelation by empirical evidence

Protestant fundamentalists have at their core a conviction that they need to be able to justify the Christian faith, and that justification is possible only if the Bible is without error, and therefore that first justifying the Bible is a necessary prolegomena to faith.

Some Protestant fundamentalists have been content with deductive reasoning to establish that the Bible is without error. They argue along these lines:

- Scripture is inspired by God word-for-word
- God does not err
- Therefore, Scripture cannot err.

This argument relies upon the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration, according to which a belief that the Bible is the Word of God is equal to the belief that all of the words of the Bible are God’s chosen words. In their 1881 article on inerrancy, A.A. Hodge and B.B. Warfield put the deductive argument like this: ‘the scriptures not only contain, but ARE THE WORD OF GOD, and hence … all their elements and all their affirmations are absolutely errorless’ (Hodge and Warfield 1881: 237, original emphasis). The British evangelical theologian James I. Packer made the same point the other way around: ‘what is the cash-value of saying Scripture “inspires” and “mediates the Word of God”, when we have constantly to allow for undetectable possibilities of error on the part of each biblical author?’ (Packer 1979: 27). The American Pentecostal systematician Wayne Grudem supports the deductive defence with scriptural citations: ‘all the words in the Bible are God’s words. … [T]he Bible clearly teaches that God cannot lie or speak falsely’ (2 Sam. 7:28; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18). Therefore, all the words in Scripture are claimed to be completely true and without error in any part (Num. 23:19; Pss. 12:6; 119:89, 96; Prov. 30:5; Matt. 24:35)’ (Grudem 1994: 91). In a slightly more cautious tone for the twenty-first century, Daniel J. Treier writes: ‘If, confessing Scripture’s inspiration, one holds to a fairly direct relation between the Bible and the revealed Word of God, then a viewpoint approximating biblical inerrancy follows as a matter of course. God speaks truly’ (Treier 2007: 40).

However, most Protestant fundamentalists have wanted to say not only that we know the Bible to be without error, but that we can show it to be without error. Despite appealing to the deductive argument above, Benjamin Warfield effectively undercut that argument by insisting that inspiration is not the first but the last claim we make about scripture: that first we prove the Scriptures ‘authentic, historically credible, generally trustworthy, before we prove them inspired’ (Warfield 1948: 210).

Warfield was influenced by the methods of textual-criticism, or ‘lower criticism’, which were being developed in his lifetime by B.F. Westcott and F.J.A. Hort. Warfield used these methods in order to test the inspiration of the biblical texts. He believed that sound textual criticism was bringing critics close to unearthing the original manuscripts, which, he reasoned, would be inerrant because verbally inspired. This approach committed Warfield to accept in principle that should evidence show the original biblical manuscripts to contain errors, then Scripture is not inspired. In the famed article of 1881, Warfield wrote, along with Hodge, that a ‘proved error in Scripture contradicts not only our doctrine [of inerrancy], but the Scripture claims and, therefore, its inspiration in making those claims’ (Hodge and Warfield 1881: 245).

Hodge and Warfield’s defence of biblical inerrancy put the status of the Bible at stake. At the same time, their formulation of the doctrine was such that no error could in practice be established. Hodge and Warfield (1881: 242) presumed that the existence of any actual errors in the original manuscripts was impossible, and they laid down three criteria against which any alleged error in known manuscripts must be tested:
1. Let the alleged error be proved to have existed in the original autographs;
2. Let the interpretation which occasions the apparent discrepancy be proved to be the ‘one which the passage was evidently intended to bear’; and,
3. ‘Let it be proved that the true sense of some part of the original autograph is directly and necessarily inconsistent with some certainly known fact of history, or truth of science, or some other statement of Scripture certainly ascertained and interpreted.’

Since these criteria cannot in practice be met, Hodge and Warfield protected the inerrancy of the Bible, at least in its original autographs.

Their legacy has been the development of an industry of fundamentalist Biblical scholarship that debates and defends the error-free nature of the Bible. Fundamentalist writings of the twentieth century are overwhelmingly devoted to arguing away apparent mistakes and inconsistencies in Scripture; their efforts premised on the view that Christians have a right to believe only if Scripture can be shown to be flawless according to criteria that can (in principle, if not in practice) be publicly, objectively, investigated.

An emphasis upon objectivity

Locke was suspicious of any claims to revelation that were private and could not be publicly tested. He was a strong opponent of religious enthusiasm and he distrusted talk of immediate revelation. He did not deny that the Holy Spirit could enlighten people’s minds through an immediate intercourse (Essay IV.xix.5), but he judged that enthusiasts are not so inspired, but instead suffer from a ‘warmed or overweening Brain’ (Essay IV.xix.7). He accused enthusiasts of irresponsibility, of putting themselves beyond public testing and the dictates of reason: ‘If Reason must not examine their truth by something extrinsical to the Perswasions themselves; Inspirations and Delusions, Truth and Falsehood will have the same Measure, and will not be possible to be distinguished’ (Essay IV.xix.14).

The tenor of Locke’s attacks on Quakers and others who claimed an inner light or revelation was similar to that taken by early fundamentalists against theological liberals. In the 1920s, the fundamentalists’ main case against liberals was that they rooted their faith in the uncertain ground of experience and emotion. The respected Princeton theologian J. Gresham Machen argued on the fundamentalist side that ‘liberalism’, or ‘modernism’ – the terms were used interchangeably at the time – was a new, non-Christian religion because it sought to turn faith from an objective publicly verifiable matter into a subjective, private venture verified only by the feelings of the individual (Machen 1923, 1925). Fundamentalists believed that by defending the authority of scripture they were protecting the objective data on which faith rests. Their apologetic developed as one of fact over against feeling, and objective certainty over against subjective opinion. Protestant fundamentalist apologetics have been driven by the conviction that the Bible’s teachings are publicly verifiable. The Bible, which is the word of God written, replaces Christ in this crucial respect; that it remains open to our public investigation, ‘available for study, for public inspection, for repeated examination, and as a basis for mutual discussion’ (Grudem 1994: 50).

Realism

We have alluded to Locke’s argument that since inner experience is not a reliable guide, the suitable tests for authenticating a divine revelation are those of miracle and prophecy (where prophecy is understood to be validated by the coming to bear of forecast events). ‘To know that
any Revelation is from God’, Locke wrote in *A Discourse of Miracles*, ‘it is necessary to know that the Messenger that delivers it is sent from God, and that cannot be known but by some credentials given him by God himself’ (Locke 2002: 44). He argued that miracles can witness to the messengers’ mission from God. He took the biblical accounts of miracles at face-value, in a way that might appear ‘fundamentalist’ today:

For example, *Jesus of Nazareth* professes himself sent from God: He with a word calms a Tempest at Sea: This one looks on as a Miracle, and consequently cannot but receive his Doctrine: Another thinks this might be the effect of Chance, or Still in the Weather and no Miracle, and so stands out; but afterwards seeing him walk on the Sea, owns that for a Miracle and believes: Which yet upon another has not that force, who suspects it may possibly be done by the assistance of a Spirit: But yet the same Person seeing afterwards our Saviour cure an inveterate Palsie by a word, admits that for a Miracle, and becomes a convert. By all which it is plain, that where the Miracle is admitted, the Doctrine cannot be rejected; it comes with the assurance of a Divine Attestation to him that allows the Miracle, and he cannot question its Truth.

*(Locke 2002: 46)*

While Locke held what we might call a subjective view of miracles, in that the miraculous quality of an event is in the eye of the beholder, he also exhibited a realism of the kind that became particularly cherished within fundamentalist and pre-fundamentalist apologetics. He took the scriptures to be straightforward accounts of real states of affairs in the world. The differences of interpretation that Locke considered, are differences between how witnesses judge events that have seemingly miraculous elements. They are not, for example, differences of opinion about the outward features of the events, or about how the miracle came to be ‘reported’ (as a direct realist might say) or ‘narrated’ (as a more literary interpreter might say).

Locke did not question that events unfolded as the biblical texts suggest. His realism, and more substantially that of Thomas Reid, was crucial to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century apologists who developed and sustained the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. Reid’s Common Sense Realism, in particular, was regarded as a bulwark against the idealist philosophies that underlay German Higher Criticism, and was drawn upon explicitly to underpin fundamentalist apologetics.

It may seem strange to allude to Locke’s realism given that Reid developed his philosophy of Common Sense Realism in reaction against Locke’s idealism, that is, Locke’s theory of Ideas. Locke’s theory, in short, was that the direct objects of our perceptions are not external realities but ideas in the mind which represent these realities in some way. In arriving at this position Locke drew upon Descartes’ distinction between primary and secondary qualities of matter. Descartes argued that primary qualities, namely extension and motion, are essential to matter, whereas secondary qualities, such as colour, smell and taste, reside not in the external object as such, but in the mind as it perceives the object (Descartes 1984–91, Vol. I: 88–90, 284–85, Vol. II: 29–31). Locke defined secondary qualities as ‘nothing in the objects themselves, but Powers to produce various Sensations in us by their primary Qualities’ (1689/1979: 135).

Initially, Reid followed Bishop Berkeley’s development of the ideal theory. Berkeley saw the potential for scepticism, and sought to avoid any gap between ideas and the real world. He accused Locke of distinguishing (arbitrarily) between qualities which exist materially and qualities which exist only mentally, and brought both primary and secondary qualities into the mind. Berkeley thereby extinguished matter as a substance distinct from ideas, and regarded ideas and the minds perceiving them as the only realities. He defined the real world in terms of ideas and denied the existence of a mind-independent material world (1734/1975: 88).
But despite Berkeley’s efforts to close a route for scepticism, he in fact opened up a route that David Hume came fully to exploit. Hume attributed our idea of external existence directly to ideas and impressions rather than to external objects themselves, or at least argued that we cannot know that they are attributable to external entities. He also questioned the notion of minds as substances with continued existence and identity (Treatise I ii 6, I iv; Enquiry xii). Hume’s philosophy drove Lockean empiricism to its most sceptical conclusion. When Reid realized this, he ended his endorsement of the Berkeleian system and criticized the ideal doctrine in its entirety.

Reid posited a direct realism in place of the doctrine of ideas. He defended the common sense belief that we perceive objects rather than ideas of objects, and hence that we perceive the outside world directly. The ‘vulgar’ are not aware of strange ideal objects in the mind, Reid said. They know of only one object, ‘which in perception, is something external that exists; in memory, something that did exist; and in conception, may be something that never existed’ (Reid 1863: 369).

On the matter of perception, Reid presented a geometrical argument to defend the claim that visible figure and extension are the signs of tangible figure and extension. According to the ideal theory, the mind knows only some copy of the impression that a tangible object makes on the sense organs. Reid used the example of a right-lined triangle to make the point that a tangible figure is projected on to the bottom of the eye as a spherical triangle, but is seen as the rectilinear triangle that it is (1863: 148). If we knew only copies of impressions, he argued, we would have developed a spherical rather than Euclidean geometry to match these spherical perceptions.

For biblical apologists, it was Reid’s extension of his perceptual realism to arguments about memory and testimony that became most important. Reid argued that just as perception puts us directly in touch with external objects, rather than with ideas, so memory puts us in relation with the object remembered rather than with our idea of that object. Thereby, our memory reliably informs us about past events in our own experience. Like perception, memory is an unanalyisable ‘original faculty, given us by the Author of our being’ (1863: 340). While we can find no necessary connection between remembering an act and the act having happened, and can say only that the belief which we have of what we remember ‘is the result of our constitution’, Reid asserted that our inability to explain the operation of memory does not affect our belief that it yields ‘knowledge … of things past’ (1863: 341). Memory is an original faculty which inexplicably yields immediate knowledge of things remembered.

Similarly, Reid held that, with certain qualifications, testimony can be trusted to tell us of actual events in the experience of others and not simply of the reporter’s point of view. He believed that language corresponds to states of affairs external to the mind and thereby puts us in touch with reality. He explained his faith in human testimony by means of two principles that he regarded as implanted in our natures by the Author of Our Being, who intended that ‘we should receive the greatest and most important part of our knowledge by the information of others’ (1863: 196). The first of these principles is a propensity to speak truth, which is there even in a lie because it is a yielding to a natural impulse. The second is the principle of credulity – of believing what one is told – which is unlimited until one encounters instances of deceit (1863: 196–97). Reid held that the major difference between human testimony and the testimony of the senses (perception) is that as we get older ‘the credit given to human testimony is restrained and weakened, by the experience we have of deceit’, while the credit we give to our senses is confirmed by the uniformity and constancy of the laws of nature (1863: 184).

Acknowledging Reid’s principle of credulity, Dugald Stewart (1814: 235–36, 239–40), a colleague in the Common Sense school, asserted that if our instinct to trust testimony is
regulated by lessons of experience, testimony can yield certain knowledge. Although ‘philosophers are accustomed to speak of the event as only probable; … our confidence in its happening is not less complete, than if it rested on the basis of mathematical demonstration’ (Stewart 1814: 240). We can see how this confidence, so distant from the scepticism of Hume, could be put to service in defending the notion that biblical testimony can yield certainty.

**Biblical apologetics**

Reid offered no philosophical consideration of biblical authority in his major works. He gave greater consideration to natural than to revealed religion, and had less to say about Scripture than did Locke. However, in his lectures on natural theology delivered in 1780 (edited from student notes and published in 1981), Reid took essentially the same line as Locke; that to be justified in accepting the Scriptures as Revelation one must use reason to establish that they come from God:

> It is no doubt true that Revelation exhibits all the truths of Natural Religion, but it is no less true that reason must be employed to judge of that revelation; whether it comes from God. Both are great lights and we ought not to put out the one in order to use the other. … We acknowledge then that men are indebted to revelation in the matter of Natural Religion but this is no reason why we should not also use our reason here. … Tis by reason that we must judge whether that Revelation be really so. … [T]hat man is best prepared for the study and practice of the revealed Religion who has previously acquired just Sentiments of the Natural.  

(Reid 1981: 1–2)

James Beattie also shared the Lockean position that reason should acquiesce to the mysteries of religion, but that evidences make such acquiescence possible. He was the only member of the Scottish Common Sense school to offer an apologetic for the Bible, which he gave in his *Evidences of the Christian Religion*. (James Oswald offered a simplistic apologetic for natural religion, which brought the Common Sense school into disrepute.) Beattie’s aim was to defend the Gospel history as true. His efforts read like a precursor to fundamentalist biblical apologetics, particularly in his application of realist principles. For example, he defended the unbiased nature of the apostles’ testimony: ‘all is fair, candid, and simple: the historians make no reflections of their own, but confine themselves to matter of fact, that is, to what they heard and saw’ (Beattie 1786, I: 89), and he accepted their reports of miracles and prophecies as ‘facts, in regard to which they could not be mistaken, though they had been the most credulous of mankind’ (I: 164–65).

Beattie’s method was principally to maintain the reliability of human testimony and the trustworthiness of the apostles. He argued that discrepancies between the gospels exist only insofar as the writers ‘could not have stood all in the same place, nor consequently taken notice of the very same particulars without variation’ (Beattie 1786, II: 100), and some inaccuracies may have entered through transcribers (II: 83–84). But, Beattie claims, supposed ‘obscurities’ have been ‘both multiplied and magnified far beyond the truth’ (II: 82). He judges it ‘the intention of Providence that we shall have difficulties to encounter’, but denies that these pose considerable difficulties for the religion of the New Testament. When ‘fairly stated, they will be found rather to add to its evidence’ (II: 88, 90). He insists that the Christian faith is rational, but that it may not appear to be so to those who take reason beyond the true limits of philosophy and attempt to explain that to which reason should simply assent. Beattie’s views on reason and evidences, and his appeal to the evangelists as reliable eye-witnesses, backed by
harmonisations of the gospel records and a defence of their general consistency, all find their parallels in fundamentalist apologetics. However, attempts to provide detailed evidence of inerrancy came after Beattie’s time.

**Inerrancy and facticity**

The idea that scripture ‘evidence[d] itself to be the Word of God’ (the Westminster Confession, I, v) was not new, and of course not created by eighteenth-century philosophies. However, evidences had previously been regarded as supportive of, rather than foundational to, claims to the Bible’s truth and authority. Under the influence of Lockean empiricism, the weight was shifting. Locke’s own tests for the authenticity of a divine revelation turned on the message being supported by miracle or prophecy, and it not offending our intuitively held certainties. By the turn of the twentieth century, Warfield was arguing that we must first prove the Scriptures to be authentic, historically credible and generally trustworthy, before we prove them to be inspired. Warfield’s fundamentalist descendants have largely accepted this onus of proof, and seen it as their duty to defend the inerrancy of Scripture in order to establish its divine origins, and that in order to uphold the truth of the Christian faith.

We also find in Locke and in the Scottish Common Sense philosophers a realism that would come to lend confidence to the fundamentalists of the twentieth century. Neither Locke nor Reid themselves came close to holding a fundamentalist form of Christianity. Far from it, Locke was suspected of harbouring Unitarian and Socinian views, and Reid remained Moderate rather than Evangelical in his Presbyterianism. But the appeal of Common Sense Realism in particular was that it could be used to support the conviction that the biblical records inform us not of ideas or interpretations of events, but of events themselves. This felt deeply important to biblical conservatives at the turn of the twentieth century, who were concerned about the German Idealist influence behind higher-criticism; an influence that named Kant and Hegel in its ancestry, and that eroded confidence in the factual nature of the biblical reports.

The empiricist, objectivist, and realist elements that we have so far attributed to a fundamentalist outlook, are deeply apparent in the fundamentalist emphasis upon facts. J. Gresham Machen, the most intellectual apologist for the fundamentalist cause in the 1920s and ’30s, and, like Hodge and Warfield, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, argued that the ‘Bible is quite useless unless it is a record of facts’ (Machen 1936: 65). Machen’s philosophical differences with modernists became intensely relevant in debates over the nature of Jesus’ resurrection. Machen decried the modernist concern with ‘the belief of the disciples in the resurrection’ which refused to deal with ‘whether the events really took place’ (Machen 1926, quoted in Marsden 1980: 216–17). He insisted that the biblical narratives are factual accounts of real events from the past. A number of commentators, including H.L. Mencken, who was a forceful critic of fundamentalism, thought that Machen had the stronger arguments, and that his liberal critics did not address his concerns satisfactorily.

Machen was a scholar who was embarrassed by others in the 1920s and 1930s who shared the fundamentalist label, including those involved in anti-evolutionist crusades and pre-millennialist speculation. Realist readings of the Bible need not take one down the path of reading creation narratives or prophetic passages factually. Protestant fundamentalists tend to read the Bible factually wherever possible, but not where a factual reading would be thought to contradict other accepted facts, as this would undermine belief that the Bible is inerrant. Fundamentalists would not resist evolution if they thought that the factual evidence lay overwhelmingly in favour of evolution; they would not pitch the Bible against what they take to be fact (although they use the Bible to shape what they take to be fact), for that would directly jeopardise their belief in
inerrancy. Arguments against evolution since the 1960s have developed not as a Bible v. Science debate, but in the form of creation science, that is, in the form of appeals to empirical fact. Not all fundamentalists are creation scientists; belief in an inerrant Bible does not necessarily entail reading creation accounts factually.

Nevertheless, reading the Bible in an over-factual way (which is a more accurate phrase than ‘reading the Bible literally’) is a characteristic of fundamentalist apologetics. The new-evangelical theologian Harold Lindsell provides a clear example of an over-factual reading when he argued that Peter must have denied Jesus six times (Lindsell 1976: 175–76). Lindsell could not otherwise make sense of the Gospels’ contrasting accounts of Peter’s denials.

**Summarising remarks**

This chapter has examined fundamentalism within one diverse religious tradition, namely Protestant Christianity. This tradition is where ‘fundamentalism’ first acquired its name, and where religious fundamentalism has developed most self-consciously and self-critically. Protestant fundamentalism is infused theologically with Reformed emphases on sola Scriptura, and philosophically with empirical-rationalist attitudes about epistemic duties and justified belief. A shorthand way of capturing the shape of Protestant fundamentalist belief is to see it as strongly foundationalist: as positing a belief at the base of its system, which must be an immediate, certain, self-justifying belief, and from which all other beliefs can be derived. Protestant fundamentalists place the Bible at the foundation of their belief system and hence treat it almost as an unmediated entity; one that has been directly communicated by God, is self-justifying, can be plainly understood, and needs little if any interpretation (or mediation). It is a tension, then, for Protestant fundamentalists, that they also seek to justify placing the Bible at the fundament of their beliefs, by means of empirical investigation.

Returning to Farley’s theory, we can view the doctrine of inerrancy as an example of a fundamentalist development in which a mediation (in this case, the Bible) is over-identified with the divine, and therefore regarded as free from all error, limitation, or historical conditioning. Biblical fundamentalists would not wholly recognise themselves in Farley’s account, for they do acknowledge to some extent the historical nature of the Bible, and they are careful to reject theories of inspiration that suggest mechanical dictation. They speak about the personalities of the individual authors. However, that God inspires the Scriptures word for word is important to fundamentalists because God guarantees not only that the Scriptures are reliable for our edification and salvation, but also that the human authors got all their facts right. That the facts are right, and hence the Scriptures inerrant, then becomes the primary evidence for God’s inspiration, and in this way the biblical apologetic is circular.

The analysis within this chapter hopefully dampens enthusiasm for using the label ‘fundamentalist’ too readily of philosophers on the grounds that they give realist readings of scripture, or that they allow religious beliefs to influence the ways in which they philosophise. Fundamentalism is a modern religious phenomenon that can be analysed quite specifically, and which can shed light on larger theological and philosophical trends of the modern era, particularly in relation to epistemological anxiety. If we understand fundamentalism as it has developed historically and philosophically, we can use a study of it to assess the effects of foundationalism and empiricism upon religious belief. We can also identify fundamentalist characteristics, such as a strong empiricism or emphases upon facticity, which we see mirrored in New Atheism, and address them from diverse vantage-points of practice, faith, and philosophy.