The Battle for God  
By KAREN ARMSTRONG

One of the most startling developments of the late twentieth century has been the emergence within every major religious tradition of a militant piety popularly known as "fundamentalism." Its manifestations are sometimes shocking. Fundamentalists have gunned down worshippers in a mosque, have killed doctors and nurses who work in abortion clinics, have shot their presidents, and have even toppled a powerful government. It is only a small minority of fundamentalists who commit such acts of terror, but even the most peaceful and law-abiding are perplexing, because they seem so adamantly opposed to many of the most positive values of modern society. Fundamentalists have no time for democracy, pluralism, religious toleration, peacekeeping, free speech, or the separation of church and state. Christian fundamentalists reject the discoveries of biology and physics about the origins of life and insist that the Book of Genesis is scientifically sound in every detail. At a time when many are throwing off the shackles of the past, Jewish fundamentalists observe their revealed Law more stringently than ever before, and Muslim women, repudiating the freedoms of Western women, shroud themselves in veils and chadors. Muslim and Jewish fundamentalists both interpret the Arab-Israeli conflict, which began as defiantly secularist, in an exclusively religious way. Fundamentalism, moreover, is not confined to the great monotheisms. There are Buddhist, Hindu, and even Confucian fundamentalisms, which also cast aside many of the painfully acquired insights of liberal culture, which fight and kill in the name of religion and strive to bring the sacred into the realm of politics and national struggle.

This religious resurgence has taken many observers by surprise. In the middle years of the twentieth century, it was generally taken for granted that secularism was an irreversible trend and that faith would never again play a major part in world events. It was assumed that as human beings became more rational, they either would have no further need for religion or would be content to confine it to the immediately personal and private areas of their lives. But in the late 1970s, fundamentalists began to rebel against this secularist hegemony and started to wrest religion out of its marginal position and back to center stage. In this, at least, they have enjoyed remarkable success. Religion has once again become a force that no government can safely ignore. Fundamentalism has suffered defeats, but it is by no means quiescent. It is now an essential part of the modern scene and will certainly play an important role in the domestic and international affairs of the future. It is crucial, therefore, that we try to understand what this type of religiosity means, how and for what reasons it has developed, what it can tell us about our culture, and how best we should deal with it.

But before we proceed, we must look briefly at the term "fundamentalism" itself, which has been much criticized. American Protestants were the first to use it. In the early decades of the twentieth century, some of them started to call themselves "fundamentalists" to distinguish themselves from the more "liberal" Protestants, who were, in their opinion, entirely distorting the Christian faith. The fundamentalists wanted to go back to basics and reemphasize the "fundamentals" of the Christian tradition, which they identified with a literal interpretation of Scripture and the acceptance of certain core doctrines. The term "fundamentalism" has since been applied to reforming movements in other world faiths in a way that is far from satisfactory. It seems to suggest that fundamentalism is monolithic in all its manifestations. This is not the
case. Each "fundamentalism" is a law unto itself and has its own dynamic. The term also gives the impression that fundamentalists are inherently conservative and wedded to the past, whereas their ideas are essentially modern and highly innovative. The American Protestants may have intended to go back to the "fundamentals," but they did so in a peculiarly modern way. It has also been argued that this Christian term cannot be accurately applied to movements that have entirely different priorities. Muslim and Jewish fundamentalisms, for example, are not much concerned with doctrine, which is an essentially Christian preoccupation. A literal translation of "fundamentalism" into Arabic gives us usuliyah, a word that refers to the study of the sources of the various rules and principles of Islamic law. Most of the activists who are dubbed "fundamentalists" in the West are not engaged in this Islamic science, but have quite different concerns. The use of the term "fundamentalism" is, therefore, misleading.

Others, however, argue simply that, like it or not, the word "fundamentalism" is here to stay. And I have come to agree: the term is not perfect, but it is a useful label for movements that, despite their differences, bear a strong family resemblance. At the outset of their monumental six-volume Fundamentalist Project, Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby argue that the "fundamentalisms" all follow a certain pattern. They are embattled forms of spirituality, which have emerged as a response to a perceived crisis. They are engaged in a conflict with enemies whose secularist policies and beliefs seem inimical to religion itself. Fundamentalists do not regard this battle as a conventional political struggle, but experience it as a cosmic war between the forces of good and evil. They fear annihilation, and try to fortify their beleaguered identity by means of a selective retrieval of certain doctrines and practices of the past. To avoid contamination, they often withdraw from mainstream society to create a counterculture; yet fundamentalists are not impractical dreamers. They have absorbed the pragmatic rationalism of modernity, and, under the guidance of their charismatic leaders, they refine these "fundamentals" so as to create an ideology that provides the faithful with a plan of action. Eventually they fight back and attempt to resacralize an increasingly skeptical world.

To explore the implications of this global response to modern culture, I want to concentrate on just a few of the fundamentalist movements that have surfaced in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the three monotheistic faiths. Instead of studying them in isolation from one another, I intend to trace their development chronologically, side by side, so that we can see how deeply similar they are. By looking at selected fundamentalisms, I hope to examine the phenomenon in greater depth than would be possible in a more general, comprehensive survey. The movements I have chosen are American Protestant fundamentalism, Jewish fundamentalism in Israel, and Muslim fundamentalism in Egypt, which is a Sunni country, and Iran, which is Shii. I do not claim that my discoveries necessarily apply to other forms of fundamentalism, but hope to show how these particular movements, which have been among the most prominent and influential, have all been motivated by common fears, anxieties, and desires that seem to be a not unusual response to some of the peculiar difficulties of life in the modern secular world.

There have always been people, in every age and in each tradition, who have fought the modernity of their day. But the fundamentalism that we shall be considering is an essentially twentieth-century movement. It is a reaction against the scientific and secular culture that first appeared in the West, but which has since taken root in other parts of the world. The West has developed an entirely unprecedented and wholly different type of civilization, so the religious
response to it has been unique. The fundamentalist movements that have evolved in our own day have a symbiotic relationship with modernity. They may reject the scientific rationalism of the West, but they cannot escape it. Western civilization has changed the world. Nothing — including religion — can ever be the same again. All over the globe, people have been struggling with these new conditions and have been forced to reassess their religious traditions, which were designed for an entirely different type of society.

There was a similar transitional period in the ancient world, lasting roughly from 700 to 200 BCE, which historians have called the Axial Age because it was pivotal to the spiritual development of humanity. This age was itself the product and fruition of thousands of years of economic, and therefore social and cultural, evolution, beginning in Sumer in what is now Iraq, and in ancient Egypt. People in the fourth and third millennia BCE, instead of simply growing enough crops to satisfy their immediate needs, became capable of producing an agricultural surplus with which they could trade and thereby acquire additional income. This enabled them to build the first civilizations, develop the arts, and create increasingly powerful polities: cities, city-states, and, eventually, empires. In agrarian society, power no longer lay exclusively with the local king or priest; its locus shifted at least partly to the marketplace, the source of each culture's wealth. In these altered circumstances, people ultimately began to find that the old paganism, which had served their ancestors well, no longer spoke fully to their condition.

In the cities and empires of the Axial Age, citizens were acquiring a wider perspective and broader horizons, which made the old local cults seem limited and parochial. Instead of seeing the divine as embodied in a number of different deities, people increasingly began to worship a single, universal transcendence and source of sacredness. They had more leisure and were thus able to develop a richer interior life; accordingly, they came to desire a spirituality which did not depend entirely upon external forms. The most sensitive were troubled by the social injustice that seemed built into this agrarian society, depending as it did on the labor of peasants who never had the chance to benefit from the high culture. Consequently, prophets and reformers arose who insisted that the virtue of compassion was crucial to the spiritual life: an ability to see sacredness in every single human being, and a willingness to take practical care of the more vulnerable members of society, became the test of authentic piety. In this way, during the Axial Age, the great confessional faiths that have continued to guide human beings sprang up in the civilized world: Buddhism and Hinduism in India, Confucianism and Taoism in the Far East; monotheism in the Middle East; and rationalism in Europe. Despite their major differences, these Axial Age religions had much in common: they all built on the old traditions to evolve the idea of a single, universal transcendence; they cultivated an internalized spirituality, and stressed the importance of practical compassion.

Today, as noted, we are undergoing a similar period of transition. Its roots lie in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of the modern era, when the people of Western Europe began to evolve a different type of society, one based not on an agricultural surplus but on a technology that enabled them to reproduce their resources indefinitely. The economic changes over the last four hundred years have been accompanied by immense social, political, and intellectual revolutions, with the development of an entirely different, scientific and rational, concept of the nature of truth; and, once again, a radical religious change has become necessary. All over the world, people are finding that in their dramatically transformed circumstances, the old forms of faith no
longer work for them: they cannot provide the enlightenment and consolation that human beings seem to need. As a result, men and women are trying to find new ways of being religious; like the reformers and prophets of the Axial Age, they are attempting to build upon the insights of the past in a way that will take human beings forward into the new world they have created for themselves. One of these modern experiments — however paradoxical it may superficially seem to say so — is fundamentalism.

We tend to assume that the people of the past were (more or less) like us, but in fact their spiritual lives were rather different. In particular, they evolved two ways of thinking, speaking, and acquiring knowledge, which scholars have called mythos and logos. Both were essential; they were regarded as complementary ways of arriving at truth, and each had its special area of competence. Myth was regarded as primary; it was concerned with what was thought to be timeless and constant in our existence. Myth looked back to the origins of life, to the foundations of culture, and to the deepest levels of the human mind. Myth was not concerned with practical matters, but with meaning. Unless we find some significance in our lives, we mortal men and women fall very easily into despair. The mythos of a society provided people with a context that made sense of their day-to-day lives; it directed their attention to the eternal and the universal. It was also rooted in what we would call the unconscious mind. The various mythological stories, which were not intended to be taken literally, were an ancient form of psychology. When people told stories about heroes who descended into the underworld, struggled through labyrinths, or fought with monsters, they were bringing to light the obscure regions of the subconscious realm, which is not accessible to purely rational investigation, but which has a profound effect upon our experience and behavior. Because of the dearth of myth in our modern society, we have had to evolve the science of psychoanalysis to help us to deal with our inner world.

Myth could not be demonstrated by rational proof; its insights were more intuitive, similar to those of art, music, poetry, or sculpture. Myth only became a reality when it was embodied in cult, rituals, and ceremonies which worked aesthetically upon worshippers, evoking within them a sense of sacred significance and enabling them to apprehend the deeper currents of existence. Myth and cult were so inseparable that it is a matter of scholarly debate which came first: the mythical narrative or the rituals attached to it. Myth was also associated with mysticism, the descent into the psyche by means of structured disciplines of focus and concentration which have been evolved in all cultures as a means of acquiring intuitive insight. Without a cult or mystical practice, the myths of religion would make no sense. They would remain abstract and seem incredible, in rather the same way as a musical score remains opaque to most of us and needs to be interpreted instrumentally before we can appreciate its beauty.

In the premodern world, people had a different view of history. They were less interested than we are in what actually happened, but more concerned with the meaning of an event. Historical incidents were not seen as unique occurrences, set in a far-off time, but were thought to be external manifestations of constant, timeless realities. Hence history would tend to repeat itself, because there was nothing new under the sun. Historical narratives tried to bring out this eternal dimension. Thus, we do not know what really occurred when the ancient Israelites escaped from Egypt and passed through the Sea of Reeds. The story has been deliberately written as a myth, and linked with other stories about rites of passage, immersion in the deep, and gods splitting a sea in two to create a new reality. Jews experience this myth every year in the rituals of the
Passover Seder, which brings this strange story into their own lives and helps them to make it their own. One could say that unless an historical event is mythologized in this way, and liberated from the past in an inspiring cult, it cannot be religious. To ask whether the Exodus from Egypt took place exactly as recounted in the Bible or to demand historical and scientific evidence to prove that it is factually true is to mistake the nature and purpose of this story. It is to confuse mythos with logos.

Logos was equally important. Logos was the rational, pragmatic, and scientific thought that enabled men and women to function well in the world. We may have lost the sense of mythos in the West today, but we are very familiar with logos, which is the basis of our society. Unlike myth, logos must relate exactly to facts and correspond to external realities if it is to be effective. It must work efficiently in the mundane world. We use this logical, discursive reasoning when we have to make things happen, get something done, or persuade other people to adopt a particular course of action. Logos is practical. Unlike myth, which looks back to the beginnings and to the foundations, logos forges ahead and tries to find something new: to elaborate on old insights, achieve a greater control over our environment, discover something fresh, and invent something novel.

In the premodern world, both mythos and logos were regarded as indispensable. Each would be impoverished without the other. Yet the two were essentially distinct, and it was held to be dangerous to confuse mythical and rational discourse. They had separate jobs to do. Myth was not reasonable; its narratives were not supposed to be demonstrated empirically. It provided the context of meaning that made our practical activities worthwhile. You were not supposed to make mythos the basis of a pragmatic policy. If you did so, the results could be disastrous, because what worked well in the inner world of the psyche was not readily applicable to the affairs of the external world. When, for example, Pope Urban II summoned the First Crusade in 1095, his plan belonged to the realm of logos. He wanted the knights of Europe to stop fighting one another and tearing the fabric of Western Christendom apart, and to expend their energies instead in a war in the Middle East and so extend the power of his church. But when this military expedition became entangled with folk mythology, biblical lore, and apocalyptic fantasies, the result was catastrophic, practically, militarily, and morally. Throughout the long crusading project, it remained true that whenever logos was ascendant, the Crusaders prospered. They performed well on the battlefield, created viable colonies in the Middle East, and learned to relate more positively with the local population. When, however, Crusaders started making a mythical or mystical vision the basis of their policies, they were usually defeated and committed terrible atrocities.

Logos had its limitations too. It could not assuage human pain or sorrow. Rational arguments could make no sense of tragedy. Logos could not answer questions about the ultimate value of human life. A scientist could make things work more efficiently and discover wonderful new facts about the physical universe, but he could not explain the meaning of life. That was the preserve of myth and cult.

By the eighteenth century, however, the people of Europe and America had achieved such astonishing success in science and technology that they began to think that logos was the only means to truth and began to discount mythos as false and superstitious. It is also true that the new
world they were creating contradicted the dynamic of the old mythical spirituality. Our religious experience in the modern world has changed, and because an increasing number of people regard scientific rationalism alone as true, they have often tried to turn the mythos of their faith into logos. Fundamentalists have also made this attempt. This confusion has led to more problems.

We need to understand how our world has changed. The first part of this book will, therefore, go back to the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, when the people of Western Europe had begun to develop their new science. We will also examine the mythical piety of the premodern agrarian civilization, so that we can see how the old forms of faith worked. It is becoming very difficult to be conventionally religious in the brave new world. Modernization has always been a painful process. People feel alienated and lost when fundamental changes in their society make the world strange and unrecognizable. We will trace the impact of modernity upon the Christians of Europe and America, upon the Jewish people, and upon the Muslims of Egypt and Iran. We shall then be in a position to see what the fundamentalists were trying to do when they started to create this new form of faith toward the end of the nineteenth century.

Fundamentalists feel that they are battling against forces that threaten their most sacred values. During a war it is very difficult for combatants to appreciate one another's position. We shall find that modernization has led to a polarization of society, but sometimes, to prevent an escalation of the conflict, we must try to understand the pain and perceptions of the other side. Those of us — myself included — who relish the freedoms and achievements of modernity find it hard to comprehend the distress these cause religious fundamentalists. Yet modernization is often experienced not as a liberation but as an aggressive assault. Few have suffered more in the modern world than the Jewish people, so it is fitting to begin with their bruising encounter with the modernizing society of Western Christendom in the late fifteenth century, which led some Jews to anticipate many of the stratagems, postures, and principles that would later become common in the new world.

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