

Wesleyan Identity and the Impact of the Radical Right

Robert W. Smith

The aim of this paper is to set forth the basic characteristics which give Wesleyanism and Fundamentalism their respective identities and to explore how contemporary expressions of Wesleyanism have been shaped by the principles of Fundamentalism which have become the foundation of the Radical Right.

Introduction

The Church of the Nazarene has not adequately resolved the fundamental structural pattern which provides the essential characteristics of its identification as a contemporary religious institution. Within the Church of the Nazarene a large contention would hold that the Church must be defined from the perspective of the nineteenth century American Holiness Movement. Their reasoning is that the American Holiness Movement provided the social context out of which the Church was born. Others would argue that the Church is only properly defined as it is aligned with the characteristics of Wesleyan theology. Their reasoning reflects a desire to find essential theological characteristics which override the basic sociological issues involved in the identity of the Church. As scholars debate their respective positions, the silent majority of members within the denomination find their identity in issues that need neither the American Holiness Movement nor Wesleyanism. Thus, while many might consider this to be simply an academic debate expressing "much to do about nothing," it is evident that the debate has reached an impasse by failing to include the average member of the Church within the discussion.

Identity issues are never easily resolved. As a third generation Nazarene growing up in central Michigan during the 1950's, the identity of the Church received its shape by a rigid fixation on specific boundary issues that separated members of the Church of the Nazarene from the larger community in which we lived. The boundaries which provided our identification were, for the most part, an attempt to live out the theological implications of the central doctrines of the Church of the Nazarene in a specific social context. The nature of our "being-in-the-world" was dictated by certain values within a subcultural setting that enabled us to reject the values of the dominant cultural environment. Ironically, the two value systems are subject to the same social context that provides a sense of sameness between them.

Fundamentalism: The Social Context

In 1960, Franklin L. Baumer published his research on *Religion and the Rise of Scepticism*.

The motivation behind this work focused on the problem of "the relationship between religion and civilization."⁽¹⁾ As he develops the problem, Baumer asks, "Why, for instance, is the twentieth century one of the great skeptical epochs of history?"⁽²⁾ He answers this question in the major thesis of his book: "Present-day religious scepticism...would not be what it is, would certainly not be as pervasive as it is, had it not been for the development of a powerful skeptical tradition over four centuries and more."⁽³⁾ The impact of this skeptical tradition, however, has taken on an intriguing new dimension. Whereas in its initial forms scepticism

provided release and relief from the dogmatic claims of a powerful political organization, the Church, the skeptical tradition itself has now become a problem.⁽⁴⁾ Were Baumer writing today he could demonstrate how scepticism bore its late twentieth century fruit in a pluralistic cultural relativism. This skeptical tradition which eschews authority and has established a "humanistic ontology," provides the social context which gives shape to the development of both Wesleyanism and Fundamentalism.

"Fundamentalism came into its own in the early 20th century in opposition to Modernist tendencies in both American religious and secular life."⁽⁵⁾ What, exactly, was taking place during the development of Fundamentalist movement in America? On the one hand, labor unrest was growing and moving toward the early beginnings of the labor movement; on the other hand, the Church was facing the challenger posed by biblical criticism. Fundamentalism was able to justify its "world-denying" stance as the reality of the First World War destabilized society as a whole.⁽⁶⁾ Following the devastation of the war, the American social context was confronted by the rise of communism, the popularization of evolution after the verdict of the Scopes Monkey trial (1925), the Great Depression, prohibition, and the brutality of organized crime syndicates. During this period of cultural upheaval in the United States, European intellectuals were responding to similar problem as they created works which reflected the nihilistic quality of existentialism as their attempt to express one's being-in-the-world without the discernible presence of god.

In the midst of the social disorganization of the early years of the twentieth century, a time when the very foundation of cultural meaning was in flux,⁽⁷⁾ the fundamentalist movement in America began to flourish. Its greatest strength, which became its greatest weakness, was its ability to established religious absolutes in the uncertainties of its cultural setting. Thus, the world view of Fundamentalism is grounded in its ability to discuss the certainty of absolutes in a culture which is in the grips of *anomie*. When the old answers to the questions of meaning no longer satisfy the mind of the masses, a new approach to basic cultural questions must be found. Fundamentalism was able to create a "feeling" of certainty by stressing five major convictions about the structure of the world:⁽⁸⁾

1. The Verbal Inspiration of the Scriptures: The Bible is the exact word of God and is, therefore, without error.
2. The Virgin birth of Jesus Christ.
3. The Substitutionary Atonement: Jesus received the wrath of God for human sin.
4. The Bodily Resurrection of Jesus: The resurrected Jesus had a physical body.
5. The Premillennial Second Coming of Christ: The second coming of Christ will usher in the millennial age.

In order to cope with the increasing secularization of Western culture, these five principles became non-negotiable truths of the Fundamentalism movement. These principles became the "intellectual framework within which one explains the meaning of life."⁽⁹⁾ According to Keith Roberts, "the set of concepts [here, the five principles of Fundamentalism] is placed beyond question and is made absolute by the sacred mood in which it is transmitted."⁽¹⁰⁾ Note that Roberts says that these fundamental principles are "placed beyond question." The

unwillingness of the group to allow its fundamental truths to be brought to the table for discussion created a sense of "iron-clad" certainty for its members. One can see that the social development of American fundamentalism took place as follows:

In a day when social events made it seem as though the security that one hoped to find in America culture by the teachings of Christianity was about to collapse, a new set of principles were agreed upon which enable the average Christian in America to stand firm in spite of social *anomie*. This new affirmation of the Gospel afforded a sense of stability in world that faced the uncertainty of war, depression, and other social ills.

Fundamentalism provided as sense of religious security for people who faced the insecurity of an increasingly secularized world.⁽¹¹⁾ It enabled those who were convinced by its rhetoric and theological teaching of its leaders that sense of *order* was possible in the growing disorder of society.⁽¹²⁾ From my perspective, what enabled Fundamentalism to work its magic as a religious system was its ability to provide a literal interpretation of Scripture that was able to clearly address the insecurity of the social context. Because of its early ties with the millenerain movement of the nineteenth century,⁽¹³⁾ fundamentalist could assume that the social conditions were ripe for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Here was a "ready mad solution" to the *anomie* which was so troubling to American culture. The great preachers of the movement proclaimed that social disorientation had been predicted in Scriptures. The end of history as we know it was at hand, and social disease would soon be replaced by the second advent of Jesus Christ.

For some reason, multiplied failures of prophetic types to accurately se the date of the Second Coming did not dissuade fundamentalists in general from rigidly holding such views. Again, these principles were never brought up for critical discussion, because they were assumed to be the "Gospel truth."

The certainty of this event was stabilized in American Fundamentalism by an indebtedness to the teachings of John Calvin. Philip Lee has stated that "Not only in the mainline Protestant churches, but also through the various sects, Calvinism has unquestionably exerted the dominant influence on the American scene...

and it continues to have an enormous influence on American life even among people who have no knowledge of or interest in its creeds or intentions."⁽¹⁴⁾ Thus theological issues, such as the sovereignty of God, began to give shape to individual's experience of reality. To affirm the sovereignty of God, began to give shape to individuals experience of reality. To affirm the sovereignty of God meant to some religious types that the structure of society has been determined by the activity of God rather than by humanistic forces. This theological affirmation was used to support an absolutely inerrant Scripture and a literal interpretation of Scripture in the social context of a culture that appeared to reflect the biblical idea of the "last times." The movement was able to convince many that to deny any part of the Fundamentalist agenda was to divorce oneself from orthodox Christianity and to hold a position contrary to the sovereign will of God.

In recent years, the agenda of Fundamentalism has broadened considerable. The current social condition has allowed the Radical Right to emerge as a troubling political influence within contemporary culture. While the five basic principles continue to remain "beyond question," the character of the present social context has shifted significantly. Current

concerns include abortion, family values, creationism, the role of women in ministry, homosexuality, school prayer, defense spending, and the support of the nation of Israel by the government of the United States of America. The Radical Right, as a contemporary expression of Fundamentalism, has developed an agenda that uses political methods as it confronts its specific social context.⁽¹⁵⁾ Religious leaders like Jerry Falwell, of the Moral Majority, Pat Robertson, of the Christian Coalition, and Ralph Reed, of the National Right to Life Movement, affirm that “political activism in no way violates the separation of church and state, for in their view religion has a responsibility to address vital issues.”⁽¹⁶⁾

One significant statement remains to be made: “Although Fundamentalist are not notably ascetic, they do observe certain taboos. Most Fundamentalists do not smoke or drink alcoholic beverages and usually do not dance or attend movies and plays. At most Bible institutes and Fundamentalist colleges, these practices are strictly forbidden. Worship practices may vary from denomination to denomination but are usually nonliturgical and heavily influenced by revivalism. A sermon with congregational singing and prayer are common elements of Fundamentalist services.”⁽¹⁷⁾

When I compare my experience of life within the social influence of the Church of the Nazarene in the 1950s with the five principles of Fundamentalism and the statement cited immediately above which describes the ethos and worship of the Fundamentalist moment in general, I am to confess that the Church of the Nazarene shared more than a little of the Fundamentalist agenda.

Wesleyanism: The Social Context

John Wesley was a child of his cultural context as much as were the leaders of the Fundamentalist movement were children of theirs. Like Fundamentalism, Wesley had to contend with increasing secularization within the social context of his life and ministry.

Less than a decade before Wesley’s birth in 1703, critic of the moral and social condition in England lamented that “Our light looks like the evening of the world.”⁽¹⁸⁾ Expanding on this evaluation, Fitchett states that “A new century was dawning, but it seemed as if in the spiritual sky of England the very light of Christianity itself was being turned, by some strange and evil force, into darkness.”⁽¹⁹⁾ Eighteenth century England was forced to wrestle with complexities imposed upon it by the Enlightenment. Along with the intellectual complexities which resulted in a clearly defined strata within the population, the economic disparity between rich and poor was widening. The problem of that day seemed insurmountable:

Rationalism has penetrated all classes of religious thinkers, so that even among the orthodox, Christianity seemed little more than a system of morality supported by divine Sanctions. . . . There were able preachers, but the characteristic sermon was the colorless essay on moral virtues. Outreaching work for the unchurched was but scanty. The condition of the lower classes was one of spiritual destitution. Popular amusements were coarse, illiteracy widespread, law savage in its enforcement, jails sinks of disease and iniquity. Drunkenness was more prevalent than at any other period in English history.⁽²⁰⁾

In addition to the decadent moral condition of society, "Great Britain stood on the eve of the industrial revolution that was to transform it in the last third of the eighteenth century from agriculture to manufacture. . .The industrial and revolution that was to transform it in the last third of the eighteenth century form agriculture to manufacture... The industrial and social changes, and the problems consequent upon the changes, were of the widest importance and involved readjustments of immense practical religious consequence."⁽²¹⁾ It was into this less than idyllic social context that Wesley carried out his ministry.

While Wesley's outstanding work as a student in Christ Church College, Oxford, enabled him to be chosen a fellow of Lincoln College in 1726, he did not align himself with the religious elitist of his day. His ministry among the masses of Great Britain "largely revolutionized the religious condition of the English lower and middle classes."⁽²²⁾ As his awareness of his cultural context in eighteenth century England began to develop, his concept of ministry began to broaden. His message contained implications that could not be kept within the four walls of any church building. Thus, "Labor problems and child labor came to his attention. He worked for fair wages, fair prices, honest healthy employment. He cared about the whole man, not just his soul."⁽²³⁾ I would contend that Wesley's concern for humanity is the necessary outgrowth of his affirmation of the unlimited atonement of Christ. Because all humanity is redeemable, all humanity is valuable and worthy of a life that is free from the constrictions of an oppressive social context.

In our discussion of Fundamentalism, we emphasized the role of the five basic principles set forth by the Niagara Conference in 1896. While it is the contention of this paper to demonstrate that these Fundamentalist principles attempted to establish religious certainty in a period of social disintegration, Wesley chose a different method to confront his social context. Thus, Wesleyanism, in its purest form, "refuses to list a definite number of 'fundamental' articles."⁽²⁴⁾ Nor did he require a clear knowledge of doctrine for entrance into his society.⁽²⁵⁾

It could appear that Wesleyanism is little more than a religious society grounded in the subjective response of individuals to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A careful reading of Wesley, however, indicates that he did regularly emphasize certain teaching which were essential to ministry:⁽²⁶⁾

1. original sin
2. the deity of Christ
3. the atonement
4. justification by faith alone
5. the work of the Holy Spirit
6. the Trinity

These essential components of Wesley's theology provide a grid by which contemporary scholarship may evaluate its various attempts to create a dynamic Wesleyan vision for the twentieth-first century. They are not, however, "litmus test" which establish the boundary markers for those who wish to be "in the faith." Wesleyanism works with a method that is far different from the confessional ideology of Fundamentalism.

Randy Maddox has shown that "Scripture, reason, 'tradition,' and experience all played roles in Wesley's theological reflection."⁽²⁷⁾ Maddox, however, is not content to accept the so-called "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" without re-thinking how it functioned within Wesley's theological program. He concludes from his study of the quadrilateral that "Scripture held a conscious primacy of place., Indeed, Wesley's so-called 'quadrilateral' of theological authorities could more adequately be described as unilateral *rule* of Scripture within a trilateral *hermeneutic* of reason, tradition, and experience."⁽²⁸⁾ Wesley's commitment to Scripture provided the underlying authority for his theological reflection while, at the same time, placing him firmly within the tradition of the Protestant Reformation. More than two centuries prior to Wesley's ministry, Luther has rejected the inerrancy and final authority of the pope while challenging the infallibility of general councils. "These steps implied a break with the entire medieval systems of authority, and they seemed to allow final appeal only to the Scriptures."⁽²⁹⁾

Thus, any attempt to construct a Wesleyan theological system in the contemporary world must first settle its relationship to Scripture. Wesley's freedom from creedal statements permits theological reflection to possess a dynamic which cannot be captured in propositional forms. When he allows his teaching on the Christian Perfection to be interpreted within the broad perspective of "love,"⁽³⁰⁾ he *forces* people to engage in critical theological reflection as they consider how their relationship to God impacts their being-in-the-world. Here, then, is a major distinction between the methodology of the Fundamentalist as expressed in the Radical Right and Wesleyanism. Although it is a methodological distinction, it provides a means of seeing a crucial point of distinction between the two systems.

Professor Edwin C. Crawford, Jr., of Northwest Nazarene College supports this distinction between Fundamentalism and Wesleyanism in an unpublished paper, "Fundamentalism and the Church of the Nazarene." After clarifying that "Fundamentalism is a product of Calvinist doctrine," he goes on to demonstrate how Calvinism is grounded in deductive reasoning that begins with universal principles (the sovereignty of God) and then supports these principles with various examples (e.g., Scripture). Wesleyanism, on the other hand, follows the empiricism of John Locke which is rooted in inductive reasoning. Crawford notes that "This is the foundation of modern thinking and science... (wherein) knowledge claims are based in verifiable data, rather than universal principles."⁽³¹⁾

Wesleyan identity confronts a major problem that is endemic to its nature. Wesleyanism is a dialogue between Christian practice and the theological convictions that support the practice. It avoids the doctrinal absolutes of the Reformed tradition, while being more concerned about doctrine than most who are part of the modern charismatic phenomenon. Perhaps it is not an overstatement to say that Wesleyan doctrine is always in process. It is "in process" because it carries on an open dialogue with its social context. Wesley's sermon "Catholic Spirit," can help us find a pattern which will facilitate this dialogue. Colin Williams provides a simple evaluation of Wesley's position:

Wesley's great concern was for unity in witness. But this did not mean that he considered the points of difference of no importance. Instead, he believed that when the task moved from witness to the world to nurture of the faithful, some of these differences were of very great importance. He was quite certain that the Quakers were seriously wrong in their rejection of the sacraments, the Baptists wrong in their view of baptism, and the Independents faulty in

their church order. He was certainly convinced that the Calvinist doctrine of double predestination was a serious barrier to the nurture of the faithful... Nevertheless, Wesley believed that he was obliged to seek unity in witness to the world with those whom he believed to be in serious error, yet in whose lives Christ was manifest.⁽³²⁾

The "open-ended" nature of Wesleyanism that enables it to dialogue with its social context is far easier to experience in a "religious movement" than in a denominational context. Denominations are expected to proclaim their distinctive characteristics, so that they might find their way in a crowded social context. It would appear that the dynamic nature of Wesleyanism must be sacrificed when Wesleyanism becomes a component of a denominational structure. Thus, the question that cries out to be answered is far different than we might have imagined: *Can a denomination function denominationally and at the same time maintain the spirit of the Wesleyan dialogue?*

Conclusion

There is a little doubt that the Church of the Nazarene at its "grass roots" has been influenced by the fundamentalist movement. An example of this influence may be found in how the church has approached the issue of the Second Coming. Article XV of the Articles of Faith of the Church of the Nazarene states:

We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ will come again; that we who are alive at His coming shall not precede them that are asleep in Christ Jesus; but that, if we are abiding in Him, we shall be caught up with the risen saints to meet the Lord in the air, so that we shall even be with the Lord.⁽³³⁾

This statement of belief says nothing about when this event will take place, nor does it establish any pre-conditions that must be fulfilled prior to the event itself. In spite of this, the teaching of the Second Coming in many local Churches of the Nazarene reflects the writings of pre-millennial teaches like Hal Lindsey. I would interpret this to mean that members of the Church of the Nazarene are overwhelmed by the disintegration of society, whether ministers or laity, and that they have been able to construct a greater sense of meaning from this position than from the "openness" of the Article of Faith. Thus the social context has exerted a greater influence on preaching and teaching in this area than the *Manual* of the Church. This assimilation of doctrinal teaching will continue as long as ministers and laity accept without critical reflection the message of media preachers like Charles Swindol, Charles Stanley, and John McArthur, Jr. Nor must we be so naive as to think that Promise Keepers is "doctrinally" neutral.

This assimilation of the dominant religious ethos will continue to take place as long as doctrinal issues are absent from the pulpits of our churches. Someone, and for sometime, has been selling the pernicious idea that doctrine in the pulpit is irrelevant to people in the postmodern world. If they do not hear doctrine from our pulpits, doctrine that reflects a clear perception of Wesleyanism, then their doctrine will come from others who share neither our heritage nor our uniqueness. Our churches will reflect the same generic ethos that is dominant within the social context of conservative America. This brings us to Smith's first law of doctrinal dynamics: Along with their religious experiences, the masses will have doctrine--

even if it is not recognized as such. As leaders interested in the church, our concern will focus on where the masses obtain their doctrine.

As the Church of the Nazarene struggles to reestablish its identity within a social context one century removed from its founding, it must refuse to be shaped by social forces alone.⁽³⁴⁾ Neither can it accept the social agenda of a religious movement (the Radical Right) without taking on the social and theological baggage the upholds the agenda. Rather than opting for absolute statements that provide security in a vulnerable world, the Church of the Nazarene must risk its very soul by taking its system of beliefs and practices to the marketplace of contemporary society. The dialogue created in such a venture will allow the church to teach while being taught. Before this dialogue can begin, Church must reclaim its distinctive, not restating irrelevant shibboleths, but by rethinking our doctrinal beliefs in our present social context. To fail here is to exchange the "life force" of Wesleyanism for lifeless corpse.

1. Franklin L. Baumer, *Religion and the Rise of Scepticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1960), 3. Baumer is using a statement from Goethe who said that the deepest, the only theme of human history, compared to which all others are of subordinate importance, is the conflict of scepticism with faith (cf. Goethe, *Wisdom and Experience*, trans. and ed. Hermann J. Weigand (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949), 72.
2. Baumer, *Religion and the Rise of Scepticism*. It is important to note that Baumer is writing before the height of the cold war, the Vietnam conflict, the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Watergate break in and the forced resignation of President Richard M. Nixon, and the exposed "sins" of religious luminaries like Jimmy Swaggart and Jim and Tammy Bakker.
3. Baumer, *Religion and the Rise of Scepticism*, 4.
4. Baumer, *Religion and the Rise of Scepticism*, 11.
5. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. "Fundamentalism."
6. I am not certain that the impact of the First World War on the social dis-ease that has marked Western culture in the twentieth century has been clearly articulated.
7. Emile Durkheim named this period of social disorganization *anomie*. Cf. Keith A. Roberts', *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1995), 164, "**Anomie** is the feeling that results when the rules of the game are unclear. It is frustration due to a lack of consistent cultural expectations."
8. Cf. Thomas C. Oden's *Agenda for Theology: After Modernity...What?* Foreword by J. I. Packer (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 67, after noting that the five "fundamentals" listed here have originated in the Bible Conference at Niagara, 1895, Oden says, "If one reflects on it, the major premise of nineteenth-century historicism (that faith is based on historical facts and evidence) is much more determinative in the selection of these points than either patristic or Protestant scholastic orthodoxy."
9. Roberts, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, 100.
10. Roberts, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, 102.
11. Cf. Lloyd J. Averill's, *Religious Right, Religious Wrong: A Critique of the Fundamentalist Phenomenon*, foreword by Martin E. Marty (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1990), 14, "Although the movement presented itself from the start as a return to the faith of the first apostles, it was, on the contrary as new in its own way as the modernist theological formulations and the secularist social movements it found so threatening and denounced so virulently." Thus the origin of the Fundamentalist movement is deeply imbedded within the

social-historical context of the nineteenth century.

12. Cf. Chapter one in Peter L. Berger's *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of the Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967), "Religion and World-Construction," 3-28.

13. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. "Fundamentalism."

14. Philip J. Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987),

15. Cf. Glenn H. Utter and John W. Storey, *The Religious Right: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara, CA; Denver CO: ABC-CLIO, 1995), 3, "It is not theology so much as active involvement in the political process that separates the contemporary religious right from the conservative religious forces of the pre World War II era."

16. Utter and Storey, *The Religious Right*, 1.

17. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. "Fundamentalism."

18. Cf. W. H. Fitchett's *Wesley and his Century: A Study in Spiritual Forces* (New York; Cincinnati: The Abingdon Press, n.d.), 139. Fitchett is quoting from a "Proposal for a National Reformation of Manners," published in 1694.

19. Fitchett, *Wesley and His Century*.

20. Williston Walker et als., *A History of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985, 596f.).

21. Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 597.

22. Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 605.

23. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *John Wesley: Christian Revolutionary* (Kansas City MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1970), 44.

24. Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today*, (London: The Epworth Press, 1960), 17.

25. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today*, 20.

26. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today*, 16-17. "Wesley refuses to list a definite number of 'fundamental' articles. He seemed to believe that doctrines which may be called opinions in certain circumstances may become fundamentals in others."

27. Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1994), 46. To see how this methodology functions within a theological system, cf. H. Ray Dunning', *Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1988).

28. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*

29. Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*

30. Cf. Matthew 22:37, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

31. Edwin E. Crawford, Jr., "Fundamentalism and the Church of the Nazarene" (Northwest Nazarene College).

32. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today*, 18-19.

33. *Manual 1993-1997* (The Church of the Nazarene), 30, 19.

34. I recall from somewhere a statement by E. Stanley Jones: "A Church that marries the spirit of its age will become a widow of the next generation."