A Case for Flexible Epistemology and Metamethodology in Religious Fundamentalism Research

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Abstract: After reviewing a representative sample of current and historical research in religious fundamentalism, the author addresses the epistemological presuppositions supporting both quantitative and qualitative methodologies and argues for epistemological flexibility and metamethodology, both of which support and are supported by metatheoretical thinking. Habermas' concept of the scientistic self-understanding of the sciences is used to point up the limitations of positivist epistemology, especially in the context of fundamentalism research. A metamethodological approach, supported by epistemological flexibility, makes dialogical engagement between researchers and those they research possible, and an example of how this would look in an actual research design is provided. The article concludes with a theoretical statement and graphic representation of a model for dialogical engagement between Western scholars and non-Western religious fundamentalists. Such engagement, the author argues, is necessary before any real progress on the "problem" of radicalized fundamentalism can be made.

Keywords: Epistemology, fundamentalism, Habermas, metamethodology, metatheory, positivism.

The purposes of this article are to review a representative sample of religious fundamentalism research, comment on the various epistemological positions it represents, make an argument for an inclusive approach to epistemology and methodology, and relate these first three purposes to the larger project of metatheory. Given the changes that have taken place in Western consciousness since 9/11, it seems important to summarize and reassess the direction and impact of the research that is meant to help us understand fundamentalist movements. Because most of the studies in this area are conducted by Western researchers and published for a Western audience, questions about how academics come to "know" things about non-Western fundamentalists are relevant. In the case of Islamic fundamentalist movements, a vast cultural gap separates the individuals being studied from those researching them. How do well meaning

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but culturally and intellectually disconnected investigators find useful epistemological approaches to studying these phenomena? Is fundamentalism research more epistemologically attuned to the object of its study or to the positivistic bias characteristic of Western intellectual discourse? Does the epistemological hegemony attendant to the scientific method contribute to other kinds of hegemony, including those that some believe are the root causes of fundamentalist movements? How can metatheoretical thinking help us to assess, organize and synthesize religious fundamentalism research in new and helpful ways? This is the sort of question that is at the heart of this article.

I will explore religious fundamentalism using a metamethodological perspective that calls for epistemological flexibility. I am defining "epistemology" classically: one's theory of knowledge, of how it is possible to know something. The term "metamethodological" refers to a sensibility that derives richness from the cumulative consideration of a wide variety of methodological approaches. Metamethodology is similar in intention to metatheory. Both activities are aimed at finding commonality, building bridges, identifying overarching concepts, and utilizing any synergies that result. I will stress the need for epistemological flexibility both because it is necessary to support metamethodology, and because it is a prerequisite for dialogical engagement between parties whose native epistemologies are not compatible (i.e., between Western academics and fundamentalist believers). There are also parallels between epistemological flexibility and metatheory. During the development of metatheoretical constructs, walls between previously unassociated concepts, theories, and schools of thought must be broken down so that new, integrated knowledge can be developed. Though it is not often stated in these terms, some measure of epistemological flexibility is necessary for metatheoretical knowledge production.

Before beginning my formal survey of religious fundamentalism research (and some of the epistemological, methodological, and theoretical issues arising from it), I will offer some definitions of religious fundamentalism. A word about the role of positivism, and a brief discussion of the question of causation, will round out the introductory portion of the essay. Next, the survey of the literature will be presented, and the article will conclude with discussion and practical application.

Religious Fundamentalism Defined

Sociologist of religion Martin Riesebrodt Riesebrodt (2000) notes that:

> the term fundamentalism emerged in early twentieth century American Protestantism to designate a religious movement which, among other things, opposed biblical criticism, the teaching of evolutionism, and the philosophy of Nietzsche while advocating biblical literalism, strict patriarchal moralism and authority, prohibition, control of social vices and self-control. (p. 269)

He defines fundamentalism as being associated "with religious orthodoxy, often literalism, and rigid moralism, especially with regard to sexual morals and gender relations, as well as intolerance, anti-pluralism, and anti-modernism" (Riesebrodt, 2000, p. 271).

Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the term "fundamentalist" has come more into common usage as meaning any religiously extreme individual or movement, especially those that sometimes resort to violence to accomplish their goals. Almond, Appleby and Sivan (2003, p. 116) define fundamentalism as "a set of militant, mobilized, antisecularization movements arising in the course of the twentieth century." A more detailed and religiously-focused definition has been suggested by Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1992). They see fundamentalism as:

> the belief that there is one set of religious teachings that clearly contains the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, essential, inerrant truth about humanity and deity; that this essential truth is fundamentally opposed by forces of evil which must be vigorously fought; that this truth must be followed today according to the fundamental, unchangeable practices of the past; and that those who believe and follow these fundamental teachings have a special relationship with the deity. (p. 118)

The Role of Positivism in Fundamentalism Research

Too often, the epistemological foundation necessary to engage in scholarly work is assumed or not considered carefully enough. Analyzing and addressing the epistemological foundations for research questions and methodologies can shed fresh light on past work, identify unstudied areas that may be fruitful topics for future research, and strengthen the critical analysis of a body of literature. Traditionally, modern scientific inquiry has been both based on and consonant with the philosophy of positivism, which holds that truth is derived from empirically validated and objectively measured data. Positivism was born in an atmosphere of confidence about scientific discovery. The industrial revolution and subsequent meteoric rise of technological advancement created the perception that universal laws formed a dependable, unquestioned and self-evident intellectual structure (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 21). The emphasis on logic, structured design, and cognitively generated solutions were translated, first among intellectuals and later by the general public, into the view that rational thought under girds all truth. Like many widely accepted philosophical positions, the popular version of positivism eventually took on an almost religious fervor, which allowed adherents to remain in denial about the gnawing problems that science could not solve: those ancient tendencies among the human race toward avarice, greed, cruelty, hatred, isolationism, and racism that were brought back in to clear relief in the aftermath of the Holocaust (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Habermas, 1971).

Because they focus on numbers and objective measurement, the research methodologies arising out of the positivist worldview are often termed "quantitative." In light of the difficulties encountered by using traditional quantitative methods to study the nuances of fundamentalism, Almond, et al. (2003, p. 117) opt for a more open and flexible theoretical structure that takes into account the heterogeneity of social reality. "In trying to generalize about causation from a relatively small number of very complex cases… [one finds that] there are not enough cases to establish statistical significance with confidence." Almond's attempt to address this problem is evidenced by "increasing rigor and systemization in case study research, comparative historical analysis, and the adaptation of statistical analysis to small numbers." More on this "qualitative" approach to fundamentalism research will be presented later in this article.

Droogers (2005) makes the observation that positivists and religious fundamentalists are similar in some ways:

> positivists hold that the term 'reality' refers to a singular entity . . . so too do fundamentalists hold that there is but one form of the sacred reality. . . . Accordingly, there is only one 'grand' story to be told about this reality. In the case of both fundamentalist believers and positivist scholars, the reality that they focus on is driven by laws and rules. . . . Fundamentalists and positivists seek to impose a rather monopolistic, centripetal, law-based and strict view of the world. (p. 469)

Notwithstanding this analogical comparison between the approaches taken by religious fundamentalists and positivist scholars, it is important to remember that positivism is a philosophical position resulting in a particular epistemological set while fundamentalism is a religious conviction resulting in a particular way of life. Even so, there does seem to be a parallel between the tendency of positivism to reject all "truth" that cannot be observed using empirical methods and the tendency of fundamentalist believers to reject claims that are not in line with accepted doctrine. Being completely sure of our own position can blind us to solutions our native epistemology does not allow us to perceive, and this can be equally true whether the "proof" that backs up our favored position is "scientific" or "theological."

The Question of Causation

One debate among social scientists who study religious fundamentalism involves the question of causation. One way of stating the question is:

> Are individuals and communities truly motivated by their religious convictions to take personal, social and political action, or is the religious context only a palatable justification for the actions those individuals or communities would have taken anyway for personal, social, or political reasons? (Bruce, 2000, pp. 102-103)

In searching for an answer, positivist epistemology would most likely lead to empirical analysis of fundamentalism using quantitative methods, but positivist epistemology cannot account for phenomena outside the measurement capacity of scientific observation and analysis. For example, even though religiously motivated actions or behaviors can be quantified, purely spiritual aspects of religious experience do not lend themselves to the kinds of questions that science asks. In other words, because spiritual (i.e., non-empirical) phenomena cannot be observed (except through the actions or behaviors they may produce), they are more appropriately the terrain of researchers who are not bound by the strictures of the scientific method and a positivist epistemology. Hence, the answer to the question of causation depends, in part, upon the epistemological lens through which the question is examined. A positivist approach would likely produce a mechanistic interpretation of human behavior (religious or otherwise) that bypasses the issue of spiritual agency (because that agency cannot be measured). By way of contrast, a relativist epistemology would likely allow for the attribution of religious motivation to spiritual agency. This is because a relativist epistemology would not require that the methodologies employed to examine the question of causation hold to standards set by the scientific method.

One of the epistemological questions confronting the study of religious fundamentalism has to do with the effect of epistemological set on perception. Stated as a question, we might ask, "Is it possible for a positivist scholar and a fundamentalist believer to observe the same phenomenon and perceive different 'truths' because of their divergent epistemologies?" Take prayer as an example. The scholar could measure the physiological responses of the adherent, or make observations about post-prayer changes in behavior. The believer could have a profound or even life changing experience during that same prayer, but because the believer and the scholar are attending to different aspects of the phenomenon (i.e., are perceiving the prayer through different epistemological lenses), they have no common reference points at which they can connect and dialogue. From metatheoretical perspective, one supported by epistemological flexibility and informed by metamethodology, I am choosing to answer "yes" to this question (i.e., that divergent epistemologies *do* cause divergent perceptions and estimations of truth). I am also making the judgment that dialogical engagement is of utmost importance in the study of religious fundamentalism, and am therefore led to the conclusion that a strictly positivist epistemology is incompatible with productive fundamentalism research. Epistemological flexibility, it will be argued, is key to the development of a metamethodological approach, which, in turn, is key in the development of dialogical engagement.

This is not to say that positivist epistemology and the quantitative methodologies associated with it are not helpful in the study of religion. As will be seen in the following review of the research literature, salient and interesting facts about religious behavior have come from using quantitative techniques. But in order to enter a dialogical environment, at least two things are required. First is what I am calling metamethodology: an integrative, flexible and inclusive approach to research methodology that places equal value on quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Second is the epistemological flexibility that is demanded by a metamethodological approach. Since distinct methodologies flow from distinct philosophical theories of knowledge, metamethodology implies the ability to bridge the epistemological divide that has separated positivists from those ascribing to other positions.

A Survey of Religious Fundamentalism Research

Quantitative Approaches

One area of study that has been mined using quantitative methodologies is the relationship between religious fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism. For example, Miller and Wattenberg (1984) used national survey data to assess the effect of evangelical religious identification on voting habits. They categorized respondents according to the strength of emotional attachment to fundamentalist interests and religious beliefs and then analyzed the associations between fundamentalist attachment, policy preferences and voting. The authors used descriptive statistics to arrive at demographic characteristics of fundamentalist voters and then applied correlational and factor analyses to determine the magnitude of individuals' affective connections to fundamentalist thinking.

In a related study, Jelen and Wilcox (1991) used survey data to develop an index of religious dogmatism as measured by doctrinal orthodoxy and public religious activity. Predictive statistics indicated that the dogmatism construct accounts for a significant portion of the variance

associated with respondents' attitudes about personal freedom. In another study, these authors (Jelen & Wilcox, 1992) surveyed financial contributors to Republican presidential candidates to explore the relationship between religious self-identification and attitudes toward the Christian Right in the U.S. Respondents self-identifying as fundamentalists evidenced the highest level of support for Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority.

Quantitative social research also focuses on the relationship between fundamentalism and sexism. One project analyzed both individual and group fundamentalisms with respect to attitudes about women. Researchers designated participants who said they believed in the Bible as literally true "individual fundamentalists" and used denominational affiliation to identify "group fundamentalists." Respondents' affect (positive or negative) toward public leaders of the Christian Right was the dependent variable. Independent variables included the self-identification of participants as fundamentalist, evangelical or charismatic. A two-stage process of bivariate analysis (Christian Right affect and religious self-identification) preceded a multivariate procedure that attempted to uncover unique effects of religious self-identification while controlling for other independent variables such as attitudes toward the ACLU, feminists, and liberals. The authors found that sexist attitudes were connected with both individual and group-level fundamentalisms. For women, sexist attitudes were a function of individual as opposed to group-level fundamentalism, but for men the opposite was true (Peek, Lowe, & Williams, 1991).

Another study investigated the relationship between the number of fundamentalists living in various states in the U.S. and the overall level of conservatism among whites in those states. Larger fundamentalist populations were correlated with more conservatism in the general Caucasian population. This relationship was strong even after experimentally controlling for the religious affiliation, beliefs, and practices of individuals (Moore & Vanneman, 2003).

The hypothesis that southerners would evidence more prejudice than those from other regions because fundamentalism is more common in the southeastern U.S. led another group of researchers to study the relationship between fundamentalism and prejudice by region of the country. An analysis of data from the 1988 general social survey did not fully support the supposition, but the authors did find significant regional differences in fundamentalists' tolerance of communists, atheists, gays and lesbians (Ellison & Musick, 1993).

Psychometric research shows the Religious Fundamentalism Scale to be psychometrically sound and has helped researchers measure several kinds of prejudice and authoritarian aggression. This instrument was standardized on college students (and their parents) from mostly Christian backgrounds. *Post hoc* item analysis yielded solid intercorrelations between the Religious Fundamentalism Scale and other scales used to measure prejudice (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992).

In a critique of the Religious Fundamentalism Scale, Watson, et al. (2003) highlight what they see as ideological bias. Through psychometric isolation of anti-religious sentiment in the wording of items, they determined that the scale "describe[s] 'fundamentalism' relative to unsympathetic normative assumptions" (p. 317). By translating the original items of the scale to remove such bias and then administering both the original and translated versions to the same

subjects, these investigators made both a quantitative and a theoretical critique of what they saw as the ideological preconceptions held by the scale's authors.

Another set of researchers used multiple regression analysis to demonstrate that authoritarianism can statistically predict prejudiced attitudes against people of color and gays and lesbians. Controlling for authoritarianism, however, produced a positive correlation between fundamentalism and homophobia but a negative relationship between fundamentalist attitudes and racial prejudice. Based on these findings, the authors theororized that Christian fundamentalism "consists of a second major component other than authoritarianism—related to Christian belief content—that is inversely related to some forms of prejudice but not others (Laythe, Finkel, & Kirkpatrick, 2001, p. 1).

Summary: Quantitative Approaches

As can be seen from this sampling of quantitative research studies on religious fundamentalism, important knowledge has been produced using these methodologies. The observant reader will have noticed that all the studies cited thus far have investigated North American fundamentalist movements. Quantitative studies of non-Western fundamentalist groups were sought but not found. To the extent that religious constructs can be quantified, the relationships between phenomena such as authoritarianism, political affiliation, policy preference, dogmatism, social and gender issues, prejudice, and aggression can be analyzed as a source of descriptive and comparative data. One of the strengths of quantitative methods is that otherwise amorphous concepts and confusing relationships can be presented logically and, often, with clarity. The value of being able to compare fundamentalism directly with other known behavioral phenomena is immense, and the empirical sensibility that originally grew out of positivist epistemology brought us this "common language" of quantified constructs.

There is also something missing in a purely quantitative approach to fundamentalism. We see nothing of the quality of individual lifeworlds, or of the rich, human texture of religious fervor, spiritual devotion, and doctrinal certainty. Qualitative methodologies were, in part, created to access aspects of research "data" that are not adequately understood or described by quantitative methods.

Qualitative Approaches

Qualitative methodologies are more flexible than quantitative study in terms of both associated epistemology and the range of techniques available to researchers. Several qualitative techniques, as they have been applied to fundamentalism research, are discussed here.

Typology and Grounded Theory

The largest and most comprehensive research endeavor undertaken to date regarding religious fundamentalism is the *Fundamentalism Project of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences,* a "decade-long interdisciplinary public policy study of antimodernist, antisecularist militant religious movements on five continents and within several world religious traditions" (Almond, et al., 2003, p. 6). This study was primarily concerned with three questions: (a) "What are the

local, regional, and global contexts for, and triggers of, the emergence of fiercely antimodernist, antisecular movements from within virtually every major world religion in the twentieth century?", (b) "What characteristics do these movements share across religious, cultural, and political borders?", and (c) "Are fundamentalist movements, whatever their places of origin and everyday activity, capable of extending their influence transnationally" (p. 6)?

One of the books arising from this massive study is *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms Around The World* (Almond, et al., 2003). This volume describes a process of data collection and analysis that eventually led to the formulation of a grounded theory of fundamentalist movements. The authors developed an extensive typology through methodical coding and categorizing of group characteristics along several different continua. For example, the following ideological characteristics of fundamentalist groups transcend national, religious, cultural and ethnic differences in the cases analyzed: reactivity to the marginalization of religion, selectivity (of texts or doctrines), moral dualism (right or wrong, good or evil), absolutism or inerrancy, and the idea that history has a miraculous culmination. All the cases studied were assigned a rating for each of these measures based on the extent to which that particular case demonstrated the characteristic. Matrices were then developed to graphically represent gradations of various characteristics within and between groups.

The theoretical model presented in *Strong Religion* asserts that all fundamentalists share a "family resemblance" regardless of religious or other contextual demarcations. Specifically, all fundamentalists are united in their identification of three distinct antagonists to their cause: the corrupt or compromised religious establishment, the secular government, and the secularization of modern society. This framework is further delineated using the concepts of *structure* (long-term contextual conditions), *chance* (contingent random factors) and *choice* (the element of human leadership). Each domain (structure, chance, choice) is divided into sub-domains and coding systems are used to categorize cases based on both domain and sub-domain ratings. For example, the sub-domains for structure are education, communication, civil society, social structure, mobility, ethnic-regional factors, economic development, political characteristics, and international environment (Almond, et al., 2003, pp. 116-132).

Max Weber's (1922/2008) typology of religious attitudes has also been applied to the analysis of fundamentalism. His system offers two continua on which to place religious phenomena: approval/rejection and control/adaptation/withdrawal. Fundamentalist attitudes on the one hand reject secular society and, on the other, might evidence a desire for world control or withdrawal from society depending on the organizational form of the particular group. Withdrawal can be symbolic, as in the formation of a subculture, or geographical, resulting in a commune. Control may take the form of a religious movement, social protest, secret society or political party (Riesebrodt, 2000).

Hermeneutics

Modern fundamentalist doctrine is based on text, whether the Bible, Quran, or other sacred document. This fact situates the discussion of fundamentalist movements within the realm of hermeneutics. Originating in the context of scriptural interpretation, hermeneutical inquiry was later applied to secular texts, and then to non-textual phenomena.

Bloom (1992) contrasted divergent interpretations of sacred texts in his commentary on protestant fundamentalism. He compared the scholarly practice of biblical interpretation, based on the original language, meaning, and context of biblical literature, with what he saw as the idiosyncratic and often agenda-based interpretive strategies used by some fundamentalist pastors. These two hermeneutic methods produce different meanings from the same texts, and those differences can be used to further explore what protestant fundamentalists find important to emphasize.

Pizzuto (2007), focusing on Islamic fundamentalism, appealed for objective criteria that can be used to distinguish valid interpretations of sacred texts from invalid ones. He maintained that people of faith have only the narratives and symbols of their religion to defend themselves against the lure of power, meaning, and significance promised by violent extremism. When scripture is interpreted to support violence, effective gestures toward peace must be theological, must start with the presumption of faith, and must challenge religious traditions from within. Pizzuto suggested that we distinguish between valid and invalid interpretations and use valid interpretations to help transform fundamentalist religion from the inside. Uncritical use of scripture to advance a fundamentalist agenda can result in the conviction that God condones violence against the "other" (i.e., non-believer) in the name of moral righteousness or religious purity.

Bartkowski (1996) has pointed out that, among Christians, evangelicals view the Bible as inspired and authoritative but are also able to allow for metaphorical interpretation. Fundamentalists, on the other hand, insist that the Bible is infallible and literally true. Many take a concrete, anti-interpretive, anti-metaphorical stance toward scripture. Understanding the various camps of Christian interpretation quickly becomes complicated when hermeneuticists move beyond the inspired versus inerrant debate. Inerrantists can be further divided into subcategories based on their particular hermeneutic sensibilities and tolerances. According to Barnhart (1993), these subgroups include:

> (1) those who subscribe to *extended inerrancy*, and thereby insist that 'when Scriptures affirm something as true, it is true exactly and precisely as stated', (2) those committed to *limited infallibility*, in which minor conflicts in textual reports of a specific event (e.g., the Resurrection) are believed not to imply that the event never happened; and lastly (3) those who argue for *appropriate inerrancy*, thereby attempting to distinguish the 'essential truths' of the Gospel (which are believed to be without error) from the Bible's non-essential qualities (e.g., pseudonymous writings, scientific inaccuracies, cultural accommodations). (Barnhart, 1993, p. 260)

Ethnography

Ethnography is particularly adapted to the witnessing, experiencing and exploration of otherness. Arising from within Cultural Anthropology, ethnography has more recently been embraced by sociologists, historians and others investigating the differences between people, cultures, societies and organizations. Some social phenomena cannot be perceived or appreciated except through immersion of the researcher into the culture being studied, and this immersion,

coupled with specific analytical procedures, is what makes ethnography unique from other qualitative methodologies (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998).

A well-known example of ethnographic enquiry is Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (Said, 1978). Part of his thesis was that modern cultures do not develop in isolation. There are reciprocal economic, social and power differentials that characterize the divergent historical experiences of Eurocentric and Eastern individuals. Therefore, the development of the Occidental identity required the subsequent and complementary social construction of the "Oriental" identity. Because the Oriental identity was formulated by Western academics and intellectuals without the knowledge or involvement of those it purports to describe, Said labeled these Western thinkers "Orientalists."

In bridging the cultural and epistemological divide between East and West, both in terms of his personal immersion and his scholarly writings, Said was one of the first to point out that individual cultures hold "the naïve belief in the certain positivity and unchanging historicity of a culture, a self, a national identity" (Said, 1995, p. 2). Many Westerners see Western ideology and culture as superior to Eastern ideas and practices. Said would contend that Orientalism has led to an intellectual and popular environment in which Asian, Indian and Middle Eastern cultures appear less human, weaker, and less sophisticated than cultures of European decent. In addition to pointing out that the West's Orientalist portrayal of the East was volitional and subjugating, Said railed against "the creating of entities essentialising a region or a people, whether it be East or West. His endeavour [was] precisely to demolish the conceptual constructions that divide the world into confrontational cultures or hierarchical civilisations" (Ferial, 2004, p. 124).

Zaidi (2007, p. 424), in a recent assessment of "the Orientalist essentialization of Islam," pointed out that most Western scholars critique the ideological content of Islam rather than embracing a dialogical hermeneutic.

> Such a critical approach to Islam and Muslims has only grown stronger since the 1970s, when western academic interest shifted from the relatively humanistic interest in the religion of Islam to social-scientific explanations of Islamic fundamentalism. What has gone largely unremarked in this shift from a perspective informed by the humanities to one informed more by the social sciences is the slippage that occurs by shifting from a focus on the fundamentals of Islam to Islamic fundamentalism…. Since then, the analysis of Muslim societies has been replete with such critical accounts, which, while they break with the classical Orientalist scholarship that regards the religion of Islam as the sole defining element of Muslim backwardness, continue to treat the self-knowledge of Muslims as impure, as mere ideology. (p. 414)

Comparative-Historical Inquiry

The concept of the "enclave culture" was developed using both ethnography and comparative-historical inquiry. The enclave construct is a way of formulating and describing the group psychology, worldview and sensibilities common inside fundamentalist movements. The study that led to this construct compares religious and cultural movements that eventually resulted in fundamentalism with those that did not (Almond, et al., 2003, Chapter 1). Using *exile* as a

metaphor, the marginalization of religious activity and thought in developing countries was taken as a common existential aspect of fundamentalist groups. The idea that members are fighting for survival and moral purity against the seemingly intractable movement of modernization (away from righteous living and religious viability) figures prominently in the social psychology of fundamentalist groups. The enclave culture has a unique cosmology of physical time and space. Although a religious movement at its core, the enclave is also contextualized within the wider historical and cultural environment. In the enclave, historical time:

> tends to be somewhat shrunken, collapsed, and condensed. The past is reduced to a few key eras, closely related to the enclave's notions as to what accounts for the glory and decline of the tradition; it is, hence, intensely relevant for the present. The future perspective is likewise rather short; the more radical the enclave, the shorter it is. Its overall bent is pessimistic if not doom-laden. (Almond, et al., 2003, pp. 56-57)

Metatheoretical Research and Critical Social Theory

Metatheoretical inquiry and social theory are discussed together because the overlap between them is substantial. Metatheoretical research refers here to a method of gathering together existing theories relating to a particular topic, assessing strengths and weaknesses, and reviewing criticisms. The metatheoretical researcher then looks for patterns, themes, discontinuities and possible overarching theoretical content in preparation for constructing a unique extension of theoretical knowledge. The unique foci of critical social theory are the relationship between research and the surrounding social justice context, the betterment of society, and the amelioration of human suffering and oppression. Critical social theory has been used to critique social policies and institutions as they contribute to racism, oppression of the poor, the subjugation of women, and other misuses of power. One method of applying social theory is to compare the stated purpose of powerful individuals, institutions or governments with the social results produced by their actions. When inconsistencies are identified, especially when they point to the oppression of marginalized groups, researchers can attempt to exert pressure for change on those in power (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998).

Coreno (2002) used metatheoretical inquiry to combine two traditional sociological paradigms, the class model and the culture model, in an effort to better understand religious expression. The class model, in the tradition of Karl Marx (Marx & Engels, 1967) and Max Weber (1922/2008), explores the link between class location and religious belief and behavior. The culture model, by contrast, "emphasizes religion's power to create shared commitments across class boundaries" (Coreno, 2002, p. 340) and is associated with Durkheim (1976). By synthesizing these two paradigms into the "class culture model," Coreno attempted to demonstrate that religious beliefs and practices often "define the symbolic boundaries of distinct class cultures" (Coreno, 2002, p. 343). To test this model, he employed quantitative analysis of survey data. Using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis, he showed that class and culture together provide a more robust model for understanding religious phenomena than either class or culture alone.

Schmalzbauer (1993, p. 331) has drawn attention to the existence of a "new class" in North American societies in which there is a strong relationship between professional/managerial

employment and political and moral liberalness. Study of these "knowledge class" workers can help to clarify the roles of both class and subculture in defining ideology. Christian evangelical new class workers are members of both a religious subculture that embraces conservative social values and a work force that is characterized by liberal attitudes. Schmalzbauer found that evangelical members of the knowledge class strongly resist any relaxation of their moral position regarding sexuality, but that significant liberalization takes place regarding abortion, civil liberties and gender roles. Conservative Christians continue to resist the liberalizing effects of higher education even after becoming consumers of it.

Critical social theory can provide a context for discussion of the root causes of fundamentalism. For example, in an attempt to set the stage for a critique of the power structures and geo-political alliances that were in place on 9/11, Wallace (2003) noted several grievances held against the U.S. as a result of its Middle East policy.

> The issue is not one of indirectly supporting regimes through buying oil from them. . . . Rather, the USA arms almost everyone in the region. Not only does it not encourage democratic reform, it actively suppresses it. Consider American support for the three-decades-long Israeli occupation of West Bank and Gaza. Consider CIA support in 1953 for the Shah as he crushed a fragile emerging constitutional democracy in Iran. Consider also that our [USA] government is the principal backer of the massively corrupt regime in Saudi Arabia, which, when not exporting oil, exports Wahabism around the world, an especially intolerant species of militant Islamic doctrine to which Osama Bin Laden and many of his top lieutenants apparently belong. Valid criticisms, grievances, real offenses, open wounds: in short, a history of social injustice lies at the heart of Muslim opposition to the United States. (pp. 493-494)

Wallace (2003) went on to suggest a Habermasian foundation for a critical theory relating to the ongoing ideological, cultural and political conflict between militant Islamic fundamentalists and the West. Habermas sees modernization as a historical process in which societies are progressively rationalized over time. This evolution is marked by intermittent backsliding, stasis, and struggle. Habermas posited a number of developmental stages through which societies pass, and holds that societies progress from "tribal," to "traditional," to "modern" over time. "In tribal societies, religious-based kinship structures govern virtually all social interaction, determining conduct in accord with the sacred and transcendent" (Wallace, 2003, pp. 503-504). Societies in which (non-Western) fundamentalists live are mainly "tribal" or "traditional" and Western countries are "modern." This disparity may help to explain the difficulties inherent in building a dialogical bridge to span the distance between fundamentalists and the Western researchers who study them.

The progressive modernization and secularization of society are at issue for many fundamentalist groups, especially those outside North America. The tension between Islam in the Persian Gulf region and the forces of modernization helps to explain "the events of 11 September as an episode in the ongoing historical drama of modernity itself" (Wallace, 2003, p. 510). Although modernization has been somewhat spontaneous in the West, Islamic countries see it as an import grown elsewhere. Wallace has hypothesized that there is a clear connection between the introduction of modernity in the Middle East and an "especially virulent religious backlash"

(p. 510). When modernization is imposed from the outside, even though it may be promulgated by governmental representatives within Islamic society, it is perceived as being both a Western commodity and a tool used by the local elite to consolidate power and wealth (Wallace, 2003).

Langman (2005) offered insight into the role modernization and globalization have played in the development of religious fundamentalism. In addition to creating rapid social change and dislocation related to rural-urban migration and class mobility, globalization has disseminated "rational, secular worldviews and mass mediated forms of privatized hedonism from consumerism to eroticism that are an affront to the values and identities of many traditional people – especially those already disadvantaged by the global economy" (p. 258). Globalization is interpreted by many fundamentalist leaders as eroding the authority of elders, challenging values and morals, and disrupting social structures and gender relations. Thus, the ascent of religious fundamentalism can be seen as a response to globalization. Langman's critical theory holds that capitalist modernity, in addition to the benefits often touted, brings new forms of domination and "a cold, sterile, lonely dehumanized world of conformist 'cheerful robots' seeking consumerisms… in an ever more frantic attempt to secure a meaningful identity in a meaningless world" (p. 270).

In a recent example of social criticism related to Islamist terrorism, Cigdem (2006) warned against denouncements of terrorist acts that do not also criticize terrorism's foundations. He was careful to point out that fundamentalism can present a healthy challenge to the religious institutions that have collaborated with repressive political regimes, but also made clear that terrorism cannot be justified under any circumstance. Islamic fundamentalism and Islamic terrorism are two separate phenomena. Terrorist acts of self-proclaimed Islamic militants are not the result of the "religious orientation of postmodern Islamic expansionism," but "one of the consequences of American hegemony and of the European Union's reluctance to confront global inequalities and political inconsistencies" (p. 162).

Summary: Qualitative Approaches

The knowledge we can glean from qualitative investigation of religious fundamentalism is often broader but less specific than quantitatively derived results. There is a clear trade off here. We are trading away empirically based observation and measurement of the behaviors and constructs associated with fundamentalism, but we are gaining a more descriptive and sweeping landscape of (less specific and measurable) information. As mentioned, the epistemological position historically associated with the scientific method and its quantitative methodologies is positivism. The epistemologies that have helped pave the way for qualitative techniques are quite diverse. For example, in addition to being a methodology, hermeneutics is also a distinct epistemological perspective (see Gadamer, 1976; Ricoeur, 1981). The qualitative methodologies that do not have connections to specific epistemological positions evidence an epistemological flexibility not characteristic of the scientific method. An ethnographer or social theororist, for example, is generally free to draw from a range of epistemological positions, as long as she can make a convincing argument for how her theory of knowledge supports her truth claims as they relate to her methodologies.

This flexibility has pros and cons. The epistemological position of positivism is limiting in that it restricts the researcher to only what can be perceived and measured empirically, but quantitative methodologies do have the advantage (generally speaking) of producing the kind of data that can be compared meaningfully with data produced in similar quantitative studies. This can usually not be said of investigations that employ qualitative methods.

One comparative advantage of qualitative methods, and the epistemological flexibility associated with them, is their ability to cast a wide net in exploring religious phenomena. Because qualitative inquiry is more flexible than quantitative inquiry, it is more adaptable to the particular phenomena being studied. In the case of religious fundamentalism, this is important because much of what interests scholars does not lend itself to the precise demands of the scientific method.

The typological analysis described by Almond, et al., (2003) for example, provides a way of categorizing a wide array of fundamentalist movements. But typology requires some level of subjective judgment about which category an item should be placed into. Similarly, the grounded theory of "family resemblance" would not have been possible without the authors' willingness to take certain intuitive leaps that cannot be justified scientifically.

Hermeneutic study provides a rich source of information about how fundamentalist groups interpret and interact with their sacred texts. Because scriptures play a central role in many religions, the tools of hermeneutic inquiry have become an important part of fundamentalism research. But hermeneutic findings are of a different nature, and are supported by different epistemologies than, say, survey findings subjected to statistical analysis. In the same way, critical social theory is a valuable source of conceptual data regarding the root causes of fundamentalist expression, especially outside North America. Through it we have been able to understand that there is likely a relationship between militant Islam and Western hegemonic domination. Though this theoretical structure could not have been arrived at without the use of different rules and methodological standards than those supported by positivist epistemology, I personally find it one of the most convincing and inspiring scholarly arguments related to religious fundamentalism.

Having laid out examples of both quantitative and qualitative research into religious fundamentalism and argued for the indispensability of both, I will now proceed to a discussion of the significance and problematic nature of the epistemological divide that tends to separate scholars with positivist leanings from those who embrace the epistemological flexibility demanded by qualitative methodologies. This divide is, in my view, akin to the divide between fundamentalist believers and non-fundamentalists. I am taking a more practical or applied turn at this point in the article as I move from examination of scholarship and its epistemological foundations to how scholarship, epistemology and metatheororizing might mirror and contribute to the real world problems of fundamentalist isolation, radicalization and militancy.

Discussion

Scientistic Self-Understanding as a Limitation of Positivism

The differences between quantitative and qualitative methodologies (and between varying qualitative techniques) point up the diverse theories of knowledge that support methodologies by providing the philosophical foundation on which to lay truth claims. Thus far, I have made, somewhat indirectly, a number of points that I would like to now bring to the foreground. First, although quantitative methodological approaches to fundamentalism research produce important knowledge, the primary epistemology informing quantitative methods is positivism. As Habermas ably pointed out in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1971), positivism as an epistemological position has led to the scientistic self-understanding of the sciences, which means that, through circular reasoning, science lost the ability to critique itself philosophically.

> Positivism certainly still expresses a philosophical position with regard to science, for the scientistic self-understanding of the sciences that it articulates does not coincide with science itself. But by making a dogma of the sciences' belief in themselves, positivism assumes the prohibitive function of protecting scientific inquiry from epistemological self-reflection. Positivism is philosophical only insofar as is necessary for the immunization of the sciences against philosophy. (Habermas, 1971, p. 67)

Habermas' point here is that science understands itself in a way that precludes accurate self-reflection because positivism categorically excludes science from the need for epistemological self-questioning. This exemption is accomplished by the positivist definition of "truth" as objective, measurable, etc. In short, positivism defines truth as scientific truth, and this puts science in the role of examining everything except itself.

There exists an epistemological divide between quantitative and qualitative methodologies, and between fundamentalists and the scholars who study them. Not that these two fissures are identical, but they have parallels, and my task now is to argue for a dialogical and tolerant approach to both areas of division. Habermas' solution to the epistemological roadblock thrown up by scientistic self-understanding was to construct his own empirical epistemology to support "empirical-analytic" inquiry, which remained open to philosophical critique and dialogue. Though Habermas' new epistemology has not come close to overtaking positivism, he was able to lay philosophical groundwork in *Knowledge and Human Interests* to support what would later become known as "qualitative" research. My interest in this early project of Habermas lies in his identification of the rigid insularity of positivism and the effects this philosophical isolationism has had on scientific inquiry.

The application of the association between scientistic self-understanding and positivism to our current topic rests on the association already made between positivist epistemology and quantitative methodology. Fundamentalism researchers who are wedded exclusively to the positivist project at the level of epistemology will be limited in their ability to study fundamentalism at the level of methodology. Scientistic self-understanding is insular, self-assured, and dependent on pre-conceived notions about the reliability and validity of the scientific method. Fundamentalist believers are insular, self-assured, and dependent on pre-

conceived notions about reliability and validity of their faith and doctrine. Dialogical engagement between researcher and researched requires a break with positivism so that the epistemological distance between scientific "fundamentalism" and religious fundamentalism may be bridged.

Metamethodology as an Antidote for Scientific Insularity

The second point I have tried to make, and will elaborate on here, is that a metamethodological approach to religious fundamentalism is more helpful and informative than focusing on one technique or category to the exclusion of others. This is partly because of the multi-faceted nature of religious fundamentalism research. Fundamentalist believers do produce actions that can be measured, attitudes than can be quantified, and political activity that can be observed, but religious fundamentalism also evidences aspects that are not amenable to empirical study.

Metamethodological approaches must, by definition, be supported by a flexible epistemological sensibility, one that can appreciate the scientific worldview, but also other epistemological positions. As has been mentioned, metamethodology and flexible epistemology both evidence important convergences with metatheory. In fact, it can be said that metamethodology is the methodological equivalent of metatheory. This direct comparison has clear limitations, mostly owing to the categorical separation between theory as a formulation of knowledge and method as a form of data collection. But the comparison is still, I think, helpful conceptually, especially in light of the connection between methodology and epistemology. The complex phenomenon that is religious fundamentalism is best studied using a variety of methods and theories of knowledge, and both metamethodology and epistemological flexibility support and are supported by metatheoretical thinking.

In order to travel the distance between Western intellectual culture and the internal culture of fundamentalist groups, flexibility is required on the part of researchers. I suppose we could wait for fundamentalist believers to become more flexible, open, and "reasonable," but what we logic-bound Westerners perceive as unreasonableness in, for example, Muslim fundamentalist believers, is part of what defines them (at least to us) as fundamentalists. Though it is important to understand the objective aspects of religious behavior, this is not enough when it comes to fundamentalism research. It is largely the elements of religion that are *not* amenable to objective, quantified study (such as spiritual experience and conviction) that need most to be studied and understood. The visceral correlates or descriptive statistics associated with fundamentalism contribute valuable data, but these kinds of data do not have the potential to help build a dialogical and mutually respectful bridge between "us" and "them."

Epistemological Flexibility as a Dialogical Bridge

The third and final point I have alluded to is that the dialogical engagement needed to bridge epistemologies is also needed to surmount the walls that separate fundamentalist believers from the scholars who study them. The epistemological divide between researchers and fundamentalists consists in the fact that fundamentalists do not fit within the predominant worldview of Western academia. Similarly, the values and purposes of Western academia do not

fit within the worldview of religious fundamentalists. Western scholars are at a particular disadvantage when attempting to broaden their epistemological sensibilities. Because the West, and especially the U.S., is seen as the main source of pain and trouble by many Islamic fundamentalists, American researchers can easily become defensive, even subconsciously, at being blamed for the very phenomenon they are studying. Intellectual and epistemological rigidity, not flexibility, tends to result from a defensive posture. So rather than walking onto a level playing field, Western researchers, epistemologically speaking, are staring out at a disadvantage.

When scholars acknowledge personal barriers to the epistemological flexibility I am calling for, the possibility of engaging the frame of reference of the fundamentalist presents itself. More informed and effective methodological approaches to fundamentalism research would likely follow from this sort of epistemological transformation. Dialogical encounters with the lifeworlds of fundamentalist believers require an epistemological flexibility on the part of researchers that forsakes the assumed transcendence of positivism, scientism, intellectualism, and the Orientalist caricature of Islamic fundamentalist believers that is the current stereotype held by most (even educated) Westerners.

Perhaps a practical example would be helpful. I am imagining two versions of a research study, conducted by culturally Western researchers, that seeks to examine and better understand some particular aspect of the experience of Islamic fundamentalist believers. In the first version, a traditional quantitative study built on positivist epistemology would collect data or use data already collected, analyze the data according to the guidelines of the scientific method, disseminate the results to the rest of the scholarly community, and rest in having made some contribution to our "knowledge" of the phenomenon. There would be no attempt to validate the results against the lived experience of the research subjects because positivist epistemology, supported by the scientistic self-understanding of the sciences, is able to reassure itself that "truth" lies within the confines of the theory of knowledge it has created.

Continuing with our example, the second version of the study would employ metamethodology, be based on flexible epistemology, and would also seek to examine and better understand some particular aspect of the experience of Islamic fundamentalist believers. This set of researchers would begin with the perspective of the phenomenon that is held by the fundamentalist believers themselves, work backwards from there to establish the most appropriate set of methodologies, and then backwards again to the epistemological foundations needed to support and inform the selected methodologies. The attained results would then be presented to the research subjects as a topic of discussion in order to ascertain how they compare with the subjective lifeworlds of those being studied. This dialogical encounter between researcher and researched is partially made possible by the fact that the study has been based on and consonant with the values and sensibilities of the research subjects from the beginning. Because the epistemological set of the researchers has been calibrated based on the methodologies suited to the phenomenon under study, a bridge of common language and ideas is already potentially at hand. This increases the likelihood that dialogue between researchers and researched will be characterized by sameness of purpose, by a more accurate understanding of the lifeworlds of religious fundamentalists, and by a sense among those being studied that Westerners are making an honest, concerted, and sincere effort to understand them and to help

explain them and their position to other Westerners. This dialogical engagement is, in my opinion, the only way the "problem" of fundamentalism (as many Westerners think of it) will be effectively addressed.

Almond, et al. (2007) describe how some fundamentalists have a different perception of time, history, meaning and the future than most other people. How can non-initiates understand the experience of initiates if that understanding is based on a divergent perception of time, history and meaning? Refining and adjusting our epistemology to meet the needs of the group being studied is the first step toward the "dialogical hermeneutic" advocated by Zaidi (2007) . When we expect the subjects of our study to conform to our worldview, we build a wall of misunderstanding between them and us that cannot be scaled by even the most astute methodology. Without an appreciative epistemology that includes the worldview of those we are studying, we may literally be "talking to ourselves" in that the data and insights we collect and publish have no meaning for anyone outside our small circle of like-minded intellectuals.

Metamethodological consideration of religious fundamentalism can only take place in an atmosphere that is epistemologically flexible and metatheoretical. Because each methodology brings with it the epistemic baggage of its founders and defenders, metamethodological insight requires an appreciative and inclusive, as opposed to rigid and essentialising, approach to research. Coming at the topic of religious fundamentalism from a number of different angles at once helps us to see that metatheoretical knowledge of religious fundamentalism must include some element of the contributions of each part of the whole: empirical and hermeneutic, quantitative and qualitative, Western and Eastern, secular and religious, believing and non-believing, theoretical and practical. It is the synergy of metatheory that is exciting, and it is the epistemological clarification and bridging engendered by metamethodological thinking about religious fundamentalism that holds some promise for improved dialogical interchange between two sides of an issue who appear, on the surface, to have nothing in common.

Conclusion

The basic argument of this paper can be summarized in two statements, one existential and one theoretical. First, my existential offering: The only way the "problem" of religious fundamentalism is going to be "solved," especially the violent and militant type, is if the people to whom the ire of radicalized believers is directed (Westerners) do a better job of understanding, reaching out, communicating, responding and otherwise attempting to bridge the span that divides "us" from "them." Second, I offer a theoretical model, which is complemented by a graphic representation (Figure 1). Beginning at the left of the diagram and working toward the right, researchers embark on the task of religious fundamentalism research with either an exclusive preference for positivist epistemology or with some measure of epistemological flexibility. Studies in the first category utilize quantitative methodology and are adapted to the tenets of the scientific method. Scientistic self-understanding completes the loop which keeps these studies and their authors from penetrating the gap that exists between two very different cultures, epistemologies, and value systems (i.e., between Western researchers and religious fundamentalists).

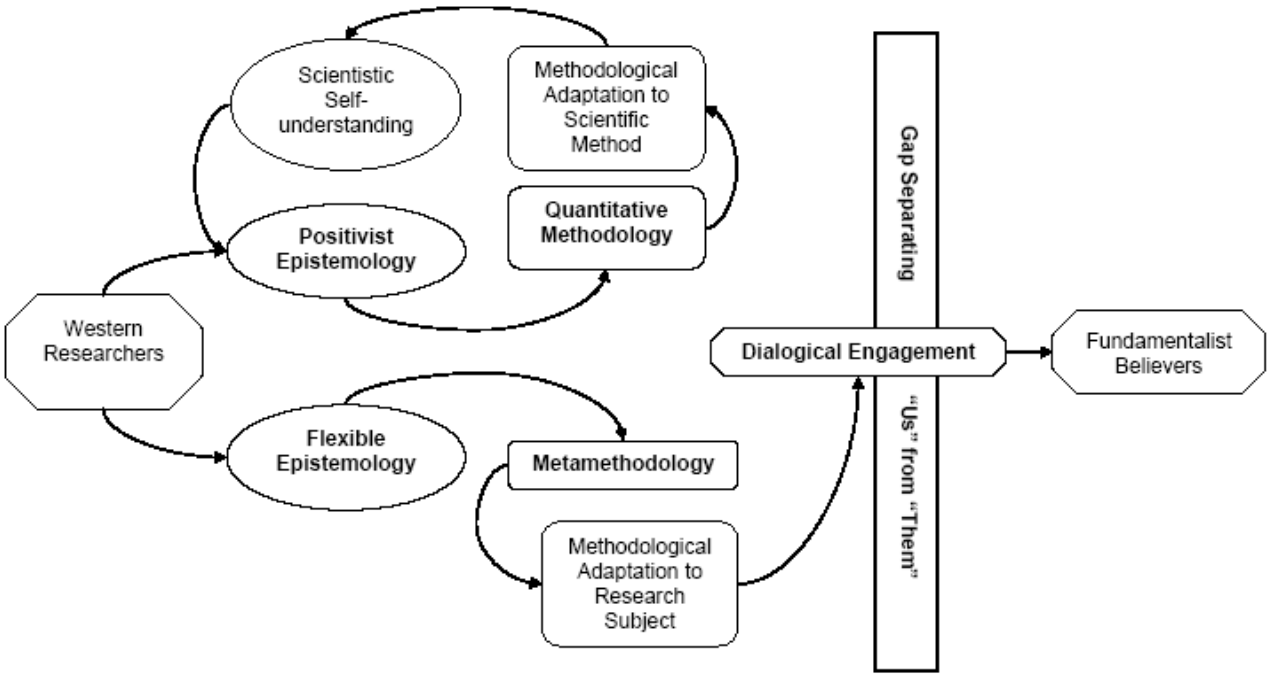

Figure 1. Dialogical engagement as a function of epistemological flexibility and metamethodology.

Starting again at the left of the graphic and following the bottom track to the right, studies based on flexible epistemology are positioned to adopt metamethodology. Because metamethodology has the ability to adapt itself to the needs of the research subject(s), the chance of dialogical engagement between researchers and researched is optimized. Dialogical engagement is the bridge that has the potential to span the gap that separates "us" Western researchers from "them" fundamentalist believers.

This is only one way of conceptualizing these issues and what road we might take to address them more fruitfully. It is also true that this argument is based partly on my own value system. Again, a theory or a model is only helpful to the extent that it assists us in making a sticky or intractable problem clearer and more solvable. My hope is that these ideas, when combined with the ideas and contributions of other scholars, will move us a step toward mutual understanding.

If the issues that create and sustain the radicalization of religious fundamentalists are to be more fruitfully addressed, a bottom up change in how we think about and try to "solve" those issues is needed. This change will look different depending on the context (political, religious, social, academic, etc.), and the current effort relates to scholarly endeavors and the philosophies and theories that support them. In the scholarly context, wholesale restructuring begins with epistemology, because intellectual pursuit is about "knowing" things. Barriers that exist at the epistemological level must be exposed and worked around. Research methodology, which emanates from and is supported by epistemology, must attune itself to the phenomena being

studied. Metatheoretical constructions formulated in an environment of epistemological flexibility and metamethodology predispose the scholarly project toward appreciation, engagement, openness and dialogue and away from isolation and insularity.

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