

## The Cultural History of Biblical Literalism

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blurb: Americans of all faiths—and of no faith—need to understand both the historical origins of Christian fundamentalism and the intellectually-solid alternatives to it within Christianity itself. Books to be discussed: Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* and Alan Jones, *Reimagining Christianity: Reconnect Your Spirit without Disconnecting Your Mind*.

I wanted oatmeal. That's where it started. I wanted oatmeal for breakfast, but we were out of milk. We live half a block from a grocery store, so I put on my coat and my boots, my red hat and my thick mittens, and I headed off to buy myself some milk. I was brought up to believing that surviving winters around here demands two things: oatmeal and fortitude. Oatmeal is probably the more important of the two: start the day right, and the afternoon will be an afterthought. Not microwave oatmeal, not instant oatmeal, but the real thing, stirred in a pot the stove until thWe kitchen smells like cinnamon and oatmeal cookies.

Once outside I was startled by air that almost smelled like spring. The wind was soft and it smelled like the lake, it smelled like wet mud and hopefulness.

So I postponed my oatmeal. I went for a walk instead, meandering the narrow streets lined with highrises, dodging the morning crowds forging grimly into their offices for the day. Despite the grey urban landscape, despite the dirty puddles and dark clouds skudding by, it was glorious outside. I pulled off my mittens and I unzipped the high neck of my parka and I reveled in walking on wet concrete. God's own wet concrete. Not ice, not snow, not salty slush that seeps into my boots no matter what. Just *pavement*. Do you know, can you remember, how wonderful plain pavement can be after months of snowy winter?

My delighted widened out to embrace far more than the weather. For a while, for these few blocks of a quick morning walk, I had "solid footing" in my life as well. I knew who I was. I knew where I was going—not that I could have said, of course. But that didn't matter. Just as it didn't matter whether the stoplight changed, whether I turned at the

corner or kept going straight. I had faith in life, faith in myself, faith that ultimately everything was okay. My place in the world was both good and secure, so good and so secure that I didn't need to explain it, not even to myself. All of who I am, all of the whole world around me, everything and everybody seemed held in a love that was beyond anyone's ability to explain.

So I meandered. I meandered until I happened past a grocery store, and then I remembered. I needed breakfast. I needed to get to work. The magic of the moment had faded to grey, to the ordinary grey of a morning in February. I needed breakfast, and I had work to do. "Miles to go before I sleep," as Robert Frost puts it, one night after he too is captivated—captured, perhaps—by a moment like this.

We all have moments like these on occasion, moments when, the poet Robert Browning puts it, "God's in his heaven and all's right with the world." William Wordsworth called these moments "spots of time." Most of his major poems are efforts to recapture and to understand what exactly is happening when, for this brief shining moment, the world makes sense. The world makes *good* sense, and we are part of that goodness.

How do we understand such moments? Any of us? One choice is to write them off to brain chemistry. Just brain endorphins. High serotonin levels. Lots of endogenous opioids on board this morning, umm—but stay on track to buy milk. Don't be fooled. Brain chemistry will reset itself to baseline and the "real world" will show up again.

Or we can brush these moments aside as "good moods," knowing of course that moods are both fragile and very transient. If a passing cab were to spatter me with slush, if a clerk at the grocery store were to be sullen and rude, then, as we say, "the day could be ruined." My "good mood" could be lost in a blink.

In fact, if you are adept enough at such brush-offs, you might never notice such moments at all. Lots of people don't. They don't "stop to smell the roses," as we say. If they notice the roses at all, it's only to worry about aphids and black spot and marauding rabbits. Global warming. In our culture, it's easy to feel that we have solidly objective evidence that life is indeed solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. Rejoicing in the morning air is naive nonsense.

The other choice—and it is a choice, I think—is to accept and to welcome such moments as encounters with something sacred. Something holy. Call it grace, call it God, call it the Ultimate, the Transcendent. Call it whatever you want: the question for today is whether or not it's real. Are moments like this essentially illusions? Are they merely surface-froth byproducts of nothing in particular?

Or are they glimpses of something that an intelligent person might take seriously? And if they are real, *what's going on? How do you explain such things?* Better yet, *Can we learn to elicit such moments? Can we feel this way more often?*

One way to think about what “religion” names is that various religions are different collections of ideas and the teachings that have, over time, accumulated around such experiences. Religions are efforts to explain what is real about such experiences. Alan Jones has a lot of great things to say about that in *Reimagining Christianity*.

"Explaining such moment" is not a complete or an absolute definition of religion, of course, but it's useful in its own way. It's especially useful for today's specific purpose, which is understanding what fundamentalism is, where it comes from, and thus how we might cope with the rising tide of fundamentalism as a political force globally, both among Muslims in the Mideast and among Christians in the US.

I come here today to defend what may seem like an unlikely proposition: religious fundamentalism is, at heart, a badly mistaken effort to take scientific view of religion. Let me say that again: religious fundamentalism is, at heart, a scientific view of religion.

The problem here is that the science in question dates from the 16<sup>th</sup> century—from Shakespeare's day, roughly speaking. Christian fundamentalism, like Islamic fundamentalism, reflects an effort to ground religion using the methods and the assumptions of what Shakespeare's day called the “New Science.” And at the core of the New Science was the theory, advanced by Copernicus and indirectly confirmed by Galileo's observations through his telescope, that planets orbit the sun not the earth.

Many fundamentalists—probably most of them—fail to realize this. But one way to cope with contemporary fundamentalists is to bring them back to a far richer, far more

ancient understanding of their own religion. That's what Borg is about in this month's book, *The Heart of Christianity*. I'm going to be supplementing his argument with a lot more historical background than he provides. That means I'm also pushing his thinking a bit further than he pushes it. I'm pushing this a bit because—frankly—I'm a lot less worried than Borg is about not offending fundamentalists. Like many church insiders, he is very committed to keeping peace within the big house that is "the church." I'm not a church insider in that sense. The key need that I see is helping all of us—whether or not we are Christians—to understand how religious fundamentalists see things. We can't effectively oppose the political clout of Christian fundamentalists if we don't understand their cultural and historical origins

The story I want to tell focuses on the 16<sup>th</sup> century—the 1500s—which was a period of cultural tumult unequalled until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this century, the Reformation, the Renaissance, and the birth of recognizably modern science were all taking place at once—and all of it fueled by new information technology, the printing press. Here's a quick time line. Michelangelo finished the Sistine chapel ceiling in 1512, and in 1514 Copernicus published his first evidence that planets orbit the sun, not the earth.

A mere three years later, in 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the cathedral door in Wittenburg. In the 1540s, Henry VIII started divorcing his wives.

In 1564, both Galileo and Shakespeare were born. In 1610 Galileo first published his observations supporting Copernicus's theories; that's roughly when Shakespeare was writing *The Tempest* and John Donne was writing his sonnets. One year earlier, the first settlers arrived at Jamestown; one year later, the King James Bible made Scripture widely available in English for the first time.

In short, European culture was in an absolute uproar all through the 1500s. Patterns of power and authority were up for grabs everywhere you looked. This uproar that burned itself out in devastating wars of religion—wars much like what we see going on now between the Sunni and the Shia in the Middle East. By the end of the "Thirty Years War" in 1640, one-third of the population of Germany was dead, and all of her major cities were in ruins. Just as the 30 Years War was ending, England erupted—

another twenty years of brutal civil war and genocidal “ethnic cleansing” along religious lines. None of this was really about theological disputes, any more than the Sunni/Shia mess today is about theology. Then and now, it had to do with power, and especially the cultural power to define or to control the ways in which we decide what is “real.” What is real or genuine or true, versus what is illusory, or incidental, or out-and-out faked. And who gets to decide.

As the dust settled on all this unspeakable violence, European culture slowly consolidated around a consensus that religion was to be banned from politics. Religion was sequestered in “private life” because it seemed that religion was inherently violent and inherently irrational. Religion was politically destabilizing and so it had to be controlled. Excluded. Public affairs, public policy, were to be managed objectively, rationally, on a “scientific” basis. Europe remained massively, actively Christian, but “theocracy” in any form was repudiated.

This new consensus came to be called the Enlightenment; the breakup of that consensus in our lifetimes is called “postmodernism.”

Imagine, if you will, how reasonable pious Muslims feel about the ways in which Sunni and Shia murder one another. Imagine what they feel about how the God they worship has been kidnapped—rhetorically kidnapped—and pressed into service as the moral foundation for terrorism. Now roll that feeling back to, oh, say, 1650. Imagine how abashed Christian believers felt about all these terrible wars. Imagine how they would have resolved to find their way to a more solidly reasonable, contemporary, morally responsible form of Christianity.

My argument today is that fundamentalism—Biblical literalism—is Christianity recast according to Enlightenment norms of scientific rationality. Biblical literalism doesn’t make sense to us because these Enlightenment norms don’t make sense to us any more either. But arguing postmodernism to Southern Baptists won’t get anyone anywhere. What we need to understand is how their beliefs originated in a perfectly understandable effort to devise a modest, reasonable form of Christianity. Let me show you what that means.

Marcus Borg argues that there are four key features to what I bluntly label "fundamentalism" and he more cautiously calls the "earlier paradigm" of Christian belief. It's a great analysis, so I'm going to use it here.

1. God wrote the Bible. Or at least God very directly "inspired" the human authors of Scripture to such an extent that the Bible is or offers a direct communication from God to humanity.

The Enlightenment norm here is direct observation. That's what Galileo did. He got into trouble for using a telescope to scan the night sky rather than reading Genesis to satisfy his curiosity about the stars. The New Science was all about direct observation rather than consulting ancient texts and ancient authorities. You want to know how many chambers there are in the heart? Dissect a heart, don't page through Aristotle. This was big news in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. Huge news.

But if observation is the norm, the new norm, where is religion supposed to look? What is religion to observe? We can't observe God directly, because God is pure spirit. God is not visible. We can't observe religious behaviors, in part because sociologists and pollsters don't exist yet, and in part because everyone already knew that religious behaviors were diverse. That diversity provided the tinder that set off all these terrible wars. What else is there? The Bible.

What Borg calls the "emerging paradigm" that we more commonly call postmodernism does not see the Bible as a directly or immediately divine product. The emerging paradigm sees the Bible as a thoroughly and absolutely human product. The Bible is the work of human hands from beginning to end, and so the Bible is subject to all the vagaries of human nature.

And yet the Bible is a human product of an interesting kind: it is the record, assembled and revered over thousands of years, of human spirituality, human spiritual experience, human encounters with God. Or what humans understood—and misunderstood--as encounters with God.

Maybe, then, maybe my moment enroute to the grocery story might have turned into a psalm. Maybe even a minor miracle of some sort: anxious workaholic takes a walk! A moment of revelation.

And maybe somebody made a colossal mistake when they thought God ordered the genocide of the Canaanites. All sorts of interesting possibilities open up if we can imagine that specific religions, like Christianity, are attempts to explain and to support the spiritual experience recorded—in all its messy diversity—in sacred scripture.

2. The fundamentalist paradigm insists that the Bible is to be read as literally true, as word-for-word factual. Creation in six days. Parting the Red Sea. Walking on the water. Miracles, yes, miracles. And along with working miracles, of course, God wreaks some capricious, gratuitous violence. There are parts of the Bible you never hear read in church.

The Enlightenment norm here has to do with a deep suspicion of metaphor. By the mid-seventeenth century, metaphors were seen as lies, as deceptions or attempted deceptions. At best, metaphors were frivolous, distracting ornament. Verbal frou-frou. This was the verbal equivalent of the architectural turn away from false and gaudy Victorian ornament to stark, functional boxes of modernism. And that 17<sup>th</sup> century change was driven in part by the experience of devastating war, just as stark architectural modernism was in part a reaction to the 20<sup>th</sup> experience of devastating war. The need in both cases was for a certain transparency, a certain intellectual honesty. That was a decent yearning. In both instances, of course, one excess was replaced with a different excess, one problem with another problem.

In the 1660s, for instance, the first funded research project of the Royal Academy for the Advancement of Science was to hire John Wilkins to invent a language without metaphors, a language in which there would be a direct one-to-one relationship between words and things. He tried for years, eventually deciding that metaphor was inherent in language. Wilkins was right, of course, but he was so far ahead of his time

that nobody listened. If direct observation is the way to truth, then truthful language has to provide the most direct access to “the real world,” and that means flatly, absolutely literal language.

And if good scientists and honest people write without metaphor—supposedly—if the truth is best conveyed directly and literally, then of course God will write without metaphor too. What, is God going to be upstaged by the Royal Society for the Advancement of Science? By the New England Journal of Medicine? Not a chance!

As Borg explains, the emerging paradigm argues that the Bible is densely and intentionally metaphorical, because by now we understand that metaphor is the most sophisticated resource of meaning that language provides. All language is inherently metaphorical, and the most sophisticated, meaning-dense language uses metaphor in powerfully intentional ways. This argument is flatly and completely opposite to what the Enlightenment believed about metaphor. And so it is flatly and completely opposite to what Biblical literalists believe about the language of the Bible, or Muslim literalists believe about the Koran. But the problem here isn't religion, and it isn't the Bible. The problem is how some believers have gotten stuck in the attitudes and beliefs of the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. *And they don't realize that's where they are stuck or why they are stuck there.*

Furthermore, in the ancient world—in the times when biblical documents were being written, edited, rewritten, re-edited, and assembled into The Book, the literal meaning of any serious or sophisticated text was regarded as its least important level of meaning. The literal meaning wasn't the core. It was a shell, a surface, something to entertain the crowds maybe, but not remotely serious intellectually. In the ancient world, the serious dimensions of meaning were what today we call the metaphorical, the symbolic, and the moral. Reading the Bible literally *limits* both the power and the meaning of the text. Literalism denies that God might be able to use language just as adeptly as Shakespeare did, or John Donne, or William Faulkner. The emerging



paradigm in Christian thought reclaims these metaphoric and symbolic dimensions of scripture, which leads to a moral reimagining too.

There's another dimension to this question of literal word-for-word factuality, and that has to do with history. Part of reading the Bible literally is taking all of its historical accounts at face value. If the Bible says that thousands of Hebrews wandered in the Sinai desert for 40 years, then it was 40 years, not 39 and not 41. Creation happened in six days, period. Behind this historical literalism is the belief that absolutely objective observation is in fact possible. If all observers will see the same things and all honest observers will report what they saw in the same ways, then of course history is or can be completely objective. And just as God would not use metaphors, so also God would not write history that is less than absolutely objectively accurate.

The emerging paradigm, Borg explains, has a contemporary understanding of history and of the people who write history. Any history, every history, is a partial reconstruction. Every historical account is colored—more or less, of course—by the locale and the limitations of the historian. We can never get back exactly to “what really happened,” any more than we can get our hands on “what really happened” for local events in our own day.

Look at arguments in the news about what economic indicators indicate, about what elections signify, about whether or not the surge is “working” in Iraq or whether in Iran there's a secret weapons program. Look at how hard it is to figure out what's going on around us now. History is harder yet. Ancient history is spectacularly difficult. Furthermore, the separate stories comprising the Bible were rewritten and re-re-re-written again, and edited and re-edited and re-re-re-edited all long before it was assembled as what today we call “the Bible.” What remains in it of accurate “literal history” is anyone's guess. But the way in which the Bible was transmitted to us clearly suggests that documenting “literal history” was not what they were trying to achieve in the first place. They were trying to preserve and to convey human spiritual experience in

ways that would lead other people to recognize and to take seriously their own spirituality.

And this was a flawed process, a human process. At times the human authors and editors of Scripture succeeded brilliantly, but at times they failed in devastating ways. At times the God of the Bible is brutal, capricious, and vindictive. That fact wasn't edited away. The text wasn't cleaned up as it so easily might have been. It wasn't spin-meistered. What we have instead functions brilliantly as a warning to us that we too can make devastating mistakes about what we think is "the will of God."

3. The fundamentalist paradigm reads the Bible as a source of doctrine or theories, on the one hand, and moral laws on the other. The Enlightenment "scientific" norm here is the quest for the universal laws underlying reality. The Middle Ages didn't worry about universal scientific laws because people then did not assume that reality was consistent. Maybe things fall when you drop them in Europe, but maybe elsewhere—in China, maybe?—things float up. Maybe in China cats chase dogs and birds chase cats. Who knows? But part of the New Science was its insistence that the fundamental laws governing reality were both absolute and universal. These fundamental laws, the New Science claimed, were the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth, and valid everywhere—and the goal of science was to figure out what these laws are.

The religious equivalent of scientific laws are doctrines and catechisms: absolute claims about God, about us, and about everything in between: salvation, sin, redemption, incarnation, creation, resurrection, forgiveness etc. etc. etc. When I was a kid, the Baltimore Catechism had 499 questions and answers that I was supposed to memorize before my confirmation. When the bishop came to confirm us, he wandered up and down the center aisle of the church asking random kids to answer random questions from that Catechism. He had a copy in his hand. I had only memorized my way to question #367, and my sole memory of that evening is how terrified I was that the bishop might call on me.

The emerging paradigm, Borg explains, takes a difference stance. The purpose of the Bible is not to teach catechism. In fact, Biblical scholars agree that different parts

of the Bible take contradictory positions on even the most rudimentary and important questions about morality and about the nature of God. As a collection of accounts of the human encounter with the sacred, the Bible is meant or designed to draw us into that encounter as skillfully as literary convention permits. It's not trying to be a single theory or to teach a single theory about who God is, who we are, and what life means. The Bible is spectacularly more diverse than that, spectacularly more *spacious*.

Let me be clear about something. Borg's emerging paradigm is going to strike many people—not all of them fundamentalists—as a spectacular loss in prestige for the Bible. Seeing the Bible as a human work is far less dramatic, far less potent than thinking God dictated or at least directly inspired the Bible so as to reveal to us the fundamental laws governing spiritual realities.

On the other hand, no single set of coherent fundamental moral laws or theological claims can in fact be found in the Bible. And there's a lot in the Bible that is morally repugnant if you *really* take it literally—but in fact even Southern Baptists are highly selective in their literalism.

4. Finally, Borg argues, the earlier paradigm strongly emphasizes the afterlife. What are we to do or to believe in order to be saved? That's the fundamentalist's question, right, that's what they ask when they buttonhole you on the street: "Are you saved?"

Seen this way, salvation is like the outcome of an experiment. Scientists test their hypotheses with experiments, and if experimental results are as predicted then the hypothesis is true. But what demonstrates the truth of a doctrine? What proves the correctness of a moral law? Going to heaven.

How it is that we "get to heaven" remains a hugely contested question even within Christianity. Hugely contested. But as Borg argues, the emerging paradigm emphasizes a transformed life here and now. "Going to heaven" is only one of the ways in which Scripture talks about what "salvation" means. The word "salvation" itself means health or wholeness—think of the word "salve," which means comfort or soothe.

Scripture offers many specific images—metaphors!—explaining what this means. If the problem is human blindness, then the remedy is light, restored light, restored vision. If the problem is captivity of some sort, then the solution is freedom or liberation. If the problem is exile or alienation or separation, then the solution is a return to “home.” If the problem is poverty or indebtedness, then the solution is to have our debts paid. The Bible offers a wide array of specific metaphors for we might call, simply, spiritual insight or spiritual growth.

“Pie in the sky when you die” makes religion largely irrelevant to the immediate texture of life here on earth except for obeying the rules. Maybe that’s understandable when a culture needs radically to separate religion from violent conflict over control of power in a given society. But it’s tremendously impoverishing to the religion imagination. It flattens out the complexity of genuine spiritual experience. And it provides a handy excuse for ignoring the needs of our neighbors so as to focus on our own private bank account with God. There are major stirrings within American evangelicalism on this point: Jesus said nothing about homosexuality, for instance, or about creation in six days, but he had a lot to say about poor people and about social justice and about loving our neighbor. If these voices prevail in the next election cycle—and they may prevail—the change could be historic. Radical neoconservatives and American imperialists would lose their electoral basis.

The bottom line here, I propose, is that good people who are fundamentalists have turned to Biblical literalism in an effort—misplaced but understandable—to take God seriously. To take morals seriously. And to do so in ways that strike them as plain, straightforward, intellectually honest, and politically responsible. Their way of doing so stems from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, and it no longer works. Borg’s book is important because it outlines how this emerging paradigm within Christian thought also takes God and our relationship to God very seriously. It also wants to be plain, straightforward, intellectually honest, and politically responsible. And that desire is a basis on which people can begin to talk to one another.

One last point from Borg, one of my favorite parts of his argument. What do we mean when we say we “believe” in God? When people claim to be spiritual but not

religious, what they often mean is simply that they can't stand churches, that they want nothing to do with what they have heard in churches. I understand that. Spiritual but not religious can also be code for "I don't believe in God," or at least not the God preached in those churches. I don't believe in the God I've heard preached in plenty of churches, and so for a long time I thought I didn't believe in God, period.

But "belief" is actually a very complicated word. The "lief" part of it comes from a root that means "love." Consider the word "beloved." That word has the same etymology as "belief." The word has four meanings, Borg argues.

First, faith or belief means trust. It means confidence. It means relying on something or someone. Consider what we mean when we say to one another, "I believe in you." The opposite of belief, then, is anxiety and fear. The measure of our faith is the base level of anxiety permeating our lives.

Second, faith or belief means loyalty. Consider the word "infidelity," especially as that work plays out in sexual relationships. Infidelity is betrayal; fidelity—faith, belief—is a commitment to someone. To God. To Christian community, to one another in the name of God.

Third, faith or belief refers to cognitive assent. To believe something is to accept it as true, often to accept it as true despite a relative lack of evidence. This meaning of faith or belief circles back to the question of doctrines and theories.

Ultimately, Borg argue, faith is a vision of life itself. It is a loyal, trusting commitment that life does ultimately make sense, a loyal trusting commitment that we are all, all of us, loved beyond our wildest imaginings. And if we have nothing to prove to God, then we have nothing to prove to one another. Then none of our fears and none of our insecurities need to dominate our lives.

The Good News, as they say.