

'Fundamentalism' and 'fundamentalist' semantically considered: Their lexical origins, early polysemy, and pejoration

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The words *fundamentalist* (as both a noun and an adjective) and *fundamentalism* were coined in 1920 within the Northern Baptist Convention when that and other American Protestant denominations were experiencing theological turmoil due to the advance of theological modernism. It is argued in the present article that both terms initially had positive meanings when used by defenders of orthodoxy. However, within weeks of their birth both were criticised by less conservative Christians. Like many other theological terms they underwent semantic change – in this case pejoration and lexical extension. Moreover, by 1923 'fundamentalist' had been extended into political journalism to refer to strict adherents of one ideology or another. The greatest change, however, and one that fixed these neologisms in the public mind in both North America and the United Kingdom, came with the widely published 'Scopes monkey trial' of 1925, when the association of 'fundamentalists' and 'fundamentalism' with anti-intellectualism and obscurantism reached its apogee.

'Fundamentalisme' en 'fundamentalis' semanties beskou: Leksikale oorsprong, vroeë polisemie en verwording. Die terme *fundamentalis* (as 'n selfstandige sowel as byvoeglike naamwoord) en *fundamentalisme* het binne die Noordelike Baptiste-tradisie ontstaan toe hulle en ander Amerikaanse Protestantse denominasies onrus op teologiese gebied beleef het as gevolg van die opkoms van teologiese modernisme. Die betoog in hierdie artikel is dat albei hierdie terme aanvanklik positiewe betekenis gehad het toe dit deur die beskermers van die ortodoksie gebruik is. Albei terme is egter binne weke na hulle ontstaan deur minder konserwatiewe Christene gekritiseer. Soos vele ander teologiese terme, het hierdie woorde ook semantiese veranderinge ondergaan, in hierdie geval met ongunstige betekenis en leksikale uitbreiding. Boonop is die term *fundamentalis* teen 1923 ook in die politieke joernalistiek gebruik om na die rigiede navolging van een of ander ideologie te verwys. Die grootste verandering, en een wat hierdie neologiesmes algemeen in Noord-Amerika sowel as in die Verenigde Koninkryk gevestig het, het egter gekom met die wyd gepubliseerde 'Scopes monkey trial' in 1925 toe die assosiasie van *fundamentalis* en *fundamentalisme* met anti-intellektualisme en verkramptheid 'n hoogtepunt bereik het.

Introduction

During the latter half of the 20th century, the terms *fundamentalist* and *fundamentalism*, both of which had existed since 1920, became even more polysemous than they had been since that year. Their usage to signify various kinds of people and phenomena expanded to hitherto untouched extremes. Originally Christian theological nomenclature, they were applied to a seemingly ever-widening variety of people and ideologies. Basketball coaches who emphasised such basic skills as dribbling and passing were dubbed 'fundamentalists'. Portfolio managers who concentrated their analyses on the financial details of individual companies rather than basing their fiduciary decisions on macroeconomic market trends were similarly called 'fundamentalists'. Muslims who militantly defended their faith entered political and journalist rhetoric as champions of 'Islamic fundamentalism'. Mormons who continued to practise polygamy despite the abrogation of that phenomenon by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were described as 'Mormon fundamentalists'. Generally terms of opprobrium on the lips or in the pens of people who denigrated what they were describing, these two terms had long undergone what semanticists call 'pejoration'. As Lyle Campbell's (2009) textbook definition succinctly informs us:

In degeneration (often called *pejoration*), the sense of a word takes on a less positive, more negative evaluation in the minds of the users of the language – an increasingly negative value judgement. (p. 260)

As will be demonstrated, this happened almost immediately, although many self-styled 'fundamentalists' continued to carry that banner proudly long after its detractors had convinced

much of the American public that it was an odious word, not a badge to be worn with pride.

Writing retrospectively in the 1960s, the ground-breaking historian of fundamentalism Ernest R. Sandeen (1967a:66, 1967b:80) observed that the theological defensiveness which had given rise to the terms in question ‘quickly gave way to the clangor and strife that has turned Fundamentalism into a term of reproach’. By his own time, Sandeen noted, few people were willing to use what had become the connotatively burdened word *fundamentalist* to identify themselves.

When and why was the term *fundamentalism* coined, and what did it and the cognate neologism *fundamentalist* originally signify? For well over half a century, these and related questions have received various and often incompatible answers. To cite but one immediately relevant example of an attempt to identify the provenance of the former word, in a recently published book an eminent South African theologian asserted, ‘since 1927 the concept fundamentalism was used to describe a form of conservative Protestantism that was discernible in Christian circles in the US’ (Vorster 2008:7). In fact, both the terms *fundamentalist* and *fundamentalism* had been current for several years before the indicated date. By then they had already undergone noteworthy semantic change, drifting from their original meanings and taken on unsavoury connotations with remarkable speed. (For an incisive introduction to the general concept, see Traugott 2009:853–860.)

In the present article, steps will be taken towards unravelling the tangled usage of these words in their infancy, paying especial attention to their origin, disputes over their usage, and how they took on opprobrious connotations when they underwent early semantic change. This is not – it should be underscored at the outset – an argument either for or against any of the phenomena, either religious or secular, which the terms in question have signified. The *terminus ad quem* of the present analysis is 1925, an important milestone in the history of the words *fundamentalism* and *fundamentalist* when they were very commonly used in widespread journalist coverage of the infamous ‘Scopes monkey trial’ as signifiers for anti-intellectualism and obscurantism. Our focus is on the Northern Baptist Convention, in which these twin neologisms were born, and especially on its weekly organ, *The Watchman-Examiner*, in which much of their early semantic history is lucidly revealed.

The Fundamentals

Forming an etymological and theological bridge to the 20th century ‘fundamentalism’ were a series of 90 essays in 12 paperback volumes published in the United States of America (USA) and distributed internationally between 1910 and 1915. It was collectively known as *The Fundamentals*. Intended to serve as a bulwark against the incursions of ‘higher criticism’ of the Bible which was regarded as having undermined orthodoxy, and against theological liberalism generally, these volumes were written by dozens of chiefly American and

British theologians. *The Fundamentals* are widely believed to have been among the most popular semi-scholarly Christian literature of their era. Millions of copies were distributed internationally and generally free of charge to churches, ministers, missionaries, Sunday school superintendents, students of divinity and others. Those who did not receive free copies could buy individual volumes for the princely sum of 15 cents. From the outset, *The Fundamentals* were a transatlantic project with noteworthy Baptist input, although theologians representing other denominational traditions were also prominent in the list of authors. In the wake of these publications, it became very common in American Protestant parlance, especially in the religious press, to refer to what were generally regarded, at least in theologically conservative circles, as ‘fundamental’ beliefs. Of course, what was fundamental to one Protestant was not necessarily fundamental to another. For example, to some believers’ baptism was an essential, non-negotiable tenet, whilst others obviously defended paedobaptism. To cite another matter on which there was then no consensus: since the late 19th century many Protestants in the United Kingdom and North America had advocated premillennial eschatology, whilst others had rejected it as speculative. Nevertheless, by the time of the First World War ‘fundamentals’ was ingrained in transatlantic English Protestant usage.

Curtis Lee Laws coins ‘Fundamentalist’

If any man deserves to be called the ‘father of fundamentalism’, not as a movement, but as a word, it is arguably Curtis Lee Laws (1868–1946), even though he did not actually coin it. Rather, this Baptist minister and editor sired the term *fundamentalist* in 1920 and doggedly promoted its usage as a signifier in theological disputes. A native of Virginia, Laws received his undergraduate education at Richmond College and did his theological studies in the early 1890s at Crozer Theological Seminary, an institution in Upland, Pennsylvania, where more than a half-century later. Martin Luther King Jr, did likewise. Laws thereupon served churches in Baltimore and Brooklyn for two decades before being appointed editor of the very widely circulated and influential Baptist weekly newspaper *The Watchman-Examiner* in 1913. He would hold that position for 25 years (Bradbury 1946:747–749).

This transplanted Southerner stood squarely on the traditional side in the theological disputes which had begun to rock the Northern Baptist Convention long before he occupied the editorial chair.¹

From his office in New York, Laws used *The Watchman-Examiner* to publicise *The Fundamentals* and the conservative position in the intradenominational strife, occasionally criticising the more liberal stance of a rival periodical, *The Baptist*, whilst consistently giving favourable coverage to the theologically more orthodox Southern Baptist Convention.

1. Much has been written about the theological disputes in the Northern Baptist Convention before 1920. For a succinct summary of events which prompted the theological conservatives within the denomination to act to defend orthodoxy, see McBeth 1987:568–570.

When the doctrinal disputes continued after the First World War ended in 1918, Laws and approximately 150 other Northern Baptist Conventions ministers and laymen organised a special conference to take place immediately before the 1920 denominational assembly in Buffalo, New York. Their reason for holding this extraordinary meeting, the arrangers declared, was 'the havoc which rationalism is working in our churches as evidenced by the drift upon the part of many of our ministers from the fundamentals of our holy faith'. One finds in the list of participants several men such as William Bell Riley, Curtis Lee Laws and Amzi Dixon who would soon either identify themselves or be identified by others as 'fundamentalists' (Anon 1920a:652, 1920b).

Laws reported this event in detail and found it particularly heartening that the two day-parley had attracted approximately 150 participants. That, he believed, implied a renewal of hope for reasserting doctrinal orthodoxy which, he repeatedly emphasised, was actually the stance of the overwhelming majority of Northern Baptist pastors and laymen. In an enthusiastic commentary published in *The Watchman-Examiner* on 01 July 1920, Laws proposed that those 'who cling to the great fundamentals and who mean to do battle royal for the fundamentals shall be called "Fundamentalists"'. He explicitly included himself amongst them and explained that whenever he used this neologism 'it will be in compliment and not in disparagement' (Laws 1920a:834).² A highly consequential term thus saw the light of day.

Disputing the neologism

Its birth was not without complications. Almost immediately some Baptists rejected 'fundamentalist', arguing that it was inappropriate nomenclature. Before the end of July, Dr Charles Watson of Boston challenged what he perceived as the exclusivist, self-righteous tone of Laws' use of that term. In doing so, however, this minister exceeded the *Watchman-Editor* in rhetorical stridency. He and more doctrinally inclusive churchmen in the Northern Baptist Convention, Watson insisted, consistently affirmed Baptist beliefs. He added, though, that they were 'not enamored of the men who assume that they are the only Baptists in sight, and who press suspicion and accusation so far that they continually break the ninth commandment'. Nothing was more fundamental to Christianity than speaking the truth in love, Watson suggested, alleging that on that score Laws and his cohort had fallen short. Furthermore, Watson, like many other Baptists and other Protestants who commented on the contemporary theological strife, rejected the notion that the faith could be reduced to a few core propositions. 'Can you draw an inclusive circle around three doctrines', he asked rhetorically calling them fundamental, then outside of that circle, exempting yourself from the commandments of God, sniff suspiciously among Christian teachers and schools, misrepresent their teachings, and continue to be a sound 'Fundamentalist'?

2. During the early 1920s Laws was inconsistent in capitalising 'Fundamentalist' and 'Fundamentalism' in *The Watchman-Examiner*.

Watson did not veil his disgust with the 'holier than thou' attitude he perceived among the conservatives. 'You get dreadfully bored by the man who always calls your attention to the hardness of his backbone, and talks and acts as if he were *all* bone', he lamented. Furthermore, by nature people differed somewhat. Watson reminded readers that their physical differences were manifestations of 'God's variety'. By analogy, he reasoned, one should also accept the fact that in terms of 'individual faith, there has always been and will always be a similar variety, in spite of "Convention", "Conference", or "Committee", or "Fiat"'. His denominational fellows, Watson pleaded, should acknowledge that (Laws 1920b:925).

In what was undoubtedly one of the first published usages of the word *fundamentalism*, Watson then announced that the phenomenon was by no means a novel development. In another of his censorious comments, he averred:

already this 'Fundamentalism' that we are hearing about is not new. It is old and is well into the stage of cant, pretense, hypocrisy, and chronic accusation. To thousands of Baptists it has been made disagreeable and unchristian simply because they know some who are exploiting it are not telling the truth about their brethren, else are telling it in unrighteousness. (Laws 1920b:925)

Watson urged the dropping of terms which could be divisive. Instead, he asked, 'would it not be better for all of us to remain simply Baptists and Christians, and try to adorn these names by the spirit that is in us?' (Laws 1920b:925).

Laws remained unrepentant and continued to advocate use of his neologism. He explained in the same issue of *The Watchman-Examiner* in which he published Watson's critique that far from being a stinging term intended to divide and accuse, it was actually a consciously positive word intended to express the characteristics of the conservatives in a more meaningful and inclusive way than other labels he had pondered. It was, he insisted, 'a good, wholesome, descriptive word to take the place of several current misnomers.' Laws explained that he had coined 'Fundamentalists' specifically to avoid antagonising 'ultra liberals' by using 'conservative' and 'pre-millennialist' 'because just to pronounce those words in the presence of some of these men makes them froth at the mouth.' His coinage of 'Fundamentalist', he pleaded, had been done 'in all innocence and good nature', and he had believed that it would be 'more acceptable' and 'more illuminating' than those inflammatory epithets (Laws 1920b:925).

The words become a movement

At least within the Northern Baptist Convention, the new words became an integral and nominal part of a movement intended to stave off the advance of modernist theology. The initial conference which Laws and his allies had convened in Buffalo as a prelude to the denominational assembly became an annual affair. Laws gave them favourable publicity in *The Watchman-Examiner* and, undeterred by the criticism levelled by men like Watson at the term *Fundamentalist*, continued

to employ it in an exclusivist sense to signify the men who participated in the campaign to bolster orthodoxy and the organisations they established within the denomination to structure their efforts. Under Laws' pen, the programme to defend orthodoxy remained 'Fundamentalism' (Laws 1921a:1229–1230, 1921b:709–710, 1922b:501).

At the conference held in Indianapolis in June 1922, Laws addressed the delegates and summarised the movement in terms which echoed what he had long stressed in his newspaper. After quoting the editorial in which he had proposed 'Fundamentalist', he summarised 'Fundamentalism' as:

a protest against that rationalistic interpretation of Christianity which seeks to discredit the miracles of the Old Testament, sets aside the virgin birth of our Lord as a thing unbelievable, laughs at the credulity of those who accept many of the New Testament miracles, reduces the resurrection of our Lord to the fact that death did not end his existence, and sweeps away the promises of his second coming as the idle dream of men under the influence of Jewish apocalypticism. (Laws 1922a:745)

He acknowledged that opponents of the movement had described its adherents in less flattering and even opprobrious terms, among which he listed *literalists*, *dogmatists*, *separatists*, *medievalists*, *cranks*, and *ignoramuses* (Laws 1922a:745).

Connotations of intolerance and anti-intellectualism

Given the strident nature of theological disputes, it seems plausible that in the eyes of modernists the defenders of orthodoxy were inherently intolerant and narrow-gauged in their doctrinal attitudes. One gets this impression from observations made about the fundamentalists' conferences preceding the annual assemblies of the Northern Baptist Convention in the early 1920s. Certainly as early as 1922 the word *fundamentalists* was being explicitly associated with such a restricted mindset. Nowhere did this come to the fore more lucidly than in what might be dubbed the Magna Carta of the anti-fundamentalist campaign, Harry Emerson Fosdick's oft-quoted sermon of 21 May 1922, 'Shall the Fundamentalists Win?' (Fosdick 1922:713–717).

Born in 1878, Fosdick was a well-known Northern Baptist minister who taught homiletics at Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan and was perhaps the most renowned American Protestant preacher during the first half of the 20th century. From 1919 until 1925 he occupied the pulpit at the first Presbyterian Church in New York without, however, relinquishing his allegiance to the Northern Baptist Convention. Fed up with the bitter strife in his own denomination, this unabashed modernist levelled several broadsides at 'the Fundamentalists' – although without mentioning any of them by name – in his notorious homily.

Fosdick (1922) unreservedly laid all of the blame for the tensions on the doorstep of the other party whilst exonerating his own side as the victims. It was 'the Fundamentalist controversy', he began – not what historians of American

Protestantism consistently call 'the fundamentalist-modernist' one which was threatening to divide the churches. Rather than following Laws' lead and identifying fundamentalists as people who sought to preserve orthodoxy by doing 'battle royal' for the basic doctrines of the faith, Fosdick stressed what he perceived as their desire to cleanse the churches of unwanted people, that is, 'to drive out of the evangelical churches men and women of liberal opinions'. That the fundamentalists were a narrow-minded lot was axiomatic: Whilst 'the best conservatives' could be exemplary in evincing a tolerant spirit, those who carried the fundamentalist banner had a program that was 'essentially illiberal and intolerant' (Fosdick 1922:713).

Moreover, in Fosdick's portrayal of the fundamentalists, they were virtually un-American, or at any rate misfits in what he believed was the generally tolerant society of the United States. He granted that in this country people were at liberty to hold orthodox theological views, but he doubted that anyone had a right 'to deny the Christian name' to those who differed with them on doctrinal matters and consequently 'shut against them the doors of the Christian fellowship.' Precisely that, Fosdick declared, was what the fundamentalists were intent on doing, both on American soil and abroad. Linking his arguments about the un-American character and the intolerance of that group, he lamented, 'they have actually endeavored to put on the statute books of a whole state binding laws against teaching modern biology' (Fosdick 1922:714).³

Qualified embracing of natural science by fundamentalists

Fosdick was neither the first nor the only critic to ascribe this anti-intellectual attitude to the new movement. In any case, in the American public mind it continued to expand as part of the semantic change which the neologisms underwent during the first half of the 1920s. As will be seen shortly, within five years of the birth of 'fundamentalist' and 'fundamentalism' these terms had gone far beyond theological defensiveness and became inextricably associated with hostility to modern science. That linkage became a permanent part of the understanding of these words outside theological circles, and to a great extent it must be attributed to hostile journalistic coverage of such events as the infamous 'Scopes monkey trial' of 1925. What should not be overlooked, however, is that during the early 1920s some self-styled 'fundamentalists' sought to counter the early perception of their movement as inherently anti-scientific by arguing that it was compatible with modern science.

Exemplifying this argument was Bernard C. Clausen, who in 1923 contributed to *The Watchman-Examiner* an article titled 'The religion of science'. This scholarly Baptist pastor argued that no less than religious people, natural scientists based much of their work on postulated assumptions that had not been proven and perhaps were incapable of being either verified or falsified. 'Science builds upon faith', Clausen

3. Probably meant the state of Kentucky.

(1923) declared in an alignment of the former with religion. He granted that there were many 'selfish, over-confident, unworthy scientists' but also conceded that there were also 'bigoted, hard-hearted religionists too'. Clausen urged readers to embrace scientific methods and to 'deliberately proclaim the truth of Christ in the vocabulary which [scientists] understand, fearlessly submitting the things we believe to the gruelling test of modern life.' He expressed confidence that if they did so:

some day all of science will take upon its lips the cry of [seventeenth-century astronomer Johannes] Kepler, uttered in his observatory the night he caught the first glimpse of his expected comet, 'I am thinking God's thoughts after him.' (Clausen 1923:106)

'Fundamentalism' and reactionary political rhetoric

In the eyes of at least some modernist Christians, by 1922 'fundamentalism' was not merely a religious phenomenon, but one which had become intimately linked with 'reactionary' political rhetoric. An unidentified editor of *The Christian Century*, a pro-modernist weekly magazine published in Chicago, expressed this in an editorial published in November 1922. This was during the presidency of Warren G. Harding, a Republican who had succeeded Woodrow Wilson and whose term in the White House included the 'Red Scare' of 1919–1921, when many citizens of the United States feared that ripples of the Bolshevik Revolution might reach American shores. 'Frequently, of late, our Fundamentalist leaders have issued voluminous warnings against the spread of what they call "infidelity" in the modern pulpit,' groused this editor (Anon. 1922):

Such warnings are accompanied by terrifying predictions of impending anarchy, communism, and all the other nightmarish hobgoblins conjured up by the post-war hysteria to frighten us – things worn as thin as toy balloons. (p. 1348)

Fundamentalists were offering their rigid orthodoxy not only as the key for saving the integrity of Christianity, but also as a nostrum to cure the nation's ills. That such a rhetorical religio-political alliance had emerged did not surprise this critic since, in his words, 'birds of a feather flock together' and 'both know how to "treat 'em rough"'. The two belligerents were equally repugnant in his eyes, because 'the spirit common to both is neither American nor Christian, being intolerant and ruthless, and at bottom a fundamental scepticism' (Anon 1922:1348). These acerbic comments were a noteworthy contribution to the pejoration of the terms in question. However, it should be noted that they do not echo what Laws was repeatedly – and with a high degree of consistency – emphasising about the *theological* nature of fundamentalism during the early 1920s. There is no evidence that he linked that doctrinal restoration movement to a political agenda. Nevertheless, from this early date in the minds of parts of the American public 'fundamentalism' included a very conservative ideological component, although it did not always come to the surface.

Metaphorical extensions to the political sphere

An example from *The Times* of London in August 1925, that is, immediately after the 'Scopes monkey trial' which will be discussed below, illustrates the point. 'The spirit of fundamentalism is not peculiar to Tennessee', reported its correspondent in Germany:

The chief characteristic of the Tenth German Communist Congress, lately held in Berlin, was the attempt to enforce the rigid acceptance of Leninism on the German Communists and to exorcise all signs of the Demon Evolution. (Anon. 1925b:7)

Less than a month later *The Watchman-Examiner* published a different usage of 'fundamentalism' from another quarter, namely its British correspondent, Gwilym O. Griffith. In a dispassionate review of the evolving political landscape of the United Kingdom since the end of the world war, he suggested that the public had to choose between:

the fundamentalism of the socialist revolutionaries out for the destruction of the existing order and the setting up of a labor [sic] republic; 'the fundamentalism of the Tory extremists, proclaiming the divine right of the heredity and industrial aristocracy, and developing into some sort of Fascism', and 'the fundamentalism of evolutionary democracies' (Griffith 1925a:1204).

Griffith's usage of Laws' word to express political ideologies vividly shows one kind of semantic extension.

From theology to ridicule: 'Fundamentalism' and the Scopes monkey trial

As indicated above, by 1922 Fosdick could discuss fundamentalism in an almost axiomatic way as a movement which was hostile not only to theological modernism, but also natural science. This attribution was gradually occupying centre stage in the drama of the modernist-fundamentalist controversy. By the middle of the 1920s many American commentators clearly regarded fundamentalism and anti-intellectualism as two phenomena with a great deal of common ground.

A major factor in this linkage was the spirited campaign against Darwinism. One can find considerable evidence of it at least as early as 1923. One representative example occurred in a series of articles which the Congregationalist minister Rollin Lynde Hartt, contributed to the monthly magazine *The World's Work* that year. Bearing such titles as 'The War in the Churches', his reports of what he termed a 'three-thousand mile journey among the Fundamentalists' highlighted the pre-millennialist eschatology he found amongst many of them (Hartt 1923b:469–470). Hartt cited a book titled *Evolution – A Menace* by the 'Fundamentalist' Baptist John William Porter (whom, however, he did not identify) as evidence of the support the new movement was giving to the campaign against Darwinism. Hartt (1923a) quoted the volume's dedication to illustrate the spirit he had confronted:

To my beloved and womanly wife, on whose brow is stamped the likeness of Him, in whose 'image' she was created, and whose pure and noble blood is untainted by that of insect, reptile, fowl, or beast. (pp. 605–606)

Hartt (1923a) apparently found it heartening when the eminent modernist theologian Shailer Mathews at the University of Chicago had assured him, 'Since we accepted evolution, a number of eminent scientists have publicly confessed their faith in God.' Their theological foes, however, remained unreconstructed. The intransigent biblical literalism of 'Fundamentalists', Hartt concluded, made it virtually inevitable for them to oppose Darwinism. For them, it had become axiomatic to:

maintain that their 'fundamentals' – namely the Virgin Birth, the Deity of Christ, a substitutionary Atonement, and the imminent, physical return of Christ – presuppose 'the inerrancy of the Scriptures in science and history, as well as in religion'. (Hartt 1923a:612)

This conviction, he lamented, had already made an impact in the field of tertiary education. 'Especially vehement is the Fundamentalists' protest against modern science in denominational colleges', Hartt (1923a:605, 606, 612, 614) reported. The resulting hostility went hand-in-hand with an exclusivist, remonstrative attitude which had already become entrenched: 'Not less firm than their faith in the first chapter of Genesis and in the literal, personal, bodily, visible, imminent return of Christ to this earth as King,' is their conviction that Fundamentalists, and Fundamentalists only, are Christians' (Hartt 1923a:614).

Arguably the event which outdid all others in cementing 'fundamentalism' and 'fundamentalist' in the public mind was the 'Scopes monkey trial' in Dayton, Tennessee, in July 1925. The copious journalistic coverage given this proceeding, perceived and reported by journalists from the USA and overseas who lacked theological training but who reported its sensationalistic aspects at great length, was inundated with the terms under review. From that summer onward, the connotations which had burdened them nearly from the outset were an integral part of these words, although the purely theological meanings never completely disappeared. In the minds of much of the Anglophone public on both sides of the Atlantic, fundamentalism no longer referred only or primarily to uncompromising Protestant theology but to an irrational attack on science and an intolerant mind-set which fostered obscurantism.

A few examples from journalistic coverage of the trial lucidly illustrate the point. Headlines in *The New York Times* the day after it opened included 'Scopes Jury Chosen with Dramatic Speed after Prayer Opens Picturesque Trail; State Fights Testimony by Scientists', 'Cranks and Freaks Flock to Dayton', 'Farmers Will Try Teacher', and 'Europe Is Amazed by the Scopes Case'. Lines in the last-named article typify the attitude that dominated that metropolitan newspaper's critical coverage. The English Methodist Frank Ballard was quoted as saying that 'the assumptions of Fundamentalism' reminded him that his extensive dealings with American

churches a quarter-century earlier had convinced him that 'both the science and theology of many of those who posed as authorities were half a century behind the times' (Ballard 1925:1–2). In an article the following day, one could read that in Dayton:

the backwoodsmen defended Fundamentalism against Modernism and free-thinking to the point where once the police had to come to the rescue of one man by arresting him for 'disturbing the peace. (Anon 1925c:1)

Near the end of the trial, the agnostic defence counsel, Clarence Darrow, put the renowned Presbyterian layman, William Jennings Bryan (who was assisting in the prosecution), in the dock as a supposed authority on the Bible and questioned him mercilessly. *The New York Times* was apparently pleased to report Darrow's unvarnished answer when asked what his purpose was: 'To show up Fundamentalism, to prevent bigots and ignoramuses from controlling the educational system of the United States' (Darrow 1925:1).

To be sure, in its coverage of the Scopes trial *The New York Times* was amongst the most critical of daily newspapers. Even a Southern paper like *The Atlanta Constitution* could uncritically quote the renowned Darwinian and Oxford biologist Julian Huxley (1925) during the spectacle in Tennessee that 'Fundamentalism is an attempt to deny the right to free thought and truthful education and must not be permitted to win in the trail of John T. Scopes.' He informed American readers that:

the attempts of fundamentalists to deny the teaching of science is a gross infringement on the right of free thought which until recent years we thought the United States stood for, but which now we begin to fear it does not. (Huxley 1925:1)

Some American journalists sought to portray the religious environment in which the trial took place in a fairly nuanced way. To cite but one of many possible examples, Frank R. Kent (1925a) of the Baltimore daily *The Sun* contrasted the 'cynical and sophisticated newspaper and magazine writers' who had chosen to treat 'the whole business as a screaming farce' and the local populace in general. The latter, he (Kent 1925a) opined:

self-contained and indicate their self-consciousness only by a slight eagerness to prove they are a civilized people, living decent lives in a decent place and neither the hill billies nor yokels which the trial and its atmosphere tends to stamp them, and which they are not. (p. 1)

Kent estimated that about 1700 of the 2000 residents of Dayton believed the biblical account of Creation and rejected Darwinian evolution, but most of these believers did not voice their views as openly as their foes did. 'The fundamentalist is reserved in the expression of his views', Kent generalised. A possible explanation for this, he thought, was that 'the feeling of the fundamentalist is deeper and stronger, the sort of thing about which men do not argue on street corners and in drug stores' (Kent 1925a:1).

The next day, however, even Kent wrote in a less dispassionate vein about the local populace's religious mentality. He understood that not all Christians there were cut from the

same bolt of cloth. In that region, which was 'saturated with religion', Kent reported that it was a 'literal fact' that 'the great bulk' of the residents adhered to a personal religion 'the rigidity of which is hard to exaggerate'. To him their intellectually unrefined faith seemed to be essential to their happiness and without it their lives would be 'almost intolerable'. He described in particularly deprecating terms the Holy Rollers, Pentecostals whose 'dreadful contortions' and 'lurid fanaticism' left no room for natural science. Under Kent's pen the people of Rhea County were hardly a rational lot: 'To talk seriously about convincing them, either the reasonably or relatively educated and intelligent church members of Dayton or rougher and largely illiterate elements in the high hills, on the subject of evolution, is fantastic, futile, foolish,' he judged. 'Scientific facts that clash with the Bible are to them more ammunition for the devil in his war against God' (Kent 1925b:1-2).

Turning to the American religious press, by 1925 the vigorously modernist *Christian Century* was also employing 'fundamentalist' to signify anti-intellectual attitudes, and the Scopes trial provided an unparalleled opportunity for its editors to use the term derogatorily. 'Mr. Bryan and the other fundamentalists are by no means untrue to the traditions of the static mind throughout history' (Anon 1925d:913), sniffed the editors sarcastically midway through the legal proceedings. After Scopes was found guilty by a jury that had deliberated for less than ten minutes, the same editors lampooned fundamentalism as a manifestation of Southern regional cultural backwardness. 'Ideas travel slowly', they remarked, adding that there was much distance between Tennessee and 'the centers of British culture'. They allowed that even in Northern states like New York, Illinois, Ohio, and Pennsylvania one could find clergymen 'who would champion the fundamentalist protest against a reasonable and scientific interpretation of the holy scriptures and the Christian faith' (Anon 1925d:913). The *Christian Century* editors contrasted this attitude with what they too optimistically believed was the case in the United Kingdom where they mistakenly believed 'the controversy over evolution has been settled for at least fifty years' (Anon 1925a:943). In the wake of the trial, the previously mentioned British correspondent Gwilym O. Griffith contributed to *The Watchman-Examiner* his perception of the linkage of fundamentalism with anti-intellectualism. Like many other observers in the United Kingdom, he found the affair both bewildering and disillusioning. Admitting that viewing the Scopes trial from afar undoubtedly gave him a distorted perception of it, Griffith stated that it seemed to be a 'spectacular phase' of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. In the United Kingdom, he judged, it had received 'a very bad press in the matter of fundamentalist propaganda' and been particularly 'damaging to the cause of doctrinaire conservatism'. In British free church circles, Griffith believed, 'the Dayton affair has presented fundamentalism in a guise calculated least of all to appeal to Nonconformist evangelicals,' because the restrictive nature of the law Scopes had violated the cherished ideal of educational freedom without 'the intrusion of the clerical dogmatist'. He asked rhetorically whether the trial was a

step 'back toward the psychology and philosophy of the Inquisition' (Griffith 1925b:1041).

Curtis Lee Laws' lament

The father of 'fundamentalism', Curtis Lee Laws, looked askance at the bastardisation of his lexical child. In the columns of his weekly, he took Griffith to task for focussing his remarks on the advisability of having an anti-evolution statute, not on its infraction which was the issue before the court. Beyond that, Laws lamented that the Scopes trial had taken place, despite the verdict of guilty. In his view Darwinism should not have become a 'major' point for fundamentalists, because, as he readily acknowledged, 'many Christians believe in some form of the development theory'. The trial had merely impeded what Laws realised were his sustained endeavours to explain to readers 'in the plainest and most unequivocal English the contention of the fundamentalists.' This editor allowed that in a 'free country' like the United States of America 'men have a right to call themselves fundamentalists if they please,' regardless whether their views conflicted with his own. He continued to declare, however, that 'fundamentalism, pure and simple, is merely a defense of what practically all Christians believed twenty-five years ago' (Laws 1925:1071). What Laws failed to understand, is that words almost inevitably undergo some measure of semantic drift. That means his coining of 'fundamentalist' could not prevent others from using it and 'fundamentalism' as they saw fit.

Conclusion

We have limited our analysis of the neologisms *fundamentalism* and *fundamentalist* almost exclusively to the milieu in which they were born in the contentious Northern Baptist Convention. It should be emphasised, however, that only very briefly was their usage limited to that denomination. Certainly by the mid-1920s these terms were current in several branches of American Protestantism and, to a lesser extent, in British nonconformity. Only rarely, it appears, were they used in the Union of South Africa during that early period. Outside Baptist circles, Presbyterian churches in the USA were one of the other verbal arenas in which 'fundamentalist' and 'fundamentalism' were tossed about in ways which reflected their coinage in 1920, but often departed from it semantically.

It must also be stressed that the pejoration and lexical extensions which these terms underwent in the early 1920s did not eradicate their original meaning from the popular religious vocabulary. Probably owing especially to the World's Christian Fundamentals Association, which the very conservative Northern Baptist pastor William Bell Riley and others had founded in 1919, the words retained their original meanings in certain Protestant circles during the decades between the two world wars until they were gradually superseded by *evangelical* and *evangelicalism* – terms which had existed in English and other European languages for centuries and also undergone various semantic changes which lie outside the scope of the present article.

This analysis underscores some of the potential pitfalls in employing *fundamentalist* and *fundamentalism* as terms in the history of modern Christianity. Notwithstanding Laws' protestations, virtually from the outset 'fundamentalist' and 'fundamentalism' were polysemous concepts, even before they became burdened with heavy connotations of anti-intellectualism. To cite but one example of this, many self-styled 'fundamentalists' were premillennialists, but Laws refused to accept that school of eschatology, which he understood entailed speculation beyond what he read in the Bible. On other issues there were disagreement too. In other words, even with regard to theological issues of the early 1920s, not all fundamentalists could agree on what the fundamentals of the Christian faith were.

From the perspectives of both doctrinal and semantic history, the further exploration of the course of 'fundamentalist' and 'fundamentalism' remains a potentially rich field for research. How did these words take on additional shades of theological meaning when transplanted outside the USA? How were they used metaphorically there and abroad as, for example, the ideological landscape underwent noteworthy changes? How and why was there general abandonment of these terms in quarters which had once owned them? How have various theologians and historians used them, and how has this semantic variety influenced their analyses and portrayals of Christian fundamentalism(s)? These and other questions await further examination.

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