Fundamentalist Religion and Its Effect on Mental Health

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ABSTRACT: The national self-help group, Fundamentalists Anonymous (F.A.), has focused attention upon mental problems that may be caused or exacerbated by authoritarian religion. In this article we outline assertions about the mental problems caused by membership in fundamentalist religion, illustrate these with two case histories, briefly discuss intervention strategies, and describe conceptual and empirical issues. While former members have presented problems severe enough to warrant professional treatment, a causal link between their symptoms and their religious membership has not yet been established, because there is little empirical work on the subject.

Increasing membership in authoritarian Protestant groups has paralleled the burgeoning of new religions during the last two decades. Just as some members of new religions have experienced a difficult adjustment after leaving, some apostates from "fundamentalist" Protestant churches have reported emotional problems during their membership and especially in the wake of leaving. Increasingly, these "emotional casualties" appear to arise from nondenominational, "ultrafundamentalist" Protestant churches in which a highly authoritarian leader uses his "special relationship with God" to exert powerful control over members.

In response to his perception of these problems, Richard Yao, a former Wall Street attorney, founded Fundamentalists Anonymous (F.A.) in 1985, a self-help group which enables ex-fundamentalists to "make a successful transition from fundamentalism to a healthier lifestyle." With 30,000 supporting members and a nationwide network of 42 self-help groups, F.A. is neither "an anti-Christian or atheistic group" nor "a front for any church or religion."
F.A. has piqued the interest of mental health professionals and clergy from two standpoints. First, some have expressed support for F.A. because many of their clients or parishioners are former fundamentalists. Consequently, they have at times referred these individuals to the group as an adjunct to treatment or usual church activities. Second, the group has rekindled one of the most controversial issues in the psychology of religion—that of religion’s positive or negative impact on mental health.

The purposes of this paper are to outline F.A.’s assertions about the mental problems caused by “fundamentalist” religion, to illustrate these with two case histories, to discuss briefly intervention strategies, and to highlight conceptual and research issues. The first question that we must ask, however, is “What is fundamentalism?”

What is fundamentalism?

Traditionally, fundamentalism has referred to those Protestants who adhere to the “fundamentals of the faith,” such as the inerrancy of the Bible, the divinity of Jesus, and his second coming. Another definition has been highlighted by the advent of the “Moral Majority,” a group favoring what sociologists have called “cultural fundamentalism.” This term describes “people whose public activism is motivated by a desire to defend and extend a traditional lifestyle.” They seek a return to values of the last century by supporting school prayer and by opposing abortion, pornography, the teaching of evolution, and “secular humanism.”

Fundamentalism, however, may also be seen as a “mindset” that is independent of religious content, implying that members of any religion can be considered “fundamentalists” if they display traits of this set. Describing the set as “a diseased way of processing reality,” Yao lists its traits as follows:

A. An inability to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty in life,” manifested by “painting everything in black and white, right and wrong, good and evil”;
B. A desire for simplistic, “quick fixes” for problems involving “marriage, children, sexuality, or society”;
C. An extreme dogmatism that demands homogeneity and refuses to tolerate differing viewpoints;
D. A compulsion “to impose itself on the rest of society”; and
E. “Massive denial” that is fostered by belief in “a world of fantasy.”

This cognitive set may also be construed as one end of a continuum of moderate versus fundamentalist religion. Such a continuum is displayed in Figure 1, depicting the attributes of fundamentalist religion versus those of moderate religion. Among Protestants fundamentalist traits are most obvi-