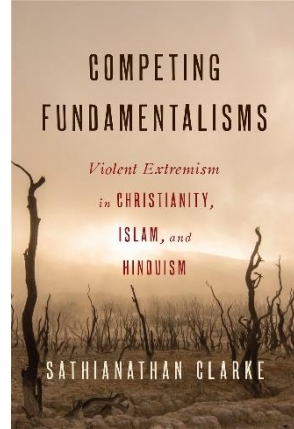


**Sathianathan Clarke.** *Competing Fundamentalisms: Violent Extremism in Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017. Pp. viii + 246. ISBN 978-0664259884. Paperback \$30.00.

The relationship between religion and violence is a touchy one. This is especially true in a context where national hopes and tribalistic politics finds convenient validation from the eternal throne of God (i.e., “divine authorization”). But something has emerged to scholars of religion that can help untangle this subject—namely, the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism.<sup>1</sup>



Sathianathan Clarke’s new book *Competing Fundamentalisms* seeks to unfold this subject and explain why it (not simply “religion” or any religious tradition in particular) is cause for public concern. Three major religious traditions (Christian, Islamic, Hindu) are examined separately and then together (instead of just one or two). Along the way, Clarke crafts a deeply insightful historical narrative behind contemporary fundamentalisms from each religion which, interestingly enough, all emerged in the early 1900s. The latest scholarship is implemented without falling off balance in his assessment of each tradition (even while being a Christian professor). The final result is a remarkably concise, readable, and discerning volume.

Clarke is by no means the first to spotlight the many harms caused by religious fundamentalism. Even narrowing to the Christian tradition, the

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<sup>1</sup> Note that David Harrington Watt, *Antifundamentalism in Modern America* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2017) offers an alternative narrative that questions the legitimacy of the “fundamentalism” category, or at least its supposed neutral status. But his argument is uphill given the five-volume *Fundamentalisms* project by the American Academy of Religion in the 1990s, and field studies like Josie McSkimming, *Leaving Christian Fundamentalism and the Reconstruction of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

Oxford and Vanderbilt scholar James Barr wrote three heavy-hitting volumes on the subject in the 1970-80s<sup>2</sup>—interestingly, a period of “resurgence” (p. 38) for global religious fundamentalism. But, what is it? Clarke patiently positions himself towards the end of the book to provide this basic definition. His concise summary is found below with insertions of key words (to help readers grasp its depth):

Religious fundamentalism is a communal mind-set [separatism, in/out dynamics] steeped in a revealed Word-vision [biblicism, Qu’ranism, literal interpretation, fixed textual foundation], corroborated by a definitive ethical system of world-ways for human living [includes patriarchalism, practical dos and don’ts in contrast to godless world], and calibrated by an aggressive movement [statism, nationalism, militancy] that labors toward the goal that such a global order will govern the social, political, economic, cultural, and religious lives of all human beings [universal in scope; colonization/proselytization]. (p. 154)<sup>3</sup>

The first chapter of the book unfolds the complex dynamics of religion and public life, giving priority to “four theories that underestimate the role of religion” (p. 9). Most of these theories (social and psychological) tend to be secular, and don’t give credit to the role of religion itself in fundamentalism. “I submit that it is irresponsible, especially for nonfundamentalist religious practitioners,” Clarke concludes, “to blame the violent manifestations of religious fundamentalisms exclusively or

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<sup>2</sup> James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Louisville: WJK, 1978); *Beyond Fundamentalism* (Louisville: WJK, 1984); *Escaping Fundamentalism* (London: SCM, 1984). The content from most of these books can be found in the more recent publication, John Barton, ed., *Bible and Interpretation: The Collected Essays of James Barr*, vol 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. McSkimming, *Leaving Christian Fundamentalism*, 40: “In short, Christian fundamentalism may be understood as a totalizing and highly influential social movement, thoroughly adept in the acculturation of its participant members through embracing and promoting a defensive collective identity, suspicious of ‘the other’ but also committed to mission and evangelism. It is apparent that a guarded, fortified and self-perpetuating inward focus (with requisite identity specifications) emerges.”

primarily on nonreligious spheres or forces. We must be honest with ourselves: religion is part of the problem" (p. 32). He further qualifies, "I do not claim that religion can be distilled from and extracted out of the rest of reality....religion cannot help but be expressed though [*sic*] cultural, social, political, economic, and psychological dimensions of our twenty-first-century world. Yet neither can religion be fully emptied into these other facets of human life" (p. 33).

The next three chapters (2-4) look at Christian, Islamic, and Hindu fundamentalisms, respectively. After sketching out the 20<sup>th</sup> century origins, he summarizes Christian fundamentalism in three headings:

1. Biblical Absolutism

- a. "Modernity threatens to let assured reason and liberal reasoning shake the secure foundation of the Bible as absolute authority in the life of the community of believers as they seek to bring about the divine purposes for world history. The other sacred narratives jeopardize the fundamentalist myth that as a 'Christian nation' the United States must be grounded upon and guided by God's Word as revealed concretely, historically, and literally only in the Bible." (p. 49)
- b. "...Christian fundamentalists find their own purpose organically and missionally connected to the nature of God's powerful and even violent works in the Bible." (p. 49)

2. Cosmic Struggle between Good and Evil

- a. "fundamentalists espouse and disseminate imagery that bespeaks the clash between powers of good and evil. Thus, battle symbolism permeates individual Christian's thought..." (p. 51)
- b. "...this dualistic worldview marks the overflow of such conflicting language and symbolism from the mind of individuals and communities into real life [e.g., suspicion and antipathy towards Muslims]." (p. 51-52)
- c. "...this cosmic conflict between good and evil will end in a cosmic showdown in which God will completely crush and conquer Satan and all the forces of evil...[this] apocalyptic end

that involves the whole cosmos makes this dualistic drama pregnant with meaning for fundamentalists.” (p. 52)

3. “Chosenness” and God’s Rule over the Whole World.
  - a. “When the absolute God ‘whose name is Jealous’ acts against those perceived as a threat to this ultimacy in the world, we humans see ourselves as authorized to commit violence.” (p. 56; as a case in point, Clarke quotes Liberty University President Jerry Falwell Sr., who cited the Bible to legitimize the Iraq War in 2003)
  - b. “...the United States has been chosen by God...[as such] the nation must engage in beliefs and actions that demonstrate its fidelity to God, justifying its status as chosen” (p. 57)
  - c. “...the United States must embrace its calling to be ‘the Redeemer nation’ within the world.” (p. 58)

Clarke’s account incisively identifies how, through politics and belief, Christians came to be known for *legitimizing* large-scale violence instead of opposing it. He also rightly notes (as other scholars have), that fundamentalism is an unwitting, negative *extension* of modernism, not an alternative to it (p. 61). All of this affects Christian perceptions of Islam in global affairs, doing theology, and self-perception as the Christian community—especially in connection to statism.

The alliance between neoconservative political ideology and religious fundamentalism swept the country, which believed it was under massive and violent threat, both from secular and liberal “pagans” within and religious and anti-Christian “terrorists” abroad...[T]he justification for violence and responsibility for war was effectively transferred by Enlightenment modernity from the church to the nation-state...On the other hand, Christian fundamentalists became much more vested in gaining control of the nation-state. I have highlighted the way in which the Bible, flag, and God were entwined by fundamentalism to forge an imagined “deification of the nation.” On the other hand, Christian fundamentalists could utilize the state to carry out violence against those who were demonized by religious and political leaders of the chosen

nation....[M]ythical appeal to the privileged status of “redeemer nation” is fused at the with engaging the myth of “redemptive violence.” (pp. 45, 61-62)

The chapter on Muslim fundamentalism begins with background dynamics of Islamic violence and traverses into the Ottoman Empire and ultimately the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1900s. Like Christian fundamentalism, Muslim fundamentalism is a response to Western, modern secularism and an uncomfortable, shifting sense of cultural identity. Clarke traces the contours of the movement in three cords: “(1) complete surrender to the one God and conforming to Allah’s will made available in the Sharia; (2) absolutist Scripture interpreted by authoritative leaders committed to a divinely scripted view of the world; and (3) promotion of global religious civilization that extends the Muslim way of life in a world of westernization and modernization” (p. 81). The Qu’ran and role of tradition, concepts of *jihad*, and the present-day situation (ISIS, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt) are also covered.

The chapter on Hindu fundamentalism is particularly interesting for Western readers (being restricted to India). Since the goal is to establish a nation-state based on a particular race and set of ideological principles, the whole enterprise felt awfully similar to Jewish Zionism. In any case, the three contours of Hindu fundamentalism Clarke assembles are (1) “strongly cultivated scriptural identity” (based on the Vedas), (2) body-emphasis (“the objective of Hinduism is for human beings to reflect the harmonious order of god’s body in the world”), (3) “hegemonic politics and monistic philosophy” (nationalist aspirations, also rooted in Hindu theologies, e.g., *atman*, *dharm*a, etc.). Clarke concludes: “Many fear that the dual tactics of persuasion through Vedic education and coercion through violence will succeed in uniting Hindu fundamentalism’s short-term goals of ‘intimidation of the minorities, especially Muslims and Christians’ with its long-term one, that of ‘Hinduization of the whole of India’” (p. 126).

The next chapter then connects the dots from all three traditions without doing injustice to their distinctives. Clarke identifies three overlapping connections in this respect:

1. "Unwavering confidence in and complete submission to the Word-vision" (the Real and true is definitively revealed in revelatory, textual form)
2. "Fixed and straight-forward world-ways" ("rigid and uniform ways of living" p. 134)
3. "Global order in conformity to an absolute word-vision and in compliance with fixed world-ways" (world domination)

Clarke provides numerous case studies to make all of these themes come alive. He also looks at "intra-religious" and "interreligious" competitions, concluding the chapter with a discussion on fundamentalism's common enemies: secularism and modernity (p. 159ff).

Finally, the concluding chapter looks for positive ways in dealing with fundamentalism, such as "unleashing religion's constructive power" (p. 165), "detoxifying scripture" (p. 167), being "stewards of God's mysteries" and, above all, being proclaimers of "the gospel of peace" (p. 177). Religion in general is not the problem. In fact, he finds redemptive threads (especially within Christianity) that can disarm the destructive mayhem of 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century Islamic, Hindu, and Christian fundamentalisms.

There are other particular features in Clarke's insightful analysis. In reconciling violence in the scriptures with Christian theology, he essentially takes the view of John Crossan, saying,

Jesus represents the radical and inclusive nonviolent version of ushering in God's vision for the world that subverts the contending vision of God pursued by the elite establishment, which depends on violence. I believe that this third approach, with its emphasis on embrace peace with 'distributive justice,' offers up a credible conception of sacred Scripture as a whole that both delegitimizes violence and validates nonviolent action on behalf of the well-being of all human beings. It manages to keep

the traditional canon as a mark of respect...without ignoring the contest between violent and nonviolent strands woven into the metanarrative. (p. 172)

Unfortunately, Clarke doesn't draw the connection between the economic concept of "distributive justice" and how its enforcement almost always requires the kind of empire and coercion that is being critiqued. Liberal-democratic and socialist applications of any kind of economic or moral "justice" necessarily (and historically) terminate in, ironically, the "elite establishment, which depends on violence."<sup>4</sup> A sharp distinction between the role of the church and the role of the state would have been very helpful here—especially as one sees Caesar's head popping up all over the place.<sup>5</sup>

Clarke also highlights an important, anti-intellectual feature of fundamentalism when discussing fundamentalist Hindu education: "Acceptance of the idea that the Vedas are divinely revealed scripture, *even if one does not know what they contain*, undergirds the fundamentalists' aspirations to Hindu unity" (p. 115, emphasis original). How many people have been compelled by Christian fundamentalists to believe in the

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<sup>4</sup> One recalls that a "state" is, by definition, a territorial monopoly on violence. See Anthony Giddens, *Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985), 2:121; Max Weber, "Politik als Beruf," in *Gesammelte Politische Schriften* (Muenchen, 1921), 396-450; Franz Oppenheimer, *The State*, trans. John Gitterman (Black Rose Books, 2007, originally published New York: B and W Huebsch, 1908), 15; Murray Rothbard, *For a New Liberty* (Auburn: Ludwig Von Mises Institute, 2006), 56-68; David Friedman, *The Machinery of Freedom*, 3rd ed. (David Friedman via Createspace, 2014), 108. Despite confusion about this subject in Clarke's account, he nevertheless brilliantly observes that "Capturing the nation-state to implement the Master's metanarrative within the country across the whole world, as human history marches toward the end times, becomes an important goal for Christians in the United States" (p. 54).

<sup>5</sup> The same can be said of a similar, recent volume: Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson, eds. *Violence in the World's Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), as noted in my review published by *Reading Religion* (November 8 2017).

truthfulness (or “inerrancy”) of the Bible without even having read it? One should never forget the remarks of the popular Christian rapper, Jahaziel, after leaving his faith: “When I first joined Christianity, I was told ‘you must believe this book is God’s infallible word...Before I’d even read the book!! How can one decide for themselves whether a book is accurate and true BEFORE they have even read & investigated the book thoroughly?!”<sup>6</sup> Clarke doesn’t mention it, but he might as well have said it: Christian fundamentalism (along with its dominant form, American evangelicalism) is one of the leading *causes* (not guardrails) of apostasy.<sup>7</sup>

*Competing Religious Fundamentalisms* is arguably one of the most important works of contemporary religion. Bombings, wars, and other acts of violence is serious business; most human beings living on earth today are affected, in some way, by Islamic (think 9/11 and America’s endless “war on terrorism”) and Christian fundamentalism (think literal Bible interpretation and bans on women teachers). And if the driving motivations underneath all of this are *theological*, then an informed, level-headed, and constructive assessment of this topic is extremely valuable. This is the kind of assessment found in Clarke’s work.<sup>8</sup>

It’s also encouraging that Clarke’s own Christian tradition has neither been alienated (flawed as it has been throughout history) or rendered powerless to deal with these notoriously complex problems. In fact, he plainly says at one point: “...tolerance is not enough...much more is required of Christians, who are called and commissioned to transform the broken world that God loves so much” (p. 177).<sup>9</sup> He ably unfolds the

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<sup>6</sup> Jahaziel, cited in Billy Hallowell, “Christian Rapper Renounces Christianity, Citing ‘Human Errors of the Bible,’ ‘Brutal Nature of Its God’ — and There’s More.” *The Blaze* (January 5, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> This is pointed out by the many volumes on this subject, including those in apologetics such as Craig Evans, *Fabricating Jesus* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> There are at least two typos in the manuscript: “absolutism” (p. 46); “though” (instead of “through,” p. 33).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the nonviolent ethic of libertarianism compared to the nonviolent *and* constructive ethic of Christian libertarianism in Jamin Andreas Hübner, “Christian Libertarianism: An



nonviolent Christian vision of the world by revisiting theologians, popular texts, and ideas that maybe need dusting off for some readers. He shows how in Ephesians Paul “was drawing from the imagery of the Roman Empire even as he was spiritualizing such military symbolism by infusing it with the ethic of nonviolent resistance of the people on the Jesus way” (p. 182), how a sound doctrine of the Trinity demolishes selfish monarchy and “reveals and authorizes self-emptying love” (p. 180), and most of all, how an ethic of peace is not just a popular theme in Christianity, but a central feature of Christian identity.

Clarke is also careful not to dismiss God’s work in other religious traditions. He realizes the futility of some pluralistic attempts at simply collapsing religious traditions together by saying “we’re all on the same page,” but also realizes that people of different faiths have positive contributions to offer one another. In the end, one either embraces fundamentalist religion or peaceful religion:

The difference between fundamentalist religion on the one hand and peace-embracing religion on the other, can be seen in the *competing* propensity of the battlefield with the *completing* possibility of the flower garden. On God’s behalf, violent fundamentalists are competing in a battle to take over the world....Competing names, competing peoples, competing lands, and competing lifestyles are all needed in this cosmic dualistic struggle to make One God to be Lord over all. By contrast, the nonviolence implied in the restorative Word, inclusive ethical practices, and all-encompassing world of *completing* religions serves to make room for God’s overflowing plenitude. God is the richer communion into which the whole human family is made free to enter. Names, peoples, lands, and lifestyles complete each other in this divine-human communion of abundant life. (p. 186)

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Introduction and Signposts for the Road Ahead,” *The Christian Libertarian Review* 1 (2018): 15-74.

This is an encouraging end to the book, especially for those who struggle to see how world religions might peacefully coexist in an ever-globalized age.

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