

# Fundamentalism and Science: *The Literal and the Provisional*

Dale H. Easley  
<http://daleeasley.com>

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My father died during the spring semester of my sophomore year in college. I mark that time as an inflexion point, beginning the slow transition into adulthood, a transition I still feel at times to be incomplete. Prior to Dad's death, I was aware on some superficial level of the world's injustices but I was mostly disengaged or I thought the problem lay with myself or individuals, not with society or the theology of the Baptist church I attended throughout my childhood.

That church was in Walnut Cove, NC, so I grew up both Southern and Southern Baptist. "We don't drink, dance, or screw, nor go out with girls who do." Legalism was far more a priority than social justice, but John 3:16 ranked highest. It was the basis for dividing the world into two groups—those who were born again and going to heaven and those who weren't, including Catholics, Jews, Episcopalians, and, no doubt, Unitarians. I suppose African-Americans could be saved, but I never saw one in *our* church.

Baptists have historically championed the separation between church and state, the autonomy of the individual church, and opposition to any creed—being born again was the only requirement. However, during the 70s and 80s, fundamentalists took over the Southern Baptist Convention, including the presidency and the Board on Boards. The latter determines the boards of other SBC entities, including overseeing the seminaries. Soon faculty who didn't accept a *literal interpretation* of the Bible were looking for other jobs.

After high school, during the midst of the rise of the fundamentalists, I attended college at a small Quaker school in North Carolina. It was there that I first met Christians that chose to think and to confront social injustice. I majored in math and looked around for an excuse to travel. I applied to the Peace Corps but my application was rejected because I wrote it in pencil. In the meantime, I was accepted as a two-year volunteer Baptist missionary to teach math in Nyeri, Kenya. As I told the mission meeting upon my arrival, "I wanted to go forth and multiply."

I loved Kenya. While there, I taught in three-month terms with a month in between to travel. I caught malaria, a lung infection, and a GI infection, and decided that clean water was important enough for further study. During one of my months off, I went to an island camp in a lake in the Rift Valley. While walking around taking photos, I encountered a retired professor from the University of Wyoming who was on vacation in Kenya. We talked only 20 minutes or so, but it led to my grad-school application and acceptance. After returning from Kenya, I drove my old wrecked-and-rebuilt Ford Pinto 1800 miles from my mom's house to Wyoming for grad school.

When I first began at UW, I really tried to remain in the church. I attended both a Baptist church and the Baptist Student Union. I somehow thought I could work within the church for change. I understood both the Baptists and modern science. Maybe I could be a translator. As you can imagine, I often felt torn. One afternoon while at the BSU after a guest speaker, one of the student leaders approached me and asked my opinion of the talk. I made the mistake of thinking he really wanted to know. As I started to tell him, he said he felt like his mind was being poisoned, turned, and walked away. That was when I gave up on the Baptists—the last time I visited the BSU. Soon after, I dropped out of the Baptist church completely.

After finishing at UW, I took a job at the University of New Orleans where I taught for 15 years, took student groups to Haiti, and volunteered as a GED teacher for middle-aged African-American women. I also took a class on science and religion at Loyola University, taught by an 80-year-old priest who was also a physicist. Subsequently, I taught a science and religion class with a paleontologist friend at UNO. New Orleans is mostly a Catholic town, so we focused on John Paul II's teachings and a book by biologist Kenneth Miller, also a Catholic. However, the paper I read that stuck with me the most was from *UU World: The Fundamentalist Agenda* by Davidson Loehr. It is based upon a study conducted by AAAS on fundamentalists worldwide—Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu—and their common characteristics:

**Their rules apply to all people.** This is close to the definition of totalitarianism, certainly within the realm of fascism. As fundamentalists took over the SBC, the one-time champions of church-state separation became its opponents. In 1993, Pat Robertson said, "[The] radical left kept us in submission because they have talked about the separation of church and state. There is no such thing in the Constitution. It's a lie of the left, and we're not going to take it anymore."

**Men are on top.** During our first year of marriage, my wife and I lived in Qatar, next to Saudi Arabia. At the time, Qatar and Saudi Arabia both embraced Wahhabism, a fundamentalist form of Islam. For my wife to receive a driver's license, I had to approve and sign as the responsible party. Lest we feel too righteous, remember that the export of radical Islam to places like Pakistan and Afghanistan is funded by the gasoline we purchase for our cars.

**They must control the educational systems.** If you want to perpetuate your beliefs, limiting the next generation's exposure to alternatives is crucial. When

the Taliban took over in Afghanistan, one of their first actions was to eliminate education for female students. Where they have tried to expand their influence in Pakistan, some have been brave enough to oppose them. By now, all of you probably know the story of Malala, shot for speaking out, but undaunted, winning the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize.

**They spurn the modern and want to return to some *Golden Age*.** They love some old time when women and minorities were subservient, people knew their places, and society just worked, at least for the males on top. In the South, the favorite time often seems to be the pre-Civil-War era or perhaps the 1950s, complete with Joe McCarthy, segregation, and lynchings.

**They deny history, especially as it shapes culture,** both now and at the time of the writing of their holy texts. They see present-day culture as distorting and destroying the things they value but fail to recognize the role of culture in shaping their sacred texts. The Apostle Paul's sexual issues may have led him to go on rants, not reveal God's Word. And the role of culture in determining what was included and excluded from sacred texts is dismissed.

As a geologist, I regularly bump into conflicts with the worldview of fundamentalists. A starting point for my field is the ancient age of the Earth, not the 6000 years that young-Earth creationists claim. They toss my entire field of science out. Interestingly, they don't park their cars, though geologic reasoning is used to find the gas to power them and the metals to build them.

Recognizing the patterns in the occurrence of natural resources, for example, is the first part of what scientists do. The next step is to figure out why the patterns occur. Seeing patterns, guessing why the patterns exist, making a prediction, and then testing it are what science does. If the predictions work well, we have a new tool, a new scientific theory. If not, we revise and try again. Regardless, our theories are always partial, tentative, subject to revision—provisional. This is the big difference and tension with fundamentalism. To a scientist, theories are *always* open to challenge. To a fundamentalist, the Bible is not.

One of the central theories of science is evolution. An amazing insight springing from evolution is how we are all related. Modern genetics has confirmed that insight, showing the tremendous sharing of genes between species. So if we want to understand human behavior, perhaps we should observe other animals:

- Wolf cubs play. Why? Because it's fun. The evolutionary benefit is to learn hunting skills.
- Lions hunt in prides. It increases the chance of survival of close kin.
- Chimps fight wars. They protect resources that they need to survive.

What about fundamentalists? How does evolution give us insight? Humans evolved as small bands of sexually dimorphous nomads. Survival of the group required that we quickly determine who was in our group and who was out. Fundamentalists are giving into our most primitive instincts, our tendency to put up rigid boundaries as

to who is in and who is out. Nor is that tendency seen only in fundamentalism—it pervades our social structures.

However, we know that with training—education—animals can overcome their instinctive tendencies. Years ago, I read a lot about training dogs and have owned many dogs through the years. Most trainers agree that dogs respond best to instruction in line with their instincts. When my daughter, Ananda, was one, we visited my sister-in-law who had a large German shepherd named Brownie. Ananda was on the floor drawing when Brownie stepped on her papers. My sister-in-law asked, "Did your daughter just growl at my dog?" Yep. She grew up around dogs, and speaking their language was something she learned ahead of English.

So how does this apply to humans? Ask Martin Luther King. Here are some words from his famous *I have a dream* speech:

... we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:  
Free at last! Free at last!

Notice what he does—he takes the in-group (whites) and expands it based on another characteristic (all God's children), our common humanity. He speaks to our common desire for freedom. In fact, society has always progressed by using our ability to find commonality, to redefine the in-group to be more inclusive. Think of the freeing of slaves and the opening of the vote to women. We even extended it beyond humans—Wasn't that the idea behind the Endangered Species Act, that *all* species have a right to continue to exist? Indeed, at some points in the past, we have done well:

I am old enough to know that this country has a history of generosity. And generosity seems like a terrible risk for fearful people.

Marilynne Robinson, Salon.com, 3 Jan 2016,  
a discussion of her book **The Givenness of Things**

But recently we seem to have lost our courage. The Donald Trumps of the world don't want us to get past our fears and see ourselves in a refugee's face. And education alone is not enough—Donald Trump has an education but chooses to emphasize differences and blame others. Such behavior has throughout history led to wars and genocide. Instead, what Trump and many other tough guys lack is a special kind of courage, *the courage to be tender*. Tenderness implies vulnerability, compassion, and generosity. It is bound up in the old saying, *There but for the grace of God go I*.

When I was young, in public school on most mornings, we had to recite our favorite Bible verse. The most common was *Jesus wept*. Undoubtedly, my classmates chose it for its brevity rather than its depth. Some of those same classmates are no doubt nowadays criticizing President Obama for his show of emotion in public. But regardless of one's views of his policies, his example points us in the right direction. Jesus wept. So did President Obama. Sometimes it is the right thing, the courageous thing, to do.