

## **Falwell and bin Laden: Kissing Cousins?**

Understanding Fundamentalism

by Rich Tafel, M.Div.

In June 1998, I was invited to speak at a rally in Fort Worth, Texas outside the GOP state convention that summer. It was a "rally for liberty," calling for an inclusive Republican Party. When the rally got underway, trucks full of fundamentalist Christians began flooding the stage area. We'd learned some of them came from great distances. In short order they were pushing and shoving in the crowd, waving signs that said "Fag Sin" and jumping on stage to drown out the speakers, all under the watchful eyes of the police. All of the speakers, including a grandmother, were shouted down with "You're going to burn in hell," "You can not have my son! You can not have my daughter!" and "God does not love you! He hates you!"

The speech I wrote for that day was a political speech, not a religious one. But I was so angry that those in the crowd invoked God to justify their hatred that I scrapped my speech. Instead, I spoke (and occasionally shouted) about a loving God, a God of compassion, love, forgiveness and generosity. The more I spoke of God's love, and that we were all God's children, the more enraged the screams from the fundamentalists. One of them came to sound like a yelping coyote at one point, screaming incoherently.

As a Christian, it is hard to accept, but the fact is that these people – by their every word -- were motivated by their belief in God.

Our nation is at war with terrorists, who perpetrated unimaginable acts against our people on September 11. On the day of the attacks, many Americans asked themselves, why would anyone have such hatred for humanity that they would take so many innocent lives? Why would they do this in the name of God? Soon after, we learned that Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda terror network was responsible, a group motivated by a fundamentalist Islamic worldview in which God has called them to strike at the heart of America. News reports out of the Middle East quoted bin Laden as saying that when he heard of the attacks on New York and Washington, he gave thanks to Allah. A video later released to the Al-Jazeera news network in Qatar on the first day of coalition bombing of Al Qaeda sites in Afghanistan showed bin Laden saying the attacks on America were "sent by God."

"We run with our religion," bin Laden said, in clear fundamentalist language. "These events have split the whole world into two camps: the camp of belief and the disbelief. So every Muslim shall support his religion."

Far and wide, condemnation of bin Laden and the attacks came from all corners of the Muslim world. Even Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat, whose people bin Laden claimed to be fighting with, said the attacks were "evil" and "criminal" and demanded that "no crimes be committed on behalf of Palestine."

Back on the other side of the world, in the moments and days and weeks following the attack, America has pulled together with a unity that has not been seen in over 50 years. Political divisions lingering after a decade of impeachment, divided government, partisan bickering and a controversial 2000 election disappeared. Americans filled churches, mosques and synagogues, waited on long lines to donate

blood, and gave billions of dollars to disaster relief efforts. President Bush's approval rating soared above 90%, and the nation's slogan became "united we stand."

But only two days after the attacks, in a clearly dissonant note, the Reverends Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson discussed their views on the meaning of the September 11 tragedy.

"God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve," said Falwell, appearing on the September 13 broadcast of the Christian Broadcasting Network's "700 Club," hosted by Robertson.

"Jerry, that's my feeling," Robertson responded. "I think we've just seen the antechamber to terror. We haven't even begun to see what they can do to the major population."

Falwell said the American Civil Liberties Union has "got to take a lot of blame for this," again Robertson agreed: "Well, yes."

Falwell added that federal courts and others in America were "throwing God out of the public square," adding: "The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way -- all of them who have tried to secularize America -- I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.' "

Reaction was swift. The White House immediately criticized the Falwell-Robertson commentary. Responsible conservatives from Rush Limbaugh to the National Review condemned them. CNN conservative commentator Kate O'Beirne, whose colleague Barbara Olson was murdered on September 11, said that Robertson and Falwell were "a disgrace." Soon, articles were written pointing out the obvious fact that Falwell's fundamentalist Christian view was not much different from bin Laden's fundamentalist Islamic view -- that God indeed was punishing America on September 11 for its sins.

Americans have come to painfully understand that fundamentalist Islam is mortally dangerous to our country. However, are Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson themselves dangerous home-grown fundamentalists, sowing the seeds of same kind of hatred that sent bin Laden's followers into suicide missions? Or are groups in the United States using Falwell's comments to score political points against an old enemy?

To get beyond the hype around the Falwell-bin Laden connection we need to dig deeper. We need to understand better the origins and beliefs of Christian and Islamic fundamentalists. We also need to understand what leads to fundamentalism, how it turns militant, and how it becomes enmeshed with political goals.

### **What is Christian Fundamentalism?**

The earliest roots of the kind of Christian fundamentalism we see in America go back to the Reformation. Protestant reformers pointed to what they called the avarice,

greed, and opulence of the Roman Catholic Church as movement away from true Christianity. When the Anglican Church formed in England, and Martin Luther founded the Lutheran denomination, these reformers remained unsatisfied, believing that real reform didn't take place. The Brethren, Mennonites of Germany and the Anabaptists in England then led a reform movement within Protestantism. These groups wanted a purified Christian faith devoid of earthly treasures.

The most well-known group of these purifiers to Americans were the Puritans – our Pilgrims – who were unwelcome in England. After trying to settle in Holland, the Pilgrims traveled to the New World to end their own religious persecution. While the Puritans have a direct family tree line to modern day Congregationalists the United Church of Christ, and even the Unitarians, they are the theological ancestors to modern day Puritans in the fundamentalist Protestantism of 19th Century America. No sooner did they escape religious persecution than they exiled wayward believers, such as Roger Williams who left their ranks to found the Rhode Island colony, and America's Baptist churches.

American Puritanism saw secular society as the greatest problem of mankind, to be solved through true Christian conversion. But more importantly, they view their own Christian brothers as men in grave need of reform and salvation through the purifying power of their more literal view of Christianity.

What we call Christian fundamentalism today grew out of America's great revival movement in the late 19th century. It was a reaction against a growing historical-literary understanding of the Bible in mainstream denominations, which meant they viewed the words of the Bible in their historical context and time. Mainstream Protestantism was also seeking to find common ground with science and faith, which fundamentalists rejected. Fundamentalist Christians, who claimed they took the Bible literally, began branching out and creating their own schools and seminaries in opposition to mainline Protestantism.

The label "fundamentalist" came from their belief in six "fundamental" beliefs of Christianity: the infallibility of the Bible, the virgin birth and the divinity of Jesus Christ, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross as atonement for the sins of all people, the physical resurrection and second coming of Christ, and the bodily resurrection of believers. In America, fundamentalism reached a socio-political peak at the Scopes Monkey Trial, where the theory of evolution was debated. But since the 1960's, mainstream Protestantism embracing an ecumenical movement moving itself further away from conservative Christians. This left a huge vacuum for fundamentalists who began their own radio and TV "evangelism" --spreading the good news of Christ.

American fundamentalism had a major comeback in 1976 when America had its first modern "born again" Christian run for President and win a major party nomination – Democrat Jimmy Carter. "Born again" is a common expression among evangelical Christians and it implies that they have gone through a life-changing decision as an adult or young adult to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. In support of Carter, fundamentalist Christians joined with Pentecostals such as Pat Robertson and other Christian literalists who believed that America risked losing its greatness as it became more secular or "turned from God." The waning appeal of mainstream Protestantism, the Vatican II reforms in the Roman Catholic Church and the secularization of American society all led to a stronger fundamentalist movement. In addition, modernity and the complicated ethics of "moral relativism" that arose within it led many Americans to seek out a faith with clear cut, right and wrong,

good and evil.

Beginning with the Carter campaign, fundamentalists rejected previous admonitions that politics was no arena for Christians, and threw themselves into the arena. Wooed by both parties, many supported Carter and later switched to the Republican Party where most are today.

American Christian fundamentalism has taken dramatic turns twenty years. It has become less theological and more political in its basic tenets. The separation of church and state, which protected their spiritual ancestors from a state-imposed faith not their own, is viewed today as keeping God out of public life. No longer do you hear debates about the virgin birth; instead you hear a steady stream of declarations and admonitions about homosexuality and the unborn, and explicit political threats against political leaders who don't follow fundamentalist demands. Fundamentalism has evolved from "fundamental principles" to "fundamental policies." Dr. James Dobson's Focus on the Family, the largest and best-funded operation of this movement, lays out these new principles of American Christian fundamentalism:

*"We believe that the ultimate purpose in living is to know and glorify God and to attain eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord, beginning within our own families and then reaching out to a suffering humanity that does not know of His love and sacrifice. We believe that the institution of marriage was intended by God to be a permanent, lifelong relationship between a man and a woman, regardless of trials, sickness, financial reverses or emotional stresses that may ensue. We believe that children are a heritage from God and a blessing from His hand. We are therefore accountable to Him for raising, shaping and preparing them for a life of service to His Kingdom and to humanity. We believe that human life is of inestimable worth and significance in all its dimensions, including the unborn, the aged, the widowed, the mentally handicapped, the unattractive, the physically challenged and every other condition in which humanness is expressed from conception to the grave. We believe that God has ordained three basic institutions — the church, the family and the government — for the benefit of all humankind. The family exists to propagate the race and to provide a safe and secure haven in which to nurture, teach and love the younger generation. The church exists to minister to individuals and families by sharing the love of God and the message of repentance and salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ. The government exists to maintain cultural equilibrium and to provide a framework for social order.*

*Our commitment to these principles is apparent at every level throughout the organization. The values and techniques taught to parents are drawn from the wisdom of the Bible and Judeo-Christian ethic, rather than from the humanistic notions of today's theorists. In short, Focus on the Family is a reflection of what we believe to be the recommendations of the Creator Himself, who ordained the family and gave it His blessing." [Focus on the Family, "Our Guiding Principles"]*

The political convergence of these strains of Christianity in America has united fundamentalists with a unique cousin – Pentecostalism – which was founded on the belief that on the true Christian were born of the body and through the Holy Spirit recorded the book of Acts. To be a true Christian, Pentecostals believe that you must not only be "born again" like the fundamentalists, but they also believe one must be baptized in the Holy Spirit, leading to speaking in tongues and faith healing. Their services lead to such ecstatic worship that believers fall to the ground while being baptized in the Spirit, gaining them the nickname of "holy rollers."

During their periods of early growth, fundamentalists and Pentecostals looked at each other with skepticism. Today, common political and public policy objectives have united them, and both groups gained a foothold of power in the U.S. political arena. Jerry Falwell is a fundamentalist. Pat Robertson, who once ran for President of the United States, is Pentecostal. The two who sat together in the days after September 11 and shared their views of the attack represented two sides that have joined in what they have termed is a common "culture war." Both feel that America has become secular, turned from God and therefore become deserving of horrific retribution. To them, America is in need of a Christian awakening and a turning back toward God, and it is so imperative that our nation's survival depends on it.

### **What is Islamic Fundamentalism?**

Islamic Fundamentalism also has its origins in roughly the same period of world history as American Christian fundamentalism, by way of a movement originating in Arabia called Wahabism. Founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahab (1703-1791) it proclaimed itself as a reform movement within Islam claiming that for the past seven hundred years, the Islamic faith had lost its way. Like the fundamentalist Christians, Wahabi sect Muslims felt a deep need to get back to the true faith. Also, like Christian fundamentalists, they saw themselves purifying the dominant Sunni sect of Islam. In the same way the England's Protestant reformers regarded the veneration of saints, ostentation in worship, and luxurious living as the chief evils of life, so did the Wahabi. Modern-day Christian fundamentalists call for a tradition of simple houses of worship, plain dressing and opposition to gambling, drinking and tobacco. Their Islamic counterparts also built simple mosques without minarets, and their adherents dress plainly and may not smoke tobacco or hashish, nor drink alcohol.

Within Arab society, the Wahabi sect was equally unpopular as their Christian fundamentalists cousins in Europe. They were driven from Medina but were successful in eventually converting the Saud tribe that would come to power in the holy land. While American fundamentalism engaged in "crusades" or spiritual revivals around the rural American countryside to bring unbelievers to Christ through the persuasion of the pulpit. The Islamic fundamentalist merged with Saudi sheiks embraced a different, violent strategy to accomplish their mission. This is an important and crucial distinction in the two forms of fundamentalism.

The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia sums it up this way:

*"From the beginning of Wahab's dispensation, in the late 18th century, his cult was associated with the mass murder of all who opposed it. For example, the Wahabis fell upon the city of Qarbala in 1801 and killed 2,000 ordinary citizens in the streets and markets. ...The Ottoman Empire drove them into the desert in 1818, but they returned to power in 1821 only to lose it again in 1884, forcing the Saud family to escape to Kuwait. They regained all of their old land in 1932 under the name Saudi Arabia, where Wahabism remains dominant. This reform movement became a political, and then governing power."*

Stephen Schwartz explained the role of the Wahabi in the [London Spectator](#) after the September 11 attacks:

*"Bin Laden is a Wahabi. So are the suicide bombers in Israel. So are his Egyptian allies, who exulted as they stabbed foreign tourists to death at Luxor not many years ago, bathing in blood up to their elbows and emitting blasphemous cries of ecstasy. So are the Algerian Islamist terrorists whose contribution to the purification of the world consisted of murdering people for such sins as running a movie projector or reading secular newspapers. So are the Taliban-style guerrillas in Kashmir who murder Hindus. The Iranians are not Wahabis, which partially explains their slow but undeniable movement towards moderation and normality after a period of utopian and puritan revivalism. But the Taliban practice a variant of Wahabism. In the Wahabi fashion they employ ancient punishments - such as execution for moral offenses - and they have a primitive and fearful view of women. The same is true of Saudi Arabia's rulers. None of this extremism has been inspired by American fumbblings in the world, and it has little to do with the tragedies that have beset Israelis and Palestinians."*

### **What Gives Rise to Fundamentalism?**

There is no doubt that Christian fundamentalists share many of the same world views as Islamic fundamentalists. They both believe themselves to be theologically superior to others in their faith. They both fear a modern secular encroachment on their faith and their homeland. These are the clearest connections between the commentaries of Falwell and bin Laden after September 11. The evils of a free market society – equality for women and for gays, free speech advocacy, modern ways of life – have brought a deserving vengeance.

Gays are big targets for both sides. The New York Post reported on the cruelty of bin Ladin's fundamentalist Taliban hosts in Afghanistan:

*"No other Islamic regime has pushed the interpretation of the shariat (Islamic law) so far, to the point of devising novel forms of punishment. Take gay men, for example. Mullahs argued for months about what to do with them. Should they be pushed from the top of a cliff? Forced to jump from a high building? Or should they be made to lie in a hole in the ground while a wall was knocked down on them?...The last scenario was deemed closest to recommendations in the Haddiths, the apocryphal comments by Muhammed on Allah's teachings. But because many victims survived the punishment, the reclusive Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, decided a bulldozer would crush their bodies as well."*

Modern Christian fundamentalism, like Wahabi Islam, has its own princes who engage in high finance, and its own advocates of violent action like Osama bin Ladin. William Edgar, Professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, wrote in [First Things](#) magazine with a favorable slant about Christian Reconstructionist R.J. Rushdooney after his death last year. Rushdooney is the closest Christian cousin to bin Ladin's violent political leadership.

*"The movement inspired by R. J. Rushdooney is often given the label Theonomy ... Rushdooney's Theonomy involves the application of the law of God, and the biblical law particularly, to all of life. It also requires that one appeal to the whole law of God—including the civil law of the Old Testament—as a necessary supplement to being saved by grace through faith. Some of Rushdooney's followers prefer the term "reconstructionist," because they believe it does a better job of conveying their*

*positive outlook on life ... [T]hey tend to believe that God's Kingdom will eventually be established on earth through the faithful preaching of the gospel and the faithful application of God's law to society. The result will be a Christian civilization and a thousand year reign of Jesus Christ. [But] R. J Rushdooney advocates a violent Christian fundamentalism."*

The American Christian fundamentalist movement is united in its desire to outlaw all forms of abortion in the United States. Many activists groups move to shut down, even by force, abortion clinics that are operating in accordance with current law. Some have gone so far as to threaten and intimidate employees, and in extreme cases, murder doctors working there. This is one area where Christian fundamentalism mirrors the militant Islamic fundamentalists.

Randall Terry, a failed Republican candidate for Congress and founder of the anti-abortion group Operation Rescue, offers his fundamentalist view on tolerance and pluralism:

*"I want you to just let a wave of intolerance wash over you. I want you to let a wave of hatred wash over you. Yes, hate is good... Our goal is a Christian nation. We have a Biblical duty, we are called by God, to conquer this country. We don't want equal time. We don't want pluralism." [The News-Sentinel, Fort Wayne, Indiana. 8-16-93]*

Both Islamic and American Christian fundamentalism are rooted in a belief that you are part of an elite group that alone is true to the faith. Both believe that superiority, which is God-given, means you must do all you can to convert the unbeliever, and worse, the impure person who claims to hold your faith. Both groups tend to flourish in periods of rapid change and modernization where people feel displaced. Both groups thrive in telling their followers that spirituality is not a personal journey of life-long struggle, but a submission to literal doctrine resulting in salvation. Both groups have made political power a top priority. Where they still diverge today, though, is in the use of violence. While Al Qaeda is now a worldwide movement that has killed thousands of people, violent Christian fundamentalists in America still remain isolated and small in number.

The response of Islamic and American societies to Christian and Wahabi fundamentalists in the public policy arena has similarities. When fundamentalist Christians chose the Republican Party as a vehicle to gain political power and hasten America's return to God, Republican leaders often made a Faustian bargain of paying lip service with few deliverables, and weighed many policy decisions against their fear of Christian fundamentalist opinion – much like the fear of the "Arab street" in Islamic nations.

When Pat Robertson began mounting his 1988 presidential campaign, he made some startling but revealing comments about his political goals:

*"It is interesting, that termites don't build things, and the great builders of our nation almost to a man have been Christians, because Christians have the desire to build something. He is motivated by love of man and God, so he builds. The people who have come into (our) institutions (today) are primarily termites. They are into destroying institutions that have been built by Christians, whether it is universities, governments, our own traditions, that we have... The termites are in charge now, and that is not the way it ought to be, and the time has arrived for a godly fumigation." [New York Magazine, August 18, 1986]*

GOP leaders were very reluctant to criticize him, despite his comments. Robertson went on to defeat then-Vice President George Bush in the Iowa Caucuses. For more than a decade, Republican officials would admit privately that they often found the Christian fundamentalists in their midst frightening, embarrassing and impossible to work with, but they rarely spoke out against them.

On the Islamic side, Saudi leaders have done a similar dance with Wahabi fundamentalists. As the Saud families became multi-billionaires with western education and extravagant lifestyles, they became targets of Islamic fundamentalists. To appease the fundamentalists, these monarchs have funded militant schools and relief programs. Many analysts argue that the wholesale adoption of the Palestinian cause by Saudi Arabia's wealthy establishment, and its prominence in the state-controlled Arab media, is a diversionary tactic rather than an inspired act of Muslim brotherhood. It made Israel the convenient target of Muslim rage – the true enemy of Islam – and as the years dragged on, Israel's only powerful ally – the United States – became an even bigger target. The "Arab street" throughout the Middle East is encouraged and cajoled to riot against America and Israel. But one word of criticism, for example, against the Saudi kingdom in the streets of their country leads to terrible punishment and is immediately silenced. This is standard operating procedure in most Islamic countries in the region, and it has not only fed virulent anti-Americanism in the Islamic world, but has marginalized puritanical fundamentalists like Osama bin Ladin, strengthened their violent attitudes, and nurtured the growth of their terrorist movement.

### **Are they kissing cousins?**

American Christian fundamentalism does not have the militant history of Islamic fundamentalism. However, the attraction to both causes and their views of the world are very similar. To say Falwell is America's answer to the Taliban would be untrue.

However, we need to keep a vigilant eye out on what turns fundamentalists violent. What made modern Islamic fundamentalism militant was a feeling of powerlessness. They have no say in their government. Their nations' attempts at modernization through a pan-Arabism have failed. The standard of living in most Muslim countries is worse today than twenty years ago. There is an anger, a desire for real reform and among many a dual enemy – the Western world, and those leaders in their own country that don't live a true faith. As America's Christian fundamentalism grows less politically powerful and more cynical about the political arena we should be aware of the potential dangers that could follow.

Today, Christian fundamentalists are very frustrated with American society. Many political pundits have shared a sense of shock at the comments of Falwell and Robertson in the days after September 11. Even more fascinating things have followed.

The nation is enjoying an unprecedented level of unity, and former political enemies of President Bush are singing his praises today. And yet, even as the nation has gone to war and American soldiers are in combat over Afghanistan with Al Qaeda and the Taliban, every leading political organization in the Christian fundamentalist movement has begun attacking President Bush and his administration on the issue of

homosexuality, accusing his administration of not holding a purist line and welcoming gays into public life. Before the conflict, Robert Knight of Concerned Women for America's Culture and Family Institute published a lengthy, scathing article in May entitled "[The Bush Administration's Republican Homosexual Agenda.](#)" Knight came back into the fray unbowed after September 11, telling the Associated Press that fundamentalists were frustrated and felt betrayed by Bush. "You'd almost think they were Democrats trying to infiltrate what makes the Republican Party distinctive," Knight said. "The record so far has been pretty bad ... shockingly so..."

The [Family Policy Network](#), a public policy group whose guiding principles promise "resolute opposition to the homosexual movement" and "works with the confidence that the one, true, sovereign God of the Bible will ultimately fulfill His purposes, in His own time," has also attacked President Bush. On September 28, FPN accused Bush of "promoting global homosexual activism" when it was learned the new U.S. Ambassador to Romania is a gay man.

"Apparently it's not enough for George Bush to establish a pro-homosexual administration here in America," FPN President Joe Glover said, as U.S. troops were moving into position near Afghanistan. "It seems he's determined to spread his endorsement of that perversion to the rest of the world."

Ken O'Connor of the [Family Research Council](#), a Christian fundamentalist political group which argues that "the American system of law and justice was founded on the Judeo-Christian ethic," accused Bush on September 27 - just over two weeks after the terrorist attacks -- of embracing a "destructive, anti-family political strategy" promoted by "the homosexual lobby."

When the Washington Post asked O'Connor to address the timing of the attack on Bush, O'Connor responded that building frustration with Bush boiled over because the White House wouldn't call on Congress to pass an anti-gay rider to the District of Columbia appropriations bill on September 25, adding: "we waited, we waited and we waited..."

The fact that these groups are not preoccupied with the timing of their demands on arguably trivial issues to the nation is illuminating, and it hints at potential trouble to come. As political power wanes and their overriding priorities are not addressed, American Christian fundamentalists will feel more powerless and more angry. While none of their main political groups advocate any form of violence, strains of militant fundamentalism in the nation which oppose pluralism, modernity, respect for differences and claim to know the truth as God has told them, might find no other way to accomplish what they perceive to be God's ends.