

The Rationality of Fundamentalist Belief

By Finlay Malcolm
University of Hertfordshire

Forthcoming in *Journal of Social Philosophy*

Abstract: Religious fundamentalism remains a significant force in global politics and religion. Despite a range of problems arising from fundamentalism, the beliefs fundamentalists hold can seem quite reasonable. This paper considers whether, in fact, fundamentalist beliefs are rational by drawing on recent ideas in contemporary epistemology. The paper presents a general theory of fundamentalist beliefs in terms of their propositional content and the high credence levels attributed to them. It then explores the way these beliefs are both acquired and retained by applying ideas from the social epistemology of echo chambers and group belief. The paper then considers three accounts of the rationality of belief: evidentialist, reliabilist, and virtue-theoretic. It is argued that fundamentalist beliefs can be reasonable on evidentialist standards, but are nevertheless still problematic on reliabilist and virtue standards, since they are formed in environments that are not truth-conducive and which cultivate intellectual vice.

1. Introduction

Forms of religious fundamentalism, which are taken to include religious groups as diverse as the Christian Right in the USA, Salafi Islam in the Middle-East, Africa and Europe, and Haredi Judaism in Israel and North America, are considered responsible for a litany of problems in the world. These include cultivating extremist and intolerant views, propagating terrorism and violence, resisting scientific discoveries and progress, impeding access to education for its members, and seeking to limit rights for women and the LGBT community. Because of this, the expression 'religious fundamentalism' is generally deemed a pejorative. But despite the harms that have been brought about by some manifestations of fundamentalism, the adoption of a fundamentalist ideology may seem perfectly reasonable. Many people turn to these ideologies because it satisfies a need for likeminded community and belonging, and provides a way to secure an agent's identity amidst cultural upheaval (McDonald 2011).

A crucial component to any ideology is *belief*, and this clearly applies to religious fundamentalism: the fundamentalist believes certain claims, and these beliefs are used as a basis for behaviour, including salient actions and practical expressions of religious life.¹ They also provide the agent with the foundations of a secure identity. However, in typical discussions of the reasonableness of fundamentalism, the focus tends to be on the actions, and the broad adoption of the fundamentalist ideology, whilst the rationality of fundamentalist beliefs in particular is hardly addressed. This may be due to disciplinary boundaries: the

¹ According to a widely held view, agents are motivated by their desires, but act on their desires by drawing information from their beliefs (Nettleman 2011).

rationality of belief is usually a consideration within contemporary Western philosophy, which has had little to say about religious fundamentalism.

This paper attempts to fill this lacuna by taking up the question of the rationality of fundamentalist belief, and does so by applying some of the resources developed in recent analytic philosophy. The paper will offer an account of what fundamentalist beliefs are, and then contrast different approaches to the question of whether they are rational. It will consider how the account being offered helps us to understand better the general issue of fundamentalist beliefs and whether there is something problematic with them.

The theory is developed in several stages. §2 offers a broad account of the ideology of fundamentalism and explores some of its manifestations. The paper will only consider examples from the main three monotheistic religions because they are, for varying reasons, clearer to describe than other religions.² §3 argues for an account of the nature of fundamentalist belief in terms of, first, the propositional content of those beliefs, and second, the high credence in which those beliefs are typically held. §4 explores how fundamentalist beliefs are both acquired and sustained by drawing together ideas from sociology, broadly speaking, with recent work in social epistemology. It explores how these beliefs are formed and sustained in echo chamber-like environments as a variety of group belief. §5 considers three accounts of the rationality of belief: evidentialist, reliabilist and virtue-theoretic. It is argued that fundamentalist beliefs are not clearly irrational on evidentialist standards, but are nevertheless epistemically problematic since they are formed in environments that are not truth-conducive and which cultivate intellectual vice.

Before we begin, it's worth noting that 'fundamentalism' is a contested expression, and many find it too broad in application to be useful (Wood and Watt 2014). I will proceed on the assumption that it *does* describe an ideology that is widely adopted and has been problematic, but accept that this label will not apply to every single person in groups deemed to be fundamentalist. Nor is every fundamentalist group the same, but bear mere family resemblances to one another. But I do want to offer a theory that is at least *paradigmatic* of fundamentalist belief in the sense that it is the norm, and so would be widely recognisable to members of fundamentalist groups.

2. Religious Fundamentalism

The term 'fundamentalism' derives its origins from the publication of *The Fundamentals*, a Christian pamphlet published 1909-1915, which aimed to specify a set of essential, non-negotiable 'truths' that ought to be the basis for Christian practice and belief (Harris 2008). These pamphlets were influential in some Christian groups, and within those groups developed a prominent ideology that took the form of a religiopolitical movement.³ This early

² The Hindu case, for instance, is not always so strictly tied to a literalist reading of scripture.

³ I use the expression 'ideology' here, and throughout, in the sense of a *worldview* or overarching *narrative* that someone understands reality within.

form of fundamentalism aimed to resist changes to American culture that were deemed to have a harmful 'modernising' influence, and to be in tension with the teachings thought of as fundamental to Christianity, and in particular, the teaching of evolutionary theory in schools (Marsden 1980, 184-9). As it evolved, Christian fundamentalism in America took the form of the Christian Right, who, through Moral Majority, lobbied for political ends, particularly restrictions to abortion rights. The Christian Right is often thought to persist through the 'evangelical' voter base in the USA who try to achieve political goals through electoral incentives (Giroux 2005; Smidt 1988).

Whilst each case of fundamentalism has its own distinctive character, bearing largely family resemblances to one another (Ruthven 2004), two main components highlighted for Christian fundamentalism in the USA are paradigmatic of other cases. They are that fundamentalism, first, specifies a set of essential, non-negotiable claims that ought to be believed and which provide the basis for practice; and second, involves an active component in which political aims are to be achieved by the fundamentalist group (Almond et al. 2003, 1-22). One kind of political aim is 'activist' which can involve influencing governmental policy through actions that can, in extreme cases, include religious violence. Another kind is 'quietist', usually involving a group withdrawing from the wider society to form an enclave culture of its own. Of course, even activist religion is often cultivated within enclave cultures, and this issue will become prominent in later sections when accounting for the resilience of fundamentalist belief.

We can see these two components in several widely discussed cases of fundamentalism. As already noted, Christian fundamentalism has been influential in the USA, and Christianity is deemed susceptible to fundamentalist impulses, in part, because it is generally said that the Bible is God's revelation of past and future events to humankind, which, if interpreted correctly, provides the indisputable truth about reality. As such, there have been recent fundamentalist movements in most parts of the world where Christianity is practiced, often influenced by American Christian fundamentalism, such as in the Philippines and Guatemala (Brouwer et al. 1996).

Also widely discussed are forms of Islamist fundamentalism. Like Christianity, Islam is also susceptible to fundamentalism given its commitment to the Koran as a divinely revealed text, but also because 'its tenets include laws to govern politics and society as well as a set of spiritual beliefs' (Wright 1989, 46). As such, Islamist Fundamentalists tend to see a justification for a close relationship between faith and state. For some, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, established in Egypt in the 1920s, this has meant 'the founding of an 'Islamic state' – a theocracy ruled by spiritual rather than temporal authority, and applying the shar'ia, divine Islamic law, based upon principles expressed in the Koran' (Heywood 2012, 294). Such a state was behind 'the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's militant theocratic attempt to implement the Shar'ia (traditional Islamic law) across all that country's institutions' (Shupe 2011, 480) during the Iranian revolution in 1979.

A particularly violent and extremist form of Islamist fundamentalism arose in the 1990s and early 2000s through Al-Qaeda, who would be responsible for the 9/11 attacks. A

similarly violent militant group – the so-called *Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant* – gained influence throughout Northern Africa and the Middle East following the invasion of Iraq from 2003, and subsequently, political unrest in Syria in the early 2010s. The group has had a significant local and international influence, attracting global followers to its cause, and succeeding in capturing and holding one third of the territory of Iraq between 2014 and 2017. Again, this form of religious fundamentalism is committed to the view that there are a number of essential and non-negotiable propositional claims recorded in religious scriptures, particularly concerning Shar'ia law in the Koran (Günther and Kaden 2016, 136), and a desire to achieve political aims through, in this case, violent action.

A form of Jewish fundamentalism is also thought to exist within the Haredi, or ultra-orthodox, branch of Judaism, which is a significant minority in Israel and has expressions in many countries across the world (Aran 2013). Haredi communities are also taken to be a response to modernising forces, are known for being highly insular, and for basing religious practice on a strict, essentialist reading of religious scriptures. But these communities are also known for attempting to influence political policies within Israel through demonstrations, and even violent protest (Ravitzky 1996).

Whilst fundamentalism is a response to modernisation (Peels MS), there are three modernising forces in particular that are thought to have caused the adoption of fundamentalist ideologies.⁴ First, fundamentalism is often a response to perceptions that society is becoming increasingly secular, resulting in a loss of religious influence. The motivation to adopt fundamentalism in societies one deems to be becoming more secular is generally that one takes secularism in society to have failed to provide adequately for the human need for meaning and firm moral foundations (Geoffroy 2004, 39). More generally though, for religious people, a society perceived to be becoming more secular can lead to a feeling that one's own identity is being eroded, causing religious people to have a sense that they are 'orphans' in the modern world (Hobsbawm 1994). Religion offers to resolve this identity crisis by providing 'its members and supporters with a rootedness and sense of belonging that they would otherwise lack' (Heywood 2012, 285), especially when grounded in a set of essential truths about morality, meaning and ultimate reality.

A related, second cause of fundamentalism is globalisation. Since globalisation involves the increasing of international connectedness, particularly through trade and patterns of immigration, it can have an eroding effect on national identities (Wilkinson 2003, 124). In order to stabilise a sense of identity, some citizens look to a nation's past religious affiliations. They then essentialise the religion and aim to instate it as the national religion and the basis for national values and identity. This nationalising of religious identity has led to significant political unrest in countries like India and Sri Lanka and has been associated with an increase in terrorism (Lutz and Lutz 2015).

The third cause for fundamentalism is postcolonialism. This is notable in particular in Muslim-majority societies, such as in North Africa. As Western powers relinquished their

⁴ These issues were catalogued in the influential *Fundamentalism Project* (Marty and Appleby 1991-1995).

control of territories that had been Muslim societies under the Ottoman Empire, their inhabitants sometimes expressed anti-Western sentiments by embracing their Islamic heritage. In some cases, this led to an increase in fundamentalist belief, and the politicisation of Islam to form states that oppose the values of the West, particularly their perceived selfishness, greediness and competitive individualism (Upal 2015).

These three causes of fundamentalism all arise with problems of losing and reclaiming identity. To be a fundamentalist in the modern sense is, at least in part, and paradigmatically, to respond to these identity problems by adopting the view there are a set of essential and non-negotiable truths that one ought to subscribe to, and to seek to achieve religiopolitical goals through collective action alongside others who also adopt a fundamentalist ideology.

As part of subscribing to an ideology, one forms particular attitudes, including desires, plans, intentions, emotions and beliefs. The beliefs of fundamentalists are important to understand because they form part of the basis for religiopolitical practice, which is itself usually morally problematic and can involve acts of extremist violence. But what are fundamentalist beliefs? What makes these beliefs distinctively *fundamentalist*? In the next section we survey two accounts – *the Content Theory* and *the Certainty Theory* – and interpret fundamentalist belief in terms of a hybrid of the two accounts.

3. The Nature of Fundamentalist Belief

The Content Theory takes the propositional content of an agent's beliefs to be necessary for making them *fundamentalist* beliefs. Since religious fundamentalism arises in relation to religious systems, then one cannot hold religious fundamentalist beliefs about just any matter – the propositional content of fundamentalist beliefs must be salient to a religious system. Moreover, the agent will require not just one or two, but a cluster of appropriately related beliefs concerning propositions salient to the religious system. Perhaps the best-known example of the Content Theory for the three Abrahamic religions comes from Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1992):

By "fundamentalism" we mean the belief that there is one set of religious teachings that clearly contains the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, essential, inerrant truth about humanity and deity; that this essential truth is fundamentally opposed by forces of evil which must be vigorously fought; that this truth must be followed today according to the fundamental, unchangeable practices of the past; and that those who believe and follow these fundamental teachings have a special relationship with the deity. (118)

We can draw out at least five components of Altemeyer and Hunsberger's Content Theory.

Religious fundamentalist beliefs are, first, a cluster or set of beliefs that are salient to the teaching of a particular organised religion; second, they include the meta-proposition that the content of the teachings of the religion are so essential, or 'core' to it, that to change them would be to change the religion; third, they include the proposition that holding beliefs concerning these core teachings is good-making, in this case, by grounding a relationship with a religious deity; fourth, they include the proposition that those not believing the specified

teaching are to be opposed; and fifth, these beliefs ought to be used as the basis for religious and political action.

To give an example we can put the Content Theory to work in the context of Christian fundamentalism (Bendroth 2014). On this account, Christian fundamentalist belief would require beliefs concerning a number of teachings that are salient to Christianity (e.g. the existence of God, Biblical inerrancy, sinful human nature, etc.), and that these are core, inalienable, essential 'fundamentals' to Christianity. This alone, though, is not sufficient for Christian fundamentalist belief, although these beliefs may make one a *traditional* Christian.⁵ One must also believe that these propositions put one in good relationship with God, that the 'fundamentals' of Christianity should be the basis for Christian practice, and most distinctively for fundamentalist belief, that people and forces that disagree with the 'fundamentals' are to be opposed. This opposition instantiates itself in political action, predominantly to achieve political goals associated with the beliefs, for instance, in voting in political parties that will act in ways aligned with values deemed to be Christian, to lobby militantly for political ends, or, in extreme cases, politically motivated violence, including violent opposition to abortion (Beier 2006), terrorist acts and reconfiguring a state around religious rules.

Other accounts have developed on this theory by specifying the reasons for adopting fundamentalism into the content of the beliefs themselves. In particular, the reasons for the rejection of modernity and refuge sought in fundamentalism highlighted in §2. For instance, the measurement scale offered by Liht et al. (2011, 322) propose seven 'areas symptomatic of the tension between traditional religiosity and modernity'. These include believing that 'Scientific knowledge amounts to little in comparison to the truth present in my religion's holy books', and that 'Modern culture is...hostile to my beliefs.'

The propositions proposed for fundamentalist belief in these two Content Theories are highly plausible by marking out what is typically believed by fundamentalists. It's true, of course, that no fundamentalist believes exactly the same propositions, nor to the same degree, but provided there is sufficient coherence in one's beliefs with a general set of propositions, then one can reasonably be described as holding fundamentalist beliefs. That is the point that each of these broad 'family resemblance' accounts of fundamentalist belief are putting forward.

The Content Theory tells us *what* fundamentalists believe – the *content* of those beliefs. But there is also a *psychological* component to fundamentalist belief that specifies the *strength* to which those beliefs are held. The proposal developed in the ensuing is that fundamentalist beliefs are characterised by either a subjective evaluation of certainty, or an extremely high credence in the propositions believed. According to Michael Baurmann, 'Fundamentalists

⁵ Some definitions put fundamentalism this way. For instance, according to Yelderman et al. (2019, 105): 'Religious fundamentalism is the belief in a single divine God, Biblical truth, sinful human nature, and free will.' But this seems too limited since it fails to distinguish fundamentalism from mere traditional religion.

claim that their view is *certain* and that there is no room for *doubt*' (2007, 158). This view can be defended given two sets of considerations. First, recall that in §2, a central reason for adopting fundamentalism is to find a secure identity. A sense that one's identity is being eroded or lost can result from the modernising influences of secularisation, globalisation and postcolonialism. Consider this in the context of the Middle East:

The Islamic world is passing through a most devastating period of transition. A history of economic and scientific change which in Europe took five hundred years, is, in the Muslim world, being squeezed into a couple of generations...Such a transition period, with its centrifugal forces which allow nothing to remain constant, makes human beings very insecure. They look around for something to hold onto, something that will give them an identity. In our case, that something is usually Islam. (Winter 2009, 304-5)

Now, a religion can give one a sense of rootedness – an identity to hold on to. But it's plausible that one will feel *more* secure in one's identity the more *firmly* one believes. This is part of the psychological appeal of fundamentalist religion: 'its appeal is based upon its capacity to offer certainty in an uncertain world' (Heywood 2012, 289). To connect this with the propositions lauded by the Content Theories, the need to adopt a secure identity explains why fundamentalists tend to believe in tradition over change, and heteronomy over autonomy.

So, the need for a secure identity provides one ground for believing with certainty. But a second consideration is the *source* of the propositions believed. As noted in §2, they are often derived from sacred texts deemed to be infallible, and the Content Theories both propose that fundamentalists believe in revealed traditions. Since the truth of the propositions believed 'is guaranteed by superior comprehension and higher forms of knowledge, disclosed by divine revelation and holy scriptures' (Baurmann 2007, 156), then they cannot be wrong. It would therefore not be rational to doubt their truth; one ought to believe them with certainty. What is important for fundamentalist belief, according to Richard McDonough, is that one 'believes one's religious views *must be believed unconditionally because they were communicated to humanity (or to him) by a perfect God*' (2013, 564; emphasis in original).

The two grounds for believing with certainty dovetail in a neat way. This has been noticed by Martha Crenshaw (1986, 391-2) in the context of the psychology of terrorism. For, when people are forming their identities, Crenshaw notes, they 'seek both meaning and a sense of wholeness or completeness'. But some individuals experience a 'crisis of identity', that is, 'when the individual who finds self-definition difficult is suffering from ambiguity, fragmentation, and contradiction'. These crises of identity make people susceptible to 'totalistic collective identities that promise certainty' – particularly *religious* identities since they are so effective at promising certainty, given the divine origins of their truth claims. Hence, the search for identity is satisfied by fundamentalist forms of religion in which 'the troubled young find not only an identity but an explanation for their difficulties and a promise for the future.' This is the case because fundamentalist religion bases the truth of its

propositional claims on infallible divine revelation, hence giving the certainty that is required. We can call this *The Certainty Theory*.

It may be that not *all* fundamentalist's beliefs are held with extremely high credence or confidence levels. But nevertheless, on the basis of the reasons we have given, it is paradigmatic of fundamentalist beliefs that they be held with very high confidence or possibly even certainty, or that this be desirable. Taken together with the Content Theory, we can say that fundamentalist religious beliefs are paradigmatically (a) held with high levels of confidence or certainty (b) towards propositions whose content is salient to a particular religiopolitical system. Call this the *Certainty of Content Theory*, or CCT.⁶

Whilst CCT appears to be sufficient for accounting for the nature of fundamentalist beliefs, there is much more that can be said concerning them if we are to give them epistemic appraisal. For, note that beliefs in general are both acquired and retained in particular ways. A religious person who believes that, say, God communicates through holy scriptures, will likely have acquired this by partaking in the life of a religious community, and will sustain it by reading those scriptures, and listening to the views of other religious people within that tradition. Fundamentalists acquire and hold on to their beliefs in social settings that generally includes the influence of charismatic leaders, the role of social institutions that provide one's informational diet, and the effects of normative considerations, including the obligations fundamentalists hold to one another, and the pressures they face to remain part of their communities. These social contexts, with their normative requirements, provide ways of accounting for how fundamentalist beliefs are acquired and retained. In the next section I offer an account of this by viewing them through the lens of some recent ideas in social epistemology.

4. Acquiring and Retaining Fundamentalist Belief

To begin, we need to note that fundamentalist beliefs and ideologies are not formed within a vacuum, nor are they only held by individuals, but by individuals within larger *groups*. Liberals, nationalists, conservatives, fascists, feminists, ecologists and fundamentalists all belong to social and political groups where likeminded people hold to the same ideological position. Within these groups, knowledge and belief are shared through testimonial chains between individuals, and agents trust the testimony of revered leaders and influential figureheads. The outcome of these social activities are beliefs salient to the fundamentalist ideology, which are shared by members of the ideological group. This is particularly the case for the fundamentalist ideology since, as we saw in §3, propositions are put forward as essential, non-negotiable truths to be believed by members of the group. As such, believing particular propositions is at the core of what it is to be a fundamentalist, and since such beliefs

⁶ For an account that makes emotional attachment to these beliefs an essential component to fundamentalist belief, see Peels and Kindermann (MS).

are formed through trusting the testimony of others, especially leaders within the group, then fundamentalist belief is inherently social.⁷

I want to suggest three components to the social environment in which fundamentalist beliefs are acquired and retained. With these three components in place, we can assess the rationality of fundamentalist beliefs. We first need to note that numerous studies on fundamentalism have pointed out that fundamentalists operate within ‘enclave cultures’ that eschew the practices of the dominant culture around them in order to prevent ‘pollution by the malevolent outside and/or leakage of members to it’ (Almond et al. 2003, 32; see also Johnston 2014, Paine 1997, and Stadler 2014). It is regularly pointed out by these studies that fundamentalist groups aim to preserve the ideologies and commitments to the group by applying moral pressure upon its members. For instance, they try to convince their members that the mainstream culture outside of the enclave is morally bankrupt, and that life inside the enclave is morally virtuous. Whilst these claims seem indisputable, it leaves out the *epistemic* pressure that these groups also apply to their members to keep up their *beliefs*. The three components to the social environment I will explore here aim to explain both the moral and epistemic pressure applied to individuals to keep up not just their commitment to the ideology, but also their beliefs. Indeed, such pressure, and the practices that surround it, will be taken as paradigmatic of fundamentalist beliefs.

First, since fundamentalist beliefs are formed and sustained in social contexts, then we can explore the normative pressure that group believing puts on individuals. For this, we require an account for what it is not merely to believe individually, but to *collectively* believe a set of propositions. A leading approach to understanding group, or collective belief, is through a shared group commitment to believe as a body. According to the theory offered by Margaret Gilbert, ‘The members of a population, P, *collectively believe that p* if and only if they are jointly committed to believe that p as a body.’ (Gilbert and Pilchman 2014, 197; c.f. Gilbert 1987, 195). There are two main clauses to draw out from this analysis. The first is the idea of *joint commitments*. To see what is meant by this, let’s begin with *individual* commitments to oneself. If I commit to taking a walk at lunchtime then I unilaterally place a constraint on myself, which, in virtue of it being an individual commitment to myself, can be unilaterally rescinded. I can, without moral blame, rescind this commitment by deciding to no longer take the walk, and can do so without being blamed. A joint commitment, on the other hand, cannot be unilaterally rescinded. If I agree with a friend to go for a walk together at lunchtime, I cannot unilaterally rescind this commitment: if I decide not to go for the walk, then I need to give my reasons to my friend as to why I am breaking the commitment. If I don’t, then my friend is justified in directing moral blame towards me. If I do give my reasons then the commitment can be rescinded, but I must explain myself, and my friend must grant me release from the commitment. As such, joint commitments exert normative pressure on individuals

⁷ Whilst the primary source of the propositions to be believed is often a divine agent (McDonough 2013), not only is this a social source of belief formation through a special form of testimony (Malcolm 2021), but it is believed alongside other people, approved by them, and lauded for belief by religious leaders.

to follow through on them, which is enhanced when the failure to come through on the commitment can have significant negative consequences. For instance, if I commit to starting a business with a friend and she invests her life savings in the venture, then there is significant normative pressure on me to follow through on this commitment. The reason that joint commitments exert normative pressure is, hence, threefold: first, because of the obligation one takes upon oneself when committing to a joint venture; second, because the other agents in the joint venture can insist that we retain our commitments, and pressure us into doing so; third, because of the harmful consequences that could follow if the commitment is broken.

The second clause to draw out is the idea of *believing p as a body*. According to Gilbert, believing *p* as a body is quite different from believing *p* as an individual, in which one has a mental state that represents the world as true. Rather, when believing *p* as a body, 'the parties are jointly committed to emulate, in relevant contexts, a single believer—a single party who believes that *p*—by virtue of the actions, including the verbal utterances, of each' (ibid. 198). So, it is not the adopting of a mental state that a group agrees to form, but rather the kinds of behaviours and dispositions characteristic of holding a belief that the group is committed to emulating. For, someone who believes *p* will be disposed to act as though *p* in relevant contexts, for instance, to affirm *p* when asked whether *p*, to behave as though *p* in contexts where *p*'s truth would guide action, or to stand up for *p* if *p*'s truth is challenged. On Gilbert's account, the same will be true for collective belief.

We can now see how joint commitments to believe *p* constrain action – because joint commitments, as discussed, come with normative pressure, and jointly committing to believe *p* is to act as though one believes *p*, and hence the normative pressure of the joint commitment ranges over behaviours salient to acting as though *p*. For example, Gilbert claims that 'If we collectively believe that everyone should do what they can in favor of energy conservation, I am constrained in my decision as to what car to buy, and so on' (ibid. 199). For religious fundamentalists, if there is collective belief that abortion is morally impermissible, then that belief constrains activities and behaviours concerning abortion for members of the fundamentalist group.

Now, whilst Gilbert's account maintains that all parties with the joint commitment are to act the same by emulating the behaviours of a single agent, it needn't be that there is an actual agent to emulate. This agent could be someone entirely abstract. They could just be emulating the patterns of behaviours that a single agent would engage in if they believed the salient propositions. But oftentimes, there is an actual agent – normally a group leader – who *authorises* collective beliefs over the group:

the members of a given group may be jointly committed to believe as a body whatever proposition their leader expresses belief in, in a particular context. So, if the leader, in the right context, says "Eating meat is wrong," the members are now jointly committed to believe as a body that eating meat is wrong. (ibid. 198)

In a fundamentalist context, group members will be required to jointly believe the propositions that the leader expresses belief in. This agent can take numerous forms. It could

be a religious founder, such as Jesus or Muhammad, or a living leader of a religious group, who is usually positioning themselves as a spokesperson for, and interpreter of, the original religious founder. Given the long heritage of interpretation of religious texts by leaders that continues to this day, it seems more likely that fundamentalist groups will jointly commit to believing that which a current religious leader authorises for belief, such as a Rabbi or Imam, and thereby only indirectly jointly commit to the beliefs of the original founder. So, whilst joint commitment to believe p is only to act as one would if one believed p , and so not necessarily to just follow the behaviours of a particular agent, there are particular agents (leaders) who authorise what to believe, whether or not that person actually behaves in the relevant way for themselves.⁸

Gilbert's account of group belief is useful for explaining fundamentalist beliefs because of the resilience those beliefs have, and how difficult it can be to relinquish those beliefs and exit fundamentalist groups. This is because group beliefs are joint commitments that exert normative pressure on individuals to form and retain collective beliefs through coercion and criticism if they attempt to stray from the party line.⁹ As Gilbert adds, members of the group can 'rebuke one another for denying the truth of the proposition[s]' (ibid. 198) they are committed to believing. Moreover, this account builds into it the idea that the group are to imitate the beliefs of a single agent, and that there are leaders who authorise what to believe – a description clearly recognisable in many expressions of fundamentalism who largely follow a particular religious leader.

To see the relevance of *group believing* for believing as an *individual*, we first need to outline the second component to the social environment in which fundamentalist beliefs are formed and sustained. This second component concerns the flow of information and evidence that fundamentalists consume. Fundamentalists can be seen to exhibit many similar features to those living within echo chambers (Jamieson and Cappella 2008). The metaphor of an 'echo chamber' is used to describe a social-epistemic environment in which your own views are reiterated to you, and because of this, they are systematically reinforced, leading to a resilient set of beliefs that are extremely difficult to dislodge. Since fundamentalism holds that certain propositions ought to be believed, and since the more certainly they are believed the more secure fundamentalists will feel believing them, then an aim of fundamentalism is to engage in forms of credence manipulation that strengthen one's fundamentalist beliefs. Echo chambers are a psychological device that prove very effective in achieving these epistemic aims.

The main function of an echo chamber is to restrict the flow of information to a group to that which confirms their pre-existing beliefs on particular matters (Elzinga 2020; Benkler et al. 2018, 76). This will include the news and social media sources you read, the friends you listen to, and the authorities (including religious) that you take guidance from. Rather than

⁸ Thanks to an anonymous referee for indicating the need to clarify this issue.

⁹ Note that this goes beyond normative pressure on an individual to form beliefs due to encountering evidence. Here, the pressure also comes from other agents to form and sustain collective beliefs.

being openminded by considering a range of evidence for a particular viewpoint, the person in an echo chamber controls and restricts the flow of information she receives in order to reinforce that which she already believes. The flow of information may be controlled autonomously by the individual, or authoritatively by the leaders in one's community. Consider a Christian fundamentalist in the USA who believes in the lead up to the 2020 election that Trump is a good leader who will protect and promote Christian values. This person will typically restrict her access to news media, like Fox News, that is generally pro-Trump, and spend her time discussing politics with those who agree with her. She seems unlikely to enter into reasonable dialogue with supporters of the Democrat party or practitioners of other religions.

However, the fundamentalist living in the modern world is not a hermit, and so will encounter views contrary to those that are essential to her fundamentalist system. Many fundamentalists are highly educated, and during their studies will have read widely, engaging with disparate views, and are active users of social media. But this is compatible with some current conceptions of echo chambers, which are not so strict that they require that people living within them do not encounter any contrary views or opinions. Rather, they require that contrary views are given a credibility deficit. For instance, on the account offered by Nguyen (2020), echo chambers involve filters in which the views of those we agree with have their credibility *amplified*, and the views of those we disagree with have their credibility *diminished*. Nguyen proposes that non-group members are discredited by being 'actively assigned some epistemic demerit, such as unreliability, epistemic maliciousness, or dishonesty', whilst group members are amplified by being 'assigned very high levels of trust' (ibid. 146). So, whilst views that oppose your own will be encountered, they are given such low epistemic credibility that, to the agent confronting them, they don't elicit belief-revision. Indeed, they may be belief-reinforcing. Recall our example of the Christian fundamentalist. She may believe that liberal media sources that challenge Trump are in fact evidence that he is chosen by God to lead the country since he is a Christian martyr of sorts. But in general, she will treat views that oppose Trump as though they have little credibility, and give significant credence to media sources, friends and religious leaders who agree with her.

Let's now combine the idea of fundamentalist echo chambers with fundamentalist collective belief. For, a joint commitment to collectively believe p as a body will usually qualify one for membership within a group, and hence someone with this commitment will be assigned a high level of trust, and become a source of information for others within the group. But this person will be expected, and normatively pressured, into following the party line on what to believe, and hence to not oppose those beliefs that the group are committed to believing. So, when people in the group believe, say, that same sex relationships are wrong as *individuals* and are also jointly committed to believe this as a *group*, then the group belief will require members of the group to not oppose this belief by showing any dissent, and to affirm its truth. Recall that this is due to the moral nature of the commitment itself, and the peer pressure other members of the group place on each other to keep up this commitment. As such, each member of the group will mutually reinforce the beliefs of one-another. Now, if

they are also operating within a secure echo chamber where the same views are reiterated to each member in an environment designed to produce resilient beliefs held with a high credence, then the group commitment to believe will *enhance* these effects. There will be less opposition to and more coherence with the received belief, in part, because of the pressure to keep to the party line. The result will be reinforced and unopposed beliefs, which then become resilient and held with high credence.

The third component to the social environment in which fundamentalist beliefs are formed and sustained concerns the moral influences to remain within a fundamentalist group. Fundamentalist religious groups can often create incentives to remain by providing for many of the needs of its members, as Baumann notes:

If kindergartens, schools, universities, hospitals, employment possibilities, sports clubs, social associations, newspapers, television programs, nursing homes, social welfare and cemeteries are all supplied by the social group itself – and may be even of a better quality than the external alternatives – then there is no necessity for the members of a community to leave the context of their own group if they want to enjoy such facilities and institutions. (Baumann 2007, 163)

Such extensive incentives have been used in societies where fundamentalism has been prevalent, including in France, Iran, Israel, and the USA. In a fundamentalist community like this, the incentives to remain in the group are twofold. First, the costs of leaving include foregoing the provisions supplied by the community, which can be of a high quality. Second, leaving a fundamentalist group can invoke intimidation from other group members, and elicit uncertainty as to how one will operate outside of the community, particularly if it would involve migrating to a new area within a nation, or even to an unfamiliar country.¹⁰ Together, these two motivations significantly increase the pressure on people to remain within fundamentalist groups, and to retain the beliefs that secure one's fundamentalist identity.

The three components to the social environment – collective believing, echo chambers and group provisions – create a structure of *social insularity* that encloses fundamentalists within a secure enclave inside which fundamentalist beliefs are acquired and retained. Call this the *Social Insularity Theory (SIT)*. In the next section, we explore what SIT and CCH reveals about the rationality of fundamentalist belief.

5. Rationalising Fundamentalist Belief

It will be helpful to briefly recap what has been argued in the earlier sections. In §2 we saw that fundamentalism is a religiopolitical ideology that is typically adopted by agents who are seeking to secure their identity as a result of a sense that it has been eroded through modernising processes of secularisation, postcolonialism, and globalisation. In §3 it was argued that fundamentalism offers agents propositions for their belief upon which they can

¹⁰ For one collection of narratives and theory about leaving the orthodox Jewish community, see Cappell and Lang (2020).

secure their identities. The content of these propositions must be salient to a particular religion, but they are distinct in that they have a political component: they express the idea that the religion ought to achieve certain political ends, such as the sacralising of the state, the change to government laws and policies, or the withdrawing from public life. It was then shown that the more firmly the propositions are believed, the more secure one will feel in one's identity, and hence they are paradigmatically believed by fundamentalists with high levels of credence, or indeed, even certainty. This provides us with the Certainty of Content Theory (CCT).

In §4, we explored the way that fundamentalist beliefs are acquired and retained by drawing on recent ideas in social epistemology. This theory has it that collective believing, echo chambers and group incentives create a structure of social insularity that encloses fundamentalists within a secure enclave in which their beliefs are formed and sustained. We can now combine this Social Insularity Theory (SIT) with CCT to gain a rich picture of the nature of fundamentalist beliefs:

Fundamentalist religious beliefs (a) must be held towards propositions whose content is salient to a particular religiopolitical system; and are paradigmatically (b) held with high levels of confidence approaching certainty, (c) being formed and sustained within an enclave structure of social insularity, involving forms of collective belief, echo chambers and group incentives to remain within the community.

This theory can account for many widely held intuitions concerning fundamentalism. The idea that it is opposed to modernity, given to Manichaeistic views about extremes of forces of good and evil, and intolerant to the views of others, can all be accounted for in terms of (a) the propositional content of the fundamentalist beliefs. The view that fundamentalists are socially isolated, restrict their interactions with non-members, are disposed to follow authoritative leaders and are distrustful to outsiders is captured by (c) the social-epistemic environment for cultivating and retaining fundamentalist belief. And the perception that fundamentalists can violate norms of moderation in their credences is given by (b) outlining how firmly fundamentalist beliefs are held.

We now have the resources to provide rational critique of fundamentalist belief. In what follows, I adapt three ways of addressing this issue from contemporary epistemology. The first approach we can take is broadly *evidentialist*. Evidentialists maintain that a belief is only justified or permitted if there is sufficient evidence to support it (Conee and Feldman 2004). The idea behind this view is that beliefs should be proportioned to the evidence if we are to attain knowledge.¹¹ For instance, if someone is getting on a plane to London, then she should only believe that the plane leaves at 5pm if she has sufficient evidence to believe that it leaves at 5pm. She could gather this evidence by, say, looking at her plane ticket, or checking

¹¹ This idea has a long tradition in Western philosophy. According to Hume, 'A wise man...proportions his belief to the evidence' (1975, p.110/§87); and for Clifford, 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence' (1879, p.186).

the website of the company she is flying with. But she would be unjustified in believing this proposition if she just had a guess at what time the plane flies out. The problem with just guessing is that there is no connection between making a guess and getting to the truth, which is essential for knowledge, whereas beliefs based on proper evidence are more likely to be true.

Now, on this evidentialist sense of rationality, it seems that fundamentalist beliefs, as described by CCT and SIT, can be reasonable. For, note several points we have said about fundamentalist beliefs. First, that the propositions believed cohere with reality as the fundamentalist experiences it: they explain why she feels a sense of a loss of identity, and what needs to be done to recover it. For instance, scientific discoveries, or capitalist greed, or colonial injustices, jar with her personal values and sense of self, but religion coheres with these values and notions of selfhood. Believing them makes perfect sense of the world, and so her experience seem to the agent to provide evidence for the truth of her beliefs. Second, the source of these propositions is deemed to be infallible divine revelation, which would make the propositions indubitable. It is not only rational to believe propositions that are based on divine revelation, but, as CCT holds, to believe them with high degrees of confidence. Third, fundamentalists are led by epistemic authorities, who give good reasons to believe what they laud for their followers to believe. When an authority figure lauds a proposition for belief, say, that the US government should be opposed, they might then show the faults with the US government, thus giving grounds for their authority. Moreover, those authorities might go on to become persecuted or even martyred, which could function so as to strengthen and confirm the views of the authority figure. Fourth, given SIT, there will strict controls on the flow of information fed into the group, and so what the members will see and hear will be evidence that confirms what they already believe. Moreover, all of the group members will confirm these beliefs, thus acting as reinforcing evidence for their uptake and retention. And when dissident views appear, they are treated with widespread distrust. Given these four factors, on an evidentialist account of the justification of belief, fundamentalist belief can seem to be perfectly reasonable.

Of course, some of these points can be challenged. For instance, McDonough (2013) argues that the idea of God communicating to people in the way fundamentalists believe is incoherent. He notes that, for the Christian case at least, taking the Bible to be God's word faces problems of translation and interpretation. It is just not straightforward to take the Bible to be a clear case of God's speech to humans. But assuming this is correct, it might not seem that way *for the fundamentalist*: from her perspective, the Bible is God's clear and final communication to humankind. And moreover, she is surrounded by so many people showing assent to the view of the Bible as God's word that it's hard for her to come to doubt it as such within that social structure.

But again, we could respond that the fundamentalist may be reasonable from her subjective perspective, but from an *objective* perspective, fundamentalists are irrational since they *should not* hold the beliefs they do – if they were exposed to rational critique then they rationally ought to relinquish their beliefs. So, all we require to show that fundamentalists are

irrational, on an evidentialist account, is to distinguish between the subjective- and objective-perspective, where the objective shows that the fundamentalist is irrational, whereas the subjective is not really compatible with evidentialism. But to make this objection work, it needs to be shown that, objectively, fundamentalist beliefs are not based on proper evidence. In the case of purported divine revelation, this is a longstanding and potentially impossible problem. Is the Hebrew or Christian Bible, or the Koran, a reliable communication from the divine? Whilst we can cast doubt on whether it is, to show that these texts are not divinely revealed, and hence do not provide good evidence for belief, remains an open question. And this makes the evidentialist approach limited. Moreover, even objectively, some of the purported evidence may have a legitimate connection to the truth. Consider the proposition that *modern culture is hostile to my beliefs and values*. When one who believes this then sees evidence of legislation passed that opposes those beliefs and values, then the belief is objectively rational on an evidentialist account. So, evidentialism has limitations when it comes to critiquing fundamentalist beliefs, and it may yet be reasonable, on objective evidentialist grounds, for an agent to hold fundamentalist beliefs.

But there are other ways of giving epistemic evaluation to belief, and on these accounts, it is more straightforward to show that there are epistemic problems with fundamentalism. The second approach is broadly *reliabilist*. Reliabilists hold that the justification of a belief depends upon the process by which the belief is formed, and in particular, whether or not the process is *truth-conducive* (Goldman 1979).¹² For instance, suppose I believe there is a tree in front of me, and I have perfect eyesight, am in a clear state of mind, and it is daytime. In this case, the process for forming that belief, made up from my perceptual organ (the eyes) and the conditions for perceiving (the light), is likely to produce a true belief – it is a truth-conducive process. We can give social examples of reliabilism as well. For example, suppose I read academic journal articles that claim that the earth is warming due, in part, to anthropogenic causes. Now, add that these articles come from journals with excellent peer review processes, written by renowned climate scientists, and that their research is rigorous and thoroughgoing. Again, the process by which I acquired the belief is likely to produce a true belief: the process is truth-conducive.

If we apply this *process reliabilist* approach to fundamentalist beliefs, we can now see where they are problematic. For, they are formed in echo chamber-like environments, which have properties that are *not* truth-conducive. It's worth noting that, on some accounts, echo chambers don't have to be epistemically problematic – in themselves, they are epistemically neutral. As Lackey (2018; see also Elzinga 2020) notes, for someone who believes in climate change, there is no epistemic benefit gained by considering the position of a climate change denier because the content of the denier's claims is unlikely to be true. Moreover, diminishing the credibility of climate change deniers, and amplifying that of believers, is not necessarily a

¹² Reliabilism has received widespread support in contemporary philosophy. For an overview of the theory and extensive literature see Goldman (2015). As Goldman notes, there are ways of making reliabilism compatible with evidentialism.

problematic practice. Indeed, that would seem to be a policy that would *enhance* the truth-conduciveness of the process of acquiring beliefs on climate change. So, the epistemic goodness or badness of echo chambers is contingent, and some policies produce truth-conducive echo chambers. But this is not the case for someone in a fundamentalist echo chamber. In their case, the echo chamber has properties that are epistemically bad, or, falsity-conducive. Consider some features of the social insularity involved in fundamentalism described in §4. Authorities may demand that followers believe propositions on matters in which they are not experts, including issues of science and history; out-group members are distrusted simply because they are not in the in-group, rather than on the basis of their credentials or the plausibility of their counterevidence; in-group members are trusted simply because they are in the in-group, rather than on the basis of their credentials or the plausibility of their evidence; and the aims of the social insularity of the fundamentalist group is not to believe accurately or truthfully, but to believe with high credence. In general, these kinds of socially insular epistemic practices will tend to be unreliable for the purposes of generating true beliefs. Hence, fundamentalist beliefs will be unjustified, on a reliabilist account, because they will result from social processes that tend to produce false, rather than true beliefs. Whilst not all echo chambers are epistemically bad, fundamentalist echo chambers do have epistemically problematic properties, and hence will produce unreliable (falsity-conducive), and therefore unjustified beliefs. But although fundamentalist beliefs will not be justified on a reliabilist account, this doesn't mean that fundamentalist beliefs cannot be *reasonable* in the sense of being quite understandable, or even evidentially rational, as we have already described.

Note that a reliabilist account of the justification of fundamentalist beliefs targets the truth- or falsity-conduciveness of the practices that lead to the formation of those beliefs. But fundamentalist groups also discourage their members from seeking truth altogether: they don't just restrict the diet of information to that which already confirms their beliefs; they also apply pressure on members of the group to be uncritical and not to challenge those beliefs. To account for this, we can appeal to a third ground for criticising fundamentalist belief, which connects with *virtue* and *vice* epistemology.

Epistemic virtues are generally taken to be intellectual character traits or attitudes that motivate agents to acquire epistemic goods, such as knowledge, evidence, and justified true belief (Zagzebski 1996). Among these virtues include openmindedness, curiosity, courage, diligence, humility, firmness, and attention to detail (Roberts and Wood 2007). Whilst the acquisition of epistemic goods is the *ultimate* end of epistemic virtue, each specific attitude motivates an agent to attain these goods through the acquisition of salient *proximate* ends. For instance, we might think of humility as disposing an agent to acknowledge and act on her intellectual limitations (Whitcomb et al. 2017). So, if a humble person is forgetful, her humility will motivate her to acknowledge and act on her forgetfulness by, for instance, asking others to remind her about important appointments and meetings. In doing so, she will use the input of others as evidence about when her appointments will take place so that she can have knowledge of them. Accordingly, the agent's humility has as its proximate end the disposition

to acknowledge and act on her intellectual limitations, but it is virtuous because it enables her to acquire the ultimate ends of evidence, true belief and knowledge.

In contrast to the virtues, the epistemic vices are attitudes such as negligence, idleness, conformity, rigidity, prejudice, wishful thinking, closedmindedness and obtuseness (Zagzebski 1996, 152). These vices present a more complex picture than the virtues, since there seems to be a range of motivations associated with them. Symmetrically to the virtues, they can involve a disposition to acquire epistemic “*bads*”. For instance, with wishful thinking, the agent is disposed to believe a proposition simply because she wants it to be true, regardless of whether the proposition *is* true, and as such, wishful thinking can motivate an agent to believe what is false, or to ignore counterevidence. But asymmetrically to the virtues, they can simply exhibit a ‘straightforward lack of desire for knowledge or an insufficient concern with knowledge relative to other goods’ (Baehr 2010, 209). Consider that, for example, the intellectually lazy, negligent or incurious person will be either disinterested in acquiring knowledge, or will be unwilling to put effort into acquiring it.

To capture both of these epistemic limitations, Quassim Cassam proposes that we should think of vices in consequentialist, rather than motivational terms. He proposes that what makes an attitude intellectually vicious is that it ‘systematically obstructs the gaining, keeping, or sharing of knowledge’ (2019, 23). That’s not to say that they aren’t motivational, but that despite their diverse motivational profiles, they are epistemically bad because of their bad epistemic consequences.

Both the motivational and consequentialist approaches to epistemic virtue and vice are usually referred to as ‘responsibilist’ theories since, unsurprisingly, the traits they pick out are deemed to be those over which we are responsible.¹³ For responsibilists, virtues and vices are traits and attitudes that are acquired through habits over which we have at least a measure of control, and as such, we are responsible for the formation of these traits and attitudes, and can, accordingly, be praised or blamed for acquiring them. But the possession of intellectual virtue and vice is not always the responsibility of the agent. As Battaly (2015) points out, in cases where agents have received abusive upbringings, been subject to indoctrination,¹⁴ or have inherited prejudices from their community,¹⁵ they can form intellectual vices for which they are not responsible. In place of the responsibilist theory, Battaly defends a *personalist* account, which differs from responsibilism only in the sense that agents may or may not be

¹³ The contrast is generally made with virtue *reliabilism*, which highlights hard-wired traits that generally produce true belief (Greco 2010).

¹⁴ She points to the case, highlighted by Adams (1985, 19), where the Hitler Youth were ‘victim[s] of [their] education’.

¹⁵ The example used to illustrate this point is Fricker’s (2007) white jurors in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, who inherited their racism from their community.

held responsible for the acquisition of their intellectual character.¹⁶ Given that many fundamentalists were raised in fundamentalist families and communities, then the personalist account offers a better way of critiquing their intellectual character.

Now, it seems plausible that fundamentalists engage in practices that cultivate intellectual vice, whether or not they ought to be blamed for doing so. For instance, the fundamentalist is incentivised to sustain and strengthen her beliefs, not to arrive at true justified beliefs; to believe authority figures regardless of their credentials; and not to check the truth of what one is told by other members of the community. These practices can lead to the cultivation of certain character traits. For instance, members of fundamentalist groups are encouraged to be *incurious* about objections to the truth of their religiopolitical system; *distrustful* towards outsiders regardless of their epistemic competence and credentials; *gullible* in accepting what they are told by group members and authorities; *arrogant* in holding their beliefs certain above those from other groups whilst paying little attention to their own intellectual limitations; and *negligent* in checking whether or not what they believe is accurate. These five intellectual vices, amongst numerous others, will be formed because fundamentalists habitually close themselves off to counterevidence, and engage in belief-reinforcing practices, and in so doing fail to explore alternative intellectual options.

Taking the example of intellectual carelessness, consider how the echo chamber-like environment of the fundamentalist group promotes, through habit and practice, the formation of intellectual vice. When an agent only consumes information that is consonant with her beliefs because she wants to hold the beliefs that secure her identity, she may simply not check on the likely veracity of the information she is consuming. One might treat the claims being made by religious authorities as though they are from reliable and well-informed people, without paying any attention to their credentials or motives. This would be paradigmatic of intellectually careless behaviour. And the worry this generates is that by engaging in this practice habitually, the agent will not merely engage in careless behaviour, but will *become* intellectually careless, and hence will become generally disposed towards intellectual carelessness. It will then become harder for the agent to break out of her vicious tendencies and become diligent in checking the veracity of her informational sources. Then, the more careless she becomes, the more she will engage in careless behaviour, which will then intensify her carelessness further, in a vicious cycle. Her experience in the echo chamber-like environment cultivates and intensifies intellectual vice.¹⁷

¹⁶ However, some will actively influence their beliefs using the socially insular practices of the fundamentalist environment. To account for this, we could endorse the *influence theory* (Peels 2017), which argues that we are responsible for how our beliefs are *formed*, not just for the beliefs themselves.

¹⁷ My proposal here contrasts with that of Peels (2020, 225) who hypothesises that ‘fundamentalist beliefs are always beliefs that are brought about by the operation of intellectual vices’. On my account, the processes that produce fundamentalist beliefs also cultivate intellectual vices, which then have the operative effect of sustaining those beliefs.

But even if fundamentalists acquire intellectual vices through their lived environments, how does this impact on the rationality of their beliefs? Well, the more intellectual vices are acquired, the more detached from truth their beliefs will become, for, the agents with the vices will lack the motivation to have true beliefs. Intellectual vice *demotivates* agents to engage in practices that enable them to acquire knowledge, such as relying on genuine epistemic authorities, checking the truth of what one believes, being aware of one's limitations, and seeking evidence for the truth of one's belief. Instead of having these virtuous motives, the vicious agent will just want to hold the beliefs, regardless of whether or not they are true, or based on good evidence. And on this basis, the fundamentalist's beliefs will be unjustified, since they will be *retained* because of vicious intellectual character. It is the bad character that the fundamentalist has formed that partly enables her to hold on to her beliefs, by not properly checking to see if they are true, or if there is evidence for or against those beliefs. Beliefs based on vice rather than virtue are epistemically unjustified: they lead her away from epistemic goods like truth and knowledge.

Again, the fundamentalist is not necessarily blameworthy for forming these vices, and for allowing beliefs to be based on them, as the personalist account of intellectual vice acknowledges. But if she knowingly cultivates these vices through socially insular practices, then she will be epistemically blameworthy. Moreover, she may have understandable reasons for what she does, but she will still become epistemically deficient and fail to flourish epistemically.

So, fundamentalist beliefs can be reasonable from a subjective perspective, and on an objective evidentialist account, they are not clearly irrational. But nevertheless, they are epistemically objectionable on a reliabilist account since they are formed in socially insular environments and through practices that are not truth-conducive. Moreover, these environments cultivate epistemic vices that demotivate fundamentalists to pursue epistemic goods, which then provide an unjustified basis for the beliefs held by fundamentalists.

We have now arrived at an account of fundamentalist belief and how it can be epistemically problematic. Some may wish to simply dismiss fundamentalism as irrational and non-evidence based, but as we've seen, this assumption is too quick. Fundamentalism can be reasonable, and may even be considered evidentially rational. But the epistemological problems with fundamentalism are much deeper and more problematic than evidential considerations. For, fundamentalist social environments involve elements that are not truth-promoting, cultivate poor intellectual character, and ultimately, lead to resilient beliefs that, due to their basing on bad character and poor processes, are less likely to be true.

A potential implication of this account is that, to break down problematic forms of fundamentalism, particularly where this involves extremism and radicalisation, could require breaking into the echo chambers, undermining trust in authorities and scriptures, or presenting a more compelling ideology. By doing so, confidence will be reduced in the extremist system. Moreover, members will become aware of their negligence, gullibility or distrustfulness, and begin to critically question their circumstances for themselves. Exploring

these issues may prove fruitful for future research, particularly on tackling problematic forms of fundamentalism.¹⁸

References

- Adams, Robert (1985) 'Involuntary Sins,' *The Philosophical Review*, 94 (1985), 3-31.
- Almond, Gabriel A., R. Scott Appleby and Emmanuel Sivan (2003) *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms Around the World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Altemeyer, Bob & Hunsberger, Bruce (1992) 'Authoritarianism, Religious Fundamentalism, Quest, and Prejudice,' *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 2:2, 113-133.
- Aran, Gideon (2013) 'On Religiosity and Super-religiosity (II): The Case of Jewish Ultra-orthodoxy,' *Numen* 60, 4, 371-419.
- Baehr, J. (2010) 'Epistemic Malevolence,' in *Virtue and Vice: Moral and Epistemic*, ed. H. Battaly, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell: 189–213.
- Baurmann, Michael (2007) 'Rational Fundamentalism? An Explanatory Model of Fundamentalist Beliefs,' *Episteme* 4, 2: 150-166.
- Beier, Matthias (2006) 'On The Psychology of Violent Christian Fundamentalism: Fighting to Matter Ultimately,' *Psychoanalytic Review*, 93(2), 301-327.
- Bendroth, Margaret (2014) 'Fundamentalism and Christianity,' in *Fundamentalism: Perspectives on a Contested History*. Simon A. Wood and David Harrington Watt (eds.). University of South Carolina Press, 55-69.
- Benkler Y., Faris R. and Roberts H. (2018). *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brouwer, Steve, Gifford, Paul and Rose, Susan D. (1996) *Exporting the American Gospel: Global Christian Fundamentalism*. London: Routledge.
- Cappell, Ezra and Jessica Lang (eds) (2020) *Off the Derech: Leaving Orthodox Judaism*. State University of New York Press.
- Cassam, Quassim (2019) *Vices of the Mind: From the Intellectual to the Political*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Clifford, W. K. 1879. 'The Ethics of Belief,' in *Lectures and Essays*. London: Macmillan.
- Conee, E. and Feldman, R. 2004. 'Introduction,' in E. Conee and R. Feldman (eds.) *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 2-8.

¹⁸ Work on this article was made possible by contributing, as an Associate Member, to the project EXTREME (Extreme Beliefs: The Epistemology and Ethics of Fundamentalism), which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant agreement No. 851613), and from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. I am thankful to the Extreme Beliefs group for their helpful feedback on this paper, in particular, to Nora Kindermann, Rik Peels, Chris Ranalli and Ruth Tietjen. Thanks also to two anonymous referees from this journal.

- Crenshaw, Martha (1986) 'The Psychology of Political Terrorism,' in *Political Psychology: Contemporary Problems and Issues* M.G. Hermann (ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986, 379–413.
- Elzinga, Benjamin (2020) 'Echo Chambers and Audio Signal Processing,' *Episteme*.
- Fricker, Miranda (2007) *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Geoffroy, Martin (2004) 'Theorizing Religion in the Global Age: A Typological Analysis,' *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 18(1/2), 33-46.
- Gilbert, Margaret (1987) 'Modelling Collective Belief,' *Synthese* 73 (1): 185–204.
- Gilbert, Margaret and Pilchman, Daniel (2014) 'Belief, Acceptance, and What Happens in Groups: Some Methodological Considerations,' in *Essays in Collective Epistemology*, Jennifer Lackey (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 189-212.
- Giroux, Henry (2005) 'The Passion of the Right: Religious Fundamentalism and the Crisis of Democracy,' *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies* 5, 3: 309-317.
- Goldman, Alvin (1979) 'What is Justified Belief?' In G. Pappas (ed.), *Justification and Knowledge*, pp. 1–25. Boston: D. Reidel.
- Goldman, Alvin (2015) 'Reliabilist Epistemology,' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- Greco, J. (2010) *Achieving Knowledge: A Virtue-Theoretic Account of Epistemic Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Günther, Christoph and Kaden, Tom (2016) 'Beyond Mere Terrorism: The Islamic State's Authority as a Social Movement and as a Quasi-State,' *Security and Peace* Vol. 34, No. 2, 134-140.
- Harris, Harriet A. (2008) 'Fundamentalism(s),' in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies* Edited by Judith M. Lieu and J. W. Rogerson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 810-840.
- Heywood, Andrew (2012) *Political Ideologies: An Introduction* (5th edition). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hobsbawm, Eric (1994) *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991*. London: Michael Joseph.
- Hume, D. 1975. *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*. 3rd edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Jamieson, K. H. and Cappella, J. N (2008) *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnston, David L. (2014) 'Fundamentalism Diluted: From Enclave to Globalism in Conservative Muslim Ecological Discourse,' in *Fundamentalism: Perspectives on a Contested History*. Simon A. Wood and David Harrington Watt (eds.). University of South Carolina Press, 199-216.
- Lackey Jennifer (2018) 'True Story: Echo Chambers are Not the Problem,' *Morning Consult*. <https://morningconsult.com/opinions/true-story-echo-chambers-not-problem/>.
- Liht, José, Lucian Gideon Conway III, Sara Savage, Weston White and Katherine A. O'Neill (2011) 'Religious Fundamentalism: An Empirically Derived Construct and Measurement Scale,' *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 299-323.

- Lutz, Brenda J. and Lutz, James M. (2015) 'Globalisation and Terrorism in the Middle East,' *Perspectives on Terrorism* Vol. 9, No. 5, 27-46
- Malcolm, Finlay (2021) 'Testimony, Faith and Humility,' *Religious Studies*, 57, 466-483.
- Marsden, G. M. 1980. *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism 1870–1925*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marty, Martin E. and Appleby, Scott eds. (1991-1995). *The Fundamentalism Project, 5 Volumes*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- McDonald, Laura Zahra (2011) 'Securing Identities, Resisting Terror: Muslim Youth Work in the UK and its Implications for Security,' *Religion, State and Society*, 39:2-3, 177-189.
- McDonough, Richard (2013) 'Religious Fundamentalism: A Conceptual Critique,' *Religious Studies* 49, 4, 561-579.
- Montmarquet, J. A. (1993) *Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Montmarquet, J. A. (2000) 'An 'Internalist' Conception of Virtue,' in *Knowledge, Belief, and Character: Readings in Virtue Epistemology*, ed. G. Axtell, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield: 135–48.
- Nguyen C. Thi (2020) 'Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles,' *Episteme* 17(2), 141–61.
- Nottleman, Nikolaj (2011) 'Belief-Desire Explanation,' *Philosophy Compass* 6/12, 912-921.
- Paine, Andrew (1997) 'Religious Fundamentalism and Legal Systems: Methods and Rationales in the Fight to Control the Political Apparatus,' *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* Volume 5, Issue 1, pp. 263-296.
- Peels, Rik (2017) *Responsible Belief: A Theory in Ethics and Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Peels, Rik (2020) 'Responsibility for Fundamentalist Belief,' in *Epistemic Duties: New Arguments, New Angles*, Kevin McCain and Scott Stapleford (eds.). New York: Routledge, 221-239.
- Peels, Rik (MS) 'Defining 'Fundamentalism''.
- Peels, Rik and Kindermann, Nora (MS) 'What Are Fundamentalist Beliefs?'
- Ravitzky, Aviezer (1996) *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*. Chicago University Press.
- Ruthven, Malise (2004) *Fundamentalism: The Search for Meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shupe, Anson (2011) 'Religious Fundamentalism,' *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. Peter B. Clarke (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 478-490.
- Smidt, Corwin (1988) 'Evangelicals within Contemporary American Politics: Differentiating Between Fundamentalist and Non-Fundamentalist Evangelicals,' *The Western Political Quarterly* Vol. 41, No. 3, 601-620.
- Stadler, Nurit (2013) 'Infiltrating Fundamentalist Institutions,' *Counterpoints* Volume 354, pp. 341-357.
- Upal, M. Afzal (2015) 'Confronting Islamic Jihadist Movements,' *Journal of Terrorism Research* 6, 2, 57-69.

- Whitcomb, Dennis, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-Snyder (2017) 'Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations,' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, XCIV, 509-539.
- Wilkinson, Paul (2003) 'Why Modern Terrorism? Differentiating Types and Distinguishing Ideological Motivations,' in *The New Global Terrorism: Characteristics, Causes, Controls*. Charles W. Kegley, Jr. (Ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Winter, Tim (2009) 'The Poverty of Fanaticism,' in *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition, Revised and Expanded: Essays by Western Muslim Scholars*. Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, pp. 301-313.
- Wood, Simon A. and David Harrington Watt (eds.) (2014) *Fundamentalism: Perspectives on a Contested History*. University of South Carolina Press.
- Wright, Robin (1989) *In the Name of God: The Khomeini Decade*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Yelderman, Logan A., Matthew P. West and Monica K. Miller (2019) 'Death penalty decision-making: Fundamentalist beliefs and the evaluation of aggravating and mitigating circumstances,' *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 24, 103–122.
- Zagzebski, Linda (1996) *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.