

FUNDAMENTALISM, LIBERAL CHRISTIANITY, SECULAR  
HUMANISM, AND THE BIBLICAL MOVEMENT

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Exploration of the Bible can be a rich and worthwhile undertaking, regardless of whether one is a fundamentalist, a liberal Christian, a secular humanist, or any of the countless degrees within that broad spectrum between extreme fundamentalist and materialist. Study of the Bible is especially relevant due to its popularity as being the most published book in history, and at least portions of it have been translated into over 2000 different languages ([biblesources.bible.com](http://biblesources.bible.com)). A particular frame of mind sets the foundation upon which one will study, filter, glean and learn from the Bible.

The stories of the Old Testament began as oral traditions that were passed down from generation to generation until they were eventually written down. All of the writings of the Bible comprise work from about 15 centuries B.C. to the latter part of the first century A.D. The Bible came into its current form at some point in the fourth century A.D. Copies had to be handwritten for centuries afterwards until the printing press was invented and utilized. The first sizeable book printed with moveable type was the Gutenberg Bible, printed in 1454 or 1455.

There was really no system of critical analysis of the Bible until around the age of Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was a cultural epoch of the eighteenth century, initially centralized in Europe, but with far-reaching affectation. Different countries experienced the Enlightenment differently through the diversity of opinion not only on the topic of religion, but also on philosophy and politics. The desire to investigate and critically analyze life's complexities welcomed such concepts as reason, freedom, science, optimism, rational Christianity, natural religion, and social contract, and rejected the older concepts of authority, tradition, church, revelation, and the supernatural (Ramm 3). Along with the Industrial

Revolution, the Enlightenment helped mold vast secular populations as it replaced faith and obedience with reason and individual liberty.

Although some revolutionary ideas of the Enlightenment eventually faded away (e.g., the simplistic definition of Reason), many more ideas continued to shape history, and eleven Enlightenment-era ideas that remain which influence our modern dependence on critical analysis are listed below (Ramm 4-5):

1. the beginnings of scientific history
2. the contention that whatever is claimed as truth must justify itself before the bar of reason
3. the primacy of nature as the source for answers to fundamental human questions
4. the necessity for literary and historical criticism of all documents of the past—secular, ecclesiastical, and biblical
5. the need for freedom to advance progress and human welfare
6. the need for a critical philosophy
7. the belief that ethics is autonomous and not dependent on religion or theology
8. the fundamental suspicion of all truth claims grounded in authority, tradition, or divine revelation
9. the high evaluation of the sciences and the virtue of progress in scientific knowledge
10. the affirmation that tolerance is the supreme disposition in matters of religion
11. the need to continue the humanism that first broke through into Western consciousness in the time of the Renaissance

With the expanded valuing of critical analysis, it is easy to see why the most extreme fundamentalists are seen by some to be so close-minded when it comes to interpretations of the Bible. It is not just how someone views the Bible, but also how they view Christianity in general. A certain mindset is required to accommodate the concept of belief in God. Those who *believe* see everything in life through the lens of the belief in God. That mindset and its accompanying belief system filters every single belief that the individual experiences, and it affects the way they see the world and its operations. Strict fundamentalists can make a case to support every single belief they have, even to the point of being prepared to counter arguments of fact, and when the principles of formal logic are not able to be utilized to support an argument, they invoke the concept of faith.

At the opposite end of the belief spectrum are supercilious secular humanists. Those who *don't believe* can use every possible argument to deny the existence of God. Richard Dawkins might be considered such an individual. Dawkins uses his secular humanist filter to counter Christian apologetics. For example, he stated that “The five (a posteriori) ‘proofs’ asserted by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century don’t prove anything, and are easily ... exposed as vacuous” (77). Additionally, Dawkins rejects the (a priori) argument that was proposed by St. Anselm of Canterbury in 1078, which held that any God we can imagine couldn’t be as great as the real God because the real God must *exceed* whatever we could possibly imagine (80).

Dawkins is also willing to use sarcasm with his “filter” of the world to support his points. For example, he mentions the “well-loved story of Noah” and the “charming” legend of the animals entering the ark two by two (237). Dawkins does, however, make a valid point when he observes that too often we pick and choose which scriptures to believe to support our arguments, and which (scriptures) to write off as symbols or allegories (238). In other words, we are often too quick to use the Bible for our own ends. Arguments for either peace or war can be made by biased interpretations of the subjective selection of certain applicable verses.

Dawkins also criticizes the *argument from personal experience* that Christians express whereby they argue that through their own experiences they have come to believe in God. But people can surely benefit from personal experiences that form the basis of their belief system, even if some of those experiences come from growing up within a preexisting framework of a particular church’s doctrine. Mankind’s natural personal freedom should guarantee their right to believe as they wish as long as their actions don’t infringe upon the rights of others to do the same, and this is the essence of freedom of religion that we value so highly.

Exploration is needed in order to gain a richer understanding of the Bible. One of those

explorations led to wondering how the concept of God arose in humans. David Hume (1711 – 1776) discussed this issue by describing early mankind’s belief in polytheism. In ancient times, there were so many different forces at work (e.g., sun, drought, floods) that it seemed like there must be multiple invisible powers at play concomitantly, often in contention with each other. He wrote that “the conduct of events ... is so full of variety and uncertainty, that, if we suppose it immediately ordered by any intelligent beings, we must acknowledge a contrariety in their designs and intentions, a constant combat of opposite powers” (27). Not only did the providence of each god seem separate from that of the others, but the operations of the same god were uncertain and invariable. For example, the entity “responsible” for rain might provide water for the nourishment of agricultural plants, but with seeming caprice might just as easily produce a flood that would wipe out those crops. Therefore, people created prayers and sacrifices to appease the apparently fickle gods.

Eventually, as people increased the preemptive efforts of their fearful and cautious reverence, they intuited the concept of one god as supreme above all others, and as they continued to offer adoration for subordinate divinities, “their addresses to (those divinities) gradually rise upon them, and encroach on the adoration due to their supreme deity ... Thus the deity became the Optimus Maximus of the heathens. Thus the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, became the supreme deity of Jehovah of the Jews” (Hume 44). Numerous ancient mythological beliefs inspired the oral traditions that led to the collection of writings that eventually formed the Old Testament.

The tradition of God-belief proceeded through history as an integral part of the inner nature of mankind. It influenced the way people viewed the world. Religious leaders continued that tradition of beliefs through the doctrine of the Church. While some embraced the changes

brought about by the Enlightenment, still others continued to value the traditional belief system of Christianity. And as some explored the fields of science, others explored the complexities of religious life. Søren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855) commented that 1848 was the richest year he had experienced as an author. From his journal entry of April 19, 1848, it was clear that he felt that his whole inner nature had changed by a feeling of epiphany that not only had God forgiven his sins, but God had also *forgotten* them (Lowrie xi). Kierkegaard observed that the Christian lives for something different than what the heathen (i.e., non-believer) lives for. The Christian seeks something greater that is experienced through an inner awareness. Kierkegaard observed that the Christian “believes that he has a father in heaven who every day openeth His bountiful hand and filleth all things living (him included) with blessing; yet what he seeks is not the satisfaction of his appetite, it is the heavenly Father” (Kierkegaard 19). When someone sees the world this way, it is fundamentally different from the world of the nonbeliever.

The liberal Christian wants to gain understanding in a religious life but is still aware of the complexities of a pluralistic society. That society includes those who are in science and use rigorous methods to acquire evidence to prove hypotheses. Religion is not a field of science, and is in a completely different domain of study. Psychology and theology are more appropriate for studying religion than the methodologies of science. Religion is manifested differently in people in the way they choose to live their lifestyle. Miller described two different ways of understanding the relationship between religion and lifestyle. The first has religion as a subsymbol of one’s lifestyle, just as one’s house, automobile, attire, choice of pet, and career are subsymbols. The second view “places religion at the very core of one’s being, with religious values functioning in a determinative role ... In this model, one’s religious commitments become normative for the rest of one’s lifestyle choices” (Miller 48). Miller’s first model is more

pragmatic than the second model which is more idealistic. Each represents a filter, or viewpoint, of the world.

Fundamentalists, liberal Christians, and secular humanists all choose a different combination of values and beliefs by which their lifestyle reflects their level of religious belief. Leo Tolstoy discussed how scientifically-minded individuals may be inclined to substitute love for humankind and service towards humanity for the principles of love for God and God's service. These secular humanists seem to believe that while loving God seems obscure and arbitrary, loving "humanity alone is far more clear, tangible, and reasonable. Scientific men teach in theory that the only good and rational life is that which is devoted to the service of the whole of humanity. That is for them the import of the Christian doctrine, and to that they reduce Christ's teachings" (103). Tolstoy went on to add that "the Christian doctrine has nothing in common with the doctrine of the Positivists ... and (all believers) of the universal brotherhood of mankind. They differ from one another especially in Christianity's having a firm and clear basis in the human soul, while love for humanity is only a theoretical deduction from analogy. The doctrine of love for humanity alone is based on the social conception of life" (Tolstoy 103). Tolstoy's observation was that love for humanity is absolutely wonderful, but there is one type of love that is more encompassing—love of God, which implies broader love of *all* of creation.

Tolstoy keenly observed that the social conception of life served as the basis of religion when it was first presented to men thousands of years ago, and at the time it seemed mystical. That mystique was misunderstood and misinterpreted in instances when patriarchal religions exalted the family or clan, or where state religions deified their rulers. We have become much wiser over the past several thousand years and no longer need to see religion as anything mysterious or supernatural. We have "outlived the social, family, and state conceptions of life"

(Tolstoy 113). With that observation, Tolstoy believed that humankind was ready for the next phase of its life—that of the spiritual life. While Jesus came some eighteen centuries before Tolstoy, changes have been slow to occur in practice as it relates to the Christian ideal. It is hard to give up old habits using just reason alone to acknowledge the value in Jesus's teachings as presented in the Bible. This is where the concept of faith, with its corresponding filter of life, helps strengthen individual resolve to approach the complexities of the outer world.

The variety of beliefs of fundamentalists comes in many different forms, including such diverse denominations as Baptists, Pentecostals, Protestants and Catholics. "Even certain branches of such denominations as Presbyterians have their fundamentalist congregations" (Blaker 36). What they all have in common is a strong belief in the Bible. The most strict fundamentalists "tend to avoid the secular world (as much as is reasonably possible) as they look to a world to come" (Blaker 36). Sometimes too much time is spent pondering the afterlife rather than on living fully in this world.

One problem with the most extreme fundamentalists is that they discard facts when the facts are inconsistent with their belief system. One example is their belief that the Earth could not be more than several thousand years old because the counting of generations from Adam to Jesus (as presented in the Bible) indicates likewise. Despite the expertise of those in numerous scientific disciplines (e.g., geology, astrophysics, astronomy, paleontology) who show the earth to be several billion years old, strict fundamentalists reject it.

The wording of the Bible can be misleading for those who study its words. It may be unlikely that accurate meanings are extracted if one refuses to see alternate meanings or more truthful representations. Certain viewpoints, especially those at the far ends of the spectrum between strict fundamentalist and secular humanist, make it difficult to be open to new ideas.



Getting accurate meanings from the Bible can be difficult, especially since there are so many different versions of it. Compare the following translations of what Jesus was reported to have said in Matthew 4:17:

- *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand* (New King James Version, and Revised Standard Version)
- *Turn to God and change the way you think and act, for the kingdom of heaven is near!* (Good Word translation)
- *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near* (New International Version)
- *Turn from sin, and turn to God, for the Kingdom of heaven is near* (The Living Bible)
- *Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is close at hand* (New Jerusalem Bible)
- *Change your life. God's kingdom is here* (The Message)

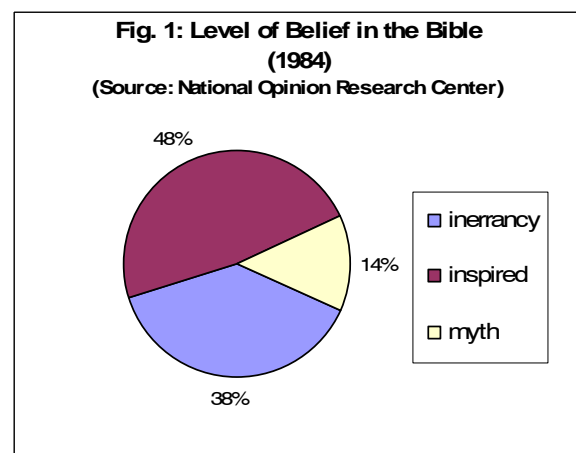
Different translations attempt to capture the most accurate meaning, and some attempt to put it in contemporary language to make it more accessible to a greater number of people. However, the variance of a single word between translations can lead to much different implications of meaning. Three versions above have “repent” as the first word. Repenting implies acknowledgement of culpability. In contrast, the other three versions give a directive to change one’s life. Change carries one *forward* into the future, but there is no directive in these three versions to look *backward* in order to be penitent; one would surely acknowledge their past mistakes, but only as a reference point for how *not* to behave in the future.

Current translations may never be able to capture the purest meanings of the Bible. Professor Bernard Ramm’s interview with evangelical Karl Barth on April 26, 1958 included the following question: “Is not your view of revelation and inspiration so subjective that there are no theological propositions in Holy Scripture, hence the writing of theology is impossible?” Barth replied by stating that we don’t have the *pure* Word of God in scripture because it is already in the original Hebrew and Greek language (Ramm 119). He went on to add that the theological content in the original Word of God is carried over into written witness, and there is, therefore, a theological content in Holy Scripture, and this content forms the basis of Christian theology.

Some people, like Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong, believe that the strong view of most fundamentalists in the inerrancy of the Bible poses a threat not only to “faith in thought, but also to thoughtful faith, (and, in his opinion), if it continues to be viewed literally, the Bible ... is doomed to be cast aside as both dated and irrelevant” (Blaker 37). After being translated into more languages than any other book in history, it is unlikely that the Bible will be “cast aside,” but Spong makes the relevant point that strict close-minded fundamentalist beliefs may alienate some who would otherwise welcome a relationship with Christianity and the Bible.

Liberal Christians are willing to explore outside of the domain of the Bible and the Church for religious or spiritual truth. Some, for example, find The Urantia Book to be a rich supplement to the Bible, especially its fourth section on the life, ministry and divinity of Jesus. They would welcome reading about “the reality of Jesus of Nazareth as the glorified Christ, the son of God” (1084). Readers of The Urantia Book would also acknowledge that the gospel *about* Jesus is important for a religious life, but the living reality of the gospel *of* Jesus is of more value for a spiritual life. Mormons are another group of liberal believers, and their use of The Book of Mormon is complementary to a study of the Bible. Mormons typically believe that “The Bible is inspired ... but it is both unbiblical and illogical to state that it must be complete and perfect.

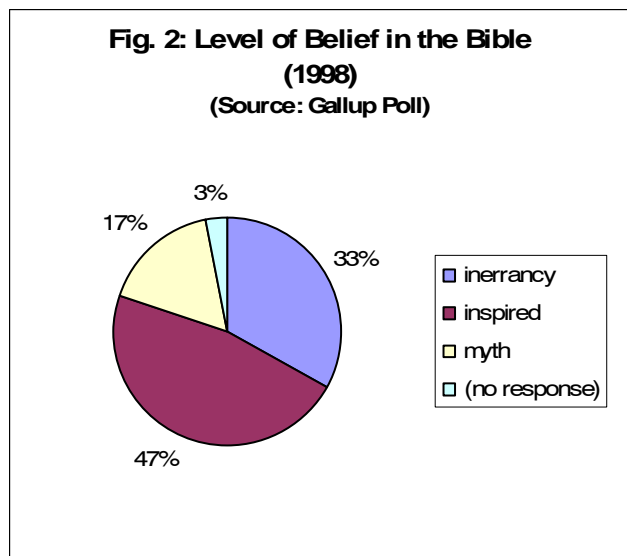
Neither the Bible nor the Book of Mormon is complete and perfect” (Lindsay). Mormon believers would add that God is the ultimate living authority, not an inanimate work that has passed down through human hands, translators, and print shops since it was finally compiled in its current form around 375 A.D. Their view,



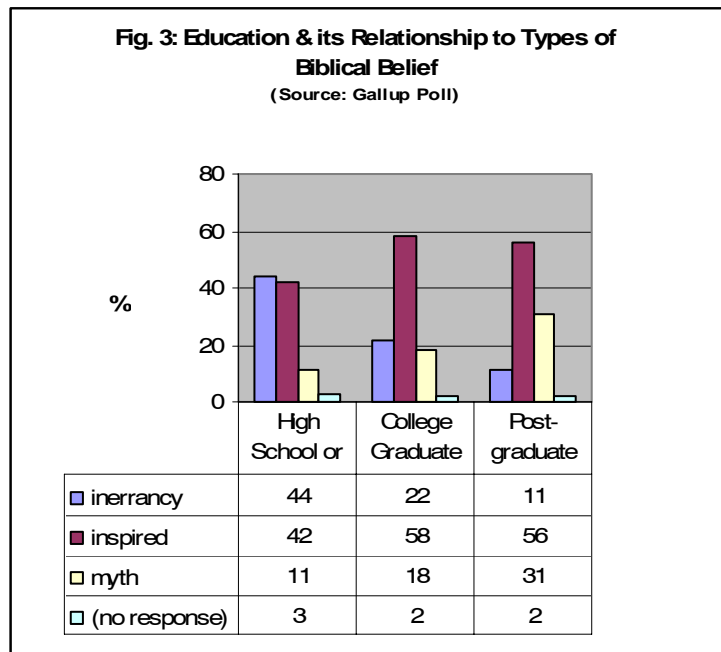
then, is that the Bible is an invaluable tool to enrich a Christian life, but is not something that should be *made* divine, almost to the point of being idolatrous.

Some people still hold strongly to their belief in the inerrancy of the Bible. The results of a survey (Fig. 1) by the National Opinion Research Center in 1984 show the distribution of fundamentalists who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, liberal Christians who believe the Bible was only inspired by God, and secular humanists who believe the Bible is man-made and full of myths and legends. The question asked of the respondents was, “Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible?” Thirty-eight percent selected *The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word*. Forty-eight percent selected *The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word*. Fourteen percent selected *The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by man*.

According to Gallup and Lindsay, the “move toward understanding the Bible as the *inspired*, not necessarily the *actual*, word of God is one of the most dramatic shifts in religious beliefs since the 1960s. As recently as 1963, approximately two-thirds of people believed the Bible was the *actual* word of God and should be taken literally. A 1998 survey (Fig. 2) using the same questions from 1984 show a reduction of those who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible.



It is interesting to note that the level of formal education is a factor in determining whether one believes in the inerrancy of the Bible (Gallup and Lindsay). Figure 3 illustrates that those with only a high school education (or less) are much more likely (44 percent) to believe in the inerrancy of the Bible than college graduates (22 percent) and those with post-graduate



education (11 percent). Presumably, the more one studies in the setting of formal education, the more one is likely to use standardized methods of critical analysis when studying the wording of the Bible. Of note, however, is that the survey did not consider level of intelligence, only level of formal education.

When it comes to studying the Bible, there are many degrees of belief ranging the broad spectrum of strict fundamentalist on the far right and secular humanist on the far left. Those at the extreme left of the secular humanist paradigm actually go so far as to ridicule those who believe in the Bible. Secular humanists with an accommodating attitude, while still not believing in God, are nevertheless more open to benefits of Biblical study, including the importance of what we can learn about human history. Those at the far right of the fundamentalist paradigm close off any argument that isn't consistent with their beliefs of Biblical inerrancy. Surely much can be learned by being exposed to all views. If any individual can gain meaning from the Bible that is positive in nature and helps them have a more integrous approach to interactions with their fellow humans, then study of the Bible will be worthwhile and of practical value. Those who

believe in God will undoubtedly gain a richer understanding of the Bible. If some experience inner peace and comfort by being believers in the inerrancy of the Bible, then that is of value to them and their belief system. There is something to be gained for everyone in the study of the Bible, whether it is merely educational, or whether it is spiritual in nature.

The ultimate point is that we can't know about the actual veracity of the Bible using the rigors of the scientific method or the principles of formal logic. Theology does not lend itself to scientific analysis. But theology does lend itself to philosophical debate, the practice of which can be edifying for anyone wanting to learn. For intellectual discussion and academic exercise, studying the Bible is instructive and worthwhile. However, for a spiritual awakening, the Bible is best recognized for being more than just an invaluable tool—it is a beacon to illuminate *the way*. The importance is not necessarily in the precise words of whichever version of the Bible is studied, however, but in the *meanings* those words convey, and in what we can learn about humanity during that study.

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