

Fundamental Intolerance?

“Religious Outlook, Culture War Politics, and Antipathy toward Christian Fundamentalists” by Louis Bolce and Gerald De Maio, in *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Spring 1999), Annenberg Public Policy Center, Univ. of Pennsylvania, 3620 Walnut St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19104-6220.

In recent decades, Americans have become quite intolerant of religious intolerance. Anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism are no longer socially acceptable, a sign of progress for which the spread of education is often given some credit. Yet ironically, the highly educated seem to be among the chief harborers of religious intolerance today: they simply cannot stand Christian fundamentalism.

“Roughly one-fifth of the nonfundamentalist [white] public hold intensely antagonistic sentiments toward fundamentalists,” report Bolce and De Maio, political scientists at the City University of New York. Other “culturally conservative religious groups” (e.g., Evangelicals, Seventh-Day Adventists, Pentecostals, and Mormons) also stir “significant” antipathy.

In surveys taken in 1988, 1992, and 1996, Americans’ feelings toward various groups were gauged on a “temperature” scale running from 0 (most negative) to 100 (most positive). Feelings about the poor were as warm as 69, while attitudes toward poor people on welfare got as cold as 47. Attitudes toward Christian fundamentalists were just about as frosty (45–49)—scoring higher than the frigid 35 for illegal aliens, but still well below the scores for past pariahs. Catholics, Jews, and blacks were held in warm regard (58–64).

The term fundamentalism was coined in 1920 by Curtis Lee Laws, a Baptist editor seeking to rally support for the “fundamental truths of Christianity.” Five years later, iconoclastic journalist H. L. Mencken popularized the term in his coverage of the famous Scopes trial, in which a Tennessee teacher was convicted of violating a law against teaching evo-

lution. Mencken called fundamentalism a “malignant imbecility,” and its followers “anthropoid rabble.” The harshly unflattering image has more or less stuck. But Bolce and De Maio say it no longer fits. Today’s fundamentalist is “more educated [and] politically sophisticated . . . less the ignorant hillbilly or cracker, and more a conservative suburban housewife who votes Republican.”

For many years, antifundamentalism was spread across religious and political lines, but a distinct shift occurred in 1992, the authors say, as fundamentalists allied themselves more explicitly with the Republican Party. This polarized sentiment, with other conservative groups warming toward their new allies, while “Jews, the highly educated, sec-



Pariahs to the Volvo set: Baptists at a revival meeting.

ularists, and Democratic voters became relatively more negative.” Indeed, Bolce and De Maio say that 37 percent of highly educated white Americans are “intensely antagonistic” toward fundamentalists.

Foes of fundamentalism claim their opposition reflects not prejudice but rather “attempts to guard democratic civility and pluralism,” note Bolce and De Maio, who avoid evaluating the claim. Similar arguments, of course, were once made about Catholics and Jews.