

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

August 2, 2011 at 12:00pm

The Many Faces of Fundamentalism

by Ken Briggs

NCR Today

It may be small consolation, but the roar of the Tea Party is a welcome reminder that fundamentalism comes in a wide varieties of forms and fashions.

Snake handlers and Biblical literalists take the brunt of social and media sarcasm and scorn but they're just one expression. And they aren't confined to a certain set of churches on the Protestant right wing. They exist across the spectrum of traditions as a stratum within each. I've even known Unitarian fundamentalists. By comparison, Baptists have a lot, but so do Catholics.

Fact is that fundamentalism is a state of mind, a hunger for certainty, an affinity for absolutism. I'd guess few of us would be excluded entirely from this category. I'm a part time fundamentalist; just try to dislodge my firm conviction that the death penalty is wrong.

Though religious fundamentalists are the scapegoats, its economic and political forms often escape notice. I can generally abide a religious fundamentalist who insists my soul is in peril unless I take the prescribed action quick over a free market fundamentalist who is willing to let the "losers" perish or the political fundamentalists like the Tea Party crowd who ignore the country's overall welfare in the name of policy purity.

As a nation, we're fairly drenched in patriotic fundamentalism. No matter how debased the arguments about debt reduction, the dreary state of the economy and the widening gap between rich and poor, nearly every participant felt it necessary to trumpet the United States as "the greatest country in the world."

In shaky times such as ours, Big Simple Answers naturally have enormous appeal from both the left and the right. Both smack of the need to sweep away the ambiguities and threats of real conditions for panaceas. My version of it is that things might have to get very bad before the revolt and reform can take

place. It's a questionable article of faith, but an article nonetheless.

The Tea Party's treacherous machinations deserve the fierce denunciations they get from a wide variety of Americans from across the political horizon. They also underscore that decidedly non-religious fundamentalisms may be more dangerous than their religious counterparts, though not as popularly entertaining. The preacher who recently became a laughing stock for failing to forecast the end of the world was a good sideshow but it's hard to imagine he caused much if any harm.

By contrast, the Tea Party species is on a warpath that, if unchecked, can take a great number of casualties.

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