



## **Interview with Dr. Martin E. Marty**

For our current issue, “Fundamentalism, Extremism and Dogmatism,” I thought long and hard about a person I would love to interview on this subject. I wanted someone who had the scholarly credentials, the experience, and the ability to convey what religious fundamentalism is all about. I realized the best person for this task would be Dr. Martin E. Marty. After all, he has been investigating and writing about various forms of religious fundamentalism for over fifty years. We at the Claremont Journal of Religion are honored to share our interview with Dr. Marty.

**How do you think fundamentalism has changed in America over the last 20 years?**

Fundamentalism and fundamentalisms remain in America, but are not as central to the plot as they were a third of a century ago, after the Iranian Revolution and figures like Jerry Falwell received front-page attention. Here are four trends: a) Moderate fundamentalisms have come to be seen as an classified as "evangelical." While non-fundamentalists could not "do business" with fundamentalists, they can, with evangelicals, who define themselves as more open, b) what we might call "secular right-wing" activities drained energy from political fundamentalism. You do not find COP courting Protestant fundamentalists or DEM opposing them; they deal with "Tea Party" and movements to its right, and c) Non-Protestant fundamentalisms (e.g. in Islam, the BJP and RSR in India) sail under so many different flags and colors that it is hard to cluster them as "fundamentalist."

**How does on go about understanding fundamentalism without automatically lumping everyone under the same title? Better put: how would you describe "the Varieties of Religious Fundamentalism?"**

In the Fundamentalism Project hosted by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, ""we" (meaning Scott Appleby and MEM and our co-workers) took great pains not to "lump" all movements having (our borrowed term) "family resemblances to fundamentalism" as having the same characteristic and face. In the end we found that we had dealt with over thirty movements, and in every case we took pains to see that our scholars dealt fairly, in terminology and characterization,

with each, a) A fundamental distinction throughout was between "militant" vs. "non-militant" fundamentalisms. The former represented people "down the block" or "in the next village," who sincerely and profoundly believed in their version of their faith, but were never aggressive. The most they would do was try to convert you. The latter including militancy in metaphors, strategies, and goals, and b) the other way to classify was to begin by studying the "host" religion, and keeping it as an adjective as in "Islamic" or "Mormon" or "Protestant" fundamentalism.

**In what ways do you think religious progressives and the non-religious can work with fundamentalists for a better society?**

Ardent, pure-form, exclusive fundamentalists resist cooperation with anyone, so it is hard to form coalitions or common causes. Mistrust and suspicion are part of the mental arsenal of those committed to such fundamentalisms. Yet not all the people in them are armed, or subversive of the common good. Slightly open fundamentalisms can be part of coalitions, though usually they moderate and acquire some non-fundamentalist commitments and styles. Example: some fundamentalists in the USA leaped over long-cherished Protestant boundaries to ally politically with Catholics on several causes. It is important for non-fundamentalists to make it easy for fundamentalists to join them in what they regard as causes for the common good.

**What are some ways you think popular media depictions of fundamentalism are misguided?**

In a broad sweep, one can observe that many forms of "media depiction" are

tone-deaf to religion and religious people, and treat Hasidic Jews, evangelicals, Catholic conservatives, and others as "The Other." Name someone as the other, and you can assign attributes and motives, etc. Some ways are born not of prejudice but ignorance. They see no difference between a militant un-lettered backcountry Protestant and John Calvin and John Milton etc. Non-fundamentalist religious people should "call the media down" when they show signs of malice or unthinking impulses against any religion-to-their right.

**Can you describe a funny experience or encounter you have had related to fundamentalism?**

Let me borrow one from my son, Micah Marty, a professional photographer. After our five volumes appeared, a foundation funded three PBS/BBC films ("The Glory and the Power.") TV people like to offer a book to go with a series. We had a several week deadline, While the Appleby's and the Marty's have "no nepotism" impulses and self-regulations, we reached to Micah Marty, who was close at hand, understanding, and ready-to-go. He photographed in Egypt since the Muslim Brotherhood was a focus; then to Israel and the Gush Emunim; and in the United States we did less with "militancy," as an abortion-clinic bombing was hardly representative of global militancy's.

So the photographer went to Bob Jones University, an authentic fundamentalist "ideal-type" stronghold, but not militant. He was led into the office of the then-President (owner?), Bob Jones III. Micah, "I see "Fundamentalisms Observed," (our Volume One) boldly placed on his desk. Micah asked him what he thought of it. "It's a very good book; they deal with 13 fundamentalisms, and got 12

of them exactly right; we are the only one they got totally wrong." Then he noticed MM's name: "Are you related to editor Martin Marty?" Yes. As a parting gesture he gave Micah (for me) a miniature football and a Bob Jones coffee mug. I placed it on my desk at the University of Chicago and got many comments. It's still my favorite. . .

**Biography:** Dr. Martin E. Marty is the Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus at the [University of Chicago](#), where he taught for 35 years, chiefly in [the Divinity School](#), where the [Martin Marty Center](#) for advanced studies has since been founded, and in the History Department. He was a columnist for and Senior Editor at [the Christian Century](#) for decades after 1956 and now a writer for its blog. He was the editor of the semimonthly [Context](#), a newsletter on religion and culture, from 1969 to 2010. He is a Lutheran pastor, ordained in 1952. He served parishes in the west and northwest suburbs of Chicago for a decade before joining the University of Chicago faculty in 1963. While serving his internship in Washington, D.C., he served for the year 1950–1951 as Interim Pastor of Pilgrim Lutheran Church in Chevy Chase, Maryland. He is the Author of more than 60 [books](#). Among them are *Righteous Empire*, for which he won the National Book Award; the three-volume *Modern American Religion*; *The One and the Many: America's Search for the Common Good*; *The Mystery of the Child*; *Building Cultures of Trust*; *The Christian World: A Global History*; *Martin Luther* (in the "Penguin Lives" series); and *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison: A Biography*. He has also collaborated with photographer Micah Marty in producing *Places Along the Way*; *Our Hope for Years to Come*; *The Promise of Winter*; and *When True Simplicity Is Gained*. Marty was born in West Point, Nebraska, on February 5, 1928. He and his wife [Harriet](#), a musician, enjoy an extended [family](#) of seven children, including two who joined the family as foster children, nine grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren.