"Fundamentalism" is a word many around the world have grown accustomed to hearing and associating with Islam in the last few years—especially after the attacks by Al-Qaeda on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in the United States on September 11, 2001.

Nevertheless, the term did not originate within the Muslim world, nor was the definition always connected to Islam.

Fundamentalism used to have a fairly generic meaning, especially "fundamentalism" spelled with a lower case "f". In 2000, Grant Wacker, a professor at the Duke University Divinity School in the United States, defined "fundamentalism" as "a global religious impulse, particularly evident in the twentieth century that seeks to recover and publicly institutionalize aspects of the past that modern life has obscured."

On the other hand, Wacker explained that "Fundamentalism" with an upper case "F" refers to "a religious movement specific to Protestant culture in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries." Fundamentalism, therefore, prior to 9/11 was understood as having an association with Christianity.
But post-September 11 the common definition of the word changed. No longer is there a common distinction made in English between the lower and upper-case spelling. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* now defines “fundamentalism” as the “strict maintenance of ancient or fundamental doctrines of any religion, especially Islam.”

And the connection that has been drawn between “fundamentalism” and Islam has been made outside the English language. The Real Academia Española, for example, which monitors the Spanish language throughout the Spanish speaking world, identifies “fundamentalism” specifically with Islam: “movimiento religioso y político de masas que pretende restaurar la pureza islámica mediante la aplicación estricta de la ley coránica a la vida social” (a religious and political mass movement that tries to restore Islamic purity with the strict application of the Quranic law to social life).

In common speech, “fundamentalism” is now rarely used when referring to Christianity or Judaism, although it could be a term of reference if one uses the still-existing definition provided by the *Collins English Dictionary*: “the belief in the original form of a religion or theory, without accepting any later ideas.

### Exercises

#### Class Project

Here is a chart of different newspapers around the world and how many articles in the respective papers used the word “fundamentalism” over a three year period –before and after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City. Take a look at how papers in different areas of the world varied in their frequency of using the word.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The New York Times (United States)</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian (United Kingdom)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Age (Australia)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Daily Star (Lebanon)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Nación (Argentina)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Tiempo (Colombia)</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El País (España)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerusalem Post (Israel)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le Figaro (France)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Links to the archives of these newspapers can be found in the credits at the end of this Lesson Plan)

Now consider the following question:

1. Think of other newspapers from your home country or other places in the world and compare how often they used the word “fundamentalism” in 2000, 2001, and 2002.
2. Pick two papers either from this list or two that you yourself select. Read an article containing the word “fundamentalism” before September 11, 2001 and one after. What is the context of these articles? Is the word used any differently before and after? What religion does it refer to?
3. Using the same papers you just researched, chart how many articles have contained the word fundamentalism this year. To what religion did the term refer? Was the term used in a positive, neutral, or negative way?
4. Look at the chart. *El Tiempo*, from Colombia, South America, continually and steadily decreased its usage of the word “fundamentalism” from 2000 to 2002. Why do you think this was the case? Look up some of the articles from each year. How was the word used?
5. Why do you think *The Daily Star*, a Lebanese newspaper, did not use the word “fundamentalism” at all during these three years?
6. Type the word “fundamentalism” into your local search engine. What comes up? Why do you think this is so? Now try an image search for “fundamentalism.” What comes up? Why do you think this is so?
Analysis Criteria

ACCESS
How easy is it for those living in one region that has a dominant form of religion (such as Christianity or Hinduism) to access stories from media in regions that have a different dominant form of religion (such as Islam or Buddhism)? Do you think it’s necessary for different religions to access news about each other—especially news that is written by members of that other religion? Why or why not?

AWARENESS
Are you aware of any synonyms of the word “fundamentalism”? What words do Christianity and Judaism use to describe sects within their religions that interpret the Bible and the Torah literally? Do you think the media is aware of the similarities and differences between these words? Are the people who read these media stories aware of the definitions of these words and how they are being used?

ASSESSMENT
What methods can the public use to assess how media cover religions or religious stories around the world? How can media assess what type of religious coverage interests the public? Do you think media in your home town characterize religion in a positive, neutral, or negative way?

APPRECIATION
How can media teach members of the audience to appreciate religions other than their own? Does appreciating other religions help to create or maintain civil societies? How do different media sources in your country express their understanding of different religions?

ACTION
What action can the public take to break down stereotypes that link Islam with fundamentalism and terrorism? What action can the media take to reverse or avoid future narrow-minded definitions like the ones from the Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English and the Real Academia Española? What can people who practice Christianity, Judaism, or Islam do to ensure that their beliefs are not misinterpreted?

Resources

Definitions of the following three terms:

Fundamentalism Related Articles: