



# Fundamentalist Religiosity: An Obstruction to Critical Literacy

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## Research Article

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## Abstract

Religious literalism has high potential of creating pseudo-intellectualism by encouraging literary interpretations of religious texts. The practice has a proclivity of degenerating into the antithesis of critical literacy. The focus of the article is on the explications of how fundamentalist religiosity with reference to Christianity, stifles the development of critical literacy in andragogic situations. Fundamentalist religiosity which is nurtured both explicitly and implicitly in religion-intiated academic institutions is manifested mainly in literalism of religious texts and subsequently in all secular-academic texts. Religious literalism is anchored in historicism whose adherents claim to know the will of the Creator. The qualitative research methodology guided by the social constructivist paradigm was considered for generating data. The research design for this study was phenomenology and the data were generated through interviewing andragogic learners in teacher education. The informants were selected purposively on the criterion of active participation in religious activities at college. Research findings show that superficial religiosity has retrogressive influences on the extent of critical literacy. Religious literalism is employed for indoctrinating the religious adherents. Criticality of religious texts is considered as blasphemous and provokes Divine retribution. In andragogy, one of the criteria of quality education is critical literacy thus learners should be encouraged to interrogate fundamentalist religiosity and expose its vices.

**Keywords:** Critical Literacy; Fundamentalist Religiosity; Religious Literalism; Andragogy

## Introduction and Background

There is a contention among academics that in some nation states the education systems are infested by anti-intellectualism. Anti-intellectualism is characterized by rigid adherence to one's convictions and that anyone with a contradistinctive world view is an enemy. There is a close intertwinement between anti-intellectualism and Christian fundamentalism. Anyone who questions Biblical texts is an "enemy" of God [1]. Thus, in most Christian countries there is emphasis of Biblical literalism in religio-educational

institutions. The Bible is anchorage of ideal social interactions and science should be hinged on the 'truth' in the Bible. Anything that is not in tandem with the fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible is influenced by the devil and precipitates secularism [2]. Coyne [3] postulated that the intertwinement of creationism and religion is precipitant for the impediment of criticality of religious texts since any contradistinctive perceptions is regarded as blasphemous.

The thrust of this article is on the explications of how over-simplification of religious texts influences anti-

intellectualism. In the context of this article, 'intellectualism' which is devoid of critical literacy of texts is pseudo-intellectualism. One of the manifestations of pseudo-intellectualism is uncritically embracing the idiosyncratic interpretations of religious texts by those who claim to possess divine hermeneutical prowess. The superficial interpreters of religious texts can best be described as evangelizing demagogues. Some of these people claim to be inspired by the Creator to disseminate the Creator's Will. The other evangelizing demagogues are highly educated but they have an epistemic close-minded disposition which is by design. They are the beneficiaries of an anti-intellectual fundamentalist religiosity. The evangelizing demagogues employ the idiosyncratic 'fabricated evidence' to emasculate empirical evidence about the conspicuous realities of life. They have *ad hominem* interpretations of Biblical texts which are reason, facts and education. They are conscious of the scientific epistemology and ontology about human existence but, they deliberately eschew critical discourses about these. They have a tendency of labeling whoever interrogates religious texts an 'atheist' and hence prone to satanic manipulations [2].

Against this backdrop, fundamentalism is both a philosophical problem and a social interaction vice which suffocates the development of critical literacy. Drawing from fundamentalism and critical literacy literature, the article explores the reclusive relationship between Christian fundamentalism and critical literacy. There are four sections which the article focuses on. Section one, is about the presentation of insights on religiosity and Christian fundamentalism. In section two, there are discernments on critical literacy. In section three, focus is on the research methodology used in this study. In the last section, there are reflections on the findings of this study.

### Insights on Religiosity and Christian Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism, as a tendency and a habit of the mind is a super complex phenomenon and a very illusive construct – it continues to play a critical role in influencing political and social life around the globe. Perhaps it is worthy to indicate that people around the globe embrace fundamentalism – a belief in literal interpretation of the religious texts. It is a ubiquitous phenomenon that fundamentalists do not simply believe; they aggressively cherish their convictions and vehemently attack intellectuals who seek to enlighten the public [4]. Yet, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century fundamentalism is apparently looming as a new source of conflict globally [5]. Quite often, when ordinary people reflect about contemporary religious fundamentalism the concepts Middle East and Islam', the United States Protestant Circles, the Boko Haram, Hindu fundamentalisms, and terrorism', just to list

a few, occupy their discourses. The fundamentalists have been used in some discourses to be the same as conservative Protestants. According to Bruce [6] the fundamentalist are traditionalists who consciously eschew rationality when discoursing about social, political and economic situations of some people. They would always attribute all situations to being Providential.

There are substantial scriptural traces of fundamentalism in the monotheist traditions; Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Gang and Epstein [7] observed that the fundamental attribute of fundamentalism is the conviction that religious texts as infallible and hence indubitable. Thus, the fundamentalists have total in their religious texts and are convinced that they have the hermetical prowess to unpack the texts for their benefit and that of society at large. While fundamentalism continues to rise globally, Christian fundamentalism is booming in Africa, specifically in the Anglophone countries South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Ghana, Uganda and Nigeria. Since the 1970s it has posed a threat to authentic social cohesion.

Religiosity and 'fundamentalism' are not synonymous but are related. Fundamentalism which has basis in religious convictions is problematic since it is a threat to criticality and consequently social harmony. Ruthven [8] postulated that;

... for the secular non-believer, or for the liberal believer who takes a sophisticated view of religious discourse, the god of fundamentalism must be mischievous, if not downright evil, a demonic power who delights in setting humans at each other's throats.

According to Ruthven religious fundamentalism has been a major source of social conflict since the late 1980s and early 1990s. The construct 'religiosity' is metaphysical and thus elusive. It is hinged on the extent of one's self-consciousness. It has manifestations in faith-oriented practices like fundamentalism. Perhaps it is appropriate to indicate that self-consciousness and religion have a symbiotic relationship – they remain fundamental ingredients in the social construction of fundamentalism. Marx [9] was categorically opposed to religious fundamentalism and postulated that religion is the tranquilizer of the oppressed people and the hope of the hopeless. He postulated that religious fundamentalism is anchored on historicism which is akin to essentialism [10]. Essentialists have the conviction that religious texts are inherently essential and should be embodied for the prosperity of society. According to historicism, different historical eras were designed by God so they are a result of God's will [10].

According to Christian fundamentalism, the bearers of religious authority and political power are endowed with wisdom to know the will of God. Thus, these bearers of

authority and power consider themselves as the instruments of God for fighting evil and for fortifying God's kingdom on earth [11]. Consequently, the religious fundamentalists aggressively impose their political, social and economic agendas to society through idiosyncratic interpretations of the biblical texts [12]. The fundamentalists also consider themselves as a sect of the chosen people who should disseminate the will of God at whatever cost [10]. Inevitably, fundamentalism is hyper-divisive in society since it dichotomizes people in society according to faith.

Quite often, fundamentalists camouflage in religion and insidiously commit atrocious injustices against humanity. They presumed self-righteousness which makes them think that they know the mind and will of God. This is not only self-delusive, but is the precipitant of the perpetration of social injustices in the world [2]. Christian fundamentalists have the conviction that God requires them to be aggressive participants of religion who should enforce their Biblical beliefs upon all people and all levels of government up to the Supreme Court [11]. The Christian fundamentalists have a strong conviction that the Christian organizations which have proclivity to improving human rights and social conditions of the disadvantaged are influenced by the devil [2].

It could be argued that from the fundamentalist perspective, that the focus on the welfare of the disadvantaged in society is a result of secular thinking which is anti-Christ. Christian fundamentalists are convinced that it's solely Christ who can salvage the disadvantaged from their predicaments. Any secular solutions to societal problems are tantamount to inviting satanic interventions [2]. Christian fundamentalists have a conviction that Christians who are after secular satisfaction are liberal Christians possessed by satanic demons which deceive them and make them believe that there are some secularly oriented solutions to problems. Consequentially, the socially progressive or charitable groups have their operatives in restricted environments that are precipitated by religious fundamentalism. Fundamentalists have the perception that freedom in society is predominantly based on the fundamentalist interpretations of Biblical texts. Freedom of religion in an inclusive society is abhorrent to the fundamentalists. It is claimed that secular freedom relegates them to the peripheries from Christ [2].

Fundamentalism is multifocal and static perspective which views reality through cultural-religious hegemonic lens. Among other vicious teachings, fundamentalist Christianity teaches its adherents to embrace the adage that they should be 'in the world but not of the world,' Thus the fundamentalists are supposed to live among secular people but should not be secularized by them [11]. Secularization is characterized by critical rationalizations of situations. It is believed that rational inquiry is weaponized by Satan to

deceive the human mind which is vulnerable to sinfulness. Succinctly, fundamentalists believe that reason is vicious and faith is virtuous [11]. It is believed that faith begets eternal truth from God but reason is from Satan and breeds falsehoods despite the empirical evidence by which it is confirmed [13]. Fundamentalists believe that the educated-rational unbelievers no longer have any semblance of faith since Satan has stolen the 'seeds of faith' from them. Whatever clever intellectual reasoning they indulge in is influenced by the devil [11].

Worrisomely, adherents of the fundamentalism enforce their views of the spiritual world which are anti-intellectual, retrogressive and destructive. The fundamentalists are in an epistemic closed state which provides simplistic answers to complex political and social problems [13]. According to Groenke and Hatch [1], the number of American people (which is over (70) million) who vowed to be evangelical is a threat to intellectualism. All these people have a proclivity to be proselytizing ideologues. Proselytizing ideologues are rigid adherents of ideology due to indoctrination [14]. Indoctrination is the insemination of belief systems ideologies which are considered to be infallible and hence unquestionable [15]. The worth of an ideology is determined by the extent of numerical dominancy which it enjoys. The number of people who subscribe to the ideology gives it an 'explanatory force' to persuade the non-adherents to perceive the ideology as the truth [16]. Thus, the number of people who subscribe to literalism of the Biblical texts, is considered as a criterion for the worthiness or 'truth value' of literalism. The other criterion of true value is the racial dominance. The Whites consider themselves as the 'chosen race' who have inherent 'explanatory force' of the Biblical texts.

The Christian fundamentalists are contented that the public school system is injurious to their children since it inculcates secular humanist values [2]. Secular education is considered as vicious to children since it is considered to be the apparatus for paddling falsehoods which create conflict among religious people [12]. Consequently, education is considered to be believed to be acidic to social harmony because of pseudo freedom which is secular oriented [17,18]. According to Christian fundamentalists, the education curricula should be focused on teaching morality and basic practical skills. Education should have more thrust on manual labour than intellectual development. The Christian fundamentalists stand guided by the Biblical verse that 'work with your own hands, as we commanded you' (1 Thessalonians 4 verse 11) [2]. The adherence to the verse undermines critical literacy and critical thinking in the education situations. The education system bend towards Christian fundamentalism imposes a religious-cultural ideology in the national public-school curriculum as hegemony of ensuring standards in education. The so-

called standards degenerate into prescriptive values of the fundamentalists. Christian fundamentalism has similarities with Nazism. The Nazis clinched to their unwavering conviction that what served the interests of Germany and for German supremacy was always right and was supposed to be forcefully pursued regardless of the detrimental effects thereof [11].

According to the Christian fundamentalists, education is 'demonized' as being a proselytizing ideological apparatus which 'indoctrinates' the learners in the secular world view. In this regard, education is perceived as a satanic apparatus [2]. The education curriculum which is anchored on rational empiricism is perceived to be against God's Word since it emasculates 'faith-based education'. In andragogy, for the past 30 years, there has been an increase in the practice of traditional religion. The situation is attributable to Christian fundamentalism [13]. The findings of the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) [19] are that 83% of students are affiliates of a religion, 79% of students are believers in God and 40% of the students are routine followers of religious teachings. Confirmatory findings were got by the Harvard Institute of Politics which are that; 35% of the students consider themselves as "born again Christians" and 22% identify themselves as evangelical or fundamentalist Christians. There has been a remarkably the highest increase of evangelicals since the 17<sup>th</sup> century [20]. About 64% of the students vowed that they would continue to adhere to their religious beliefs even if empirical evidence disproves their religious convictions [3].

The intellectually injurious effects of Christian-political fundamentalism are exacerbated when the literalist assumes the role of an 'educator'. The literalist becomes a proselytizing ideologue who readily confuses education with indoctrination. There is reliance on the kerygmatic approach which focuses on biased idiosyncratic interpretation of Biblical texts. The kerygmatic approach focuses on indoctrinating the learners so that they unquestioningly accept the proclamation of Good News-heralding the message of God's love and salvation [21]. The kerygmatic approach should 'move hearts and change lives' [22] and hermetically sealed to the extent that learners are protected from any content which is contradistinctive to the fundamentalist interpretations of the Biblical texts. In such hermetically sealed educational environments, learners go for years without hearing, watching or reading anything that would challenge their belief systems. Thus, the proselytizing ideologues promote anti-intellectualism in the learners [1].

Anti-intellectualism runs across religious fundamentalisms. Islamic fundamentalism is believed to be the precipitant of patriarchal fundamentalism in countries that have Islam as the dominant religion. Patriarchal

fundamentalists emphasize the importance of being male and indoctrinate the adherents that the universe was created and male beings were created and are ruled by a male god. All the other things including women are profane and do not deserve sanctity [23]. Women are forced to accept the inferior status accorded to them.

### Discernments on Critical Literacy

Perhaps, it is remarkable to comment that critical literacy is one of the criteria for quality education in andragogy which is not accorded the worthiness which it deserves [24]. Criticality should not be misconstrued as deliberate criticism of the prevailing situation but as being judgmental about situations with reference to socio-political reflections [25]. In other words, being 'critical' is concerned with rationalizing the essence within the framework of certain rules, principles and values. Criticality employs systematic and analytical critiquing the prevailing systems of rules, principles and values [16]. Thus, the thrust of contemporary quality andragogy should be on critical literacy which embraces the 'modern' 3Rs which are 'reading', 'reflecting' and 'reacting' [26]. With regards to the modern 3Rs, the learner in andragogy is expected to be critical, analytic and reflective about all the texts exposed to him or her.

Critical literacy is against power-influenced interpretations of texts which are for the idea that those in power have the 'correct' interpretation of any text [27]. McLaughlin and De Voogd [28] stress that critical literacy is about challenging common assumptions and values. The willingness of some people to believing in some superstitious texts could be having a stifling effect on critical literacy [17]. Critical literacy unveils indoctrination is perpetrated by theological, familial and educational interactions [29]. Critical analyses of spoken and written texts about interactions in social institutions and should expose the insidious machinations about how religious texts are used to stifle criticality.

Criticality of information is virtuous since it exposes the hidden agenda of the text producer. The actuality is that texts are never neutral but are presented with ulterior motives to bend the consumer towards the interests of the producers of texts. There are varied interpretations of the same text which are influenced by prior experiences of the consumers of text. The fluidity of texts brings about the issue of 'polysemy'. 'Polysemy' is the basic feature of language which entails that texts have multiple meanings. Polysemy is the precipitant of ambivalence and ambiguity in the interpretation of text [30]. A good example is religious texts whose interpretations are never sufficient (congregants have heard interpretations of the same religious texts several times but they continue to be attentive whenever someone tries to interpret it). All



texts have a hidden agendas since they are biased towards the interests of the producer. Thus, texts which claim an objective and neutral truth should be interrogated critically [29]. Texts are devoid of neutrality [16]. The andragogic learner is supposed to critically interrogate texts to disclose some biases [26].

### Research Methodology

The researchers employed the qualitative research methodology in generating of data. They were informed by the social constructivist paradigm. A paradigm is a philosophy which guides action. The social constructivist paradigm develops contextual meanings from the informants' experiences [31]. The research focused on understanding of the world in which the informants lived. The focus on the realities of the lives of the informants implicitly engaged phenomenology as the research design for this study. Phenomenology was considered as a plan, recipe or blueprint which was considered in describing the conditions and procedures for generating data [32]. The express purpose of phenomenology is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of the informants. The lived experiences of the informants were empirically presented that is in the informants' own words [33].

The study focused on unravelling the intricate realities between fundamentalist religiosity and critical literacy. The explications of the realities are phenomenological and are meant to permeate illusions of situations in attempts to dissipate them [34]. Interviews were used in generating data. Six interviewees were selected purposively basing on the extent of active participation in religious activities at the college. The informants were pseudonymized as R1, R2, R3, R4, R5 and R6. The responses of the informants were audiotaped in order to capture all the data which were generated. The data were analysed and interpreted considering two voices in interpreting of situations or experiences of the interviewees. The voices were of the informants and the researchers. The informants' verbatim interpretations of their own experiences are the *emic* interpretations. These provided the anchorage basis for more precise and trustworthy *etic* interpretations which were the interpretations by the researchers [35].

Thus, for the precise *etic* interpretations, the researchers reflected on the *emic* interpretations of the experiences in order to decipher meanings. The method of data analysis which was used was the Johnson and Christensen.

The authentic analysis was ensured when the researchers: segmented and coded the data, compiled a master list, checked for inter-coder and intra-coder consistency, and indicated relationships among categories [3,36,37].

### Reflections on Findings

#### Misconstructions About the Existence of Social Classes

When responding to a question about the influence of religion on the creation of dichotomous classes in society, R2 proclaimed,

*"Critical literacy is nonsensical – God should do as he pleases"*.

In corroboration, R1 commented;

*"The word of God should be respected"*.

The responses of the According to Webb [11], such student teachers depict that they have a presumption that they are knowledgeable of the will of God and that they are agency for the fortification of God's Kingdom on earth. The students succumb to the influences of historicism and essentialism which perceive that the prevailing situations in society incontrovertible since they are God's will [10]. The students are adherents of Christian fundamentalism which emphasizes that the state of things was done out of God's supreme wisdom and rationality. Secular rationalizations about society are believed to be influenced by Satan despite the soundness of the rationale.

#### Castigation Of Critical Literacy

There is a conviction among Christian fundamentalists which is about the treacherousness of Satan who uses evil tactics to 'steal the seeds of faith' from the educated unbelievers [11]. In line with the perceptions of the fundamentalists, R3 postulated;

*"Critical literacy is blasphemous. People should be taught to fear God. Reasoning against religious text is demonic"*

The student teacher is an adherent of Christian-political fundamentalism which promotes simplistic literalism. There is a conviction that true believers have trust in God and should accept situations as essentially providential [1].

There is a tendency among some students to embrace the Christian-political fundamentalist thinking. R4 posited that;

*"Whatever, I will read the Bible and do as it say. God reveals truth in simple terms, thus there is no need to grapple with the hidden meanings"*.

In corroboration, R5 posited;

*"The word of God has no hidden agenda."*

The students' proclamations indicate that they embrace naïve realism. They eschew the interrogation of oppressive social, cultural, political, theological and educational

situations [38,39]. Naïve realism is akin to literalism of Biblical texts and their combination promotes a vicious indoctrination-based which is anti-intellectualist. The reason for this phenomenon is that Bible is perceived as the fountain of 'truth'. Anyone who has contradistinctive perceptions about the fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible is influenced by satanic motives [2]. R6 who was an adherent of Biblical literalism postulated that,

*"Those possessed by demons criticize the Bible".*

Confirmatory remarks were given by R2 who asserted;

*"Being critical about religious texts is abhorrent and is tantamount to Satanism".*

### **Pseudo-Panacea to Social Problems**

The literalism involved Biblical texts is an indication of the abhorrence of the interrogation of Christian-political fundamentalism. The adherents of Christian-political fundamentalism are conservative about regressive politics and indoctrination-based education. The education has adopted subtle indoctrinating tactics which are camouflaged in the hegemony of standardized education. There is also emphasis on the pseudo-panacea to societal problems. R1 remarked;

*"We as Zimbabweans need to pray harder so that God delivers us from our economic problems. The Israelites prayed in the wilderness and were saved".*

The student is an adherent of Christian fundamentalism who reveres simplicity of literalism. With reference to Christian-political fundamentalism, Groenke and Hatch [1] postulated that;

In this social and theological configuration, individuals no longer have to grapple with textual meanings or the historical and social contexts in which a text has been produced. All the believer has to do, is to trust in God and accept things as they seem to be on the surface.

The quotation underscores the extent to which Christian fundamentalism can stifle criticality about Biblical texts. The naïve teacher education student could be made to think that criticality about Biblical texts is tantamount to profanity.

### **Naïve Realism**

Christian-political fundamentalism nurtures naïve realism. Criticality about social, cultural, political, theological and educational activity is subdued and the status quo is celebrated [38,39]. The teacher education students' critical literacy is stifled when they are indoctrinated to adopt a

literalist mentality. The students get into hermetically sealed educational environments and become uncritically literate about the Biblical texts. R1 made the assertion;

*"Interpretation of Biblical texts is not biased for benefitting religious leaders. In fact, the congregants are the beneficiaries because they are assured of a space in heaven",*

Corroborative remarks were echoed by R5;

*"Religious texts do not promote any exploitation of women by men. Women-Christian believers should always bear in mind that a woman was created from the rib of a man"*

R4 further consolidated naïve rationalism by postulating that;

*"The pictures which depict the devil having the image of 'black' Africans – are not discriminatory. Maybe that is what the devil looks like- who knows. Let's take things as they are."*

The extent of malleability of the teacher education students due to fundamentalist indoctrination is hyper critical. Simple sources of gender and racial discrimination are not interrogated.

### **Conclusion**

The andragogic students who were studied have adopted and are adapted to Christian fundamentalist values and have subsequently developed anti-intellectual dispositions which are manifested in the eschewal of criticality Biblical texts. The students have fallen victims of have succumbed to the new dimension of indoctrination in education which is considered as hegemony of standardized education. There is perpetuation of naïve realism which simply subdues the deeper questions of meaning about any form of social, cultural, political, theological and educational activities. For the students who are partisans of Christian-political fundamentalism, they find it not necessary to grapple with textual meanings or the historical and social contexts in which the Biblical texts were produced. They have a conviction that they should trust in God and accept texts superficially. On the contrary, they are supposed to look beyond the literal meanings of texts by analysing, critiquing and evaluating power dynamics which are ingrained texts. It is imperative for the students in andragogy to be critically literate so that they interrogate the purpose of the information they receive in order to figure out its possible partiality. In andragogy, the students should be encouraged to employ critical literacy on all texts that they are exposed to in order to enhance disinterested interpretations of the texts. The educators should place new emphasis on empowering students to be intentional learners through critical literacy.

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