

Fundamental things: Dietary restrictions

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [August 23, 2003](#) issue

Something “anomalous” is “inconsistent with or deviating from what is usual, normal, or expected.” I just learned that this definition fits the University of Chicago faculty, with whom I worked for four decades.

I read about this in my favorite Catholic magazine (*U.S. Catholic*, August) in an interview with Scott Alexander of the Catholic Theological Union. Speaking of an American Academy of Arts and Sciences six-year study of fundamentalism which he associated with the University of Chicago, Alexander said: “To put it the way sociologist Peter Berger did, if you want to have a project studying anomalies or curious movements in the latter part of the 20th century, don’t have faculty at the University of Chicago study traditional religious folk around the world. Instead have religious folk all around the world study the faculty of the University of Chicago.”

Interviewed about his field of expertise, Muslim-Catholic relations, Alexander offered informative, clarifying and generous responses, but then swiped at use of the term “fundamentalism” to describe certain forms of Islam. Fair enough. No covering term is perfect for scholars who do comparative work. Alexander rejects “fundamentalism” because he thinks it is “a Christian self-descriptor” and “is based on the assumption that the norm is Western secularism.” He must know that words travel. He uses normed-in-the-West terms such as revolutions, traditions, nationalisms, imperialisms and pilgrimages as applying to Islam.

The academy people who produced the five fat volumes of the Fundamentalism Project met at the University of Chicago six times and published the volumes at the university’s press. Beyond that, the school lent the academy a phone-booth-sized office for “control central.” How many “faculty of the University of Chicago” were involved? An emeritus historian, an emeritus English professor and an anthropologist.

Had Alexander read the essays by these and 102 other scholars, he would have found that not one defined fundamentalism as he did. He uses what he says is the Arabic meaning of the term: “devotion to the principles and the roots of one’s faith.” The category of fundamentalism was invented by “people who saw Western secularism and modernism threatened by a religious appeal to traditional values,” Alexander charges.

Every one of the academy scholars, however, instead saw fundamentalisms as nontraditional challenges to traditions, orthodoxies, conservatisms, classicisms and old-time religion. Not one scholar “lump[ed] all fundamentalisms into one anomalous group.” The scholars were all but fanatic in pointing to the particularities, even idiosyncrasies of the religious movements they studied and sometimes represented.

Almost all the studying was done by folk from Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jewish, Mormon, Muslim and other religious cultures. The many Muslims, who came from Iran, Egypt, Pakistan and other Muslim countries, published over 30 detailed chapters.

They were all aware of the limits of any term, including “fundamentalism.” We simply could not find any other word from any other represented language and culture that had such wide currency and such potential for being intelligible if handled with care. Some of our Islamic scholars would have settled for Alexander’s choice of “Islamism” for that one religion, but it is as useless as “Christianism” for comparative purposes.

When the project was completed in 1995, the caterers who had been hired by the University of Chicago made a lumping value judgment. After having had to serve conference menus that respected Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu and other diets, they told me, “We really like you Christians. You’ll eat anything.”