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Christian Fundamentalism and Prominent Sociopolitical Values among College Students in a South-Korean University

Eun Jung Oh, Stacy L. Bliss, and Robert L. Williams
The University of Tennessee

Introduction

Christian Fundamentalism and Kindred Belief

[1] The scientific literature on religious ideology has typically defined Christian fundamentalism as reflecting five fundamental beliefs: The Bible is literally true and internally consistent; Jesus is God’s only Son; Jesus is the only historical figure to be born of a virgin; the crucifixion of Jesus provides the only avenue for salvation from sin; and Jesus will return to earth again to claim his own (Fundamentalist Christianity; Kellstedt and Smidt; Marsden). Additional notions often associated with Christian fundamentalism are beliefs in the efficacy of prayer and the influence of the Devil in human affairs.

[2] In analyzing research on religiosity in the United States, it is often difficult to differentiate Christian fundamentalists from such kindred groups as Christian evangelicals, born-again Christians, and Christian conservatives. It is likely that these kindred groups share commitment to most of the Christian fundamentals, but not necessarily all of them. For example, a survey in the mid-1980s at the Fuller Theological Seminary (a widely known evangelical seminary) indicated that most of the students did not believe in Biblical inerrancy (Marsden). In identifying Christian groups that are heavily invested in political endeavors, researchers appear more inclined to use the term evangelical than the term fundamentalist (Kellstedt; Kellstedt, Green, and Guth). However, building on Williams, Oh, and Bliss’s distinction between Christian fundamentalism and Christian evangelicalism, the current study defined and assessed Christian fundamentalism strictly in terms of theological beliefs (namely the five fundamentals) without regard to the political implications of these beliefs (e.g., advocating prayer in the schools, opposing same-sex marriages).

Church Attendance and Fundamentalism

[3] Another religious dimension sometimes associated with Christian fundamentalism is church attendance, which is usually assessed through self-report. However, some research (e.g., Marcum) indicates that self-reported attendance tends to be an overstatement of actual attendance. Church records cited in the Marcum study indicated that self-reported attendance was 1.7 times larger than actual attendance. A relatively recent Harris poll (Taylor) reported that about 25% of Americans attend Church every week. Americans are far more likely to attend religious services weekly than individuals in most developed countries, particularly in Europe (Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance n.d.a).

[4] Although those who attend church may hold a variety of beliefs about Christianity, most attendees appear to embrace traditional religious beliefs (Willits and Crider). Most Christian churches, especially Protestant, highlight the New Testament message of Jesus in their songs, sermons, and liturgy. One who attaches little value to this message would be unlikely to attend church regularly. Plus, attending church is likely to strengthen traditional Christian beliefs via the dogma emphasized during church services. Thus, levels of church attendance and Christian fundamentalism appear to be reciprocally related.

Christian Fundamentalism and Sociopolitical Values in the U.S.

[5] Attending church is likely to affect more than one’s personal religious beliefs. In recent U.S. society, Christian fundamentalist churches have unofficially (and sometimes officially) promoted a sociopolitical agenda that emphasizes nationalism, patriotism, and militarism (Land; Moser). Although many Christian churches officially advocate democratic principles, their political actions may convey a different message, such as a compromise of civil liberties and repression of dissent. They may insist on public display of their religious symbols in government facilities, yet resist the rights of others to express alternative religious views in the same settings (van der Vyver).

[6] Research conducted in the United States on the relationship between religiosity and sociopolitical values has addressed tolerance of dissent more than any other sociopolitical variable targeted in the current study. Stouffer’s national survey showed attending church to be negatively related to tolerance of dissent, with Southern Protestants manifesting less tolerance than any other Christian group. Beatty and Walter reported that frequent church attendance across all denominations was inversely related to tolerance of unpopular political views.

[7] Although educational level and geographic region may affect level of intolerance among Christian fundamentalists, doctrinal issues also may contribute to this intolerance. Wilcox and Jelen proposed that two doctrinal issues contribute to Christian fundamentalists’ intolerance of dissent: belief in the Bible as literally inerrant and belief in the Devil as a spirit who influences human actions. Given the presumed indisputability of the Bible, any questioning of Biblical accounts and commandments would be considered an affront to the Christian faith (Jelen & Wilcox). The very act of questioning Biblical teachings may be regarded as resulting from the influence of the Devil. Thus, a collegiate atmosphere that permits discussion of alternative religious and moral views could be viewed as a Satan-inspired assault on the Christian faith of young people (Wilcox & Jelen).

[8] Social-science research in the U.S. has not widely examined the relationships between Christian fundamentalism measures and the sociopolitical variables addressed in the current study. However, one recent research report (Williams, Oh, and Bliss) has shown Christian fundamentalism among students in a Southeastern U.S. university to be positively related to nationalism and patriotism but negatively related to respect for civil liberties and tolerance of dissent. Of these comparison sociopolitical variables, nationalism has generally been regarded as elevating the importance of one’s country above that of other countries (Baughn and Yaprak; Kosterman and Feshbach). In contrast, internationalism emphasizes global wellbeing above the interests of one’s own country. Internationalists advocate national sacrifices to reduce poverty and suffering in other societies (Kosterman and Feshbach).

[9] Another widely discussed sociopolitical value possibly related to Christian fundamentalism is patriotism, a construct that emphasizes emotional commitment to one’s country (Kosterman and Feshbach). Because patriotism and nationalism have often been portrayed similarly in American society, Schatz, Staub, and Lavine have made a critical distinction between blind patriotism and constructive patriotism. These researchers describe blind patriotism as virtually the same notion as nationalism (unquestioning support of the U.S.’s policies). On the other hand, constructive patriotism promotes questioning of political practices counter to the high purpose of the U.S. democratic system of government.

[10] Respect for civil liberties and tolerance of dissent are concepts having much in common. The former term reflects a belief that any person in the domain of the U.S. government, citizen or non-citizen, has the right to due process when legally accused of wrongdoing. Thus, one cannot be incarcerated without incriminating evidence obtained through lawful channels and one cannot be held in prison indefinitely without being charged and having access to counsel. Tolerance of dissent respects the right of individuals to question the most popular government policies and still be regarded as upstanding citizens. For example, one could burn the U.S. flag and still be considered a reputable citizen of the U.S. Respect for civil liberties and tolerance of dissent sometimes intersect when the U.S. society deals with individuals who support causes counter to U.S. foreign policy. Not only does U.S. society tend to be intolerant of such actions, it may interpret those actions as support for terrorist causes and possible reason for incarceration.

Christian Fundamentalism and Sociopolitical Perspectives in Other Cultures

[11] Do the connections between Christian fundamentalism and mainstream sociopolitical values in the U.S. society prevail in other cultures? Actually, negligible research has examined such connections in societies other than the U.S. Karpov appears to be one of the few researchers who has compared the sociopolitical implications of Christianity in the U.S. with those in other cultures. Karpov compared the relationship between religiosity and political tolerance in the U.S. and Poland. Karpov defined political tolerance in terms of "willingness to extend civil liberties to political outgroups" (2002: 267). Similarly, Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus defined political tolerance as a willingness "to extend freedoms to those whose ideas one might reject, whatever these might be" (784).

[12] Karpov's research found that theocratic beliefs (support for the power of the church in government) proved predictive of political intolerance in both Poland and the U.S., especially toward atheists (2002). The similarity in findings between the U.S. and Poland emerged despite major differences in the religious culture of the two societies. The U.S. is predominantly Protestant but still considered highly pluralistic, whereas Poland is dominated by the Catholic Church and religiously more monolithic than the U.S.

[13] Most of the international studies addressing relationships between religiosity and sociopolitical variables (namely tolerance) have been done in Europe, without direct comparisons to religiosity patterns in the U.S. Kunovich and Hodson reported that frequency of church attendance and intensity of religious beliefs in Croatia contributed to intolerant attitudes toward minority ethnic groups. These researchers concluded that both religiosity and ethnic intolerance likely were anchored in an in-group/out-group polarization. Karpov found that political intolerance in Poland was based more on support for the societal power of the Church than on religious affiliation or participation (1999). Village reported that Anglican churchgoers espousing the most dogmatic religious beliefs, among both liberals and conservatives, were the most dismissive of alternative beliefs. Konig, Eisinga, and Scheepers found that traditional Christian beliefs in the Netherlands contributed to secular anti-Semitism. In a study across eleven European countries, Scheepers, Gijberts, and Hello reported that both Catholics and Protestants "support prejudice against ethnic minorities more than non-religious people and . . . that the more frequently people attend church, the more they are prejudiced" (242).

Focus of the Current Study

[14] The basic question of the current study was whether the linkages between Christian fundamentalism and sociopolitical values such as nationalism, internationalism, patriotism, respect for civil liberties, and tolerance for dissent that have been documented in the U.S. and selected European societies would be similar in a sample of college students in an Asian nation with a sizeable Christian presence, specifically the Republic of South Korea. In contrast to the percentage of U.S. citizens who claim to be Christians (about 75% according to Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance n.d.b), the percentage of Christians is far less in South Korea (about 25% of the population). Nonetheless, South Korea has by far the highest percentage of Christians of any Asian nation. Only about 4% of the overall Asian population is Christian, with South Korea making up a substantial portion of that 4% (Kim). Also, South Korea has some of the largest Christian churches in the world, with some church memberships approximating 500,000.

[15] Our focus on South Korea in the current study also relates to its religious diversity. Kim claimed that it is one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world, with about 23% of its population Buddhist, 19% Protestant, 7% Catholics, 49% no religion, and a variety of other religions each representing less than 1% of the population. Thus, although the U.S. is considered a religiously pluralistic society, South Korea has stronger participation in non-Christian religions (namely Buddhism) and non-religious orientations than does the U.S.

[16] Kim reported that Christianity in Korea has a strong materialistic and nationalistic appeal, based on the perspectives that Christians are likely to prosper and that the growth of Christianity is likely to win God's favor for South Korea. Protestant Christianity in South Korea appears to have a particularly strong alliance with the government, being granted a variety of financial favors by the government and in return being unequivocally loyal to the government. The growth rate of Christianity in Korea since the early 1960s has been greater than in any other country. Yet, 49% of South Koreans report no formal religion and only 48% report belief in God, whereas approximately 80% of Americans report belief in God (Kim; Taylor).

[17] Overall, the major objectives of the current study were twofold: (a) compare the level of Christian fundamentalism and sociopolitical values across religious subgroups in a sample of students in a South Korean university and (b) compare the relationships between fundamentalist Christian perspectives and other sociopolitical variables across religious subgroups in the South Korean sample. Given the greater diversity of major religions and the smaller percentage of Christians in South Korea than in the U.S., we expected college students in South Korea to evidence different patterns of relationships between Christian fundamentalism and the selected sociopolitical variables than patterns previously found in U.S. universities.

Method

Participants

[18] Students in a South-Korean university (*N* = 201) participated in the study. These students were generally enrolled in coursework related to teacher education. Most participants were in the second or third year of their program. Christians represented a minority of students surveyed. Specifically, 27% of the Korean students identified themselves as Protestants, 9% as Catholics, 16% as Buddhists, and 48% as atheists. This distribution is substantially different from that reported in a similar study of students in a Southeastern U.S. university: 80% Protestants, 9% Catholics, 2% atheists/agnostics, and 8% of other religious faiths (Williams, Oh, and Bliss).

[19] Based on national statistics in South Korea, Buddhists were under-represented and Protestants over-represented in the Korean sample. However, Kim has reported that Buddhists generally have less education than Christians in South Korea. Approximately 25% of Korean Christians have a university degree, whereas only 7% of the Buddhists have a college education. Thus, a college population should have a higher percentage of Christians and a smaller percentage of Buddhists than would be the case in the general population. The percentage of students claiming to be atheists in the Korean sample (48%) was very close to the percentage (49%) in the general population who reported “no religion” (Kim 2002).

Religious and Sociopolitical Measures

[20] All participants responded to questionnaires that measured selected religious and sociopolitical constructs: Christian fundamentalism, nationalism, internationalism, patriotism, respect for civil liberties, and tolerance of dissent. The Korean students responded to Korean translations of all instruments. All students indicated their responses to the instruments on scan forms that were computer scored.

[21] Twenty items in the questionnaires were devoted to the measurement of Christian Fundamentalism. Approximately half the items affirmed fundamentalist perspectives and the remaining items questioned such perspectives. Statements representing fundamentalism included such items as “every word in the Bible is inspired of God,” “Jesus is the only person in recorded history born of a virgin,” and “Jesus offers our only hope for salvation.” In contrast, statements questioning fundamentalism included such items as “there are several contradictions in the Bible,” “it is highly questionable whether Jesus arose from the dead and ultimately ascended back to heaven,” and “the notion of Jesus as the Son of God is largely mythical.”

[22] Students responded to all items on a five-point scale: *strongly agree*, *agree*, *uncertain*, *disagree,* and *strongly disagree.* Items sympathetic to Christian fundamentalism were scored in the following manner: *strongly agree* = 5 points, *agree* = 4 points, *uncertain* = 3 points, *disagree* = 2 points, and *strongly disagree* = 1 point. In contrast, items counter to Christian fundamentalism were scored in an opposite direction: *strongly agree* = 1 point, *agree* = 2 points, *uncertain* = 3 points, *disagree* = 4 points, and *strongly disagree* = 5 points. Thus, scores could range from 20 to 100 on the combined Christian fundamentalism items. High scores on these items reflected strong allegiance to Christian fundamentalist notions and low scores indicated misgivings about these perspectives.

[23] The same 5-point scale was used to assess the strength of the sociopolitical perspectives. All items were scored in a positive direction for the construct being measured (e.g., nationalism, internationalism, and patriotism), with high scores indicating endorsement of the construct and low scores reflecting reservations about the construct. Five items were used to assess each sociopolitical perspective: Nationalism, Internationalism, Patriotism, Respect for Civil Liberties, and Tolerance of Dissent. Total scores on each of these subscales could range from 5 to 25. Several statements in these scales were revised from items identified by Kosterman and Feshbach as having strong factor loadings on constructs similar to the sociopolitical dimensions included in the current study.

[24] The nationalistic items assessed whether one prioritizes the interests of one’s own country above those of other countries. Representative items were “an important consideration in determining whether to provide aid to another country is whether giving that aid would be politically advantageous to us” (Kosterman and Feshbach: 265); “generally, the more influence our nation has on other countries, the better off they are” (Kosterman and Feshbach: 265); and “we should buy products made in our own country whenever they are available.” Such items appear to express a self-serving regard for one’s country or even a sense of arrogance about the importance of one’s country in the world community.

[25] The internationalistic items emphasized the value of providing humanitarian aid to all nations, even if such assistance requires sacrifices by one's own nation. The following items exemplify this theme: "The action our country takes regarding an international issue should primarily depend on how much good it does for how many people in the world, regardless of their nation"; "we should support any movement that contributes to the welfare of the world as a whole, regardless of our special national interests"; and "we should teach our children to uphold the welfare of all people everywhere even when that assistance may be against the political interests of our country." All of these items were adapted from items in the Kosterman and Feshbach study (266).

[26] The patriotism subscale emphasized emotional attachment to one's country, with such items as "I feel a great pride in my homeland"; "I love my country"; and "my citizenship in this country is an important part of my country." The patriotism items were also adapted from the Kosterman and Feshbach article (264). The items were intended to convey an allegiance to one's country without implying superiority of one's country over other countries, as is often reflected in the concept of nationalism.

[27] The respect for civil liberties subscale represented due process rights for individuals alleged to be acting counter to the security and respect of one's country. Two items that encompass this theme are "individuals suspected of involvement with terrorist groups should *not* be detained without being charged and without having access to legal counsel" and "it is acceptable to indefinitely imprison enemy combatants without charging them and without allowing them access to legal counsel" (negative item). Thus, the tone of such items reflects an extension of due process rights to non-citizens of one's country who are under the control of one's country.

[28] The last set of items, tolerance of dissent, targeted the potentiality of being a respectable citizen while rejecting conventional political practices in one's country. Sample items included "a person who doesn't stand when our national anthem is performed could still be a good citizen" (Kosterman and Feshbach: 267); "a person who prefers going to jail to serving in our military could still be a good citizen" (Kosterman and Feshbach: 267); and "people who frequently criticize our country should be encouraged to move to another country" (negative indicator). Thus, these items reflect the extent to which objecting to popular political practices/symbols of one's country should be tolerated within a society.

Findings

[29] Because of diversity in religious affiliations within the sample, we first examined differences in means for the four subgroups that comprised the sample. Table 1 indicates that these subgroups differed only on Christian fundamentalism. Protestants scored significantly higher on Christian fundamentalism than did all other subgroups. Participants who identified themselves as Catholics also scored higher than Buddhists and Atheists on Christian fundamentalism.

Table 1. Differences in Religious and Sociopolitical Means for Korean Subgroups

Sample	Christian Fundamentalism	Nationalism	Internationalism	Patriotism	Respect for Civil Liberties	Tolerance of Dissent
Protestant	75.33a	16.89	17.91	19.80	16.93	16.41
Catholic	62.26b	17.11	17.26	20.74	16.37	14.74
Buddhist	47.33c	17.09	16.67	19.00	15.70	16.53
Atheist	46.21c	17.14	17.58	20.09	16.33	16.42

Note. Only Christian fundamentalism produced significant differences among the Korean subgroups. For the column representing this measure, subgroups that do not share the same letter differed significantly at the .05 level.

[30] Given the differences in levels of Christian fundamentalism across the Korean subgroups, we examined relationships between the Christian fundamentalism and sociopolitical measures by subgroup (see Table 2). Few of the correlations proved statistically significant (in part, due to the small sample sizes of the subgroups). Overall, the relationships were somewhat stronger for the Protestant subgroup than for the other subgroups. Although few were statistically significant, the correlations between

Christian fundamentalism measures and respect for civil liberties and tolerance of dissent tended to be negative across all subgroups.

Table 2. Differences in Correlations between Christian Fundamentalism and Comparison Sociopolitical Measures for Korean Subgroups.

	Sociopolitical Measures				
Sample	Nationalism	Internationalism	Patriotism	Respect for Civil Liberties	Tolerance of Dissent
Protestant (*n* = 54)	.26*	.20	.30*	-.14	-.20
Catholic (*n* = 18)	.21	-.28	-.08	.05	-.09
Buddhist (*n* = 33)	.08	.00	.02	-.21	-.20
Atheist (*n* = 96)	.13	.13	.07	-.11	-.10

*$p < .05$

Implications of the Findings

[31] The South-Korean sample surveyed was quite different from what one might expect in a U.S. university, given the sizeable number of Buddhists and atheists in the Korean sample. In fact, approximately half the sample expressed no belief in God. In contrast, close to 80% of American college students profess belief in God (Taylor). What is also striking about the Korean sample is that the two Christian subgroups differed from the other two groups only on Christian fundamentalism. Comparison of the two Christian subgroups revealed that Protestants scored significantly higher on Christian fundamentalism than did Catholics, who in turn scored higher than both Buddhists and Atheists. Beyond those differences on Christian fundamentalism, the subgroups were remarkably similar on all the sociopolitical variables. Of all sociopolitical variables assessed, patriotism received the highest raw-score ratings from all four subgroups.

[32] The relationships between Christian fundamentalism and sociopolitical variables (particularly tolerance of dissent) in the Korean sample tended to be somewhat different from those previously reported in American and European studies (Karpov 2002). Several European studies have shown conservative Christian views and church attendance to be negatively related to political and religious tolerance (Karpov 1999; Konig, Eisinga, and Scheepers; Kunovich and Hodson; Scheepers, Gijberts, and Hello; Village). That relationship was also evident in the current study but not very strong.

[33] The correlations for the Protestant subgroup in the South-Korean sample were directly compared with those previously reported on similar measures in a predominantly Protestant sample of students in an American university (Williams, Oh, and Bliss). Specifically, the Christian fundamentalism correlations with nationalism (.26) and internationalism (.20) for the Protestant subgroup in the Korean sample were somewhat stronger than companion correlations reported for the American sample (.17 and .10, respectively). Conversely, the negative correlations of Christian fundamentalism with respect for civil liberties and tolerance of dissent were substantially weaker for the Protestant subgroup in the Korean sample (-.14 for civil liberties and -.20 for tolerance of dissent) than those previously reported in an American sample (-.36 and -.49, respectively). Only one comparison variable, Patriotism, yielded similar correlations for the Protestant subgroup in the Korean sample and for the previously studied American sample, with both correlations being positive (.27 and .30, respectively).

[34] One possibility strongly suggested by the comparison of the Korean sample with the previously studied American sample is that Christian fundamentalism may be associated with a different worldview in South Korea than in the U.S. It appears that Christian fundamentalism has become less negatively linked to such notions as respect for civil liberties and tolerance of dissent in South Korea than in the U.S. Thus, there appears to be less tension between Christian fundamentalism and democratic principles (e.g., respect for civil liberties and tolerance of dissent) in South Korea than in the U.S.

[35] On the other hand, Christian fundamentalism in South Korea probably is not without some self-serving motivation. The prospect of being blessed with material resources and good health both at an individual and national level reported by Kim may be as strong an emphasis in Korean Christianity as the American fundamentalist emphasis on national security at the expense of some civil liberties and tolerance of dissent. However, the relative strength of these emphases in the two societies remains to be clarified through further research. What appears most evident at this point is that Protestant Christianity in both cultures may reflect motivation far removed from the primary teachings of Jesus (e.g., helping the poor, the suffering, and the imprisoned without regard to their national identity).

[36] The correlations between Christian fundamentalism and the sociopolitical variables were generally weaker for the other subgroups than the Protestant subgroup in the Korean sample. Although one might have expected Protestants and Catholics to report similar connections between Christian Fundamentalism and the comparison variables, these correlations were especially different for internationalism and patriotism, with Christian fundamentalism correlated positively with these variables in the Protestant subgroup and negatively in the Catholic subgroup. Thus, Catholics were less likely than Protestants to positively link their fundamentalist beliefs with love of country and concern for other countries, although the mean scores for both of these comparison variables were similar for Protestants and Catholics.

[37] Neither Buddhists nor Atheists in the South-Korean sample appeared to hold strong anti-Christian beliefs. Their average scores on the fundamentalism scale suggest average item responses between non-support and uncertainty regarding Christian fundamentalism perspectives. The mean fundamentalism responses of Buddhists and Atheists among South-Korean college students may reflect more questioning of fundamentalist claims than outright rejection of those claims. Surprisingly, to the extent that Buddhists and Atheists share Christian fundamentalist beliefs, they are also likely to diminish respect for civil liberties and tolerance of dissent within their society.

Conclusion

[38] The findings of the current study should be considered more suggestive than conclusive. Certainly, one should be cautious about generalizing the findings to the South-Korean population as a whole and especially to the different religious subgroups represented in the South-Korean culture. Because all of the participants were university students from the same university and largely in the same program of studies, generalizing the results to a broad spectrum of university students in South Korea or to the larger population of South-Korean adults, which would include many non-university adults, would not be warranted. Additionally, the sample sizes for the subgroups were quite small, which minimized the likelihood of obtaining significant differences in means and correlations for the various subgroups. Certainly, the subgroup differences reported in the current study should be confirmed and extended by assessing much larger subgroup samples in future research.

[39] Despite the sampling limitations enumerated in the previous paragraph, the relationships suggested by the findings of the current study merit further study. The worldview associated with Christian fundamentalism in a South-Korean college sample appears somewhat different from that previously reported for a largely Christian college sample in the U.S. (Williams, Oh, and Bliss). One difference that seems especially important to revisit in both Korean and American samples is the relationship of Christian fundamentalism to respect for civil liberties and tolerance of dissent. The current findings suggest that South-Korean Christians may be less inclined to use their Christian beliefs to restrict the personal and legal rights of individuals within a society than appears to be the case for American Christians having a fundamentalist perspective.

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