

# Roots of Fundamentalism traced to 16th-century Bible translations

November 8 2007

---

The English Reformation—heyday of religious change—spurred a fundamentalist approach to Bible reading, according to new research by a Harvard professor.

“Evangelical reading habits after 1525 were disciplinary, punishing and even demeaning,” says James Simpson, Donald P. and Katherine B. Loker Professor of English in Harvard University's Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

In 1525, Protestant reformer William Tyndale translated the Bible into early modern English. Scholars have widely hailed that moment as a liberating step for the literate public, who could suddenly read the Bible on their own terms—without the constraints of priestly interpretation.

Simpson disagrees.

“The 16th-century moment was not the foundation of liberalism, as many historians have maintained, but rather the foundation of fundamentalism,” he says. “Anyone who wants to understand how fundamentalism is a product of the modern era must look to its birth in the 16th century.”

Tracing the history of biblical translations between 1525 and 1547, or from Tyndale to the death of Henry VIII, Simpson argues that reading in this era became a program of punishment that left believers “persecuted and paranoid.” His argument is the focus of a forthcoming book titled

“Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and its Reformation Opponents” (Harvard University Press).

“Evangelicals did not believe that you could be saved through good works, so they looked for signs that the decision had gone their way,” Simpson says. “Reading became the locus for salvation or damnation—it was an intense experience in which your eternal fate would be decided.”

Prologues to the Bible as well as polemical works helped Simpson to illuminate what the reading experience would have been like for commoners in the 16th century. Tyndale’s prologue to the 1525 Bible, for example, highlights the kind of stern warnings offered to private readers.

“If you fail to read it properly, then you begin your just damnation. If you are unresponsive ... God will scourge you, and everything will fail you until you are at utter defiance with your flesh,” the prologue reads.

According to Simpson, such rhetoric reveals the fundamentalist nature of these early translations, and indicates the extent to which reformers repudiated individual interpretation.

“Reading became a tightrope of terror across an abyss of predestination,” Simpson says. “It was destructive for evangelicals, because it did not invite freedom but rather fear of misinterpretation and damnation.”

Simpson argues that the history of evangelical reading has important implications for politics in today’s world.

"The birth of fundamentalism marked a new kind of modernity which still influences religion today," he says. "As we enter a new period of fundamentalist reading, we had better understand the ways in which the last period in the West produced 150 years of European violence."

Source: Harvard University

Citation: Roots of Fundamentalism traced to 16th-century Bible translations (2007, November 8)  
retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2007-11-roots-fundamentalism-16th-century-bible.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.