

Concepts of care in fundamentalist and non-fundamentalist faith communities: Living on fear or on solidarity

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What makes it possible and attractive for Christian faith communities and individuals to become part of a fundamentalist ultraright movement like the CNP in the US or the rightwing party AfD in Germany? Which arguments trigger them? What Christian values and ideals stand against it? In this chapter, I will argue that at the bottom line, the rightwing movements and the fundamentalist Christians have similar ways of caring for their members and communities. These right wing and fundamentalist ways of caring differ widely from those of non-fundamentalist faith communities. The care of non-fundamentalist Christians is connected to an open and differentiated view of our existential situation and a hopeful outlook. This care is rooted in the trust in God and confidence that their faith community will be supportive. They do not need to idealize themselves or demonize others.

Fundamentalists in the US

In her book *Shadow Network* (Nelson 2019), the journalist Anne Nelson analyzes the history of the CNP (Council for National Policy) in the US and its roots in the Fundamentalist Southern Baptist Communities in the sixties when the Civil Rights Movement gained power, led by Martin Luther King Jr. The conservative forces tried to hinder the public protests, but in 1965 President Johnson passed the Voting Rights Act that enabled many African American citizens to vote. In addition, the Black Power movement and the Women's Liberation Movement questioned white male supremacy. Even the bedrock of conservative power, the bible, was not out of the question anymore. Liberation and feminist theologians showed that the literalistic interpretation for the bible was only one way of many to read the bible. Against all these pluralistic and liberal forces, the movement of CNP wanted to build a counterforce. Anne Nelson details that Paige Patterson and Paul Pressler III from Southern

Baptist backgrounds met in 1967 and formed the CNP. From 1979 on, they developed a successful strategy to install conservative presidents at the Southern Baptist Convention each year (Nelson 2019, 6). Then they extended their strategy to state politics. In 1980 they invited Ronald Reagan, who accepted the invitation and supported the CNP (Nelson 2019, 13). Consequently, the CNP joined forces with other fundamentalist Baptist movements and entered national politics. "By the mid-1980s, Southern Baptist annual conventions began to look like precinct meetings of the Republican Party" (Haley 1988, 210). The CNP supported the Republican Party and was looking forward to installing Ted Cruz as their candidate for the presidency. When Trump, instead of Ted Cruz, won the Primaries in 2016, the fundamentalist network scheduled a meeting with Trump to introduce him as the chosen one, even if he did not fit in with the idea of a model of a fundamentalist Christian. But for the greater purpose of gaining influence in politics and jurisdiction, even Trump could be useful.



When diving into the history of the CNP, I was struck that Southern Baptist communities and their pastors were at the roots of the CNP. At first, the church leaders were afraid that their communities would not tolerate their involvement in politics. In 1980, after a rally in Dallas where Ronald Reagan spoke to 15,000 fundamentalists and the New Right came into being, the Republican Paul Weyrich invited the leading pastors of Dallas. He asked, “You don’t think that your congregations will tolerate your involvement into public policy?” They answered, “Amen—that is right.” Many churchgoers believed that the church should attend to spiritual life and render politics ‘onto Caesar’ (Gilgoff 2007, 80). But the pastors knew that the involvement in politics offered a huge rise in finances and power. They agreed when Weyrich offered to conduct a poll asking the congregations whether they would support their pastors’ active involvement in politics and whether they would be ready to pay for these activities. The congregations agreed on both questions, and Weyrich and the pastors could forge a new fundamentalist political pathway.

Fundamentalists in Germany

I had the hope that for Germans this might be a far-away problem, a problem of the US, where the segregation of society is much more severe than in Europe and, due to the dichotomic political system in the US, where the chasm between democrats and republicans makes it much easier to demonize the other side. However, examples like the very right-wing Marine le Pen running for the presidency in France in 2017 and 2022 tell that Europe has a problem with ultranationalists as well.

In 2014, the rightwing party AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) was voted into European Parliament. In 2017, the AfD came into the German Parliament with 12,6 % in 2021, they had 10,3%. The party is constantly moving toward the right; in many parts considered extremist right now. With the refugees coming along the Balkan Route and across the Mediterranean Sea in 2015, many Germans decided to give their votes not to the socialist or conservative democratic parties but to the ultra-nationalist party AfD. On the other side, many Christian faith communities and their members—as well as other volunteers—supported refugees, helping them learn German, organizing clothing, finding housing, and helping to find their way

through the German bureaucratic jungle. In complex cases, Christian communities opened their churches to give “Church Asylum”

(“Kirchenasyl”). As long as refugees stay on church grounds, they are withdrawn from state authorities because state authorities cannot interfere with religious rites and worship. The parishes referred to the Old Testament laws about the protection of strangers and the Matthew passage on the Last Judgement (Mt 25, 31-46, specifically v.40): “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

In many ways, the New Right supports values and narratives that contrast the ideals of these Christian faith communities. Many of the right-wing populists, especially neo-national socialists, namely, “Neo-Nazis” are very critical of “the church” and rather venerate “das Volk” and “the nation.” “Nature” and “common sense” are used to support neo-nationalist claims and argumentations (Bednarz 2019, 10). On the other side, the New Right tries to instrumentalize the Christian tradition to legitimize the radical rightwing views and messages (Hildago, Hildmann, Yendel 2019, 3). The New Right uses Christian vocabulary and especially biblical language to demonstrate their closeness to Christian culture and to make themselves attractive to conservative Christians.¹ They seek ways to lure Christians into their ultra-nationalist thinking, like the CNP’s persuasion of US-American pastors to join their ranks. But the core of the right-wing ideology does not need Christianity or any other religion. The religious argumentation is much more a disguise than genuine interest.

Right wing argumentations appealing to fundamentalist Christian faith communities

What are the arguments and narratives the New Right uses to reach out to Christians? What is it in fundamental thinking that is attractive to Christians?

The journalist Liane Bednarz (2018) lists several markers of the New Right that are congruent with

1 “2. These: Die Inanspruchnahme der christlichen Religion durch rechtspopulistische Akteure erfolgt primär aus strategischen Gründen.” Hildago, Hildmann, Yendel 2019, 3.



fundamentalist Christian thinking, giving the impression that the New Right is fighting the Christian cause.

1. **Elitist thinking:** The New Right and their followers see themselves as the guardians of the one and only truth. With this idea, they link into the fundamentalist's understanding of their way of being Christians and especially of the literal interpretation of the bible. More liberal faith communities are called churches of "Zeitgeist": running after today's mainstream thinking, giving up family values and blurring the lines to non-believers. Fundamentalists understand themselves as the only ones seeing "the signs on the wall," and the only rightful ones to define true Christianity. Democracy and a decent culture of debate are not part of their desired virtue (Bednarz 2019, 20).
2. **Anti-pluralism:** The New Right insists that they possess the only truth and that all the others are either stupid, vicious, corrupt, or perverse. People of different opinions are not considered to have a dignity of their own. They denounce the democratic system as a dictatorship and the diverse press as lying press ("Lügenpresse"). They describe the mainstream churches, the democratic political system, and the liberal media scene as doomed to perish. They do not hesitate to verbally abuse these democratic players and agitate against the ones representing these values (Bednarz 2018, 52–58).
3. **Anti-liberalism:** The New Right criticizes the Western democratic system as decadent and supports the "Zeitgeist." One of their most important topics is sexuality. Saying that the New Right has a fixation on sexuality is no exaggeration (Bednarz 2018, 70). They condemn homosexuality, diverse sexual or gender expression, abortion, and the discourse on gender, calling it "Gender-Wahn." Homosexuality, Trans, and all other sexual orientation and gender expressions are said to dissolve heterosexuality, marriage, and – according to their world view – the only legitimate way of being family: mother, father, and children. The New Right also opposes the promotion of equal rights for men and women and persons of diverse gender expression. Furthermore, they resist the right to abortion and understand movements against sexual assault and the demand for political correctness as dangerous to the Natural Laws (Naturgesetz), assumed as eternal laws and biblical truths. The commonalities between the Right-Wing Movements and the fundamentalist Christians are evident in these anti-liberal arguments.
4. **Ethno-pluralism:** Instead of the propaganda of the "Herrenrasse" (sc. Master race) the Nazis proclaimed, the New Right uses the euphemistic idiom of ethno-pluralism. Instead of "races," they speak of different cultures that should not mix but stay within their boundaries. This argumentation is used not only to condemn migration, but also to brand "Islam" and Muslim people as a culture and religion that does not belong to Germany and Europe (Bednarz 2019, 21 f.). Ethnopluralism uses the same arguments as white Christians in South Africa before the Rainbow Revolution: "God gave every people its own culture." They used this argumentation to implement the Apartheid System.
5. **Replacement of the people:** One of the main narratives of the New Right is that we do not live in a democratic state but under the siege and dictatorship of the liberals, the communists, etc. To them, any person of an upright mind must resist this regime—like in the NS-times against the Nazis. The New Right also spreads the rumor that the liberals accept Muslim refugees replacing the "original" German white Christian population (Bednarz 2018, 172). They will take their workplaces, rape their women and daughters, and erase the Christian culture. In 2017 and 2019, Alexander Gauland of the AfD and a member of the German Parliament openly supported this idea in public. For fundamentalist Christians, this is the overpowering force of the Muslim people that they must resist.

Spreading fear

In 2019, the historian Volker Weiss published Theodor Adorno's speech in Vienna in 1967 (Adorno 2019). Weiss used the recorded audio of the speech to reconstruct Adorno's lecture. In 1967, Adorno analyzed that rightwing parties gain their influence and followers by spreading fear, especially the fear of a threatening catastrophe (Adorno 2019, 19f). Adorno points out that the fears the rightwing parties are trying to spread are mostly illusory and outdated. In his afterword to Adorno's speech, Weiss stresses that Adorno's analysis of the extreme right argumentation is still valid for today's rightwing movements and especially for the AfD, the political

party in Germany that gained access to the German Bundestag in 2017 (Weiss in Adorno, 2019, 77–86). According to Weiss, the AfD directs much of its rage towards political movements and actors, invoking them like revenants. Quoting Jörg Meuthen, a former politician of the AfD, Weiss argues that the AfD uses phenomena of the past to evoke resentments and to scare today's people:

Der Popanz eines quasidiktatorischen 'links-grün-ver-seuchten 68er-Deutschland'² zeigt, dass tradierte Feind-bilder selbst unter völlig veränderten gesellschaftlichen Bedingungen noch ihren Schrecken entfalten können.³ (Weiss in Adorno 2019, 77).

Instead of analyzing and pointing to the social conditions and real threats that society must face today, right-wing parties bring up pseudo-dangerous "facts" to unsettle those worried about their future, in fear for their jobs and for their way of living. These people, unsettled and in fear, are most prone to the arguments of false prophets, luring them into false security and easy solutions. Nelson (2019, 96) shows that for the CNP. Eric Heubeck (2001) even drafted a manifesto explaining this strategy quite openly: "We will use guerilla tactics to undermine the legitimacy of the dominant regime. We will take advantage of every available opportunity to spread the idea that there is something fundamentally wrong with the existing state of affairs [...] Most of all, we will contribute to a vague sense of uneasiness and dissatisfaction with the existing society. We need this if we hope to start people picking off and bringing them over to our side. *We need to break down before we can build up.* We must first clear away the flotsam of a decayed culture." (Heubeck 2001).

The title of Bednarz's book (2018), "Die Angstprediger" (sc. fear preachers), points to the same phenomenon. She presents different messages of the New Right and how they reach out to Christian communities, but Bednarz does not draw the great lines as Adorno does in his speech.

An alternative culture created by new Media and Big Data

For Heubeck, the New Right needs to create new associations "that should provide everything that a person could want in terms of social interaction" (Heubeck 2001). In 2001, this was a kind of wishful thinking, but from 2010 the CNP broadcasted their messages on all social media channels. Significantly, when fundamentalist Churches expanded to mega-churches, they used video screens in their congregational halls to spread ready-made information and messages from the CNP broadcasting networks. In addition, they tried to gather new members by using the data they collected. In this way, the media messages of the new organizations of the CNP were able to gain effective influence. (Nelson 2019, 169)

Already Adorno saw propaganda as the core of the Nationalist movement (Adorno 2019, 41). As the Nationalist ideology is relatively thin, the propaganda consists of pseudo-facts given with the posture 'everybody knows this', and of 'fake news', always appealing to the authority-bound personality (Adorno 2019, 42). Together with the heightened fear, the nationalist propaganda offers charismatic leadership that promises to erase these reasons for fear.

Bednarz (2018) analyzes how media initiatives of the extreme right blame public media as biased in their contributions and manipulated by left-wing activists. In addition, the mainstream churches and publications are viewed as anti-Christian, because they welcome Muslim migrants, whereas the Christian crusaders of the Middle Ages fought against Muslim invasions.

Remedies against fear in fundamentalist faith communities

The markers of the New Right that Bednarz (2018) lists, including the critique of liberal ways in the field of sexuality, have many overlaps with Christians on the conservative side. The rightwing parties and their propaganda profit especially from people who see themselves as Christians and are members of rightwing parties. The strategy of calling themselves 'conservative' instead of 'extreme right' and using Christian vocabulary helps to blur the line between conservative Christianity and rightwing extremists. The ways the rightwing parties deal with

2 Quote of Jörg Meuthen at the party conference of the AfD in Stuttgart in 2016.

3 Translation by the author: "The bogey of a quasi-dictatorship of 'a left-green contaminated Germany of the 1968' shows that handed down enemy concepts can develop their horror even under totally changed social and historical conditions."



fears of real or fake challenges seem reasonable and in tune with Christian thinking. Faith communities seeing the world as a doomed and sinful place can turn to the apocalyptic traditions of the bible and will see the Antichrist everywhere. If you believe that you are on God's side, you can denounce all the others as being on the devil's side. This dualistic worldview was always part of the Christian tradition. It comforted those living as a minority in the Roman Empire, where Christians were persecuted and killed because of their faith. Now this worldview is inadequate, because the description of the situation does not fit—Christians are not a persecuted minority anymore. Though having the financial means, rightwing parties have neither the social intelligence nor the intentions to help those in need. They do not work constructively in politics or other social engagements, because they do not want to work on sustainable solutions democratically and lawfully. All they have to give is a vague hope of understanding the rage, the feelings of helplessness, uneasiness, and the need for change.

Once again, I must stress that the rightwing movements do not have or need to have a Christian foundation. Their liaison with Christians is purely based on strategic thinking to gain more influence and followers and strengthen their messages by framing them in Christian values and traditions.

Remedies against fear in non-fundamentalist faith communities

The German sociologist Heinz Bude sees faith communities neither as a remedy against fear nor as a bulwark against the rest of the society. Instead, he distinguishes many different fears in society and in a pluralistic faith community: the underprivileged fear for their livelihood (Bude 2014, 83–90), the members of the middle class are concerned about losing their status in the future (Bude 2014, 60–82), the young ones are afraid of not finding a proper place in society and of failing their inner goals and expectations (Bude 2014, 91–100) and all are afraid of the opaque systems of data-transferences, and other self-regulating control-loops out of reach (Bude 2014, 118).

Non-fundamentalist Christians have to admit that there is neither a simple analysis of the actual situation nor is there an easy solution. However, instead of the fundamentalist promise that God will take away all fear, mainstream faith communities

(in Germany the Volkskirche) believe that by standing together, there is a way to cope with fears by helping one another and others in need. Bude highlights that Christian faith traditions have the narratives of the Exodus, they have the history of welcoming refugees after WW2, and they come together to hear words of hope in the Gospel and liturgy, prayer, and music (Bude Interview 2019, 13 f).

In non-fundamentalist faith communities, Christians must face the fact that God did not promise their fears to go away and all their problems to be solved. They cannot see themselves as an elitist community apart from the corrupt world. They must accept that they are a group of ordinary, sinful people, and some of them are praying more intensely than others. They must accept that there is no way to separate the God-chosen from the lost sheep – at least not in this world. Instead, they must go into the world and work in that pluralistic world to find compromises and solutions.

The Jewish sociologist and philosopher Agnes Heller (2002) sees a special task for non-fundamentalist faith communities in a post-religious world, where Christians, Jews and other religious believers only represent a minority of the society. According to Heller, those not clinging to fundamentalist religious views can have a critical perspective on sciences and the whole of society. Institutions of society and sciences freed themselves from religious bondages during the enlightenment period. Now they find themselves in new dependencies on economics and positivistic worldviews. Heller sees religions and arts as having the potential to see the blind spots and what is missing in western societies (Heller 2002, 79).

The courage to be: its roots and remedies

When talking about fear it is helpful to turn to the theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich, who was heavily influenced by his experiences during WWI and the impressions of the Nazi ideology in the 1930s. After losing his chair as a professor of systematic theology in Frankfurt, Tillich left Germany to emigrate to the US, where he taught at the Union Seminary in New York City. In 1952, Tillich published his famous book *The Courage to be*. Using the language of existential philosophy, he discusses human existence and how to overcome despair when facing the threat of nothingness in the world. Tillich distinguishes fear that may have many actual causes

from existential ‘angst’ that is part of everyone’s existence, because humans must face existential nothingness. Angst, the reminder of the threatening abyss of nothingness, cannot be erased. The only way to confront the existential angst and overcome despair is the courage to be; that is the courage of self-affirmation despite all nothingness. Tillich analyses that many shy away from the existential angst and try to exchange it for fears of certain objects or matters to be able to confront it. But confronting it does not dissolve the angst underneath. Rather, the courage to be can take in and incorporate the angst of nothingness (Tillich 2015, 54).

Besides the individual courage to be, Tillich also analyzes the courage to be part of a whole: courage and participation (Tillich 2015, 66–82). According to Tillich, there are positive and negative ways of gaining this courage to be part of a whole. Tillich calls the National Socialism way of overcoming nothingness in the world “neo-collective.” He describes this courage to be part of a whole as identification with the collective group. Through this identification with the group, the individual gains the courage to be by idealizing the collective, as Tillich describes in the following:

So wird die Angst vor dem individuellen Nichtsein in die Angst um das Kollektiv verwandelt, und die Angst um das Kollektiv wird besiegt durch den Mut, der sich durch die Partizipation am Kollektiv bejaht.⁴ (Tillich 2015, 74)

There is another way of participation, another way of courage to be part of a whole. Tillich calls it the way of “democratic conformism.” This courage to be is not rooted in simple identification with the collective. The participation Tillich describes is rooted in the creative act of self-affirmation and participation in the universal creative power.

It is not a direct identification with a collective group but a balance between the individual’s courage to be himself/herself and the courage to be by participating in a greater cause. In this way, individuals can be part of a group without giving up their courage to be that conquers the individual’s existential angst and still participate in the courage to be part of a whole.

Philosophically, Tillich states that Christian faith is neither about ignoring the existential angst nor about soothing it. For Tillich, the Christian message is, the courage to be is rooted in the ground of being—the God Above God, or the God below the human understandings of God. Tillich lays out a way to deal with existential angst and the many fears of today in a critical, self-affirming way without fusing with a group to erase fear. This is not an instruction on how to build a proper faith community. But Tillich’s ideas help find criteria for Christian faith communities and others to deal with the challenges of our time, and to distance themselves from communities that use religious language only to disguise their totalitarian ideology. In times when many foundations are shaking, it is most important to understand where to find the power of being and who is this God who infinitely overcomes despair and raises hope. (Tillich 1960, 40).

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4 English translation: “The angst of the individual nothingness will be transformed into the angst for the collective, and the angst for the collective will be overcome by the courage that is rooted in the participation of the collective.”



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