

## IS PROTESTANTISM MORE OR LESS THAN MODERN?

**Olivier Bauer**<sup>1</sup>

---

Dernière version « auteur » de l'article : Bauer, O. (2018). Is Protestantism less or more than modern? In Y. M. Rabkin & M. Minakov (Ed.), M. Bauer (Trad.), *Demodernization. A Future in the Past* (Ibidem-Verlag, p. 311-327). Stuttgart.

---

Since 1955, the *Westboro Baptist Church*, based in Tokepa, Kansas in the United States, regroups about 100 members, all part of the same larger family. This church is, without a doubt, the one that hates the most people in the world because all their convictions can be summarized to one affirmation, 'God hates!' <sup>2</sup> The God, in which the *Westboro Baptist Church* believes, hates everyone: homosexuals and American soldiers, Jews and Muslims, Catholics and Protestants, Canada, Great Britain, et cetera. This church demonstrates this hate, for example, by thanking God for letting American soldiers die, a joy they show during these soldiers' funeral.

The *Westboro Baptist Church* is part of a specific Protestant stream called 'fundamentalism', named in reference to the 12 booklets published between 1910 and 1915 in Chicago: *The Fundamentals: A Testimony of Truth*.<sup>3</sup> According to sociologist Sébastien Fath, fundamentalism can be characterized by three traits. First, a 'pre-millenarian eschatology': 'the history goes from bad to worse: only the return of Christ, establishing the Millennium, the Golden Age, will provide for the expectation of the chosen.' Second, the affirmation of the Bible's inerrancy; this means that 'the Bible [is] "without errors" in its original

---

<sup>1</sup> Translated in English by Marion Bauer

<sup>2</sup> To know more about the *Westboro Baptist Church*, we may consult their website (Westboro Baptist Church, n. d.) and read the detailed article on Wikipedia ('Westboro Baptist Church,' 2016)

<sup>3</sup> 'In front of the liberal heterodoxy, the authors suggest identifying the fundamental and not negotiable elements of the Christian faith. It is obvious that we recognize those who are part of the common heritage of all the Christians, such as the Trinity, the virgin birth of Jesus Christ and his divinity. Other elements are more specific to the American Protestantism such as salvation by faith, the new birth and the imminence of the return of the Christ. A defensive logic dominates the work. Twenty-nine articles defend the infallibility of the Bible. Thirty-one defend traditional doctrines. Thirty others are dedicated to personal testimonies, attacks against other faiths and exhortations to evangelization.' (Mitri 2004, 36–37)

manuscripts’ and that it has ‘led to an increasing distrust for any recourse to the humanities, sterilizing the intellectual and ethical debate (especially on the question of the evolution) in the name arguments of authority’. Third, a ‘separatist ideology’, which has led the fundamentalists to ‘give up de facto, any attempt to transform the existing denominations from within, preferring to stand apart and develop their own structures (media, schools...)’. (Fath 2003, 40)

The *Westboro Baptist Church* and more largely Protestant fundamentalism correspond very closely to the principal characteristics of demodernization: God is used to build authority; the premillennial eschatology allows them to read history regressively; the separatist ideology leads them to fall back to their religious identity; the affirmation of the Bible’s inerrancy steers them to condemn the scientific theories they deem incompatible with Biblical narratives and to reject the hermeneutic that involves the subject in the interpretation process.

## 1. A Hypothesis to Falsify

Does this aforementioned attitude really come from a demodernization process? Could we not state that the *Westboro Baptist Church* and Protestant fundamentalism are rather ideal types of premodern Christianity and religion, from both chronological antimodern and ideological point of view?

The hypothesis being tested here is that the concept of demodernization allows us to understand the relationship between Protestant fundamentalism and modernity. We will submit this hypothesis to three tests: is Protestantism modern? Is Protestant fundamentalism modern? And is Protestant conservatism antimodern? If, and only if, Protestant fundamentalism is issued from modernity and that it seeks to break free of it, then we will maintain our hypothesis until the next tests.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Is Protestantism Modern?

Protestantism fundamentalism appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century, at a time when modernity was largely settled and began to even be contested.<sup>5</sup> Even if it is part of an ancient line of

---

<sup>4</sup> On the application of the methods of rational criticism on theology, we may read the doctoral thesis of the Swiss Protestant theologian, Pierre Paroz (Paroz 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Note here that modernity has a single calendar; the modernity from a philosopher’s point of view well predates the one of theologians. ‘Philosophers, however, are in rather close agreement that René Descartes was the first modern philosopher, and so the date of his death in 1650 is often used to date the beginning of modern philosophy. Notice that I have been looking at philosophy in order to date the beginning of modernity. If we looked at theology instead the dates would be different. Friedrich Schleiermacher is often called the first modern theologian, and the publication of *On Religion: Speeches*

Christianity and Protestantism, it is first and foremost a reaction against what can be called ‘liberal Protestantism’ (Mitri 2004, 34), the one that not only accepted modernity but also grew from it and contributed to it.

French philosopher, Mark Alizart, defines modernity<sup>6</sup> as a ‘yearning for Protestantism’ (Alizart 2015, 25). It needs it, since moderns are revolutionary who topple authority and law; but at the same they are anxious, hesitant to live without authority and law. However, Protestantism legitimizes and reassures them since it ‘guarantees that morality and the self-fulfillment can bloom even where the authority is overturned, where meaning is lost’. (Alizart 2015, 33) Martin Luther had said it: ‘obey the Law; here is the sin’. It is therefore necessary to let go, to trust in God’s goodness, to accept to dedicate body and soul to his vocation, to deal with what is important: family, church, and profession. And if Jean Calvin had reset a Moral Law, even minimal (love God and his neighbor), it was to liberate ‘a quantity of energy’, used for evangelization and also for ‘public service, be it teaching, army or administration’. (Alizart 2015, 56)

When Law comes back in strength, whether moral, civil, economic, or ecclesiastical, it is again Protestantism allowing to escape the impasses of Protestantism through reformation, that is to say adding more Protestantism to Protestantism but this time another Protestantism, more pious, more intense, more interior, and more sentimental, the Protestantism of Revivals, the Protestantism of John Wesley. By proposing ‘a tangible, sensitive, physical, unquestionable salvation, which allows to escape the curse of mechanization and the pauperization, not only material, but also spiritual which it entails,’ (Alizart 2015, 19) Methodism spreads like wildfire from its native England to Germany, Switzerland, France, and the United States, which it conquers in no time since it brings what the era needs: the rehabilitation of the Me that Lutheranism and Calvinism had judged hateful. One must discover his or her Me, to seek it and maintain it. The formation of interiority becomes the vocation of the human being, and the self-made man his ideal. And this Methodist sensitivity goes beyond the scope of religion; in its cultural form, romanticism, it permeates the entire culture.

The eighteenth century sees a turning point. Protestantism continues to serve as a template but this time to think of other subjects. It is no longer reserved to think of the sky, but also of the earth, not just for the relationship with God but the relationship with others. However, it is still faith that characterizes it, faith against the Law. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is a perfect example of this. For him, ‘Salvation

---

to Its Cultured despisers gives us 1799 as a crucial date for the beginning of modern theology—150 years later!’ (Murphy 1996, 4)

<sup>6</sup> A modernity that he limited to 120 years, between 1750 and 1870.

depends on our capacity to think better, and not only to want better'. (Alizart 2015, 84.) To think better is to let go. It is to refuse to separate the earth from the human. It is to allow subjectivity, to renounce both objectivity and thinking outside of history. And to think the world better means 'to be satisfied with the fact that the world is such as it is'; to think the human being better means, 'to recognize in the laws which rule him the laws of his own thought, of its own will'. (Alizart 2015, 87.) In the United States too, Protestantism becomes a method; always faith but faith in one's self: 'Trust thyself!' as Ralph Waldo Emerson once said. Yet with the return of Law, statistical ones, evolutionary ones, there is an obligation to believe. From unfreedom, we must believe, but believe in freedom because 'to believe in salvation means, simply put, to believe in freedom, which is the best way to make it happen'. (Alizart 2015, 101) Our hypothesis seems to have withstood the first test, that is, is Protestantism modern? From the Reformation to the emergency of liberalism, including the Methodist revival, Protestantism, as a posture rather than religion (though this posture also applies to religion) has been better than modern and has actually contributed to modernity.

### 3. Is Protestant Fundamentalism Modern?

To answer this question, we will use the reflections of two American authors: the Episcopalian theologian Marcus Borg and the philosopher and theologian Nancey Murphy.

#### 3.1. Marcus Borg

Marcus Borg very clearly brings forward the fracture, which divides contemporary Protestantism. It can be divided into two main paradigms,<sup>7</sup> which Borg respectively names the earlier paradigm and the emerging paradigm. What separates them are two different and competing visions of the main 'phenomenon' of Christianity: 'God, the Bible, Jesus, the creeds, faith, and so forth.' (Borg 2003, 5)

Very briefly, we will recall the main features of how to regard the Bible, what a Church judges to be normative, and how to conceive the Christian life:

- The earlier paradigm, from many hundreds of years, is the most common form of Christianity and is claimed by fundamentalist Christians, conservative evangelicals, and Pentecostals. It considers the Bible as infallible because it originates from God and sees Biblical accounts as literal and factually accurate. It summarizes a Christian life with the following principle: Believe and do

---

<sup>7</sup> 'Sometimes called a *gestalt*, a paradigm is a large interpretive framework that shapes how everything is seen, a way of constellating particulars into a whole. Our time of conflict is about more than specifics, for it concerns a change in how the Christian tradition and the Christian life are viewed as a *whole*.' (Borg 2003, 4–5)

---

what is necessary to be saved, in other words, to benefit from a good life after death.

- The emerging paradigm, from more than 100 years, is predominant in historical Protestant Churches<sup>8</sup> for the past 30 to 40 years. It considers the Bible as a historical product, a metaphor that becomes the mediator of the Spirit and takes on meaning for those who read it. It summarizes a Christian life as follows: Live the current life in relation to God and as part of the Christian tradition.

If the earlier paradigm claims to be the only one to remain faithful to the Christian tradition and if the emerging paradigm believes that its form of Christianity is best suited to the contemporary world, Borg shows that the two paradigms are actually from tradition and, what is most interesting here, modernity.<sup>9</sup> Modernity, defined by Borg as ‘Western cultural history since the Enlightenment of the seventeenth century, marked above all by the birth of modern science and scientific ways of knowing’ (Borg 2003, 11), has had a profound effect on Christianity. It particularly undermined the authority of the Bible. By identifying ‘truth with factuality’ (Borg 2003, 29) and then questioning ‘the literal-factual truth’ (Borg 2003, 11) that the Bible tells, modernity questioned the truth from its divine origin. However, ‘modernity has not only affected the forms of Christianity that have accepted it and sought to integrate it but also the forms of Christianity that have strongly rejected it’. (Borg 2003, 11–12) The proponents of both paradigms have accepted the new premises posed by modernity. They attempted to integrate it and to respond, in opposite ways, to it.

- The proponents of what is to become the emerging paradigm firstly attempted to save the historicity of the Bible.<sup>10</sup> They then slowly, progressively and sometimes regretfully, abandoned

---

<sup>8</sup> Borg uses the expression ‘mainline or old mainline Protestant denominations’. He specifies: ‘These include the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Presbyterian Church USA, the American Baptist Convention, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The emerging paradigm is also present in the Catholic Church.’ (Borg 2003, 6) But Churches inspired by the emerging paradigm still welcome the tenants of the earlier paradigm, which may even form the majority of its members. Most likely because the emerging paradigm acknowledges religious plurality: if Christianity is one of the strongest religions, it is still a single response to the experience that humans have with what they call ‘God.’

<sup>9</sup> ‘Moreover, there is much about the emerging way of being Christian that is conservative and traditional: it conserves the tradition by recovering it and envisioning it afresh. And there is much about the earlier way of being Christian that is innovative: its most distinctive features are largely the product of the last few hundred years. Indeed, both are modern products, as we shall see later in this chapter. Neither can claim to be the Christian tradition. Both are ways of seeing traditions.’ (Borg 2003, 2)

<sup>10</sup> From this desire, the quest for a historic Jesus pursued throughout the nineteenth century is exemplary.

the idea of turning the Bible into a historical book or only a historical product, where men and women testified at different times and contexts of their relationship with God. In this way, they are participating in the criticism of modernity by affirming that there is a truth without factuality or more accurately there is a truth beyond factuality. The meaning of the Bible is then ‘more-than-literal’. (Borg 2003, 13)

- However, the proponents of the earlier paradigm are no less indebted to modernity. On the contrary, they are even more likely because they think of Christianity within the framework of modernity. Borg gives three hints. Firstly, it is only in the seventeenth century that the idea of an infallible and inerrant Bible appears, and it is not until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that it is ‘insistently affirmed by some Protestants’. Secondly, the ‘emphasis upon the literal-factual interpretation of the Bible’ is also a product of modernity. In order for the Bible to be true, the events told in it must have really happened. And thirdly, ‘faith means believing in spite of difficulties, believing even when you have reason to think otherwise. It means believing “iffy” things to be true.’ (Borg 2003, 29–30)<sup>11</sup>

### 3.2. Nancey Murphy

Nancey Murphy starts from the idea that the ‘American Protestant Christianity’ is divided into two ‘types’<sup>12</sup> or ‘two clear-cut patterns’ (Murphy 1996, 79): liberalism, on the one hand, and conservatism (‘including both fundamentalists and evangelicals’) on the other, separated by a profound difference. (Murphy 1996, 1.) She seeks to identify the ‘intellectual positions’ from one another and postulates the hypothesis ‘that the *philosophy* of the modern period is largely responsible for the bifurcation of

---

<sup>11</sup> Here is the fundamentalist reading of the two stories surrounding the creation of the world in Genesis 1 and 2. In order for these stories to be true, the creation of the world must have happened as explained. If scientific studies contradict the biblical stories, then we must believe in the biblical version. Why must we do this? Because, as with the rest of the Bible, these stories are infallible and without error. The proponents of the emerging paradigm will note that Judaism has juxtaposed two irreconcilable stories in the Tanakh, which takes away any of their historicity, taking along any obligation of a literal reading.

<sup>12</sup> Murphy specifies, ‘It is important to reiterate that the goal of this study is to construct ideal types, not to write a history of modern theology.’ But she also adds, ‘The project, of course, would be entirely uninteresting if *no* modern theologians clearly fit the types.’ (Murphy 1996, 7) She works with the texts of four contemporary theologians, two are liberals, Gordon Kaufman and David Tracy, and two conservatives, Donald Bloesch and Alister McGrath; and with four theologians ‘from a generation to a century ago’, two liberals, Harry Emerson Fosdick and Shailer Matthews, and two conservatives, Charles Hodge and Augustus H. Strong.

Protestant Christian thought'. (Murphy 1996, 1.)<sup>13</sup> She examines three questions of modern philosophy (the question of creation, the conception of language, and the principle of reduction) and shows how these have modeled the two types of Protestantism. The Table 1, constructed by Murphey to summarize her demonstration, synthesizes it. (Murphy 1996, 79)<sup>14</sup>

	<b>Liberal</b>	<b>Conservative</b>
<b>Knowledge</b>	Experiential foundationalism Inside-out	Scriptural foundationalism Outside-in
<b>Language</b>	Expressivism	Propositionalism
<b>Relationship with science</b>	Incommensurability	Commensurability
<b>Divine action</b>	Immanentism	Interventionism

Table 1 : Liberal pattern versus Conservative pattern (Nancey Murphy)

However, let us briefly detail her argument.

- 'What is the foundation to be?' or 'how do we know God?' In his *Discours de la méthode*, published in 1637, René Descartes is the first to consider knowledge like a building, built from its foundation. He makes modern philosophy fundamentalist. By rejecting the argument of authority, denouncing the infinite regression of the justification of beliefs on and by other beliefs, he postulates, 'the regress must end in a "foundation" of beliefs that cannot themselves be called into question'. (Murphy 1996, 13)<sup>15</sup> Protestantism, whether liberal or conservative, has accepted this requirement of modern thought. He looked for 'a sturdy foundation' to build his theology upon. However, with the first bifurcation, each found different foundations. 'Conservative theologians have chosen to build upon Scripture; liberals are distinguished by their preference for experience. This forced option has been one cause of the split between liberals and conservatives.' (Murphy 1996, 16.) The conservative Protestantism asserts 'the verbal inspiration of Scripture'

<sup>13</sup> 'The philosophers who will concern us in part I are René Descartes (1596–1650), John Locke (1632–1704), David Hume (1711–1776), Thomas Reid (1710–1796), and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Their relations to one another and to theological developments are shown below' (Murphy 1996, 5).

<sup>14</sup> Murphy specifies: 'Numerous theologians, of course, have attempted to find compromise positions between the two types, but it has been the burden of these three chapters to show that there really is no self-consistent middle ground. Thus, we find Christianity bifurcated into two distinct traditions in the modern period.' (Murphy 1996, 79)

<sup>15</sup> The pronoun 'themselves' is in the plural and refers to the 'beliefs' and not to the 'foundation'. This surprises us because we believe that beliefs can always be questioned ... and their foundations too!

(by God of course) and ‘its complete inerrancy’ (Murphy 1996, 16). On the other hand, the liberal Protestantism asserts the existence of an experience so universal that it refuses to qualify it as ‘religious’ but rather ‘available to *all* people, regardless of culture and religious training’, as an experience ‘immediate, independent of interpretation, and such that is one unable to doubt that one has it or be mistaken about its character’. (Murphy 1996, 27) Obvious corollary of these two concepts, the knowledge comes, according to liberal Protestantism, from the inside, meaning from experience, to go to the outside (‘inside-out’) while for conservative Protestantism, it starts on the outside, the Bible, to go toward the inside (‘outside in’).

- The ‘theories of language’ or ‘how can we speak about God?’ In the twentieth century, the question of language became a central subject of the ‘Anglo American philosophy.’ To the question, ‘what is the meaning of meaning?’ the ‘early modern philosophers’, answered, ‘either the referential or the representative theory: words get their meaning from the things in the world to which they *refer*, or sentences get their meaning from the facts or states of affairs they *represent*’. But ‘late modern philosophers’ have developed an ‘expressivist or emotivist’ theory, according to which there is ‘a second-class language’ ‘to express the emotions, attitudes, or intentions of the speaker’. (Murphy 1996, 38.) In the second bifurcation, conservative Protestantism adopted the first theory of language, from the beginning of modernity. For them, the ‘religious language’ or doctrine describes the ‘immaterial realities’ they posit or ‘supra-empirical states of affairs’. (Murphy 1996, 42) Liberal Protestantism adopted the second theory of language, that of late modernity. For them, the ‘religious language [...] gives expression’ to the experience which makes up ‘the essence of religion’; expressed in the framework of Christianity. It is ‘a legitimate expression of the Christian’s religious awareness’. (Murphy 1996, 47)
- The principle of ‘reductionism’ or ‘How does God act in the world?’ Because ‘modern science’ has the tendency to conceive the world as a ‘hierarchy of levels of complexity, from the smallest sub-particles through atoms, molecules, tissues, cells, organs, organisms, societies, to ecosystems’ (Murphy 1996, 65), there is an ‘ontological and metaphysical reductionism’ that postulates that ‘higher-level entities are nothing but complex organizations of smaller entities’, that they are ‘the parts of an entity or system determine the character and behavior of the whole, and not vice versa’. (Murphy 1996, 65.) However such a conception seems to exclude God’s action in the course of things. In the eighteenth century, deism thought to conciliate theology and ‘modern science’, by asserting, ‘God was the creator of the universe and author of the laws of nature, God was not at all involved in ongoing natural processes or in human affairs.’ (Murphy 1996, 68.) But by refusing this radical position, the two forms of Protestantism attempt to think about the God’s



intervention in the course of things. Liberal Protestantism has an ‘immanentist view of divine action’, a vision that underlines, ‘the universal presence of God in the world and God’s continual, creative, and purposive activity in and through all the process of nature and history’. (Murphy 1996, 71)

### 3.3. Results

Once again, our second question (‘Is Protestant fundamentalism modern?’) seems to have withstood the second test of the theological reflections of Marcus Borg and philosophical – theological reflections of Nancey Murphy. Protestant fundamentalism, more largely conservative Protestantism in which Murphy includes evangelical Protestantism, and even more largely the earlier paradigm, which according to Borg travels in Christian Churches, are truly a product of modernity. It is Christianity created, expressed, lived and most likely believed in modern categories: factuality as truth, the necessity for a foundation worthy of faith, words which represent (or make available) things, the existence of laws of nature and history, which God has put in place and may transgress. Her approach, which goes from the outside, a God who reveals himself, and comes inward, the faith of a believer is not premodern, faith is a response to modernity, a response made in the context of modernity.

## 4. Is conservative Protestantism Antimodern?

For French historian of science, Bruno Latour, even ‘antimoderns’, those who ‘struggle fiercely against the effects of the [modern] Constitution,’ ‘accept it fully’. (Latour 1993, 47.) They defend God (and ‘universality,’ ‘liberty’ and ‘society’, etc.), ‘as if these entities really existed and actually had the form that the official part of the modern Constitution granted them’. (Latour 1993, 47.)<sup>16</sup> If we can show that Protestant fundamentalism defends God as if he truly existed under the form given by the modern Constitution, then we can conclude that Protestant fundamentalism is truly antimodern, that is to say that it accepted modernity only to combat it.

---

<sup>16</sup> As soon as we reformulated Bruno Latour’s sentences, we started to doubt. We understand that anti-moderns can accept and combat the modern Constitution at the same time. In a way, they are fighting it from inside. But are they truly defending a modern form of God? By symmetry, without taking any interest in theology, it appears truer to state that they have accepted it, but they are still fighting it without the framework of this modern Constitution. To defend God as if he truly existed seems to us a radical way to combat the modern form of God.

#### 4.1. The Modern Constitution

Bruno Latour defines modernity<sup>17</sup> as a Constitution in the sense that it ‘allows,’ ‘prohibits,’ ‘enlightens,’ and ‘darkens’ (Latour 1991, 68), that it distinguishes ‘humans and nonhumans, their properties and their relations, their abilities and their groupings,’ (Latour 1993, 15), that it draws ‘two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings, on the one hand, that of non-humans on the other,’ (Latour 1993, 10), that it ‘purifies’ these two spaces by ‘a total separation between nature and culture’ (Latour 1993, 30) and finally that it divides the powers of representation: ‘the representation of non-humans belongs to science,’ ‘the representation of citizens belongs to politics’. (Latour 1993, 28.) However the modern claim to purify is not actually its reality. For modernity produces, by ‘translation,’ by ‘mediation’ without admitting it, or even admitting it to one’s self, ‘mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture’. (Latour 1993, 10) Modernity produces it exactly like ‘the other cultures-natures’, which it made ‘premodern by contrast’ (Latour 1993, 38) with the exception that modernity produces more of it, that it enables the increase of the mediation work, that it amplifies ‘the contacts’,<sup>18</sup> and that it mixes ‘much greater masses of humans and nonhumans’. (Latour 1993, 41.) This makes modernity’s first strength.

To be modern is the sum of two works, one hidden and even unthought and the other assumed, revealed, and asserted: ‘the work of production of hybrids and the work of elimination of these same hybrids’. (Latour 1993, 46.) To be modern is to believe in ‘the total separation of humans and nonhumans’ and ‘simultaneously cancels out’. (Latour 1993, 37.) To be modern is to both ‘willingly subscribe to the critical project’ (Latour 1993, 11) and to ‘render the work of mediation that assembles hybrids invisible, unthinkable, unrepresentable’. (Latour 1993, 34.) This does not mean that this mediation work no longer exists but only that modernity denies doing it. An illusory denial, but a denial that gives its second strength to modernity, which gave it ‘its own effectiveness’, the audacity to ‘mobilize things and people on a scale that they would not otherwise have disallowed’. (Latour 1993, 41.) To be modern is to become ‘invincible’ (Latour 1991, 57) by being immunized against all criticism, by affirming that society just like nature is, at any time, built ‘by the hands of people’ and that its ‘laws infinitely surpass us’. (Latour 1993, 37) Nature, just like society, is at the same time immanent and transcendent (see Tables 2 and 3).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Bruno Latour makes chemist Robert Boyle (1627–1691) and philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) the opposite but symmetrical origins of this modernity. These dates his modernity to the middle of the seventeenth century.

<sup>18</sup> In the French version, Bruno Latour uses the term ‘brassage,’ meaning ‘brewing’.

<sup>19</sup> We have adapted the table proposed by Bruno Latour (Latour 1991, 55). The rupture of style in the second line particularly intrigued us. Why is no “we” mentioned? We think it is possible to reestablish the symmetry.

	<b>Transcendence</b>	<b>Immanence</b>
<b>Nature</b>	We can do nothing against the laws of Nature	Nature gives us unlimited possibilities
<b>Society</b>	We can do nothing against the laws of society	We are completely free

*Table 3: Transcendence versus immanence (Bruno Latour)*

Each of the four terms is used to both criticize and ensure the three others.

Moderns attribute their successes to the fact that they have ‘carefully separated Nature and Society (and bracketed God), whereas they have succeeded only because they have mixed together much greater masses of humans and nonhumans, without bracketing anything and without ruling out any combination’. (Latour 1993, 41.) However as soon as moderns admit that they work through mediation as much as through purification, they cease to be modern. Even better, ‘as soon as we study in detail the work of production of hybrids and the work of elimination of these same hybrids’, we realize that ‘we have never been modern in the sense of the Constitution’ (Latour 1993, 46) ‘because we become retrospectively aware that the two sets of practices have always already been at work in the historical period that is ending’. (Latour 1993, 11)

## 4.2. God and the Modern Constitution

A little surreptitiously, ‘God’ appeared at the turn of a citation. However, the fact that Bruno Latour adds God in his analysis of modernity augments its pertinence in this case because he clearly and precisely shows how modernity will answer, ‘the question of God’. (Latour 1993, 32.)<sup>20</sup> As usual, it does this

<b>Anchoring points</b>	<b>Possible critics</b>
Transcendence of Nature	We can do nothing against natural laws
Immanence of Nature	Unlimited possibilities
Immanence of society	We are completely free
Transcendence of society	We can do nothing against the laws of society

*Table 2: Personal Freedom versus collective Slavery (Bruno Latour)*

<sup>20</sup> Bruno Latour mentions that modernity borrows from Christianity its way to deal with the question of God. Modernity continues, bends and accomplishes the work of the Protestant Reform: ‘Reinterpretation of the ancient Christian theological themes made it possible to bring God’s transcendence and His immanence into play simultaneously. But this lengthy task of the sixteenth-century Reformation would have produced very different results had it not got mixed up with the task of the seventeenth century, the conjoined invention of the scientific facts and citizens.’ (33) These ‘ancient Christian theological themes’ are for example those of *Deus absconditus*, the Wholly Other, the God hidden and revealed at the same time or the

through purification. It distances the ‘supreme God,’ (Latour 1993, 34) ‘the premodern God<sup>21</sup> of the Christians,’ (Latour 1993, 33) further from ‘interfering with Natural Laws as well as with the laws of the Republic’; (Latour 1993, 33) it makes God ‘the crossed-out God of metaphysics’ (Latour 1993, 33) or of deism. But again, as we have seen before, modernity does this by applying ‘the same doubling to the crossed-out God that they had used on Nature and Society’. (Latour 1993, 33.) Because God is at the same time, a ‘remote God’ and an ‘intimate God’. (Latour 1993, 38.) He is at the same ‘the all-powerful God [that] could descend into men’s heart of hearts [yet] without intervening in any way in their external affairs’. (Latour 1993, 33)

- Remote God: He is ‘the creator God to whom everything belongs to and who gave man everything’, and the ‘all-powerful God who is infinitely remote in the great beyond,’ (Latour 1993, 38–39) but an ‘absent God,’ (Latour 1993, 34) ‘something of a foreigner,’ (Latour 1993, 39) a God who ‘would no longer interfere’. (Latour 1993, 34)
- Intimate God: He is a ‘wholly spiritual religi [ous]’ God (Latour 1993, 33) a God who ‘could descend in men’s heart of hearts,’ (Latour 1993, 33) a God that we can ‘call on [...] at will in the privacy of [our] own hearts,’ (Latour 1993, 34) so that we can ‘feel the spiritual presence’. (Latour 1993, 34)

It is therefore necessary to add a third line to the table because, as modernity has done for nature and society, it has also made God at the same time transcendent and immanent (see Table 4).

<i>Transcendence</i>	<i>Immanence</i>
God does not interfere in nature, nor society	We can dispose of the will of God in the intimacy of the heart

Table 4: *Transcendence of God versus Immanence of God (Olivier Bauer and Bruno Latour)*

### 4.3. Results

Our hypothesis has resisted the third test (‘is conservative Protestantism antimodern?’) if and only if it fulfills two conditions. First, conservative Protestantism must accept to conceive God in the terms of modernity. And second, it must defend its true existence under the double form given by modernity.

Initially and in a modern perspective of purification, it may appear convenient to assign a form of modern God to each Protestantism: to the emerging paradigm, the liberal Protestantism, the God who speaks from the intimacy of the heart; to the earlier paradigm, to the conservative Protestantism, the God who

---

God revealed in its opposite. Here again is a falsification of the hypothesis that Protestantism has never been modern.

<sup>21</sup> In French, Bruno Latour writes ‘dieu,’ with a small letter. He never explains this single use of ‘dieu’ without a capital letter.

created and gave everything to human beings. However, this symmetry is misleading because it does not resist the distinctions made by Marcus Borg and Nancey Murphy!

- The God of the liberal Protestantism and of the emerging paradigm indeed resembles in some ways the intimate form of God. When the knowledge of God comes from within human beings, when it comes from a personal and immediate experience, when the religious language is used to express a certain religious conscience, when the Bible brings together human testimony about God, we are truly in the register of intimacy and of the heart. However, against modernity, the liberal Protestantism and the emerging paradigm refuse to radically limit the action of God in one's heart. Interventionists, according to Nancey Murphy, refuse to rule out the possibility of an action by God outside, despite or in spite of the laws of nature, of history, or of society.<sup>22</sup>
- On the other hand, it seems difficult to recognize the remote form of God in the God of the conservative Protestantism.<sup>23</sup> Modernity and the earlier paradigm share some quality of God, probably because modernity has borrowed them from Christianity, such as a God Almighty or a God who created and gave everything to humans. However, against modernity, conservative Protestantism and the earlier paradigm have always stated, and even with strength, that the remote God, because he is Almighty, intervenes both inside (in the hearts) and outside. His 'immanent' vision makes him state that God acts at the same time in and for as well as against, despite or in spite of the laws of nature, of history and of society.

We still must verify if Protestantism defends God as if he truly existed under the two forms of modernity given by modernity. The fact that its real existence is necessary sends us back to the conservative Protestantism.<sup>24</sup> The need of the reality of God is found in part in the conception of religious language that Nancey Murphy gives it: the religious language<sup>25</sup> represents and makes even those immaterial and supraempirical realities present, so God in the front. This necessity refers back to the conception of

---

<sup>22</sup> Some Protestants reduce the mode of intervention of God to inspire men and women who make gestures and words in his name.

<sup>23</sup> While it perfectly matches the God of deism.

<sup>24</sup> The fact that Christian postulates that God exists might seem self-evident. Except that it is possible to be Christian and to defend the nonexistence of God. The Protestant theologian Klaas Hendrikse showed, in our opinion convincingly, that we may 'believe in a God who does not exist' ('Geloven in een God die niet bestaat' is the title of his book) (Hendrikse and Kuitert 2007). Evidently Klaas Hendrikse does not belong to either the earlier paradigm or the conservative Protestantism.

<sup>25</sup> The use of the word 'representation' is without a doubt not harmless. Bruno Latour gives it a particular importance since modernity awards scientists the task of representing nature and politicians the representation of citizens. Here it is the religious language, or maybe the religious by their language, who represents God.

truth as factually mentioned by Marcus Borg, which the earlier paradigm relied on: for the Bible to be true, it is necessary that its narratives truly happened, primarily those involving God.

Finally, is the conservative Protestantism ant-modern? We answer this question positively. It is antimodern in the sense that it agrees to think of God within a framework defined by modernity, but that it joins two separate forms that modernity gives it, that it affirms its true existence, and that it recognizes its impact on the laws of nature, of history, and of society.

## 5. Conclusion

In this text, we have shown, with the *Westboro Baptist Church*, Sébastien Fath and Tarik Mitri that Protestant fundamentalism clearly rejects that which is attributed to modernity; with Mark Alizart that modernity owes at least a part of what it is to Protestantism; with Markus J. Borg and philosopher Nancey Murphy that we can distinguish between two kinds of Protestantism based on their relationships with modernity; with Bruno Latour that neither of these two Protestantisms has ever been modern, regardless of what they claim to be (this is the case of the conservative Protestantism) or of what they pretend to be (this was often the case for the liberal Protestantism). This is because with the question of God, Protestantism, whether it be conservative or liberal, proceeds with mediation, rather than purification: God is, at the same time and in the same breath, remote and intimate, almighty and purely spiritual and his central figure is mediation, Jesus the Christ, real God and real man, a humanity – divinity hybrid. The recognition of the mediation work (even more, its valorization) makes Protestantism a premodern religion, directed by another Constitution than that of modernity.

But if this Constitution were never applied, if no one has ever been modern, then the concept of ‘demodernization’ would never have had any sense and the one of ‘postmodernity’ either. We are all premoderns and the two Protestant theologies are too. At the same time, this deals with the question posed in the title, regarding the conservative Protestantism being more or less than modern. The conservative Protestantism is neither more or less than modern. It is not unmodern either. It is neither more nor less than the liberal Protestantism would be postmodern. Both are something other than modern. The only difference (though an important one) lies with the relationship that the two have with the modern Constitution. The conservative Protestantism refuses it, while the liberal Protestantism distances from it. To continue playing with prefixes, we can then say that the conservative Protestantism is antimodern and the liberal Protestantism is a-modern.

## 6. Bibliography

Alizart, M. (2015). *Pop théologie : protestantisme et postmodernité*. Paris: PUF.

- Borg, M. J. (2003). *The Heart of Christianity: rediscovering a life of faith* (1st edn.). San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.
- Fath, S. (2003, November). *Les fondamentaux du fondamentalisme*. *Le Monde des religions*, pp. 38–41.
- Hendrikse, K., & Kuitert, H. M. (2007). *Geloven in een God die niet bestaat: manifest van een atheïstische dominee*. Amsterdam: Nieuw-Amsterdam.
- Latour, B. (1991). *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes : essai d'anthropologie symétrique*. Paris : La Découverte. (English version: Latour, B. [1993]. *We have never been modern*. Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press)
- Mitri, T. (2004). *Au nom de la Bible, au nom de l'Amérique*. Genève : Labor et Fides.
- Murphy, N. C. (1996). *Beyond liberalism and fundamentalism: how modern and postmodern philosophy set the theological agenda*. Harrisburg, PA.: Trinity Press International.
- Paroz, P. (1985). *Foi et raison : la foi chrétienne aux prises avec le rationalisme critique, Hans Albert et Gerhard Ebeling*. Labor et Fides, Genève.
- Westboro Baptist Church. (January 2016, 25.) Retrieved on January 26, 2016, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westboro\\_Baptist\\_Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westboro_Baptist_Church)
- Westboro Baptist Church. (n. d.). *God Hates Fags*. Retrieved on January 26, 2016, from <http://www.godhatesfags.com/>