

Interreligious Insight

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The Faces of Fundamentalism

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Introduction

September 11, 2001 entered American history with an apocalyptic impact, revealing to the entire world a clash of fundamentalisms that unchecked can destroy not only the World Trade Center but the world itself. For it was fundamentalism that flew airplanes into our buildings and it was another kind of fundamentalism that responded by attacking and occupying both Afghanistan and Iraq. From President Bush's first use of the word *crusade* to Lieutenant General William Boykin's comments more than two years later about the struggle between our Judeo-Christian tradition and the idol-worshipping Muslims, a fundamentalist mindset has been driving American policies, just as a comparable fundamentalism drives the attacks of our enemies. Thus it is fundamentalism that remains our greatest threat. It is alive and well within our country's borders as well as outside of them, at home in Washington D.C. and indeed in the offices of the White House and the Pentagon, as much as in the hills of Afghanistan or the plains of Iraq.

STATIC, SELECTIVE & SEDUCTIVELY SIMPLE

Scholars differ about the precision with which the term fundamentalism should be used. It is rightly argued that in its strictest sense it applies only to Christianity. But our contemporary conversation about religion tends to use the term in a broader meaning. In the *Encyclopedia of Fundamentalism*, for example, Brenda E. Brasher, the editor, notes the current controversy about the term and informs us that the editors have concluded that the term can be used beyond the confines of Christianity "in relationship to movements within a variety of religious traditions (albeit often with significant qualifications)." ¹ Our own use of the term takes it beyond the strict confines of religion and applies it to a mindset found within various areas of experience.

What, then, is this menacing fundamentalism and how can we recognize its face? We are using it to mean a belief system that is static, selective, and seductively simple. One can find it in religion, in politics, in the academy; indeed anywhere human beings make decisions about the world outside their doors. It has to do with the way we deal with difference, with otherness, with whatever is foreign, alien, or uncomfortably different. It is a mechanism to reduce our fear, to cover up our doubt, to veil our ignorance, and to shore up our insecurity. It is a coping device, however mistaken, and a form of collective neurosis, however misguided.

Fundamentalism is static because it views an ideology as a monolith, not like a living current. It fails to see its own founding texts in terms of a developing tradition; instead, it adheres to a point on a

continuum as though it were the entire surface. A biblical text about the boundaries of ancient Israel (not that all the biblical texts agree on these) becomes a dogma, not part of a dialogue. A phase in the life of the Ottoman Empire becomes an eternal verity. A metaphor used to describe the death of Jesus in an environment of animal sacrifice becomes an unchangeable doctrine. The clock has stopped for fundamentalists and whatever time appears on the face of that clock is construed as eternally correct.

Fundamentalism is selective. No one claiming to take the whole Bible or the whole Qur'an literally can ever make good that claim. The Christian who points to a text in Leviticus forbidding a man "to lie with a man as with a woman" will inconsistently be wearing wool and linen at the same time or be eating ham – both of which actions are banned by that same book of Leviticus. An ultra Orthodox Jew may be punctilious in observing kashrut, while treating Palestinians with contempt, forgetting the biblical injunction to be kind to the stranger in your midst. A Muslim may scrupulously avoid drinking alcohol and yet ignore the poor people who live in his community, the very people for whom Muhammad had such compassion. As one scholar comments: "Fundamentalists are always selective in their choice of texts and tend to focus on passages that underscore their exclusive claim to truth and superiority over others whilst ignoring passages that stress the universal nature of divine love and compassion."²

Fundamentalism is seductively simple because it turns all the grays of a tradition into black and white. We see this in the fundamentalist posture of our own president for whom other nations are either with us or against us. We conveniently divide countries into a "coalition of the willing" and an "axis of evil". A U.S. military spokesman in Iraq stated that we were there to be friends to the people of Iraq but if they rejected our friendship, they would find out what it was like to have us as enemies. It is clearly an either-or world that fundamentalists inhabit. "America: love it or leave it" – and there's no room in between those alternatives. People who change their minds are wafflers and suspect. Former President Clinton recently commented that the country's mood is such that we would rather support someone who is strong though wrong than someone who is right but might change his mind, words that serve to clarify the results of the last presidential election.

Although fundamentalism is a phenomenon that consists of making reality more simple than it is, in itself it is not a simple reality. It exists in phases of development, from the tranquility of an enclave culture, to a militant form that nevertheless operates within the law, to a terrorist organization that denies its own fundamental ethic. Our task here is to examine this menace in all of its basic mutations and to seek to draw it out and help it to transform itself into the healthy reality it both pollutes and distorts.

PHASE ONE: UNCHALLENGED FUNDAMENTALISM

Even at its most harmless level, fundamentalism has the potential to be a dangerous and divisive societal force. The common element in all forms of fundamentalism is an enclave culture, a separation from the outside world that can be physical or ideological or both. A boundary, physical or perceived, sharply divides the righteous fundamentalist community from an alien and dangerous outside world.³ The self-proclaimed insiders are keenly aware of their uniqueness and relish the exclusivity that this special status warrants. The worldview of unchallenged fundamentalists is nonetheless jaded since there is no effort to understand anything beyond the confines of the enclave. Because of their tainted social lens, these first stage fundamentalists are extremely wary of what exists beyond their protective barrier. "The enclave tends to see itself as inherently fragile, given the ever-lurking outsider."⁴

Unchallenged fundamentalism exists in countless forms in our current world. In religion we find the smug arrogance of an exclusivist faith, the conviction that only the enclave members have access to truth, grace, and salvation. In national affairs we find the simplistic bumper-sticker mindset: “To hell with our enemies, God bless America.” Absolute truth forms the barrier protecting the enclave from false religions and false political ideologies. Just as God’s salvation stops at the religious community’s borders, so do God’s blessings stop at the nation’s boundaries. It is the USA that God blesses and none of that blessing dares to creep over the border into Canada or down into Mexico. All other countries and continents exist in the outer darkness, just as all other religions hide under Satan’s cloak.

PHASE TWO: ANGRY FUNDAMENTALISM

The intrusion of an outsider, a foreign influence, can catapult the unchallenged enclave into an angry force. Within a fundamentalist Christian context, this can be something as simple as a Muslim teacher being hired by the town’s high school, the choir director of the local church turning out to be gay or the high school biology teacher suggesting that the creation story in the biblical book of Genesis may not be literally true. Restoring the religious integrity of the community becomes the rallying cry for action. Any action, however, must remain within the law. Members of the angered enclave work with the school board and with the local administrative bodies to bring things back to normal. If the court house is honoring gay marriages then a bill must be passed to stop this perversion. Unchallenged fundamentalism has now become militant. It is ready to take up arms: to block gay marriages, to put prayer in the classroom, to keep the Ten Commandments in the courthouse, to keep “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance, to revoke Roe vs. Wade, to teach creationism in the biology classroom.

The pattern is similar in the enclave communities of Jews, Muslims, or Hindus. A rabbi wants to introduce a bat mitzvah, a female coming of age ceremony, into the Orthodox community; a Muslim woman feels that being modest in this country does not have to mean wearing a veil; a spiritual teacher wants to read a text from the Qur’an in a Hindu religious ceremony. Immediately a line is drawn in the sand; the challenge has to be met. A threat has come from outside the enclave culture and it must be dealt with quickly and effectively. And yet, the boundaries of legality and morality must be respected. The fight must stay within the ring; the game must be played by the rules.

PHASE THREE: SUPRAMORAL FUNDAMENTALISM

An important line has to be crossed before we come to Phase Three Fundamentalism. The religious cause must be so holy that it transcends the normal confines either of the law of the land or the accepted moral canons of the enclave community. A new sense of desperation and hopelessness must be added to the formula. The civil community, for example, has abandoned its duties, allowing innocent children to be killed by abortion doctors. The country has betrayed the Muslim tradition by allowing foreign soldiers to be present on holy soil or by suggesting that a Jewish state might be legitimate in traditionally Muslim lands. Israel has betrayed its founding ideals in suggesting that settlers might have to return land to Muslim intruders or that the biblical boundaries of Israel might have to be readjusted to the political realities of a negotiated peace. Action must be taken and there can be no bounds or limits to the scope of that action.

In discarding religious and civil morality, religious fundamentalism has evolved into a political crusade. The Western notion of separation of church and state has been transcended. Terrorist acts are no longer merely the assertion of exclusive religious ideals but “performance events, in that they make a symbolic statement and performative acts insofar as they try to change things.”⁵ Divine mandate is

assumed for any and all actions. A true Christian can murder an abortion doctor and his bodyguard or bomb a gay nightclub. A Jewish hero can walk into a mosque and kill over twenty Muslims at prayer. Suicide bombers who blow themselves up in a battle for Palestinian statehood can be revered as martyrs. Since government has failed to uphold the truth, the true believer can be executioner, judge, and jury. As Karen Armstrong reminds us: "Once a movement has started killing in the name of God, it has embarked on a nihilistic course that denies the most fundamental religious values."⁶

HOW TO RESPOND?

The tactics of response differ according to the level of fundamentalism being addressed. At the first level, little more is needed than inviting the person to participate in a larger world, to look outside the barriers of a self-imposed enclave. Someone from a small town in Indiana where everyone is either Methodist or Baptist sits comfortably in the pew while the preacher declares that Muslims worship idols and are all going to hell. But if that same person visits a Muslim country and sees hundreds of Muslims at prayer, it may be more difficult to keep the reality of Islam at arm's length. As mosques spring up in communities across America, there will be new opportunities for dialogue. Such dialogue will help to break down the wall of separation between enclave and reality.

When dealing with the angry fundamentalist, the challenge is greater. A conscious effort must be made to find common ground. Instead of a debate, where neither party listens to the other, a context of dialogue needs to be established. Both parties need instruction in how to listen to others, how to feel the other side, how to affirm some shared values despite their disagreements. Does a gay organist at the church seem offensive to some members of the community? Set up a dialogue with other gay Christians and see if some of the fears can be allayed. Avoid a context of angry debate and find people who are skilled in facilitating real dialogue. Initiate a discussion about what the Bible does or does not say about homosexuality. Progress, though more challenged than at stage one, is nonetheless possible.

The supramoral fundamentalist prompts a whole different level of response. When their actions impinge on the rights of others and threaten the lives of the group they have targeted as intrinsically evil, supramoral fundamentalists need to be stopped. This may mean bringing them to justice and putting them in prisons for the protection of the larger society. In some instances, this might mean killing them if they are trying to carry out homicidal plots against the targets of their fundamentalist hatred. If, however, there is any chance of moving them to dialogue, that must be attempted. As in all dialogue, they must be allowed to define themselves. They may see themselves as freedom fighters, not terrorists, as martyrs, not suicide bombers.

The supramoral fundamentalist usually carries more than one kind of bomb. In addition to the physical weapons with which he threatens his avowed enemies, he also carries a time bomb of hurt and resentment in his own heart. In the words of the current adage: hurt people hurt people. There may be neither time nor opportunity to lay bare the festering psychosis at the root of the violence and hate. Fundamentalists at this level are acting from desperation and near despair. It may be possible to initiate the long process of healing but no one should anticipate an easy cure. In most cases, as with pedophiles and other social deviants, the primary goal has to be the protection of the population they threaten.

With all fundamentalists, however, an approach of anger and hostility will only frighten them to retreat more deeply into their enclave culture. There always needs to be an effort to understand them on their own terms, to hear how they are defining themselves and the world they are affirming as real. This requires an extraordinary patience and real compassion. The danger is that the opponent of

fundamentalism becomes in essence a type of fundamentalist. In other words, one can adopt a posture that is as static, selective, and simplistic as the fundamentalism one is opposing.

It is not without significance that we human beings have two ears and one mouth. We need to listen twice as much as we speak. We need to understand the world of the fundamentalists, just as we invite them to explore our world. We need to help them feel safe and secure in an environment where they will be heard and not silenced or stereotyped, providing, of course, that they are willing to abide by the moral codes of their own traditions and the civil laws of their society.

Our national policy is but one example of this larger challenge to respond to fundamentalism. In our post 9-11 world, the last thing we need is a “war against terrorism”. As Stephen Zunes wisely observes: “All the sophisticated weaponry, brave fighting men and women, and brilliant military leadership the United States may possess will do little good if there are hundreds of millions of people in the Middle East and beyond who hate us.”⁷ We need a “response to terrorism” as indeed to all fundamentalisms, based on listening and understanding. The volatile nature of our world ill affords us the luxury of proceeding in the direction of dialogue at our leisure. The date on our calendar for beginning this new kind of response must read “today”.

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NOTES

¹ This quote is found on p. xvii of the Introduction to the *Encyclopedia of Fundamentalism* (New York: Routledge, 2001). Brenda E. Brasher is the general editor and there are more than one hundred scholarly contributors.

² Oliver McTernan, *Violence in God's Name* (Maryknoll NY, Orbis Books, 2003), p. 22.

³ Gabriel Almond, Scott Appleby, and Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion* (Chicago IL, University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 32.

⁴ *Strong Religion*, p. 67.

⁵ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God* (Berkeley CA, University of California Press, 2003), p. 127.

⁶ Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York, NY, Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), p. 223.

⁷ Stephen Zunes, *Tinderbox* (Monroe MA, Common Courage Press, 2003), p. 3. .