

Intolerance and Fundamentalism Seminar

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WHAT IS FUNDAMENTALISM?

In the middle of the twentieth century, it was generally assumed that secularism was the coming ideology and that religion would never again play a major role in world events. Today religion dominates the headlines, and this is due in no small part to the militant piety that developed in every single major world faith during the twentieth century. We usually call it “fundamentalism.” Fundamentalist groups have staged revolutions, assassinated their presidents, carried out terrorist atrocities, and have become an influential political force within strongly secularist nations. There has, for example, been much discussion about the role of Protestant Christian fundamentalism in the recent American elections. It is no longer possible to dismiss fundamentalism as a passing phase, but essential to understand this powerful force in contemporary life.

We should begin by defining what fundamentalism is *not*. First, it should not be equated with religious conservatism. Billy Graham, for example, is not a fundamentalist: he would neither call himself a fundamentalist nor would he be claimed by the fundamentalist churches as one of their own. Second, fundamentalism should not be linked automatically with violence. Only a tiny proportion of fundamentalists worldwide take part in acts of terror; the rest are simply struggling to live what they regard as a good religious life in a world that seems increasingly inimical to faith. Third, fundamentalism

is not an exclusively Islamic phenomenon. There are fundamentalist Jews, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Confucians, who all challenge the secular hegemony of the modern world. In fact Islam was the last of the three monotheistic religions to develop a fundamentalist strain, long after it had erupted in Judaism and Christianity.

So what *is* fundamentalism? It is essentially a revolt against modern secular society. Wherever a Western polity has been established that separates religion and politics, fundamentalist movements have sprung up alongside it in protest. Whatever the politicians or the pundits claim, people all over the world are demonstrating that they want to see religion reflected more prominently in public life. As part of their campaign, fundamentalists tend to withdraw from mainstream society to create enclaves of pure faith. Typical examples are the Ultraorthodox Jewish communities in New York or Bob Jones University in South Carolina. Here fundamentalists build a counter-culture, in conscious defiance of the Godless world that surrounds them, and from these communities some undertake a counteroffensive designed to drag God or religion from the sidelines to which they have been relegated in modern secular culture, and bring them back to center stage.

This campaign is rarely violent. It usually consists of a propaganda or welfare effort; in the United States, for example, the fundamentalist riposte attempts to reform school textbooks or to get “Christian” candidates elected to government posts. But if warfare is endemic in a region and has become chronic ~ as in the Middle East or Afghanistan ~ fundamentalisms can get sucked into the violence that pervades the whole of society. In this way, originally secular disputes such as the Arab-Israeli conflict have become sacralised, on both sides.

The ubiquity of the fundamentalist revolt shows that there is widespread disappointment with modernity. But what is it about the modern world that has provoked such rage and distress? During the sixteenth century, the peoples of the West began to develop a new type of civilization that was without precedent in world history. Instead of basing their economy on a surplus of agricultural produce, as did all premodern cultures, they relied increasingly upon technology and the constant reinvestment of capital, which freed them from the inherent limitations of agrarian society. This demanded radical change at all levels of society ~ intellectual, political, social, and religious. A wholly new way of thinking became essential, and new forms of government had to be evolved to meet these altered conditions. It was found by trial and error that the best way of creating a productive society was to create a secular, tolerant, democratic polity.

It took Europe some three hundred years to modernize, and the process was wrenching and traumatic, involving bloody revolutions, often succeeded by reigns of terror, brutal holy wars, dictatorships, cruel exploitation of the workforce, the despoliation of the countryside and widespread alienation and anomie. We are now witnessing the same kind of upheaval in developing countries presently undergoing modernization. But some of these countries had had to attempt this difficult process far too rapidly and are forced to follow a Western program rather than their own.

This accelerated modernization has created deep divisions in developing nations. Only an elite have a Western education that enables them to understand the new modern institutions. The vast majority remains trapped in the premodern ethos; they experience the incomprehensible change as profoundly disturbing, and cling to traditional religion for support. But as modernization progresses, people find that they cannot be religious in

the old way and try to find new means of expressing their piety. Fundamentalism is just one of these attempts, and it therefore develops only after a degree of modernization has been achieved.

The modern spirit that developed in the West had two essential characteristics: independence and innovation. Modernization in Europe and the United States proceeded by declarations of independence on all fronts ~ religious, political and intellectual, as scientists and inventors demanded the freedom to develop their ideas without interference from the religious or political authorities. Further, despite the trauma of the modernizing process, it was exciting, because the Western countries were continually meeting new challenges and creating something fresh. But in some developing countries, modernization came not with independence but with colonial dependence and subjugation; and the West was so far ahead that they could not innovate but only imitate. So these countries find it difficult to develop a truly modern spirit. A nation such as Japan, which was not colonized, was able to make its own distinctive contribution to the modern economy in a way that some Middle Eastern countries have not.

Culture is always contested, and fundamentalists are primarily concerned with saving their own society. Protestant Fundamentalists in the United States want America to be a truly Christian nation, not a secular, pluralist republic. In Palestine, Hamas began by attacking the PLO, because they wanted the Palestinian resistance to be inspired by Islamic rather than a secular polity. Bin Laden began by targeting the Saudi royal family and such secularist rulers as Saddam Hussein. Only at a secondary stage ~ if at all ~ do fundamentalists begin to attack a foreign foe. Thus fundamentalism does not represent a clash *between* civilizations, but a clash *within* civilizations.

Perhaps the most important factor to understand about this widespread religious militancy is that it is rooted in a deep fear of annihilation. Every single fundamentalist movement that I have studied in Judaism, Christianity and Islam is convinced that modern secular society wants to wipe out religion ~ even in the United States. Fundamentalists, therefore, believe that they are fighting for survival, and when people feel that their backs are to the wall, some can strike out violently, like a wounded animal. This profound terror of annihilation is not as paranoid as it may at first appear. Jewish fundamentalism, for example, gained fresh momentum after the Nazi Holocaust, when Hitler had tried to exterminate European Jewry, and after the 1973 October War, when Israelis felt vulnerable and isolated in the Middle East.

In some Muslim countries, modernization has usually been so accelerated that secularism has been experienced as an assault. When Mustafa Kemal Ataturk created modern secular Turkey, he closed down all the *madrasahs* and abolished the Sufi orders. He also forced all men and women to wear Western dress. Reformers such as Ataturk wanted their countries to *look* modern. In Iran, the shahs used to make their soldiers walk through the streets with their bayonets out, tearing off women's veils and ripping them to pieces in front of them. In 1935, Shah Reza Pahlavi gave his soldiers orders to shoot at unarmed demonstrators in Mashhad, one of the holiest shrines in Iran, who were peacefully protesting against obligatory Western clothes. Hundreds of Iranians died that day. In such circumstances, secularism has not been experienced as liberating and civilized, but as wicked, lethal and murderously hostile to faith.

The main fundamentalist ideology of Sunni Islam developed in the concentration camps in Egypt into which President Jamal Abd al-Nasser had incarcerated thousands of

members of the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1950s, without trial and often for doing nothing more incriminating than attending a meeting or handing out leaflets. One of these prisoners was Sayyid Qutb, who was executed by Nasser in 1966. Qutb went into the camp as a moderate and a liberal; but in these vile prisons, watching the Brothers being executed and subjected to mental and physical torture, and hearing Nasser vowing to relegate Islam to a marginal role in Egypt, he came to regard secularism as a great evil. He developed an ideology of committed armed struggle against this threat to the faith. His chief disciple today is Osama bin Laden.

Thus fundamentalism usually develops in a symbiotic relationship with a secularism that is experienced as hostile and invasive. Every single fundamentalist movement that I have studied in each of the three monotheistic traditions has developed in direct response to what is perceived as a secularist attack. The more vicious the assault, the more extreme the fundamentalist riposte is likely to be. Because fundamentalists fear that secularists want to destroy them, aggressive and military action will only serve to confirm this conviction and exacerbate their fear, which can spill over into ungovernable rage.

Thus membership of al-Qaeda has increased since the recent Gulf War; the offensive has convinced many Muslims that the West really has inaugurated a new Crusade against the Islamic world. In the United States, Protestant fundamentalists in the smaller towns and rural areas often feel “colonized” by the alien ethos of Harvard, Yale and Washington DC. They feel that the liberal establishment despises them, and this has resulted in a fundamentalism that has gone way beyond Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority of the 1970s. Some groups, such as the Christian Reconstructionists, look

forward to the imminent destruction of the federal democratic government: the blazing towers of the World Trade Center would not be alien to their ideology. But when liberals deplore the development and persistence of fundamentalism both in their own societies and worldwide, they should be aware that the excesses of secularists have all too often been responsible for this radical alienation.

Fundamentalism is not going to disappear, as secularists once imagined that religion would modestly retreat to the sidelines and confine itself to private life. Fundamentalism is here to stay, and in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, at least, it is becoming more extreme. Fundamentalism is not confined to the “other” civilizations; a dangerous gulf has appeared, dividing many societies against themselves. In the Middle East, India, Pakistan, Israel and the United States, for example, fundamentalists and secular liberals form two distinct camps, neither of which can understand the other.

In the past, these movements were often dismissed with patrician disdain and this has proved to be shortsighted. We have to take fundamentalism very seriously. Had the United States made a greater effort to understand Shiite Islam, for example, they might have avoided unnecessary errors in the lead-up to the Iranian Revolution of 1978-9. The first step must be to look beneath the bizarre and often repulsive ideology of these movements to discern the disquiet and anger that lie at their roots. We must no longer deride these theologies as the fantasies of a lunatic fringe, but learn to decode their ideas and imagery. Only then can we deal creatively with fears and anxieties that, as we have seen to our cost, no society can safely ignore

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