

Intolerance and Fundamentalism Seminar

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LSE

Introduction:

I'm grateful for this invitation to speak at my alma mater.

I'm interested in exploring the psychological appeal of fundamentalism to fundamentalists and the fascination of fundamentalism to others. I also want to fray the binary between the 'fundamentalists' and the 'others'.

In a nutshell, I propose that the psychological appeal of fundamentalism to fundamentalists is that it trades off some profound human psychological themes and tendencies. There is, therefore, generic human ground for fundamentalism to sew and reap. Psychoanalysis traverses this ground, too. Hence, there are many more fundamentalisms than the usual kind, buried in apparently more tolerant milieux.

I say that the fascination of fundamentalism to others, primarily in so-called liberal and allegedly more tolerant cultures is that fundamentalists are like us – only more so! Fundamentalism and fundamentalists represent an out of reach, idealised, literalised and concretised version of ourselves – what psychoanalysis might recognise as a contemporary mirroring Other of a specially problematic kind.

Disclaimer:

The way Susie has constructed this series reflects something in which both she and I passionately believe: That psychoanalysis deployed on its own is useless when it come to social problematics – there always needs to be an alliance with other disciplines. By all means, let's have an analyst or therapist on every committee, or at every conference or symposium on a social issue, but – please God – not a committee or a conference only of analysts! With appropriate humility, and conscious of its often

compulsive need to prove its theories correct and (with a nod to Nikolas Rose) to 'govern the soul', psychoanalysis can play its part in contributing in a small measure to the alleviating of the sufferings of the world. We should try to eschew the maddening rectitude of the analyst and beware psychoanalytic fundamentalism. Then perhaps we can move forward from agony, to analysis, and eventually to action (and action is not something psychoanalysis is yet very comfortable with). (Reference: *The Political Psyche*.) NB selected extracts on the themes of the paper available.

Summary:

The four themes that I see as underpinning the appeal and the fascination of fundamentalism are: sexuality, sacrifice, morality and aggression.

Sexuality:

Behind the gender certitudes of fundamentalism, lie the usual immense anxieties over sexuality. Fundamentalism settles these anxieties with its literalising clarity.

We shall see throughout this paper how fundamentalism seeks to tip the balance between literalism and symbol in favour of the former in all its solidly reassuring concreteness. This literalism constitutes the psychological fingerprint of fundamentalism – and it is literally literal, given the prominent position of the Book in many religious and political fundamentalisms.

As far as sexuality is concerned, this anxiety-settling clarity is what enables it to structure the relations between women and men in a way that is usually, though not always, unchallenged.

Most psychoanalysts spend too much time worrying about gender identity weaknesses or disorders, when they should perhaps think more about the private and public problems of excessive unconscious gender certitude, especially amongst men. (Reference 'In praise of gender confusion' in *Politics on the Couch*.)

Behind physical sex is a search for meaning and context which fundamentalism provides. When sex goes off in a relationship, it is often because of a catastrophic loss of its meaning. I could invent a new diagnostic category here: ‘meaning deficit disorder’, which fundamentalism offers to cure.

To summarise this section on sexuality: Fundamentalism appeals to the fundamentalists and fascinates others in its particularly reassuring engagement with the overwhelming and upsetting numinosity of sex.

Sacrifice:

Sacrifice of oneself for another or something other – such as a cause, community, nation or religion – is a widespread psychological, historical and anthropological theme, both literally and symbolically. We say ‘no pain, no gain’. Sacrifice leads to renewal (for example, of the earth or soil), to love and relatedness, and to the survival and flowering of the community. Sacrifice lies at the heart of Abrahamic religious symbolism (thinking of Abraham and Isaac and the ram). It is, of course, a far older religious phenomenon than that. And sacrifice is a central element in fundamentalist discourse.

Let’s take a brief look at the depth psychology of sacrifice. In Jungian theory, ego-consciousness is understood as eventually being too atomistic, rationalistic and arrogantly wedded to logic for the subject’s individuation. The ego has to be, as it were, ‘sacrificed’ for movement in the self to take place. In my own work, I’ve extraverted this Jungian insight to suggest that much the same could go on in the social realm. For example, citizens have to sacrifice the dubious regressive pleasures of passive and infantile dependence on heroic male leaders so as to realise their own potential for collaborative politics under sibling leadership.

(When I spoke about how this thought about politics was relevant for women on Woman’s Hour the other day, the programme people got a substantial appreciative response.)

To summarise this section on sacrifice: Fundamentalism appeals to the fundamentalists because of the expectation of benefits and gains for the community. It fascinates others because of the connection to change and improvement on both personal and social levels.

Morality:

Psychoanalysis, ethology, cognitive science and genetics are moving into an uneasy agreement that humans are not born amoral (to use Winnicott's words here). There seems to be something like a skeletal, ineluctable moral sensibility in humans, made flesh by human and social relationality. Obviously, the details and particulars of moral and ethical codes and behaviours vary very widely historically and geographically.

The idea I am floating is that, in its outspoken espousal of codified public and private moralities, fundamentalism does not have an uphill struggle to be heard. There is a marked resonance always already.

Of course, it is often a very harsh and rigid morality that fundamentalisms of the religious variety promote – what I call 'original morality'. This original morality is devoid of the possibility of debate and discussion, of forgiveness of self and other, of atonement and reparation. *There are no exceptions to the rule.* Self-congratulatory elitism is the outcome even when the discourse is one of humility and the avoidance of pride. The whole world view is highly literal, with no room for symbol or metaphor – which is why actual punishment lies at the core of this kind of morality.

What is missing is the other side of moral process - what I call 'moral imagination' – in which forgiveness, atonement and reparation are positively valued. For moral imagination to flourish, *exceptions are the rule!*

Yet, were moral process only to consist of moral imagination, it would be too slippery and unreliable. So, just as moral process based only on the cruel, codified pomposities of original morality is insulting to human creativity, moral process based only on imagination is going to be far too tricky.

For there to be a full moral process, there need to be a dialectical interplay between the fundamental, ineluctable, rigid original morality - and the more generous, tolerant moral imagination. This is not an easy balance to strike, as we all know from daily life. I hope you can see what I am getting at here – the mix between what you might call standards or rules and something that responds to the urgencies of a difficult situation. (Reference: my piece on ‘Psychoanalysis and moral process’ in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*.)

To summarise this section on morality: Fundamentalism appeals to the fundamentalists because it confers a sense of moral superiority. It fascinates others because it poses a question that is central in lived experience: How to get a balance between the certitude of original morality and the flexibility of moral imagination?

Aggression:

Most liberally minded people discuss fundamentalism in terms of its aggression, which is very convenient for them, a projection of the shadow of the intellectual! They see fundamentalism as aggressive towards other ways of knowing and being, or of worshipping and relating. This seems a bit obvious and self-congratulatory, as if Western societies were nothing but open-minded and welcoming of the stranger. I am not sure that a vision of fundamentalism as aggressive to the outside is the whole picture, and I want to review the same ground from a rather different angle.

I want to suggest that in its avoidance of difference and diversity, in its turning its back on tolerance, fundamentalism is actually *terrified of aggression*. In fact, I further suggest that fundamentalism seeks to manage aggression out of existence.

Let me develop this a bit more. Tolerance of and a vital relation to difference involve inevitable degrees of conflict and aggression. Tolerance will imply aggression because there are always going to be misunderstandings, disappointments, struggles for power and resources. Now, if there is no philosophy of tolerance and no vital relation to difference, there will, on a very important level, be no consequent conflict and aggression. On this reading, fundamentalism can be understood as an anti-aggressive discourse – though certainly not one that we should praise simply for that

reason given that it is fear of ordinary, healthy-enough aggression that is the problem for fundamentalism.

It's worse, actually. We should not praise fundamentalism for seeking to manage aggression because, if you can't face aggression, then you have to steer clear of anything to do with tolerance, difference and diversity. OK, so fundamentalism helps a person to avoid the aggression of encountering something different. But isn't that a terrible loss for that person. Aren't they then deprived of the benefits of difference and diversity? A superficially easier but less rich life is guaranteed when the problems of tolerance are bypassed or frozen. If you search out the etymological roots of the word 'tolerance' in Latin, it comes from the verb meaning 'to bear,' and that in turn comes from the Greek verb meaning 'to suffer'. Tolerance is hard and painful work. Intolerance is a helluva lot easier.

I realise that to accept the claim that fundamentalism has a problem with aggression that is the exact opposite of the problem it is usually thought to have won't be easy. So I want to explain this thinking yet a little more.

The basic idea comes from Islam. I have been on a steep learning curve here, due to the interfaith and inter-religion work that I am currently doing (I could give details later if you want). As Jewish man, I have found an engagement with Islam a highly emotional experience. In print, I have suggested - to my cost - that Islam has the potential to be more than the shadow of the West; that it may have something to teach us about a one-sided mode of life (materialism, tawdry sex including trafficking, lack of spiritual values and integrity in politics). Such thinking may help to deepen and nuance the debate over 'the rise of the religious *left*' that lots of people are talking about in the States and, in slightly different language, here.

In Chapter 49, verse 13 of the Koran, we find the 'Ta'Aruf' verse. Ta'Aruf means 'that you might come to know one another':

'Oh Mankind, we have created of you male and female, and have made you peoples and tribes, that you might come to know one another.'

In terms of a discussion on intolerance and tolerance, this is a brilliant and inspiring take on difference, on relationality, on the value to the subject of otherness, and on the religious and psychological importance of 'multilateralism' and 'inter-culturalism'.

We know that men and women, and peoples and tribes, enter into conflict as they fail to resolve their differences. We see an acceptance and valorisation of misunderstanding and conflict in the service of encountering difference and diversity and getting to know one another. Ta'Aruf seems to me to be rather different from Judaism's Tower of Babel or Christianity's universal salvation via acceptance of Christ.

To summarise this section on aggression: Fundamentalism offers fundamentalists a chance to avoid the knock-on effects of an encounter with difference which are an experience of conflict and aggression within the self. Aggressive rhetoric and pronouncements are not the same as the ordinary reciprocal aggression engendered by a meeting with something strange and new. For those others, who do not see themselves as fundamentalists, their fears, hopes and aspirations about benefiting from an encounter with difference are played out on the pitch we call fundamentalism.

Closing remarks:

In this very short paper, I have tried to show how fundamentalism appeals to fundamentalists and fascinates others. I have suggested that these groups called 'fundamentalists' and 'others' have quite a lot in common. I demonstrated this with reference to psychological themes that psychoanalysis has worked with, namely sexuality, sacrifice, morality and aggression.