



Religious Fundamentalism: Our Response

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Challenge of the Secular World

To understand the modern phenomenon of fundamentalism, it is not sufficient simply to explain the origin of the term. We must go back further and examine the origin and nature of the modern secular world, to which fundamentalists are so violently opposed.

Humankind is currently caught up in the most radical cultural change which has ever taken place. Human culture, of course, has always been undergoing slow evolutionary change. In the past 200 years, however, cultural change has suddenly accelerated. It is now overturning beliefs and institutions which, in some cases, have lasted for millennia, and which are judged by some to be absolutely essential or fundamental to the meaning of people's lives and the welfare of society. In particular, within the three monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, modernity appears to be threatening the very foundation of all truth and meaning, namely the being and authority of God. Religious fundamentalists condemn the modern secular world as humanistic and godless. Those who believe the change to be fundamentally evil are resisting it to the point of waging war against it. Convinced that they must remain loyal to the fundamentals of the past, they condemn secular humanism as the work of the devil.

The theistic foundations of Christianity were challenged by the leading thinkers of the Enlightenment of 18th century. Theism, or belief in a personal God, was replaced by deism, or belief in an impersonal First Cause. Dependence on divine revelation was replaced by human endeavour and discovery. It is hardly surprising that not only fundamentalists but also even some fairly traditional thinkers and theologians look back to the Enlightenment with grave concern. Yet to the Enlightenment we owe many features of modern culture which most of us now take for granted and would not dream of surrendering – the freedom to think for ourselves, the freedom to ask questions and to hold up cherished

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beliefs to critical examination, the freedom to express our opinions and doubts, the assertion of human rights, the acknowledgement of human equality, etc. Thus the Enlightenment was a very liberating period. It replaced the divine right of kings with democratic self-rule. It gave rise eventually to many new freedoms – the emancipation of slaves, the emancipation of colonies from imperial control, the emancipation of women from male domination and, more recently, the freedom of homosexuals to openly declare their sexual orientation.

Catholic Reaction

The ideas generated by the Enlightenment were so innovative that they were not readily acceptable to church authorities. Those who embraced the new thinking from the Enlightenment often found themselves forced out of the church establishment. Pope Pius IX in his *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) condemned the new freedom of thought then emerging. This was followed in

1869 by the calling of the ecumenical council now known as Vatican I. Among other things it made the infallibility of the papacy a mandatory dogma. This move attempted to protect Catholicism from modern thought by building a protective wall of authority around it. The Vatican had long forbidden the faithful to read books thought to be injurious to their spiritual health, by placing them on the Index. The impact of modernity did not show itself again in Catholicism until Pope John XXIII called Vatican II, when Catholicism took a sudden but cautious leap into the modern world with its policy of updating by reading the signs of the times.

Christian Fundamentalism and Literalism

Christian fundamentalism has sometimes been equated with biblical literalism. In other words, fundamentalists are said to take the Bible literally. Indeed, they themselves often speak of being committed to the literal inerrancy of Bible. But literalism is not a very satisfactory term. It is clear that, when the Bible refers to God as Father and Jesus as shepherd, the words are intended to be taken metaphorically and not literally. Fundamentalists have no problem with metaphorical language in that regard.

It is true that up to the 19th century the six days of creation in the biblical myth of origins were taken literally as 24-hour periods. But when the immense age of the earth became clearly evident on geological grounds, most fundamentalists tried to defend the “truth” of the biblical story by interpreting the six days as six geological ages, thousands or even millions of years in length. Thus, in order to defend the Bible as true in everything it says, fundamentalists keep shifting between literal and non-literal interpretations. Their purpose in doing so is to defend the fundamentalist dogma that the Bible, being the Word of God, is truly inerrant.

So fundamentalists are not consistently biblical literalists. They are literalists only when and where it suits them to be so. They

are usually literalists when it concerns the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of Jesus as an historical event and the existence of eternal punishment in hell. But when Jesus says it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God they go to great lengths to interpret this in such a way that they do not themselves have to “sell all that they have and give to the poor”, as Jesus directed the rich young ruler who wanted to follow him.

The claim of fundamentalists to be the true guardians of their particular faith must be strongly rejected. In fact, fundamentalism is fast becoming one of true religion’s chief enemies. In condemning secular humanism, fundamentalism is actually opposing the legitimate evolution of the very faith it sets out to defend. It is sadly ironic that fundamentalism, which sees itself as the guardian and preserver of Christianity, now constitutes one of Christianity’s chief obstacles to its natural and logical development.

Muslim Fundamentalism

In order to understand the rise of Muslim fundamentalism we must go as far back as the 18th century, when Muhammad al-Wahhab founded the Wahhabi movement in Arabia. He advocated a strict return to the original teachings of Islam as found in the Qur’an and Hadith (authoritative traditions of Muhammad). This move was very much like that of the first Christian fundamentalists with their slogan of “Back to the Bible”. Wahhabism could be described as the first manifestation of Muslim fundamentalism.

Islam lends itself to fundamentalism even more than Christianity does, for the strength of fundamentalism lies, as we have seen, in its appeal to Holy Scripture. Islam possessed Holy Scripture from the beginning. As the words of the Qur’an continued to be uttered by Muhammad during his lifetime, they were accepted by Muslims as coming directly from God. Whereas it is the figure of Christ which is central to Christianity, it is the Qur’an, not Muhammad, which is central to Islam.

There are several aspects of the Wahhabi movement for Islamic reform, and they set the pattern for the later types of Muslim fundamentalism. Main aspects are Politics, force and jihad.

- It was politically active from the beginning. This is because in Islam there has never been the division between religion and politics. Islam is primarily concerned with the ordering of society, and only secondly with the spirituality of the individual. So for the Muslim, religion and politics are virtually one and the same.
- It had no qualms about using force to attain its goal. Wahhabism soon gathered sufficient military power not only to capture Mecca and Medina, but to take over the whole of Arabia and move into Iraq, where it captured and partially destroyed the mosque in Karbala, so sacred to the Shi'ites.
- It revived the practice of jihad. Though often incorrectly translated in the West as "holy war", jihad literally means "struggle". It can refer to the internal struggle which may take place in a Muslim in trying to be wholeheartedly obedient to Allah. But it can also mean the external struggle, not only to defend the boundaries of Islamic society but also to extend them to include unbelievers. It was always the ultimate aim of Islam to incorporate all nations into the brotherhood of Islamic society.

So the Wahhabis are to be seen as the forerunners of today's Muslim fundamentalists. Indeed a direct link can be traced from the Wahhabis to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and from it to such groups of Muslim fundamentalists as Hamas, the Islamic Jihad and Al Qaeda.

Comparison

Just as Christian fundamentalists seek to restore the secular West to its original form of Christendom, so Muslim

fundamentalists are motivated by the goal of restoring the Islamic world to its pristine purity. Both groups see the modern secular world as a materialist, consumer-driven society which has lost whatever spirituality it had in the past. One of the chief differences between the two fundamentalisms is that Christian fundamentalism is fighting against something which has its seeds within Christianity, whereas Muslim fundamentalism has set itself the task of eliminating all the evil influences which have come from the outside. Muslim fundamentalists began their fight against their fellow-Muslims, who in their view had succumbed to the West. But more recently this has brought them into conflict with the West itself.

Hindu Fundamentalism

One of the leading Hindu intellectuals that greatly impacted the rise of Hindu movements, specifically during the British occupation was V.D. Savarkar (1883-1966). His most influential work was the fundamental *Hindutva* (Hinduness), which he wrote while he was imprisoned by the British. *Hindutva* is a manifesto for religious nationalism. Savarkar makes India Hindus' Holy-land. Although he accepts the presence of certain religions, such as Buddhism and Jainism in India, other religions such as Islam and Christianity are seen as foreign elements and do not belong in the subcontinent. Savarkar became the president of the *Hindu Mahasabha*. It was founded in 1915 in order to bring together the diverse local Hindu movements. It believed that in order for India to one day become a free Hindu state it would have to support and encourage Hindu brotherhood between different castes, including the untouchables.

In 1925, the *Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangha* (RSS) was established under the leadership of K. Hedgewar, a former member of the *Hindu Mahasabha*. It was incepted as a voluntary organisation with the aim to create a Hindu cultural pride and brotherhood. It adopted a much more militant stand than that of the *Hindu Mahasabha*. It spread across all of India giving its members Hindu nationalistic education and

paramilitary training. The organisation wanted to take the emphasis off of spiritual strength alone and incorporate the necessity of physical strength. Another organisation that has come to be very influential is the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP). It was founded in 1964 by some of the leaders of the RSS. Yet another party that emerged as a result of the RSS, that has become part of the mainstream political life of India is the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), which emerged in 1980 out of the Janata coalition. It is one of India's largest political parties and it espouses Hindu nationalism according to the writings of Savarkar in *Hindutva*. Hindu fundamentalists have used extreme and violent means to achieve their goals. Such was the case with the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, by a crowd of nearly one million activists of the VHP, that led to violent clashes between Hindus and Muslims that left thousands dead and injured.

Fundamentalism Divides People

The internationalism of the coming global society calls for flexibility of thought and practice, for empathy with those who differ, for compromise in a spirit of goodwill; it requires mutual co-operation for the common good. Since fundamentalism encourages people to become blindly loyal to specific fundamentals, whether it is a Holy Book or the overcoming of a perceived injustice, all forms of fundamentalism are socially and globally divisive. Thus fundamentalism is socially and internationally dangerous and a threat to peace.

How Do We Respond?

It is a grave error of judgment to assume that terrorism can be stamped out by war. Neither can terrorism be eliminated simply by planning to kill or imprison all terrorists. The state-ordered assassination of terrorists simply aggravates still further the hostility, hatred and sense of injustice, which were the original causes for the rise of terrorism. For every one killed, five more may appear somewhere else. Terrorism is the symptom of a

deep malaise, a malaise which lies behind the current responses to terrorism as much as behind terrorism itself. Therefore, we must find out the motivating cause behind terrorism and deal with that.

We can see that the current wave of terrorism around the globe is the product of fundamentalism. we encounter the face of Islamic fundamentalism in the terrorist acts of suicide bombers who are determined to kill and destroy. The Islamic world encountered the face of Christian fundamentalism and terrorism in the person of George Bush, the American President, who was ready to wage war against any nation that stands in the way of America's economic interests.

Conclusion

To sum up, here are the chief features of religious fundamentalism:

Fundamentalism rejects the human freedoms which have opened up in the aftermath of the western Enlightenment, and is committed to combat secular humanism and all other aspects of the modern world which it regards as harmful to the spiritual condition of humankind.

Fundamentalism asserts that humans must submit to the authority of the Divine Being, whose divinely revealed truths and absolute commands they believe to have been permanently revealed – in the Torah for the Jew, in the Bible for the Christian, in the Vedas for the Hindu and in the Qur'an for the Muslim.

Fundamentalism consequently leads people to think in terms of black and white. Everything is either true or false, good or bad; there are few shades of grey, little uncertainty, and no area for debate and dialogue.

Fundamentalism is distrustful of human reason. It does not enter into open dialogue but dogmatically proclaims. It is wary of democracy, the assertion of human rights and the equality of the

sexes. It favours strong, male, charismatic leadership, both in religion and in society.

Fundamentalism seeks to exercise control by establishing theocratic societies which conform to the (divinely revealed) absolutes. Hence Israel must be a Jewish state, Iran must be an Islamic state, India must be a Hindu State and America must be a Christian state.

Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Islam each have a cultural history of which its adherents can be justifiably proud. Fundamentalists in each tradition do their cultural heritage a great injustice by making it look like a rigid, intolerant sect. Christian fundamentalism is preventing Christianity from playing a positive and creative role in shaping the modern global society. Similarly, Muslim fundamentalism is distorting the face of Islam and giving the impression to the rest of the world that Islam, far from being the religion of peace, brotherhood and compassion which it can be, is simply a seedbed for violence and terrorism. Fundamentalism, whether Christian, Hindu or Muslim, distorts and does irreparable harm to the very religious tradition it claims to be defending.

It has to be remembered that the fundamentalist organizations are not the majority of any specific religion. Their interpretations of the *fundamentals* of their religion may be so distorted that to really associate it with that religion as a whole would be detrimental. For it seems that rather than a religion creating these fundamentalists, it is the fundamentalist mentalities of powerful individuals that use religion as a tool to achieve their goals. 🙏



O Cross of Christ!

Pope Francis

Rome

O Cross of Christ, symbol of divine love and of human injustice, icon of the supreme sacrifice for love and of boundless selfishness even unto madness, instrument of death and the way of resurrection, sign of obedience and emblem of betrayal, the gallows of persecution and the banner of victory.

O Cross of Christ, today too we see you raised up in our sisters and brothers killed, burned alive, throats slit and decapitated by barbarous blades amid cowardly silence.

O Cross of Christ, today too we see you in the faces of children, of women and people, worn out and fearful, who flee from war and violence and who often only find death and many Pilates who wash their hands.

O Cross of Christ, today too we see you in those filled with knowledge and not with the spirit, scholars of death and not of life, who instead of teaching mercy and life, threaten with punishment and death, and who condemn the just.

O Cross of Christ, today too we see you in unfaithful ministers who, instead of stripping themselves of their own vain ambitions, divest even the innocent of their dignity.