

The Battle for God

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Last week a former colleague of mine, another progressive Christian, posted an encounter on his Facebook page. He told of a sweet looking elderly lady coming to see him in his office. By her appearance and manner he was not prepared for what he described as the “poisonous piety” that would spew from her. She came to tell him that what he preached was false teaching that would condemn him to what he translated as a “steamy place.” She made it clear that he was not a “real” Christian nor did he represent her beliefs supported by their common denomination. When he sought to find common ground with her, she made it clear she wanted nothing in common with him.

His posting generated a multitude of responses from those who sympathised with his experience to those who thought it funny to those who felt he was being arrogant and mocking of the woman’s beliefs to those who had “helpful” suggestions about how to pastorally deal with her. My own response to his post was, “I was handed a cup of poison piety last week in a phone call. It wasn’t any easier to swallow.”

I was referring to a call from a young man who asked if I was the minister at the Unitarian Church. After I warily acknowledged I was, he went on to explain that he was a “new” Christian and he had some questions. He got right to the point. He asked, “Your church is supportive of the gay community, right?” I said, “Yes.” “But isn’t that forbidden in the Bible?”

And then we were off on a conversation I have had too many times to remember. For him the Bible was inerrant, literal and the voice of God. While I had no trouble “educating” him about the Bible, I knew it would have no impact. In his eyes I was a false prophet, although he was quite polite in how he informed me of my eternal fate. He would later explain his Christian teachers were from the Elim Church. I hadn’t heard of it before coming to New Zealand, but I looked up its roots on the Interwebs and discovered it was spawned in Western New York. Of course! Where else? I once lived there. That region gave birth to Mormonism, Scientology, and Millerism from which the Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses come. There must be something in the water. Much to my surprise, Elim has an institute in Orchard Park, New York where I was ordained. I never heard of it, but I knew a lot of their ilk in the US. They have a fundamentalist view of Christianity and they have a lot of confidence in the purifying effect of hell’s fires on those like me who don’t share their beliefs.

I would really enjoy spending the rest of this sermon having a good rant about fundamentalist Christians who I have often experienced as narrow-minded, mean-spirited, ignorant, self-righteous, judgemental, and dangerous, but I would be preaching to the choir. A better use of our time would be to better understand how often intelligent people claim a religious view of God that from our perspective confirms their prejudices and then calls on them to condemn and sometimes do violence to those who don’t share their view.

It might surprise you to know that the term fundamentalist is only properly applied to certain Christians. However, we now hear the term applied to other religious groups as well. Some Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists share enough common characteristics in terms of ethos and worldview that the media conveniently labels them fundamentalist as well. The biggest difference between them and Christian fundamentalists is that they have often been colonised or oppressed and are more interested in reclaiming national or ethnic identity using their faith as a means to achieve their ends. Examples are Al Qaeda, ISIS, Zionists, some Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand and the Hindutva in India.

To understand this broader usage of the term it might be useful to define first who is probably

a Christian fundamentalist.

1) If a person embraces classically orthodox Protestant doctrines such as the deity of Christ, the Trinity, the inspiration of Scripture, salvation by grace through faith, etc. and on principle declines to have Christian fellowship with anyone who has Christian fellowship with persons of questionable doctrinal commitments, he is probably a fundamentalist. An extreme example would be the Exclusive Brethren who will not eat with those who are not Exclusive Brethren even if it means shunning members of their family.

2) If a person believes the Bible is inerrant in all matters, including history and cosmology, she is probably a fundamentalist.

3) If a person believes that the King James Version is the only acceptable English translation of the Bible, he is probably a fundamentalist.

4) If a person holds as “fundamentals of the faith” that Jesus will return in glory to destroy the earth after the faithful have been raptured and that the earth was created in seven days in 4004 BC, she is probably a fundamentalist.

5) Remembering that fundamentalism was an American creation exported to the rest world, if a person believes that America is, as a nation, part of God’s salvation history and plan of redemption, he is probably a fundamentalist. Think George W Bush and what the implications have been of his acting on that belief.

6) If a person believes that the Bible ought to be the basis of an entire educational curriculum, including studies of science, philosophy, psychology, etc., she is probably a fundamentalist.

There is no one litmus test to say who is or is not a Christian fundamentalist. For instance, there are fundamentalist ministers who will join a clergy association with non-fundamentalist members and not all fundamentalists believe in the rapture. But these characteristics generally describe the ethos of fundamentalists.

Fundamentalism is historically a fairly new phenomenon that developed around the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Diverse Christian sects and denominations coalesced around the banner of a militant defence of conservative Protestantism against liberal theology and biblical higher criticism. They saw them as assaults on “real” Christianity. Exactly like the Puritans of the seventeenth century, the early fundamentalists believed churches needed to be purged of heresy and everything linked with it. The problem was agreeing on what was heresy and what was not. In 1910 and 1911 leading fundamentalist scholars and ministers published booklets called *The Fundamentals* with articles that laid out and then defended what they believed were the essentials to the Christian faith. It is from those booklets we get the term “fundamentalist”. It is not a derogatory term to a fundamentalist, but a title they have proudly attributed to themselves.

In her brilliant book, *The Battle for God*, Karen Armstrong delves deeply into the often violent histories of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, exploring the rise of fundamentalist enclaves in all three religions. She begins her exploration into what were the historical conditions that would give birth to the ethos of fundamentalism, which she labels as “militant piety” in a surprising place: 15th century Spain.

In 1492 three important events happened that were characteristic of a new society coming to birth in Western Europe. The first event was the conquering of the city-state of Grenada by the armies of Ferdinand and Isabella, the Catholic monarchs of the recently united kingdoms of Aragon and Castile. When a Christian banner was ceremoniously raised upon the city walls, church bells pealed triumphantly all over Europe, for Grenada was the last Muslim

stronghold in Christendom. The Crusades had failed, but at least the Muslims had been flushed out of Europe. In 1499 the Muslim inhabitants of Spain were given the option to convert to Christianity or be deported.

The second major event of 1492 was when Ferdinand and Isabella signed the Edict of Expulsion. It was designed to rid Spain of its Jews who were given the choice to be baptised or deported. Many converted but 80,000 went to Portugal and 50,000 fled to the more tolerant Ottoman Empire where they were given a warm welcome.

The third event was the one most associated with the year 1492, Christopher Columbus sailed west to find a new trade route to India, discovering a new world instead. His discovery broadened the horizons of Europe. They were on the brink of a new world. It was an uncharted realm, geographically, intellectually, socially, economically, and politically. Their achievements would make them masters of the globe, but modernity had a darker side.

Ferdinand and Isabella were in the process of creating the first modern centralised state and could not tolerate the old autonomous, self-governing institutions such as the guild, the corporation or the Jewish community, which had characterised medieval Europe. After completing the unification of Spain at Grenada, ethnic cleansing was their next goal. So, for some, the beginnings of modernity was empowering, liberating and enthralling. For others, it was coercive, invasive and destructive. As the concept of a centralised state spread through Europe this pattern would be repeated. Centuries later, those who experienced the darker side of modernity would be resort to fundamentalism.

This assault was not just deportations and forced conversions. The broadening of horizons that would lead to scientific rationalism and the secular state were experienced as a spiritual assault. Armstrong contends that at the root of fundamentalism is a battle between *mythos* and *logos*.

Mythos concerns "what was thought to be timeless and constant in our existence... Myth was not concerned with practical matters but with meaning". By contrast "*Logos* was the rational, pragmatic and scientific thought that enabled men and women to function well in the world". By the eighteenth century, "people in Europe and America began to think that *logos* was the only means to truth and began to discount *mythos* as false and superstitious."¹ While in the pre-modern era *mythos* and *logos* coexisted, the absence of *mythos* in the modern world left what Jean Paul Sartre would famously describe as "a god-shaped hole" in the modern consciousness. *Mythos* provides the meaning that used to fill that hole; it basically answers the question "why?". *Logos* — rationalism and science — answers the question "how?". *Logos* may heal the body but only *mythos* can heal the spirit.

The American Civil War, the Franco-Prussian War and later the First World War undermined salvific belief in scientific rationalism that formed the modern world. It created a crisis that opened the door for the growth of fundamentalism. Fundamentalists wanted to reclaim the world for God. For them, giving meaning back to a society, is a cosmic, spiritual battle between good and evil. In their eyes, they are engaged in a conflict with enemies whose secularist policies and beliefs have left the world spiritually bereft. For them, it is a battle for survival. They fear extinction.

To survive they affirm their identity by selecting doctrines and practices from the past; often withdraw from mainstream society and create a counterculture; and create an ideology and action plan under the guidance of charismatic leaders. That ideology adamantly opposes many of the most positive values of modern society. Fundamentalists have no time for democracy, pluralism, religious toleration, peacekeeping, free speech, or the separation of church and state.

Besides being repelled by their resistance to these positive values, I see a fatal flaw in their plan. When a religion adopts a political, economic or cultural ideology, it ceases to be a *mythos*, and becomes a *logos*. As I see it, fundamentalism turns religion upside down: rather than explaining the meaning of life, it seeks to give life meaning. In short, it usurps the place of God.

I find no easy answers as to how we might respond to this battle for God. Part of the reason is fundamentalist movements are still quite young and evolving. Protestant fundamentalism is only a little over a century old and it only became a political force in the US in the 1980s. Jewish fundamentalism or Zionism only became a force after the holocaust and only a significant one after the fall of the Soviet Union allowed conservative Jews to migrate to Israel in large numbers. They have transformed it from a strict secular state to an increasingly religious one hampering the resolution of conflicts with the Palestinians. Islamic fundamentalism is even younger, beginning as reactions in the 1970s to the oppressive secular regimes of Nasser in Egypt and the Shah in Iran, both supported primarily by Britain and the US. The first invasion of Iraq by the US and her allies fed the flames resulting in 9/11. The second invasion contributed to the Arab Spring, and now to ISIS.

While I have few answers, I do know that the Patriot Act, torture, indefinite incarceration without due process, spying on citizens, treating refugees from the conflicts as criminals and sending in more troops don't seem to be helping. Nor is labeling all the adherents of a particular faith terrorists because of the acts of a few. All Christians weren't considered terrorists because of the acts of the Ku Klux Klan. These responses give the illusion of doing something, when in fact they feed the paranoia at the root of the problem.

A more constructive response might be to take seriously the Biblical injunction "Fear not". At best, fear leads to paranoia; at worst, to the nihilistic fanaticism that has marred so much of the 20th and now 21st century. Whereas any religious movement must practice compassion above all; otherwise it betrays itself.

Karen Armstrong urges us to listen to the fear in fundamentalism, however incoherently it may be expressed. At bottom, it is existential dread, that we may all be only accidental organisms in a meaningless universe. And if corporations and governments — one's own or those of foreign powers — treat us as though that's all we are, then are they not, in their turn, Satanic and nihilistic? I will go farther: all parties — fundamentalists, "mainline" denominations in all religions, and secular humanists as well — have a lot to learn, and they will need each other to learn it.

