Fundamentalism and the secular society

Fundamentalism is an unsatisfactory term, but it is widely used to describe a militant piety that has developed in every major religion during the 20th century. The aim of fundamentalists—be they Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, or Buddhist—is to bring God and/or religion from the sidelines to which they have been relegated in secular culture and back to centre stage. It constitutes a widespread rebellion against secular modernity. In every country where a western-style government has been established, a fundamentalist counterculture has developed alongside it in deliberate reaction, aiming to create a sacred enclave of pure faith in a world that seems increasingly hostile to religion.

Hence every single fundamentalist movement that I have studied in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam has been rooted in fear, convinced that the secular, liberal establishment wants to wipe out religion. Each movement has developed in a symbiotic relationship with a modernity and secularism that is experienced as invasive and aggressive. The more fundamentalists are attacked, the more extreme they become, because the assault convinces them that they are correct in their assumption, and that the modern world truly wants to annihilate them and their religion. This is not necessarily paranoid. Jewish fundamentalism became especially prevalent after the Nazi Holocaust and after the October War of 1973, and in the Muslim world, secularism has

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often been imposed so aggressively—by such reformers as Ataturk, the shahs of Iran, or Gemal Abdul Nasser—that it has seemed an evil, lethal ideology.

Modernity has always been problematic. When the western countries began to develop their modern, secular institutions in the 16th century, they were engulfed in three centuries of bloody revolution, dictatorships, anomic, exploitation of women and children, and violent wars of religion. We are watching a similar process in countries that are making the painful rite of passage to modernity today. In some Muslim countries, there are special difficulties. In the west, the modern spirit was characterized by two essential qualities: independence and innovation. In the Muslim world, however, modernization did not come with independence but with colonial subjugation; and the west was so far ahead that there could be no innovation—only imitation. So the wrong ingredients are going into the modern spirit there.

Fundamentalism is a modern phenomenon, dedicated to fighting the secular state. It is part of the modern world and it is not going to fade away. We must, therefore, deal with it more intelligently than we have done hitherto. Contrary to much popular opinion, Islam is not more disposed towards fundamentalism than other faiths; in fact, it was the last of the three Abrahamic traditions to develop a fundamentalist strain. Nor is there anything in Islam that is inherently hostile to modernity. Much of the terrorism that disturbs us at present is Arab, and Arabs comprise only about 20 percent of Muslims worldwide. Fundamentalism is not necessarily violent; most fundamentalists are simply trying to live an embattled religious life and do not take part in acts of terror. But when violence becomes endemic in a region, such as the Middle East, religion gets sucked into the conflict, and this has happened on both sides of the Arab-Israeli dispute.

But since fundamentalism often becomes more extreme when attacked, it is likely that Muslim fundamentalism will be exacerbated in the wake of the Iraq War, the aggressive rhetoric of western politicians, and the alienation of Muslims in the west who no longer feel that they have a home there.

The atrocities of September 11 were a defeat for religion, but secularism has its problems too. Auschwitz, the Gulags, the regime of Saddam Hussein, and the behaviour of British and American troops in Iraq in such prisons as Abu Ghraib all show what happens when the sense of the
unique sacredness of every single human being has been lost. Secularism will not inevitably usher in an era of sweetness and light.

Secularists and fundamentalists alike need to reacquaint themselves with the purpose of religion. All the great world religions developed an ethic of compassion, an ability to “feel with” the other in order to mitigate human violence. All preached the practice of *kenosis*, a self-emptying: we are most fully ourselves when we give ourselves away. This consensus is remarkable, but often obscured by religious leaders who, like secular politicians, make the triumphant and exclusive affirmation of a unique identity an idolatry that distracts the faithful from the true religious enterprise.

In the future, we have to create a global consensus. Whether we are religious or secularist, we all have to cultivate an ethic of compassion and *kenosis*. But we are living in a time of war. What should we do to try to heal the rage in the world that is often expressed in religious terms and which now threatens us all?

First, we must create the right conditions for religions to be healthy. We should not allow conflict and violence to fester in a region and become sacralized. It is easier to sort out a dispute when it is still a conventionally secular dispute. Nor should we allow people to lose hope in the normal political processes. There are few greater demonstrations of despair than the action of the suicide bomber. We should turn our attention to places where people feel hopeless, and we should not raise hope too extravagantly by making unrealistic promises, as the United States and its allies did before the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Nor should we suppress a militant religious movement violently, because, as history shows, this is likely to make it more extreme. Finally, we must realize that fundamentalists and secularists threaten each other’s sacred values, and this means that we must all act with restraint. Secularists must try to understand and decode the fundamentalist imagery that expresses fears, anxieties, and rage that no society can safely ignore.