

We and the Others: Fundamentalism as a Primitive Group Integration Symptom

“What makes us human also makes us religious.” (Thomson, A. 2008)

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Abstract

The word *fundamentalism* appeared for the first time in the sense it has today in the context of North American Christian Protestantism. It was a reaction to the ideas of the Enlightenment which were becoming influential on the Protestant theology of the time. As a reaction, it provided cohesion to those groups that called themselves fundamentalists—a primitive cohesion according to Bion’s basic ideas of “fight and flight” since they identified a common enemy and organized those groups around actions which purported to rescue a purity or idealization of their origins. The application of the term fundamentalism expanded to other religions, which is contested by some authors; nevertheless, some phenomena come close to its basic features, notably in the Islamic world. Religiosity is a relevant aspect of human existence which has both institutional and social consequences.

Strolling through Lisbon while observing the significant urban spaces which are devoted to religious buildings, I could not help but reflect on how much this religious heritage is still begging to be welcomed and transformed. To that end I think that within the realm of psychoanalysis it is extremely important to go beyond the questions which Freud has raised about religion so that we may provide profitable interventions in the realm of group analytical psychotherapy/group analysis and articulate reflections that might promote a basic contribution toward a decrease in the violence which is perpetrated by groups or ideologies that are called fundamentalist.

Key words

Fundamentalism, Protestant Christians, Primitive group cohesion, Islam, Religion, Psychoanalysis.

Fundamentalist Thinking: Origins and Consequences

The first time a religious movement was dubbed as fundamentalist occurred among North American Protestant groups at the end of the 19th century. Conservative Protestant leaders reacted to so-called liberal theological ideas during the North American Bible Conference which took place in Niagara, State of New York, in 1895.

Theological liberalism was strongly influenced by the rationalism proposed by Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz as well as the empiricism of Locke, Berkeley and Hume (Lopes, A. N., 1995). Especially noticeable was the attempt to reconcile the existence of God with the postulates of rationalism. Several theologians would affirm the existence of God while maintaining that God does not intervene in History. As a consequence, such things as miracles or revelation were ruled out of theological thinking.

A key point in that new way of theological thinking, which led to a strong reaction by fundamentalist Christian leaders, was dubbed the historical-critical method of Scripture interpretation, which was promoted within German circles at the time. This method included several approaches, viz., textual criticism, philological analysis, literary criticism, form criticism and redaction criticism, all aimed at rereading the Bible from a modernist perspective.

The conservative response involved several practical steps. In the academic world it took the form of a realignment of forces in universities such as Princeton, Yale and Harvard. Several legislative measures were taken to curb the advancement of those new ideas among theological institutions. Between 1910 and 1915, some 3 million copies of a pamphlet titled *Fundamentals, a Testimony of the Truth* were distributed far and wide throughout the United States of America. Leading conservative theologians, such as J. G. Machen, John Murray, B. B. Warfield, R. A. Torrey and Campbell Morgan, contributed several articles to counteract the novel theological ideas. Those ideas came to be known as the five fundamentals of faith and were then made public as follows:

- The inerrancy of the Scriptures—i.e., the absolute veracity of the Bible or the inspiration, infallibility and inerrancy of the Scriptures, with the consequent exclusiveness of its literal interpretation.
- The virgin birth and the deity of Jesus
- The doctrine of substitutionary atonement by God's grace and through human faith
- The bodily resurrection of Jesus
- The historical authenticity of Christ's miracles and his second coming

The fundamentalist label was first coined in 1920 by the Reverend Curtis Lee Laws, who was then the editor of the *Watchman Examiner*, a Baptist newspaper. Soon, several religious groups that identified with the five principles started adopting the term. It was proudly incorporated by various religious denominations which identified themselves with the

five principles. A crucial question for the fundamentalists was the interpretation of the biblical texts as a ferocious reaction to the critical-historical method. For a fundamentalist, the Bible as God's inspired and error-free Word must be read and interpreted literally in all its details.

The literalist approach to the Bible had its highlight around the controversy around the biological sciences. In opposition to evolutionism, fundamentalist leaders coined yet another term – creationism. The famous 1925 John Scopes trial, which took place in the State of Tennessee, pushed the issue to its limits. State laws prohibited any teaching on evolutionism, which was blatantly challenged by Scopes. Initially charged, Scopes was later acquitted on appeal.

This “monkey trial”, as it came to be known, influenced public perception of the issue at stake. Fundamentalist sectors stood their ground and became staunchly anti-intellectualists. The fundamentalist label quickly became a derogatory term.

Fundamentalist groups gave rise to much publicized Protestant preaching. Starting in the 1950s and beyond, the electronic church, as it was called, became quite popular. Preachers such as Pat Robertson, Jimmy Swaggart, Jimmy Bakker and Rex Humbard developed a considerable following, even abroad. Jerry Falwell started a political movement known as the Moral Majority, which had considerable influence and helped tilt the scales in favour of Ronald Reagan's election and provided considerable support to the likes of George Bush, father and son.

According to Carlos E. B. Calvani, Fundamentalism originated at a time when the avowedly Christian North American society realized that their national ideal was being threatened by the evils of civil war, slavery, immigration and Darwinian thinking (Calvani, C. 2003). Pedro Oro states that “Fundamentalism came into being as a by-product of the profound contradictions which characterized Protestantism per se and the relationship between the social context and the official representations of their belief system” (Oro, I. 1996).

“Back to the roots” seems to be the motto of most fundamentalist groups. Whoever opposes the tenets of the faith, whatever the group, is immediately ostracized.

“Returning to the roots, restoring the beauty, integrity and plenitude to a content which is truth unchanging—this is the main ideal of various fundamentalism” (Pace, E., 1990). To that end “truth unchanging” is simplified—to the Christian fundamentalist the Bible according to a literalist approach, to the Muslim the Koran and the Suna, and to the Jew the Torah.

From time to time, religious groups take on a hard-core mentality and devise an enemy who embodies all that opposes their highly cherished beliefs and values. Alternatively, they prohibit the verification of their authenticity, stir a great mobilization and reinforce group cohesion. Nevertheless, it is a primitive or regressed cohesion as described by Bion's “fight and flight” postulate (Bion, W. R., 1975).

All followers rally behind their leaders because they have identified a common enemy. Their leaders become then the guardians of truth. In the end, the enemy takes on a transcendence of its own, almost rivalling that of their own gods. Any insider who questions the validity of time-honoured beliefs becomes a heretic and an outcast.

Freud describes in “The Future of an Illusion” some aspects of religiosity which are proposed by fundamentalist movements. “When we inquire about the foundation of their claims begging to be believed, we meet with three answers which are exceptionally ill-

harmonized among themselves. Firstly, the teachings must be believed because they were believed by our primitive ancestors; secondly, we possess proof that that they were transmitted [to us] from those same primeval times; thirdly, it is expressly forbidden to raise the question of their authenticity. In previous times, such a presumption was punished with the most severe chastisements, and even today society looks with suspicion at any attempt at raising those questions again” (Freud, S. 1927).

The fact that the rationale behind fundamentalist hardly resists close scrutiny is quickly dismissed. Fundamentalist movements are found anywhere, not in the least among the major religions of the world, including the three offshoots of Abrahamic faith – Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

In his *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud discusses the bases on which fundamentalist leaders explain their status as a “chosen people” and insist on preserving their monotheistic faith (Freud, S. 1939). Dissension is quite likely to occur and the primeval unity and cohesion are quickly lost. War between the resulting factions is not entirely uncommon.

To my limited information I may perhaps add that the case of the foundation of the Islamic religion seems to resemble an abbreviated repetition of the Jewish faith from which it emerged as an imitation. It seems, as a matter of fact, that the Prophet intended originally to accept Judaism completely, for himself and for his people. The reappraisal of the great and only primeval father brought the Arabs an extraordinary exaltation of their self-confidence, which led to great world successes but which became exhausted in themselves. Allah showed more gratefulness to his chosen people than did Jehovah to his. But the internal development of the new religion was quickly interrupted, perhaps because it lacked the depth which, in the Jewish case, was caused by the assassination of the founder of their religion (Freud, S, 1939) [Freud in this work defends the idea that the original Moses, the founder of the Hebrew people’s monotheism, was actually assassinated.]

It is noticeable that in the case of North American fundamentalisms, the State and the church remain separated whereas in the case of Islamic fundamentalisms, quite often it is the opposite situation. Besides, Ali Kamel (2007) insists that labelling terrorist groups as fundamentalist is an imprecision and an overstatement. Along similar lines, Werner Bohleber emphasizes that fundamentalist groups almost invariably see change negatively thus becoming opposed to everything that leads to modernization (Bohleber, W. 2008).

Islam and its Developments

Following the death of Mohammad, his political legacy was disputed by two major divisions of the Islamic bloc, viz., the Sunnis and the Shiites. A popular conception of Jihad (striving, in Arabic) derived into the thinking that all peoples must be converted by the sheer use of force. Soon the Islamic faith spread to the northern parts of Africa, the Iberian Peninsula and parts of Asia.

Heaven is achieved through the strict observance of the five pillars of the Islamic Faith—belief in one God and in Mohammad as his prophet, prayer five times a day, fasting

during Ramadan, the pilgrimage to Mecca and the *zakat*, which is the annual contribution to the established Islamic government. A conservative view of Jihad, far from the militarized perception which is often associated with it, implies striving to live in accordance with the tenets of the faith. Besides, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca is a vivid symbol of the Islamic ideal of gathering together all Muslims under one “nation.”

According to Ali Kamel (2007), a call to return to the early purity of Islam, known as *salafi*, has appeared from time to time in the history of the movement. This approach owes its genesis to Ibn Taymiyya, a 13th century philosopher, who influenced the thinking and teaching of Al-Wahhab, an 18th century religious leader.

An ultra-orthodox follower of Sunnite Islam, Al-Wahhab taught that belief in Allah, the enforcement of correct behaviour and opposition to all that is considered as deviant from the Islamic faith were the obligations of a truly Islamic government. Wahhabism proposes a return to the true faith and the adoption of Shari’a Law, which is the embodiment of Islamic Law. The Hadith, i.e., the collection of traditional teachings and customs, is strictly reinforced. Smoking, drinking and dancing are strongly prohibited and women are considered as second-class citizens. A woman walking on the streets must always be accompanied by the husband or a close relative male escort. Adulterers are stoned, thieves and robbers have one of their arms amputated and the death penalty is publicly enforced (Kamel 2007).

Wahhabism was decisive for legitimating Saudi Arabia at the turn of the 20th century. In 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood was created in Egypt as a way of returning to the golden age of Islam which supposedly characterized the time of Mohammad. Hassan al-Banna, a key figure in the Wahhabist movement, advocated the idea that there is no such thing as separation between religion and the State. Al-Banna dreamed of uniting the entire Muslim world under one nation and one caliph. He used to say, “Islam is a single faith and devotion, one country, a citizenship, one religion and one State... it is both spirituality and hard work; it is the Koran and the sword [all merged into one]... Allah is our aim, and his messenger is our example; the Koran is our Constitution, Jihad is our method and martyrdom is our desire.” The Muslim Brotherhood proved to be an immediate success among underprivileged Egyptians and their numbers swelled.

In 1945 the Brotherhood underwent a radical transformation—it adhered to violence and terror as a means to achieve its ends. Political assassinations became a common practice with the express aim of overthrowing the Egyptian monarchy. This radical transformation was only made possible because Al-Banna modified the concept of Jihad, which until then was understood to mean either of two things—striving to achieve a life pleasing to Allah or self-defence in case they were attacked by any enemy. In his thinking, Jihad became the kind of war which a true Muslim had to engage in order to return to the true faith, even at the cost of his/her own life.

The Egyptian government declared the Brotherhood illegal and confiscated all its assets. One year later, Al-Banna, only 43, was assassinated by Egyptian secret agents and became a martyr whose sacrifice was to be emulated by his followers. Brotherhood sympathizers often took to the streets chanting, “We fear no death; we desire it.” The often quoted Al-Qaeda phrase, “You love life, we love death” has its origin in the Brotherhood.

After Al-Banna’s death, Sayyid Qutb rose to power as a mentor of terrorists. An educator, Qutb had worked for the Egyptian government before joining the Brotherhood. His

stint in the USA, where he had been sent on an education assignment, had the opposite effect. He returned to his country under the impression that he had seen the worst of human licentiousness. Churches appeared to him as playgrounds rather than centres of spirituality, women were openly provocative and political figures were corrupt and defiant of religious values. His American experience turned him into a radical thinker and practitioner. A powerful leader had emerged.

Qutb joined the Brotherhood and became its main philosopher. He published “Signposts”, his most radical work, in which he advocates Islamic terrorism. He was arrested and condemned on the charge of conspiracy and treason. During his imprisonment, and despite extended torture, he wrote a full 30-volume piece titled “Under the Shadow of the Koran”, an analytical approach to the Islamic Holy Book. He was hanged in 1966. Needless to say, his hatred of the West shines through his writings.

Qutb lived according to his beliefs. The perennial question of human existence and *raison d'être* had an objective answer: “The Koran explains the secret of human existence and the secret of the universe. It reveals what is man, where he comes from and where he is leading toward after death.” Even the Muslim world is in a state of Jahilliyyah, pre-Islamic ignorance, according to his perspective.

Qutb went further than Al-Banna in his ambition. For Qutb, the purpose of Islam is the conquest of the entire world under one caliphate, no exceptions allowed. His ideals are reflected in the strategies of Al-Qaeda. For him, mere preaching is not enough; the use of force is absolutely necessary to achieve that purpose. The Muslim Brotherhood has its ramifications in many countries, despite all persecution and pressure to conform to mainstream Islamic lifestyles.

Both the Hamas and Al-Qaeda are offshoots from the Brotherhood. Abdullah Azzam, the founder of the Palestinian Brotherhood, was one of Bin Laden’s first associates. An expert on Shari’a Law, Azzam moved to Pakistan following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and devoted himself to Jihad. He organized what came to be known as MaK (Maktabu I-Khidamat, “office of operations”), which is devoted to recruiting and training would-be warriors from among all Muslim nations. Thousands of terrorists who have been trained by both Bin Laden and Azzam have returned to their countries to found new terrorist organizations dedicated to the cause of revolution and Jihad.

The case of Bin Laden is emblematic. Initially devoted to forestalling the Iraqi invasion of his native Saudi Arabia, Bin Laden drew the ire of the royal family with his strong criticism of their acceptance of North American military help and was expelled. Bin Laden then became their nemesis and accused them of not practicing true Islam. Bin Laden moved to Afghanistan and Sudan, where he continued his business activities (banking, construction, export and import ventures). He was expelled once more and returned to Afghanistan. His motto is “Killing Americans and their allies, whether civilian or military, is the obligation of every Muslim.”

A wave of suicidal terrorists has followed the appearance of Wahhabism. Young radicals lay their lives at the service of their cause. They have a vision and a purpose and will not refrain even at the cost of their lives in the pursuit of their aims.

Conclusion

Having discussed briefly the origin and ramifications of fundamentalist ideas, we may safely conclude that it is an attempt at returning to a primeval religious bliss (whether Bible, Koran, Suna or Torah based) in which a literal interpretation of sacred texts is accompanied by a blind trust in a charismatic leader, an intense network-based militancy and an energetic antagonism to an objectively identified enemy.

It is clear also that fundamentalist movements are peaceful by nature and move more in the realm of ideas. They produce psychic comfort and a stabilization of socially based tensions. In some cases, however, when they gain momentum in the political and economic arenas, their actions may derive into violence, terrorism, intolerance and social oppression.

In times of social, political and economic turbulence, different groups behave differently. In the case of fundamentalist groups, this reaction takes on a religious garb within an individual dimension in which personal beliefs, desires and fears are articulated as a collective front. Several people attach themselves to a strong leader who coordinates a sequence of concerted actions and strategies which are implemented collectively. According to Odilon de Mello Franco Filho, “the private representation that each individual makes of God is related to that which is provided by the cultural environment and the institutionalized religion in which he/she lives, as in a bi-univocal interaction” (Franco Filho, 1995). The sources of fundamentalism are found in the religious discourse of the group which is the seedbed of the militant individual.

In Brazil common sense dictates that football, religion and politics are non-issues. I remembered this saying when I saw the limited psychoanalytical research on the field of religion and also because the ‘non-issue’ stance looks like fertile ground for the appearance of fundamentalist movements.

There is blindness in relation to [our dealing of] the unconscious religious feelings of our clients and from there their non-elaboration because that aspect has been the blind spot of our theories and our psychoanalytic formation. In not daring to transgress the Freudian postulates about religion we impoverish the research and we give witness that our discipline can become another religious establishment (Franco Filho, 1995).

The primeval elements which are found in every religious system need careful attention. We only lose by not daring to transpose Freudian postulates about religion. If we are not careful enough, we may end up by erecting a monument which is just as oppressive as the establishment which we should consider critically.

Betting on the premise that religion is a secondary thing and would lose importance as science develops is pointless at present. A great proportion of present conflicts involves religious questions and in many of them one observes a primitive religiosity at the service of political or economic interests. Our concepts about the religious phenomenon are still incipient. Our little elaboration on the issue of religion makes it into a useful instrument for power-based conquests. I think that we need to go beyond Freud’s diagnosis in *The Future of an Illusion* whereby “religion would be a universal obsessive neurosis of humanity” (Freud, S. 1927). Such diagnosis is important. A psychoanalytic investigation of individual

and group psychic processes which are present in religious movements will be of great value toward a better understanding of fundamentalist movements thus helping to mitigate their hostile consequences.

Religion is far from being *passé*. Much of present-day conflicts have their origins in religious questions which serve well to promote various politically- and economically-based interests. We would well to reconsider our standard approaches to religious phenomena on a global scale.

I conclude with another quote from Odilon de Mello Franco Filho:

The continuous transformation of the representations of God throughout someone's life follows closely that person's ability to use symbolic representation. They also participate in his/her sense of identity and provide the necessary elements for identification with the social group to which he/she belongs. Again, they may be at the service both of the process of personal balance and maturation as well as of their impediment (Franco Filho, 1995).

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