

THE PROBLEM WITH RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISMS!

We have been studying Karen Armstrong's book, *The Battle for God: a History of Fundamentalism*, this month and the discussion has been lively! So I thought that I would take this opportunity for capturing some of my thoughts and the ideas we have discussed around the varieties of fundamentalism expressed in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam since the late 1400s. Now other than the secular humanist atheist fundamentalism that sometimes appears in Unitarian Universalist congregations, UUism is generally the antithesis of religious fundamentalism, but I do think we need to remind ourselves from time to time about the kind of religious questions that forced Boston's Liberal Christian Congregationalists to form the American Unitarian denomination in the early 19th century. Though we like to hold ourselves above the religious fray, our American roots were planted in the conflict over Scholarly German Higher Criticism of the Bible, and Christian Religious fundamentals such as the birth, resurrection, miracles, divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ.

Armstrong's *Battle for God* is a pithy encyclopedia of religious currents from the late 15th Century up to modern times within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. She names many of the players (too many to keep track of) as well as the beliefs and socio-economic realities that shaped the religions of recent centuries as well as our own times. Her comprehensive study is foundational for anyone who really wants to understand fundamentalism today.

Armstrong's work is particularly helpful in clarifying the religious differences resulting from the conflict between traditional mythic religious understandings and those based on or attempting to reflect modern scientific thought. She casts this conflict as mythos versus logos, tracing the ways that the mythos which gives meaning has often been lost in the attempt to understand religion and the cosmos in terms only of logos, misreading mythos as history or scientific fact. With that background for looking at fundamentalism, I want to address something which I believe results from these reactionary efforts to bring religions whose scriptures were written as mythos into the modern scientific world.

For me, the biggest problem with religious fundamentalisms is that they are based in fear rather than in love. They, perhaps without exception, include an extraordinary amount of fear, particularly around the loss of religious meaning to which they are reacting. I suspect that this is why so many of them aggressively assert an unchanging God in an unchanging world, going back to narrow literalistic and selective interpretations of their sacred writings to challenge any modern understandings. The most aggressive and evangelistic versions of fundamentalism would also bypass all the good that might be discovered in these times and this world for a cataclysmic end initiated by an angry deity ready to punish or destroy all those not adhering to such an apocalyptic understanding. What love is expressed by these groups is only offered toward the God who will fulfill their expectations and those who share their vision.

Now, to be clear, there are many conservative (and even some liberal religious groups) within Judaism, Islam, and Christianity that are not fundamentalist and which are very different in their approach, certainly more loving and more accepting. I am only speaking about the fundamentalist groups today and the way that they contrast with us and other religious groups.

The Fundamentalist religious groups also tend to be very judgmental toward anyone that does not adhere to their particular views. The fundamentalists have tended to come to a very narrowed understanding of their tradition based on a literal reading of the scriptures they deem most important. Many denominations, sects, or branches of the three Abrahamic religions which are not generally fundamentalist have within themselves groups of fundamentalists. Some groups which started out as more fundamentalistic have also broadened their perspective over time, so one must be careful in labeling any large group, sect, or denomination fundamentalist.

The Fundamentalisms of our time have most of their roots in the conflict between Enlightenment ideas and traditional religion. While referring back to primitive periods in each tradition they are in reality no less modern than the groups they rail against. Rather than highlighting the difference between mythic stories written to convey religious meaning and those reporting scientifically tested facts and history, fundamentalists instead assert that the

Chronology of the Bible is literally true and inerrant with God having created the universe in 7 days, Noah having literally saved all the animals and humanity from the great flood in a large homemade boat, etc. Fundamentalist Creation Science, now known as Intelligent Design, explains how God hid Dinosaur bones in geologic formations to test our faith and that Dinosaurs and early humans coexisted and that the theory of evolution is wrong because God created everything as it is and things don't change!

Christian Fundamentalists look back to the foundation of Fundamentalism in the set of 12 pamphlets entitled *The Fundamentals*, financed by oil millionaires Lyman and Milton Steward which were sent out between 1910-15 to ministers, professors, and students to explain their important beliefs and counter the Higher Criticism. The terrors of the Great War then pushed much of conservative American Protestantism into the fundamentalist camp. Premillennialists saw in those dark times fulfillment of prophecies about tribulations to be suffered before Jesus returned. (Armstrong, p. 171)

The attempt to put forth the Bible as scientific and historical tended to further separate progressives and fundamentalists, as it has ever since. Had fundamentalists instead asserted that the Bible conveyed timeless truths in a mythic manner, there might never have been the religious splintering that occurred throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Amazingly a surprising number of modern scientists are able to compartmentalize their fundamentalist religious beliefs in order to treat modern findings as real at work while believing something entirely different!

In Hasidic Judaism, some fundamental beliefs about the nature of God and the universe are not found in the Torah or main sacred writings, but have come to set apart the fundamentalists nonetheless.

Within Islam, certain fundamentalist beliefs about who should lead and judge society seem more based in sect, nation and group than in the Koran or Sharia. One important example is in how women are treated, whether they are allowed to obtain education, or drive, and whether they are required to wear the head and body coverings demanded by some groups.

From whichever background they come, the fundamentalists seem to set themselves apart, declaring the truth of their beliefs at the expense of others, and ignoring the injunction to love one's neighbor. Their reaction against modernity and their battle to hold fast to a set of beliefs in the face of a world that continues to change is impressive on one hand but also presents significant challenges to more liberal and progressive religious groups.

When fundamentalist groups accept violent means to accomplish their ends, such as the quest for premillennials to hasten the end of this world, and that of certain Islamic radical jihadists to attempt to destroy the western world, it can make our already crazy world far more dangerous. Even a few small fundamentalist groups have managed to disrupt modern life all too often in recent years. When a group such as the mostly Saudi fanatics that attacked the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon uses modern science and technology in their effort to disrupt American life, the costs can be overwhelming. The greatest loss for America was probably in what the attacks did to show our vulnerability. We continue to respond to that loss, and under provisions of the Patriot Act, we continue to surrender our rights in the hope that it may prevent future attacks.

Fundamentalist religion appeals most to those who benefit least from the progress of modern science and technology. Since it is often apocalyptic, such religion offers a way out of these difficult times by focusing on the return of Jesus and whatever lies beyond this life. This life is seen as a wasteland, something to be escaped rather than as a treasure to be enjoyed. Heaven is an attractive alternative to both Muslim and Christian fundamentalists who find little success in this world.

Most of us have benefitted by being on the right side of the class struggles in America, but it is easy to see how those less fortunate might be tempted by the promises of some fundamentalist religions. Though many of us have gone through difficult periods, most of us have also benefitted from our educational attainments and from the start we had in the middle classes. Those who have not had the love and affirmation we have enjoyed may be more willing targets for religions that offer a sense of certainty and the promise of fulfillment beyond this life, especially if one gives one's life to the cause.

Even though the modern world has not shown the continuing progression toward fairness, justice, and a good life for all that many of us and other liberal religious people have hoped for, nonetheless enough progress continues for most of us to remain hopeful and positive. The growing chasm between rich and poor in this country remains a discouragement, as does the slow progress of the developing world and the ongoing tendency to resort to warfare to solve international disputes. Those of us who are Unitarian Universalists, with our commitments to tolerance and acceptance may also be more willing to wait believing that freedom and justice are coming. Those whose lives are more precarious, who do not have the money and stuff, the privileges that we have may not be so willing to wait.

The promises of Fundamentalist groups may give comfort to those less fortunate and those going through difficult times, but they come at a cost to society and they come at a cost to the individual. For the individual they often bring a separation from family and friends and limit the enjoyment of this life in favor of a belief that this life means nothing and is only to be endured on the way to whatever is beyond. For society, such groups often disengage from the effort to make this world better because they would rather leave this world behind anyway, and in some cases may seek to end this world. The fear and uncertainty that people may have about this world, is for these groups fuel to separate from and destroy this world in order to hasten the next. No love is lost on this world, nor hope or dreams for its future.

I cannot say that I know whether there is anything beyond this world and the universe which we can see, but I would rather enjoy this world and do what I can to make it better than to give up on it in the hope of something no human can know. This is the best world that I know, and though it could be significantly better, that will not be accomplished by those who disengage or try to destroy it. This world is full of beauty and it is full of wonderful people and amazing plants and animals. My life and this planet are better for the trees and flowers I plant, for the people I love, and for the animals I befriend. How can such things not be meaningful, beautiful, wonderful?

If there is a world beyond this one, I would like to see it, but I can hardly ignore this world for what might be. I believe in possibilities. I believe that humans will one day live on other m-class planets and travel throughout the universe. I believe that humans will solve the problems of pollution and overpopulation and reach a balance point that allows a good life for all people and protects the planet and all remaining life-forms.

Religious fundamentalism based in fear too often lacks love and functions by judgment and that just doesn't work for me. I believe that we should love the one we're with, I mean the planet and other living beings, and that we should make it our religious quest to do what we can to make our lives and theirs better, healthier, and more meaningful!

Go in Peace and Love, and I encourage you to share peace, love, and acceptance with all you meet!

So may it Be! Amen!