

## Fundamentalism

### A Vitally Important Worldwide Phenomenon

This talk is an attempt to bring out the importance of fundamentalism as a worldwide phenomenon, both in the U.S.A. and in various countries throughout the globe. It is not intended to focus entirely on the current situation affecting our country, although we are all being profoundly affected by the consequences of the fundamentalist beliefs held by people at the highest levels in our government. Rather, the aim is to discuss how fundamentalism is a phenomenon that can, and has occurred in many religions and in many ages throughout the world. And the fact that it has played, and continues to play, an important role in the history of our country. We have been here before!

Before starting this discussion, it is necessary to define fundamentalism and other related words. Webster's Unabridged Dictionary gives the following definitions:

Fundamentalism – Orthodox religious beliefs based on literal interpretation of the Bible (Torah, Quran, etc.)

Fundamental – A leading primary principle, rule, law, or article, which serves as the groundwork or basis; essential part; as the fundamentals of the Christian faith (Jewish faith, Islamic faith, etc.)

Fundament – 1. A basic principle; 2. the buttocks; 3. the anus; 4. foundation (Definitions 1. and 4. are most germane to this discussion.)

We are presently living in a polarized world. No one on earth is free from the plague of polarization and violence that seems to permeate every sphere of life today. Secularism and scientism are as rabidly and stridently defended as any religious dogma. We must ask, what is affecting us?

Fifty years ago Teichard de Chardin wrote: "Once upon a time everything seemed fixed and solid. Now everything in the universe has begun to slide under our feet." Is fundamentalism in essence "fear of falling".

The application of the word/term fundamentalism has spread beyond the original reference to an American Christian movement of the early twentieth century. Far too often we term fundamentalist those who don't agree with us; those "out there" who – unlike us – are rigid and narrow minded. But even a brief glance within discloses a constellation of resistances that in any one of us, at any moment may blossom into the fear, rigidity, arrogance and self righteousness we attribute to others.

Within this inescapable situation, we find an essential question for every twenty-first century human: under what conditions is it possible to hold strong, unshakable beliefs

without violence; however subtle, toward another who may hold equally strong and quite different beliefs? This entails a human capacity that is not much discussed, not much practiced, and mostly not seen as necessary. It demands far more than polite tolerance. How do we maintain our identity and our convictions without turning against what we perceive as the Other?

In his article “Why Fundamentalism Matters”, published in the Journal Parabola, , Huston Smith states, “The underlying cause of fundamentalism is the sense of being threatened. The threats that produced fundamentalism a century ago in the U.S. were basically two. The first was Darwinism, and the second was the so-called “Higher Criticism”. We are still arguing about evolutionism vs/ creationism, e.g. the 2006 decision in Kansas to teach creationism in the public schools. During the late 1800’s and early 1900’s a number of conferences were convened to consider these threats. Arguably the most important of these was the one that met at Niagra Falls in 1885. It issued a statement that listed five things a person needed to believe if she/he was a Christian: 1) verbal inerrancy of the Bible (it is the literal word of God); 2) divinity of Jesus Christ; 3) the virgin birth; 4) substitutional atonement (Christ died for our sins); and 5) physical resurrection of Jesus Christ and his bodily return at the end of time.

Karen Armstrong points out in her book The Battle for God, that there are actually two fundamentalisms today, religious fundamentalism and the equally dogmatic fundamentalism of today’s secular culture. Call it conservatives vs/ liberals, which is the inevitable downside of isms. Again Karen Armstrong notes: “The underlying cause of fundamentalism, as we have seen, is fear. The fear that derives from the sense of insecurity, of being threatened.” People are scared; the world is scary.

Again Huston Smith notes, “The ‘tipping point’ when people become violent is ‘when they become patriotic’. It comes down to the difference between individuals and groups.” The thesis is that individuals can sacrifice themselves, but groups cannot.

We must recognize that many religions have been hijacked by politics. Huston Smith notes that “Religion is the sitting duck, because the primary commitment of politicians is not to religion, but the use of religion for political purposes. What really breeds violence is political differences. We live in a politically divided world in which each half shouts, ‘We are on God’s side!’ The flip side of that is believing your opponents are the devil, the evil axis, the empire of evil. The rhetoric is exactly the same. The vicious circle of religious or political blame games leads us to the dehumanizing of entire peoples, when, in fact, authentic religion is the search for the deeply real and is the greatest humanizing force we have.”

This brings us to the situation that the U.S. is confronting in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East; the confrontation between Christian Fundamentalism and Islamic Fundamentalism. Indeed this is a confrontation affecting the entire world, not just the U.S. and the Middle East. Former Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright dedicates her entire book The Mighty and The Almighty. Reflections on America, God and World Affairs to this vitally important matter. In this book, she discusses the history of this

confrontation; how we must learn more about Islam if we are going to resolve this matter; presents seven ideas about how a generalized confrontation between Islam and the West can and should be avoided; and finally, she stresses the similarities between Christianity, Judaism and Islam, as well as other religions and philosophies.

You are all aware of the confrontations presently occurring in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the rest of the Middle East. It is worthwhile, however, to mention some facts concerning Islam:

- Muslims worship the same God (in Arabic, Allah) as Christians and Jews.
- “Islam” means submission to God. A person who surrenders to God and lives faithfully will find that life has harmony and purpose.
- Muslims believe in the day of judgment, in an afterlife, and in the ethical accountability of every individual.
- The Muslim holy book, the Quran, contains the exact words believed to have been conveyed by the Archangel Gabriel to a Meccan merchant, Muhammad ibn Abdullah (the Prophet), over a two year period beginning in 610.
- The five pillars of Islam are: 1) profession of faith; 2) ritual prayer; 3) purification through charity; 4) fasting; and 5) pilgrimage to Mecca.
- Muhammad is considered by Muslims to have been the last in a series of prophets that began with Adam and Noah, continued through Abraham and Moses, and included King David and Jesus of Nazareth.
- Arabs trace their lineage to Abraham through Ishmael, son of Hagar – just as Jews trace theirs through Isaac, son of Sarah.
- Muslims believe that Jesus was a major prophet, but they do not accept the possibility that God could have a “son”.
- In Muslim tradition, the first altar to God was built in Mecca by Adam and later rebuilt by Abraham and Ishmael. The mosques in Mecca and Medina, two cities where the prophet lived, are the two holiest sites in Islam.

- The Islamic concept of jihad is often and somewhat simplistically equated – even by some Muslims – with holy war. *Jihad* is correctly translated as “effort” or “striving” for the sake of God.

The seven ideas (“at least cautions against foolish mistakes”) suggested by Madeleine Albright to avoid generalized confrontation between Islam and the West are:

First, localize don’t globalize. Al Qaeda yearns for a worldwide stage; we should prevent it from claiming one.

Second, remember who the enemy is. There is a cottage industry of western commentators eager to identify “radical Islam” as the new communism.

Third, don’t play with matches. The political climate is already overheated. Every miscalculation of word and deed drives the temperature higher.

Fourth, we should develop a common understanding of what terrorism is. In politics, controlling the accepted meaning of words can be as vital as controlling the high ground in combat: hence the effort by some to label certain categories of terrorists as freedom fighters.

Fifth, we should talk about the treatment of women in a manner that leads to actual progress. The empowerment of women both as a matter of individual human rights and as an essential element of economic and social development is important.

Sixth, Christians, Muslims and Jews should realize how much they have in common. The same forces of globalization and change that raise fear in Muslim society are also generating anxiety in the West. The same concern that God’s role as a source of law and a guide for living will be lost is felt by the devout in Kansas as much as in Karachi, in the average Orthodox kibbutz, as much as in Riyadh.

Finally, Al Qaeda’s leaders do not speak factually, but neither do they speak trivially. They concern themselves with transcendent issues of history, identity and faith. To be heard, the rest of us must address matters equally profound.

In closing, a question Madeleine Albright asks is, how can we hope to unite people around a principle – respect for the individual – that is such a uniquely western concept? The answer of course, is that it is not. Hinduism demands that “no man do to another that which would be repugnant to himself.” The Torah instructs us, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Zoroaster observed, “What I hold good for myself, I should for all.” Confucius said, “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do unto others.” Buddha taught us to consider others as ourselves. The stoics in ancient Greece argued that all men are “equal persons in the great court of liberty.” The Christian gospel demands, “Do unto others as you would have done unto you.” The UU first principle suggests, “We covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” The

Quran warns that a true believer must love for his brother what he loves for himself. Finally the world's first legal code had as its announced purpose "to cause justice to prevail and to ensure that the strong do not oppress the weak." This is, we might think, the kind of legal system the world should develop now as a gift to the people of Iraq. In fact, it is the law code of Hammurabi, a gift civilization received four thousand years ago from ancient Babylon, now known as Iraq.

## **Opening Words**

from

### **UU Hymnal “Singing the Living Tradition” Reading No. 431**

by Barbara Wells

O Spinner, Weaver of our lives,  
Your loom is love.  
May we who are gathered here  
be empowered by that love  
to weave new patterns of Truth  
and Justice into a web of life that  
is strong,  
beautiful and everlasting.

## **Closing Words**

from

### ***Sabbaths, 1999***

by Wendell Berry

We travelers, waking to the sun, can't see  
Ahead, but looking back the very light  
That blinded us shows us the way we came,  
Along which blessings now appear, risen  
As if from sightlessness to sight, and we,  
By blessing brightly lit, keep going toward  
That blessed light that yet to us is dark.