

The Psychology of Fundamentalism

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We have a delusion detector on my ward at the Allan Memorial Institute. It comes in the form of a Haitian psychiatric nurse. Every time a Haitian patient is admitted to the ward with some bizarre ideas, we ask this nurse to talk to the patient and tell us whether his or her “crazy” ideas are delusional or just typical of the island culture. So if a Haitian lady feels that she is hexed or that all her problems are caused by someone poking a voodoo doll, our professional delusion detector will decide if the particular description of magic is within or outside the bounds of cultural belief.

Recently a young deeply spiritual and very religious Muslim male was admitted to the ward because he had stopped eating and drinking in order to purify himself. He desperately wanted to make sure that he would be allowed to enter Paradise if he should die. He didn't seem depressed and his thinking was otherwise normal. Fortunately at that time we had a Saudi resident working on the ward and she was able to assure us, without reservation, that the patient's thinking was delusional. In fact recently the patient again stopped eating and the family consulted a local Sheik who tried to convince the young man that God would not want him to avoid food or drink, “It's against our religion,” he said, but the young man replied that he is an exception.

A family that I saw a few years ago raised related issues. A Pakistani man and his French Canadian wife believed that their 19-year-old son, who suffered from a severe form of schizophrenia, was possessed by a *djinn*. *Djinns* are malevolent spirits commonly believed in some Middle Eastern cultures to cause all kinds of illness and abnormal behaviour. That part was easy for me to understand. What was more difficult occurred when I saw the family in therapy. The family consisted of the parents and three brothers, one of whom was the patient. At the beginning of one session, mother came in to the office wearing dark sun glasses which she refused to take off. I thought I saw swelling and a bruised cheek under her glasses. When I asked about it, father defiantly said that he hit his wife because she was sun bathing on their porch wearing only a bathing suit. The three boys shouted at their mother that she deserved to get hit and that god would punish her. She looked guilty.

With only minor changes in the details, this family could have been found in the pages of *The Swallows of Kabul*,¹

¹ Khadra, Yasmina, *The Swallows of Kabul*, (trans. John Cullen), Anchor, 2005.

a novel written by Yasmin Khadra (a pseudonym of Algerian author Mohammed Moulessehoul) set in Afghanistan that follows the fortunes of a married couple living under the Taliban regime. Violence and humiliation are daily events as the Mullahs try to impose their values on the population.

In *Infidel*,² the Muslim writer, Hirsi Ali, writes about her religious education: the teacher “

turned to the verses on how women were supposed to behave with their husbands. We owed our husbands absolute obedience, he told the mothers and teenage girls who had gathered to listen to him. If we disobeyed them, they could beat us.

A further example is found in Jon Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven*,³ a non-fiction account of a fundamentalist Mormon sect in Utah. What would a Mormon delusion detector say about Dan Lafferty, a devout believer, who, along with his brother, murdered two people (a third brother and his wife) because they rebelled against the religious requirement of polygamous marriage? He testified that he was ordered to kill by God. In an interview with Krakauer, Dan “believes ... that the most salient fact of existence is the immutable division of humankind into those who are inherently righteous and those who are inherently evil. ‘Some were chosen to be children of God and others became children of the devil. Either you're a brother—a child of God—or an asshole—a child of the devil.’” So what does our delusion detector find? According to Krakauer, “Most folks in Utah regard Dan Lafferty's theology as both preposterous and horrifying, but they concede that he seems to be a true believer.”

In the first example I gave, a fictional Haitian patient, a nation's culture accounts for ideas that to us Canadians would be delusional. In the second, our Muslim gentleman, we had to rule out appropriate religious ideas before deciding that the patient was, in fact, ill. In the third case, we see that it is possible that several members of a family hold beliefs (which may or may not be congruent with their culture) that are delusional, or at least seem so to someone looking in from the outside. And in the case of the devout Mormon, we see how fundamentalist beliefs can rationalize murder; or were they delusions?

² Hirsi Ali, Ayaan, *Infidel*, Free Press, 2007.

³ Krakauer, Jon, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, Doubleday, 2003.

Let me define delusion. It is a fixed, false belief, not correctable upon presentation of appropriate evidence, and – very important – not part of a subcultural norm. Well how big does the subculture have to be before we can chalk up a crazy idea to something other than a delusion? Are the wafer and wine really the body and blood of Christ? Well, no, but enough people believe it so that is not delusional. How about a wire strung up around a neighbourhood? Is this *eruv* really the extended wall of a house? What about the 39 members of Heaven’s Gate, a religious cult, who collectively suicided when the Haley Bopp comet was nearest the sun believing that they would be reborn on a starship hidden in the tail of the comet, certain of a better fate than the one awaiting them on earth. Does 39 make a subculture, or were they all delusional – in other words, if one of them survived and came to the emergency room, would he be considered psychotic for holding such beliefs if, in every other way, he were logical and appropriate?

These questions seem more topical today. In a recent New York Times article,⁴ Paul Krugman wondered whether the administration in Washington was cynical or delusional in planning its famous “surge.” He couldn’t decide (both imply contempt for the government), but the mere fact that he could raise the question ought to make us consider the role of delusional thinking in everyday life. And look at the controversy caused by Richard Dawkins’s popular book, *The God Delusion*.⁵ In it Dawkins asserts that the belief in a transcendent being, responsible for cosmic creation and consciously involved in the lives of people, is delusional. Strictly speaking, both Krugman and Dawkins misuse the word “delusion.” For better or worse, the Neocon ideas are a subcultural norm, and belief in God is more of a cultural norm than is atheism, which at least is a subcultural norm.

What’s important here is the notion that ‘delusion’ means ‘not real’. It’s a false belief, fixed, and not correctable, yet here we are using the term to describe ideas held by groups of people. Are they all delusional? The “not part of a subcultural norm” requirement reduces the number of people who might be considered to be delusional, but it makes context important. Is the belief inside or outside a subculture? And the same way that context determines ‘delusion’, context determines reality, as I will show shortly.

Now what does all this have to do with the psychology of fundamentalism? It would be a lot simpler to look at the

⁴ Krugman, Paul, “Quagmire of the Vanities,” New York Times, Jan. 8, 2007.

⁵ Dawkins, Richard, *The God Delusion*, Houghton Mifflin, 2006.

psychological motives of the individual fundamentalist and propose a number of theories, most of which derive, in one way or another, from a psychoanalytic perspective. Let me list a few:

1. We hold beliefs that unite us to a group. That identity provides security for the person whose sense of self is shaky. Group norms and values are accepted and expressed in order to feel the embrace of the group. While “faith and belief can be the most powerful motivating forces in human life” at the extreme, “Reality is replaced with delusions, perspectives with myopia at a level which attains an almost erotic level of collective hysteria.” (Stephen Morgan, *The Psychology of Terror Cults*⁶)

Rituals help solidify group identity, perhaps even at the expense of individual identity. Alan Shapiro, an American poet writes about an old friend of his who became a “fanatic,” a Hasidic Jew:

He talked about the 613 mitzvot (commandments), which govern every aspect, every moment, of a Hasid’s life, and how a life lived according to the Law infuses everything—lovemaking, eating, even bodily functions—with holiness and joy ... the more [I watched him] the more it seemed that the holy joy he felt (and I have no doubt that he felt it) was not a personal joy but the joy of personal extinction, the joy of the body transformed through ritual and unremitting discipline into a transpersonal vessel for the holy spirit, the living God.⁷

2. To insure that we are not threatened by ideas that are not part of the group identity, we project onto those who hold contrary ideas images of sin, evil, and degradation. Thus certain cultures try to sever ties with the world outside their domain in order not to be contaminated. David Brooks, in a January 25 NY Times Op-Ed piece,⁸ described the current situation in Iraq, “Amid the turmoil, the complexity of life falls away, and things are reduced to stark polarities: Sunni-Shiite or Shiite-Sunni, human-subhuman. Once this mental descent has begun, it is possible to kill without compunction.” We employ the mechanism of splitting to create us-against-them scenarios. We (and, by inclusion, I) are all good and they (the other) are all bad.

⁶ Morgan, Stephen, *The Mind of a Terrorist Fundamentalist*, Awe-Struck E-Books, 2001.

⁷ Shapiro, Alan, *The Last Happy Occasion*, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

⁸ Brooks, David, New York Times, Jan. 25, 2007.

3. As you might expect from an analytic framework, sexual conflict has been proposed to account for fundamentalist thinking. There are several variations of this model: in one, men's fear of the feminine underlies the kind of patriarchy and subjugation of women that is seen in many fundamentalist cultures. In another, it is the fear of the uncontrollable that leads to ideologies that provide clear and rigid rules to govern sexual behaviour, another characteristic of fundamentalist cultures. Listen again to Hirsi Ali²:

I found it remarkable how many esteemed Muslim thinkers had philosophized at such length about how much female skin could be bared without causing chaos to break out across the landscape. Of course almost all these thinkers agreed that once a girl reaches puberty, every part of her body except her face and her hands must be covered when in the company of any men who are not immediate family, and at all times outside her home. This was because her bare skin would involuntarily cause men to feel an uncomfortable frenzy of sexual arousal.

Surely these ideas would register with the Outremont Orthodox Jews who lobbied for frosted glass on the windows of the local YMCA. Let's face it, the physicality and intensity of sexual feelings can be unsettling, even explosive, and fundamentalist cultures opt for external constraints.

4. From a more existentially oriented analytic framework, human beings live with the awareness of their own mortality – we are all going to die. For many this reality is fraught with unbearable anxiety; it is easy to understand why so many religions offer images that assuage death anxiety. Belief in Heaven, Paradise, reincarnation, and the soul all offer consolation. The more intense the individual's fear, the more rigidly held the belief. The greater the outside threat (or the greater the perception of threat) the more desperate is the need to defend the comforting belief against criticism, skepticism, evidence, or denial.

5. Man senses his insignificance in the face of an overwhelming and uncaring universe. Seeking guidance and meaning, he turns to sources which give answers. Doubt and questioning only lead to more anxiety, so a literal interpretation of the literature is preferred. Religious fundamentalism is characterized by literal readings of the relevant texts. There is neither room for debate, interpretation, nor literary critique.

6. Another theoretical perspective is offered by Dawkins, the Professor of evolution. He suggests that "memes" or ideas that emerge at some point in human history, often across cultures, have a "survival of the fittest"

quality much like genes. Such ideas have a particular appeal, meet a vital need, provide some kind of advantage, probably psychological, and, therefore, have staying power. He believes that the "meme" hypothesis accounts for the widespread notions that lie at the heart of the world's religions, and when taken to extreme, they evolve into fundamentalism.

But I don't think that this kind of hypothesizing captures the essence of the psychological roots of fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is more about a way of thinking than it is about the content. And here I want to bring in the concept of epistemology. That is the branch of philosophy that deals with knowledge. Not knowledge about things but, rather, "what do we mean when we think we know something?" Do we think that what we know corresponds to a reality that exists out there, independent of us, and that our knowledge corresponds to that reality? Sure, in everyday life, we are in pretty good shape if our knowledge of a banana leads us to peel that banana before slicing it into our cereal. No doubt a scientist could provide empirical evidence to support such a practice. But what about "knowing when life begins *in utero*" or "the age of the earth"? What does it mean to say that we know the Messiah is coming, or, for that matter, that Jesus, or the Hidden Imam, will one day return? If we think that our "knowledge" about these issues is the same as our knowledge of a banana, we are using an "absolutist" epistemology. If, on the other hand, we recognize that much of what we call knowledge is culturally determined, or consequent to our own unique experience or education, we will not be so quick to assume that our knowledge is the only correct explanation or the "Truth." We will be using a contextual epistemology which allows for alternate points of view.

Postmodernists, in taking this relativity to an extreme, make moral principles seem vague and trivial. They also risk being so respectful of cultural diversity that any criticism of cultural practices becomes unacceptable. (Think about female circumcision, as an example.) One might make the case that fundamentalist ideologies are a growing response, first, to the lack of moral absolutes and, second, to notions of cultural diversity. In fact, since 9/11, our tolerance for cultural diversity has shrunk as the U.S. has demonstrated a missionary zeal to spread the Truth: "freedom and democracy" and, in some places, reasonable accommodation notwithstanding, laws banning the wearing of religious clothing and symbols are being enacted.

But what does all this talk about epistemology have to do with fundamentalism, and where does psychology fit in? There is no doubt that fundamentalists see the world as if their knowledge of it were absolute. Rigidly held beliefs,

intolerance of alternative points of view, capacity to reinterpret history to fit their worldview,⁹ and rejection of scientific evidence are all manifestations of a fundamentalist ideology. Not just religions, mind you, but also systems of government and economic theories can become endowed with the characteristics of fundamentalism. Look at Pol Pot's Cambodia, or Mao's China, or the Israel imagined by Yagil Amir, the assassin of Yitzhak Rabin. Even Baptists call those Baptists who favour gay rights "Fundamentalists of the Left."

These ideas blend into psychology when we think about how an absolutist epistemology (or fundamentalist thinking) relates to imagination. I contend that there are two kinds imagination: the first underlies the ability to create; here it is the ability to imagine other worlds, other ways in which things can be organized, other explanatory models. The second is the ability to imagine other minds. Believe me, this is not as simple or as common as you might think. It is the capacity for empathy or, as Martin Buber¹⁰ defines it, the "bold swinging into the other." And to do that, one has to assume an openness, a non-judgmental attitude, a sense of wonder and curiosity about how the other mind makes sense of the world. Empathy requires a recognition that each mind is unique. From a psychological perspective, we can see that fundamentalists lack the capacity for empathy and their imaginative world is narrow indeed.

In *How to Cure a Fanatic*,¹¹ Amos Oz prescribes imagining the other as part of the cure. He writes, "Imagining the other, in my view, is not only an aesthetic business. It's an ethical imperative. Inside the family—not just between nations or between communities—imagining the other is a moral imperative. I want to tell you a secret (don't quote me): I think that imagining the other is also great pleasure. A secret pleasure and a great pleasure. I think imagining the other turns us not only into better neighbours, or better spouses, it even turns us into better lovers." But, as I've implied, it's fear of the other, the unique and separate other, that lies at the heart of fundamentalism.

How do we account for the existence of fundamentalism? I already expressed skepticism that the answer will be found in individual analytic models of psychological development. That doesn't mean that in some cases, individual fears, conflicts and vulnerabilities may make someone prone to rigid thinking or to joining fanatic

⁹ Sharlet, Jeff, *Through a Glass Darkly, How the Christian Right is Reimagining U.S. History*. Harper's, December, 2006

¹⁰ Buber, Martin, *I and Thou*, Free Press, 1971

¹¹ Oz, Amos, *How to Cure a Fanatic*, Princeton University Press, 2006.

groups or cults. In other words, people with psychological vulnerabilities will seek out "subcultures" whose ideas, perspectives and values offer comfort. Take a charismatic leader and he or she will find willing followers, followers whose own weakness is fortified by the energy, confidence and conviction of a leader who preaches salvation no matter what flavour it comes in.

To maintain loyalty to a leader, even a dead one, rigid group-think becomes the norm. Baruch Goldstein was an Israeli doctor and a follower of Rabbi Meir Kahane, the founder of the Jewish Defence League. In 1994, Goldstein walked into a mosque in Hebron during prayer services and shot to death 29 Muslims and wounded 150 before being killed by the survivors. His tombstone has become a pilgrimage site. It reads: "Here lies the saint, Dr Baruch Goldstein, blessed be the memory of the holy man, may the Lord avenge his blood, who devoted his soul to the Jews ... His hands are innocent and his heart is pure. He was killed as a martyr of God."¹² Grandiosity and hero-worship are a potent, sometimes lethal, mix.

Another dimension may be biological. Imagination might have a lot to do with brain circuitry. There is no doubt that some people have more robust imaginations than others, and likewise, some people have much higher developed capacity for empathy. However, with relatively few exceptions, I don't think that biology or individual psychology are responsible for the fundamentalism we see on a vast scale.

I think culture shapes not only *what* we think, but also *how* we think. And culture does this on one level by using the family as a conduit to pass on values, but more explicitly in its education systems. I remember my wife telling me about her days as a teacher at a Lubovitch day school. Certainly clothing regulations were in place to maintain modesty; that didn't surprise me. But what did was the censorship of reading material and the topics that could be discussed. And she told me that the students could not watch commercial TV and were not allowed to see movies. What is different about educating children in that milieu and home schooling in the States where 43% of home schooled children come from Evangelical families, or the Amish without electricity, or the Madrassas in Pakistan? It is obvious that the content of the curricula varies, but what doesn't is the epistemological foundation of all the teaching – there is only one reality, one way of conceptualizing the world, one way of understanding ethics and metaphysics, and the knowledge that is being transmitted corresponds to the one reality that exists out there independent of culture and experience. This is the nature of fundamentalism – the

¹² Baruch Goldstein, Wikipedia.

indoctrination of young children into a way of thinking that renders them impervious to alternate models of understanding their world, even blind to evidence from their own senses.

We can erect wall around schools and fences to separate nations; we can censor books, imprison dissident writers and, if necessary, murder or execute those willing to disseminate ideas that threaten the beliefs underlying group identity. But the 21st Century has seen the rise of technologies that allow ideas to jump over fences, disregard borders, evade censors, and leap freely from an anonymous source into a secret computer hidden in a teenager's closet. For cults this is a way of attracting adherents; for fundamentalists these technologies are a formidable threat to their ability to control the epistemological agenda. How will they recreate their borders and limit the availability of alternative views? The answer lies at the heart of the "Clash of Civilizations."

Recently a documentary film, *The Jesus Camp*¹³ was shown in Montreal. It illustrated with frightening clarity the role of education in shaping the thinking patterns of impressionable children. Again, I want to emphasize that it is not so much the content as it is the process of thought that is so important. The film focuses on the work of Pastor Becky Fischer, an Evangelical Christian, who runs a summer camp called *Kids on Fire* that prepares children to be soldiers in God's army. I'll quote from a review by Stephen Holden in the N.Y. Times¹⁴:

Ms. Fischer understands full well that the indoctrination of children when they are most impressionable (under 13 and preferably between 7 and 9) with evangelical dogma is the key to the movement's future growth, and she compares the Kids on Fire to militant Palestinian training camps in the Middle East that instill an aggressive Islamist fundamentalism. The term war, as in culture war, is repeatedly invoked to describe the fighting spirit of a movement already embraced by 30 million Americans.

At one point in the film, a 12-year-old home-schooled boy is reading a book ridiculing evolution and mocking the idea that science has any relevance in his education. One can imagine that if this lad began to question some of the ideas that he is being fed, he would be branded a traitor by his community. This, of course, was the fate of Hirsi Ali, who rejected the religious values and clan traditions in which she was raised. For Amos Oz, being a traitor is a good thing because it assumes the capacity to change, to

buck conformity, to question, and to doubt. It takes courage to give up the big weapon of "Truth."

Knowing the truth, or at least feeling that one is in possession of the truth, boldly affects one's personality. Think of the beatific glow on the face of someone who has found the answer to life's mysteries and the answer to the vexing problems of deciding right from wrong; see how earnestly they want to share the answer with you. As Amos Oz says, the fanatic wants nothing more than to help those who haven't found the truth. In a somewhat tongue-in-cheek mode, he suggests that:

Bin Laden's immediate target may have been New York, or Madrid, but his goal was to turn moderate, pragmatic Muslims into "true" believers, into his kind of Muslim. Islam, in bin Laden's view, was weakened by "American values," and to defend Islam, you must not just hit the West and hit it hard, you must eventually convert the West. Peace will prevail only when the world is converted not to Islam, but to the most fundamentalist and fierce and rigid form of Islam. It will be good for you. Bin Laden essentially loves you; by his way of thinking September 11 was a labor of love, he did it for your own good, he wants to change you, he wants to redeem you.

But in a striking juxtaposition, Oz immediately goes on to say,

Very often these things begin in the family. Fanaticism begins at home. It begins precisely with the very common urge to change a beloved relative for his or her own good. It begins with the urge to sacrifice oneself for the sake of a dearly loved neighbor; it begins with the urge to tell a child of yours, "You must become like me not like your father." Or among married couples, "You have to change, you have to see things my way or else this marriage is not going to work."

But if people are not willing to change, if they are not willing to accept the Truth, fanatic believers are prepared to dole out the consequences.

In October, 2006, at a debate on the grounds of Dublin's Trinity College, Omar Brooks, a British-born Muslim extremist, said Prophet Mohammed's message to nonbelievers is: "I come to slaughter you." He went on to say, "We are Muslims... We drink the blood of the enemy, and we can face them anywhere. That is Islam and that is jihad." But another young Muslim in the crowd watching the debate waved his finger at the radicals and shouted, "This is not ideology. It's mental illness."¹⁵ That too is subject for debate, but who is going to be the delusion detector? Or has delusional thinking already become a subcultural norm?

¹³ "Jesus Camp," film directed by Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, Magnolia Pictures, 2006.

¹⁴ Holden, Stephen, New York Times, Sept. 22, 2006.

¹⁵ *Radicals vs. moderates: British Muslims at crossroads*. CNN.com, 1/18/2007.

From 9/11 to family life, fundamentalist ways of thinking are seen to pervade the very fabric of our daily lives. From spouses to nations, from our neighbourhood to the planet, intolerance of differences is tearing us apart. It would be funny if it weren't so sad. But, as Oz reminds us, we have to see the humour in it. We have to retain the ability to laugh at ourselves. That is a sure antidote to the fundamentalist in us – fundamentalists can't laugh at

themselves. And we have to have the courage to be traitors, to acknowledge that we have not found *the* answer, but rather that we have found *an* answer that feels right for now, and we know that others have found their comfortable answers. Some of those answers may seem delusional to us, as ours may appear to them, but it matters less what is the content than what boundaries contain it.

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- * Lawrence Harrison's *The Central Liberal Truth, How Politics Can Change a Culture and Save it From Itself* provides a background for understanding how culture plays a role in cultivating fundamentalism.
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