

TOWARD A SPIRITUAL PHENOMENOLOGY OF FUNDAMENTALISM

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Abstract

This essay is a phenomenological approach of some of the foundations of the fundamentalist self. It is an attempt at considering the ways in which fundamentalism crystallizes a moving away from the “cumulative tradition” and religious intellectual and spiritual culture prevalent in all religious civilizations. In conjunction with this divorce from nurturing tradition the relationship between formalism, the religious construction of identity and the ideologization of the religious are explored with a view to unveil the confusion between the truth and the mould of truth which, the author argues, is one of the main keys for understanding fundamentalism. The essay also provides insights into a contextualization of fundamentalism within the framework of secular culture and post-religious spirituality.

Keywords: Fundamentalism, Spirituality, Ideology, Formalism, Phenomenology, Religion

It could be postulated, as a starting point, that the great religious traditions are worlds of ideas and practices – worlds of conceptual and spiritual forms – the goal of which is to lead their faithful practitioners toward That which lies beyond forms and cannot be fathomed by concepts. John Hick proposed that the less unsatisfactory way to refer to this transcendent domain could be by

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means of the two words “the Real,”¹ inasmuch as this term suggests a sense of the ontological Ultimate that lies at the core of the *weltanschauung* of the axial religions, while implying also the impossibility of sub-rating this one Principle, as Eliot Deutsch would put it, since it is the Supreme that nothing can alter.² We are thus confronted with a powerful spiritual key and a ponderous paradox. Whether we think of nirvānic bliss in the way of the Buddhist “ultimate concern,” in Paul Tillich’s sense,³ or speak of the God of the Bible as supreme Person, we refer to a Reality that, without being utterly un-relatable in all possible manners – which would make religious phenomena radically moot – still lies beyond all that we can think, say, and imagine.⁴

Knowledge of the Real: The End and the Means

As a matter of fact, the Real of ultimate concern dwells even beyond the scriptures, rites, and injunctions through which it manifests itself to mankind, and through which it invites human beings to be drawn back to its “shore.” If all these scriptures, rites, laws, and practices have any value – and the transformative and creative experience of centuries are clear evidence, for men and women of faith, that they do – then they derive validity and power from the Source that resides beyond them while also being *efficacious* within them. What holds true of the Buddha nature – as the spiritual

¹“The Real’ is then, I suggest, as good a generic name as we have for that which is affirmed in the varying forms of transcendent religious belief. For it is used within the major theistic and non-theistic traditions and yet is neutral as between their very different ways of conceiving, experiencing and responding to that which they affirm in these diverse ways.” John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion – Human Responses to the Transcendent*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004) 11.

²*Reality* is that which cannot be subrated by any other experiences. (...) *Appearance* is that which can be subrated by other experience. (...) *Unreality* is that which neither can nor cannot be subrated by other experience.” Eliot Deutsch, *Advaita Vedānta: A Philosophical Reconstruction*, Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1969, 18-24.

³Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of a meaning of our life.” Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology 3*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963, 4.

⁴This is so true that apophatism even applies to the highest reaches of Trinitarian Personalism: “Trinity! Higher than any being, any divinity, any goodness! (...)” (The Cause of all) is not a substance, nor is it eternity or time. It cannot be grasped by the understanding since it is neither knowledge nor truth. It is not kingship. It is not wisdom. It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness. Nor is it a spirit in the sense in which we understand that term. It is not sonship or fatherhood and it is nothing known to us or to an other being...” *The Mystical Theology* in Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, New York: Paulist Press, 1987, 135 and 141.

and ontological foundation of the entire field of reality – holds true also, *mutatis mutandis*, of the Biblical God, who is, out of Love, the source of all goods. Thus the Real is transcendent, however one may understand the precise meaning of this adjective – hence Hick’s capitalization of the word, thereby affirming its “exclusive” ontological status – but it is also, albeit somewhat mysteriously, “at work” in and through everything that is believed to condition or facilitate the ways of accessing it.

The preceding remarks suggest that the un-knowableness of the Real *as such* cannot be deemed to amount to ignorance pure and simple. The unfathomable depth of the Unknown is a matter of ontological proportion, or rather disproportion, while the possibility of knowledge is one of epistemological adequateness, or lack thereof, to make use of E.F. Schumacher’s precious vocabulary.⁵ This amounts to saying that the Buddha nature is as ontologically “incommensurate” with samsāric units of consciousness as God *qua*. God has no common “measure” with any created being, hence Saint Bernard of Clairvaux’s counsel that “the measure of love is to love without measure.” However, there is not only a perspective of metaphysical incommensurability. There is also, and first of all, one of adequateness, and adequateness always entails some sort of identity, from the *adaequatio rei et intellectus* of the Scholastic truth to the Supreme Union of mystical theology. On the deepest or highest level of adequateness, which is none other than identity, mystics would be the first to intimate that the Real cannot be known by “another” to the extent that it lies beyond the very polarity that is constitutive of dualistic knowledge, that is the distinction between a subject and an object. Only the Alone can know the Alone, to paraphrase Plotinus, which is the meaning of Franklin Merrell-Wolff’s reference to Ultimate Consciousness as “consciousness-without-an-object,”⁶ that is “knowledge without knowledge.” On such an epistemic level, the

⁵“Not the eye, only the mind, can determine the ‘grade of significance.’ People say: ‘Let the facts speak for themselves’; they forget that the speech of facts is real only if it is heard and understood.” E.F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, New York: Harper and Row, 1977, 41.

⁶“1. Consciousness-without-an-object is. 2. Before objects were, Consciousness-without-an-object is. 3. Though objects seem to exist, Consciousness-without-an-object is. 4. When objects vanish, yet remaining through all unaffected, Consciousness-without-an-object is. 5. Outside of Consciousness-without-an-object nothing is. 6. Within the bosom of Consciousness-without-an-object lies the power of awareness that projects objects. 7. When objects are projected, the power of awareness as subject is presupposed, yet Consciousness-without-an-object remains unchanged. 8. When consciousness of objects is born, then, likewise, consciousness of absence of objects arises.” Franklin Merrell-Wolff, *Experience and Philosophy*, Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1994, 309-310.

docta ignorantia, or the Buddhist “Only Don’t Know,”⁷ is necessarily unmediated, and therefore utterly independent from any form. This led Abhinavagupta and other Śaivite sages to consider the highest spiritual way as *anupāya*,⁸ without means, a way of no-way.

Such an understanding of knowledge as *adaequatio*, or indeed identity, is not the last epistemological word, however. While the Real cannot be known *qua* Real, except in the nakedness of its own *vāstava*, as *Ātman*, it does not follow that it cannot be known in regard to other aspects, or from other standpoints, as “disguised” or *adhyasta*.⁹ One of the ways in which this holds true appears in the domain of religious mediations that make it possible to gain adequateness, or refine one’s attunement, to What lies beyond. The key resides, therefore, in that some *fundamental* realities are needed to access the Mystery, while the paradox dwells in that these *fundamentals* are not the Mystery, and may therefore, in some particular manners and specific circumstances, function as the greatest obstacles barring access to it. Therein lies the tension: at the intersection of the Ultimate, or the sense of the Ultimate, on the one hand, and the phenomena that point to it, on the other hand.

Missing the Moon and Worshipping the Finger

In its exclusive and misguided obsession with the key, as well as in its ignorance or rejection of the paradox, “fundamentalism” betrays a misplaced sense of Reality, and it is in this respect not different from other intellectual and political passions that absolutize the relative. While the latter substitutes ideology for religion, the former substitutes the “mould of truth” – which is itself, as mould, open to all manner of abuses and ideologization – for the “truth.”¹⁰ It would

⁷See, for instance, *Only Don’t Know: Selected Teaching Letters of Zen Master Seung Sahn*, edited by Hyong Gak Sunim, Boston and London: Shambala, 2013.

⁸“Now I am starting (to write) this second chapter in order to decide which is the best path leading to the understanding of Śiva. What is the use of any instruction at all! It may need only one-time instruction followed by futility of instruction known as *anupāya*. This Reality is such as does not need anything else to bring it home. If anyone questions the validity of this (Śiva’s) Reality, we have to tell them that this is like this.” Abhinavagupta, *Abhinavagupta’s Śri Tantrāloka and Other Works*, volume 1, trans. Satya Prakash Singh and Swami Maheshvarananda, New Delhi: Standard Publishers: 2015, 71.

⁹“To begin with, one form of the Brahman is the product of delusion (and) the other form is understood from the knowledge of it, viz. as only that which exists within, (and) that is the true nature of the Ātman.” Sureśvara, *Vārtika on Śīśu and Mūrtamūrta Brāhmana*, edited by K.P. Jog and Shoun Hino, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996, 21.

¹⁰We are borrowing this distinction from Ghazzālī who, criticizing dogmatist belief, propounds that “it will never be possible for the truth of matters to be shown

not be quite enough to say that “fundamentalist” zeal misses the moon out of a self-interested fascination for the finger, to paraphrase a well-known Zen *dictum*. Its error is more serious indeed: it substitutes *de facto* the finger for the moon, while remaining utterly unaware of this substitution, which – given its premises and its end goal – it is intrinsically unable to discern. The premises lie in a quasi-quantitative objectification of God as a supreme “idol,” on the one hand, and an exclusive understanding of religious life as consisting of doing and not doing, on the other hand. The outcome is an intensification of one’s sense of being *qua* individual limitation by means of abiding by the formal will of the supreme “idol,” in a fateful conjunction of the Infinite and the finite, whereby the “biggest” is mistaken for the Infinite, and the finite is erected into an infinite reality *en trompe-l’oeil*.

In a sense, such flattening and idolatrous tendencies have always manifested themselves in religious history, albeit in various degrees and in various forms: literalistic and formalistic biases are nothing new under the sun of the spirit. There is, however, a significant gap between literalism and formalism, on the one hand, and contemporary “fundamentalism,” on the other hand. Literalism is a hermeneutic tendency that stems from a scrupulous respect for the integrity of scriptures, combined with a lack of concrete awareness of the limitations of language and the unlimitedness of the Ultimate. Formalism is characterized by analogous tendencies, with the difference that its area of predilection is the realm of action, which it takes as the exclusive repository of religious imperatives and the focal point of its sense of the Absolute. Literalism places the sense of the Absolute in the scriptural letter, while formalism situates it in specific forms of action. From the awesome depth of the Mystery, literalism and formalism make a one-sided and unidimensional surface of exsiccated forms. When the spiritual ebb of the tradition is at its lowest, proponents of formalistic religion, making claims that forms exhaust or espouse Reality, may even attempt to force everything and everybody into their mode of thinking, sometimes by any means necessary.

A Modern Phenomenon

In a sense, fundamentalism prospers on the same religious grounds as the formalism of old, but it is also, in some very significant ways, a

to him [the dogmatist]. That belief which the commonalty of mankind learns is the mould of truth, not truth itself. Complete gnosis is that the truth be uncovered from that mould, as a kernelis taken out of the husk.” Al-Ghazzālī, *On Know Yourself and God*, Chicago: Kazi, 2002, 195.

truly new and typically modern phenomenon. To wit, the term “fundamentalism” has a relatively recent history, a history that highlights both its values and its limitations. It is well known that the term originated in North-American Evangelical Christianity, where it began to refer, in the 1920s, to a protestation against a “rationalization” of religion, an eviction of its supernatural dimension deemed incompatible with the rationalistic and positivistic tendencies of the age. It is therefore important to note that the original impulse that lay at the foundations of the fundamentalist reaction was focused less on the religious forms themselves than on their legitimizing source, Divine authority, on their ontological grounding, in response to the modernist drive to understand religious categories within the epistemological strictures of a prevalent rationalism. Thus, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of 1910 crystallized the supernatural essence of Christian faith into five fundamentals.¹¹ These were the Divine inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth of Jesus, the redemptive death of Christ, Christ’s bodily resurrection, and the historical authenticity of his miracles. This means that fundamentalism, in its initial impetus, was a defence of the transcendent and absolute dimension of religion. What it rejected was a flattening of religious phenomena that would reduce them to an ethical and allegorical status.

What is striking, therefore, in the original fundamentalist principles, is that they referred to realities of faith that are both closely related to the very “form” of the Christian religion, that is the historical, “mythological” and “practical” specifics that are “symbolically” aligned with the needs of “Christian mankind,” and to the “substance” of those realities, i.e. to their universal grounding in the Divine Reality. Therefore it could be said that this original and, in a sense, prototypical fundamentalism is characterized by a conflation of “form” and “substance.”¹² Hence the explanation of the *prima facie* paradox that the focus of original fundamentalism lay in the “supra-formal” and “supra-natural” seal of forms, that is to say the divine and “miraculous” dimension of grace and sacramental power, while fundamentalism in its historical unfolding has tended

¹¹Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1985, 206.

¹²“Every religion has a form and a substance; Islam spread like lightning by virtue of its substance; but its expansion was brought to a halt on account of its form. Substance possesses every right; it derives from the Absolute; form is relative; its rights are therefore limited.” Frithjof Schuon, *Form and Substance in the Religions*, Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2002, 14.

to become equated with formalistic and literalistic tendencies. Thus, the connection between these two aspects appears to reside in an awareness that the supernatural referent of the religious forms translates into a subjective conflation of the latter with the Divine itself. In other words, the outwardly formal aspects of the religion become endowed with the absolute and supernatural character of their source. Now, it must be admitted that the distinction between form and substance is itself not absolute, since it is possible to distinguish between forms that directly and most efficaciously “express” the essence, and others that are more peripheral. Notwithstanding this important *caveat*, fundamentalism as a whole remains insensitive to such distinctions and nuances, as it tends to absolutize the totality of the religious system, with a particular emphasis on the most distinctly formal dimensions thereof.

As mentioned above, the fact that fundamentalism first appeared during the contemporary period suggests that it must bear, in some ways, the imprint of the modern outlook, while being at the same time seemingly hostile to modernity. Indeed this paradoxical conjunction is revealed, among other factors, in fundamentalism’s lack of immunity to frequent solidarity with the world of technology and post-modern media. One could opine that this is just a matter of proselytizing convenience, but it would be missing an important dimension of the phenomenon: its radical lack of integration of the intellectual and spiritual culture of traditional religion, and the one-dimensional aspect of its message. The latter is both the cause and the consequence of its modes of expression and transmission, which participate in the ways of advertising, show business, internet blogs, and other fast and far-reaching mass media. As was noted earlier, by contrast with pre-modern religious perspectives, fundamentalism ignores the layers of meaning of scriptures and traditions, precisely because of a lack of religious culture, and because such polysemic depth would be a challenge to its ready-made formulas and watchwords. This is another way in which religious fundamentalism resembles the political ideologies with which it competes, or more often coalesces, in order to establish its worldly order. Ideology replaces ethics and spirituality, or it redefines them in its own terms. This is not to say that the moral dimension is totally absent in fundamentalism. What can be said, however, is that fundamentalist attitudes foster, and flourish upon, a fateful assertion of the tyrannical ego in the name of a mental idol, which tends to confine and suffocate the religious spirit within the strictures of its own limitations, in radical contrast to the fluid and organic flowering of traditional spirituality.

Do this egoic hardening and this formalist rigidity mean that fundamentalism cannot avoid falling into some kind of abusive violence? Although the answer to this question may appear to be negative – if “abuse” be taken in a physical sense – it remains nonetheless true that fundamentalism cannot but involve a solidification of the ego, tragically and paradoxically intensified by religious means, which may give rise to brutal and fanatical manifestations whenever the conditions for such irruptions are ripe. Far from being martyrs of a holy war, those fundamentalists who end up as blind killers of others and themselves are only taking to its extreme consequences the deadly “logic” of the absolutized self that is unconsciously “worshipped” in and through the mirage of absolutized religious forms.

Unity and Diversity of Fundamentalism

Fundamentalist tendencies are universal, and present in all religions, but their modes of manifestation depend upon the forms and perspective of a particular faith and the specificities of the socio-political terrain upon which it thrives. In Islam, fundamentalism is puritanical and legalistic since the religion is based on the religious law, and in so far as the socio-political assertion of the law becomes the standard of religious consciousness. It can also be based on a sense of pristine formal integrity, as is the case with Salafism, focused as it is on preserving a formal way of worship and life. In Christianity, fundamentalism tends to be scripturally literalist, or it thrives on a charismatic cultivation of the Spirit that lends to psychic phenomena a quasi-absolute authority. In Hinduism, fundamentalism leans toward a nativist bent, given that there is no “fundamental” that could serve as a dogmatic “Hindu creed.” In Buddhism, it may often be reactive and protective, and refer to a sense of collective identity, as it does everywhere else in one way or another. The various nefarious consequences of globalization can only intensify such trends toward “identity religion.”

The “identitarian” thrust of fundamentalism suggests that while religion could be defined as a set of sacred forms geared toward an inward liberation from the outward forms that imprison the self, fundamentalism could be characterized, by contrast, as an “absolute” adherence to forms that imposes upon them the passionate limitations of the individual ego – and the collective ego – with which it identifies. By contrast, while the traditional faithful do not reject the “letter,” the gradual withdrawal of self-seeking souls, which is both the condition and the result of a sincere contact with

religious forms and practices, must ultimately make the Spirit free to take them beyond their initial understanding of things. This spiritual contact opens onto a virtually unlimited deepening of faith, intelligence, and virtue. Fundamentalism, on the contrary, freezes the understanding of the “letter” and worships this icy idol to the point of death. It makes the form absolute, severing it artificially from its utter dependence upon the Spirit, thus making it available to serve whatever ideological goal it obsessively pursues.

Fundamentalism in Context

In order to situate fundamentalism, it is also important to set it in a contemporary context that is characterized by three major phenomena with significant implications for religious consciousness. The first one is the overall collapse of the traditional religious magisteria, or at least of the way they used to inform the intellectual substance of particular religious civilizations. The second is the process of the secularization of society, culture, and mentalities. The third is the appearance of alternative forms of “neo-spirituality” that tend to discard dogmatic teachings, authoritative institutions, and traditional lineages of learning. In response to the first of these phenomena, and sometimes as a partial cause of the latter, fundamentalism has imposed a new, unmediated, egalitarian, and universally accessible model of religious commitment. Against the second, and the ambience of relativism and uncertainty that it has fostered, fundamentalism has vehemently affirmed the certainties of a divinely sanctioned formal creed without contradictions or qualifications. Finally, contemporary fundamentalism is a product of its own religious opposite, New Age and informal spirituality, to which it is linked in a fateful reciprocity. The individualistic and psychologizing neo-spiritualism that has bloomed in the latest decades is in many ways a reactive offshoot of fundamentalism. It thrives on misleading attempts at bypassing sacred forms and traditional disciplines by confusing them with their fundamentalist caricatures. In return, fundamentalist attitudes feed on a perceived lack or loss of norms and objective forms. Unfortunately, these forms are all too often envisaged independently from their organic context and from the spiritual and moral ambience that gives them meaning and life.

Fundamentalism in Context

By contrast, traditional spirituality is centred on deepening and strengthening the understanding and meaning of sacred forms. Today, in a world where religious traditions have largely collapsed or decayed, or have at least lost a determining influence on culture, the

role of spirituality is to remind people of the living sources of religion. Fundamentalism is a caricature of this search for sources, as is often manifested by its ambitions to “purify” or “restore” an allegedly original state of affairs. Fundamentalist “restoration” most often amounts to no more than an overemphasis on selected scriptural forms, which are simplistically “codified” and shallowly or “mechanically” applied to modern phenomena and contexts, thus severing them from the spiritual wealth of cumulative knowledge that animates and vivifies them. This knowledge is rejected as human and backward accretion or mystical corruption. Fundamentalist discourse is not only a discourse of “purity” and “restoration”; it is also one of exclusive certainty predicated on a conviction that its view of religion is able to do away with the human mediations that have corrupted the message. By rejecting those mediations and strictly abiding by what it understands to be the meaning of religion, fundamentalism demonstrates a lack of insight into the nature of the Divine, as well as an impoverished sense of the human. The first misjudgement flows from an unconsciously arrogant reduction of the Divine to the limitations of individual human understanding. This is suggestively encapsulated in a contemporary spiritual master’s response to a fundamentalist critic who was rejecting mysticism under the claim that religion is “nothing other than the Book of God and the Wont of the Apostle.” To this the master replied: “In saying [that], it is as if you said: ‘[Religion] is what [*you yourself*] understand of the Book and the Wont, and no more.’”¹³ Besides this reduction of God’s providence and intended message to the limits of a particular individual, or collective, human understanding, there is also, in most fundamentalist discourses, a correlative flattening of human capacities and of mankind’s vocation. Fundamentalists tend to limit human nature to its ability to register dogmas, ignoring that the great religions highlight the nobility and depth of intelligence as a Divine gift to mankind. In the darkest sides of this belittling of intelligence may also lurk a desire to control and coerce intellectual and spiritual manifestations that would exceed the limited purview of the enforceable and “acceptable” definition of religion, and therefore potentially undermine the “truth” upon which it claims to stand.

Fundamentalism as Reformism

Another dimension of the coercive tendencies of contemporary fundamentalism appears in its pervasive intention to “rebuild”

¹³Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2006, 90.

religion, or to reassert its presence in society through the imposition of social and political forms and norms, unless its eschatological bent induces it to favour a withdrawal from secular society and the formation of religious "enclaves." Sometimes the two tendencies are combined, the creation of a segregated society or state being deemed a prelude to a "reconquest" of the entire social order. This is another aspect of the previously mentioned collusion between religion and ideology. Whatever attempts are made at realizing these socio-political or cultural objectives, one has to admit that such endeavours are bound to fail in pluralistic and individualistic societies, which are intrinsically incompatible with the enforcement of religious norms. Even within less secular contexts in which a restoration of religion in society may seem possible, at least outwardly and for a time, these efforts result in producing but a thin crust of formalism and religious hypocrisy. By contrast, when confronted with a secularist or materialistic ambience that is contrary to its tenets and goals, traditional spirituality does not embark upon the quixotic project of restoring an allegedly original state of affairs, nor does it aim at rebuilding modern society according to religious principles. It would rather focus on the crux of the religious message, and call those who are able and willing to listen to an interiorization that is the only means of accessing the realm of the Spirit, to the limited extent possible for mankind. Extrinsic efforts at rebuilding a religious socio-political edifice by means of flattened and artificially reconfigured materials can only lead to social failure and spiritual bankruptcy. The few examples of such attempts that have seen the light of day have glaringly confirmed this prognosis. Moreover, religious forays into socio-political matters are bound to exacerbate polarities, thereby contributing to an ever more formal, exterior, and passionately polemical understanding of reality, on the one hand, and to a radically secularist rejection of religion identified with its ambiguities and deformations, on the other hand. Such orientations can only give full way to the tenebrous ego in the form of collective fears and arrogance, thus becoming the vehicle of the principle of discord, disorder, and destruction.

Without being democratic, multicultural, or relativistic in the contemporary sense of those terms, religious tradition is, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith reminds his readers, "cumulatively": it is the result of a diverse and complex set of interpretations and applications, debates and magisterial choices, all flowing diversely, and on different levels of inspiration and contemplation, from the source of revelation. This is what makes a tradition integral and profound, while at the same

time betraying its unavoidable limitations and imperfections. A religious tradition has the depth and strength of its absolute origin, and the diversity, complexities, and ambiguities of its relative unfolding. By contrast, fundamentalism is partial, for a lack of recognition of the breadth of meaning of religion, and superficial, on account of its ignorance of inwardness, both in terms of hermeneutics and spirituality. It claims a kind of artificial perfection on account of its obsessive focus on the formal domain, the only realm that can provide the illusion of facile “guarantees” for being “on the right path.”

It must be added, though, that this fundamentalist cult of forms does not extend beyond the domain of prescriptions and proscriptions, as it plainly appears from the fact, far from coincidental to be sure, that fundamentalism is most often oblivious to beauty, be it moral, natural, or artistic. It tends to replace virtues with legalistic adherence and ideological allegiances, the “canticle of creatures” with the irresponsible exploitation of natural resources in the name of its God, and traditional crafts and arts with gaudy trivialities as means of proselytization. In order to make plain the shortcomings and dangers of fundamentalism, there may be, therefore, no better way, as an antidote, than to cultivate the language that is perhaps the most obviously and easily shared – that of beauty. It is enough to contemplate the mosque of Cordoba or a medieval Quranic illumination to understand that contemporary zealots and fanatics are missing the point of Islam, and we just need to read St Francis’ canticles or consider the Cathedral of Chartres to know that Christianity carries no flag and cannot be merchandised. Religion distils a subtle perfume in the souls and works that it informs, a perfume that religious ideologies riding on fundamentalism have always failed to exude.

Conclusion

To conclude, let us observe that two constitutive elements have been assigned to current-day fundamentalism by some contemporary analysts of its cross-religious manifestations: “a reliance on religion as a source of identity,” on the one hand, and “a boundary setting that determines who belongs and who does not,”¹⁴ on the other hand. While these two characteristics are undoubtedly defining aspects of fundamentalism, they can hardly be deemed exclusive traits. Indeed, they may plausibly characterize any religious phenomenon. To wit,

¹⁴Tessa J. Bartholomeusz and Chandra R. de Silva, *Buddhist Fundamentalism and Minority Identities in Sri Lanka*, Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1998, 2.

there is no religion that does not cement an identity, whether individual or collective, and rely on this identity for its development and expansion. There is no religious movement that does not predicate its identity and that of its faithful, at least extrinsically, upon exclusive markers of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. On that account, the early monastic *sangha*, the original Church, and the first Muslim community should all be considered as fundamentalist phenomena. There is need, therefore, to take into account other defining factors and to consider the quantitatively and qualitatively distinct specificities of the fundamentalist concern for, and understanding of, identity and boundaries. These considerations should lead one to measure the extent to which religion is, indeed, about identity and boundaries, and, no doubt more importantly, to inquire into the source, nature, and finality of such exclusive identities and limits. Our suggestion, in the context of this preliminary inquiry, is that the making of religious identity is of a radically different order and function, at its spiritual core, than that of other types of identity. This is so inasmuch as the making of religious identity is not an end in itself, but rather the means whereby the ego-centred identity, which condemns the human being to suffering and sterility, is dissolved into an objective sense of the Real, through which it is radically transformed and renewed. In this regard, what is boundary *a priori* opens onto an inner transcendence of all boundaries *a posteriori*. Thus, the most significant question appears to be the following: Does religious commitment result in a self-centred – unconsciously “deified” – identity or, on the contrary, does it reduce the egoistic self, or dissolve it, through a centering on the Ultimate Concern, the Absolute, Divine Grace and Presence? Or, to put it in a different way, does the divinized and idolatrous self surrender its delusive centrality by “dying” in the “objective” Presence of the Ultimate that redeems and revives? It could be argued that what fundamentalism sorely lacks is precisely a sense of the Presence that “objectifies” the ego. Only a consistent attention to Divine Presence could dissolve the subjective claims of the self-righteous “tyranny” of formal identity. Hence the keen relevance, *mutatis mutandis*, of concluding these remarks on fundamentalism with one of Paul Tillich’s most powerful insights: “The Spiritual Presence excludes fanaticism because in the Presence of God no man can boast about his grasp of God. No one can grasp that by which he is grasped – the Spiritual Presence.”¹⁵

¹⁵F. Forrester Church, editor, *The Essential Tillich*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, 88.