

# PSEUDO-RELIGION, FUNDAMENTALISM, AND VIOLENCE

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## **1. Introduction**

India is a land of great sages who have searched deep into their own hearts to come to a perennial understanding of the reality. The co-existing religions and a pluralistic vision of reality are the living testimonies of the great heritage that India has to offer to humanity, especially when clouds are darkening on Indian and international horizons. Although religions still hold sway on the Indian population, pseudo-religious entities are sneaking into the holy precincts reserved for genuine religions and as a result we witness tensions and strife in our society. Added to these woes, politicians play foul games to tackle the vote bank and manipulate the religious identities for successfully realizing their political designs: religion is becoming a puppet in the hands of politicians. The so-called holy men and women who make venomous statements against all other religions and call for the boycott of one or the other religion as it is not originated in the land, or proclaim their allegiance to various political parties for temporal gains are, by and large, unholy in their being and actions.

As these dramas unfold in the Indian society, at stake is the harmony among various religions, which have been coexisting side-by-side for centuries. It is a great credit to the Indian ethos that it could weave various religious strands into the inner fabric of India's unity. Drawing from the wealth of our healthy religiosity, where each religion has been effectively animating unceasing activity of love and unity among its own members and the members of other religions for over centuries, it is now our turn to squarely address the issues that involve religion (overtly or covertly), analyse the issues involved, and propose effective solutions. It must be the aim of an enlightened society to see to it that its social fabric is not ruptured by any individual or agency; instead, we shall be united and uncompromising in establishing and maintaining unity and harmony among various religions.

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## 2. Why Fundamentalism Is a Problem?

Holding on to certain fundamentals is a necessity for a consistent and meaningful human life. It is characteristic of human beings that they can critically and creatively subscribe to certain fundamentals, which would qualitatively enhance their existence, both individually and collectively. It is not this type of a noble life that is referred to by the nomenclature 'fundamentalism'. When some persons or systems hold on to certain fundamentals so rigidly for the sake of those fundamentals alone, that too without proper intelligible justifications, disregarding every other aspect of life, they could be categorized as fundamentalists, and their ideology as fundamentalism. Thus, there can be a variety of fundamentalists and fundamentalisms. In fact, the recent scientific literature on fundamentalism abounds in categorizing as fundamentalist all those tendencies and activities which aim at the isolation of one group based on religious, ethnic, linguistic, or any other categorization to augment its own identity and the apparent good of its in-group members through a militant and exclusive adoption of certain ways and means, even if that would adversely affect others to such an extent that it would be almost impossible to break the barriers set up by the former. Fundamentalism may involve traces of communalism, theocracy, revivalism, and anti-secularism, etc. However, as an ideological position, it cannot be equated or identified with any of them.

Fundamentalism, as it is being prevalent in our society, cannot be restricted to any one particular group. In general, fundamentalist tendencies have been prominently noticed among religions that assert a central place for the revealed texts of the sacred scriptures, especially Christians and Muslims.<sup>1</sup> However, it is unfair to claim that these two groups alone share fundamentalist viewpoints. A closer and impartial look at the doctrines and practices of various religious groups would indicate that almost all of them share it in one way or another. This is not to say that all religions are fundamentalists; but, it is a fact that no religion is immune to it. That is, it is not necessarily a religious problem, but a problem resulting from a particular human tendency to insulate itself from both internal and external threats which cannot be squarely faced through an intelligent (genuinely human and genuinely religious) mechanism.

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<sup>1</sup>For example, Muslims believe that the Quran was revealed to the Prophet word by word in Arabic language and that the exact form of the text was divinely inspired.

Further, religious fundamentalist groupings occur when some persons belonging to a religion feel the necessity of forcefully augmenting its self-consciousness and identity at the exclusion of others, probably as a result of certain real or apparent threats either from outside or inside forces. It may also result from certain repression of the autonomy of one or another particular group, mostly in the wake of a weakening of its own inner power sources or due to the unilateral assertion of another entity that cannot be reckoned with in the normal course of events. As the fundamentalist orientations begin to aggressively assert their exclusive identity, they begin to insulate themselves against others, to the extent of even asserting that they alone are the depositories of truth. Usually, this takes place as a result of an identity crisis that prompts them to an excessive inward looking and reinforcement of their self-identity with some militant thrust, so much so that they wouldn't mind even taking recourse to violent means to reassert their identity resulting from the newly constituted self-consciousness. A great difficulty with this process is their perception of the other as a threat that needs to be either eliminated or, at least, quarantined. These tendencies are pushed to the extremes in our society, especially with the backup of pseudo-religious ideologies. It would naturally develop antagonism against all those who really strive to practice religion in its core, including those who do not subscribe to their point of view. Such a tendency leads the society to further fragmentation, isolation, and alienation, apparently based on religious issues. In fact, a closer look at the issues involved and the personalities who are at the helm of events would indicate that they do not have any genuine religious foundation, but only an artificially generated 'religious' aura around it for the sake of faking the patronage of the larger public, which would indirectly serve the vested interests of the involved parties.

From the point of view of practising religion for the enhancement of human life and the ambience and other ingredients needed for the same, fundamentalism is a problem that has to be squarely faced and eliminated. As fundamentalism does not make room for critical and creative interaction with the fundamentals adopted by oneself and others, it would perpetuate obscurantism and isolationism. A religious point of view would find it impossible to accommodate fundamentalism as the latter would eat into the inner core of religion and religious practice by way of smuggling in many ideologies and practices which are irreligious in character. As it would be difficult for an ordinary person to easily distinguish between the

genuine religion and a fundamentalist religion, as they would lack the critical acumen required for the same, the proponents of fundamentalism would continue to succeed in harnessing a large base, sometimes even larger and stronger than what a genuine religion can manage.

### **3. Pseudo-Religion as the Source of Fundamentalism and Violence**

Human life is full of encounters: human-cosmic, human-human, and human-Divine. Interestingly, religion brings an integral and integrating dimension to all these encounters. Religion, being true to its own inner reality, has to initiate, facilitate and maintain various encounters in and through relationships that would pervade all recesses of human life. Any religion, therefore, that does not positively has the inner dynamics that would cater to the logic of relationship does not fit to be called a religion at all. In other words, apart from all that we traditionally identify as constituting a religion, initiating and maintaining harmony among the people of a particular religion and among people of various religions are said to be providing us with a test case.

#### **3.1. Pseudo-Religion: Religion Devoid of Religiosity**

In the same manner, as a religion loses its inner vitality and meaning, it may adversely affect its ability to cater to encounters and relationships. However, its inability to do what it is supposed to do may create a counter-culture among the votaries of such a religion. Instead of encounter and relationship, a religion impoverished of its inner dynamics among its subscribers may turn out to perpetuate hatred and division not only among its own members but also among others, thus fundamentally degrading itself. This is found to be more extensive and intense than its original charisma, as these agents would falsely absorb the power sources of religion, but without sharing the internal faith content. This sets in a dangerous process whereby an agency which originally facilitated encounter and relationship would begin to act against its own very existence. However, such religions would not admit the fact that they have lost their inner powers, but would go on making added claims to the contrary, and would reinforce and embellish their external dimensions, projecting a better image to the outsiders. Furthermore, as the religious leaders are aware of the loss of inner spiritual powers (in most of the cases, starting with them), they would covertly attempt to garner and tap in other power sources, especially that of politics. As temporal powers become more and more accessible to the leaders, enabling them 'better' control

over the people, these leaders would demand more external compliance to the religious tenets. There would be insistence from these leaders (as well as the followers) that their religious tenets and dogmas, which they identify as per their convenience, are to be uncompromisingly followed. It is here we have the emergence of pseudo-religions. It would have the appearance of a religion, but lacking in the inner spiritual dynamics that would enhance human-cosmic, human-human, human-divine encounters and sustained relationship among them. It is here we locate the seeds of fundamentalism; here begins not only the rupture of harmony among religions, but also some powerful movements that would act against harmony, thus the inner core of religion itself.

### 3.2. Pseudo-Religious Ideological Content of Fundamentalism

There is an ideological content to fundamentalism, and this aspect is said to be very crucial in its relation to religion. The ideological content, as T. N. Madan identifies it, has three important components: (i) rootedness in a historical experience, (ii) emergence of a comprehensive or totalizing blueprint for living and action, and (iii) the rhetorical form.<sup>2</sup> These components contribute a strategy for an ideology to initiate a pattern of control over those who subscribe to it and, through them, on others who do not. The contemporary religious phenomena in relation to the fundamentalist tendencies indicate that these constituting elements are well employed in the existing relationship between the sacred and the secular dimensions. As religions turn out to be dominant expressions of ideologies, the rhetorical form employed by these forces to enforce a totalizing blueprint with its foundation in the unchangeable historical nucleus *empowers* the religious functionaries in relation to the centres of temporal power (i.e., political establishments of the time). It is this alliance between the religious functionaries and the seats of temporal power that indicate possible deviations from the strictly religious orientation, which would gradually open its gates to pseudo-religion.

The hand-in-glove relationship that we find between religion and fundamentalism can better be explained in terms of an unwarranted and undue idealization of the origins of a religion for certain benefits which are not strictly religious. In the wake of certain internal or external threats that a religion faces and certain rational challenges that the leaders (or sources

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<sup>2</sup>T. N. Madan, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds: Secularism and Fundamentalism in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, 2-4.

of authority) of a certain religion cannot contain, it tends to motivate the latter to take recourse to idealizing the origins of that religion in an extreme form with the hope that this would sort out the issues for good. By and large, this move to idealize the origins and the claim of orthodoxy being tied to such an ideal would bring dividends to those in authority within the religion by way of barring or eliminating every attempt towards progress and transformation of systems. As the origins are made into the exclusively sacred model par excellence, any bid to transform and to move forward taking into account the changes within social and cultural scenario will be shunned as extremely unviable and, sometimes, dangerous to the identity of the religion and its faith content itself. This tendency pushed to the extremes, denying any idealization outside its sacrosanct precincts, with certain militant practices of affirming an exclusive possession of the truth would make such a religion ideologically fundamentalist.

### **3.3. Exclusivity and Idealization**

Religious fundamentalism accords a higher value and priority for doctrinal aspects of the religion even at the expense of intelligibility and human transformation. It tends to create a culture in which what is accepted as right within its own domains is that which is accepted as unchallengeable truth. True fundamentals of any religion are important for its institution and maintenance. However, being unreasonably selective with regard to the identified fundamentals, giving them exclusive primacy at the exclusion of many others (like love of God and fellowmen, and the ensuing ideal of service, at least within Christianity, or loving compassion in Buddhism) is a challengeable one. Thus, they attempt to idealize a few fundamentals (at the exclusion of others), exaggerating them to undue proportions and according them the highest value without providing any rational or theologically viable justification.

Interestingly, many of the fundamentalist religious groups tend to argue that the teachings that they impart to their followers is the *only* true one; in fact, they propose an outright rejection of the teachings of all others, baselessly claiming that none of them could be right. Usually, this is done by taking recourse to a narrow interpretation of their scriptures and traditions, and by implying that a true understanding of these religious sources is available only to them, and them alone. They have no difficulty in claiming that truth is exclusively available to them, as if all those who do not belong to their religion or sect do not even deserve to be treated as

human beings, that reason and revelation are definitively known to them at the exclusion of all others. Then, salvation that is facilitated by that religion will be available to none but to those who subscribe to their teachings and practise them literally (meaning blindly).

Literal conformity to the doctrines identified as fundamentals can be identified as a hallmark of religious fundamentalism. In fact, they not only insist upon the conformity to the fundamentals in their lives, but, with far more seriousness, they insist that everyone else should follow the same pattern of life and the foundational doctrines if salvation is to be attained. They tend to believe that their knowledge about salvation is definitive and final, thus making it a universal claim. That is, the rest of the humanity should see and approach salvation exclusively through their microscopically narrow perspective. Although it is the strong assertion of the fundamentals of a particular religion that primarily makes it a fundamentalist religion, it is its overarching antagonistic attitude against every other religion or faith that makes it most dreaded in the contemporary society. Moreover, it must also be kept in mind that the antagonism that they inculcate among its members is an all-enveloping one; it covers various spheres of personal and social life, such as ethnic, linguistic, cultural, etc.

### **3.4. Lack of Self-Criticism: Mark of Fundamentalism within Religion**

Fundamentalists do not encourage self-criticism, though they would involve in meticulous other-criticism. The basic attitude is that ‘I am ok’ and ‘you are not ok’. One problem with this type of attitude is that these persons would never be able to change themselves in any of the so-called fundamentals, while they would adamantly insist that everyone else should change and accept their points of view. As they lack the impetus for self-criticism, they continue to perpetuate obscurantism and remain backward looking and extremist in most of their approaches.

With a view to realize the universal concurrence to their point of view, which is certainly impossible given the diversity enjoyed by humanity, fundamentalists resort to employ political pressure tactics. As religious authority is practically limited to a few domains, fundamentalist forces that are bent on universal practice of their pattern of thinking, gradually take recourse to political domains.<sup>3</sup> A joint activity of religion

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<sup>3</sup>Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi is said to have stated as follows in his *The Islamic Movement*: “Islam desires, above all, that people should commit themselves entirely

and politics is the most deadly weapon in the hands of the fundamentalist forces. Together they would control every facet of human life, both at the individual and societal levels, by butchering creativity and sagacity. They succeed gradually, as they do not shy away from any opportunity to grab power and from making use of any possible mechanism in this regard. Moreover, their conviction that they alone represent the truthful position leads them to oppose every other person who holds a different point of view; they even take recourse to physical force (with their political muscle power) to eliminate anyone who wouldn't yield to their ideology and designs. In this context they would even engage in power-politics in order to effect a fundamentalist take over of many core religious and social institutions so that they can perpetuate their vicious designs without any challenge from within or without. In fact, this tendency had been visible among various religionists in the use of inquisitorial methods (this was very obviously practised by medieval Christianity; the method is said to be systematically adopted by the Taliban) to guarantee that no dissenting voice comes up from among the intelligentsia or ordinary faithful.

#### **4. Fundamentalism Damaging the Foundations of Religion and Society**

As fundamentalism spreads hatred within the human society, instead of enhancing bonding among people, they scatter them as best as they can through their vicious ideologies and treacherous practices. Indian society is the best example in this regard. Fundamentalist forces apparently from Islam and Hinduism,<sup>4</sup> though both are known for their ideal of peace and harmony, incite sentiments of hatred among people, thus distancing each other first, initiating even violence and killing, which will then unleash an unceasing cycle of violence and human sacrifice. The result: inter-religious harmony is destroyed, sometimes even irreparably. Then, peace and harmony among religions become a sheer mirage!

Ironically, instead of the heads of these religions condemning such acts and their perpetrators, some of them promise the greatest reward for those who shed blood and take lives of the members of the opposing camp

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to God's Truth and that they should serve and worship only God. Similarly, it desires that the law of God should become the law by which people lead their lives... *Only when power in society is in the hands of the Believers and the righteous, can the objectives of Islam be realized.*" Cited in Madan, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds*, 106, emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup>It is so ascribed due to their explicit allegiance to the said religions and practices.



(most of the recent alleged public appearances of Bin Laden – mostly through leaked video clips or audio messages – continue to make this point. He is categorical in asserting that all those who take on the western forces, especially those who sacrifice their lives for this ‘divine’ cause, will inherit the heaven and fullness of life).

The self-imposed walls that separate a fundamentalist religion finally tend to isolate its members not only with regard to their ideology, but also with regard to every other aspect of their lives.<sup>5</sup> The psychological, cultural, and social barricades that they construct around their group finally tend to provide them with an identity that acts apparently as a lifeguard in times of crises. “Fundamentalist movements appear to be characterized by a tendency first to redefine tradition in the light of perceived contemporary challenges and only then to give the call for a return to the fundamentals of the faith.”<sup>6</sup> However, given the helplessness of these groups to creatively respond to the given situation, the only possible way out to retain their identity is to reassert their own self-identity at the exclusion of all others. Instead of a healthy inclusive and dynamic understanding, they would finally get trapped in an exclusivist and stagnant understanding of almost every aspect of human life.

#### **4.1. Caste System: Result of Fundamentalist Powers**

In order to see the extent of damage that pseudo-religious movement can initiate we undertake a brief analysis of the practice of caste system and its foundations in the Hindu scriptures. It is true that the sacred scriptures of various religions have been instrumental in motivating religious followers to live a good life by performing right actions; that is, in general, we can say that scriptures have succeeded in providing an effective moral orientation to many. However, if we take into account some of the happenings in the history of humanity, which are ascribed to have their foundations in the scriptures, we cannot but claim that they are basically founded on fundamentalist readings and interpretations of these scriptures.

Classifying a society in one way or the other is normal for the efficacy of social living. However, a classification of society leading to a

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<sup>5</sup>We experience a lack of enthusiasm and vitality among religions, ethnic groups, various castes and cultural groups when it comes to mutual appreciation and recognition. This is very conspicuous among those who have got fundamentalist tendencies.

<sup>6</sup>Madan, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds*, 148.

rigid social stratification based on birth, and its perfect perpetuation over millennia in the Indian society resulting from a re-reading and interpretation of the Vedic sources (i.e., the *Purusa Sukta*) and the subsequent codification of an ethico-legal framework in the *Manusmṛti*, both of which are given to the subsequent generations as divine ordinations, set the platform for the fundamentalist tendencies to flourish. The rigidity of the social stratification went to the inhuman extremes of even suppressing any upward move from the subaltern levels through unchallengeable religious, cultural, and political injunctions that seemed to shamelessly favour only those who remained on the top of the social/religious ladder. This gradation is founded on the evil motives of the upper castes to retain and perpetuate their unmerited status in the society. To that effect they had even taken recourse to modifications and reinterpretations of the scriptures (which were universally and categorically binding on all Hindus).

Looked at from a modern point of view, it is impossible to deny the fact that the codification of the law in the *Manusmṛti* was an attempt on the part of the then ‘religiously’ and politically elite to perpetuate a social structure for their benefit. Such a structure was made viable and acceptable among the masses by way of ascribing divine ordination, which no orthodox Hindu would challenge or overthrow. All those who attempted to challenge it were branded as unorthodox and, hence, were thrown out of the system itself, thus assuring the maintenance of the rigid pattern to the advantage of the upper castes. As the scriptures and religious affinities are manipulated to serve the interests of a particular class at the expense of the human dignity of another group, without accommodating any flexibility whatsoever, it encourages me to brand it as one of the long lasting but disgraceful episode of practising fundamentalism in an extreme form under the auspices of pseudo-religion.

Purity of doctrine as it is conveyed through the written word of the sacred scripture becomes centrally crucial and un-negotiable to the fundamentalists. They attempt to *freeze* the divine revelation and its meaning and relevance to a single cultural milieu and linguistic tradition.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Barr lists three most pronounced characteristics of Christian fundamentalists: “(a) a very strong emphasis on the inerrancy of the Bible, the absence from it of any sort of error; (b) a strong hostility to modern theology and to the methods, results and implications of modern critical study of the Bible; (c) an assurance that those who do

The purity of revelation is apparently maintained in fundamentalist religious groups by way of assuring that interpretations are given only by those who would guarantee the pre-conceived purity, without in any way inviting critical scholarship. The same strategy would be maintained in religious instructions as well, so that only the conservative intellectual positions are passed on to the new members. Further, those who unquestioningly accept these instructions would gradually form part of the bodies responsible for planning and decision making, thus ensuring that at every level the same conservative doctrinal position is maintained, thus doubly ensuring that their religious position does remain the same irrespective of who enters and exits.

#### **4.2. Majority versus Minority Syndrome**

In certain societies, particularly those pluralistic societies divided in terms of a numerically large and politically assertive majority and a hapless and helpless minority, a homogenizing tendency may arise, as a result of the ongoing assertion of the majority. A typical example could be found in the Indian society, where the Hindu majority and the Muslim minority, in many places, create an unbecoming and irreconcilable situation. Most of the riots in the post-Independence era have resulted from the antagonism between these two communities. As the minority had been the losers many a time, they tend to reinforce their vitality by way of resorting to stronger fundamentalist orientations (especially if the inner religious sources are dried out), and would try to attract more and more people to these streams of religion. While the Muslim minority begins to re-assert itself, the Hindu majority would feel threatened all the more, and their inability to mobilize more hands and heads to fight for their causes naturally warrant further extreme views to counter the former. Fundamentalism, especially along the line of religious ideology, attracts more people, especially in the Indian subcontinent as by and large people still continue to be practising their religion. Instead of binding together people either within a religion, or between/among different religions, these unhealthy tendencies, and idealization of the extreme positions by the religious heads who are supposed to be animating people along the core values of religion, finally create a wedge between religions; here practising religion, for many, becomes quite a pointless concern. Then, religion becomes pseudo-religion

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not share their religious viewpoints are not really ‘true Christians’ at all.” James Barr, *Fundamentalism*, London: SCM Press, 1977, 1.

in its approach to reality and realization, and such a ‘religion’ would tend to reinforce fundamentalist tendencies, finally making these religious practices divisive and irreligious to the core.

The contemporary Indian society is a typical example for the above dynamics. Among different cases available, the strategy adopted by the Hindutva forces may be taken for analysis. Those who are actively advocating a religious nationalism in the name of Hindutva are making attempts to give shape to a *homogeneous* national unity purportedly based on the fundamental religious identity of the majority religious community, i.e., Hindu identity. Hardcore Hindu nationalists have rallied together to form a typically double-pronged strategy to take control of the Indian polity. This includes making every community that is technically identified as non-Hindu into a foe and the source of every evil that India faces in the present. The fundamentalist strategy that is adopted by the Arya Samaj, the RSS, and other Hindutva forces seems to provide us with a type in which they categorize people into two camps: ‘we Hindus’ and the ‘others’. This division, though succeeds in maintaining the stronghold of the Hindutva forces, really weakens the unity and sovereignty of India as a nation (though it is not a concern of these forces at all).

To understand the fundamentalist rhetoric employed by the Hindutva proponents further, we shall have a look at the approach adopted by Golwalkar, the second supreme guide of the RSS, who maintained that the RSS is only a cultural organization concerned with national rejuvenation. It must be noted that the nation referred to here is the “full-fledged ancient nation of the Hindus” united by geography, race, religion, culture, and language.<sup>8</sup> From among these five, he would highlight culture, or the “national culture” as the important one, of course, placed only after religion (dharma), though it is not clear what exactly is meant by religion in his teachings. In fact, he would list the quest for God realization, the *samskaras*, the *purusarthas*, self-restraint, and altruism as the key elements that constitute the Hindu culture. The formation and spread of the RSS clearly indicate that the culture and politics were obviously integrated in one unit, to which the powerful nationalistic Hindu religious substratum was added, with the intention of providing the unshakeable public support of the majority. Golwalkar stated this alliance in unambiguous terms:

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<sup>8</sup>M. S. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, reprint, Bangalore: Jagarna Prakashana, 1980, 182.

The non-Hindu people in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and revere Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but the glorification of the Hindu nation, i.e., they must not only give up their attitude of intolerance and ingratitude towards this land and its age-long traditions, but must also cultivate positive attitude of love and devotion instead; in one word, they must cease to be foreigners or may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment, not even citizen's rights.<sup>9</sup>

It is clear from the above and the ideological pronouncements of subsequent RSS leaders that “the ultimate objective of the RSS is *political domination through cultural homogenization*.”<sup>10</sup>

What the Hindutva campaigners attain in and through their ideology and activity is not national or cultural integration of the people of India, but ultimate disintegration of Indian ethos and national unity. In fact, they are only paying lip service to the cause of the nation;<sup>11</sup> what they primarily

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<sup>9</sup>M. S. Golwalkar, *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, Nagpur: Bharat Prakashan, 1938, 52.

<sup>10</sup>Madan, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds*, 225. On the Indian scene, as I have mentioned elsewhere, the strategy adopted by the Muslim fundamentalists is on par with that of the Hindutva protagonists. To quote Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia, “If Brahminism sought hierarchized homogenization of Indian society on caste basis, political Islam in India attempted a kind of differentiated homogenization in terms of Dal-ul-Islam and Dar-ul-Harb. Today diverging from the Nehruite conception of pluralistic nationalism, certain forces in our country are disorienting the dynamics of nation-building, taking it towards all-inclusive homogenization of Indian society in the name of what they call ‘real’ nationalism. In this exercise the Nehruite concept of secularism, which aimed at a united India with social and cultural pluralism as its significant dimension, is also being distorted into an instrument of Unitarianism.” Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia, “A Perspective on Sikh Fundamentalism” in *Religious Fundamentalism: An Asian Perspective*, ed. John S. Augustine, 11-19, Bangalore: SATHRI, 1993, 13.

<sup>11</sup>The riots that have taken place in different parts of India, especially in Gujarat, better explain their politically oriented strategy hidden behind the apparently straightforward call for cultural and religious revival and strengthening of Hinduism. More or less the same strategy is adopted by the Muslim fundamentalists as well, thus, both tending to reinforce the prevalence and perpetuation of fundamentalist forces apparently in the name of the common good of Indian people. But, almost always, the people of India continue to be the losers!

aim is not the establishment of a culture conducive to the people of this land, who have been accustomed to a pluralistic perspective with regard to religion, culture, language, etc.

In the name of correcting certain historical wrongs, these Hindutva fundamentalist forces instigate ordinary Hindus to take recourse to certain measures that would lead them as well as the rest of the society into deeper troubles. As I have stated elsewhere, “religious fanaticism is not only a misguided and exaggerated reaction to certain historical wrongs, but also a conscious but ‘blind’ adherence to the tenets of a religion or belief system that is made to be the axis of manipulating other adherents for certain vested interests which are diametrically opposed to the generally accepted and articulated central principles of relationship and communion among humans and with the transcendent cosmic reality.”<sup>12</sup>

### **5. Openness: Cure for Fundamentalism and Religious Violence**

Religion is an instrument for human wellbeing in relation to (and, in most of the cases, with its centrality accorded to) the Divine. It provides us with an environment or ambience that is necessary for initiating an ongoing interaction and integration between human beings and the Divine, and among human beings themselves and with the whole of creation. The ability of a religion to augment human wellbeing depends upon its capacity to elicit a spontaneous response from its votaries by way of enhancing every aspect of human and cosmic existence. The spontaneity referred to here is essential, as a voluntary response emerging from proper knowledge is the cornerstone of any action that is uniquely human. Without belittling the need of proper religious initiation and instruction into its fundamentals, it could be said that any attempt on the part of any religion, or religious authority (individually or collectively) to force certain teachings or doctrines upon an individual believer goes against the very spirit of being human and being religious.

Being part of human dynamics, organically understood, religions shall contribute towards the wellbeing of human society only insofar as they remain open, and involve in creative interaction with others. In this context, if they should succeed in making human society alive and active, they should not see each other as potential enemies; no one shall threaten others by way of a totalitarian approach. All of them need to be brought

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<sup>12</sup>Saju Chackalackal, “Hindutva: Cultural and Religious Response” (Editorial), *Journal of Dharma* 29, 1 (January-March 2004), 6.

together based on the great Indian ideal of *samanvaya*, a symbiosis, integration.

### **5.1. Fighting Fundamentalism by Highlighting Strands of Unity**

In most of the conflicts listed above, what stands out clearly is the unwillingness on the part of the fundamentalists to involve in self-criticism and soul-searching. Moreover, due to continued brainwash a good number of followers of these movements stop to squarely look at the issues involved; it so happens especially because the leaders do not entertain it. So, both the leaders and the followers concentrate more on the factors that divide the society: they do it in terms of constituting their unique but unalterable identity. In doing this, they ignore the fact that there are innumerable aspects that can infuse and maintain unity among various segments of the society, provided we are open to them. Although what unites us are stronger than what divides us, fundamentalist leaders are bent on underlining the dividing factors so that they can continue to manipulate and exercise control over others, and let them dance to their tunes. Sadly, given these trends, conflicts abound in the society and a solution will not be immediately in sight, as there are various levels at which many people entertain fundamentalist tendencies. Facing and countering these conflicts essentially require cultivation of an open perspective which is genuinely religious through proper educational strategies.

Countering fundamentalism resulting from pseudo-religion, therefore, has to be done not merely through counteraction with political overtones, but through a conscious effort on the part of genuinely enlightened and religiously rooted people to inculcate a value system that would make room for plurality and integration, but without endangering the role of individuals, various self-identities (religious or non-religious), etc. Acquisition of moral and religious power through humane religious practices, therefore, shall be identified as the most powerful mechanism to counter all ills associated with pseudo-religion and fundamentalism.

### **5.2. Education as the Best Avenue to Create a Counter-Culture**

As our Indian society is a pluralistic one, we would succeed only by addressing all religions at one go, which is not an easy task if the political as well as the religious leaders are not ready to drop their pretensions and vested interests. If people in authority are oriented towards the achievement of the welfare of the people and the society at large, then they should acquire a broader vision, which would enable them to go beyond

the assumed narrow territorial boundaries; excessive emphasis on boundaries would only choke the spirit of unity and harmony as long as they remain closed to and aloof from each other.

Harmony among human beings and human communities can come about only when individuals would consciously involve in relating to the other; it is not an automated action. It is to be facilitated by all, especially by those who are at the helm of affairs. In order to broaden the horizons of these, it is essential that the political as well as the religious leaders are offered training in critical and creative thinking. As this cannot be done after having assumed the office, I would propose that our educational system itself has to undergo radical transformation, which would enable one to look at one's own and others' perspectives (including religious) from a humanely rational perspective. Our curriculum should make room for open analysis and critical appraisals of the points of views adopted by various ideologies, including religious ideologies. A critical perspective would initiate a creative understanding of the secular as well as religious realities, which would then pave the way for shedding the hard shells assumed by certain leaders for the sake of immortalizing their pseudo-religious, or even irreligious points of view. Instead of adopting a negative strategy to directly fight these fundamentalist forces – which would only give better edge for them to flourish by way of their emotion-building strategies – what I call for is to equip the individuals and groups to counter this menace by way of a conscientization process, which can be well done through proper value education.

Fundamentalism has flourished in different parts of the world at a time when either the public education system had failed, or else the vested interests had restricted access to education to a few, mostly belonging to the elite classes, and strategically denying access to education to the members of the lower strata of the society. For example, Vedic education was restricted exclusively to the *dvijas* (twice born); there are scriptural injunctions within the Vedas that had consistently and methodically ruled out any possible access to education by the members of the lowest caste, *Sudra* and anyone from the outcaste. Indeed, these efforts initiated by the codifiers of the 'sacred' scriptures (*Sruti*) and the 'sacred' traditions (*Smrti*) were consistently maintained by the priestly and ruling classes, both of whom had a lot at stake if all had access to education.

A trend among the fundamentalist forces in the arena of education is to perpetuate indoctrination instead of education proper. Indoctrination is



an attempt on the part of the priestly and ruling classes to use and misuse the mechanism of education to instruct everyone in the view of life and way of life already accepted by them without any critical reflection. Conscious and intelligent reflection is not at all expected of anyone within the parameters of indoctrination. Blind and unreflective acceptance of any doctrine is an unhealthy practice for a human being, much less for a religious person, as religion calls for a definitive faith assent, not merely a refusal and rejection of reason as a human endowment. Education proper must initiate the students in the art of human reflection, which should have an open process of critical and creative interaction with the instructors as well as the content of instruction. Instead of aiming at the maintenance of status quo, proper education should facilitate a critical perspective on anything that is presented.

Education is worth its name only when it succeeds in enabling everyone to open up their worldviews and vistas of life in a creative manner, imbibing the spirit of change in a proactive manner, and welcoming the possibility for a new life, although this dynamic life vision would involve also certain risks. Only dead or inert matter would fit into the mould of another; living is dynamic and vibrant, and restricting it to a mould designed by others of the bygone era would only curtail the human spirit from its noble potentialities. Indeed, it would not only be a denial of justice to humanity, but to the supreme spirit, who has created the human spirit to soar to the unseen and unimaginable heights of existence: that is an invitation to be human, and the fundamentalist forces shall not be given the edge to curtail and kill it.

Education must enable us to see the tricky strategies employed by the fundamentalist forces. Once understood to be deceptive in nature, many would try to be cautious in responding to such forces, and at least a few would strive to expose those deceiving agencies and their strategies, which would, in turn, assist others to move on an enlightened path of love and liberation, the ideal foundation and goal of any genuine religious movement or institution.

### **5.3. Necessity of a Wholesome Theological Education**

My suggestion to initiate openness in education is not restricted to secular education; in fact, more is to be done by a religion, so much so that their own theological education would consist not only of an exclusive treatment of their own scriptures, traditions, and dogmas but would also

deal with all these elements of other religions as well. It need not be seen as an instance of belittling one's own religious tradition; on the contrary, it is intended to initiate broader horizons and deeper commitment among the leaders as well as the faithful through a balanced imparting of theological education (from a pluralistic religious point of view).

A crucial event in liberating people from the clutches of fundamentalism shall be catechetical instruction. Every religion has one or other form of religious instruction. Most of the organized religions have a planned programme to initiate the neophytes into the religious teachings of a particular community, mostly done through a class of religious teachers. Although quite welcome is the procedure, many a time this technique can turn out to be counterproductive if the instructors have already become fundamentalists. A fundamentalist would always conduct instruction in religion by way of imposing religious doctrines and practices in an unquestioning manner, and would interpret the original sources to suit their ideology. A possible resolution of this problematic situation is to invite these new members to go to the basic sources; they should also be helped to distinguish between the essentials and the accidentals within the accepted core beliefs and practices. If they are given the tool to do this, and if they are encouraged by the enlightened in the religious societies, gradually, grip of the fundamentalist forces would decline. This can be further enhanced by teaching these religious students the scientific technique of reading and interpreting sacred scriptures and traditions. Critical reading and reflection would, then, be part of the mental framework of all the followers of a religion. Instead of diminishing the value of a religion, such an approach would only enhance its core value and would deepen the faith experience of the followers.

Education should impart a proper understanding of the very religious reality. A critical attitude towards religion is an essential requirement in the contemporary Indian situation. Anything promulgated by a religious head need not be accepted as final; the religious follower should be able to critically look at it, and then assent to it. Although this is the ideal, our recent experiences in the subcontinent with regard to the issues related to religion indicate that people are emotionally charged easily, especially when it comes to the matters of religion. I tend to think that this is due to the lack of proper education (and the resulting maturity) that would enable them to distinguish between the essentials and the accidentals. It is true that there is a core religious experience in the foundation of any religion

worth its name; however, this does not mean that the whole corpus of a religion is static.

In fact, religion is a human reality that attempts to respond to the higher or sublime levels of existence. If it is a human reality, naturally it has to be a progressive one. What Wilfred Cantwell Smith has stated about religion is worth recalling: A religious tradition is “a part of this world, it is a product of human activity; it is diverse, it is fluid, it grows, it changes, it accumulates.”<sup>13</sup> Without disregarding the element of continuity within any religious tradition, it must be said that the followers of religion must be trained to keep the proper balance between tradition and continuity, so that the dynamism that is part of being human can be safeguarded. As our analysis has already indicated, any inordinate swing, either to the side of tradition or to continuity, without each other, would keep the fundamentalist forces active. Religion and state, therefore, have a responsibility in instructing people in the art of integrating religious tradition and continuity to keep the flames of religion glowing for enhancing and ennobling the human spirit.

## 6. Conclusion

Harmony among religions cannot be attained merely by vocalizing our concerns. There need to be concerted action plans, which are monitored on an emergency basis, by taking into account the existential threats posed by fundamentalist forces, which have already crept into the vitals of our society, and especially into the holy precincts of religions. A cleansing has to be effected among the high-ranking functionaries of various religions, who are many a time responsible for the perpetuation of certain fundamentalist attitudes and practices, including violence, among ordinary faithful. These leaders are to be trained into a holistic understanding of religion. It needs to be emphasised that religious leaders of every religion must be at least introduced to the religious tenets of others with whom their own wards stage the play of their lives. Openness on the part of the religious leaders would certainly seep into the consciousness and practices of the ordinary faithful, which would then initiate broadmindedness among all, and an ability to accept others as they are. Here, there is fear as to whether individuals and individual religions would lose their identity and rootedness in the fundamentals already accepted; because a genuine

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<sup>13</sup>Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, New York: Harper and Row, 1978, 159.

religious person as well as religion as a whole can keep its own boundaries open without losing the identity. In fact, the fear of losing one's identity is seen only among those who do not have an identity or those who have only a forged identity, which is established and perpetuated through unnatural means, such as falsehood and violence.

Winning back genuine religion and meaningful religious practices would depend very much on the openness that the people at large and the leaders of our societies would entertain. As we know, this openness is the patrimony of Indian religious psyche that has been bequeathed to us down through the ages, starting with the enlightened ones of the ancient times, when many modern civilizations did not even have the initial promptings of refined religious ideology and practice. This spirit has been instrumental in effecting a harmonious existence among varied religious affiliations, even to the extent of positively tolerating some others which were atheistic in character. Now, it is our turn to make sure that our religious patrimony is not lost sight of due to the pressures ensuing from irreligious and anti-religious sources like fundamentalists who assume the garb of genuine religion. It is pretty simple to identify a religious-minded person, movement, or institution: it consists of the ability to initiate and maintain a proactive state of harmony among the people and realities of the surroundings, and to have the same attitude universally extendible to all.

We need to "strengthen unity" among religions, first of all, by "accepting differences." We need not only recognize differences, we should be ready to celebrate those differences in a healthy and mutually welcoming atmosphere. As we commonly partake in the celebration of these differences, our knowledge and respect for each other would be enhanced. Openness among religions and the harmony ensuing there from are not be ushered in automatically; they would come about only by the conscious effort and involvement of human individuals who are ready to encounter and relate to the others – as they are. As religion is a human reality (that constantly attempts to dynamically relate to the divine-human-cosmic), there would be limitations on its part, whatever be the form of that religion and wherever it is found to be existing. Hence, instead of blaming each other for the limiting factors, Indian religious scenario of the twenty-first century calls for a proactive approach to various religious entities, even if they seem to be pseudo-religious and fundamentalist in their being and affairs.