

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

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1. Introduction

The destruction, on December 6, 1992, of a mosque of the early Mughal period at Ayodhya, one of the most Hindu holy cities had sent shock waves not only across India and her neighbouring Muslim countries of Bangladesh and Pakistan, but even to the far away countries. It gave the impression to other countries that India abandoned or was about to abandon secularism, one of the most progressive features of the modern India. The tragedy at Ayodhya came as the climax of a long campaign on the part of a major political formation to incite religious sentiments to gain political ascendancy. The Country's intellectual elite felt deep sorrow and asked the question where would the tendency to exploit religious sentiment and religious symbols for political ends lead India? The destruction of World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001 was another shock not only to United States of America but to the whole world. A perceived shock arose from a realization that no country is safe from the hands of fighting fundamentalists. Everybody was raising the concern over the consequences of recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. These events affect the internal harmony and the external security of every nation. What is behind all these is a mixture of religious bigotry and political opportunism.

2. Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism has been associated with a closed and dogmatic personality type, with exclusivism, particularism, liberalism, and moral

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rigourism.¹ Fundamentalism stands in opposition to religious and cultural liberalism and in defence of orthodoxy and tradition. It may refer to an approach to interpreting Scripture that accepts it without question as absolute authority, leaving no room for taking into account changed circumstances or possible error. Religious fundamentalism may be said to be the exaggeration of a religious tradition. This leads to the use of the ideational component or religion, which is basically a faith expression, as the basis or rationale for a sort of “closed circuit” ideological system. This process is facilitated because religion is susceptible to easy and expedient politicization. According to Stella Balthazar,

Fundamentalism implies a belief held by a group of people who have the power and the facility to impose, project their beliefs on others and control them with an ulterior personal motive which negates and denies access to such facilities and information to a section of people in its own circle or outside of it. When a group uses the name of God in doing this, it becomes religious fundamentalism.²

There is the common concern about the ‘misuse’ of religion in public life, in the name of a return to the basic or original core of a religion. This threatened return could be historical; it could be textual. In the first case, the fear is absolutisation and closure of a faith through historicism; in the second, through literality. In both situations, fundamentalism has come to mean something terribly dangerous, unmanageable, intolerant, and narrow-minded.

Economic factors also play an important role in the fundamentalist reaction. In a situation where resources are scarce, people use religion or communal grouping as the focal point for their organized fight for their share. The fight becomes intense when the resources become scarce, or one group finds itself alienated from the mainstream, or is losing in the game. What we experience today is a kind of political process in which regional and alienated groups are struggling for their share. No one seems to be succeeding and there is constant rivalry, and clashes born out of disappointment.

¹Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane eds., *The New Dictionary of Theology*, “Fundamentalism” by William Dinges, 411.

²Stella Balthazar, “Religious Fundamentalism: A Feminist Perspective,” *Religious Fundamentalism: An Asian Perspective*, ed. John S. Augustine, Bangalore: South Asia Theological Research Institute, 1993, 97.

But in the present conflicts triggered off by fundamentalist groups, the poor are being used as pawns and the benefit goes to the powerful in each group. They instigate the caste or communal feelings in order that they may continue their dominance and power.

3. Religion

The word religion itself is a transliteration of the Latin word *religio* meaning to bind, to bind fast, or to fasten up. It is defined as reverence for God, or gods, or the fear of God. Religion could perhaps be best defined as a human attempt to achieve the highest possible good by adjusting life to the strongest and the best power in the universe. This power they usually call God. According to Gordon W. Allport, “A man’s religion is the audacious bid he makes to bind himself to creation and to the creator. It is his ultimate attempt to enlarge and to complete his own personality by finding the supreme context in which he rightly belongs.”³ To Jesus, the heart of religion is the inner spirit, and he constantly turns from external to desires and motives, affections and thoughts, that become the decisive issues of life. Murder begins in anger, adultery stems from lust, profanity from irreverence and insincerity, enmity from selfishness and hatred. In confronting his accusers and wrestling with crucial decisions, he brings into bold belief the power of love devoted to God in eternal perspective.

Towards the end of his life, Vivekananda dreamt that Goddess Kali was asking him: Do you defend me or do I defend you? Vivekananda drew the right lessons from the dream; his admirers do not. They continue to desperately defend their faiths outside because they have already lost much of it within. Karl Marx, in his indictment of religion, had considered “religion as the opiate of the people.” He had also made a profound observation that “religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. As the oldest form of logic, popular religion expresses the first stammering efforts of mankind to rationalize existence.”⁴ It appears to me that our people seem to have enough religion to hate one another, but not enough to love one another! Mahatma Gandhi had acknowledged that “undoubtedly, some of the worst crimes in world history had been committed in the name of

³Gordon W. Allport, *The Individual and His Religion*, New York: Macmillan, 1950, 142.

⁴*Deccan Herald*, Tuesday, October 4, 2005, 9.

religion.”⁵ However, Gandhi explained that this unfortunate aspect of religion seemed to be “not the fault of religion itself, but was due to the presence of the brute in the human being.”⁶

The seeds of fundamentalism lie in the perversion of the concept of God Almighty. A god who is himself greedy, a god who is seething with anger, lust and pride, a god who is seated in some imaginary terrestrial heaven and occasionally stoops down to the level of the mortals but retains his power to perform miracles and performs them to overawe the people into meek submission, these and all other related attributes of God have played havoc with each one of our world religions and filled them to the brim with the potential for fundamentalism.⁷

Various manifestations of religious fundamentalism have become a global phenomenon, and in Asia, especially, they threaten the inherent plurality of the socio-cultural fabric. Religious fundamentalism is manifest in all the major religions including Christianity. It is, therefore, necessary to initially understand the phenomenon *per se* and, then, to be properly aware of, and make an adequate response to it. There is a common saying that nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power. “Nothing will divide the Church so much as the love of power,” said St. Chrysostom.⁸ For, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

4. The Psychology and Psychopathology behind Fundamentalism

When visiting the Niagra Falls, a man inquired of a bystander, “What’s that house down there?” “The power house. From it wires go to all the houses giving them the needed electricity.” “Where does all that power come from?” “Well, lake Erie is 169 feet below lake Ontario. The fall of the water provides the power. If they were at the same level, there would be no power.” The above conversation explains the whole psychology of dominance, a basic mental attitude behind the fundamentalism for personal gain.

⁵*Deccan Herald*, Tuesday, October 4, 2005, 9

⁶*Deccan Herald*, Tuesday, October 4, 2005, 9.

⁷Swami Agnivesh, “An Activist View,” *Religious Fundamentalism: An Asian Perspective*, ed. John S. Augustine, Bangalore: South Asia Theological Institute, 1993, 28.

⁸Chrysostom, cited in Roy B. Zuck, *The Speaker’s Quote Book*, Bangalore: ATC, 1997, 292.

Sigmund Freud in his essay “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices” (1907) suggested that religious ideas as illusions springing from the infantile desires of the believer for protection from harshness of reality. His approach to religion was reductionist; religion represented a transitional stage that humanity was passing through on its way to full maturity. The notion of God had its roots in the young boy’s experience with his natural father and humanity’s experience with a primal tyrant who was both loved and feared.⁹ Carl Gustav Jung saw religion as beneficial to humanity because it kept humanity in touch with the unconscious. Jung detailed a process of individuation which occurred in adulthood and led a person to befriend the unconscious and discover the true self. For Jung, Christ was a symbol of this full self and passion of Jesus a model of the individuation process. Erik H. Erikson, in his famous work, *Young Man Luther* (1958), applying his theory of psychosocial development, noted how a religious person like Luther comes to discover who he is in the light of a Transcendent Other. For Erikson, Crisis is a turning point that occurs in every stage of life. In the very first of these crises – the crisis of infancy – trust vs. mistrust, the growing infant is introduced to trust in God through the hands of a benevolent mother/caretaker. Gordon Allport wrote in some detail about a religious sentiment and differentiated immature religion which he saw as magical, wish-fulfilling, and self-centred from a mature religion that was dynamic and critical.¹⁰ Abraham Maslow studied self actualizing people and the ‘peak-experiences’ which they enjoyed. For him peak-experience, which he identified with mystical experience, was the primary element in religion. Through such experience one gained a vision of transcendent reality.

It was Alfred Adler (1870-1937) who brought the concept of striving for superiority. Adler maintained that all people begin life with a sense of inferiority. This perception is to be expected from the weak and helpless child who is surrounded by and dependent for survival on larger and stronger adults. This perception of inferiority marks the beginning of a lifelong struggle to overcome such feelings of inferiority, which Adler called “*striving for superiority*.” Adler says: “I began to see clearly in

⁹Sigmund Freud, *Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices*, In Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological works of Sigmund Freud, James Strachy ed., London: Hogarth Press, 1959, vol.9, 115-127.

¹⁰Gordon Allport, *Individual and His Religion*, New York: Macmillan, 1950.

every psychological phenomenon, the striving for superiority. It runs parallel to physical growth and is an intrinsic necessity of life style. It lies at the root of all solutions of life's problems and is manifested in the way in which we meet those problems. All our functions follow its direction."¹¹ Thus, for Adler, virtually everything we do is aimed at overcoming feelings of inferiority and in establishing a sense of superiority. Adler believed that a well adjusted person expresses the striving for superiority through concern for the social interest. Poorly adjusted persons might develop an inferiority complex leading to superiority complex expressed as extreme discouragement, continuous hesitation, over sensitivity, impatience, anger, aggression, and constant retreat.

According to Psychoanalytic Approach, aggression was seen as part of the *libido*, the pleasure seeking drive that stimulated psychosexual development. However, Freud (1920, 1923) later redefined his thinking on aggression and identified it as a separate instinct – '*thanatos*', the powerful death instinct. The individual was seen as a being driven by two competing biological mechanisms, a life instinct (*Eros*) and a death instinct (*Thanatos*). The death instinct, according to Freud, drove the individual to strive for personal obliteration and ran contrary to the life instinct. Although this self-destructive instinct could be controlled (usually through the ego) it could not be completely eliminated and, therefore, Freud visualized defence mechanisms as central to dealing with the *libido*, manifesting as sadism and/masochism; it could be displaced on to others resulting in aggression/violence. In psychoanalytic terms, then, aggression is seen as inevitable, an instinct that builds up and requires some type of outlet. It really seems as though it is necessary for us to destroy some other things or persons in order not to destroy ourselves, or to guard against the impulse of self-destruction.¹² This explains well the aggressive and destructive tendencies seen very much in fundamentalist movements.

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55), who himself suffered much emotional distress, thought of emotional disorder under the concept of despair, which he called "sickness unto death." He saw despair as being self-rejection due to imbalances between self's awareness of finitude and infinitude or

¹¹Adler, cited in Ansbacher and Ansbacher, New York: Basic Books, 1956, 103.

¹²Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, London: Hogarth Press, 1933, 588.

despair of spirit or self in terms of the polarity between possibility and necessity or the polarity between consciousness and unconsciousness. These three polarities – off balance – are the source of pathological expressions of religion. On balance, they are the source of health.¹³

Religion participates as causative factor in mental illness when punitive forms of religion are used as a means of controlling the person. Religion participates in emotional disorder when it is a religion of nostalgia that ties a person to the past. Religion becomes a cause for sickness when it is the vehicle of maintaining a constricted territory for a growing person leading to constricted consciousness. Religion brings in maladapted behaviour in a person when in the name of religion a person is encouraged to avoid the developmental tasks of life and to refuse to make the great transitions of life. Religion participates malignantly in mental disorders when a person persistently shifts blame to others, refuses to forgive others, to accept their humanity, refuses to accept responsibility for one's own actions, and organizes his/her life around a permanent sense of unforgiveness. For mentally ill persons, religion becomes the last-straw to hold on to before he/she collapses emotionally.

5. Conclusion

Fundamentally, indeed, every religion is a religion of love for all those whom it embraces; however, cruelty and intolerance toward those who do not belong to it are natural to every religion.¹⁴ Gordon Allport defines the developed religious sentiment in terms of a “comprehensive attitude whose function is to relate the individual meaningfully to the whole being.”¹⁵ It is a kenotic – or self-emptying – approach which alone will save the present situation. The person who is the agent of change must be ready to sacrifice or renounce his/her own prerogative by reason of rank, office, or point of view. This enables everyone to see for a time the inner world view and perspective of the other person. Then, the other person becomes a Thou to whom to be related, to be understood, to be known and to be loved. When conflicts or polarities arise between inner self and the outer self, oneself

¹³Wayne E. Oates, *The Psychology of Religion*, Texas: Word Books, 1981, 264-266.

¹⁴Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of Ego*, London: Hogarth Press, 1948, 43, 51.

¹⁵Gordon W. Allport, *Becoming: Basic Considerations for a Psychology of Personality*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955, 94.

and the other, finite and the infinite, one's own will and the will of the other, consciousness and unconscious within the personality in defence of these polarities, one begins to wear the masks and builds up a false identity. Ann Morrow Lindberg writes: "I find I am shedding hypocrisy in human relationships. What a rest that will be! The most exhausting thing in life, I have discovered, is being insincere. That is why so much of social life is exhausting; one is wearing a mask. I have shed my mask."¹⁶ Gandhi explained that the unfortunate aspect of religion seemed to be "not the fault of religion itself but was due to the presence of brute in the human person."¹⁷

It is essential to treat fundamentalists with respect and love. They must be approached on the level of doctrine because they remain fixed on some doctrines, enjoy their name, power, and influence because of these doctrines. They believe that God's salvation depends on accepting the truth in its entirety in all its consequences. If we want to fight fundamentalism, rescue first the fundamentals of God. We need to realize that Truth is God, Love is God and compassion is God. This goes beyond saying God is truth, love and compassion. Save God from the fundamentalist Big Bulls who reduced religion to a bundle of rituals, beliefs, and a source of corrupt business and power. It is a long journey – a journey against strong currents of cravings and aversions. We are all being swept off our feet by the onslaught of a consumer culture, by a materialistic world-view, by the avalanche of a superficial lifestyle which is at once sapping the warmth of fellow human feelings. If we believe that we need to answer fundamentalism, we will have to begin from ourselves experiencing within the peace and joy of oneness. This is a self-emptying journey towards martyrdom. Socrates prayed:

"O Lord, give me beauty in the inner soul!

And may the outward man and the inward man be at one."

¹⁶Anne Morrow Lindberg, *Gift from the Sea*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1955, 32.

¹⁷*Deccan Herald*, Tuesday, October 4, 2005, 9.