

The Idolatry of Fundamentalism

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Reading 1: “Fundamentalism” from *Heretics’ Faith* by Fred Muir

To be a religious fundamentalist means to be anti-modern, it means being opposed to what the modern world not only symbolizes, but what it actually is. And it makes little difference what kind of religious fundamentalist you are – Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Black Muslim – all fundamentalists share an abhorrence for modernity. Without an understanding of this, you will be lost in today’s world, a world that is witnessing a growing fundamentalist movement.

Perhaps you’ve had the experience of listening to a fundamentalist preacher – it makes no difference what religious faith he (and more often than not it is a man) is espousing – and after a while shaking your head because what you’re hearing simply makes no sense. It’s beyond comprehension, as though the message were in another language, as if the person and you were not inhabiting the same earth. My mistake is in assuming that we do speak the same language, that we inhabit the same earth. . .

Very few in the circles most of us live in would ever question the world about us, but that is precisely what the fundamentalist does. The world, the modern world, is not what it should be, it is not what it could be, according to the fundamentalist: the world has gone astray. Rather than participating in it or attempting to reshape it from within, the fundamentalist seeks to remain detached, removed, at a distance, in a subculture – a world of their own which clings to the way life ought to be, which clutches to the fundamentals of the one and only true way. Their objective is to change the world so that their religion will be easier to live: they don’t want to translate their message into the world’s terms, but bring the world into line with their message.

Reading 2: “Idolatry” from *Amazing Grace* by Kathleen Norris

Learning to love is difficult, because it takes not only devotion but time, and ours is a fast-food culture. Many of us settle for something less than love, even in our most intimate relationships. Most of us know couples who despise each other and yet stay together, living as if in an armed camp. And young people grow up understanding that love means possessing and being possessed. It is a consumer model of love, an “If I can’t have her, nobody will” psychology that all too often turns deadly. Nearly half the murders in North Dakota, for example, are “domestic” in origin. It seems that many men, and some women, cannot give up the illusion of possessing another person. The idea of that person – and “idea” is related etymologically to the word “idol” – becomes more important, more potent than the actual living creature. It is much safer to love an idol than a real person who is capable of surprising you, loving you and demanding love in return, and maybe one day leaving you. People who have murdered their spouses often talk about how much they loved them, and they mean it. In order to keep their idol intact, in order to keep on loving *it*, they had to do away with *him* or *her*. . .

The Bible – and human life – is full of evidence that religion itself can become an idol: what the sentimental call the love of God is nothing if it is short-circuited into private piety or religious self-righteousness and doesn’t translate into compassion for others. Unfortunately, it is scorn for others that often marks religion’s public face in America, leading me to suspect that

one of the most popular idols around today is still the Pharisee's prayer as recorded in the Gospel of Luke – when he prays, it's to thank God that he is not like other people, who don't go to church, or if they do, don't say the right prayers. Idolatry in this sense is the original equal-opportunity employer, and anyone can play: the Protestant fundamentalist looks down on the mainstream one as not “really” Christian, the conservative Catholic despises the “cafeteria” one, the self-proclaimed spiritual seeker sneers, “You go to *church*? I find God in nature.” . . .

What is worth dedicating ourselves to? And what is not? . . . I would hazard to say that eventually one must learn that it is not the special events, not the losing oneself in the roar of the crowd, in which love flourishes. It is not in attempting to hand our unformed, needy selves over to the experts or the gurus who are all too glad to take our devotion and our money. It is the people we live and work among who can teach us who God is, and who we really are. And also, with the gift of grace, what it means to rid ourselves of idols, and live in the real world.

Sermon:

When I'm considering what I should preach about in future services, I go through a kind of brainstorming to generate lists of possible topics. Sometime in the past year, as I did that, both “idolatry” and “fundamentalism” made it onto the list. And I think that each is a worthy topic in its own right. Idolatry means, quite simply, the worship of idols. Another way of thinking about idolatry is as the treating as ultimate something which is less than ultimate, or giving something more devotion than it deserves. By fundamentalism I mean an approach to religion – or life - characterized by an uncompromising adherence to certain dogmatic doctrines, unchangeable over time.

As I pondered my list of topics, there came an “aha” moment in which it was clear to me that idolatry and fundamentalism were very closely related. In fact it occurred to me that fundamentalism might best be understood as a particular example of the more general concept of idolatry. That is, fundamentalists, in my view, get hung up on devoting themselves to details of doctrine which are less than ultimate, and in fact end up obscuring that which is worthy of ultimate devotion. And so I decided to address these two topics as one.

I'll begin by spending some time talking first about fundamentalism – its nature and background – and then about idolatry and some of the ways it affects all of us. Then I'll try to make the case that fundamentalism is in fact a form of idolatry, and why both are problematic. And finally I'll explore how we might address our own susceptibility to idolatrous living and fundamentalist thinking.

Taken very literally, the word fundamentalism suggests an approach based on adherence to some set of fundamentals. And on the face of it that doesn't sound so bad. “Fundamental” derives from the same root as foundation. As Huston Smith, the great historian of world religions, writes:

Every structure – whether it is a building, a structure of thought, or a life – has to be founded on something, hopefully something solid. But now comes the “ism” – fundamentalism – and immediately our guard goes up, or should. . . So “fundamentalism” takes what is intrinsically an indispensable necessity, and turns it into a doctrine, which is likely to be disputable.

Clearly the nature of a particular form of fundamentalism depends on what is taken to be fundamental. As Fred Muir pointed out in our reading this morning, every religion has its

fundamentalists. In order to put a more particular face on it, I'll focus primarily on American Protestant Christian fundamentalism as it has developed over the past hundred and fifty years or so.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, liberal Protestantism in the United States was influenced by the new biblical criticism coming out of Europe, and by scientific advances such as evolutionary theory. "Most liberals were committed Christians whose very commitment drove them to respond to the intellectual challenges of their time, in the hope of making the faith credible for modern people." [Justo Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity*] They embraced the notion of progress and looked forward to the day when most problems could be solved, bringing in a new age of joy, freedom, justice, peace, and abundance.

Not surprisingly there was a conservative reaction to that way of thinking from those who saw liberalism as a threat to the very core of the Christian faith. As early as 1846, the Evangelical Alliance was formed to bring together the anti-liberal forces. But it was in 1895, at a meeting in Niagara Falls, New York, that the movement actually put down in writing the five "fundamentals" that could not be denied without falling into the error of liberalism.

Particular fundamentalist sects may have generated their own longer lists of fundamentals, but these original five have stood the test of time across a broad, multi-denominational fundamentalist movement. They are 1) the inerrancy of scripture (that is, the Bible is the true, literal word of God); 2) the divinity of Jesus as the Son of God, one person of the Trinity; 3) the Virgin birth; 4) Jesus' death on the cross as atonement for our sins; and 5) the physical resurrection and impending return of Jesus. And so American Christian fundamentalism was born.

What is the real driving force behind this kind of fundamentalism? Fred Muir describes it as abhorrence for, and a reaction to, modernism. In the American Christian version, it does in fact seem to be a reaction to modernism, particularly in the form of Darwinism and the Higher Biblical Criticism. Karen Armstrong, whose book *The Battle For God* explores Christian, Jewish, and Muslim fundamentalisms, describes the situation as a besieged mentality that arises out of a sense of deep fear. Huston Smith agrees, stating that "The underlying cause of fundamentalism . . . is fear, the fear that derives from the sense of insecurity, of being threatened. People are scared; the world is scary."

One way that fundamentalism offers security is through its strong dualistic, either/or nature. There's right and wrong, good and bad. Everything is easy to understand so long as you know which side of good/bad it falls on. Furthermore, as a follower of fundamentalism there is the assurance that you are always among the correct. You are right, and "they" are wrong.

Fred Muir tells a story, a non-religious one, to illustrate another feature of fundamentalism:

A sergeant was asking a group of recruits why walnut was used for the butt of a rifle. "Because it's harder than other woods," said one man. "Wrong," said the sergeant. "Because it is more elastic." "Wrong again," shouted the sergeant. "Because it has a better shine?" "You boys certainly have a lot to learn," complained the sergeant. "Walnut is used for the simple reason that it is laid down in the Regulations."

Fundamentalism is a "regulations" way of faith. As with anything where there is a set of rules, there is little room, perhaps no room, for interpretation.

Idolatry, in Christian theology, is the worship of a created object rather than worship of the true God. It goes all the way back to the Ten Commandments, one of which says “You shall not make for yourself graven images . . . you shall not bow down to them or serve them.” But the concept of idol goes beyond explicitly religious icons or statues. The term often refers to conceptual constructs such as fame, money, nationality, or ethnicity. Money and fame are certainly among the primary idols in our culture, if popular television is any indication.

Whether within a Christian context or not, idolatry means giving excessive devotion or allegiance to things, people, or ideas. This idea is closely related to the Buddhist (and psychological) notion of attachment. Becoming too firmly attached to things or ideas is harmful to emotional health, and could be considered idolatry.

So how does fundamentalism qualify as idolatry? Dr. Bruce Prescott, once a Fundamentalist, and still a devout Christian, puts it like this:

Fundamentalists speak of the Bible with the same words they have used to describe Jesus. The Bible points to Jesus as the “Word of God.”

Fundamentalists point to the Bible as “the Word of God.” The Bible says that Jesus was “tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.”

Fundamentalists say the Bible is “without error in any area of reality.” The Bible calls Jesus perfect. Fundamentalists call the Bible perfect.

The cumulative effect of all this is to elevate the Bible to the point that faith in the Bible is equivalent to or, at least, prerequisite to faith in Jesus.

Eighteenth century Unitarian Theodore Parker takes this line of reasoning even further. He would presumably have considered Dr. Prescott an idolater because of his devotion to Jesus. In his famous sermon, “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” Parker addresses the notion of idolatry by trying to determine what the real essentials are of the Christian religion (the permanent), and what are merely transient, non-essential features (or idols).

For Parker, the essentials are those universal religious truths reflected in the teachings of Jesus, things like the importance of love and forgiveness. He sums up by saying that Christianity – indeed religion itself – is simply pure absolute morality. Furthermore, as a Transcendentalist, Parker believed that knowledge and understanding of such morality was directly accessible through religious intuition. Among the transient are any of those historical details or doctrines of Christianity that vary from generation to generation, as well as any focus on Jesus himself as an individual. Parker goes so far as to say that “true” Christianity would be as true as it is whether or not Jesus had actually lived. Like many liberal Christians, Parker was concerned with the religion *of* Jesus, not the religion *about* Jesus. As such, it was the truth reflected in Jesus’ teachings, and not his personal history, that was essential. Parker considered Christianity merely one particular expression of universal true religion.

The idolatry and rigidity of religious fundamentalism might be merely a curiosity, or perhaps occasionally an annoyance, if the effects of its beliefs went no further than its believers. As religious liberals who espouse religious freedom and tolerance, we should be able to tolerate a wide array of religious, theological stances, even those we find personally repugnant.

However, the case of religious fundamentalism is not so simple. By its very nature, fundamentalism is inherently certain of its rightness, making no allowance for the possibility of other legitimate points of view. In *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, Bishop John

Shelby Spong writes that if you are among the true believers, “. . . it becomes not merely justifiable but downright righteous to utter words of condemnation and prayers for the early demise of the enemy. Indeed, you can even believe that you are God’s anointed one to rid the world of a demonic figure.”

And so religious fundamentalism can lead directly to death and destruction. Whether it’s the bombing of a Planned Parenthood clinic by a Christian fanatic, or the destruction of the World Trade Center by Islamic fanatics. Of course not all fundamentalists are violent fanatics, but there is no doubt that much violence has had fundamentalist thinking as a motivating factor. At the heart of such actions is the idolatry of placing the certainty of one’s rightness not only above God, but above life itself. Such skewed priorities can do nothing but lead to more violence, more death, more heartache.

So what is to be done? How can those darned fundamentalists be stopped? After all, they are wrong, and we are right, right? Oh, wait a minute. That sounded almost a little fundamentalist, didn’t it? When I was younger and even more foolish than I am now, I used to have these fantasies. I had all this righteous indignation about “bad” people: violent, bigoted, fundamentalist. You know, the ones that make the world such a miserable place. After all, if everyone believed and acted like me, the world’s problems would disappear. And so the fantasy was to wipe out everyone who was “bad”, leaving only those of us who were “good”; that is, like me. Thank goodness I’ve grown up since then. And thank goodness it was only a fantasy.

So, how can we help the fundamentalists grow up? We probably can’t. What we can do is look at our own selves - our minds and hearts and actions – and struggle against our own idolatrous and fundamentalist tendencies. But how could we have fundamentalist tendencies? We’re Unitarian Universalists! We’re religious liberals!

Well, I suspect most of us have our moments of self-righteousness and certainty with respect to our thoughts and opinions on various issues. And I suspect most of us have our idols. It might not be money or fame. But then again it might be. Or it might be education. It might be science, either as an institution, or as a path to unlimited knowledge. It might be the Democratic Party. It might be a particular diet or exercise program. It might be a noble idea like progress. And it’s not that these aren’t all good things. It’s that they aren’t *ultimately* good in and of themselves, but only to the extent that they reflect good and healthy principles and values.

A part of our eternal vigilance must be to continually dig beneath the surface of those institutions and ideas to which we devote ourselves to make sure that they are still reflecting and embodying those values that *are* worthy of forming the foundations of our lives.

At any given moment of my life, I am guided by my current beliefs and convictions. But I try to hold my beliefs lightly enough so that they are capable of correction when that is appropriate. I try to be open to the possibility of new approaches, perspectives, ways of thinking. It’s not that I’ll be swept away by every new fad or theory. But neither will I dismiss new ideas simply because they are new or different.

I do have foundational values and beliefs. But, with them I try to maintain as global and universal a point of view as I can, keeping the “big picture” in mind. So what are the fundamentals that I embrace? Some of them are life itself, love, compassion, justice, a sense of the interconnectedness of everything. The difficult challenge is to always look to the heart of things – and myself - for those qualities, and not simply be satisfied by those lesser people, institutions, or ideas that claim to embody them. There is a classic Buddhist injunction against focusing on the finger pointing at the moon, rather than on truly seeing and appreciating the beauty and majesty of the moon itself.

May we successfully avoid the temptations of idolatry, and fully appreciate the beauty of the moon – and life, in the real world..

So may it be.

Closing Words [from the Rev. Michael Shuler]

Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the servant of truth.

Question your convictions, for beliefs too tightly held strangle the mind and its natural wisdom.

Suspect all certitudes, for the world whirls on -- nothing abides.

Yet in our inner rooms full of doubt, inquiry and suspicion, let a corner be reserved for trust.

For without trust there is no space for communities to gather or for friendships to be forged.

Indeed, this is the small corner where we connect -- and reconnect -- with each other.