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## Fundamentalism and the Modern World

**A return to the Dark Ages? Or a modern rebellion against secularism? Either way—as we've so painfully learned—we ignore this phenomenon at our grave peril.**

*by A dialogue with Karen Armstrong, Susannah Heschel, Jim Wallis, and Feisal Abdul Rauf*

*It's long had a bad reputation, but fundamentalism has become an especially dirty word since Sept. 11. But does fundamentalism necessarily equal violence? Four experts on the subject, from all three Abrahamic traditions, gathered at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City on Nov. 17 for a conversation on the religious and political roots in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.*

**Karen Armstrong:** Fundamentalism has erupted in every single major faith worldwide, not just in the Islamic world. The term "fundamentalism" was coined here in the United States, at the turn of the 20th century, when Protestant Christians said that they wanted to go back to the fundamentals of their faith. Sometimes Jews and Muslims, understandably, find it slightly offensive to have this Christian term foisted upon them, because they feel they have other objectives. It also suggests that fundamentalism is a kind of monolithic movement expressing the same kind of ideas and ideals.

Nevertheless, the term has come into popular parlance and tends to stand for a group of militant pieties that have erupted in every single major faith worldwide during the 20th century, first in Protestant fundamentalism. But also we have fundamentalist Judaism, Islam, Sikhism, Confucianism, Hinduism.

Fundamentalism is not simply extremism. Fundamentalism is not simply conservatism. Billy Graham, for example, would not be accepted as a fundamentalist by those who call themselves fundamentalists, nor would he call himself one. The Saudis, in Saudi Arabia, may be traditionalists but they're not, strictly speaking, fundamentalists.

We often see the words "fundamentalist terrorism" or "fundamentalist violence" put together. But only a tiny proportion of the people who might be called fundamentalists actually take part in acts of terror and violence. That's a very important distinction to make. Most people are simply struggling to live a religious life, as they see it, in a world that seems increasingly inimical to faith.

So what is fundamentalism? Fundamentalism represents a kind of revolt or rebellion against the secular hegemony of the modern world. Fundamentalists typically want to see God, or religion, reflected more centrally in public life. They want to drag religion from the sidelines, to which it's been relegated in a secular culture, and back to center stage.

**Susannah Heschel:** For some people fundamentalism is about bigotry and rigidity. For others, it's about nostalgia and more. One of the reasons an ultra-orthodoxy has been created in the Jewish world today is because so much of liberal Judaism betrayed some of the central religious principles of Jewish life. That is, they turned Judaism into something rational and removed the element of emotion that's so important in religion. Instead of a life of prayer, a striving to create a holy life, they talk about ceremonies, customs, and rituals in a very distant way. Often in non-orthodox settings, prayer is

undertaken by the rabbi and the cantor. The congregation doesn't pray. Prayer is vicarious, through the rabbi, and that's a problem.

I come from an extended family that's Hasidic, what we call ultra-orthodox. I'll let you in on a secret: The head of Agudas Israel, the ultra-orthodox organization in the Jewish community, is my cousin. His grandfather and my grandmother were twins. I'm drawn to that life because it is a life of religiosity. If I take my Jewish religiosity seriously, I find that it's exemplified in that community. It's incumbent upon us who are not part, or not willing to live in an ultra-orthodox setting, to find ways in the world in which we too can experience religiosity and express it as fully as those who are ultra-orthodox.

**Armstrong:** Typically, fundamentalists have proceeded on a fairly common program. Very often they begin by retreating from mainstream society and creating, as it were, enclaves of pure faith where they try to keep the godless world at bay and where they try to live a pure religious life. Examples would include the ultra-orthodox Jewish communities in New York City or [Christians at] Bob Jones University or Osama bin Laden's camps.

In these enclaves, fundamentalist communities often plan, as it were, a counteroffensive, where they seek to convert the mainstream society back to a more godly way of life. Some of them may resort to violence. Why? Because every fundamentalist movement that I've studied—in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—is rooted in a profound fear. They are convinced, even here in the United States, that modern liberal secular society wants to wipe out religion in some way or is destructive to faith.

In some parts of the Muslim world, the modernization process has been so accelerated and so rapid that secularism is very often experienced not as a liberating movement, as we have in the United States, but as a deadly assault upon faith. For example, when Ataturk was bringing modern Turkey into being, he closed down all the *madradas*, the colleges of further education. He abolished all the Sufi orders and forced them underground, and forced all men and women to wear Western dress.

In Iran, the shahs used to make their soldiers go through the streets with bayonets, taking the women's veils off and tearing them to pieces in front of them. These modernizers wanted their countries to look modern. Never mind that the vast majority of the population, because of the rapid pace of the modernization process, had no understanding of modern institutions or modern ideals. Very often in these countries, only an elite had the benefit of a Western education.

In Egypt, the chief mentor of Osama bin Laden, a man called Sayyid Qutb, developed the form of fundamentalism that tends to be followed by most fundamentalists in the Sunni Muslim world. President Nasser had incarcerated thousands of members of the Muslim brotherhood, often without trial, and often for doing nothing more incriminating than handing out leaflets or attending a meeting. Sayyid Qutb went into the camp as a moderate. But after 15 years of hard labor, watching the brothers being executed, or being subjected to mental or physical torture, and hearing Nasser vow to relegate religion to the purely private sphere, he came to the conclusion that secularism was a great evil. Qutb was executed by President Nasser in 1966.

**Jim Wallis:** I was raised in an evangelical church in the Midwest—some might have called it a bit fundamentalist. Sometimes there are blurry lines between "evangelical" and "fundamentalist." When I was in high school, I was interested in a girl in our church. My family was more evangelical, and hers was very fundamentalist. I offered to take her to a movie, which was often forbidden in my church culture. But I chose *The Sound of Music*. Who could go wrong with Julie Andrews? I thought. I was wrong.

As we left the house, her father literally stood in the doorway blocking our exit and said to his daughter, "If you go to this film, you'll be trampling on everything that we've taught you to believe." She fled downstairs to her room in tears.

The man knew that his religion was to make him different from the world, which is a fair point. I wished

he would have chosen to break with America at the point of its materialism, racism, poverty, or violence. But he chose Julie Andrews.

I don't think his kind of fundamentalism results in what happened Sept. 11. That takes a turn to theocracy, a turn to violence, a reach for power.

Conventional wisdom suggests that the antidote to religious fundamentalism is more secularism. That's a very big mistake. The best response to bad religion is better religion, not secularism. The traditions we are looking at are religions of the book, and the key question is, how do we interpret the book? In Christian faith, we have the interpretation of Martin Luther King Jr. and also that of the Ku Klux Klan. Better interpretation of the book, in my view, is a better response to fundamentalism than throwing the book away.

Fundamentalism, it is often said, is taking religion too seriously. The answer, in this view, is to take it less seriously. That conventional wisdom is wrong. The best response to fundamentalism is to take faith *more* seriously than fundamentalism sometimes does. The best response is to critique by faith the accommodations of fundamentalism to theocracy and violence and power and to assert the vital religious commitments that fundamentalists often leave out—namely compassion, social justice, peacemaking, religious pluralism, and I would say democracy as a religious commitment.

Fundamentalism betrays true faith by its devotion to an easy accommodation to the state. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state." That is often missed by this move to theocracy, particularly to a theocracy that is intended to enforce the dictates of the faith. In my view, al Qaeda, the Taliban, and American fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson are indeed theocrats asking that their religious agenda be enforced by the power of the state. That is primarily a *religious* mistake.

Fundamentalism too easily justifies violence as a tool for implementing its agenda. Genuine faith either forbids violence as a methodology or says that violence must always be limited and lamented, never glorified or celebrated. Genuine faith always seeks alternatives to violence that seek to break its deadly cycle. Fundamentalism, instead, offers what Walter Wink calls "the myth of redemptive violence"—that somehow violence can save us after all.

Some will say that after Sept. 11 we must keep religion safely relegated to the private sphere. That again is a mistake. The question is not whether religious and spiritual values should inform public discourse, but how. Separation of church and state does not require the removal of religious values from the public square.

**Armstrong:** When people feel that their backs are to the wall and they're fighting for survival, they can, very often, turn to violence. So fundamentalism often develops in a kind of symbiotic relationship with a modernity that is felt to be aggressive and intrusive.

Fundamentalism is not going back to the Dark Ages. We often treat fundamentalist movements as though they're harking back to some impossible, archaic, distant golden age. This is not true. These are essentially modern movements that could have taken root in no time other than our own.

The great changes of modernity mean that none of us can be religious in the same way as our ancestors. We are, all of us, having to develop different forms of seeing our faiths. Every generation, ever since religion began, has had to reinterpret its traditions to meet the challenge of its particular modernity. But the challenges have been particularly great, especially during the 20th century. Fundamentalism is simply one of the attempts to rethink faith. The Ayatollah Khomeini was essentially a man of the 20th century. Instead of harking back to the Dark Ages, he was really introducing a revolutionary form of Shi'ism that was, in fact, as innovative as if the pope had abolished the Mass. But most of us didn't understand enough about Shi'ism to appreciate that.

Fundamentalist movements can also be modernizing. We're seeing in Iran the Islamic revolution—which seemed to us to throw off modernity—introduce into the country representational government,

which Iranians were never allowed to have before. The institutions are highly flawed and imperfect but, under President Khatami, who sees himself working within the tradition of Khomeini, they are moving towards something democratic and modern.

It's no good ignoring fundamentalism with secularist or liberal disdain, as unworthy of serious consideration, hoping that it will somehow go away. Fundamentalism is an essential part of the modern scene and will be with us for some time. The fact that it is so ubiquitous, that it has erupted in almost every place where a modern, secular-style society has tried to establish itself—that again tells us something important about modernity. It suggests a great disenchantment that we must take seriously or ignore at our peril.

**Feisal Abdul Rauf:** It is difficult to try to look at Islam through the lens of fundamentalism. It's important to imagine what it sounds like within the Muslim experience.

We in America have as our social contract our Bill of Rights, our Constitution, and the preamble to the Constitution. When we feel our personal rights are violated, we tend to react by saying, this is unconstitutional. The Muslim's social contract is his or her faith. So when we feel that we have been violated at some level, that our social rights have been violated, we respond by saying this is un-Islamic. To a Muslim, the term "un-Islamic" is not a translation of "un-Christian"—which tends to mean uncharitable—but more like "unconstitutional" in the language of a U.S. citizen.

Much of what we call fundamentalism today in the Muslim world is less accurately described by that term. It's more a psychology, a reaction to a perceived attack. I do not see it as a fear of modernity. Within the Muslim world, if you go back a century, we find the great intellects like al-Afghani and Mohammed Iqbal, who studied in the West and came back to the Muslim world and talked about how we, as a Muslim people, ought to modernize ourselves as Muslims. There was active intellectual fermentation of ideas on how we, as a modern Muslim society, should emerge. So I don't see a conflict between Islam and modernity. It is rather a reaction to a militant secularism—a militant attack against us based upon our self-definition as Muslims.

**Armstrong:** I went to the United Nations recently and was told that this was the first time that they'd had a discussion of religion in the General Assembly. They've kept it out on grounds of principle. This is part of the reason we're in this kind of mess. Of course we value the separation of church and state, but religion is nevertheless a fact out there to be reckoned with. Whether the United Nations or the pundits or the politicians like it or not, fundamentalism worldwide has shown that people want religion reflected more clearly in their polity. This secularist disdain in government has got to end. It's just a matter of sheer common sense now to gain intelligence about religion; not just a quick crash course in fundamentalism or Islam, but a real understanding of the emotions, sensitivities, and aspirations that go along with faith.

**Wallis:** Fundamentalists often feel attacked by what I call "secular fundamentalism." At Harvard a couple of years ago I gave a talk on religion and public life to a group of Harvard's "best and brightest," the left intelligentsia. After I finished, the first question was, "But, Jim, what about the Inquisition?" I said, "Well! I was against it at the time. And I'm still opposed to it. But how about if every time you talk about national health insurance, I don't raise Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge? Instead, let's have a good conversation here."

Religion is not as undemocratic as the secular fundamentalists want to make it out to be. But fundamentalists need to learn that bringing faith into public life doesn't happen by the takeover of the mechanisms of the state. They have to learn the dynamics and disciplines of prophetic religion.

I think prophetic faith is, finally, the best counterpoint to fundamentalist religion. You bring your faith into the public square in a way that says your political conviction is because of your faith. But to win,

you have to win a democratic argument about why the policies you propose are better for the common good. That's the discipline religion has to be under when it brings its faith to the public square. Some fundamentalists haven't learned that yet. But they shouldn't be told to be quiet or to take over. They should be told to win in a democratic arena by offering their faith as their deepest conviction.

**Rauf:** The source of all conflict is always an identity differentiation between the "I" and the "you," however we might define it. It could be Arab against Jew, it could be black against white, it could be Hutu against Tutsi, it could be Harvard against Yale, it could be man against woman.

I don't believe religions really contribute to conflict. I think people themselves are subject to conflict. They fight for power—whether it's within a university administration, within a church, within a mosque board; we know these clashes for power—then we use whatever we want to justify it. A lot of war has been done in the name of freedom, in the name of many principles that we have.

One of the things that has been bothersome to many of us in the Muslim world is the so-called "clash of civilizations" [language] that was fostered by Samuel Huntington. His paradigm was that when people engage in conflict, they do it along civilizational lines. But it's become a very catchy phrase. People say civilizations clash, and the next big clash is the West against Islam. We've been demonized in that way. You have to have a dialogue amongst civilizations rather than speak of it in terms of a clash. Because the United States is the sole superpower today, we have the power of the bully pulpit. How we frame the dialogue will frame the future. If we frame the dialectic in terms of a dialogue among civilizations, we will create harmony. But if we foster the dialectic as a clash of civilizations, we will actually perpetuate the clash.

**Heschel:** Fundamentalists of different religious communities often come together and speak. And liberals in communities come together and speak. I can speak to liberal Christians much more easily than I can to ultra-Orthodox Jews. Why don't we have that ability to speak within our own community? How can we develop the language so that I can speak to my cousin who is the head of Agudas Israel? The question I would ask myself is what do I have to offer to that community, to that part of my extended family that's Hasidic? What do I have to give?

On the other hand, they often missionize me. They would like me to become a Hasidic like them. I tend to turn away, or I smile and pretend that I'm interested in listening, perhaps out of nostalgia. That's not very honest on my part. I speak now on behalf of other liberal Jews—what can we do to respond fully with honesty about what we reject?

**Wallis:** The future of politics is less and less about ideological categories of left and right, and more and more about what kind of people we want to be, what kind of community, what kind of world. It's going to be a conversation about values—religious values, moral values, spiritual values.

I don't think the real issue anymore is going to be between belief and secularism. That's the wrong juxtaposition. The real conflict now is between cynicism and hope. The principal vocation of religious communities in the public square is not to bring their dogma, but to bring the one thing you must have if you're going to change your neighborhood, your city, your nation, or your world. That's the dynamic and power and promise of hope.

**Armstrong:** What we must all be striving for, whether we are religious or secularist, is the compassion that our religions teach us and that our own Western society prizes so highly. We regard ourselves as a compassionate, tolerant society that respects the rights of others. We got this from the Abrahamic religions, from all three of these faiths.

Fundamentalism has achieved some successes. At the middle of the 20th century it was widely assumed by pundits and intellectuals that never again would religion play a major part in world affairs. But now we know, to our cost, that that has not proven to be the case. There has been a crying out, not just in the violence, but by those Muslim fundamentalist movements that work for better social justice within an Islamic society. Those Christians that are demanding that religion play a great centrality in public life. The extraordinary struggles that Jews have made to reconcile the terrible assaults that they suffered in the 20th century, and to rebuild faith and hope again in a world which seems to want to get rid of God.

There has been a religious resurgence. Fundamentalism has been part of that resurgence. But ultimately fundamentalism represents a defeat, because when people are so fearful, so threatened, they tend to accentuate those aggressive aspects of their faith or their scripture and downplay those that speak of compassion and justice. But, in our response too we must also stress compassion, the importance of reaching out, understanding even those forms of religiosity or ideology that we find abhorrent. Because in that struggle to understand, I am convinced we'll find a deeper sense of the Divine.

*Karen Armstrong is a former Catholic sister who teaches at Leo Baeck College, a seminary for reform Judaism in London, and author of many works, including A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; The Battle for God; and most recently Buddha.*

*Susannah Heschel holds the Eli Black Chair in Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College and is the author of numerous books, including Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus and Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism.*

*Feisal Abdul Rauf is imam of the al-Farah mosque in New York City and founder of the American Sufi Muslim Association. He teaches Islam and Sufism at the Center for Religious Inquiry at St. Bartholomew's Church and at New York Seminary. He's the author of Islam: A Search for Meaning and Islam: A Sacred Law: What Every Muslim Should Know About the Shari'ah.*

*Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of Sojourners.*


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