

**“How Shall We Live? Part II:
What Is Fundamentalism and What Does It Mean?
February 13, 2005
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode**

Call to Worship

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather on this Sunday morning.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve goodness, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

Congregational Covenant Statement for Lighting of Chalice (Spoken in unison)

We are travelers. We meet for a moment in this sacred place to love, to share, to serve. Let us use compassion, curiosity, reverence, and respect while seeking our truths. In this way we will support a just and joyful community, and this moment shall endure.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: Let religion be to us life and joy.

CONGREGATION: Let it be a voice of renewing challenge to the best we have and may be; let it be a call to generous action.

MINISTER: Let religion be to us a dissatisfaction with things that are, which bids us serve more eagerly the true and right.

CONGREGATION: Let it be the sorrow that opens for us the way of sympathy, understanding, and service to suffering humanity.

MINISTER: Let religion be to us the wonder and lure of that which is only partly known and understood:

CONGREGATION: An eye that glories in nature's majesty and beauty, and a heart that rejoices in deeds of kindness and of courage.

MINISTER: Let religion be to us security and serenity because of its truth and beauty, and because of the enduring worth and power of the loyalties which it engenders;

CONGREGATION: Let it be to us hope and purpose, and a discovering of opportunities to express our best through daily tasks:

MINISTER: Religion, uniting us with all that is admirable in human beings everywhere;

CONGREGATION: Holding before our eyes a prospect of the better life for humankind, which each may help to make actual.

(Vincent B. Silliman)

Introduction to Reading

My sermon this morning, the second in a series titled, "How Shall We Live?", is on the subject of fundamentalism, now a global phenomenon affecting the social and political environment in which we live.

To get us into the subject I will read the opening two paragraphs of a recent history of fundamentalism written by a very fine scholar on religion, English author Karen Armstrong.

In the year 2000, at the turn of the millennium, and just prior to 9/11, she published an historical study of fundamentalist movements in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in a book titled, *The Battle for God*, a book that to me is at once both a cool-headed and empathetic exploration of fundamentalism.

Reading

One of the most startling developments of the late twentieth century has been the emergence within every major religious tradition of a militant piety popularly known as "fundamentalism." Its manifestations are sometimes shocking. Fundamentalists have gunned down worshippers in a mosque, have killed doctors and nurses who work in abortion clinics, have shot their presidents, and have even toppled a powerful government. It is only a small minority of fundamentalists who commit such acts of terror, but even the most peaceful and law-abiding are perplexing, because they seem so adamantly opposed to many of the most positive values of modern society. Fundamentalists have no time for democracy, pluralism, religious toleration, peacekeeping, free speech, or the separation of church and state. Christian fundamentalists reject the discoveries of biology and physics about the origins of life and insist that the Book of Genesis is scientifically sound in every detail. At a time when many are throwing off the shackles of the past, Jewish fundamentalists observe their revealed Law more stringently than ever before, and Muslim women, repudiating the freedoms of Western women, shroud themselves in veils and chadors. Muslim and Jewish fundamentalists both interpret the Arab-Israeli conflict, which began as defiantly secularist, in an exclusively religious way. Fundamentalism, moreover, is not confined to the great monotheisms. There are Buddhist, Hindu, and even Confucian fundamentalisms, which also cast aside many of the painfully acquired insights of liberal

culture, which fight and kill in the name of religion and strive to bring the sacred into the realm of politics and national struggle.

This religious resurgence has taken many observers by surprise. In the middle years of the twentieth century, it was generally taken for granted that secularism was an irreversible trend and that faith would never again play a major part in world events. It was assumed that as human beings became more rational, they either would have no further need for religion or would be content to confine it to the immediately personal and private areas of their lives. But in the late 1970s, fundamentalists began to rebel against this secularist hegemony and started to wrest religion out of its marginal position and back to center stage. In this, at least, they have enjoyed remarkable success. Religion has once again become a force that no government can safely ignore. Fundamentalism has suffered defeats, but it is by no means quiescent. It is now an essential part of the modern scene and will certainly play an important role in the domestic and international affairs of the future. It is crucial, therefore, that we try to understand what this type of religiosity means, how and for what reasons it has developed, what it can tell us about our culture, and how best we should deal with it.

(The Battle for God, pp. ix-x)

HOW SHALL WE LIVE? PART II: WHAT IS FUNDAMENTALISM AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Introduction

My sermon this morning, as I indicated earlier, is the second in a series titled, “How Shall We Live?” – that is, how shall we live given the current polarized national political and social environment?

Last week in my first sermon of the series I asked the question, “Have you felt a change in the rhythm of events?” – is what we are experiencing now in our national life just part of normal political and social weather, like a temporary storm that will blow over so that we return to milder and more harmonious conditions, or is this storm an indication of something more permanent that only promises to get worse?

I could use the analogy of global warming: Is the current rise in global temperature that we are seeing – if you believe we are seeing it – just part of the normal up and down cycle of things, nothing to worry about really for the long-term, or are we affecting the atmosphere of the earth in such a way that unless we change what we are doing we will permanently change the conditions in which we live, and not for the better?

Following last week’s sermon I invited those interested to join me for a discussion of this issue, a discussion that took place this past Thursday evening with over 50 persons in attendance. Here’s my brief summarizing report of that discussion:

By far the majority response to the question was this: while many felt there have been a number of positive changes in our society, overall it was felt that as a society we were on

downhill slide, with varying estimates as to whether there was hope of reversing that slide.

Some felt that our nation was too far gone, that greed and selfishness and the accompanying short-sighted thinking was so deeply set in the system that our nation would collapse, and sooner rather than later.

Others felt that perhaps some catastrophe might awaken us and pull us together into appropriate united action so that we could stop our destructiveness and go forward.

And a couple of persons felt optimistic about our time, felt that life was pretty good, that if you had to pick a time to be alive, this was a pretty good time to be alive and a pretty good society of which to be a part.

But, overall, the majority feeling, at least as expressed on this occasion, was a feeling of not being in control of your life – that the areas where you could plan and develop a life according to your ideals was diminishing, while, in the larger framework, huge, impersonal forces were grinding away, overwhelming the more human and humane dimensions of our life, wearing down individual will and spirit so that there was a sense of impotence and disconnect to a meaningful societal center.

Visitors from Europe in attendance at the discussion reported that the concerns and feelings expressed in this gathering were very similar to conversations from across the pond. They felt quite at home in the discussion.

One person used the interesting image of a small clock within a large clock to describe our current situation. The small clock making faster revolutions had to do with a smaller cycles of things and perhaps the current polarization in our country belonged to the smaller clock. But meanwhile the larger clock was ticking away and time was running out on us.

I was reminded, in this regard, of a lecture I heard some years ago from Wendell Berry, American novelist, poet, and essayist who lives on a small farm in Kentucky where he concentrates particularly on environmental issues. Following his prepared remarks at that evening lecture, he was asked – this was now probably 15-20 years ago – whether he thought we were gaining in our environmental efforts.

Wendell Berry, normally deliberate in his speech anyway, especially took his time answering this question, but finally he did answer it. “Yes,” he responded, “I believe we are gaining in our environmental efforts ... slowly.” And he paused again, then added, “But we’re losing fast.”

Gaining slowly, losing fast – that might be a way of summarizing the majority responses to the question, “Have you felt a change in the rhythm of events?” Overall, a sense of grave concern was expressed, not only in the immediate present, but even more for the future, a sense of a grave threat to a way of life and the values that belong to it.

And that might be a good place to enter the conversation today with regard to fundamentalism, for fundamentalism, too, has arisen as a response to a felt threat to a valued way of life, and now fundamentalism has become an important player in changing the rhythm of events, because it was a type of fundamentalism that brought us 9/11 and woke us up to a changed and changing world.

The distinguishing features of “fundamentalism

“Fundamentalism” is the name given to a modern movement in religion, a movement that originated in American Protestantism in the early part of the 20th century and has gained increasing strength so that now it is found throughout the world in a whole variety of religions.

Though, as Karen Armstrong says, “Each ‘fundamentalism’ is a law unto itself and has its own dynamic” (The Battle for God, p. x), and though there are some religious groups that object to being labeled “fundamentalist,” still there are family resemblances which can be pointed to, common characteristics found in a variety of religious movements in a number of different faiths that distinguish them as “fundamentalist” in nature.

I will briefly speak of seven such distinguishing characteristics, leaning heavily on the work of Karen Armstrong in her books, The Battle for God and Islam: A Short History.

1. First, as I have been indicating, “fundamentalism” is a term that describes a modern phenomenon. It’s not something that has appeared in history before; it belongs to the modern world. Says Karen Armstrong:

There have always been people, in every age and in each tradition, who have fought against the modernity of their day. But ... fundamentalism ... is an essentially twentieth-century movement. It is a reaction against the scientific and secular culture that first appeared in the West, but which has since taken root in other parts of the world.” (Battle, p. xi)

“Fundamentalists,” she says, “look back to a ‘golden age’ before the irruption of modernity for their inspiration, but they are not atavistically returning to the Middle Ages. All [these fundamentalist movements] are intrinsically modern movements and could have appeared at no time other than our own.” (Islam: A Short History p. 165)

2. A second related point is that fundamentalism is a global phenomenon. As I said, it was a movement that began in the early part of the 20th century in the United States, but now there are fundamentalist responses in all the major religions. Again, to quote Armstrong:

Fundamentalism is a global fact and has surfaced in every major faith in response to modernity. There is fundamentalist Judaism, fundamentalist

Christianity, fundamentalist Hinduism, fundamentalist Buddhism, fundamentalist Sikhism and even fundamentalist Confucianism.” (Islam, p. 164)

3. Thirdly, fundamentalism is, as just quoted, “a response to modernity,” a response to the rise of scientific, secular culture that developed in the West in the last few centuries and which has quickly spread over almost the entire world. Says Armstrong:

The West has developed an entirely unprecedented and wholly different type of civilization, so the religious response to it has been unique. The fundamentalist movements that have evolved in our own day have a symbiotic relationship with modernity. They may reject the scientific rationalism of the West, but they cannot escape it. Western civilization has changed the world. Nothing – including religion – can ever be the same again. All over the globe, people have been struggling with these new conditions and have been forced to reassess their religious traditions, which were designed for an entirely different type of society.” (Battle, pp. xi-xii)

4. Fourthly, fundamentalism is a response to modernity *after* accommodation has failed; it is not the immediate or the first response to modernity. First there is an attempt to accommodate, to work with the new ideas and ways of life; but when that accommodation proves disappointing, or the new ways are felt to be too overwhelming in their force, or too threatening to previous values, then there may be another response, a snap-back, an attempt to return to some kind of root in the past to preserve a way of life.

“They [fundamentalist movements],” says Karen Armstrong, “reveal a deep disappointment and disenchantment with the modern experiment, which has not fulfilled all it promised. (Islam, p. 165)

I think, in this regard, of the play and movie, Fiddler on the Roof, a serious and humorous musical enactment of a traditional way of life meeting the modern world. With each successive daughter who is getting married, Tevya, the papa, stretches himself a little further, accommodates himself a little more to the new, modern reality. But, finally, when his third daughter is going to marry outside the faith, that is too much and he can accommodate himself no further. “If I bend too much,” he cries, “won’t I finally break?”

So, too, traditional religion at first tries to accommodate new movements and to take in new ideas and work with them. But sometimes it reaches a point where it feels it can go no further. The new ideas are too at odds with the old ideas and values and a crisis point is reached. At this point another approach may be tried, an approach of returning to the “fundamentals” of the faith in order to find a way through the crisis.

5. Fifthly, that return to the “original revelation,” to what is regarded as the fundamentals of the faith, is both selective and creative, often radically so.

To preserve the old in the midst of a new reality involves the “selective retrieval of certain doctrines and practices of the past” (Battle p. xi) – you can’t just pull the past

wholesale into the present – and it involves working with those doctrines and practices in such a way that it often involves a radically innovative reinterpretation of the old-time religion.

In the case of fundamentalism, it is a literalistic and rationalistic interpretation of its revelation. This is largely what marks fundamentalism as a modern movement that could appear at no other time but this time.

Fundamentalism treats its revelation as “fact” in a way that hasn’t been seen before. To preserve its religion it is felt it has to become as rational and fact-oriented as science.

Whereas scientific rationalism has bypassed and often distained the myths of the past and the rituals that went hand in hand with them – myths and rituals which, like art and music, are intended for the psyche and the underlying eternal truths of things – the fundamentalists, in order to try to preserve the *mythos*, have tried to treat the *mythos* as hard, scientific, objective fact. Says Karen Armstrong:

In their own way, fundamentalists were ardent modernists....” [In the early twentieth century] They were as addicted to scientific rationalism as any other modernists.” (Battle, p. 178)

6. A sixth characteristic of fundamentalism is that it develops in the face of a perceived threat. In other words, it develops out of fear, fear of annihilation, fear that its way of life will be undone. Armstrong again:

Every single fundamentalist movement that I have studied is convinced that the secular establishment is determined to wipe religion out.” (Islam, p. 165)

This, she says, is not always a paranoid reaction or unjustified. Particularly in some Islamic countries, secularism has been imposed very aggressively and very brutally. If you wish to document that you can turn to her book, The Battle for God.

The point here is that when one is fearful and not feeling safe, then not only is one not in a posture to receive new ideas, but one can also be aggressive in striking out at the perceived enemy.

7. A seventh and final characteristic of fundamentalism I will mention is that it is a struggle, often a desperate one, to preserve meaning, value, and holiness in the world. Fundamentalism can be seen as an attempt to re-sacralize a world that is felt to be drained of meaning by secular life.

The realm of religion is the realm of the sacred, the realm of the meaning and holiness of things – “One does not live by bread alone.” And when the stories, rituals, ceremonies, and ideas of religion relating to the meaning and holiness of things is roughly pushed aside with nothing adequate to replace it, a desperate struggle make ensue to find a way to preserve that realm of life that is life itself.

Often this struggle for the preservation of the sacred involves an initial withdrawal from society. But as we have seen, both here and abroad, fundamentalism can re-group and re-organize itself and create a plan of action to confront secular society with its own technology and on its own turf.

The battle fundamentalists see themselves involved in is not, however, a conventional political and social struggle; rather, it is a cosmic war between the forces of good and evil, a great cosmic play, and the battle can be rough and lives and fortunes can be lost.

And which side are you on? Are you with us or are you against us? There is little middle ground ... because in fundamentalism the truth is revealed and the truth is singular.

The values and ideals held so sacred by modernity: pluralistic approaches to truth; toleration of differing religious perspectives, practices, and beliefs; separation of religious values and government, even freedom of speech and democratic ideals – these are not part of fundamentalist movements for whom the truth has been challenged and now again grasped with renewed strength and vitality.

And therein is a great divide, which may grow greater before it grows smaller.

Any bridge?

Is there a way to bridge that divide? Is there a way to find a common humanity or shared values that are deeper than the large fissure that has opened in our landscape?

I will suggest two things that struck me as I have been thinking about this and particularly as it came out of the discussion here on Thursday evening – two possible points of connection:

1. In our discussion, as I mentioned, there were many expressions of concern and fear – a felt threat to a way of life and the undercutting of values that made life worthwhile and gave it meaning. Some of this fear is a fear of what fundamentalism itself might do.

But can there perhaps be a connection in the fear itself? Can seeing the fear in the eyes of an opponent on the other side of a divide touch your own fear? – “Looking into your eyes, I see that you are fearful, too. Is this some way we can work together in our common fear?” Or will such vulnerability to fear be taken only a sign of weakness and an opportunity to punish or destroy?

2. And then a second thought relates to re-sacralizing our world. For us, too, as expressed in last Thursday’s discussion, the Western way of life of which we are part of is not necessarily serving us well in terms of the life of the spirit. We, too, struggle in our concern relating to the holiness of life, attempting to preserve life’s holiness, to strengthen it, to find a way through a world that too often pretends that the life of the spirit can be dispensed with, that life can be lived on a flat, horizontal plane only.

Interpretations relating to the vertical and depth dimensions of reality may differ significantly between those who essentially embrace modernity and its ways of knowledge and those who don't, but perhaps we are one with the fundamentalists in our desire to re-sacralize life. Perhaps, here, too a bridge can be found over the chasm.

Addendum

Sometimes in a sermon I find I can only touch on a small portion of what I had intended. This morning is one of those occasions, for I had wanted to distinguish between some terms such as: Fundamentalism, Evangelicalism, Apocalypticism, and Pentecostalism. And I had wanted to talk more about the history of fundamentalism in the United States, and about how our current administration relates to fundamentalism.

I hope to touch on these in a future sermon in this series, perhaps my next one in two weeks. In the meantime, I'd like to invite you to another Thursday evening discussion – not this Thursday, but next Thursday, Feb. 24. at 7 p.m. here in our sanctuary.

And for next Sunday, I commend you to the grace and tender mercies of Peggy Albers, a long-time member of this congregation, who will talk about rituals in everyday life that can steady you as you make your way “in your one wild and precious life.”

Benediction

Now may peace be in our hearts,
and understanding in our minds,
may courage steel our wills,
and the love of truth forever guide us. Amen.

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish this chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on Sunday, February 13, 2005. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette and CD at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)