

Of Fundamentals and Fundamentalism

A Sermon Delivered on May 9, 2010
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“The fundamental desire of life
is the desire to exist.”
-- Rabindranath Tagore*

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Reading: by the Iranian born author Reza Aslan, from *No god but God* (p. 79)

Islam has often been portrayed, even by contemporary scholars, as “a military religion, [with] fanatical warriors, engaged in spreading their faith and their law by armed might,” to quote historian Bernard Lewis...

This deep-rooted stereotype of Islam as a warrior religion has its origins in the papal propaganda of the Crusades, when Muslims were depicted as the soldiers of the Antichrist in blasphemous occupation of the Holy Land (and, far more importantly, of the silk route to China). In the Middle Ages, while Muslim philosophers, scientists, and mathematicians were preserving the knowledge of the past and determining the scholarship of the future, a belligerent and deeply fractured Holy Roman Empire tried to distinguish itself from the Turks who were strangling it from all sides by labeling Islam “the religion of the sword,” as though there were in that era an alternative means of territorial expansion besides war. And as the European colonialists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries systematically plundered the natural resources of the Middle East and North Africa, inadvertently creating a rabid political and religious backlash that would produce what is now popularly called “Islamic fundamentalism,” the image of the dreaded Muslim warrior, “clad in a long robe and brandishing his scimitar, ready to slaughter any infidel that might come in his way,” became a widely popular literary cliché. It still is.

Reading: by the British scholar of religion Karen Armstrong, from *The Battle for God* (p. xi)

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 tolerance, 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 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... 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.

Reading: by Rebecca Baggett, a poem entitled “God and the Artists’ Colony”

Talking at dinner, we discover
how many of us have fundamentalist
families – mothers and sisters stricken

with gifts of tongues, ponderous
deacon fathers, brothers who praise
Jesus for every red light missed.

God rides them, we decide, the way
our art rides us. Perhaps God
is their art, driving them toward that

perfect abnegation, that desire to open
themselves and let Him fill them,
use them, just as we, alone here, locked

in our separate cells, struggle
to surrender self and let our blankness
fill with words, light, music, images

flashing against the dark screen
of our eyes, each of us moving, aching,
toward that private *Alleluia*, revelation,

Yes...

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Saturday last week, a 30 year-old Pakistani-born American citizen named Faisal Shahzad, loaded up a dark green SUV with gasoline and propane tanks, fertilizer and firecrackers, and parked it in New York City’s Times Square. In the midst of the bustling crowds of the evening’s pre-theater rush, he quietly set a match to the firecrackers, and walked away. Luckily, for the hundreds of potential victims of this homemade car-bomb, it didn’t go off. Street vendors noticed the sound of fireworks from within the car, and saw smoke. They called the police, and a bomb-squad diffused the threat. Within two days Mr. Shahzad was found and arrested, just as he was attempting to the leave the country on a flight to Dubai.

Why would a young man do this? News reports in the course of the last week have been providing snippets of insight into the story of his life. He comes from a family of wealth and privilege, a family that is not religious. His father is a retired high-ranking air force pilot in Pakistan. When the family in Pakistan heard about his alleged involvement in the Times Square bomb scare, they couldn't believe it was him. They were sure it was a case of mistaken identity.

He came to the United States as a student, earned a bachelor's in computer science and engineering, and a master's in business administration. He worked in several firms, married in 2004, had two young children. It seemed Mr. Shahzad and his wife were on their way to live the American dream. They bought a \$273,000 home in Shelton, Connecticut. They had a pool in the back yard, toys in the garage, and friends over for barbeques.

And yet, despite the trappings of success, some speculate that the family was struggling. Maybe his marriage - which was arranged by the couple's families - was strained. Maybe his professional ambitions did not come to fruition as quickly as he hoped. The young couple had intended to cash in on the real estate boom, but when the housing bubble burst, they lost their home to foreclosure. Maybe adapting to the cultural norms and social expectations of the American young urban professional, was more difficult than they had anticipated.

According to a relative, Faisal Shahzad was neither religiously-minded nor radically inclined when he moved to the U.S. at the age of eighteen. But after spending several years here, he seemed to change.

Experts have long observed that Muslim immigrants, or their children, are especially susceptible to extremist and violent forms of Islam. In these instances Islam provides a clear sense of identity in an unfriendly and confusing environment.

Mr. Shahzad had grown up in a Pakistan in which alcohol was banned, and Islam was forced into schools and communities as both doctrine and national glue. According to one Pakistani official, the youth of Mr. Shahzad's generation were taught from an early age to reject the West. This attitude lingers in their hearts and minds, and it makes it impossible for them to envision a world in which the Muslim world and the West can exist in peace.

Last Saturday's events suddenly transformed Faisal Shahzad from a fairly typical suburban father, struggling with many of same personal and financial challenges millions of other Americans face, into a "fundamentalist terrorist."

And fear of further terrorist plots is, once again, spreading among us. Talking on the phone with my brother, who lives in Queens, I heard about the annoying racket, when, for hours on Wednesday evening, helicopters circled above the nearby Triborough Bridge, because a U-Haul truck, leaking gasoline, had been abandoned in the middle of

the bridge. Only after the bomb squad had come and gone, and after traffic had been held up for hours, was it determined, it was simply a broken truck, probably stolen.

And Friday morning there was another scare in Times Square, when a vendor reported an abandoned canvass cooler and shopping bag on the street corner. Again a bomb squad was called, again the area cleared. Only to discover the cooler contained nothing but a few water bottles.

* * *

The story of Faisal Shahzad re-enforces all our stereotypes of Islam as an irredeemably violent religion. However, if we look at the history of all the world's great religions, we see they have each had their share of bloodshed. The histories of each are unique, and yet parallels can be found.

Reza Aslan traces modern Muslim fundamentalism to the eighteenth century. At the time the sacred lands that had given birth to Islam, and Mecca in particular, were under the control of the Ottoman Empire. The deserts of Arabia, however, were inhabited by a multitude of autonomous tribes.

In the early 1800s, an ambitious sheik named Muhammad ibn Saud, formed an alliance with an itinerant preacher named Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Abd al-Wahhab was a zealous man with a puritanical Islamic ideology. He developed a fanatical obsession to strip Islam of everything he considered superstitious innovations, and restore its "original Arab purity." He pursued an archaic and exclusivist vision of the prophet's original community in Medina, and any Muslims who did not share his vision - especially Sufis and Shi'ites - were put to the sword.

Aslan writes, had it not been for the extraordinary circumstances under which Wahhabism emerged, it would undoubtedly have passed into history as a marginal and short-lived sectarian movement. For two reasons it didn't. First: it emerged in the sacred lands of the Arabian Peninsula. Second: it benefited from a willing and eager patron who saw in its simple ideals the means of gaining unprecedented control of the region. That patron was Muhammad ibn Saud.

In the early 1800s the Wahhabis attacked the city of Karbala, killing two thousand worshippers, and smashing the tombs of Ali, Husayn, and the Imams, as well as of the prophet's daughter, Fatima. But they were later easily overwhelmed by the armies of the Ottoman Empire. Thus the Saudis learned an important lesson: they could not take on the Ottoman Empire on their own. They needed a much more powerful ally than the Wahhabis.

They found that ally in 1915 when they signed the Anglo-Saudi Treaty. At that point, in the midst of the First World War, the British were eager to gain control of the Persian Gulf. So they supported the Saudis' efforts to recapture the Arabian Peninsula from Ottoman control. The British provided weapons and money to support the Saudi

rebellion. And their plan worked. By the end of the war, the Ottoman Empire was dismantled, and the Saudis had re-conquered Mecca and Medina. After publicly executing forty thousand men and re-imposing Wahhabism over the entire population, the Arabian Peninsula was renamed “the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.”

Aslan writes, “almost immediately, the sacred land where Muhammad had received the gift of revelation miraculously burst forth with another gift from God - oil - giving the tiny Saudi clan sudden dominion over the world’s economy.” But the problem with fundamentalism is that it is by definition a reactionary movement. It cannot be tied to power.

Soon the Saudi rulers were incredibly rich, and with this newfound wealth imported modern technology and goods from the West. The Wahhabis were not happy about this new rampant materialism. Alienated by the greed and corruption of the Saudi court, they launched a rebellion in 1929 in the city of al-Salba. They demanded that the foreigners who now worked the oil fields be expelled, and that the king renounce his materialist ways. Instead the king sent an army to al-Salba and massacred the rebels. While this military response did squelch the rebellion, it did not weaken the religious fervor that fueled it.

As Aslan puts it,

“Saudi Arabia quickly discovered what the rest of the world would soon learn. Fundamentalism, in all religious traditions, is impervious to suppression. The more one tries to squelch it, the stronger it becomes. Counter it with cruelty, and it gains adherents. Kill its leaders, and they become martyrs. Respond with despotism, and it becomes the sole voice of opposition. Try to control it, and it will turn against you. Try to appease it, and it will take control.” (p. 247)

This pattern of shifting alliances between political leadership, religious extremists, and international allies and enemies has continued to this day in the Middle East. The names of rulers, countries and groups involved change, but the dynamics remain the same. Whether Arabia, Iraq, Iran or Afghanistan. Whether Britain, America or Russia. Whether Wahhabis, al-Qaeda or Taliban.

At the heart of these conflicts lies a religious dispute between various factions of Islam. It provides the spark that continues to ignite a volatile conflict of political powers and economic interests.

* * *

When we think of Islamic fundamentalism, we often think of it as a conflict between the Muslim world and the Western world. That’s the way the so-called “war on terror” was framed following the attacks on 9/11. And that is the way some continue to conceive the conflict. For instance the American-born Muslim cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, whose religious and political views helped radicalize Faisal Shahzad, as well as the American

Major Nidal Malik Hasan, who went on a shooting rampage at Fort Hood, Texas, last year.

Anwar al-Awlaki says, America is at war with Islam. He points to the American invasion of Iraq and the war in Afghanistan as evidence. And as long as U.S. foreign policy is driven by our own economic interests and geo-political ambitions, many Muslims listeners may believe him.

But according to Reza Aslan, this is a misunderstanding of the real issues at the heart of Islamic fundamentalism. Beginning with the violent conflict between Wahhabis and mainstream Muslims, this has been a dispute between factions within Islam. They are battling over whose interpretation of the prophet's life and teaching, whose interpretation of the Koran is correct. Aslan says, "The West is merely a bystander - an unwary yet complicit casualty of a rivalry raging in Islam over who will write the next chapter in its history."

All great religions grapple with these issues of scriptural and institutional authority, though some more fiercely than others. We need to remember Christianity's own Thirty Year War in seventeenth century Europe. It was a bloody battle between Protestant reformers and the Catholic League. It signaled the end of the Reformation, and left nearly a third of Germany's population dead. The evolution of Christianity from its inception to its Reformation, and finally its adaptation to the spirit of the Enlightenment took fifteen centuries.

Fourteen centuries of fierce debate over what it means to be Muslim, how to interpret the Koran, and how to apply Islamic law, have now come and gone. And Islam is now entering its fifteenth century.

A half-century since the end of colonialism, the question remains: Can Islam now help establish a genuinely liberal democracy in the Middle East?

This is exactly what Islam *must* do, Reza Aslan believes. And he sees evidence that this has already been happening in parts of the Muslim world. But this process must be based on Islamic tradition and arise out of Islamic culture. This is the lesson we should learn from the failure of Western involvement in the Middle East: If democracy is to be viable and enduring, it can never be imported. It must be nurtured from within.

* * *

The human search for meaning takes many forms. For millennia questions of meaning have been framed in the language of religion, a language of myth and metaphor, of ritual and daily devotion. In the modern age a new language has developed, that offers new perspectives on the purpose of our lives, and our place in the universe. The language of science has helped us conceive of religious pluralism and tolerance, free speech, the separation of church and state, and democracy.

And yet secular society is not perfect. Existential questions of human meaning continue to haunt us, especially in times of personal crisis, sorrow and loss. Without some kind of faith we are too easily consumed by our fears. Without a clear vision of a greater good - whether we call it God, or some other name - we too easily sink into despair. A world of peace and justice remains an ideal we are struggling to attain.

Finding a faith that can embrace both the loftiest flights of science as well as the deepest experiences of the soul - this is a modern dilemma with which every religion of this day, and every individual must grapple. No one can do this work for us. And we can't do this work for anyone else.

As Rebecca Baggett writes, we must each find our own God, whether fundamentalist family members, or those who live in an artists colony - each in their separate cells, struggling to surrender self, and let their blankness fill with words, light, music. Each moving toward some private "Alleluia," a revelation, an affirmation - *yes*.

May we do our part to create a world shaped by faith rather than fear.
Mindful of the hard lessons the past seeks to teach us,
May we do our part to bind what is broken
And build a world in which all people may find freedom, prosperity and peace.

Amen.