

Plenary Session

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Religious Fundamentalism and Political Extremism

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I begin this paper by reflecting on some of the more popular political leaders in many countries around the world. Their names surface constantly before us in news briefings, international events and meetings.

Common factors link these political leaders: they are male (one commentator has even called them ‘Alpha males’¹), powerful and wealthy. While each is different given their diverse political environments, their style of leadership—and this, of course, is my idiosyncratic analysis— each dismisses dissent, removes opposition, and invents ‘truths’—their interpretation of reality—believed to be self-evident. (One of them has even coined the phrase ‘fake news’ in disputing interpretations of reality that do not cohere with his agenda.) They easily identify conspiracy, seek to control media and other means of social communication that contradicts their predominant political agenda.

The climate that results is two-fold.

One is of rapturous applause by their followers and political allies. The political climate that results leads to a culture that deifies the leaders who are against liberal-progressive views and can do no wrong. A simple, monochromatic interpretation of the world dominates. The single most important defining value that shapes political success and popularity is nationalism and national loyalty.² Economic success, protected by militarism, legitimizes a national identity and becomes the litmus test of global importance. An exaggerated nationalistic ideology when promoted by the kind of political leadership described above further emboldens those who hold fundamentalist and extremist views. Those who have such a mindset reject pluralism and affirm a political system that encourages egoistical pursuits antithetical to the common good.³

Another climate or spirit emerges at the same time, and one about which I am deeply concerned. It is one of suspicion, fear, antagonism and indifference to others. These ‘others’ include asylum seekers, and, depending on the political context, religious adherents of ‘other’ faith traditions, and the poor—though in the first blush of the appeal which such leaders have to a popular nationalism or populism,

¹ Journalist Shekhar Gupta in a June 2017 address at a conference in India (<https://www.ibtimes.co.in/alpha-males-modi-putin-trump-erdogan-xi-jinping-dominate-our-world-shekhar-gupta-7317000>)

² Anthony D. Smith defines nationalism as ‘[a]n ideological movement for attaining or maintaining autonomy, unity and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential “nation”’, in *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 9.

³ On this and an exploration of the nature and various forms of extremism, see Uwe Backes, ‘Meaning and Forms of Political Extremism in Past and Present,’ *Central European Political Studies Review* 9: 4 (2007): 242-62, esp. p. 247.

these political leaders would have wooed the poorer members of their constituencies who eventually become their victims.

In this paper I seek to explore fundamentalism and political extremism and their implications for inter-religious, Jewish-Christian conversations. I want to do two things. First, I offer my definition of political extremism and fundamentalism and explicate their epistemological and economic foundations. I suggest that these social expressions are a response to western neo-liberalism. I shall also suggest in the second half of my reflections that fundamentalism is not a phenomenon of a particular group. It is a human phenomenon. All of us are fundamentalists 'of sorts'. Second, I want to propose some responses to political and extremism and fundamentalism that might be helpful in the light of our inter-faith encounters that draw on our respective theological traditions. These centre on humility, openness and generosity.

1. Political Extremism and Fundamentalism

I understand 'political extremism' as the exaggerated expression of an ideology considered by its adherents as unquestionable, and, for some who take a quasi-theological position on secular matters, of semi-divine status.

Extremism...aims at '*monism*' and '*monocracy*' in the sense of the enforcement of a bundled claim to power which – if at all possible – eliminates any competition, does not tolerate variety and opposition, seeks to render it harmless at the very least, stops political change, obstructs and suppresses the autonomous commitment of groups and individuals, at least when this stands in the way of the ambitions of the rulers.⁴

This ideology has social consequences. Extremist views, as we know only too well, can lead to violence and death as the ideologue seeks to impose their point of view upon others they consider heretical, corrupting or immoral. In the many examples of the violent, death-dealing acts that we are so aware of and, for some of us, painfully experienced by those close to us, we distinguish between acts perpetrated by committed ideological advocates and those who are criminals enacting social protest and seeking to inflict pain under the banner of an ideology, often religious.

For a person who holds extremist views, that can lead to nefarious and fatal actions, the ability to entertain difference and engage in dialogue is limited, if not absent. For such a person, their epistemological belief system rests upon a simple, Manichaeic, black and white, right or wrong interpretation of reality. Partial truth claims do not exist. There is only one, non-negotiable truth, which the adherent possesses. Simplicity trumps complexity, 'common sense' trumps intellect, untrammelled zeal trumps reason and wisdom. I will argue that Fundamentalism, a particular interpretation of reality and truth claims, especially religious truth, buttresses the ideologue's epistemological frame of reference.

Fundamentalism emerged from a nineteenth century North American evangelical Protestant context which affirmed the literal interpretation of the Bible as the foundation of Christian faith and the unchangeable word of God.⁵ It emerged in reaction to liberal-critical approaches to biblical interpretation which recognised the historical-cultural conditioning of biblical texts. Those who hold this

⁴ Backes, 'Meaning and Forms,' 249.

⁵ Although, as pointed out to me by a colleague of Indian descent, 'Such fundamentalism goes back much further, probably about 5,000 BC in Hinduism and the evolution of the caste system as a way of the religious elite to control the common person'.

fundamentalist perspective are, usually, Christocentric (in the sense that without Jesus there is only hell⁶), against feminism, gay relationships, are economically conservative and politically obsessed with order, discipline and security.⁷

A Christian context is the origin of this classical notion of fundamentalism. However, the term 'fundamentalism' has been applied beyond Christians to adherents of other religious and institutional systems. In its usual application, fundamentalism identifies those who hold absolutist views that represent or define for them irrefutable truth. It is not difficult to see how such an epistemological position leads to violent acts committed under the banner of religion or nation. The South American Catholic theologian, Leonardo Boff suggests,

One who sees himself or herself as the holder of an absolute truth cannot tolerate another kind of truth, and this is destined to intolerance. And intolerance causes contempt for the other, and contempt engenders aggression, and aggression brings wars to combat and exterminate those who have erred. Religious conflicts emerge everywhere, with an incalculable number of victims.⁸

We know in more recent decades of how non-critical, extremist attitudes when melded with religious doctrines take on a style of violence that is considered divinely endorsed. We are in, and not for the first time in history, an *epistemological* and *social* crisis. We desire cultural meaning and social stability at a time when many of the world's leaders seem to back away from sane, measured political engagement and social encounter. We desire social and political systems that will protect, enhance human dignity and bring justice, especially to those who are impoverished or victims of tragedy.⁹ One Catholic theologian, Anthony Carroll, identifies the impoverishment that people feel at times of vulnerability and the inadequacy of solutions proposed to deal with these situations:

The secular horizon of modern societies is often poorly equipped to deal with the tragic aspects of human life such as illness, suffering, and death. Short of resources of existential meaning, purely secular programs in advanced modernity often turn to chemical [or economic] solutions to extinguish the pain and existential angst that face us at such time. These solutions, whilst having an important contribution to make, do not provide adequate support in these moments of human life.¹⁰

⁶ The recent response by a popular Australian rugby player to a question about God's attitude to gays demonstrated the Jesus-Hell dichotomy that operates with some religious fundamentalists. Israel Folau was asked, 'What was gods [sic] plan for gay people?' His response was 'HELL...unless they repent of their sins and turn to God' (<https://www.rttom.com/sport/423183-israel-folau-gays-go-to-hell/>).

⁷ Leonardo Boff, *Fundamentalism, Terrorism and the Future of Humanity* (London: SPCK, 2006), 6.

⁸ Boff, *Fundamentalism*, 15.

⁹ I want to add a comment here offered by my colleague, Dr Ron Hoenig: 'There is also, of course, a secular economic issue here – that wages are more or less frozen at a time when capital is rampant. As well as that, people who belong to dominant cultures – even if they are not part of the elites – are seeing their "cultural aristocracy" threatened. So white working class men are, in many parts of the world being challenged by women, by people of colour, by ethnic, religious, sexual "minorities" for the unquestioned cultural power they possessed – even if they belonged to the more oppressed working classes. The battle for cultural hegemony is being won by cosmopolitan knowledge elites and whether or not the elites themselves are diverse, there is no doubt that there is more of a battle going on between the former culturally secure and the forces of cultural, secular, ethnic, etc. diversity.'

¹⁰ Anthony Carroll, 'A Catholic Program for Advanced Modernity,' in Staf Hellemans and Josef Wissink (eds), *Towards a New Catholic Church in Advanced Modernity: Transformations, Visions, Tensions* (Reihe: Tilburg Theological Studies/Tilburger Theologische Studien, 2012), 64, as quoted by Richard S. Gaillardetz, *An Unfinished Council: Vatican II, Pope Francis and the Renewal of Catholicism* (Collegeville, Minn: The Liturgical Press, 2015), 142.

Carroll recognises that generally we struggle to respond adequately and comprehensively to people's pain, struggles and fears. We know the inadequacy of pharmaceutical solutions to people's suffering and deep need. We also know that no amount of available funding and welfare, though helpful, addresses the real cause of human impoverishment and social isolation. The human malaise is deeper than what seems on the surface. Within this setting of impoverished and destabilised societies, it is easy to see how religion can be promoted as the panacea. Further, people in these situations can also feel a sense of social exclusion and meaninglessness brought on by unanticipated change from modernity that they identify with globalisation and westernization. In this situation, religion, interpreted and promoted from a basic or fundamentalist perspective, offers identity, protection and security. It can provide people with an interpretative key for understanding their situation and responding to it. This in turn can lead to opposition, even extreme and violent opposition that allows them to reassert their identity and address their experience of social exclusion.

Western Neo-Liberalism

A contributing factor to the perceived global rise in religious fundamentalism and violent extremism (terrorism) is the neo-liberal western obsession with ownership and consumption.¹¹ The preoccupation with wealth and property reduces the world into haves and have-nots, pits cultures against one another and produces an environment of unrest and social disease. For peoples victimised by a global wealth imbalance and conscious of a penchant for greed, sometimes expressed by leaders as they seek to address a 'trade imbalance', violence, formed within religious contexts, become the means perceived by some to redress this social and economic imbalance. Terrorism thus becomes a form of defence of the weak against the powerful and economic elite. We have seen the results of this more recently, not only in the increased acts of terrorism in places and cities we once thought 'safe', but by the forced displacement of people from Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Balkans. These have sought asylum in Europe. According to the 2014 report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), almost 60 million people had been displaced. We are now aware of the most significant displacement of human beings on this planet since WWII.¹² We know well the response to this crisis, when, in one day, 43000 people, half of them children, sought refuge in Europe and tent cities sprang up at borders. One social commentator even interprets the UK decision to leave the European Union as a response to this refugee crisis and the social anger that came from this.

Anger stirred up a winning turnout in the depressed, down-at-heel cities of England...Anger at immigration, globalisation, social liberalism and even feminism, polling shows, translated into a vote to reject the EU. As if victory were a licence to spread hatred, anger has since lashed Britain's streets with an outburst of racist abuse.¹³

If this observation is even partly correct, then the UK response to leave the EU emerged from a Western xenophobic reaction to neo-liberal 'values' that were perceived as being undermined by these people from 'other' countries. The reaction emerged out of poorer sectors of the UK population.

¹¹ It needs to be said that, unfortunately, such obsession is not an exclusive western phenomenon.

¹² For a further analysis of the neo-liberal penchant for property and possessions and its critique from a Christian-biblical-theological perspective, see Paul Babie and Michael Trainor, *Neo-liberalism and the Biblical Voice: Owning and Consuming* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018).

¹³ 'The politics of anger', *The Economist*, 2 July 2016 <<http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21701478-triumph-brexit-campaign-warning-liberal-international-order-politics?cid1=cust/ednew/n/bl/n/20160630n/owned/n/n/nwl/n/n/n/>>.

2. A Christian-Jewish Response

Anger, symbolised in the Brexit vote, is one tangible reaction to social change accompanied by a rise in political fundamentalism leading to expressions of extremism evidenced in the spread of hatred and racial abuse in the UK. This scenario is not unfamiliar to us and I have sought to describe it more generally, though I recognise that my analysis needs further rigour and expansion.

How might we, as religious interlocutors involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue, draw on our respective traditions to respond to or create an environment that could change the need for the kinds of issues that leads people to hold fundamentalist opinions and act out their extremist views? I would like to suggest that we have a richness within, though not exclusive to, our Jewish and Christian traditions to cultivate three virtues I consider 'fundamental' (if I might use this term!): humility, openness that seeks dialogue for peace, and generosity.

a. Humility

All of us are fundamentalists. This recognition, if we acknowledge it, leads us to a spirit of humility. At the heart of our belief in a living God lives a spirit of fundamentalism as we embrace what we believe are the core or fundamental elements of our faith traditions. These define our lives and religious practice. These beliefs are 'radical'. They reflect what is at the *root* (Lat. *radix*) of our lives, and offer existential meaning in a world that we experience as difficult, awkward, conflicted and confused. Leonardo Boff writes,

The term fundamentalism has become a word used to accuse the other. 'Fundamentalist' is always the other. When one refers to oneself, be it referring to one's religious, political or economic views, one always prefers to use the term 'radical'. By using the term radical, we mean that we seek the roots of the problem in order to understand it, and after understanding the roots of the problem, we seek to undermine them, which is a very positive thing to do.¹⁴

I think Boff offers us a helpful insight. In the us-them dichotomous, accusatory manner in which we speak of the 'fundamentalist' we need the humility to see that at our core we are also fundamentalists. We prefer, though, to see ourselves as *radical* in our desire to distinguish ourselves from the 'other'. But this humble recognition opens a space in us that allows for a communion of being and compassion with those who think and act in a manner with which we do not agree. Cultivating the virtue of humility may not lead to social change or alter the view of those who hold fundamentalist attitudes. It probably will not stop the occurrence of violent acts. It will offer us, though, with a resource that links us to a God who invites us to understand rather than condemn, to recognise that we are capable of 'terrorist dementia', violence against others and environmental devastation.

b. Openness and Dialogue for Peace

This recognition of what I hold as sacred (my 'radical' stance) and what another seeks to defend (as a 'fundamentalist') contains within it the seed for critical analysis of the various expressions of fundamentalism and its link to extremism. Boff's analysis above that understanding the roots of what is important and problematic can lead to 'undermining' (Boff's expression) the causes. By 'undermining' I think Boff means to 'address' the issues. It alerts us to the value of retaining a spirit of humble openness to the situations we encounter, deep reflection on their causes and the issues related to them, and seek ways of dialogue, if possible, with those who disturb us. This means engaging in unpopular, even

¹⁴ Boff, *Fundamentalism*, x.

controversial conversations with interlocutors with those whose views or opinions I disagree. Such an approach moves us from postures of power and aggression toward laying the foundation for non-aggressive peace-making and peace building. To return to Boff again,

Along with our aggressive constitution we also have a capacity for affection, for compassion, solidarity, and love. It is now urgent for us to draw out these forces from inside us so that we can direct history towards a more benevolent path. Any kind of delay in doing this is foolish...We have at our disposal resources to re-work violence through the social development of contention of violence and the use of rationality.¹⁵

Gleaning the wisdom of our respective theological traditions is an imperative at a time that is for may a period of social unrest and spiritual chaos. Those of us involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue are, in some respects, in a privileged position. We have the wisdom of our traditions that can bring forward values and virtues that can enhance the social contexts in which we live. As we engage with political and civic bodies, we can offer an alternative voice that raises up compassion for the poor and the importance of social inclusion of those who are disenfranchised by virtue of their social status, religious background or cultural origins.

c. Generosity

We know that the ICCJ is not an agency for political change, but an umbrella body for those who live and act in the local, regional level. However theological convictions and religious actions are not apolitical realities. We believe they influence the world in which we live. In this viewpoint one of the important religious truths common to our religious traditions concerns the place of wealth and the role of our possessions. A counter-balance and moderating disposition in a Western world obsessed with possessions and ownership, which I have suggested is one of the causes for fundamentalism and extremism, can come from mining the theological traditions about wealth. From a Christian point of view shaped by the gospels, Jesus calls his followers to dispossess them of their possessions. This freedom from material possessiveness and spirit of generosity allows his followers to focus on the neediest and respond in ways that unites them with those who experience social ostracism. A similar wisdom emerges from the Tanakh's prophetic tradition. This biblical conviction of the centrality of generosity offers a counterbalancing voice in a world preoccupied by wealth accumulation and inspired by the tactics of greed. Living with a generous spirit creates an environment that addresses one of the serious causes of global fundamentalism and religious extremism.

Conclusion

In this brief paper, I have sought to offer an insight into fundamentalism and political extremism. I have suggested that the popular world political leaders foster a social environment of exclusion, simplicity, and nationalism that dismisses any form of opposition and closes off any signs of critique, especially from traditional media and social communication sources. The political environment that results offers a potential seed-bed for fundamentalism, critical of integrative reflection and appreciative of simple binary analysis. I have suggested that there is a link between fundamentalism and political extremism, especially in those situations where such analysis goes uncontested. This link is bolstered in social contexts of upheaval, poverty and political chaos. The kinds of leaders that I have been thinking of are perhaps not religious fundamentalists themselves, but draw on fundamentalist expressions of nationalist ideologies to bolster their political and economic agenda. Finally, I have suggested that that

¹⁵ Boff, *Fundamentalism*, 63.

wisdom of our inter-religious, Jewish-Christian traditions, enhanced through respectful dialogue and mutual support, can assist towards creating a social environment and political atmosphere that is humble, open to dialogue for peace, and critical of a political economic agenda obsessed with material gain, greed and wealth.