

Fundamentalism: An Enemy Of the Common Good

By FR. GERALD A. ARBUCKLE, SM, PhD

Pope Francis said, “Fundamentalism is a sickness that is in all religions ... Religious fundamentalism is not religious, because it lacks God. It is idolatry, like idolatry of money ... We Catholics have some — and not some, many — who believe in the absolute truth and go ahead dirtying the other with calumny, with disinformation, and doing evil.”¹

We are seeing something close to a global epidemic of fundamentalism. Pope Francis is right: “Fundamentalism is a sickness that is in all religions.” And it strikes at the heart of the common good, because it prevents people from growing as individuals and contributing to the welfare of others.²

Fundamentalism is “a religion of rage.”³ Fundamentalists are people who are outraged when they see the world around them disregarding their revered religious values. They respond in dangerously simplistic but militant ways to

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fears that they will lose their identity. They use words, or recourse to the ballot box, or, in extreme instances, bullets and bombs. Those who dare to question them are intolerantly scapegoated as enemies of the truth.

REACTING TO CULTURAL CHAOS

Fundamentalist movements are most active and culturally apparent whenever there are periods in which radical political, social or economic changes cause cultural trauma in a nation as a whole or in smaller institutions or communities.⁴ These

changes threaten to devastate treasured personal and cultural identities and respected moral values. Feelings of bewilderment and frustration result. People then search for quick explanations of what is happening and ways out of their overwhelming confusion. The atmosphere is ready for the unsophisticated solutions offered by fundamentalist populist and often demagogic leaders.

For most people, fundamentalism in the modern world has become synonymous with a radical form of Islam. Islamic fundamentalism has replaced communism as the specter plaguing Western minds. It is a menace that looms ever larger following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington D.C.⁵ and the more recent terrorist assaults in London, Paris, Brussels, Orlando, Istanbul, Baghdad, Dhaka, Nice and Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray and the ostensible inability

of the Western nations to destroy the clandestine and brutal al-Qaeda network and the Islamic State (ISIS). In the Middle East, Islamic extremists are killing fellow Muslims and persecuting, even murdering, Christians and other minorities.

The West, however, has yet to understand that a military response may give temporary answers to terrorism, but, in the long term, it is most likely to increase religious rage and extremism. We first need to understand the multifaceted political, economic and social causes of Islamic fundamentalism.



Jon Lezinsky

ON THE COMMON GOOD

We, in the ministry of Catholic health care in Canada, implicitly affirm the common good in questioning how our country can establish legal access to voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide, while at the same time entertain calls to establish a national strategy for suicide prevention. But beyond wagging a finger in disappointment and moral outrage at this absurdity, we continue working tirelessly to ensure Canadians receive quality mental health services or palliative and hospice care, and that the voice of the silent majority is not overshadowed by the few. There is nothing common or vanilla about this understanding of the common good. Rather, this is the risky social teaching that calls Catholic health care to step up, and stand out, helping shape the future of our country as a truly just society.

Gordon Self, Covenant Health Canada

Because of the violent nature of their actions, Islamic fundamentalist movements have received an undue amount of media attention in recent times. However, fundamentalism in multiple different expressions is very much present in our Western societies, though most often less visibly and physically violent. There are fundamentalist economic, political, nationalistic, religious movements aplenty in the West. Right-wing, populist, anti-immigrant movements are on the rise in Europe, the United States, Australia and elsewhere, and the Western world has significantly contributed to the tragic development of Islamic fundamentalism.⁶

GENERAL QUALITIES

Among the many definitions of fundamentalism, the following is particularly useful here: Fundamentalism is an “aggressive and marginalized religious movement which, in reaction to the perceived threat of modernity, seeks to return its home religion and nation to traditional orthodox principles, values and texts through the co-option

of the central executive and legislative power of both the religion itself and the modern national state.”⁷

Though they may differ in the degree of emphasis they give, fundamentalist movements share these qualities:

Religion-inspired: Religion has resurfaced as a global force in the rise of fundamentalist movements. But our understanding of religion must be broadened. Religion is whatever offers people an all-embracing means of interpreting the world. Understood in this sense, people can change any belief into a religion. For example, people can become so attached to markets unrestrained by governments, or to nationalism, that they turn them into religions.

Reactive to crises: Fundamentalists achieve power in times of actual or perceived cultural or national crises. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the identity of the American nation was under severe threat from communism in the



Soviet Union and elsewhere. This provided an environment for the rise of the charismatic and demagogic anticommunist Republican senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy (1908-1957).

Simplistic solutions: Fundamentalists' interpretation of the world's problems and their solutions admit no ambiguity. For example, Donald Trump, when seeking the 2016 presidential nomination, repeatedly gave simplistic solutions to complex political and economic problems facing the United States. His responses were meant to reassure his audiences that he could quickly resolve their anxieties.

Aggressive and intolerant of dissent: Not all fundamentalist movements are violent, but because they are intolerant of dissent, they have the potential to be violent. Terrorism is the worst form of violence; terrorists feel the need to express their violence through killing to "prove" authentic commitment to the values they stand for.⁸

Political aims: To achieve their aims, fundamentalists seek to dominate the central executive and legislative power, either through democratic processes — for example, the Tea Party that around 2009 emerged in the United States, or by recourse to extreme violence, for example the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran.⁹

Skilled use of media: Ironically, fundamentalists often combine a commitment to a selectively imagined utopian past with a ready ability to use modern technology to propagate their beliefs. Following the March 22, 2016, bombing in Brussels, ISIS effectively seized control of the world's media to circulate their admission of responsibility.¹⁰

Text selective: Fundamentalists select particular statements from the sacred texts of their religion or of their tradition, such as the U.S. Constitution, to legitimate their actions and ignore other important points.¹¹

Conspiracy-oriented: Not uncommonly, fundamentalists develop paranoid fantasies about the dangers their movements face. They see enemies where there are none. Timothy McVeigh, convicted of the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah

Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, believed that the U.S. government was conspiring to undermine people's liberty.

Populist charismatic leadership: Commonly, fundamentalist movements are led by populist, frequently anti-gay,¹² male charismatic or authoritarian leaders who show bullying qualities, such as Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989). Followers see in their leaders all the qualities they yearn for.¹³

FUNDAMENTALISM: PASTORAL RESPONSES

The disturbing fact is that every individual and culture is capable of fundamentalist attitudes and actions. Christ once used an incident to help his disciples understand how they themselves had unconsciously become trapped in fundamentalist thinking. The disciple John said to Jesus: "Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us" (Mark 9:38). John, like a good fundamentalist, thought that only the disciples could have such noble power, but Jesus is quick to respond: "Do not prevent him. There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name

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who can at the same time speak ill of me. For whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9: 39-40).

Here is a series of pastoral axioms that will help readers avoid fundamentalist attitudes and movements:

Axiom 1: Self-knowledge: We are all in danger of becoming fundamentalists.

Imprisoned in their prejudices, fundamentalists are absolutely certain they are right. We need to be alerted to the danger that our own prejudices, if left unchecked, can solidify into fundamentalist behavior. The poem "We and They," by English journalist and author Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), is correct: Through absorbing, so often unconsciously, the prejudices in our own culture about other people and things, we learn

that “All nice people, like Us, are We/And everyone else is They.”

Axiom 2: Be self-critical by fostering laughter of the heart.

Fundamentalists cannot live with ambiguities because they demand impossible certitudes. There is little humor in their lives; they take themselves far too seriously. This is why the gift of authentic humor is necessary. People with an authentic gift of humor and self-mockery have a healthy skepticism; they are wary of simplistic answers to today’s challenges.¹⁴

Axiom 3: Be alert: Receive without prejudice migrants and parishioners with cultures different from our own, as Christ would wish.

Many immigrants to Western countries today, particularly Hispanic and Muslim peoples, encounter xenophobia and discrimination, sometimes made worse by racist politicians and populist speakers.¹⁵ The Pew Research Center, based in Washington, D.C., disturbingly reported in late 2015 “that 41 percent of all Americans see immigrants as a ‘burden’ on our society, but 55 percent of white (i.e., non-Hispanic) Catholics do. More than a third of white Catholics do not think undocumented immigrants should be permitted to stay, even when the strict conditions included in immigration reform proposals are met.”¹⁶

Pope Francis exhorts us: “Migrants present a particular challenge for me, since I am the pastor of a Church without frontiers ... For this reason, I exhort all countries to a generous openness which, rather than fearing the loss of local identity, will prove capable of creating new forms of cultural synthesis. How beautiful are those cities which overcome paralyzing mistrust, integrate those who are different and make this very integration a new factor of development!”¹⁷

Axiom 4: Cultivate the difficult art of dialogue as an antidote to fundamentalism.

Dialogue is that “address and response between persons in which there is a flow of meaning between them in spite of all the obstacles that normally would block the relationship.”¹⁸ Dialogue is authentic if three conditions are met: People feel they understand the position of others; they also feel that others understand their points of view; and there is a readiness on the part of all to accept what is decided because it was reached openly and fairly.

The capacity to listen places people in contact with the wider dimensions of the world in which they live. Authentic listening is able to break through the rigid borders that imprison fundamentalist thinking; this allows people to engage with the world beyond. In most attempted dialogues, “we don’t listen; we just reload.”¹⁹

Axiom 5: Recall the examples of Jesus Christ and St. Paul; they challenged fundamentalism in word and action.

Jesus Christ, sensitively aware of prejudice and discrimination among fundamentalists of his time, deliberately challenges these crippling realities in various ways.²⁰ While strongly disagreeing theologically with the fundamentalist scribes and Pharisees, Jesus nonetheless remains open to them and engages in dialogue with them. We even see him dining with a Pharisee, overlooking at first the fact that his host had given him no special welcome. Jesus uses the occasion to point out gently what true conversion means; he reflects on the deep repentance and love of the woman who washed his feet with her tears and then “wiped them with her hair” (Luke 7:38).

St. Paul fought hard at the Council of Jerusalem to stop the early church communities from becoming fundamentalist groups. Jewish Christians were demanding that non-Jews adopt Jewish customs as a condition to being received into the faith. St. Paul responded to the challenge with courage, respect and dialogue. If he had not succeeded, the church would have become a sect, inward looking and lifeless. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). “But now that faith has come ... through faith you are all children of God” (Galatians 3:25-26).²¹

Axiom 6: Following Christ’s example, approach other cultures and also fundamentalists with patience, respect and a willingness to listen and engage in dialogue.

Prejudice in all its forms is potentially highly emotional, because people’s identity or security can be so dependent on maintaining their prejudices. Therefore, it is recommended not to confront large groups of people directly with what you know, or feel to be, *their* prejudices. There may well be emotional and hostile reactions, thus further reinforcing their prejudices.

Work instead in small groups, where people



feel less threatened and more open to listening and dialogue. The advice Pope Francis offers is highly relevant in relating to any religion and culture, fundamentalist or not. He writes: “In order to sustain dialogue with Islam, suitable training is essential for all involved, not only so that they can be solidly and joyfully grounded in their own identity, but so that they also can acknowledge the values of others, appreciate the concerns underlying their demands and shed light on shared beliefs.”²²

Axiom 7: Remember, violence in all its forms — for example, terrorism and bullying — is contrary to the Gospel.²³

The universal guideline in relating to others is: “Do to others whatever you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12). Love must be the motivating force: “But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you ... For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? (Matthew 5:44, 46). Love for one’s persecutors, not the “eye for an eye” directive of some terrorists, is to be the principle of action: “You have heard that it was said: ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil” (Matthew 5:38).

Axiom 8: Beware of moral panics fueled by the media.

“Moral panics” refers to the way parts of the mass media exaggerate and overreport an action or event by unpopular individuals and subgroups, including actual or potential fundamentalist subcultures, which then provides the foundation for a public and official backlash against the individuals or groups.²⁴

Axiom 9: Critically assess the biases against Islam projected by politicians and the mass media.

The fact is that Muslim terrorists represent only a tiny fraction of 1 percent of the world’s 1.6 billion Muslim people.

Axiom 10: Be mindful of the complex causes of Islamic terrorism.

Two theories commonly given for the radicalization of young Muslims provide governments with foundations for policies in their “war on terror.” The first theory is that terrorism is caused by the failure of Islamic cultures to adapt to the realities of modernity and the demands of globalization.

ON THE COMMON GOOD

When I think of the common good, I envision boats in a harbor all afloat. Because we are all made in the Imago Dei, we have the duty and responsibility to ensure all people are provided for to reach their highest potential. Oftentimes, I believe that people confuse the common good with the ideology that we should only provide the greatest good for the greatest number. This is contrary to the teaching of the common good, as “haves” and “have-nots” are created. As people of faith and leaders in Catholic health care, we must continually advocate and promote the common good as well as provide for the most poor and vulnerable among us.

Joshua Allee, Providence St. Joseph Health

The second theory focuses not on Islamic cultures, but on the fact that dangerous people such as Osama bin Laden have distorted the tenets of Islam. Poverty of Muslim migrants in Western countries is another important factor, as is the prejudice of Islamophobia that creates a dangerous mix, especially for young Muslims.²⁵

Axiom 11: Understand that the vast majority of Muslims in the West are model citizens, often in the face of racism.

Millions of Muslims live in the West — close to 2 million in Britain, 4 million in Germany, 5 million in France. And Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States. The great majority of Muslims live peacefully beside their neighbors and do not threaten democratic values. Governments must be proactive in assisting immigrants to integrate, but do so in ways that respect, as far as possible, the immigrants' cultures.²⁶

Axiom 12: Remember: A simple greeting to a stranger can change hearts.

For example, it is the personal views and behavior of non-Muslim citizens, in countless small, everyday interactions, that will decide whether or not their Muslim fellow citizens begin to feel at home in the United States, Europe or elsewhere. Of course individual preferences of individual Muslims and the leadership they receive from their spiritual and political leaders is equally important.

The story of Bartimaeus, a blind man who “sat by the roadside begging” (Mark 10:46-52), is a wonderful example of the power of a simple greeting. The description connotes that, because of his blindness and economic condition, Bartimaeus has become a social outcast. Hearing Jesus approaching, Bartimaeus cries out, “Jesus, son of David, have pity on me,” but many in the crowd rebuke the blind beggar. The crowd has followed Jesus and listened to his words on compassion and justice, but they remain blinded by their prejudice against people like Bartimaeus.

Jesus will have none of this fundamentalist nonsense. He calls Bartimaeus to his side. Bartimaeus detaches himself from his past identity as a beggar by throwing off his cloak and running to Jesus, an act that signifies the risk Bartimaeus

took. The cloak is his only symbol of official identity; it is the equivalent of a license to beg. Without it, he is bereft of any identity that could give him some minimum of protection: “He threw aside his cloak, sprang up and came to Jesus.”

Jesus, the ritual leader, asks what Bartimaeus needs: “Master, I want to see.” Jesus heals him. “Immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way.” The words “on the way,” in contrast to the opening verse where Bartimaeus “sat by the roadside,” symbolically means that he joins the community that had rejected him. His social exclusion has ceased. All because someone listened and greeted him.

CONCLUSION

Fundamentalist movements are simplistic reactions to cultural chaos. Enraged fundamentalists try to escape the turmoil by nostalgically seeking to return to an unreal utopian past. Because they shun the real world and intolerantly condemn those who refuse to follow them, they become humanly stunted as persons. For this reason they can no longer contribute to the welfare of others, that is, the common good. Sadly, the institutions they work for lose touch with the realities of a changing world.

Health care leaders, trustees and boards must be aware of how they unwittingly can develop fundamentalist attitudes. If they refuse to dialogue among themselves and with the changing

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world around them, they risk isolating and stunting their organizations.

St. Paul was alive to the dangers of fundamentalist thinking in his day: “If you go on biting and devouring one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another” (Galatians 5:15). Yet his remedy to avoid fundamentalist thinking is inspirationally uplifting: “In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,



generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5: 22-23).

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NOTES

1. Pope Francis, comments to journalists on plane returning from Africa (Nov. 30, 2015). www.lifesite-news.com/news/pope-francis-attacks-fundamentalist-catholics-dismisses-condom-ban-as-unimp (accessed 9/29/2016).
2. John XXIII writes that the common good “embraces the sum total of those conditions of social living, whereby people are enabled more fully and more readily to achieve their own perfection.” *Mater et Magistra* (1961), paragraph 65.
3. Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (London: Harper-Collins, 2001), 216.
4. See Nancy T. Ammerman, “North American Protestant Fundamentalism,” eds. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 56.
5. See Stuart Sim, *Fundamentalist World: The New Dark Age of Dogma* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2004), 3-12.
6. See David C. Rapoport, “Comparing Militant Fundamentalist Movements,” eds. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, *Fundamentalisms and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 445-46.
7. Patrick Arnold, “The Rise of Catholic Fundamentalism,” *America* (April 11, 1987), 298.
8. See Stuart W. Twemlow, Frank C. Sacco and George Hough, “A Socio-Psychoanalytic Perspective on Group Dynamics, Cults and Terrorism,” *Socio-Analysis* 5, (2003), 57-78.
9. See Noam Chomsky, *Who Rules the World?* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016), 40-41, 200.
10. See Charlie Winter, “ISIS is Using the Media Against Itself,” www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/isis-propaganda-brussels/47 (accessed 3/26/2016).
11. See Bhikhu Parekh, *A New Politics of Identity: Political Principles for an Interdependent World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 149.
12. See Marty and Appleby, “Conclusion,” *Fundamentalisms Observed*, 830. Mark Juergensmeyer notes that “Virtually all radical religious movements of the final decades of the Twentieth century have had a homophobic twist.” *The Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 202. The pattern is the same in contemporary Islamic fundamentalist movements.
13. See Archie Brown, *The Myth of the Strong Leader: Political Leadership in the Modern Age* (London: Bodley Head, 2014), 6-7.
14. See Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Laughing with God: Humor, Culture, and Transformation* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2008), 19-90.
15. In the days following the successful referendum to exit the European Union, the reports of hate crime increased by 57 percent in Britain, compared with the same period four weeks earlier. Polish and other minorities were targeted. Cardinal Vincent Nichols expressed concern: “This upsurge of racism, of hatred towards others is something we must not tolerate.” www.thetablet.co.uk/news/5770/0/cardinal-nichols-condemns-upsurge-in-racisist-attacks-post-brexite (accessed 7/11/2016).
16. Michael Lipka and Jessica Martinez, “Catholics, Especially Hispanics, Echo Pope’s Call to Embrace Immigrants,” *Pew Research Center FactTank: News in the Numbers*, Sept. 25, 2015. www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/25/catholics-especially-hispanics-echo-popes-call-to-embrace-immigrants/.
17. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, paragraphs 210 and 253.
18. Reuel L. Howe, *The Miracle of Dialogue* (New York: Seabury Press, 1963), 37.
19. William Isaacs, *Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 87.
20. See Arbuckle, *Earthing the Gospel*, 158-59.
21. See Arbuckle, *Laughing with God*, 143.
22. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, paragraph 253.
23. See Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Violence, Society, and the Church: A Cultural Approach* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2004), 230-34.
24. See Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1972), 22-23.
25. See Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (London: Verso, 2014), 10.
26. See Arbuckle, *Earthing the Gospel*, 167-85.

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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