

Fundamentalisms

A homily by Geoffrey Gomery

June 15, 2014

© 2014 Unitarian Church of Vancouver

Late last month, Bank of England Governor Mark Carney blamed the financial crisis of 2008 on ‘light-touch’ regulation and market radicalism. He said:¹

Just as any revolution eats its children, unchecked market fundamentalism can devour the social capital essential for the long-term dynamism of capitalism itself. To counteract this tendency, individuals and their firms must have a sense of their responsibilities for the broader system.

...

All ideologies are prone to extremes. Capitalism loses its sense of moderation when the belief in the power of the market enters the realm of faith. In the decades prior to the crisis such radicalism came to dominate economic ideas and became a pattern of social behaviour.

My *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* defines ‘fundamentalism’ somewhat more narrowly:²

1. strict maintenance of traditional Protestant beliefs such as the inerrancy of Scripture and literal acceptance of the creeds as fundamentals of Christianity.
2. strict maintenance of ancient or fundamental doctrines of any religion, esp. Islam.

The first recorded use of the word in the *Canadian Oxford’s* older cousin, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is from a news story in the *Daily Mail* on 24 May 1923, referring to a religious campaign of William Jennings Bryan supporting Biblical literalism.

Mr Bryan is a fascinating figure. One of the great orators of his day, he stood for and

¹ *The Guardian*, 28 May 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2014/may/27/capitalism-critique-bank-of-england-carney>

²

manifested an American religious movement with an important political dimension – he was three times the Democratic candidate for president – and is best known now for his role as the prosecutor in the Scopes Monkey Trial. That trial involved the prosecution of a school teacher in Tennessee for teaching the theory of evolution, contrary to state legislation. His opponent in the trial was the great American lawyer and agnostic, Clarence Darrow. The trial was a circus in which Darrow was permitted to call and cross-examine Bryan on the fundamentalist beliefs that underlay the legislation, and the prosecution. It is often said that trials are theatre. This was a trial that became theatre, being adapted into several plays and a number of films, the best known of which is *Inherit the Wind*, starring Spencer Tracy as the Darrow character, Drummond, and Fredric March, as the Bryan character, Brady.

So fundamentalism is a word most commonly used to describe some kinds of religious belief. It is a word coined in modern times. It is not insignificant that the American religious movements originally characterized as ‘fundamentalist’ had a political component, or that the second use particularly noted by the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, with special reference to Islam, engages important political controversies of our day. By their nature, religious fundamentalisms tend to be political. Their believers have the truth, they know what people should do, and that always has political implications.

We all understand what Mark Carney is getting at when he speaks of ‘unchecked market fundamentalism’. Unpacking the thought, he apparently views market capitalism as an ideology and market fundamentalism, that is, a belief that markets offer a superior means of allocating resources than all the alternatives (especially collective alternatives), as an extreme version of that ideology. As he puts it, the market ideology becomes market fundamentalism ‘when the belief in the power of the market enters the realm of faith’. The parallel with religious fundamentalism is therefore clear. It is equally clear that Mr Carney does not intend the description as a compliment. He is diagnosing a pathology of the financial system grounded in a mistaken way of looking at the world. He means his listeners to understand that this extreme ideology, amounting to an ungrounded faith in

markets, is ultimately destructive and needs to be moderated.

Mr Carney is not Naomi Klein. What made Mr Carney's remarks at least mildly newsworthy was not so much their content as the fact that they were coming from Mr Carney who, as befits a central bank governor, has a doctorate in economics and is an alumnus of Goldman Sachs. Undoubtedly Mr Carney cherishes his own deep belief in market capitalism. His description of it as an ideology is intended descriptively and not as a criticism. He himself is not a radical. His criticism is that his own ideology has become radical. It has been taken too far.

Contemporary Unitarian belief shares common roots with radical Protestantism. The Unitarian progenitors – the people we have rooms named after in Hewett Hall, Michael Servetus and his contemporaries – out-radicalled the original Protestants of the Reformation. Servetus was burned at the stake by outraged Swiss Calvinists for his heresy. From the beginning, the Unitarian heresy had the peculiar quality of a fervent absence of belief.

The first Unitarians refused to believe in the divinity of Christ. The first Universalists refused to believe in damnation. These heretics could find no trace of either doctrine in the Bible, which they accepted as authoritative. In the 20th century, at least in North America, our predecessors broadened and generalized their refusals to believe to the point of denying any collective creed and substituting the principles and purposes found at the front of the hymnal. When asked, what do Unitarian Universalists believe, the reply includes:

- We affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- We recognize wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life; Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves; and Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us

against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

Unitarian Universalists are ‘grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and enobles our faith’.

This is not religious fundamentalism. It is the anti-fundamentalism. It denies that any single religious tradition has a lock on truth and spiritual insight. Unitarian Universalists make a virtue of our open-mindedness, even to the point of heeding reason and the teachings of science as warning us against ‘idolatries of the mind and spirit’. We are a religion, or at least a religious tradition, that questions faith.

I want to put to one side, at least for the time being, the question of whether one can be a Unitarian Universalist fundamentalist, that is, a fundamentalist in one’s denial of fundamentalism. For now, I want to spend a little more time talking about fundamentalism in its extended sense implied by the notion that one can be a fundamentalist about things other than religion, such as market capitalism. In this extended sense, it is fundamentalism to treat an ideology or system of ideas and ideals as a dogma, accepted on faith as incontrovertibly true.

The Marxist-Leninism of the late Soviet Union, is a good example of a fundamentalist ideology, now abandoned everywhere except, perhaps, for North Korea. In hindsight its rigidity of thought, turgid prose and disregard for human life are so easily mocked that it is easy to overlook the hundreds of millions of people who lived lives in conformity to economic and political doctrines said to be scientific but grounded in faith in the authority and destiny of a party speaking for the proletariat. Any questioning of that faith was unacceptable and the results were totalitarian political regimes.

The opposition of some right-wing Americans to Marxist-Leninism or, more simply, ‘communism’, had fundamentalist overtones. On my first road trip into the United States with my parents – this would be in the late 1960’s and I was quite young – I was puzzled by the bumper stickers. “Better dead than red”? “Extremism in the defence of liberty is no vice”? According to the *Blue Book of the John Birch Society*, founded in

1958:³

... both the U.S. and Soviet governments are controlled by the same furtive conspiratorial cabal of internationalists, greedy bankers, and corrupt politicians. If left unexposed, the traitors inside the U.S. government would betray the country's sovereignty to the United Nations for a collectivist [New World Order](#), managed by a 'one-world socialist government.'

...

There are many stages of [welfarism](#), socialism, and collectivism in general but Communism is the ultimate state of them all, and they all lead inevitably in that direction.

A part of what is going on here is the human tendency to treat political and economic belief systems as akin to team sports. Whose side are you on? If you're not with us, you're against us. The phenomenon is nicely discussed by Jonathan Haidt in *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Haidt is a psychologist and his field of study is the psychology of morality.

Haidt says that religion is a team sport. He draws this analogy, beginning with a detailed description of college football at his university, the University of Virginia or UVA. It involves drinking, singing, chanting, special outfits, body painting and an outpouring of collective emotions. He says:⁴

A college football game is a superb analogy for religion. From a naïve perspective, focusing only on what is most visible (i.e., the game being played on the field), college football is an extravagant, costly, wasteful institution that impairs people's ability to think rationally while leaving a long trail of victims (including the players themselves, plus the many fans who suffer alcohol-related injuries). But

³ Quoted by Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Birch_Society. On its website, the John Birch Society questions aspects of the Wikipedia article while quoting other passages from the *Blue Book* and without challenging this quote: <http://www.jbs.org/>

⁴ Pp 247-248.

from a sociologically informed perspective, it is a religious rite that does just what it is supposed to do: it pulls people up from Durkheim's lower level (the profane) to his higher level (the sacred). It flips the hive switch and makes people feel, for a few hours, that they are "simply a part of a whole". It augments the school spirit for which UVA is renowned, which in turn attracts better students and more alumni donations, which in turn attracts better students and more alumni donations, which in turn improves the experience for the entire community, including professors like me who have no interest in sports.

Religions are social facts. Religion cannot be studied in lone individuals any more than hivishness can be studied in lone bees.

Haidt's point is that religious practices and rituals can accomplish for communities what football accomplishes for UVA. He says that religious community provides a 'shared moral matrix' that helps us behave in a way that is not selfish, and that 'we evolved to live, trade, and trust within shared moral matrices'.⁵ Intense communal experiences are not the only source of our shared moral matrices, but they are particularly powerful.

Haidt is a proponent of something called the Moral Foundations Theory. It claims that humans naturally engage in moral reasoning according to innate predispositions falling into 5 categories, each of which enhanced survival in the evolution of our species. These are:

- A predisposition to care for those who are suffering or in need, and to despise cruelty;
- A predisposition to shun or punish cheaters;
- A predisposition to trust member's of one's own group, and to punish members of the group who betray the group;
- A predisposition to respond to and respect social hierarchies; and

⁵ P 268.

- A predisposition to invest symbolic objects and threats with emotional significance, at the one end, sanctity, and at the other, emotional disgust.

These are only basic human predispositions. Their content is supplied by moral matrices and the individual's experiences. As an example, a 21st century Canadian is likely to view a swastika posted on a notice-board at a community centre as a disgusting display. A 19th century Canadian would be puzzled at this, because the swastika was an obscure symbol without emotional connotations until Hitler's fascists appropriated it as their own in the 1930s.

We may need to stop and think about this for a minute to puzzle out its implications. Staying with the Nazis for a moment, Moral Foundations Theory identifies some of the secrets of their success. The valorization of the nation as sacred and the party as its avatar, the identification of symbols such as the swastika and the leader, the Fuhrer, as standing for the nation, the identification of Jews, homosexuals and gypsies, among others, as traitors who must be punished, and encouragement to view their practices as disgusting, the invocation of rallies and marches to build communal fervor and reinforce this moral matrix: by these means, the Nazis enlisted the ordinary moral predispositions of Germans to terrible ends. The difficult and horrible thing is that for those caught up in the communal fervor, those standing in the crowd shouting, 'Sieg Hiel', those smashing shop windows on Krystallnacht, their actions felt right. They felt *righteous*.

Moral Foundations Theory tells us where morality comes from: not just our morality, but any morality, even moralities that we identify as 'bad' moralities. It says that we are predisposed to moral judgment by our natures, and the kinds of judgment we draw fall into identifiable categories. This has interesting implications for our understanding of political debate generally, but I want to focus on what it might tell us about fundamentalism. The primary implication is that fundamentalism – any fundamentalism – is a moral stance reinforced by membership in a particularly cohesive and well-defined group.

Fundamentalism is also, of course, an intellectual stance, one that privileges certainty over ambiguity, doctrine over inquiry. In this sense, it is perhaps a state of mind, or a way of looking at the world. We all know someone who is always certain, and sometimes right. We may even be a little more prone to that that we ourselves would like to think. There can be minor fundamentalisms without too much moral content. A person might say, perhaps with a trace of self-mockery, that ‘I am a fundamentalist about punctuation’, or about Australian rules football, by which she might simply mean, that she takes this thing more seriously than is customary and fashionable.

A more serious species of intellectual fundamentalism is one that insists on a certain world-view, or a certain set of doctrines, as primarily important. So it is that prominent physicist, Peter Higgs – he is the Higgs of the Higgs-Boson particle, and a leading candidate for the next Nobel prize in physics, for those who follow such things – calls evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins a fundamentalist for Dawkins’ advocacy of ‘militant atheism’, Dawkins being famous for, among many other things, having written a book entitled, *The God Delusion*.⁶ This is an interesting debate. Higgs says that he, himself, is not a religious believer, but he knows many scientists who are, and that he thinks that religion and science are not incompatible. Dawkins believes that religion and science are incompatible and that religion is wrong, a mistaken world-view. Higgs calls Dawkins ‘almost a fundamentalist himself, of another kind’ than a religious fundamentalist, because Dawkins’ scientific world-view excludes theistic perspectives. Fundamentalist being a word with, how shall we say, negative connotations, Dawkins denies that he is a fundamentalist. In a 2007 blog-post, Dawkins wrote:

No, please, do not mistake passion, which can change its mind, for fundamentalism, which never will. Passion for passion, an evangelical Christian and I may be evenly matched. But we are not equally fundamentalist. The true scientist, however passionately he may 'believe', in evolution for example, knows exactly what would change

⁶ ‘Peter Higgs criticises Richard Dawkins over anti-religious “fundamentalism”’, *The Guardian*, 26 December 2012: <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2012/dec/26/peter-higgs-richard-dawkins-fundamentalism>

his mind: evidence! The fundamentalist knows that nothing will.

Dawkins is a very smart man and I don't doubt his sincerity, but I think he may be missing the point. He views evidence, by which he means material evidence, things that can be seen, heard, felt and measured, as the indispensable foundation of all knowledge that is worthwhile. This is the very point of which Higgs is not so sure. Dawkins is an intellectual fundamentalist about his materialism, and Higgs is not. Put another way, there is a dogmatic quality to Dawkins' implied position that the only knowledge worth having is scientific knowledge of the material world, with its implicit denial that there are other things worth knowing, that give meaning to our lives.

Now if Dawkins were here – I would regard it as a great privilege – I think he might concede that he is an intellectual fundamentalist in the particular sense I am now using the term, while denying that his fundamentalism amounts to a moral stance in the strong sense that I have identified. Certainly we don't see militant atheists gathering together in groups to sing and chant, glorifying their leaders, punishing outsiders, and so on. There is intellectual content, but without the social reinforcement of a moral matrix.

We could contrast Haidt's description of college football at the University of Virginia. There, we see social reinforcement of a moral matrix, but it is not a fundamentalist moral matrix.

Intellectual fundamentalism of some kind or another is difficult to avoid. We all have to ground our beliefs in some kind of faith. In Dawkins' case, it is a faith in the truth and importance of what our senses have to tell us about the world. In the case of others, it might be a faith in the accruing collective moral wisdom of the human species, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr, paraphrasing 19th century Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker, that 'The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice'. This faith or something like it today lies at the heart of Unitarian Universalist belief, creedless though we may be. It combines an affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of each and every one of us with the assertion that spiritual growth is achieved collectively, in our

congregations, informed by moral and religious teachings of the past. It privileges the individual conscience, while requiring of the individual that she take others seriously even, and perhaps especially, when they seem to be wrong.

I suggested a while ago that Unitarian Universalist belief has evolved to something that is the anti-fundamentalism. Could even this become a fundamentalism? Imagine the 22nd century news blog on the website, Georgia Straight International:

Singing, chanting and blocking traffic while dressed in their colourful robes, fundamentalist Unitarian Universalists occupied the legislature of the city-state of Vancouver today to voice their support for a bill that would deny charitable status to any religious denomination that refused to recognize same sex marriage. A small attempted counter-demonstration by evangelical Protestants, said to have been bussed in from the Independent Christian Republic of Langley, was overwhelmed by the crowd and melted away, without violence.

It all seems rather unlikely. But perhaps we can imagine that even a faith in the arc of the moral universe might lead us into dogmatism, if not fundamentalism, in our attempt to reach the promised land as we perceive it.

Religious fundamentalists are apt to dismiss Unitarian Universalism as woolly-minded relativism. The answer to this must be that we not confuse toleration of differing views with credulity. We cannot view all moral matrices as potentially equally valid. To believe in everything is ultimately to believe in nothing at all.

I want to suggest that the other side of our commitment to religious liberalism is that we are obliged to take fundamentalists seriously. We are not obliged to accept their premises, but we need to make an honest effort to understand them, and to engage with them. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning and a respect for their inherent worth and dignity requires nothing less.

No doubt we are mistaken in some of our beliefs. Look closely at the life of an historical

figure whom you admire and you are likely to find things that jolt you. People of my grandparents' generation grew up with views about racial characteristics that no longer pass muster. They would have been startled by same sex marriage. It is likely that our spiritual descendants will look back upon us, perhaps in a hundred years time, and say, 'how could they do that?' or 'how could they think that?'. This is part of what it means to live in a particular place and at a particular time. Our vision is limited.

The knowledge that we err should not prevent us from judging. Judgment is necessary. Moral judgment must be grounded in our moral intuitions. We should be wary, though, of where those intuitions, that sense of rightness, is coming from. If we find ourselves feeling that something is sacred, or disgusting, or that someone ought to be punished, or that someone must be respected, then we are not necessarily thinking at all. We are having our buttons pushed. We can do better than that.

Geoffrey Gomery
15 June 2014