“Fundamentalism God and Politics”
Dr. David Thompson
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“Let the first act of every morning be to make the following resolve for the day:
- I shall not fear anyone on Earth.
- I shall fear only God.
- I shall not bear ill will toward anyone.
- I shall not submit to injustice from anyone.
- I shall conquer untruth by truth. And in resisting untruth, I shall put up with all suffering.”
— Mahatma Gandhi

An old fundamentalist preacher, who had to do everything right by the Bible, was dying. He sent a message for his banker and his lawyer, both church members, to come to his home. When they arrived, they were ushered up to his bedroom. As they entered the room, the preacher held out his hands and motioned for them to sit on each side of the bed. The preacher sighed contentedly, smiled, and stared at the ceiling. For a time, no one said anything. Both the banker and lawyer were touched and flattered that the preacher would ask them to be with him during his final moments. They were also puzzled; the preacher had never given them any indication that he particularly liked either of them. They both remembered his many long, fundamentalist sermons about God and politics, greed, covetousness, and avaricious behavior, sermons that had made them squirm in their seats. Finally, the banker said, "Preacher, why did you ask us to come?" The old preacher mustered up his remaining strength and then said "I always ask myself 'What would Jesus do?' " and then do it. “Jesus died between two thieves…”

We are on the verge of an election with a country perhaps never as polarized like this except at the time of the civil war. The polarization is about values, fundamentalism, the nature of God and divisive politics. We are almost evenly divided in this country in terms of percentages of the vote held by the two political parties. The Republicans have a very strong right wing of conservative Christians within it who demand to be heard in terms of
policy. The Democrats also have people of faith within the party, but generally speaking they are people of more liberal views on things like abortion, gay rights, the separation of Church and state, and whether the government should have an active role in society protecting citizens with programs like social security and health care and creating a level playing field for business or not.

But this polarization is not just in America. The Bishop of Wales, Dr. Morgan said recently that there is a new fundamentalism at work in the modern world. "It allows no room for disagreement, for doubt, for debate, for discussion. It leads to the language of expulsion and exclusivity, of extremism and polarization, and the claim that, because God is on our side, he is not on yours."

In a review of Jack Berlinerblau’s book, How to be secular, it is argued that: Americans are stuck in an all-or-nothing landscape for religion in public life. What are reasonable citizens to do? Berlinerblau argues that so called ‘religious freedom’ initiatives directly favor the majority faith while purporting to bring freedom to all people of faith.

Thomas Raphael Nakos says that fundamentalism always assumes there is a conspiracy afoot preventing the righteous from living their lives as was ordained by God, the Bible, the Koran, or the Constitution. Because they believe evil has taken over, there is no room for compromise. And, when compromise isn't possible, then there must be a fight with one side assuming total control.

In such a fight, much more dies than just the perceived enemy. A trust that can hold things together is compromised when compromise is no longer possible.

Is this what is actually happening with the gridlock in Washington? Is it all about fundamentalism really? For fundamentalism applies not only to religion but also to certain views about economics— like beliefs about the free market, deregulation, the deficit, family values, war, Israel/ Palestine— you name it, is it possible to be fundamentalist about it? Oh yes!

So what is fundamentalism?

In a study conducted over years by Martin Marty, the distinguished American theologian and teacher called The Fundamentalism Project, research showed that the following statements describe fundamentalism as we find it here in America in these broad brush strokes:

- Men are to lead and women and children are to follow. Wives are to be subservient to their husbands. Often, this subservience applies to sisters toward their brothers. A woman's role in life is to be a homemaker.
- The rules of their religion are complex and rigid and must be followed. Therefore, to avoid any confusion, children of fundamentalists must be sequestered in an environment of like-minded adherents to the corresponding fundamentalist religion. Especially so in their schooling.
- There is no pluralism. Their rules apply to everyone everywhere.
There is a distinct group of insiders and all others are outsiders. Insiders are nurtured and cared for. Outsiders are cast off and fought.

They pine for an older age and wane for a past time when their religion was pure, as largely they no longer see it as such. Oftentimes, this time period never truly existed, but they have a nostalgic view of a Utopian past and they long to re-acquire this past.

Fundamentalist Roman Catholics, Mormons, Muslims and Protestants adhere to what can be called a theology of salvation through correct ideas and correct doctrines. Frequently the scriptures of these various faiths are worshipped instead of the deity. You have got to sign up to correct doctrines in order to get to heaven and if you don’t you are clearly on the road to hell.

There is no middle ground.

Because there is no pluralism there is danger here. There is a direct connection to fundamentalism and violence when pluralism is denied.

When our forefathers brought forth on this continent a nation conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, part of that liberty conception by Thomas Jefferson was the separation of Church and state as a unique American experiment. It has worked. In fact there is still religious freedom in America and religions have thrived under the separation of church and state.

However, when a particular religion’s rules are made to apply to everyone in society (as Fundamentalists argue is necessary), in things like Proposition 8, which banned gay marriage, the American experiment in government is violated. I was listening to Joe Biden saying that as a Catholic he supported his churches position on abortion but that he could not impose that position on others who did not subscribe to the Catholic faith. When he said that, he was being true to his personal faith and to the secular constitution and the American experiment. It is precisely because of attempts to impose theology and morality on others who do not adhere to the beliefs held by the majority that caused the wall of separation between church and state to be erected in the American democracy, in order to guarantee that the rights and freedoms of minorities might be preserved. People who fled Europe, due to religious persecution determined that it would not happen here if they could help it. But that freedom has to be constantly upheld.

This has worked so well for us. Why should we unpick separation of church and state from our founding constitution and Declaration of Independence?

But let’s pause for a moment. There is another question which is the really fundamental question. What are the real fundamentals of the Faiths? Do the fundamentalists in each religion really grasp their faith’s fundamentals or is it something else more sinister that they have got a hold of? Do they have the fundamentals at all? Or is it just fear of change, fear of the future, fear of a false God and fear of eternal punishment that they have been brainwashed to believe in?
The Bishop of Wales says no they don’t grasp what true Christianity is really about. He says the nativity story in St Luke's Gospel, in contrast, has a "message of joy and good news for everyone".

He says: "God is not exclusive; he is on the side of the whole of humanity with all its variety."

The Hebrew Bible teaches major doctrines about love and forgiveness and the Grace of God and the mercy of God. So does the Quran which emphasizes daily the mercy of God using the word mercy to actually describe the very nature of the deity. “Most merciful. Most gracious…”

Fundamentalists rarely show mercy. The recent assassination attempt on the teenage Pakistani girl, who wanted to learn to read, is a classic example of fundamentalism ignoring the fundamentals of Islam— mercy. Where is the mercy? Where is mercy in the Taliban rule? Where is the equality of women that the Quran teaches?

Where is the mercy in Proposition 8 which denies equal rights before the law for the gay community? Did you hear of the gay woman, Tam O'Shaughnessy, who was denied compensation because the Federal Government did not recognize her marriage to Sally Ride because of the Defense of Marriage Act? DOMA was a so called “religious freedom” that was no freedom for the gay community, but which instead created injustice for a minority.

Do we remember historically that the Jews had no dealing with the Samaritans in Jesus day on religious grounds? Do we forget that the fundamentals that Jesus taught both were upheld in his parable of the Good Samaritan and the story of the Samaritan woman at the well? The fundamentals were love, acceptance, no discrimination… In fact the fundamental value that Jesus taught was GRACE.

Do we forget that King Solomon had a court of the gentiles in the center of the Jewish temple so that the strangers could worship who were not part of the Jewish nation?

Do we forget that Mohammed trying to support these same fundamentals of grace and mercy, himself, suffered persecution? First, his converts were persecuted then a commercial and social boycott of the Prophet's family was attempted. During this time Muhammad's faith and resolution were greatly tested. But inspired by the spirit and example of earlier prophets such as Abraham and Moses, who were also tested and persecuted, Muhammad persevered in his faith and continued his preaching.

These are the fundamentals of the Great faiths: Grace, acceptance of difference, kindness, love, peace goodwill to all peoples— not what the fundamentalists have been taught at all.

So we have some educating to do. The only way to deal with fundamentalists is to love them as all the great teachers have taught us to do. We must recognize in our own
selves the narrowness of our views, recognize when we are not gracious and ask God to forgive us as we trespass against others. For God is GRACIOUS to all, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy—on that, the Abrahamic faiths all agree.

In America, we sing the national anthem and the first verse says; “O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave, O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?”

The rights and freedoms of the American people have been hard won. Independence from Britain was no easy thing. It took courage and bravery. Liberating the slaves in America took courage and bravery, immense amounts of them, and the whole of America owes a great debt to Martin Luther King Jr., who upheld the greater fundamentals of religions, teaching that God was the God of us all and therefore all were equal before God. Women had no easy time of getting the vote, or getting access to control their own bodies before the law.

The gay community has had a long battle which is far from over with fundamentalists who quote Scriptures to uphold inequality before the law based on gender.

What have we learned in America? Rights and freedoms come hard here, but as Martin Luther King Jr. said: “The Arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.”

What is the common thread? In order to believe in the true fundamentals of faith and goodness and equality before the law and justice for all, when all around you looks dark and foreboding is to be brave. It is to believe in The God of love and compassion as fundamental to every faith. It is to seek that God above all and in all and through all.

Michael, from Louisiana, writes:
Bravery, to me, is an internal choice to do the right thing. I realized changing the minds of others was not important. Arguing with people who disagreed with who I am did not make me feel better about myself, it only frustrated me. The second I decided not to spend my time on other people’s opinions was the second I became a happier person.

I feel brave when I walk into a church that speaks against who I am, and I sit next to a person who speaks against who I am, but I love them anyway. I feel brave when I say “I am here for God. I feel brave every time I think about overcoming rejection in my life. I feel brave when I talk to the person in the back of the bar that nobody is talking to. I feel brave when I stand up for the person everybody is talking about.

Some people may just call it a new-found confidence, to not worry about what others think or to go against what the others are doing. I feel like its bravery. For eighteen years, I denied who I really was. It is brave to look inside myself and know that I am truly a wonderful person, now. I am brave every single day that I wake up and acknowledge the negativity, and hear the hatred from others’ mouths, but I chose to love myself anyway.
Bravery means, to me, openly choosing to love every single person in this world, no matter who they are, or how they feel, or how they act. The second I see every, single person I make a conscious decision to love them as I want to be loved. And it's bravery to believe that everybody else is doing the same thing when they look at me.

Michael from Louisiana has understood the connection between freedom and bravery. When we all make the connection and conscious decision to love everyone equally, then the star spangled banner shall truly wave over the land of the free and the home of the brave!

Dr. Morgan said: "All of this is what I would call the new "fundamentalism" of our age. It allows no room for disagreement, for doubt, for debate, for discussion. "It leads to the language of expulsion and exclusivity, of extremism and polarization, and the claim that, because God is on our side, he is not on yours."

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A pious fundamentalist couple felt it important to own an equally pious fundamentalist pet. So, they went shopping. At a kennel specializing in this particular breed, they found a dog they liked quite a lot. When they asked the dog to fetch a religious book, he did it in a flash. When they instructed him to look up a passage, he complied equally fast, using his paws with dexterity. They were impressed, purchased the animal, and went home. That night they had friends over. They were so proud of their new fundamentalist dog and his major skills; they called the dog and showed off a little. The friends were impressed, and asked whether the dog was able to do any of the usual dog tricks, as well. This stopped the couple cold, being fundamentalists they hadn't thought about 'secular' tricks. "Well," they said, "let's try this out." Once more they called out to the dog, and then clearly y pronounced the command, "Heel!" Quick as a wink, the dog jumped up, put his paw on the man's forehead, closed his eyes in concentration, and bowed his head.

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