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Fundamentalism Writ Large

The End of Days?

Perhaps the world balances on a precipice. Could it be that if we make the slightest mistake, life as we know it would end? Or does that way of thinking reflect what sociologist Barry Glassner has aptly called "the culture of fear"?[1]

Our predispositions can mislead either way: complacency can be comforting, but looming disaster makes us feel important. Movements that warn of an imminent apocalypse usually foresee special treatment for a favored few, a "saving remnant." Or they at least flatter those who can discern the signs others miss.

Climate change is upon us, political differences have become toxic, authoritarian governments are on the rise, and younger generations are losing confidence that market economies and democratic processes can lead to equitable outcomes. It seems that the latest industrial revolution is destroying jobs every day. The notion of free speech for all—an axiom until recently—has

1. See Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Hachette, 2018).

grown almost quaint. And when people are not allowed to criticize orthodoxies, societies get locked into destructive thought patterns and policies.

Doom, it seems, is everywhere. If anything, the global pandemic has made things even worse.

But when haven't predictions of impending disaster been the norm? It seems that what all generations share is the conviction that they live at the most important, and often most perilous, period in human history.[2] And they think so sincerely, because the criteria of importance belong to the present, while what earlier epochs regarded as important seems much less so as time goes on. How, we wonder today, could people have fought wars about the nature of divine grace, or what exactly goes on during the Eucharist?

The trademark irony that marks Edward Gibbon's masterpiece *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* depends on the difference between what his age and what antiquity regarded as of supreme significance. What the early Christians were willing to die for now seems almost impossible to explain, let alone take seriously. In his ironic catalog of theological squabbles that, in the opinion of the early Christians, would determine the salvation of humanity, he mentions one about the exact wording of the Trisagon, the chant of "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts" that the angels sing to God: "In the fever of the times, the sense, or rather the sound, of a syllable was sufficient to disturb the peace of an empire. . . . The Trisagon . . . was chanted in the cathedral by two adverse choirs, and when

2. Perhaps they feel that way because, as Marcel Proust put it, we "imagine ourselves always to be going through an experience which is without precedents in the past." Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 1., trans. C. Scott Moncrieff and Stephen Hudson, loc. 23336 of 51336, Kindle.

their lungs were exhausted, they had recourse to the more solid arguments of sticks and stones."[3] We laugh today at the absurd fears and controversies of our predecessors, but we, too, succumb to a "fever of the times."

All the same, to understand an earlier period is to grasp what people then feared or expected. What Bertrand de Jouvenel called "futuribles"—the sense of possible futures—are an inescapable part of each present moment, which those living through it almost inevitably regard as singled out by destiny. There is an egoism of time, and part of this sense of unparalleled importance is that unprecedented dangers await just around the corner.

We take some comfort in the fact that this type of thinking almost always proves incorrect. Are today's challenges really as threatening as, for example, the destruction wrought by Genghis Khan, or the twentieth century's two world wars? Is there anyone now who poses as great a danger as Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin? We both remember the daily terror of nuclear annihilation that, in our school years, had children crouching next to their lockers or under their desks, coats covering our heads, as we waited to see how the Cuban Missile Crisis turned out.[4] By that standard, even in the wake of COVID-19, these days don't seem quite so scary.

And yet, as amateur golfers know when they hit a six iron and end up a foot from the hole, unlikely things do happen. Some predictions of disaster are, alas, realized; catastrophes do occur, and they make skeptics look foolish. The outbreak of the

3. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury (New York: Heritage, 1846), 1557.

4. While we did what we were told, we never quite understood how our coats would protect us from a nuclear attack.

coronavirus may remind us that the Black Death, which wiped out a substantial part of the world's population, could be repeated, if not by this pandemic, then by another. Those who successfully predict catastrophes—the way Dostoevsky predicted what we now call "totalitarianism"—are in their time regarded as, at best, highly eccentric. They become prophets only in retrospect.

Perhaps this time the world really *is* on a precipice, with democracy, freedom, and other cherished principles at risk should it teeter in the wrong direction. While we do not see the present as the most dangerous of times, we do discern some serious threats with common features that need to be addressed. And the sooner, the better.

Fundamentalism Abounds

> So urgent . . . is the necessity of believing, that the fall of any system of mythology, will most probably be succeeded by the introduction of some other mode of superstition.
>
> —EDWARD GIBBON, *DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE*[5]

We sense a danger in what we call a new "fundamentalism," a term we use in a special sense elaborated at length in chapter 2. That fundamentalism has infected not only politics, but also many other areas of thought. Not so long ago, it seemed as if belief in "grand narratives," or "metanarratives," as Jean-François Lyotard observed, was over.[6] No longer would people rush to

5. In *English Poetry and Prose, 1660–1880: A Selection*, ed. Frank Brady and Martin Price (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1961), 397.

6. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

adopt theories that purport to explain everything (or, at least, everything pertaining to a whole domain of human experience). Also not so long ago, it was an unchallenged commonplace that cultures are undergoing a far-reaching secularization that, in spite of occasional resistance, is unstoppable. The rise of militant Islam, and what some have termed "fundamentalist Hinduism," have called the "secularization thesis" into question. Where are the inevitabilities of yesteryear?

We often flatter ourselves that, when ideas or policies lead to terrible consequences, people eventually admit their error and change course. But, in matters touching their very sense of self, or a movement's very reason for being, the opposite often happens; disconfirmation turns into confirmation. Failure, it is argued, was due to lack of sufficient rigor in executing the policy. That is the logic that led Stalin to proclaim the "intensification of the class struggle" after the Revolution, when no opposition was visible. Greater vigilance is demanded, and a bigger dose of the dubious medicine is administered. The more extreme the theory, the less is disconfirmation possible.

When people adopt extreme theories, they discover dangers that justify extreme actions. That is because such theories teach a way of viewing the world that (as we shall see) reveals only confirming evidence. When extreme and still more extreme action is taken, the result may indeed be horrific. What was meant to solve a serious problem creates a still more serious one. Call it "the self-fulfilling catastrophe."

In the United States and Europe, discussions of political polarization are everywhere. The rise both of the far left and the far right poses a threat different in both degree and kind from that entailed by a bad policy decision, which might be corrected. Some of these movements may fall prey to forms of fundamentalist thinking that make correction impossible. Matters grow still worse when one fundamentalism confronts another.

Clinging to opposite poles, they accuse each other of all sins, including polarization.

Beyond the political arena, we see analogous conflicts among fundamentalisms. What might be called "market fundamentalism" (as opposed to a general inclination to market solutions) insists categorically, and on a priori grounds, on deploying market solutions everywhere economically possible. And not only there: it also applies market models to disciplines and areas of life remote from economics. These models are offered not as a contribution to another discipline, but as its replacement. Just as some sociobiologists have never met a human behavior they could not explain, so some economists have never encountered problems that could not best be solved by the tools of economics.

This market fundamentalism encounters an opposite one, a revival of the sort of thinking that the failure of the "socialist bloc" had seemingly consigned to what Leon Trotsky called "the dustbin of history."[7] In this view, capitalism cannot be compassionate any more than the plague can be healthy. Some have described these opposites in terms of a generation gap—which, if true, seems as wide as the Grand Canyon.

We are speaking here not of arguments between those who favor either a market or a government solution to this or that problem, but to those who think categorically, so that the answer to any question is known as soon as the question is posed. The answer is always privatization or nationalization, drastically

7. When the Mensheviks walked out of the 1917 Congress of Soviets, Trotsky (as tradition has it) told them: "Go to the place where you belong from now on—the dustbin of history!" See William Safire, "On Language; Dust Heaps of History," *New York Times*, October 16, 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/16/magazine/on-language-dust-heaps-of-history.html.

cutting or increasing regulations, radically lowering or raising taxes.

Categorical thinking admits no compromise and allows no correction in light of results. On the contrary, as we have noted, it makes the failure of a policy the reason for more of it. It is this kind of thinking, not just the bad solutions to which it might lead, that we find especially dangerous. While dangerous in itself, it is still more so because it prevents learning from experience. Alchemy failed to transmute base metals into gold, but this intellectual alchemy successfully converts reasons against a course of action into reasons for still more of it.

Some fundamentalisms cause more havoc than others. The political is usually the most dangerous, with the economic close behind. But when a given way of thinking becomes routine, it affects areas less vital but still significant. It is worth examining these areas to see how the fundamentalist way of thinking manifests itself. The more examples, the clearer it becomes. And, by the same token, if one can show what the alternative looks like in area after area, one might more successfully arrest the harmful tendency.

In our classes, we have seen students who adopt fundamentalist ways of thinking almost by default: not as a choice, but because they imagine that is just what thinking *is*. These students seem genuinely surprised that there are situations where one cannot find a uniquely correct answer, where one needs to make choices under uncertainty, and where those who recommend a different course of action might turn out to be right. By showing what other ways of thinking there might be, we have at least encouraged some of them, even if they remain fundamentalists, to be so more reflectively, precisely because what had been automatic has become a choice. As Mikhail Bakhtin liked to say, the old way of regarding things has become

"contested, contestable, and contesting."[8] As we discuss in chapter 2, when that happens, people have moved from a "Ptolemaic universe," which they regard as the unchallenged center of things, to a "Galilean" one, where theirs is but one of many planets—or as sociologists like to say, their world has lost its "taken-for-grantedness."[9]

Some students take the next step and recognize that the more circumspect alternatives we offer may be better. Each time students recognize them, they become more thoughtful. In a course we teach together, we treat a variety of disciplines, including economics, city planning, history, and philosophy. In the present volume, we turn our attention to two others: religion and literary study. The fate of the world does not depend, as English professors sometimes seem ready to maintain, on the nature of the canon or of interpretation, but the issues are still significant. They happen to display one or another version of fundamentalism, different from but recognizably resembling those we have seen in politics and economics.

We wonder about the persistence of an old conflict in religion, which has been with us for a century or more, but may now be reviving and intensifying. Like the early twentieth-century Christian fundamentalists, who invented this sobriquet, there are those who see no alternative to an unchangeable idea of the sacred and what it demands, other than a radical relativism that makes Scripture and faith mean whatever seems most in accord with present beliefs. By the same token, those

8. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 332.

9. See Peter Berger and Anton Zijderveld, *In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions Without Becoming a Fanatic* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 13–17, 71.

who think that Scripture means whatever current thought needs it to mean see no alternative to their view but rigid adherence to ideas that at best make no sense and, at worst, are morally repellent. The idea of a principled middle ground seems like cowardice or intellectual inconsistency. In a pattern we shall see repeated, a positive fundamentalism encounters a negative fundamentalism, and ne'er the twain shall meet.

In the study of the humanities, a similar dynamic repeats itself in various issues. This is hardly surprising for disciplines that abandoned structuralism, with its aspiration to be a theory of everything, for deconstruction and other theories of nothing. Almost overnight, a purported hard science of culture was replaced by a radical skepticism denying the possibility of knowledge. One would have made even Plato smile, the other even Hume blush. One might suppose that a radical skeptic would, like Hume, be anything but militant, but, when we are dealing with fundamentalisms, the very reverse is the case. There is such a thing as missionary nihilism, and in the humanities we have seen it.

The questions surrounding "the canon" pertain not just to what works should be included in it, or what qualities make literary works great, but to the very notion of great literature. In literary studies there seem to be no positive fundamentalists left, or, at least, none that admit to being so. Negative fundamentalism reigns supreme. Few would defend, at least publically, the proposition that the determinate meaning of a text is to be found either in the author's intention or in the text itself. The very notion of determinate meaning, like that of objective value, is suspect. It is not that nonsubjective meaning and value are difficult to ascertain, and that evidence can point in different directions; rather, they are, like God for Nietzsche—dead. Issues remote from these, which are not really literary at all,

have consequently taken their place. Literary scholars, who for decades have been denouncing, deconstructing, and decolonizing the canon, and who have established the orthodoxy that literary value is a myth, wonder why enrollments in literature courses have declined. Somewhere there must be atheist pastors baffled by their empty pews.

In our view, great literature, which surely exists, teaches a lesson the very opposite of fundamentalisms, positive or negative. That is especially true of the great realist novels, which often take fundamentalist styles of thinking as their topic ("the novel of ideas"). As we shall see, all literary genres have presuppositions—you don't write a saint's life if you don't believe in holiness, or an epic if you scorn heroism—and the realist novel presumes the irreducible complexity of individual psychology, culture, society, and ethical questions. The finest novelists (Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Joseph Conrad, Henry James, George Eliot, and Jane Austen) offer readers marvelous experiences in nonfundamentalist thinking. Their works contain a deep wisdom, a real alternative to fundamentalisms, and we shall therefore be returning to them frequently. If we allow them to teach us to think more complexly, we can address many other questions more wisely.

We suspect that these new fundamentalisms, in politics, economics, religion and literature, demand a common response. It is time to be sure at least that fundamentalism is not adopted by default.

Talking with colleagues and students, we sometimes have the impression that they have no clear idea as to what an alternative way of thinking might be. They seem to suppose either that the only alternative to a positive fundamentalism is a negative one, or that anything else is at best makeshift accommodation. But it is not true that anything short of a totalizing theory is somehow

flawed, at best a stopgap until such a theory is found. Aristotle was right to maintain that "it is the mark of an educated person to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits."[10] It is therefore important to clarify what alternatives are available, and why they are superior to totalisms in explaining human affairs, understanding specific people and cultures, formulating policies, and judging moral actions. To be effective, policies must respond to reality and therefore may go badly wrong when they are based on premises that look neat, appear symmetrical, and sound magnificent, but are untrue.

The Bolsheviks thought that human nature was infinitely malleable and perfectible to those with the right theory, who could be, in Stalin's famous phrase, "engineers of human souls" (inzhinery chelovecheskikh dush).[11] Immanuel Kant maintained the opposite view: "From the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made."[12] When we build with such material, we must not assume all logs are straight and must look for the intransigent knots. We hope that this book will be a lesson in the carpentry appropriate for crooked timber.

10. Aristotle, "Nichomachean Ethics," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 936.

11. From Stalin's speech in Maxim Gorky's apartment, October 26, 1932, as cited in David Joravsky, "The Construction of the Stalinist Psyche," in *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 127. For the Russian text, see https://citaty.su/inzhenery-chelovecheskix-dush.

12. Immanuel Kant, *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*, proposition 6, in *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1977), 17–18, where the line is given as: "From such crooked wood as man is made of, nothing perfectly straight can be built." To render the German (Aus so krummem Holze, als woraus der Mensch gemacht ist, kann nichts ganz Gerades gezimmert werden), we prefer Isaiah Berlin's version. See Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (New York: Knopf, 1991), xi.

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