

# Fundamentalism and Scientific Rationalism

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**Karen Armstrong**

**The Battle for God**

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**Kenneth Jupp**

In 1492 Spain, united under Ferdinand and Isabella, achieved victory over the Muslim province of Granada, expelled all Jews who refused to be baptised, and despatched Columbus on his voyage of discovery. The author takes this as a convenient starting point of the modern world, in which the people of Europe began to enter "upon uncharted realms, geographically, intellectually, socially, economically, and politically". Her book is an admirably arranged and fascinating history of three major monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – from 1492 until the present day. The subtitle "Fundamentalism" indicates its purpose, which is to examine how religious dissent, disintegration, and discord, under pressure from the rise in scientific rationalism, produced "fundamentalism" in a variety of *soi disant* "religious" sects chiefly inspired by hatred. In her Introduction, Karen Armstrong acknowledges the difficulty of using the word "fundamentalism" in this sense, but claims, with good reason, that the term has been so widely adopted to describe the "attempt to resacralize an increasingly skeptical world... whose policies and beliefs seem inimical to religion itself", that it is best to accept it. The attempt to resacralize

certainly "lacked the compassion which all faiths have insisted is essential to the religious life and to any experience of the numinous. Instead, it preached an ideology of exclusion, hatred, even violence". This hatred was not only of liberal government, but of other religions and other sects of the same religion. In the twentieth century, which she examines in the greatest detail, these fundamentalist sects became a serious danger to society, to peace, and to governments.

The main body of the book takes each of the three religions in turn, and relates the history of the various sects and sub-sects into which they split over eight centuries. The field is vast, covering all the well known religious reformers, as well as a host of others of whom most people will never have heard. But, as stated in the introduction, the fundamentalism of the type with which the author is chiefly concerned is "an essentially twentieth century movement".

The writing is lucid, as one would expect from the author's Oxford degree in English Literature, and the reader is borne along by the crispness of the narrative, although retarded from time to time by the irritating necessity of having to refer to the Glossary (six pages long) for the explanation of a

large number of Hebrew and Arabic words with which the text is peppered. As a comprehensive history of comparative religion within the three faiths, *The Battle for God* could hardly be surpassed. Some will find difficulty in maintaining their attention through its very detailed history; but it will always remain a most useful reference book.

The Introduction adopts the Greek words *mythos* and *logos* to categorise an important distinction between two different ways of thinking, speaking and acquiring knowledge – important because these two contrasted categories are repeated in every chapter throughout the book. *Mythos*, connected with mystery and mysticism, is concerned with the timeless, with origins, with the deeper levels of the human mind. *Logos*, by contrast, is the rational, pragmatic and scientific way of thinking. In the pre-modern world, Miss Armstrong writes, they were both essential as complementary ways of arriving at the truth. In the modern world, *logos* is the basis of our society, and *mythos* is discounted as false and superstitious. Rationalism has prevailed. Presumably the author derives this meaning of *logos* from the large number of English words ending in *-ology*, and in particular from *theology*.

The distinction between these two points of view is perfectly valid, but the choice of the word *logos* to express the latter is quite astonishing. In Christian thought, *logos*, far from being rational and scientific, represents the acme of mystery and mysticism. According to St John in the opening verses of his gospel, the *logos* was in the beginning with God and was God. Without it was not anything made that was made. It came into what it created, which comprehended it not. Yet it was the light and the life of man, and those who received it were given power to become sons of God. Ultimately (verse 14) the *logos* was made flesh in the Messiah and dwelt amongst us. In the synoptic gospels *logos* also plays some part. After relating the parable of the sower to the people (Lk. cap. 8), he explained its real meaning to his disciples in

private. The seed was the *logos*. In his last long prayer (Jn. cap. 17) he distinguished three degrees of humanity in their relationship to the *logos*. Lovers of the fourth gospel will find it hard to accommodate to Miss Armstrong's use of the word *logos* to denote what is in effect the intellectual appreciation of religion.

Whatever name one may give to it, however, the contrast between *logos* and *mythos* tends to dualism – a tendency the author deprecates later in her book. If *logos* represents the intellectual view of religion, and *mythos* the emotional, the third point of view must be the active, – what one might call the "gut" reaction.

ONE OF the many merits of *The Battle for God* is that it brings to light in detail and without exaggeration the fundamentalists' neglect of the tolerant, inclusive, and compassionate teachings of their respective religions. It shows how they have cultivated instead theologies of rage, resentment, and revenge, even to the extent occasionally of sanctioning murder in the name of religion.

After reading 364 pages of history covering this religious battlefield over many centuries, it is very difficult for the ordinary reader to form an overall view of the subject, and to assess what is to be learnt from it. The author's expert assistance is needed to digest the bewildering detail, to form an opinion of its causes, and to reflect upon how it might have been avoided. However, the six pages of *Afterword*, although it contains several bright shafts of light, is disappointing. The root of the trouble, says the author, is fear; which can be neither suppressed nor reasoned away. It is a neurosis the depth of which must be understood. Its effect is to split nations in two – secular and religious, church and state, sacred and profane. Yet religion has had considerable success in helping people to adjust to modernity. Most of the fundamentalist sects are modern and forward looking. Two Ayatollahs since the second world war, for example, have insisted that it is impossible to exclude the sacred from politics. The rebellion has been

against the hegemony of the secular. "It was a way of bringing God back into the political realm from which he had been excluded", and of "re-creating a lost wholeness". Yet the reader can hardly be satisfied with the *Afterword*. Its conclusion seems to be only that the two sides must come together the better to understand each other.

If fundamentalists must evolve a more compassionate assessment of their enemies in order to be true to their religious traditions, secularists must also be more faithful to the benevolence, tolerance, and respect for humanity which characterise modern culture at its best, and address themselves more empathetically to the fears, anxieties and needs which so many of their fundamentalist neighbours experience but which no society can safely ignore.

The book lacks the broad overall view that a Macaulay or a Trevelyan might have expressed about a long period of history. Yet the author has unusual qualifications to give an informed opinion. From the age of seventeen she lived in a nunnery for seven years under strict religious discipline. She wrote about these formative years in *Through the Narrow Gate* (1981). She has written other studies of the three faiths, and has described herself as a "freelance monotheist". One would have liked to have her opinion on the lessons that Churchmen, Politicians, and indeed ordinary people could learn from this history of fundamentalism.

After a single reading one can only pick up one or two of the obvious points made in the body of the work. First, the historical narrative frequently showed the evident connection between fundamentalism and nationalism. The fear of losing the national territory, or the passionate desire to possess or repossess it clearly inspired many of the fundamentalist movements. Hebron, Shechem, Jericho, and Anathoth torn from the state in 1948, recovered in the Six Day War of 1967, and lost in the Yom Kippur War of 1973 had much to do with the malevolence of the later days of the Kookist and some other movements. Jewish fundamentalism was inspired by the idea of

*Eretz Israel*, claiming the land as given to them by God. The Arabs on the other hand not unnaturally claimed a prescriptive right to the lands they had inhabited for all but two millennia since the Diaspora. Today the desire of each side to make Jerusalem their capital stands in the way of peace. The site of the ancient Jewish Temple, overarched by the Muslim Dome of the Rock, is a most holy shrine in each of their respective faiths. It appears to be an insoluble problem, making nonsense of the Camp David talks and their sequel. Does scripture not teach the sharing of land?

Similarly in Persia the fundamentalist Shiite movements of the post-war years were inspired by the realisation that British and American companies were taking control of the national territory, and robbing the people of their beloved land and its resources, in particular their oil. Religious leaders were behind the revolt which deposed the Shah. It was a revolt against foreign influence, and against what was seen as foreigners stealing the nation's resources. Faith, said the Ayatollah Khomeini, was not a matter of personal belief, but an attitude that compels a man to action. Islam is the school of those who struggle against imperialism. In Egypt too, although the British influence ensured better government, the same territorial possessiveness inspired revolt. Corrupt government was preferred to foreign intervention. In each case religion seems to have been used as a tool by patriotism. What has religion to teach about the love of one's native land?

The bonds that unite a nation are many – race, language, history, culture, and the territory, "father-land" or "mother-land", they occupy. Of the cultural ties, religion is probably the strongest, and in many instances the particular form of religion adopted by a nation has been strongly influenced by economic and political forces. Professor Tawney credited the defection from Rome of the industrial Rhineland to the rise of capitalism in Germany. In Elizabethan England the Spanish hegemony and maritime competition served

to unite Protestant religion with patriotism, resulting in the most unfair treatment of many patriotic Catholics. One tends to forget how comparatively recent was the repeal of the Test Acts (1828). Even then the ancient universities were not opened to Catholics until the University Tests Act of 1871. Religion has been most potent in promoting patriotism, and most easily twisted into an instrument of war. One need hardly mention the gulf of ill-feeling between Serbia and Kosova, or between North and South in Ireland.

TERRITORY is of paramount importance both internally and internationally. It causes wars, and it causes revolutions. The volatile situation in Palestine today seems insoluble except by some system of land-sharing. Earlier in the text Miss Armstrong linked the fear underlying fundamentalism to the fact that people had been torn from their roots, as they were sucked into the slums which served the factories of the industrial revolution. They felt excluded and had lost their sense of identity. In the southern states of America incomers to the rapidly expanding cities felt uprooted and alienated from the society in which they lived. But it was more than this. They had lost their land.

In England a not inconsiderable amount of the enclosures, against which the Tudor governments had legislated, but which they had been unable to stop, were of ecclesiastical lands. Those ejected from their holdings and their villages became "rogues and vagabonds" on the highways of England driven to crime to support their families, and liable to whipping, imprisonment, and even hanging because they could not find a livelihood. The medieval historian Thomas Rous attacked the abbey of Leicester in these words: "it is a den of thieves and murderers. The profit of the enclosures the monks enjoy ... but the voice of the blood of those slain and mutilated there cries every year to God for vengeance". The language may be exaggerated, but it points to the dejection of the dispossessed, and their inevitable loss

of faith in the church. Emigrating to America the fugitives began their new lives with strong religious communities. Those transported to penal colonies were not so fortunate. What do the scriptures of the three faiths have to say about this?

Again, every religion springs from the inspiration received by its founder. The knowledge having crystallised in one person, he becomes a vehicle to express it in his own way, and passes it on in terms suitable to the time and place, and the culture then and there existing. That is why the religions differ. None of the major religions expresses the unvarnished truth seen by its founder. Legendary fragments gather round all great men, and religious leaders are no exception. Alfred the Great has been credited with all manner of achievements which were fictions prompted by the reverence in which he was held. He was said, for example, to have founded Oxford university, a fiction that was exposed in litigation in the eighteenth century. Great religious leaders attract especial reverence, which is therefore an even more powerful influence in weaving fable round the Way, the Truth, the *Dharma*, the *Tao*, and so on, which it was their purpose to explain.

There is surely room in our multi-cultural society for "fundamentalism" of a very different kind to that defined by the author – a fundamentalism which sees humanity as One, for whom there can only be One Truth, no matter how differently it is seen by different types of people. The intellectual view is of necessity partial, while emotional, and active people, each in turn, see it differently, and likewise partially. Moreover the view changes under the influence of different times, places, and cultures. The "fundamentalist" in this sense respects all religions as springing from the same underlying truth, and leaves to be enjoyed by any whose faith it reinforces, the growth of myth and legend which inevitably collects round each of them. Only the religion he was brought up in is of any use to him. Within it he searches deeply below the surface to discover the universal truth. He realises that all roads lead to the summit,

and the higher he climbs the closer he gets to those climbing by other routes.

Why is it that religions – never mind the sects and subsects – cannot have unconditional respect for each other? It may well be because a religion, even before its founder dies, and in any event after his death, becomes an institution. Every institution naturally takes on an ego, and in all its works it serves the purposes of that

ego. This too is natural. But it is directly contrary to the instruction to be found in all three of the main monotheistic religions. For the Jew: Thou shalt not take the name of thy God in vain. For the Christian: The Holy Name must be hallowed, His sovereignty acknowledged, and His will done. For the Muslim: *Allah akbar*. In all three the ego must be subjected in obedience to the Absolute.