

Of Fanatics and Fundamentalists

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THE COMMENTATORS ON TELEVISION invariably tell us of the dangers of religious fundamentalism. They warn us and alarm us. The rising tide of fundamentalism poses a danger to human survival and to civilized society, as we know it. Religious fundamentalists all over the globe are fighting to carve new boundaries and new nations; they stand ready to destroy anyone who blocks their way. The fundamentalists, it is alleged, are the least tolerant of any people.

My purpose here is to cast a 'jaundiced' eye on the whole concept. To me as a scientist, fundamentalism means to be in touch with the basics, the fundamentals - in this case of a religion. I think this should be the minimum expectation from anyone who professes a religion, be it Islam, Christianity, Sikhism or any one of the wide varieties of religious experiences. **Fundamentalism thus cannot be inherently evil. But excessive enthusiasm for one's own belief, diminution and demeaning of another's, to the point of denying the other the right to believe in his or her own way, certainly would be evil.** And that would be fanaticism, which would - and should - be sinful, under any circumstances, in any place.

But, contrary to what we usually think, not all fanatics necessarily believe in religion of any kind. When we look at major religions of the world we often recognize the good that religions have done in awakening the humanity, but more often we see the injustice that has been done in the name of religions. The crusades, jihads, the inquisition and the 20th century pogroms by the Nazi bear witness to the inhumanity of people in the name of race or religion. In the same breath we remember the systematic genocidal policies of the Indian government against Sikhs during 1980's and perhaps longer.

We often think that perhaps many of these pogroms and policies against religious people stemmed out of, or were a reaction to, the fanatical beliefs and practice of the believers. 'Beware of those who hold too tightly to their religions', conventional wisdom warns us, for they are the fanatics, and the least tolerant of diversity. However, not all fanatics are believers in religions, as we know them.

Look at the irony of one situation - it would be delightful were it not so illogically and fanatically cruel. In Turkey, a few decades ago, if a Muslim woman walked down the street dressed and covered as required by her religion, she used to be immediately arrested. But if the same Muslim woman appeared on streets in Iran or Afghanistan, with her face uncovered, she would invite immediately cruel reprisal. Much of the world probably wouldn't care either way, nor should it. **Every era, every continent, has had taboos and tormentors.**

If a family wanted to observe Islamic religious service in their home in Turkey and invited a cleric to officiate, it could be illegal. If Sikhs build a Gurdwara in Kuwait, it would be closed

by order of the local government. The Gurdwara in Tehran is (or was until not long ago) called Masjid-e-Hindi!

The policies of Iran, Kuwait and Afghanistan are ostensibly derived from their religion, those of Turkey seem to stem from a rejection - not of just that one religion - Islam - but effectively from a rejection of all religions. Turkey is - or was until recently aggressively secular.

But what is secularism in the modern day context? Is secularism to be a new religion replacing the older religions with the support of the government? Can rejection of religion itself become a religion? Illogical, but that seems to be the intent in some countries. India's Constitution is secular, in the sense that, in matters of religion the state is neutral. But to 'profess' should also mean to practise!

A government that is representative of the people can (and should) be quite fanatical in requiring that all its citizens uphold the laws of society. (The laws of a society primarily require its citizens to conduct their lives such that they respect the rights, persons and property of their neighbours). But to enforce a religion of secularism means to deny people the right to believe and practice their religion, which is not in conflict with laws that protect themselves or their neighbours. **To require from citizens a denial of their beliefs makes secularism a religion and its proponents and prophets undeniably fanatics.**

It seems to me that forcing such positive secularism as a belief system provides an excellent working definition and model of fanaticism. Lest one should think that this separation of politics and religion, I emphasize that this is not at all inherent in concept of separation of the church and the State. That concept only means that the State will not establish, promote or hinder any religion.

There is no virtue in being nominally secular, as India claims to be, or aggressively so like Turkey. The point is: to be fundamentalist in the true meaning of the word, that is, remaining faithful to the fundamentals of your belief - while remaining tolerant of the different beat of the distant drummer that your neighbour chooses as his or her religious path. It is in this latter stipulation that India - and other secular countries in the world - need to strengthen their social and political fabrics.

