

Is Fundamentalism in Meltdown?
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Every mainstream religion has positive elements that provide comfort and direction to its parishioners. But religions also have dark underbellies that create death, destruction, and havoc. No human society has ever been without religion, but in addition, no human society has ever escaped bouts of the dark stuff.

Could anyone at the time of the birth of Christianity, a religion based on the loving, pacific theology of Jesus, imagine that faith 1400 years later in the hands of an Inquisition? Yet Christianity indeed suffered through several centuries of Inquisitions, followed by several centuries of religious wars (Protestants and Catholics killing each other) and a witch-hunt that murdered thousands of women in the name of religion.

Today, Christianity is a big tent housing literal believers (fundamentalists), followers of the compassionate Jesus (Unitarians and Quakers), and nominal Christians who attend church twice a year. It provides for the most part a benign and spiritual flavor with more good works than bad.

Fundamentalist branches of Christianity produce a muscular faith that can create solid communities: people there for each other. But it can also produce killers of doctors who perform abortions and legislators who want more control over women's bodies (no contraception, no abortion, no choices). One literalist county sheriff actually believes that the Ten Commandments are all the law the country needs. This is not a successful movement.

Hinduism is another very big tent, embracing the sophisticated who see the many gods and goddesses as symbolic and the unlettered who are polytheists and gullible. Although illegal today, Hinduism's caste system (belief that one's caste at birth can be either a reward or a punishment for actions in a past life) A modern democracy cannot survive with more than half the population illiterate and superstitious.

Judaism is also a big tent today. There are those who are observant of every element of Rabbinical Judaism (food prohibitions, important ancient holidays, and weekly readings of the Torah (Scriptures) in the Synagogue, yet in every other way are modern citizens of Western democracies, free to participate in every profession or activity. The tent also has room for those who honor their religion's historic contributions, its emphasis on ethics and value of the intellect, yet not observing formal Jewish practices.

But Israel, a secular democracy that acknowledges its historic Judaism, also has a hyper-religious minority, the Ultra-Orthodox, who replicate in dress and custom 16th century Polish Judaism. This group has been supported by government welfare and spared civic duties such as universal military service. Their astonishing birthrate has made them a drag on the society, much resented by most Israelis. Ultra-orthodox men are now subject to serve in the military and soon women will follow. Welfare payments have been reduced and women have entered the work force, surprisingly talented as computer techs. Working women cannot be pregnant every year as they did when cloistered in the home.

Islam is also a bigger tent than many realize. There are Muslims who practice a benign form of the religion, based on the "Mecca Mohammad," a time when the prophet was spreading his faith. His behavior during the first ten years of his mission are what we could call mainstream Islam. (See Ayaan Hirsi Ali's book Dawa.)

There are also modern secular Muslims who acknowledge their ancestry but have little interest in practice. We find these only among educated immigrants to Western secular countries where they are good members of their societies.

But there are others, "Medina Muslims," fundamentalists who emulate the prophet's behavior as a warlord during his final ten-year mission, when he and his followers waged savage battles against Arabian tribal polytheists. Out of the Medina Muslims come today's militants, ISIS, al Qaeda, and others who have revived "holy war," decapitation, rape of captives (with prayers before and after), polygamy, and slave markets. They war with the modern world with an odd combination of medieval ideology and modern weaponry and propaganda, and they commit mass murder on peaceful citizens. This is not a perversion of Islam; it is an imitation of Islam's darkest underbelly with no likelihood of a future.

682 words

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