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The Nature of the Beast

Religion has always been a disruptive force. When Karl Marx famously described religion as 'the opium of the people', he was painting only half the picture. It is true that religious leaders have often provided spiritual sanction for the status quo. By promising the poor and dispossessed great rewards in some other world so long as they did not cause trouble in this one, religious ideologies have often diverted potentially radical energies into safe channels. But religious ideas have also inspired revolutions; simply by asserting that there is some power higher than the monarchs and magistrates of this world, religion always has the potential to shake the settled order.

Religion taken very seriously is too rich a diet for most people. We cannot all become monks or mullahs; someone has to till the fields and mind the cattle, or serve the French fries and programme the computers. Hence in most cultures we find a division of spiritual labour. A small number of people serve the gods while the rest of us confine our religious observances to a few rituals, fund the religious virtuosi in our midst and try within reason to live what our religious leaders tell us is the good life. If it wishes to retain the loyalty of the population at large, the dominant religion must accept laxity. It may punish severely those who challenge its authority, but it cannot for long expect the people to remain feverishly religious. However, there will always be zealots (a label originally

applied to Jewish enthusiasts) who reject such compromises, and social ferment will occasionally amplify their voices. Every society will at times experience the disruption that disposes people to religious explanations for their troubles and to religious enthusiasm as their solution. Religious revolts and reformations and revivals may be crushed by the establishment, or they may succeed and become the new establishment. Either way the fire burns out and there follows a period of calm – until the next wave of enthusiasm.

This book is about the modern zealots. One of their signs is intolerance. In September 1986, the Indian-born but thoroughly anglicized Muslim Salman Rushdie, published *The Satanic Verses*, a novel that was taken by some readers to lampoon the Prophet Muhammad. The title was derived from the legend that verses 19 to 23 of the Qur'an originally referred to three pre-Islamic deities as daughters of Allah (Elias 1999: 100). Initially the strongest criticisms of Rushdie came from Muslim leaders in India and Pakistan, but the controversy took on a new urgency in February 1989, when the Iranian spiritual leader Ayatollah Khomeini issued a legal judgement (or *fatwa*) denouncing Rushdie as a blasphemer who should be punished by death. The placing of a bounty on his head provoked outrage across the Western world.

There is no shortage of examples of militant Islam in the modern world. We could mention the Muslim Brotherhood, formed in Ismailiya in 1927, and dedicated to restoring Islam to prominence in Egypt. Its members fire-bombed cinemas and restaurants frequented by unbelievers. They attacked and scarred women who were not veiled. And they sought power by assassination. The Brothers killed two prime ministers; a third escaped three attempts on his life. They murdered a chief of police, an interior minister, a chief justice and scores of other officials. The movement initially supported the 1952 July Revolution in which young army officers apparently dedicated to pan-Arabism seized power, but 'amicable relations did not last long' (Ramadan 1993: 155). The officers banned the Brotherhood; the Brothers retaliated in 1954 by trying to assassinate Gamal Abd al-Nasser, the chief power behind the coup and by then prime minister. He survived and gradually the Brotherhood became more moderate. It was legalized in the 1970s by Nasser's successor as president,

Anwar Sadat, who saw it as a force to counter increasingly powerful left-wing groups. Its place was taken by more radical Islamic groups and Sadat was himself murdered in 1981 by an Islamic militant. The gun used in the killing had 'In the name of Allah the avenger' inscribed on its barrel.

Sadat's death was emblematic of Islamic fundamentalism in that it involved both Israel and the United States. Israel offends the Muslim because Islam lays claim to the same history and the same territory. It also offends because the formation of the state of Israel displaced many Muslims and constrained Muslim access to a number of their holy sites. But it particularly offends *Arab* Muslims because Israel has repeatedly defeated its Arab neighbours' attempts to destroy it, most spectacularly in the Six Day War of 1967, when Israel captured territory from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt. In signing a peace accord with Israel, Sadat had also signed his own death warrant. That deal had been brokered by the United States, which for many Muslims is the Great Satan.

The United States is anathema for essentially three reasons. Two are quite straightforward: its long history of interference in the politics of the Middle East and its support for the state of Israel. The third is more complex, but can be summarized as its being the primary carrier and exemplar of modernity. Its great economic and military power is deeply resented by Muslims who can see it both as an insult to their national pride and as a slight on the true faith of Islam but, power aside, Western culture is a threat to Islam and the United States is the main promoter of Western culture.

These combine to make the United States an obvious target for Islamist terrorists. In February 1993, a bomb at the World Trade Center in New York killed three people and injured hundreds. Had the building collapsed thousands would have died, which is what did happen in September 2001, when terrorists hijacked four airliners and flew two of them into the twin towers.

At first sight, Islam may seem unusually violent: three of the four caliphs who succeeded the Prophet were assassinated. But comparisons need to incorporate a sense of history and context. No present-day Christian bishop would assert, as did an Iranian ayatollah, that 'killing a hypocrite who refuses to reform is more worthy than a thousand prayers' (Taheri 1987:

19), but such sentiments were commonplace in pre-modern Christianity. One only has to think of the Crusades, the European wars of religion, or the Spanish Inquisition to appreciate that the present Christian emphasis on the message of love may owe almost as much to the evolution of social order in Western societies as to the intrinsic nature of the Christian religion.

Judaism has its fundamentalist groups. Best known is probably Gush Emunim (the Bloc of the Faithful). Founded in 1974, it built a base among the Jews who settled in the West Bank territory captured from Jordan during the 1967 Six Day War. The Faithful saw the war, in which Israel not only survived but gained large areas of the lands occupied by Jews in Old Testament times, as a clear sign that Jehovah 'did not desert his people in their worst moment' (Sprinzak 1993: 409). Initially looking for an accommodation with the Arab inhabitants of the captured territories, Gush Emunim gradually became more militant and violent. One site for conflict was the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, which was held to be the burial ground of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their wives, but which for centuries has been a Muslim mosque. The government tried to hold the ring and allow Jewish settlers to pray there for limited hours. Then it arranged to have the site shared, which led to frequent skirmishes between Jews and Muslims. With the growth of settlements in the occupied West Bank, Gush Emunim took on the role of a vigilante force, revenging Arab attacks on the settlers. The most dramatic retaliation came in 1980, when several Arab mayors of West Bank towns were crippled by car bombs. 'The plan was to injure these people severely without killing them' and thus leave them as enduring reminders of Israeli power (Sprinzak 1993: 473). Although much Gush Emunim violence was justified in secular terms as protecting its people, some schemes were self-consciously intended to have religious symbolic value. Just as militant Muslims took Sadat's signing of the Camp David peace accord as an evil act, so some members of Gush Emunim felt that Prime Minister Menachem Begin's signature on that treaty was not so much a political mistake as God's judgement on them for some sin. They concluded that only a major act of retribution could restore God's favour. They planned to blow up the Dome of the Rock, the

third most holy Muslim shrine, which sits on the site of the first and second Jewish temples in Jerusalem. The plans were eventually shelved because none of the rabbis consulted was willing to approve the action.

The final chapter of this book will consider whether the major world religions differ in their potential for generating violent extremist movements. It is enough to note here that none has been free of them. We might expect fanaticism to be common in Christianity, Islam and Judaism, where there is a single god, rather than in religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, where the variety of gods (or the varieties of forms that the divine can take) should create a climate of tolerance. After all, if one is used to accepting that people may worship different gods, it is a little difficult to insist that this particular group deserves to be persecuted or imposed upon. Nonetheless, there are aggressive Hindu and Buddhist movements that have been described as fundamentalist.

In December 1992, Hindu radicals sacked the Muslim mosque at Ayodhya. The Babri Masjid mosque had been built in 1528 on the site of what Hindus would later claim was the birthplace of the god Rama, with funds given by Babur, the first Mogul emperor. In the nineteenth century the British tried to keep the peace by dividing the site between Muslims and Hindus, but they periodically fought over it. A large mob planned to sack it in 1984 and was only halted by the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Ironically, she was killed by Sikhs retaliating for her troops' attack on the Golden Temple at Amritsar. In opposition, leaders of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party encouraged those committed to building a new temple to Rama on the Ayodhya site. Once in power, they, like the British and the Congress Party before them, tried to rein in their more fanatical supporters and find a viable compromise.

Buddhism is taken in the West to be a tolerant, pluralist and pacifist religion, but in Sri Lanka, which the majority Buddhist Sinhalese population shares with the Hindu Tamils, Buddhist monks have at various times been involved in political conflict. Prior to the formation of the Sri Lankan state in 1948, monks pressed the British to recognize the primacy of Buddhism. They were instrumental in preventing the first independent governments extending certain citizenship rights

to the Tamils and when, in the 1970s, the Tamils gave up trying to win acceptance within the state and turned to fighting for independence for the Tamil north-east, monks led the violence against the Tamils and against those of their own religion and race who were thought insufficiently robust in defence of the integrity of Sri Lanka (Tambiah 1993). Buddhists have been able to persuade themselves that the demerit that comes from taking human lives will be cancelled out and excelled by the merit that comes from promoting the true religion.

In 1970 Alice Moore, the wife of a fundamentalist pastor, was elected to the school board of Charleston, Kanawha County, West Virginia. In 1973 she ran a successful campaign to ban sex education from the public schools. The following year she turned her attention to the content of school textbooks. She organized a series of meetings to protest against the 'secular humanism' that she believed many school books promoted. People started circulating petitions. Parents withdrew their children and blockaded schools. The coal miners came out on strike in support of the parents. The local chapter of the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan become involved. Three schools were fire-bombed and shots were fired at teachers. The imprisonment of a fundamentalist pastor for arson did not prevent Moore's group winning almost all the board seats at the next school board elections.

That particular outburst might owe something to the general climate of violence in the West Virginia coalfields, but another example of religiously inspired violence in the United States concerns a national crusade. In November 1987, Randall Terry, a 27-year-old born-again Christian from New York State, organized a picket of an abortion clinic in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. What was formally constituted the following year as Operation Rescue quickly achieved notoriety for harassing clinic staff. According to the movement, by 1990 there had been over 35,000 arrests of its members. In common with many religious fanatics, Terry believed that his form of confrontation was effective not only because of the difficulty it caused to abortion clinics but also because of the way in which it forced the Christian community to take sides: 'God is using us to separate sheep from goats . . . There are a lot of people who believe this is going

to be the seedbed for revival in the church, the locomotive to bring reformation in our culture' (in Ginsburg 1993: 558). By the end of 1985, 92 per cent of abortion clinics reported a range of attacks from picketing to vandalism, but some protestors went further. In 1984 in Pensacola, Florida, the Ladies Center Clinic was bombed by two young men active in the Assemblies of God. Ten years later a young Catholic man murdered two people in attacks on abortion clinics in the Boston area and a former Presbyterian minister killed two people at a clinic in Pensacola.

Violence and religious extremism

Although its ideology is religious, fundamentalism is not just a religious movement. If it was, it would be of little concern to anyone outside the particular religious tradition to which it belongs. What forces it on the attention of all of us is its desire to reshape the world at large, and that often involves violence. However, not all violence is fundamentalist and not all fundamentalists are violent. To help clarify what interests me, I should like briefly to explore the possible links between religious and secular motives and to set aside some apparently similar phenomena.

Even when the combatants are of the same religion, God is commonly invoked to justify what are essentially secular national or ethnic conflicts. During the First World War, Christian leaders on both sides blessed their troops and claimed divine support, but very few people involved thought that they were fighting a specifically religious crusade. The religious rhetoric was deployed to add solemnity and gravitas to a mundane quarrel.

At the other end of the continuum, we have the thoroughly religious crusade or, in the language of Islam, the jihad. In pursuit of its universal mission to conquer the entire world for Allah, Iran attempts to export its Islamic revolution. Although it exploits mundane struggles, the primary purpose of Osama Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda movement is to purify the faith and conquer first the notionally Muslim countries and then the entire world for Allah.

Between the extremes of primarily secular and primarily religious conflict, we find a large number of cases where both sorts of motives are inseparably intertwined. This is not surprising. Although religions may sometimes redraw maps, they generally spread to the edges of pre-existing political or military units and the ethnic and linguistic groups that commonly make up those units. Looked at the other way round, the formation of states or the boundaries of ethnic groups that strive for statehood often map on to pre-existing religious and ethnic identities. Hence wars are often fought on religious and secular grounds simultaneously. Religion is not just a convenient sign of difference (like the contrasting colour shirts of opposing football teams); it is also often deeply embedded in the sense of ethnic or national identity. It provides each side with a justification for seeing itself as superior (we obey God) and the enemy as inferior (they are the infidel).

Anything involving large numbers of people will be driven by a variety of motives; people with differing interests form alliances, and even individuals can have complex drives. The Russian troops in Dagestan and Chechnya were attacked in 1999 by secular nationalists who wished to push the Russians out of the southern Caucasus, by Muslim fundamentalists keen to regain for the true faith land that was once Islamic and by people who saw the creation of a new state as the best way of promoting the true faith.

The point of this is simply to note that, as we have already seen in many of the examples given above, fundamentalism may derive its character not just from arguments within some body of believers about what God requires but also from largely secular nationalist struggles. We will not understand fundamentalism if we try to divorce it from the social, economic and political contexts in which it arises. However, it is primarily religious movements that concern me.

What is fundamentalism?

In order to make the subject manageable, this brief study will concentrate on two very different sorts of fundamentalism: the communal and the individual. In chapter 3 I shall examine

closely Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East, where a particular kind of religion is associated with big issues of economic development, geopolitical power and social evolution and where what is at stake is the relative power of communities. In chapter 4, I shall consider the very different fundamentalism found among conservative Protestants in the United States. Although ethnic and racial considerations are not entirely absent, American fundamentalism is essentially a voluntary association of self-selecting individuals, competing to define the culture of a stable nation-state.

We could describe the communal fundamentalism of Islam as pre-modern and the individualistic Protestant fundamentalism as modern. Such a designation would capture the point that the close ties between religion, ethnicity and nationalism found in the contemporary Islamic cases (and those of Hindu, Jewish and Sinhalese fundamentalism) were once common in the West and are now rare. In chapter 2 I shall outline a series of social changes that accompanied the modernization of the Western world. Some of these seem so closely tied together that we can think of a common evolutionary pattern. But it would be unhelpful to expect the rest of the world to follow the history of the West. Societies no longer (if ever they did) develop in isolation from each other, all separately working through the same changes, but on a different timetable. Chapter 3 should make it clear that, far from being solely a response to internal developments, Islamic fundamentalism owes a great deal to the direct influence of the West on the Middle East. In brief, although we could note that present-day Islamic fundamentalism is in some respects closer to the European wars of religion of the seventeenth century than to Protestant fundamentalism, too great a stress on the old and the new will mislead more often than it illuminates.

Although fundamentalist movements may have little of substance in common, being a product of their own religious tradition and social circumstances, they share some abstract features, and I shall introduce these briefly before considering in more detail what has produced fundamentalism. The term first designated an early-twentieth-century movement within American Protestantism which campaigned against liberal and progressive changes within the Protestant churches and thus acquired by implication the anti-modernist meaning.

The term was also used early on to identify a particular stance on the way in which the world would end. In the Christian tradition there are two crucial arguments about the end of the world. First, although all Christians differ from Hindus and Buddhists in supposing that the created world has a short life (made quite recently and due to be terminated soon), they argue about quite how short. Periodically, some Christians have supposed that the apocalypse is imminent, that they are living in the 'end times'. But there is also a second argument about the order in which the various events that can be discerned from the Bible will occur. Some Christians believe that the Day of Judgement will divide the saved from the damned, the godly from the ungodly, before the promised thousand-year reign of righteousness (and hence are called 'pre-millennialists'). Others think that Judgement will follow the millennium (and hence are called 'post-millennialists'). This simplifies, but there is an obvious link between the general social climate and the relative popularity of the two polar positions. In times of social crisis and economic depression, the more pessimistic pre-millennialist view tends to dominate. In periods of social optimism, such as that enjoyed by the United States in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the post-millennialist view tends to be more attractive.

In the American context, 'fundamentalist' was used to identify pre-millennialists of an apocalyptic bent. Although this is narrowly speaking a stance on biblical interpretation, it was also a general assumption about the powers and ability of humankind. The progressives, apparently supported by the evident success of modern people in controlling and improving their environment, tended to see life as good and getting better. The fundamentalists (who were more commonly found in those regions and classes that were benefiting least from US prosperity) stressed the sinful and precarious position of humankind, and accused the progressives of usurping God's powers.

Although this was a specifically Protestant argument, most religious traditions have some similar tension between optimistic and pessimistic views of the present age. Most also have some sort of millenarian strand: the notion that we live in the end times and that the Messiah or his equivalent is about to

return and bring this world to a close. There is a strong strand of millenarianism in Shi'ite Islam that expects the Hidden Twelfth Imam to show himself soon. Within Sunni Islam the tradition of the Mahdi – the 'rightly guided' one who will return and set the world to rights – periodically asserts itself. In 1979 some 500 Saudi radicals, mostly influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, seized the Grand Mosque at Mecca. The demands were political: expel US troops from sacred soil, depose the royal family and stop oil exports to the United States. But the attempted coup was inspired by the belief that its leader, Mohammed Abdullah al-Qahtani, was the Mahdi (Furnish 2005: 60–2). Among the Lubavitcher sect of Chassidic Judaism there is a strong messianic streak.

Believing that we are at the end of the world need not provoke radical action. A common response is to retreat from the world to cultivate one's personal piety in seclusion while quietly awaiting the end, but in many religious traditions we find some notion that disruptive action may hasten the desired Day of Glory. The faithful may believe that the Messiah's return will be speeded if his people abandon all forms of temporal support (by, for example, destroying their possessions) and throw themselves on his mercy. Or, and this is where the apocalyptic vision becomes revolutionary, the corrupt political establishment may need to be brought down. Even if not accompanied by a refined 'end times' theology, fundamentalism in every religious tradition often derives a particular edge from a vague sense that we are on the brink of something dramatic or cataclysmic.

From its rather specific US Protestant roots, 'fundamentalism' has been broadened to describe merely the most conservative expression of some religious bloc (for example, Roman Catholics who continued to use the form of the Latin Tridentine Mass after the 1960s Second Vatican Council had encouraged churches to develop modern services in the local languages). By the end of the twentieth century, once the Iranian revolution had overtaken Christian versions as the defining image of fundamentalism, the word was being used to mean any group which took its religion very seriously, advocated a distinctive way of life or expected public policy to conform to religious requirements. And, like 'cult', the term was often used simply to denigrate some religious group the

writer or speaker did not like. Especially when used by liberals within the same religious tradition, 'fundamentalist' has become a term of abuse suggesting a lack of intellectual maturity on the part of those who hold more conservative views.

A sensible response to such promiscuous usage would be to drop the term altogether. Elias (1999: 86) notes that, seen in one light, all Muslims would have to be described as fundamentalist, and suggests that the terms 'traditionalist' and 'Islamist' be used to describe the passive and active alternatives to those who would modernize the faith. Others have used 'revivalist', 'radical', militant' or 'extremist'. Some scholars have argued that no English term will do for the desire to regain a lost era of consensual faith and that we should instead use the French term 'intégrisme'. My feeling is that academics protest too much about language. If in our ordinary lives we manage to live comfortably with the complex meanings of terms such as 'car', I do not see why we should not be able to find words that allow us to say something useful about a range of religio-political movements. Although I accept all the reservations about 'fundamentalism', the term is now so firmly established in common parlance that we are unlikely to dissuade people from using it. Anyway, as Marty and others have suggested, there are enough common features in many fundamentalisms to justify pressing on with its use. I will briefly describe these before turning to the detailed case studies.

In general, fundamentalisms rest on the claim that some source of ideas, usually a text, is complete and without error. Protestant fundamentalists believe that the Bible is the revealed word of God, correct in every detail and in need of no addition. Islamic fundamentalists similarly see the Qur'an as 'God's literal and eternal word' (Elias 1999: 86), although they add to it as a major source of inspiration the Hadith – the record of the sayings and actions of the Prophet and his companions. The original sources provide a perfect guide. Of itself this feature shows us the relative novelty of fundamentalism. All traditions have at some time been questioned; there are always arguments over interpretation and application. But the particularly bitter battles that we now see over foundational texts and traditions seem particular to literate cultures and to cultures where, however vaguely articulated, some notion of

a *hermeneutic* principle is abroad. What I mean is this. In the Middle Ages most people naively accepted the Bible as a special and magical book: witness the convention of making oaths particularly dreadful by having them sworn on the Holy Book. In the nineteenth century it became common for scholars to use historical and comparative studies to claim insight into what the original authors meant. Combined with the idea that people's interests and background influence how they interpret any text, this opened up the possibility that no universally correct reading of a text was feasible: there could only be competing, equally plausible, versions. The modern combination of challenges to the idea of an authoritative version of the text and widespread literacy – which allows ordinary people to join in the argument – permits fundamentalism.

Along with the inerrant text, fundamentalists also claim the existence of some perfect social embodiment of the true religion in the past. Radical Protestant sects see themselves not as innovators but as advocates of a return to the Arcadian past of the early Christian church. For Muslims, that Arcadia is located in Mecca and Medina in the seventh century and, for some, elements of it are genetically transmitted through the bloodline of the Prophet.

Fundamentalisms arise in traditional cultures, but they are not traditional in any simple sense. Enough of the old religion needs to have been preserved to provide the inspiration and the symbolism for those who wish to reassert its domination. But fundamentalisms are not merely survivals, the past continued. They are radical revisions of the past provoked by changes that threaten the continuity of the tradition. In that sense, fundamentalisms are reactive. Their conservatism is not conservation but a creative reworking of the past for present purposes. Fundamentalisms are shaped both by the perceived threats to the tradition and by the nature of the opportunities to resist those threats. The goal of resistance is to recreate the excitement and commitment of the original believing community. As Marty and Appleby (1993: 3) rather awkwardly put it, 'the retrieved and updated fundamentals are meant to regain the same charismatic intensity today by which they originally forged communal identity from the formative revelatory religious experiences long ago'.

One further common feature of fundamentalisms is their social address. Lawrence plausibly argues of recruits to Protestant, Islamic and Jewish fundamentalism, 'All are marginalized male elites, coopting women by claiming to protect them as custodians of domestic space' (1990: 236). I shall take up the gender point in the next chapter, but 'marginalized' is important. Fundamentalists often occupy an ambivalent socio-economic status, either recently excluded from power or recently upwardly mobile but prevented from fulfilling their newly raised aspirations. As Mernissi puts it, Islamic fundamentalists are 'not the most wretched but those who have had some contact with the West, who understand the horizons of possibility denied them by the inequities of the world system' (1993: 237).

An ironic characteristic of fundamentalisms is that they often combine a commitment to a selectively imagined past with an easy facility with modern technology. Because the establishments which the fundamentalists oppose control the major forms of communication and the main social institutions, the dissidents are often at the forefront of exploring alternative technologies and social structures. In Iran the Shah had controlled radio, television, the press, the army, schools and political institutions. So while in exile Ayatollah Khomeini spread his teachings by audio-cassette and by loose networks created by enthusiastic supporters. Osama Bin Laden used fax machines and satellite telephones to control his international network of Islamic terrorists. The US Christian right built its networks with computerized direct mailing lists, toll-free telephones, and its own Christian cable television networks.

As all fundamentalisms are in good part reactive, a useful way to start the detailed exploration is to consider the changes that have provoked them, and that will be the purpose of the next chapter.