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Modernity: The Great Satan

Fundamentalism is a radical reconstruction and redeployment of a tradition for contemporary purposes. The best way of adding flesh to those definitional bones is to explain just what it is about the modern world that fundamentalists find so objectionable. In the case studies in the next two chapters I shall consider the circumstances that dispose people to fundamentalism and encourage them to mobilize in organized movements. Here I shall concentrate on the general focus of fundamentalist ire. The problem will be taken in two parts. I shall first describe and explain the creation of a secular culture in the modern industrial democracies of the West. This identifies what irks fundamentalists in those countries. I shall then consider the focus of fundamentalism in non-Western societies. Some of the unacceptable changes are the same as those in the West. Although the pace of change is much accelerated, we can think of them as indigenous or naturally occurring. Some are directly imported from, or are imposed by, the West. Some are a product of the interaction between the developed and under-developed worlds.

We should note that starting with the West does not imply that its history sets the standard, either in the sense that it is particularly worthy of imitation or that what happened there must come to pass everywhere else. I begin here because it is where modernization first had its effect and because, as we shall see, the Western powers have exerted considerable

influence on the rest of the world. Where features of other religions are compared and contrasted with those of Christianity, this is not an expression of partisanship but a recognition that Christianity will be more familiar to most readers than any other religion, and it makes sense to work from the familiar to the unfamiliar rather than the other way round.

Modernization and the division of life

Life in Manchester or Birmingham after the end of the twentieth century is very different from life in the Merrie England of the first Queen Elizabeth. It would take a very large book to describe comprehensively the novel characteristics of the modern world. This account selects a few features of modernization that have had the greatest consequences for the nature and public position of religion and explains them in sketch form.

Part of what we mean by modernization is the fragmentation of social institutions into ever more specialized units and the division of social life into distinct spheres, each with their own values and procedures. In agrarian societies the family was a unit of production as well as the institution through which society was reproduced. In modern societies, economic activity is conducted in distinct settings that have their own values. We leave home to go to work and at work we are supposed to treat customers alike, paying attention only to the matter in hand, which we define very narrowly. We are not supposed to vary our prices according to the race or religion of the purchaser. We hire the best person for the job, not the most pious. While the public sphere is meant to be instrumental and rational, the private sphere is expressive, indulgent and emotional. At home we are supposed to behave in a discriminatory manner: to treat my wife and children like all other women and children is to miss the point.

In addition to the indirect effects to be described shortly, increased specialization has the direct effect of secularizing many social functions which in the Middle Ages were either the exclusive preserve of the Christian Church or were dominated by the clergy. Education, healthcare, welfare and social

control now have their own realms dominated by their own expertise, values and assumptions. Where religious institutions retain secular functions, they are discharged largely by lay professionals trained and accredited by secular bodies. For example, the Catholic Church in the United States provides various forms of residential social care, but its social workers are tested in secular expertise, not piety, and they are answerable to secular state, rather than church-determined, standards. Spiritual values may inspire Catholic involvement in university education, for example, but there is very little in the expression of that inspiration that distinguishes it from secular provision.

As the functions of society become increasingly differentiated, so the people also become divided and separated from each other. Although wrong in much else, Karl Marx was right that the economic growth implicit in modernization created an ever greater range of occupation and life-situation. Rural communities grouped together small numbers of people of every station in life. Like a fractionating column in a chemical refinery, industrialization separated out like-situated people and brought them together in large 'manufactories'. The emergence of social classes, defined more by occupation than by place in a feudal hierarchy, was usually accompanied by increasing class conflict; it was certainly accompanied by class avoidance. In feudal societies, masters and servants lived cheek by jowl. The master might ride while the servant walked, but they travelled together. In modern cities neighbourhoods have clear class identities and modern trains have first- and second-class compartments.

Modernization also meant ever faster change. The notion that there is a single God who made the world, material and social, is most plausible when the social structure that supposedly mirrors the supernatural world is relatively stable. With the proliferation of new social roles and increasing social mobility, traditional communal conceptions of the moral and supernatural order began to fragment. As classes became more distinctive, so each generated religious visions better suited to its interests. Feudal agricultural society had a hierarchical religion where the great pyramid of pope, bishops, priests and laity reflected the social pyramid of king, nobles, gentry and peasants. Independent small farmers or the rising

business class in the growing towns preferred a more democratic religion, hence their attraction to such early Protestant sects as the Presbyterians, Baptists and Quakers.

However, modernization was not simply a matter of the religious culture responding to changes in the social, economic and political structures. Religious innovation itself was a cause of differentiation and influenced its shape. Belief systems differ greatly in their propensity to fragment (and, a point I shall consider in the final chapter, in their potential for fundamentalism). Much of the variation can be explained by the assumptions about ease of access to authoritative knowledge. To simplify the possibilities to two extremes, some religions claim a unique grasp of the truth while others allow that there are many ways to salvation. The Catholic Church claims that Christ's authority was passed to Peter, the first bishop of Rome, and was then institutionalized in the office of pope. The Church claims ultimate control of the means to salvation and the right finally to arbitrate all disputes about God's will. So long as that central assertion is not disputed, the Catholic Church is relatively immune to fission and schism. As the beliefs that one needs to abandon in order to depart from Rome go right to the heart of what one believed when one was a Catholic, such departures are difficult and are associated with extreme upheavals, such as the French Revolution. And they tend to be final. Thus in Catholic countries the social forces of modernization, which impacted later than in northern Europe, split the people into those who remained within the religious tradition and those who openly opposed it. So Italy, France, Spain and Portugal divided into conservative Catholic traditions and powerful left-wing movements.

In contrast, the religion created by the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was extremely vulnerable to fragmentation, because it removed the institution of the church as a source of authority between God and man. If, by reading the scriptures, we are all able to discern God's will, then how do we settle disputes between the various discernings that are produced? Being theists who believed in one God, one Holy Spirit which dwelt in all of God's creation, and one Bible, the Reformers could hope that the righteous would naturally agree, but history proved that hope false.

Tradition, habit, respect for learning or admiration for personal piety – all restrained the tendency to schism but could not prevent it. The consequence of the Reformation was not one Christian church purified and strengthened but a large number of competing perspectives and institutions. In Protestant countries social differentiation took the form, not of a radical divide between the purple of the Church and the scarlet of revolution, but of a series of schisms from the dominant traditions. Rising social classes were able to express their new aspirations and ambitions by reworking the familiar religion into shapes that better accorded with their self-image.

Modernization and the growth of society

In the pre-modern world, political units such as empires and monarchies could encompass large numbers of very different communities because they required little or nothing of the ordinary people. The linkages were only of small elites or were for very specific purposes such as trade. Most English people of the sixteenth century had little or no sense of being 'English'; they lived their lives and drew their sense of identity from their small village communities. The shift from a subsistence economy to a manufacturing one greatly increased communication and required a high degree of integration; there had to be a common language, a shared legal code, structures of social control powerful enough to prevent banditry and pillage, and so on. Life became increasingly enmeshed and organized, not locally but societally, with that society typically being the nation-state. As the subsistence farmer and the craftsman working for his immediate neighbours gave way to the commercial farmer, the factory owner and his workforce, so the closely integrated community was replaced by the modern state with its massive, impersonal bureaucracies, and the village was replaced by the town and the city.

Religion drew its strength from its roots in the community. The Christian Church of the Middle Ages baptised, christened and confirmed children, married young adults and buried the dead. Its calendar of services mapped on to the temporal order

of the seasons. It celebrated and legitimated local life. In turn it drew considerable plausibility from being frequently reaffirmed through the participation of the local community in its activities. When the total, all-embracing community of like-situated people working and playing together gave way to the dormitory town or suburb, there was little in common left to celebrate.

One consequence of this fragmentation was that the plausibility of any single overarching moral and religious system declined and was displaced by competing conceptions of the divine. While any of the many alternatives could address privatized individual experience, none could successfully shape the performance of social roles or the operation of social systems. In being relegated from the public to the private world, religion retained subjective plausibility for some people, but lost its objective taken-for-grantedness. Faith was no longer a matter of necessity; it was a choice and a leisure activity.

Again it is worth stressing the interaction of social and cultural forces. The fragmentation of the Christian tradition which resulted from the Protestant Reformation hastened the development of the religiously neutral state. Where there was religious consensus, a unifying national high culture could be provided through the dominant religious tradition. The clergy could continue to be the schoolteachers, historians, propagandists, public administrators and military strategists. Where there was little consensus, the growth of the state was secular. In Ireland and the Scandinavian countries, a national education system was created through the Catholic and Lutheran churches respectively. In Britain and the United States it was largely created by the state directly. However, even where a dominant church retained formal ownership of areas of activity, those still came to be informed primarily by secular values. Britain and then the United States enjoyed such a lead in economic and military power over the rest of the modernizing world that their culture came to predominate. The secular state became a model, even for countries that lacked the religious diversity of the United Kingdom or the United States; religious liberty came to be seen as simply part of what it meant to be a modern democracy.

Modernization and rationalization

While differentiation and societalization are essentially changes in the structure of societies, a third significant process – rationalization – concerns changes in the way people think and consequently in the way they act. Again, social and cultural forces interacted. Social changes rationalized culture, but they did so by amplifying existing rationalizing tendencies that had religious origins. Peter Berger has plausibly argued that the rationality of the West has Jewish and Christian roots (Berger 1969: 115). The religion of the Old Testament differed from that of surrounding cultures in a number of important respects. The religions of Egypt and Mesopotamia were profoundly cosmological. The human world was part of a cosmic order which embraced the entire universe, without any sharp distinction between the human and the non-human. Gods interfered to the extent of having sex with humans and producing semi-divine offspring! Such continuity was broken by the religion of the Jews. In the myths of ancient Rome and Greece, a horde of gods or spirits, often behaving in an arbitrary fashion and at cross purposes, made the relationship of supernatural to natural worlds unpredictable. First Judaism and then Christianity were rationalizing forces. By having only one God, they simplified the supernatural and allowed the worship of God to become systematized. Serving God became less a matter of trying to please a whimsical despot and more a matter of correct ethical behaviour. Judaism was also a rationalizing force in the second sense. By elevating him, it removed God from the world. He created it and he would end it but, between start and finish, the world could be seen as having its own structure and logic. This conception of God and the universe was carried over into Christianity and Islam.

As the Christian Church evolved, the cosmos was remythologized with angels and semi-divine saints. The Virgin Mary was elevated to mediate between God and humankind, almost on a par with Jesus. The belief that God could be manipulated through ritual, confession and penance undermined the tendency to regulate behaviour with a standardized

and rational ethical code. No matter how wicked your life, redemption could be bought by funding the Church. However, this trend was reversed as the Protestant Reformation demythologized the world, eliminated the ritual and sacramental manipulation of God, and restored the process of ethical rationalization.

Since what was pleasing to God could be codified, morality and ethics could become detached from the supernatural. The codes could be followed for their own sake and could even attract alternative justifications. For example, 'Do unto others as you would be done by' could be given an entirely utilitarian justification in a way that 'Placate this erratic God or suffer' could not. In that sense, the rationalizing tendency of Christianity turned against its progenitor.

A similar point can be made from the way in which people thought about various aspects of the social and material world. Science is not easy for cultures which believe that the world is pervaded by unpredictable spirits and divinities. Systematic exploration of regularities in the behaviour of matter requires the assumption that matter is indeed regular. It is hard to discover the laws of physics if one supposes that volume may be measured by the displacement of water one day but not the next. Such a culture may produce the odd Archimedes, but it retards the development of a community of scholars directing sustained effort to the study of the material world. In that sense the three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, by simplifying a supernatural menagerie to one God and supposing him distant from the material world, made way for modern science.

The less that God was directly implicated in the day-to-day operations of the universe, the freer people were to explore that universe and elaborate theories of its operations that paid only lip service to the creator. Many early scientists assumed the existence of God and wanted to demonstrate the wonders of his creation, but the development of a healthy tradition of rationalistic scrutiny in time subverted what it had been intended to protect. By freeing the way for empirical enquiry, and for pragmatic and instrumental treatment of this world, the Judeo-Christian tradition created its own problems.

A related sense of rationalization involves the pursuit of technically efficient means of securing this-worldly ends. One

of its most potent forms is technology. Technically efficient machinery and procedures reduced uncertainty and thereby reduced reliance upon faith. The domain over which religion offered the most compelling explanations and the most predictable outcomes shrank. Innovating farmers found that crop rotations did more to clean the soil of weeds and parasites than did prayer. The growth of technical rationality gradually displaced supernatural influence and moral considerations from ever wider areas of public life, replacing them by considerations of objective performance and practical expedience.

The Reformation played a particular role in demystifying the world. Just as the medieval Church retarded and temporarily reversed the ethical rationalization inherent in Judaism and early Christianity, so the development of science was retarded by the Church's attempts to impose orthodoxy on all fields of thought. The ability of powerful religious institutions to prevent the growth of rational scientific exploration of the world will be considered again in the final chapter. All that needs to be said here is that the Reformation, by breaking the power of the Church, made way for a variety of thought and for the questioning of tradition which is so vital to natural science.

I have deliberately placed science and technology after structural and social differentiation in my explanation of secularization because I want to make clear the relatively small part played by science in displacing religion. Often science and religion are seen as competing systems of explanation and it is supposed that the latter was pushed out by the former. Of course, many of the beliefs of the early Christians have been shown to be wrong. The earth is round and not flat. The earth moves round the sun, not vice versa. The earth and human life are vastly older than the ages traditionally taken from biblical accounts. While scientists recognize that there are still huge gaps in our knowledge, there is a consensus that an evolutionary model along the lines of Darwinism offers a better explanation of the origins of species than does the account of divine creation in seven days given in the Old Testament book of Genesis. For all that, science probably did little direct damage to religion. Nineteenth-century arguments between Darwinists and church leaders may have gripped the middle classes, but they hardly penetrated to ordinary people.

Anyway, to insist that one set of beliefs lost popularity because another proved it wrong is to miss the difference between truth and plausibility. There are all sorts of ways in which we can insulate our beliefs from apparently contradicting evidence. We can avoid hearing the troublesome evidence or we can dismiss it by blackening the character of those who bring the bad news. For example, many American fundamentalists accuse evolutionists of being sexually promiscuous and left-wing. But such neutralizing strategies require social support. The isolate who stands against the consensus is a lunatic and will be treated as such. To maintain a shared belief system one needs a social strategy that organizes shared defences against the cognitive threats. Where such resources are available, new ideas, no matter that they might be better supported by the evidence, can readily be ignored or rejected. It is far less easy to avoid being influenced by widespread and powerful, but subtle, assumptions about the nature of the world.

The relationship between science and secularization can best be put this way: religion is challenged less by specific scientific discoveries than by the underlying logic of science (indeed, of rationality). Science and technology have given us a notion of cause and effect that makes us look first for the natural causal explanation of an event. When an aeroplane crashes with the loss of many lives we ask not what moral purpose the event had but what was its cause. And in so far as we keep finding those causes (a loose engine nut or a terrorist bomb), we are not prevented, but we are subtly discouraged, from seeking the moral or religious significance.

Science also undermines the notion of a fixed and unchanging truth. Where religion looks back, science looks forward. The fundamentalist seeks explanations of new events by prayerfully rereading the Bible or the Qur'an. The scientist constantly seeks to explain better what we thought we understood. The religious scholar derives benefit from reading the ancient books of his tradition. For the scientist, old books have value only as historical curiosities. Indeed, modern science is now developing so fast that it outstrips the pace of conventional publishing. Leading journals use the Internet and no longer produce paper editions. Although science is, strictly speaking, anti-relativist in that it supposes that we can rationally improve our knowledge and that it is possible to distinguish between good and bad explanations, science does

undermine the notion of an unchanging and authoritative knowledge. It makes truth provisional.

As David Martin (1969: 116) says, with the growth of science and technology 'the general sense of human power is increased, the play of contingency is restricted, and the overwhelming sense of divine limits which afflicted previous generations is much diminished'.

In the contemporary West, religion is most often and extensively used for the areas of human life over which control has not been established by technology: personal unhappiness, extreme stress and the like. When we have tried every cure for cancer, some of us pray. Even committed religious believers suppose that a scientific research programme is more likely than a mass prayer meeting to produce a cure for Aids. Our space for the divine is thus much smaller than that of preindustrial man. This is not to trivialize the events and problems which still cause many of us to turn to God. The unexpected death of a loved one or the injustice of some act of suffering may be enormously important to us. In that sense the 'gaps' in our rational control and intellectual understanding of our world may loom very large. But they do so in an individualized manner, in legal language 'severally' rather than 'jointly'. They are personal, not social problems.

To summarize, I am suggesting that the effect of science and technology on the plausibility of religious belief is often misunderstood. The clash of ideas between science and religion is less significant than the change in their relative scope, the power technology has given us to resist fate and the more subtle impact of naturalistic ways of thinking about the world. Science and technology have not made us atheists. Rather, the fundamental assumptions that underlie them has made us less likely than our forebears to entertain the notion of the divine.

Modernization, egalitarianism and cultural diversity

One very important element of modernization has not yet been explicitly laid out: egalitarianism. The link between modernization and inequality is paradoxical. We need not