

WHY I AM A LUKEWARM ENEMY OF FUNDAMENTALISM

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Abstract

Assuming that mere opposition to fundamentalism is counter-productive, if not hypocritical, this article calls for an understanding of the question fundamentalism seeks to answer: What is to fill the space between the 'most sacred' and the 'most mundane'? It turns out that we struggle to provide better answers. If, instead of dismissing fundamentalism as a futile reaction against modernity, the ambiguous links between fundamentalism and postmodernity are explored, it is seen that modernity, late capitalism and postmodernity are intertwined in complex ways that defy standard classifications. Fundamentalism poses important questions to the contemporary world and thus deserves some sympathy. The conclusion suggests that we should, nevertheless, prefer to the negativity of fundamentalism sources of affirmation. These may be found in the spaces of the 'most sacred' and the 'most mundane' – but not simply in 'secularity'.

Keywords: Fundamentalism, Postmodernity, Modernity, Sacred, Mundane

Introduction

In choosing the title for this paper, I had in mind two closely related ideas that can be summarized as follows: “Fundamentalism cannot be fought against” (Müller-Fahrenholz 1992:20), and “repression ... ends up by producing, reproducing and regenerating the very thing it seeks to disarm” (Derrida in Borradori 2003:99).

Behind the first statement stands the common view that fundamentalism thrives on opposition. As Marty (1993:3; cf Hawley & Proudfoot 1994:12) puts it, oppositionalism is “the fundamental theological feature of modern fundamentalism”. Fundamentalists sense a threat so dire that only desperate measures will avail against it: “Their agenda is set by what they feel or calculate demands their opposition.”¹ Fundamentalism is not a specific belief, but a ‘modality of belief’ (Barradori 2003:72), a particularly defensive one. Sensing ‘clear and present danger’, fundamentalists defend at all costs beliefs that could otherwise have been debated and critically tested to reach a deeper understanding. All people sometimes feel obliged to defend their deepest beliefs; among fundamentalists the need to defend seems to confirm the belief – it is certain because it is under attack. On the defensive, people turn to beliefs they had previously held rather fitfully and make these their bastion.

This leaves those who wish to oppose fundamentalism with little room to manoeuvre. An academic engagement with specific beliefs misses the pathos of fundamentalism, that is, the extent to which the beliefs represent and are embodied in the believers (cf Clemens 2006:7). Because belief and believer are identified, questions directed at an item of belief are perceived as an attack on both the faith and the faithful – or irrelevant. Then again, anything smacking of a holy war serves to confirm a central fundamentalist message: they

¹ “Fundamentalism could not exist if it did not feel itself on the verge of extinction” (Clemens 2006:5).

will get us unless we get them first. In the absence of an overt enemy, a covert one has to be invented, but then plausibility suffers (cf Juergenmeyer 2000:12).

Secondly, we may be complicit in the production or reproduction of fundamentalism. Symbolically, Osama bin Laden and George W Bush produced each other (cf Soyinka 2004:74). Bush, a plausible representative of a neo-imperialism that humiliates through its unselfconscious complacency rather than through overt brutality, was helped to a second term by Bin Laden, champion of Islamic honour, who in turn provided a convenient symbol of the 'axis of evil'. Yet this is but the surface. In providing the opponent with an enemy, I risk coming to resemble my enemy, adopting the very attitude that I decry.² What we fiercely strive to suppress around us, *may* be what we have repressed in ourselves. Our most lauded (or, fashionable) crusades may be the return of our own repressed fundamentalisms and imperialisms. In debates on fundamentalism the charge of hypocrisy is often cogent.

Initially I wished merely to plead for a mild opposition to fundamentalism³ that would not raise many fundamentalist hackles and not be too blatantly self-satisfied. In brief, a piece of delicate liberal-humanist wishy-washiness. Unfortunately, things became more complicated.

² Therefore, I found the feeding frenzy evoked by Bush's blunders scary. Another convenient scapegoat whose spilt blood will cleanse us of guilt! The *real* axis of evil is – Bush and his neo-conservative cronies.

³ I take note of the serious objections to the use of the terms 'fundamentalism' and 'fundamentalist' to refer to phenomena found in various religions today. These objections should reviewed one by one:

1. Originally the terms were applied (by themselves) to a specific Christian group in America; it is now applied to groups who differ greatly in orientation from the original group. Indeed, the current definition hardly covers the original group. This is the most cogent objection, for the terminological confusion is real.
2. The terms, undoubtedly pejorative, are used of groups who do not (as a rule) apply them to themselves or their beliefs. Though this is true, implicitly pejorative terms are frequently applied in this way. Thus Riffat Hassan (1990), who objects to using 'fundamentalism' of Islamic groups, frequently uses 'imperialism'. Similarly 'racist', 'authoritarian' and 'elitist' are terms frequently applied to people who would not own them.
3. The terms, when applied to phenomena across religious and cultural barriers, obscure vital differences. They then hinder rather than help, because the differences are more significant than the similarities (Elshahad 1992:62f; Harris 1994:166). Again, the same line of argument can be mustered against terms such as socialism, capitalism, modernist and postmodernist. Sometimes, indeed, the differences between two trees are more significant than the similarities, thus this objection, though not a knock-down argument, is a salutary warning.
4. It is sometimes said that fundamentalism cannot exist within a certain religion, because that religion is, 'by its very nature', inimical to fundamentalism (cf Wieseltier 1990:194 – of Judaism). This is often 'proved' by noting that the particular religion differs from Christianity, supposedly the natural home of fundamentalism. This argument is cogent only if the claim is that fundamentalism within a particular religion is an outgrowth of the fundamentals of that religion. In popular rhetoric this claim is sometimes made, particularly concerning Christian and Islamic fundamentalism; it is not typical of scholarly writing. It is not difficult to show that fundamentalists of all kinds are usually out of tune with the fundamentals of their own tradition (cf Arnold 1990:174f, who regard fundamentalism as 'a deviation' from 'normative religion', a 'religious disease').

In view of the first objection, I would prefer 'neo-fundamentalism'. Otherwise, the terms are not more misleading than others in the social sciences. The definitions given nearly two decades ago by Hadden and Shupe (1989:111) and Bruce Lawrence (1989:27) have in essence stood the test of time, as has Lawrence's arguments against critics of the term and his suggestion – often taken up by later authors – that we should understand the features he identified (1989:100f) as constituting a set of 'family resemblances' in Wittgenstein's sense.

The Space of Fundamentalism

To understand fundamentalism, one has to locate the question to which it offers an answer, the question that creates the *space* in which fundamentalism situates itself. Neither religion as such nor faith – if one follows Cantwell Smith’s distinction between religion and faith – invariably produce fundamentalism. Even disputes about doctrine often eschew the fundamentalist spirit. Two spaces, however, seem *not* to produce fundamentalism at all.

The first is the space of the *most sacred*. Experiences of the Holy, Otto’s ‘wholly other’ or Buber’s ‘ultimate Thou’, generate spirituality or mysticism, not fundamentalism. Both spirituality and mysticism relate to what Lott (1988:39ff) calls ‘the visionary centre of religious life’. At this centre, the concerns of fundamentalism, particularly the concern to oppose and defend, evaporate. What is experienced here, whether it be called ‘ultimate reality’ or something else, *cannot* be opposed and, by the same token, *cannot* be defended: it simply *is*. The visionary ‘gains’ something infinitely precious (salvation, *moksha*, *satori*, etc.), something worth defending, yet this ‘something’ is never a possession. It is a state of being, a sense of relatedness, that cannot be taken away from you. If anything, it possesses you.⁴

Though not all experiences of the Holy are mystical in the narrow sense, William James’s old insights on mysticism may help us to understand why these experiences are inimical to fundamentalism. According to James, mystical states involve a certain *passivity*. “The mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power” (1977:368). This power is so vastly superior to the individual, the group and all putative opponents that activism on its behalf would be ludicrous. Mystics are necessarily other-worldly quietists: James (1977:399ff) notes that some mystics, energized by their experiences, led active public lives. Nevertheless, activity arising from a sense of inner security differs in quality from activity that is primarily a response to a perceived threat.

Furthermore, James (1977:367) speaks of the *ineffable* quality of mystical experience. What is experienced cannot *adequately* be expressed in words. Precise definitions and carefully crafted doctrines necessarily fall short, therefore quarrels about them serve little purpose. Instead, poetic and symbolic expressions, themselves open to many interpretations, may capture the quality of the experience (cf James 1977:369). Therefore it is not surprising that a large degree of convergence marks the writings of the world’s great mystics. Even in a text emanating from a religious tradition very different from your own, you frequently light upon a passage or phrase that speaks to your heart. “So you have also been there?” When we grope together for words to say what cannot be said, absolute opposition is not possible.

If fundamentalism does not flourish in the space of the most sacred, it also withers in the space of the *most mundane*, the space of the profane and the everyday, which has its own stubborn rhythms, rooted in the common human condition. Even when these rhythms have been given a shaped by culture, they are often recognized and appreciated across boundaries.

The relationship between the spiritual and the mundane is depicted charmingly in Giovanni Guareschi’s stories about a burly village priest. Don Camillo speaks directly to the Lord on the cross, but is also locked in an endless political struggle with the equally brawny communist mayor Peppone – when they are not helping each other out of scrapes or joining forces against outsiders. Dedicated to his spiritual task, he also loves hunting,

⁴ For a similar view, see Farley 2005:2ff. He argues (2005:11) that the Holy is ‘suppressed’ in fundamentalism.

smoking and gambling, and is not at all averse to a bout of fisticuffs. When the Lord expressed surprise that one of Don Camillo's morally dubious plans had worked out for the best, the priest replied: "Naturally, because You understand humanity, but I know Italians" (Guareschi 1953:76).

The most mundane, then, is not divorced from religion, but it is linked to it by an economy of its own, not the economy of salvation (or its equivalents). The currency of this space is the proverbs and platitudes that we live by; its prime virtue is wisdom. Claus Westermann (1982:9-15) argued that within the Old Testament one finds two distinct themes: the theme of God's salvation, linked to the covenant and applying predominantly to Israel, and the theme of God's blessing, linked to creation and applying to all of humanity. If the Old Testament is seen *solely* as a record of 'Yahweh's saving acts', then parts of it, particularly the wisdom literature, must be seen as peripheral. But if the wisdom literature is placed under the rubric of God's blessing in which humanity as a whole shares, it is understandable that this corpus does not mention the exodus and borrows freely from foreign sources. It is probably possible to find such a 'second economy' in all religious traditions.

The most mundane leaves fundamentalism no foothold. It is a space of shared – or sharable – experiences; that, I suppose, is why people from different cultural or religious backgrounds do, talk about 'incommensurable paradigms' notwithstanding, often communicate and cooperate with ease. The most mundane is not, indeed, wildly inspiring, but fortunately it does not inspire to fanaticism either. As Westermann (1995:11) said, people have never gone to war in the name of wisdom. Nor, he might have added, have there been attempts to eradicate fools simply because they are fools.

The question that fundamentalists seek to answer is: How do we fill the space *between* the most sacred and the most mundane? How do we 'manage' our visions and organize the world to conform to them? How do we frame our common human needs, desires and perceptions so as to minimize the inevitable tensions of social life? The 'space in between', the space of culture, politics and ethics, is not *automatically* filled by either the sacred or the mundane.

James's description of mystical experience shows why the most sacred does not provide all the answers we need. Mystical experience carries overwhelming authority (1977:407); it is not simply about feeling (1977:391), but has a noetic quality (1977:367). Still, the mystical experience is transitory and ineffable (1977:367). For the duration of the ecstasy, the mystic is not able to or required to act in a specific way. Afterwards, when action is required, the mystic has a new sense of *purpose*, but not an infallible set of *rules*. Thus the mystical vision cannot be *applied* (as one would apply a method or rule) in everyday life; it has to be *translated* to the terms of everyday life – with all the perils that attend translation.

The most mundane, good as far as it goes, does not go far. The commonplaces derived from the shared human condition yield no 'system'. Instead, they are like a collection of proverbs: somewhat loose and incoherent and full of internal contradictions (cf Billig 1991:20ff). Moreover, when we perceive a particular action to be 'typically human', a degree of moral ambiguity remains: we may sympathize (in the etymological sense) without condoning.

Fundamentalism, it seems, seeks to fill the gap between the most sacred and the most mundane by a) *activating* the sacred in all spheres of life, and b) *purifying* the mundane of its contradictions and ambiguities – and of all that seems to clash with the sacred vision. Fundamentalisms are particularly activist and purist forms of religion. Fundamentalism seeks to 'reclaim public space for religion', because it cannot tolerate different spheres of life falling, as it were, under different regimes. A holistic urge is inherent in fundamentalism.

Do we give better Answers?

How exactly should we fill the space between our clashing visions and our shared humanity? While rejecting the answer of fundamentalism, I am sceptical about many of the other answers on offer. Nor do I think we can dodge the question.

Some supposedly better answers are perilously close to fundamentalism. Whenever a group (Marxist, capitalist, or whatever) argues that all will be well 'if only' – if only its vision were activated *and imposed* in all spheres of life and if all enemies of this vision were eliminated – we have quasi-fundamentalism. People are ready to kill or die for Zuma and to maim or be maimed for Manchester United. This shows that religious and secular answers are not easily differentiated. Coleman (1992:41) says that, given the 'new sense of meaning' demanded by globalization, 'purely secular or materialist accounts do not suffice'. Certainly, neither the religious nor the secular is easy to define. Was the invasion of Iraq a crusade against Islam, as some Muslims believe, or a capitalist plot to control the world's oil, as some leftists claim? Whichever answer is chosen, those who believe one explanatory principle applies here and practically everywhere are already proto-fundamentalists: they divide the world into two warring factions, each the representative of a total vision.

Do we *have* to give an answer at all? Postmodernists, rejecting all grand narratives, insist that we make our peace with a world without centre, structure or coherence. Fundamentalism, still longing for something fixed, is simply foundationalism. It is the understandable but regrettable hankering after an 'own identity', distinct from the uniform (male, white, bourgeois) identity that modernity imposed as universal norm. Thus one can applaud the 'subversive' aspects of fundamentalism from the stands, knowing that – as a matter of fact! – nobody has a fixed identity.

Practical social pressure ensures that – in spite of the ideological vacuum – life goes on in the world of politics, culture and ethics, still *de facto* if not *de jure* under modernist management (cf Farley 2005:4f). The management has lost its justification, not its power. Its narratives are no longer accepted as explanations of how things must necessarily be, yet things are pretty much unchanged for all that. Since the late-modernist management imposes no ideology and positively encourages most forms of play, those with the means to do so can playfully experiment with simulated identities and endlessly differentiating meanings. It has always been possible to dispense with foundations (and fundamentalisms) if one has sufficient funds. Bread and games fill the gap.

Zygmunt Bauman (1997:90ff) claims that in the postmodern era the metaphor of the tourist replaces that of the pilgrim. Whereas the pilgrim, having a sense of destination, sacrifices the present for the future, the tourist travels to explore ever new worlds, focusing solely on the immediate experience. Alongside the postmodern tourist is the postmodern vagabond, the *alter ego* of the tourist: "The tourists travel because they *want to*; the vagabonds – because they have *no other choice*" (1997:92f). He does not draw all the possible conclusions from this. Tourism has links with status and wealth. Sons of the nobility went on the Grand Tour; today's yuppies follow suit. Meanwhile, those who lack the means to be tourists themselves are forced to adapt to the demands of tourism. Their cities, homes, cultures and religions have to become 'tourist friendly', that is, suitably exotic on the outside and sterile on the inside. They have become vagabonds in their own homes.

Postmodernism has, it must be said, effectively revealed the shortcomings and hypocrisies of the modernist compromise between the sacred and the mundane.⁵ This compromise rested

⁵ I deliberately avoid the word 'secularization' in this regard. Greely (1995:199f), perhaps overly scoffing, asks questions about the secularization thesis that deserve an answer. When did religion exercise great influence in

on three pillars: the formal separation of church and state, the elevation of instrumental reason (particularly scientific reason) to the status of final arbitrator in the public sphere and the promise of virtually unlimited material progress. It was not a subtle plot: those who hewed the pillars were mostly people of good intention and probably had wide support.⁶

Separation of church and state would ensure ‘freedom of religion’ and put an end to religious wars and persecution – at least among Christians. The state promised not to impose an arbitrary order on society; it would be guided by ‘neutral’ reason, of which science seemed to provide the best example.⁷ The state as embodiment of (Hegelian) reason would provide the space in which individuals and groups could exercise the beliefs without infringing on the rights of others. The promise of increasing material prosperity must have seemed both appealing and plausible.⁸ It served also to make the limitations placed on the public role of religion more palatable, *because universal religions as a rule did not promise material rewards to their adherents*. One could, to put it crudely, entrust one’s soul to God and one’s body to the state without too many qualms. Finally, the gap between the most sacred and the most mundane was to some extent filled by a civil religion,⁹ or at least a civil ethos, not incompatible with Christianity.¹⁰

For reasons too complex to tackle here, this modernist compromise no longer commands intellectual and emotional assent. Globalization probably played a role, yet one has to consider also that modernity always was a bit drab. It largely lacked both heroic and inspirational elements.¹¹ When bread and games are readily available and ringing the changes on these themes is either not possible or no longer interesting, one has to search beyond modernity for a sense of meaning. This, in short, is why it is hard to formulate better answers to ‘the problem of the gap’ than those offered by fundamentalists. Modernity is discredited, yet postmodern theory has thus far brought forth nothing positive to take its place.¹²

all spheres of life? Relative to what are we ‘more secularized’ today? What evidence is there that people today are less pious than those in the past? Is the secularization thesis not a variation on the myth of a golden age in the distant past? All ages, I believe, had their compromises, their forms of secularity, not only Western modernity. The global influence of the West and the greater Western tolerance of open unbelief have led to the view – also among some fundamentalists – that secularism is uniquely Western. There is truth in Hadden’s statement that the secularization theory is ‘a *doctrine* more than it is a theory’ (1989:4, his emphasis).

⁶ For a similar view, see Farley 2005:5ff.

⁷ The clarity of hindsight reveals that much Western, upper-class, male prejudice passed itself off as reason. This can be seen in the subtext of the Scopes trial, in which, supposedly, scientific rationality confronted backward fundamentalism (of the old kind). Since Scopes’s accusers were patently fundamentalists, the rationality of the opposition is often taken for granted. But as Carter (1975:88f; 95) pointed out, the textbook used by Scopes was not only dogmatically scientific, but also downright racist. It lists the ‘five races ... of man’, ending with “the highest type of all, the Caucasians, represented by the civilized inhabitants of Europe and America”.

⁸ Gellner (1992:62) makes this point trenchantly: one kind of knowledge (scientific knowledge) works with far greater *efficiency* than any other, *although its functioning is restricted to one sphere of life*.

⁹ That is why some attribute the rise of fundamentalism to the decline of civil religion (Hunt 2003:65).

¹⁰ For the colonial empires, this may be considered: Colonial rule *imposed* modernity, leaving a (supposedly) holistic indigenous view suppressed but intact, waiting to reassert itself. Problems surfaced when, after the colonial era – it proved impossible to discard all aspects of modernity and postmodernity.

¹¹ Buruma & Margalit (2004:49-73) deal in detail with criticism – from inside and outside the West – of modern Western ‘comfort’, which excludes honour, heroism and self-sacrifice. Juergenmeyer (2000:187ff) again shows how fundamentalists embrace ‘the warrior’s power’ – the exact opposite of ‘comfort’.

¹² This sweeping statement needs qualifications. The point is that postmodernism lacks the ‘sense of depth’ usually associated with religion. Winquist (1996: 200) says that postmodern spirituality deals solely with the surface and denies any ‘depth dimension’. Lee & Ackerman (2002) argue that postmodernity has brought a ‘re-enchantment’, a reversal of Weber’s disenchantment. Yet their re-enchanting world seems anything but enchanting. “[I]n the New Age, the sign replaces representation with revelry, a type of celebration of the

Fundamentalism and Postmodernity

The common view is that fundamentalism is essentially a rejection of modernity. According to one rather simplistic formulation, fundamentalism is simply ‘orthodoxy in confrontation with modernity’ (Hunter 1990:56). Years ago, Lawrence already spoke of the highly complex interaction between fundamentalism and modernity (1989:41ff). This view has been echoed by many others, who note that fundamentalists seldom reject, for instance, modern technology (cf Bauman 1998:72; Hunt 2003:69; Boucher 2006:4, and others). Moreover, fundamentalism in many respects speaks the language of modernity. If the reaction is against *one* aspect of modernity, the ‘Great Western Transmutation’ (cf Kepel 1994:30f; Lawrence 1998:95) that tends to eliminate local cultural differences, the view that fundamentalism is linked to globalization (Coleman 1992:42ff) makes sense. Yet this relationship too is ambiguous (Hadden & Shupe 1989:111). Islamic fundamentalists refer to a global *umma*; Christian Reconstructionists strive for global ‘dominion’; Hindu fundamentalists strive for a ‘greater India’ that could, under conditions of emigration, embrace the world.

The relationship between fundamentalism and postmodernism has not been examined quite so often,¹³ though there is good reason to do so. After all, the rise of neo-fundamentalism coincided with the proclamation of the *passing* of the modern era and the ushering in of a ‘postmodern condition’.¹⁴ In this section I shall briefly examine ways in which fundamentalism may relate to postmodernism as a reaction against it, a selective continuation of it and an intentional or unintentional misreading of it. It goes without saying that these three relationships cannot always be separated clearly.

Reaction

Is it surprising that people will search for fundamentals when anti-foundationalism is all the rage? Fundamentalism may well be a reaction against the postmodern denial of all foundations. Postmodern anti-foundationalism is intended as a critique of modernity, but, since the play of signs cannot be terminated, it strikes also at the foundations of those who see themselves as the *victims* of Western modernity. Subversion, deconstruction and destabilizing all sound less appealing to those who are still trying to construct something from the rubble left by previous ‘destabilizations’ and who have had their lives turned upside-down often enough – not least by modern Western imperialism.

“We need foundations in order to be able to live *creatively*” (Müller-Fahrenheit 1992:14, my emphasis). ‘Anti-foundationalism’ is a poor slogan for builders – literal and

senses that promotes bricolage, depthlessness and homogenization. The sign moulds re-enchantment into commodities of direct experiential power” (2002:vii). “Religion may evolve into an emporium of sign-filled fulfillment in which no individual can unilaterally claim subjective privilege on the road to salvation” (2002:125). If, as they claim (2002:48), fundamentalists try to oppose the commodity culture that they embrace so joyously (and in such execrable prose), my sympathies are on the side of the fundamentalists.

¹³ For exceptions, see Bhatt 1997; Juergenmeyer 2000:xii; Boucher 2006; Clemens 2006. Bauman (1998:72, 74) calls fundamentalism ‘a thoroughly contemporary postmodern phenomenon’, ‘a legitimate child of postmodernism’.

¹⁴ Regarding the position of women, fundamentalism has to be regarded as a reaction against postmodernity, not modernity. As Balmer (1994:59) puts it (speaking of American Christian fundamentalism): “The political agenda of contemporary fundamentalists, then, represents a desperate attempt to reclaim the nineteenth-century ideal of femininity...” That fundamentalist groups relegate women to a secondary status is a commonplace in the literature (see Brown 1994 for one explanation), *just as it is a commonplace of postmodern discourse that modernity did the same.*

metaphorical ones.¹⁵ Even in the natural sciences new theories are often built on the foundations of older ones. Thus Quine and Ullian (1998:405) place ‘conservatism’ first among the virtues of a new scientific hypothesis: “The less rejection of prior beliefs required, the more plausible the hypothesis – other things being equal.” They argue that such conservatism is a sound strategy, not because previous beliefs are necessarily close to correct, but because ‘the longer the leap’ beyond the known, the greater the risk of error becomes. A modest leap can always be followed by a series of other further leaps (1998:406). Perhaps the great leap attempted by postmodern theorists – instead of taking them beyond foundationalism – has brought them face with a more virulent form of foundationalism.

Since the majority of them are academics, postmodernists cope easily with their ‘lack of foundations’, theorizing from the security of one of the most stable institutions in human history, the university. This foundational institution allows them to wander around fearlessly in the realm of ideas, surrounded by the sempiternal verities of ‘home’: academic irony, academic rivalry, academic politics. All of which helps those outside the holy family not at all. On the contrary. Whereas modernists often crudely disrupted or rejected the foundations of ‘others’, postmodernists, for all their concern with ‘the otherness of the other’, seldom hide their ultimate disdain for the beliefs of those others. As Gellner (1992:71) points out, postmodernism imposes a relativistic framework in order to lay the ghost of ethnocentricity (racism, classism, etc.), but thereby implicitly denigrates those beliefs that the ‘others’ hold in an all but relativistic spirit. It is one thing to be told that you are wrong and should change; it is another to be patted on the back and told that you cannot possibly be right.

Chetan Bhatt (1997:5), who provides examples of this form of patronizing by postmodernists, speaks of the ‘consistent *distaste*’ (his emphasis) that postmodern theorists have for certain views, although they deny that they have grounds (foundations) for rejecting them. When it turns out that such views are held by certified ‘others’, the theorists either close their eyes and think of heterotopia or ‘explain’ the views in ways that reduce those who hold them to puppets. “Colonial and postcolonial discourse studies can, at worst, allow the indigenous elites from other countries to claim marginality without any developed doctoral-level sense of the problematic of decolonized space...” (Spivak, quoted in Bhatt 1997:26). What if those who claim marginality do not see themselves as elites? Is marginality to be apportioned by the new elite, those with a ‘doctoral-level sense of the problematic’?

Consider this possibility: fundamentalism arose as a revolt not against the rule of the gun and the whip (which was resisted in other ways), but against the domination of the sneer and the condescending pat on the head.¹⁶ Perhaps the speechless subaltern, *for whom* the postcolonial theorist pours out a torrent of words, has found speech in fundamentalist movements.

¹⁵ As Müller-Fahrenholz (1992:14f) points out, children need security and protection to achieve healthy physical, mental and emotional development. The foundations of ‘love, trust and care’ provide a sense of ‘fundamental confidence’ without which people cannot cope with crises. What is said about foundations can also, *mutatis mutandis*, be said of myth. Nielsen (1993:57ff) argues that we cannot completely dispense with ‘mythos’.

¹⁶ Gellner gets his own hands dirty when he sneers at the provincialism of ‘Middle America’ (1992:52f). ‘Middle America’ (non-urban America) secured Bush his victory over Kerry, as an analysis of the vote by *county* (not state) shows. Even in the states won by Kerry, the vote in rural counties went to Bush. Thus marginalization by the urban elite might play a role in American fundamentalism (cf Clemens 2006:1,3).

Continuities

The obvious continuity between postmodernism and fundamentalism lies in rhetorical style. The penchant for a vocabulary of violence, a noted feature of postmodern rhetoric, is underpinned by a relentless hermeneutics of suspicion bordering on the paranoid: the evil machinations of logocentrism are ubiquitous. While the battle against the external foe rages, witch-hunts sniff out the enemy within – the purveyors of subtle forms of logocentrism. Positive ideals, when these come up for discussion, are clothed in words so arcane that one can be excused for interpreting them as mystico-religious symbols.

Fundamentalists, lacking ‘doctoral-level sense’, translate this into crude terms. They eagerly endorse the postmodern criticism of the Enlightenment (Boucher 2006:3). The rejection of universal rationality and individualism becomes acceptance of a particular faith and the embrace of communal religious identity. Just as postmodernists see potential oppression everywhere *because they believe modernity is inherently oppressive*, so fundamentalists see threats to their faith everywhere because they believe that their environment, modern or postmodern, is inherently hostile to *their* religion. Nominal members of their own tradition are more often than not regarded as the prime enemies.¹⁷ Their positive ideals are signalled by what Lawrence (1989:101) calls a “technical vocabulary ... with a particular meaning that exceptionalizes ... their ideological stance”. Although the terms are taken from the particular tradition, they are given a special, nearly arcane meaning by fundamentalists.

There is a disturbing link between postmodern *visions* of violence and the fundamentalist appropriation of violence. First, postmodern theorists generalize violence to the extent that distinctions of *quality* are lost: violence is naturalized. If Heidegger (quoted in Critchley 1992:224) could say that modern agriculture is in its essence “the same thing as the manufacture of corpses in the gas chambers and death camps”, why cannot Muslims say that the violence of a cartoon ridiculing the Prophet justifies suicide bombings? Even those who would not endorse Heidegger’s view sometimes suggest that ‘the system’, by validating some forms of violence and punishing others, is the real perpetrator of violence.

Secondly, the neo-Nietzscheans, by reducing all human motivation to a ‘will to power’ and by seeing everything in terms of conflict and war,¹⁸ suggests that those who oppose violence are mere hypocrites. Baudrillard (quoted in Rivkin & Ryan 1998:334) wrote of ‘the nostalgia for the spoken word and for violence’: ‘Something in all men profoundly rejoices in seeing a car burn.’ Again, those who express themselves more cautiously do little to dispel the idea that violent action is ‘natural’. When the wife of the ‘paintball pastor’¹⁹ said boys should learn to ‘be aggressive and adventurous’, to ‘conquer and subdue’, because they were created to ‘exercise dominion’, to be ‘lords of the earth’ (Weekend Argus, 3 December 2005, 7), was she not speaking of Nietzsche’s *Gewaltsmensch*?²⁰

¹⁷ Thus Rabbi Meir Kahane regarded many Jews as ‘Hebrew-speaking *goyyim*’ (Hawley & Proudfoot 1994:33), Christian Reconstructionists call other Christians ‘God-haters’ (Langemann 2003:69) and Khomeini spoke of the traditional *ulema* as ‘servants of imperialism’ (Bhatt 1997:92). See also Frykenberg 1994:594, 596).

¹⁸ ‘We are already at war’ is a theme that runs through all the interviews Juergenmeyer had with religious activists from various traditions (see Juergenmeyer 2000:19-116).

¹⁹ Peter Hammond, an adherent of Dominion Theology, together with his young boy, went out with paintball guns to shoot at children playing ‘tricks and treats’ at Halloween.

²⁰ It could be argued that postmodernists, in rejecting centred subjects, would also reject ‘lordship’. But fundamentalists, for their part, would interpret ‘lordship’ without positing a centred subject. See below.

Misreadings

Here I deal with various ambiguous links.²¹ Both Bhatt (1997:73) and Boucher (2006:7f) note that religions are at home with the idea of the decentred subject. Christians say that their identity lies outside themselves in Christ, that their citizenship is in heaven and that they are mere members of the body of Christ. In as much as they obey God's word, they are inscribed in the Bible. In the orthodox texts (probably of all religions), this is balanced by an emphasis on identity formation through responsible decisions. In fundamentalism – and some postmodernism – the dispersal of the subject is the final word. Just as the postmodern interstitial subject is interpellated by impersonal discourses beyond her control, so the fundamentalist subject is called forth by God's will, which *works through* (not 'is done by') the believer. Though the fundamentalist view is logocentric in that it is theocentric, the opposition between centre and periphery can be deconstructed without loss: God's *dominion* is manifest in the believer's acts and God *serves* to justify these acts.

The catch-phrase 'meaning is differential' might have been coined for fundamentalists. Their oppositionalism suggests that life is meaningful *only* in contradistinction. Even internal differentiation is not ruled out: the foe is also within the group itself (even within the believer) and has to be combated there as well. 'I am because you are – my enemy.' One could, in view of, say, Derrida's notion of *différance*, dismiss this as an egregious misreading that operates with precisely the binarism that postmodern theorists challenge. Yet the dismissal re-instates the problem, for it suggests that the meaning of postmodern texts are at least provisionally available – and oppositional differentiation is a favoured tactic in them.

That objectivity is a myth is no news to fundamentalists, who agree that all positions are partisan ones. Biases and prejudices cannot and need not be justified. Since they assume a state of war, they expand the doctrine of inevitable partisanship to 'there are no innocents'.²²

Closely connected to this is the ambivalent relationship that both postmodernists and fundamentalists have with relativism. Although prominent postmodern thinkers reject relativism, 'street-level postmodernism' (Boucher 2006:1) tends to relativism, particularly cultural relativism. Thus one can understand why Gellner (1992:24) equates postmodernism with relativism. When irreducible alterity and radical incommensurability are stressed to the point of denying effective communication, relativism by default is the result.²³ Fundamentalists, one could say, are 'anti-relativists' (Lawrence 1998), yet they find 'tactical relativism' useful.²⁴ Just as neo-racists do, they argue for their right to be 'different' and reject criticism from outsiders, who invariably 'will never understand' (cf Juergenmeyer 2000:69).²⁵ This may be deemed hypocritical, yet this double-think is not all

²¹ How can fundamentalists be said to 'misread' postmodern themes, given that fundamentalists are probably not avid readers of postmodern works? Now the postmodern theory of intertextuality allows one to speak of someone's 'reading' of a text that has not yet been written (Plato reading Lacan). Next, since all readings are, to most postmodernists, partly misreadings, fundamentalist readings may be as valid as any others – postmodern idiom even allows one to say that the postmodern authors have misread *their own texts* when they say that fundamentalists have misinterpreted them. Finally, fundamentalist readings of postmodernity may be seen as either valid re-inscriptions (continuations) or, along the lines of Harold Bloom, as defensive reactions.

²² Wole Soyinka (2004:106) rightly says that this fundamentalistic doctrine is a denial of human dignity.

²³ Homi Bhabha (quoted in Bhatt 1997:27) states blatantly that "it is actually very difficult, even impossible and counterproductive to fit together different forms of culture and to pretend that they can co-exist".

²⁴ Marty & Appleby (1994:2) recognize the fundamentalists, far from being rigid, are pragmatic in their tactics. See also Boucher (2006:7) on the selective flexibility of fundamentalists.

²⁵ For examples of the use of forms of cultural relativism in neo-racism, see Taguieff 1991:236ff, who correctly notes that this was the case in apartheid South Africa. Bhatt (1997:19f) gives a good fundamentalist example.

that different from the vaunted postmodern ‘double science’ (in which one can argue for the essential difference of women while also denying that there is any female essence).

The case of hermeneutics is strange. It used to be an axiom that fundamentalists are literalists who ‘reject hermeneutics’ (Marty 1992:4). Kathleen Boone (1989), though she found that fundamentalists do not really reject figurative interpretations, maintains that fundamentalists are literalists in another sense: they restrict themselves to ‘the empirical or the ostensibly referential’ (1989:45) and they choose ‘the common reader’s approach to the text’ (1989:39). This does not hold true even for Christian fundamentalists. In that they *apply* biblical texts figuratively to modern phenomena, they may be called extreme figurativists. And some of their interpretations would *never* occur to the common reader.

If they reject hermeneutics, it is only in a particular sense – one also rejected by post-modernism. Hermeneutics in this sense pertains to a scholarly method (or methods) that, if expertly applied, yields a meaning which at least approximates the one true one. Both fundamentalists and postmodernists reject the authority of the predominantly scholarly *tradition* of interpretation.²⁶

Chetan Bhatt (1997:161) sees the fundamentalist approach to sacred texts as *semiotic*, not hermeneutic. These texts are too complex, contradictory and (often) irrelevant to our contexts to be used directly, therefore a ‘semiotic distance’ is created between them and the believer – they are turned into *signs*.²⁷ ‘Theonomy’, ‘Islam’ or ‘Hindutva’ is said to capture the essence of the specific text, yet the plenitude that these signs stand for cannot be more precisely defined. “Scripture is made to testify to a world it does not address in passionate terms of which the meanings are permanently deferred” (Bhatt 1997:101). As a consequence, far from being anachronistic, rigid textualists in their interpretation, are frequently flexible contextualists. They *posit* a perfect whole, an ordered cosmos, but, since this is not present, they retrieve from the sacred texts *ad hoc* or embroider on them freely. Thus Bhatt (1997:74, 101) claims that for fundamentalists “good and evil are just slogans that bear little or no relation to foundational ethical or moral considerations”; they are ‘semiotic products’ without determinate meaning.²⁸ ‘Good and evil’ is for practical purposes ‘we and they’.²⁹

Fundamentalist interpretations appear incorrect and perverse. But postmodern theory, which not merely allows but privileges parody, will find it hard to make the first charge stick. And is the label ‘perverse’ not used to disqualify what falls outside the dominant discourse?

²⁶ In this spirit, Christian Reconstructionists, against the entire tradition and against the ‘plain sense’ of the New Testament, maintain that Mosaic law applies to Christians today, and Sayyid Qutb re-interpreted the idea of *jahiliyya* (Kepel 1994:19ff; Buruma & Margalit 2004:116ff).

²⁷ Bhatt uses ‘sign’ (linked to hermeneutics), as opposed to ‘symbol’ (linked to semiotics) in the way popularized by Kristeva. According to Lee & Ackerman (2002:14), “the symbol represents something, whereas the sign is its own reality, devoid of representation” They argue that fundamentalism is a desperate attempt to recover the certainty of symbols (2002:51ff); Bhatt denies this. According to an older terminology, signs have simple meanings while symbols, being ambiguous, call for constant re-interpretation (Farley 1996:24f).

²⁸ Given the emphasis on law in some fundamentalists groups, this seems paradoxical, yet the examples given by Bhatt (1997) and the interviews recorded by Juergenmeyer (2000) support Bhatt’s assertion. There may be two reasons for this. First, the legal codes are not present as determinate entities. *Shari’ah* is not a given thing; it is constructed differently in different legal schools. ‘The Mosaic law’ of Christian Reconstructionists (Langemann 2003:63) is neither a coherent nor a currently operative code – it provides no *contemporary* examples of practice. Secondly, in dealing with the ‘enemy’ in a war situation, perfect law yields to an interim ethic, a form of martial law that permits, for instance, lying or deception.

²⁹ In addition, Hoffer’s view on the role of ‘doctrine’ in social movements deserves attention. “The effectiveness of doctrine does not come from its meaning but from its certitude.” The doctrine must *not* be understood; it has to be vague, for we can be “absolutely certain only about things we do not understand” (1951:79f).

Questions

Fundamentalism is obviously not simply a form of postmodernism; it is also linked to modernity, globalization, late capitalism, etc. My point is that the space within which fundamentalism emerges and which it seeks to conquer is marked by intricate contests, complicities and ambivalences. It is as if the phenomenon of fundamentalism brings into focus a range of questions that we are usually able to evade.³⁰ Without attempting to be exhaustive, I shall briefly point to three areas in which these questions arise:

Sociography

Fundamentalism, ostensibly an attack on modernist secularism, arises precisely when post-modern discourses are displacing modernist ones. In what sense, then, is postmodernism new and in what sense is it simply the latest, most consistent form of modernity, ‘the cultural logic of late capitalism’ (Jameson)? Lee and Ackerman (2002) conflate post-modernity, late capitalism and consumer culture without batting an eyelid. Postmodernists who deplore their New Age enthusiasm for ‘the way we live now’ should indicate where Baudrillard (1994) offers something substantially different. Is his greater irony not perhaps greater cynicism (see especially 1994:159ff)?

Fundamentalists are often called ‘right-wing’, even ‘fascist’.³¹ Nevertheless, they frequently adopt a distinctly *leftist* rhetoric – in their attacks on liberalism. Thus Bhatt (1997:99) says that if Khomeini’s rhetoric is stripped of a religious veneer, “the bulk that is left is ‘Marxism’”. When fundamentalists regard themselves as marginalized enemies of imperialism, their claim is not silly. In that fundamentalist groupings seldom tolerate one another (cf Lawrence 1998:96), each group is indeed severely marginalized, usually lacking the powerful lobbies of other marginalized groups.³² Fundamentalist centres of learning face the overwhelming *intellectual* imperialism of the ‘real’ universities. Will fundamentalists ever be admitted as *equal* partners in the discourses at Yale or the Sorbonne?

Thus fundamentalism poses a challenge to our sociography, the ways in which we chart social space, relationships and origins. Our *metaphorical* tools – archaeology, genealogy, cognitive mapping – though not useless, are fairly blunt and limited. This leads directly to two further sets of questions, pertaining, respectively, to our conceptualizing of *language* and of *people*.

Language

Popular postmodernism remains prone to nominalism (‘the prison house of language’). Human agents are subsumed under linguistic categories, words are treated as things and ‘re-conceptualizing’ is thought to change the world. People are good or bad because good or bad words apply to them. It is confidently said that certain *words* (or ‘non-concepts’) ‘resist totalizing’, ‘destabilize the system’ or ‘subvert hierarchies’. Other words are, as it were, logocentrism (foundationalism, modernity) incarnate. ‘Subversion’ is good, no matter what

³⁰ Compare Kepel’s view that fundamentalism gives evidence of ‘a deep malaise in society’ and has, like all religious movements, “a singular capacity to reveal the ills of society” (1994:11).

³¹ Though Hadden & Shupe (1989:120) warned long ago that fundamentalism is not necessarily right-wing, many scholars still apply the label automatically. A fundamentalist trait in academic discourse?

³² Even theologically fundamentalists have more in common with contextual and liberation theologians than with pietists and traditionalists. This is clear from their social activism and their emphasis on this-worldly changes and benefits (cf Kepel 1994:25f).

is subverted in the interests of what. Thus 'Theory' deals with language as fundamentalists deal with their respective scriptures.³³

Fundamentalists, as eager to change the world as most postmodernists are, deploy a different terminology. Undeniably many of the privileged terms of postmodernity apply to them *in some ways*: 'alterity', 'catachrestic', 'subaltern', 'marginalized', 'anti-imperialist' and 'subversive'. As Bhatt (1997:35) pertinently asks: "How does the subaltern silence of that theoretical gold standard, the 'Third World woman', lead to the thunderous intolerance of Hindu nationalist women?" How, also, does one 'theoretize' the sexism and racism³⁴ that crop up often in fundamentalist discourses presented as protests against Western imperialism? I suspect that more than verbal gymnastics will be required.

Human Agency

Fundamentalism renders the systematic reduction of human agency (the *verso* of nominalism) aporetic. Guns and bombs may be wielded by inscribed subjects, but the roles of the victims, if they are inscribed at all, cannot be inscribed in the same way. Unless, that is, one speaks with blatant cynicism of 'collateral damage'. When fundamentalists want to change the world, they resort to actions that cannot plausibly be glossed as 'play'. Nor can their opponents, even lukewarm ones, easily convince themselves that intention plays no role in their theorizing. Indeed, without a *humanistic* terminology of action, passion, intention and attitude there can be no *ethical* understanding of fundamentalists or their opponents.³⁵ The phenomenon of fundamentalism then has to be accepted, in a parody of fundamentalist rhetoric, as an act of God (or a mutation or hybrid, if the current terminology is preferred).

This leads to a deeper problem. Fundamentalists are seldom abjectly poor or desperately oppressed (cf Bauman 1998:75); they do, somewhat plausibly, claim that they are *insulted and humiliated*. Precisely those theorists who are chary of criticizing them outright (or even profess some sympathy with them) inflict on them the ultimate insult – they *explain* them. They are 'conceptualized' as the fallout of modernity (capitalism, etc.). It is now generally accepted that fundamentalism does not totally reject modern science or even modern rationality. It is the unbearable shallowness and soullessness of Western modernity, its claim that nothing lies beyond science and reason, that is rejected. And in this regard postmodernism, in that it restricts itself to surfaces, offers very little.

³³ An example: Gospel has it that that universalism is the root of all evil and that racism is a particularly bad form of evil. Unfortunately racism seems to be a strong form of particularism. Balibar (1991:175) sees the problem and goes on to 'prove' (1991:177-182), in impeccably nominalist fashion, that racism is actually a form of universalism. The gospels have been harmonized and all is well! (Recently, the gospel has been rewritten: Žižek and Badiou now champion universalism.)

³⁴ Racism in the normal sense is not invariably an adjunct of fundamentalism, though it clearly informs some Christian and Hindu fundamentalism (via British Israelite and Hindutva ideologies). But what Taguieff (1991:227ff) calls 'differentialistic neo-racism' is present in virtually all forms of fundamentalism. This is easily understandable. Neo-racism no longer bases itself on *biological or genetic* differences, but on *cultural* ones (1991:237), and tends (overtly) to stress mere *difference* rather than *inequality* (1991:243). It operates with the principle of *radical incommensurability* (1991:237) and states that outsiders *fundamentally resist assimilation* (1991:242). In this sense all fundamentalist groups, in that they see an *unbridgeable* gap between their world-view and those of all others, are neo-racist.

³⁵ Habermas (2001) argues that scientific descriptions, since they lack 'awareness of authorship', the awareness of "people who can take initiatives, make mistakes and rectify mistakes", cannot deal with "people who demand an explanation from each other", whose interactions are 'regulated by norms'. Cf also Lawrence 1998:100 on the need to account for 'moods and motivations'.

Homo economicus, humanity circumscribed by any ‘economy’, is anathema to those who insist that honour, commitment and a non-pragmatic communality go beyond systems of interests or mechanistic explanatory frameworks. They assert that to die willingly and bravely – and therefore gladly – is preferable to living in cowardly comfort. This rhetoric must inspire respect in those who have ever *said* ‘No retreat, no surrender’ – and who hope someday to live up to it. “In the crunch, I am not so sure I prefer Max Weber’s image of an iron cage of modernity to the fundamentalist hope to address a new integration beyond differentiations” (Coleman 1992:44; cf Lawrence 1989:244). After adding ‘and the velvet cage of postmodernity’, I would endorse this. We have ‘theorized’ humans to the point where they seem not merely beyond salvation, but hardly worth saving.

Affirmations

Eric Hoffer (1951:89) wrote that fanatical social movements can “rise and spread without belief in a God, but never without belief in a devil”. Fundamentalism requires ‘symbols of evil’ (Hadden & Shupe 1989:112). This may be why Derrida (Borradori 2003:113) says (after typical qualifications) that he chooses against ‘bin Laden’ (used as a synecdoche – Borradori 2003:111), saying that the ‘bin Laden effect’, its actions and discourses “*open onto no future and, in my view, have no future*” (his emphasis).³⁶ He has to choose something that ‘leaves a perspective open to perfectability’, that ‘lets resonate within it an invincible promise’ (2003:114). Pure negation, in a battle based solely on belief in a devil, offers no future. My lukewarm enmity is not qualified friendship, but I prefer to place my affirmations before my negations, my God before my devils.³⁷

How? What can we affirm over against the fundamentalist vision? Clearly not the unbearable sleaziness of politicians – and I do not merely mean Bush and Berlusconi. Nor a purely instrumental reason, which, it is now clear, can be a tool for either liberation or domination.

Two apparently more promising alternatives also seem to fail. Our gymnastic scholarly analyses of power relations (etc.), when they offer no way out, issue in erudite cynicism.³⁸ If the Enlightenment ideal of liberation through education was naïve; the new scholasticism is not even idealistic about its own project. It does not seek to address even the educated elite as a whole, only the circle of ‘doctoral-level’ disciples. After years of scholarship, you attain *bodhi* – till the next batch of knowledge comes off the production line to make yours obsolete.

‘Progressive social movements’ at least try to make a difference, but fundamentalists have long appropriated their rhetoric.³⁹ For their part, progressive social movements often resort to the exclusivist, authoritarian and confrontational rhetoric typical of fundamentalism. Advocacy groups and activists clamour to have their respective ‘*shari’ahs*’ legally imposed and sometimes resort to violence to get their way.⁴⁰ Without consensus as

³⁶ This is not the self-understanding of fundamentalists, who, as Lawrence (1998:90) points out, do not primarily seek a ‘golden past’, but a ‘fiery future’. Here too mere words are insufficient.

³⁷ Buruma & Margalit (2004:125) distinguish between criticism of and dehumanization of enemies. (For the latter, Juergenmeyer (2000:182) uses ‘satanization’). It seems to me that satanization becomes necessary when all affirmations appear to fail.

³⁸ The charge of sterility is often directed at Foucault; see Rosen (1987:188ff); Boone (1989:109f, drawing on Said); Wartenberg (1990:137ff, 193f).

³⁹ Thus Christian Reconstructionists refers to their theology as ‘liberation theology of the right’ (Langemann 2003:61). An abortion clinic bomber, a self-styled fighter against imperialism, compares himself to Bonhoeffer (Juergenmeyer 2000:23ff).

⁴⁰ Was the purism and identity politics of fundamentalists foreshadowed in the infighting within radical groups?

to what constitutes ‘progressive’, we may as well call fundamentalist groups (misguided?) progressive social movements – that is how they see themselves.

A brief return (re-turn) to the two edges, the most sacred and the most mundane, might leave us with clearer heads, if nothing else. Here I impose somewhat on two secular thinkers, Habermas and Derrida, making them say more than they had probably wanted to say.

Much as I believe in a level of shared humanity, I admit that we have no unmediated access to this. Emotions, sexuality or perceptions come to us ‘always already’ encultured. Although our practices strongly suggest that commonality shine through cultural differences, no method allows us to separate a human core from a cultural husk with any degree of certainty.

Habermas (2001) reminds us of the shared – though not coherently ordered – everyday, ruled by a ‘democratically enlightened commonsense’ which owes no allegiance to either religion or science. Both science and religion ‘leave the framework of our everyday knowledge essentially untouched’. Commonsense is indeed fallible, but it is also in Derrida’s sense ‘perfectible’ in that it grows, changes and corrects itself in communication with others.

Habermas (2001) admits that commonsense ‘has many voices’. What he does not admit is that the differences rule out communication ‘*in the public space of more or less good reasons*’ (Borradori 2003: 35, his emphasis). According to him (Borradori 2003:37), “the idea of a self-contained universe of meanings, which is incommensurable with other universes of this type, is an inconsistent concept”. However distorted communication may be in a given instance, the very idea of communication involves the sense of the other as a self in the conversation. It is this ability to enter into conversation that is above all the mark of a shared humanity and the basis of what I call the most mundane.

Commonsense, alias everyday wisdom, is a refraction through different cultures of the shared human condition, a residue of the universal blessing that Westermann talks about. It maintains a distance from both religion and science, though it listens to both. How common or sensible it is in a given case is always debatable.⁴¹ It is *debatable*: springing from and growing through conversation, it remains open to conversation.

Derrida, mostly a maverick among postmodernists, adopts a view that is neither simple ‘anti-foundationalism’ nor the affirmation of a foundational law or order. Though none of our ideas and institutions are perfect, Derrida asserts that some of them – and not others – are *perfectible* and ‘have a future’ (Borradori 2003:111, 113f, 121). The ‘perfecting’ is directed by certain ‘im-possibles’ (Borradori 2003:120, 134) – ‘democracy to come’, justice, unconditional forgiveness, unconditional hospitality. These all lie beyond law and involve a nearly reckless giving of space to the other. Here Derrida seems to present a vision of that which we affirm and cannot but affirm, what inspires and makes possible respect.

Though Derrida remains firmly committed to secularity, one might ask whether justice, hospitality and forgiveness can be the *products* of pure secularity. Is it not so that *at any stage* the purely secular (in politics, culture, etc.) produces and is the product of laws and conceptions of orders? These, being entirely fallible, never yield affirmations that cannot later be withdrawn. In the economy of the secular, otherness itself is a product of prior strategies of ‘othering’. The other who inspires respect and before whom laws evaporate also calls into question ‘the secular’. The incursion of the other (and one might as well

⁴¹ My bet is that a study of (for instance) poems and proverbs from across culture will reveal more similarities than differences and leave commonsense with a better track record than either science or religious dogma.

always write ‘Other’ when this incursion takes place) is not of the *saeculum* but is creative of a new *saeculum*. Even to Derrida, the secular is perfectible only in terms of the sacred.

Then, unavoidable, we return (re-turn) to the space ‘in between’, to politics, society, culture – and their conflicts. With what? First, with the recognition that we have not and cannot bridge the gap. Derrida’s ‘im-possible as an *affirmation*’ (Borradori 2003:134) lies beyond language. This knowledge in itself might protect us against the lures of fundamentalism. Secondly, with a sense that there *is* a gap: the *saeculum* neither closes on itself nor mutates senselessly. It remains at the mercy of a material base and a spiritual superstructure, both intractable to our verbal lures. Finally, those of faith would see in this God’s hands enclosing them from below and above, in blessing and salvation, in materiality and spirituality.⁴² Thus religion itself may heal the diseases of religion (cf Juergenmeyer 2000:238ff).⁴³ For the ineffable we need either very many words or else the humility of silence. A few pat slogans will not do. For the everyday we need everyone, else it becomes everynight.

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⁴² Habermas (2001) introduces one religious term, *creation*, linking well with Westermann’s line of thought.

⁴³ It is perhaps less apt to say, with Soyinka (2004:123), that religion, having given birth to fundamentalism, should now commit a ‘benevolent act of infanticide’.

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