

## The Heart of Fundamentalism

by Tenzin Sherab

Why are people “fundamentalists”? They don’t see themselves that way. It’s a label we give to others whom we fundamentally disagree with. Fundamentalism is in our hearts—all our hearts. Once we recognize that, we can start to come to terms with it.

We all have a trace of de Sade, Genghis Khan, or Hitler in us. And all a touch of Mohammed, Socrates, or Avalokiteshvara. They merely express the extremes of our humanity. If we condemn someone for evil we are, in part, condemning ourselves.

Often, the people who most condemn a fundamentalist group are those who were once members, but have escaped its “clutches.” But what made them join in the first place? Not anger or hate, but the desire for love, devotion, and the search for a better world, a life more meaningful than the usual 9-to-5 drudgery.

“They brainwashed me,” former members sometimes say. “I was told to trust the leaders without question,” “I was told my money would build the new tomorrow.” The message is: Now that I’ve left, I’m all right, but the group I was part of is condemned.

But any group is a whole bunch of I’s. I was a member, I was the one who propagated those views, I was the one who believed, and they are my friends who are still members. Now I’ve changed. But why? And why are these, my erstwhile friends, now the enemy, dangerous fringe elements out to destroy society and everything I stand for?

Whenever I read an alarmist newspaper article, or hear some terrible first-hand account by a “victim” of fundamentalism, I try to answer four questions:

- 1       Who’s labeling whom as fundamentalist, and why?
- 1       Am I seen as fundamentalist by the people I’ve labeled as such?
- 1       What am I going to do about my attitudes; am I simply going to condemn and grow more paranoid,               or reach out compassionately and communicate?
- 1       Why is it that “fundamentalism” produces such a fundamental reaction in me?

Fundamentalism is not something alien, “out there,” to be feared and guarded against. It is something that can well up within any of us, because it results from very human conditions: faith and fear.

In my experience—and I’ve been there, having been both a political and evangelical fundamentalist in my time—fundamentalism begins from a very deep and powerful dissatisfaction with life. Take my story. As a teenager, I perceived the way of

the world as radically wrong. So wrong, I desperately wanted to change it, make it a better place to live. First, I turned towards God, then towards Marxism.

I was young. It was hard to get a job. The people I lived with and identified with were poor. The world was being polluted, not just by carbon monoxide, but by evil, by rich people. Everyone seemed to be against me. Nothing seemed to work for me. I increasingly searched for a more radical answer to my fears and frustrations. Twice, I joined a small group of people who believed they held the right answer, the only answer.

Now, as members of these groups, we didn't see ourselves as a great threat to the world. We saw the world as the great threat to us! We felt marginalized, laughed at, vilified, endangered. These feelings only served to push us further to the extreme and make us more insular and secretive.

It's the same with members of the NRA (National Rifle Association). They believe that Big Government threatens their whole way of life. To "Wise-Use" people (who believe in unrestricted exploitation of natural resources), environmentalists are evil extremists, fundamentalists out to destroy their whole way of life. Christian and Muslim "fundamentalists" sincerely believe the world is in the grip of the Devil and that everything they value is being torn down. To Christians, Muslims seem extreme; to Muslims, Christians, and the Western values they bring with them, seem the real threat.

So "fundamentalists" don't see themselves as particularly extreme. Rather, they see the extent of the threat to themselves as so great, so powerful, that the only answer is an extreme one: a theological state, sectarian violence or holy war. We may not like it, but Libyan bombers or IRA terrorists blowing up civilians in London believe they're the victims, that they're forced to those actions because of the desperate plight of the Palestinians or Catholics in Northern Ireland. This way of thinking is also true of Marxists. They believe in revolution because they see it as the only answer to the terrible problems of poverty and class inequities.

So part of others' "fundamentalism" is, in fact, a reflection, a mirror image, of our own fundamental beliefs, for which we are as answerable as they. To my mind, we all need to make compromises. Christians must be prepared to compromise on their way of life. So must environmentalists, Buddhists, Muslims, the FBI. Part of the answer is to look at our own belief system and question how it is perceived by the people we are labeling.

And another part of the answer is to question precisely why we're labeling them. What right do we have to call anyone a "fundamentalist"? Is that the very problem—we've labeled people who differ from us, and, as part of that labeling process, we've decided they're evil, a terrible threat, to be condemned outright?

Fundamentalism frequently grows out of a feeling of being ignored and despised. It is often a call to arms by people worn down by years of oppression. We have to

examine our role in wearing them down and in continuing their oppression, in not hearing their cries for help.

When the Boer people trekked across southern Africa in their wagon trains, if they were attacked by the Zulu, they would form their wagons into a circle called a laager. This “laager mentality” is at the heart of fundamentalism. “Fundamentalists” feel they’re on a mission to build a holy land, a place of peace and contentment. They are visionaries, often escaping from some sort of hell. Just like the Lutherans and Pilgrims escaping religious persecution in Europe. They were “fundamentalists,” too.

These visionaries see dangers all around them; they feel they’re being attacked from all sides. To defend themselves, they resort to everything from sloganeering to slaughter. Look how the European settlers, usually deeply religious, set out to exterminate the Native Americans, because of the threat they were thought to pose. Fear and misunderstanding led to genocide.

For myself, emerging from my fundamentalist mentality was the result of two trends, one internal, the other external. Internally, I began to find peace, to become happier with the world as I saw it. I began to realize the world’s problems would take a lot longer to solve, and perhaps weren’t as immediately life-threatening as I’d once thought. This was all part of my move towards Buddhism. I felt less need for a vision and less threatened by the visions of others.

But also, I found understanding from the society around me. As a visionary, I needed to be offered a new, more compassionate vision. I needed to be involved, not swept aside. I began to talk to people, to explain my point of view, and to listen to others.

As I emerged from my own cocoon, I realized others could be loving and giving as well. I also had to learn patience. To some extent, I had to accept the defeat of my ideals. While I realized I had to accept compromise, it was the compassion of others that gave me the strength to emerge from fundamentalism, not as a twisted mutant Ninja Turtle, but as what, I hope, is a passably beautiful butterfly.

But many people don’t want to give up their ideals. They feel so endangered, so disempowered, that they have no alternative but to fight back. As long as those in power continue to turn their backs on those without, they will have to face the frustrated explosions of fundamentalism. And now, as I count myself as one of those in power—I have a well-paid job in California, I’m one of the world’s elite—I have to remember what it was like to be disenfranchised, and reach out to understand their position. Fundamentalism is a plight, a plea to be heard, not an evil to be destroyed.

What am I going to do about the impoverishment of Palestinian families? What am I going to do about the spiritual degeneration of society, and the pollution of the planet? What am I going to do about crime and the crisis of morality in the West, the violence on TV, and the ruthless indoctrination of the world into Western cultural values, so that multinational corporations may sell it more consumer goods? How am I going to

reach out my hand to those who turn to Christian or Muslim “fundamentalism”? How am I going to change my life to accommodate theirs?

“Fundamentalists” are visionaries who feel their vision is in dire danger. We need to communicate our vision and listen to theirs. We need to compromise and not fear. We need to have compassion in our hearts and work with the compassion in theirs. v

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