

AMERICAN RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

With perhaps as many as 50 million Americans describing themselves as Religious Fundamentalists, and allegedly almost half again as many calling themselves Evangelical Christians," I decided that I should try to understand better the beliefs by which they profess to live. Like most Americans, I had some exposure to Sunday School Christianity while I was growing up but never made a determined effort to study the Bible in the same "academic" way that, being concerned with Middle Eastern history, I studied the Qur'an. So I have recently tried to fill in this gap in my education. Let me share with you some preliminary findings.

The first thing that struck me was how extraordinarily different were the Old and New Testaments. I think that any outside observer, unless he was told differently before he began to read them, would conclude that they were the texts of separate religions. It is not only that the Old Testament portrays itself as the Holy Book of a single people, the Israelites, whereas the New Testament does not so constrict itself, but that the philosophy of the two appears contradictory. Attempting to bridge this gap, some commentators have said that the God of the Old Testament, Yahweh, is a judge who is intent on warning his people and threatening them with punishments (*Leviticus 26/14-46, Deuteronomy 28/15 ff*) whereas the God of the New Testament lays down moral precepts and focuses not on "justice" but on love. It is, incidentally, the Old Testament that is echoed in the Qur'an; the God portrayed there, Allah, is the stern judge of the Old Testament and some of the most vivid passages of the Qur'an speak of the punishments meted out to those who associated (Arabic: *shirk*) other gods with The God (the literal meaning of Allah) or who killed or drove away the prophets (including Moses, Jesus and various Arabs) sent to them by God.

Apart from the philosophical aspects of the differences between the Old and New Testaments, we know that in the early days of the codification of Christianity, there was a profound split between those who were more influenced by the Judaic traditions embodied in the Old Testament, notably Paul/Saul, and those who opposed them. The most famous today of the latter are the people about whom we know from a collection of documents found in the Egyptian desert at Nag Hammadi. The people who wrote them were purged and mostly exterminated, but periodically over the centuries other groups took up aspects of their beliefs, almost certainly unaware of the original group but driven by their readings of the teachings of Jesus. Overall, however, it was the Judaizing tendency that predominated and survived. It was that tradition that grew into both the Medieval Catholic church and, paradoxically, was adopted by most of the Protestant breakaway sects. Indeed, most of these groups became even more "Judaizing" than the Catholics; they sought to strip away the "accretions" of theologians, most of them of course Catholic, to "purify" their beliefs and to get back to the origins of what they assumed God intended. The followers of Luther and Calvin in Europe and the Puritans and Pilgrims in the New World were the more famous of these groups in Seventeenth century England and America, but there were a profusion of others that split away from these and other dissident sects and established themselves in America in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries.

During his visit to America in 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville was astonished by the diversity of Protestant sects, each of which he observed, “adores the Deity in its own peculiar manner ...there is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America...it must be regarded as the first of their political institutions.” As he traveled around America during his nine-month visit, Tocqueville found that “Although the desire of acquiring the good things of this world is the prevailing passion of the American people...Here and there in the midst of American society you meet with men full of a fanatical and almost wild spiritualism [and] From time to time strange sects arise which endeavor to strike out extraordinary paths to eternal happiness. Religious insanity is very common in the United States.” Tocqueville would have been even more impressed by today’s America with people pouring into megachurches or glued to their sets to give televangelists audience ratings beyond rock stars. But certainly never forgetting the task of “acquiring the good things of this world” each for himself.

So what can we say about these groups in American society? Begin with the Puritans. Their most striking endeavor was their attempt to institutionalize their reading of the Bible in a set of laws, customs and government and to force others to live by their code in their theocratic virtual state, the Massachusetts Bay Colony. They attempted to avoid all compromise and to rigidly enforce the commandments of the Old Testament while paying relatively little attention to the New Testament admonitions on love, tolerance and generosity. They took to heart the injunction (*Leviticus 25/18*: “ye shall do my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them...” That is, they believed that they had to enforce *everything* ordained in the Bible. Since they truly believed that it was the literal word of God, they could not pick and choose among its commandments. Each was obligatory. Yet, no matter how hard they tried, they were unable to carry all the Biblical injunctions into force. And when the first generation of “true believers” passed away, their children and grandchildren heaved a collective sigh of relief and set about dismantling the theocracy of their fathers.

It seems to me that their failure highlights the dilemma of contemporary Fundamentalists as well: just as the conflict between the *letter* of the commandments and the *values* of Seventeenth century Anglo-American society – one is tempted to say the universal tendencies of human nature -- precluded strict adherence initially and ultimately forced a willful if unspoken revision of Biblical injunctions, it is evident that modern Fundamentalists feel the need to pick and chose among commandments, obeying some and neglecting others. I think most would be shocked by the idea that they should actually shape their lives by the ordinances of the Old Testament. Let me illustrate:

Punishment: A number of ritual crimes are to be punished by stoning. Blasphemy is one. (*Leviticus 25/14, 16 & 23*) Does anyone among American Christians today advocate stoning a person to death? If asked, I imagine that most of our fellow citizen would think of this as the ultimate proof of the barbarism of those other Fundamentalists, the Muslims. Yet, there it is, undeniably set forth in the Bible as God’s order.

Apostasy: Allowing one's children to stray from the path of true religion (that is Judaism as defined in the Old Testament) by going over to other faiths, draws the death penalty. (*Leviticus 20/2*). So Jews who convert to Christianity and Christians who become Jews are to be condemned. Does anyone in America today wish to carry out this sentence? The same injunction carries over to Islam, and Muslim Fundamentalists believe it must be effected; American Christian missionaries have always been horrified by this aspect of Islam, but it is also firmly rooted in Christianity.

Ritual: Violations of ritual strictures can result in exile from the nation or community. For example, as set forth in the quaint Elizabethan English of the King James Bible, when a man "hath discovered her fountain, and she hath uncovered the fountain of her blood..." (*Leviticus 20/18*) -- that is. Engaging in sex while the woman has her menstrual period -- results in the two people being driven into exile. Her "flowers" (her menstrual discharge) contaminates everything on which she sits (*Leviticus 15/16*).

Working on the Sabbath draws the death penalty (*Exodus 35/2*). In the first case that came before the Massachusetts Bay Colony's courts on kidnapping Africans into slavery, the charge against the slavers was not kidnap but kidnapping on the Sabbath, a more serious (because Biblical) charge. Do Fundamentalists today wish to enforce this order? It does not appear so.

Lesser crimes: for them, a judge can order up to 40 lashes. Again, this is seen as one of the uglier aspects of Islamic theocracy. I certainly find it so. But, let us admit that it was a common form of punishment both in England in America until recently. Do Christian Fundamentalists feel bound to reinstitute it here? It is clearly obligatory by the words of the Bible. (*Deuteronomy 25/2-3*)

Crimes against deportment: Cursing one's father or mother, engaging in homosexuality (*Leviticus 18/22* and *20/13*), and loose conduct by the daughter of a high priest (*Leviticus 21/9*) draw the death penalty. The latter also by burning.

Social crimes: For example, adultery draws the death penalty (*Leviticus 20/10*). According to all the studies I know, Americans are in mortal danger!

Incest: At least one form of incest draws the ultimate punishment of being burned to death (*Leviticus 20/10*). Other degrees draw the death penalty (*Leviticus 20/11-12*), but not necessarily at the stake. I think most Americans, including Fundamentalists, would today think of burning at the stake as a ghastly memory of the Catholic Inquisition. They are right, but it was practiced by Protestants too. A horrifying response. Yes, but there is a good deal of evidence that the crime is far more common even today than anyone would like to admit. And, devastating to families as it undoubtedly is, there are circumstances when the Bible permits it: to ensure the continuation of a lineage, daughters are allowed to trick their fathers into getting them pregnant by getting them drunk and seducing them. (*Genesis 19/31-36*)

Virginity: The current campaign to get young people to abstain from sex before marriage is certainly encouraged in the Bible. Here the Old Testament and

contemporary social mores are in accord. But, what happens to a young woman who lapses from this standard is rather different. Today, her baby may be discretely put out to adoption while her parent or parents register mild disapproval. It should be quite otherwise according to the Bible. By its orders, when the young woman gets married, she is to be tested. To prove that she is a virgin, her “tokens of virginity,” blood on the sheet on the nuptial bed, should be exhibited to the community. If the woman fails this test, “Then they shall bring out the damsel to the door of her father’s house, and the men of her city shall stone her with stones that she die (*Deuteronomy 22/13-21*) She faces a similar fate if during her engagement she lies with another man: “Then ye shall bring them both out unto the gate of that city, and ye shall stone them with stones that they die.” (*Deuteronomy 22/23-24*)

Aggression among the citizenry: capital punishment is mandated for killing a person. (No distinction between homicide and murder is drawn in *Leviticus 25/17* or *Exodus 21/12*.) Lesser crimes, presumably arising from fist fights, are to be punished “Breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth...” (*Leviticus 25/19-20; Exodus 21/23-25*) If a woman intervenes in a fight, even to try to save her husband, and grabs the “secrets” of the other man, her hand is to be cut off. (*Deuteronomy 25/12*)

Serial punishment: whenever one does wrong, he is not the only one to be punished. *Exodus 34/7* warns that punishment will be inflicted upon his “children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.” An illegitimate child is ritually unclean and beyond the pale surrounding the community although the nature of his birth is hardly his fault. “A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even to his tenth generation shall he not enter into the congregation of the lord.” (*Deuteronomy 23/2*). Given the nature of American frontier society and the immigration into the country of a large portion of our citizenry in circumstances that were not conducive to marriage sacraments, few of us could “enter into the congregation of the lord” today.

Marriage outside the community effectively cuts both spouses off from the community; they cannot eat at the bride’s father’s table (*Leviticus 22/12*). Marriage is legal only within the ethnic community (*Genesis 24/3*); trans-ethnic (and certainly trans-racial) marriage is condemned (*Ezra 9/12* and *Nehemiah 10/30*). Both participants in such a union may be legally killed (*Numbers 25/1-9*). Clearly, American society would be decimated if this rule were enforced.

Slavery: *Leviticus 25/45-46* says that you may enslave the children of strangers who live among you. Others can also be enslaved. For example, a thief who cannot make restitution for what he has stolen should be sold into slavery. (*Exodus 22/2*) However one is enslaved, there is no Biblical basis for abolishing the institution.

Sexual discrimination: if a man seduces a married slave girl, she is to be whipped while he is to pay a small penalty (a sacrificial ram) to the priesthood. (*Leviticus 19/20*). In practical terms, a man is regarded as twice a woman (*Leviticus 26/3-4*). Sexual differentiation must be maintained so no cross dressing, thus presumably today’s women should never wear blue jeans. (*Deuteronomy 22/5*).

Outcasts: Various categories of people whom most of us think should be protected and encouraged to realize their full potential in as meaningful a life as possible – and for whom we have both written laws and created charitable institutions -- are to be ostracized: in the community envisaged in the Old Testament, that means forbidding them from participating in religious observances. Thus, no one with a “blemish” can worship. This category of deprived or sick people includes (*Leviticus* 21/18-21) the blind, the lame, “he that hath a flat nose, or any thing superfluous, or a man that is brokenfooted or brokenhanded or crookbackt, or a dwarf, or that hath a blemish in his eye, or be scurvy, or scabbed, or hath his stones [testes] broken.” Priests are given the task of checking the community weed out the ill in order to ostracize them. (*Leviticus* 13-14)

Animals: curious to the modern ear, if an ox gores a person, it is the ox that is to be stoned to death (*Exodus* 21/28); if a man (or a woman) forces an animal into an act of sex, the person and the animal are both to be put to death. (*Leviticus* 20/15-16)

Much is made in the press today about Muslims growing great bushy beards. To many of us, this is the most evident symbol of Islam. In the immediate aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center in New York, having a beard got an unfortunate Indian Sikh attacked and lynched by an American mob. Beards are not generally favored among us today, but the Old Testament orders believers: “Ye shall not round the corners of your heads, neither shalt thou mar the corners of thy beard.” (*Leviticus* 19/27 and 21/5) That Sikh was more “Biblical” than most of us.

Witches are treated as actual, and the community is told, “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” (*Exodus* 22/18) So what the New England Puritans did in rooting out witches, as they decided some of their neighbors in fact were, was in accordance with Biblical instruction.

As to government, the proper role and attitude of the moral person is obedience and silence: “Thou shalt not...curse the ruler of thy people.” (*Exodus* 22/28) Some Americans, at least, would like to reinstitute this commandment, but it is clearly in opposition to the American Constitution.

It would be fascinating to see the results if a poll were taken among American Fundamentalists today, without, of course, the Biblical references, to see how many of these injunctions would be regarded as just, reasonable, or even enforceable. Or, if enforced, how many of the Fundamentalists would themselves escape draconian punishment.

My hope for the first question – and hunch for the second -- is that the answer would be “few.”

William R. Polk
November 15, 2005