

SECULAR FUNDAMENTALISM

Dylan Evans

In its original sense, the term fundamentalism refers to those religious movements that claim to return to the founding principles of their religion, in contrast to the majority of their fellow believers, who the separatists accuse of being corrupt. According to this definition, the phrase “secular fundamentalism” would be an oxymoron. These days, however, the word is increasingly used in a looser sense, to refer to fanaticism and intolerance of any kind, whether religious or not. And in this sense, it is certainly possible to have such a thing as secular fundamentalism. Indeed, not only is it possible, but it has become, in recent years, an unpleasant reality. In this essay, I will outline what I see as the main features of this secular kind of fundamentalism.

My interest in secular fundamentalism began in 2005, after I wrote a short article for the Guardian in which I criticised some of my fellow atheists, such as Richard Dawkins and Jonathan Miller, for being so hostile to religion (Evans, 2005). Just because one is an atheist, I argued, does not mean that one has to view religion in an entirely negative light. I suggested that atheists could see value in religions by viewing them as works of art – human creations that give wonderful testimony to the remarkable creativity and inventiveness of their creators. Of course they are not literally true – that goes without saying, at least among atheists. But neither is Wagner's Ring cycle literally true, and that doesn't stop me from enjoying it or appreciating its artistic merits.

I did not anticipate the storm of protest that my whimsical little puff-piece would stir up. Within hours of publication, emails started flooding in, and debate started raging on several blogs devoted to atheism and humanism. Most of the responses were wholly negative. Many were downright rude. In fact, the vitriolic nature of some was eerily reminiscent of the kind of insults levelled at non-believers by religious fanatics, or even the fatwas pronounced by hardline muslim clerics. In all my life, I had never experienced such a torrent of religious bigotry. And it all came from self-professed atheists. Even Salman Rushdie derided me (Rushdie, 2005). I would have thought that someone like Rushdie, who has been the target of a real and deadly fatwa, might be more open-minded.

Perhaps I was being naïve, but I had always imagined, prior to this experience, that my fellow atheists were, on the whole, dedicated practitioners of calm, respectful, and rational debate. And yet here it seemed that they were engaging in the very same kind of fanaticism and fundamentalism of which they accused religious believers. It was a sorry spectacle, and I must confess that it almost made me ashamed to call myself an atheist. But it did set me thinking.

Later that year, something happened that would lead to a far more serious row, and which would prove my concerns about secular fundamentalism to be well founded. In September, the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten published a series of cartoons, some depicting the founder of the Muslim religion as a terrorist. Islamic tradition explicitly prohibits visual representations of all their prophets, even favourable ones, so many Muslims saw the cartoons as an attack on their faith and culture. In January 2006, the cartoons were reprinted by a Norwegian newspaper, provoking a wave of protests in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia recalled its ambassador to Denmark, Libya closed its embassy in Copenhagen, and gunmen

raided the EU's offices in Gaza, demanding an apology. The Danish newspaper apologised, but the next day newspapers in France, Germany, Italy and Spain reprinted the caricatures in solidarity with the Danish and Norwegian press. Angry crowds attacked Danish and Norwegian embassies in Damascus, Lebanese demonstrators set the Danish embassy in Beirut on fire, and five people were killed in protests in Afghanistan. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims joined in further demonstrations in Somalia, Iran, Lebanon, and Malaysia.

Why were the cartoons reprinted in France, Germany, Italy and Spain, when it was clear that millions of Muslims found them extremely offensive? The European newspapers claimed they were defending their right to free speech, but this was disingenuous, since even the most secular countries recognise that free speech is not an absolute, and impose certain restrictions such as prohibiting defamation and incitement to violence. The real issue was not free speech but how sensitive we ought to be to the religious sensibilities of others.

Those newspapers that republished the cartoons were implicitly denying any duty to be sensitive to religious sensibilities, and this is a core trait of secular fundamentalism. Other key aspects of secular fundamentalism include:

1. A belief that religion will automatically wither away with the passage of time
2. An implicit assumption that beliefs are voluntary
3. Failure to acknowledge the subjective nature of its own sacred values

I'll refer to the first of these as the thesis of inevitable secularisation, the second as the assumption of voluntary credence, and the third as the selective blindness of ethical relativism. Now I'll examine each of these points in a bit more detail.

1. The thesis of inevitable secularisation

Many nineteenth-century thinkers assumed that that religion would eventually disappear altogether. The gradual process of secularisation, whereby religious creeds, practices and institutions gradually lose their social significance, would culminate in a world based on science and reason. Today, however, this no longer seems credible. The tide is turning, and in some societies religion is becoming more important than ever. In the United States and the Middle East religion is resuming the dominant social and moral role it had in Europe before rise of modern science. Even in Europe, we seem to be witnessing the emergence of what the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas has called "post-secular societies", in which many belief-systems, some religious and some not, compete for followers.

This seems to annoy many humanists and atheists intensely. There seems to be a widespread tendency among people of all creeds and none to think the world would be a better place if everyone agreed with them. Humanists and religious believers alike seem to want to convert the whole world to their own point of view. Yet there seems little prospect of such an eventuality. The world contains a dazzling variety of conflicting and irreconcilable worldviews, and this is probably a permanent feature of human existence. The idea that all rational beings will eventually converge on the same point of view, even though they begin from radically different starting points, is a hopelessly naïve view that only holds good in toy worlds such as that of Bayesian epistemology.

Since diversity of opinion is not likely to disappear any time soon, it would seem rather

unhelpful to view it as a disaster. Besides, as John Rawls has argued, “to see reasonable pluralism as a disaster is to see the exercise of reason under the conditions of freedom itself as a disaster” (Rawls, 1995: xxiv), so it is particularly paradoxical for humanists, who are supposed to value the free exercise of reason, to disparage diversity. Humanists should, rather, view diversity as a primary good. As a humanist myself, there is nothing – not one single thing – that I wish everyone in the world would agree about. Life would be boring if everyone thought the same thing. To my mind, it is the wonderful diversity of opinion that makes it possible to have such interesting conversations.

2. The assumption of voluntary credence

The anger that some humanists and atheists feel towards religious believers (and which they often deny feeling, despite all the evidence) also betrays an implicit assumption that people choose their beliefs. They may not have thought about the matter explicitly, and if challenged to do so, they may deny that they hold this belief, but there can be no other explanation for their anger. It makes no sense to be angry with someone for something he is not responsible for, and people cannot be held responsible for something that they did not freely choose.

Yet the consensus among most philosophers and psychologists today is that belief formation is a largely spontaneous and involuntary process. One may choose to investigate or not investigate a matter, but one cannot choose to adopt a new belief or reject an old one simply as an act of will. There can be no such thing, therefore, as an “ethics of belief”, such that the acceptance of a belief may be judged as ethical or unethical, or a duty to believe certain things but reject other things. Many religious traditions concur on this point. Christianity teaches that faith in god is a gift of the holy spirit, and the Koran states that there can be no such thing as compulsion in religion.

It is ironic, to say the least, that religious traditions agree with modern science on this point, while some humanists do not. Some humanists, for example, argue that we need laws against ridiculing another on the grounds of his race, but no corresponding laws against ridiculing someone on the grounds of his religious beliefs, because race is not voluntary, while religion is.

Even when humanists concede that religion is not entirely voluntary, they may still be tempted to argue for the same distinction – allowing laws against racial hatred, but ruling out laws against religious hatred – on the grounds that religion is mutable, while race is not.¹ Even if people don't always choose their religious beliefs, they do sometimes come to reject those beliefs after rational debate. But it is hard to see why this consideration should carry much weight. In fact, even if beliefs were entirely voluntary, it would be no more acceptable to stigmatise, marginalise or intimidate people for things they have consciously chosen than for things they have not. The nature of the harm remains the same.

Besides, humanists are begging the question by setting up their own value – that of subjecting of every belief to rational criticism – as the arbiter of the debate. In putting such a high value on rational choice of beliefs – or at least, rational revision of beliefs – humanists are assuming precisely what many religious believers dispute. For some people, religion

1 Dolan Cummings, personal communication.

forms such an integral part of their identity that it would be not merely be painful to them to stand apart from their religious beliefs for the purposes of analysis – it would be a subjective disaster. In fact, as I argue in the next section, non-religious people also tend to have such integral beliefs, except that they tend to be less aware of this fact, or less willing to acknowledge it.

3. The selective blindness of ethical relativism

Everyone, even atheists and humanists, has what the psychologist Philip Tetlock calls “sacred values”. Tetlock defines a sacred value as “any value that a moral community implicitly or explicitly treats as possessing infinite or transcendental significance that precludes comparisons, trade-offs, or indeed any other mingling with bounded or secular values” (Tetlock, 2003). He emphasises that sacred values need not be taken by those who hold them to have divine sanction, and hence that atheists and agnostics can and do have sacred values. Common examples of such nonreligious sacred values are racial equality, democracy, justice – and, of course, free speech.

Since they do not believe in God, atheists and humanists cannot appeal to any objective or absolute basis to legitimise their own sacred values. They are, in other words, committed to moral relativism. Indeed, this is precisely what lies behind their calls for religious believers to keep their values to themselves – that is, not to impose their own religious principles on the rest of society. Yet they often fail to see that this is itself a form of imposition, no different in its aspirations to universality than the religious principles they oppose.

Take the following statement by the philosopher A C Grayling, for example, which appeared on the BBC news website in December 2004 as his wish for the forthcoming year:

I would like conservatives and fundamentalists in all religions to accept the principles of pluralism and secularism - by the latter meaning a situation in which religious observance is a private affair wholly separated from the public and political domains.

(Grayling, 2004)

Doesn't Grayling see that this is tantamount to asking religious believers to abandon their religion? An important feature of many religions is that they are not mere private affairs, but make strong claims to regulate the public and political domains. To insist that believers to leave their religion at the door when they enter the arena of political debate is to assert that the sacred values of humanism take precedence over the sacred values of religion. It is therefore distinctly anti-pluralist. Calling for everyone to agree about the supreme importance of pluralism is self-contradictory, as is the insistence that no particular belief should be beyond critical reflection and open to revision – for what about that belief itself?

There is simply no way round this problem. The secular and religious bases for justifying moral prescriptions are fundamentally different, and there is no reason to think these differences result from the fact that one side is less reasonable or well-informed than the other. The two frameworks are incommensurable; they do not have enough in common, in terms of either shared concepts or shared standards, to resolve their differences, and there is no impartial third standpoint, accessible to any reasonable and well-informed person, that

could be invoked to resolve the conflict.

As Slavoj Žižek points out, choice is always a meta-choice, a choice of the modality and grounds of the choice itself:

That is why, in our secular societies of choice, people who maintain a substantial religious belonging find themselves in a subordinate position; if they are allowed to practise their belief, this belief is “tolerated” as their idiosyncratic personal choice; the moment they present it publicly as a matter of substantial belonging, they are accused of “fundamentalism”. What this means is that the “subject of free choice” (in the Western “tolerant” multicultural sense) can emerge only as the result of an extremely violent process of being torn out one's world, being cut off from one's roots.

(Žižek, 2006: 18)

Humanists are often good at identifying the sacred values in others, and pointing out that they are relative, but bad at realising that the same point applies to themselves. Their ethical relativism is subject to a kind of selective blindness, according to which everyone's moral beliefs are relative except their own. Just like religious believers, many humanists react with moral outrage when they observe someone who dares even to *analyse* – let alone dispute – one or more of their sacred values. Tetlock describes moral outrage as a composite psychological state that subsumes cognitive reactions (such as attributing wicked motives to deviant thinkers), emotional responses (such as anger and contempt for deviant thinkers), and actions (such as ostracising and punishing the deviant thinkers). In their arguments with religious believers, humanists often react not like intuitive scientists seeking to understand causal relations, but as intuitive moralists/theologians struggling to protect sacred values from secular encroachments (Tetlock, 2003). They accuse religious believers of intolerance and criticise them for taking offence, yet display similar intolerance and take offense just as readily. Worse, they take offense at the idea that others take offense, betraying a peculiarly self-contradictory form of hypocrisy.

In other words, many humanists are guilty of a secular form of fundamentalism that is not very different from the religious fundamentalism they oppose. When two opposed fundamentalisms meet, we get something very like the clash of civilisations envisaged by Samuel Huntington (Huntington, 1996), though it would be more accurate to borrow Tariq Ali's expression, and talk about a “clash of fundamentalisms” (Ali, 1993). This was what happened in the row over the cartoons. The row would not have escalated into violence if secular newspaper editors had not engaged in the tit-for-tat gesture of republishing the offending cartoons.

Conclusion

The rise of religious fundamentalism in the Middle East and in the USA has been accompanied by a growing mood of intolerance among humanists and secularists towards expressions of religious faith. This intolerance represents a kind of secular fundamentalism that is arguably even worse than the religious fundamentalism it opposes. It is worse because humanist fundamentalism is not even logically consistent. There is no ultimate authority – no divine lawgiver – to which humanists can appeal to sanction their moral principles, and so they must accept some form of moral relativism. So when they seek to impose their moral

principles on others, or treat them as absolutes, they are not only being hypocrites; they are being inconsistent too.

As Frank Furedi has argued, secular fundamentalism is particularly evident in reactions to religious films. First there was the controversy provoked by Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004, and in 2005 *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* was bitterly condemned by liberal critics for its religious content. Furedi is rightly suspicious of the motives behind these denunciations of films with a religious message, and adds:

Such fervour reminds me of the way that reactionaries in the past policed Hollywood for hints of blasphemy or expressions of 'Un-American values'. Replacing the zealotry of religious intolerance with a secular version is hardly an enlightened alternative.

(Furedi, 2006)

But Furedi himself seems to fall prey to the same lack of imagination that underlies secular fundamentalism when he writes that “in Gibson's vision Jesus is reduced to little more than a lump of meat, the victim of whippings and abuse whose physical suffering is shown in gruesome detail. It is far from uplifting.” Such a description betrays the purely secular viewpoint from which Furedi is writing. I too reacted in a similar way when I first saw the film. Indeed, I had to stop the DVD at the point where Jesus was being whipped, as I could not bear to see such bloody violence. It seemed so gratuitous, and it felt wrong to watch a man being tortured.

But then I realised that, to a Christian viewer, this was not simply “a man being tortured”. To a Christian, this was the Son of God, suffering to redeem our sins. And I recalled what that great humanist, David Hume, had to say about appreciating works of art:

We may observe, that every work of art, in order to produce its due effect on the mind, must be surveyed in a certain point of view, and not be fully relished by persons, whose situation, real or imaginary, is not conformable to that which is required by the performance.

(Hume, 1757)

In viewing Gibson's film from my own, secular viewpoint, I had been like the man who, in Hume's words, “obstinately maintains his natural position, without placing himself in that point of view, which the performance supposes.” Hume condemns this lack of imagination in no uncertain terms:

If the work be addressed to persons of a different age or nation, he makes no allowance for their peculiar views and prejudices; but, full of the manners of his own age and country, rashly condemns what seemed admirable in the eyes of those for whom alone the discourse was calculated. [...] By this means, his sentiments are perverted; nor have the same beauties and blemishes the same influence upon him, as if he had imposed a proper violence on his imagination, and had forgotten himself for a moment. So far his taste evidently departs from the true standard; and of consequence loses all credit and authority.

(Hume, 1757)

Hume is particularly keen to point out the relevance of such a principle to religious art:

On this account, all the absurdities of the pagan system of theology must be overlooked by every critic, who would pretend to form a just notion of ancient poetry; and our posterity, in their turn, must have the same indulgence to their forefathers. No religious principles can ever be imputed as a fault to any poet
(Hume, 1757)

So, taking Hume at his word, I proceeded to watch *The Passion of the Christ* again, from the beginning, and to “impose a proper violence on my imagination” while doing so. I endeavoured, that is, to see it from a Christian point of view. It was quite hard at first. But as I grew accustomed to this alien perspective, the film began to affect me in a completely different way. With my Christian hat on, so to speak, I no longer saw a pointless act of torture, but a beautiful act of redemption. And instead of feeling repelled by the brutality, I was moved to tears by this act of divine love.

The experience did not turn me into a Christian. When the film ended (for I saw it through to the end this time) I took off my Christian hat, and put my atheist one back on. But I had gained something in that temporary holiday from my own belief-system. I had become aware of how different things seem from a religious point of view. I wish more of my fellow humanists would try to do the same.

www.dylan.org.uk

References

Ali, T. (1993) *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity*, London: Verso.

Evans, D. (2005) ‘The 21st century atheist’, *The Guardian*, 2 May 2005.

Furedi, F. (2006) “The curious rise of anti-religious hysteria” Spiked Online <http://www.spiked-online.com/articles/0000000CAF37.htm> – Accessed on 25 February 2006.

Grayling, Anthony C. (2004) “A wish for 2005”, BBC News Online, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/4117901.stm> – Accessed on 25 February 2006.

Hume, D. (1757) “Of the standard of taste”

Huntington, S. P. (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon & Schuster.

Rawls, J. (1995) *Political Liberalism*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Rushdie, S. (2005) “Just give me that old-time atheism!”, *Toronto Star*, 23 May 2005.

Tetlock, P.E., Kristel, O., Elson, B., Green, M., and Lerner, J. (2000). The psychology of the unthinkable: Taboo trade-offs, forbidden base rates, and heretical counterfactuals. *Journal of*

Personality and Social Psychology, 78, 853-870.

Zizek, S. (2006) "Our cherished friend Liberty reveals herself as a naked lie" *The Times Higher Educational Supplement* 24 March 2006 pp.18-19.