

THE FUNDAMENTALIST'S MIND

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When calamity struck the Twin Towers on Sept. 11th, I was away on a remote mountain ranch in Colorado. No electricity, no TV, only a battery-opped radio on the blink, tuned to the Reservation's fading NPR station. For a week, I listened to my neighbors' reactions. What struck me most about those was their muted, matter-of-fact, coherent and yet utterly personal cast: *Them guys* didn't hit New York, they hit us. All of us, Indian, Spanish and Anglo alike. We were all in their gunsights now, together. So we had better wake up, get real, find our bearings--and get things done. Meticulously, tenaciously. Together.

For the last three weeks, I have been listening to the loose talk emanating from my University and getting increasingly mystified by the utter incoherence of what I hear, and by its supreme detachment from reality, leastwise as I know it. What I have been hearing can be divided into four compatible creeds.

One: "Turn the other cheek". Like Christ, like Gandhi, like Martin Luther King. For peace is a supreme, overriding value and must be maintained at all costs. I listen, and I wonder if it would be in good taste to remind my learned colleagues about some of the other practitioners of this ancient doctrine: the 50,000 Huguenots on St. Bartholomew's day in 1572; the 1 million Armenians on Mousa Dag in 1915; the 6,000,000 European Jews in the 1940s; the 600,000 Rwandan Ba-Tutsi in 1994. They all turned the other cheek.

I am likewise tempted, sorely, to jiggle my learned colleagues' chain about what this world would have been like if we had all turned the other cheek to Hitler; to Tojo; to Stalin. Some of the people who didn't never had the luxury of a rich father, a safe Ivy League haven, or the right exculpatory ideology when they were called to serve. Poor slobs, it never occurred to them they had a choice. They just up and went, and we are eternally in their debt.

Two: "Maintain all civil liberties at all costs, come what may". We all love our liberties, but liberty on rare occasions must be tempered with other principles equally vital to our survival. The dead, wherever their poor souls may come to rest, seem to be conspicuously deprived of all liberty.

Three: "Discuss all available options in public, *ad nauseam*--a national teach-in--before we take any action". Terrific, and let Osama Bin-Laden, al Qaeda and the Taliban watch it all on CNN.

Four, and perhaps most disturbing: "We regret the tragedy, but we deserve it; for we have provoked the poor murderous buggers, the dear exterminating angels, with our rotten foreign policy and our support of Israel". What disturbs me most about this last one is how profoundly detached it is from who *them guys* are and what really ails them. That is, how utterly wide it falls of the Fundamentalist's mind-cast.

So, let us refresh our collective memory about what drives the Fundamentalists bonkers, what really ails them--be they Christian, Jewish, Hindu or Moslem. What drives them to a pitch of exterminatory wrath is not what we do, but what we *are* and what we stand for:

- our addictive freedom
- our anarchic civil liberties
- our confusing diversity
- our free-wheeling commerce
- our staunch separation of church and state
- the 18th Century's Enlightenment
- our Humanism, secular and otherwise

- our science, founded on doubt and skepticism; and yes, including Darwin
- our women's right to go free, to work, to choose; and yes again, to be beautiful in public

To our culture of restless inquiry, reality is complex and truth is contingent--on the presently-available evidence, on the currently-defensible perspective. More facts and a more profound theory erode our truth, sooner or later, again and again. To the Fundamentalist, reality is simple, a searing vision, clear as a bell and governed by few immutable principles; truth is manifest and eternal, beyond doubt, beyond revision.

Above all, the Fundamentalist's truth is cast in the harsh cement of Scripture, in articles of faith, from here to eternity. To question, to doubt, to change one's mind, are worse sins than fornication or adultery (which may be confessed and forgiven).

What worries me most about my learned colleagues, I suppose, is how much they remind me of the Fundamentalist. How adept they seem to be at reducing enormous complexities to shining, eternal, single principles. How little they are inclined to change their minds. Like my ex-teacher Noam Chomsky, the pied piper of hectoring self-righteous dissent, they seem to have been frozen in time, still raging against the futility of Vietnam, the ubiquity of the CIA, the evil Military, the oppressive Government, the corrupting Media, the Molloch of Capitalism. The pantheon of their enemies, like that of the Fundamentalist's, is eternal and immutable. And just as inherently evil. Great Satan incarnate.

There is nothing all that novel about Fundamentalists. The 6th Century BC sage Heraclitos of Ephesos pegged them rather neatly:

They raise their voices at stone idols
As a man might argue with his doorpost,
Having understood so little of the Gods.

- (fragment 126)

All this is not to suggest that I like everything my government does, or that our foreign policy has always been immaculate. Just for the record, I had protested our sorry adventure in Vietnam since 1954, and have supported the right of the Palestinians to a state of their own ever since before I can remember. But seeing as how we are under the gun, and all in it together in a complex and fog-shrouded world, the least one would expect of learned folk who are paid to think is a modicum of plain old Aristotelian common sense.

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