



A RESPONSE TO ROBERT M. YOUNG'S 'FUNDAMENTALISM AND TERRORISM'

Barry Richards

Written as it was just after 9/11, this essay by Bob Young vividly captures the response (then and now) of many people in the West – and specifically those in psychoanalytically-minded intellectual communities – to that world-changing event. It points to the fundamentalist mindset as the executive agent of terror. It puts al-Qaeda in its context of Wahabi fundamentalism, but also examines two essentially American types of fundamentalist violence – ‘Patriot’ militia groups and racist lynch mobs – and so locates the problem squarely in a universal potential for violence. Moreover, it draws ideas from the heart of psychoanalytic understanding to offer an account of how, and why, fundamentalist hatreds incubate in the mind – as defensive responses to catastrophic anxieties and phantasies of annihilation.

The essay offers its author’s typical combination of rich learning with sharp personal observation, much of the latter from his upbringing in the mid-twentieth century Bible Belt of the USA. Perhaps that kind of milieu, in its saturation with dogma and a sense that violence is never far away, is in some ways a better preparation for being a global citizen in the twenty-first century than growing up in a milder culture where less of human nature is on display. One poignant autobiographical tableau caught this reader’s attention, that of the earnest young student from Dallas patiently pointing out to his relatively liberal professor that every word in the bible was true, and meeting, it seems, a patient and respectful response. Would that all such clashes of culture were conducted with such civility and open-ness to learning.

That they are not points indirectly to what I would see as the one area overlooked in Young’s stimulatingly panoramic observations. This neglected area is that of individual personality. Why do some people become terrorists while others with just the same socio-political experiences do not? If, as many commentators on Islamist terror have argued, like those quoted in Young’s essay, that terrorism is a ‘dragon’s teeth harvest’ from seeds sown by the injustices which the USA delivers to the rest of the world, why are not all those suffering from the injustices contributing to it, and why is it not led by those individuals or groups suffering the most? And why should the same phenomenon of fundamentalist terror emerge inside American society itself, and moreover not particularly amongst those there who suffer from its internal distribution of injustice?

These questions do not challenge the basic idea that global inequalities and indignities are essential in the mix that leads to terrorist violence, but they do demand that another necessary condition is added to the explanation. This is that there are individuals whose emotional development disposes them to enact violence – for reasons that may be unrelated to, or are only very indirectly related to, current or recent geopolitical factors. And it may be right to see this violence as against ‘civilisation’, indeed as deathly (though Gandhi’s observation quoted by Young remains painful). Back in the immediate aftermath of 2001 it was perhaps more plausible that terrorism was simply a response to immiseration for which the ‘West’ was culpable. In the years since, the evidence has grown that involvement in terrorism is often associated with psychological damage and instability, and not infrequently with other criminal activity.

In any case, Young’s insistence that all forms of fundamentalism must be identified and addressed reframes the problem, moving us away from a West vs Islam(ism) frame to one which does not have a ready, media-friendly handle, but which is about fundamentalist vs non-fundamentalist mindsets. In psychoanalytic terms, as he points out, we can approach this through the concepts of paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, but this is only a starting point since our routine oscillations into and out of the P/S position do not in themselves lead us into solidified and murderous fundamentalist creeds. A particular depth of terror and strength of destructiveness must also be involved. While clarifying the nature and origins of those factors calls for a great deal more psychosocial study, the starting point of seeing fundamentalism as a trans-cultural and unconscious state of mind is helpful. While the concept of fundamentalism originated in relation to religion (as Young reminds us, in American Christianity), and is most frequently applied to religious dogmas, the basics of it as a state of mind – a radically split world-view, and a desire to create and inhabit a purified world – do not intrinsically require religious precepts, and may find conscious expression in any number of political ideologies (not least in Marxism) and in other secular philosophies.

While a fundamentalist regime must be inherently authoritarian, as an individual state of mind fundamentalism may not necessarily generate support for authoritarianism, or any other sort of regime. An individual’s belief in the absolute primacy and power in life of the forces identified in ancient Chinese philosophy as yin and yang will not in itself have any political consequences. That may not count as fundamentalism, but even if the definition is restricted to worldviews which split absolutely between good and evil, fundamentalism may still assume benign or quietist forms, unless it is recruited to or gives rise to a political agenda. While the most prominent and toxic forms of contemporary fundamentalism may see a resistance to the globalisation of liberal values as their mission, there are other fundamentalisms with orientations which are not necessarily political, e.g. towards ‘Nature’, or particular visions of family life. The key functional point for the individual is that the idealised side of the split must provide some image of purification, safety or escape, or some object of identification which will offer pseudo-containment for the anxiety which is driving the person into splitting. The key practical point for society is whether this defensive functionality will eventuate in conflict and violence by demanding attacks on whoever or whatever represents the denigrated side.

So while Young sees fundamentalism as linked intrinsically to anti-modern attitudes, we might take one lesson of his essay, with its diverse case studies and its strong psychoanalytic base, to be that fundamentalism comes in many socio-cultural forms, not only regressively religious, and that the most important thing is for us to understand how and why it can become a vehicle for the expression of hateful attacks on others. How does malignant narcissistic grandiosity take the wheel of this vehicle, or how is it captured by an aggressively paranoid vision of ‘them’? Young’s work in and around *Free Associations* and Free Association Books has been of great influence in leading us towards psychosocial questions of that sort. Given the roots of fundamentalism which he observes in the universal paranoid-schizoid state of mind, we are not going to wipe it out, but we might, with more attention to the individual, *psycho*-dimensions of the psychosocial, be able to understand more about how it escalates into toxic politicised forms.

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