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Being Tolerant in an Intolerant Age: Fundamentalism in the Abrahamic Faiths

As many of you know, I graduated from seminary and became a minister only in the last couple of years. Many of my relatives and friends -- who've known me for a long time -- have been befuddled by this step. Most of these folks have no religious or spiritual connection, and they often send me articles and books that they think will be provocative. The book they most commonly bring up is *The End of Faith*, by Sam Harris. Harris's book has also been the subject of discussion in the long-standing book group that includes some members of this Fellowship who live in and near Sonora. The book provides a good entry point into our discussion today of fundamentalism and how we UUs can remain tolerant in an age of intolerance. Does it make any sense to continue our path of religious pluralism when there seem to be so many people who believe that their faith is the only true faith and that it is perfectly OK to kill you if you don't believe as they do?

Harris takes on all religious belief, but he focuses on the three Abrahamic faiths, and especially Islam. He argues that religious faith is by its nature both intolerant of other views and incompatible with reason. Here I quote:

It is time we recognized that all reasonable men and women have a common enemy. It is an enemy so near to us, and so deceptive, that we keep its counsel even as it threatens to destroy the very possibility of human happiness. Our enemy is nothing other than faith itself.ⁱ

Although Harris recognizes that exclusivism and intolerance exist within Christianity and Judaism, he directs most of his argument at Islam. "We are at war with Islam," he claims:

It may not serve our immediate foreign policy objectives for our political leaders to openly acknowledge this, but it is unambiguously so. It is not merely that we are at war with an otherwise peaceful religion that has been hijacked by extremists. We are at war with precisely the vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslims in the Koran and further elaborated in the literature . . .ⁱⁱ

Here, I believe, Harris manifestly overstates his case and is unfair to Islam. He trots out the arguments that are often made in the West that Islam is a religion of conquest and that the principle of *Jihad* obligates all Muslims to impose Islamic rule by violence. I assumed that Harris had done his research well and would cite many scholars of Islam for this point, but once I looked through his bibliography, I realized that he did not in fact consult many leading authorities on Islam. He places primary reliance on Bernard Lewis -- who formerly taught at my alma mater -- but who is and has been an unabashed apologist for Western colonialism in the Middle East and who takes a distinctly "us" versus "them" tone in all of his writing about Islam. That's why I brought along two highly-regarded books by Islamic scholars,ⁱⁱⁱ and why I note Harris's failure to consult American scholars who take a much more sympathetic view of Islam, such as

Frederick Denny^{iv} and John Esposito,^v to say nothing of the excellent work of Karen Armstrong.^{vi}

As Seyyed Nasr points out, the term *Jihad* means “to strive” or to “exert effort” and this striving and effort are understood to be part of the path to God -- *Allah*. In this sense, all life might be said to be *Jihad*, because for Muslims life is a striving to live according to the will of God, to exert oneself to do good and to oppose evil.^{vii} Although a violent, military form of Jihad has been espoused by Islamist extremists, such as the Wahhabists in Saudi Arabia, and Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, and Al Qaeda, it is simply incorrect to claim – as Harris does -- that violent *jihad* is a central tenet of Islam.

Harris sees little or no possibility of compassion, tolerance, or interfaith dialogue, especially where Islam is concerned. Given what he feels to be this unalterable intolerance, he points to the dangers posed by the possibility that religious extremists will get their hands on nuclear weapons and use them against those who don't share their beliefs. To quote Harris again:

If history is any guide, we will not be sure where the offending warheads are or what their state of readiness is, and so we will be unable to rely on targeted, conventional weapons to destroy them. In such a situation, the only thing likely to ensure our survival may be a nuclear first strike of our own . . . it may be the only course of action available to us, given what Islamists believe.^{viii}

Obviously, this is serious stuff, and very, very scary. It is a provocative book and a disturbing one. I recommend it, not because I agree with everything Harris says, but because he raises some important points that we need to consider. He catalogues at some length the many barbarous acts that have been carried out in the service of religion, including many horrors from the Bible and the Qur'an. And he is surely correct in claiming that there are millions of people around the world – in a variety of faiths – who believe that their religion is the only true religion, their God the only true God, their path the only way to “salvation.”

Harris aims particular scorn at what he terms religious “moderates,” (a group in which he would almost certainly include us):

While moderation in religion may seem a reasonable position to stake out, in light of all that we have (and have not) learned about the universe, it offers no bulwark against religious extremism and religious violence. From the perspective of those seeking to live by the letter of the texts, the religious moderate is nothing more than a failed fundamentalist

Religious moderation, insofar as it represents an attempt to hold to what is still serviceable in orthodox religion, closes the door to more sophisticated approaches to spirituality, ethics, and the building of strong communities.^{ix}

Harris also argues that what drives faith-based religion is fear of death and the desire to live forever. “Without death,” he says, “the influence of faith-based religion would be unthinkable.”^x Death is a constant in the lives of all us. We and everyone we know is bound to die – and Harris pins much of the impetus towards religious faith on the promise that religion will enable us to escape death.

For generations, Unitarians and Universalists have believed that it is not only possible, but necessary, to combine faith and reason. We have also, of course, believed

in religious tolerance, going back at least as far as the reformation in Europe. So, we might agree with Harris on the need for reason in the public discourse, even when it comes to faith, but I think we would take issue with his blanket condemnation of all religious belief as basically superstition. Indeed, it seems to me that Harris himself strays into the type of behavior he condemns by implicitly characterizing the struggle he perceives as one of “us against them” -- of those who believe in reason and science as being “right” and those who have a religious faith as being “wrong.” But as the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai said: “Where we are right, no flowers can grow.”^{xi} When we are absolutely sure of our “rightness,” there is no possibility of real conversation with those we perceive as being “wrong.”

We UUs would agree with Harris, I think, about the danger of basing religious faith on belief in an afterlife. UUs like to say that we believe in “life before death,” and we devote little or no time to focusing on matters of sin and salvation, heaven and hell. A belief in life before death tends to lead us away from an exclusivist religious view – i.e., that we are the only ones who know how to get to heaven. It also tends to give us a focus on matters of justice and ethics in this life.

So, I think there are areas where we might agree with Harris, and probably some areas where most of us would disagree with him. But what about his central argument: that there are many people out there who believe that they have the exclusive claim to religious truth -- and that such people are dangerous, especially in an age when weapons of mass destruction are all too readily available? Do we go too far in our tolerance for diverse religious beliefs, so that we fail to critique those things that really deserve to be criticized? I have to confess that Harris’s description of religious moderates makes me wince a bit. Is it possible that we are so accepting of each person’s right to believe as he or she chooses that we are wimps when it comes to opposing truly malignant points of view?

Well, this brings us to the issue of “fundamentalism.” I agree with Harris that there are groups within most of the major religions that are extremist, exclusivist, that may wish to do harm to those who don’t believe as they do. Where I disagree with Harris is that such extremist, exclusivist views are a basic and essential part of religious faith in any major religious tradition, including Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Within these faith traditions, however, are movements that are often described as “fundamentalist,” and that in any case would be considered to be extremist, perhaps even fanatical, in their devotion to a particular set of beliefs.

Fundamentalism, as such, is a relatively modern development. The term arose among American Protestants in the early 20th Century. These fundamentalists distinguished themselves from more liberal Protestant churches; they wanted to go back to basics, to reemphasize what they believed to be fundamentals of the Christian tradition. They identified with a literal reading of scripture and acceptance of certain core concepts, and they deplored what they perceived to be increasing secularism.^{xii}

The term “fundamentalism” has come to be applied to reforming movements within most of the world’s religions. As Karen Armstrong points out, however, it is an imperfect term for describing a series of movements that have taken extreme stands within various religions. Although imperfect, the term is probably here to stay. When I use it here, I am primarily referring to movements that are extreme in their exclusivism; that is in their belief that they and only they have a claim on religious “truth,” and that they are

engaged in a struggle to the death with those who believe differently. Armstrong identifies several commonalities among fundamentalist movements: (1) they are embattled forms of spirituality, emerging in response to a perceived crisis; (2) they are engaged in a conflict with secularist policies and beliefs that they see as hostile to religion itself; (3) they see this struggle as a cosmic war between good and evil; and (4) they fear annihilation and try to fortify their identity by selectively retrieving certain doctrines and practices of the past. Fundamentalism certainly seems to be a response to modernism and to the changes brought about by the enlightenment, and an attempt to revert back to what was perceived to be a simpler time.

Fundamentalisms take different forms. For Christians, fundamentalism tends to take the form of a preoccupation with doctrine and literal interpretation of scripture, both Old and New Testaments. For Jews, a predominant form has been Zionism – the emphasis on a literal interpretation of Torah in which God promised the land to the Hebrew people, and thus gave the Jews legal title to Palestine. We tend to think of Zionism as a movement that began after the 2nd World War to create a homeland for Jews who had survived the holocaust. But the movement actually began in the 19th Century with leaders such as Theodor Herzl, although it had a hard time gaining traction within Orthodox Judaism.^{xiii}

For Muslims, the term fundamentalism does not quite fit, although it is commonly used today. Muslims pretty much believe in a literal reading of the Qur'an in any case, so fundamentalist movements have little to do with reverting to earlier scriptural readings. Islamic fundamentalism has tended to take the form of movements within Islam to reform and purify the practice of the faith. The one group that might legitimately be called Islamic fundamentalists is the Wahabbi movement in Saudi Arabia, begun during the 1700s by ibn Abd al-Wahhab and ever since associated with the Saudi ruling family.^{xiv} Wahhabism is strongly, and at times violently, opposed to movements within Islam such as the Sufis and Shiites; it is radically ultraconservative and puritanical in terms of faith. Wahhabism needs to be distinguished from Islamic political movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, started in Egypt in the 1920s by Sayyid Qutub and others. We see examples of the Islamist political movement today in groups like Hezbollah and Hamas. These movements tend to see Islam as a politicizing movement as well as a religious one – to eschew the notion of separation of church and state. Thus, they are opposed to a strict secularism; they attempt to unite a person's spiritual and worldly duties -- an individual's duty to the community is indistinguishable from his or her duty to God. It's easy to see how this view might come into conflict with western notions of democracy and consumer capitalism, both of which tend to depend on secularism.

In the cultures we are discussing here, fundamentalists are not in the majority; quite the contrary – they are usually fairly small minorities. The problem is that they tend to exert an influence far beyond their numbers. We can certainly see that in this country right now. And we can see it in Israel and Palestine. Numerous polls show that a great majority of both Israelis and Palestinians want peace and would be happy to co-exist side-by-side with each other, would be willing to accept the other's existence as a given. But a small percentage of extremists on each side are unwilling to accept such a vision. Extreme Zionists, especially among the settler population, are determined to drive out the Palestinians so that Israel controls everything from the Jordan River to the Sea. And a similarly small percentage of Palestinians are determined that Israel should not exist

and that that same land should be under Palestinian control. The irony is that the fundamentalists of both sides often seem to have more in common with each other than they do with their co-religionists. And, they will continue to drive the agenda until the majorities of both populations can somehow manage to take control.

So where does all that leave us? Does our commitment to tolerance and religious pluralism require us to accept absolutist and extremist religious beliefs? Well, one of our important ideals has always been a commitment to reason, to the search for truth, rather than to claim that we have a monopoly on the truth. I think our commitment to reason empowers us to be critical of absolutism and exclusivism; to challenge claims by any group that they have exclusive access to religious truths. In doing so, however, we need to be constantly aware of the dangers of polarization, of falling into the “us versus them” trap.

In her book, *The Battle for God*, Karen Armstrong argues that fundamentalism is not going to go away and that we need to try to understand it as best we can.^{xv} She writes:

If fundamentalists must evolve to a more compassionate assessment of their enemies in order to be true to their religious traditions, secularists must also be more faithful to the benevolence, tolerance, and respect for humanity which characterizes modern culture at its best, and address themselves more empathetically to the fears, anxieties, and needs which so many of their fundamentalist neighbors experience but which no society can safely ignore.^{xvi}

We live in a culture that does not easily accommodate the spiritual. Science and reason have played their part, and so has global consumer capitalism. People throughout the world are taught that happiness lies in the acquisition of money, power, and things, that making a profit is the bottom line. Is it any wonder that fundamentalists of all the major faith traditions deplore this materialism and long to put God back into the world? Many of us feel similarly disenchanting with this consumerist culture. I know I do. Our solution would not be to demonize gay people and to attempt to control the sexuality of others, but are there ways that we might begin to address people’s hunger for meaning and purpose beyond the acquisition of material things?

Armstrong also points out that the theologies and ideologies of fundamentalist movements are rooted in fear. And, as we have experienced in the years since 9/11, policies based on fear simply become self-fulfilling. The more we act out of fear, the more we turn to violence to get the upper hand, and that violence simply begets more violence. So, along with understanding the extremists, I would argue that our primary mission must be to put forward our own vision of a world that is based on hope, not fear, a vision of a world that appeals to the best in human beings, not their worst. Religious traditions have always contained these two strands within them – one based on fear, violence, vengefulness, and the other based on hope, love, and compassion. In our concern over the rise of extremist movements, we can’t lose sight of this positive, hopeful vision of a world that can be.

There is a movement beginning to take place – a movement to bring this spirit of love, hope, and compassion back into the public dialogue. And I believe we need to be part of this effort. Jim Wallis is a Christian evangelical who argues for a radical redefinition of the issues that progressive religious people might bring into the public dialogue – an emphasis on eradicating poverty, promoting nonviolence, and caring for

the earth, instead of obsessing about sexual behavior. Cornel West, a professor of religion at Princeton, argues for the rejuvenation of a democratic tradition that would transcend political parties and voting and would bring people and their values back into the public discourse. And Rabbi Michael Lerner, founder of Tikkun magazine and the Tikkun Community, argues that the way to take our country back from the fear-based religious right is to revive the Biblical traditions of love, caring, and generosity. He calls this tradition "the Left Hand of God," in his new book by that name.

I don't have time today to do more than give passing mention to this new movement. Next month, though, on the first Sunday in April, in Sonora, I intend to talk about these attempts to bring these "left hand of God" principles back into the public conversation. It seems to me that Unitarian Universalists have an important role to play in beginning to turn our country and our world away from fear and towards a worldview based on hope and love. I hope you will join me three weeks from now in Sonora as we continue this discussion. Thanks for inviting me here today. Blessed be! And Amen!

ⁱ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, 131.

ⁱⁱ *Id.*, 109.

ⁱⁱⁱ Reza Aslan, *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* (New York: Random House) 2005; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam* (San Francisco: HarperCollins) 2002.

^{iv} See, e.g., Frederick M. Denny, *An Introduction to Islam*, 3rd ed. (New York: Prentice Hall) 2005)

^v John Esposito and John O. Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam* (New York: Oxford) 2001.

^{vi} Karen Armstrong, *Islam* (New York: Modern Library) 2000; *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* (San Francisco: HarperCollins) 1993.

^{vii} Nasr, 256-258.

^{viii} *Id.*, 129.

^{ix} *Id.*, 20-21.

^x *Id.*, 39.

^{xi} Quoted in Amos Oz, *How to Cure a Fanatic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 2006.

^{xii} Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Ballantine) 2000, xii.

^{xiii} *Id.*, 149, 258-262.

^{xiv} Reza Aslan, *No God but God*, (New York: Random House) 2005, 241-248.

^{xv} Armstrong, 368-371.

^{xvi} *Id.*, at 371.