

Going beyond religious fanaticism (Elder Efraim Vatopaidinos)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Religious fanaticism is defined as the absolute rule of the holy over the secular, even through violence. Nowadays the term 'religious fundamentalism' prevails over the Greek equivalent: 'religious fanaticism'. Even though religious fanaticism was present from the birth of ancient religions, 'fundamentalism' as a term has been established in the beginning of the 20th Century and referred to the reaction against the secularization of religion.

Particularly in the middle of the 1860's two basic principles of fundamentalism are articulated: the expectations of the Adventists and the belief to the god-inspired bible to the letter. The Adventists, mainly English Protestants, advocated that Christ will come again in person to establish His thousand- year rule on earth for the chosen ones. At the same time strong conservatism forces were strongly opposing the literary and historical critique of biblical studies and upheld the idea that the bible was god-inspired and was correct to the letter. Eventually 'fundamentalist' as a term is established in 1920 and was used to describe 'those doing battle, loyal to the Fundamentals'.



Extreme fundamentalism has evolved among the Muslims, mostly as a reaction against Islam mingling with the secular spirit of the west. A first testimonial is derived from the life of Mohammed, himself. After his departure from Mecca towards Medina (622Bc) and in order to help his small community survive, Mohammed raided caravans and the fellahin in the desert. The use of force enabled him to secure vital supplies, rare in the desert, but also to increase the number of his followers.

The Muslims' basic duty is to launch a holy war against the contamination of their faith to Allah, to defend their tribal/ national existence against internal and external threats and impose punishment on their rulers who abdicate. These three peculiarities along with the duties (of faith, prayer, alms giving, fasting and holy pilgrimage) make up Jihad. This term has two features: the internal (war against passions, enhancement of morals and battle against ourselves) and the external (the enforcement of Islam, punishment of the unfaithful, aggressive spread of the faith). Fundamentalism is not a genuine religious phenomenon but has social and political implications. We must mention that since 1973 Jihad has been launched as a result of the Arab Israeli conflict. Jihad is associated with revolutions against governments and isolated acts of violence like hijacking of planes and ships, bombings, kidnappings and murders, occupation of foreign embassies, massive anti-western protests and real sacrilege or offensive behaviour against other

religious and national symbols.

To illustrate our point let us cite some examples. The revolution launched by Zia ul Haq in 1977 in Pakistan which toppled Ali Bhutto with the assistance of the mullahs, established the first theocratic democracy. In 1979, a new Islamic republic is established in Iran after the overthrow of the Shah, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi by the revolutionary guards and the mullahs of the 'charismatic' Ayatollah Khomeini. In 1981, 'the Muslim brotherhood' murders the president of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, while they try to do the same to Hosni Mubarak in 1993, without success. In 1983 the US embassies are bombed in Beirut and Kuwait. In 1984 the president of the US University, Malcolm Kerr, is killed in Lebanon. In April 1996, the organization Gama'a al-Islamiyya attacks Greek tourists, killing eighteen people and injuring sixteen others. Along the same lines runs the Welfare party of Necmettin Erbakan in Turkey, which wants to convert Agia Sophia into a Muslim Mosque and is responsible for several bomb attacks against the Ecumenical Patriarchate. We also have Alia Izebekovic, in Bosnia Herzegovina whose messianic dreams were responsible for the murder of twenty thousand orthodox civilians in eight Serbian villages. Isn't the 1974 Turkish invasion of our island the result of the fundamentalist activities for the propagation of Islam, the punishment of the unfaithful and the violent spread of the faith, as Jihad believes?

But the most recent, devastating event is the hijacking of five aircraft and the collapse of the Twin Towers in New York in September 2001. The fanatic Islamist Osama Bin Laden is thought to be behind this terrorism as well as behind the suicide attacks by fanatic mujahidin, which took place after the American military intervention in Afghanistan.

In Israel, religious fundamentalism is represented in the Knesset and occupies 15% of the seats. The well known 'Love for Zion' party and the party Meir Kahane insist on the implementation of the Torah and demand that all non-Jews be expelled from the land of Judea.

In the Christian west, the most apt representation of religious fundamentalism was the 'Holy Inquisition' during the Middle Ages. Many scientists were put to death, usually burnt in bonfires, because they advocated a different view than the one espoused by the Hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, which was acting under the dogma 'the end sanctifies the means'. Moreover, fundamentalist trends in the Roman Catholic Church are also linked to the schism with the Old-Catholics and the reforms decided by the Second Synod at the Vatican.

At the same time the Scientific Committee of UNESCO in a report on the future of

religious communities in Europe says: By 2015 there will be 18 – 35 Muslim Mps in the German Parliament as a result of the expansion of the Muslim population. The largest Muslim mosque, with a capacity of 50,000, is being built at the outskirts of Rome, with the financial assistance of the Libyan ruler, Col. Gaddafi. The largest theological school in the world has not been established in a Muslim country but in Paris. In 1992, there were more than one thousand temples of various eastern denominations in London.

Among Orthodoxy one could describe the 'Old Calendarists' in Greece and the 'Old-Believers', the Raskolnik, in Russia as fundamental movements. Moreover, most of us could become extremists because of an excessive, without awareness, zeal and carry out acts of violence, unsuitable to an orthodox Christian. Sometimes various factions and dissenting groups with varying degrees of 'spiritual attachment' cause incidents of religious bigotry among the faithful. Inside Orthodoxy, which is the Body of Christ, no disputes or conflicts ought to take place. We ought to experience the unity in Christ and regard all orthodox as our brothers in Christ; otherwise we are in danger of being derailed from the path of evangelic love and get involved in religious fanaticism.

On the opposite end of fundamentalism lies modernism, which chooses incompleteness. It often denounces traditional elements as seemingly superfluous and irrelevant to modern man. The faithful of various religions became weary of this modernism, this secularization of religion and ended up becoming fanatics and fundamentalists. The act of defending a religion or a dogma, apart from Orthodoxy, against the dangers of modernism may be akin to someone's struggle to defend the foundations of a deserted house. Deserted houses with unsound foundations are all religions apart from Christianity, as well as all other Christian denominations apart from Orthodoxy. The absolute truth is only found in Orthodoxy and the Triune God is only revealed in the Orthodox Church, whereby one experiences the dogma regarding God, man and the world. Orthodoxy offers the revealing and genuine dogma of the Trinity, Christ, man and the world. Orthodoxy has preserved the living tradition of the Prophets, the Apostles and the Saints untainted. It walks the middle path.

Aristotle said that 'virtue is midway'. St Basil, the Great, regarded the middle path 'as the royal and safe route'. While St John Chrysostom stressed that if one is to be regarded as Orthodox one must walk on a tight rope and take care not to lean to the right neither to the left. Fundamentalism goes for the overkill. It leans to the right, sidestepping people while viewing institutions, circumstances and authorities as absolute. On the outset therefore, fundamentalism ought to be avoided by every

religious person.

Fundamentalism can be overcome inside Orthodoxy through one's ascetic effort to attain perfection and become complete as a psychosomatic person and existence.

Perfection, that is the accomplishment of a person's reason for being, which also means the completion of human existence, is called 'sanctification' in Patristic terminology. Repentance is the only route leading to sanctification. It is experienced through the obedience to the Lord's commandments. The person who has been enslaved by sin lives in a sick and unnatural state. The therapy, which he ought to follow if he is to return to his natural state and regain 'his ancient beauty', is mainly found in the way the hesychastic orthodox tradition is experienced.

The experience of the hesychastic tradition guides man to the cleansing of his heart from the passions, the illumination of his mind and to deification. According to the Fathers, these are the three stages of spiritual perfection.

When man participates empirically in the cleansing, uncreated energy of God, he experiences divine Grace as "consuming fire" (Hebrews 12, 19). This energy guides him to attain divine zeal in order to obey the Lord's commandments while at the same time cleanses his heart from the various passions. This means that man is not trying to abide by an externally moral life, but strives to focus his life and thoughts on Christ. This struggle for the purification of one's heart aims to unite him with the Lord. The Lord clearly states: "Blessed are the pure at heart for they shall see God" (Matthew 5, 8). When his passions deaden, he enters spiritual contemplation and from there he finds the "throne of Grace", namely the heart. As St Gregory Palamas says, he recognizes then another kind of energy, the mental.

When the energy of the mental prayer is experienced "perceptively", one lucidly experiences the orthodox spiritual life and begins to assent to the 'theoretical' stage, as apposed to the previous stage which the Fathers describe as 'practical'. At this second stage, where he is participating in the uncreated, illuminating energy of God, man lives without his wicked passions. His remembrance of the Lord feeds and increases his divine Eros as well as his love for his brethren. As St Gregory Palamas stresses in his homilies, 'philanthropy is the result of philotheia' (i.e. the love of God). The illumination of the mind is not the outcome of study or indoctrination but the result of the personal participation in the uncreated knowledge of God.

The orthodox faithful, in walking the path to repentance and striving to accomplish the pure, mental prayer, reforms his heart in order to be able to receive the

contemplation of the uncreated Light. With this contemplation, the faithful experiences deification, which is sanctification of the highest degree, namely the immediate perception of God. Deification is unfathomable to the human intellect, cannot be verbally explained and remains incomprehensible even to those who experience it. From then on, man attains a different kind of existence; he becomes above nature.

Fundamentalism is unhealthy. The one, who strives to achieve sanctification, strives for dispassion. The saint, who experiences dispassion, especially at the stage of illumination and deification, is not able to act violently or behave fanatically in favour of religion.

The vast realm of Orthodox asceticism provides the way to deal with and overcome fundamentalism. The purpose of orthodox asceticism is to perfect man as a person 'in the image' of God. This perfection, as we have already mentioned, is deification and is not accomplished through the enforcement of impersonal rules and principles but by the personal communion with the Triune God. This communion, as a communion of love, is cultivated through obedience to the commandments. The Lord has given us a comprehensive command: "Become holy, for I Am Holy" (A Peter 1, 16). A faithful person who experiences sanctification has overcome fundamentalism. The saint, through his personal struggle, attracts divine Grace and participates in the uncreated deifying energies, attains the state of Christ and repeats Christ's life in his own life. A person is not sanctified by succeeding in his own personal defence but by expanding into a universal person, modelled after Christ. Thus, a saint experiences not only his union with Christ but with the whole world. This unity is accomplished through love which embraces the whole world, even one's enemies. When man becomes able to receive the charisma of this selfless love through which he sacrifices himself for his brethren, he expands into a genuine person. Man is a potential person. His development into a person, which is the reason for his existence, is accomplished through his growth into the uncreated model. Word-God with His incarnation has gifted this growth to man. The genuine man is revealed in the person-Christ. The genuine human person is revealed: it is the universal man, for whom there are no external commitments or authorities, only absolute love and freedom. The man who loves his enemies, obeying the Lord's command, expands his heart and his mind and becomes able to pray for the deliverance of the whole world. There is no place in his existence for any kind of fanaticism or violence.

When Christ wished to visit a Samaritan village once and the villagers had not received Him, his disciples, James and John, said to Him: "Lord, do you want us to

tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them like prophet Elijah has done?" (Luke 9, 54) Christ reprimanded them and said: "You know not what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them"(Luke 9, 55). In this passage fundamentalism will be denounced if one obeys the command of Love- the Love crucified for the deliverance of the world. Christ is inciting His disciples for this. Christ is the only redeemer. In a conversation with the Jews, He reveals: "I have other sheep that are not of this fold (meaning other nations, not Jews). I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd (i.e. Christ)" (John 10, 16). He is the One who came to seek and save the lost sheep (Luke 19, 10). We, therefore, must view all people who are far from Christ's truth as the lost sheep of one flock and must seek their return.

Nowadays quite a few cross-denominational dialogues are taking place in the name of love. We are acquainted with and can bear witness as to how the notion of love is exploited. Where are we to find this love? In the beginning of the 7th century St Maximus stressed: "Many speak of love but only Christ's disciples own it".

A genuine disciple of Christ does not pay lip service to fanaticism, takes no part in fundamentalist groups and does not become part of the masses that run after an idea or a vision, even if it is a religious one. He believes in the Lord, serves Him, undergoes struggles for Him and sacrifices his life in His name and this faith, but he does not forfeit others, neither does he harm anyone, even if he is an enemy. Therefore in the context of the Orthodox Tradition the existence of fundamentalists and fanatics can neither be tolerated nor justified, even if they occasionally show up as a matter of exception.

The faithful who experiences sanctification inside Orthodoxy willingly takes upon him the collective responsibility for the wickedness in the world. He places himself beneath all men and the entire creation and feels as if he is the worst sinner. From the depths of such humility, he begs for the Lord's mercy for all creatures since he feels responsible for the hardships that befall man and the wickedness of the human race. With such prayer, akin to the one Jesus offered in Gethsemane, he acquires His state. Just as Jesus holds in Himself the entire humanity, he also expands and embraces the whole world and becomes universal in the image of Christ's universality. In many hymns of our Church we chant 'Hail father universal'. For example in hymns dedicated to St Efrem the Syrian and St Silouan the Athonite. When man experiences that all men belong to the one multi-member nature which is upheld through Christ's love, he comprehends the meaning of universality.

Blessed Elder Sophrony confesses that he had experienced the following: He was able to see all men like a tree and himself as one part of the tree, a leaf, which contributes a little to the life of the entire tree. I remember pious Elder Paisios was saying: "I have not become a monk for the Orthodox people alone, but also for the Indians, the Africans, and the Chinese". The Saint knows how to genuinely love and pray with his heart. He sees all men as his brethren and regards them all as better than him. He cannot harm any creature; he aches even for the tiny insects, imagine how much he cares for his brother who is created in the image of God. He is not able to use force in the name of any excuse or religious dispute, in order to impose his views.

The Orthodox experience in its perfection, which is sanctification, offers the ideal opportunity to overcome fundamentalism. This is attested in the conversations which St Gregory Palamas held with fanatic Islamists, cited in his biography. These dialogues indicate how superior the Saint was in the face of Muslim fanaticism. In 1354, the Saint travelled from Thessaloniki to Constantinople to reconcile John Kantakouzinus with John Palaiologos the Fifth. In this trip he was arrested by the Turks. During his detention, he had three important cross- religious conversations: with Ismail, grandson of the great Emir, with a tasimani (i.e. a Turk responsible for the worship) and Chiones, who were Christians, converted to Islam. During his conversation with the latter, this beacon of the Orthodox Church used substantial arguments, with the illumination of the Holy Spirit, and managed to refute all arguments offered by the Muslims. One of them was so furious that he punched the Saint on the face. Similarly during his conversation with the tasimani, many of the Muslims present became livid, not being able to accept his views, while someone

was preventing them from hurt him.

The experience of Tradition in Orthodoxy provides a shield against any fundamentalist notion. However, when Tradition loses its impact and becomes dead letter, a foundation without its structure, it easily nourishes fanaticism. That is, the insistence on Tradition without its necessary experience may easily develop, and it does, into fundamentalism. In this respect we may all become victims of fundamentalism unless we consciously espouse Orthodox Tradition and struggle to acquire its empirical experience. We all ought to acquire evidence of such an experience if we are not to become illegitimate and violate Tradition. St Paul advises all of us through Timothy: "It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops" (B Timothy 2, 6). All of us ought to taste the spiritual fruit, my brothers, that is the experience of divine Grace. This Grace, the deifying gift, operates perceptively inside the heart of man, causing his regeneration and his perfection in Christ.

The Orthodox, if he is not to be tempted by fundamentalism, ought to lift his heart and his mind to the Heavens. He must not forget that "our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3, 20). He ought to pursue with all his might his sanctification. He ought to seek communion with the uncreated Lord. The orthodox becomes a fundamentalist only if he believes that his roots and his origins are restricted within the boundaries of this created, material world.

source: Translated by Olga Konari Kokkinou from the Greek edition: Αρχιμ. Εφραίμ Βατοπαιδινού Καθηγουμένου Ι. Μ. Μ. Βατοπαιδίου, Αθωνικός Λόγος, Ιερά Μεγίστη Μονή Βατοπαιδίου, Άγιον Όρος 2010.