

MODERNITY'S ANGRY TWINS

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This decade has seen an increasing strident attack by the non-religious on the religious. The USA has also seen a rise of the religious right and of fundamentalism, some of this focused on the teaching of evolution in schools. Creationism and intelligent design have been dressed up as science in a backhanded compliment to 'real' science.

What fundamentalists share is insecurity and fear which is masked by stridency and apparent certainty. Both secular and religious fundamentalists are in fact creations of modernity and they are warring twins. Religious fundamentalists seek to create a safe fortress against the modern world and social change. They radically 'simplify' religious traditions and narrow them down to one constructed 'tradition'. They 'literalise' texts which were never literalised before. Scripture is interpreted univocally (i.e. there is only one true meaning) instead of multi-vocally. Particular texts which were marginal in the tradition or were interpreted differently are suddenly given great prominence (e.g. jihad in the Qur'an). The idea that truth might be in the whole complicated picture of Scripture is rejected as is the idea that a religious tradition might have significant variety within it and that it evolves over time. Institutions are sacralised – a particular historical form of an institution is made sacred and is assumed to have been unchanged for ever. Category errors are made. For example that the Bible is a scientific textbook.

But if there are religious fundamentalists there are also secular fundamentalists who sacralise the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment had a belief in an immutable, universal human nature and the Utopian prospect of endless, rational improvement and emancipatory freedom. Religion was seen as superstition and science as giving us all the knowledge we need. But this enlightenment faith (and it is a faith) has had totalitarian consequences. There is a link between Enlightenment faith in limitless progress and the worst excesses of the secular religions of Nazism, Fascism and Communism. These are secular religions of the Enlightenment and they are not a pretty picture.

The secular Enlightenment projects have collapsed, the key one being socialism. All that is left in the hollow husk is anti-Americanism (America being the great Satan for many on the left) and anti-religion. 'Faith – of all varieties – has become one of the phenomena against which a demoralised post-socialist centre-left chooses to define itself' (Madeleine Bunting). The anti-religion rhetoric has been encouraged by the emergence of radicalised Islam on the world stage (and within Western European countries).

There is only one great project left – that is globalisation – the extension of free markets to everything and everywhere (this is another form of fundamentalism). But those who are excluded from the fruits of globalisation or who are caught up in the profound religious and political crisis in Islamic societies, or who are alienated from their traditional world and belong nowhere can turn in anger and despair to species of (false) transcendent religion that offer hope, often through purifying violence.

And, of course, our Western world which the proponents of enlightenment values wish to defend so much has also been hallowed out. The vista of endless progress is

challenged by almost everything we see around us: climate change, rising levels of mental ill-health, growing economic inequality, fuelled by debt and hyper consumerism. As Oliver James' new book, *Affluenza*, makes clear, the nostrums of the West's "good life" – success, fame, wealth – mark an extraordinary vacuity of purpose, a desperate, restless discontent. (Madeleine Bunting)

Living without limits has brought us to this situation. These are the sorts of things that serious people – secular and religious – should be talking about. Not about gays and anti-discrimination legislation.

Yes, there can be an association of religion with violence. Yes, the Enlightenment incorporates a necessary critique of religion. Yet religious fundamentalism witnesses to profound issues about the nature of modernity. Modernity brings a disenchantment of the world (Max Weber) and with it the temptation of ersatz religion of different sorts. And there is the 'iron cage' of modernity (Max Weber) which traps everyone. And this brings profound issues to religious traditions – accommodation to modernity which risks emptying the tradition of all real content (religious liberalism which accepts the 'reality' given by the iron cage); seeking to escape the iron cage by resolute opposition to it (religious fundamentalism); or seeking to destroy the iron cage through utopian religious violence. Or is there some other way – seeking to question and critique the assumptions of modernity but living uneasily and not at home in it? This is where the efforts of really serious religion should be concentrated.

We do not need the clash of angry fundamentalists – of whatever description. We cannot undo the Enlightenment (even if that was desirable) and religion will not disappear. We need an honest discussion about the state of our world and there may be some things that we can agree on. An important first question for discussion might be: where do we now find social hope?

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