

4

RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM AND AN ETHICS OF RECOGNITION

Joseph I. Fernando, Thailand

1. Meaning of Fundamentalism

The Oxford advanced learner's dictionary defines fundamentalism as "the practice of following very strictly the basic rules and teachings of any religion; (in Christianity) the belief that everything that is written in the Bible is completely true". The term fundamentalism was coined by Curtis Lee Laws in 1920 in the United States.¹ At a meeting of the Northern Baptist Convention in 1920, Curtis Lee Laws defined the "fundamentalist" as one who was ready to regain territory which had been lost to Antichrist and "to do battle royal for the fundamentals of the faith."²

¹ Curtis Lee Laws (1868-1946) was born in Loudoun County, Virginia and educated at Crozer Theological Seminary. He was an editor, denominational leader and pastor at the First Baptist Church of Baltimore, Maryland and at the Greene Avenue Baptist Church of Brooklyn, New York.

² Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 2001), p. 3.

70 *Overcoming Fundamentalism*

Christian fundamentalism is identified in the European study as a phenomenon directed

[1] against every theological, cultural and political liberalism; against the historical and critical view of Christian faith documents (Scriptures, etc; [2] against the infallibility of the pope, the infallibility of the Bible is affirmed); [3] against the theory of evolution as compared with a literal understanding of the biblical creation stories; and against every syncretism as seen in all inter-religious dialogue, in ecumenism, and (secularly) in the League of Nations and the United Nations; [4].³

Although the term fundamentalism has its origin in American Protestantism, Karen Armstrong in her *The Battle for God* traces Jewish, Muslim and Christian fundamentalism to the 15th century. Henry Munsen notes that:

The use of “fundamentalism” as an analytical category for comparative purposes remains controversial... (We) can discern a fundamentalist impulse in the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh movements commonly called fundamentalist insofar as they insist on strict conformity to Holy Writ and to a moral code ostensibly based on it. Such an impulse is lacking in Hindu nationalism and it is not of equal significance in all Christian, Jewish, and Muslim movements.⁴

Today, fundamentalism is not only alive and kicking in all the world religions including Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism but is also making inroads into politics.

⁴ Henry Munsen, “Fundamentalism,” *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. John R. Hinnells, (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 351.

(In) some states – Pakistan, Morocco, Israel, India, and the United States, to name a few – religious fundamentalists influenced the terms of political and social discourse, but they found the construction of an Islamic or Christian or Jewish polity to be well out of reach.⁵

I am trying to figure out what factors contributed to fundamentalism. Could they be the growth of science, atheism, agnosticism, secularity, foreign rule and so on?

2. The Growth of Science

For August Comte, there are three stages in the evolution of human society. 1. The theological stage: The primitive man in his helplessness in the face of nature personified and deified it. He explained the origin of the universe and of life and almost everything in terms of religion. Religion had a tremendous hold on ancient societies. The priest played a key role. 2. The metaphysical stage: The religious stage was surpassed by the metaphysical stage. Man began to ask questions concerning the nature of the world and of beings. Philosophers in India and Greece sought answers to several perplexing questions. Rational reflection was developed into a fine art. Man was not merely satisfied with myths but reached for rational explanations. This was a transition from *mythos* to *logos*. 3. The positive stage: The theological and metaphysical stages gave way to the positive stage. Some believe that science alone can provide man true and valid knowledge. The scientific method can unravel the mysteries of the universe. Science is hailed as a liberator of humankind from superstitions, myths and metaphysical theories. The scientific stage is seen as in the age of enlightenment and truth.

⁵ Gabriel A. Almond et al, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalism around the World* (The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 12.

72 *Overcoming Fundamentalism*

To respond to Comte, the positive stage has not brought about the end of theology and metaphysics. Philosophical reflection is an ongoing process. Millions of people believe in God or the ultimate reality. Religion, philosophy and science could be seen in complementary and not necessarily in contradictory terms. Could the arrival of science be a threat to religion so much that some people become fundamentalists in their defence of religion? If we take a look at the intellectual history of Western civilization we may notice three periods – the pre-modern, modern and postmodern. The pre-modern period could be called the age of faith with a theocentric conception of the universe. The sense of the sacred was predominant. The universe is a manifestation of God. God is the beginning and end of all. God created man as the best of creatures and placed him on earth with conditions suitable for life. Therefore, the earth must be the centre of the universe. This geocentric view of the universe was supported by Ptolemy. The Church was powerful, as it was thought to be a divinely established institution to guide people to heaven. Art and philosophy were at the service of religion. The great philosophers and theologians of the pre-modern period besides the Greeks were St. Augustine, St. Anselm of Canterbury, St. Albert the Great, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure, John Duns Scotus, Roger Bacon and so on. The great artists like Michael Angelo, Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci and writers like Dante and so on, and the great Gothic cathedrals, were products of this God-centred pre-modern period. People were probably working out their salvation in fear and trembling.

The pre-modern period gave way to the rise of the modern period. Martin Luther was the first to challenge the Catholic Church in the 16th century followed by King Henry VIII in England. Rene Descartes, the father of modern philosophy philosophized in an altogether new way, rejecting scholastic philosophy. Copernicus showed the universe was heliocentric, not geocentric. Francis Bacon developed inductive logic which led to the advancement of the scientific method. Science was

mathematised nature. Nature was studied to be controlled and to be at the service of man. Nature was meant to be used to provide a comfortable life. The Cartesian dualism of mind and matter resulted in the domination of matter by mind. It looks as if man has become the lord of the universe and everything is at his disposal. All things in the world are reduced to use-value and cash-value. The world is no longer the place where beings display their glory, magic and beauty but is seen as raw material. As Heidegger puts it, the river Rhine is no longer the home of the Rhine maidens, nor as something of intrinsic value, but as something to produce hydroelectric power. Man designs the world to suit his purposes. As Schopenhauer remarks, science is at the service of the body. The philosophies of utilitarianism and pragmatism would support reordering, rearranging and manipulating the world for human gratification. Science is apparently the new wonder-worker and panacea to all human ills.

Some people fear that science as a new god may banish religion from the face of the earth. If religion disappears, then will morality survive? Could there be a desacralised morality? In the absence of religion, what kind of social life would be possible? As Dostoevsky says in his *Brothers Karamazov*, if God did not exist, everything would be permitted. Similarly, I would say if man did not have an immortal soul, cannibalism would be permitted. For the believer, a world without religion would be unthinkable. A fundamentalist might ask, "Is it not worthwhile to defend religion at any cost?" He would justify a militant piety.

The postmodern or post-war period is marked by a gigantic progress in science. Man's landing on the moon, computer technology, advanced communications media, breakthrough in genetic engineering like cloning and so on, are some of the milestones in postmodern scientific achievements. Mankind has gained a new confidence through science. In such an environment myths, religions and superstitions may appear weird. Science dismisses the creation story as myth and explains the

74 *Overcoming Fundamentalism*

origin of life through evolution. But the fundamentalist rejects the theory of evolution in favour of intelligent design. The Bible teaches a great truth that God created the world. Science tells us how the world evolved. Religion and science need not contradict each other; they can throw light on each other. But the perceived threat from science to religion may fan the flames of fundamentalism. The growth of science may have a link to the erosion of the sense of mystery and of transcendence.

In fact, believers need not fear the growth of science or its impact on religion. Aristotle's *Metaphysics* begins with the statement, "All men, by nature, desire to know." Man has a natural inclination to knowledge. The desire to know more and more about the universe is perfectly in keeping with human nature. As Aquinas had demonstrated long ago, there cannot be conflict between reason and faith as both are complementary and not contradictory. Scientific rationality discloses the world, provides facts about the world. Although a scientist provides amazing facts about the world, he may not answer questions like, what is the purpose of life? Does life have a meaning? Is there life after death? Why should one be good? Philosophy and religion will be able to answer such questions.

Genuine scientific advancement can certainly be at the service of humankind. Science cannot be blamed for the way technology is abused. At the same time there cannot be science without ethics. Scientific enquiry cannot sideline moral concerns. Discoveries which may bring about disaster cannot be ventured upon. "Where there are wicked inventions, there are wicked uses, and where there are wicked uses, there are wicked hearts."⁶ Science needs to be governed by the purity of intentions. As science advances, myths must be preserved as part of cultural heritage. The scientific age would be poorer without myths which are another kind of discourse about the world. What is needed is apprecia-

⁶ Karl Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 193.

tion and interpretation of myths. For the Christian fundamentalists who understand the Bible literally, myths are part of the revealed word of God. Bultmannian demythologizing would be unacceptable to them. Studies on myths by scholars like Mircea Eliade, Claude Levi-Strauss, Paul Ricoeur and others affirm the value of myths.

2.1 Secularism and Secularity

In Medieval Europe, the church was thought to be superior to the state, as it was concerned with guiding people to attain eternal happiness. The state appeared subservient to the church in the sense that the former should care for the welfare of the citizens and not hinder the spiritual concerns of the latter. The state and the church were not watertight compartments; they overlapped each other in Christendom. Finally, at a point of time in European history, secularism came to be accepted. Secularism is separation of the state and the church. The state is an autonomous institution and the church cannot dictate to it. Secularism marked the birth of the civil society.

Secularism appears to be more of a theory than a practice. It is hard to separate politics from religion. Religion and politics are part of the whole of human concerns. The Presidency of the US, the most powerful democracy in the world is influenced by the Bible belt of America. Some politicians in India, the largest democracy in the world, play the religious card when it is a question of seeking and retaining power. The Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party) stands for *Hindutva* (Hinduness), the creation of a Hindu theocratic state. It is reported that there are hardly any Catholics employed in Buckingham palace. There are Christian political parties in some European countries. President Mikhail Gorbachev of the USSR went to the Vatican and met Pope John Paul II, who was said to have been keen on dismantling communism. Total elimination of religion from politics even in a secular state seems

76 Overcoming Fundamentalism

impossible because such separation is more theoretical than practical. Any such attempt would be tantamount to fragmenting man. This is not to say civil society is not possible. What is meant here is banishing religion from governance of the state cannot be total.

Secularity which is largely a contemporary phenomenon refers to the affairs of the world, temporal concerns, not distinctly sacred or ecclesiastical. A secular society is a nonreligious society and its members may have nothing to do with the precepts of religion. Some of those who believe in secularity could be extremists, known as secular fundamentalists, the opposite of religious fundamentalists. Born and brought up in the atmosphere of narrow Christianity, Hinduism or the closedness of an Islamic state or Buddhist nation, religious fundamentalists are an unhappy lot with the emergence of secularism. For them, secularity may be worse than secularism because the latter stands for the separation of politics and religion, whereas the former is indifferent to or positively hostile to religion. No wonder, the religious fundamentalist takes up the cudgels for religion for, in his scheme of things, human life is meaningless without religion which in its fundamentalist form must be thrust down the throat for the good of man.

2.2 Foreign Rule and the Rise of Hindu Fundamentalism

From time immemorial India has been known for its spirit of tolerance and hospitality, especially towards foreigners. The Muslims invaded India and became its rulers. Later the Europeans came as traders to India and ended up as rulers. The British ruled almost the entire country except Goa and Pondicherry which were Portuguese and French colonies respectively. The foreign rulers took advantage of the people of India. The culture of the ruler was considered superior to that of the ruled. The foreign rulers probably asked, can anything good come from India? Except for a few scholars, the British could not appreciate the

antiquity and immense richness of Indian culture. As Huntington remarks,

The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion (to which few members of other civilizations were converted) but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do.⁷

Hinduism's contribution to Indian civilization is enormous. Some writers call India "the wonder that was" (before the Muslim invasion). Indian civilization is the only living ancient civilization. The other ancient civilizations of Egypt, Greece, Rome and so on have become museum pieces. India has made remarkable contributions to philosophy, literature, architecture, sculpture, fine arts, mathematics, astronomy and so on. But the European rulers with a Eurocentric mindset failed to recognize Indian cultural heritage. Educated and self-respecting Indians felt humiliated and insulted by the attitude of the European rulers. As a student, philosopher-President S. Radhakrishnan heard his British professors telling him that only the West had a rich philosophical tradition dating back to Greece and Indian civilization had none. Radhakrishnan was challenged by the ignorance of the British and vowed to make it his mission to propagate Indian philosophy in the West. He lectured in British universities and wrote widely on Indian philosophy for the Western readers.

Some self-respecting Hindus were unhappy that their nation was too long under foreign rule and thought it necessary to assert themselves in terms of their culture, religion and identity. The Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission and so on emerged as reform movements within Hinduism to respond to the challenges posed

⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p. 51.

78 *Overcoming Fundamentalism*

by British rule in India. In the process some of them, unfortunately, embraced fundamentalism. Hindu fundamentalism, combined with nationalism, became a militant force exemplified by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) founded in 1925 by K.B. Hedgewar. The Vishva Hindu Parishad (The World Hindu Council) is the religious and intellectual wing of the RSS and the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party) its political wing. Gandhi was assassinated by Nathuram Godse who was known to Hedgewar, the founder of RSS. Muslims, Christians and Sikhs are the targets of the RSS attack and communal riots are not uncommon in India

2.3 *The West and Muslim Fundamentalism*

Millions of Muslims the world over are spiritually nourished by the faith of Islam. Besides them, there are fundamentalist and ultra-fundamentalist Muslims. The latter are terrorists.

In the eighteenth century, the Wahabi "puritan" school arose in the Arabian peninsula. Championed by a regional prince who eventually conquered the entire peninsula with religious zeal, its paradigm today is dominant in Saudi Arabia, which controls the leading pilgrimage city of Islam, Mecca (which is closed to non-Muslims). It is one of a "fundamentalism from above." The Saudi's immense oil riches have given them worldwide power and influence, and they support generously their kind of fundamentalist Islam in other lands – even as they fear and oppose its Shiite Iranian version.⁸

Muslim fundamentalism has spread almost all over the world. The Taliban in Afghanistan, the al-Qaida and the Islamic militant groups in Kashmir and Pakistan are well known.

⁸ Niels C.Nielson, Jr., *Fundamentalism, Mythos, and World Religions*, p. 99.

Muslim fundamentalists appeal to a succession of teachers: Ibn Hanbal (d. 865), Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), and Ibn Abd-al Wabah (d. 1792), to mention only a few. We may ask, how does this model from the past translate into fundamentalism today? The paradigm identified by analysts is very specific. Essentially it means (1) renewal by a return to Islamic roots; (2) militancy and *jihad*, holy war, in defence of Islam; (3) a condition of ideology with political activism in personal life; and (4) a readiness to challenge traditional religions and political authority and willingness to sacrifice for the sake of Islam.⁹

Islamic fundamentalism became prominent in recent years with the Islamic Revolution of Ayatollah Khomeini and his rise to power in 1979 in Iran. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is a well known fundamentalist group organized by Hasan al-Banna. Sayyid Qutb of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt wrote that “Any society that is not Muslim is jahiliyya ... Thus, we must include in this category all the societies that now exist on earth.”¹⁰

Confrontation between the West and Islam dates back to the crusades. The children of Abraham – the Jews, Christians, and Muslims – have not always enjoyed cordial relationship among themselves. Currently, Islamic fundamentalism is deadly with regard to its confrontation with the West. Samuel P. Huntington remarks that: “Islam is the only civilization which has put the survival of the West in doubt...”¹¹ As Karen Armstrong writes,

September 11, 2001, will go down in history as a day that changed the world. This was the day when Muslim terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center and a wing of the Pentagon, killing over five thousand people... For the first time ever, the people of the United States were attacked by a foreign enemy on their

⁹ Ibid., pp. 90-9.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 100.

¹¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 210.

80 *Overcoming Fundamentalism*

own soul; not by a nation-state, and not by a nuclear missile, but by religious extremists brandishing only penknives and box cutters. It was an attack against the United States, but it was a warning to all of us in the First World... We are facing a period of frightening, disturbing change.¹²

London was attacked by the Muslim terrorists in July 2005. Al-Qaida says it is planning more attacks against the West. Why do the Muslim fundamentalists target the West? Samuel P. Huntington warned already in 1997 in his *Clash of Civilizations* and the *Remaking of the World Order* that it is “most important to recognize that Western intervention in the affairs of other civilizations is probably the single most dangerous source of instability and potential global conflict in a multi-civilisational world.”¹³ The Muslim world, especially the fundamentalists, resent Western interference in their affairs. Huntington says that:

During the fifteen years between 1980 and 1995, according to the U.S. Defence Department, the United States engaged in seventeen military operations in the Middle East, all of them directed against Muslims. No comparable pattern of U.S. military operations occurred against the people of any other civilization.¹⁴

In Islamic nations there is no separation of politics and religion unlike in the Western democracies. Currently, America is involved in imposing democracy on Iraq. More than 100,000 Iraqis, mostly innocent civilians and nearly 3,000 Western troops are dead in an effort to make Iraq a democracy. Saddam Hussein allegedly killed 5,000 Kurds and the American-led coalition decided to eliminate his “evil” regime. The promoters of democracy have made a mess of Iraq. In my opinion, it is very undemocratic to impose democracy suddenly on any nation. American

¹² Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God*, p. vii.

¹³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 312.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

occupation of Iraq has provoked the Muslims, especially the ultra-fundamentalists, against the West as a whole. There are serious drawbacks too in the mindset of the Muslim fundamentalists. Huntington has the following observations on Islam and Muslims:

While at the macro or global level of world politics the primary clash of civilizations is between the West and the rest, at the micro or local level it is between Islam and the others¹⁵...the relations between Muslims and peoples of other civilizations – Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Hindu, Chinese, Buddhist, Jewish – have been generally antagonistic; most of the relations have been violent in the 1990s. Wherever one looks along the perimeter of Islam, Muslims have problems living peaceably with their neighbours.¹⁶ ... Islam's borders *are* bloody, and so are its innards.¹⁷ ... Islam has from the start been a religion of the sword and that it glorifies military virtues. Islam originated among “warring Bedouin nomadic tribes” and this “violent origin is stamped in the foundation of Islam. Muhammad himself is remembered as a hard fighter and a skilful commander.” (No one would say this about Christ or Buddha.) The doctrines of Islam, it is argued, dictate war against unbelievers, and when the initial expansion of Islam tapered off, Muslim groups, quite contrary to doctrine, then fought among themselves. The ratio of *fitna* or internal conflicts to jihad shifted drastically in favour of the former. The Koran and other statements of Muslim beliefs contain few prohibitions of violence, and a concept of non-violence is absent from Muslim doctrine and practice.¹⁸

But is the West non-violent or less violent? How about the crusades? President George W. Bush called “Operation Infinite Justice” (the initial name of U.S. military response to the September 11 terrorist attack) a

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 255.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 256.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 258.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 263.

82 *Overcoming Fundamentalism*

“crusade”.¹⁹ The West too has aggravated violence in its confrontations with the Muslims. It all began with the colonial exploitation of the non-Western people by the Westerners. It is pertinent to ask, Is colonialism over or do we have neo-colonialism? It is alleged that the “unholy trinity” of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization, perpetuate neo-colonialism. It is not surprising that the ultra-fundamentalists react to the West so vehemently.

3. Overcoming Religious Fundamentalism: An Ethics of Recognition

Religious fundamentalism, especially the Christian or Muslim variety, is myopic. It does not perceive beings beyond itself. For a fundamentalist, to be is to be a fundamentalist. A non-fundamentalist cannot exist. This is a denial of diversity, plurality, multiplicity, history and culture. Religious fundamentalism rejects an ethics of recognition. An ethics of recognition calls for the perception of other groups and their right to exist. Recognition of the other is in a way self-recognition as the self is part of a universal web of beings. The self is inextricably related to others – parents, siblings, relatives, neighbours, communities, nations, the environment, universe, and the ultimate reality.

Diverse human groups have their own histories, cultures, traditions, religions, beliefs and so on. So long as these are not a threat to oneself, and to one’s freedom, they are perfectly legitimate and have a right to be. This right is sacred and elicits respect and recognition. For instance, there are several ways of perceiving the divine – animism, shamanism, totemism, fetishism, polytheism, anthropomorphism, pantheism, theism, monotheism, monism, pan-en-theism and so on. Atheism and agnosticism are attitudes of negation or uncertainty regarding God’s existence. An ethics of recognition is not necessarily an ethics of unanimity and

¹⁹ Gabriel A. Almond et al, *Strong Religion*.

consensus, but a healthy, humane, mature, acceptance of difference. The best antidote to religious fundamentalism seems to be an ethics of recognition.

An ethics of recognition means recognition of the other – persons, races, communities, cultures, nations, languages, traditions, ideologies and so on which are different from one's own. An ethics of recognition means respect for the rights of others to be. Racism, genocide, fascism, exploitation, discrimination and so on are the antitheses of an ethics of recognition. In its most fundamental form an ethics of recognition is the recognition of the human person who has his own intrinsic dignity, worth and value. As Kant says, man is an end in himself and never a means. The sanctity of the human person is the bedrock of an ethics of recognition.

An ethics of recognition upholds recognition of self as essentially related to others. It is recognition of what it means to be human, of how one can discover in the other the truth of oneself. An ethics of recognition is a rediscovery of the value and dignity of the human person in oneself and others. What is it to be human?

To be human is to be in the world.

To be human is to celebrate our humanity.

To be human is to exult in fellowship.

To be human is to be pluralistic.

To be human is to belong to a culture.

To be human is to be historical.

To be human is to be part of a community.

To be human is to be linguistic.

To be human is to be caring.

To be human is to be creative.

To be human is to be finite.

To be human is to be open to alterity and transcendence.

84 *Overcoming Fundamentalism*

In the absence of an ethics of recognition, religious fundamentalism will continue to challenge ethics in several ways and can have the following negative impact:

1. Rejection of Pluralism: The religious fundamentalists claim fullness of truth of their religions and look down upon others. The Christian fundamentalists believe and preach that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation and whoever rejects Christ will go to hell. Some Christian fundamentalists say that the Catholics will not be saved. Poor Catholics! They quote the Bible in support of their claim. For the Muslim Fundamentalists, whoever does not accept Allah and his prophet Mohammed is an infidel. Denial of religious pluralism amounts to denial of human rights.

2. Threat to Peace: Fundamentalist beliefs and actions can destabilize society by creating warring camps which may indulge in violence. Violence inflicts injury, death, destruction and insecurity. The Muslim terrorists are ready to be suicide-bombs and to die as “martyrs”. Their martyrdom is glorified and it is a slur on Islam. Have they not deviated from the teaching of Islam? If Prophet Mohammed were alive today, would he ever approve of the suicide-bombs? The suicide-bombs mark humanity’s entry into the darkest era of history by rejecting the sanctity of life and the worth and dignity of the human person. They represent the horror of horrors, death of reason, the peak of hatred, and negation of the beauty and goodness of human life. The suicide-bombs challenge and mock the Creator, the Author of life, and discredit and murder Islam.

3. Rejection of History of Scholarship: The fundamentalists reject the value and contribution of scholarship and intellectual pursuit. This is tantamount to irrationality. The Pakistani Muslim scholar Fazlur Rahman’s criticism of fundamentalism sounds valid:

Neo-fundamentalism ... seems to think it has a divine mission to shut down Islamic intellectual life ... But its assumption that Muslims can straighten out the practical world without serious intellectual effort, with the aid only of catchy slogans, is a dangerous mistake. Not only have neo-fundamentalists failed to seek new sights into Islam through broadening their intellectual horizons, they have even let go the richness of traditional learning.²⁰

4. Intolerance: Fundamentalist intolerance threatens the social fabric. How is social life possible without tolerance? A pluralistic society cannot exist without respect and tolerance for the beliefs and practices of others which in no way are harmful to one's own interests. Intolerance is a moral blindness, the inability to recognize the rights of others and to perceive difference and ontology of multiplicity.

5. Threat to Welfare and Progress: A society controlled by the fundamentalists can hardly progress, and the welfare of the citizens will be at stake. Fundamentalists can take society backwards and deprive the citizens of growth and advancement. For example, in some fundamentalist societies, there is a tendency to deny girls education. In such societies, Aristotle's dictum that "All men by nature desire to know" would be falsified. Fundamentalism as regimentation is a denial of freedom, rights and the social nature of human beings. A fundamentalist society could be a joyless conglomeration of men and women restricted by outmoded, unreasonable, extremist and inhuman codes of beliefs and behaviour.

Today, the West and the Muslim fundamentalists are locked in a violent confrontation with each other. What could be the causes of this confrontation? Does Euro-centrism have anything to do with that? Euro-centrism is the belief that Europe or the West is the centre of the world, perhaps based on the idea of the alleged superiority of the European

²⁰ Niels C. Nielsen, *Fundamentalism, Mythos and World Religions*, p. 101.

86 *Overcoming Fundamentalism*

civilization. But how is the European civilization said to be superior to other contemporary civilizations? Is it because of 1) science and technology, 2) the European race and 3) the claim of Christianity as the true religion and so on? But these so-called reasons for the superiority of the West seem to be no reasons at all. 1) Science and technology: The fascination with science and technology may not be so exciting today, as their abuse has almost wrecked the world. Environmental decay and a nuclear holocaust may terminate human existence. Science and technology played their role in making the West almost a predatory civilization – preying on the natives of the colonies and on nature. 2) The European race: We are judged not by the colour of our skin, but by our character and the quality of our lives. So one's race is not what really counts. 3) Christianity as the true religion: If Christianity is *the* true religion, others must be false. I am not questioning the beliefs of Christianity but the claim that it is the true religion. What the Bible teaches is that the Christians must love others rather than claim that theirs is the true religion. Their love, not their claim to absolute truth, shall save the world. So where is the room for Euro-centrism?

What both the West and the Muslim fundamentalists need is a good dose of an ethics of recognition. How could the West practice an ethics of recognition? The West needs to recognize a lot of things about itself in relation to the rest of the world. Such things would include Euro-centrism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, use of technology and so on. Colonialism has had a damaging effect on both the colonial powers and the colonies. It boosted the false image of power and superiority in the colonizers. It exploited the colonies which are even today affected by the aftermath of colonialism. The West strengthened its economy at the cost of the colonies. Some Western nations have had empire-building ambitions. Colonialism is over but without restitution and reparation. The West needs to recognize that the colonies have to be com-

compensated for centuries of exploitation. Until today, hardly anything in this regard has been done.

Neo-colonialism seems to be another mode of exploitation by the West. The rest of the world resents it. One gets the impression that the rest of the world exists for the sake of the West which already has enormous resources. Universalism cannot be imposed on the whole world. Universalism is often perceived as imperialism. Since 2003, some Western nations have ignored the United Nations and unilaterally in mafia style, invaded a non-Western nation with the alleged intention of eliminating weapons of mass destruction and of introducing democracy. How can democracy be imposed? Is it not undemocratic to impose democracy? How do these Western nations legitimize their behaviour? Such behaviour can only create more enemies and destroy the possibility of peace. Unfortunately, some terrorist leaders are said to be the creation of the West. In fact sanctions must be imposed on these nations. Their leaders together with those responsible for September 11 terrorist attacks, must be tried for crimes against humanity. Western interference in the affairs of non-Western nations should cease. Today, Iraq is the largest killing field in the world, created by the United States. The U.S. must withdraw from Iraq as quickly as possible to save more lives. The longer is the U.S. presence in Iraq, the greater will be reign of death and the aggravation of Muslim fundamentalism.

On the other hand, the Muslim fundamentalists cannot threaten the Western way of life. The West has its rights to be a free society and to its way of life within the limits of decency. The West would do well to develop an appreciation of non-Western cultures and their lifestyles. Both need to dialogue with each other. The Western powers cannot say, "We will not dialogue with terrorists". Unless dialogue takes place between the two there is no way of understanding the problems, grievances, aspirations and beliefs of each other. By avoiding dialogue, both have been destroying themselves and others since September 11, 2001.

88 *Overcoming Fundamentalism*

They rely more on deadly weapons than on the saving power of dialogue. Both have a bloody history of violence, hatred and destruction. In the absence of common sense in both of them, a third party is needed to take initiative to bring them to the negotiating table. This is an urgent need so that sanity will prevail and more lives will be saved. They will benefit a lot if they learn the value of non-violence. Non-violence is not only for the terrorists, it is for the people of the whole world. An ethics of recognition cannot be separated from an ethics of non-violence. Both the West and the fundamentalists are obliged to transcend violence, to rediscover what it means to be moral persons and to live a higher life of the spirit, which is possible for human beings. Militarism, suicide-bombs and deadly confrontations should become things of the past.

An ethics of recognition will be seen as an ethics of friendship. It takes a lot of efforts to recognize the other who is inalienably tied to one's own destiny. It is my firm conviction that the root cause of many problems in the world today is the rejection of the dignity and worth of the human person. It is imperative for humankind to understand what it means to be human. In the absence of such an understanding, there is little hope that things will improve. We may be eventually heading towards a global suicide.