

Fundamentalism as Fixation

Black/White, Might Makes Right, & the Wounded Inner Child

by

Todd F. Eklof

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In February, 2006 we had a terrible tragedy in our community when one of the deadliest house fires in Kentucky history took the lives of ten people, including six children. But if it were possible to make matters worse, members of the fiendish Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas decided to protest their funerals to express their belief the fire is part of God's punishment for our nation's tolerance of homosexuals. This hate group, which runs two websites, [www.GodHatesFags.com](http://www.GodHatesFags.com), and [www.GodHatesAmerica.com](http://www.GodHatesAmerica.com), has gained widespread notoriety in recent years by also protesting the funerals of soldiers killed in combat; and first made international headlines in 1998 by protesting the funeral of Matthew Shepard, the University of Wyoming college student who was pistol-whipped to death for being gay. Fred Phelps, its minister, has claimed, among his more mild statements, such things as, "The Lord God Almighty killed [the people who died on 9/11], looked at them in the face, laughed and mocked each one of them as he cast each one of them into hell;" "The hell with your flag. The hell with your fag army, your fag courts, your fag-run government;" and, "This is the hypocritical, fag-infested, fag-run United States of America and we're supposed to respect that fag rag flag?"<sup>1</sup> He has also made the outlandish claim that hurricanes Katrina and Rita were answers to prayer. Needless to say, even many fundamentalist organizations have condemned these tactics, and have disavowed any affiliation with the Westboro Baptist Church, including the largest Protestant denomination in the country, the Southern Baptist Convention. Nevertheless, all fundamentalists need to take a long hard look at this, so called, "church;" as the mirror of fundamentalist extremism everywhere. This is what hatred,

self-righteousness, and judgmentalism look like at their core. It may be more politically advantageous within our culture for the majority of fundamentalist to, at least, pay lip service to our democratic values by feigning disgust over such raw extremism, but the truth always manages to slip out. This is precisely what happened a couple years ago when televangelist, Pat Robertson, in a moment of weakness, openly called for the assassination of duly elected Venezuelan President Victor Chavez during an August 2005 broadcast of his 700 Club. Caught red-handed, so to speak, he eventually apologized, but not before the cat was already out of the bag and the true nature of his hateful, self-righteous heart was made evident.

Although they may not all be quite as vocal about it as members of Westboro Baptist Church are, Christian Fundamentalists everywhere seem equally as obsessed with the issue of homosexuality, as if all the problems in the world would magically be solved if only we would wipe out all the gays and lesbians among us. Most fundamentalists may not be as blunt, but that's what they believe, and that's why, despite having a Constitution protecting us against laws favoring any established religion, multiple States have been allowed to pass laws discriminating against gays and lesbians purely on religious grounds—the, so called, “sanctity of marriage.” And if it were “politically correct” in our culture, fundamentalists everywhere would sanction open persecution against homosexuals.

In some sense, however, we ought to be grateful to the folks at Westboro Baptist Church, not only for showing other fundamentalists the ugliness at the heart of their own beliefs and values, but also for proving to the rest of us that we can no longer tolerate such extremism and hate for the sake of diversity and openness. In the name of tolerance,

we have allowed bigots to run amuck with the rule of law, absconding with the moral high ground, while claiming those of us who preach kindness, equality, and justice for all, are completely lacking in morals and will eventually burn in Hell. The courts, of course, are correct in upholding the rights of Westboro Baptist Church to continue its sick and twisted protests, but it is not right for any of us to continue dismissing fundamentalism as a legitimate philosophy when it really expresses the most base and underdeveloped tendencies of the human mind. Fundamentalism is fixation, not philosophy!

Fixation is the psychological term used to describe those who cease to mature by remaining stuck, (or fixed) at a premature stage of cognitive and moral development. The pioneering work of developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, for instance, suggests several similarities between the thought processes of children younger than seven and fundamentalists. Neither, for instance, makes an “effort to stick to one opinion or any given subject.”<sup>2</sup> This means, in brief, that fundamentalists, like young children, appear to contradict themselves, which is precisely why someone like Pat Robertson can say, “One of the things we must protect from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death is the life of people,”<sup>3</sup> yet openly call for the assassination of another human being. It’s why Jerry Falwell can complain, “Today, many doctors and political defenders of abortion have become wealthy on the slaughter of blameless victims; but they will forever have the blood of the unborn on their hands,”<sup>4</sup> yet simply responds to the estimated deaths of somewhere between 160,000 and 600,000 “blameless” Iraqi civilians, victims of an unwarranted oil war that’s made billions for corporate war profiteers like AEGIS, Bechtel, Lockheed Martin, and, the now infamous, Halliburton, by saying, “President Bush declared war in Iraq to defend innocent people. This is a worthy

pursuit.”<sup>5</sup> Such minds, according to Piaget, don’t mean to adopt self-contradicting opinions, “but they adopt opinions successively, which, if they compared would contradict each other; and they forget the points of view which they previously adopted.”<sup>6</sup>

The self-contradiction common among both fundamentalists and young children demonstrates a mind that hasn’t yet developed the capacity for connecting the dots. As Piaget’s theory suggests, “Each distortion arises from [an] inability to make relations mentally.”<sup>7</sup> As a result, such a mind has no problem grasping absolute concepts like, “hot” and “cold,” or “good” and “bad,” but has difficulty understanding what is meant by “hotter,” or “colder,” or “better” and “worse.” In short, fundamentalists, like young children, can’t intellectually cope with shades of grey. They don’t comprehend the relationships between ideas and events. “Bigger” and “smaller” can only be understood in relation to something else, whereas, “A child uses ‘big’ and ‘small’ without confusion, since they imply one single comparison...”<sup>8</sup>

This limitation, thus, leads to a third mindset also common among fundamentalists and young children alike; both “are aware of rules and take them to be absolute.”<sup>9</sup> A religious extremist understands “good” and “evil” as unyielding, regardless of relative circumstances, but is unable to make a distinction between the “lesser of two evils.” Abortion, for example, may never be a “good” choice to make, but it may be the “best” choice one can make given the circumstances. But for the fundamentalist, like a small child, something that is “bad” is always bad in every circumstance. Because they can’t think in relative terms, they can’t easily comprehend how something considered bad might be the best choice in some circumstances, which is why the etymological root in

the word “bad” is the same as in “better” and “best.” Sometimes bad is best! The unknown author of the mystical, *Cloud of Unknowing*, spoke somewhat humorously of Christians who think so simplistically by saying “they have but one spiritual nostril.”<sup>10</sup> Having two spiritual nostrils, on the other hand, enables us to “decide the good from the bad, the bad from the worse, and the good from the better before pronouncing judgment.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, a mature mind looks at things from all directions, connecting the dots, relatively, before making ethical decisions, which, even then, may only enable us to make a choice that is less harmful than another, but harmful nonetheless.

This is why the same author, in his *Book of Privy Council*, said, “What is important is that you attend to your own calling and do not discuss or judge God’s designs in the lives of others... Believe me, if you begin judging this and that about other people you will fall into error.”<sup>12</sup> This is especially difficult for the immature fundamentalist who, like a small child, attributes authoritative rules and ideas to a supreme authority. The problem with this is, as Piaget explained, “the little child cannot differentiate between the impulses of his own fancy and the rules imposed on him from above.”<sup>13</sup> Confusing one’s own will with the will of God, one’s own beliefs as ultimate truth, and one’s own moral values as absolute, is bad enough, but, coupled with the typical authoritarian need to punish “wrongdoers,” too often leads to the sort of violence advocated by people like Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and Fred Phelps.

Unfortunately, fixation, that is, remaining stuck at an infantile stage of moral and cognitive development, leads to many others forms of psychological dysfunction too:

- Thus, fundamentalists also demonstrate a tendency toward compensation, an ego

defense mechanism that enables them to avoid failure in one area by overemphasizing another. Fundamentalists have failed miserably, for example, to nurture life by, instead, promoting violence, intolerance, and injustice, and compensate for it by obsessing about the “unborn;” that is, unreal people they don’t have to actually take responsibility for. People they have no relationship with.

- Another psychological defense mechanism, deflection, the attempt to redirect attention to others, explains why, having failed miserably to establish peace, justice, and compassion themselves, they need to blame all our social woes on homosexuals.
- Other ego defenses include, dissociation, the compartmentalizing or splitting off of one group of ideas from another, creating a bizarre inconsistency. Hence, respect for life is reserved only for those in the “unborn” category, while those who have actually been born will likely suffer from fundamentalism’s general disrespect and disdain for others.
- This may lead further to Isolation, the splitting of emotions from thoughts, so that, in the example of abortion, one claims intellectually to value life, yet acts without empathy toward the lives it persecutes and destroys;
- Omnipotence, coping with external stresses by assuming one is superior to others and has the right to control them—like passing laws that prevent women from having reproductive rights, or gays from marrying;
- Projection, blaming one’s own thoughts and feelings (i.e., disregard for life), on others, like abortion doctors and homosexuals;
- Along with Projective Identification, condemning someone else’s behavior by behaving similarly, perhaps by supporting capital punishment, (killing someone for

killing someone, an eye for an eye);

- And, Reaction Formation, going to opposite extremes to overcompensate for undesirable behavior, by leading a crusade against abortion, for example, protecting the unborn, while demonstrating a long history of antisocial, if not sociopathic, behavior toward almost everyone else.

If it sounds like I'm claiming fundamentalism borders on mental illness, I am! I say this, not to mock those unfortunates who suffer from this condition, but to name it as such, and, by putting it in this light, to begin promoting a course of compassionate treatment that will neither validate it as a legitimate philosophy, nor condemn its adherents as despicable buffoons. As the poet Rilke said, "Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us." You see, Westboro Baptist Church isn't only a mirror for fundamentalists; it is a mirror belonging to all of us. It is the mirror of the wounded inner child afraid of the dark, afraid of losing its innocence, the love of its parents and peers, afraid of growing up into a world of pain and uncertainty. Each of us has a fixated-fundamentalist hiding somewhere inside us that can, at any moment, defend us by unconsciously exhibiting compensation, deflection, dissociation, omnipotence, projection, projective identification, and reaction formation. The only difference between the fundamentalists and us is that they have adopted these dysfunctions as a constant way of life because they are fixated at an immature stage of development they validate through religion and an unevolved morality.

For us these defense mechanisms emerge only periodically, through the normal neuroses all of us carry with us, to some degree, from childhood into adulthood. Neurotic behavior occurs whenever something happens to us in the present that stirs up a complex

of painful emotions left over from a past experience, which causes us to treat the present like the past. A simple example would be if we had an overly critical parent, we might overreact to a legitimate criticism from a boss or a friend. If we had a parent who abandoned us in some way, perhaps through death, or just by being emotionally distant, we may have difficulty trusting people in the present. Or if we were often lonely, or excluded by our siblings and other children when we were little, we may react negatively when our friends can't make time for us. In his book, *Homecoming*, John Bradshaw suggests the “major source of human misery,”<sup>14</sup> is the anger and hurt we experience as children. And Carl Jung once said, “The small world of the child, the family milieu, is the model for the big world.”<sup>15</sup>

Fundamentalism is a model for the big world that is a major source of human misery. We must show compassion toward fundamentalists because their wounds are deep, and their wounds, ultimately, are the same as our own. But just as we would not give a small child a loaded gun, or let cross the street without holding our hand, we can no longer allow these moral simpletons to lead our nation by giving them free reign over government, or religious institutions, or any other organization that requires the guidance of highly evolved individuals capable of advanced cognitive functioning and moral reasoning. As the Apostle Paul said, “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.”<sup>16</sup> It's time progressives everywhere stop allowing childish minds to dash about in the streets with loaded guns, to take them by the hands, and lead them home.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westboro\\_Baptist\\_Church](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westboro_Baptist_Church)

<sup>2</sup> Beard, Ruth M., *An Outline of Piaget's Developmental Psychology*, A Mentor Book,

Basic Books, Inc., New York, NY, 1972, p. 76.

3 Hill, Paul, *Defending the Defenseless*, August 2003, from a revised paper in an anthology in *The Current Controversy Series: The Abortion Controversy*, Greenhaven Press, 2001, found at [www.armyofgod.com/PHill\\_ShortShot.html](http://www.armyofgod.com/PHill_ShortShot.html), December 1, 2006.

4 [www.juntosociety.com/guest/falwell/jf\\_tyoa010303.html](http://www.juntosociety.com/guest/falwell/jf_tyoa010303.html), November 29, 2006

5 [http://worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE\\_ID=36859](http://worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=36859), God is Pro-War, posted January 31, 2004.

6 Beard, *ibid.*

7 *Ibid.* p. 78.

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.* p. 79.

10 Johnston, William, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing & Book of Privy Counseling*, Doubleday, Random House, Inc., New York, NY, 1973, 1996, p. 108.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.* p. 165f.

13 Beard, *ibid.* p. 80.

14 Bradshaw, John, *Homecoming*, Bantam Books, United States, 1990, p. 7.

15 Jung, C.G., *Freud & Psychoanalysis*, CW, vol. 4, Bollingen Series XX, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1989, pg. 137.

16 I Corinthians 13:11