

Fundamentalism and the Psychology of Violence (Fr. Lawrence R. Farley)

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Propaganda Poster

Recently I began what I hope will become a dialogue with a fundamentalist. That is, I asked on-line for a free copy of the Quran, and in due time it arrived in the mail. After a decent delay, the people who kindly supplied it to me emailed me to ask what I thought of it. It was, of course, not so much an interested query as an attempt at conversion, but that was fair enough, and politely asked, and completely expected.

In a similar spirit of brotherly conversation between two men of good will, I replied that I had read the Quran in its entirety, and had a couple of questions. One was how in the surah “The Story” the Old Testament figures Pharaoh and Haman were portrayed as contemporaries, since Pharaoh was an Egyptian (dating from ca. 1400 B.C., and Haman was a Persian, dating from ca. 500 B.C. (Their stories are found in the Biblical books of Exodus and Esther respectively.) The surah in question portrayed them as speaking with one another. How could this be, I asked, since they were separated one from another by hundreds of miles and about 900 years? I also asked how in the surah “Women” it was denied that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified and a look-alike killed in his place, since all reputable scholars and historians accept the Crucifixion as an historical fact.

My Muslim friend replied at great and generous (and courteous) length. Most of his reply consisted of an argument that Jesus was not crucified, arguing from, of all things, the *Letter to the Hebrews*. (For those unfamiliar with this New Testament letter, the self-offering of Jesus on the Cross is its center-piece and main theme.) He didn’t spend much time on my first query about Pharaoh and Haman, but disposed of my objection by simply asserting that the Haman with whom Pharaoh spoke was his “prime minister who happened to have the same name of that person who lived in Persia; it is just the same name and not the same person”. That was the sum total of his reply.

Here, I submit, is the voice of fundamentalism. The scenario my Muslim friend is suggesting is rather like that of a school boy writing an historical paper and asserting in it that Napoleon once had a conversation with Mao-Tse-Tung, and when being told that this was impossible, replying that “of course it was entirely different Mao-Tse-Tung”. No educated person would give this serious consideration. If it was an educated historian who suggested such a thing, there might be a further request for sources. But a school boy, without prior historical credentials, would correctly be written off as not knowing what he was talking about.

The Quran is, I believe, similarly lacking in historical credentials: it mistakes the son bound by Abraham in Genesis 22 as Ishmael when it was Isaac; it mistakes the woman who found Moses in the bulrushes as Pharaoh’s wife, when the Exodus account says it was his daughter. And, of course, it manages to deny altogether the historicity of Jesus’ crucifixion. These elementary errors of historical fact do nothing to establish the Quran’s historical reliability. It seems clear that it was written by a brilliant story-teller who had only a passing and inaccurate knowledge of Jewish and Christian traditions. The conversation of Pharaoh with Haman clearly

is one such anachronistic inaccuracy. The Quran's author had obviously heard from Jewish sources of two villains who persecuted the Jews, Pharaoh and Haman, and assumed that one worked for the other. To try to deny this by saying "of course it was an entirely different Haman" is fundamentalism. (I thought of asking my Muslim friend how an Egyptian prime minister came to have a Persian name, but decided against it.)

I have met many fundamentalists in my time—Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, even some Christians. All have the same characteristic. For them, outer fact is determined in advance by their dogma, and no argument is allowed to dislodge this priority. That is, their dogma or belief is the prism through which they view and judge all of the real world around them. If their dogma says "Elvis is alive and living in Oregon", then Elvis is alive, regardless of what any exhumation in Graceland may prove. If it says, "There is a Jesuit conspiracy running and corrupting the Protestant seminaries", then there is such a conspiracy, and no amount of argumentation or accumulation of facts will prove otherwise. (This last example is a real one, odd as that sounds.) If it says, "The sky is not blue, but green", then the sky is green. All the world but them may see it differently, but will be written off as colour-blind, for the sky must be green. When dealing with the fundamentalist, argument is unavailing.



Qur'an

This means that for the fundamentalist, at least when he is arguing his case, the opponent is not fully real. He is not a three-dimensional person, with all the credibility real persons bring with them. He is one-dimensional, and therefore not fully human. The one arguing with the fundamentalist that there is, in fact, no Jesuit conspiracy corrupting Protestant seminaries is written off as simply a dupe. He is to be discounted, given no weight. That is why the argument goes nowhere, because the fundamentalist is not really listening. It is not actually a dialogue, but a monologue. The person with whom the fundamentalist is arguing is not really a person, he is “the Other”, the unbeliever, the infidel. He is part of Babylon, of the *Dar al-Harb*, the “house of war”. He exists not to be listened to but to be converted.

It is just here, I suggest, that all fundamentalism carries within it an inner psychology of violence, whether or no this latent psychology and tendency produces bodily violence. It is not that fundamentalists are necessarily violent or aggressive persons. That depends entirely on the fundamentalist, and it is not my point. My point is that all fundamentalism tends to see the neighbour not as a real person, but as a target, a threat, something to eliminate—either by conversion, refutation, or by other means—if he threatens the dogma or world-view. Most

people see their neighbours as other people like themselves—real persons with likes and dislikes, persons to be agreed or disagreed with, persons who share the same transit system, whose children share the same schools. They cheer for the same national hockey team in the Olympics as we do, and grumble under the same federal taxes. They are like us. But for the fundamentalist, the neighbour is not like himself, for he defines himself over against his neighbour, and as radically unlike him.

This is the psychology of violence. If we fail to see our neighbour (that basic Biblical category) as like ourselves, we leave ourselves open to the possibility of doing him violence. That is why in any war the enemy to be killed must be first dehumanized. The Germans in the second world war were thus not like us. The German was “the kraut”. The Japanese were “the japs”. The Vietnamese were “the gooks”. In each case we refuse to see the Germans, the Japanese, the Vietnamese as basically like ourselves, with families and loved ones, with hopes and fears, with strengths and weaknesses. All the humanity of the neighbour has been stripped away; he is simply “the enemy”. That is why the higher ups on both sides in the first world war objected to the now-famous game of football with the “enemy” between the trenches on Christmas Eve. It was difficult to ask men to kill each other after they had played together and shared tokens and showed each other pictures of their girl-friends and families. The men across No Man’s Land were no longer “the enemy”. Now they all had faces and names. They were no longer the *Dar al-Harb*. Now they were persons.

People of different faiths will have conflicting dogmas and beliefs. But it is important that in our conversations with those of differing faiths that we maintain a dialogue, and not let it degenerate into a monologue. It is our neighbour to whom we are called to offer our witness, not “the enemy”. As Orthodox Christians, we are called to faith, not to fundamentalism.

This article was originally posted on October 25, 2010 on [Straight from the Heart](#). Many more of Fr. Farley’s articles and thoughts can be found on his blog, [Straight from the Heart](#). This article was posted here with permission.