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Chapter Eight

In the Name of the Father: Understanding Monotheism and Fundamentalism

Russell Grigg and Matthew Sharpe

The German philosopher Walter Benjamin famously declared that every rise of fascism bears witness to a failed revolution. Slavoj Zizek adapts this saying of Benjamin's to declare that every rise of religion bears witness to the failure of secularism. But wouldn’t saying this just be begging the question? Or even, isn’t it precisely the reverse that is true? Doesn’t the rise of secularism bear witness to the failure of religion? This seems historically more accurate—or so it seems to us—given that our history has been more religious than it has been secular.

This has led us to develop an approach according to which the rise of secularism bears witness not to the failure but to the repression of religion. ‘Repression’ is here to be taken in the slightly technical Freudian sense of the term: an idea, a thought, a desire maybe, is expelled from conscious life because it has become too objectionable for the subject to sustain. However, as repressed, it does not disappear from mental life altogether but remains in the unconscious from where it returns in disguised and distorted forms—in the form, for instance, of a symptom. Applying ‘repression’ to a social phenomenon like religion is of course a metaphorical extension, but we think it might still allow us to conceptualise an important development.

Our view includes the following three broad theses:

1. The progressive secularisation of society since the Enlightenment has not led to the disappearance of monotheistic religion but rather has led to its effective ‘repression.’

2. Thus, what we are seeing now, with the persistence of and growth in religion, particularly monotheistic religion, is its subsequent return in different and sometimes disguised forms.
3. Fundamentalism represents one especially virulent form of the return of repressed religious expression.

An implication of our view is that, while contemporary fundamentalism shares features with some earlier forms of religious practices, its emergence in our secular age gives it some very specific features, including its renewed, powerful appeal.

The idea of the 'secularisation of society' is a complex notion. A good starting point for thinking about secular society is the three senses recently elaborated by Charles Taylor (2007):

1. Public spaces have become emptied of God. The church is separate from political structures; religion or belief is a private matter; political society is made up of believers and non-believers alike, and is compatible with the majority being believers, as in the case of Communist Poland.

2. Religious practice and belief have fallen away. People have turned away from God. They no longer go to church, or the synagogue, or the temple. Most of Western Europe fits into this category.

3. We can speak of the 'conditions of religious belief.' This is intended to capture the sense of a move from a society in which belief in God is unchallenged and unproblematic to one in which belief in God is understood to be just one option among others, and moreover not always the easiest or most comfortable to embrace.

The move in question, then, is from a society in which it is virtually impossible not to believe in God, where this belief is the background against which I live my life, to a society in which faith is just one human possibility among many, in which belief in God is no longer axiomatic, a society where, no matter how profound my own belief, I come up against the fact that there are others who have no faith and live their lives with no religious belief.

We consider fundamentalism, which is just one of the contemporary forms of religion, even if it is its most extreme form, as a reaction to secularisation in this third sense. Many studies by sociologists, political scientists, social commentators, and others have explored the various material conditions and political structures that have allowed a frequently aggressive and destructive fundamentalism to take root and grow. However, these analyses only tell part of the story—in our opinion, at least. We first need to acknowledge the hold and power that religion, particularly monotheism, is capable of having over the psyche, and we need to uncover the deep reasons why it continues to have such a hold. Once we understand this, we will then be in a position to begin to explain the psychological forces behind the contemporary, parallel rise of fundamentalism, on the one hand, and new forms of spiritualism, on the other. Our working hypothesis is that they are only possible in a secularised age—or at least, they have special features in a secular age.

Our focus is on monotheism, which explains why we’ve called this article 'In the Name of the Father.' All three monotheisms are father-religions just as they are also religions of the book, and it is they that have the closest links
to fundamentalism. It therefore seems to us natural for the term ‘fundamentalist’ to have developed from its original meaning of subscribing to certain fundamental doctrines of the Bible to a broader, and mostly pejorative, meaning that refers not to a specific set of beliefs but to: The aggressive insistence by religious traditionalists upon the sacredness of particular encoded beliefs and practices which they seek to impose upon others as well as themselves, even though these beliefs and practices stand in opposition to contemporary social trends. (But see Stump 2000: 4–5 for a different definition.)

There are many authors who because they attack religion as deeply irrational fail to understand its return and its insistence. Moreover, their work is evidence for thinking that ours is an age of secularisation in this third sense. You might pick out the work by the French philosopher Michel Onfray, Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (2007); there is the philosopher Daniel Dennett’s Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon (2006); then we have Richard Dawkins’s The God Delusion (2006); and also Christopher Hitchens’s God Is Not Great (2007). You might want to add a fifth book to this list which in our opinion is the most interesting of all, for while it is in some ways similar to these four in its anti-religious polemics, it not only sustains a more rigorous argument but also strives to understand the specific psychological appeal of religion. The book is Against Religion (2007), written by the Australian philosopher Tamás Pataki.

The appearance of these books by prominent public figures is an indication of the level of concern amongst atheists over not just the turnaround in the fortunes of religion but in fundamentalists’ aggressive intervention in public life and the readiness—this is one of the characteristic features of fundamentalism—to impose conservative (actually, retrograde) views and values on the broader community. And, as we know, this fundamentalist movement has arisen against the background of the expectation that religion was undergoing a gradual but inevitable decline in significance. It was thought that there would always be places in the world where religion is vigorous and central to the lives of the people. But in Western nations the best interpretation of the evidence had until recently emphasised the increasing irrelevance of religion in general, and of the religions of the book in particular: Judaism, Christianity, Islam. (Yes, even Islam.)1 As we now know, this prediction of the decline of religion turns out to be false, both inside and outside postmodern Western societies.

The four aforementioned authors all share the view that religion is a threat to, an assault on, even an insult to, reason and science. Daniel Dennett asserts, somewhat facetiously, that possibly apart from alcohol, or television, or addictive video games, religion is the greatest threat to rationality and scientific progress; though, he adds, religion has the added feature of not just disabling rational thought but actually honouring the disability (see Dennett and Winston 2008). Then there’s what we dub the ‘righteous rationalism’ of Christopher Hitchens who writes, with characteristic bombast: ‘We do not rely solely upon science and reason . . . but we distrust anything that contradicts science or outrages reason. . . . What we respect is free inquiry, open-mindedness, and the pursuit of ideas for their own sake’ (2007: 5).
Although we don’t want particularly to defend religion, we are driven to take exception to the confusions and inaccuracies reflected in claims such as these. The claim that religion disables rational thought just seems empirically false. Some of the best teachers we have had in philosophy were believers, and moreover the most significant developments in the history of Western philosophy have been made by Christian, or Jewish, or indeed Muslim (e.g., Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd), believers—and, moreover, these philosophical contributions were made as a contribution to their religious convictions. In fact, we would almost be inclined to say the opposite—that is, religion, rather than disabling reason, actually provokes it and stimulates it. If you look at the discussions of religion in scholastic philosophy, for instance, reason doesn’t suffer from euthanasia; if anything, it suffers from hyperventilation.

We should perhaps regard such statements by the new atheists as indicative of the extent to which Western society has become secularised—once it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, and now the conditions that make belief in God rationally possible no longer exist.

This point is supported by the fact that such attacks as these on religion on the grounds that it is an assault on reason are ultimately making an ethical or moral accusation. It is not simply the case, for Hitchens, that a religious person is committing an error of reason, or simply making a logical mistake. Rather, they suffer from some moral defect or imperfection of character; they are blinding themselves to reason so as to seek comfort in their illusions. It is Hitchens who expresses this attitude of moral reprobation most clearly, or perhaps we should say most transparently, but the message is the same throughout: beware religion; like smoking, it’ll stunt your growth—maybe not your physical growth but definitely your emotional and intellectual development. Of course, there used to be, and maybe still is, a perfectly reasonable counter-claim handy, which is that a life without religion is itself a life impoverished of its spiritual dimension.

The secularisation of society did not happen just by itself. A great deal of intellectual and conceptual effort was required in order to prepare the ground for its emergence. Dawkins and the like emphasise the role that science has played in this development—in Dawkins’s case, for understandable reasons, he emphasises the science of Darwin. However, we should not underestimate the contribution by thinkers of a more philosophical or conceptual kind—this is after all the sort of contribution that in their modest way Hitchens and others are aspiring to make. And, of course, their line of criticism that religious belief is illusory is not new: it was given forceful expression by no less a figure than Karl Marx. But there is a difference, and what the new atheists say lacks the conceptual penetration of Marx. What Marx says is that the turn towards religion is at one and the same time the expression of the distress of people’s real existence and a protest against that distress. Religion, Marx says in a wonderful expression, is ‘the sigh of the oppressed creature,’ it is ‘the heart of a heartless world,’ the ‘spirit of a spiritless situation’ (1990). Religion, he says in his most famous phrase, is ‘the opium of the people.’ Marx thought, then, that the suppression, or at least the disappearance, of religion, the illusory happiness of the people, is a necessary step for their true happiness. Only within a truly secular society is true happiness attainable. But he also thought that the root cause of religious belief was the projection
onto the scale of the cosmos of both the reality and a complaint about that reality of the situation in which the oppressed classes found themselves.

Hitchens, with typical modesty, aligns himself with Marx and Freud. There is, however, a significant difference. In Marx the critique of religion comes with some political analysis, while in Freud it comes with psychological insight. The anticlericalism of Hitchens is a bowdlerised version which, because it fails to operate in the name of justice and social critique, flips over into a form of smug superiority. This is because the battle for secularisation has already been waged and won. And so what in Marx was seen as a natural response by the people to their suffering and distress here on earth, becomes in Hitchens and company an indication of the failure of moral and intellectual resoluteness in lesser mortals than they.

The point is that Marx offers an explanation of why it is that people actually cling so strongly to something that, as Hitchens would agree, is so implausible as religion. Marx’s explanation is that people adopt religion because of the misery of their material existence, and the content of religion—the actual beliefs in an almighty God, an afterlife, divine justice, and so forth—is to be understood as the displaced expression (Marx called it ‘alienation’) of their desires and aspirations.

What we have in Marx, then, is an explanation of the origins and persistence of religious belief. How good an explanation is it? Ultimately, not very good at all, as a matter of fact. It might have seemed like a plausible account at a time when religious belief could be regarded as a form of superstition that provided solace to the poor, uneducated, and, more generally, the disenfranchised classes in our society. It will not do today, however, where there is at least as much interest in religion among those whose material happiness is secure as amongst those who live in misery; at least as much interest among those who are educated as amongst those who are ignorant. As we have indicated, Marx says that because religion offers people illusory happiness, its abolition or disappearance is required for their real happiness. Perhaps we could say, today, that people are turning to religion because without religion their real happiness turns out to be illusory and leaves them wanting and dissatisfied. Thus, Marx’s explanation of the origins of religious belief in terms of alienation fails because it cannot account for either the persistence of religion or its social distribution in times of prosperity and high levels of education.

Let us turn now to an alternative explanation of the sources of religious belief, one that we find in Sigmund Freud. We turn to Freud in the hope that he can throw light on the psychological forces underlying the appeal and persistence of religion, and if we can understand these forces then perhaps we will be able to uncover connections with the recent revival of religion in new, contemporary forms.

Freud offers a naturalistic explanation for the unconscious origins of key religious beliefs. For instance, the belief in a supreme and all-powerful being is seen as originating in the child’s early dependency on its parents, and as the expression of an infantile longing for an all-protecting paternal figure. Freud thus contributes something lacking in Marx, as Freud’s account explains the attraction of religion and the reasons for its psychological hold. It is an illusion, though a comforting one, to think that we are not alone in this
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miserable existence but are watched over and protected by a benevolent and all-powerful figure.

However, while Freud gives us an account of the persistence of religious belief, the limitation of the Freudian explanation is that it has no historical dimension. Sure, Freud's analysis of the unconscious origins of religious belief is part of the account, but it doesn't tell us what makes for the renewal of interest in religion in our time. Moreover, Freud was a major warrior in the battle for secularisation. He contributed to its triumph. And hence he doesn't fully understand or foresee the implications for religious belief in a secular age.

There is nevertheless a historical dimension to Freud's thinking that we can draw on. It begins with his contention that the God of monotheism, along with his patriarchal representatives from Abraham onwards, were mythical representations of the father of our infancy. This was the basis on which Freud emphasised the qualitative gap between on the one hand the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and on the other pagan, polytheistic religions, and considered that the Abrahamic religions speak most deeply and directly to the human need for a father-figure who is both protecting and vengeful at the same time. This much is clear.

Freud's work in Totem and Taboo and Moses and Monotheism adds a further dimension to this when he identifies this 'God the father' with the initial establishment of all social law. At the heart of this social law is the prohibition of incest and the renunciation of murder. But this social law clearly goes beyond these two dimensions of prohibiting incest and murder, and in actual fact it shapes all human desire. Human sexual relations, which seem to be natural and seem to have a biological even evolutionary basis, are everywhere mediated and regulated by complex social laws that, moreover, human subjects do not merely comply with but, more fundamentally and significantly, identify with.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan refers to this identification as an identification with 'the Name-of-the-Father' to emphasise its religious affiliations in Western society. And because this identification is actually constitutive of human desire and human relations, the decline or absence of stable social—and religious—authority does not simply 'liberate' this desire, as if in some fulfilment of Dostoyevsky's oft-quoted remark that 'if God is dead, everything is permitted.' This decline is more likely to produce an unconscious desire to reinstitute and reinvigorate forms of social authority and law. This decline will also engender greater anxiety and malaise concerning sexuality and sexual identity, including the meaning and social place of masculinity and femininity. This is why Lacan, taking his cue from Freud, famously reversed Dostoyevsky's dictum, saying 'if God is dead, nothing is permitted.'

These ideas suggest the following thesis concerning the present emergence and growth of monotheistic fundamentalism:

*Fundamentalism has arisen as a compensatory attempt to reinstate the order of paternal symbolic law which has been challenged in the secularised West and, as a consequence, around the world.*
This thesis explains why the breakdown or liberalisation of symbolic norms does not lead solely to anomie, the breakdown of groups, and the alienation of individuals. Typically, the collapse of the law does not simply lead to the passive acceptance of an unregulated social order, but to an active and concerted attempt to reinstate that law. This collapse is rarely so total as to prevent the reaction of reinstating the law as a response to its breakdown. Extreme fundamentalism, involving terrorism, seems to us to fit this pattern very well. The external assault on one's internal law is experienced as humiliation when the internalised law remains in place. Psychologically, the terrorist response involves a perception of humiliation and degradation of the law, rather than the complete destruction of the law. The terrorist act is an act perpetrated in the name of the law, in the name of the father, however misguided. This is also why, in places where terrorist acts are considered legitimate, the support for terrorism is strong among the educated intellectual class, where the degradation of the law is experienced particularly acutely.

This thesis also explains why monotheistic religions, based around the central figure of the law-giving father-God, underlie the new forms of fundamentalism and today's return to religiosity. We speculate that the return of religion appears in the form of a splitting of religion into two dimensions that in monotheistic religion have previously been joined together. These are, firstly, the new forms of fundamentalism that emphasise doctrinal approaches and that seek to regulate social and sexual behaviour by the literal application of prohibitions deriving from textual sources. Secondly, there is the new spirituality which strives to avoid any reference to codified practices and strives for pure religious experience.

Fundamentalism represents the return of a dimension of religiosity that has been effectively repressed in the modern developed world. Thus fundamentalism has emerged alongside the growth of new forms of 'spirituality' within the religious orbit, and the wider liberalisation of sexual and social norms.

Is there possibly a slight asynchrony here? While nondenominational, New Age, or Eastern 'spirituality' was growing, God-the-father had been suffering a relative eclipse, in the form of repression or foreclosure from public discourse. More recently, with the rise of fundamentalism, the figure of the law-making father-God has returned with a vengeance.

NOTE

1. We should remember that the pan-Arab liberation movements of the 1960s were anti-religious.