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Heterodoxies, sectarianism, and utopianism in the constitution of proto-fundamentalist movements

Introduction

I

The major aim of this chapter is to explore the relations between modern fundamentalist movements and modernity, and its major claim is that contemporary fundamentalist movements are thoroughly modern movements, albeit promulgating anti-modern or anti-Enlightenment ideologies. This chapter also intends to demonstrate the importance of heterodox sectarian movements in influencing both the dynamics of civilizations as well as the expansion and crystallization of modern civilization.

By modern fundamentalist movements I am referring particularly to those that emerged in the twentieth century. However, some of these movements do have earlier origins that led to further development through the twentieth century, such as Protestant groups in the United States, while others emerged more recently, first in Islam, and later in Judaism. Beyond the original Protestant ones, these latter movements did not usually refer to themselves as fundamentalists (with perhaps the partial exception of some Islamic movements in Egypt) but were rather so dubbed by Western scholarly and more general discourse.[1] We place all of these movements under the rubric fundamentalist because, despite all their great differences and disparities, it seems to us that some of the characteristics that they do have in common are indeed crucial to our attempts at understanding their dynamics. This chapter will explore both the commonalities and the differences between these fundamentalist movements, noting also the seemingly similar, yet quite distinct religious ones – communal or national – which have developed especially in India and in Buddhist societies of South and Southeast Asia.[2]

It is the major thesis of our analysis that all these fundamentalist

movements do not constitute, as has often been portrayed, an eruption of
traditional or traditionalistic "pre-modern" forces which were repressed, as
it were, by modern regimes and by the cultural program of modernity, nor
are they simply cases of reactionary anti-modern movements. Rather, it is
here contended that modern fundamentalist movements constitute a dis-
tinctive form of modern political movement, namely a special type that
demonstrates strong Jacobin tendencies. In other words, modern funda-
mentalist movements contain a very strong Jacobin component which con-
stitutes one of their distinctive characteristics.

The general affinity between fundamentalist movements and varying
aspects of modernity has been touched upon in the literature: many tend
towards a very tight, even party-like, discipline; they tend to use modern
communication technologies and propaganda techniques; and they have
appropriated of many modern tropes and modes of discourse. Despite the
growing recognition of such affinities, the distinct features of these move-
ments as modern ones have not been adequately or thoroughly delineated.
My central argument here is that the crucial aspect that renders these move-
ments products of modernity is the appropriation by them, to varying
degrees per movement and at different times in their histories, of one
central component of the political program of modernity, which crystal-
lized in the so-called Great Revolutions – namely the Jacobin, totalistic,
participatory, and later totalitarian ones. As we shall see later in greater
detail, in some ways, even if paradoxically at times, the fundamentalist
groups and regimes share some crucial characteristics with most extreme,
secular, left Jacobin movements and regimes – namely the communist ones.

It is above all with respect to some of the features of their ideologies, to
the mode of construction of their ideologies, that the close relations
between the fundamentalist movements and the modern world, modernity,
are most conspicuous. Indeed, one of the major manifestations of such
Jacobin tendencies within these movements is the construction by them of
highly elaborate ideologies which are part and parcel of the modern politi-
cal agenda, even if their basic ideological orientations and symbols are in
many ways anti-modern, especially anti-Enlightenment. From the point of
view of the construction of their ideologies, they constitute thoroughly
modern movements, which promulgate an anti-modern traditionalistic
ideology – an ideology which is, however, couched very much in modern,
especially Jacobin, terms just as their organization evinces some distinct
Jacobin tendencies. Moreover, their very strong anti-modern, or rather anti-
Enlightenment ideology constitutes a part of the more general cultural and
political discourse of modernity from the eighteenth century into the nine-
teenth, and above all as it developed in the twentieth century, with the

continual expansion of modernity. The crucial importance of the modern dimensions of these movements is also evident in the strong emphases to be found in most of them on the importance of conscious moral choice in their continual confrontation with the outside world, in joining them, in continual adherence to them, in the promulgation of their ideologies, and in the belief that such choice may affect the course of history.

More than simply containing some traditional elements, modern fundamentalist movements build on earlier religious traditions and historical experiences, and indeed are deeply rooted in their respective religious traditions. Significantly enough, however, they are rooted not in the hegemonic orthodoxies of their respective traditions but rather in the traditions of their heterodoxies. They evince above all close relation or parallels to some specific, especially utopian, sectarian heterodox tendencies and movements, some of which can be designated as proto-fundamentalist, which developed in their respective religions or civilizations.

The common core of the proto-fundamentalist and modern fundamentalist movements alike is a special type of renovative utopian sectarianism. Such sectarian ideologies and organization developed in all so-called Axial Civilizations. It is such sectarian heterodox movements that constituted also, as we shall see yet in greater detail later, a central component of the crystallization of modernity in Europe, above all in the Great Revolutions. The sectarian utopian orientations prevalent in these movements became, in a highly transformed way, through the impact of these revolutions a central component of modernity – a component that became manifest in many modern movements including the fundamentalist ones. Concomitantly, the composition of these movements also greatly differs from that of the proto-fundamentalist movements of earlier periods, very much in line with the composition of many of the more militant modern movements. Accordingly, fundamentalist movements have to be analyzed in the context of both the historical experience of their civilizations and their various religious traditions, as well as the cultural and political program of modernity.

We shall start this analysis with an examination of sectarian and heterodox tendencies in so-called Axial Civilization – the Weberian Great Religions – as it is within the framework of some of these civilizations that the proto-fundamentalist and fundamentalist movements arose.

Heterodoxies and utopianism in Axial-Age Civilizations

II

By Axial-Age Civilizations (to use Karl Jaspers' nomenclature)[3] we mean those civilizations that crystallized during the 1,000 years from 500 BC to

the first century of the Christian era, within which new types of ontologi-
cal visions, of conceptions of a basic tension between the transcendental
and mundane orders emerged and were institutionalized in many parts of
the world. Examples of this process of crystallization include ancient
Israel, later in Second-Commonwealth Judaism and Christianity; Ancient
Greece; possibly Zoroastrianism in Iran; early imperial China; Hinduism
and Buddhism; and, beyond the Axial Age proper, Islam.

The crystallization of such civilizations can be seen as a series of some
of the greatest revolutionary breakthroughs in human history, which
changed its course. The central aspect of these revolutions was the emer-
gence and institutionalization of the new basic ontological conceptions of
a chasm between the transcendental and mundane orders referred to above.
These conceptions, which first developed among small groups of autono-
mous, relatively unattached "intellectuals" (a new social element at the
time), particularly among the carriers of models of cultural and social
order, were ultimately transformed into the basic "hegemonic" premises of
their respective civilizations, and were subsequently institutionalized. That
is, they became the predominant orientations of both the ruling elites as
well as of many secondary elites, fully embodied in the centers or sub-
centers of their respective societies.

The development and institutionalization of such conceptions of a basic
tension between the transcendental and the mundane order entailed the
perception of the given mundane order as incomplete, inferior – oftentimes
as evil or polluted, and as in need of reconstruction. Such reconstruction
was to be effected according to the basic transcendental ontological con-
ceptions prevalent in these societies; especially according to the conception
of bridging the chasm between the transcendental and the mundane orders,
according to the precepts of a higher ethical or metaphysical order or
vision. In Weberian terms, this reconstruction suggests a movement toward
"salvation," basically a Christian term for which equivalents can be found
in all the Axial Civilizations.[4] Accordingly, the institutionalization of such
conceptions in these civilizations was closely related to attempts to recon-
struct their major institutional contours. It gave rise in all these civilizations
to attempts to reconstruct the mundane world, from the human personal-
ity to the socio-political and economic order, according to the appropriate
transcendental vision, to the principles of the higher ontological or ethical
order.

Thus, in these civilizations there developed a strong tendency to define
certain collectivities and institutional arenas as most appropriate for
resolving these tensions, as arenas of "salvation" for the implementation of
their respective transcendental visions. This act created new types of collec-

tivities or endowed seemingly natural and primordial groups with special meaning in terms of the tensions and their resolution. The most important transformation of this sort was the construction of unneeded "cultural" or "religious," as distinct from "ethnic" or "political," collectivities.

Alongside these major collectivities, there developed within these civilizations strong tendencies to construct a societal center or centers to serve as the major autonomous and symbolically distinct embodiments of the respective transcendental ontological visions, that is, the major loci of the charismatic dimension of human existence. The center's symbolic distinctiveness from the periphery received a relatively strong emphasis, yet at the same time the center tended to permeate the periphery and restructure it according to its own autonomous visions, conceptions, and rules. Sometimes this tendency was accompanied by a parallel impingement by the periphery on the center.[5]

These processes of center formation and reconstruction of collectivities were connected to the construction of great traditions as autonomous and distinct symbolic frameworks, and to the transformation of the relations between the great and little traditions. Hence there developed in all these civilizations attempts by the carriers of the Great Traditions to permeate the peripheries and to absorb the Little Traditions into their realm of influence and control. Consequently, the carriers of the Little Traditions attempted to profane the Great ones, to dissociate themselves from them, and to generate a distinct ideology of their own that also included and incorporated the peripheries.[6]

Thus, in these civilizations, the center (or centers) emerged as a distinct symbolic organizational arena, one whose "givenness" could not necessarily be taken for granted. The construction and characteristics of the center, characterized for instance as either strong and guiding or weak, tended to become central issues under the gaze of the increasing reflexivity that was developing in these civilizations.

The different modes of reflexivity that developed in these civilizations focused above all on the relations between the transcendental and mundane orders. The political dimension of such reflexivity was rooted in the transformed conceptions of the political arena and of the accountability of rulers.[7] The political order as one of the central loci of the mundane order was usually conceived as lower than the transcendental ideal and therefore had to be restructured according to the precepts of the latter. It had to be reconstructed above all according to what was perceived as the proper mode of overcoming the tension between the transcendental and mundane orders, and with special regard to the basic premises of their respective transcendental visions of "salvation." It was the rulers who were usually

held responsible for organizing the political order according to such precepts.

At the same time the nature of the rulers became greatly transformed. The king-god, the embodiment of the cosmic and earthly order alike, disappeared, and a secular ruler appeared, even if with strong sacral attributes, which was, in principle, accountable to some higher order. Thus there emerged the conception of the accountability of rulers and community to a higher authority, God, Divine Law, and the like. Accordingly, the possibility of calling a ruler to judgment appeared. One such dramatic appearance of this conception appeared in ancient Israel, in the priestly and prophetic pronouncements. "Secular" conceptions of such accountability, an accountability to the community and its laws, appeared in both the northern shores of the eastern Mediterranean, in ancient Greece, as well as in the Chinese conception of the Mandate of Heaven. In varying forms this conception of accountability appeared in all these civilizations.[8]

Concomitantly with the emergence of conceptions of accountability of rulers there began to develop autonomous spheres of law as somewhat distinct from ascriptively bound custom and from purely customary law. Such developments could also entail some beginnings of a conception of rights even if the scope of these spheres of law and rights varied greatly.

The basic premise of these civilizations, and the closely related accountability of rulers to some higher law or principles, were closely connected with the crystallization of distinct new roles and groups. In all these civilizations the development and institutionalization of a perceived tension between the transcendental and the mundane orders, the perceived importance of this tension, as well as the subsequent attempts to overcome it via the implementation of a transcendental vision, were closely connected to the emergence of a new social element. Autonomous intellectuals emerged as a new type of elite who acted as carriers of models of cultural and social order such as the ancient Israeli prophets and priests and the later Jewish sages, the Greek philosophers and sophists, the Chinese literati, the Hindu Brahmins, the Buddhist Sangha, and the Islamic Ulema. The small nuclei of such intellectuals and elites that developed these new ontologies, these new transcendental visions and conceptions, saw themselves as representatives and promulgators of such visions of the higher law, and thus further considered themselves entitled to call rulers to accountability.[9]

III

The new type of elites that arose with the processes of institutionalization of such transcendental visions differed greatly from the ritual, magical, and

sacral specialist in the pre-Axial Age Civilizations. New elites, intellectuals, and clerics were recruited and legitimized according to distinct, autonomous criteria, and were organized in autonomous settings distinct from those of the basic ascriptive political units of the society. They acquired a conscious, potentially countrywide status of their own. They also tended to become potentially independent of other categories of elites, social groups, and sectors. The new cultural groups became transformed into relatively autonomous partners in the major ruling coalitions and protest movements.

At the same time there took place a far-reaching transformation of other elites, such as political elites, or the articulators of the solidarity of different collectivities. All these elites tended to develop claims to an autonomous place in the construction of the cultural and social order. They saw themselves not only as performing specific technical, functional activities – be they those of scribes, ritual specialists, and the like – but also as potentially autonomous carriers of a distinct cultural and social order related to the transcendental vision prevalent in their respective societies. All of these elites saw themselves as the autonomous articulators of the new order and rival elites as both accountable to them and as essentially inferior.

Moreover, each of these groups of elites was not homogeneous (in these civilizations even more than in others), and within each of them as well as within the broader sectors of the society there developed a multiplicity of secondary cultural, political, or educational groups and influentials, each very often carrying different conceptions of the cultural and social order. Accordingly these various groups, elites, and influentials often competed strongly with each other, especially over the production and control of symbols and media of communication.

It is these elites and influentials that were the most active in the restructuring of the world and in contributing to the institutional creativity that developed in these societies. Above all – and this is crucial for our analysis – these different elites in general and the intellectuals in particular also constituted the most active proponents of various alternative conceptions of the social and cultural order that have developed in all these civilizations.

The basic antinomies in the cultural programs of Axial Civilizations

IV

It was indeed one of the distinct characteristics of these civilizations that there continually developed within them alternative, competing transcendental visions. These alternative conceptions or visions crystallized around

three basic antinomies inherent in the very premises of these civilizations and in the process of their institutionalization – namely, first, around the awareness of a great range of possibilities of transcendental visions and of the range of methods of their possible implementation; secondly, around the tension between reason and revelation or faith (or their equivalents in the non-monotheistic Axial Civilizations); and thirdly, around the problematique of the desirability of attempts at full institutionalization of these visions in their pristine form.[10]

The awareness of a great range of possibilities of transcendental visions, of the very definition of the tensions between the transcendental and the mundane order and of the quest to overcome these tensions by implementation of such visions, constituted an inherent part of their institutionalization in the Axial Civilizations. Historically such a process of institutionalization was never a simple, peaceful one. Any such institutionalization usually contained strong heterogeneous and even contradictory elements. It was usually connected with a continuous struggle and competition between many groups and between their respective visions. Because of this multiplicity of visions, no single one could be taken as given or complete. Once the conception of a basic tension between the transcendental and the mundane order was institutionalized in a society, or at least within its center, it became in itself very problematic. The elaboration of any such vision attendant on such institutionalization generated the possibility of different emphases, directions, and interpretations, all of which were reinforced by the existence in any historical setting of such institutionalization of multiple visions carried by different groups.

The second basic antinomy inherent in these civilizations has been between reason and revelation or faith in the monotheistic tradition, or commitment to some equivalent transcendental principle in the Confucian, Hinduistic, and Buddhist ones. The premises of these civilizations and their institutionalization entailed a high level of reflexivity, including a second order reflexivity suggesting a critical awareness of these very premises. Such reflexivity has been, of course, reinforced by the awareness of the possibility – and existence – of alternative visions. It necessarily entailed the exercise of human judgment and reason, not only as a pragmatic tool but as at least one arbiter or guide of such reflexivity. Such exercise often gave rise to the construction of "reason" as a distinct category in the discourse that developed in these civilizations. Hence, it may have easily endowed reason with a metaphysical or transcendental dimension and autonomy which did not exist in pre-Axial Civilizations – and could generate confrontations between its autonomous exercise on the one hand and revelation or faith (or their non-monotheistic equivalents) on the other. Such confrontation

was historically central in the monotheistic civilizations as they confronted the only Axial Civilization that did indeed define reason, or "logos," as the ultimate transcendental value, namely the Greek civilization. But parallel confrontations, even if couched in other terms and in less confrontational ways, developed in the Axial Civilizations.

The above antinomy is closely related to the third one inherent in the Axial Civilizations which concerns the desirability of full attempts at institutionalizing these visions in their pristine forms. In most of these civilizations it was strongly emphasized that there exists a sharp discrepancy between the ideal order, as prescribed or envisaged by the transcendental visions prevalent in them (by the commandments of God, by the ideals of cosmic harmony or the like), and the mundane order as constructed by the exigencies of social and political life or by the vagaries of human nature (often conceived as guided by purely utilitarian conditions, by strict considerations of power, or as *raison d'état*).

At issue here is the development within the reflexive traditions of these civilizations, given the at least implicit assumption of human imperfectability, of doubts about the possibility, or even the feasibility of full implementation of such a vision. Such views were not inherently exogenous to the basic conceptions and premises of these civilizations, rather they were a fundamental, even if controversial, component of these premises. The very emphasis on a chasm between these two orders entailed the notion of the inherent imperfectibility of humanity. It was thus often emphasized in the discourse of these civilizations that attempts to completely overcome the chasm between these two orders could be very dangerous and perhaps lead to attempts by fragile humans to claim for themselves divine power. Accordingly there developed within these civilizations strong emphases on the necessity to regulate mundane affairs with reference to the transcendental vision without full, extreme attempts at totalistic implementation of the pristine version of the vision. The proper limits of such implementation, or the scope of the arenas and aspects of life that should be regulated according to such vision, as opposed to arenas possibly better left to regulation by more mundane means such as economic and political processes, constituted one of the major concerns of the reflexive discourse in all these civilizations.

Augustine's famous distinction between the City of God and the City of Man is one of the best-known illustrations of this concern – as is the resolution of this problem in the direction of the separation of the two cities – which was challenged by many heterodox, among them gnostic, groups. Similar discourses can also be found in other Axial Civilizations.

These concerns were closely related to yet another problem that was central in the discourse of all these civilizations, namely that of the

evaluation of hedonistic and anarchic impulses, as well as of the general mundane interests of people. That is, there was a strong preoccupation with the relationship or tension between, on the one hand, the impulses and interests of potentially egoistical, hedonistic, and anarchic individuals and groups in society, and on the other, the maintenance of a proper social order. In close relation to these considerations, there developed in many of these civilizations some notions of the concept of a social contract, that the actual mundane, especially the political order, is constituted through some implicit contract between the members of a society, one to another, and especially between them and the ruler. Variations of such notions as social contract can be found in some of the great writings on political and social matters of the Asian civilizations, as for instance the Artashartra of Katulya, in the work of Ibn Khaldoun, and in some of the work of such Chinese thinkers as Motzu or Hsunt-su. Most of these discussions emphasized that such contracts with rulers were based on some utilitarian considerations as well as on fear. Such considerations were usually seen as being natural parts of the mundane order as the anarchic potentials of human nature had to be regulated and hemmed in by laws, customs, and potentially by the power of the rulers. The recognition of this necessity was often connected with the legitimation of the political order as grounded in considerations of power and fear of anarchy. Contracts based on such considerations could be seen as legitimate, but certainly not as adhering to the full implementation of a pristine transcendental vision. Their legitimation could likewise be connected with the fear of attempts to totalistically implement a pristine transcendental vision.

At the same time, however, the possibility was raised in this discourse that the regulation of such impulses could be best assured by the exercise of human judgment, by reason rather than by attempts to fully implement transcendental visions in some pristine form.

V

The various alternative visions of the transcendental and mundane orders that developed in these civilizations focused above all on these basic antinomies inherent in their premises. These alternative visions, with their strong antinomian possibilities, usually entailed some reconstruction of the basic ontological conceptions of reality, of the conception of the transcendental order and its relations to the mundane order – especially to the political order and the basic social formations that were institutionalized in these civilizations.