

Religious Fundamentalism and Violence



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This presentation focuses on:

1. Individuals who cling to exaggerated religiosity;
2. Extreme fundamentalist religious encapsulated groups such as cults or *tarikats*;
3. Extreme fundamentalist globalized religious movements such as al-Qaeda.

The Fundamentals (financed by Lyman and Milton Stewart in the 1920s)

1. Biblical inerrancy
2. The virgin birth
3. Christ's atonement and resurrection
4. The authenticity of miracles
5. Dispensationalism

Even though the term “fundamentalism” in relation to religion was first used in the 1920s, earlier in history and on countless occasions, individuals or groups the world over from practically every faith turned to exaggerated religiosity.

Definition

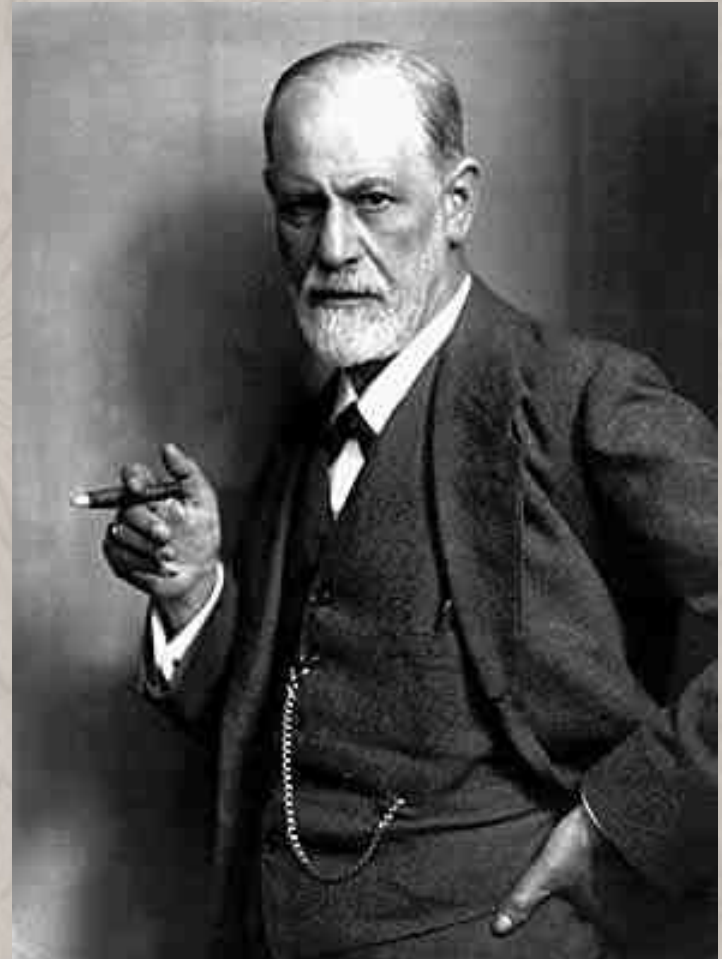
Fundamentalism in any religion is associated with the believers' list of unchangeable doctrines and is defined "in terms of its disciplined opposition to nonbelievers and 'lukewarm' believers alike" (Marty and Appleby 1995, p.1).

Perceived omnipotence associated with a belief in the group's special relationship with a divine power, combined with a determination to stand apart from non-believers or lukewarm believers, may lead to violence when "others" are perceived as threatening.

However, religious fundamentalist movements, even the extreme ones, are not always violent.

Psychoanalysis and Religion

Sigmund Freud viewed obsessional neurosis as a distorted private religion, and religion as a kind of universal obsessional neurosis.



Donald Winnicott's (1953) paper on transitional objects and transitional phenomena gave psychoanalysis a new way of understanding religion and its universality.



Elaborations on transitional objects and transitional phenomena (Greenacre 1970; Modell 1970; Volkan 1976) allowed us to see more clearly the progressive, healing, and creative aspects of religious beliefs and feelings, as well as their destructive and restrictive aspects.

A Lantern



Moments of Rest

People have “moments of rest” during which there is no need to differentiate between what is real and what is illusion, times when logical thinking need not be maintained.

The need for “moments of rest” varies from individual to individual and from social group to group.

Some people declare that they do not require such religious “moments of rest,” but perhaps they know them by different names. They may “play” the game of linking magical and real in astrology, or paint abstract paintings that represent a mixture of illusion and reality, or become good psychoanalysts who can easily travel between primary process and secondary process thinking with their associated affects, providing models for their patients to do the same with minimal anxiety until they modify their psychic realities.

Extreme religious fundamentalism

1. Extreme religious fundamentalists are preoccupied with keeping the opaque side of the lantern turned against the real world with its perceived threats and frustrations.
2. They refuse to travel between illusion and reality and attempt to maintain illusion as their own special reality.
3. Unlike infants who can effectively block out the external world, adult extreme religious fundamentalists are more aware of what they perceive as a threatening environment. This is a key reason why an extreme form of religious fundamentalism has the potential to strike out against threatening objects.

Individuals

- At birth we do not know what religion is, nor do we comprehend ethnicity or nationality. Erik Erikson (1966) called children *generalists*; they do not belong to a large-group identity.
- The most organized and socially-sanctioned “propaganda” for a better way of life comes from religious organizations (Volkan and Kayatekin 2006).
- Due to experiences with environment, identifications, and elements that are “deposited” into them as children, some people grow up as fundamentalist religious individuals. Others, for personal reasons, will turn to an exaggerated religiosity later in life.

Religiousness has been shown to be highly prevalent among psychiatric patients, especially among those with schizophrenia who exhibit religious delusions and hallucinations (Kirov, Kemp, et al. 1998; Pieper 2004).

Two Cases

Patterson
and
Serpil

When threats from the outside world become magnified, persons with extreme religious fundamentalism may seek the company of others who also keep the opaque sides of their lanterns turned against the real world.

Some seek comfort in cults or *tarikats* in hopes that the leaders of such groups will make their uncomfortable “moments of rest” comfortable. Alas, such radical fundamentalist leaders also possess a lantern with an opaque side facing the outside world, magnifying the dangers that exist “out there.”

Encapsulated Extreme Religious Fundamentalism: Cults or *Tarikats*

Jim Jones's Temple in Jonestown, David Koresh's Waco, Shoko Asahara's Japanese Aum Shinrikyo, Joseph DiMambro's Order of Solar Temple, Gush Emunim in Israel and even, in their initial stages, Hamas in Lebanon and Molla Omer's Taliban in Afghanistan, to name a few. (Mayer 1998; Weber 1999; Wessinger 1999; Moses-Hrushovski 2000; Volkan 2004; and Volkan and Kayatekin 2006).

The term “encapsulated” refers to movements which remain isolated within one large group and which often induce negative feelings and/or fear in those within the same large group who are outside of the movement. Psychological processes that we see in individuals such as Serpil and Patterson echo the psychology of religious cult leaders and, in turn, *ten characteristics* of extreme religious cults or *tarikats*.

Ten characteristics of
encapsulated *extreme*
fundamentalist religious cults
or *tarikats*:

(Volkan and Kayatekin 2006)

1. A divine text: Each encapsulated cult or *tarikah* has its own “divine text,” whether it is written or passed along verbally, such as a specific version of the Bible or an interpretation of certain verses of the Koran. The “divine text” is irrefutable, non-negotiable.

2. An absolute leader who is the interpreter of the divine text: Their leader is the sole interpreter of the group's divine text. No other interpretations are acceptable. The leader is a man; only rarely is the leader a women.

3. Total loyalty: Membership in a cult or *tarikah* provides a sense of belonging for its followers. The members' total loyalty to the leader and to the divine text "removes" any anxiety they might have due to intrapsychic and interpersonal conflicts, especially those that threaten the individuals' identities.

4. Tangible incentives: Cults and *tarikats* create tangible incentives and economic dependence to ensure that members do not leave the group. The putative divine rule infiltrates members' everyday existence and intimate personal relationships, fundamentally changing them.

5. Feeling omnipotent yet victimized: These are pessimistic movements (Sivan 1985), because the members perceive their specific religious “fundamentals” to be continually under attack by non-believers or even lukewarm believers, Darwinists, Freudians, scientists, and rival religious fundamentalist groups that cite other texts as truly divine. Paradoxically, because they believe that their text is the true divine guide and their leader the only true spiritual leader, they experience a sense of omnipotence.

6. Extreme sadistic and/or masochistic acts:

The contamination of a shared sense of pessimism with a shared sense of omnipotence creates a special condition that allows extreme sadism or masochism to become tolerable. When an encapsulated extreme religious fundamentalist group perceives a threat to the divine authority of the leader and to the survival of the group and its identity, the protection of the group and its identity becomes its primary preoccupation.

7. Alteration of the shared “morality”: The existence of an altered shared “morality” (altered shared superego) accepts mass suicides or mass killings in the service of maintaining a tie to a divine power.

8. Creation of borders: Even during “safe times” when there is no real imminent threat to the group’s security, these organizations build physical borders like walls or barricades. But more importantly, they also build psychological symbolic borders around themselves, such as by wearing a specific color or style of dress, a turban or a fur hat that separates them from others.

9. Changing of family, gender, and sexual norms within the “borders”: The leader of these groups becomes “the father,” “the mother” and “the lover” for all the followers. Traditional family values are replaced by the leader’s interpretation of the “divine text.” The role of women is usually reduced to giving sex (pleasure) and food (milk) to the leader or other men belonging to the same group. Sometimes the cult leader “owns” all the women and children in the group, just as David Koresh did at the Waco compound. In most *tarikats* women are forced to cover themselves, including their faces.

10. Negative feelings and fear among outsiders: Because encapsulated extreme fundamentalist religious groups feel special, divine, secretive, magical, omnipotent, masochistic and sadistic, and because they erect borders around themselves, they induce negative feelings and fear among people who live outside their borders. Outsiders perceive these or similar organizations as a threat to their own religious or other belief systems.

**Globalized Fundamentalism:
Large-Group Psychology**

An encapsulated extreme fundamentalist religious movement starts to become generalized, politicized and globalized when the majority of “bystanders” within the large group, instead of having and maintaining negative feelings and fear about the movement, begin to support it directly or indirectly.

Numerous causes:

If people have gone through a massive trauma and felt humiliated and helpless, the idea of a savior becomes attractive to them. Such circumstances create an atmosphere which supports the emergence of a *narcissistic political leader* who believes in his or her own superior skills and who, in the long run, may either raise the followers' shared self-esteem (*reparative leader*) or become very destructive (*destructive leader*) (Volkan 1980).

Under traumatic circumstances the society may, in answer to its existing misery, be attracted to a cult or *tarikat* with extreme fundamentalist religious beliefs contaminated with its leader's omnipotence (The Taliban's rising to power) (Volkan 2006).

Traumatized societies, like traumatized children, tend to identify with feared objects (“totalitarian objects” {Šebek 1994}), and this leads its members to gather under a shared superego that allows violence. Globalized extreme religious fundamentalism functions as a shared superego that sanctions violence.

We should also consider sociopolitical manipulations, coercions, propaganda, economic and political incentives (real world issues) when examining the expanding influence of an extreme fundamentalist religious organization.

Historian Bernard Lewis noted: “Islamic fundamentalism has given an aim and a form to the otherwise aimless and formless resentment and anger of the Muslim masses at the forces that have devalued their traditional values and loyalties and, in the final analysis, robbed them of their beliefs, their aspirations, their dignity, and to an increasing extent even their livelihood” (Lewis 1990, p. 59).

Al-Qaeda

Today the best-known global fundamentalist religious movement is known as al-Qaeda. Its leader Osama bin Laden is not the only recent figure to inflame what Bernard Lewis (1990) called “Muslim rage.” Long before September 11, 2001 it was clear that Islamic religious fundamentalism and even its extreme forms, would find emotional support among Islamic large groups, especially in the Arab world, and that it could easily become globalized.



On the surface, the characteristics of a globalized extreme fundamentalist religious movement seem different than those of encapsulated extreme religious groups.

Al-Qaeda resembles a giant global commercial corporation with secret funds, representatives in various countries, and a shared ideology, contaminated with strict religious doctrines. It strives to become a world power by using any means, from engaging in effective political and religious propaganda, to making financial deals. But it also performs horrendous acts of violence.

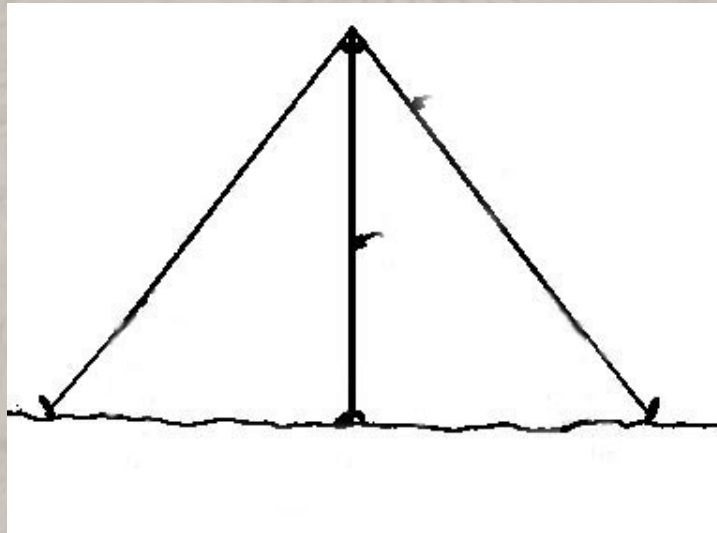
The characteristics that we see clearly in encapsulated extreme fundamentalist religious movements are present within the al-Qaeda movement as well.

- It contains a “divine” ideology (Salafism) and Osama bin Laden is its interpreter.**
- Followers blindly idealize Osama bin Laden (and the leaders of the local cells).**
- Followers feel victimized but omnipotent, and experience an altered “morality.”**
- They have built “borders” around themselves in order to maintain their large-group identity and therefore we seldom know where they are and where they are hiding.**
- “Divine” ideology replaces family values and many traditional and religious beliefs.**

Al-Qaeda induces extreme negative feelings and fear in “outsiders” in faraway locations. However, many Moslems who live where al-Qaeda’s influence is present, although not terrorists themselves, often have direct or hidden sentiments supporting the movement. The last characteristic basically differentiates this global extreme religious fundamentalist movement from an encapsulated one.

Large-Group Identity Issues

When an extreme and violent religious fundamentalist movement such as al-Qaeda becomes globalized, it becomes intertwined with the *psychology of large-group identity* in its own right.



When a globalized extreme fundamentalist religious movement weaves new religious symbols into the cloth of the metaphorical large-group tent, that large group can be abused or manipulated in the name of one god or another. In conflicts between large groups where gods are present, gods cannot be questioned and gods do not negotiate; they give followers permission to kill nonbelievers, even “lukewarm” believers, in order to protect and maintain the “new” large-group identity or to die in order to find omnipotence in eternity.

Cynical remarks made by Napoleon long ago:

“When one man is dying of hunger while his neighbor has too much to eat, he cannot accept this difference unless there is an authority which tells him: It is the will of God; there must be poor people and the rich people in the world; but later on, and throughout eternity, the distribution will be done in a different way” (Duverger 1968, p.174).

Psychoanalysts who are interested in contributing to the understanding of extreme fundamentalist religious movements, encapsulated or globalized, should not simply focus on affected individuals' personal perceptions of gods representing loving fathers and images of large groups representing nurturing mothers. Rather, they should focus on the psychology of large-group identity and how this identity can be manipulated to make people ready to do anything, including massive sadistic and masochistic deeds, with the illusion they are protecting the large-group identity or bringing attention to it so that its continuing existence can be witnessed (Volkan 1997, 2006).



Islamic World-Western World
Dialogue: Ankara, Turkey. November