Monotheisms and Modernity: A Battle of Ontologies and Bodies

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Fundamentalisms are reactionary religious movements which are mobilized against select changes brought about by modernization, secularization, and globalization (Almond, Appleby, & Sivan, 2003, p. 17) (Bruce, 2008, p. 13). Modernization is a complex process characterized by the fragmentation of social institutions, individualization, alienation, constant and accelerated change, the growing authority of science, and increased communications technology (Bruce, 2008, p. 16-17) as well as the rise of democratic, urbanized, and industrialized societies. Secularization and globalization are by-products of these processes. As the social order becomes increasingly fragmented, spiritual and moral understandings also become increasingly fragmented (Bruce, 2008, p. 17). This is because “a religious movement is one mobilized to work on the cultural frame” (Thomas, 1997, p. 13). Urbanization and globalization mean that societies everywhere are becoming increasingly pluralistic and culture is becoming varied with different systems of meaning. In this context, overtly culturally specific systems of meaning like monotheisms become less viable as totalitarian social organizers. Therefore, faced with plurality, modern societies designate religion to the private realm (Stark, 2001, p. 222). The public realm becomes secular, supposedly indicating that society is of both all religious denominations and none. Democracy advertises itself as an open system, one that exists outside and apart from categorical inequalities and governs all of its subjects as equals. This self-image is evidenced by democracy’s claimed devotion to human rights. This is exactly opposite to the enclave-based organization of fundamentalisms which advertises itself as a closed system, contained by meticulously kept boundaries which separate the righteous from the damned. Each system, democratic/secularist and fundamentalist, constructs the human body in a way that is mutually antagonistic and which reflects an ontological competition between two totalizing systems. Monotheisms as fundamentalist host religions provide ideal vehicles of resistance.

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Globalization is the process whereby geographical distances become compressed by
communication and transportation technology, allowing for increased worldwide relations
and influence (Waters, 2001). This compression allows for the economic expansion of global
capitalism which has had disastrous effects on many nations. The free market competition
style of capitalism and the priority placed on profits over human empathy continuously
widens the gap between the rich and poor with the effect that entire nations find themselves
economically and politically marginalized (Antoun, 2001). The roles of producer and
consumer increasingly become mutually exclusive roles in a global production process
rightly named “slave-labour”. While countries are impoverished in order to produce
Western luxury, the West produces and exports cultural products which extort Western
values of individuality, secularism, and consumerism. These cultural exports attempt to
sell a very specific constitution of the individual self as a self-contained whole, a free agent,
an ideal consumer. The Western world is hence launching both a cultural and economic
invasion which threatens to incorporate all late-comers at the bottom of the global hierarchy
of power and influence.

Religion provides an ideal vehicle of resistance; since the Western invasion is
primarily on ontological grounds (although Western military presence also plays a role), it makes sense that the resistance also be ontologically based. Religions serve as modes of explaining existence and the unknown realms which stretch beyond it, therefore, religion can be used to directly challenge the secular ontology which seeks to erase the religious ontology (Stark, 2001). Monotheisms, especially ones with sacred texts and clear moral outlooks, provide strong, defendable boundaries by which a religious community may resist incorporation into an irreligious understanding of the world.

Nevertheless, secularism is alluring. It rewards the individual with freedom, material rewards, and self-indulgence (Almond et al., 2003). To borrow from Stark (2001), in the market place of religion, people enter into exchange relationships with spiritual beings in which they trade certain sacrifices for the perceived rewards granted by that particular deity. The religious free market of the secular, pluralistic society provides an (illusory) freedom to diversify one’s ontological investments. However, in the reality of Western society, all religious investments are expected to occupy a secondary role in relation to democratic/secularist centrality. Therefore, in order for a religious resistance to compete it must demand an exclusive exchange relationship with God, one that will not allow itself to be marginalized by the overriding norm of religious civility. In any ontologically competitive society, any exchange relationship entails the risk of selecting the “wrong” understanding and therefore the “wrong salvation”. As mentioned above, by diversifying one’s investments one is able to minimize this risk. Therefore, in order for any religion to demand ontological exclusivity it must have a God of great scope that is able to offer rewards great enough to justify the risk (Stark, 2001). This is especially true in the age of science which only recently has begun to loosen its hold on metaphysical space (Almond et al., 2003). The moral, responsive, rational, dependable God which is often characteristic of dualistic monotheisms (Stark, 2001) has the great scope and predictability necessary to justify the risk of an exchange relationship. In a pure monotheism, one God is believed to be responsible for all occurrences, both positive and negative. A God that is equally responsible for negative and positive events appears indifferent to human life and does not make a very attractive exchange partner. Dualistic monotheisms solve this problem through the existence of a separate, but lesser supernatural being responsible for only negative or “evil” occurrences. This allows a single central God to both remain omnipotent and avoid blame for negative occurrences. The result is a powerful, trustworthy God that justifies an exclusive exchange relationship. Polytheistic religions are ineffective forms of resistance in this sense because specialized gods of lesser scope tend to justify a plurality of exchange relationships. Since democracy and science leave room for these spiritual exchange relationships, although as peripheral roles, they do not directly antagonize the role of specialized gods. Therefore monotheism is able to confront more fully the centrality
of the secular state.

The exception to this notion that polytheisms are more apt to assimilate than confront, is polytheistic fundamentalist movements which have dominant ethnocultural or ethnonational elements (Almond et al., 2003). Like the God of great scope, mass cultures and entire nations, combined with a common religious basis, also represent collective organizations which are capable of demanding exclusive exchange relationships from their members and in turn, offering great rewards. Like the monotheistic religion, membership in a relatively closed system, such as a nation or a geographically bounded culture enables the creation of boundaries between the fundamentalist collectivity and the secular world attempting to envelop it. These boundaries keep the in-group cohesive and central rather than diversified and specialized.

Whether solely religious in nature or with ethnocultural and/or ethnonational elements, all fundamentalisms share the characteristic of collectivity. The fundamentalist organizational structure constructs the individual as part of a larger whole. This communal whole is what Almond et al. (2003) terms “the enclave”. The enclave relies on homogeneity and group cohesion and is threatened by internal schisms and heterogeneity resulting from freely expressed individuality (Almond et al., 2003, p. 213). This reflects a low grid, high group configuration. “Group” refers to a society sui generis, a society that exists on its own ground for the purpose of its members. This configuration contains both insiders and outsiders. Group members share the same identity which is juxtaposed against the negative identity of outsiders (Almond et al., 2003). “Grid” refers to dimensions of power. The grid configuration exists along two dimensions: hierarchy and sameness. People are grouped into hierarchical levels in which others may be inferior, equal or superior in comparison (Bandyopadhyay, 2010). The enclave’s inner-structure is relatively egalitarian and reflects low grid constraints (Almond et al., 2003). The group mentality is dominant in the enclave’s social relations, which leads to the construction of the human body as open.

Deborah Lumpton (1999) describes the concept of the open body as a body that is not self-contained, but conceptualized as part of a “communal whole, freely interacting with other bodies” (p. 125). This conceptualization of the human body as part of a greater whole is well suited to recognize forces beyond human control; indeed in this context self identity exists within a network that exceeds beyond the individual. Durkheim originated this claim that “society is quite capable of arousing the sensation of the divine, simply by its influence over the minds of its members” (2001, p. 154). Furthermore, “this force can be realized only in and through those individuals so man came to see himself as a sacred being” (Durkheim, 2001, p. 167). The religious human body is necessarily one that opens itself up to the influence of the group. The sacred status of the body is drawn from group membership, whether this membership is solely religious or includes mixed ethnocultural...
and ethnonational elements. This explains why the enclave is egalitarian in its inner structure (Almond et al., 2003, p. 75). In order to encourage members’ self constitution as open bodies their primary sources of empowerment must be as group members and not as individuals. Differences in individual levels of empowerment within the group differentiate individuals and destabilize the enclave. An egalitarian structure keeps group constraints strong and grid constraints low by minimizing further sub-categorization within the group. Therefore, by maintaining a closed system of equals, fundamentalisms are able to resist the modern construction of the closed body, the self-contained individual, whose grid constraints are not as minimal as the Western self-image would imagine.

Modernity is the sum of the outside forces which the enclave resists and these forces are identified by their human-centered ethos (Almond et al., 2003). Modernity presents human autonomy as the ultimate goal. Phrased another way, modernity aims for a social context in which both group and grid constraints are minimal. This social context reflects a market organization composed of free agents driven by self-interest (Almond et al., 2003). This type of social context constructs the human body in an entirely different fashion from the open body. Fundamentalisms focus on boundaries between groups and between group and grid. Modernity focuses on the boundary between self and group, self and grid, as well as self and other. It devalues the human body as a social being and hence as a sacred being. Therefore, the modern body is a closed body, one that does not interact freely with other bodies, but views others as potential threats to the boundary around the self (Lumpton, 1999). Democratic ideals preserve this image of the body by subordinating grid and group constraints to individual freedoms and rights.

However, despite many countries’ professed democratic values, there is an overriding social context that repeatedly intrudes on the notion of the autonomous individual and the society of equal rights. Despite the official abolishment of grid constraints such as ethnicity, gender, religion, etc., in most democracies, the monetary system continues to act as the over-arching grid constraint of both the Western and globalized world. This reflects the modern trend of valuing quantity over quality (Antoun, 2001). Qualifying characteristics of individuals are often linked to a group or grid based identity; they are characteristics which have resulted from one’s specific language, ancestry, culture, tradition, etc. Quantifying characteristics are thought to be more objective and therefore beyond group or grid interpretation. Hence the notion of individual autonomy becomes closely related to the notion of monetary autonomy. However, the qualifying effects that money has at the real life level are consistently ignored; money becomes a grid constraint in itself. This result is a social context characterized by low group constraints and high grid constraints in which the individual is subject to grid domination without group support. Individuals living in this social context become ideal recruits for fundamentalist movements (Almond et al.,
Thus modernity directly feeds fundamentalist movements.

The battle between modernity and fundamentalism is a battle between the grid and the group, but it is also a battle between the social self and the self as an individual. As mentioned above, fundamentalisms require an egalitarian structure with minimal hierarchy in order to function (Almond et al., 2003). This structure is best protected through ceaseless efforts towards hegemony, created by the homogenization of the in-group and protected by rigid boundary maintenance. An atmosphere in which the group mentality dominates the individual mentality must be maintained to prevent schisms and desertion. This is why fundamentalisms “equate ‘strong religion’ with ‘purity’ and purity, with uniformity of belief and practice” (Almond et al., 2003, p. 17). Dualistic monotheisms are especially adept at providing a clear basis for both homogenization and boundary maintenance in order to create a strong group. Firstly, dualistic monotheisms have a special capacity to link supernatural with a social ethic, unlike polytheisms and pure monotheisms. Since the god of great scope must also be a moral god to justify an exchange relationship, morality is imbued with a divine nature (Stark, 1997). The divine morality represented by one God naturally extends to the behaviour of members in the form of sin and divine virtue (Stark, 2001). This allows divine morality to perform three major functions.

The first major function of divine morality is that it provides the enclave with moral authority to demand strict behavioural requirements that will maintain strong boundaries between the enclave and the outside. This is the foundation upon which the enclave’s “Wall of Virtue” may be built (Almond et al., 2003, p. 33). This “Wall of Virtue” differentiates the moral superiority of the enclave from the moral degeneracy of the outside world (Almond et al., 2003). Moral authority is further enhanced by the presence of sacred texts which provide clear behavioural outlines. This allows the members of the enclave to remain distinct and distant from the modern society they resist even as it surrounds them.

The reification of this boundary allows for divine morality’s second function which is to horde the only resource that all fundamentalisms are able to offer: in-group status. The enclave is able to exercise a great deal of moral suasion which counteracts the alluring benefits of modern life. By minimizing the distinction between members and focusing on their overriding status of pure and virtuous members of the righteous enclave, members are given a status value that is much greater than that which may be achieved from a dominated low group, high grid context in the outside world (Almond et al., 2003). The use of a monotheistic host religion helps the enclave maintain an exclusive hold on this resource. This is because particularism is inherent in dualistic monotheisms (Stark, 2001). Since monotheisms acknowledge only one true God in an exclusive exchange relationship, all other exchange relationships (and therefore all other gods and all other religions) are viewed as falsehoods. As Stark (2001) points out, particularism has two sides: the contempt
of insiders for other “false” religions and the negative reaction of outsiders who are labelled “false believers” (p. 117). The mutually negative image actually serves to protect the enclave structure. It encapsulates the enclave and reduces network ties across boundaries. This simultaneously reduces the effect of assimilation and increases group solidarity (Stark, 2001).

The reification of boundaries is problematic in polytheisms because they are based on a multiplicity of exchange relationships between members and specialized gods. Therefore no one God has the necessary scope to demand an exclusive exchange relationship. Competing religious deities and ontologies may be incorporated into this pluralistic structure without much damage to the overall systems as they too take on a specialized role within the existing pantheon of Gods and exchange relationships (Stark, 2001). Therefore polytheistic fundamentalist movements, such as the Hindu Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, must be ethnonational or ethnocultural in nature. Supplemented with these elements, polytheistic fundamentalist movements form syncretic movements which utilize non-religious boundaries such as nationality and political affiliation (Almond et al., 2003).

The third function of divine morality leads us back to the notion of open bodies because active morality is a process that connects the body to the group; it is a group constraint. Morality regulates the boundary between self and group and keeps this boundary open through a mutual responsibility of trust and respect. Ideally, morality prevents the formation of boundaries between the self and the group based on self-interest which would result in the construction of a modern closed body. Religions based on divine essences are also capable of cultivating views of morality and philosophy that keep boundaries between the self and outside world open. However, these religions focus on individual spirituality which problematizes the homogenization of the group on religious grounds. Therefore, these religions have little power as political mobilizers because they imply a balance between the individual and the group that resists group and grid constraints, but on a smaller, less powerful, individual level. Furthermore, their appeal is limited by the fact that they do not offer an exchange relationship with a God; without an exchange there can be no rewards (Stark, 2001). Religions based on essences appeal more to intellectual elites than to the more numerous potential recruits who find themselves in social contexts of high grid and low group (Stark 2001).

In conclusion, monotheistic religions are likely to generate fundamentalist revivals within the globalized, modernized, secularized context that the world now finds itself. Compared to polytheisms and essentialist religions, monotheisms are best equipped to resist the grid constraints of the modern Western world by supplying those dispossessed by the process of globalization and modernity with ontological artillery and group identity.
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However, with some adjustments, polytheisms have also proven capable of generating fundamentalist movements that are not strictly religious. Meanwhile, the Western world continues to build boundaries between the self and the group in the pursuit of freedom and self-interest. While democracies officially cleanse themselves of all social categories that could create grid restraints, the monetary/market grid remains untouchable and dominant. It creates a grid constraint of class that threatens to encompass and stratify the entire global society. The creation of fundamentalist religious movements to challenge the authority of the grid with the authority of the group is logical and monotheisms provide ideal hosts as religions strong in solidarity, morality, and boundary maintenance.

References


