Perspective

The Apocalyptic Other
On Fundamentalism and Violence

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ABSTRACT: The article begins by noting that the idea of a “fundamentalist mindset” is implicit in the scholarship on fundamentalism, especially in the project led by Martin Marty some years ago. One important aspect of that mindset is the paranoia that lies imbedded within it. Paranoia is explored in some depth, including clinically, in order to clarify its general meanings and most of all its relation to violence. The article argues further that the very notion of the other in paranoid ideation is apocalyptic in form, which leads to a final section on the nature, history, and psychology of the apocalyptic.

In the massive study of global fundamentalism by scores of leading scholars directed by Martin Marty in the early 1990s that was published in five very large and invaluable volumes, there emerged a consensus about what Marty shrewdly called “family resemblances” between otherwise seemingly very different expressions of fundamentalism.¹ It was always a conceptual tightrope to walk in the discussions within that project (of which I was a part in its early stages) when comparisons were made between, say, Pat Robertson and the settler movement in Israel, or between Hindu extremists and Hamas. But that was—and is—the point. Of course, one needs to keep clear that Baruch Goldstein, who carried out the Cave of the Patriarchs Massacre in 1994, in his hatred does not speak for or embody all the settlers, then called the Gush Emunim, just as Osama bin Laden and Ayman Zawahiri are on
the fringe of Islamists throughout the Middle East and elsewhere, and that William Pierce (the author of The Turner Diaries, the Bible of American racists and a book that Timothy McVeigh slept with under his pillow) is hardly the typical American fundamentalist. And yet there are some general characteristics about the psychology of fundamentalism to discuss that include its relation to violence. I think it is fair to say that in the Marty study the theme of fundamentalism and violence was muted, though not ignored, to keep the dialogue open among people of very different political persuasions and spiritual commitments. With scores of paper, there is in all the volumes no discussion of terrorism and religion per se, nothing on the psychology of fundamentalism that would suggest its general relationship to violence, and only glancing empirical accounts of violence within fundamentalism. The closest one comes to a general statement is by David C. Rapoport, and that focuses on militancy rather than violence and on the political framework of fundamentalist movements. After the 11 September al-Qaeda attacks, it seems to me, we can no longer afford such conceptual narrowing of the topic, nor what I have always felt is an allergic avoidance of psychological analysis in most social scientific scholarship. Many, indeed most, new religious movements (NRMs) are far removed from anything directly to do with violence, nor are the worlds of NRMs and fundamentalisms coterminous. At the same time, scholars need to explore the potentials for violence in all these movements and their realization in some. The problem is too urgent.

The most impressive results of the Marty project were to identify a template that is astonishingly generalizable across all faith traditions. There are some key characteristics in this regard worth noting in the studies of Marty himself, Emmanuel Sivan, Nancy Ammerman, Mumtaz Ahmad, James Davison Hunter, Robert Wuthnow, Menachem Friedman, Samuel Heilman, Gideon Aran, Aviezar Ravitsky, and many others, including in my own work. These themes include the ambivalent struggle of all fundamentalisms with modernity (which is a very different thing from a rejection of the modern project), a tendency to create social and cultural enclaves that are in a sense open on one side, an exceedingly patriarchal attitude toward women, an attitude toward texts that always moves towards literalism, often but not always an evangelical outreach, and a sense of apocalyptic doom that involves a new relationship toward violence. The general principle, at least as I would state it, is that fundamentalists radically alter the faith traditions out of which they emerge, but in their extremities themselves share more in common than they would ever like to admit. They even talk alike, after translation, especially about evil, and they sometimes look alike: haredi rabbis in the yeshivas and Islamic imams in the madrassahs thus wear the same beards and teach in much the same style and with many common outlooks. These phenomenological similarities between such seemingly
different movements suggest there is what I would call a fundamentalist mindset, a concept that does little more than extrapolate from Marty himself, writing on the first page of the first volume of the fundamentalism series: “The present point in adducing the term [fundamentalism] is to suggest that while there may be such a thing as a ‘fundamentalist mentality’ which finds its expression in various ideological or scientific forms, here the prime interest has to do with fundamentalisms in which the religious dimension is foremost.”6 I see the naming of that mindset or mentality, or at least beginning the conversation that will define some of the parameters for naming it, as my task in this essay. As a preliminary formulation, I would say the fundamentalist mindset embraces rigid dualistic thinking, is totalistic or absolutist, moves all too easily toward a paranoid style, lives within a frame that lends it a special relationship to the divine, embraces either an actual or a potential for violence, readily dispenses with the evil other, and is always apocalyptic.

What I am personally most interested in are the links between paranoia and the apocalyptic, and how and why these relate to violence. I will begin with paranoia, which exists ontologically as a potential in the self that can be actualized in moments of historical crisis, though I am really more interested in the ways historical crisis can evoke paranoia in individuals and groups. The relationship is synergistic. There is always some paranoia in the self, and David Terman of the Chicago Psychoanalytic Institute has suggested recently the idea of a “paranoid gestalt.”7 The range and depth of what we see now in the world suggests a larger historical crisis we only dimly understand. I think this sensitivity to the historical moment underlay the approach Richard Hofstadter wisely took half a century ago in his essay on the paranoid style in American politics—even though he uses different language—and explains why his essay has been so enormously influential.8 Within psychiatry there is a mostly irrelevant literature on paranoia that is concerned with the choice of appropriate drugs for treatment. The more psychological literature, especially within psychoanalysis, got off to a bad start with Freud’s 1910 explanation of paranoia’s basis in repressed homosexuality.9 It continues in the margins, since few psychoanalytic psychotherapists actually treat paranoids for the simple reason that they respond very badly to the prolonged experience of inquiry into motivations. Jerrold Post has written about narcissism and paranoia10; Vamik Volkan has been concerned with what he calls the “second skin” of nationalism11; Joseph Berke and his colleagues have put together a valuable collection of essays on paranoia called Even Paranoids Have Enemies12; Robert Jay Lifton, as always, is excellent on the subject, but a lone voice and somewhat idiosyncratic13; and I have written one book and edited several others relating to the subject,14 and convene a study group in New York on the psychology of fundamentalism that connects with the

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study of paranoia. But, for such a vital subject that is so important if we are to understand contemporary violence, we are left with a surprisingly thin literature that tells us anything.

In what follows the reader should keep in mind that I am describing dimensions of paranoia in general psychological terms as a way of exploring the meanings of paranoia as a subset of the fundamentalist mindset. Fundamentalism and paranoia do not necessarily overlap, as I have indicated. But to analyze systematically the relationship of fundamentalism to violence, we must begin with paranoia. Certain things are clear. The paranoid lives in a world of heated exaggerations, one in which empathy has been leached out, and lacks humor, creativity, and wisdom. The paranoid lives in a world of shame and humiliation, of suspiciousness, aggressivity, and dualisms that separate out all good from pure evil. The paranoid is grandiose and megalomaniacal, and always has an apocalyptic view of history that contains within it a mythical sense of time. Many paranoids are very smart, and I have long felt it may be the pathology of choice for the gifted. There is no question paranoia focuses all of one’s cognitive abilities in ways that can make their schemes intellectually daunting. Some have noted that a heightened degree of suspiciousness bordering on mild paranoia can be adaptive in situations of real chronic danger, as many African Americans experience in the ghettos of American cities, or as Palestinians feel about their lives in the West Bank or in Gaza. To talk of “adaptive paranoia” in this way, however, is tricky, and often emerges with a political agenda in mind, i.e., to clarify the identity of the evil persecutor. Such formulations also usually fail to recognize the serious deformations in the self that come with any degree of paranoia. For its sufferers relinquish much to its pathology. In paranoia everything is intense and of the moment, and time is forever running out. Their understanding of history is truly diseased. Great forces are arrayed against the paranoid, in fact, virtually the workings of the cosmos are aligned to punish and persecute the victim. One is helpless and beaten down, but this keen sense of victimization and what can be seen as negative grandiosity—no one has suffered as much as I have in the face of this persecution—readily turns positive in its most malignant and psychotic form. That is, I am actually greater than my tormenter; I am the creator; I am Napoleon; I am Jesus, and so forth. The conspiracies that abound in the world in the mind of the paranoid are not just isolated events that affect him, but are actually the very motive force of history. There is nothing of consequence to understand in the world except how these large conspiracies work, which explains why paranoia is so totally self-absorbing.

Furthermore, the instrument of the conspiracies and the source of dread is a large figure, or a conglomeration of figures or even forces, of dark mystery which psychological observers have always agreed is a projection of one’s own inner sense of evil. What makes psychotherapeutic
treatment of paranoids so difficult is that the therapist usually becomes rather quickly established as the persecutor in the mind of the patient. But, for our purposes, it is worth noting that the paranoid’s subjective images of evil that are rooted in trauma become distilled and institutionalized into collective imagoes (unconscious, idealized mental pictures) of designated victims—Jews for Europeans over many centuries, Westerners now for Islamists in the Middle East (the “Zionists and Crusaders” in the discourse of Osama bin Laden), Blacks and Jews for American radical racists—that in turn intensify the paranoid potential in the self. Such imagoes may exist in very different ways for different individuals and even groups. They are, however, imbedded in the collective self, capable of assuming virulent form in moments of historical and social crisis.

This experience of the apocalyptic other, in other words, grows out of confused and ambivalent but deeply personal knowledge. What gets established is a kind of paranoid projective feedback loop. The awful and disgusting evil other, who is created from within the self of the paranoid, serves as an objective correlative to stir desire and fantasy deep within the paranoid, who in turn strives to find relief by intensifying the imago of the evil other through more projection. The apocalyptic other is always objectified as the subjective self in this way, becoming in the process a ludicrous tangle of desire, power, and malice. Hofstadter, for example, made the astute observation of the pedantry that always makes a mockery of paranoid attempts to describe the conspiracy he faces.17 In the literature of those who deny the Holocaust, for example, one finds that some of these tomes have literally thousands of footnotes and other academic trappings, which unconsciously imitate the best of Jewish learning. Timothy McVeigh, in his letters to upstate New York newspapers after his return from the Gulf War but before he embarked on his murderous project, talked vaguely of understanding the big picture that no one else could see or understand but then read like the intellectuals he seems to mock.18 The paranoid knows the evil other because it is his own creation. When asked to describe that other, a look of horror will come over the face of a paranoid, one that comes from a place of secret awareness. It is really very striking. Sometimes, indeed often, he will tilt his head slightly, jut his chin, perhaps turn somewhat sideways to look askance, and smirk with a knowing smile that can become a terrifying and haughty laugh.

The paranoid is a haunted soul. While Freud got the homosexual issue wrong, his most profound insight into the psychology of paranoia was its restitutional character. The actual psychological illness and collapse in paranoia is rooted in some deep and abiding trauma that is almost always beyond the reach of a clinician to unpack in any meaningful way because paranoids are usually so resistant to psychotherapeutic investigation. But to think in self terms, what we can surmise is
that the paranoid’s response to the crisis of fragmentation is a frantic attempt to stave off what he inevitably experiences as the psychological equivalent of death by constructing an alternate universe of imagined dangers populated with projective imagoes of inner experience. That new reality fills in for the old. The new reality is bursting with terror and is not a stable terrain—paranoia, like anxiety, spreads—but at least this new world of malice is familiar. It cannot be taken away and if one can just understand it properly, maybe, maybe it won’t cause more misery and torment.

I cannot stress enough the suffering that lies beneath the often angry, arrogant, and superficially confident exteriors of a paranoid person. I have encountered it often in my clinical practice, but usually fleetingly for the reasons I have mentioned. For the last two years, though, I have had a fully paranoid patient in my practice. Harriett is a 73 year-old woman whose neighbors send poison gas in through the air vent, whose colleagues in her local Greenwich Village AA meeting are conspiring to turn her into a “lesbian, drug-addicted slut,” and who can barely recover during the night from the pains in her neck from the tasers that are used against her. Her landlord sneaks in at night to do unspeakable things to her sexually, and once she woke up with a large, growling German Shepherd in her bed. Karl Rove is the ultimate engineer of her suffering, though he works with Rudy Giuliani, and the question she keeps asking is why do they care about someone so insignificant? The world makes absolutely no sense for Harriet. All she really knows is that she suffers.

There is, however, visible rage that surfaces in Harriett’s experience. She reports in therapy that in her apartment she often starts yelling at those who torment her, those malevolent figures who are either listening in at the door, or through a microphone in the fan, or outside her window. Sometimes, she throws things out of frustration and anger. She would kill, she says, though such violent fantasies usually get turned on herself, reducing her to despair and suicidal ideation, and she collapses on the floor in tears. The most important point for our purposes here is that Harriett experiences her fantasies of violence, however fleeting in her case, as ethically justifiable, given what she feels she has been forced to endure. In her experience the feelings of extreme victimization so imbedded in the template of paranoia turn to fantasies of killing her oppressors.

One must dwell on this extraordinary sequence from victimization to violence. The paranoid intimately understands the secret world of evil he has created in his projective schemes. His rigid dualistic outlook further removes him from the malice as it loads him with virtue and righteousness. The other becomes then the embodiment of evil and not only can but must be dispensed with. In its more extreme cases when fantasy turns to action, the paranoid feels more than simply an allowance...
to kill. It becomes an obligation. And since in the paranoid world one acts on behalf of absolute righteousness, killing becomes healing, as Lifton wrote so eloquently about the Nazis, or as Aum Shinrikyo, the apocalyptic Japanese cult in the early 1990s, sought in its wild schemes to carry out Armageddon.  

The violence of the paranoid always exists as a potential and as such can be turned into action, depending on the moment. Violence is intrinsic to paranoia, even, I feel, ontological within it, at least in fantasy. Such violence is often described as counter-phobic, that is, the feeling that “I must strike out at the evil other before it attacks me.” In other words, even in fantasy such violence is experienced by the paranoid as self-protective. But, given the rigid dualistic world that the paranoid inhabits, to act against the perceived tormentor in the name of self-protection is to become a savior. Violence heals and redeems. The evil of the world threatens our very existence. The paranoid himself becomes the vehicle of salvation and redemption, which is why, I think, paranoia plays such an important role in religious fundamentalism and the apocalyptic.

The model I am proposing for understanding the psychological dimensions of the fundamentalist mindset might be conceptualized as a number of overlapping circles that includes but is by no means limited to paranoia and the apocalyptic. In its deeper meanings, paranoia is inevitably apocalyptic, which is itself a hugely complicated subject. For one thing, apocalyptic ideas are rampant in the culture and by no means restricted to religious fundamentalism. Everywhere there are images of Armageddon and the end, from Homer Simpson who works fitfully for the local nuclear plant, to Schwarzenegger’s Terminator, to the banal Left Behind series. Sometimes, a genius like Don DeLillo explores apocalyptic themes in ways that bring new meaning to old forms. In White Noise (1991), for example, a professor of “Hitler Studies” moves through traumatic history to nuclear threat, and in Mao II (1992) the narrator joins the cultic frenzy of the Moonies with immersion in Beirut terrorism of the 1980s. Some of our most perceptive contemporary philosophers are equally drawn to the power of the apocalyptic. How can they not notice it, since it defines the most terrifying and yet sublime levels of contemporary existence? It is not surprising a new shelf of books on the 11 September al-Qaeda attacks appeared in 2002, including works by Jacques Derrida (The Work of Mourning), Paul Virilio (Ground Zero), and Giovanna Borradori (Philosophy in a Time of Terror).

The powerful idea of totalistic redemption is not without its element of hope. Our own successful nineteenth-century experience of abolitionism would have been inconceivable without its apocalyptic undertow. In Christian theology, people as diverse as Daniel Berrigan and Liberation Theologians from Allan Boesak, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Pablo Richard read the book of Revelation as a call for
the oppressed to remake the world in their own image.23 Lois Ann Lorentzen, in turn, describes the apocalyptic nature of the environmental activism of Earth First!24 and one could add that of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, as well as the very interesting and hopeful movement of anti-globalists among young people all over the globe. Even on the wacky edges of this movement, among the millions of those who either feel they have been abducted by UFOs or have faith in the truth of the phenomenon, the feeling among many, as the late John Mack described it, alien beings outside of our familiar Cartesian world are attempting to save us from our path of destruction toward collective death.25 Finally, people such as the German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, in The Theology of Hope argues for a renewal of Christian eschatology in his read of Revelation, and Catherine Keller, a theologian at Drew University, argues passionately in Apocalypse Now and Then and in many subsequent essays, that Revelation is a text of hope, filled with dark and ominous images, especially against women, but that the wild and poetic flux of end-time images must be yoked toward our salvation.26

But nor can we ignore the malevolent power of the apocalyptic and its role in the creation of “atrocity-producing narratives.”27 Personally, I am impressed (and appalled) at the Revelation images of blood running up to the bridles of the horses, of seals opening to death, of trumpets blowing violence, and of vials pouring forth destruction in three great sequences of sevens, each linked forward and backward at the endpoints of destruction. Revelation is a story of biblical genocide, with God acting, in the words of James Jones, as a “Divine terrorist.”28 The text is presented as a dream, which is why John writes it in the past tense, and it moves quite logically from the release of great violence at the hands of an angry God to final redemption in chapters 19 through 22. Revelation is also a survivor narrative, for the text proves simultaneously the death and torment of the other and the salvation and redemption of the elect. There are, of course, many survivor narratives, and some can become paradigmatic of the hopeful for all time. But in the apocalyptic the survivor narrative gets corrupted and turned into violence as it gets totalized, or turned into an absolute story of redemption.

I would say, sadly, we also must understand that the destruction of the apocalyptic other, even if the agency is switched from humankind to God as in Revelation, is subjectively experienced by those who become violent as serving the highest of purposes. Endism, or the location of self in some future narrative as I called it in 1994, is highly motivated. Dispensing of the other in collective ways, something we call genocide, grows out of an intensely felt idealistic and moral commitment to make the world better.29 People commit individual violence for all kinds of idiosyncratic reasons, but it is the deeply idealistic goal of changing history, of correcting it, of purifying it racially and ethnically that leads to
genocide. And for the most part, those who carry out exterminatory projects feel they are acting on behalf of a messianic goal, on behalf of God's end-time purposes in the world, or some variation of these motivations.

Finally, and most generally, the endist narrative is also not one thing, but has itself evolved historically, from the Egyptian Book of the Dead in the thirteenth century B.C.E., to the early Zoroastrians some six centuries later, to John of Patmos in 95 C.E., and to Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202) in the Middle Ages. In no way, however, is this more important than in our recent historical discovery of the ultimate power of destruction with nuclear weapons and increasingly with biological agents. In fact, nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction have changed us psychologically in ways we are just beginning to understand. We don’t need God anymore, as we have since the beginning of culture, to carry out the end. The agency shifts. The ultimate power of destruction is now in human hands. It changes our world of desire. Nuclear and other ultimate weapons are, of course, dangerous in and of themselves in the hands of wild, apocalyptic groups below the level of the state, such as Aum Shinrikyo, or in the hands of new, religious terrorists like Osama bin Laden, but the more important and subtle psychological point is that the very presence of nuclear weapons in the world evokes the existence of murderous cults and new terrorism, indeed of fundamentalism itself. Robert Jay Lifton defines nuclearism as the “worship” of nuclear weapons for the power of God that they possess. As Lifton put it in 1979, “The ultimate contemporary deformation is a condition we may call nuclearism, the passionate embrace of nuclear weapons as a solution to death anxiety and a way of restoring a lost sense of immortality. Nuclearism is a secular religion, a total ideology in which ‘grace’ and even ‘salvation’—the mastery of death and evil—are achieved through the power of a new technological deity.”

Nuclear weapons represent the religion of our age. They define our politics and values, and most of all set forth the end-time narrative by which we live. Failed states such as North Korea yearn for and acquire the weapons, as do problematic regimes such as Iran. Most informed observers believe that if Osama bin Laden had access to a nuclear weapon and the operational ability before the 11 September attacks, he would have placed one or more on the planes that struck New York and Washington; he also obtained a fatwa (a ruling on a point of Islamic law that is given by a recognized authority) from a radical cleric in 2003 to allow for the use of such weapons in the future. Does he imagine wiping out New York City or ending human history? Such a question in his case is almost certainly hypothetical, but may not remain entirely fantastical for other figures in future decades. But we must also remember our own deep and obsessive involvement with nuclear weapons. We joined with the Soviet Union for half a century in
an exterminatory project over ideology that at several points nearly brought about the end of history. We have pulled back from that brink, but now proliferation to other states and probably in the future to terrorist groups has made the world even more unstable. Yet we cling to the weapons and their power. As others, we worship them in our own peculiar way. It is no longer, if it ever was, an issue of freedom or democracy. Nuclear and other ultimate weapons and all they mean call forth human desire to possess that power, to own it, to make it our own, to reverse the divine sequence, to make ourselves gods.

By this extraordinary psychohistorical turn of events, the apocalyptic other transforms personal suffering into a collective worship of nuclear weapons. It is a dangerous sequence. Paranoia is hardly new in human experience, and it probably emerged countless thousands of years ago as adaptive in an evolutionary sense (like fear of snakes). But paranoia in the contemporary era has perhaps long outlived its useful adaptive meanings. Paranoia, as I have tried to make clear, is inherently apocalyptic and its tendency to construct the other in these terms opens the self to violent fantasies and sometimes violent action. In a world of rising and often raging fundamentalisms, there emerges a dangerous potential nexus of paranoia and strong faith that embraces nuclear weapons. We can only guard against such dangers by first becoming acutely aware of their dynamics.

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**ENDNOTES**

Nova Religio


5 I am indebted to my colleague, Samuel Heilman, for this observation in a doctoral course on fundamentalism that we taught together at The City University of New York in the fall of 2005.


9 Sigmund Freud, “Psycho-analytic Notes on An Autobiographical Account of A Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoide),” The Standard Edition of the Complete


13 Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1979). This is Lifton’s most theoretical book, but there is much of great interest on fundamentalism, violence, and paranoia in the twenty-six volumes he has written or edited thus far.


16 One anonymous reader of this paper strongly suggested I use the Jungian term “shadow” in this context. I would prefer not to employ a Jungian term, however, for it would import a construct that, however useful in some contexts, suggests an entire theoretical apparatus that I am not comfortable adopting.


31 Michael Scheuer, the author of Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terrorism (Dulles, Va.: Potomac Books, 2004) revealed later in the year that he published his book the quite remarkable fatwa that bin Laden sought from a radical Saudi sheik after the 11 September attacks. Scheuer had been the senior intelligence analyst at the CIA in the latter part of the 1990s. He headed the secret group of analysts following bin Laden then and for several years after 11September 2001. Shortly after his resignation from the CIA, he appeared on 60 Minutes, the CBS news program (14 November 2004). In that show, Scheuer said two things about bin Laden and nuclear weapons. One was that he confirmed how serious had been the efforts of bin Laden before the 11 September attacks to acquire weapons of mass destruction. In the period after the attacks, in part responding to criticism from some in the Muslim world regarding the killing of Muslim civilians, bin Laden then sought and secured a fatwa from Hamid bin Fahd in May 2003 that specifically allowed for the use of nuclear weapons against Americans.