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The Religious Imagination: Fear and Fundamentalism in Contemporary American Culture

By Sally Porterfield, Ph.D.

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MIRANDA: O brave new world, That has such people in't!
PROSPERO: 'Tis new to thee. *The Tempest*. (V,1)

In this familiar exchange between Miranda and Prospero lies a bittersweet reminder of the way in which life unfolds for each generation. Prospero's knowledge is appropriate to his age, as is Miranda's dewy-eyed wonder to hers. *The Tempest* can be read as an individuation drama that marks life's seasons in some of Shakespeare's wisest, loveliest poetry. For everything there is a proper time, not only with individuals, but with societies, nations, and cultures. As Miranda's naivete would ill suit her father, so does such an attitude reflect poorly on a nation that remains stubbornly wedded to its own youthful illusions.

There are many reasons why those illusions have stayed past their season in the United States, and I would suggest that this immature perspective constitutes a *puer aeternus* possession that is responsible for much of the religious fundamentalism that is the subject of this paper. Two strains of influence that have contributed to our present

situation are in the national myth of the American hero in his Western incarnation as the pioneer/cowboy/loner on one hand, and his Eastern counterpart in the pilgrim/puritan/Calvinist self-made man.

Andrew Samuels furnishes us with a description of the *puer* in both his negative and positive aspects: “The most striking characteristic of the *puer aeternus* when looked at as a personality disorder, is his over-emphasis upon SPIRIT” (Samuels 126).

Samuels points out that Von Franz used the term *puer* to describe men who had difficulty settling down, were impatient, unrelated, idealistic, ever starting anew, seemingly untouched by age, appearing to be without guile, given to flights of imagination” (Samuels 126).

But the *puer* has a positive side as well. Along with the perennial adolescence that leads to a provisional life, Samuels quotes Hillman, who saw in the *puer* a vision of “our own first natures, our primordial golden shadow...our angelic essence as messenger of the divine.” From the *puer*, he concludes, “we are given our sense of destiny and meaning” (Samuels 126).

When pioneers who settled the West glorified the wide-open spaces and the virtues of a simple life, their attitude developed into a defensive posture that devalued Eastern refinement, and by association, the European tradition from which it had sprung. This grew into a shadow projection based on the assumption that simplicity being good, complexity must then be bad. Anti-intellectualism still pervades our cultural mindset, equating youth and simplicity with virtue, thus relegating age and complexity to its opposite, an attitude that is clearly antithetical to individuation.

But let us travel back further, before the pioneers ventured west. Each November, every American schoolchild is reminded of the Pilgrims who celebrated the first Thanksgiving in that month, having survived the cold, hardship, and disease of the first year in the New World. These refugees, having come in search of religious freedom, quickly fell prey to their own shadow projections in an *enantiodromia* that began a tradition of religious contradiction still persistent as a stubborn vein in the culture. Their Puritan mindset remains embedded in our collective unconscious, documented by tales of religious persecution. From the stories of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, who were driven out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony for divergent religious views, to the present day, those who are not “born again” are consigned to the fires of hell in the minds of fundamentalist Christians.

In Karen Armstrong’s excellent study of fundamentalism, *The Battle for God*, she stresses the separation of *mythos* and *logos* that marks one of the main differences between the world view of our early ancestors and our present ways of thinking. For them, myth did not apply to literal reality, but to meaning, a reason for living that gave their lives significance, without which we mortals fall into despair. *Mythos* was the provider of meaning that gave their everyday lives a cause and directed them toward the eternal and the universal. Because it was rooted in the unconscious, and in myth, she asserts, it was an ancient form of psychology (Armstrong xv). Armstrong goes on to say,

Myth was also associated with mysticism, the descent into the psyche by means of structured disciplines of focus and concentration which have been evolved in all cultures as a means of acquiring intuitive insight. Without a cult or mystical practice, the myths of religion would make no sense. They would remain abstract and incredible, in rather the same way as a musical score remains opaque to most of us and needs to be interpreted instrumentally before we can appreciate its beauty. (Armstrong xvi)

Since most of the radical fundamentalism that we encounter is based in the Protestant denominations, a look backward at the roots of Protestantism is in order. Because of its split from the Roman Catholic Church, the doctrines of men like Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli were more permeable than the rigid structure maintained by the Vatican. Although various sects embraced different doctrines, without the mediation of clergy, the individual became increasingly responsible for his own relationship with the Almighty.

Meanwhile, science was beginning to make inroads on traditional thought in the ideas of men like Isaac Newton, who became dedicated to the idea of removing myth from Christianity because it conflicted with physical and scientific reality. Since Newton was still a religious man, he, like many of his ilk, encountered an unsolvable problem when he attempted to banish his intuitive nature because it did not fit into the new insights that science provided (Armstrong 68-69). Eventually, the schism between *logos* and *mythos* hardened into two camps, both in the old world and the new, but particularly in the latter, where it would eventually form the basis for American Fundamentalism in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

There was a revival of some Protestant sects during the eighteenth century that made religion a more palpable influence in both public and private life. The Quakers were so-called because of their early days when the born-again experience that became common in many churches caused them to go into transports of ecstasy that have been noted to make “the dogs bark, the cattle run madly about, and the pigs scream”(Armstrong 78). This would all seem to be connected to some sort of hysterical rejection of the rational ideas of the Enlightenment, which was of course, paradoxically

the movement that was responsible for the birth of a nation late in the eighteenth century. This was all part of the compensation process which spawned such books as *Frankenstein* and made the Romantic Poets popular, as a confused public attempted to escape their fear of mechanical tyranny. The similarities of this violent religiosity with the corresponding Romantic Revolt seem hardly coincidental. The world was moving too fast, propelled by science that threatened to engulf humanity in a strange and godless universe in which nature is swallowed by the infernal machine.

So why did the religious aspect of the Romantic Revolt affect the New World more dramatically than the old? One might speculate that whereas Europe turned to arts and letters as a return to *mythos* for a balancing of the psyche, the raw young country of America lacked the capacity to express the psychic disturbance brought on by the coming age of the machine. Like those of their pre-modern forebears, their creative energies were channeled into religion. In Jung's words, "The man whom we can with justice call 'modern' is solitary. He is so of necessity and at all times, for every step toward a fuller consciousness of the present removes him further from his original '*participation mystique*' (quoted in Samuels 105).

A nation of immigrants, all leaving behind their traditions and their ties to the past, became not quite the proverbial "melting pot," but a loose confederation of refugees, seeking a better life in the New World. As each new wave of immigrants followed the last, they suffered the scorn of those who had come before, all attempting to belong in an alien world in which it was necessary to forge a new tribal identity, to fall back into the comfort of Jung's *participation mystique*.

Lacking the comfort of tradition and the sense of belonging, each new generation has attempted to invent itself anew, to reject the old values of their polyglot forebears and create a fresh, young independent American persona. We circle back to the national myth of the western hero here, the lone paladin who having vanquished the forces of evil, disappears into the sunset. While Joseph Campbell's description of the myth of the hero's journey describes it as a transformation of consciousness fundamental to individuation, the American version of the myth is truncated because the solitary American hero fails to embrace and enact the final stage of the journey, the "return," and therefore he fails to transform, fails to mature and so keeps on with his interminable quest, untrammelled by adult responsibility. A truncated archetype, forever young, noble, God-fearing, and out of reach, he becomes a sort of Divine Child/Savior figure. Thus a dangerous inflation pervades the national psyche, a grandiosity that convinces us that we have been elected to save the world.

Fundamentalism and Its Discontents

With the increasing urbanization of the country, the wholesome dream of wide open spaces peopled by the simple and virtuous began to fade. With the growing schism between secular and religious life, churches felt threatened by the specter of modernism. Two specific threats that helped to stimulate the formation of fundamentalism were Darwinism, highlighted by the infamous Scopes Monkey Trial and the so-called Higher Criticism of the Bible, in which scholars questioned the veracity of the scriptures on the basis of their human, fallible origins (*Parabola* 57).

Among many church conferences that were held to consider these two threats, the most influential was held at Niagara Falls in 1895. That was the beginning of the “Christian Fundamentalist Association,” which formally declared the things one must believe in order to be considered a Christian. There are five of them: the verbal inerrancy of the Bible, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the virgin birth, substitutional atonement, and the physical resurrection of Christ and his bodily return at the end of time.

Fundamentalism has served to unite large portions of the country’s population as a people still unsure of their identity have retreated gratefully into the refuge of a doctrine that eliminates uncertainty and fear of ambiguity. For them this is the supernatural identity that has proved elusive in a constantly changing world. It is a retreat to childhood simplicity disguised as moral certainty, and a welcome retreat from the sense of inferiority that dogs many of those who feel threatened by the complexities of a bewildering postmodern culture.

Of course the shadow of this attempt at prelapsarian purity grows ever larger and darker. The prurient celebrity mania that pervades our culture titillates by demonstrating the Sodom and Gomorrah that one can escape only by foreswearing all the behavior that the pop icon or celebrity *du jour* dangles in front of the saved as a constant reminder of guilty, vicarious pleasure. These two extremes feed each other as reverse mirror images of the *puer aeternus* mentality. Like a giant high school with its cliques and posses in opposition, each side clings to its own *participation mystique*, terrified of the dangers of growing up and contending with the complexity of coming to consciousness that is essential to individuation in our contemporary world.

Critical to the fundamentalist mindset in many cases, is the growing *End Times* movement. As it happens, this movement was largely powered by an Englishman, John Nelson Darby who, unable to interest many of his countrymen in his theories, came to the United States and toured six times between 1859 and 1877, gaining many converts to his cause in that time. Darby's rationale for his beliefs is a small passage from Paul, "Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord (I Thessalonians 4:17).

This so-called Rapture has become the stuff of which dreams are made for those who consider themselves among the elect. Karen Armstrong describes it as a fantasy of revenge for those who have felt marginalized and ridiculed for their faith. She writes, "A popular picture found in the homes of many Protestant fundamentalists today shows a man cutting the grass outside his house, gazing in astonishment as his born-again wife is raptured out of an upstairs window. Like many concrete depictions of mythical events, the scene looks a little absurd, but the reality it purports to present is cruel, divisive, and tragic" (Armstrong 139).

Tragic is the proper description for the sickness that grips much of American society today in the form of radical, vicious hatred toward those who disagree with their beliefs and their way of life. This infection is displayed in its most virulent form in the actions of the self-styled Reverend Fred Phelps, best known for his web site excoriating gays, and especially Matthew Shepard, the University student who was murdered in Laramie, Wyoming by two local men who were fueled by their hatred of his sexuality. Phelps harassed Shepard's friends and family by picketing his funeral with signs saying "God Hates Fags" and "Matt in Hell." Phelps's latest efforts are directed toward

picketing the funerals of our service men and women killed in Iraq, with signs that applaud their deaths, claiming it to be God's vengeance on the nation for its tolerance of homosexuality. And of course, we have public figures, like the Reverend Pat Robertson, who declared that both 9/11 and Katrina were God's vengeance on a nation that did not happen to adhere to Robertson's particular religious beliefs.

What is going on here can be easily compared to the fury of the students who have taken to mass shooting sprees in schools across the country, beginning with Columbine's atrocity. It is the fury of the outsider, the other, those who feel as if they are on the outside, looking into a world that has become too complex for them. The ubiquitous nature of popular culture, in which we are all awash because of commercial interests, forces those who feel alien to that world to band together into groups that seem to have some sort of commonality, much like the different groups in contemporary schools, cliques of refugees who attempt to form their own tribes in order to be part of a group, one of the most primitive human needs.

For the individual seeking his own path, those who follow the path of individuation, the shadow aspects that drive so much of this tribalism become clear when brought into the light of consciousness. For those who remain stubbornly in an unconscious state, however, the need for some sort of outside authority is necessary in order to feel secure. Like children, they cling to the notion that there are simple answers to complex questions.

This need for simplicity is closely allied to the political peculiarities of our times as well. Thomas Frank, in his thoughtful examination of the great divide in American culture and politics, says, "In an America where the chief sources of one's ideas about

life's possibilities are TV and the movies, it not hard to be convinced that we inhabit a liberal-dominated world." He goes on to say, "The [fundamentalist] backlash sometimes appears to be the only dissenter out there, the only movement that has a place for the uncool and the funny-looking and the pious" (Frank 241). This sense of alienation fosters not only anger and paranoia, but fear, and that fear is the underlying source of the whole phenomenon, according to Huston Smith, in a recent issue of *Parabola*. "The underlying cause of fundamentalism...is fear, the fear that derives from the sense of insecurity, of being threatened. People are scared; the world is scary" (*Parabola* 61).

In an article called *Insanity Now Mainstream*, Bill Moyers writes in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* on January 30, 2005, "One of the biggest changes in politics in my lifetime is that the delusional is no longer marginal. It has come in from the fringe, to sit in the Oval Office and in Congress." We see this, of course, in the increasing invasion of politics by religion, especially in the current presidential race, where a candidate's religious views are often seen as more important than his ideas of government.

Our isle, like Prospero's, in *The Tempest*, is filled with noises. Let us hope that we can prevent them from driving us all mad. It is only through individuation, and the strength to move past the *puer* stage and withdraw the projections that create enemies on every side, that we can begin to overcome the fears that create much of this constantly self-fulfilling prophecy.

We need to look at the enemies and the monsters under the bed, to subject them to mature scrutiny and realize that only in our acceptance of life's responsibilities can we find this adult guidance we seem to be seeking. Rather than seeking simple answers in a fundamentalism that attempts to avoid reality, we need to look within, to the Jungian Self

that lives in each one of us, waiting to be called out of the unconscious and take its place as our inner guide on this journey we call life. For those who seek the divine, the numinous, and contact with spiritual reality, it is often found in that still, small voice within all of us, if we will be still and listen.

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