

The Fundamentalists Plurality Problem

Written by Chris Crews

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CHRIS CREWS, MAY 1 2015

Over the past several months I have been writing about contemporary theories of radical democracy and the politics of plurinationalism in Ecuador, Bolivia and Nepal, and trying to think critically about what these political experiments can teach us regarding the challenges of trying to imagine new worlds beyond the current dominant influence, namely liberal capitalism or neoliberalism. While both Ecuador and Bolivia are further along this experimental road of plurinationalism than Nepal, which is still mired in constitutional debates about its future and may yet opt against some kind of ethnic federalism, the initial challenges and victories are telling.

One of the biggest obstacles that seems to come up time and again in my research is this question of political alternatives—not only to capitalism, but also to the politics of democratic liberalism. And while I want to suggest there are numerous fascinating discussions to be had about this question in both the Andes and Himalayas where I have been focusing, this larger issue can help us think about some of the important political developments going on right now in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

In particular, I want to suggest this may help us think more clearly about balancing competing political claims through a shared political framework, which appears as a constant challenge in the context of diverse and competing ethnic and religious communities within countries across the MENA region. As the various internal conflicts from Iraq and Syria to Yemen and Libya highlight, central to these conflicts is the question of how these states should be defined, and who gets to make that decision. Are they Arab or Muslim states? Are they democratic or theocratic or something in between? Are they single states, or regions of an emerging Islamic Caliphate that dreams of spanning the entire MENA region? Who and how these questions are answered are critically important, not only for those living in and around these regions, but also for the larger international community.

In thinking about these challenges, my research keeps coming back to the issue of fundamentalism, both religious fundamentalism and market fundamentalism, which I want to suggest are deeply intertwined, perhaps far more than most people would care to admit. The important uniting point for both market fundamentalists and religious fundamentalists is an unwavering belief that there is no other alternative, and that their way, their system of ideas and practices, is the one and only true way. It is this narrow black and white perspective that appeals to many devout followers, irregardless of whether they practice their faith on the trading floor of Wall St. or in a local house of prayer. Unfortunately, it is also this blind acceptance which does not allow for dissenting voices to enter the room, or when they do, immediately seeks to excise them from the communal body as if they were a piece of rotten flesh.

It is this messy diversity which a politics of plurinationalism attempts to embrace and build on, rather than suppress and view as a source of fear. Two simple examples here are instructive, and I think help to make this issue more clear. Both deal with the politics of the Islamic State (IS), and help to highlight the dynamic relationship between Christian and Muslim fundamentalists, who more often than not, despite their claims to the contrary, share a common underlying logic united by their fundamentalism.

In late January of this year a IS manifesto was released discussing the role of women in Islam, which was credited to the Al-Khanssaa Brigade, the women's activist wing of IS. In the document, the authors present a highly selective but also instructive glimpse into the fundamentalist logic and mindset which is supporting and advocating for an expanded IS, as well as how they perceive the external threats.

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Thanks be to God [whose rule has been] returned to us, after decades of humiliation and surrender, since the Ottoman Caliphate fell and was replaced by Arab regimes and their clients who were supported by the enemies of religion. Because of this military, economic and intellectual occupation of Muslim civilisation, Islamic thought derived from the Book and Sunnah became estranged from the lives of people and, hence, Western colonialism was able to continue spreading impure culture and atheism among Muslims, wherever they might live ... You may find Muslims having friendly relationships with the infidels who are at war with us and living in their midst and benefit from their worldly knowledge, which is unworthy in relation to knowledge of the afterlife. (Al-Khanssaa Brigade, 2015: 11;14)

I want to call attention to two main themes in this passage, which are echoed throughout the document.

The first has to do with memory, both historical and contemporary. In this case, there is a simultaneous invocation of a glorious Sunni past, marked by the end of the Ottoman Caliphate (~1924), and the future imaginary of a revived Islamic Caliphate which the authors see emerging in Syria and Iraq. This past is marked by the oppressive influence of both Arab and Western “atheistic” and capitalist regimes, who are understood as enemies of the one true religion, which in the case of IS appears to be a hybridized and mythologized version of medieval Sunni Islam. In this narrative IS becomes both the victims of Western and Arab aggressions, as well as the source of hope for a revived and more authentic Islamic community that is in the process of being born.

The other important theme here, which is echoed in the later part of the quote, is the idea of pollution and religious admixing. A large portion of the manifesto is written as a critique of Saudi Arabia, and the translator suggests in his opening analysis that this document was largely written for an Arabic speaking, Saudi female audience, with the intent to bolster female converts to the IS movement.

This is important as one of the manifesto criticisms levelled against Saudi Arabia, a country that most people in the US and Europe associate with an extremely conservative form of Wahhabi Islam, is its overly lenient and Westernized policy towards women. In the language of the manifesto this is framed as everything from having friendly relations or living amidst non-Muslims to using modern scientific knowledge associated with Western countries.

This fear of contamination is tied to notions of purity and pollution, which in this case is demarcated by a particular Sunni identity, but also linked to a larger *ummah*, or community of believers. The only way to preserve the purity of Islam (or women in the Islamic Caliphate more generally, according to Al-Khanssaa), is to limit or avoid as much contact as possible with people of other religious beliefs, and to ensure proper divisions and roles (hajib, screens, separate entrances, etc.) are maintained at all times. If the messy diversity of the world cannot be excluded, then contact should be minimal and regulated.

As we can see, the unifying logic of fundamentalism holds together diverse strands, from critiques of Western and Arab imperialism to the revival of an imagined and pure Islamic Caliphate. The end goal, as the authors note, is an idealized and mythic new world:

Instead of this, in my state here, the Chechen is a friend of a Shami, the Hijazi a neighbour of a Kazakh – lineages are mixed, tribes are merged and races join under the banner of monotheism, resulting in new generations within which are gathered the cultures of many different peoples, one a beautiful meeting, and harmonious alliance.” (Al-Khanssaa Brigade 2015)

On the flip side, the Westernization and “atheistic” societies, which are the main targets of critique in this and other IS publicity, seem themselves as the victims of Islamic terror and violence, a threat which is simultaneously imagined as both real and existential. The idea of an Islamic Caliphate challenges the fundamental logic of the Westphalian system, and by extension the basis of international relations, in a way which the European Union or regional blocks do not.

Here again the political threat which IS represents from an American perspective is simply an inversion of the critique we saw earlier in the IS narrative, where freedom, liberty and democracy are substituted as the analogous “Western”

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values to those of Islamic calls for piety, honor and faith. These are the so-called “universal” values which the US is fighting for in places like Iraq or Afghanistan, where the combined logic of market fundamentalism and a peculiar version of Christian evangelism dresses up in the mantle of Manifest Destiny in order to bring light (secular democracy and market deregulation) to the dark corners of the world.

This narrative implicitly sees the “free” world as under siege from the forces of Islam, yet presents nothing more than a rehashing of the same worn out logic of the Crusades and the long ago debunked claims about a civilizational conflict.

Barely a month after this IS manifesto was released, a group of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians were executed in Libya, prompting a strong outcry from the Christian community, and renewed claims about Islamic persecution of Christians. Franklin Graham, President of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, and a leading voice for Christian fundamentalism, framed this incident in the following way during a recent Fox News television interview.

The Christians in the Middle East are being persecuted, and they are being slaughtered ... The internet is filled with the images of Christians being beheaded, being shot, being buried alive, being burned, these things are on the internet. As a Christian I want to follow Christ, and I want to emulate Christ, and I want to do good to all men. Islam, the God of Islam required you to die for him ... the Muslims want to emulate their prophet Mohammad. Muhammad raped, he murdered, he killed, and so we are seeing the followers of Islam emulate the prophet Muhammad. We have to take a stand, we have to understand what we are dealing with. And it's not just the Muslims in the Middle East, we have to be careful of the Muslims in this country. We need to stop the immigration ... stop the immigration of Muslims coming to this country from countries that have active terrorist cells. If we don't stop that, we are going to regret that, because we will be importing that into this country. Sooner or later, we will see a major terrorist attack on one of our theaters, or schools or synagogues. (Franklin 2015)

As we saw with the earlier manifesto from IS, here again we see a narrative of suffering and oppression, but this time it is the Christians who are suffering at the hands of Islam. While the reality of Christians being persecuted globally is in truth rather minor, what matters here is the perception of global persecution, and the strategic use of incidents like this to advance a narrative which can help bolster a fundamentalist defense of the faith.

But it also serves another purpose, one slightly different from the framing of the IS manifesto. In that document, the focus was on rejecting the West and removing oneself as much as possible from the corrupting influences of Westernization as understood by the IS. But for Graham, as he noted in an earlier segment of this same interview, this perceived threat to Christians on the part of Islam is also the justification for another military invasion and a return of US troops to Iraq, and possibly other places, in order to defend Christian, or US, interests, a distinction which becomes meaningless from the US fundamentalist perspective, since they are one and the same.

And although the logic is expressed differently, just as the IS manifesto criticized Saudi Arabia for its failure to uphold the proper moral codes and social relations for women in Islam, in Graham we see this same invocation of pollution and purity, where the US body politics must be purged of Islam in order to ensure the unity and safety of the imagined US community, a community which explicitly excludes Muslims from amongst those eligible for inclusion.

It's a bit unclear, however, exactly which countries Graham had in mind when he made these comments, since virtually every country in Europe has some active terror cells at this point, and a strict application of his logic would shut down immigration from more than 75% of the world, including those countries perceived to be Christian allies in the US war on groups like the IS. It also conveniently ignores that fact that virtually all of the recent attacks on schools, theatres and other public places in the US have been carried out by white Americans, rather than foreign Islamic militants, with the obvious exception of the Tsarnaev brothers in Boston.

The major difference is that in the US case, fear of terrorism is mapped onto the existential threat posed by Islam to Christian fundamentalists, which is then projected onto the internal US body to legitimate a police state logic that would justify more restrictive immigration policies in the name of religious profiling. At the same time, such a claim ignores that fact that much of the political unrest which feeds into terror recruitment is a direct result of the past 50

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years of US directed and dominated global economic policies, a process which has led to the constant eroding of basic social and cultural values in the name of a global consumer culture dominated by US firms and values, as well as a body of disposable immigrant labor, bodies which can raise a shovel to build a school or fire an AK-47 to topple a nation, it all depends on which pays more.

As I hope these two small examples help clarify, part of the challenge in thinking about the politics of religious fundamentalism and international relations is precisely that it seeks to close down, rather than open up, spaces for political dialogue, whether that be internal dialogue amongst citizens themselves about their political future, or external dialogue between nations as part of forging a global community. What all of my research keeps bringing me back to is the inescapable conclusion that at the heart of many of our current problems it is the fundamentalist imaginary, in both its economic and political forms, which has locked us into our present destructive cycles. One way we can begin to counter this tendency is by pluralizing our politics, rather than calling for more narrow and fundamentalist understandings of the world.

References

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