

Fundamentalisms, columbusday, hate speech, and American Indians

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Every year one to two thousand people line the streets in Denver, USA, to protest the annual columbusday parade, to oppose what is a blatant celebration of five hundred years of genocide in the Americas. A federal holiday only since 1971, columbusday seems to have become a quintessential U.S. holiday, yet one that commemorates a murderer, slave-trader and thief as the all-American hero.

The so-called parade on this day amounts to no more than a 'convoy of conquest', a parade of semis with empty flatbeds, empty limos, and motorcycle gangs, rolling through a gauntlet of protesters who far outnumber the paraders and make up the only audience for this unashamed racist outburst. The real shame, of course, is not the pathetic attempt at a parade. There are ugly racists everywhere, and the USA's concept of civil liberties reserves to all Americans the right to racist speech.

The shame is that the body politic and the press have failed to raise their own voice of protest. For nearly two decades a huge alliance of Denver metro area citizens (some 80 different local organizations) has pressed a public education about the murderous and on-going legacy of Columbus. Yet neither the city nor the state has seen fit to step in with their own moral condemnation of this holiday to genocide.

The press has generally declined to engage the issues in any meaningful dialogue, preferring the standard, defensive knee-jerk response, rooted in the denial of any possible wrong-doing on the part of the European invaders of these continents. Rather, the press uses the holiday excuse to solicit an extra heavy dose of full-page advertisements for 'columbus day' sales all over the metro area. Genocide, the perfect excuse to indulge the gluttonous religion of american consumerism!

The real shame is not that columbusday parades are acts of hate speech. The shame is that columbusday gives voice to state sanctioned hate speech.

A modern religious fundamentalism

For a number of years there was one regular banner that spanned the width of the street. It seemed to speak for the parade organizers just as it decidedly named one of the reasons for protest. 'He [Columbus] brought Christ to the Americas!' The pious colonialist sentiment shrieked its message in four-foot high letters. It was a pernicious reminder to all Indian people present that our conquest and the loss of our lands, our economies, our self-sufficiency, and our way of life was as much a religious conquest as it was military and political.

The banner, like the columbusday holiday itself, was both a trope to the larger public sentiment of the settler population of the U.S. and a convenient lie steeped in denial. It presses a modern religious fundamentalism that continues to see its religion (and its socio-political systems) as superior to, for instance, the religious traditions of the peoples that were native to this continent—all of which are consigned to the euro-western tropic categories of animism, primitive polytheism, pagan idolatry, and the diabolic.

Of course, calling this holiday an exercise in religious fundamentalism begs the question as to what we might consider to be fundamentalism. Presumably no one any longer confines fundamentalism to that late 19th century american christian movement that invented the name. They created the name as a positive self-affirmation of their strict adherence to a narrow set of doctrines.

The shift to a new meaning is especially apparent, however, since September 2001 when fundamentalism came to be an adjective (or abjective) describing Islam as a negative trope and slogan, coined by U.S. political speakers and gleefully propagated by the corporate U.S. press — with little regard for the breadth and complexity of Islam in actuality.

Given this contemporary usage, we might define fundamentalism this way: the reckless sense that a more or less narrowly defined faith or belief system is both the only salvific way of being in the world; and that it needs to be imposed on others at whatever cost, perhaps even by force of one kind or another. This seems, at least, to capture the abjective sense intended by those who use the trope of 'Islamic fundamentalism'.

Relationships of power

Where does fundamentalism in this sense come from? To be clear about issues of religious fundamentalism today, we need to be clear about relationships of power in the world — around us and in which we are embroiled. Fundamentalism can arise both as a response to dominance and as an act of dominance itself. That narrow slice of Islam that engages in violent resistance in central and west Asia is an example of a fundamentalism, then, that has arisen as an act of resistance to amer-european christian political dominance in the world.

Whatever one's ultimate judgment might be of the Other, if we are serious about understanding — rather than merely quashing — those who oppose us, then we need to see the reactive response of the Other in its own interpretive context. Too often, we see a response to important or global dissent that is merely a reaction based on self-interest. It would be helpful today to begin our understanding of contemporary religious fundamentalism as a perceived self-defense against what non-U.S. peoples around the world may be identifying as the reigning fundamentalism of the U.S. dominated world: namely, the ideological impositions of the IMF, World Bank, Security Council Permanent Membership, and the radical euro-christian individualism that lies at the base of these ideologies.

The American Indian experience of fundamentalism, on the other hand, has been the imposition of dominance by an invading colonial power. From an American Indian perspective, fundamentalism began with the colonialist urges of European expansionism and the colonial need to impose structures of thought, patterns of behavior, and a certain cultural unification on the colonized other. It came with the European invasion in the form of the imposition of whole ways of thinking about the world, along with the religious teachings and practices to go with those ways of thinking. While this fundamentalist imposition of culture, values and language was quite apart from the theft of the land, it served as a colonial device to rationalize and self-validate conquest, theft, and genocide.

Part of the strategy invariably involved sending missionaries from the metropole to the colonized in order to win their adhesion to the colonizer's cultural and religious beliefs. While the missionaries themselves no doubt had concern of some kind for the Natives, the missionized, their efforts served especially to increase the effectiveness of the colonizer governmental structures of control by subtly shifting the cultural values of the colonized toward those of the colonizer.

That cultural practice is inherent in colonizer religious beliefs is already apparent in the missionaries insistence (John Eliot in 17th century puritan New England; the Franciscan Gerónimo de Mendieta in Mexico half a century earlier) that Indians must learn European culture before they can fully convert to the gospel and affirm the doctrines of the church. In the vast majority of cases, these colonial missionaries served the purposes of colonial government more overtly and purposefully. Bishop Henry Benjamin Whipple and Jesuit Pierre-Jean DeSmet, to suggest just two examples, served as U.S. government officials in negotiations with the same Native peoples whose trust they were purported to have won as missionaries. More pernicious was the insistence, using fear in a variety of ways, that any Native community was condemned by a loving god unless they adopted and learned to reflect back the colonizer's religious traditions.

Thus aboriginal communities in the Americas experienced religious fundamentalism from the very first preaching of the gospel in their midst. In puritan 'New England' it began in 1646 with John Eliot or on Cape Cod with Thomas Mayhew, and concurrently with the Massachusetts General Council passing a law that made it illegal for any Indian to mock the missionary. In the Roman Catholic version in California, the 18th century Franciscan missionary Junípero Serra (continuing the 16th century efforts his Franciscan ancestor Gerónimo de Mendieta honed among Indians in Mexico) used the local Spanish military detachment to hunt down any Indian person who,

rethinking his or her conversion to Christianity, tried to leave the walled mission compound in order to rejoin their communities and families.

By the 1880s this Christian fundamentalism had captured the hearts of liberal republican politicians, who were often also churchmen or were following the advice of churchmen like Bishop Henry Benjamin Whipple. These politicians called explicitly for the imposition of Christian conversion and a concomitant conversion to euro-american culture.

Devastated communities

While the intent of the missionizing process was to replace Indian cultures with their own European culture, missionization was devastating to the community structures of every Indian nation. For example, the very first White euro-missionaries who entered an Indian community with an idea to convert members of that community to their church functioned explicitly to split that community and to destroy the indigenous culture and value system that they had encountered.

The community had been a coherent and integrous whole, intricately bound together in complex structures of family, clan, village, sodal and modal organizations. People awoke each morning with a clear sense of who they were and what needed to be accomplished that day. If there were a ceremony, it would be a tribal ceremony in which all were involved as participants. Suddenly, with the appearance of the powerful White colonial official (and the missionary was always a colonial representative), people are faced with a choice as to whether to participate with the community for the good (salvation) of the whole, or to make an individual decision for personal salvation. Indeed, the European ideal of individualism was the first colonial imposition in the European colonial project in every corner of the colonized earth.

Since our spiritual life was inherently community based, every major ceremony called for the involvement of the whole community. In my tribe, key leaders from virtually all 24 clans had to be present in order for a major ceremony to be completed in a healthy fashion. There was never a question as to which ceremony or which church one would attend on a given day. Every ceremony was a community event that commanded the attention of every person in the community. The first euro-western missionary to venture into an Indian community with his colonial proclamation of a better gospel and a new hegemony succeeded first of all in splitting the community irrevocably. Suddenly, with the first convert, every member of the community was faced with a new choice: to participate with the community or to honor a perception of a greater power (backed by the U.S. Cavalry) represented by the colonizer's god.

The columbusday banner recalls the presence of missionaries in every conquest of the Americas and the imposition of a new religious conviction that destroyed or attempted to destroy the peopleness of every Indian nation, that is, proactively to destroy that nation's community-ness by

replacing the communitarian structures and value system with radical euro-western individualism. After several hundred years of missionary preaching of the gospel in Indian communities of north America, the net result has been the multiplication of denominational choices and the greater division of community; the destruction of our own religious traditions; the end of too many grand ceremonies that require the participation of different personalities from a variety of different clans; the destruction of communitarianism in favor of a new radical individualism; the devaluation and replacement of Indian values with those propagated by the missionaries and deeply reflective of their european culture.

Colonial entanglement

This sense of fundamentalism — the religious attachment to the superiority and normativity of european culture (and its religion) and the concomitant privileging of Whiteness — has been historically always in play in the colonialist interaction between American Indians and the euro-colonizer, just as it was inherent in the colonialist project of mission civilisatrice in all 19th century European colonialism. In any context where there is a political imbalance between groups (societies, genders, classes), when a socially constructed dominant group imagines itself normative or superior and supposes its prerogative to teach, mentor, manipulate, coach, subdue, or enslave the dominated other falls into this pattern of colonial entanglement.

In the context of the modern or postmodern world, then all missionary work dedicated to a mission of conversion is necessarily imperialistic and triumphalist and fits into a pattern of colonial conquest. As a result, it is always a dangerous and inherently destructive enterprise. The biblical notion of mission, it would seem, rooted as it was in a survival modality in worlds of Judaism and Roman Empire that threatened to destroy early Christianity, is one that has been terribly warped by the social fabric of colonialism in the modern world.

In today's world, fundamentalism continues to have its political and economic analogies which are not entirely non-religious, depending on how broadly analytical one's definition of religion dares to be. Does a 'god' have to be named — even in atheistic religions like Buddhism or in indigenous cultures for whom the word god equally fails to function in any useful way except as a Christian missionary device? Or can the god be merely presumed and unnamed as such, as in the globalization of capital?¹

Otherwise useful words such as freedom and democracy have become powerful religious tropes — along with the blatant political positioning of the language of free trade and capitalism — as political rhetoric in the U.S. government's and U.S. press' attempts to justify the invasion of other countries and the killing of innocent civilians in those countries. While these tropes voice a clear political agenda, they presume to voice a normative and universal value that is to be imposed on all others in the world of U.S. dominance. World domination. As such then, the U.S. imposition on Iraq of 'modern' euro-western statist democracy, with its attendant notions of freedom of religion, is a distinct type of religious fundamentalism, as are its economic doctrinal counterparts: capitalism, privatization, and the globalization of capital.

This mode of fundamentalism as dominance continues to be imposed globally in the economic and governance policies promulgated by the priestly institutions of globalization: the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The banner of Christ, carried so proudly in the columbusday parade as a remembrance of triumphal glories past, has been replaced, by a new gospel and a new fundamentalism, rooted in the same euro-western culture as the old gospel, but to which Christianity has become merely the choir.

And American Indian peoples in the U.S. continue to be today the poorest by far of all ethnic communities on the continent by all social indicators. The columbian legacy and the genocide it spawned is long-lived indeed. That it is now celebrated as a holiday by a modern liberal democratic state can only be seen as an act to further disavow the abjected aboriginal owners of the land.

Note

1 As one National Public Radio commentator put it the day after 9-11-2001, the “Twin Towers” of the World Trade Center marked the “uprights of the world’s largest dollar sign.”

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