



Fables and Reflections

Sixteen

The Fatal Allure of Fundamentalism



Picture by Nathan Bilow. Getty Images

(i)

Moses is always portrayed as a venerable elder with a long white beard, but it's hard to believe he was especially old when he led his nation out of Egypt. He was certainly not feeble. Just think of the influence he had over a whole people, to convince them to go on that trek with him, into the unknown. And he must have been fit, to travel so far, in such heat. So must his nation.

He believed that there was something true in the world, in opposition to the false ; a living spirit at the heart of things, in opposition to dead outward shows, hollow gestures and set motions ; a reliable and active essence, the Alpha and Omega, the Word.

And of course the only way to commune with this inner essential, this One, was to climb a mountain, all alone. Only at the absolute summit can the Word be met with.

But also he needed urgently to re-establish his credentials as receiver, confidante and translator of this Truth spoken on the holy mountain. His people were on the move and without roots. Nothing stayed still for them and nothing was sure. They were desperate, down-hearted, disillusioned and becoming dangerous. He had to keep winning them over if any were to reach the Promised Land.

But we know what happened on Mount Sinai. It wasn't easy. Moses had to strain all his faculties to hear the Words of Truth, and even then couldn't be absolutely sure. All his preconceptions, his images of the Absolute, proved unfounded, facile and impertinent. As they were bound to. He came down from the mountain bewildered and spent. As he was bound to.

And down in the valley he found his brother in much better shape than he, giving the people what they wanted. After all, you knew where you stood with a golden calf - it was shiny to look at and solid to the touch. And sure enough, it spoke to Aaron in terms everyone could understand, giving instructions, ordering sacrifices and blood-lettings, showing them exactly what to believe and what to do. Here was Certainty and Belonging. Here was Relief from Doubt.

Relief from Doubt and Desolation is the false god which Fundamentalism proffers. Moses' word for Fundamentalism was Idolatry. He was a prophet.

(ii)

The poet TS Eliot said "Humankind cannot bear very much reality." In other words, each of us will flinch many times a day from the difficulty of connecting fully and honestly with fact and truth. Or, in other words again, there are many ways of escaping into a fundamentalist mode of operating, and each one of us will succeed in finding one or another of them several times a day, day after day.

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Here's another angle :

The historian Hugh Trevor-Roper asked, what can we learn about human nature from a study of the burning of witches ?

The point is, those persecutions didn't happen in a single burst or particular place, or consistently, but in irregular waves over a long period, and in different places over a wide area.

I suppose we might ask a similar question about the Inquisition and other heresy hunts, or the pogroms which at different times all over Europe (and beyond) killed Jews or gypsies or other easily blamed "outsiders" and scapegoats.

But as far as witches were concerned, Trevor-Roper found that outbreaks of persecution occurred either along *borders* of special uncertainty and insecurity, or in *times* of special uncertainty and insecurity.

Obviously, during the centuries when witch-burning on occasion took place, there was ready to hand an intellectual framework, mind-set, belief system or what you will, which rationalised and excused these persecutions and murders of particular women in the community. Some of the women were perhaps a bit strange, others a bit special – making them all the easier to pick out and target - fair prey. But nowadays that belief system is discredited and no longer available. So the women are safe.

But uncertainty and insecurity haven't gone away. In fact, some would say that these present early days of the twenty first century are uniquely uncertain and insecure for all humankind, whatever material comforts some few of us enjoy.

And all over the world, fraught borders and walls continue to divide people - fault lines of fear and hatred. Guards patrol them ceaselessly, their sole aim to enforce exclusion.

So if we still believed in the existence of witches, and our right and need to destroy them, we should perhaps be looking round today, some of us nervously, for new billows of smoke, crackles of flame and puckerings of skin-surface.

But maybe these days you don't need to be judged a witch to be in danger of burning. Or, put another way, maybe we are all now liable to be hunted down.

For, clearly, there's a new post-medieval mind-set, shared by significant numbers of intelligent and competent people, that says you don't need to single out victims for this or that reason - it's perfectly okay just to blow people up at random, wherever and whoever they are, their only qualification for execution being that they are vulnerable, compressed into a crowd, and killing them terrifies everyone else. Various fervent believers (of opposing beliefs) seem to favour this form of high-tech witch-burning and think it does good.

But, in addition to the new random version, I personally think there is still a process in operation similar and in some ways successor to the witch-hunt, by which a singling out takes place, a victim is chosen, and destruction follows in which the community participates and from which it gains some sort of satisfaction.

I shall develop the thought by giving a specific example. I work in the field of social care, often with people who have mental health problems. In other words, some might say, I am stationed at one of the most troubled borders and fault-lines in the world. On one side of the line, reason, order, control, sense – all our bright dreams of grace and balance ; on the other side the furies, chaos and bewilderment – all our worst nightmares of pursuit and engulfment. And for many people, the only way to protect the former good dream from being overwhelmed by the latter bad one, is to have guards ceaselessly patrolling the fine line between. Here, where sanity meets madness, is a border, par excellence, of special uncertainty and insecurity. Here, most certainly, witches in plenty have been burnt.

But something else is in constant danger along this crucial border. Not literal witches these days, perhaps, not burnable bodies, but the qualities and skills needed to connect people across the dividing line - forms of communication, forms of recognition, forms of reconciliation, forms of *connection*. These are “soft,” difficult and complex human creations and applications, high arts and subtle crafts, and on the face of it they are mysterious and hard to measure. They are realities which do not speak with a voice of thunder from on top of the mountain. Nor are they shiny. But, speaking still and small, they are the qualities and delicate bindings on which community relies, they are central and our future relies on them. We attack or belittle them at our peril. To attack or belittle them is truly insane. But attack and belittle them we do – constantly and across the board.

It’s easy to understand how it happens and how it’s rationalised. For instance, the issue of Community is vastly complex and can leave us feeling helpless and at sea. So let’s *reduce* it to a bureaucrat’s view from the window, whereby Community becomes just a matter of implementing equitable policies, challenging prejudice and organising street parties.

By the same token and process, attending to someone with extensive problems comes to be judged by the bullet points written afterwards, summarising what the person said during the meeting. Offering someone long-term support comes to be placed in columns under slogan headings – such as “Empowerment,” “Recovery,” “Inclusion,” “Employment.”

Consulting with people who use a mental health service is another area of great complexity, requiring care, skill and judgements ; but a pressured system *reduces* the whole topic to inviting those people in ones and twos to management meetings in management offices, following management agendas.

The way too many harassed service managers communicate with people who have mental health problems is to speak to them as if they were mirror images of themselves, sharing the same view from the office window, part of the same committee-room persona and performance.

Training becomes the panacea, the valium that cures all ills. A few days’ “training” will transport us from chaos to order, bewilderment and conflict to enlightenment and harmony. It will teach the drowning how to swim.

The high, central, difficult, long-taught and hard-won inter-personal skills of warmth, genuineness and accurate empathy are allowed to wither on the stem or are consigned to the odd specialist consulting room. They can’t be counted, they can’t be weighed, they can’t be summarised.

A certain psychotherapist said : we need to make precious the space between us.

At the fraught and questionable boundary between the sane and the mad, we have balked throughout history at the complexity and difficulty of making human connection across the space between us. And in new different ways and disguises we are still doing so. But through turning against that preciousness, through denying, reducing, rejecting it, through making a witch of it, we are destroying our hope and meaning, our capacity for a future. Perhaps beside our latest witch also burns the right hand side of all our brains.

When a certain strident lady said : “there’s no such thing as community – only the individual and that which belongs to the individual” there was a strong reaction. Some Christian vicars who until that moment had been reasonably content to have a Conservative Government in power, suddenly jerked awake. No such thing as *community* ? But the gospels are about nothing else ! Community is God’s sphere of operation ! That lady is making a fundamentalist attack on the very foundations of Society. She’s a woman of metal who’s gone seriously off the rails. A few years later she fell from office with a mighty clang and the aged gentlemen returned to their after-dinner dozes.

A few years later still, a very different government was returned, firmly committed to the recognition that community is both real and essential. Yet too often, the tools it reached for to renew and modernise community, were the lady’s own tools.

For we are still mesmerised by the merely material and outward, the solid, simple and shiny, just as the lady was. And now the denial of reality which she represented is working even deeper in.

So “only someone who has experienced mental illness themselves can properly relate to someone in that same position, because only they can know what it’s like.” This statement has become a truism in the mental health services. Is it any different, essentially, from the Iron Lady’s denial of the existence of community ? It is saying in effect that human empathy does not exist and we are mere computers, only able to connect to those with the same past and programming as ourselves. In this new and dangerously simplified world, nothing is real unless it can be weighed on a grocer’s set of measuring scales ; and because the human skills and qualities that connect Me to Thee can’t be touched by those measures, they are given decreasing value and currency. Too much we meet Community as a mere presentation exercise – as Customers wowed and wooed with Choice and crude externalised Targets and Indicators ; so it becomes just a Big Sell shop-front, with computers in the window, connected by wires and flashing lights...

All external shows. In the meantime, those workers whose job it is to function in areas where community is most obviously in the making and under strain – the teachers, the social workers, etc - are constrained, belittled, driven, unsure of their expertise, scapegoated – their skills lacking in social weight and credit. As workers they are reduced by inference to being shop assistants, passing care over the counter as a kind of commodity.

Behind the Shop-front Community of the present-day, witches are still being burnt, fundamentalism is prospering, and the human self continues to reel and flounder.

The Moses/Aaron argument is not that different from the trouble Christ had with the Scribes and Pharisees.

The tension is a fundamental one. Perhaps here is another central dichotomy of opposing forces, which between them form a larger whole.

It is the tension between the original principle and its outer form, the spirit and the letter. At the top of Sinai, Moses found the true spirit difficult to decipher ; down on the plain, Aaron took an easier route and went for gold, solid and tangible.

Christ's case against the Scribes and Pharisees was that in devoting themselves to the Law's letter, and imposing it on others, they had lost touch with the Law's informing spirit. In effect they were worshipping what was now a human interpretation and artefact, locked in time, fixed and material like Aaron's golden calf. They were actually fundamentalists and idolaters, in one.

But this hardening of inner spirit into outer form - so that in time the form becomes stuck and brittle and inadequate as an expression of the original meaning, a perversion of it, even sometimes the expression and vehicle and disguise of an opposite and opposing force - is a necessary process. Creation has to take form, in the first instance - otherwise nothing gets done. And it needs to survive in a world not just of time but also hard knocks.

So we're stuck with this tension. And now that history is imposing comprehensive change at breakneck speed across all elements and aspects of our lives, the tension is enormous and ever-present. New creation is hardening into viable form and then into a brittle perversion of itself, almost simultaneously.

And the policy-maker simply cannot know the spirit informing and motivating the people he or she relies on to make the policy happen - and therefore whether the finished article will bear any relation to the original dream.

For my example I turn again to the aspiration that health and social care services should be more responsive to and shaped by the expressed needs of the people for whom they exist. That aspiration is expressed by policies and directives, sent down through hierarchies of over-worked and often disempowered public servants.

And too often the aspiration emerges at the work-face as a set of perversions and posturings that do the very opposite of what was intended. The aspiration of better listening manifests itself as an irresistible top-down pressure to supply bodies to sit on committees, arenas which are notorious for supplying the worst possible conditions for good listening. The aspiration of greater sensitivity and responsiveness manifests itself too often in one or another form of collusion and manipulation, both expressions - if not merely of unthinking haste - then of unspoken resentment and contempt.

As a result of the process described above, it is possible to observe that in many cases a well-meaning vision of inclusiveness, made into policy, has manifested itself almost immediately in forms which merely add to division, disempowerment and exclusion.

I have no satisfactory answers to this difficulty. If I did, I fear their almost instant transformation into yet another aspect of the problem !

My only suggestion is a time-honoured one - to keep forcing a way back to the guiding principle as check and monitor of all our doings.

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And among so much confusion, here's yet another duality, or dichotomy.

(Whether it's Nature that comes up with these dualities and oppositions, or whether it's just human nature that keeps inventing them out of need, is beyond me to answer.)

This latest duality may perhaps be causing us trouble, and getting in the way of seeing the others clearly. So it's worth trying to identify it, if only then to pack it away.

It is the secular view of reality, versus the religious view. This duality seems often closely parallel to another one that has played a part in history – eighteenth century Reason vs Unreason.

The scientist Galileo recanted on his knowledge that the world was round. If he'd carried on insisting on what he knew, and we know, the Inquisition would almost certainly have killed him. Faith in this instance and for that time was an enemy of Plain Fact and refused to allow it air. And for years people of Faith saw Darwin as an enemy of the Word made manifest and they fought his findings. The Christian Fundamentalist Wing is still doing so.

In these situations the secular approach has be defended as the merely obvious and sane.

Fundamentalism grows ever more tempting as a retreat position, and threatening as a force of unreason and denial. "I know this is true." "How do you know ?" "Because the Lord told me so yesterday afternoon, after lunch, in a dream," or "In the Sacred Book it is written...."

Perhaps in opposition to that retreat into fundamentalism, unreason and idolatry, one is tempted in turn to over-simplify the secular approach, so that it excludes anything that is not material and measurable in the crudest terms. All too easily the extreme secular, turned exclusively materialist, becomes as destructive of reality as the blindly fundamentalist devotee....

Fundamentalism in two forms, both equally enemies of reality.

I picture the dry-fly fisherman.

There he stands in the flow of the stream, thigh-deep in water. The current whirls around and past him. But he is concentrated, his movements circumscribed and pre-ordained.

He flexes his back and arms, to send the rod arching on before him so that the line flashes further still across the surface of the water. Yards and yards of perfect reach. The fly comes to rest, an inch or two above the surface, but too briefly to be seen, and then flicks back - over and behind the fisherman's head - as he and the rod flex again and the long oval continues and continues.

And all the while as the water gurgles, the rod and line are singing as if a strong wind is using them as reeds.

The fisherman stays intent. He is the centre of each cast and it relies absolutely on the committed perfection of all his movements. He takes joy in his action, in his placing, in his place, in this time. If he thought of a catch, a hit, an end, his cast would suffer, making the catch less likely. He is given over entirely to his instruments and their proper deployment, this moment and its proper living.

Let the fisherman keep casting his line. Let each cast seem to hang in the air as the next one comes to join it.

Let him persist in his joy and be endlessly prolific with his casting.

I remember this picture whenever I become distraught at my lack of progress or achievement !

Rogan Wolf