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Fundamentalism and (Early) Modernity: Revisiting the F-Word in Historical Context

Can we speak of "fundamentalism" in the early modern period? A quick glance at the recent scholarship demands in fact the opposite question: can we afford not to speak of fundamentalism in the early modern period? From John Carey's notorious essay on Milton's Samson Agonistes in the Times Literary Supplement following the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, and the vociferous debate that ensued, to James Simpson's recent Burning to Read, which locates the origins of fundamentalism, rather than individual liberty, in the Reformation, early modern scholars are scrutinizing their subjects with a critical and moral consciousness acutely sensitized by contemporary concerns (Carey 2002; Simpson 2007). If fundamentalism is the political buzzword of the day, it is now refracted in the renewed attention devoted to radical religion, theological dogmatism, heterodoxy, politico-religious violence and civil war in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. After all, there appear to be striking parallels between the period of religious crisis that preceded (or led to) the debates on toleration and liberty of conscience, and our own historical moment, which seems to be grappling once again with that familiar dialectic between dogmatic absolutism and moral contingency.

Not surprisingly, then, even a book written for a general readership such as Nigel Smith's Is Milton Better than Shakespeare? opens with a long reflection on the American war on terror in the twenty-first century that includes this telling paragraph:

Islamic fundamentalism often looks today like the kind of violent bigotry that was associated with so many of Milton's coreligionists, the Puritans [...]. The defeat of terrorism, as it has been strategized thus far, involves the compromise of Western liberty (to a degree that makes some Christian fundamentalist supporters of President Bush, the descendants of the seventeenth-century Puritans, happy) in a cause that appears to many modern Western defenders of liberty as imperialistic and unjust. (Smith 2008, 2)

Milton's (early) modernity, it appears, can emerge more sharply only when juxtaposed provocatively against present anxieties over "violent bigotry" and the "compromise of Western liberty." There are seemingly unavoidable, if troubling, analogies between the Puritans (as well as their American Evangelical descendants) and Islamic fundamentalists, suicide bombers and other political extremists.

While this tendency towards injecting presentist concerns into historical study is hardly new, the case of fundamentalism, that new fourteen-letter political "F-word," is particularly compelling. For almost all treatments of the phenomenon acknowledge that it is problematic to stretch the term beyond the nineteenth-century American matrix within which it emerged, but are nevertheless driven to do so and to justify its anachronistic usage, whether looking forward to contemporary global politics, or backwards, to medieval or early modern events. Thus, in his snappy "very short introduction" to fundamentalism, Malise Ruthven argues for Wittgensteinian "family resemblances" between fundamentalisms past and present, and across different socio-
cultural contexts, which may serve to illuminate each other, even as he weeds out semantic cognates that offer "mere analogies" (Ruthven 2007, ix). And on a very different scale, the monumental six-year "Fundamentalism Project" of the 1990s, sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and funded by the MacArthur Foundation, which also sought to identify and analyze the phenomenon of modern fundamentalism across the globe, has fuelled many extended historical, cultural and anthropological investigations (Marty and Appleby 1991). Against this background, the introduction of "fundamentalism" as a term of inquiry and provocation in early modern studies demands careful critical attention: while it lends an undeniable relevance to discussions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature, culture and politics, it also runs the risk of devolving into "mere" topical analogy where present violence seems to replicate past practice.

Consequently, this essay seeks to interrogate and unpack the adoption of "fundamentalism" as a term of inquiry and a controversial label in early modern studies, suggesting how and why the term powerfully illuminates aspects of early modernity and its surprising conjunctions with our postmodern world. Historical studies of fundamentalism, I want to suggest, are important and effective only when they extend beyond the identification of similar events and ideological positions to explore historical patterns and causalities that may enable us to understand both past and present concerns. Thus, this essay seeks to move beyond the more obvious analogies – between the St Bartholomew's Day massacre and contemporary religious genocides, between Puritans and Evangelicals, between Milton's Samson and Al Qaeda's suicide bombers – to examine how some exemplary early modern thinkers grappled with the phenomenon we now call "fundamentalism." It also argues that these early modern reflections may in turn illuminate our current, postmodern moral and political dilemmas.

**Fundamentalism and the Challenge of Modernity**

"Fundamentalism," as a pejorative label, has come to signify attachment to an irreducible set of beliefs or an unshakeable conviction in a theology that seems to forestall further questions (Nagata 2001, 481; Ruthven 2007, 4-6). But as anthropologist Judith Nagata notes, contemporary studies of the phenomenon have struggled to separate normative and descriptive characteristics of fundamentalism, so that the term extends from specifically theological and scriptural positions (a focus on textuality and literal reading; credal or doctrinal questions about belief, adherence to an original Word versus praxis) to social and political issues (Nagata 2001, 483). Despite this wide range of application, most recent analyses of fundamentalism as a phenomenon return to a central observation: that fundamentalism is modernity's dark double, inextricably if paradoxically, bound up with the transitions to secularity, rational contingency, bureaucratic nationalism and globalization that characterize the post-Enlightenment world.2

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2 Of course, defining "modernity" in a precise sense is a very vexed critical issue: see, for instance, Appadurai (1996), Featherstone (1990), Giddens (1991), Habermas (1987), Harvey (1989) and Sailer (2006). On the relation between fundamentalism and modernity see Brasher (2001), Breton (2002),
Thus, Ruthven, summarizing various approaches to fundamentalism, writes, "put at its broadest, [fundamentalism] may be described as a religious way of being that manifests itself in a strategy by which beleaguered believers attempt to preserve their distinctive identities as individuals or groups in the face of modernity and secularization" (Ruthven 2007, 5-6). Expanding this early definition, he notes, "[F]undamentalism only comes into being when challenged by modernist theologies, when post-Enlightenment scholarship is perceived as threatening to the eternal verities enshrined in the Word" (81). Even early Christian fundamentalism, emerging as it did in the socio-economic and existential turmoil of an industrializing, urbanizing and immigrant America of the late nineteenth century, might be best situated in "the ideological vacuum of modernity." Not surprisingly, then, in "The Fundamentalism Project," Marty and Appleby identify "anti-modernity" as a key feature of fundamentalism.

Such characterizations locate fundamentalism as a reactionary repudiation of modernity, a response to the individualism and moral relativism, the "spiritual dystopias and dysfunctional cultural relationships" perceived to be central to crises of modernity and late capitalism, particularly in Islamic or other non-Western contexts (Ruthven 2007, ix; Euben 1999, 140-141; Gellner 1992). The very physical and metaphysical conditions of postmodernity, in particular, seem to trigger a fundamentalist response, as Nagata so eloquently describes:

It may be no coincidence that fundamentalism has been added to the academic and public lexicon at a time when the global (dis)order, with its attendant transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, pluralisms, relativisms, and movement of people and ideas across the world has contributed to an obsessive concern with identity, authenticity and ultimate values – the fundamentals of existence. These conditions, characterized by paradox, creolizations, crossing of once forbidden boundaries in the face of bewildering choice, it may be argued, precipitate a renewed quest for guiding principles, for greater ideological certainty. For those with low tolerance for ambiguity, the attractions of a prescriptive fundamentalist solution are evident. In a sense, one set of processes feeds on the other in a kind of dialectic. (Nagata 2001, 482)

Nagata's emphasis here on the experience of a world turned upside down, in which traditional socio-cultural and political markers have been stripped away by the breaching of boundaries and the establishment of new networks, creating uncertainties, ambiguities and little clarity for the future, is resonant not only for the global upheavals of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, but also for analogous moments of historical transition. It suggests how the turn to fundamentalism is not simply a backward-looking rejection of progressive modern ideas, a dynamic that is all too easily mapped onto East/West dichotomies, but rather a complex admixture of socio-cultural and existential practices that variously interact to produce violent collisions of ideas and actions. More important, perhaps, her evocation of fundamentalism and modernity as processes that feed on each other "in a kind of dialectic" opens a powerful lens through which to examine similar phenomena in other historical con-


texts, an interpretive move that challenges the popular perception of fundamentalism as the irrational ideology of a demonized anti-Western "Other."  

From this perspective, the rapid global transformations that powerfully affected the experience of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe offer an important case study of the relations between fundamentalism and modernity, and further illustrate why the much-debated period designation "early modern" might be especially appropriate. Beyond the analogies scholars have recently drawn between particular religious extremisms past and present, there are deeper, more pervasive links that tie the experience of early modernity with that of the postmodern condition. We might in fact have reason to consider fundamentalism to be a foundational aspect of modernity.

For the post-Columbian world of the sixteenth century was no longer the familiar, divinely ordered, humanly mapped terrain well-known to classical antiquity and the Middle Ages. Like the contemporary situation described by Nagata, it too was grappling with a hitherto unprecedented sense of "global (dis)order," with emergent nationalisms, "cosmopolitanism, pluralisms, relativisms, and movement of people and ideas across the world," and was consequently marked by a "renewed quest for guiding principles, for greater ideological certainty." Beginning with the discovery of the New World, and eventually, of new planetary bodies, the intelligibility and extent of the known world had seriously been called into question. By the 1580s, the culmination of several related movements—such as the new opening of the Americas and Asia to the pursuit of colonial and commercial exploration, the growing intellectual trends of skeptical thought, theological questioning, astronomical speculation, and the emergence of what Eugenio Garin has described as a new historical consciousness (Garin 1978)—had exposed the inability of traditional explanatory systems to comprehend the world.

Reflecting on this upheaval, Michel de Montaigne observes, "[o]ur world has just discovered another world and who will guarantee us that it is the last of its brothers, since the daemons, the Sibyls, and we ourselves have up to now been ignorant of this one?" (Montaigne 1958, 693). In "Des coches," Montaigne’s meditation on the Spanish discovery and conquest of the New World, the "very image of the world which glides along as we live in it," is beyond the grasp of human knowledge, elusive and perpetually multiple in its many forms (693). The Old World of Europe has encountered another, one which profoundly challenged the geographic boundaries of the Ptolemaic oikumene, as well as the historical narratives of human existence and cosmic order derived both from the Bible and classical antiquity. An apposite quotation derived from Lucretius describes the impact of the moment: "This age is broken down, and broken down is the earth" (693).

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4 On fundamentalism as a label used to demonize an "other," see Euben (1999) and Nagata (2001), who notes that "the existence of the fundamentalist, backward cultural Other helps to secure the hegemonic 'modern' point of view" (485).

5 For one articulation of this connection, see the introduction to Jeanneret (2001).

6 These new discoveries and trends of thought that precipitated the so-called "epistemological crisis" of the seventeenth century are variously described and explained in such classic texts as Cassirer (1964) and Foucault (1966). See also Reiss (1997) and Popkin (2003).

7 "Et de cette meme image du monde qui coule pendant que nous y sommes, combien chetive et raccourcie est la cognaisance de plus curieux!" (Montaigne 2004, 908).

8 "Iamque adeo affecta est aetatus, affectaque tellus" (Montaigne 2004, 908). The reference is to Lucretius, De rerum natura, II.1150: "Iamque adeo fricta est aetas effetaque tellus."
Written in the late 1580s, Montaigne's essay, with its emphasis on the plurality and infinitude of customs, opinions, and versions of the world, attempts to record and respond to this turmoil. Almost a hundred years later, however, a similar perplexity remains in the poetry of Andrew Marvell. "'Tis not, what once it was, the world," he muses at the end of "Upon Appleton House." No longer the fixed, beautifully harmonious category well-known from medieval compendia, "the world" of Marvell's seventeenth century is "but a rude heap together hurled." With a mixture of elegiac solemnity and surprised wonder, the poet describes one of the most profound transformations of early modern Europe in the elegance of a couplet: the destabilization of traditional forms of knowledge and belief, and the ushering in of a new world order whose outlines still remained uncertain and tenuous well into the late seventeenth century.

Both Montaigne and Marvell capture a crucial change identified with the emergence of modernity — what has been called the epistemic crisis of the late Renaissance — that increasing emphasis in the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on worldly plurality, contingency and the limitations of human perception and knowledge. And both do so in the midst of historical contexts that are characterized by the violence of "fundamentalism": the French Wars of Religion, the St Bartholomew's Day massacre, the English Civil Wars. Significantly, however, neither writer is commonly invoked to illustrate the question of early modern fundamentalism, and all too often, their writing seems deliberately to ignore or elide their own awareness or response to the horrific acts that were taking place around them. And yet, for both, this tension between the demands of a "modern" epistemology and those of fundamentalist ideology and absolutist dogma is never far. Indeed, the very emergence of a "modern" voice can be traced to the ways in which such writers enfold investigations of fundamentalist acts into their writing.

The Fundamentals of Virtue

One of Montaigne's most penetrating discussions of what we might call fundamentalism emerges in a short essay in the second volume. "De la vertu," which opens as a deceptively innocuous meditation on the courage required to commit suicide, soon transforms into a probing examination of the religious convictions that drive individuals to sacrifice themselves willingly and to kill others — whether believers in another religion or their own co-religionists — without remorse. With the oblique indirection characteristic of the Essais, Montaigne draws on exotic anecdotes and tales from foreign lands only to reflect trenchantly on the Wars of Religion ravaging France. Should we praise acts of self-mutilation and self-destruction, the essay asks, because they are driven by an unshakeable faith in the divine? And how do we evaluate moral courage when the most virtuous of men turn out to be assassins guided by the fundamentalist ethos of religious fanaticism?

Montaigne's revisions of the essay from its original publication in 1580 to its final version in the posthumous 1595 edition reveal a clear re-orientation of the essay towards a consideration of religious belief and action in the contemporary world. As it progresses through a series of anecdotes, the essay increasingly dramatizes the colli-

10 See Nakam (1982) and Quint (2009).
sion between the immovable convictions of believers wedded to traditional practices and the essayist's own ironic, skeptical — one might say, modern — ethical sensibility. In particular, three sets of anecdotes stand out, and their juxtaposition within the text raises strikingly contemporary questions about the nature of fundamentalism and its place in a modern world. Indeed, Florio's English translation of the *Essais* itself opens with a letter to the reader which reflects on Reformation conflict, effectively framing the work as a religio-political intervention for its English audience (Montaigne 1933, xx).

Though it begins with familiar local and classical examples, the essay shifts its focus with a seemingly irreverent turn. Two accounts of men who cut off their genitals impetuously to spite and please their lovers, now give way to an association with the priests of Cybele who ritually mutilated themselves in a similar manner: "If this [genital mutilation] had been for reason and religion, like the priests of Cybele, what should we not say of so sublime an enterprise?" (Montaigne 1958, 534). The introduction of "reason and religion" changes the stakes of the argument, by recasting an act that might seem the result of absurdly excessive emotion into a reasonable or "sublime" enterprise. Here, the priests' desire for holiness through ritual castration may seem like irrational zeal, but as Montaigne will show, it is not so distant (and perhaps less destructive) than other actions driven by similar motivations.

Other examples of ritual self-destruction follow, most notably a long, horrifying section, which Montaigne expanded in 1588 and again in 1595, on the Hindu custom of sati, the ritual self-immolation of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband. After a detailed description of various rituals performed by the widow, Montaigne compares her to the Gymnosophists who burn themselves alive because, "among them a man was esteemed neither holy nor blessed who had not killed himself thus [...] This constant premeditation through a whole life is what makes this a miracle" (Montaigne 1958, 535). The language here highlights the religious basis of the agonizing death that these women and men choose — it is done to achieve true holiness and blessedness, and is a "miracle" — and Montaigne foregrounds once again the vexed question of how to interpret such acts, motivated as they are by an individual's choice to follow religious doctrine, even to death.

The second set of suggestive anecdotes concern instances of extreme combat between Muslims and Christians. Montaigne describes the unusual faith and valor of the fatalistic Bedouin who would fight fully armed Christian crusaders in no more than a white loincoat, of a Turkish lord who shows great ferocity on the battlefield, and finally of a Muslim sect known as the "Assassins":

The Assassins, a people dependent on Phoenicia, are considered among the Mohamme-
dans as being of supreme devoutness and purity of morals. They hold that the most cer-
tain way to deserve Paradise is to kill someone of a different religion. Since they scorn all personal dangers in order to carry out so useful a mission, there have been many in-

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11 "Si c'euist esté par discours et religion, comme les prestres de Cibele, que ne dirions nous d'une si hautaine entreprise?" (Montaigne 2004, 706).
12 "Et n'estoit estimé entre eux ny saint, ny bien heureux, qui ne s'estoit ainsi tué...Cette constante premeditation de toute la vie, c'est ce qui fait le miracle" (Montaigne 2004, 708).
13 The example of sati offers a particularly resonant parallel for contemporary discussions of fundamentalism: Ruthven (2007) for instance, uses the example of Roop Kanwar, the last sati (immolated in 1989, despite stringent anti-sati laws), and the complex, often vitriolic, controversy surrounding her death to illustrate the complex relations between modernity, fundamentalism and gender.
stances in which they presented themselves, singly or in pairs, at the price of a certain death, to assassinate (we have borrowed that word from their name) their enemy in the midst of his forces. Thus was our Count Raymond of Tripoli killed in his city. (Montaigne 1958, 538)\(^{14}\)

Here, finally, at its very end, the essay reveals its position, emphasizing the role that religious fundamentalism can play in fostering what looks like "virtue" but what may also be seen as irrational, unjustifiable violence. The Assassins prove their purity by killing those of opposing faiths, and it is this license to kill that is also their ticket to Paradise, a compensation for the certain death which they willingly pursue. One of their targets is "our Count Raymond," a French crusader, whose insertion here charts the space between these frightening foreign killers and seemingly safe, rational space of Christian Europe from which the essayist writes. But herein lies the essay's final set of ironies.

Before the final anecdote of the Assassins, Montaigne intersperses two anecdotes of Christian assassins-turned-martyrs, specifically the case of Balthazar Gérard who successfully sought to kill William the Silent, the Protestant Prince of Orange in 1584 and Poltro de Méré, the Huguenot assassin of the Catholic leader François de Guise in 1563. Emphasizing Gérard's fortitude – he is credited with having said "I was prepared for this; I will astonish you by my endurance," when his sentence of death by torture was announced – Montaigne notes with dark irony:

It is a marvel how [Gérard] [...] could be keyed up to an enterprise in which his companion had come out so badly [...]. Certainly he employed a very determined hand and a courage moved by a vigorous passion [...]. The motives of so powerful a conviction may be various, for our fancy does whatever it pleases with itself and with us. (Montaigne 1958, 537)\(^{15}\)

The "marvel" of assassination verbally recalls the "miracle" of ritual self-immolation, except now, self-destruction is in the service of destroying a religious opponent.

Perhaps as a consequence, religious conviction here dissolves into "vigorous passion" driven by the whimsical nature of "our fancy," and this subtle dismissal of theological justification affects not only Gérard, but the seeming heroism of any martyr-assassin. Both Catholic and Huguenot have their icons, but their very similarity breaks down any claim to theological primacy. Similarly, the original twelfth-century Assassins comment on these Catholic and Huguenot assassins who have taken not only the word "assassin" from them but also the practice itself. As the juxtaposition collapses the space between the exotic and the familiar, Muslim other and Christian self become indistinguishable at the essay's conclusion, tied together by their mirrored

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\(^{14}\) "Les Assassins, nation dependante de la Phoencie, sont estimés entre les Mahometans d'une souveraine devotion et pureté de meurs. Ils tiennent que le plus certain moyen de meriter Paradis, c'est tuer quelqu'un de religion contraire. Parquoy mesprisant tous les dangers propres, pour une si utile execution, un ou deux se sont veus souvent, au pris d'une certaine mort, se presenter a assassiner (nous avons emprunte ce mot de leur nom) leur ennemi au milieu de ses forces. Ainsi fut tué nostre comte Raimond de Tripoli en sa ville" (Montaigne 2004, 711).

\(^{15}\) "C'est merveille comme [Gérard] [...] qui l'executa, a une entreprise en laquelle il estoit si mal advenu a son compagnon [...]. Certes, il y employa une main bien determinée et un courage esmeu d'une vigoureuse passion [...]. Les motifs d'une si puissante persuasion peuvent etre divers, car nostre fantasie faict de soy et de nous ce qu'il luy plaict" (Montaigne 2004, 710f.).
fundamentalisms.\textsuperscript{16} As David Quint notes, "The critical force of the comparison is to suggest that the fanaticism being directed at Christians by the infidel has now been directed by Christians against one another in civil war. Catholics and Protestants, too, seem to feel that the best way to reach heaven is to slaughter one another" (Quint 2009, 83).

"De la vertu" is noteworthy not only for its subtle moral questioning of practices motivated by what we might identify as fundamentalist beliefs, but also because of the distinctly modern tone that Montaigne adopts. If the \textit{Essais} are often regarded as voicing an exemplary modern subjectivity, if Montaigne is to be credited with introducing the first skeptical work into modern European literature with the "Apology for Raymond Sebond," then his approach to the extreme actions of various believers, martyrs and assassins driven by religious zeal offers a paradigm for thinking about the phenomenon of fundamentalism in both early modern and contemporary contexts. Such actions can only be called into question through the ironic distance and contingent gaze made possible by the experience of modernity. For Montaigne, fundamentalist beliefs and practices are not repudiations of the modern world but are paradoxically identifiable \textit{as such} only because of it. They would otherwise be unquestionably virtuous.

\textbf{Bacon's Points Fundamental}

This probing skepticism, which illuminates and reflects upon fundamentalist strains both in foreign and familiar cultural contexts also finds analogues in the \textit{Essais}' English counterparts, Bacon's \textit{Essays} and Browne's \textit{Religio Medici}. In what may be an echo of Montaigne, Bacon's essay "Of Customs and Education" also destabilizes the thorny division between social custom and religious belief by revisiting the example of sati and the Gymnosophists:

We see also the reign or tyranny of custom, what it is. The Indians (I mean the sect of their wise men) lay themselves quietly upon a stack of wood, and so sacrifice themselves by fire. Nay the wives strive to be burned with the corpses of their husbands. The lads of Sparta, of ancient time, were wont to be scourged upon the altar of Diana, without so much as queching. I remember, in the beginning of Queen Elizabeth's time of England, an Irish rebel condemned, put up a petition to the Deputy, that he might be hanged in a with, and not in an halter; because it had been so used, with former rebels. There be monks in Russia, for penance, that will sit a whole night in a vessel of water, till they be engaged with hard ice. Many examples may be put of the force of custom, both upon mind and body. (Bacon 2008, 419)

Bacon's seemingly artless jumble of examples here is deceptive, for like Montaigne, he too carefully entwines foreign "customs" (the religious practice of the Indians and Spartans) with incendiary political conflicts (the problem of Irish rebellion) and religious excess (the Russian monks). In all cases, unwavering conviction, whether it is identified as social custom, political ideology or theological belief, enables the individual to undertake extraordinary action. But, at the same time,

\textsuperscript{16} Montaigne makes the point explicit in "De la moderation" where he writes of the ancient idea "which consists of thinking that we gratify heaven and nature by our committing massacre and homicide, a belief universally embraced in all religions" (Montaigne 1958, 149): "Cette impression se raporte aucunement à cette autre si ancienne, de penser gratifier au Ciel et à la nature par nostre massacre et homicide, qui fut universellement embrassée en toutes religions" (Montaigne 2004, 201).
Bacon ironically suggests that such actions, which we might identify as "fundamentalist," cannot be justified and only reflect "the tyranny of custom."

If Bacon only touches lightly on the issue of religious radicalism here, it is the focus of other essays. Like "De la vertu," Bacon's key essay, "Of Unity in Religion," opens with a strong affirmation of religion, particularly that of the "true God" of Christianity, against the lesser religions of the heathen (Bacon 2008, 344). But as the essay progresses, its subject clearly becomes the problem of Christian factionalism and sectarian zeal. Bacon, of course, lived through the struggles toward religious uniformity engendered by the Elizabethan settlement, and buried in the essay are powerful concerns about religious zealotry, violence and extreme belief. Significantly, some of the language that Bacon evokes seems to look ahead with uncanny prescience to the fundamentalist declarations of Lyman Stewart and others in the early twentieth century:

Concerning the Bounds of Unity [...] There appear to be two extremes. For to certain zelants, all speech of pacification is odious [...] Peace is not the matter, but following and party. Contrariwise, certain Laodiceans, and lukewarm persons, think they may accommodate points of religion by middle ways, and taking part of both, and witty reconcilements; as if they would make an arbitrement between God and man. Both these extremes are to be avoided; which will be done, if the league of Christians penned by our Savior himself were in the two cross clauses thereof, soundly and plainly expounded: 'He that is not with us, is against us'; and again, 'He that is not against us, is with us'; that is, if the points fundamental and of substance in religion were truly discerned and distinguished from points not merely of faith but of opinion, order, or good intention. (Bacon 2008, 345)

Bacon appears here to distinguish between a fundamentalist position (the "zelants" for whom "all speech of pacification is odious") and the accommodationists who seem all too willing to compromise their articles of faith. But his solution, a kind of golden mean, is to advocate for the unity of all Christians against other faiths, a position that might also be called "fundamentalist," particularly given Bacon's own qualification: "if the points fundamental and of substance in religion were truly discerned and distinguished, from points not merely of faith, but of opinion, order, or good intention" (my emphases). This distinction between "points fundamental" and "points [...] of faith, of opinion, order or good intention" underlines the differences between the doctrinal bases and the socio-cultural uses of religion, a distinction whose contemporary afterlife is visible in debates over whether "fundamentalism" is a purely theological, doctrinal position or whether it is to be considered a wide-ranging socio-cultural phenomenon. It is also a distinction that would be crucial in the theological conflicts of the English Civil Wars to come.

Bacon's consciousness here of the difference between the two, and the respective roles they play in political and social disunity finds greater elaboration as the essay reaches its conclusion:

Men create oppositions which are not; and put them into new terms so fixed, as whereas the meaning ought to govern the term, the term in effect governeth the meaning [...] men must beware, that in the procuring or muniting, of religious unity they do not dissolve and deface the laws of charity, and of human society. There be two swords amongst Christians, the spiritual and temporal; and both have their due office and place, in the maintenance of religion. But we may not take up the third sword, which is Ma-
homet's sword, or like unto it; that is, to propagate religion by wars, or by sanguinary persecutions to force consciences; except it be in cases of overt scandal, blasphemy, or internixture of practice against the state; much less to nourish seditions; to authorise conspiracies and rebellions; to put the sword into the people's hands; and the like; tending to the subversion of all government, which is the ordinance of God [...]. Lucretius the poet, when he beheld the act of Agamemnon, that could endure the sacrificing of his own daughter, exclaimed: Tantum Religio potuit suadere malorum. What would he have said, if he had known of the massacre in France, or the powder treason of England? He would have been seven times more Epicure and atheist than he was. For as the temporal sword is to be drawn with great circumspection in cases of religion; so it is a thing monstrous, to put it into the hands of the common people. Let that be left unto the Anabaptists, and other furies [...]. (Bacon 2008, 346-347)

Here, Bacon, like Montaigne, shows his hand. The essay is a powerful protest against civil unrest and the violent political consequences of fundamentalist positions that deny peace in the name of doctrine. And yet, in another striking contemporary parallel, the fundamentalist other is stridently demonized by identification with "Mahomet's sword," a figurative evocation of an entire range of brutal and persecutory actions that need to be purged from the Christian body politic. The final turn to the atheist Roman poet Lucretius, and the quotation from the notorious poem, De rerum natura, is especially telling: Bacon invokes the very passage where Lucretius passionately condemns religion for its ability to incite evil actions, such as Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter, Iphigeneia. But this atrocity, he notes slyly, is nothing compared to the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre or the Gunpowder Plot, both conspiracies of Christians against other Christians, which he suggests, would have made the Epicurean Latin poet even more an atheist than he already was.

Bacon's analogy here is not merely rhetorical hyperbole used to magnify his own indignation at the savagery unleashed during the civil wars of Reformation Europe. The invocation of Lucretius, whose name alone conjured religious heterodoxy and the specter of atheism, introduces a challenge to absolute religion within the texture of the essay, despite its ringing opening affirmations. It opens a space between the claims for religious orthodoxy and "points fundamental," on the one hand, and the shockingly brutal political and social costs of religious extremism on the other. More sharply and more urgently than Montaigne's oblique meditations, Bacon's essay captures a historical moment and a mind torn between strong pledges of religious faith and the gruesome realities of religio-political practice as they were unfolding in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. If a strain of skepticism creeps into Bacon's essay at its conclusion, it enables the final powerful call to peace and unity:

It was great blasphemy when the devil said, 'I will ascend and be like the Highest'; but it is greater blasphemy, to personate God, and bring him in saying, 'I will descend, and be like the prince of darkness'; and what is it better, to make the cause of religion to descend to the cruel and execrable actions of murthering princes, butchery of people, and subversion of states and governments? Surely this is to bring down the Holy Ghost, instead of the likeness of a dove, in the shape of a vulture or a raven; and set out of the bark of a Christian church a flag of a bark of pirates and Assassins. (Bacon 2008, 347)

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17 See De rerum natura, 1.84-101 (Lucretius 1975, 10-11).
Significantly, Bacon too returns here to the notorious example of the Assassins (which may perhaps be an echo of Montaigne), but uses it to try and separate the Christian body from its Muslim other, which it has come to resemble in unsettling ways. Under the scalpel-like gaze of the essayist, fundamentalist religious belief is ruthlessly declassified: it is no longer a miraculous sign of virtue, but looks suspiciously similar to signs of passion, whim, or custom. Ideological virtue and purity is itself balanced against a (new) idea of moral virtue as humane compassion; the "butchery of people" can no longer be overlooked or cloaked in the name of the Lord.

The most direct descendant of this strain in moral and religious thought is Sir Thomas Browne, whose Religio Medici opens with a Montaigne-esque moment of self-exposure that seems to speak directly back to Bacon's concerns:

For my Religion, though there be severall circumstances that might perswade the world I have none at all, as the generall scandall of my profession, the naturall course of my studies, the indifferency of my behaviour, and discourse in matters of Religion, neither violently defending one, nor with that common ardour and contention opposing another; yet in despithe thereof I dare, without usurpation, assume the honorable stile of a Christian: not that I meerely owe this title to the Font, my education, or Clime wherein I was borne, as being bred up either to confirme those principles my Parents instilled into my unruly understanding; or by a generall consent proceed in the Religion of my Countrey: But having, in my riper yeares, and confirmed judgement, scene and examined all, I finde my selfe obliged by the principles of Grace, and the law of mine owne reason, to embrace no other name but this; neither doth herein my zeale so farre make me forget the generall charitie I owe unto humanity, as rather to hate then pity Turkes, Infidels, and (what is worse) Jewes, rather contenting my selfe to enjoy that happy stile, then maligning those who refuse so glorious a title. (Browne 1977, 61)

While these famous lines, which, for a long time remained the preferred focus of literary scholarship because of their "religious ease and urbanity," seem comfortably removed from swirling sectarian enthusiasms of the early 1640s, they are best understood as a powerful response to them. Browne carefully separates himself from "zelants" or fundamentalists (he neither "violently" defends, nor does he oppose with "common ardour and contention"), acknowledges that religion could become merely a matter of custom or education, but insists that his own religious choice is motivated "by the principles of Grace, and the law of mine owne reason" — a declaration that looks ahead to the Deists of the later seventeenth-century as well as the debates over toleration and non-conformity. Most strikingly, however, Browne treats that double problem of intra-religious conflict and its mirror image in inter-religious conflict: not only does he distance himself from the civil unrest provoked by religious dissent in England, he is also quick to assert — as do Montaigne and Bacon — the importance of mitigating his own "zeale" so that he does not "forget the generall charitie I owe unto humanity, as rather to hate then pity Turkes, Infidels, and (what is worse) Jewes."

This is not to suggest that Browne, Bacon and Montaigne exemplify early modern attitudes to religious fundamentalism: quite the contrary. Given the surge of interest since the late 1960s and 1970s in the "Puritan," non-conformist and dissenting tracts published in the seventeenth century, and the renewed focus on sectarianism, anti-

18 The phrase is used by Victoria Silver to describe the prevailing view of Browne at Oxford in the mid-twentieth century (Silver 1999).
prelatical polemic and other forms of radical popular religion, voices such as these have been relegated to the minority and margins: they have seemed elite, ironic, and too removed from the rough and tumble popular politics of the public squares.\(^9\) Early modern literature itself is littered with many more instances of radical calls to arms, with the very anecdotes and examples that the essayists draw on here to make their case. But from a critical and interpretive perspective, it is only too easy to point to specific figures and events in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe and identify them as "fundamentalist" – the greater challenge, perhaps, is to ask what responses were available to such fundamentalisms. Was extreme religious violence only met with more religious violence, whether by the individual or the state? Or were there other responses – such as those of Montaigne and Bacon – that sought to undercut the authority of fundamentalist rhetoric? And moreover, might such responses offer us a model for thinking through the moral and socio-political challenges of current fundamentalist violence?

Marvell, Milton and the Dilemma of Political Action

The fundamentalist challenge is especially evident in the literary historiography of English literature's three canonical early modern sectarians and political activists: John Milton, Andrew Marvell and John Bunyan. While liberal (often Marxist) historiography since the 1960s has reclaimed these figures as defenders of liberty and freedom of conscience, high-humanist guardians of aesthetic culture (Milton, Marvell) or working-class heroes (Bunyan), more recent criticism is cautiously coming to terms with the radical extremest and violent strains in their writing.\(^{20}\) In the wake of the contemporary waves of religious violence worldwide, where the labels "revolutionary" and "fundamentalist" seem only too confusingly interchangeable, it has become increasingly difficult to defend these icons of the Western literary canon from charges of inhumane and absolutist rhetoric.\(^{21}\) Stuart Sim has shown how Bunyan, a favorite anti-establishment figure of Marxists and Evangelicals alike, seems to "speak most powerfully to those who have a fundamentalist streak" (Sim 2007, 215), since his life and work both emblematize a refusal to compromise his beliefs and celebrate events and characters who resist pressure to conform at all costs.

But it is Milton, most prominently, who stands at the center of this re-evaluation as the raging debates over Samson Agonistes have demonstrated. In his intervention on this issue, Feisal Mohammed summarizes the stakes of interpretation with devastating clarity:

In presenting a hero of faith [Samson] whose ultimate achievement is providential slaughter, Milton shows an ideology marginalizing the humanity of nonadherents – just as he did in his satisfaction over the beheading of Charles, in his triumphalism over Cromwell's Irish slaughters, and in his advocacy in the final days of the republic of military suppression of the "inconsiderate multitude[s]" desire for monarchy [...]. By

\(^9\) See for instance the revisionist work by historians such as Hill (1962; 1969; 1972; 1997), Lake (2002), Morton and Smith (2002) and Smith (1994).


\(^{21}\) Mohammed notes a tantalizing connection between Milton and the Ayatollah Khomeini when he writes: "One of the most Miltonic statements of recent history is the Ayatollah Khomeini's (probably unwitting) paraphrase of The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth on the eve of the Iranian Revolution [...]." (Mohammed 2005, 337).
imposing permissible readings of Milton's dramatic poem, Carey seeks to render impossible a view of the text that might interrogate the Western location of religious violence in the Other [...] This view, too, tends anachronistically to associate Milton with skeptical humanism rather than religious enthusiasm.

If Milton holds especial importance in current political discussion, it is precisely because he frustrates uncomplicated narrativization of the Western tradition [...]. His propagandist prose for the Protectorate mirrors the conflicted relationship between the discourses of liberty and conquest inhering in "Operation Iraqi Freedom" [...]. Through such challenges, we interrogate the coding of high Western culture as fundamentally rational and non-violent and examine the tendency of libertarianism, in Milton's day and our own, to privilege the freedoms of the elect above those of the marginal. (Mohammed 2005, 336-337).

Mohammed argues strongly against the desire of Carey and other critics to rescue Milton from the ugly taint of fundamentalist violence, pointing to the extensive historical and biographical evidence that shows Milton's increasing commitment to radicalism especially after the Restoration (333). Paradoxically, Milton emerges simultaneously as a key voice in defense of individual liberty, a committed republican and anti-monarchist who was a significant influence on the American founding fathers such as Adams and Jefferson, but also as a zealous, partisan supporter of regicide, of military suppression of popular uprising, and mass homicide of non-believers. It is this doubleness that in fact makes Milton so central to any study of early modernity and fundamentalism: it is precisely by confronting the extremist polemics of Milton's writing that we can begin to confront the fundamentalist strain that lurks within the privileged spaces of (Western) modernity.

For the debate over Milton's legacy and the appropriate interpretation of works such as Samson Agonistes or The Readie and Easie Way raise the crucial question of evaluating political action, particularly those actions motivated by fundamentalist belief. For Montaigne and Bacon, there is little or no moral justification for the taking of human lives, whether in the name of religion or the state. But Milton, on the other hand, like Marvell, is divided on this score.

Samson Agonistes celebrates the final destruction of the Theatre and the Philistines in no uncertain terms:

Now ly'st victorious
Among thy slain self-kill'd
Not willingly, but tangl'd in the fold
Of dire necessity, whose law in death conjoin'd
There with thy slaughter'd foes in number more
Then all thy life had slain before.

In his final act, Samson exemplifies the ethos of Montaigne's Assassins, of all religious martyrs who are justified by the sacrifice of their own lives in the destruction of their enemy-victims. As an Old Testament type for Christ, Samson's sense of godliness depends on heroic action, on a justification by works rather than by

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22 See also important recent scholarship on Milton's increasing sympathy with radical religion after the Restoration, for instance, in Achinstein (1996), Lewalski (2002), Locwenstein (2001) and Mueller (2002).

23 In this vein, Rajan notes that Milton seems to be a "liberal intelligence straining against, but attracted to, fundamentalist orientations" (Rajan 2007, 3).

24 Samson Agonistes, ll. 1663-1668. All citations from Milton's poems are from Milton (1957).
faith. He must act to prove and perform his belief in God, and in this, Samson offered a model for spiritually justified militarism (Mohammed 2005, 333). In the 1640s and 1650s, such justifications were to prove integral to the discourse of revolution and freedom from tyranny; in a post-Restoration world, they provided a rhetoric of resistance variously associated with non-conformity, dissent and radical spiritualism. The Milton of Samson Agonistes thus betrays strong fundamentalist credentials, and is an influential participant in a culture of zeal and violence, which operated by demonizing alterity, specifically religious otherness (Rajan 2007, 2).

On the other hand, as Balachandra Rajan notes, in the 1671 volume that contains Samson, "a poem of maximum quietism [Paradise Regain'd] is placed in proximity with the most rampantly activist poem that Milton wrote" (Rajan 2007, 7). To read Samson alongside and in dialogue with Paradise Regain'd is to juxtapose the silent resilience of Jesus’s resistance to Satan against the vaunting self-annihilation of Samson's deed:

To whom thus Jesus: also it is written,
Tempt not the Lord thy God; he said and stood.
But Satan smitten with amazement fell
As when Earths Son Antæus (to compare
Small things with greatest) in Irassa strove
With Joves Alcides and oft foil'd still rose,
Receiving from his mother Earth new strength,
Fresh from his fall, and fiercer grapple joy'n'd,
Throttld at length in the Air, expir'd and fell;
So after many a foil the Tempter proud,
Renewing fresh assaults, amidst his pride
Fell whence he stood to see his Victor fall. (Paradise Regained, II. 560-571)

The Son demonstrates the power of truth without force, and it is Satan who, "smitten with amazement fell," as though thrown down by Hercules. Here, the materiality of the metaphor, which evokes the battle between the earth-bound, fleshly Antæus and Hercules, son of the Olympian Jove, serves to highlight the space between the Son's non-violent conquest and the Tempter's inability to move beyond the limitations of bodily violence and control. The fleshliness of Samson's strength tearing down the "massie pillars" of the Theatre have no place in this poem, where force is belittled and presented as the last resort of the Adversary. As Rajan notes, "Paradise Regained asks us to distance ourselves from the triumphalist elation [of Samson] and to reflect on the kind of action that will sustain rather than undermine the human hopes which launched it" (Rajan 2007, 8). To read across the two poems is thus to complicate and question the activist solution to political action, to reconsider its moral power – and ironically, to simultaneously affirm and deny the necessity of violence.

A similar dichotomy emerges in several of Marvell's poems, but perhaps most clearly in "An Horatian Ode Upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland," one of the most notoriously difficult poems of the seventeenth century to pin down in terms of its political allegiance and its attitude towards political action. Written in 1650, the poem is ostensibly an encomium for Cromwell, a celebration of the hero's return after the

25 Rajan argues that Samson "is a fundamentalist text [...]. A fundamentalist text is fiercely antithetical. It draws a firm boundary between itself and chaos, a 'just circumference' (PL 7.231) that shields it from an irreconcilable otherness" (Rajan 2007, 2). See also Kranidas 2005.
successful, if brutal, suppression of the Irish revolts. But, contained within it is also a startlingly sympathetic portrayal of Charles I at the scaffold—a description which was frequently memorized in the nineteenth-century as a eulogy to the martyr-king (Legouis 1968, 14-15). With its interrogation of the choice between political action and contemplative retreat, its allusions to Lucan’s Pharsalia, and its ambivalent praise of Cromwell as a new Julius Caesar, "An Horatian Ode" delicately questions the justifications for political violence even as it seemingly celebrates them. Is Cromwell to be celebrated as a liberator or a tyrant? Is Charles a tyrant or martyr-saint? Will the future of the nation be marked by religiously motivated civil war and destruction, or is this the great revolution that will pave the way for true liberty? Finally, the only answers are tied up in shadows and uncertainty; as the poet warns, echoing Seneca, violence once deployed becomes unavoidable to the maintenance of the new status quo:

But thou the War's and Fortune's son
March indefatigably on;
And for the last effect
Still keep thy sword erect:
Besides the force it has to fright
The spirits of the shady night;
The same arts that did gain
A pow'r must it maintain.²⁶

Once unleashed, fundamentalist belief and action both denies and enables the modern ideals of individual liberty, political choice and moral contingency.

Works Cited


