

Religious Fundamentalism and Deliberative Democracy¹

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Religious fundamentalism is seen as one of the major threats in 21st Century, at least for Western countries, and as an obstacle to the expansion of democracy, human rights and modernization around the world. For many people, it is closely connected to harsher forms of international terrorism. But fundamentalism entails, no doubt, a broader threat than terrorist attacks.² It amounts to the strongest global current enemy of democracy and often violently challenges the ideals of international peace and social progress (Garaudy 1990: ch. 1). This is enough to see why this new phenomenon should concern us, as human beings, provided we defend these ideals.³

1 This work was written after the discussions which took place at the Tampere Club Meeting on Democracy and Varieties of Fundamentalism, held at Tampere (Finland) on September 6-8, 2007. Although it was not presented and discussed there as such, my arguments greatly benefited from all that was said during the meeting, and from all that I learned from my colleagues. Accordingly, I want to thank all the participants in this two-day meeting, most of whom are also authoring a contribution to this volume. I would like to thank the Tampere Club organization as well for the wonderful attention they provided to the service of knowledge. I want to thank also to Hugo Seleme and Jahel Queralt for having read a preliminary version of this text, and having contributed to improve the outcome with their comments and suggestions.

2 There is, of course, no logical connection between both phenomena. Neither all fundamentalists are terrorists (indeed, not all of them are violent), nor all terrorists are fundamentalists. Most terrorists are not even religious. It is true that fundamentalism need not be religious; leaving aside the etymology of the word, the concept can easily be extended to secular extremists as well. However, non-religious terrorists are not all political fundamentalists. I am convinced that many, but surely not all, members of the ETA Basque terrorist group in Spain (or many Jacobins in revolutionary France) are (were) political fundamentalists, at least according to the definition I am going to hold.

3 It is usual to point out that religion in general becoming more and more politically important in our advanced democracies, and a wide array of religious claims

Notwithstanding, fundamentalism also concerns us as theorists. The usually rough approximation to fundamentalism cited in popular media is not sufficiently accurate to adequately understand this phenomenon. Many nuances underlie the widespread notion outlined above; several elements are far more complicated and deserve our exploration. We must be fair with the people engaged in fundamentalist movements, with their beliefs and perceptions, and with other people surrounding them, who often times suffer from their direct effects. In addition, further analysis is convenient because we can learn much about democracy itself and its political legitimacy by reflecting on one of its major threats, one of its opposites. My purpose in this work is to contribute to both ideas, especially arguing that fundamentalism opposes mutual rational justification, the particular source of political legitimacy in deliberative democracies.

To that end, I will begin by exploring the concept of fundamentalism, emphasizing some features that I consider relevant to my argument, in particular those related to the epistemic assumptions underlying that ideology or attitude. I will secondly analyze how fundamentalism opposes all forms of democracy, while it is particularly antagonistic to those models that focus on collective and democratic deliberation. In doing so, I will analyze the political epistemology underlying both doctrines and their view of political legitimacy. I will conclude this chapter by analyzing the case of group polarization in our democracies as an example of the sharp contrast between deliberative democracy and fundamentalism.

I. The concept of fundamentalism

In 1983 a group of Christian families in the Hawkins County (Tennessee, USA) complained against to the County's Board of Education challenging a primary school reading program in which students were supposed to read 47 stories referring to several major religions in the world. This complaint led to a controversial judicial decision, *Mozert v. Hawkins*,⁴ which has since then been widely discussed by legal and

have being introduced in the public sphere in the last decades. But while the rise of fundamentalism can be considered as the extreme of this wider phenomenon, they must not be conflated. Religious fundamentalism is a much narrower social phenomenon that religion in general. For a presentation of the general revival of religion in the public sphere, see Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2009.

4 *Mozert v. Hawkins County Bd. Of Education*, 827 F. 2d 1058 (6th Cir. 1987)

political theorists in the United States and has become an interesting test case for some of the theories of education and laicism. Christian parents argued that the reading program was denigrating their religious views; though the program did not sponsor any particular religion, the very exposure of children to a plurality of religious views was understood as interfering in their free exercise of religious belief. During the trial, parent Vicki Frost declared that “the word of God as found in the Christian Bible ‘is the totality of my beliefs’”.⁵ This testimonial, only one among many others proffered on that case, can be taken as a paradigmatic statement of religious fundamentalism.

The term ‘fundamentalism’ was coined in the 1910s in the United States, when radical evangelical Protestant groups, with their beginnings at the Princeton Theological Seminary, began to edit a series of pamphlets under the title of “The Fundamentals of the Faith”. These booklets defended the core of Protestant beliefs against the liberal and progressive spirit of the age and reacted to a process of social modernization (Bruce 2000: 10-11, 66-67). The connotation of the word remained relatively static until the Iran hostage crisis in 1979, when it was also extended to refer to extremist movements in Islam usually associated with Khomeini’s revolution.⁶ The term has gained several, different uses from that time on, most of them related to the term ‘religious extremism’ or the French term ‘intégrisme’.⁷ Fanaticism, intolerance, conservatism, dogmatism, intransigency, extremism, radicalism, prejudice and rigidity, are all adjectives frequently associated with fundamentalism (Garaudy 1990: ch. 1).

Experts agree on defining fundamentalism as an ideology, a doctrine, or an attitude, that advocates a return to the ‘fundamentals’, the basic tenets of a religious or a political faith, claiming then to turn back to the past, to

5 This is cited by Stephen Macedo, who quotes the description made by Judge Lively in *Mozert v Hawkins*, p. 1061 (Macedo 1995: 471).

6 Now it can be applied to any religion’s radical extreme, or even to some political movements. As Steve Bruce points out, “[e]very religious tradition is capable of producing people who put the promotion of religiously inspired goals above their society’s norms” (Bruce 2000: 5-7, also 94-95).

7 Some of these usages refer broadly to merely conservative or strong expression of religious beliefs, or either to disqualify or reject more conservative views as lacking “intellectual maturity”. This opens a debate about whether we should abandon the term for another more precise –or less emotive– word, such as radical or extremist. But I agree with Bruce in that it is absurd to reject a term that is well established in common parlance and acceptably identifies a common phenomenon (Bruce 2000: 12-13).

a precedent cultural, social or institutional setting (Garaudy 1990; Bruce 2000: 12-15).⁸ “[F]undamentalisms rest on the claim that some source of ideas, usually a text, is inerrant and complete” (Bruce 2000: 13), and it appeals to, and tries to impose, absolute truths (Garaudy 1990).

As an ideology or doctrine, it is supported by some fanaticized movements that protest and react to modernization processes (Bruce 2000: 94ff; Marty and Appleby 1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1994 and 1995; Macedo 1995: 479; Barber 1996: 205-208), whether these processes are actually transforming (or have yet to transform) the societies in which they live -as in the case of Protestant fundamentalists in the United States-, or are simply external influences and potential factors of social and cultural change. In this last case these processes are therefore seen as threats to the society’s way of life -as in the most of the Islamic countries in which fundamentalists have proliferated.⁹ In the face of the perils of modernity, fundamentalism proposes to “regain the same charismatic intensity today by which they originally forged a communal identity from the formative revelatory religious experiences long ago” (Marty and Appleby 1993b: 3). While this doctrine is basically religious, it also entails a desire “to reshape the world at large” and advocated “society-wide obedience to some authentic and inerrant text or tradition”, it is also a political ideology that intends to impose traditions, recurring to violence if necessary (Bruce 2000: 8 and 94; Garaudy 1990: ch. 1; Barber 1996). Nonetheless, whatever religious cause there may be, fundamentalism is rooted in particular cultural, political and socioeconomic circumstances and it carries an evident political dimension.

8 Scholars and intellectuals around the world have paid considerable attention to the issue of fundamentalism. A crucial academic event, at least for the Anglo-American context, was the Chicago Fundamentalist Project, planned by the US historian Martin Marty and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences at the end of 1980s. Over 100 scholars of fundamentalist movements met in a series of seminars to analyze this phenomenon. The outcome of these meetings was the monumental publication of five collective volumes, which now represent a decisive scholarly work in that field (Marty and Appleby, 1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1994 and 1995). Other important works are Armstrong 2001, for the historical perspective; Brasher 2001; and Kaplan 1992 for a comparative view.

9 Modernization is seen as a process of social change that brings about the division and fragmentation of life and social institutions, the separation of church and state with a process of secularization, the faster growth of society, a general process of rationalization and scientific knowledge, an increasing egalitarianism, a change in gender roles, and greater cultural diversity (Bruce 2000: ch. 2; the same idea in Garaudy 1990: ch. 1).

One “cardinal feature of modern societies that fundamentalists find objectionable is the notion that all individuals should be accorded the same liberties irrespective of their faith and piety” (Bruce 2000: 33). Fundamentalists often challenge the principle of laicism, the separation between church and state, and they react politically to the culture of rights and democracy, as well as to our egalitarian laws and settings. These and other legal and political features of modern democracies are seen as unacceptable from the fundamentalist point of view. Rather, it asserts a preference for a religious view of the human being and politics, an integral perspective to judge any value in human life. It therefore rejects any political institution or setting that contradicts or does not harmonize with its religious view and requirements.

Fundamentalism involves a claim for authority, generally to a text, which is supposed to provide “a perfect guide” for the human being and the human life (Bruce 2000: 13). This means that the possibility of any authority other than the original sources of religious belief is excluded. Fundamentalism amounts to a sort of Manichaeism that divides the world between right and wrong (good and bad), being part of the former only those people or actions who respect what the text literally commands; other people and actions are indisputably wrong. This means that fundamentalists are capable of sorting out the correct (literal) interpretation of holy texts, and they can appeal to “some notion of a *hermeneutic* principle (Bruce 2000: 13). This explains the innovation of fundamentalism.¹⁰ Only in cultures with a certain degree literacy can a violent battle about the original meaning of religious texts be fought. Only in such cultures can there be people who judge the dominant interpretation of such texts as a betrayal. Extremism or radicalism in religion is hardly a new phenomenon; the particularity of fundamentalism where texts are seen as ‘fundaments’ is a recent feature associated with this kind of movements.

Fundamentalism is then reductionist with respect to values and authority. It identifies a single religious order of values which applies to all aspects of human life, including morals and politics (Macedo 1995: 479). And it reduces all authorities to only one: God through the texts. God is the only theoretical as well as practical authority for all aspects of life. Additionally, the fundamentalist claim for authority entails a particular

10 As I have mentioned above, the word appears in English at the beginning of 20th Century. And according to Garaudy, the French word ‘*intégrisme*’ was not recognized by dictionaries until 1960s (Garaudy 1990: ch. 1).

epistemological thesis: the truth, both theoretical and practical, is to be found in the text, and there is no possible doubt about this (Macedo 1995: 479). Thus, they hold, then, a variant of a correspondence theory of truth. The correspondence is not, however, with empirical world, but with God's word revealed through the texts, the fundamentals. What the texts establish or command is necessarily true since God is infallible and the text expresses God's word; there is no room for doubt.¹¹

It is true that any religious believer (at least, in the main monotheistic Western religions) shares the view that God is infallible. However, one particularity of fundamentalism is that it extends such infallibility both to the holy texts and to a particular interpretation of them. Accordingly, fundamentalists, as all other religious believers, think that what God says is necessarily true. Fundamentalists add that what they say God says is also necessarily true. They cannot distinguish, then, between "holding something true", and "holding something as true".¹² One mistake in fundamentalist epistemological assumptions, in which other believers do not (need to) make, consists in extending the infallibility attributed to God and the holy texts to their interpretation itself. Thus, an immediate effect of this extension is that fundamentalists are not akin to discuss rationally with others about their interpretation.

The authority is theoretical and practical, and it is infallible. This leads fundamentalists to a practical thesis with political relevance: the truth must be coercively imposed, perhaps through violence.¹³ Thus, funda-

11 And this leads to a variant of Euthyphro's Dilemma: is what the text says (under a literal interpretation) true because it infallibly reflect what is 'really' true according to an independent standard or is it true simply because it has been stated or commanded by God (provided there does not exist such independent standard)? The original Euthyphro's Dilemma, as pointed out by Plato in the so-called dialogue, concerns in similar terms the property of good, instead of truth.

12 This distinction was introduced by Avishai Margalit in the Tampere Club sessions.

13 Stephen Macedo does not find this third thesis necessary for fundamentalism, and this is reason why he concludes that fundamentalism can be compatible with liberalism, a reasonable comprehensive doctrine in Rawlsian terms (Macedo 1995: esp. 479 and 480). In my opinion, however, the common use of fundamentalism refers to a doctrine that supports this principle of intolerance, and this is necessary for distinguishing it from other moderated, religious interpretations. Macedo's criticisms of Stolzenberg rest on the assumption that there can be a sort of liberal religious fundamentalism. Notwithstanding, this seems to me a *contradictio in terminis*, not because liberalism is interpreted as a comprehensive doctrine, but because fundamentalism is not capable of subscribing to the sort of neutrality, 'epistemic abstinence' and respect and tolerance that political liberalism demands.

mentalists' practical position entails a principle of intolerance. All those who do not endorse one particular interpretation of the text held true are wrong and are doing wrong. Since there is no room for doubt, wrongness is not to be tolerated; it must be censured and even repressed. Truth and goodness must be imposed. As a practical and political doctrine, therefore, fundamentalism rejects both the distinction between the right and the good, as well as the principles of neutrality and tolerance.¹⁴ In addition, as it neglects the separation between church and state and endorses a monist and reductionist view of normative values, it advocates using state resources, i.e. the law, to impose its particular, religious conception of the good. Since fundamentalism does not accept the separation between politics and morals –not to say between law and morals-, its practical thesis collapses into a political thesis as well. From its point of view, it is impossible to disentangle both fields.

In conclusion, we can define fundamentalism as an ideology or a doctrine that holds –or as an attitude that presupposes- these three theses:¹⁵

(1) A reductionist thesis on values and authority: there is only one order or set of values to be applied to religion, morals, politics and all other facets of human life. And there is only one authority in all these areas of life, which is God, speaking through the text that constitutes the fundaments.

(2) An exclusive epistemological thesis: the only source of truth (or rightness) in both theoretical and practical issues is God, and his will is revealed by the texts (the fundaments) that are rightly, literally interpreted. God, the texts and their interpretation are all considered infallible, and there is no room for doubt, and therefore neither for discussion.

(3) A practical or political thesis (or principle of intolerance): the truth about the good (i.e., the right set of values as commanded by God) must be imposed by any means necessary, including the law and other resources of the state. This leaves no room for neutrality or indulgence for those who make errors.

14 For that reason, it is also a perfectionist doctrine; it intends to impose a view of the good life to all citizens.

15 I have stated above that the most of experts see fundamentalism as a doctrine and/or as an attitude. Although I am analyzing here the concept basically as a doctrine, I think there are no difficulties in translating the same analysis to the attitudes level. The attitudes of fundamentalism would be those of endorsing the third theses mentioned in the text.

This analysis helps to explain the main difference between fundamentalism and simple extremism or radicalism. Extremism need not be reductionist. And while it entails some kind of epistemological exclusiveness that can be accompanied with a certain degree of intolerance, both features are never fully realized. Extremism or radicalism is a matter of degree; an ideology can be more or less extreme or radical depending on how intolerant it is, or on how many or in the degree of importance of the fields in which is radicalized.¹⁶ Fundamentalism, instead, is an all-or-nothing property of ideologies, doctrines or attitudes. It would be absurd to state that an ideology is 'quite reductionist', and that those who believe in the existence of two sets of values or two authorities are closer to fundamentalism than those who follow three or four. On the other hand, a non-fundamentalist religious believer might endorse the first two theses, but not the third. What characterizes fundamentalism, in contrast to religious beliefs in general, is the principle of intolerance.

Fundamentalists apparently assume that the practical thesis logically derives from the other three, but this is certainly not true. One can think that there is only one set of values to be applied to all facets of human life, only one authority commanding such values, and that this authority (through the text expressing his will under a particular interpretation) is infallible, and still not impose on others one's own views of the good life through coercion and violence. This would be the case when, for instance, God's will is precisely that human beings live in harmony with other people with other beliefs, and that they must be politically neutral and tolerant, and so on.¹⁷ It would be a mistake, therefore, to think that the principle of intolerance is an implication of the other two theses. In other words, it is not true that fundamentalism amounts to the most consistent version of religion.

16 It is not inconsistent, at least on logical grounds, to be radical or extremist only in some areas or fields of human life -to be so in religion, for instance, and not in politics-, provided one separates axiologically these areas or fields. But this is not the case of fundamentalism, due precisely to its monist and its reductionist theses.

17 An obvious instance of this case is contemporary Catholicism, at least under the interpretation of the Second Vatican Council, what makes it a firm candidate for endorsing a liberal conception of politics and the state (Rawls 1993: xxxix-xlii, 144-154). This does not mean that all other religions, excepting this interpretation of contemporary Catholicism, be fundamentalist.

II. Fundamentalism and (deliberative) democracy

According to the preceding analysis, it is easy to see how fundamentalism opposes some principles traditionally associated with liberalism (Barber 1996; Bruce 2000; Garaudy 1990; Stolzenberg 1993; for a detailed and partially differing view, see Macedo 1995).¹⁸ Its characterizing theses erase the distinction between the public and the private sphere and between the right and the good; it violates the principles of neutrality and separation of church and state (laicism); it involves a perfectionist doctrine; and it also neglects the principle of autonomy. The epistemological and the practical theses, together, reject the value of allowing people to make their own judgments and their own mistakes. Autonomy, for a fundamentalist, could only be valuable if exercised correctly, if it leads to the right choices. But this assumption contradicts the very idea of autonomy.

Fundamentalism opposes all forms of democracy as well. First, because democracy, on all its accounts, involves a minimal sense of autonomy and equality, accompanied by a developed principle of tolerance. The main value in democracy is the basic political equality among all citizens, understood as a *prima facie* equal right to influence or determinate political decisions. This is because all of us are politically equal and deserve the same treatment by the state, and all of us are considered autonomous beings capable of making our own choices and our own mistakes; we have a basic and equal right to participation. All this constitutes democracy. But this presupposes that none of us possesses an infallible epistemology, contradicting the exclusive epistemological thesis of fundamentalism.

But more interestingly, fundamentalism opposes more emphatically those models of democracy strongly grounded on an idea of collective rationality, as deliberative democracy. The reason has to do with the exclusive epistemological thesis of fundamentalism. As pointed out above, according to religious fundamentalism, God's will revealed by holy texts -under the allegedly true interpretation made by fundamentalists themselves- is the only criterion of truth (or rightness) both for theoretical and for practical issues. This means that this interpretation of

18 The importance of such principles transcends liberalism itself, since they are endorsed also by republicanism and other political doctrines, even under differing interpretations. I am therefore not particularly interested in exploring the relationship between fundamentalism and liberalism alone, but simply to show the tensions with those general principles.

God's words expressed in texts acts as both a theoretically and a practically infallible authority. And there is no room for doubt about it. Now, there is a leap in this fundamentalist argument. One thing is to claim that God is an infallible authority; another is to claim that some texts are the true expression of God's will; and still quite another to claim that a particular interpretation of texts as ambiguous as these is the only right and admissible one. Infallibility, according to fundamentalism, is attributed to all three elements, but it is not evident why this is so.¹⁹

Any religious believer can hold a particular interpretation of the holy texts, and of course think of it as true, but no one can be completely sure about the truth of it, or the infallibility of this judgment. The best an individual can do is to confront his interpretation with other ones and try to argue in favor of his own. However this is precisely what fundamentalists are not willing to do. As Vincent Branick describes fundamentalism, "to the degree that the historical-critical method requires that I distance myself and my life decisions from the matter at hand, to the degree the method renders me a detached observer of the Bible 'out there', it becomes a game. Such playfulness fails to do justice to the seriousness of scripture" (Branick 1984, quoted by Stolzenberg 1993: 626; a similar position in Carter 1987: 978).

Fundamentalist discourse does not try to rationally convince people to accept a particular interpretation of texts. On the contrary, its epistemic thesis is usually presented as a matter of faith, not of reason; and the same for the principle of intolerance.²⁰ To be fundamentalist

19 One fundamentalist answer to this question seems to be the following: since the texts are the expression of God's will, the correct interpretation must be the literal one, but this strategy is problematic too. First, the very idea of literal meaning is highly disputed in current philosophy of language. It is not easy to distinguish literal from un-literal meanings. Second, even if we are capable of doing so, it remains to be seen why we should prioritize literal meanings over the other ones in order to find out God's real will, especially if we accept that holy texts have been written by human beings.

20 This does not amount to affirming that fundamentalism is not an efficient way of spreading collective knowledge or beliefs. As a matter of fact, it most certainly is. It can even be seen as a useful "device for creating consensus and demanding loyalty from supporters" (Bruce 2000: 112). But such a device is not based on free and rational acceptance on behalf of the people. Bruce tells the account of, and criticises "a long tradition in the social sciences" that assumes the irrationality of fundamentalism (Bruce 2000: 112-117). Bruce's main argument against it is based on two premises. First, that while fundamentalist logic can be seen as statistically abnormal today, it has most certainly been normal in the past. But to say that fun-

means, among other things, to refuse dialogue and deliberation (Garaudy 1990). Deliberating with other people entails a personal disposition of participants to modify their beliefs in light of the best argument (Habermas 1981; Elster 1998; Cohen 1989; Gutmann and Thompson 1996 and 2004; Fishkin and Laslett 2003: 2), and an active virtue of mutual respect and reciprocity (Gutmann and Thompson 1996 and 2004), all of which are absent in fundamentalist minds. Consistent fundamentalists do not value or respect others' views and perspectives when these are different from their own. And for that reason, they do not treat others as autonomous beings, but as simple means for or obstacles to their religious ends.

In conclusion, the fundamentalist epistemic thesis is not supposed to be susceptible of rational scrutiny, a sort of contribution to wider and broader epistemological discussion. Once complemented by the practical principle of intolerance, it is something to be imposed, such as the content of their particular interpretation of the texts. In other words, fundamentalists do not purport to deliberate with non-fundamentalists nor to leave them a space for reflection and collective deliberation. They reject both individual autonomy (the capacity to make rational judgments and to make our own mistakes) and mutual justification and argumentation.

Deliberative democracy is an ideal of political legitimacy. Ideally speaking, political decisions are considered legitimate if they are the product of a deliberative and democratic procedure of decision-making.²¹ As a democratic ideal, deliberative democracy claims for all those (potentially) affected by a decision to be included in the very process of decision-making (Manin 1987: 352; Cohen 1989; Bohman 1996 and 1998; Elster 1998: 8), recognizing in each of them an equal capacity of influencing the final decision. As a deliberative ideal, it “is a sequence of

damentalism is irrational is not to pronounce it as normal or not. Second, he sees fundamentalism as “perfectly consistent with the logic of the religious tradition from which it grows”, and finds a rationale for it: “Fundamentalism is a rational response of traditionally religious peoples to social, political and economic changes that downgrade and constrain the role of religion in the public world.” (Bruce 2000: 116 and 117; see a similar strategy in Stolzenberg 1993 and Levinson 1990). However one thing is to say that a certain social movement such as fundamentalism has a rationale in social terms- that is, that it accomplishes a particular social function-, and quite another to state that its claims are rational too- that is, that people can have reasons to accept or follow them, or that the ends pursued by the social function it intends to accomplish are rational at all.

21 For a general characterization of deliberative democracy, see Elster 1998; Bohman and Rehg 1997; Macedo 1999; Fishkin and Laslett 2003; Besson and Martí 2006.

propositions aiming to produce or reinforce agreement in the listener. In this sense, it is a discursive and rational process” (Manin 1987: 353) that “ought to be different from bargaining, contracting and other market-type strategic interactions, both in its explicit attention to considerations of the common advantage and in the ways that attention helps to form the aims of the participants” (Cohen 1989: 17; Elster 1995: 239 and 1998: 5-8; and Martí 2006a and 2006b).

As I have stated above, fundamentalism opposes all forms of democracy, but only deliberative democracy requires that citizens ideally ground their preferences in mutually acceptable reasons; only this model requires the people to make an effort to rationally scrutinize their beliefs and pass them through the filter of democratic deliberation. For this reason, fundamentalism is particularly at odds with deliberative democracy. In a pluralist democracy, for instance, fundamentalists can play the role of strongly opposing other groups and they are not charged with publicly justifying their demands; they simply pursue them and press or lobby for them. In deliberative democracy, instead, fundamentalists have the burden of offering a public justification for their political opinions, beginning with their practical or political principle of intolerance.

Let me take into consideration in the next section the phenomenon of group polarization regarding religious arguments as an example of my argument here.

III. Religious group polarization and deliberative democracy

As Cass Sunstein has alerted, one of the major dangers in modern democracies is the polarization of societies, and fundamentalism can be seen as an extreme consequence of that effect. According to Sunstein, “group polarization means that *members of a deliberating group predictably move toward a more extreme point in the direction indicated by the members’ predeliberation tendencies*” (Sunstein 2002: 176; see also Sunstein 2000 and 2001). If we ask a group its opinion about a particular issue, before and after an internal deliberation, the answer afterwards will be more extreme. This is so because of two sorts of mechanisms. First, there are social influences on individual behavior and on “people’s desire to maintain their reputation and self-conception”; second, a group offers a limited pool of arguments to confront and contrast with their own (Sunstein 2002: 176-177).²²

²² This has to do with another problem in the formation of preferences, the “preference cascades” (Sunstein 1991, 2000, 2001 and 2002).

Social psychology has largely accounted for this phenomenon (Zuber 1992), and empirical studies show that polarization is more likely in homogeneous groups and, most importantly, in isolated and poorly deliberative groups, those who develop what Sunstein calls “enclave deliberation” (Sunstein 2002: 177). Enclave deliberation is a process that involves “deliberation among like-minded people who talk or even live, much of the time, in isolated enclaves” (Sunstein 2002: 177). And, in Sunstein’s view, it is, “simultaneously, a potential danger to social stability, a source of social fragmentation or even violence, and a safeguard against social injustice and unreasonableness” (Sunstein 2002: 177). This certainly resembles what I have said above about fundamentalism.

It can be argued that group polarization concerns, as Sunstein states, only deliberating groups. Since fundamentalist movements cannot be considered deliberating groups, they apparently would not be affected for such phenomenon. But this is not true. First, the term ‘deliberating group’ used by Sunstein is unclear. It surely does not refer only to groups democratically organized, or to those groups that have an internal practice of rational discussion and free exposure to arguments. It basically applies to all groups in which communication occurs, no matter if such communication is deliberative or not. Furthermore, what produces and accelerates this phenomenon actually is a deficit in the deliberative quality of internal communications within groups.

The lack of both heterogeneity and openness increase polarization because they prevent the emergence of new and truly different arguments; they reduce the availability of new reasons to be confronted with the existing one. But deliberation is a would-be (potential) universal. It aspires to expand and connect with more and more participants since it continually demands new reasons and challenges. When deliberation is constrained to a closed and homogeneous group, with barriers to a free and enlarging exchange of ideas, it is self-defeating. It is for that reason that Sunstein’s solution to overcome or reduce the problem of group polarization is combating enclave deliberation with real, open and stronger deliberation, that is, to foster heterogeneity and to increase the deliberative quality of social communication processes (Sunstein 2002: 187-191).

Group polarization is a general, social phenomenon, but my hypothesis is that this polarization is more serious in relation to some specific subgroups, religious groups in particular. These groups are not generally characterised by concern for rational, democratic and fluid internal deliberation. Most importantly, religions have not been traditionally

enthusiast about heterogeneity, pluralism, and free exposure of other arguments. If so, we can predict that group polarization is going to be stronger in religious groups, that is, that their members are more likely to go to extremes. And this can be one of the explanations of the emergence of fundamentalism over time. Fundamentalist versions of religions are particularly at odds with this kind of exposure to arguments, as *Mozert v. Hawkins* shows. As I have mentioned above, the fundamental complaint of Protestant families against the reading program was that it meant to expose children to a plural understanding of religion. Fundamentalism would therefore be related to a deficit of deliberation. Thus, if this is true, we could conclude that the remedy against fundamentalism is democracy, or more precisely, deliberative democracy.

Of course, we still lack of appropriate empirical studies to support that hypothesis. My only concern here was to contribute to the understanding of fundamentalism. And in doing so I hope also to help to clarify why it is compromised with democracy, and in particular with deliberative democracy, which in my opinion affects the main source of political legitimacy in our world.

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