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Deweyan Critique of Fundamentalism

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Abstract. Religious fundamentalism continues to be an enormous concern in the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy since the atrocity involved numerous extremist groups, including religious fundamentalist ones. This horrible tragedy has brought in all citizens of the globe mindful of the existential threat of these organizations. Their existence sparks an immense discourse in various fields, including in the academic field that centres around the query of ‘what drives them to act mercilessly and inhumanely.’ Aside from political matters, their extremism is shaped by their method of approach to the doctrines or dogmas, teachings, ideologies, and religious traditions of faith they espouse. The methodology used by fundamentalists in approaching their religious texts and traditions is one of the major issues confronting religious fundamentalism. That methodology refers to the authoritative method, which entails two notable inquiries. Why do fundamentalists consider their religious doctrines or dogmas to be infallible or unquestionable? Why do they presume that all other knowledge and values are subordinate to their religious texts? This philosophical analysis seeks to investigate and evaluate the flaws of the authoritative method within fundamentalism by contrasting it with the Deweyan experimental or scientific method and bridging the two methods with the ‘reflective method’ the author postulates.

Keywords: religious fundamentalism, authoritative method, infallible truths, timeless truths, Deweyan religion, experimental method, scientific method, reflective method, useful truths, useful doctrines

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Introduction

This article expands on what had been discussed in a published analysis titled *Fundamentalism: A Cognitive Bias?* [1. P. 167]. Fundamentalism is portrayed as a cognitive bias in that article. This piece will focus on epistemological and

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methodological issues within it, one of which is the authoritative method the fundamentalists apply in approaching their religious texts that shape their frame of mind and alter their social behavior. The authoritative method, from a psychological approach, pertains to how fundamentalists perceive the world and their life experiences through a total correlation to the sacred texts they hold [2. P. 5]. The main query is: What is the true significance of these sacred texts, and what are the possible consequences of the application of that method for fundamentalists? The following subsections will discuss the major drawbacks of the *fundamentalist authoritative method*, the *Deweyan experimental or scientific method*, and finally the *'reflective method'* the author proposes in bridging the aforementioned methods.

Authoritative Method and Its Key Issues

In this section we will investigate how this method leads the fundamentalists to an authoritarian attitude toward other groups in their social relationships. What exactly is the authoritative method? What are its major flaws? Should the method be arguable in terms of religious faith? The method's foundation is an ontological approach to the existence of God as the source of religious beliefs. On this foundation, the method establishes religious texts as authoritative texts containing infallible truths, only because fundamentalists believe such texts were handed down directly and conveyed to humankind by God through revelations. The method is built on three key premises. *First*, religious texts are considered absolute truths. *Second*, religious texts subordinate non-religious norms. *Third*, fundamentalists believe they are bound and obliged to develop, maintain, and defend their religious texts as the only supreme source for any ethical standards of norms and principles enforced in their society. Are fundamentalists deemed to be mistaken given that their religious beliefs have their foundation on these three premises?

From a religious standpoint, the answer to that question is 'no' for four reasons. *First*, they have the right and freedom to believe. *Second*, as in Wittgenstein's perspective, religious belief is a matter of faith, and hence believing in religious truths belongs to a different language game, incomparable to, say, scientific truths [3. P. 57]. *Third*, religious belief, like in Kierkegaard's idea, is a matter of passion and spirit that is subjective and personal [4. P. 29]. *Fourth*, like in Climacus' view, religious truth is subjective and the question of faith is not an 'objective' and 'empirical' issue that can be resolved by appeal to historical evidence, but to 'existential' and 'personal' significance of it [5. P. 132]. So, what is the main argument used to question fundamentalism's authoritative method? Their method of interpreting religious texts determines their attitudes in society as well. To cite William James' pragmatic method or the *Swedenborgian Doctrine of Use*, (religious) beliefs are tested by their consequences on believers [6. P. xxiv, 327].

Deweyan Experimental or Scientific Method

In weighing the authoritative method, the author employs the Deweyan scientific method with its underlying assumptions concerning religion and religious

texts. (1) Religion is a world of conjecture; (2) There are neither absolute truths nor timeless truths; (3) The doctrinal method is limited and private, while the method of intelligence is open and public; (4) Transcendental ideals or norms are putative; (5) Religious experience is the ultimate basis of religion itself; (6) Religious ideas and hypothesis should not be treated as truths, but as *action-guiding principles*; (7) Truth claims of the religious institutions could be tested, and the effects of their various claims could be adjudicated [7. P. 191—205]. Dewey appears to offer two key notions, namely the essence of religion and the position of religious truths.

First, the essence of religion is religiosity founded on religious experience. Religiosity is not a matter of ‘truth’ or ‘a world of truth,’ but a matter of ‘fruit’ and ‘a world of meaning’ for the lives of believers. By emphasizing the concept of ‘common experience as the standard of judgement and value’, Dewey intends to assert that religious teachings are produced from religious experience. He questions authoritative methods that place a heavy emphasis on dogmas. He asserts that “common experience is capable of developing from within itself methods which will secure direction for itself and will create inherent standards of judgement and value” [8. P. 38]. *Second*, there are no absolute or timeless truths. Truths stem from inquiries operating employing observation, experiment, record, and controlled reflection [9. P. 32]. Dewey’s concept of truth may offer us a definition, that what we term ‘truth’ is not anything that ‘falls from the sky.’ Dewey appears to distinguish between two forms of truth: scientific truth and doctrinal truth. Scientific truths are ideas that emerge from experimentation in people’s everyday lives, as well as from intellectual thinking. The truth is reached by an open intelligence process that can be tested publicly. Meanwhile, because doctrinal truth is a matter of belief, it is confined and private [9. P. 39]. The following is the overview of Dewey’s principal ideas of religion and his type of approach toward religious texts.

1. Deweyan Philosophy of Religion

The major flaws of the *authoritative method*, a *top-down method* (all texts written in sacred books are considered God’s infallible and unquestionable truths), will be evaluated through Dewey’s philosophy of religion and his *scientific method*, a *bottom-up method*. Dewey’s fundamental claim is that religious texts and ideas function as hypotheses and guiding principles rather than truths. By way of his concept of a ‘*religion*’ and ‘*the religious*’, he argues the significance of religion is *religiosity* rather than *religious dogmas* generated by religious institutions. Dewey confronts a widely held belief that one’s religiosity is solely determined by the religion one practices. For Dewey, simply because a person does not accept any religion does not imply that he or she is a non-religious person. True religiousness is defined by the quality of one’s attitudes, and the vitality of religious institutions resides in the ‘fruits’ that demonstrate their quality. [7. P. 199]. His idea of ‘*religion as a noun-substantive*’ and ‘*religious as an adjectival*’ indicates that ‘a religion’ denotes an institutional structure, whereas ‘the religious’ denotes neither an

institutional organization nor a set of religious ideas [9. P. 9]. Dewey uses the terms to show that the heart of religion is ‘religious experience,’ not religious organizations or the dogmas they create. He underlines that “religious experience is the ultimate basis of religion itself” [9. P. 10].

In terms of the dilemma of the authoritative method, religious institutions are another key locus of Deweyan criticism. Returning to his concept of ‘*a religion*’ and ‘*the religious*,’ Dewey appears to draw a connection between the issues of the authoritative method and how religious institutions function. Religious institutions, according to Dewey, are governing entities that establish religious structures and ideas, and they hold responsibility for resolving fundamentalist problems. Regarding this matter, William James’ view of religion aligns with Dewey’s. He concentrates primarily on the creative works of religious institutions and the effects they have on their congregations, rather than on criteria of dogmas. Religious institutions, according to both thinkers, have no particular privilege just because they claim to have some links to the supernatural, and their significance is determined by the quality of the leadership of their elites [7. P. 197—198]. From the elite class theory, the minority class leads the majority class in any group. This theory suggests that religious leaders are responsible for creating religious values and educating their followers. Regarding this class, Dewey underlines that “educators must be ready to devote their life to drive the education system into a humanistic culture” [7. P. 198]. This group has had a considerable influence on the existence of fundamentalist groups.

The feud between Pakistani fundamentalist groups and Fazlur Rahman, a Pakistani Islamic philosopher and prominent liberal reformer of Islam, can be taken as an example of how fundamentalist groups are vulnerable to the infiltration of religious demagogues who abuse the power they wield, and it exemplifies how religious institutions are frequently run by demagogues, rather than pedagogues. Ebrahim Moosa, in the introduction for the book of Rahman, describes the case: “As a person who held strong convictions and the author of provocative ideas, Fazlur Rahman was maligned and castigated by the Muslim clerical establishment, neo-revivalist political activists, and political conservatives in Pakistan...Demagogues, of both religious and political stripes, orchestrated campaigns of mass hysteria and protests against him on the pretext that they ostensibly found some of his views and interpretations offensive” [10. P. 15]. The author reviews this case as a clear portrayal that the authoritative method within fundamentalism is dominantly determined by the political preference of the religious demagogues, and it often leads the fundamentalists to coercive, aggressive, and impulsive attitudes.

2. Deweyan Notion of ‘Religious Doctrines as Hypothesis’

Dewey’s argument contains three major premises. *First*, there are no unquestionable truths, and religious ideas are hypothetical ideas. Religious ideas should be treated as ‘prospective possibilities’, rather than absolute truths, and they

are conceptual devices that can be altered into useful ideas as they are applied to the materials of concrete experience in the lives of religious people [7. P. 195—197]. Dewey seems to underline that religious ideas should be treated as inspirational texts and guiding principles for the lives of religious people, rather than as absolute truths. *Second*, religious ideas are considered as tools that can be fruitful when used as the materials of concrete experience. *Third*, the pragmatic method objects to the notion of absolute truths. Dewey, Hickman writes, considers that “our experience does not have to conform to putative supernatural, ideological, or transcendental ideal or norms; experience itself — our experience in and of our cultural and historical context — is capable of generating the norms and ideals that allow it to grow and develop” [7. P. 193; 11. P. 95]. Dewey says not that transcendental ideas have their origins in God or men. He simply underlines that human experience can generate ideas that do not have to correspond to transcendental ideas. However, those transcendental ideas enable men to comprehend the world around them.

Dewey’s perception of religious ideals or norms comprises two main points. *First*, transcendental norms or ideals are putative. His term ‘putative transcendental norms’ appears to imply that the transcendental norms are conjectural or hypothetical. Sacred texts, thus, must not be viewed as absolute truths. *Second*, human experience is capable of generating and establishing norms and ideals that allow it to grow and evolve. When it comes to approaching religious teachings, Dewey stands in opposition to fundamentalist. Fundamentalists believe that religious ideals and norms are developed through a ‘*top-down process*’ in which God, whom they regard as the source of truth, sends down His commandments through revelations received by the prophets. Dewey, on the other hand, believes that religious ideals and norms are developed through a ‘*bottom-up process*’, that they also stem from social experience and evolve within the human context. It hints that religious ideals and teachings are not the exclusive source of moral values for humanity. However, Dewey’s objection to absolute or timeless truths does not imply that he disregards the importance of any religious truths. The Deweyan pragmatist approach to religion only stands up to fundamentalists who believe that their holy books are the only source of any ethical norms. The Deweyan experimental approach doesn’t discount and overlook the notion of religious truths of their believers.

3. Beyond Religionism

This part expands on the first subtheme of this section. However, the author will concentrate on the basic distinctions between the Deweyan and the fundamentalist approaches to religion. We can discover it from Dewey’s principle of positioning ‘*the religious*’ beyond ‘*a religion*’. Dewey’s concept of ‘the religious’ does not denote any specific entity, whether institutional or doctrinal. Dewey seems to explicate the notion of his philosophy of religion, that the centrality of religion is in ‘religiosity and religious experience’, rather than in religious

institutions from which religious dogmas or doctrine are produced. Dewey appears to treat religious experience as the central idea of his philosophy of religion [7. P. 193—194]. In a broader sense, the key issue within fundamentalism is that the fundamentalists overly concentrate on ‘religious dogmas or doctrines’ generated by religious institutions, rather than religiosity and religious experience within their everyday life as religious people. From this perspective, religion is a matter of spirituality. It is the same as saying that the vitality of religion is spirituality. What is absent from fundamentalism is spirituality because fundamentalists value dogmas or doctrines over spirituality. Dewey may be correct in arguing that religious experience should be allowed to develop without external restraints or religious institutions [7. P. 193]. What Dewey means by ‘religious experience as the essence of religiosity’, to the author's understanding, is that the heart of religion is something beyond religious dogmas.

Where do dogmas or religious doctrines stand? Dewey acknowledges the importance of religious dogmas. Given that he underlines ‘the religious’ (red: religiosity) rather than ‘religion,’ Dewey appears to position religious teachings as inspirations, motivations, aspirations, or guiding principles. Michael Eldridge, a Deweyan interpreter, points out that religious doctrines and teachings should be treated as ‘*action-guiding possibilities*’ that are continually revised through the reconstructive process. They are not outside of experience [7. P. 193]. The main issue with authoritative methods is that the fundamentalists are inclined to impose their religious ideals and dogmas they regard as authoritative teachings on other groups. Their efforts are both sociologically and epistemologically flawed for two reasons. The fact that the diversity of religious beliefs and religious texts is contingent in nature. Religious texts are conjectural texts, and as such, they should not be treated as truths or absolute truths, but as inspiring and motivating principles for the lives of believers. Religious teachings address spirituality and religiosity, which, as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi put it, means practicing love and humanity rather than truths [12. P. 154].

Another fundamental contribution of the pragmatism approach is related to the concept of the relation between the theory that corresponds to religious cognition and praxis to social conduct [7. P. 194]. Two questions should be inserted here. How can we assess the quality of religious teachings? What criteria are used to determine religiousness? Dewey's assertion that ‘religious facts are raw materials’ emphasizes the importance of religious truths being integral to religious people's values of life. They must be tested experimentally and practically, in the sense that religious truths must be implemented and tested in the social lives of the religious. This Deweyan pragmatic method makes more sense than the fundamentalists' authoritarian viewpoint. However, Deweyan scientific approach cannot be applied in the sense that science does. The author would propose another approach, the ‘*reflective method*,’ which has comparable principles to the scientific method. The ‘reflective method’ will be discussed in the theme that follows.

Reflective Method

This section expands on what the author means by ‘reflective method’, comparing it to Deweyan ‘scientific method’ and the fundamentalist ‘authoritative method.’ The scientific method in science seeks objective truths. However, objective truths in science are not given-truths as in fundamentalism’s authoritative method. Truth in science, as in Dewey’s and William James’ concept, is “truth as warranted assertability...it is constructed and reconstructed within human cognition” [7. P. 195; 13. P. 35]. Truth in sciences arises from human cognition through the process of *trial-and-error* or of ‘Popper’s falsification’, in the sense that the truth we hold at present is not a final truth. *The reflective method* seeks inspirations, motivations, visions, principles, and values in religious texts, doctrines, or teachings for the lives of religious people. While ‘religious truths’ are incomparable to ‘scientific truths,’ both may still be tested reflectively. The reflective method is distinguished by deep measures toward religious truths. It does not concentrate on ‘authoritative truth’ as in fundamentalism or on ‘objective truths’ as in science, but on how the quality and the values of those truths are tested in believers’ social conducts, whether they are constructive or destructive, useful, or worthless. Like the scientific method, the reflective method emphasizes the principle of utility that deals with the demands of concrete and existential affairs [7. P. 195].

Methodologically, if the experimental method is undertaken through the method of ‘*repeatability — falsifiability — transparency — objectivity*’, the reflective method is undertaken through the method of ‘*retrospection — reflection — projection*’; construing the relevance and the contextuality of sacred texts to be able to meet and to respond existential affairs in the past, present and their projection in the future. From this concept, religious truths have two aspects: religious and social. From a religious standpoint, their function and applicability are restricted to intragroup, in the sense that those truths are only applicable to believers. While, from a social standpoint, those claims are in interaction with alien value systems and claims. Once those truths have reached the realm of society, they should be tested or evaluated. This is because they have ramifications for the lives of religious people. Ultimately, examining the authoritative method using the Deweyan scientific method does not seek to widen the divide between science and religion or to elevate one above the other. The Deweyan scientific method does not aim to achieve the ‘*scientification of religion*’ in a narrow sense, but in a broader one, which is that science and its secular ideas do not lead religion to an end; rather, they establish religion in a new framework of meaning [14. P. 179].

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Критика фундаментализма Дьюи

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Аннотация. Религиозный фундаментализм продолжает вызывать огромную озабоченность после трагедии 11 сентября, поскольку в этом злодеянии участвовали многочисленные экстремистские группы, в том числе исповедующие религиозный фундаментализм. Эта ужасная трагедия заставила всех граждан мира осознать экзистенциальную угрозу, исходящую от этих организаций. Их существование вызывает бурные дискуссии в различных областях, в том числе в академической сфере, в которой главный вопрос состоит в выяснении того, «что заставляет эти группы действовать беспощадно и бесчеловечно». Помимо политического материала, их экстремизм подпитывается особым подходом к доктринам или догмам, учениям, идеологиям и религиозным традициям веры, которые они исповедуют. Методология, используемая фундаменталистами при подходе к своим религиозным текстам и традициям, является одной из основных проблем

в исследовании религиозного фундаментализма. Эта методология относится к авторитарному методу, который влечет за собой два важных вопроса. Почему фундаменталисты считают свои религиозные доктрины и догмы непогрешимыми и неоспоримыми? Почему они полагают, что все остальные знания и ценности подчинены их религиозным текстам? Этот философский анализ направлен на исследование и оценку недостатков авторитарного метода в рамках фундаментализма, противопоставляя его экспериментальному или научному методу Дьюи и соединяя эти два метода с «рефлексивным методом», постулируемым автором.

Ключевые слова: религиозный фундаментализм, авторитарный метод, непогрешимые истины, вечные истины, религия Дьюи, экспериментальный метод, научный метод, рефлексивный метод, полезные истины, полезные доктрины

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