

## **Fundamentalism: The Shadow of the Modern World**

Linda S. Smith  
February 2002

*We do not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.*

Carl Jung

Most of us remember what we were doing the morning of September 11, 2001. Many of us watched as airplanes full of terrified women and men and children crashed into buildings filled with people believing it was the beginning of an ordinary workday. When the first plane hit the first tower, it seemed like a bizarre and terrible accident but it soon became evident that not only was this not an accident, and not the act of a few men suddenly gone mad, but the result of much planning and forethought involving unknown numbers of men. The men who were driven to hijack these airplanes with knives and box cutters and fly them through buildings, who were ready and eager to lose their lives and kill and hurt other people believed that they were acting under the authority of God. Why is this so shocking? We've heard the same excuse for violence throughout history. Why haven't we been so shaken before? This attack was against our own people, in a familiar city; other terrorist's attacks of recent years seemed to be far from home. But this violence threatened us personally and shattered our false sense of separation and safety from the rest of the world. If we look around we notice that currently, God is being invoked with hatred not just in this one case, but also around the world -- in Ireland, India, Pakistan, Israel, Palestine, and among intolerant fundamentalist sects in our own country. The violent counterattack of our own government has been characterized as forces of good acting to rid the world of the "Evil One." This division of the world into the forces of good versus the forces of evil underlies and creates the self-perpetuating cycle of violence the human race is caught up in.

Most people agree that the world is not the same as before September 11. Our usual patterns and ways of thinking have been shattered. Structures informing our consciousness went down with the physical structures, making way for building something new. We are being offered a challenge -- the current crisis can be a great opportunity, if we can only see how to grasp it. Extraordinary events create

extraordinary openings and possibilities. But first I think we need to understand the patterns and ways of thinking that led up to the present moment. Terrorism is not the result of a few isolated individuals; it is a reflection of something very wrong in the depths of the collective psyche of humanity. The Jungian concept of the shadow is useful in exploring the crisis we face, not just as individuals, but also as a species.

### **The Shadow**

The shadow refers to the collection of feelings, attitudes, beliefs, impulses, and actions that reside in the unconscious level of the human psyche. It is that part of us which we will not allow ourselves to express. The shadow holds all that we consider irrational, immoral, and evil. Sometimes we cannot contain the shadow and it breaks into consciousness and we behave in “uncivilized ways.” In this paper I would like to show how religious fundamentalism can be seen as a shadow aspect of modern culture. Our modern, secularist, rational, scientific society has pushed “nonrational” aspects of religion into the shadow side and they are breaking through in the various forms of religious fundamentalism.

According to Jung, in order to become “civilized,” human beings had to modify many of our “natural inclinations.” We learn to adapt certain behaviors and attitudes that allow us to relate and get along in groups and reject other “anti-social” behaviors. The acceptable characteristics from what Jung calls a mask or persona, whatever we consider unacceptable are pushed down into the shadow and usually ignored. The general characteristics of an individual’s persona are defined by expectations of the society in which she lives.<sup>1</sup> A woman who lives in New York would tend to present herself very differently than a woman in Afghanistan because of the demands of their respective cultures. Some of us live in several different social groups and may shift our persona to meet the expectations of each group.

Fundamentally the persona is nothing real: it is a compromise between the individual and society as to what a man should appear to be. He takes a name, earns a title, represents an office, he is this or that. In a certain sense all this is real, yet in relation to the essential individuality of the person concerned it is only a secondary reality, a product of compromise, in making which others often have a greater

share than he. The persona is a semblance, a two-dimensional reality.<sup>2</sup>

Even though we invent the persona, it reflects who we are in the sense that we continually make decisions in the process of adapting or not adapting to the demands that are made on us. If we feel that by following the demands of our society we will not be true to ourselves, we can refuse. But this can be very dangerous in some situations as witnessed by the murder of Afghan women who refuse to wear their veil. In inventing our persona we reject certain possible attitudes and characteristics and these become part of our shadow.

Besides the persona there is another, darker side to our personality, which we do not consciously display in public: the shadow. The stronger and more rigid the persona, and the more we identify with it, the more we must deny the other important aspects of our personality. These aspects are repressed to the unconscious, and they contribute to the formation of a more or less autonomous splinter-personality, the shadow. The shadow finds its own means of expression, though, particularly in projections. What we cannot admit in ourselves we often find in others.<sup>3</sup>

The shadow, as a function of the personal unconscious, consists of all those “uncivilized” desires and emotions that are incompatible with social standards and with the persona; it is all that we are ashamed of based on who we think we “ought” to be. One way to identify an aspect of your shadow is to notice what disturbs you, beyond any reasonable explanation, in the behavior or attitudes of other people. For example, a man who gets sick and enraged at the sight of a homosexual might do well to examine his own shadow for repressed feelings towards other men.

The shadow is an important element of consciousness, even if it were possible, we would not want to get rid of it. A person would be incomplete and shallow without the shadow aspect. It also adds vitality and spontaneity in a healthy psyche that is not afraid to allow the play of the shadow in her life. In some cases, in a repressive society, for example, individuals may very well reject qualities or attitudes that would serve them and be authentic expressions of who they really are if brought to consciousness.

The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without

considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspect of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for self-knowledge, and it therefore, as a rule, meets with considerable resistance.<sup>4</sup>

When we attempt to live only out of the conscious, adapted attitudes of our personality, the opposite side remains in the unconscious, waiting for some situation that allows it to break through. “When the ego identifies with the persona, when the major concern of the ego is to appear as the public image demands, then the repressed shadow will sooner or later find a way to collapse the out-of-balance persona.”<sup>5</sup>

We may think that when the “evil” elements are eliminated from consciousness they are disposed of once and for all. But this is not true; they have merely withdrawn into the unconscious, where they will remain latent as long as all is going well on the conscious level. If we find ourselves in a crisis or difficult situation, the shadow will break through causing a collapse of the conscious attitude.

“Previously ordered systems become chaotic, burdens become intolerable, the life situation seems to be completely out of control and there is absolutely nothing one can do about it. What has happened is that the ego has given way to the collective unconscious, which has now taken over leadership.”<sup>6</sup> An example would be the young man who has repressed his hatred of his father who abused him as a child. When he experiences a major conflict or trauma he cannot handle, the hatred and desire to hurt his father may break out of his shadow causing him to kill the father.

We often hear about individuals who commit heinous crimes and when their family and neighbors are interviewed they say the perpetrator of the crime was a quiet person, a good student, a responsible employee, and seemingly incapable of such a crime. Many crimes have been written off as acts of lone madmen, or bullied, depressed, and confused schoolboys, but I suspect many of these seemingly isolated acts were symptoms of a sick society. Just as a severe trauma can create a break in an individual’s conscious attitude allowing shadow aspects from the personal unconscious to take over, a chaotic or over repressive society provides the environment for the break through of elements from the shadow of the collective unconscious. Previously harmless individuals become “monsters,” their violent acts the result of a “psychotic break” in the collective psyche.

Identity groups, religions and nations also exhibit problems with the shadow in ways analogous to what is experienced in a personal way. What is true for the individual as a microcosm is true of religions and nations as a macrocosm. “The psychology of war has clearly brought this condition to light: everything which our own nation does is good, everything which the other nations do is wicked. The center of all that is mean and vile is always to be found several miles behind the enemy’s lines.”<sup>7</sup> Today the inhumanities of the war in the Middle East perpetrated by our own side are justified as being in the long run for the common good, while those of the enemy are called evil and used to justify our own killing of civilians, referred to as “collateral damage.”

When the shadow is severely repressed by society or when inadequate outlets are provided for it, disaster often ensues. Writing in 1918 at the end of World War I, Jung observed that the “animal in us only becomes more beastlike” when it is repressed. He goes on to say “that is no doubt the reason why no religion is so defiled with the spilling of innocent blood as Christianity, and why the world has never seen a bloodier war than the war of the Christian nations”<sup>8</sup> The implication of these observations is that Christian teachings are very repressive of the shadow. If our spirituality does not provide a means for dealing with the unconscious, we can expect projections – blaming other traditions for our dysfunctions – as well as violence and atrocities.

### **Fundamentalism**

Until September 11, I primarily thought of fundamentalists as a bigoted bunch of Christians, led by people like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who took the Bible literally and hated everyone except white heterosexuals. After September 11, I felt compelled to understand religious fundamentalism in a broader context and I read Karen Armstrong’s brilliant book *The Battle for God*.<sup>9</sup> Much to my surprise, I learned that fundamentalism is not a throwback to some ancient form of religion but rather a response to the spiritual crisis of the modern world. Armstrong argues that the collapse of religion rooted in myth and ritual during the Enlightenment led people of faith to search for new ways of being religious and fundamentalism was born. “It is

important to realize that these movements are not an archaic throwback to the past; they are modern, innovative, and modernizing.”<sup>10</sup>

The modern fundamentalist movements are a response to a major shift in the way we think about the world, a shift that deeply affects our spiritual lives. As Armstrong points out, we tend to assume that the people of the past were (more or less) like us, but in fact their spiritual lives were rather different. In particular, they evolved two ways of thinking, speaking, and acquiring knowledge, which scholars have called *mythos* and *logos*.<sup>11</sup> Both were essential; they were regarded as complementary ways of arriving at truth, and each had its special area of competence. Myth was regarded as primary; it was concerned with what was thought to be timeless and constant in our existence. Myth looked back to the origins of life, to the foundations of culture, and to the deepest levels of the human mind. Myth was not concerned with practical matters, but it functioned to give life meaning. The *mythos* of a society provided people with a context that made sense of their day-to-day lives and gave them a sense of being part of a greater whole.

From a psychological perspective, myth is rooted in the unconscious and provides a way of dealing with the collective shadow. The various mythological stories were not intended to be taken literally, but were an ancient form of psychology. Stories about heroes descending into the underworld, fighting with monsters, and facing all types of “evil forces,” served to bring the realms of the unconscious to light. As discussed earlier, the unconscious has a profound effect on our experience and behavior and unless we are diligent, and aware of our “inner” life, it can break through creating chaos out of organized structures of consciousness. Rituals, in the premodern world, were carefully designed to lead people through a trauma so that they came out healthily on the other side of it. An example of this is found in the rites of Lurianic Kabbalah, where the mystic was allowed to express his grief and abandonment but made to finish the vigil joyfully.<sup>12</sup>

Myth cannot be demonstrated by rational proof; its insights are more intuitive, similar to those of art, music, and poetry. Myth only becomes a reality when it is embodied in ritual and ceremonies that evoke a sense of sacred significance within the participants enabling them to apprehend the deeper levels of existence. Myth is

also associated with mysticism, the development of intuitive insight by means of structured disciplines that have been evolved in all cultures. Without ritualistic activity or mystical practice, the myths of religion make no sense. “They remain abstract and seem incredible; in much the same way as a musical score remains opaque to most of us and needs to be interpreted instrumentally before we can appreciate its beauty.”<sup>13</sup>

From a scientific view, history is a succession of unique events. In the premodern world, however, the events of history were not seen as singular but as examples of eternal laws, revelations of a timeless constant reality.<sup>14</sup> For example, the story of the escape of the Israelites from Egypt was deliberately written as a myth and linked with other stories about rites of passage, immersion in the deep, and gods splitting a sea in two to create a new reality. Jews experience this myth every year in the rituals of the Passover Seder. To ask whether the Exodus from Egypt took place exactly as recounted in the Bible or to demand historical and scientific evidence to prove that it is factually true is to mistake the nature and purpose of the story. It is to confuse *mythos* with *logos*.

There was also a place for logic in the premodern world. It is the rational, pragmatic, and scientific thought that enables us to function well in the world. Today we seem to have lost our sense of *mythos* but we are very familiar with *logos*, which is the basis of our society. Unlike myth, which looks back to the beginnings and to the foundations, *logos* forges ahead and tries to find something new and achieve control over the environment.

In the premodern world, both *mythos* and *logos* were regarded as indispensable. Yet they were essentially distinct and it was held to be dangerous to confuse the mythical with the rational. Myth provided the context of meaning that made practical activities worthwhile. You were not supposed to make *mythos* the basis of a pragmatic policy. If you did so, the results could be disastrous, because what worked well in the inner world of the psyche was not readily applicable to the affairs of the external world. For example, when “Pope Urban II summoned the First Crusade in 1095, his plan belonged to the realm of *logos*.” He was trying to get the

knights of Europe to stop fighting among themselves and so he sent them to the Middle East in an attempt to extend the power of his church.

But when this military expedition became entangled with folk mythology, biblical lore, and apocalyptic fantasies, the result was catastrophic, practically, militarily, and morally. Throughout the long crusading project, it remained true that whenever *logos* was ascendant, the Crusades prospered....When, however, Crusaders started making a mythical or mystical vision the basis of their policies, they were usually defeated and committed terrible atrocities.<sup>15</sup>

The development of science and technology in the modern world led to the idea that *logos* was the only means to truth and *mythos*, and the religions grounded in it, were rejected as false and superstitious. Religion in the modern world is clearly very different from the old mythical spirituality. Stories that were once considered mythic, understood only within a transcendent context such as ritual or mystical experience, are now required to stand the test of logic and reason. Whatever does not fit into the modern scientific paradigm is deemed irrational and expelled from consciousness becoming part of the collective shadow likely to break through in the form of “uncivilized” actions in times of stress and turmoil.

Although many religious groups seem to have come to terms with modernity, many feel under attack and experience themselves at war with secular, scientific culture. They have responded by denying the basic facts of science itself: evolution does not exist, the Earth was literally created in six days, women are responsible for the fall of humanity into sin and need to be controlled, and the Apocalyptic vision of the Book of Revelation is an external historical fact scheduled to happen in the not-too-distant future. The literal interpretation of the apocalyptic myth seems to haunt the collective unconscious as the shadow of the myth of progress and has broken into the collective consciousness in the form of religious fundamentalism. The Y2K millennialists who predicted a breakdown in computer technology worldwide with the turn of the clock from 1999 to 2000 experienced a glimpse of the fear and panic behind the apocalyptic visions of religious millennialism.

Fundamentalism is a product of a wild counter reaction to a perceived attempt on the part of modernity to terrorize and kill spirituality in general. In wild panic, the

fundamentalists have become counter terrorists. Fundamentalist terrorists represent the extreme emotional level of the battle central to life in the modern world – “the battle to find a place for science and religion, truth and meaning, logic and God, facts and Spirit, evidence and the eternal.”<sup>16</sup>

Fundamentalism is a modern religious phenomenon, found in every major religious tradition. It is also a political movement, and a state of consciousness. It is characterized by a profound dissatisfaction with society, preoccupation with religious beliefs, expectations of imminent apocalypse, assumption of a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil, and the claim of divine authority to justify violence against the perceived enemies.

The recent extreme and terrifying attacks against the United States are not the acts of an isolated group of crazy men, they are an expression of the collective shadow of our modern culture which is also evident in the killing of doctors and nurses who work at abortion clinics, the gunning down of worshippers in a mosque, the bombing of temples, and the oppression, torture and rape of women all over the world. We tend to look only at the positive aspects of modernity, the “persona” of our brave new world – the liberal democracies; the ideals of equality, freedom, and justice, regardless of race, class, creed, or gender; modern medicine, physics, biology, and chemistry; the end of slavery; the rise of feminism; and the universal rights of humankind. The actions of September 11 seem to have no place within this pristine face of modernity, the perpetrators are wholly “other” and our president can, with righteousness and confidence, blame the “Evil One” and launch his own bombs promising to rid the world of terrorism and kill all the bad guys, no matter how long it takes. But if fundamentalism is an aspect of the shadow of our modern world, blaming the Evil One is a projection, a refusal to see our own shadow and take responsibility for it. As Carl Jung puts it:

To know where the other person makes a mistake is of little value. It only becomes interesting when you know where **you** make the mistake, for then you can do something about it. What we can improve in others is of doubtful utility as a rule, if, indeed, it has any effect at all.<sup>17</sup>

The recent violence perpetrated by a handful of Islamic fundamentalists in New York and Washington came about in a historical context that included conquest by Egyptian and Roman Empires, the spread of Christianity, crusades, and centuries of religious persecution and prejudice. European colonialism drew political boundaries which suited the needs of the victors in WWI and WWII without concern for tribal loyalties of the Muslim people. This was followed by a prolonged ideological conflict between the former Soviet Union and the United States which required Muslim peoples to choose (or be chosen by) either one side or the other, even though neither side represented their interests. Neither of the superpower's value systems harmonized with the traditional Islamic one, which favors pious religious practice and a distinctly non-consumerist vision of the future. But the rich countries' growing demand for cheap oil – and thus for political influence throughout the Arab world – resulted in the establishment of puppet governments set up, funded, and militarily equipped by the West. These governments serve the demands of their ruling elites and not the needs of their own people. The resulting authoritarianism, poverty, corruption, human rights violations and inequity fuels the fires of fundamentalist resentment.<sup>18</sup>

If **your** children were hungry, if your water was unsafe to drink, if you could never obtain the medical treatment you needed, if your population was exploited by a tiny rich elite, if your natural resources were depleted and exported for the benefit of strangers...if your human rights were violated by force of law, if your government murdered its own citizens, if your secret police made your friends and relations disappear without a trace, if your media were completely censored, if your best journalists had all been killed, if you were subjected to torture for expressing your opinion, if your every attempt to create democracy were systematically thwarted, might not you too feel mad?<sup>19</sup>

Such inequity is just as intolerable as the violent responses to it. To resolve the problem we in the rich countries of the world need change our relationships with the peoples of the world and examine the fundamentalism within ourselves. We can no longer afford to operate within the dysfunctional relationship between “us” and “them.” From the perspective of the United States, Islamic fundamentalists are labeled as insane sociopaths who massacre innocent victims in the name of God. And

from the perspective of Islamic fundamentalism, the USA and the forces of globalization are perceived as the cause of growing social injustice and exploitation: “the great Satan.” On a deep level, these seemingly opposite positions are a mirror image of each other.

The problem lies not in “them,” but in the relationship between us and them. The problem won’t go away by itself, and will not be stopped by counter violence. Sooner or later fundamentalists are bound to get hold of, and want to use, weapons of mass destruction and fulfill their own apocalyptic prophecies.

### **Spirituality**

Our world is fragmented, the cosmic wholeness, the experience of which is at the basis of all world religions, has been broken and splintered. This fragmentation is not merely a characteristic of the “outer” world but also characterizes the structure of the human psyche – our emotions are in conflict with our intellect, intellect denies intuition, and we are estranged from our physical nature. Even the distinction between inner and outer is a part of the fragmentation of our world. But in truth, we cannot really separate the structure of our individual consciousness from the form our society takes. The “outer world” is an expression of the collective consciousness. We are responsible participants in what is happening in the world. “We are not just physical beings on a material planet, but we are whole beings, each a miniature cosmos, each related to all of life in intimate, profound ways.”<sup>20</sup>

All of the world’s great spiritual traditions are grounded in the experience of unity or oneness.<sup>21</sup> The revelations of the founders of religious traditions were direct spiritual experiences of wholeness, not mythological accounts of the parting of the Red Sea, or the eating of apples. These experiences were not mental beliefs or fantastic visions but direct and immediate realizations resulting in liberation, rebirth, or enlightenment. What these spiritual teachers gave to their students was not a series of mythological or dogmatic beliefs but a series of practices, injunctions, or exemplars: “Do this in remembrance of me”—if you want to know Divine union, you must do this. The “do this” included specific types of contemplative prayer, meditation practices, dance, yoga postures, and so forth. Through meditative practices

we contact the underlying wholeness of existence, including the shadow side, and we experience the suffering of all people whether in New York or Afghanistan as our own. We are not to meditate or pray in order to increase our own comfort, or build our ego, or to escape the world in a state of transcendent bliss but to participate in the creation of a new, healthy, and peaceful world.

We have reached the point where we no longer have the luxury to indulge in self-centered comfort and personal acquisition or to escape into religious pursuits at the cost of collective interests. For us there can be no escape, no withdrawal, no private arena in which we can turn our backs on the sorrows of humanity, saying, "I am not responsible. Others have created a mess; let them mend it." The writing on the world's wall is plain: "Learn to live together or in separateness you die!"<sup>22</sup> The choice is ours.

Learning to live together is, of course, no small task. But this seems to be the key to building new structures to replace those that have been shattered by the sobering events of September 11 and to bringing us to a conscious sense of wholeness and connectedness. Karen Armstrong suggests that if secularists and fundamentalists are to escape from the trap of an escalating spiral of hostility and recrimination in which they find themselves, both must look at their own positions more honestly.

If fundamentalists must evolve a more compassionate assessment of their enemies in order to be true to their religious traditions, secularists must also be more faithful to the benevolence, tolerance, and respect for humanity which characterizes modern culture at its best, and address themselves more empathetically to the fears, anxieties, and needs which so many of their fundamentalist neighbors experience but which no society can safely ignore.<sup>23</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> June Singer, *Boundaries of the Soul* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), 209.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Jung, *Two Essays in Analytical Psychology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 155.

<sup>3</sup> June Singer, *Boundaries of The Soul* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), 215.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Jung, *Two Essays in Analytical Psychology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 159.

<sup>5</sup> June Singer, *Boundaries of the Soul* (New York: Doubleday, 1973) 220.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 226

<sup>8</sup> Calvin Hall and Vernon Nordby, *A Primer of Jungian Psychology* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1999), 50

<sup>9</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Random House, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>11</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God*, xv.

- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 79
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., xvi
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 10
- <sup>15</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God*, xvii.
- <sup>16</sup> Ken Wilber, *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* (New York: Random House, 1998), 17
- <sup>17</sup> Calvin Hall and Vernon Nordby, *A Primer of Jungian Psychology* (New York: Random House, 1999), 49.
- <sup>18</sup> "On Fundamentalism," on-line text provided by the Science and the Sacred Programme sponsored by; *Global Vision Trust*; available at <http://www.globalvision.org/sacred/fundamentalism.html>. Internet.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Vimala Thakar, "Awakening to Total Revolution: Enlightenment and the World Crisis," *Earth Star Magazine*, October/November 2001, 83.
- <sup>21</sup> See my paper, "The Esoteric Unity of World Religions" (Sancta Sophia Seminary, October 2000).
- <sup>22</sup> Vimala Thakar, "Awakening to Total Revolution: Enlightenment and the World Crisis," *Earth Star Magazine*, October/November 2001, 82.
- <sup>23</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Random House, 2000), 371.

## WORKS CITED

- Armstrong, Karen. *The Battle for God*. New York: Random House, 2000.
- Hall, Calvin and Vernon Nordby. *A Primer of Jungian Psychology*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1999.
- Jung, Carl. *Two Essays in Analytical Psychology*. Princeton University Press, 1966.
- "On Fundamentalism," on-line text provided by the Science and the Sacred Programme sponsored by *Global Vision Trust*; available at <http://www.global-vision.org/sacred/fundamentalism.html>; Internet.
- Singer, June. *Boundaries of the Soul*. New York: Doubleday, 1973.
- Thakar, Vimala. "Awakening to Total Revolution: Enlightenment and the World Crisis." *Earth Star Magazine* (October/November 2001): 20-24, 82-83.
- Wilber, Ken. *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*. New York: Random House, 1998.