

Open Space Discussion #1, Religious fundamentalism, dignity and discussion, convened by Pandora Hopkins

Participants: Sibyl, Phil, Ragnhild, Amy, Alan, Stephanie, Azad, Pandi
Date/time: Wednesday, September 6, c. 11:00 AM.

Nobody in the group was a fundamentalist, and all agreed that crossing the bridge of communication from a non-authoritarian position to an authoritarian position is difficult.

I began the discussion by explaining my personal reason for concern. This past summer, I left a writers' group because of an influx of fundamentalist Christians. I am writing a book that deals with the political situation in the United States. I had found feedback from this group immensely useful during the precious winter, but its makeup changed in the summer. The problem began with my treatment of the Southern Baptist declaration on wifely obedience to their husbands—a subject I had assumed would be non-controversial. I was wrong. “I am a Southern Baptist” said one newcomer, and she then explained her position, a combination of views that were incomprehensible to me. To summarize: she had been thrown out of her church for marrying an African-American man, was ostracized for some years by her family, saw nothing wrong with the declaration on women because “both husband and wife are simply fulfilling their duties to God,” and felt guilty because she had sinned by disobeying her parents (even though she is presently still happily married to her husband). I felt liberated when I no longer attended the group meetings, no longer had to self-censor my writing. However, one of my friends, in trying to get me to come back to the group, thought I should have persisted. I see the issue as one of significant importance today and thus brought it to the attention of our meeting.

Sibyl pointed out that not only the U.S., but countries all over the world are experiencing a revival of fundamentalism: “Why now? What has brought this about?” Amy attributed it to the change in the balance of power that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union—causing global competition for control. “Religion is the best way to control people.” She added some causes such as: *Internationalism*, and *Fear of the Unknown*. Phil said “That’s why I am here. I discovered that I was intolerant of fundamentalists” and explained that, when confronted with a question on a job application recently, he had found himself writing precisely that. Sibyl commented: “Toleration has its limits. Can’t tolerate everything.”

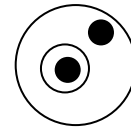
Ragnhild contributed her personal story. She rebelled against a fundamentalist Christian upbringing by becoming a Catholic and moved to Germany where she went into training to become a nun. There she studied with a wise, 90 year-old nun who persuaded Ragnhild that this was not the life for her. “After that, I fell directly into the hands of a fundamentalist.” A sexual relationship had to be followed by marriage, and the marriage almost impossible to break because of strictures against divorce. What gave her the strength to finally leave after 20 years of an unhappy marriage? “For a spiritual person, there is always the fear that God will abandon you. I finally realized

that there were other spiritual people in other parts of the world who believed in different religions, and that I had much in common with them.” Ragnhild wrote and published a book about her experience: *Daughter of the Moment*.

Azad said that religion, particularly the Islamic religion, had been a special subject of study for him. He finds it unbelievable that mass killing is being done in the name of Mohammed and thinks that the people who use religious texts to support violence and humiliation have not read them properly. He pointed out that the literal meaning of *jihad* is *spiritual*, and quoted Mohammed’s response to a person who had punched him: “Did you hurt your hand?”

Sibyl said that those of us who have never read the religious texts are at a disadvantage. “We’ll just have to believe you, Azad” – and then added, “but what about Osama bin Laden?” Amy thought it would be difficult to interpret the Old Testament as advocating peace, and I brought up St. Paul in the New Testament.

Ragnhild: “If I can’t sympathize, think like you – I can’t understand how they’re thinking, within their frame. You may think it is easy, but it’s not.” Sibyl said the only hope was the public school system, pointing out that home schooling by Christian fundamentalists “has skyrocketed.” Alan said we need to find out what all those religious groups have in common; “perhaps then we’ll find factors we can all agree on.” We got as far as agreeing that one aspect they have in common is fear of losing control and, as a result, belief in hierarchy in order to maintain control. Alan then described a diagram: a circle with a point in the center designating a group that is circumscribed by its ideas, won’t let others in. Then another circle is drawn around the first one, symbolizing the inclusion of all. “He drew a circle to keep me out. But I drew a circle to include him in.”



The participants felt that we had just scratched the surface and wanted to continue the discussion later.

Pandora Hopkins