

Perspectives on September 11

The Mind of the Fanatic

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There was a time, James (not his real name) tells me, when he could have flown a fuel-laden jet into the World Trade Center.

To meet James, one would never imagine he could perpetrate such an horrific act. James currently works in the medical field; he is a gentle man, a loving husband and a father of two. Years ago, however, he was a fanatic, a follower of a charismatic religious leader and a full-time member of an extremist religious cult.

My colleagues and I have worked with hundreds of former cultists. Some were potential terrorists. The vast majority were not what one might expect. They were bright, idealistic, hard-working, self-sacrificing individuals who believed strongly, completely, in the justness of their causes. With rare exception, their fanaticism was rooted in a sincere intention to right wrongs, "clean up" sins, impurities, or injustices, and establish a society fully compliant with what they felt certain was God's will.

Sometimes, the only things that separate the fanatic next door from the fanatic terrorist are the number of followers, amount of money, and availability of military hardware. Lest we forget, members of the fanatical Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo were actively seeking weapons of mass destruction that would have caused devastation dwarfing their Tokyo subway gassings, and even the mass murders of September 11. Closer to home, extremist groups like the Branch Davidians are, or have been, armed and anticipating the initiation of Armageddon.

The Steps to Fanaticism

To understand the mindset of fanatics, closely examine their propaganda. They sound strikingly like hygienists, who seek to "clean" or "sanitize" an environment in order to make it a "healthier" place to live. Fanatics utilize "us versus them" language to divide the world in a polarized manner between that-which-promotes-health versus. that-which-causes-illness. The actions necessary for "hygiene" and "health" then become logical as well as obvious: Destroy that which causes or encourages disease. To the hygienist, that means destroying germs and their breeding grounds. To the fanatic, that means subjugating, imprisoning, "reeducating," and, if all else fails, destroying "diseased" people.

Fanaticism often begins with a sudden, dramatic shift in world-view, often due to an overwhelmingly disturbing experience that is not readily explainable using "ordinary" or familiar frameworks. Sometimes this involves betrayals and deep disappointments at the hands of close friends, family, loved ones, or a group/cause with which one strongly identifies. (Osama bin Laden fits into this mold.) Discarding beliefs and allegiances that related to a profound betrayal can feel thoroughly liberating.

The second step on the road to fanaticism is exposure to a fanatic ideology (and, sadly, there are religious and political philosophies that lend themselves easily to this mindset). The third step usually involves a personal connection to a charismatic leader who appears to embody the "purity" promised by the ideology.

The final step requires the internalization of information control: The fanatic's new ideology and personal allegiances must be strengthened and reinforced through the demand to be ever-vigilant against "wrong" thinking, to deny and denigrate information from "outside" sources, and to confess any and all doubts and questioning of one's faith. Over time, the new identity solidifies and the "old" self becomes equated with the very "disease" that must be eradicated. The fanatic does not

distinguish between military personnel and civilians because they (we) are all germs capable of infecting those who would otherwise become or remain "pure."

I do not believe we can ever completely eliminate fanaticism. The causes are too varied, too complex, and I can think of no "cure" that does not invoke the "illness" of fanaticism itself. To invert what the late Senator Barry Goldwater once said, extremism—even in the defense of liberty—is indeed a vice. Under the right conditions, most of us can become susceptible to fanatical ideologies. That is why, in a democracy, it is so important to not only tolerate, but welcome, dissent and debate. We must challenge ourselves when we are drawn toward demonizing beliefs or lifestyles that feel foreign or repugnant, even as we protest them.

And when left with no choice but to fight and wage war, we need to resist the temptation to view our enemies as less than human--as germs or vermin--lest we find ourselves one day looking into the mirror and realizing that we have found the fanatics, and they are us.

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