Fundamentalism: A Jewish Perspective

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PRECIS: In this paper, by comparing a contemporary fundamentalist Jewish concept – Da`at Torah ("the Opinion of the Torah") – with the Roman Catholic concept of papal infallibility and with the Evangelical Protestant concept of biblical inerrancy, I suggest that the Jewish concept has none of the built-in restrictions and limitations of the two Christian concepts.

INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century was in many respects the most secular of centuries. The competing ideological forces which shaped much of it (eg., Communism, Fascism, Nazism, nationalism, liberal capitalism and social democracy) are all fundamentally secular in nature. Yet, as the twentieth century gave way to the twenty-first, in many parts of the world secular societies are facing radical religious movements which challenge, and sometimes threaten, their very foundations. Religiously inspired or exacerbated radical movements, in many cases promoting warfare and terror, whether directed externally at other groups or internally at the fabric of their own society, have been found around the globe.

Specifically within a Jewish context, after well over a century of political Zionism and renewed Jewish statehood in Israel since 1948, we are witnesses in recent years to massive religious revival in several forms: in the so-called ba`al teshuvah (penitent, i.e., return to religious observance) movement; growing religious conservatism and political extremism in what was once moderate "Religious" (i.e., Orthodox) Zionist circles and political parties; an aversion to modernity and science and a reversion to veneration of saints (such as the late Moroccan Baba Sali Israel Abuhatzeira, the late Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, and the late mystical Rabbi Isaac Kadouri, all of whom were used in their lifetimes and/or after their deaths to promise material blessings for support for political parties and other causes); use of magical amulets (*kemi`ot*); a decline in State Zionist-oriented, modern-Orthodox (*dati*) schools (combining religious and secular studies) in favor of non-Zionist or anti-Zionist ultra-Orthodox (*?aredi*) schools with minimal secular studies; increasing avoidance of military service in favor of religious deferments for yeshivah-students; increasing *?aredi* assertiveness against secular Jews and culture; incidents of violence against Arabs (including arson and even murder) in the territories under Israeli control since 1967; cases of verbal or physical violence in *?aredi* neighborhoods like Jerusalem's Meah She`arim against Arabs passing through and Christians living nearby (who were perceived to be missionaries); and occasional desecration of churches; even the murder of a Prime Minister by a "religious" Jew acting, so he claimed, on direct divine instructions. In both Israel and the Diaspora, the modern or moderate Orthodox community rabbinate has been outflanked and overwhelmed, in many cases, by *?aredi* rabbis of the yeshivah world, to whom the community rabbis often defer in terms of halakhic scholarship and charismatic leadership - - despite the fact that, unlike the modern Orthodox commitment to a synthesis of tradition and modernity - - *Torah `im derekh ere?* ("the Torah with a worldly involvement")[1] - - the *?aredi* rabbis often have little contact with community realities and little secular education and exposure to modern culture. Among the Sephardic Jews, who generally, in the context of Middle Eastern countries underwent neither the corrosive process of modernization nor the fundamentalist reaction against modernization of the Jews in Christian Europe, we witness a broad growth of *?aredi* ideology in the Shas movement, imitating the black-suited and black-hatted apathy or even antipathy towards

Zionism of their Ashkenazi counterparts, largely as a result of widespread resentment of paternalistic treatment and discrimination by the secular, socialist Ashkenazi establishment, especially in the early 1950s and 1960s, and of their exclusion from positions of leadership and prominence in Ashkenazi-dominated yeshivot and religious political parties.

The paradox is that the Jewish people, like much of the rest of the world, is experiencing a revival of what is often termed “fundamentalism”, despite earlier predictions of the inevitability of secular success, religious decline, the “death of God”, scientific progress and the triumph of humanism. The reports of the death of fundamentalist religion in general, and of Jewish culture and religious life in particular, have proved (in Mark Twain’s famous phrase)[2] to be greatly exaggerated. The historians often prove to be remarkably wrong in predicting the future. In 1818, Leopold Zunz, one of the founders of the scientific, academic study of Judaism (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*) questioned whether, a century later, there would be any more Hebrew literature and Jewish books.[3] Almost exactly a century later, in 1916, Isaac Husik concluded his *History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* with the words: “There are Jews now and there are philosophers, but there are no Jewish philosophers and there is no Jewish philosophy”.[4] In 1934, in his introduction to *The Hasidic Anthology*, Louis Newman concluded that despite the existence of hundreds of thousands of “faithful followers,”[5] ?asidism had entered into a state of decline and was losing its younger generation to the new trends of Haskalah (Englightenment) and secular European culture. Little could anyone predict the imminent murder in the Shoah of most of those “faithful followers,” on the one hand, and on the other hand, the vital revival of ?asidic life as well as of the talmudic scholarship of ?asidism’s nominal opponents in the Lithuanian yeshivah world in the renewed Jewish State and in America.

In purely demographic terms, Jewish fundamentalism is thriving, whereas the liberal movements, once thought to be the wave of the future, are failing. The only Jewish community in the world with an overall replacement birthrate of over 2.0 children per family is in Israel. Especially abroad, secular and liberal Jews are not (or are barely) reproducing demographically - - and that is before one takes into account the effects of assimilation and intermarriage - - while large Orthodox and especially ultra-Orthodox families are increasingly prevalent. Demographically, then, as well as culturally, given current trends, fundamentalist movements are likely to play a much greater role in Jewish life in the next generation, at the explicit expense of the liberal movements. Liberal synagogues (like not a few mainline churches in various western countries) are largely empty much of the year, while the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox synagogues tend to be growing and full of children.

Jews who embrace modern culture - - specifically including modern Orthodoxy[6] as well as the liberal movements - - therefore need to reconsider their strategy and program for Jewish life in light of the challenge posed by fundamentalism. What is it about secularism and liberalism - - non-Jewish and Jewish, national and religious - - which seems to leave so many people spiritually unsatisfied today? Besides socio-economic and political factors (frustration with inequality, social injustice and the inadequacies of governmental programs, and the successful social welfare programs sponsored by fundamentalist movements, such as the Islamic Brethren, ?amas etc. in Arab countries, and, *au contraire*, such as Shas and various other *?aredi* communities in Israel), what spiritual factors are addressed successfully by the fundamentalists, such as the human search for meaning and transcendence; personal and social discipline in an era of the breakdown of traditional values and mores; emphasis on personal responsibility; strengthening of family life? In which ways can these spiritual factors be adopted and implemented (and, frankly, imitated) by modern, liberal movements, to provide effective, meaningful and attractive alternatives to the extreme alternatives, on the one hand, of spiritual anomie, and on the other hand, of fundamentalism?

THE REFORM PITTSBURGH PLATFORM (1885)

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In a Jewish context, the progressive modernism, which was then opposed by Jews claiming to represent traditional Judaism, was clearly and succinctly summarized by a group of Reform rabbis in the “Pittsburgh Platform” of 1885:[7]

1) We recognize in every religion an attempt to grasp the Infinite One . . . Judaism presents the highest conception of the God-idea as taught in Scripture and developed and spiritualized by Jewish teachers in accordance with the moral and philosophical progress of their respective ages . . .

2) We hold that the modern discoveries of scientific research in the domains of nature and history are not antagonistic to the doctrines of Judaism, the Bible reflects primitive ideas of its age, and at times clothing its conception of divine providence and justice dealing with man in miraculous narratives.

3) We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today we accept as binding only the moral laws and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.

4) We hold that all such Mosaic and Rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity and dress originate in ages and under the influence of ideas altogether foreign to our present mental and spiritual state . . . They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.

5) . . . We consider ourselves no longer a nation but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship [in the Temple] under the administration of the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state.

6) We recognize in Judaism a progressive religion, ever striving to be in accord with the postulates of reason. . . We extend the hand of fellowship to all who cooperate with us in the establishment of the reign of truth and righteousness among men.

7) We reassert the doctrine of Judaism that the soul of men is immortal. We reject as ideas not rooted in Judaism the belief in bodily resurrection and in Gehenna and Eden (hell and paradise), as abodes for everlasting punishment or reward.

8) . . . We deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve on the basis of justice and righteousness the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.

It is precisely this kind of progressive religious outlook (whether Jewish or Christian), which embraces scientific discovery and regards Scripture as a product of ancient times, to be subject to historical research, to be evaluated in light of modern values and understanding, and to be adapted and/or rejected accordingly, that led to the conservative reactions known in Christianity as “fundamentalism,” but by no means limited to Christianity. The fact that the term “fundamentalist” technically and originally applied only in Christianity, especially its Protestant-Evangelical circles, does not mean that the religious phenomenon is limited to those circles. Let us keep in mind that Jews in the nineteenth century did not hesitate to adopt such Christian terms as “Reform” and “Orthodox” for their diverse ideologies, and we may, therefore, be justified in applying the term

"fundamentalist" to certain similar modern and contemporary Jewish developments.

REACTIONS

A comparative study may help clarify a significant phenomenon in modern Jewish life, even if the term "fundamentalism" itself was not adopted by Jews at the time and is still not used by Jews sharing that general *Weltansschauung*. As we shall see, the "fundamentalist" Jewish belief in "*Da`at Torah*" ("The Opinion of the Torah") and the related belief in "*Emunat ?akhamim*" ("Belief in the Sages")[8] are, in certain respects, even more radical and far-reaching than, respectively, the Roman Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility and the Evangelical Protestant doctrine of biblical inerrancy.

As we shall also see, in general (and not just in its technical Christian sense), fundamentalism refers not to a traditional, pre-modern stance, but to a modern, consistent, absolutist and even occasionally extreme reaffirmation of some traditional doctrines in response to, and in rejection of, modernity. Fundamentalist movements can take advantage of modern technology (eg., Al-Qa`idah sponsoring and coordinating terror via the internet; Ayatullah Khomeini sending cassettes of his sermons from exile abroad to his followers in Iran; and, again *au contraire*, the Lubavitcher Rebbe making closed-circuit satellite broadcasts of speeches and "Farbrengen" programs, and Christian television evangelism) while repudiating what it perceives as dangerous modern cultural values (secularism, humanism, liberalism).

In Judaism as in western Christianity – both Roman Catholic and Protestant – the nineteenth century and first years of the twentieth century (especially the period from the mid-nineteenth century to World War I) saw a rise of religious rejection of two major ideological challenges to traditional belief, focusing on:

- The theory of evolution (Charles Darwin, in *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 1859).
- Higher Bible criticism, including the documentary hypothesis (as advanced, *inter alia*, by Julius Wellhausen, in *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel,* 1878/1883).

However, in a broader sense, it is precisely the type of prevalent progressive religious attitudes, typified later in the Jewish community by the Reform Pittsburgh Platform, in which human reason replaced the authority, and became the arbiter, of revealed Scripture and doctrine, which were now seen to be time-bound and obsolete, that led to several Roman Catholic reactions.

ROMAN CATHOLIC REACTON: PIUS IX AND PAPAL INFALLIBILITY

Pope Pius IX (1792-1878), whose papacy began in 1846, already in 1854 issued the encyclical of the "Immaculate Conception of Mary,"[9] that "the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful."{10}

A decade later, in 1864, Pius IX issued the "Syllabus of Errors."{11} Although it preceded the Pittsburgh Platform by four decades, and has nothing to do with Jews and Judaism *per se*, we can readily discern how, almost point for point, the two documents – explicitly or implicitly – represent totally contradictory religious attitudes towards progressive modernism. Among its 80 paragraphs organized into ten sections, we find (*inter alia*) the following "errors":

1) That there exists no Supreme, all-wise, all-provident Divine Being, distinct from the universe, and God is identical with the nature of things, and is, therefore, subject to changes . . .

3) Human reason, without any reference whatsoever to God, is the sole arbiter of truth and falsehood, and of good and evil; it is a law to itself, and suffices, by its natural force, to secure the welfare of men and of nations.

4) All the truths of religion proceed from the innate strength of human reason; hence reason is the ultimate standard by which man can and ought to arrive at the knowledge of all truths of every kind.

5) Divine revelation is imperfect, and therefore subject to a continual and indefinite progress, corresponding with the advancement of human reason.

7) The prophecies and miracles set forth and recorded in the Sacred Scriptures are the fiction of poets . . .

11) The Church . . . ought to tolerate the errors of philosophy . . .

12) The decrees of the Apostolic See and of the Roman congregations impede the true progress of science.

15) Every man is free to embrace and profess the religion which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true.

16) Man may, in the observance of any religion whatever, find the way of eternal salvation, and arrive at eternal salvation.

18) Protestantism is nothing more than another form of the same true Christian religion, in which form it is given to please God equally as in the Catholic Church.

22) The obligation by which Catholic teachers and authors are strictly bound is confined to those things only which are proposed to universal belief as dogmas of faith by the infallible judgment of the Church.{12}

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23) Roman pontiffs and ecumenical councils have wandered outside the limits of their power . . . and have even erred in defining matters of faith and morals.

24) The Church has not the power of using force, nor has she any temporal power, direct or indirect.

55) The Church ought to be separated from the State, and the State from the Church.

76) The abolition of the temporal power of which the Apostolic See is possessed would contribute to the greatest degree to the liberty and prosperity of the Church.

77) In the present day, it is no longer expedient that the Catholic religion should be held as the only religion of the State, to the exclusion of other forms of worship.

80) The Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization.

However, it was only few years later, that the First Vatican Council (1868-1870) convened by Pius IX, formally asserted the doctrine of papal infallibility already alluded to in “Errors” #22 and #23. The 4th and final session (18 July 1870) concluded with the following decree:{13}

“Chapter 4: On the infallible teaching authority of the Roman pontiff:”

9) Therefore, faithfully adhering to the tradition received from the beginning of the Christian faith, to the glory of God our saviour, for the exaltation of the Catholic religion and for the salvation of the Christian people, with the approval of the sacred council, we teach and define as a divinely revealed dogma that when the Roman pontiff speaks EX CATHEDRA, that is, when, in the exercise of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole church, he possesses, by the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, that infallibility which the divine Redeemer willed his church to enjoy in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals. Therefore, such definitions of the Roman pontiff are of themselves, and not by the consent of the church, irreformable.

As we shall see, the Jewish concept of “*Da`at Torah*” contains none of the institutional constraints of the widely misunderstood doctrine of papal infallibility, which is limited to an official declaration of doctrine by the pope, speaking *ex cathedra*, after consultation with the bishops, and only in matters of faith or morals. It does not apply to the pope’s personal views on other matters. “*Da`at Torah*” as used today has no such constraints. It should also be noted that the doctrine of papal infallibility has been invoked formally only once in the century and a half since its promulgation in 1870, and

that was in 1950 by Pius XII in the encyclical on the “Assumption of Mary.”{14}

EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT REACTION: BIBLICAL INERRANCY

Given the authority of the magisterium in R*oman* Catholic doctrine, we can well understand why the emphasis in the Church’s response to liberal modernism lay in the claim of papal infallibility. By contrast, we can also understand why, given the notion of “sola Scriptura,” the Evangelical Protestant response centered on the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.

The revival meetings of the “Second Great Awakening” in the early nineteenth century provided the background for what later came to be known as Fundamentalism. Although the term “Fundamentalism” (not the phenomenon!) was only coined in 1920,{15} it takes its name from a series of 90 essays by different authors, originally published in twelve volumes during the years 1910-1915 by the Testimony Publishing Company in Chicago. The movement crossed (and still crosses) Protestant denominational lines.

Common elements characterizing fundamentalist movements include: absolutist claims to exclusive truth (and, in various cases, also to exclusive salvation); rejection of the spiritual validity of other religions (i.e., external pluralism) and of other interpretations within their own religion (i.e., internal pluralism); interpretation of Scripture as the true, eternal, inerrant, and unchanging “word of God”; rejection of historical, literary, scientific study of religious texts; denial of “progress” in religion; rejection of pluralism as “relativism.”

Another feature of the fundamentalist movement is “Dispensationalism,” namely the belief that the Bible reveals seven “dispensations,” successive and different periods or ages in God’s plan for humanity, in response to how humans behave. The Scofield Reference Bible,{16} a text widely used in Evangelical and Fundamentalist circles, states:

The Dispensations are distinguished, exhibiting the majestic, progressive order of the divine dealings of God with humanity, ‘the increasing purpose’ which runs through and links together the ages, from the beginning of the life of man to the end in eternity.

Returning to the notion of biblical inerrancy, we need first to understand how the “word of God” came to be understood as eternal or at least pre-existent. The Midrash Rabbah on Genesis 1:1 portrays the Torah as pre-existing the creation of the world, and as serving as God’s blueprint for the cosmos:{17}

The Torah declares: “I was the working tool of the Holy One, blessed be He.” In human practice, when a mortal king builds his palace, he builds it not with his own skill but with the skill of an architect (oman). The architect, moreover, does not build it out of his head, but employs plans and diagrams to know how to arrange the cambers and the wicket doors. Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, “In the beginning (*be*-reishit) God created” (Genesis 1:1) – “beginning” (*reishit*) referring to the Torah, as in the verse “The Lord made me as the beginning of His way” (Proverbs 8:22).

In other words, according to this rabbinic interpretation, “wisdom” (*?okhmah*, the subject of Proverbs 8), which “the Lord created me as the beginning of His way, as the first of his works of old” is equated with “beginning,” and the Torah is equated with wisdom. Thus: the Torah = wisdom = beginning. The term *be-reishit* in Genesis 1:1 should thus not be understood as “in the beginning” but “by means of the beginning = wisdom = Torah” God created the world. Nevertheless, it must be clarified that this rabbinic interpretation posits the Torah as pre-existing the world, but also created by God as the world’s blueprint. This is in sharp contrast with the Christian notion of the eternal word of God, and with the Islamic belief in the Qur’an as the eternal

word of God.{18}

We find in John 1:1, 14 that Jesus replaces the Torah as God's word (*logos*):

In the beginning (*arche*) was the Word (*Logos*), and the Word was with God (*pros ton Theon*), and the Word was God (*kai Theos en ho Logos*). . . And the Word became flesh (*kai ho Logos sarx egeneto*) and dwelt among us . . . the only Son (*monogenous*, "only begotten") from the Father."{19}

However, whereas the emphasis in John and in early Christianity (eg., in the Creed of Nicaea) is to Jesus as the eternal *logos*, in nineteenth and twentieth-century evangelical and fundamentalist thought – reacting to Darwinism (calling into question the literal truth of the creations stories in Genesis 1 and 2) and higher Bible criticism (calling into question the traditional beliefs about the integrity of the Bible itself) – the emphasis is on Scripture as the eternal and inerrant word of God.

Underlying the concept of biblical inerrancy is a kind of syllogism based on two verses in the New Testament:

- 2 Timothy 3:16: "All scripture (*graphe*) is inspired by God (*theopneustos*, "God-breathed") and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."
- Hebrews 6:18: "so that through two unchangeable things (*pragmaton ametatheton*), in which it is impossible that God should prove false (*pseusasthai*, "to lie"), we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us."

Since, then, "all Scripture" is divinely inspired for human instruction, and God cannot lie, it follows that the Bible cannot err.

According to Evangelical scholar Kevin Vanhoozer, the doctrine of biblical inerrancy was not "invented" in the nineteenth century, for example, by such influential Calvinist theologians Princeton Theological College as Charles Hodge and B.B. Warfield.{20}

Doctrine develops when something implicit in the faith is denied; false teaching provokes an explicit rebuttal. . . Doctrines are formulated in order to refute error and to preserve revealed truth. . . The doctrine of biblical inerrancy was only explicitly formulated to counter explicit denials of the Bible's truthfulness. These denials arose about the same time as did modernity and the distinctively modern way of interpreting the Bible: biblical criticism. . . . What is explicitly expressed in the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, however, is not a theological novelty so much as an articulation of what was implicitly and virtually always, presupposed through most of church history.

The doctrine of biblical inerrancy, however, is qualified: it only applies to the original manuscripts, not to later manuscripts, let alone to translations; and it only applies when the Bible is correctly interpreted according to its "intended sense." Moreover, according to Vanhoozer, biblical inerrancy must not be confused with literalistic reading of the Bible.{21}

Some critics of inerrancy have suggested that God had to 'accommodate' his message to the language and thought-forms of the day in order effectively to communicate. . . To this objection it may be replied that using the common language of the day is not the same as committing oneself to its literal truth. One must not confuse a social convention with a scientific affirmation. To say that the sun rises is to employ a metaphor – one, moreover, that is true to human experience. . . Readers need to be sensitive to metaphor. . . Inerrancy means that every sentence, when interpreted correctly (i.e., in accordance with its literary genre and its literary sense), is wholly reliable.{22}

The Bible, then, according to this contemporary Evangelical view, is the inerrant word of God,

whereas the interpretations are the words of humans, not of God.

JEWISH REACTION: *DA`AT TORAH*

Here, too, as we shall see, the concept of *Da`at Torah* goes beyond the Evangelical Christian affirmation of biblical inerrancy, because it explicitly asserts the infallibility of rabbis' interpretations, just as it goes beyond the institutional and doctrinal restrictions of the Roman Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility. In all these cases – Roman Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, and Jewish – modern beliefs are authenticated by tracing their (alleged) origin and authority back to ancient texts and doctrines.{23} As Kevin Vanhoozer observed (above) about the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, a doctrine which was only implicit in some traditional texts, may be formulated or emphasized explicitly in response to perceived modern threats.

The issue, therefore, is not the traditional, pre-modern text or doctrine *per se*, but how such texts and doctrines are used (or misused) by anti-modern believers in a radically different and narrower context.

In addition, we are witnessing in recent years an interesting convergence of views in the otherwise widely diverse and multi-faceted *?aredi* world. ?asidic groups have adopted the emphasis of a life of study for men, a value historically characteristic of their opponents in the Lithuanian-style yeshivah world, and the leaders of the yeshivah world, the *gedolim* ("great" rabbis) are now credited with having, in the name of *Da`at Torah*, the same kind of personal insight and infallibility that ?asidim have always attributed to their "Rebbes."

Higher Bible criticism and the Darwin's theory of evolution – to the extent that *?aredi* Jews are sufficiently exposed to western culture that they understand these theories – would certainly be rejected in these circles. However, more immediately pressing threats came from modernity in general, beginning (but not limited to) the Emancipation of the Jews in many European countries in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (by which the Jews attained European citizenship, but at the cost of the disbanding of the semi-autonomous Jewish communal structure),{24} the concurrent "Haskalah" (Enlightenment), in which European Jews became increasingly involved externally in modern, secular education and culture, and at the same time applied such values internally to Jewish culture, and with the development of secular Hebrew and Yiddish literature and *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (the academic "Science of Judaism" – what we call "Jewish Studies" in the university). These developments, in turn, led in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to widespread secularism among Jews, as well as the development of liberal religious movements or denominations in Judaism (Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and more recently Renewal), Zionism in its various secular and religious forms,{25} Jewish socialism (Socialist Zionism and the anti-Zionist Socialist Bund).

These modern developments were perceived among other Jews to be threats, undermining traditional life and values. Rabbi Moses Sofer, the "?atam Sofer" (Frankfurt, 1762 - Bratislava, 1839) was an outstanding opponent of the modernism typified by Moses Mendelssohn and later by the Reform movement. Adopting the Talmudic expression "*?adash asur min ha-Torah*," ("the new is forbidden by the Torah") which originally simply meant that new grains could not be eaten prior to bringing the "`*omer*" (a sheaf of grain) as an offering in the Temple, beginning on the second day of Passover,{26} Sofer used it to mean that anything new, any innovation, is prohibited by the Torah.{27} Paradoxically, of course, the attitude that anything "new" is "forbidden by the Torah" is itself an innovation.

Sofer, later in the same work,{28} clearly enunciated the doctrine that is often called "*Da`at Torah*" (although he does not use the term here). The rabbinic elite (today often referred to as the *gedolim*), are so immersed in the Torah that they are guided by "the spirit of God" (*ru'a? Ha-Shem*

):

The spirit of God is on those who engage in Torah for its own sake, who attain the true direction. Even if their wisdom and intellect would not naturally enable them to attain this insight, in any event God in his graciousness grants wisdom to the wise at that moment.

Another clear statement, this time explicitly employing the term "*Da`at Torah*," was enunciated a roughly century later by Rabbi Israel Meir Ha-Kohen (Kagan), the "?afetz ?ayyim" (Belarus, 1838-1933):

One whose opinion is the opinion of the Torah (*da`at torah*), can solve all the problems of the world, in general and in particular, on the condition that the opinion of the Torah be clear.{29}

In the view of Bernard Weinberger,{30} the "*gedolim*" are graced with a unique quality of comprehending objective reality in applying their halakhic principles. This is a type of "holy spirit" (*ru'a? ha-kodesh*) bordering on prophecy.

What is particularly radical about this concept, as mentioned above, is that its claim of infallibility is unlimited (as opposed to papal infallibility), and applies explicitly to human interpretation (as opposed to biblical inerrancy). Moreover, although its adherents would claim that any opinion of a *gadol* is, by definition, *halakhah* (Jewish law), the paradox is that *Da`at Torah* is claimed precisely in areas where there are no halakhic precedents. Its authority rests on the infallible personal authority, bordering on prophecy of the *gadol* in all areas, because he is so immersed in the world of Torah that anything he thinks and says is ultimately divinely guided.

The normal procedure in determining the *halakhah* is to cite the diverse opinions in the vast literature, and then to explain why, in this particular circumstance or case, the decision should be X, as opposed to divergent opinions in the literature. But *Da`at Torah* is often claimed without following such established procedure, and without citing any reference to the precedents in the literature, precisely because it is a personal opinion, for example on political matters today in Israel, thus not (or not necessarily) in areas normally understood to be within the realm of *halakhah* (again, unless one believes that whatever the *gadol* thinks is, by definition, *halakhah*). For example, in the controversy over Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to disengage and withdraw 21 Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2005, there were leading rabbis in the "Religious (i.e., Orthodox) Zionist" movement who argued, as *Da`at Torah*, that such a withdrawal, even from one grain of sand in Gaza, was tantamount to eating pork. (Other leading rabbis, such as Ovadiah Yosef, maintained that the principle of saving life – *piku'a? nefesh* – takes precedence over the value of the Land of Israel).

In conclusion, then, just as we have seen the fundamentalist responses to modernity in Roman Catholic and in Evangelical Protestant Christianity, we find a roughly contemporaneous and paraellel affirmation of *Da`at Torah*, a new doctrine (at least in its explicit form and usage), in what can be understood to be a fundamentalist form of Judaism. That doctrine – like its Christian counterparts – claims at least implicit ancient authority and precedent, but it only became explicit, and increasingly cited, in modern times and in response to, and rejection of, modern ideas and conditions.

Perhaps the answer to the question with which we began – why in the late 20th century and early 21st century do we find increased acceptance among many people in Judaism, as in Christianity and Islam, of fundamentalist ideas and movements and religious extremism – is that the fundamentalist claims to unchanging truth and certainty provide an anchor of stability in a time when science, which is a complex open system, the conclusions of which are always tentative and subject to revision and new discovery, and increased exposure to diverse and conflicting ideologies, provide alternatives to, and thus threaten, the simplicity, certainty, and comfort of one's

own culture and tradition.

In the Addenda that follow are several examples of how traditional Jewish sources are appropriated – or misappropriated – today to justify the radical doctrine of *Da`at Torah*.

ADDENDUM I:
EMUNAT ?AKHAMIM ("BELIEF IN THE SAGES")

One of the concepts related to *Da`at Torah* is the idea known as *Emunat ?akhamim* (usually translated as "Belief in the Sages").{31} The *Gedolim* are infallible, and we are to believe in them and in whatever they instruct us. The concept, central to ?asidic belief in the authority of the Rebbe, has now been applied in the twentieth century by their *?aredi* opponents ("*Mitnagdim*") to the leadership of the yeshivahh world. It is thus widely understood to mean acceptance of the infallible authority of the rabbi in question.

The term *emunat ?akhamim* is found in Chapter 6 of the tractate Avot ("Sayings of the Fathers") in the Mishnah. This chapter, also called "Perek Kinyan Torah" ("The Chapter of Acquiring Torah") is not an integral or original part of the tractate. Although it may, of course, include older material, it was only added some centuries later in the period of the Ge'onim (6th – 11th centuries, C.E.). Maimonides' commentary on the Mishnah, for example, ends with Chapter 5.

According to this source (Avot 6:6), "the Torah is acquired in forty-eight ways." *Emunat ?akhamim* is the 22nd of these ways. Among the other ways of acquiring the Torah, are such qualities as:

10 – attachment to colleagues, cleaving to associates (*dibbuk ?averim*)

11 – discussion with pupils/disciples (*pilpul ha-talmidim*)

33 – avoiding (keeping aloof from) honor (*mitra?ek min ha-kavod*)

34 – not boasting (puffing up one's heart) about one's learning (*lo megis libo be-talmudo*)

35 – not delighting in giving decisions (*eino same'a? be-hora'ah*)

36 – bearing the yoke with one's fellow (*nosé be-`ol im ?avero*)

37 – judging a person favorably (*makhri`a le-khaf zekhut*)

38 – leading a person to the truth (*ma`amido `al ha-emet*)

39 – leading a person to peace (*ma`amido `al ha-shalom*)

44 – learning with the goal of teaching (*ha-lomed `al menat le-lamed*)

48 – citing something in the name of the one who said it (*ha-omer davar be-shem omero*)

Although many of the forty-eight “ways of acquiring Torah” are general virtues, applicable to students as well as their teachers, many of them clearly are virtues expected of teachers, who (as indicated in the examples above, *inter alia*) have colleagues and disciples, give (legal) decisions, judge, and teach. That would seem to give credence to the equation of *Emunat ?akhamim* with *Da`at Torah*.

However, we need to note that this reading of the text may well be erroneous, certainly in its contemporary application. First, note that the last quality – citing one’s sources – which (as indicated above) is standard in the halakhic process, is absent in contemporary *Da`at Torah*. Second, the reference is to the sages collectively, and not to an individual sage, however revered he may be by his followers as a *gadol*. Third, the list clearly mandates modesty and not seeking honor, a virtue inconsistent with a person’s claim of infallible *Da`at Torah*, and explicitly contradicted by the preceding Mishnah (6:5): “Do not seek greatness for yourself” (*al tevakesh gedulah le-`a?mekha*).

Finally, it seems to me that the contemporary reading of the text misunderstands the term *emunah*, usually translated as “faith,” but really meaning trust.{32} As Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983) pointed out, in the Bible (as well as in much rabbinic use of the term, eg., in the liturgy) *emunah* is usually a quality – trustworthiness, fidelity, faithfulness – attributed to God, namely God’s fidelity to people!{33} Thus we see in Psalm 100:5: “For the Lord is good, his kindness is eternal, and his fidelity (*emunato*) to every generation.” It is also used in that sense in the central Jewish daily prayer which describes God as *meqayem emunato li-sheinei `afar*, “who keeps (or: maintains, fulfils, sustains) his fidelity to those who sleep in dust.” If Kaplan is correct, the verse in Habbakuk 2:4 may, then, not refer to human fidelity (let alone “faith” in God), but to God’s fidelity to those who live righteously.

By the same token, perhaps we should understand *emunat ?akhamim* not as our “faith in the Sages,” but rather as “the Sage’s fidelity,” i.e., not our attitude towards the Sages (let alone towards an individual rabbi), but a quality that the Sages had in “acquiring Torah.”

ADDENDUM II:
THE INFALLIBILITY OF THE RABBIS ACCORDING TO RAMBAN (NA?MANIDES)

The passage in Deuteronomy 17:10-11, “Act . . .in accordance with the Torah which they instruct you; do not deviate to the right or left from whatever they tell you,” has often been cited in our generation as justification for *Da`at Torah* and *Emunat ?akhamim* – do whatever the rabbi tells you to do. But what if the rabbis tell you that right is left?

According to Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, France, 1040-1105 C.E.), the great commentator on the Bible and Talmud: “Even if they tell you that right is left or that left is right.”{34}

Ramban (Na?manides; Rabbi Moses ben Na?man, Spain, 1194 – Land of Israel, 1270 C.E.),{35} also a great figure in the history of Jewish law, exegesis, as well as mysticism, disagreed with Rashi. In his commentary on this passage, he wrote:

The need for this commandment is very great, for the Torah was given to us in written form, and, as is known, not all opinions concur regarding corollaries. Disputes would increase and the Torah would become several Torahs. The Torah establishes that the decisions of the great court (*beit din gadol*) are binding . . . in anything they tell us concerning the interpretation of the Torah . . . because they are based on their reasoning (*da`at*), even if you think they are switching left or right, and all the more so if you think they are telling you that right is right, because the spirit of God (*rua? ha-shem*) is on those who serve in his sanctuary{36}, and will never abandon his pious, who are protected{37} from error and stumbling (*nishmeru min ha-ta`ut u-min ha-mikhshol*)."{38}

What is significant here is that the verses in Deuteronomy 17:8-11 refer to the priests in the Temple, whose responsibilities include instructing and judging the people in accordance with the Torah, as well as to "the judge who will be in those days." The verse in Ezekiel 45:4 also refers to the priests serving in the Temple. Neither of the biblical verses cited by Ramban implies that the priests and judges – let alone their rabbinic successors – are protected from error by the divine spirit.

Nevertheless, Ramban moderates the statement in the Sifré and Rashi: in Ramban's understanding the verse does not refer objectively to right and left, but to what the person subjectively thinks is right or left. Most important: Ramban does not make the claim of infallibility for individual rabbis, but collectively for the high court (*bet din gadol*), and (unlike the far broader modern concept of Da`at Torah) explicitly limits it to the interpretation of the Torah (*perush ha-Torah*), based on their "reasoning" (*da`at*).

Ramban's explicit application of the verses in Deuteronomy institutionally to the high court and not to individual rabbis, and only to matters of religious practice, has a clear precedent in Rambam (Maimonides). In his *Mishneh Torah* (Code of Law), Book Fourteent: Judges, Laws of Rebels (*Mamrim*) 1:1 Rambam wrote:

The Great Sanhedrin of Jerusalem is the root of the Oral Law. The members thereof are the pillars of instruction; out of them go forth statutes and judgments to all Israel. Scripture bids us repose confidence in them, as it is said: "According to the law which they shall teach you" (Deuteronomy 17:11). This is a positive command. Whoever believes in Moses our Teacher and his Law, is bound to follow their guidance **in the practice of religion** (***?ayyav lismokh ma`aseh dat `aleihem***) and to lean upon them.{39}

ADDENDUM III:
FUNDAMENTALIST APPROPRIATION/MISAPPROPRIATION OF TRADITIONAL TEXTS: THE EXAMPLE OF MISREADING RAMBAM (MAIMONIDES)

The two main catalysts of fundamentalism – modern scientific developments (evolution, geology, paleontology) and Bible criticism, which are often understood as contradicting the literal text of Genesis – are alien to Rambam (Maimonides; Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, Spain, 1138 – Egypt, 1204 C.E.) and are irrelevant to his philosophy. Regarding the natural sciences, Rambam held that the Torah and science (when both are correctly understood) cannot contradict each other: the truth cannot contradict the truth. To the contrary, the Torah cannot be fully and properly understood except in the light of scientific teaching, and must be interpreted accordingly. Evolution (if it could be demonstrated conclusively) would therefore not, in principle, present a problem for Rambam. Bible criticism (again, if it could be demonstrated conclusively) would also not necessarily present a problem for Rambam, whose concern was not how the Bible was written and edited, but how it is read, i.e. in light of its ultimate divine authority in Jewish tradition. The fundamentalist Jewish reading of Rambam, therefore, tends to misunderstand what he actually said, and all the more

what he stood for, which was a synthesis or harmony of faith and reason, of religious and scientific truth.

1. The Mosaic authorship of the Torah ("Torah Mi-Sinai" - Torah from Sinai) vs. the divine authority of the Torah ("Torah Min Ha-Shamayim" - Torah from Heaven)

The issue for Rambam is not the question of the Mosaic authorship of the Torah, but the divine authority of the Torah. Rambam (unlike Abraham ibn Ezra [Spain, 1089-1187 C.E.){40} was not a proto-critic of the Bible. Nevertheless, to attribute the Torah to Moses, but also to suggest that Moses wrote any of it on his own and not by divine inspiration, is heresy. In his Commentary to the Mishnah, Sanhedrin Ch. 10 ["Perek ?elek"], among the "13 Principles", we have:{41}

The eighth principle is "Torah from heaven."{42} That is, that we should affirm that this whole Torah which we possess today is the Torah which was given to Moses, and that it is entirely divinely inspired [*mi-pi ha-gevurah*], i.e., that it came to [Moses] entirely in a way metaphorically called "speech" . . . and that [Moses] was like a scribe taking dictation, writing all if its histories, stories and laws . . . There is no difference between "The children of Ham are Kush and Egypt and Put and Canaan" (Genesis 10:6), or "The name of his wife was Mehetabel the daughter of Matred" (Genesis 36:39), and "I am the Lord" (Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6) or "Listen, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4). It is all divinely inspired [*mi-pi ha-gevurah*] . . . [The rabbis] considered a heretic [*kofer*] . . . one who thinks that the Torah contains essential [things] and unimportant [things] [literally: kernel and peel; Arabic: *lubb wa-qishr*], and that Moses invented them. That is what is meant by [one who says that] "the Torah is not from heaven." According to [the rabbis, such a person] says that the whole Torah is divinely inspired [*mi-pi ha-gevurah*], except for one verse which God did not say, but Moses on his own [*mi-pi `a?mo*] . . . The traditional interpretation is also divinely inspired.{43}

The ninth principle is abrogation{44} [*naskh*].{45} That is, that this Torah of Moses will never be abrogated, and that no other Torah will come from God, and that nothing may be added to it or subtracted from it, neither in its text nor in its interpretation.

In short, for Rambam the question is less textual (what Evangelicals would call "inerrancy") than theological: the divinely inspired authority of the Torah. To suggest, contra higher criticism, that Moses was not the author of the text, is not the question interesting Rambam, because the problem for him lies in the suggestion that Moses was the actual author but wrote something on his own, without divine inspiration. I am not suggesting that Rambam was a proto-critic of the Bible (as was Abraham ibn Ezra). I am suggesting that "Torah min ha-shamayim" ("Torah from Heaven") and not "Torah mi-Sinai" ("Torah from Sinai") was the issue at point for Rambam, and that we have here a classic example of modern, fundamentalist reading into a pre-modern text their anti-modern concerns.

2. The problem of literalist interpretation of Scripture and of the Sages.

Rambam opposes and condemns literalist interpretation of Scripture and of the Sages. In the case of Scripture, literalist interpretation addresses only i.e. its "external" or "exoteric" sense, rather than its "inner" or "esoteric" meaning. In the Introduction to his *Guide of the Perplexed* he wrote:{46}

The first purpose of this Treatise is to explain the meanings of certain terms occurring in books of prophecy . . . Its purpose is to give indications to a religious man for whom the validity of our Law has become established in his soul and has become actual in his belief - - such a man being perfect in his religion and character, and having studied the sciences of the philosophers . . . He must have felt distressed by the externals of the Law and by the meanings of the . . . equivocal, derivative or amphibolous terms . . . Hence he should remain in a state of perplexity and confusion.

. . .

This Treatise also has a second purpose: namely, the explanation of very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets, but not explicitly identified there as such. Hence and ignorant or heedless individual might think that they possess only an external [literal] sense [*?ahir*], but no internal one [*batin*] . . . The sages, may their memory be blessed, following the trail of these books, likewise have spoken of them in riddles and parables . . . We promised to explain all the difficult passages in the Midrashim, where the external sense manifestly contradicts the truth and departs from the intelligible.

The same problem exists with literalist interpretation of the sages:

They understand the teachings of the sages literally, and do not interpret them figuratively at all, so they make all [kinds of] impossible things necessary existents. They only do this on account of their ignorance of the sciences . . . So they think that all the wise words of the sages only mean what they understand of them, and are meant literally, even if some of these statements, taken literally, contain absurdity . . . They think that they elevate the sages, but they utterly degrade them, and are unaware of this.{47}

The paradox, then, is that fundamentalist Jews who take everything the Talmudic rabbis said literally, unwittingly not only arrive at absurdity, but fail to understand that just as the rabbis often interpreted Scripture non-literally (as parable, metaphor or allegory), so they often also expressed themselves non-literally in a like manner.

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