

THE PURIFIED (MALE) BODY OF FUNDAMENTALISM
(As illustrated in Islamic Fundamentalism)

Ruth Stein,

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"[T]he person who will wash my body near the genitals must wear gloves on his hand so he won't touch my genitals."

"I don't want any women to go to my grave at all during my funeral or any occasion thereafter..." "I don't want a pregnant woman or a person who is not clean to come and say goodbye to me because I don't approve of it."

These phrases are taken from Mohammad Atta's will, written in 1996. "Mr. Atta, said to be painfully shy around women throughout his life, asked that women play no role in his funeral," write the newspapers (NYT).

An additional and more important document linked with the 9/11 attacks, the letter to the terrorists, is another variation on the theme of purity. Interspersed with injunctions to the hijackers to memorize their plan and to anticipate their enemy's reaction, we find in the letter directions to pray and supplicate, read and reread traditional war chapters from the Holy Qur'an and remember all of the things that God has promised for the martyrs. They were told "make an oath to die and renew [their] intentions." They were

also and explicitly instructed to shave excess hair from the body, to shower and wear cologne, and to put on clean clothes.

“Tighten your clothes well [a reference to one making sure his clothes will cover his private parts at all times; this war practice was that of the Israelites as well, as mentioned in Deutronomy], since this is the way of the pious generations after the Prophet. They would tighten their clothes before battle. Tighten your shoes well, wear socks so that your feet will be solidly in your shoes ... “

There is the cleaning of the body and the covering of its shameful parts, and there is the treatment of the soul: “Remind your soul to listen and obey [all divine orders] ... tame your soul, purify it, convince it, make it understand, and incite it ...” “Purify your soul from all blemishes. Completely forget something called "this world" [or "this life] ... Remind yourself of the supplications ... (The morning and evening supplications, and the supplications of [entering] a town, and the [unclear] supplications, and the supplications said before meeting the enemy.”

The night before action, the addressees of the letter raider must, with his determined, rational self, remind the base self (tadhkir an-nafs) to listen and obey. “Train your base self, make it understand, convince it, and goad it on to this end.” Al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood (Qutb, Atta) was an admirer of the great Medieval Sufi thinker Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, who wrote, regarding training (riyadah) “Strive hard against your own soul until it is under your full control. Lower your gaze, control your

emotions, overcome your sexual urge, and elevate it via means that are decent and lawful” ...

On the morning of September 11 the hijackers were instructed to pray their obligatory prayers at dawn in congregation ... After doing their morning routines and before leaving the apartment, they were instructed to perform their ablutions once again; they are told that “angels seek forgiveness for you as long as you have prepared ablutions and they pray on your behalf ...” They are told to bless and purify their body, the luggage, clothes, the knife, their passports, their papers with verses from Qur'an [done by reading verses into one's hands and then rubbing the hands over things over whatever is to be blessed].

Juxtaposed with these instructions, we read in the letter, “Vow to accept death, renew admonition [of the *base self*], shave the extra hair on the *body*, perfume yourself, and ritually wash yourself.” The base self is tamed to accept death that will overcome the purified body. This acceptance is followed by the instructions to sharpen their blades so as not to discomfort “the animals” to be slaughtered on the planes they'll be boarding and flying. With a clean body and a pure mind they set out to kill off the "soft" and "feminine" parts of the world that do not believe in the Truth. *Nonbelievers* are called *animals*, and so is *the carnal soul*, which also needs to be vanquished, tamed, and trained to do as it is told.

As several Islamist scholars (e.g., Hans Kippenberg, Bruce Lincoln) have noted *many of the instructions employ **the language of Muslim asceticism and mysticism to reinforce***

the urge to suicide or self-martyrdom. The paraphrasing of the killing of humans as selfless actions of love of God is amplified by the call for religious men to “purify” their “heart” and cleanse it of “stains.”

The “purified body of fundamentalism occupies a central role within the fundamentalist mindset. Fundamentalism is an individual and collective state of mind which, conjoined with further developments, can become coercive and violent. The hallmark of a fundamentalist state of mind is *simplification*, both cognitive and emotional: a sense of utter certainty, a feeling of being in the right, hermetic impermeability, and rhetorical reiterations of Truths. Simplification is attained by splitting and division, repudiation and projection of unwanted, sinful, impure elements. **Such processes of division and ordering are enacted by increasingly severe purification processes**, and are subtended by enthrallment and the need to sacrifice.

By separating the good and the bad through strictly following religious fundamentals and creating clarity and order, fundamentalism functions as tight mind-control, a kind of *soothing iron belt* (Arendt’s term for totalitarianism) that holds the collective together, a shielding carapace to keep away the confusion and fragmentation that come from a brittle self, compounded by a looming sense of futility and failure, and by resentment at contemporary/Western culture. Fundamentalism promises rewards beyond the pleasure principle. To uprooted, frustrated, psychically humiliated, envious persons, the group construction of such a carapace seems the best way to collectively strengthen their sense of identity against outside enemies. The fundamentalist fidel believes that such

carapace will protect him from forgetting Godly values and from sinking into corruption and sin. To outside observers however, the danger the fundamentalist mind shuns is altogether different: it is that of shame, weakness, alienation, even mental annihilation. Whereas for the fundamentalist combating the danger is what deepens one's religious faith, from a non-fundamentalist perspective, it is precisely this sense of danger that transforms the religious spiritual sense of the sacred – the sense that the world is suffused with invisible meaningfulness (cf. Eliade, 1968; Otto, 1958) into an impenetrably cemented religious coerciveness and outright violence. In other words, the shift from religious devotion to fundamentalism parallels the deterioration of the presence of the sacred into an alien, persecutory presence.

What is the function of purification? Mary Douglas sees the body and what is tabooed or permitted with it as symbolizing (parts of) society. Dirt, she shows, means disorder. "There is no such thing as absolute dirt," she writes. Dirt is always dirt within some system, some context. In her reflections on abjection, Julia Kristeva writes,

The boundary of the body ... is established through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness ... The boundary between the inner and the outer is confounded by those excremental passages in which the inner effectively becomes the outer, and this excreting function becomes ... the model by which other forms of identity-differentiation are accomplished. In effect, this is the mode by which Others become shit. For inner and outer worlds to remain utterly distinct, the entire surface of the body would have to achieve an impossible impermeability. This sealing of its surfaces would constitute the seamless boundary of the subject; but this enclosure would invariably be exploded by precisely

that excremental filth that it fear (in J. Butler, Preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*).

These social perspectives mesh with the psychoanalytic view I wish to offer here, which, as I believe, should take account of the by now well-known **centrality of affects** in psychic life. It seems that purification is a ritual process aimed at **the destruction of fear (and its transform, rage)**. In purification, destructiveness is being battled, and at the same time as it is enacted, even worshipped. Here a few words of explanation: we usually assume that the religious quest is a search for meaning of life and of death, and ultimately, of the fact of having to die. The “big questions” humankind asks are of course drenched in emotions – puzzlement, confusion, but mainly fear and dread. We could plausibly say that the quest for meaning, the attempt to answer these Big Questions aims at transforming **fear**, either fear **of death and personal annihilation** (see the works of Rank, Becker, or Lifton), and/or **fear and rage in the face of the very existence of the other human**, who, for one reason or another, is experienced as a threat to one’s sense of specialness and as an obstacle to one’s desires (Hegel, Sartre, Klein in their works develop this predicament). Religion attempts to provide answers to the Big Questions, and thereby to assuage the fears, or, rather, religion attempts to provide answers such that these questions are not filled with dread anymore.

Fundamentalism, on this view, is an even more intense and focused project of dispelling these fears and threats. Fear often leads to hatred and resolves in it. The hatred is that of those humans, the others, who are (justly or unjustly) linked with fear, who then become objects of hatred and contempt. One powerful and magical way to battle these

fear-born hatreds is to translate their objects into the language of defilement and impurity (cf. Douglass, 1966), and to try to destroy them by battling defilement and impurity. Human destructiveness and self-destructiveness can then paradoxically function in the service of destroying these fears and the humiliation and rage they usually engender.

Purification processes are magical ritual means to redress a sense of badness and self-repudiation, to delineate one's boundaries and uphold one's integrity and identity – and to vanquish the frailty and mortality of corporeal existence. Purification processes symbolize, or rather, allegorize badness by calling it “impurity,” but then desymbolize it again by persecuting people (or the body) nominated as impure and bad. Fatima Mernissi (1992) is a feminist religious Moslem scholar, whose researches into Islamic history showed that Islam promised its believers immortality in exchange for submission and God-man inequality. Men are promised triumph over death, and paradise until the end of time, at the price of segregation and repudiation of women, who come to represent corporeality, earthiness, and vulnerability to finitude and death. “[t]he law of paternity was instituted to screen off the [mortal] uterus,” she writes. While woman is a reminder of the corruption of the flesh, God is the symbol and promise of immortality and the hope of overcoming bodily existence. Death can be contemptuously dismissed, since life and death become highly symbolized. Impure body, base soul, perishable woman, and nonbelievers to different degrees, are all to be tamed, overcome, denigrated, or battled against.

Fundamentalism is a process that begins with self hatred and abjection, perceiving oneself as weak and ineffectual, that is, religiously speaking, as bad and sinful. Psychoanalysis is exquisitely sensitive to feelings of self-loathing and self-repudiation. Psychoanalytic work It strives to enable a person to gain a sense of redemption through human acceptance and compassion. In a psychoanalytic process, one is allowed to know that one's badness ("sins") does not take away the power to challenge one's persecutory inner object. In contrast, fundamentalist religion exploits the revulsion from an unwanted self to produce a readiness to dissolve it by losing one's individual distinctness in a compact collective whole and even to sacrifice it physically. It seems that at the core of psychic being there is often an ill kernel of unbearability. Self-loathing can be produced by internalizing an abusive other or by guilt and shame about not attaining total perfection. It is the revulsion at one's self, the pitiless self-condemnation, the feeling of worthlessness, Nietzschean *ressentiment*, that breeds the worst kinds of paralyzes, damaging bonds and wasted lives. Self-loathing impels one to want compulsively to cleanse oneself of the filth by which one feels inhabited.

The notion of purification and its excesses is an axis that can explain the puzzle we face when we contemplate the liability of religious belief to deteriorate and become so vitiated as to attain the conviction that killing is good and righteous. The phenomenon of the transformation of the good into the murderous can be better understood when we realize that a simple human belief, namely that **it is good to fight evil**, or that doing the good means eliminating the bad,

can become monstrously proliferative and perverted. The progressive stages in such processes of increasing splitting succeed each other when the belief that it is good to fight evil, and hence try to erase it and hence that it is good to “kill” everything and everyone who represents evil. When such belief is seen as ratified by a divine command, and is supported by processes of group dynamics and brainwashing, the ground is ready for massive carnage and destruction.

According to this emotional logic, by rejecting, even (symbolically or physically) destroying the people who have become recipients and carriers of our bad, denigrated parts, one attains the relief of the destruction of bad parts of our oneself. But this devilish process of projection goes on, since the impulse to destructiveness becomes unquenchable. The cleansed self becomes increasingly decimated and amputated and has now to be filled (artificially) restored only by inflating another part the psyche, which will function as prosthesis, and will be called "God." God becomes a filler, replacing the ejected, missing parts. “God”, that is, the name perverted religion gives to the inner persecutor, becomes a defensive and compensatory goodness. Such God has to be endlessly powerful and superior to replenish, boost, and vindicate the diminished and depleted state of self. Since the projective and identificatory processes become increasingly savage, strained, and violent as they go on, God becomes increasingly demanding, harsh, and tyrannical. The all-powerful, divine protector becomes successively a Dorian Grey-like inner picture of a blood-thirsty tyrant: the guardian turns into the persecutor. This change from God-as-protector to God-as-persecutor is beyond a clear awareness of the troubled believer, who has now a converted mind. He

has lost the awareness that going toward God and fusing with God now require renouncing not only one's autonomy, but one's body and physical existence as well. At this point, we are faced with the perversion and hence complete failure of the aim and function of religion, which was originally that of procuring salvation and ultimately peace of mind and wellbeing by being good and fighting badness.

Let me now enumerate **the successive stages of increasing purification:**

Unpacking the endeavor at 'purification' that is instrumental in achieving 'goodness' and further, attaining the dominion of 'goodness' over 'badness,' reveals a process that can be broken into three stages:

1. Separation of badness and goodness; cleansing oneself of impurity, becoming clean.
2. Elimination of badness through reinforcement of inerrancy and renunciation of choice;
3. Elimination of badness through elimination of the bad by violent action, eventually, to the point of achieving the good through death, inflicted on others and on oneself.

The first stage of purification attempts to separate good and evil through religious rituals, which ensure God's protection of the right and the just within a stable inner place, unassaulted and uncontaminated by evil – not unlike our usual human need to safeguard goodness and love in times of hardship and trouble. Various religious practices, such as ritual bathing and ablutions, prayer, fasting, removal of excremental symbols, or circumcision, function to segregate the good from the bad and to safeguard the good.

When these symbolic acts prove inadequate, a second stage is entered, whereby more rigid rituals and actions are resorted to in an effort to more forcefully and irreversibly eliminate the badness. Some device has to be established that will **permanently** prevent the return of the bad and its infiltration into the realm of the good. **The second stage is that of fundamentalist formation.** Although there is a world of difference between fundamentalism and violent fundamentalism, psychoanalytically speaking, they are both motivated by **the need to simplify the relation between goodness and badness, and to eliminate badness.** Fundamentalism, as empirical research has shown, carries deep discontent regarding the present state of the world compared to a golden, pure, idealized past, which it strives to reestablish in the present by force. The more force is employed for the purification of the world (= of the self), the more violent the fundamentalist mindset.

The third stage of increasingly-violent purification is instantiated in suicide-killings. There is the need to kill God's enemies as the impure, inimical elements, and there is, I suggest, the simultaneous creation of **an auto-destructive counterpart to the killing of "God's enemies," namely the killing of oneself.** Obviously the killing of oneself in the effort to kill the impure part of oneself, amounts to the total failure – or total grim success – of the process of purification, namely, murderous suicide. At this stage of religious terrorism, one purifies oneself out of life, one purifies oneself to death, and one purifies the world out of existence. The relentlessly compulsive effort to cleanse oneself from one's badness eventually amounts to the deployment of the badness against oneself, thereby reestablishing and capitulating to a cruel, murderous

superego, the death drive that strives to create the final evenness of extinction.

Although self-destruction through suicide does not refer to the leaders who recruit the religious suicidal terrorists, both recruiter and recruited are implicated in a preparatory process whereby the mind of the recruited is taken hold of, “washed”, shaped, steeled, and converted into an efficient tool of death against the others and against oneself. Thus the evacuation of the bad and the attainment of the good are reached through death, and in death.

This ultimate stage of the religious process of purification is the most perplexing and extreme of all. The attempt to magically annihilate suffering and feelings of badness about oneself, the attempt to exterminate defilement and infidelity, eventuates in the necessity to die together with the killing of others, since the boundary between life and death, self and other, has been completely obliterated and swamped by the total destruction of all materiality. In the process of projecting the hated, devalued parts of the self to the Infidels and the idealized parts of the self to God, finally nothing is left. The splitting and projection into God of sublime immateriality, and the projection of base badness and lechery into the nonbelievers, is complete. The remaining body of the terrorist has unconsciously stopped existing, or rather, **the remaining physical body, with its needs and desires, is now superfluous.** Like a pencil that is reduced out of existence by becoming increasingly sharpened, this body will find its redemption by becoming a pure instrument of God’s will, eventually by merging with God in a cataclysm of purifying fire. Becoming ashes is the ultimate act of purification and spiritualization: there

is no more desire of the flesh to defile one's self image, and the desire for God has been given its most extreme and loving due. I wrote elsewhere about this kind of "upward-tending," self-abnegating and self-consuming regression and called it regression to the father, or paternal regression.

Women do not exist in Atta's letter (even the famous virgins are mentioned here in one auxiliary phrase that speaks of their waiting for the heroes in their beautiful clothes, hardly a very sexual or intimate description). **The culture of hypermasculinity and the ideal of warriors who purify the world of contaminants** (whom Bin Laden contemptuously equates with women), **absolve these men of the need to articulate the desirability and potential power of women** and create a regressive desire to fuse with an idealized, spiritualized paternal figure.

The banishment of women reinforces the pervasive homoerotic grouping, where the desired loss of individuation that is feared with women is given free reign in terrorist group formations as well as in a devout submission to God. **The shift from women to homoerotic paternal bonding marks a specific regressive-transcendent trajectory that is altogether different than falling into an engulfing maternal womb.** The frightful sliding downward toward the feminine and maternal can be replaced, or even superseded, by an ecstatic soaring upward, toward the Heavenly Father, who is imagined to be waiting there to redeem his sons' troubled souls and sweep away the doubts of their former selves. It seems as if the Primitive Father of Freud's (1913) Primal Horde has been resuscitated or, better, is still alive and has come

to embrace his sons – provided they unite against the symbol and the flesh of "woman", that is, against earthy pleasures and womanly softness found both in Islamic women and in Western society which is seen as "feminized."

This third stage of "purification", the achievement of the good through death, combines, in the case of Islamic terrorists, *killing others for God, and killing oneself for God*. It is a configuration of warriors of sacred wars, who set out to kill infidels in their crusades, and martyrs who died for God's glory.

Atta wrote his will several years before he drove into the Twin Towers. This was at an earlier stage of his life, when the possibility of martyrdom was still not so salient. Being purified when buried is not the end of his religious **purification fantasy**: the utmost purging (note how this word has been taken over by American anorectic-bulimic women conflicted about their femininity) of the soul is by **fire**, that burns and consumes all the organic rests of one's body. Elijah, the zealous prophet went up to his Heavenly father in chariots of fire. The Inquisition really believed they were doing contrite confessed heathen a favor by letting them burn on the stake. As somebody wrote, we can understand the Inquisition (which in a way was more perverse than were the Nazis because it talked the language of love and tenderness, whereas the Nazis were open about their will to destroy). But Torquemada and his cohort **truly believed** that a few minutes of hideous agony on the stakes, what are these compared to eternal burning in Hell, for this is a finite purification by fire, compared to an eternal one.