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Minds Wide Shut: How the New Fundamentalism Divide Us

by **Gary Saul Morson and Morton Shapiro**

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When a literary critic and professor of Russian literature (Gary Saul Morson) and a professor economics (Morton Shapiro) join forces in addressing fundamentalism, a new, rather peculiar approach to the issue should undoubtedly be expected. The previous endeavour of the duo provides some clue about the approach in which economics, in its explanations, is supported or even enhanced by the findings of great pieces of literature, predominantly great realist novels, and a memorable statement: “If one has not identified with Anna Karenina, one has not really read *Anna Karenina*” (Gary Saul Morson and Morton Shapiro 2017, p. 12, italics in the original). Again, the authorial duo combines two distinctive methodologies to provides the readership a clue to how to deal with fundamentalism and how to move modern societies towards dialogue.

At the very beginning of the book, in Chapter 1, the authors, prior to the definition of fundamentalism, provide two crucial insights, both regarding something they call rather vaguely “extreme theories” – apparently a proxy for fundamentalism. The first one is that people, in situations of failure related to those theories, will not admit their failure, and will not admit their error and change course. Rather, “disconfirmation turns into confirmation. Failure, it is argued, was due to lack of sufficient rigor in executing the policy” (p. 5). Stalin’s intensification of the class struggle when no opposition was visible is a chilling reminder of this way of thinking. The second insight is linked to the previous one. “When people adopt extreme theories, they discover dangers that justify extreme actions. That is because such theories teach a way of viewing the world that [...] reveals only confirming evidence” (p. 5).

The reader understands that “extreme theories” are nothing but fundamentalism, though this is not explained by the authors. One way or the other, they explain that fundamentalism is not necessarily linked to politics, as there is “market fundamentalism”, specified as the approach that “insists categorically, and on a priori grounds, on deploying market solutions everywhere economically possible” (p. 6). Whatever “economically possible” may mean, the authors go one step further and dismiss market fundamentalism as “it also applies market models to disciplines and areas of life remote from economics. These models are offered not as a contribution to another

discipline, but as its replacement” (p. 6). The reader suspects that this is aimed at Gary Backer and his contribution to economics (Gary S. Becker 1976). Some twenty pages later in the book (pp. 24-25) this conjecture is confirmed. The problem with this attitude is not whether the authors agree with Becker’s findings, but their misrepresentation of his methodological approach. First, Becker used economics methodology in his research, not “market solutions”. Second, Becker’s contribution to some areas of research is not replacement but an alternative approach to the study of specific phenomena. The title of his seminal work in economic theory of crime “Crime and Punishment: An Economic Approach” (Becker 1968) vividly demonstrates that Becker suggests only one possible approach – “an economic approach”, not “the economic approach”, let alone “the approach”. It is just a competition between different methodological approaches (economic or other) and may the best win. The most important point and possible source of confusion created by the authors is that fundamentalism, according to the content of their book, is about normative, rather than positive judgments. Their statement about categorical thinking, perhaps, the reader may ponder, another synonym for fundamentalism, demonstrates this confusion: “Categorical thinking admits no compromise and allows no correction in light of results” (p. 6). Well, contrary to normative economics, there is no compromise in positive economics: either the findings are true, or they are false. The findings can and should always be debated, can be rejected, modified, and changed, but at the end of the day the question is always are they true or false. And Becker’s contribution to economics is (almost) entirely positive. He is hardly a market fundamentalist¹.

What should be the role of great literature in confronting fundamentalism? Well, “the realist novel presumes the irreducible complexity of individual psychology, culture, society, and ethical questions. The finest novelists [...] offer readers marvelous experiences in non-fundamentalist thinking. [...] If we allow them to teach us to think more complexly, we can address many other questions more wisely” (p. 9). Well, it is difficult to argue that reading Fyodor M. Dostoevsky’s masterpieces will not make a person wiser (though with significantly different marginal wisdom from one person to another, in some cases close to zero), so the reader wonders do we really need a book to confirm such a proposition.

Much more enlightening is Chapter 2 of the book, in which the origins of the term fundamentalism are traced to American pamphlets, published between 1910 and 1915 in a series called “The Fundamentals”. The authors of the pamphlets, according to Morson and Schapiro, defended “what they took to be the most basic Christian beliefs, including the inerrancy of Scripture” (p. 12). The term fundamentalism itself is traced in the book to Curtis Lee Laws, editor of the Baptist paper the *Watchman Examiner*, who coined the term in 1920 and who defined fundamentalists “as those who ‘do battle for the Fundamentals’ of the faith” (p. 14).

Moving away from the Protestant fundamentalism, which is greatly appreciated by the reader, the authors specify three main traits of fundamentalism as a way of thinking. The first one is certainty: the fundamentalist professes a doctrine that

¹ Other academics from Chicago School, i.e. Chicago school of economics, such as Milton Friedman and George J. Stigler, are far better candidates to be labelled as market fundamentalists (irrespective of whether they deserve it or not) because their contribution is to the great extent normative, especially Friedman’s.

provides complete certainty. The authors refer to Isaiah Berlin (1953) who distinguishes between two types of thinkers: hedgehogs and foxes. According to the authors: “Hedgehogs offer comprehensive answers while foxes raise skeptical questions. For hedgehogs, what we need is certainty, and they claim to provide it” (p. 22). So, it not unexpected that authors do not have second thoughts on who is who. “Fundamentalists are hedgehogs. Their certainty may pertain either to knowledge, to moral evaluation, or, often enough, to both. If it pertains to knowledge, all other ways of looking at things are ignorant; if it pertains to moral evaluation, they are evil” (p. 22). This is obviously the source of intolerance towards the other, created by fundamentalism of any kind, whatever the content of the fundamentalism is: religious (of all confessions), ideological, political, doctrinal, etc.

Linked to the first trait of fundamentalism (certainty) is the intriguing notion of negative fundamentalism, a concept quite distinct from scepticism. The authors portray the difference by focusing on the distinction between religious agnosticism and atheism. The second one is negative fundamentalism: God does not exist. Period. The authors offer a colourful remark: the Soviets viewed agnostics as lacking the courage to be atheists. In short, for them, (negative) fundamentalism was a virtue, like valour.

The second main trait of fundamentalism, according to the authors, is the perspicuity of truth. For fundamentalists, everything is obvious: “the world is there to be known and nothing stands in the way” (p. 39)². The world independent of our (fundamentalist) selves just does not exist, so there is no gnoseological problem whatsoever. As the example of this approach, the authors refer to Joseph Stalin, the grandmaster of Bolshevik fundamentalism, who explained in his masterpiece *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* that Soviet philosophy insists on the uncompromised knowability of the world and so is “contrary to idealism, which ... does not believe in the authenticity of our knowledge, does not recognize objective truth” (p. 41). What happened to those who did not recognize the “objective truth” during his reign has been recorded both in historiography and realist novels.

The third fundamentalism criterion, according to the authors, is that there must be a foundational text or revelation. Religious fundamentalists do not have a problem of choice: whether it is the Bible, especially the New Testament, the Qur’an, or the Torah, just to mentioned a few, is predestined. For Marxist-Leninists it is the scriptures of Marx, Engels and Lenin, and the incumbent ruler, like Stalin, may be added. The main point is that all these texts are inerrant. In religious fundamentalism the origin of the text is divine revelation, whatever the specific method of that revelation has been applied. In secular fundamentalism, with no God, the founding text, like Marx’s *Das Kapital*, “is usually held to be ‘science’, a word used to mean not a continually improving body of knowledge but, on the contrary, an unchanging guarantor of Truth. So understood, the ‘science’ of secular fundamentalists is essentially mystical” (p. 50).

² This is also true of the Bible, i.e. the New Testament. For the fundamentalist, there can be no doubt what the Bible says. As the authors point out, Protestantism originated and defined itself in terms of the principle *sola scriptura* (scripture alone, not church tradition as the highest authority on interpretation of the scripture). Taking that into account, it is not surprising that fundamentalism originated precisely in Protestantism. Furthermore, with such an origin of fundamentalism, perspicuity (of the scripture or the truth, whichever) is its inevitable trait.

The authors immediately step forward to specify alternatives to fundamentalism. One is – assertion and dialogue. The authors skilfully use the exchange between Martin Luther and Desiderius Erasmus to demonstrate the proper meaning of the terms and the difference between the two. Back to Berlin’s parable, “if Luther is the perfect hedgehog, Erasmus is the model fox” (p. 51). The conclusion made by the authors is that real dialogue, something Luther avoids, exists when the statements are provisional, to be revised in light of evidence, when the exchange is a vehicle for arriving at the truth, and a real dialogue is conducted in a spirit of concord. “Like free speech in our time, its (dialogue’s – BB) value goes beyond mere tolerance. Far from being a paltry compromise, it is, in the uncertain world of human affairs, the most reliable way of reaching better solutions” (p. 56).

Dialog and truth – the other alternative to fundamentalism – is properly linked to the previous one and the realist novel is introduced as a mechanism for if not banishing, then at least moderating fundamentalism. “The world the novelist describes consists not only of people and events, but also of points of view about people and events” (p. 71). The reader can perhaps add that in the realist novel there are many dialogues, exchanges of points of views, like the dialogue between Ivan and Alyosha Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and that Dostoevsky does not advocate the views of one of his characters or the other. As the authors point out: “There is no place in the realist novel for the sort of absolute statements found in the Bible, because, in the novel, every truth is someone’s truth” (p. 72). Novelist truth is inherently – dialogic.

Chapter 3 of the book is about political fundamentalism and its consequences, embedded in the title “Divided We Stand” and subtitle “The Politics of Hate”. The authors point out that disagreement is what a healthy democracy is all about. In opposition to that stands political fundamentalism: “a vision of the political world in which all goodness and truth lie on one side” (p. 77). Ironically, within political fundamentalism, that truth, as described in Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*, can change, for some pragmatic, even trivial reason – but with harsh consequences for the one who stays put. “You turned out to be wrong, which means your position was objectively counterrevolutionary and therefore worthy of death” (p. 78).

According to the authors, democracy is dependent on the idea of legitimate disagreement. “It gives a strong meaning to the concept of *opinion*” (p. 83, italics in the original). Legitimate disagreement (with free speech to announce it) has a substantial instrumental value: it enables humanity to learn from mistakes, basically John Stuart Mill’s argument in favour of free speech, which the authors subscribe to. Contrary to that, (political) fundamentalists believe that their views are infallible. Accordingly, the reader concludes that an exchange between extremists will not be a search for the middle ground, let alone the truth, nor bring anything else but the effort to pursue the other side in the “right ideas” or to undermine the other side if it cannot be convinced. That was exactly the job of AGITPROP (agitation & propaganda) during the communist period. To make their position stronger, the fundamentalist claims that their arguments are scientific. As the authors points out: “This is why it is so dangerous to believe (as

many have) that their political ideas are *scientific*” (p. 85, italics in the original)³. The reader perhaps concludes that free speech, with fundamentalism dominating the political scene, produces an outcome quite disparate from the outcomes of democracy. This concern is confirmed by the surge of populism in the recent years in countries with free speech, which is perhaps augmented in the era of fast electronic communication and social networking. The high tide of antivaxxers, QAnon supporter, 5G accusations and other conspiracy theories, and their rather wide acceptance, is evidence of that disparity. Alas, the authors are silent about it.

What is the way out of political fundamentalism? Well, read *Anna Karenina*, according to the authors, because: “Tolstoy examines not just *what* people believe, but also *how* they believe, and he distinguishes between those who truly think from those who arrange to remain comfortable with their position” (p. 101, italics in the original). The problem with this recommendation is threefold. First, the people who have read the novel and appreciated these insights are generally not involved in politics or they do not support the fundamentalists in any way. Second, modern day political fundamentalists hardly read anything, let alone realist novels. The reader is not quite convinced that all the members of the Taliban cabinet in Kabul these days have read the Qur’an. And the reader is positive that people like Donald Trump will stop short of reading the title of any novel, neglecting even the name of the publisher, let alone the first paragraph in the first chapter. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it is very highly likely that all the Bolshevik leaders, Lenin and Stalin included, have read the most important Russian realist novels; it was part of their education. And yet, reading Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev and Gogol did not prevent them from being some of the most extreme political fundamentalists in human history⁴. If reading realist novels has any effect to political views, then it is perhaps only a necessary, but not sufficient condition for diluting fundamentalism.

Chapter 4 of the book, properly titled “Price and Prejudice”, which according to the subtitle is about “Economics and the Quest for Truth”, is actually about market fundamentalism – a term coined by George Soros (1998). The authors admit that Soros does not explicitly define the term, so they try to help him by claiming that “he means it to apply not to a general preference for market solutions, but to a categorical commitment to them deduced from first principles and impervious to counterevidence. Market fundamentalists, as he describes them, believe their conclusions to be certain, because they are based on a hard science” (p. 130). Well, it is difficult for a trained economist to comprehend what hard science is. And what is its distinction from soft science. A trained economist knows that economics is a science because economic theory, based on working assumptions, produces hypotheses that are falsifiable in the

³ Communist propaganda pointed out that socialism is scientific and one of the proofs for this science character was the very fact that Albert Einstein had written an advocacy article titled “Why Socialism?”, in favour of socialism (Albert Einstein 1949). With Einstein’s impeccable scientific credentials and him generally being considered a genius, this was a public relations breakthrough for the claim that socialism is, or at least must be scientific.

⁴ A cynical view would be that Bolsheviks reading of the realist novels, this time Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*, produced Shigalyev (a minor character in the novel) as a role model, due to his words, quoted by the authors “there can be no solution of the social problem but mine” (p. 115).

Popperian sense, i.e. that they can be refuted by empirical testing. Not a great start of the chapter, at least for a trained economist as the reader.

But then, as in a good play, things suddenly start to improve. The authors begin to deal with important issues. “If market fundamentalism is a mistake, so is a failure to understand the benefits of markets” (p. 136). Furthermore, they refer to a story that a chair of the humanity department of a US university declared: “We reject the false choice based on the notion that resources are limited” (p. 136). Trained economists are appalled by such a statement, but the authors, experienced in dealing with academics in humanities, are not surprised with such a way of thinking. Nonetheless, they rush to point out that there is an economic imperative to allocate resources as efficiently as possible in order to address a society’s needs. The authors move one step further and claim that: “Efficiency is also a moral imperative. No matter what one’s goals, waste should be avoided” (p. 137). And the expert witness invited by the authors to support this insight is – Anton Chekhov.

“Chekhov’s stories and plays dramatize sheer waste, opportunities for kindness that are simply neglected. In the economy of things or personal relations, waste may be the greatest tragedy and is in itself immoral. Much waste comes from the refusal to acknowledge the necessity of trade-offs” (p. 138). In *The Cherry Orchard* Madame Ranevskaya and her family who have spent a lifetime squandering resources, now must at least choose between having their estate sold at auction to pay the mortgage, or accepting the suggestion of Lopakhin, a merchant, who proposes to save estate by replacing the orchard with summer cottages for tourists. “But the family dreamily refuses to acknowledge that they simply must make a choice. [...] Instead of preserving something, they lose everything” (p. 139). What a lecture on disregarding the basic concept of opportunity costs and inevitability of trade-offs – not in economics, but in the real life.

The Ranevskaya family syndrome is shared by the contemporary fundamentalist. According to the authors, they have more in common than just the idea that the elites are bad. From the radical left to the far right, they often reject the application of basic economics, as if the ideas like “scarce resources” and “trade-offs” are a conspiracy of the wealthy to defraud others. As the authors point out, the very idea of assessing costs as well as benefits becomes suspicious to the fundamentalist. Just occupy Wall Street and everything will be sorted out – milk and honey will start to flow!

For the fundamentalists, it is all or nothing. “It is a rejection of trade-offs: we either get it *absolutely* right or not at all. This is what fundamentalist thinking is all about” (p. 147, italics in the original). Obviously, not for Dostoyevsky. In his novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan asks his brother Alyosha if, to eliminate the suffering of millions, it was necessary to sacrifice one innocent child, would he do it? The authors remind the reader that “the millions saved from death and torment include millions of children” (p. 147). Alyosha’s choice, with Ivan’s cordial approval, is that he could never build human happiness on the bones of an innocent child.

Obviously that Alyosha/Ivan’s choice could be a matter of ethical debate, i.e. who is moral: “the one who would let earth and everyone on it perish, or the one who would tolerate some injustice to preserve it?” (p. 148). Nonetheless, it is far more important that Dostoyevsky, not only in this dialogue but in this chapter of the book (“The

Brothers Make Friends”) points out to hard trade-offs. As the authors emphasise “Trade-offs of this type are what economics is about, and, by rejecting the economic way of thinking, these problems don’t magically go away” (p. 148).

After the crescendo in the previous chapter, the anti-climax follows in Chapter 5, about religion. The reader is puzzled by essentially a patchwork of everything and anything, without a clear aim of the chapter, let alone a plan how to achieve it. Much more relevant information about relations between religion and fundamentalism is provided in the introductory chapter of the book, which focused on defining fundamentalism.

Nonetheless, in this chapter, there is an interesting insight, demonstrating its incredible heterogeneity. “A recent scholar of Soviet history has argued that a key factor in the ultimate collapse of Russian Communism was precisely the Russian classics, which everyone knew and whose fundamental values were radically at odds with those of Bolshevism” (p. 198). Be that as it may, one should keep in mind that the Russian classics, as already pointed out in this review, were most likely well known to all creators and practitioners of Bolshevik fundamentalism. And Russian classic authors are, of course, not responsible for the ways their readers digested the books and the lessons they took away.

It seems to the reader of the reviewed book that reading Dostoevsky’s novel *The Idiot* provides both the ground, i.e. the material, and incentives for every reader to become, or at least wish to become a better person. Again, it depends on the particular reader whether that opportunity will manifest itself. Dostoevsky already has done his part of the job.

Chapter 6 is about – literature. To the disappointment of the reader, it is not clear what the author aimed to accomplish with this chapter: it is poorly organised and many of insights are just those already mentioned in the previous chapters. Advocating reading the classic works of realism, the authors point out is that the reason for it is “Because the realist novel shows far better than any argument why the great fundamentalist systems cannot begin to comprehend the complexities of life” (p. 240). Nonetheless, the reader, following the very definition of the fundamentalism provided by the authors, is convinced that fundamentalists are not interested in life’s complexities, nor do they have any intention of comprehending them, among other things because this undermines certainty, one of the three definitional traits of fundamentalism, i.e. it undermines fundamentalism *per se*. Hence, reading such novels would be a Chekhovian waste for the fundamentalist.

As to other people, what can be accomplished by reading great realist novels? The authors, at least for themselves, have no second thoughts “nothing teaches more about the human world than the best of fiction. When you read a great novel and identify with its characters, you sense from within what it is like to be someone else. [...] Understanding real people is critical in politics and in economics, as in any other discipline” (p. 242).

Well, definitely not in astrophysics, a cynical reader would remark, but the message that the authors sent is far more important. A trained economist would reformulate their insight as that the realist novels enable readers to acquire information on the preferences of real people, and accordingly the incentives they have for their behaviour,

but the problem lies in the simple truth that these preferences differ from one person to the next. Realist novels do not provide any estimates about the representative preferences of the population, which are relevant for economic policies, or the distribution of distinctive preferences within the population. Economic policies are universal, i.e. they are public goods and affect all the people; bespoke economic policies, tailor made for each individual and effective only for them, are not available. Hence, knowing the preferences of Rodion Raskolnikov, the lead character in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* is hardly relevant for the formulation of economic policies. The other two problems with Raskolnikov are that his preferences in the novel are not stable (there is no time consistency, in economic jargon), with Sonya Marmeladova being the agent of change, and that his preferences revealed in the book are not quite relevant for the economic policies that are to be formulated.

The final chapter of the book is about a path forward. It is not, fortunately, a blueprint for coping with fundamentalism nor a manual for its dismantlement. It is a collection of thoughts that can be useful to the readers for formulation their own strategy of coping with fundamentalism, or at least avoiding being a fundamentalist, or clearly recognising one when they appear. "In a democratic society, politics is not about purity but about adjudicating among multiple overlapping and conflicting interests" (p. 279). In short, anyone in politics who claims that they are absolutely right should be taken with a pinch of salt.

A trained economist fully endorses the insight on opportunity costs, where the authors specify being "wary of anyone who proposes solutions without enumerating the costs. In the real world, but not in the thinking of fundamentalists, there are always trade-off" (p. 279-280).

An interesting suggestion by the authors (perhaps predominantly for policy making) is "Let principles become maxims, which do not guarantee a right answer but remind us of similar cases and earlier insights to consider" (p. 280). Policy makers should keep an open mind about it.

The book ends with reference to one of the Chekhov's short stories, *Enemies*. This was the cherry on the cake. It was only the lack of empathy and arrogance that made the characters of the story enemies. All that was not unavoidable. Nonetheless, in Chekhov's own words: "The egoism of unhappy was conspicuous in both. The unhappy are egoistic, spiteful, unjust, cruel, and less capable of understanding each other than fools. Unhappiness does not bring people together but draws them apart" (p. 287).

Notwithstanding Chekhov's insight, which is the essence of wisdom, it is questionable whether it is a ground for generalisation in the way the authors do: "The most deeply held social and political convictions derive not from economic self-interest, nor from rational evaluation of alternative policies, but from condescension experienced as insult. It is a lesson well worth contemplating today" (p. 287). The problem with this view is not only that it is false as a positive statement, at least because it cannot explain the source of the early Protestant fundamentalism (who and how insulted them in the US), but also in its implicit normative statement – that fundamentalism is justified because of some previous experience of insult. For example, Islamic fundamentalism is justified because of the Muslim experience of insult by Christians and

Westerners. This is not to say that this was the intention of the authors, but the quoted insight can be read in this way.

Much more wisdom is contained in the authors' insight about empathy, or rather the lack of it, in explaining the rise of fundamentalism. "Chekhov's great themes – the supreme importance of empathy and the terrible consequences of waste – shape a lesson in how social and political hatred are formed" (p. 288). The problem is that many people, political and economic agents, and decision makers simply do not have empathy. On the policy front, it is rather hard to think about an empathy generating program. And even if such a program starts, some people, especially among decision makers, will be thoroughly resistant to it.

The final insight of the book is a bit activistic "The better we understand the fundamentalist mindset, the more likely it is that we can banish its practitioners to the 'dustbin of history', where they belong" (p. 288). Irrespectively of to what extent the Bolshevik phrase is appropriate, even as an irony, in such an insight, the book does not specify the methods by which those who should be banished should be moved to the dustbin: no policy whatsoever has been recommended by the authors. Perhaps the fundamentalist practitioners are here to stay, irrespectively of the last insight of the book.

This book is not an easy reading endeavour. It is not well organised, not well edited, too many insights are repeated, some parts of the book are even not well written. But this is a joyful reading stuff. The sheer joy of reading such a thought-provoking book is more than compensation for all its downsides, regardless of whether the reader agrees with all of the insights and recommendations.

As to the book's effects regarding undermining fundamentalists, it is a very informative guide for readers for their own self-examination – when searching for traces or debris of fundamentalism in their own personality. If these traces are found and removed, and if empathy is embraced as a pragmatical day-to-day attitude towards other people, some of the readers will perhaps become better persons after reading this book. Not a bad result for a book.

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