

THE MANY FACES OF FANATICISM

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ABSTRACT. The article presents fanaticism as a universal phenomenon that can manifest itself in almost every sphere of human activity. Although many expressions of fanaticism are negative and destructive, some can be almost neutral or even positive. The article describes the characteristics of the fanatic and explains some factors that predispose people towards fanatical behavior. It also highlights some differences between fundamentalism and fanaticism which can sometimes seem quite similar. Describing fanaticism in its multi-faceted nature, the article aims to show the reader that fanaticism is a much wider phenomenon than sometimes thought.

Key words: *fanaticism, fanatic, fanatical behaviour, fandom, fundamentalism, ideology, propaganda, mass movements.*

On April 14th 2010 the lead singer and bassist of gothic metal band Type O Negative, Peter Steele (birth name Petrus T. Ratajczyk), unexpectedly died. Being only 48 years old, his death came as a shock to many of his devoted fans. Three days later a video was published on Youtube.com which claimed to be the last interview with Steele but it turned out to be an imposter making fun of the deceased musician.¹ As Steele was known for his self-deprecating sense of humour, the video would probably not have caused any kind of outrage if it had come out during his lifetime. Now, though, it was a case of defaming an idol. The video was met with a barrage of negative comments which, along with some death threats to the author, included among other violent wishes the following comments (original quotes): “May you lose a dear friend to an agonizing death”, “PLEASE HANG YOURSELF and post – tonight”, “I look forward to hearing about your horrible accident when Karma comes knocking,” etc. At the same time, there were also several fans who thought that Peter Steele himself would have appreciated the joke.

For Mario Balotelli, a young football star, the spring of 2010 was similarly problematic. As a member of the Italian top football club Milano Inter he managed to anger fans by throwing his football top on the ground just after the UEFA Champions League game. Some fans loosened the screws of his car

¹ **Jonathanfallen.** Peter Steele of Type O Negative last interview. YouTube. 17 April 2010. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNf6wiP01f4>>, (accessed March 26, 2011).

wheels in revenge. Fortunately Balotelli noticed this before getting into his car, possibly saving his own life in the process.²

In March of 2001 the armies of the Taliban set out to demolish sacred statues in Afghanistan because they considered them idols. Among other vandalized statues, some very famous ancient Buddha statues in Bamiyan Province were almost totally demolished.

What do all of these expressions of violence have in common? They were more or less the result of human fanaticism. According to legend, Czech reformer Jan Hus, while being burned at the stake, saw an elderly woman adding brushwood to his pile and exclaimed, “*O sancta simplicitas!*”³ However simple fanatical people might seem to us, sometimes their actions can have very serious consequences. What exactly is this fanaticism that makes people react in ways they normally never would?

About the meaning and usage of the term

The terms *fanaticism* and *fanatic* come from the Latin adverb *fānāticē* (frenziedly, ragingly) and the adjective *fānāticus* (enthusiastic, ecstatic; raging, fanatical, furious). The adjective is based on the noun *fānum* (place dedicated to a deity, holy place; sanctuary, temple). We also find some similarity to those terms in the verb *fānō* (devote).⁴ Combining together the noun *fānum* and adjective *fānāticus*, the term *fanatic* is understood as, for example, “a temple devotee who is orgiastic, inspired, frantic or frenzied”.⁵ Professor of Political Studies Dominique Colas who has studied tensions between civil society and fanaticism has described fanatics quite succinctly, deriving from the etymology of the term: “*fanatic* is always *profaning*: attacking the temples, polluting the relics, defying the taboos, and cursing the gods of the “other” – shitting [*sic*] in the pope’s tiara, a commonplace in anti-Catholic engravings of the Reformation period.”⁶ From explanatory dictionaries we can take for example Webster’s which describes a fanatic as “a person with

² Haige värk: Interi poolehoidjad üritasid tappa klubi ründajat. Delfi. 02 May 2010. <<http://sport.delfi.ee/news/jalgpall/maailm/haige-vark-interi-poolehoijad-uritasid-tappa-klubi-rundajat.d?id=30798683>>, (accessed March 26, 2011).

³ Latin quote meaning, ‘*Oh, holy simplicity!*’.

⁴ Terms and their translations are taken from Kleis, R; Torpats, Ü; Gross, L; Freymann, H. *Ladina-eesti sõnaraamat*. Tallinn: Valgus, 2002, lk 442.

⁵ Hughes, M; Johnson, G. *Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age*. London & New York: Frank Cass, 2005, p. 1.

⁶ Colas, D. *Civil Society and Fanaticism: Conjoined Histories*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 5. In this quote among other “fanatics” there is a reference to the iconoclasts during the Reformation period who destroyed paintings and sculptures in Catholic churches; for that reason Luther, Melanchton and others called them fanatics in their writings.

an extreme and uncritical enthusiasm or zeal, as in religion or politics”⁷ Psychologist of religion Tõnu Lehtsaar has defined the term *fanaticism* as “[t]he pursuit or defence of something in an extreme and passionate way that goes beyond normality. Religious fanaticism is defined by blind faith, the persecution of dissents and the absence of reality.”⁸ Lehtsaar has explained *extreme* and *extremity* in this context as the following: “Differing from balance. Extremity does not indicate something different in principle but different in degree, intensity, frequency or importance. Extremity does not indicate qualitative but quantitative differences.”⁹ According to Christopher C. Harmon fanaticism “involves great energy, single-minded direction and a lack of any restraint or moderation. It is characterised by extremes of effort and fervour of intensity.”¹⁰

The book “Civil Society and Fanaticism: Conjoined Histories” by Dominique Colas gives an overview of the usage of the term *fanaticism* in a historical perspective. I will only use a few examples from it here. According to the book, Cicero (106–43 BCE) and Juvenal (c. 60 – c. 140) used *fānāticus* as a synonym for *superstitious* or *raving*.¹¹ In 17th century England religious visionaries were stigmatized with the terms *fanatic* and *enthusiast*.¹² English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) understood the term fanatic as someone who is *intolerant* and this is also one main meaning of the term today.¹³ During the same period in continental Europe it designated an aggressive, religious zealot.¹⁴

At the same time it needs to be pointed out that the labelling of dissidents and those who differ with terms like “fanatic” or similar is often strongly related to the prejudices of those who apply such labels. A partisan can appear to be a terrorist in the eyes of his/her enemies but in the eyes of his/her supporters they are a freedom fighter, this also often being the case with “fanatics”. Furthermore, someone who labels particular groups as “fanatics”

⁷ **Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language**. New York: Gramercy Books, 1996, p. 697.

⁸ **Lehtsaar, T.** Äärmusliku usugrupi psühholoogia. Tartu: Tõnu Lehtsaar kirjastus, 1997, lk 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ **Harmon, C. C.** Fanaticism and Guerrilla Warfare in the Late Twentieth Century. – Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age. M. Hughes, G. Johnson (eds.). London & New York: Frank Cass, 2005, p. 101.

¹¹ **Colas** 1997, p. 372.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁴ **Hughes, Johnson** 2005, p. 1. Zealots were members of a Jewish patriotic party during the first century CE who resisted the Roman occupation and used terror and violence to achieve their goals. They had a leading role in the first Jewish-Roman War (66–70) and their fanatical rebellion against the Romans led to the destruction of Jerusalem by Roman forces. From their name comes the noun *zealot* which has become a synonym for *fanatic*.

may happen to be a fanatic him/herself, as was the case with Luther. He considered iconoclasts and activists of the Peasant War (1524–25) as fanatics, yet in his writings he himself called for the destruction of the Catholic church (in 1520), for bloodily suppressing the peasant revolt (in 1525) and for setting fire to Jewish synagogues and schools (in 1543).¹⁵

The tendency to regard as fanatics those whose beliefs and practices differ should not discourage us from using this term. Suicide terrorists and their supporters can think their motives highly virtuous and moral when they blow themselves up alongside “enemy” civilians. But this does not mean that we should give up using the term *terrorist* and replace it, for example, with milder terms like *martyr*, or *freedom fighter*. So it is with the word *fanatic*. The term *terrorist* has certain specific meanings and in a similar way we can point out at least some hallmarks that differentiate fanaticism from, for example, the normal enthusiasm that can preoccupy anyone when they engage in a hobby or some other compelling activity.

The term *fanaticism* has sometimes been used in too broad a sense in common usage and even in scientific literature, so it has become a label even for activities that could be defined more adequately by other terms. For that reason, some claim that the term *fanatic* is useless.¹⁶ Tõnu Lehtsaar has encountered similar problems when mapping religious fundamentalism. He admits, that “[f]or a better understanding of fundamentalism this term needs to be more precisely defined”.¹⁷ So he asks: “How to discern between devotion, fanaticism and fundamentalism?”¹⁸ In my opinion it is not wise to throw out the existing “baby” with the “bath water”, but to try to describe this “baby” even if this description is not always differential because its traits sometimes coincide with other “babies”. One of my aims when preparing for this article was to chart the nature of fanaticism and distinguish it from, for example, fundamentalism that has also evolved from the original narrow term into something much wider.

When speaking about *fanaticism* it is necessary to mention the “relative” of the term *fandom* that has been used primarily in the sphere of entertainment.

¹⁵ Colas 1997, p. xix.

¹⁶ Bryan, D. Fanatics, Mobs and Terrorists: The Dynamics of Orange Parades in Northern Ireland. – Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age. M. Hughes, G. Johnson (eds.). London & New York: Frank Cass, 2005, p. 154. Bryan questions the usage of the term *fanatic*, because he thinks that this is not a useful term for describing behavior. He claims that we like to use it as a label for violent human acts that we don’t like to consider a part of the “normal” social world. So he asks, are all soldiers willing to die for their country not fanatics because there is “excessive enthusiasm” and “uncritical devotion” in their behaviour, qualities that are often ascribed to fanatics? (*Ibid.*).

¹⁷ Lehtsaar, T. Usulisest fundamentalismist religioonipsühholoogi pilguga. – Usuteaduslik Ajakiri, No. 59, 2009, lk 30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Devoted supporters of a sport, athlete, sport club, game, musician, band, actor, or other similar attraction are usually called *fans*. A fan can be loyal and devoted without having a fanatical attitude but the inclination towards fanaticism is sometimes also found specifically among fans. For example, there is nothing exceptional about a fan trying to identify her/himself with the object of her/his fandom by wearing the same style of clothes or by associating her/himself with her/his idol with special tattoos. At the same time we can take as an extreme example a fan of the now deceased pop musician Michael Jackson who has undergone several surgical operations in order to look like his idol.¹⁹ In this case we are probably dealing with fanatical identification with the object of devotion. There is also an intersection with religious fanaticism here when we think, for example, about ritual crucifixions in the Philippines.²⁰ In team sports fan culture is characterized, for example, by wearing clothes with club symbols and by attending if possible every match the club plays. But fandom takes on fanatical proportions when the fans can no longer tolerate the idea that the other teams can also have their fan base, when they start to use violence against players and fans of opposing teams or when all of their life and self-identity is focused around the avidly-supported club. So there is nothing odd when fans feel anger if someone from their favourite club goes over to another club, but the situation takes a more serious turn if s/he is beaten up or receives death threats from fans because of his/her decisions.

Before we look at the characteristics by which fanatics are usually described we need to consider the following:

1) Fanaticism is a universal phenomenon. Even if fanaticism has been most commonly associated with religion and politics it can be found in almost every sphere of human activity including social activism, the military and entertainment (for instance, some so-called *football hooligans*²¹). Certain social environments can induce fanatical behaviour (for example, some religious sects, totalitarian regimes, intense fighting situations during war, etc.) but it seems that fanaticism is mostly related to certain personalities, which means that some people are more predisposed to fanaticism than others. Of course this does not imply that a person with a so-called “calm nature” cannot be shaped

¹⁹ Hills, M. Michael Jackson Fans on Trial? “Documenting” Emotivism and Fandom in *Wacko About Jacko*. – Social Semiotics, Vol. 17, No. 4, December 2007, p. 471.

²⁰ Although disapproved of by local churches, every spring at Easter some volunteers let themselves be whipped and then nailed to crosses for a few minutes, trying to imitate the suffering of Jesus.

²¹ Not every “football hooligan” is a fanatic. Some may find a football stadium the “perfect place” for releasing their violent emotions but violent behaviour is not synonymous with fanaticism, although in some cases the latter can induce the former.

into a fanatic. What makes fanaticism universal is that it is related to human traits so it can be found in almost any activity where people are involved.

2) Fanaticism is not always a negative phenomenon. There is an expression that has been ascribed to Voltaire (although he never said this in his writings, but it fittingly summarizes his attitude toward freedom of speech): “I disapprove of what you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” Here we do not find the conviction of having absolute truth that characterizes the fanatic, yet there is a fanatical fighting attitude for freedom of speech in this saying. In a similar manner someone can fanatically defend someone else’s rights and could even be ready to die for them. Harmon gives an example of the religious fervor of an ascetic or spiritual teacher that can be considered peculiar to his contemporaries but can be seen as an example of a virtuous person for future generations.²² Thus fanaticism can be either good or bad depending on how and for what reasons someone acts fanatically²³.

²² Harmon 2005, p. 101.

²³ As a positive example, we can take the French philosopher and social activist Simone Weil (1909–43), who displayed her fanaticism through the need to participate in the suffering of others. (When taking her as an example, I focus only on those circumstances where she manifested her extreme behaviour and I leave out other important facts in her biography.) While being naturally inclined to extremes, she already showed strong feelings of empathy towards the suffering of others during her childhood when she gave up her share of sugar during the First World War, at the age of six, to send it to the soldiers who suffered at the battle front. When she was acquiring her qualification as a teacher of philosophy in the École Normale Supérieure she voluntarily lived in extreme austerity and poverty, offering her bed to poorer students while she slept on the floor. When she worked as a teacher of philosophy, over and above her vocation she laboured with the unemployed in stone-breaking, sharing her income with them and fighting for their rights with the result that her career as a teacher was adversely affected. In 1934 she worked as a factory worker to experience the toil and suffering of those with whom she laboured. As she was physically weak, this year in the factory fatigued her both in body and soul and affected her whole life. It was in the factory where she learned to see herself as a slave similar to those with whom she voluntarily shared her fate. During the Second World War she was active in the French Resistance. In 1942 she went to the United States where she visited a Church in Harlem with a black congregation on a regular basis. She was the only white person there and this was her way of identifying herself with people who were outcast and oppressed. When returning to Europe she hoped and wished to join some hard and dangerous mission where she could sacrifice herself usefully to save lives or commit sabotage. She never got the opportunity. At that time she refused to eat any more than official food rations in occupied France. In 1943 when she was hospitalized due to tuberculosis and ill health she continued her voluntary starvation because she thought that eating would mean betraying her countrymen. This was noted as one cause of death when she died on August 24, 1943 in a sanatorium. So it was her *idée fixe* to support those who suffer and are oppressed and to avoid personal comfort, and by comfort she meant even elementary living conditions. Her constant desire was to prefer other people and their well-being to her own and to focus on the needs of others. (Perrin, J-M; Thibon, G. Simone Weil as We Knew Her. New York: Routledge, 2003; Tomlin, E. W. F. Simone Weil. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954).

3) Fanaticism is primarily a behavioural trait. For instance, religious fundamentalism can manifest itself in particular acts (for example, certain parents who are fundamentalists may raise their children strictly and use corporal punishment when their child has gone to the cinema), but not always (for example, parents who believe that going to the cinema is a sin, but they do not punish their child when s/he has attended the cinema because they hope that with God's help their child will turn from his/her "evil ways" and stop watching movies). The origins of fanaticism are based in the mind but it always manifests itself through actions. For instance, a fanatical conservationist is not only convinced that a certain corporation is responsible for polluting the natural environment but s/he actively calls upon others to boycott the corporation and is even prepared to commit acts of terrorism to sabotage the company.

Main characteristics of a fanatic

We will now turn to descriptions of a typical fanatic that are given in literature on this subject. Before we look at those characteristics it is important to remember that noticing only one or a few of the following characteristics in a specific person is not enough to make hasty conclusions about his/her personality. But we can argue that a person who has many of the following traits is probably inclined more or less towards fanaticism. Let us also keep in mind that fanatics are not only those who carry all those traits mentioned below. Some fanatics, for instance, have no specific ideology (only the conviction that they "must" do what they do) that could fuel their fanaticism but their zealous behaviour goes beyond sanity. For example, I might decide to prepare and write the present article within a week. As this preparation includes working with enough relevant material, I decide not to waste my time on "useless" sleeping and food preparation and limit myself to 3 hours of sleep, abundant coffee and junk food. But in my fanatical passion I do not separate the world into "good ones" and "evil ones" and do not fight with some cosmic enemy (except if this enemy is actually the creeping feeling of fatigue). Nevertheless I act fanatically and switch myself off from everything else while devoting myself to one single goal – finishing the article within one week. That is why it is not always justified to include all the following traits when portraying a fanatic, but nevertheless those characteristics can help us to identify fanatical thinking and behaviour.

***Unwavering conviction about the absolute
rightness of one's understanding***

According to Calhoun, “fanaticism [is not] merely a strong commitment to a worldview, ideology or belief system.”²⁴ Many people are devoted to a certain religion, ideology or political system without being fanatics. In Calhoun’s view, fanaticism is not the same as merely exhibiting extreme enthusiasm either. Men and women of principle are considered confident and not fanatic. Besides, those who fight selflessly and tirelessly for social change are considered heroes. If someone has strong convictions it does not mean that s/he would think about her/himself as infallible. What does differentiate fanatics from people who are confident in a positive way is that they are absolutely certain their understandings are absolutely correct.²⁵

Perkinson sees fanatics as dogmatic people whose theories, ideology and proposed solutions are absolutely right in their own eyes. At the same time fanatics avoid critical thinking when they ignore or are not able to see those “arguments, facts, or consequences that refute his solutions”.²⁶ According to Klassen, the religious fanatic takes his/her scripture as a “paper pope”, that needs to be taken as is, without any need to think about how to interpret or apply it considering present-day and human experience. S/he believes that the text of the scripture is able to answer all questions.²⁷ There is a meeting point between religious fundamentalism and fanaticism: the scripture is taken as the infallible Word of God and in cases where it contradicts scientific discoveries or everyday experiences the written text is trusted and scientific facts and experience are considered erroneous or are totally ignored.²⁸ Doctor of

²⁴ **Calhoun, L.** An Anatomy of Fanaticism. – Peace Review, Vol. 16, No. 3, 2004, p. 349.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 350–351. As for criticism of Calhoun, it seems that she approaches fanaticism too narrowly in her article, seeing only negative traits in it. We can consider fanatics in a positive sense – even those who heroically and altruistically fight for social change and are even ready to die, if needed, for their mission.

²⁶ **Perkinson, H. J.** Fanaticism: Flight from Fallibility. – ETC: A Review of General Semantics, Vol. 59, No. 2, 2002, p. 172.

²⁷ **Klassen, M. L.** Bad Religion: The Psychology of Religious Misbehavior. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2007, p. 23–24.

²⁸ A clear example of such thinking is found in so-called “Prosperity Theology” which has its origins in the United States. It disapproves of knowledge received by the senses (“Sense Knowledge”) if this contradicts with “The Revelatory Knowledge” received from the Bible. So it states that Jesus’s death on the cross also brought deliverance from sickness; a believer who has fallen ill should receive this “knowledge” by faith and should not pay attention to the symptoms of sickness in his/her body. Therefore it is not proper for a believer to say that s/he is sick, but to confess with his/her mouth that s/he is already healed so that the healing might manifest itself physically. Even more extreme is Christian Science (founded by Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910)) which considers sickness illusory and in order to get healed we need to forsake this illusion. To give an example of religious fundamentalism’s opposition to science, we may consider different views on how the physical world and humans came into being.

Philosophy Leonidas Donskis, while relying on George Orwell's concept of nationalism, considers that fanatical faith goes hand-in-hand with fanatical distrust of reality where obvious facts are denied and illusions are preferred. Therefore, in the fanatic's opinion, reality that does not confirm or support his/her convictions must be rejected.²⁹ According to Professor of Sociology Charles Selengut, some psychological tension that comes from the incompatibility between an ideal and reality can be related to certain manifestations of fanaticism. While many believers adapt their religious ideas and theology to surrounding reality and scientific discoveries, some are not willing to make such compromises in their theology. That is why they try to subject reality to their religious views and can even use violence for this purpose, if need be.³⁰

The same scheme has been eloquently described by Eric Hoffer who analysed the evolution of a fanatical *True Believer* among mass movements.³¹ His thoughts were written 60 years ago but they are still relevant and suitable for describing, amongst other things, the fanatic's claims about his/her absolute rightness. According to Hoffer, a *True Believer* relies on knowledge taken from scripture³² and draws conclusions based on it instead of drawing conclusions from his/her own experiences or observations. Relying on proofs derived from the senses and reason is considered heretical. Therefore the fanatical communist, for example, refuses to believe critical arguments or proof about the Soviet Union and s/he is not discouraged when facing the country's cruel reality. A *True Believer* closes his/her eyes and ears to the facts that, in his/her opinion, are not worthy of being seen or heard. S/he does not fear dangers or obstacles and s/he is not disturbed by contradictions because s/he denies their existence. His/her infallible doctrine helps him/her to deal with the displeasures and uncertainties of the surrounding world. Such doctrine isolates him/her from him/herself and from the realities of the surrounding world. The efficacy of the doctrine is not measured by its content

For instance, a religious fundamentalist is certain that the world is only about six thousand years old and all discussion about human evolution is false because God first made humans (and other species) in a "completed way" according to the Bible. Such beliefs turn fanatical when their proponents start to fight actively and aggressively for the replacement of evolution theory with creationism in the school curriculum.

²⁹ **Donskis, L.** George Orwell: fašismi ja vihkamise anatoomia. – Akadeemia, Vol. 15, No. 8, 2003, lk 1604.

³⁰ **Selengut, C.** Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003, pp. 64–84.

³¹ **Hoffer, E.** The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2010. The book was first published in 1951.

³² Considering the context, the word "scripture" should be taken here in a broader sense than just a collection of holy texts that belong to one religion or another. Following Hoffer's thought, we can also include those "scriptures" used in certain political ideologies (for example, the writings of Marx and Engels and their interpretations in the Soviet Union).

or meaning, but by its certainty – by regarding it as an absolute truth. Likewise, the efficacy of the doctrine does not depend on its comprehensibility, but on its credibility. When someone believes that s/he holds the absolute truth, s/he also believes that s/he has all the answers. True doctrine is considered the answer to every problem in the world.³³

Perkinson argues that human development stops when an individual ceases to be critical towards her/his creation (ideas, knowledge, social arrangements) and starts to take them as infallible and perfect. In that way s/he turns into a fanatic who does not pursue perfection any more but believes that s/he has already achieved it.³⁴ According to Calhoun, a fanatic abandons the scepticism that is intrinsic to democracy. Democracy assumes that everyone can make mistakes and no-one is free of error. Democracy also means a plurality of opinions that indicates the need for dialogue.³⁵ Just as fanaticism can endanger democracy, it can also endanger the smooth functioning of civil society. According to Colas, fanaticism opposes civil society because the latter supports tolerance, the free market and freedom of thought.³⁶ He argues that totalitarianism that hates civil society can be seen as a modern form of fanaticism.³⁷

But the fanatic is more than just a narrow-minded and dogmatic person. S/he tries zealously and by all means to impose her/his convictions on others.

Seeking to impose one's convictions on others

According to Colas, a fanatic does not need to discover or find the truth. S/he is led by total self-assurance. A faith community of fanatics is certain about the absolute truth of the words of their leader and they are convinced they are the only ones authorized to interpret those words of truth. They are proud to be chosen and hate those who do not care about the truth. The latter are regarded as doomed. This fanatical community tries to subject everyone to their truth, be it through religious or political ideology. Deviation of the world from this truth is considered an accident that must be corrected. Fanatics are ready to sacrifice themselves for their ideas. They attack the disorder of the imperfect and unholy world.³⁸

Perkinson writes that it is intrinsic to fanaticism to believe in the supremacy of its ideas and culture, for which reason it wants to impose them on others

³³ Hoffer 2010, pp. 79–82.

³⁴ Perkinson 2002, p. 172.

³⁵ Calhoun 2004, p. 350.

³⁶ Colas 1997, p. 6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

and suppress or eliminate those who have a different opinion.³⁹ According to him, “a fanatic is authoritarian. When he has power he tries to impose his answers on others. /.../ And when people become fanatics, when they try to become God, they frequently make life a hell for other people.”⁴⁰

Calhoun, who sees fanaticism as a threat to democracy, argues that while for democracy it is common to have a dialogue and possibility to express one’s opinions, the fanatic tries to smother the plurality of opinions by any means so that his/her “truth” might prevail. If they do not succeed with verbal methods then violence and killing is used. By killing those who have different opinions the possibility for dialogue and debate is eliminated. When killing individuals fear is also sown amongst others.⁴¹ Here we see a meeting point with terrorism whose one function besides attracting public attention to one’s needs⁴² is to sow (among enemies) as much fear and panic as possible⁴³.

According to Psychologist Albert Ellis, radical fanatics who don’t hesitate to use acts of terror are, amongst other things, characterized by their belief in their opinion as the ultimate truth at the expense of other people’s lives. They may believe that if the views of their opponents are dominant in society then these people have a corrupting influence and must be stopped at any cost. They may also believe that they are the only ones who can save the human race by their religious or political ideology, so all those who hinder this mission should be eliminated. Additionally, they can have faith in the afterlife and believe that by their deeds they will obtain eternal bliss, while eternal damnation awaits their opponents.⁴⁴

Dualistic world-view

Destructive fanaticism goes beyond the “moderate” distinction between “us” and “them”. Usually, in-groups (“us”) are viewed in a positive light and

³⁹ **Perkinson** 2002.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁴¹ **Calhoun** 2004, p. 351.

⁴² See for example, **Juergensmeyer, M.** *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. 3rd ed., revised and updated. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003. Juergensmeyer calls those acts of terror symbolic because often their aim is not to have as many victims as possible but to create as much publicity as possible (for instance, in the mass media) for their positions. So, for example, the suicide attacks of radical Muslims are often meant to draw attention to their resistance to the threat of secularization and, in the case of Palestine, to draw attention to the situation of Palestinians.

⁴³ Latin word *terror* means “fear” and “fright”.

⁴⁴ **Ellis, A.** *Fanaticism That May Lead to a Nuclear Holocaust: The Contributions of Scientific Counseling and Psychotherapy*. – *Journal of Counseling and Development*, Vol. 65, No. 3, November, 1986, p. 148. Still, there are fanatics who might try by extreme methods to save the souls of those who are in “error”. So it was believed, for instance, during historical witch hunts, that burning witches purifies their souls and saves them from damnation.

out-groups (“them”) are vilified or regarded with scepticism. But in fanaticism such distinction exceeds all moderation. “They” become enemies who are not simply bad but even embody “cosmic evil”. So the world does not simply consist of people with their virtues and vices, it becomes a battlefield between light and dark, good and evil. In literature on this subject it is sometimes referred to as a *Manichean dichotomy* or *Manichean construction*.⁴⁵

For example, traditional Christianity makes a distinction between Christians and “the world” (the latter is seen as being under Satan’s rule). In Islam there has historically been division between the “House of Islam” (*Dar al-Islam*) where Muslims live and rule and the “House of war” (*Dar al-Harb*) that needs to be Islamized either peacefully or, when unsuccessful, with war. When both of those beliefs are taken to extremes a peaceful mission turns into violence and blood where either coldly-calculated violence or fanatical fervour are used to reach their goals.⁴⁶ We can also turn to the two most famous 20th century totalitarian regimes – National Socialism in Germany and Bolshevism in the Soviet Union – to see that both of them frequently used violence since both had a clear “enemy” who needed to be destroyed. Whilst the former targeted Bolsheviks and Jews, the latter, relying on the concept of class struggle, targeted “enemies of the people”. Conspiracy theories are also suitable for such mindsets. For a fanatic, Donskis notices, there is satisfaction in such conspiracy theories that ascribe all the bad to the “community, whom we hate”.⁴⁷

Fanatical traits have also been noticed in the former President of the United States George W. Bush Jr. when he decided to attack Afghanistan (in 2001) and Iraq (in 2003). Calhoun has written an article in which she sternly criticises the decision to attack sovereign Iraq in 2003, a decision which contravened international law. When making this decision, international opinion was ignored, which means in principle that democratic values were forsaken and President Bush acted similarly to despots who rely only on their own convictions when making decisions. The Manichean dichotomy of such politics was laid out in the argument: “you’re either with us or with them (i.e.,

⁴⁵ For example, Calhoun 2004; Nystrom, C. L. Immediate Man: The Symbolic Environment of Fanaticism. ETC: A Review of General Semantics, Vol. 59, No. 2, 2002. The term comes from Manichaeism, which taught that the world is a battleground of opposites: light-darkness, good-evil, spirit-matter, etc.

⁴⁶ For an example of a victim of fanatical violence in Christian history we may look to the Greek female pagan scholar Hypatia (died in 415) who lived in Alexandria and was rumored to be responsible for the conflict between the local prefect and Christian bishop. Those rumors lead an angry Christian mob to seize her, after which she was taken into a local church where she was brutally tortured, killed, and burned. (Socrates Scholasticus. NPNF2-02. Socrates and Sozomenus Ecclesiastical Histories. Christian Classic Ethereal Library, p. 293 <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc3.pdf>>, (accessed April 22, 2011).

⁴⁷ Donskis 2003, p. 1614.

the terrorists)”. So there was no opportunity left for scepticism that is the basis of democracy and does not accept categorical propositions but instead applies critical thinking. By his actions and arguments, President Bush claimed to be infallible.⁴⁸

The same topic has been treated by Frances Hill who comprehensively studied the Salem witch trials.⁴⁹ The author draws several parallels between the authorities responsible for those trials and the neoconservative government of G. W. Bush Jr. She claims that, just like Puritan witch hunters back in the 17th century, those in power in the United States at the beginning of the 21st century sought to strengthen their authority by exploiting existing fears. This fear originated in the former case from occult hysteria and in the latter case from the terrorist attack of 9–11–2001.⁵⁰ The ideologies of both governments had been in the background for about a decade or more but the events of 1692 and 2001 respectively helped them to gather new strength and provided an occasion to carry out their agendas.⁵¹ According to Hill, in both cases those governments saw in their opponents a deadly enemy who wished to destroy the best and most moral society.⁵² In both cases violence was seen as the only answer and total victory or defeat the only solution. Both governments believed that God was on their side in their fight against evil. In both cases the dominating factors were not sound mind and clear thinking but “panic, simple-mindedness, and religious and nationalistic fervor”⁵³. In both cases some leading figures reaped political and personal rewards from the public panic. In both cases citizen’s rights and freedoms were sacrificed and suffering was inflicted upon countless innocent people.⁵⁴ Similarly, the politics of both governments were led with intolerance and by faith in their own righteousness.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ **Calhoun** 2004. Calhoun concludes her article with sarcastic but fitting words: “When in the fall of 2002 President Bush ridiculed the United Nations as a “debate club”, he revealed for all the world to see his complete lack of comprehension of what democracy is. Bush may know how to pronounce the word “democracy”, but he has no idea what it means” (p. 356).

⁴⁹ The Salem witch trials (1692–1693) started from Salem Village and spread over Essex County in Massachusetts.

⁵⁰ **Hill, F.** *Such Men are Dangerous: The Fanatics of 1692 and 2004*. Hinesburg, VT: Upper Access, Inc., 2004.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 18. So-called witchcraft happened in community that was named a “city on a hill” by one of its founders, indicating that the place was meant to serve as an example to the whole world of how to live. The terrorist attacks of 2001 were called an attack not only against America, but against the whole of civilization and democracy (*ibid.*, pp. 15, 17).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ **Hill** 2004. In this way, the Puritans who led the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1692 were certain of the absolute righteousness of their religious understandings and practices. Since the

Self-sacrificial devotion to the goal

There are no fanatics without this trait. For example, someone may have a fixed idea that the Sun moves around the Earth and they despise scientific discoveries that prove the contrary. So s/he believes that with similar kindred spirits they constitute an enlightened minority that fiercely opposes the rest of humanity that is seen as blinkered by their erroneous views. But s/he only becomes a fanatic when s/he starts to impose his/her fixed idea on others, demands that schools must teach not a heliocentric but a geocentric view and is willing to sacrifice not only his/her time and money but even his/her life to make his/her ideas dominant in society.

Self-sacrificial devotion to a goal is common to all fanatics, whether their fanaticism be connected with religion, politics, the world of entertainment, hobbies or something else. Therefore, the fanaticism of a sport fanatic, for instance, might not be rooted in any special ideology but it manifests itself in self-sacrificial devotion to a sport or club even if in the long term this could harm his/her health or cause trauma, for example, when getting into a fight with fans of an opposing team.⁵⁶ A fanatical computer gamer may not consider a highly addictive game the best ever made but his/her fanaticism focuses on self-sacrificial gaming that deepens the addiction and affects his/her health up to the point where it can even cause sudden death.

According to Ellis, fanatics have made a tyranny of compulsions out of their needs and wishes which forces them to get what they desire no matter the cost.⁵⁷ So the religious or political fanatic needs to win others over to his/her faith or ideology and to change the world according to his/her ideals. A fanatical computer gamer may give up food, sleep, work, social relationships, etc., to achieve the aim of the game. A fanatical athlete may seek to be as good as the top athletes through extreme training and chemical substances even if it leads to serious failures in his/her health. A fanatical admirer of a pop star may spend all her/his savings and even borrow money to visit a concert of her/his favourite artist in some other country if there is no chance of the concert taking place in her/his homeland. In all those cases rational thinking and common sense are pushed aside. It would be irrational to think that the whole

very beginnings of the colony in the first half of the 17th century residents had the obligation to confess only the official creed. Dissenters and those who shirked this obligation were punished, exiled or hanged. Dissenters were associated with the devil and there was the conviction that someone is either "with us or against us". Nevertheless, dissent (for instance, Quakers) could not be totally stopped and during the time of the witch trials the community was also forced to tolerate other creeds (*ibid.*, pp. 19–22, 43).

⁵⁶ Again we need to remember that not every type of fanaticism is thoroughly negative. Self-sacrificial devotion to a sport may not be harmful to others. However, although it can improve results in sports in the long term it can cause health problems.

⁵⁷ Ellis 1986, p. 148.

world might be subjected to one person's beliefs and ideologies; computer games can be paused for more important things and resumed afterwards; top results in sports are not achievable for everyone and sport should promote good health first and foremost; an alternative to attending a live concert could be watching it on DVD, thereby saving a lot of money. But the fanatic wants it all and wants it as quickly as possible.

Nystrom has described fanaticism as “the triumph of reflex over reflection”.⁵⁸ Reflexive reaction to stimuli is a natural human trait from birth but the ability to reason and reflect develops later. This development is important because we need to learn to modify our reactions towards our surrounding reality. This develops our self-control because we learn to critically analyse situations and defer our responses to stimuli.⁵⁹ In her article Nystrom describes the development of the so-called *Immediate Man* and relates its personality with fanaticism. The *Immediate Man* wants everything here and now. As s/he demands fast and immediate solutions to his/her problems, this leads to “his contempt for history, his Manichean construct of the origins of problems, his intolerance for complex and long-term solutions, his mystical faith in the solving and *saving* powers of technique and technology, and his deep mistrust of reason.”⁶⁰ So from this concept we can deduce that a fanatic does not reflect but reacts immediately and this reaction is often irrational. Somewhat similar is the definition of fanaticism by Doctor of Philosophy Barrie Paskins who calls it “misplaced simplicity”.⁶¹ He takes as an example a family that prepares to visit relatives for a weekend but one family member announces resolutely that his favourite team has a game at the same time, meaning that he cannot go anywhere. In Paskins's opinion this announcement is simple and clear, but at the same time misplaced because it does not fit into the context of familial cooperation.⁶² Basically, we can see in this situation the domination of resolute reflex over analytical reflection.

If a fanatic wants to reach his/her goals s/he does not hesitate in using extreme measures and is not ashamed to be considered bizarre by others. That is why religious fanaticism, for instance, can manifest itself in destroying fictional literature or albums with secular music if these are seen as stumbling

⁵⁸ Nystrom 2002, p. 175.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 178. Nystrom sees in her contemporaries (the article was first published in 1977) a manifestation of *Immediate Man* and brings as an example of quick and instant solutions popular ““instant” food chains and “instant” weight-loss programs, “instant” success and “instant” beauty books, “instant” therapies and /.../ “instant” religions” (*ibid.*).

⁶¹ Paskins, B. Fanaticism in the Modern Era. – Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age. M. Hughes, G. Johnson (eds.). London & New York: Frank Cass, 2005, p. 7.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

blocks that get in the way of the devotional life of a believer.⁶³ A religious fanatic may almost feel him/herself to be all powerful, believing him/herself able to control the weather⁶⁴, heal the sick, ignore the laws of nature (for instance, imitating Jesus walking on water like in the story in the Bible) and even conquer death by trying to raise the dead. Faith gives immense confidence to a fanatic. If s/he fails to accomplish what s/he claims to be able to do then all sorts of explanations are used. For example, it is explained away by invoking a lack of faith or by claiming God had different plans in mind. If the former is considered responsible then this faith is seen as some substance that needs to be “developed” enough to succeed the next time.

Political fanaticism is similar in nature to its religious counterpart, even if here its basic ideologies are rather secular or quasi-religious. Hughes and Johnson have pointed out that National Socialists in Germany and Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union proved that fanaticism can characterize not only some “minorities” but also those majorities in power. Therefore the dominance of fanaticism over rational logic is also shown in the behaviour of Germany and Japan at the end of the Second World War when the result of the war was almost clear.⁶⁵ Colas considered that the motivation behind the Bolshevik revolution was hatred for their enemies, which ended up causing great terror. The Bolsheviks were fanatically devoted to their goal which also meant a willingness to sacrifice themselves and to die for the cause.⁶⁶

⁶³ See for example, **Saard, R.** Tallinna vaim: peatükk XX sajandi Eesti karismaatilise liikumise aja- ja mõtteleost. Tallinn: published by the author, 2010, lk 11. Here we can see some parallels with the iconoclasts to whom I referred in footnote 6, even if they did not destroy their own property. It is worth noticing that such behaviour is usually motivated by the wake-up calls of others and seldom if ever originates purely from the believer’s own conscience. For example, I recall a sermon by Albert Türnpu from the first half of the 90s who was at that time pastor of the Word of Life Church in Tartu. In his sermon he preached about how evil secular (rock) music is and called on people to “repent” from it. As a result of this sermon, I destroyed almost my entire collection of vinyl records and wiped all secular music from my cassette tapes.

⁶⁴ This example is taken from my own experience during an evangelical campaign in the first half of the 90s. It was raining but we refused to take cover. Instead we “rebuked” the rain “in Jesus’s name” and believed that this would make it stop. As a result we got our clothes wet and the rain remained, but this did not dampen our conviction about our “God given” ability to control the weather.

⁶⁵ **Hughes, Johnson** 2005, pp. 3–4. It is useful to keep in mind the importance of social environment for the spread of fanaticism. It is probably hard, if not impossible, to “school” someone into fanaticism if s/he has no predisposition towards it. But certain social environments can facilitate the manifestation of fanatical traits in those who would act “normally” under usual conditions. As for the tools of propaganda in molding a nation and especially the youth, see for example, **Paavolainen, O.** Külalisena Kolmandas Reich’is. – Loomingu Raamatukogu, No. 37–40, 2009, where the writer describes his experiences during a visit to Germany in 1936.

⁶⁶ **Colas** 1997, p. 323.

Fanatics are therefore willing to give their lives to reach their goals. We need to consider this willingness in the context of other characteristics that we have already described. That is why we cannot automatically consider all soldiers who are ready to die with an enemy in battle as fanatics. Instead they might rather be patriots or those who believe that retreating may cost their lives anyway.⁶⁷ Military fanaticism is hard to define. In the words of Christopher C. Harmon, war itself consists of the most extreme efforts and emotions. He thinks that it is hard to differentiate between fanaticism and war because the latter brings up primitive feelings of anger and can drive people to extremes.⁶⁸ Professor of Psychology Donald G. Dutton in his book that quintessentially describes and analyses extreme violence has referred to the theory developed by Richard Solomon according to which killing, which is at first psychologically very unpleasant, can later become rather pleasant. This does not happen to everyone who takes part in massacres targeted at civilians in a war situation, but for some it becomes so gripping that it leads to the enjoyment of violence and can even induce ecstasy.⁶⁹

One specific phenomenon is religious or political martyrdom. Whether it can be described as fanatical behaviour or not depends on the situation. Both in Christianity and in Islam, martyrdom has been motivated by ideas

⁶⁷ This last argument is valid both for the troops of Japan and the Soviet Union during the Second World War. The Japanese were seen as fanatics, but this claim has been strongly contested. The reason why many of them fought seemingly “fanatically” could be due to the fact that retreating, surrendering or allowing themselves to be imprisoned was considered illegal. Therefore their fiery zeal to fight could have been motivated by fear of the Allies, by fear of capital punishment after deserting and by fear of disgracing their families (see for example, **Trefalt, B.** *Fanaticism, Japanese Soldiers and the Pacific War, 1937–45. – Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age.* M. Hughes, G. Johnson (eds.). London & New York: Frank Cass, 2005, pp. 33–47). Soviet troops were motivated to fight in a similar way; besides hatred of the enemy, by fear of being shot which was the lot of those who retreated, escaped or deserted (see for example, **Merridale, C.** *Ivani sõda. Punaarmee aastatel 1939–1945.* Tallinn: Tänapäev, 2007). In the case of German troops, patriotism was probably mostly stirred by political propaganda. For instance, the training camps of 16–17 year-old *Hitlerjugend* fighters were decorated with the slogan “We are born to die for Germany”. They were told that they were the elite youth of Germany who must fight for the honor of the fatherland and if they manifest enough strong will they can change the course of the war. They were also told that they must take revenge for their dead relatives who died in the Allies’ bombing raids. The motive of fear was also present: they were told that the Allies shoot all SS-fighters who are imprisoned. In conclusion, the *Hitlerjugend*, compared to other German troops, preferred to die rather than be imprisoned (see, **Hart, S.** *Indoctrinated Nazi Teenaged Warriors: The Fanaticism of the 12th SS Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend* in Normandy, 1944. – Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age.* M. Hughes, G. Johnson (eds.). London & New York: Frank Cass, 200, pp. 81–100).

⁶⁸ **Harmon** 2005, p. 101.

⁶⁹ **Dutton, D. G.** *The Psychology of Genocide, Massacres, and Extreme Violence: Why “Normal” People Come to Commit Atrocities.* Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 2007, pp. 116–118, 121, 139.

of heavenly rewards. In times of early Christianity, a Christian could lose her/his life if s/he refused to make sacrifices to the emperor who was considered a god. Probably for many Christians who gave their lives in that way, the basic reason for that was not their personal fanaticism but deep devotion to their faith that forbade worshipping other gods. But since martyrdom quickly became something to be admired in early Christianity, it needs to be said that at least some Christians sought their martyrdom quite enthusiastically, if not fanatically. Somewhat different is the situation with today's suicide martyrs in Islam who give their lives voluntarily. But even there it depends on the individual, whether his/her incentive to commit an act of terror comes from deep devotion to the cause or from fanatical fervour (for example, if the act is committed for revenge). According to Juergensmeyer, factors that make such acts easier for suicide terrorists are dehumanization and demonization of the enemy with strong stereotyping, so it is simpler to kill dehumanized individuals because they belong to the hated community.⁷⁰ Juergensmeyer also points out that for bystanders such violence (terror) of the minority against a stronger opponent might seem a hopeless pursuit, but for the participants among terrorists it at least gives a feeling of power. Besides, dying for the cause can be seen to be a better solution than living in a situation that is considered frustrating and humiliating.⁷¹

Besides him/herself, a fanatic is willing to sacrifice even those who are close to him/her to show his/her devotion to the "holy cause", or if s/he happens to be the leader of a nation then even his/her people can be sacrificed rather than holding negotiations or surrendering.⁷²

Devotion itself is more important than the object of that devotion

This last characteristic I describe here can also be seen as a relatively universal trait for all fanatics. Even if the fanatic may deny it, the devotion itself is more important to him/her than the object of that devotion.

Donskis, who in his article analyses Orwell's concept of nationalism, finds that while ideological fervour remains constant the object of it may change. So, for instance, somebody may admire the United States but later become disappointed and turn to its opposite. Donskis evokes the example of H. G. Wells "whose friendliness towards America was substituted with hostility and later became also love for Russia".⁷³ Or to take a few examples from religion, it

⁷⁰ Juergensmeyer 2003, pp. 176–178.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁷² Hoffer 2010, pp. 89, 125. Similar fanatical traits can be seen for example in Adolf Hitler.

⁷³ Donskis 2003, pp. 1599–1600.

is not a great wonder if a convinced Satanist becomes a zealous Christian, a fundamental Christian turns into a fighting atheist, or vice versa.

Similar logic is valid for mass movements, too. Eric Hoffer claims that when people are ready to join mass movements they are ready to join any of them no matter the doctrine or program. For instance, before the National Socialists came to power young people in Germany were ready to join with either the Communists or the National Socialists; Jews in Czarist Russia were ready to join with either the revolutionaries or the Zionists. Readiness to join any mass movement does not end when someone has already devoutly joined one. Transforming from Saul to Paul is not a rare phenomenon. For example, Hitler saw the potential in German Communists to become National Socialists (but not in the petty bourgeoisie Social Democrats or in functionaries of trade unions).⁷⁴ According to Hoffer, it is important for a fanatic to cleave passionately to something no matter what it is. That way every cause can be turned into the holy cause. Fanatics cannot be dissuaded from their cause by referring to reason or morality. S/he is afraid to make compromises and cannot be made to look critically at the truthfulness or rightness of his/her cause. But s/he can very easily turn passionately from one cause to another. S/he cannot be convinced, but s/he can be “converted”. The most important factor is his/her passionate devotion, not the object of the devotion.⁷⁵

Hoffer also mentions that different fanatics are only seemingly representative of different sides of a coin. Essentially they are all on the same side and their opposites are actually moderate. Fanatics regard other fanatics with suspicion and they are quite ready to assault each other, but in reality they are closely related. “They hate each other with the hatred of brothers. They are as far apart and close together as Saul and Paul.”⁷⁶ In Hoffer’s words, it is easier

⁷⁴ **Hoffer** 2010, pp. 16–17. Donskis gives a similar example according to which the German Communists would rather join with the National Socialists, because they were seen as lesser enemies compared to the Social Democrats (**Donskis** 2003, p. 1600).

⁷⁵ **Hoffer** 2010, pp. 85–86.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86. The apostle Paul actually bore both names: Jewish Saul and Roman Paul even if, by the saying, the first is used to describe him up until his conversion to Christianity and other thereafter. When systematizing the characteristics of a fanatic for the present article this person was outlined before me and it made me look more closely into his personality with the help of The Acts of the Apostles and his letters in The New Testament. In this way we can actually notice all five traits that may describe the fanatical personality: 1) unwavering conviction of the absolute rightness of his understandings – the phrase “my gospel” (my emphasis – K.M.) (The Letter of Paul to the Romans 2:16) which is “the gospel” (my emphasis – K.M.) (for example, The Letter of Paul to the Galatians); 2) seeking to impose his convictions on others, accompanied by an authoritative leading style and strict disapproval of teachings that contradicted his own (for example, *ibid.*), and 3) dualistic world-view, for example, against the Judizers who stressed the importance of keeping Jewish Law in order to be saved (*ibid.*); 4) self-sacrificial devotion to a goal which can be observed if reading his descriptions about how much he has suffered for preaching the gospel (for example, The

for a Communist to become a Fascist, Chauvinist, or Catholic, than a sober liberal. The opposite of religious fanaticism is not fanatical atheism, but mild cynicism that does not care about the existence or non-existence of God.⁷⁷

The primacy of devotion over the object of devotion illustrates the universal nature of fanaticism. That is why fanaticism is not only limited to the religious or political sphere, but encompasses almost every field of human activity. For the fanatic it is important to be zealous about something or somebody. If s/he gets disillusioned, disappointed or bored with the object of devotion, s/he soon needs to find another object with which s/he wants to be associated.

After getting acquainted with some of the traits that characterize fanatics, we may now ask what predisposes certain people towards fanatical thinking and behaviour?

Some factors that favour fanaticism

In the following I do not claim to provide an exhaustive answer to the question “What predisposes some people towards fanatical behaviour?” because there exist more factors than this article can present. I have already noted that fanaticism can be related to certain personality traits, so some people are more prone to fanaticism than others. I have also already touched upon the importance of a suitable ideology and tools of propaganda in inducing a fanatical mindset. Whilst reading literature on fanaticism we need to consider some other factors that may favour fanaticism.

According to Donskis, one source of fanaticism can be social changes where old values have lost their meaning but new ones have not yet been developed. So people search for theories and convictions that may help to restore their sense of security. At the same time, the modern world becomes an enemy to those who feel threatened by it because it instils incertitude and hesitation, and with its ethical universalism and secular humanism it cannot fully satisfy anyone who seeks confidence.⁷⁸ Hoffer’s *True Believer* also complains about the decadence of Western democracy because in his/her view the people who live in democracies are too soft, oriented toward pleasure and too selfish to die for anything or anybody, be it a nation, God or a

Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians 11:23ff) until his readiness to die for the gospel (Acts of the Apostles 21:13); 5) devotion itself is more important than the object of that devotion – the popular saying about turning from Saul into Paul derives from his conversion that turned a fierce persecutor of Christians into an equally zealous apologist and proselytizer of Christianity (references are taken from **Piibel**. Vana ja Uus Testament. Tallinn: Eesti Piibliselts, 1997).

⁷⁷ **Hoffer** 2010, p. 86. According to Hoffer, fanatical “True Believers” may honor those similarly rigid people who belong to their opposite camp, rather than moderates (*ibid.*, pp. 162–163).

⁷⁸ **Donskis** 2003, pp. 1609–1612.

“holy cause”. Unwillingness to die is for the *True Believer* a sign of moral decadence. In his/her view, those people who do not have any “holy cause” are without character or backbone.⁷⁹

Eric Hoffer describes the fanatical *True Believer* as a frustrated individual whose frustration impels him/her to join emerging mass movements.⁸⁰ Such individuals wish to deny their “self” because they see themselves as worthless failures and their lives as empty and meaningless. This lost self-confidence is replaced with faith in a “holy cause”; because of their presumed unworthiness they start to exalt their nation, religion, race or “holy cause”. Such a “holy cause” gives their lives new meaning, worth, and essence. They try to prove to themselves and others the worth of the “holy cause” through their willingness to die for it if needed.⁸¹ According to Hoffer, “[t]o the frustrated a mass movement offers substitutes either for the whole self or for the elements which make life bearable and which they cannot evoke out of their individual resources.”⁸² A mass movement may offer to such unsatisfied individuals the sense of power to strive for great changes. This sense of power must combine with faith in the future. Hoffer offers as an example the generation of the French Revolution, the Bolsheviks and the National Socialists. The first believed in the omnipotence and unrestricted capabilities of human reason and therefore had exaggerated self-confidence. The second had blind faith in the omnipotence of Marxism to create the new world. The third had faith in their Führer and their new methods of warfare and propaganda.⁸³ At the same time, mass movements offer a sense of belonging and community to the frustrated which they need more than a doctrine.⁸⁴

Therefore, according to Hoffer, a fanatic can be uncertain in him/herself but have confidence in what s/he believes or considers sacred. From his/her blind faith in what s/he passionately clings to s/he derives his/her whole virtue and strength. S/he sees him/herself as a defender and promoter of the “holy cause”, being willing to die for it as a proof of its worth.⁸⁵ When denying his/her “self” s/he gets rid of personal responsibility and this may lead to accepting all kinds of cruelty and evil that a mass movement may fuel.⁸⁶

Offering quick and easy answers may also favour the fanatical mindset. Nystrom, whose *Immediate Man* we described previously, claims that one

⁷⁹ Hoffer 2010, pp. 162–163.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 7–16.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

culprit for such a mindset can be television. As a visual medium, it creates non-analytical, immediate, present-focused, unreflected and emotional reactions. The solutions on screen happen quickly and often disable intellectual engagement.⁸⁷ As an example of preferring simplified solutions, Craig M. Cameron writes about the United States battling against Japan in the Second World War where American troops justified their own fanatical means by considering the Japanese as fanatics and tried to offer easy solutions to complicated problems with technology (for instance, air bombing Japanese cities).⁸⁸

Perkinson noticed that fanatical thinking can be cultivated even by the educational system if it offers largely pre-conceived answers and solutions to the questions and problems of humanity. Therefore such education may produce people “who “know,” who “believe,” who “accept” the present answers and solutions as true, good and proper. They are dogmatic, obscurantist, and authoritarian.”⁸⁹ Of course it can teach study methods and how to reason but it may then turn people into dogmatists in methodology. Even in education there is a need to develop critical thinking because all knowledge comes from humans, but humans are imperfect. Therefore this knowledge and these methods should not be seen as perfect and ready to be adopted without criticism, but as something in which we can discover shortcomings and for which we can suggest better (although imperfect) responses and solutions.⁹⁰

According to Harmon, fanaticism can also be induced by interest toward exciting “action”. Such a pursuit, in Harmon’s view, brings together the professional criminal, the racer and the revolutionary partisan. He says that “[f]anatical attraction to activity at the expense of thought can have great appeal to persons of certain types, including the nihilistic, the immature and the young.”⁹¹ So according to Harmon older people look more for stability than the drama and action that fascinates younger people. Armies and partisan troops know this and use it in their recruitment strategies.⁹²

Harmon also brings in the motive of revenge which can bring about fanatical acts. This motive can have different causes: many female partisans or suicide fighters have experienced rape by government forces but revenge can

⁸⁷ **Nystrom** 2002. A famous French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has also finely described the influence of television in mobilizing people, constructing a reality and disabling analytical thinking (see, **Bourdieu, P.** Televisionist. – Loomingu Raamatukogu, No. 30, 1999).

⁸⁸ **Cameron, C. M.** Fanaticism and the Barbarisation of the Pacific War, 1941–45. – Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age. M. Hughes, G. Johnson (eds.). London & New York: Frank Cass, 2005, pp. 48–62.

⁸⁹ **Perkinson** 2002, p. 173.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ **Harmon** 2005, p. 105.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 106.

be a response to corruption, injustice or neglect. Hatred of foreign occupation forces can also stir up military fanaticism.⁹³

But as said above, those predisposing factors of fanaticism described here are only some of many. A more systematic approach would require deeper study than the present article can offer.

Fanaticism and fundamentalism

Finally we need to return to a question asked at the beginning of this article: how to discern between fanaticism and fundamentalism?

The term “fundamentalism” is much more recent than “fanaticism” but its usage has broadened as time has gone on and it seems that this broadening has sometimes occurred at the expense of its “older brother” (i.e., fanaticism). Fundamentalism was originally a reaction from some Protestants to the success of secular science and liberal theology at the beginning of the 20th century because they were considered a threat to biblical authority. Nowadays this term is also used for movements in other religions which oppose secularism and modernization but fundamentalist traits have also been noted in secularism.⁹⁴

The sociologist of religion George Lundskow⁹⁵ has pointed out the following characteristics of fundamentalism that usually exist in conjunction with each other (some may manifest more strongly than others), so one should not consider as fundamentalist people or groups who only have a few of the following traits:

- literal (word-by-word) view of scripture. The scripture is considered infallible;
- absolute devotion to absolute truth which clearly draws a line between pure good and pure evil. This truth is considered universal and obligatory for everyone because it is ascribed to a higher force (usually to God);
- tireless efforts to impose the truth on others without negotiation or compromise;
- the pursuit to destroy evil;
- culture that is based on a cosmic battle where particular current issues become aspects of a larger battle between pure good and pure evil;

⁹³ *Ibid.* Harmon gives as an example of such occupation the situations in Northern Ireland, Palestine and Chechnya. At the same time the Jewish zealots from the first century described in footnote 14 can be a good example here too.

⁹⁴ **Kilp, A.** Sekulaarne fundamentalism. – Et sinu usk otsa ei lõpeks: pühendusteos Peeter Roosimaale. A. Saumets, A. Riistan (eds.). Tartu: Kõrgem Usuteaduslik Seminar ja Tartu Ülikooli usuteaduskond, 2009, lk 115–143.

⁹⁵ **Lundskow, G.** The Sociology of Religion: A Substantive and Transdisciplinary Approach. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2008, pp. 220–222.

- the temporal world is seen as a battleground that does not have meaning in itself but gets its meaning through certain interpretations. Success is not measured in practical terms, but in terms of emotional gratification which is derived from their own efforts. So, for example, a goal is not to create a functional society but to get the moral satisfaction derived from changing society according to their sense of justice;
- the pursuit to restore an idealized past.

Politologist Alar Kilp has narrowed the most common traits of fundamentalism into three main characteristics:⁹⁶

- dualistic view of the world as a battleground between *good* and *evil* (or bad);
- conviction that objective truth exists and only fundamentalists have certain *access* to it;
- desire to validate this truth in society, and an *intolerant* and *uncompromising* attitude towards all those who do not fit in with their views.

In short, the fundamentalist mindset is characterized by enmity towards science, reason and especially secularism. The world view of a fundamentalist is black-and-white (without any shades of gray in between). Therefore something can either be according to God's plan (or whatever is taken as an authority) or against it. The world view and lifestyle of a fundamentalist is considered universal by him/her, therefore s/he wants everyone to follow it.

When reading these characteristics of fundamentalism we notice that they largely coincide with the traits of fanaticism described previously. So the question remains: how to tell the two apart? I will make some observations in the following text.

In the case of fanaticism, fanatical ideas are not always derived from scripture. They can even be not written down at all.⁹⁷ Furthermore, not every kind of fanaticism is derived from some world view (for example fanaticism that is related to sport, the sphere of entertainment or hobbies), but fundamentalism is always based on a certain world view. The fundamentalist believes his/her world view to be imperative for everyone; while some fanatics do the same, some do not. The fundamentalist fanatic does all s/he can to impose it on others, whilst another fanatic devoted to another goal might not care much about what others believe. Not every fanatic idealizes the past and wants to restore it. S/he may pursue a future without having examples from the past. It also needs to be said that, while strongly devoted to his/her beliefs, a fundamentalist is not necessarily fanatical (in his/her behaviour) even if some fundamentalists can act very fanatically.

⁹⁶ Kilp 2009, p. 116. Italics are as in the original article.

⁹⁷ For example, consider a sports fanatic.

But the main difference is that, while fundamentalism seems to be more of an attitudinal phenomenon⁹⁸ related to a certain world view, fanaticism is rather a behavioural phenomenon (although predisposed attitudes may reinforce certain behaviour). This does not mean that fundamentalism cannot manifest itself in actions but if fundamentalism merely *may* manifest itself in actions then fanaticism does so every time.

Finally, we need to admit that while fanaticism and fundamentalism are not identical twins, in practice they are often strongly related to each other.

Concluding remarks

Fanaticism as a particular mindset and behavioural trait is always present in human society. Therefore in my opinion it is justified to talk about it. Having many faces and being a universal phenomenon, fanaticism is not limited to the world of religion or politics but can be found in almost any sphere of human activity. This is because the vehicles of fanaticism are human beings, not ideologies, even if the latter can at times induce fanaticism. Even if not every kind of fanaticism is dangerous to society, we need to be familiar with its traits to recognize those tendencies which can lead to physical or mental violence and brutality.

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⁹⁸ For instance, Tõnu Lehtsaar (**Lehtsaar** 2009, pp. 21–22) characterizes religious fundamentalism as a “way to believe”. But if we look at the aforementioned traits ascribed to fundamentalism some of them show that it is both an attitudinal and behavioural phenomenon.

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