

Domestic Fundamentalism

Whether we idealise a religion, a race, an ideology, a leader, a lover, or way of life, we are seeking to externalise our deepest fears and longings onto something other than ourselves. We see everyday how people surrender themselves and their lives to fundamentalism, leaders, flags, and strange religious ideologies. There is something in human nature that is forever seeking to submit to something bigger, beyond, or outside the self – be it a flag, an ideology, a team, or another person. This very basic human need is what breeds a suicide bomber. Everywhere we look we see evidence of how people establish their sense of importance and meaning by surrendering themselves to some cause or purpose.

This need can also be tapped for noble purposes. To see a team of men fighting for a noble cause can be inspirational. The effect that outside symbols and activities can have on the state of mind of the individual can be extraordinary. National flags, team colours, football teams, and all the associated symbols can evoke intense passion. We all seek relief from the solitary burden of our private lives in shared social experiences of seeking victory. Remember Italia 90. Or anticipate Cork doing the double. Sport has this ability to take us out of our solitary life and be part of something bigger than ourselves. In its purest form this impulse is religious in its striving. We reach for something beyond ourselves.

This impulse in us can be tapped for both noble and evil purposes – the suicide bomber and the war hero are not so far apart. Each seeking some form of victory.

However, the same forces in human nature are at work in everyday family life. In your own small world you too have a tendency to need your significance, status, and sense of importance validated and approved by those around you – by your children or by your partner. You may get this need met by either submitting to others and getting their approval or by dominating others and getting their submission. Each are ways that people seek to co-opt others into one's status and significance project.

I have a female client who controls and dominates her family by seeking their submission to her needs. Without their co-operating in relieving her of her stresses she becomes irate and angry. Like a spoilt child, she demands and expects others to give priority to what she wants. In hijacking her family like this she has co-opted them into her own fundamentalist world where she uses them to find some relief from her insecurity and anxiety.

This woman is married to a man who submits to her in a host of different ways. His philosophy of life is to “keep her happy” and if she is happy then he is happy. He measures his success in his personal life by the look on her face and his ability to relieve her of her distresses. His sense of significance and self-worth derives from his ability to attend to her needs and ward off her anger.

Both people use the other to meet needs that are, as I say, fundamentalist and quasi-religious in origin in order to relieve themselves of the isolation and burden of living.

There is not a single reader that is not prone to wanting someone else to carry the burden and responsibility of their life. We are all prone to idolising someone or degrading someone to meet this need. By making you feel small I feel big and godly. Or by making you godly I feel approved by you. Either way, I am seeking a sense of status and power by using the other person.

The elevation of the other invariably involves the degradation of oneself. Or the elevation of the self invariably involves the degradation of the other. You can see here the genesis of evil; the abuse of the self or the other in order to find some relief from the burden of living. The people-pleaser degrades herself, the abuser degrades others.

What I am inviting you to consider is that your relationships are deeply psychological and spiritual projects. You are prone always to using them to cure your innate anxiety, hunger, and isolation. Your project is exposed when you hit out in exaggerated anger at a trivial slight or when you crumble in self-doubt at some slight rejection. In these moments your deeper needs are revealed: you are as much a religious animal as you are a psychological one.

The solution to all of this is to realise that you can surrender to the God of other's approval, to the God of your control of others, or, as an alternative you can bear the burden of life with a courageous soul and a lightness of heart. In truth, everyone who comes close to the end of life realises this more and more. Angry men grow soft in old age. Submissive women get strong in later years. Your God must be one of compassion, courage, and humour. Life then flourishes.
