

## Who's Afraid of the Lion's Roar? Commentary on Grahame Thompson's 'Exploring Sameness and Difference'

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On account of those absolute and impatient ones, be not jealous, thou lover of truth! Never yet did truth cling to the arm of an absolute one. (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1999 [1911])

Grahame F. Thompson's exploration of fundamentalism and globalization through the dialectic of sameness versus difference is a nuanced and thoughtful treatment of a phenomenon that all too often is rendered in polemical terms. Thompson astutely points out that although religious fundamentalism, usually of the militant Islamic variety, is foremost in contemporary discourse, fundamentalism is less a particular *content of thought* than a *way of thinking*. That is to say, fundamentalism is a profoundly reactionary yet parsimonious way of conceiving, ordering and acting within an increasingly complex and contradictory environment. Thus, fundamentalisms abound, from intolerant strains of Islam and Christianity to the 'secular fundamentalisms' of the fringe right and left, who employ shaming, fear-mongering, intimidation, sabotage or bodily harm to cower their targets into modifying their behavior, if not their beliefs. He further exposes what could be called the 'mother of all fundamentalisms' that rode roughshod over the world in the last decades of the twentieth century, *la pensée unique* of neoliberalism, or 'market fundamentalism'. (The father of all fundamentalisms goes unnamed but remains, it should be said, patriarchy.)

Thompson's definitional specifications in this article, in addition to his previous work, enhance our understanding of the nature of fundamentalisms active in the international sphere, their potential political impact at that level, and their relationship to recent patterns of deterritorialization under the forces of globalization. His research, which is rooted in psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, is sobering in that it shatters the dichotomization between 'the fundamentalists' and 'us'. In true Freudian fashion, he suggests to the reader the somewhat uncomfortable and mildly preposterous proposition that fundamentalists are really not that different from ourselves; in fact, we are in such awe of them because we actually, deep down, *envy* them. This 'fundamentalist envy' derives from their surety and internal consistency of belief, mission and action. They are, we subconsciously

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believe, *better* than modern man—a ‘superman’ or *übermensch* of sorts, or an idealized version of ourselves.

Let us suspend judgment for a moment on this controversial assertion, and instead develop it further. My use of the term *übermensch* above is intentional. The concept, as well as the philosopher who popularized it, Friedrich Nietzsche, can in fact aid us in thinking through why fundamentalism might appear to be an antidote for those suffering from our ‘very modern pathology’ of ‘meaning deficit disorder’, in Thompson’s words. More specifically, incorporating Nietzschean concepts could carry this analysis further than Freud, and thus Thompson, have been able to go, and toward rather different conclusions with regards to fundamentalism, diversity, identity, and the desirability of the territorial state in the face of globalization.

Introducing Nietzsche, especially his *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, to Thompson’s work seems appropriate for a number of reasons. First, as the quotation at the start of this commentary elucidates, Nietzsche pursued two seemingly contradictory aims that potentially hold the key to overcoming fundamentalism: a commitment to seeking truth while eschewing and even destroying absolutes. This seems to me to go a considerable distance toward answering the conundrum posed by fundamentalist discourse identified by Thompson, when he writes, ‘Fundamentalists disavow difference in the name of sameness . . . They want, indeed insist, that everything should be the same—the same as them.’ Indeed, intolerance is predicated on idealism: ‘Chasing an “ideal” or believing in “principles” forms the basis for extremism and intolerance’, Thompson persuasively reasons. The question then arises of how one can still chase an ideal without falling into the need for certainty, sameness, and thus intolerance even of minor differences.

Nietzsche, I posit, shows us a way. His enigmatic work both champions moral relativism and unmasks systems that promulgate universal moral codes, while at the same time strives to free humankind from submission and domination through active nonconformity. At once notorious for glorifying the destructive will to power, in the last breath he calls for a child-like creativity that can construct human values anew. More specifically, Nietzsche offers a philosophical guide for how humans can surpass fundamentalism, and that is through the three metamorphoses of the spirit from the camel, to the lion, and finally to the child.

Recall that the camel is the proverbial beast of burden, a ‘load bearing spirit’ of reverent worship and of gaining strength through submission and sacrifice. The camel wanders into the wilderness in order to suffer, but while there, undergoes a second metamorphosis: the beast of burden with the will to suffer becomes the beast of prey, the lion, who instead roars out ‘I will’. The lion grows out of disenchantment with societal laws and into the fighting spirit of the wild, that of rebellion against authority, the assertion of freedom, and the will itself to dominate. Yet as aggressive as the lion may be, it cannot create new values and original forms of life. For this it must transform itself into the child: ‘Innocence is the child, and forgetfulness, and new beginning, a game, a self-rolling wheel, a first movement, a holy Yea’ (Nietzsche, 1999 [1911], p. 14). Only a child is able to embrace life in all its complexity and to create from its own will. This will is not reactive but one that flows from the depth of the outcasts’ spirit.

Employing Nietzsche is furthermore appropriate in that Freud, from whom Thompson readily draws, both admired and feared his predecessor for having prefigured much of his psychoanalytic findings. Freud in fact paid him the highest of personal complements, claiming that Nietzsche ‘had a more penetrating knowledge of himself than any man who ever lived or was likely to live’ (Jones, 1953–1957, 2: 344).<sup>1</sup> Yet he so feared the prescience of Nietzsche’s thought that he is said to have stopped studying him. That is a pity, for a thorough engagement of his work could have led Freud to a synthesis and then on to new intellectual insights the likes of which we can only begin to imagine.

Finally, and most generally, employing *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is purposefully ironic in the contemporary discourse surrounding Islamic fundamentalism. This is because Nietzsche cast none other than the *Persian* prophet Zoroaster as his own persona in this largely autobiographical meditation on the essential truths of human nature and its condition. As many have come to view Iran as a hotbed of religious fanaticism, Nietzsche's choice of seeking his own reflection in the mirror of a Persian prophet should be reason enough to give us pause before we rush to locate the roots of fundamentalism in a nation's 'ancient religion' or 'culture'.

With the above categories and justifications in mind, we can now reread Thompson's analysis of fundamentalism through what I think to be a more powerful philosophical lens, and with the ultimate aim of challenging him to reconsider his concluding prescriptions, especially with regard to re-territorialization in the face of globalization.

Thompson depicts a first facet of fundamentalism which very much echoes Nietzsche's initial category of the camel. Here idealization promotes blind faith rather than pragmatic reasoning. This type of devotion often gives rise to strong leaders who are seen as embodying desired characteristics, which in turn creates hierarchies of proximity. At the top are located a 'nobility' who respect and defer to the leader and who constitute the 'ground troops for fundamentalism and extremism', in Thompson's words. These foot soldiers are sent forth to convert the 'ignoble' to become the 'same' as them and their leader. They are thus called and willing to sacrifice both themselves but also importantly the 'other'. Fundamentalists, like the camel, are seen as being able to tolerate, endure and even invite pain, but all in the name of intolerance.

Yet next, Thompson identifies an opening, or rather a fork in the road along the path to the desert for the foot soldiers of fundamentalism, whereby the camel has the chance to metamorphose into the lion. This opportunity is located in the double meaning, and thus contradictory possibilities, inherent in the word *respect*. On the one hand, respect means deference to the leader, which undergirds fundamentalism and extremism, and thus leaving the camel unchanged. Yet on the other, when respect is oriented not exclusively toward the leader, but outward toward the 'ignoble', it connotes an active interest, an engagement, an opportunity to learn and to transform, but also to *be transformed* through social encounter and action. If this path is chosen, the beast of burden may grow to question the former authority, and my roar in defiance.

But here is where Thompson's analysis diverges from Nietzsche's categories. Seemingly frightened by the lions' (cloaked in the 1980s cultural turn's) roaring out their differences and asserting their radical identities, Thompson beckons them into domesticity. The lion's insistence on asserting difference, and the concomitant will to dominate the Other, he assures us, is a dead end street if we wish to navigate around fundamentalism. We should rather more fruitfully emphasize our sameness, and specifically the rather ambiguous task of 'arranging samenesses'.

I am unsure what to make of this. Wisely, he retreats just as quickly as he arrived at the call for arranging samenesses by declaring 'there is no already existing common sphere into which we can all tap. There is no single "cosmos" to which cosmopolitanism, for instance, would be the politically possible answer—the "globe" of globalization does not exist.' In once again defending difference, he resurrects the lion's roar. But now, which way forward out of fundamentalism? Thompson concludes by urging a lengthy 'dialogue among gods', in order to re-negotiate the terms of international and inter-religious peace, where 'the gods would need to be taken into the peace-making chamber rather than "hung up outside"', although he would seem to prefer the latter. This powwow of the gods, or better god-fearing peoples or their leaders, should be aimed at 'learn[ing] to live in a different world,' and that world will be won through tolerating and acknowledging the 'pluriversality' of the world/s in which we in fact inhabit.

But while the gods—or their spokesmen—are passing the peace pipe in these proverbial sweat lodges of inter-religious dialogue, Thompson calls for a more interim project, one that most seriously takes leave of Nietzsche's good counsel. This is to be a 'programme of re-territorializing the international . . . in the face of supposed "globalization"', which he finds to be a superior solution to both 'idealistic global cosmopolitanism' and 'interventionary repression'. This rather cryptic policy advice boils down to a defense of the Westphalian notion of national sovereignty enshrined in the treaties of Augsburg, Münster and Osnabrück's *cuius regio, eius religio*. As prudent advice as this may have been in 1555 and 1648, it must be asked, is this the best we can do in our postmodern era? After all, as Zarathustra spake, the state, as the 'new idol', is 'the coldest of all cold monsters', for it obliterates the very multiplicities of peoples and their identities:

Where there is still a people, there the state is not understood, but hated as the evil eye ... every people speaketh its language of good and evil: this its neighbor understandeth not. Its language hath it devised for itself in laws and customs ... There, where the state ceaseth—pray look thither, my brethren! Do you not see it, the rainbow and the bridges of the Superman? (Nietzsche, 1999 [1911], pp. 30–31)

If we are to reach the third metamorphosis, from the lion roaring out differences and exercising the will to power into the creative will of the child, Nietzsche would no sooner advise us to strengthen that coldest of cold monsters than he would to revert to a beast of burden. Perhaps the way past the subservient fundamentalism of the camel and through the aggressive fundamentalism of the lion and finally to the pluriverse that only the superwo/man can forge as s/he once again becomes the child is not through retrenching into the barren terrain of the state. It is rather to think, perchance to dream, and to construct ourselves and our worlds beyond it.

Have ye now learned my song? Have ye divined what it would say? ...  
O man! Take heed! . . .  
'From deepest dream I've woke, and plead:-  
'The world is deep,  
'And deeper than the day could read.' (Ibid., p. 234)

## Note

- 1 For a comprehensive guide to Nietzsche's life and work, see Sherefkin (no date).

## References

- Jones, E. (1953–1957) *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, 3 vols. (New York: Basic Books).  
Nietzsche, F. (1999 [1911]) *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, translated by T. Common (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications).  
Sherefkin, J. (no date) Nietzsche: a selected annotated bibliography, The New York Public Library. Available at: <http://www.nypl.org/research/chss/grd/resguides/nietzsche/index.html> (accessed 10 September 2006).

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