



Religious Fundamentalism: A Challenge to Peace

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Abstract: One of the serious threats that modern humanity faces is religious fundamentalism. The author, highlighting the origins of fundamentalism, tries to bring out the fact that it is a threat to the secular world. Fundamentalism of different religions is touched upon to analyze the salient features of religious fundamentalism. Arguing that fundamentalism is a reaction to the advent of the modern secular world, the author spells out the possible reactions to the phenomenon of fundamentalism.

Keywords: Fundamentalism, Appeal to Scripture, Christian, Hindu and Islamic Fundamentalism, Secular world and Reactions to Fundamentalism

1. What is Religious Fundamentalism?¹

Religious fundamentalists see themselves as the champions and faithful guardians of the ancient truths and moral commandments which constitute the essence of their particular faith. In other words, they claim to be the true exponents of the religious tradition they represent. Fundamentalism, while appealing to the past, is actually a new and modern religious phenomenon, and one that does not faithfully represent the faith in the way it claims to. It is new because it is a reaction to the advent of the modern secular world, and this is something which none of the great religious traditions had to encounter

before. That is why the term “fundamentalism” is less than 100 years old.

Far from being the loyal defense of Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism or Islam, fundamentalism is a religious aberration. For the fundamentalist Jew, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has been replaced by the Torah. For the fundamentalist Christian, God has been replaced by the Bible. For the fundamentalist Hindu, God has been replaced by the Vedas. For the fundamentalist Muslim, Allah has been replaced by the Qur'an. Their respective Holy Scripture has become the object of their faith – their God. This was not so in the pre-modern world.

So, fundamentalism may be described as a modern religious disease, for it distorts genuine religious faith in the same way as cancer distorts and misdirects the natural capacity of body cells to grow. Instead of bringing spiritual freedom and the realization of a spiritual goal, as all sound religions should, fundamentalism imprisons people into such a rigid system of belief that they find it difficult to free themselves. Fundamentalism takes possession of human minds and blinds them to the realities which most others accept as self-evident. Fundamentalism fosters a closed mind, restricts the sight to tunnel vision, hinders mental and spiritual growth, and prevents people from becoming the mature, balanced, self-critical persons they have the potential to become.

2. Deceptive Appeal to Scripture

The fact that fundamentalism is a modern phenomenon is not at all obvious at first, simply because it makes its claim on the basis of something which has long been central to the religious tradition in question: the appeal to Holy Scripture. This claim, by its very subtlety, often deceives even non-fundamentalists. They sometimes feel themselves at a disadvantage, for the fundamentalists appear to claim a high

moral ground. They are able to claim support for their case from the very words found in the Torah, the Bible, the Vedas or the Qur'an. Hindu fundamentalists quote their scripture to justify the killing of anyone who kills a cow or eats beef. They believe that they have a duty to do moral policing by forcing people to close dance bars, stopping of Valentine's day celebrations, free movement of boys and girls in parks and public places, and forcing boys and girls found together in public places on Valentine's Day to go to the nearest temple and get married, etc.

What is novel about fundamentalism is not the honouring of Holy Scripture, but the way in which it is done. Fundamentalists treat Holy Scripture as the starting point of their faith tradition when in fact it is the product: it gathered its authority only after the tradition had started. This is especially so with Judaism, Christianity and Hinduism, which existed long before they had Holy Scriptures. It is rather less so with Islam. But Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam each evolved out of an initially fluid faith tradition, in which there was still much freedom for creative change and development. As each produced its Holy Scripture, there certainly was a tendency for that creative spirit to diminish and for the living faith tradition to become frozen into a static and lifeless form. This was overcome, however, by devising a variety of methods of interpretation to accommodate the text to the changing circumstances in which people lived.

Up to the advent of the modern world, Jews, Christians, Hindus and Muslims certainly gave their respective Scriptures all due respect and honour – but they were not fundamentalists, even though there was the potential to become so. They felt free to interpret their scriptures in the light of new knowledge and fresh experience. Moreover, they were reading and interpreting their Scriptures in a cultural and religious context

which, while not the same as that in which they were written, was at least in reasonable harmony with it.

3. A New World-view

Till the advent of the modern world it was relatively easy for Jews, Christians, Hindus and Muslims to acknowledge the words of their respective Scriptures to be self-evidently true, as well as being divinely revealed. This is no longer the case. The advent of modern culture, with its accompanying knowledge explosion, has changed all that. The task of interpreting the Holy Scriptures in a way which is relevant to the changing cultural context and self-evident truth began to reach breaking point in the 19th century onwards. It was this that led to the modern religious aberration of fundamentalism. Fundamentalists reject much of the modern world view and insist, somewhat blindly, on remaining within a world view consistent with their particular Holy Scriptures.

What all fundamentalists have in common is not a set of specific beliefs but an attitude of mind. It is the conviction that they possess the knowledge of absolute truth of which they have become the divinely ordained guardians. This conviction then gives them a feeling of extreme confidence and of inner power in relation to all who differ from them. They become crusaders, bent on defending and spreading the truth as they see it. Fundamentalism breeds intolerance for it makes people absolutely sure that they know the mind and will of God on any subject which particularly concerns them. Fundamentalists see no value in tolerance because they regard tolerance as a form of moral weakness, an unjustifiable compromise with falsehood and evil. Intolerance, in turn, quickly leads to fanaticism. Fanatics are unreceptive to reasoning and will stop at nothing to achieve their ends, passionately believing them to be not their own ends but God's.

Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam have a history which shows how, at their best, they have accommodated themselves to changing circumstances. Each was a living, evolving tradition. Each can proudly point to its saints and stalwarts in the past – but these were not fundamentalists. By contrast, today’s fundamentalists stifle religious creativity and deny their faith the opportunity to continue on its evolving path as it responds to the challenges of newly emerging knowledge. Fundamentalists tend to have a static view of reality: they have not come to terms with the ever-changing and evolving character of culture, religion and life itself.

In the ancient world, people believed in many gods. So the founding Jewish, Christian and Islamic prophets were iconoclasts. They destroyed the idols or tangible things which people put their trust in. This iconoclasm stemmed from the second of the Jewish Ten Commandments: “You shall not make for yourself any graven image, or any likeness of anything which is in heaven, or earth or under the earth, you shall not bow down to it or serve it.” When one gives unconditional worship to any visible, tangible thing, even though it is Holy Scripture, it is this commandment which is disobeyed. Human mind is a real factory for the creation of idols. Fundamentalism is the modern phenomenon by which people, perhaps afraid of the uncertainties of the future, and certainly distrustful of the modern world, have raised their Holy Scripture to a tangible idol. They are doing what Aaron did by forging the golden calf when they were afraid Moses was leading them to a disastrous unknown future and they longed to return to the fleshpots of Egypt.

4. Origin of Religious Fundamentalism

The term ‘Fundamentalism’ derives from a series of 12 booklets titled *The Fundamentals*, which were published in America between 1909 and 1915. The booklets were

intended to counter the spread of liberal religious thought in the churches of America, which the publishers believed to be undermining the eternal Christian truths – “the fundamentals.” The booklets reaffirmed what the writers took to be the fundamental and unchangeable doctrines of Christianity: the infallibility of the Bible, the divinity of Christ, the Virgin Birth, historical reality of miracles, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, etc. However, they were chiefly concerned to condemn the new biblical criticism and the Darwinian theory of evolution, both of which had emerged in the 19th century. What received more publicity than the booklets was the infamous American trial in 1925 when a school teacher, John Scopes, was tried and convicted for teaching biological evolution in a Tennessee school.

The term “fundamentalist” was coined by a Baptist journalist in 1920. He thought the word “conservative” to be too weak. Thus, having started as the name of a Christian phenomenon in America, the term “fundamentalist” began to spread throughout the world. Today we speak of Jewish fundamentalists, Islamic fundamentalists and Hindu fundamentalists. The reason for this is that fundamentalists are rejecting what is common knowledge, based on scientific evidence.

According to Wikipedia, fundamentalism as a movement arose in the United States among conservative Presbyterian theologians in the late 19th century and soon spread to the Baptists and other denominations around 1910-20. The term “fundamentalist” is used to describe those who invoke religion to indulge in acts of extremism and violence against followers of other faiths, and even against followers of their own faith. These fundamentalists demand strict adherence to certain aspects of their faiths or holy books, selected by them, in order to impose their worldview on the societies they live in.²

Fundamentalism is characterized by profound dissatisfaction about the state of society and a strong preoccupation with fundamental religious beliefs. The extremity of action may be attributed to their unyielding belief that they are fighting a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil which justify their actions as claims of their divine authority.³

Religious fundamentalism has generally five features, the first of which is *reactivity*, i.e. hostility to the secular modern world. From this basic feature follow four others: *dualism*, the tendency to evaluate in starkly binary terms, as good or bad: *authority*, the willingness to believe and obey the sacred book of their religion and/or its leaders: *selectivity*, the choice from the sacred book of certain beliefs and practices in preference to others: and *millennialism*, the belief that God will triumph in the end and establish his kingdom on earth.⁴

The fact that fundamentalism was not a short-lived reaction but, on the contrary, has continued to spread and is now manifesting itself in a wide variety of forms throughout the world, shows that fundamentalism is a powerful force which has deep roots. Fundamentalism is not one movement but a collection of movements like Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and so on. Fundamentalists often find themselves bitterly opposed to one another. But they do have one common enemy and it is that which leads us to the heart of all religious fundamentalism. It believes that the modern secular and humanistic world is the enemy of religion and hence harmful to humankind.

Scholars of inter-faith dialogue are unanimous in their opinion that the fundamental message of all faiths is the same: universal peace, brotherhood, compassion, tolerance, etc. Adhering to the fundamentals of one's own faith and practising them is the key to combat fundamentalism.⁵

5. Challenge of the Secular World

To understand the modern phenomenon of fundamentalism, it is not sufficient simply to explain the origin of the term. We must go back further and examine the origin and nature of the modern secular world, to which fundamentalists are so violently opposed.

Humankind is currently caught up in the most radical cultural change which has ever taken place. Human culture, of course, has always been undergoing slow evolutionary change. In the past 200 years, however, cultural change has suddenly accelerated. It is now overturning beliefs and institutions which, in some cases, have lasted for millennia, and which are judged by some to be absolutely essential or fundamental to the meaning of people's lives and the welfare of society. In particular, within the three monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, modernity appears to be threatening the very foundation of all truth and meaning, namely the being and authority of God. Religious fundamentalists condemn the modern secular world as humanistic and godless. Those who believe the change to be fundamentally evil are resisting it to the point of waging war against it. Convinced that they must remain loyal to the fundamentals of the past, they condemn secular humanism as the work of the devil.

The theistic foundations of Christianity were challenged by the leading thinkers of the Enlightenment of 18th century. Theism, or belief in a personal God, was replaced by deism, or belief in an impersonal First Cause. Dependence on divine revelation was replaced by human endeavour and discovery. It is hardly surprising that not only fundamentalists but also even some fairly traditional thinkers and theologians look back to the Enlightenment with grave concern. Yet to the Enlightenment we owe many features of modern culture which most of us now take for granted and would not dream of surrendering – the freedom to think for ourselves, the freedom

to ask questions and to hold up cherished beliefs to critical examination, the freedom to express our opinions and doubts, the assertion of human rights, the acknowledgement of human equality, etc. Thus the Enlightenment was a very liberating period. It replaced the divine right of kings with democratic self-rule. It gave rise eventually to many new freedoms – the emancipation of slaves, the emancipation of colonies from imperial control, the emancipation of women from male domination and, more recently, the freedom of homosexuals to openly declare their sexual orientation.

6. Catholic Reaction

The ideas generated by the Enlightenment were so innovative that they were not readily acceptable to church authorities. Those who embraced the new thinking from the Enlightenment often found themselves forced out of the church establishment. Pope Pius IX in his *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) condemned the new freedom of thought then emerging. This was followed in 1869 by the calling of the ecumenical council now known as Vatican I. Among other things it made the infallibility of the papacy a mandatory dogma. This move attempted to protect Catholicism from modern thought by building a protective wall of authority around it. The Vatican had long forbidden the faithful to read books thought to be injurious to their spiritual health, by placing them on the Index. The impact of modernity did not show itself again in Catholicism until Pope John XXIII called Vatican II, when Catholicism took a sudden but cautious leap into the modern world with its policy of updating by reading the signs of the times.⁶

7. Christian Fundamentalism and Literalism

Christian fundamentalism has sometimes been equated with biblical literalism. In other words, fundamentalists are said to take the Bible literally. Indeed, they themselves often

speak of being committed to the literal inerrancy of Bible. But literalism is not a very satisfactory term. It is clear that, when the Bible refers to God as Father and Jesus as shepherd, the words are intended to be taken metaphorically and not literally. Fundamentalists have no problem with metaphorical language in that regard.

It is true that up to the 19th century the six days of creation in the biblical myth of origins were taken literally as 24-hour periods. But when the immense age of the earth became clearly evident on geological grounds, most fundamentalists tried to defend the “truth” of the biblical story by interpreting the six days as six geological ages, thousands or even millions of years in length. Thus, in order to defend the Bible as true in everything it says, fundamentalists keep shifting between literal and non-literal interpretations. Their purpose in doing so is to defend the fundamentalist dogma that the Bible, being the Word of God, is truly inerrant.

So fundamentalists are not consistently biblical literalists. They are literalists only when and where it suits them to be so. They are usually literalists when it concerns the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of Jesus as an historical event and the existence of eternal punishment in hell. But when Jesus says it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God they go to great lengths to interpret this in such a way that they do not themselves have to “sell all that they have and give to the poor,” as Jesus directed the rich young ruler who wanted to follow him.

The claim of fundamentalists to be the true guardians of their particular faith must be strongly rejected. In fact, fundamentalism is fast becoming one of true religion’s chief enemies. In condemning secular humanism, fundamentalism is actually opposing the legitimate evolution of the very faith it sets out to defend. It is sadly ironic that fundamentalism,

which sees itself as the guardian and preserver of Christianity, now constitutes one of Christianity's chief obstacles to its natural and logical development.

8. Muslim Fundamentalism⁷

In order to understand the rise of Muslim fundamentalism we must go as far back as the 18th century, when Muhammad al-Wahhab founded the Wahhabi movement in Arabia. He advocated a strict return to the original teachings of Islam as found in the Qur'an and Hadith (authoritative traditions of Muhammad). This move was very much like that of the first Christian fundamentalists with their slogan of "Back to the Bible." Wahhabism could be described as the first manifestation of Muslim fundamentalism.

Islam lends itself to fundamentalism even more than Christianity does, for the strength of fundamentalism lies, as we have seen, in its appeal to Holy Scripture. Islam possessed Holy Scripture from the beginning. As the words of the Qur'an continued to be uttered by Muhammad during his lifetime, they were accepted by Muslims as coming directly from God. Whereas it is the figure of Christ which is central to Christianity, it is the Qur'an, not Muhammad, which is central to Islam.

There are several aspects of the Wahhabi movement for Islamic reform, and they set the pattern for the later types of Muslim fundamentalism. Main aspects are Politics, force and jihad.

- It was politically active from the beginning. This is because in Islam there has never been the division between religion and politics. Islam is primarily concerned with the ordering of society, and only secondly with the spirituality of the individual. So for the Muslim, religion and politics are virtually one and the same.

- It had no qualms about using force to attain its goal. Wahhabism soon gathered sufficient military power not only to capture Mecca and Medina, but to take over the whole of Arabia and move into Iraq, where it captured and partially destroyed the mosque in Karbala, so sacred to the Shi'ites.
- It revived the practice of jihad. Though often incorrectly translated in the West as “holy war,” jihad literally means “struggle.” It can refer to the internal struggle which may take place in a Muslim in trying to be whole-heartedly obedient to Allah. But it can also mean the external struggle, not only to defend the boundaries of Islamic society but also to extend them to include unbelievers. It was always the ultimate aim of Islam to incorporate all nations into the brotherhood of Islamic society.

So the Wahhabis are to be seen as the forerunners of today's Muslim fundamentalists. Indeed a direct link can be traced from the Wahhabis to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and from it to such groups of Muslim fundamentalists as Hamas, the Islamic Jihad and Al Qaeda.

Comparison: Just as Christian fundamentalists seek to restore the secular West to its original form of Christendom, so Muslim fundamentalists are motivated by the goal of restoring the Islamic world to its pristine purity. Both groups see the modern secular world as a materialist, consumer-driven society which has lost whatever spirituality it had in the past. One of the chief differences between the two fundamentalisms is that Christian fundamentalism is fighting against something which has its seeds within Christianity, whereas Muslim fundamentalism has set itself the task of eliminating all the evil influences which have come from the outside. Muslim fundamentalists began their fight against their fellow-Muslims, who in their view had succumbed to the

West. But more recently this has brought them into conflict with the West itself.

9. Hindu Fundamentalism

One of the leading Hindu intellectuals that greatly impacted the rise of Hindu movements, specifically during the British occupation was V.D. Savarkar (1883-1966). His most influential work was the fundamental *Hindutva* (Hinduness), which he wrote while he was imprisoned by the British. *Hindutva* is a manifesto for religious nationalism. Savarkar makes India Hindus' Holy-land. Although he accepts the presence of certain religions, such as Buddhism and Jainism in India, other religions such as Islam and Christianity are seen as foreign elements and do not belong in the subcontinent. Savarkar became the president of the *Hindu Mahasabha*. It was founded in 1915 in order to bring together the diverse local Hindu movements. It believed that in order for India to one day become a free Hindu state it would have to support and encourage Hindu brotherhood between different castes, including the untouchables.⁸

In 1925, the *Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangha* (RSS) was established under the leadership of K. Hedgewar, a former member of the *Hindu Mahasabha*. It was incepted as a voluntary organisation with the aim to create a Hindu cultural pride and brotherhood. It adopted a much more militant stand than that of the *Hindu Mahasabha*. It spread across all of India giving its members Hindu nationalistic education and paramilitary training. The organisation wanted to take the emphasis off of spiritual strength alone and incorporate the necessity of physical strength. Another organisation that has come to be very influential is the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP). It was founded in 1964 by some of the leaders of the RSS. Yet another party that emerged as a result of the RSS, that has become part of the mainstream political life of India

is the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), which emerged in 1980 out of the Janata coalition. It is one of India's largest political parties and it espouses Hindu nationalism according to the writings of Savarkar in *Hindutva*. Hindu fundamentalists have used extreme and violent means to achieve their goals. Such was the case with the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, by a crowd of nearly one million activists of the VHP, that led to violent clashes between Hindus and Muslims that left thousands dead and injured.⁹

Fundamentalism Divides People: The internationalism of the coming global society calls for flexibility of thought and practice, for empathy with those who differ, for compromise in a spirit of goodwill; it requires mutual co-operation for the common good. Since fundamentalism encourages people to become blindly loyal to specific fundamentals, whether it is a Holy Book or the overcoming of a perceived injustice, all forms of fundamentalism are socially and globally divisive. Thus fundamentalism is socially and internationally dangerous and a threat to peace.

10. How Do We Respond?

War Not the Answer

It is a grave error of judgment to assume that terrorism can be stamped out by war. Neither can terrorism be eliminated simply by planning to kill or imprison all terrorists. The state-ordered assassination of terrorists simply aggravates still further the hostility, hatred and sense of injustice, which were the original causes for the rise of terrorism. For every one killed, five more may appear somewhere else. Terrorism is the symptom of a deep malaise, a malaise which lies behind the current responses to terrorism as much as behind terrorism itself. Therefore, we must find out the motivating cause behind terrorism and deal with that.¹⁰

We can see that the current wave of terrorism around the globe is the product of fundamentalism. we encounter the face of Islamic fundamentalism in the terrorist acts of suicide bombers who are determined to kill and destroy. The Islamic world encountered the face of Christian fundamentalism and terrorism in the person of George Bush, the American President, who was ready to wage war against any nation that stands in the way of America's economic interests.

11. Conclusion

To sum up, here are the chief features of religious fundamentalism:

- Fundamentalism rejects the human freedoms which have opened up in the aftermath of the western Enlightenment, and is committed to combat secular humanism and all other aspects of the modern world which it regards as harmful to the spiritual condition of humankind.
- Fundamentalism asserts that humans must submit to the authority of the Divine Being, whose divinely revealed truths and absolute commands they believe to have been permanently revealed – in the Torah for the Jew, in the Bible for the Christian, in the Vedas for the Hindu and in the Qur'an for the Muslim.
- Fundamentalism consequently leads people to think in terms of black and white. Everything is either true or false, good or bad; there are few shades of grey, little uncertainty, and no area for debate and dialogue.
- Fundamentalism is distrustful of human reason. It does not enter into open dialogue but dogmatically proclaims. It is wary of democracy, the assertion of human rights and the equality of the sexes. It favours strong, male, charismatic leadership, both in religion and in society.

- Fundamentalism seeks to exercise control by establishing theocratic societies which conform to the (divinely revealed) absolutes. Hence Israel must be a Jewish state, Iran must be an Islamic state, India must be a Hindu State and America must be a Christian state.¹¹

Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Islam each have a cultural history of which its adherents can be justifiably proud. Fundamentalists in each tradition do their cultural heritage a great injustice by making it look like a rigid, intolerant sect. Christian fundamentalism is preventing Christianity from playing a positive and creative role in shaping the modern global society. Similarly, Muslim fundamentalism is distorting the face of Islam and giving the impression to the rest of the world that Islam, far from being the religion of peace, brotherhood and compassion which it can be, is simply a seedbed for violence and terrorism. Fundamentalism, whether Christian, Hindu or Muslim, distorts and does irreparable harm to the very religious tradition it claims to be defending.¹²

It has to be remembered that the fundamentalist organizations are not the majority of any specific religion. Their interpretations of the *fundamentals* of their religion may be so distorted that to really associate it with that religion as a whole would be detrimental. For it seems that rather than a religion creating these fundamentalists, it is the fundamentalist mentalities of powerful individuals that use religion as a tool to achieve their goals.¹³

Notes

1. See http://www.religion-on-line.org/show_chapter.asp?title=2732&C=2438 accessed on 24.09.2015
2. See <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/to-be-a-fundamentalist-hindu>, accessed on 19.10.2015.
3. See also <https://tamaraalom.wordpress.com/hindu-fundamentalism-does-it-exist>, accessed on 19.10.2015.

4. Peter Henriot, *Religious Fundamentalism and Social Identity* (New York, Routledge, 2007), p. 6.
5. See <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/to-be-a-fundamentalist-hindu>, accessed on 19.10.2015.
6. See <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=2732&C=2437> accessed on 24.09.2015.
7. See <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=2732&C=2439> accessed on 24.09.2015.
8. See <https://tamaraalom.wordpress.com/hindu-fundamentalism-does-it-exist>, accessed on 19.10.2015.
9. See <https://tamaraalom.wordpress.com/hindu-fundamentalism-does-it-exist>, accessed on 19.10.2015.
10. See <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=2732&C=2440> accessed on 24.09.2015.
11. See also <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=2732&C=2437> accessed on 24.09.2015.
12. See <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=2732&C=2438> accessed on 24.09.2015.
13. See <https://tamaraalom.wordpress.com/hindu-fundamentalism-does-it-exist>, accessed on 19.10.2015.

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Science-Religion Dialogue

He who possesses science and art,
Possesses religion as well;
He who possesses neither of these,
Had better have religion.

— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

A religion old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science, might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later such a religion will emerge.

— Carl Sagan

All good moral philosophy is ... but the handmaid to religion.

— Sir Francis Bacon

All of my knowledge, of both science and religion, I incorporate into the classical tradition of my painting.

— Salvador Dali

All religions, arts and sciences are branches of the same tree. All these aspirations are directed toward ennobling man's life, lifting it from the sphere of mere physical existence and leading the individual towards freedom.

— Albert Einstein

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