

# What's at Stake?

## From "Fundamentalism & the Need for Certainty" in *The Guru Papers*

The struggle between the old order and the budding, unformed new, which we have called the morality wars, is really between old cosmologies that separate the spiritual from the worldly, and people reaching for a new worldview that supports infusing the spiritual into life. This rift between the old and the new underlies the controversies between fundamentalists and revisionists, who are both under the umbrella of the same religion. The revisionists are at a basic disadvantage, for they have to tolerate the fundamentalists' moral slurs, while fundamentalists have no need for such tolerance.

Within liberalism there is a tradition of tolerance, especially religious tolerance. While fundamentalists show little tolerance for anything that falls outside their beliefs, the liberal mind is usually compelled to tolerate the fundamentalists who make them immoral or even evil. We agree that people should be able to believe what they will without coercion. But respecting people's right to have differing beliefs does not mean one must respect the beliefs themselves. Unfortunately, the concept of religious tolerance has come to include not being critical of others' beliefs. Tolerance only works well if all the players play by the same rules. When some try to force their beliefs on others, how tolerant should one be of this? The problem with tolerating viewpoints that are themselves intolerant is their aim is to do away with tolerance altogether.

The cultural taboo against criticizing religion exists partially because religion is looked upon, with good reason, as being beyond reason. In realms of faith, belief, or even intuition, what criteria can there be for criticism? The truth or falsity of a given worldview may not ultimately be provable. But what can be shown is whether it is authoritarian. Authoritarianism is present in much that is taken for granted, often including what is held by some to be sacred. The prescription that what people hold sacred should not be criticized is itself unconsciously authoritarian. The sacred and taboo go together—in particular the taboo against challenging the sacred. In our view, the sacred is formally made sacred precisely to protect it from criticism, because it cannot stand on its own.

Tolerance needs to be redefined to encourage discourse that can question the validity and viability of any belief based upon its impact on the world. This is especially needed when the stakes are high. We believe the stakes could not be higher.

Historically, whenever a changing world brought a rift between the old and new, the old eventually faded simply because it could not adequately incorporate the new into its framework. This took time, upheavals, and bloodshed. Ultimately the old could not triumph, simply because it was old. In this particular epoch the game is different. Humanity is not only facing the need to change, it is facing an ecological time clock for its survival. Now the old can win simply by impeding whatever transformations are necessary long enough for the time clock to run out. And although this victory would be Pyrrhic, we suspect that those with an apocalyptic mentality would not care.

To the extent that fundamentalism impedes change, there is good reason to oppose it. To the extent that revisionists are bound by the same authoritarian worldview and moral order, they legitimize the fundamentalists' agenda of going back to moral purity. The focus of fundamentalism is the salvation of the individual after death. Modern revisionists want to broaden their religion to include caring about the present and future of life on this planet. They are constrained by having to refurbish an essentially authoritarian worldview constructed when the species was not at risk. In an overused, overpopulated planet, planetary values must somehow change from quantity to quality, from accumulation to preservation. Growing up as an individual involves facing one's mortality; growing up as a species involves realizing that humanity is mortal, too. Human survival is no longer a given, and it will only be prolonged if people are able to redirect what is destructive to the species and planetary systems. This requires a morality based not only on the mortality of the individual, but also on the mortality of the species. Whether or not one believes in personal immortality, having morality based on this belief instead of on what promotes viable life in this world is an indulgence that is no longer affordable.