Fundamentalism in the context of Modernity: Conflict of Identities in God’s Little Soldier

Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) French Mathematician

The point is rather that the enlightenment must examine itself.

(Adorno and Horkheimer 1972: XV)

So religion is not the cause of conflict. The problem is more anthropological than theological.

(Sudhir Kakkar 2009: 71)

Religion is one of the most distinctively identifiable phenomena in the human world. Gautam Buddha’s redemptive espousal of non-attachment and rejection of anger, Christ’s teachings recommending a peaceful world of love and harmonious existence, and Mahatma Gandhi’s exemplary persuasion of Satyagraha insisting a peaceful attitude and reluctance to engage in offensive war, are some of the illustrations of religion’s benign influence and unmitigated good done to the human world. For religious believers, it is the most purposeful motif and inspirational force in their lives. Constructive religious practices and impulses are considered to enhance the vitality of life. Conceived as a source of ethical values and identity, religion, at its best, may help people to give their lives a sense of purpose along with the cultivation and expansion of the interior. Many scholars and philosophers of religion have stressed upon the salience and significance of religion in the contemporary conflict ridden-world, highlighting the indispensability of religion for the human spirit. In this connection, Mark Juergensmeyer notes: “What religion provides society is not just high-mindedness, but also a concern with the quality of life – a goal more ennobling than the simple accretion of power and possessions” (2000: 240-41).

Shedding light on the vitality of religion in contemporary times characterized prominently by the spiritual vacuity, an eminent psychologist from India, Sudhir Kakkar writes:

Religion, we like to believe, is about love – love of God, love of nature and love of fellow man. Religion, we feel, is essentially about compassion and strives for peace and justice for the oppressed. Indeed, freedom from violence, an enduring wish of mankind, is reflected in various visions of heaven (2001: 346-7).
However, the above account of the redemptive role of religion, stressing intense experiential piety, nurturing and nourishing human spirit, should not stop us from recognizing the violence of “organized religion” or even “regimented religion” – promoting “the sordid requirements of political expediency” (Chattopadhyaya 1985: 312). If religion for its apologists is a force of peace and tolerance, promoting harmony, good will and social cohesion; for its detractors, religion is nothing less than a breeding ground of social division, conflict, war and inspires zealotry, intolerance, dogmatism, animosity, hatred, persecution and oppression. Even to Sudhir Kakkar, who considers religion “central to the vital, ‘meaning-making’ function of human life” (346), could not abstain himself from speaking the ills of religion: “Religion brings to conflict between groups a greater emotional intensity and a deeper motivational thrust than language, region, or other markers of ethnic identity” (2001: 346). Commenting on the turning of religion as a degenerative and destructive force “bereft of transcendent purpose” (339) in the context of religious revival in the contemporary world, Prof. Kakkar writes:

However, if we look closely at individual cases around the world, we will find that the much-touted revival is less of religiosity than of cultural identities based on religious affiliation. In other words, there may not be any great ferment taking place in the world of religious ideas, rituals, or any marked increase in the sum of human spirituality. Where the resurgence is most visible is in the organization of collective identities around religion, in the formation and strengthening of communities of believers: what we are witnessing today is less the resurgence of religion than (in the felicitous Indian usage) of communalism where a community of believers not only has religious affiliation but also social, economic, and political interests in common which may conflict with the corresponding interests of another community of believers sharing the same geographical space. Indeed, most secular analysts and progressive commentators have traditionally sought to uncover factors other than religion as the root cause of an ostensibly religious conflict (2001: 339-40).

Similar anxiety is shared by a Gandhian scholar, Bhikhu Parekh, regarding the destructive role of religion when it is transformed into an ideology of hatred, and it starts galloping down the path of violence:

Although religion can make a valuable contribution to political life, it can also be a pernicious influence, as liberals rightly highlight. It is often absolutist, self-righteous, arrogant, dogmatic, and impatient of compromise. It arouses powerful and sometimes irrational impulses and can easily destabilize society, cause political havoc, and create a veritable hell on earth. .. It often breeds intolerance of other religions
as well as of internal dissent, and has a propensity towards violence. (1999: 72).

An American scholar of religion, Charles Kinball writes: “It is somewhat trite, but nevertheless sadly true, to say that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history” (2002: 1). Even a simple perusal of such spectacles as witnessed by the contemporary history as Hindu-Sikh massacre in Punjab and New Delhi in 1984, Ayodhya incident in 1992, the World Trade Centre attack in New York in 2001, Gujarat communal riot in 2002, in addition to many incidents of plane hijacking and suicide bombing, should suffice to make it clear that either there is something exorbitantly wrong with the conviction of the activists and intellectuals of the religion or their religions have gone awry.

Keeping in view the destructive and pernicious role of religion and its odd association with violence as it should be clear from the above, a set of pertinent questions may come to one’s mind: Why is religion so prone to violence? What goes wrong with people’s religious impulses that promote and perpetrate violence in the name of their religion? Why has there been an upsurge of reactionary religious movements in contemporary times? Why do people commit evils against people who are foreign and different? Why should people believe and claim that their faiths are complete, absolute and unchanging and expect blind obedience from others? Why should nearly all religions, instead of functioning benignly and constructively, prove a fertile ground for the growth of close-mindedness, hatred and bigotry? Why should people misappropriate their faith as a set of hard core creeds, doctrines and regimented ideologies with potential to inspire bloodshed, zealotry, intolerance and not take it as a useful source of guidance, morality and quality-life enhancing agency? Although all these questions are of quite varying range and require diverse approaches to deal with them, yet they all refer to a complex and inescapable conflicting and cultural situation, which pose a major threat to the contemporary world-peace, which is called by social theorists, ‘fundamentalism’ a pejorative and stigmatic category.

Originally, fundamentalism was a specific conservative moment within the Protestant Church in the United States; its adherent opposed modern theology and the secularization of society, advocating in their place certain biblical doctrines. Recently, however, the fundamentalist label has also been applied to believers in other religions. (Krassel: 2008: 51).
However, in general, the term is used interchangeably for fanaticism, intolerance, extremism, ideological purism and sectarianism. Anybody who is excessively narrow-minded, dogmatic and obsessed with an urge to fight for the religious right may be called a fundamentalist. In almost all religions, fundamentalism accords holy scriptures a status of supreme authority and acknowledges them as the ultimate source of knowledge and value. These are taken to be inerrant words of God and they reveal God’s will for mankind.

Whatever the background religion in question, fundamentalists claim that their religion is absolutely true, that it owes nothing to any human culture, that we must all return to a “true” form of this religion in order for society to be “right” and “moral”, that the only “true” form of this religion is what they claim is the “original” form – untainted by human culture – and that true believers are obligated to fight against corrupting influences from the broader culture ... Religious fundamentalists frequently have more in common with fundamentalists from other religions than they do with more liberal adherents of the same religion. (Cline in Kressel: 2008: 52)

As per the exclusionary discourses of the fundamentalist world-view, nonbelievers, people from other faiths and infidels are considered as extremely dangerous and hence they are subjected to various kinds of dehumanization, stigmatization, prohibitions, hatred and persecutions. Fundamentalists believe that their religious texts contain the fundamental, intrinsic and essential truths about human beings and their God. Any kind of willful defiling and desecration of the same would amount to blasphemy and invoke harsh punishment. For instance, Salman Rushdie’s novel, The Satanic Verses, was considered disgraceful and blasphemous and an insult to Islam by Iranian leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, who issued a death sentence (fatawa) against the apostate author.

Fundamentalist conception of the world is characterized in terms of duality or binary opposition. It sees the human world in the light of the divine and the diabolic, good and evil, pious and profane, in-group and out-group, etc. This mode of thinking involving the binary opposition creates a ground for the tasks of resistance. Religion has a particular tendency to divide and project people ‘us’ versus ‘them’ and this perception of ‘others’ as threat invoke the cause of violent reaction and hyper religious activism. The religious struggle or war waged by the religious soldiers is thought to have been “sanctioned by the divine mandate or conceived in the mind of God”. (Juergensmeyer 2000: 216) and at its worse, this worldly conflict is given a name called “cosmic war”.

What makes religious violence particularly savage and relentless is that its perpetrators have placed such religious images of divine struggle – cosmic war – in the service of worldly political battles. For this reason, acts of religious terror serve not only as tactics
in a political strategy but also as evocations of a much larger spiritual confrontation. (Juergensmeyer 2000: 146).

This cosmic war makes no compromises with anything less than the complete annihilation of the enemy.

Looking closely at the notion of war, one is confronted with the idea of dichotomous opposition on an absolute scale. It is not just a matter of differing opinions or an even contest with an opponent. After all, the articulation and adjudication of differences are not advanced by war-fare. War suggests an all-or-nothing struggle against an enemy whom one assumes to be determined to destroy. No compromise is deemed possible. The very existence of the opponent is a threat, and until the enemy is either crushed or contained, one’s own existence cannot be secure. What is striking about a martial attitude is the certainty of one’s position and the willingness to defend it, or impose it on others, to the end.

Such certitude on the part of one side may be regarded as noble by those whose sympathies lie with it and dangerous by those who do not. But either way it is not rational. (Juergensmeyer 2000: 148-9).

The very bellicose stance of the fundamentalist religious thrust splits the world into camps of good and evil. Religion, instead of enhancing the capacity to love fellow human being and providing a map for living one’s life with enlarged and expanded consciousness, is corrupted into fanaticism and forged as a disruptive force. Fundamentalists’ belief that the world has gone awry – the world being in the grip of non-religious evil-forces including fornication, homosexuality, sex-entertainment, premarital pregnancy, abortion, extra marital relation, repressive-secular-state, corporate institutions and shrinking role of religion in public life etc. – gives the religious zealots a motivation to reshape the world at large and that often involves the use of violence. The combatants often invoke the name of God to justify their violent actions. Seeing the world in a troubled-state, the religious rebels reject any compromise with liberal values and loose life styles. They also “refuse to observe the boundaries that secular society has placed around religion – keeping it private rather than allowing it to intrude into public spaces” (Juergensmeyer 2011: 75). They are working for restoring the salience and vehemence of religion in people’s life and fighting hell bent against the superficial liberal values and moorings in the contemporary world and marginalization of the religion.

Commenting on the fundamentalists’ tendency to treat religious texts as inerrant and absolute and considering these texts as guides for practical action, Prof. Andrew Vincent remarks:
that two sources of human knowledge and understanding have been confused in this type of fundamentalist reading: mythos and logos. The mythos mentality (more predominantly a pre-modern conception) takes religious narratives as mythical and symbolic stories which have to be interpreted and read carefully. The logos mentality has developed largely with the natural sciences. It is concerned with a more directly rationalized and secularized understanding. Indeed as commentators on fundamentalism have noted, many of those who currently advocate or actively support fundamentalist ideas come from a natural or applied science background. In this factalist reading of texts, mythos, in effect, become logos. Myths become actual history. The material actions of fundamentalists then become God’s actions. There will and judgement – as based on the inerrant technical manual – become God’s actions in history. As Ruthven comments, when fundamentalist translate myth into empirical fact, they release the potential violence of the text”. (2010: 276)

Another notorious feature of fundamentalist religion is that it does not treat religion as a matter of personal belief and individual practice. Rather, religion is transformed into a public and communal activity. “It is not about a private subjective relation with a deity or some process of spiritual self-cultivation. It is rather something which demands public action, obedience, communal involvement, moral and social regeneration and, certainly in the last thirty years for many, political mobilization” (Vincent 2010: 277). Religion as an organized institution is used as means for the furtherance of political ends. “Religion [is] thus reduced from being ‘the essence and guide of life in all spheres’ to ‘a sign of distinction’ between politically organized communities. In this sense religious fundamentalism is really anti-religious, (Madan 1998: 86) Prof. Madan further adds: “The emphasis is upon action and the expected fruits of action and these fruits are this-worldly – economic and political. Piety or conformity to quotes of behavior is seen as valuable in instrumental terms” (1998: 100) Sudhir Kakkar, witnessing a phenomenal rise of radical religious movements in the contemporary time, which in turn has produced and prompted cultures of violence and intolerance, comments:

“However, if we look closely at individual cases around the world, we will find that the much-touted revival is less of religiosity than of cultural identities based on religious affiliation. In other words, there may not be any great ferment taking place in the world of religious ideas, beliefs, rituals, or any marked increased in the sum of human spirituality. Where the resurgence is most visible is in the organization of collective identities around religion, in the formation and strengthening of communities of believers. What we are witnessing today is less the resurgence of religion than (in the felicitous Indian usage) of communalism where a community of
believers not only has religious affiliation but also social economic and political interest in common which may conflict with the corresponding interests of another community of believers sharing the same geographical space. Indeed, most secular analysts and progressive commentators have traditionally sought to uncover factors other than religion as the root cause of an ostensibly religious conflict. (1995: 239-40)

Thus, being religious, in this context, means nothing more than holding the outward forms and doctrine, morality and reifying tradition. The next unit discusses ‘Modernity’ and ‘Modernization’ and maintains that fundamentalism is a modern phenomenon and it reacts against the various cultural manifestation unleashed by modernity and modernization.

Modernity and its Discontents

The word ‘modern’ is commonly understood as something that belongs to the current era or to a recent period and thus, it excludes everything that belongs to the past and whatever is considered as traditional. “The underlying logic of modernity is based on the idea of rupture between the current moment in history, which is seen as enlightened, scientific and progressive; and the preceding ages, which are considered to be dark, backward and superstitious” (Mikula 2008: 129). “Modernity revolts against the normalizing function of tradition, modernity lives on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative” (Habermass 1998: 5). Thus, modernity stands as an ideology of rupture and crisis in traditional values and frames of mind and society. Modernity, it is often argued, consists in a celebration of scientific rationality, technological development, and secular orientation to life, loss of one’s fondness for community links and assertion of individualism at the expense of community.

Modernity – implying innovation, novelty and critical opposition to tradition and dogmatism – ‘refers to a situation in which human beings don’t accept any external guarantors, that is guarantors that they do not themselves posit, of their knowledge of their political orders, or of their selfhood. (Wagner 2001: 9951)

Discourses of modernity and modernization considered to be closely associated with and an extension of the enlightenment project’s emancipatory agenda – champions the belief that “Reason can demystify and illuminate the world over against religion, myth and superstition” (Barker 2010: 188). Thus, modernity is broadly conceived a new age as
wherein man through his liberating potential of reason and science is at the centre of the universe.

Modernity as an attitude and experience demands the exploration of one’s self, singularity and distinctiveness of one’s being, and it emphasizes distrust into the given metaphysical and mythic – religious foundations containing hierarchical values.

However, the positive portrayal of modernity as dominant world view continuing to shape our desires and aspirations, should not blind us in seeing problems resulting from the practices of modernity. Modernity – without a doubt being a product of capitalist transformations enacted through the programmes of industrialization, urbanization, bureaucratization, rationalization, and exploitative market relations – continues to turn individuals into victims, forge the debasement of native cultures and landscapes. Modernity is a consequence of such an economy based on market exchange and forced sale of labour power which converts relations between human beings into relations between things as they are mediated by commodities. Altered liberal attitudes towards work, consumption, achievement and leisure do not inhibit people from being hedonist, narcist and morally impoverished, keeping in view the violent dehumanizing, elitist and consumerist cultural moorings promoted by modernity, a new sensitivity has emerged in the writings of many Indian thinkers including Ashish Nandy, T.N. Madan and Mahatma Gandhi, which criticizes the unmindful valorization and celebration of self-gratifying modernist cultural ethos and practices. Thus to sum up, modernity is a double-edged phenomenon. If modernity creates conducive grounds for development and liberation, it also does the same for creating conditions of anomie, fostering alienation and normlessness, moral-spiritual bankruptcy, atomization and commodification, etc.

**Fundamentalism in the context of modernity**

Religious fundamentalism is a modern phenomenon and it stands in a relationship of opportunity and opposition with modernity. Modernity not only provides a fertile soil for the growth of religious fundamentalism as the latter reacts against the former. The former (modernity) also poses new threats to the role of communalism, fanaticism and many other problems and threats associated with religion are considered to be the by-product of situations created by modernity. Modern world view supported by the authority of human reason, cause-effect relationship and rational organization of social life, begins
to question the dominance of the theocentric world-view and its values. The U.S. historian of religion, Bruce B. Lawrence sees a

[C]ore contest between two incommensurate ways of viewing the world, one which locates values in timeless scriptures, inviolate laws, and unchanging mores, the other which sees in the expansion of scientific knowledge a technological transformation of society that pluralizes options both for learning and for living. (in Kressel 2008: 226)

The enlightenment conception of autonomous human person containing all moral and epistemic resources within himself and considering the futility of any invocation of religion to account for human existence; this kind of world view is taken to be anti-God and anti-religion stand by religious fundamentalists. This kind of individualism and humanism denoting self-sufficiency of human agency is problematic and unacceptable for many people reposing faith in the sovereignty of God:

Humanism as a product of modernity – represents not only the loss of a spiritual dimension, but also a sense that it has reversed the basic priorities of human existence. As indicated above, humanistic reason is seen as a self-sufficient source of authority. As the Young Hegelian philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach succinctly remarked in the mid-nineteenth century, for we moderns all theology is at root anthropology. Human nature is identified wholly within non-religious parameters. It is humanity who have articulated God(s) in their own image. In this sense, humanism and (and modern individualism) represents something quite elemental for all fundamentalists, namely, a cosmic reversal of the order of the world. Humans are prior to any idea of God; human nature is identified by wholly non-spiritual components. For the majority of fundamentalists in all religious faith the reverse is true: it is God or the spiritual dimension which is the source of all value, knowledge and morality. God (particularly for the dominant Abrahamic religions) is the sole architect of human nature and human value and nothing should impede this absolute truth. In attacking humanism, fundamentalists would claim therefore to be restoring the correct priorities of human existence and consequently re-enchanting the world with spirituality. (Vincent 2010: 273-9)

Shrinking scope and role of religion in public sphere and its loosing grip on people’s life is another challenge to religion posed by the ever expanding and increasing processes of rationalization and secularization. People have no need of religious and supernatural explanation in order to understand the happenings and events of the world. Neither do they consider holy books containing atemporal revealed truth as fundamentals for giving meaning and direction to their life. Wisdom and values inscribed in these books seem to be obsolete and outmoded. “Often science and religion are seen as competing
systems of explanation and it is supposed that the latter was pushed out by the former (Bruce 2001: 23).

Commenting on the gradual devaluation of religion’s role in people’s life and affairs and steep hike in the value of science and secularization, Bruce argues:

Religion is challenged less by specific scientific discoveries than by the underlying logic of science (indeed, of rationality). Science and technology have given us a notion of cause and effect that makes us look first for the natural causal explanation of an event. When an aeroplane crashes with the loss of many lives we ask not what moral purpose the event had but what was its cause. And in so far as we keep finding those causes (a loose engine nut or a terrorist bomb), we are not prevented, but we are subtly discouraged, from seeking the moral or religious significance (2008: 24).

Bruce further writes: Even committed religious believers suppose that a scientific research programme is more likely than a mass prayer meeting to produce a cure for Aids. Our space for the divine is thus much smaller than that of pre-industrial man (2008: 25).

So, the enormous decline in the effectiveness and efficacy of religion in public life and resulting relegation of it into the personal and private sphere becomes a matter of worry and concern for the religious fundamentalists.

In addition liberal characters of civil society and social institutions promoting “freer sexual mores, the advent of legalized abortion, greater rights for homosexuals, a reduction in the visibility of religious symbols in the public square, and – more generally – to the rise in relativistic systems of values” (Kressel 2008: 227), are perceived by the religious activists as deviations from the plans fixed by the omniscient God for the world. They take it as an affront to God and hence taking themselves as God’s soldiers, they are obliged to mobilize the faithful to take actions against the errants. This way religious militants justify and legitimatize their acts of violence in the name of purifying and freeing the world from the malaise and corruption visible in the form of rejection of religion, unleashed by the ideology and values of modernity and modernization.

The above exposition should make it clear that fundamentalism maintains a very ambiguous relation with modernity. If it is an enemy of the enlightenment values and cultural world-views; it, at the same time, co-subsists within modernity. The next unit discusses the implications of fundamentalism and modernity in the making of human identities.
Religious fundamentalism and Modernity: Implications for the construction of Identities

Religious fundamentalism and modernity representing the two different world-views or rather signifying a clash/conflict of cultures – go in making and producing identities and subjectivities exhibiting stark cultural differences and distinctiveness. They prescribe and promote ideologies and values for engaging with the world and being in it. One may encounter mutually exclusive ideological positions of the two while dealing with the issues pertaining to marriage, divorce, abortion, sexuality, homosexuality, suicide, education, gender-relations, etc.

It frequently signifies a person’s sense of being different from and similar to others. Identity characterizes an individual both internally as well as externally.

Self and identity are often used interchangeably, though each one stands for different connotations. The former ‘self’ is used to refer to introspective experience or rather ‘I-experience’ of a person while the latter tends to be used for a particular kind of consolidation enhancement and maintenance of the self. Pointing out the difference between the connotations ‘self’ and ‘identity’, T.M. Luthermann, an American anthropologist, writes: International ency of the Soc. And Blh Sciences). The concept of ‘self’..... world? (2001: 7156)

The points of difference and similarity are explained by Stuard Hall and P. Gilroy very clearly:

Identity is always particular, as much about difference as about shared belonging … identity can help us to comprehend the formation of the fateful pronoun ‘we’ and to reckon with the patterns of inclusion and exclusion that it cannot help but to create. This may be one of the most troubling aspects of all: the fact that the formation of every ‘we’ must leave out or exclude a ‘they’, that identities depend on the marking of difference. (in Jenkins 2008: 21)

For Parekh, identity is necessarily three dimensional construct. (a) Difference, whereby identity is established by reference to ‘what makes it distinct and distinguishable from others’; (b) self-conception or self-understanding’ or (c) ‘deeply cherished values, goals and commitments’. (cited in Whitebrook 2001: 128). It is a group’s basic way of organizing experience through its myths, memories, symbols, rituals and ideals”. (Kakkar 1995: 184)

Identity, thus, may be described as the externalization or public manifestation of the self. It is a description of ourselves. It should also be made explicit that identities are
not something that one is born with. They are, rather, construct and product of various socio-historical discourses, effects’ of linguistic representations.

Identity and identity-related issues such as recognition, self-assent, achievement, etc., have gained salience in the context of modernity and modernization. The issue of identity matters more in the modern world than in any earlier historical epoch.

At earlier historical moments, identity was not so much an issue; when societies were more stable, identity was to a great extent assigned, rather than selected or adopted. In current times, however, the concept of identity carries the full weight of the need for a sense of who one is, together with an often overwhelming pace of change in surrounding social contexts’. (Jenkins 2008: 30)

Habermas refers to the ‘project of modernity’

as the efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner logic. At the same time, this project intended to release the cognitive potentials of each of these domains to set them free from their esoteric forms. The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life, that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life. (in Kellner 1989: 168)

The growth of modernity is viewed to be related to a process of social awakening from the clutches of superstition, ignorance and religious dogmas. Modern people simply do not accept and assume the position and roles allocated to them by the traditional structures of the society. They rather create themselves and have the capacity to change the world they live in. Thus, modernity’s freedom of action and reflective assessment of one’s situation in society may be considered as distinctive characteristics of the modern man.

In Indian context modernity on account its democratic ethos, may be said to have played very emancipatory roles for oppressed women and the Dalits.

Along with the promises of modernity, there are many discontents as well associated with it. Alienation and obsession with narcissism, declining intensity of family bonds, transitory relationships and cut-throat competitions are biggest offshoots of modernity. In the modern commercial world, there is an increasing tendency to define oneself in terms of common products, and their use of presentation of self and ‘life styles’ have become chronic concerns. Commodity fetishism and artificial needs and exchange values replacing use values constitute dominant personality traits of the modern man.
Highlighting the rampant consumerist tendency which deprives modern man from feeling and judging, Eric Fromm writes in his landmark book, The Sane Society:

Having fun consists mainly in the satisfaction of consuming and ‘taking in’: commodities, sights, food, drinks, cigarettes, people, lectures, books, movies – all are consumed, swallowed. The world is one great object for our appetite, a big apple, a big bottle, a big breast; we are the sucklers, the externally expectant ones, the hopeful ones – and the eternally disappointed ones. (1990: 166)

In the modern age, individuals with fears of being left behind are under constant pressure of constructing and maintaining, renovating their identities through personal achievements.

The ‘self-identification’ task put before men and women once the stiff frame of estates had been broken in the early modern era boiled down to the challenge of living ‘true to kind’ (‘keeping up with the Joneses’): of actively conforming to the established social types and models of conduct, of imitating, following the pattern, ‘acculturating’, not falling out of step, not deviating from the norm (Bauman 2001: 145).

In the market driven fast moving social circumstances, monetary and material resources are required to cope up with the latest life-style and identities.

For the less affluent majority, the race is lost before it begins: they lack the resources to construct and manage a self appropriate to their rapidly-changing environments. They dwell painfully and anxiously in the gap between ‘individuality as fate and individuality as a practical capacity for ‘self-assertion’ (Bauman 2001: 47).

In another context, poststructuralist thinker Michel Foucault has questioned a belief in the enlightenment values of reason leading to liberation. Putting Foucault’s anti-enlightenment arguments, Ann Bramann writes:

(a) reason is not absolute but is a product of discourse; (b) the ‘rational subject is a fiction constituted by discourse; and (c) liberation or freedom as abstract and totalizing values are meaningless. (in Elliott 2010: 139)

Religious fundamentalists, religious revivalists and neo-traditionalists foreground religion as refuge and savior for human beings trapped in the iron-cage of modernity and modernization. For the absence category of religiously hyper active people, a high degree of commitment to religious cause coupled with a sense of intimacy with God is the most authentic way to lead one’s life. Religion for them holds no fleeting significance. Religion operating as a form of power and force of social mobilization, also remains a vital force in
the formation and fostering of identities. Taking recourse to religious reification and considering secular gains of this world as of little significance, religious fundamentalists impregnate and instill in the faith keepers the solace of the other worldly achievements.

For a fundamentalist, his/her religiously engaged self displaces other categories of social identity such as race, nation, gender, etc. Even his personal identity gets overshadowed with the religious one. There is hardly any scope left for self-reflexivity and individual autonomy as the person carries over-religious socialized conception of self.

Religion is not just a convenient sign of difference (like the contrasting colour shirts of opposing football teams); it is also often deeply embedded in the sense of ethnic or national identity. It provides each side with a justification for seeing itself as superior (we obey God) and the enemy as inferior (they are the infidel). (Bruce 2011: 8).

Fundamentalist identity makes a strong claim for the strict adherence to communally created values. Unquestioning compliance to such values involves a sense of moral goodness which often entails an imposition of severe restrictions on the religious practitioners. Ideological advocacy and unflinching trust in such communal values go unaffected of corrosive effects of liberalization and globalization. Commitment to religious cause often sets life-long projects and lasting alliances for the religious activists.

Fundamentalist personalities often behave in a very authoritarian mode and manner. Analyzing the personality traits of the authoritarian persons is the seminal concern of W.T. Adorno’s book, The Authoritarian Personality. In it, he singles out the following characteristics.

a. Conventionalism. Rigid adherence to conventional, middle-class values.

b. Authoritarian submission. Submissive, uncritical attitude toward idealized moral authorities of the ingroup.

c. Authoritarian aggression. Tendency to be on the lookout for, and to condemn, reject, and punish people who violate conventional values.

d. Anti-intraception. Opposition to the subjective, the imaginative, the tender-minded.

e. Superstition and stereotypy. The belief in mystical determinants of the individual’s fate; the disposition to think in rigid categories.

f. Power and ‘toughness’. Preoccupation with the dominance-submission, strong-weak, leader-follower dimension; identification with power figures; overemphasis upon the conventionalized attributes of the ego; exaggerated assertion of strength and toughness.

g. Destructiveness and cynicism. Generalized hostility, vilification of the human.

h. Projectivity. The disposition to believe that wild and dangerous things go on in the world; the projection outwards of unconscious emotional impulses.

i. Sex. Exaggerated concern with sexual ‘goings-on’. (Adorno 1950: 228)
Distinguished for dogmatic attitude, closed mindedness and strong will power, religious zealots and extremists commit bigotries and indulge into persecutionary practices towards the ‘other’. “They [are] excessively submissive to those above them and excessively aggressive to those below. In a wonderful metaphor, the authoritarian personality [is] described as a cyclist; bending from the waist up but kicking out with his legs” (Bruce 2011: 116).

Fundamentalist mindset is often described in terms of binary opposition – God and Satan, good and evil, supernatural world of spirit and the sinful world of the flesh, in-group and out-group etc. Such hierarchical oppositions enable them in solidifying their struggle. Fundamentalist groups carry the perception that they are God’s chosen ones, His disciples. They are there in the world to execute God’s will inscribed in the Holy Scriptures. They are fighting battle for the God’s Will to prevail. This mentality prompts them to identify the dangerous persons and forces: the liberals, compromising the infidels, modernists and these people never subscribe the secular logic of seeing God in their own image. Their religion inspires them to annihilate all the forces such as carnal desires and material possessions that stand between people and God. In brief, they strive to establish the sovereignty of God and remain impervious to the attitudes fostering desires of the world and the flesh.

**An Introduction to God’s Little Soldier**

The master narrator and artful story teller, Kiran Nagarkar, in his novel, God’s Little Soldier (2006), continues to probe his occupation and engagement with the religion and its discontents, which has been an abiding concern of his earlier novels as well. The text under scrutiny primarily examines the tension between the cultures of religious fundamentalism (an ideology of orthodoxy, the inner world of religious militants as well as its outer manifestation in the form of terrorists, atrocities and communal killings) and that modernity (radicalizing the decline in the significance of traditional, religious values, beliefs and behaviour through the programmes of secularization, rationalization and liberalization, etc. The novel’s prime thrust is on its protagonist Zia, who proclaims himself to be a God’s soldier and is willing to die for defending his faith. The text in its three different sections depicts the three stages (as a Muslim-Zia, as a Christian-Luscent and as a Hindu-Tejas) in the life of the central character. Despite his unshaken belief into
being as a God’s chosen one and his commitment to act for the execution and fulfillment of His plan in the world, Zia represents a ‘corruption’ and perversion of religion and parody of faith as his religious impulses often inspires him to indulge into violence, bloodshed and destruction. As a religious extremist and fanatic, he purposefully plans out to attack on the life and liberty of non-believers and unpractitioners of his faith.

Zia is drawn towards fundamentalist world-view and zealotry on account of his childhood upbringing that takes place in the auspices of his Aunt Zubeida Khaala. Zubeida, herself moved by fundamentalist ideology, instills in Zia all the conservative values.

The novelist posits Amanat, as a counter point to Zia. Amanat, the elder brother of Zia, is pulled towards the liberal world view of his parents: father, Zafar and mother, Shagufta. As a liberal and an ideologue of modernist sensibility, Amanat criticizes Zia’s religious intolerance and militancy through his books and letters reflecting sanity and wisdom. Inspite of these positivities and goodness, Amanat too has his limitations. His moral flabbiness, banality in life and unfulfilling relations with his wife, Sagiri, gets strained. On the top, Amanat lacks Zia’s tremendous energy and strong will power and single-mindedness in executing things and thereby making difference. As a modernist, he stands robbed of any sense of higher purpose and commitment to some life-long project and mission.

Thus, the novel through the lead characters – Zia and Amanat – exhibits conflicting world-views and polarization of two culturally different ways of being in the world. Nagarkar embarks upon in displaying the corrosive effects of religious extremism and ‘liquid modernity’. The novelist it may be maintained has a political purpose to intervene and wring change in people’s perceptions and outlooks. Kiran Nagarkar in the major chunk of the novel concentrates on portraying hyper religious activism and construction of orthodoxies across the three religions of the world and thereby critiques an obsession of religious reformism taking recourse to violence and militancy.

Here is an attempt is made to study and analyse the construction of identities and subjectivities of the major and supporting characters inhabiting the text for convenience and clarity sake, a broad typology of characters has been created keeping in view the ideologies of religious fundamentalism and modernity.
The first opening section of the novel deals primarily with the formation or shaping of Zia’s identities and consolidation of his Islamic facts from his childhood to the manhood. Zia is born and brought up in a family whose members are torn between two opposite values of religious conservation and liberalism. Finding his parents – Zafar and Shagufta – occupied with ailing Amanat’s treatment, Zia is pulled towards his aunt Zubeida Khala’s fervent religious orthodoxy. Zubeida exercises a strong and lasting influence on Zia’s subjectivity and agency by supplying religious inputs which help him in developing the trajectories of his own religious beliefs, behaviours and preferences. She influences his religious choices, reinforces strict moral standards and channelizes his commitment to the cause of God, Allah. Zubeida keeps Zia insulated from all those social forces including dance and music which she thinks have corrosive effect on Zia’s psyche and distract him from the paths of religious piety. Zia recalls one of his earliest memories of a musical concert held at his home, he was unallowed by his aunt Zubeida Khaala as she dubbed the singer as ‘Satan, that’s what he is’. ‘Is singing forbidden, Khaalajaan?’ ‘Yes,’ Zubeida hissed. ‘Unless it is in praise of Allah’ (11). ‘Maybe he is praising the Almighty.’ ‘No, he is not’. ‘How can you tell? You can’t make out a word of what he is saying’. ‘Don’t blaspheme. I know in my heart of hearts.’ ‘Is that what makes the Ustad, Satan?’ ‘Not the Ustad, you fool. He’s only the handyman of Satan.’ ‘Then who’s Satan?’ (11). After Zia’s long insistence, he gets permission on a condition: ‘five minutes in all you have to watch the disgraceful spectacle outside. After that it’s back to bed and, as penance, Zubeida Khaala won’t be singing any lullabies for you tonight’ (9). She does not even permit Zia for singing, “unless it is in praise of Allah” (11). Zubeida tells Zia that “pleasure is how Satan entices and entraps gullible fools” (12). She blames Zia’s father Zafar for indulging into Satanic practices of dance, music and singing. Sin away, Satan,’ Zubeida said aloud. It’s a songster today. Next thing you know he will be bringing nautch girls from the kotha to this house (12).

Zubeida further comments for his father’s fallen conduct ‘Your father. Yes, your father. He’s the very image of the evil one. We’ll all burn in hell for eternity because of him’ (11). Zia narrates another instance of his aunt’s conservation
Zubeida Khaala had once taken him to a Hindi movie and had asked him to close his eyes when a woman in hot pants, along with fifty other girls in skimpy skirts, had danced to the most enchanting song he had ever heard. ‘Rumba ho, ho. Suma ho, ho’. He had covered his face with his hands and watched the disco dancing through the gaps between the fingers. (12-13)

As a woman deeply stepped in orthodox and traditional patriarchal values, at the concert, Zubeida cannot stand free-mixing of men and women, ‘just look at them, men and women mingling shamelessly” (9). Her conservative outlook creates difficulty for her in recognizing change in gender relations. For her: Decent women don’t throw off the pallus of their saris and expose their breasts. They should sit in the zenana. Or wear a burkha when they have company. As for a female fundamentalist, Zubeida, the segregation of sexes and veiling for women are quite virtuous practices. The issues of gender equality, internal to modernity and democracy would not go in consonance with Zubeida’s conservative attitude and stand on the women questions.

As a child, Zia, one day wandering into a garden in front of his house, happens to place his hand on marble sculptures being sculptured by his architect father, Zafar Khan.

With his eyes closed, Zia ran his hands over the varying textures of the sculpted figures, feeling he had entered the chill, translucent marble or become as hard and unyielding as the steel. But then he withdrew his hand as though it had been singed. He had once again forgotten Zubeida Khaala’s injunction and wandered into Satan’s den of sin. Islam, she had warned him, forbade all graven images (18).

Zubeida keeps her vigilant eye on Zia twenty-four hours and she goes on giving him prescription and proscriptions, and does not allow Zia to question her or her wisdom of Islam. On a certain day, Zia Khan playing with Sagari, who later becomes an actress and his sister-in-law, stands in front of a Hindu God, Ganesh, and Sagari starts pouring flowers at the feet of the auspicious god … joining her palms and closing her eyes and saying a prayer and laying her head at the feet of the God … Zia does too, except that he says his own Islamic prayers before bringing his head to rest on the dancing feet of Ganesh and he is aware without looking behind that his aunt is watching him, with incredulous eyes, and so is his God whom he has shamelessly betrayed. (23)

Zubeida leaves no such occasions (the two described above) when she can stir Zia’s consciousness and make him fill with a sense of remorse and guilt. With her hell bent intent to sacrilege Zia’s subjectivity, Zubeida constantly reminds and reprimands him
for his transgression of religio-cultural boundaries. A “theme in fundamentalist discourse is the inculcation of guilt .... Fundamentalism stirs anger and guilt in a potent brew” (Kakkar 1995: 226) and Zubeida is highly skillful in this insidious art. On account of this and many other seductive attributes, Zubeida has become Zia’s favourite. She is ‘Zia’s one and only friends, ally, guide task-master, his lodestar, his inspired instructor ....” (29) Zubeida instills in Zia an idealized vision of a transcendent purpose and orients him to tread on the path of the sacred and does everything to enhance his sense of religious self-esteem.

Zia had to make up to Zubeida Khaala for his terrible betrayal. He’d have been willing to move both the mountain and the Prophet but he had no idea whether that would have any effect on his aunt. Ever since he could remember, she had told him that it was his destiny to become a waalee, a saint who could perform wondrous miracles: cure the sick, bring light to the blind and speech to the mute. Mohammed was the last and greatest prophet of all; greater than Moses to whom God Himself gave the tablets with the Ten Commandments. Yes, greater than Jesus, whom the foolish Christians held to be the son of God, when he was only a fine and loving prophet and nothing more. It was Mohamed who had given the world the gift of Islam. Islam: the act of surrendering, the surrender of the true believer to the One and Only God who is Allah. It is this same verb Islam, his aunt had told him, which is the source of the word Muslim.

The novelist further writes:

It was Zia’s vocation, Zubeida Khaala had determined, to bring back to Islam those how had strayed. His voice would be a thunderous indictment in the ears and consciences of those who had become casual about Allah or had turned their backs upon Him altogether. His own faith would be like a beacon to sinners. Yes, he would bring back the lost souls of Islam. In due course, he would convert the pagans and idolaters and increase the tribe of the Prophet. And Allah had chosen her, the meek and submissive Zubeida, to mould and guide the little boy into a great pir and saint. That was her mission” (26).

As a result Zia, “learnt almost half the Koran in English to win over his aunt, to edict just one word of encouragement from her.

Commenting on fundamentalists’ strategy of making passionate religious appeals and providing ideological legitimacy to their belief system, Kakkar writes:

The Rhetoric of fundamentalist politics attempts to seduce its target group with a sense of participation in a collectivity with a transcendent purpose, giving a higher value or meaning to life than could be given by any secular politics. The group addressed by the
fundamentalist has the very satisfying feeling of being ‘chosen’ with a sense of mission connected with a sacred purpose, sanctified by God, and superior to the adversary’s mission which is not similarly blessed or is blessed by a lesser god. (1995: 227).

Zubeida Khala is quite explicit and instrumental in making Zia realize and recognize his destiny and destination in “the spectrum of Islam” (52). “She says we are no bodies and belong nowhere since we have turned our back upon Allah” (52). Hence, she takes recourse to all the corrective measures to ensure Zia to be “God’s little soldier” (52). She often takes him to the Dawoodi Mosque for a private prayer and tells him “any holy man’s blessings bring one near to Allah” (53) With Zubeida Khala’s support, Zia one day has a long session with a Maulvi, who tells Zia about Allah’s unbounded love for His devotees and appeals him to sacrifice his life if need be, “to defend the honour of [his] Allah and to bring greater glory to His name. As a result Zia’s mind had almost immediately become a mere vessel, a vessel as larger as this preacher’s infinity. This man, this maulvi, was his first revelation. He was torched by a light, the light of Allah Himself, which this man on the dais had directed towards him” (61).

The similar or more rapturous and ecstatic experience Zia undergoes when he performs the Namaz at a massive gathering in the premises of a mosque:

The power of mass prayer was a revelation to Zia. He discovered that his prayers had more body and weight and rapture when he was amongst the believers in the mosque. There were no rich or poor, no great or small, no mathematical geniuses or Little Miracles in the temple of God. You could feel Allah descend upon the faithful as they knelt down in unison, the soles of their feet turned upwards, hand conjoined as they prayed using the very language in which the archangel had spoken to the Prophet. At the end of the prayers, Zia was aware of an intense bond with his fellow-men (85).

Perception of threat is a very defining feature of fundamentalism and communalism. Another essential feature of fundamentalism is being reactive and oppositional. Communal identity thrives on the recognition of the ‘enemy – other’ which is supposed to pose a major threat. This heightened sense of perceived threat from the ‘other’ leads to intolerance and often turns into violence. This sequence is described by Sudhir Kakkar as “religious violence from the inner to the outer terrain” (1995: 246).

As a Muslim, Zubeida Khala has a constant sense of threat from the ‘Hindu other’: be it a Hindu god or a Hindu dog literally as well as metaphorically. She feels no qualms about poisoning Zia’s consciousness with communal ideology of Hindu-hatred. She mutters:
If only someone would rid us of these Hindu dogs, they won’t leave us in peace even during the holy month of Ramzaan. The police just stand by while they deliberately take out a possession to disrupt our prayer meetings (34).

Zia’s vulnerable subjectivity gets prompted into action, when his Zubeida Khala exhorts him for being “the sole hope of Islam, its latter-day savior” (36). Having pocketed a sharp knife, and bidding ‘Khuda Hafiz, Zubeida Khala” (36), Zia leaves home for “the Bajrang Paan-Beedi Shop” (36), where a dog. “sher yawned” “Down down with Hindu dogs, Zia hissed, as he bent down and plunged the knife into Sher’s flank” (36). In return, Zia was also attacked by the dog, which “took a whole chunk of Zia’s exposed thigh in his mouth” (37). Zia lying in a semi-consciousness stage was heard saying:

“Zubeida Khan, please tell Bajrang Paan wallah and Sher that I did it for you”. (37). Here easily we see how Zubeida Khala converts ends (religion) into a means for meeting her goal. In this context, Louis Demont comments with pain: “the religions element that enters into the making of communalism has been described as ‘but the shadow of religion, i.e. religion taken not as the essence and guide of life in all spheres, but only as a sign of the distinction of one man, at least virtually political, group against others (Quoted in Madan 1998: 273). Even Gandhi speaks on the issue in the same spirit: “Religion is outraged when an outrage is perpetuated in its name”. (1961)

Having completed his school education in Mumbai with excellent academic achievement, especially in Mathematics (popular in his school as a Maths Wizard), Zia left for Cambridge to get higher education in Maths. Aunt Anonia, an old family friend and Doctor of Theology at Cambridge, was his local guardian and her daughter Vivian, very close to Zia in age, was his companion during his stay at the university. For the initial six months of his stay in England, Zia “had turned his back on Allah” and “was less than the lowliest creature that crawls the earth”. (110)

He’d been at sea, tossed and driven to desperation. He had been barely aware of himself or the world without. He had sunk into an abyss of loneliness and depression from which he had never expected to climb back. He had forgotten God, but praise be to Allah, Allah had not forgotten him (110).

In this period of crisis, Zubeida Khala’s letter revives and rejuvenates his faith in Allah. The letter reads:

My dear Zia,

Are you praying, my little boy? Pray five times a day and Allah will keep you out of harm’s way. Are you going to the mosque on
Fridays? Make friends with the mullah. And read the Koran every day. It cleanses your soul. (115)

Zia meets Maulana Rizvi - ‘one of the most inspired teachers of Islam’ (111) - who promises to teach him Koran in Arabic.

Zia had read the Koran in English many times. He never ceased to marvel at how such a small book managed to encompass all of life for all time. And yet he knew that the Koran he read was not the Word of God. For the Word of God was in Arabic, and any translation, however literal, was at best an attenuation of God’s voice, and however well-meaning, a tampering with the word (111).

And finally the ultimate wisdom of Islam is revealed to him:

He prostrated himself in the house of God. Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar. God is great, God is great, he spoke the words of the azan. I bear witness that there is no God but Allah. I bear witness that Mohammed is His Messenger. Come for prayers. Come towards fulfillment. God is great, God is great. (110)

Here, we notice that the seed of faith sown in Zia’s psyche during his early years of life by Zubeida Khala’s strenuous efforts, is now metamorphosed into a giant tree of strong religious conviction. Even in a country like England, there takes place crystallization of his faith in Koran to be unaltered words of God and Islamic way of life exhibited from his heightened religiousity involving complete surrender to the will of Allah. For Zia “a life without religion [is] a pen without ink” (Juergensmeyer 2000: 69). Neglect of duty, breakdown of traditional gender values and practices, fallen and wayward existence harbor no space in Zia’s consciousness, and in his view, these are unforgivable offences.

Zia has zero tolerance for the modern life style. His Ammijaan, Shagufta is just opposite to that of his “spiritual godmother” (153) Zubeida Khala. Shagufta’s modern life style and extravagant living is completely unacceptable to Zia. He considers his mother a promiscuous woman, living a life of sin. In a response to his mother’s letter, Zia writes:

Horse racing, cards, gambling and good times, that’s all you are interested in. You’ve never had a thought for Allah nor could you spare a moment for your soul. If we lived in a pak Islamic state, you know very well what your fate would have been: you would have been stoned to death in public. Instead of whipping you and holding you to the righteous path, Abba, self-destructive man that he is, indulged your turpitude and turned a blind eye to your fallen ways (153).
Zia as a god-intoxicated, individual does not spare even his father. In the same letter he writes: “I still hold Abbajaan responsible ….. If he had not been so weak, he would never have allowed you to become a whore”. (153)

In another letter to Amanat, Zia writes:

“There is no forgiveness for adultery. Your mother has willfully transgressed Allah’s edicts not once but again and again. She is a nymphomaniac and she rejoices in her adultery instead of shunning it. (159)

Zia turns down Amanat’s pleading for his forgiveness to their mother’s flaws. His obsession and preoccupation with his faith is so extreme and in excess that he can not be normal and natural even with his new found “soul-mate” (182) Vivian in England. His act of love making with Vivian makes him feel with a sense of regret and guilt. He grumbles: “What was Zia to make of Vivian? And even more to the point, what was he to make of himself? For there was something else, something so shameful that Zia could not even acknowledge it”. (149) “His guilt was mounting by the day and he kept feeling that he had once again let his God down”. (150)

Considering himself as “the offender of the faith and Allah’s agent on earth” (150). Zia has more important task at his hand such as “to vanquish the Prince of Darkness” (150) (Salman Rushdie) than indulgence in carnal pleasure for self-gratification.

To battle against blasphemers the infidels, apostates – is the most sacred duty for religious fundamentalist. The rational questioning of religious faith, writing a work insulting religious prophets, ridiculing and making mockery of religious wisdom inscribed in scriptures, push believers to be religious extremist. Salman Rushdie’s novel, “The Satanic Verses (1988) subverts the values and beliefs promoted by Islam. The offensive and outrageous portrayal of the prophet Mohammad and questioning the infallibility of the Koran courted a lot of controversy and provoked many Muslim religious leaders condemned the novel. Novelist’s own life was in danger in the wake of the fatwa (death sentence).

Influenced by Zubeida Khala’s patriarchal belief and values emphasizing hierarchy and subordination, Zia rebels against his Ammijann’s modern outlook and lifestyle (characterized by open and free sexual mores), her belief in gender-equality and subordination to her husband as a wife. Zia’s organization and conduct of his life based on religious moorings of sacred and Holy Scriptures go incommensurate with the modern world that has upset everything including enjoying the sanctity of tradition. Zia does not
spare even his father, Zafar, whose relation with his mother is guided by the principles of solidarity, co-operation and is free from any kind of male-chauvinism. The hostile intolerant self-behaviour of Zia may be attributed to the overconsumption of religion.

As it is observed by a psychiatrist: “With very few exceptions, most religions become harmful only when taken incorrectly or in overdosage”. (Chesen 192: 94)

As a committed Muslim, Zia considers himself duty bound to annihilate the (exhibitionist) (129) Salman Rushdie as his work, The Satanic Verses speaks ills of the Prophet and downplays Koran’s mandate. As a consequence of the fatwa, “[t]he beast has gone underground”. (129). Zia assures his Almighty not to disappoint Him. I give you may word, Lord of all the worlds, that come what may, I will accomplish my mission.

All the heathens and disbelievers of the world have conspired to throw a smoke screen around it. Let them do what they will to protect it but with Your help and guidance, I will locate this evil and annihilate it. (129)

Zia becomes more vociferous in expressing his commitment:

No Rushdie can affect Allah, nor can blasphemy or heresy touch the Almighty. Allah does not need protection from Satan, but a true believer does. It is I who must defend the honour of God or else it is I, not God, who will be defenceless against Satan. If I am to lead my people and perhaps even non-believers to Allah, then I must prove myself worthy of Him. I must vanquish Satan and protect myself and my flock. (135)

Even Vivian is moved by Zia’s religiousity and requests him: “Teach me to pray to Allah.” (130) She changes “her name from Vivian to Fatima” (130), and to execute “God’s Grand design” (131), she becomes Zia’s accomplice with full exuberance.

After Zia’s long and impatient wait, the Prince of darkness comes at ‘The British Council Cambridge Seminar’ (1750) meant for the writers of different countries. Amanat too is here to “read an excerpt from the Arsonist” (181), one of his books. After waving his hand to quiet the seminar audience, Salman Rusdhie, ‘The Obstreparous Midnight’s Child” (b. 1947) (136), begins his reading. Vivian murmurs:

‘The Evil One is reading .... He has cocked a snook at the Ayatollah and his fatwa and despite the two-million-pound price on his head, has given the slip to God-alone-knows how many agents of death... He can feel their adulation and he’s well aware that they are in his thrall. His sense of power is a greater intoxicant than any designer drug.’ (191)

While Spodkar’s eyes were engaged in accepting “the furious clapping as his due” (191), Zia raises his gun, gets the soft middle of Satan’s head in the gunsight, aims and
fires. He waits for the Evil One’s brain pulp to leap out and his body to shudder and gently keel over. (191)

But to his utter shock

For a moment Zia thinks that he’s missed the mark altogether as he’d done in those early days, but there has been no loud report, and no plaster has splintered and burst from the wall. Zia pulls the trigger again. And again. And again. Click. Click. Click but no bullet flies out. He opens the chamber and stares blankly. He feels his own head splitting open. (191-92)

Zia immediately concludes that the ‘slut and traitor’ (192), Vivian, who, he thinks to have emptied out bullets from the gun clandestinely, at the eleventh hour. Zia also presumes that Vivian would certainly have informed the police. However, at the moment, Zia is disturbed and disgruntled for the opportunity he missed.

He has waited for this day for close to six years. Today he had the Evil One in his gunsight and as sure as the earth under his feet, the breath in his lungs and Allah in jannat, Lucifer was a dead man. Or should have been. Oh the shame and disgrace of it (192)

After the catastrophic incident, Zia gets back home in Mumbai with more “malevolence enveloped” (195). He has been completely engulfed in flames of self-loath.

His existence was predicated on one single absolute: dedication. Dedication to the service of Allah and the spreading of His word. And now the whole carefully constructed edifice of his calling was in a shambles. Sometimes he worried that his faith itself was in jeopardy. (198)

Zia has turned vicious and hostile to his family members. “Zia’s self-destruct went into overdrive when he got the letter from Vivian” saying “Make no mistake, I am coming to get you. You know I never miss”. (201)

Zia became a rod of uranium-238, inflammable with self-loathing and spite. There was enough radioactive toxin in him to contaminate the whole universe. (202)

Finding Zia’s condition quite unbearable, Amanat says, “I think he needs help: Amanat told his father “shall we call a psychiatrist to take a look at him?”. (202). Zia’s desperation is going unbound.

The next evening, when Amanat was returning from work, Zia was waiting for him on the landing. There was so much pain and hurt in his face, Amanat rushed up the stairs. Zia did not know what his brother was up to when Amanat embraced him. He was thrown of balance as his knife plunged into Amanat twice. How could you, Amanat? How could you? (203)

120
Zia committed the gruesome act of stabbing Amanat as the latter had betrayed (Amanat had emptied Zia’s revolver and not Vivian as presumed by Zia), the former and stopped Zia from becoming “the greatest hero of Islam of the twentieth century” or at least “Allah’s favourite martyr” (240). Zia speaks, “I nearly killed my brother because he prevented me from committing my first murder”. (242) i.e. the killing of Rushdie.

**Lucens: A Reconstructionist**

The mind is a vessel. If you don’t fill it with Jesus, the Devil be only too happy to move in. (394)

Zia invents himself as a Christian named Lucens and joins a monastery as a monk in America. He undergoes a rigorous orientation involving a lot of austere practices and has to “unlearn almost everything he had learnt in his previous life”. (215) His consciousness is saddled with a sense of guilt “for the terrible sins he had committed in another life and another continent”. (221) So to perform penance, “he picked up the tentacle flagellum and did not stop whipping himself till he had stripped the flesh off his back. The devil had got into him and the devil to be cast out. He had to be taught that he would not find a warm welcome in Lucens.” (221)

“There was a man hole in his soul, and he had fallen into it”. (270)

He had to go through an entirely dislocating experience. Months living as a mark, he realizes his place and purpose in God’s scheme of things.

Soon Lucens, however, overcome the bout of suicidal depression and sin consciousness and fervently prepares himself for the vacation ordained by the Lord Jesus. As a Christian reconstructionist, he had an obligation for remarking the world in terms of the Bible, the infallible word of God. This includes the refashioning of the individual, the family, the church, the society and the state, etc. He has a holy duty to reclaim the earth from the secular forces for Jesus Christ and to punish those who disobey Christian social order. Lucens may be said to have asserted “that America should ‘function as a Christian nation’ and oppose[d] such ‘social moral evils’ of secular society as abortion on demand, fornication, homosexuality, sexual entertainment, state usurpation of parental brides and God-given liberties”. (Quoted in Juergensmeyer 2000: 27).
Holding a troubled view of the world fraught with consumerism, lust, adultery, homeosexuality, child-pregnancy and abortion, Lucent is hell-bent on to give a full stop to the above immoral practices. Expressing his stand on homo-sexuality, Lucens speaks:

It would defeat the very purpose of sexual congress, the transmission of life, that the Church has always held sacred …… homosexuality [is] a mortal sin in the eyes of our Lord.” (331).

As a soldier for Christ, Lucens, subscribes and legitimates the use of violence for establishing God’s kingdom on the earth. For Lucens, God had always been a search for purity, simple and absolute. How could he have forgotten that children were dearest to Jesus because they were the purest amongst all of God’s creatures? From now on till he breathed his last, he would be the defender of unborn children (346). He forms “a pro-life organization called The Initiative for the Protection of Unborn Children, IPUC for short” (341), whose objective is to protect of the unborn children. The organization holds demonstration against abortion and maintains that killing unborn babies is a crime “against children, against humanity and against God” (342). The pro-life organization convenes a meeting with pro-choicers (defenders of abortion in the garb of mother’s care, etc.) to convince the latter for not performing “the dismemberment of a foetus” (349). To champion the cause of the organization and for its funding, Lucens makes massive profit from the stock market. He had said earlier “I felt the market move under my skin, at the very core of my being. I tested it first for fourteen days and then I played.” (277)

Finding “the crusade against abortion” (347) not producing the desired effect and the anti-abortion brigade being considered “as a lunatic fringe of Papist extremists” (346) by the pro-choicers, “Lucens had no choice. The doctor would have to go” (368). He began to bomb the abortion – providers and their clinics with RDX. In this connection, for Lucens the use of “force is sometimes necessary to extirpate injustice and subdue evil within a sinful world, and that small strategic acts of violence are occasionally necessary to deter large acts of violence and injustice”. (Juersenmeyer 2000: 25)

While launching his anti-abortion crusades, Lucens as a Christian activist completely, abandons non-violence and becomes hostile and intolerant against those whom he considers depraved and promiscuous. He is fully convinced that moral persuasion is too weak means for the realization of social justice. As a religious extremist, he sets aside Jesus’s message to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (quoted in Juergensmeyer 2000: 25). Being highly obsessed with religious delusion
for Lucens other than Biblican one, no life-style and individual freedom is worth pursuing extremely troubled by Lucen’s over self-indulging religiousity. Father Augustine of the Abbey* remarks:

> Our Lord Jesus is not an Olympic medal that you can wear around your neck, Lucens. He must love us all equally, saint and sinners, or not love at all. As with all extremes, there is a downside to your goodness, a kind of schizophrenia that pushes you towards evil. (316)

The father is pained at his “intolerance and rage in the name of morality” (316).

Taking note of his unbound arrogance, father further reprimands:

> Whence this boundless arrogance, Lucens? If you continue heedlessly down this road, you’ll end up usurping the privileges and prerogatives of God Himself. It is not up to you to judge or punish anyone including yourself. It is the Lord’s right and the Lord’s alone to punish. And as He made clear even on the cross, he prefers forgiveness to vengeance. (317)

Though Lucens is “a powerhouse of moral energy, inspiration and influence” (404), he is inescapably involved and occupied with puritanical insistence. He issues “injunctions against premarital sex” (413) and notices “that adolescents today are so much more worldly-wise, plugged-in and sex-savvy than any previous generation” (413). He begs them to be different and take “the pledge of purity.” (414)

Observing Lucens, “caught up in the affairs of the temporal world” (394) and especially that of America and thereby deviating and distracting from his ultimate concern and destination i.e. Jesus Christ, father Augustine again reminds him: But the flag of God ..... head it”. (419)

Smelling malicious intent of the IPUC campaign and its pernicious injunctions to “close the roads and paralyze the city” (397) and suspecting Lucens’ brain behind this, the “two FBI agents come to see him and they inform Lucens that there is a corruption in him. ..... He’s a biological menace to America and mankind”. (393)

The reading of this section of the novel should suffice to make it clear that despite Lucen’s pious and authentic beginning as a devout and committed Christian, Lucen’s utmost mania with ethical puritanism, intolerance towards the others (not inspired and guided by the dictate of the Bible and Christian spiritual moorings) and resorting violence to liquidate the defilers and deviant, belie and betray the very cause of Christianity and its civilizational concerns. His fatal attraction to the extremist vision and version of Christian faith and reconstructionist belief that the whole of the world is in error by seeking pleasure
and living life on different parameters of non-conforming individualism aspiring freedom from religion, produce trouble to the world and severe threat to the life and liberty of his own God’s people.

Tejas Niranter: A Sham Hindu

Hinduism, it is often maintained, is a way of life. It is too complex to allow any definitive statement about it. “Hinduism is not a homogeneous religion at all, but rather a potpourri of religions, doctrines and attitudes towards life, rites and cults, moral and social norms, any claim can be countered by its opposite.” (Doniger, 1991: 519). Unlike other major religions of the world including Christianity, Islam and Judaism, Hinduism “has no identifiable founder, no single canonical text so acknowledged by one and all, no Church-like organization and no fundamentals of belief and practice” (Madan 1998: 176). Almost the similar voice is expressed by Asgharali Engineer:

It is often maintained that the Semitic religions- Judaism, Christianity, and Islam- or a rigidly doctrinaire, and non-Semitic religions specifically Indian religions- Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism- are non-doctrinaire and hence flexible. The former refuse to accommodate change, when as they latter... are inclined to accept change (1998:1). Keeping in view its assimilative and inclusive orientation, it is very difficult to map-out the clear-cut dichotomy between the sacred and secular domains and practices. Prof. Madan comments further on the issue:

Secularism does not mean in India that religion is privatized: such an idea is alien to the indigenous religious traditions, which are holistic in character and do not recognize such dualistic categories as scared versus profane, religious versus secular, or public versus private (quoted in Ruthven 2007: 109).

Even the reaction of Hindu religious organizations like the VHP and RSS against secularization is very tangential. “They are not as driven as protestant and Muslim fundamentalists by changing gender roles, by the relegation of religious knowledge to the private sphere or even by the secularity of the state. ..” (Bruce 2011: 99).

Thanks to the diffused and non-essentialist character of Hinduism, it gets difficult for any particular organization/ movement to identify the core of the faith. The diverse and varied historic character of Hinduism gives little scope for enforcing strict conformity and criticizing laxity. Hence, the issue of attributing fundamentalism to Hinduism does not
hold as much significance as in case of the monotheistic religions since there is no perceived threat of decline in religious observance of Hindus. However, it should not be taken to imply that the practice of Hindu religion is free from all kinds of conservative traditionalist and communal elements.

Kiran Nagarkar, in the third and last section of the novel, focuses on the delineation of Hinduism and construction of the Hindu identity through the character of Tejas and his holy guru, Shakta Muni. Owing to the heterogeneous and unfathomable character of Hinduism, even the novelist’s endeavor to construct Tejas as a Hindu character does not seem as convincing and striking as compared to Zia and Lucens.

Lucens being in the hit list of the FBI as a mastermind in bombing the abortion clinic leading to the death of many including Dr. Laster, “he was faced with the prospect of having to reinvent himself” (385). Instead of being caught and tried by the American Security agency, Lucens takes recourse to the “vanishing trick” (385). During this crucial period, Lucens comes to take up with the holy man, Shakta Muni, the Guru of James Cambray, the financier of the IPUC campaigns and traders of arms. Despite Lucen’s initial reluctance, the holy charlatan is quite unmindful of giving “uncalled for advice” (386) to Lucens. Shakt Muni with his answering resolve goes on trying to psych Lucens:

‘The concept of conversion does not exist in Hinduism, Lucens,’ the Muni smiled mischievously. ‘You are the one who’s into saving people. Allow me to point out a few facts. You came here of your own free will. You are just as welcome to leave as you are to stay. You seem to have a rather simplistic notion of my ability to negotiate what lies beyond the ken of men. I’m not selling anything, nor is your choice of religion any concern of mine. Unlike many other faiths, we do not need to exclude others to feel that we are chosen. (452)

The miracle working Guru, the Muni, invites Lucens in the Ashram to offer him yoga-meditation, an alternative medicine and health care mechanism.

The yogic aim is to awaken the energy lying dormant within you. We do not ask you to give up anything because our aims are very different. Yogic practices seek to heighten and intensify your receptivity, beliefs and experiences. They are first and last a disciple and a way of life. Yoga opens doors and becomes a voyage of discoveries. It frees you and allows you to apprehend that there are skies beyond the one you perceive and that the human potential for growth is infinite. (452-3)

Shakta Muni initiates him into the ‘Hath yoga’, the pranayama (an art of breath control), meditation, and Sidhi (an extraordinary psychic power) to reach “a state of
heightened consciousness” (1457). Through the rigorous tantric orientation, mortification and concentration, the Muni ensures Lucens of Supreme knowledge and consequent immortality thereby:

We’ll graduate through the six chakras or centres of the kundalini starting with the muladhara at the anus and then move on one by one to the seventh one, the sahasrara, where the semen is transformed into nectar and you gain immortality. (457)

To make Lucens more self-assured, the tantric also strives to prove the superiority of the oriental mystic wisdom over the western rational paradigm.

‘The West prides itself on its rationality. But it is doubtful if Aristotle or Descartes can help you negotiate the mystery of the Holy Spirit or the divine and the human in Jesus Christ. It’s the same with Tantra’. (459-60)

Lucens also undergoes the holy naming ceremony (the upanayana) and is given a new name, Tejas Nirantar (The Light Eternal). The ceremonial naming Samskara precedes a multiple mortifying stages and processes, such as consumption of purifying soma (an emetic), rubbing the body with sandalwood oil and laying the body “for hours in a tube of warm perfumed water” (467). The purpose of serving soma is to make the past dead and to make his mind “a tabula rasa”. (467) Tejas, thus, almost acquires a new Hindu life, life like a newly born baby.

The therapeutic function of a Guru is to provide the healing to emotional sufferings, and to introduce the transformatory experience into the initiated. He is supposed to be disapproving the use of yogic methods for worldly gains and abandon all the worldly attachments. Despite his projection of being a tantric and spiritual Guru, there is a lot dubious and shady about Shakta Muni. Instead of living the life of an ascetic and the Muni promotes Tejas to “be in [arms] business” (456). He ropes Tejas into business “because he was younger, hungrier, and had the capacity to jolt the business out of its inertia with new marketing techniques and systems, and the nerve to go after much bigger game”. (43)

He is an “astute and canny man of the world” (455). He easily notices motivated and aggressive qualities of Tejas, befitting requirements for grasping the ‘mechanics ad machinations’ (487) of marketing and business world. A trader-in-arms, James Cambray “would not make any critical moves without the Muni’s consent” (487). Shakta Muni’s ashram is a safe haven for the miscreants. Instead of seeking spirituality and dealing with moral values, he is driven by an extreme sense of hedonism, instrumentality and amoral
politics. “The goals of [his] action are usually a mixture of religious objectives (pursuit and propagation of the traditional way of life and of the Truth as stated by the proponents) and the furtherance of politico-economic interests of one’s own …” (Madan 1998: 67).

The social psychic frame of mind of Tejas remains hardly different from that of his holy Guru. Despite his embrace of a new Hindu including all the paraphernalia of black magic and occult practices, self-mortification, celibacy and asceticism, Tejas continues to remain faithful to the religion of extremist and subscribes to the fundamentalist reconstructionist world-view.

I keep reminding myself, hasten slowly. Revolutionary changes have short lives, whereas incremental ones last. We are building a coalition of the righteous, regardless of a person’s political hue. Once we have the power, we’ll bend the government to our wishes and programmes. Rest assured we will change the complexion of this country. No abortion, no gays and lesbians, no same-sex marriages, no child sex, no sex shows, no dirty act. We are going to build fine, upright, God-fearing citizens from scratch. You will see a change at home, in school, in every aspect of life. But we won’t stop there. We will move into South America. We will take Europe. We will remark the world in the image of our Lord. (485)

The riches of religion fail to give his life an order and meaning. The anti-modern zealotry and a ferocity of religious impulse continue to haunt his entire being. Hyper fanatic social activism and baneful religious world-view keep him at miles distance from the reach of stillness of the senses and perfect equilibrium of the mind. His immersion into religious mode of life does not hamper his astute understanding of the worldly matters” few people understand numbers, economics and finance as well as Tejas”. (484).

When Tejas sets his mind to something, he won’t just wet his ankles, or a part of his torso, he’ll immerse his entire self, body, mind and soul, and will not surface till he has mastered the subject… Tejas will tell you that all animals stop eating once they’ve had their fill. All animals except one, that is. There’s no such thing as enough for human beings. The more they have, the more they want. Especially the very very rich. (484-485).

For Tejas, “the arms trade is like any other business” (497) and he says: “If I don’t, someone else will”. His new Hindu identity and its religious fervor does not stop Tejas from signing a Faustian deal with a Kabul based guerrilla, anti-taliban, Nawaaz Irfan. The Jihaid Irfan subscribes to the ideology and worldview that includes tolerance, puritanism and the rejection of modern life.
We are the mujahideen, the guerrilla warriors of Allah and Islam. We fight not for private gain but for justice and our way of life. Which is why we fight for our brothers in Palestine, in Kashmir, in Croatia, in any place where Islam is threatened. The resin that binds us is Allah. The infidels in the West do not know this but we are the new Crusaders. We will vanquish them. (516)

Irfan considers the Americans and Israeli as unforgivable enemies.

The Israeli motherfuckers and their American cocksuckers like to propagate the myth that the reason we become suicide bombers is because Islam promises its martyrs instant transportation to paradise and its houris. (535)

The convergence of their religious ideologies and the subscription to a missionary zeal to change the world in the light of their faith prompt Tejas and Nawaaj Ifran into a relationship of brotherhood. Both consider themselves as sentinels and executioners of “God’s Grand Design”. (540)

**Amanat: An Ideologue of Modernity**

An elder brother of Zia and a trenchant critic of the latter’s pursuit of religious extremism, lives his life on a different ideological plane, that is, of modernity. As an inheritor and a stamen supporter of this critical authority of reason, seeking scientific and material causes of events, Amanat believes in humanism that denotes self-sufficiency of an individual containing all moral, aesthetic and epistemological resources within itself. Rejecting and refuting religion altogether and its constricting role, he had an entirely different priorities in life and has a different understanding and conception of the basic issues pertaining to family, gender roles, education and achievements in life from that of Zia. Secularism and individualism pervade in all sphere of his life. Amanat’s world is in direct contrast to that of Zia’s theocentric comprehension of life.

In comparison to Zia, Amanat is allocated very less space in the novel. He is pitted against the protagonist Zia to solicit the liberal against the violent and intolerant. Though his letters and books excerpts, the critiques and reminds Zia of his extreme religious culpability and draws readers’ attention to the remedial other, though he himself suffers from the discontents and pathologies of modernity. Through his secular orientation to life and with a progressive mindset, Amanat tends to take up gender issues, specially pertaining to women, not in conventional sense. He does not subscribe to the view that the
so called ‘Second Sex’ should submit to the conventional forms of existence. Unlike his younger one, Zia, the ruthless patriarch, he does not hold women as the repositories of chastity and traditional idealized values. He does not legitimize the inherent superiority of men to authorize them for perpetual surveillance over women. Even when his mother, Shagufta, defies matrimonial bond by entering into an adulterous relations, and no longer remains chaste for her sons, there is hardly any belittling in his respect and concern towards the same. He rebukes Zia, scathingly when the latter advocates his mother to be meted out with severe corporal punishment on account of her being nymphomaniac and conducting debauchery including “cards, races, the obsessive gambling, the drinking…."

(159): Invoking Gandian principle of non-violence, Amanat speaks:

What I cannot fathom is the depth of intolerance and violence in you. Why this need to hurt, Zia? Would you really want Ammijaan to be stoned if, as you say, we were living in an Islamic state? Oh God, Zia, why would you want anybody, whether he or she is an adulterer or criminal, to be stoned, mutilated or murdered by decree? That wonderful old man, Gandhi was so right: an eye for an eye will leave us all blind. The trouble with prescribing physical or mental violence as punishment is that they debase and brutalize both parties. (158)

Amanat is quite considerate regarding his mother’s spirit of freedom and choice making. He does take recourse to a moral critique considering her a ‘degenerate’ despite her complete surrender to the forces of consumerism and entertainment industry and the world of glamour.

The novelist espouses his politics through the persona of Amanat, which stands used as an antidote to the poisonous excesses of religious militancy and extremism epitomized by Zia. Unlike Zia, for whom religion provides meaning for being in the world, for Amanat religion signifies nothing more than a false belief and superstitious practice. As a secularist, he believes in the celebration of reason and condemns his brother’s complete engagement with the sacralization of the world and his appropriation of religion for the construction and execution of communalism. By championing the cause of Islamic reformism through his dissident and subversive writing (The Sotanic verses), Salman Rushdie does not arouse a gut feeling of shock in Amanat. Contrary to Zia’s take on Rushdie, the secular novelist does not stand for Amanat as “The Prince of Darkness” or “The Obstreperous Midnight’s Child” (136). Zia’s attempt to kill Rushdie, on account of his writings as an insult to Islam, is quite unreasonable and unconvincing to Amanat. He fails Zia’s attempt to kill Rushdie by removing bullets from his gun clandestinely, at the
eleventh hour. And later, Zia nearly killed Amanat for the latter’s betrayal voiding the bullets but Amanat heaps no vengeance upon his brother. He says, “I cannot sustain my anger against you” and “...... physical violence has always been anathema to me”. (239)

Amanat stringently criticizes Zia’s blinkered religious vision and vocation and points out the futility of the change of religions if it does not metamorphorises him from within.

A leopard does not change its spots. You may have switched your religion or whatever ‘ism’ you subscribed to but you remain true to your nature. Arthur Koestler, Dos Passos and the others from the ‘God-That-Failed’ brigade, not to mention Mussolini, were card-carrying Marxists who turned into the most rabid conservatives. Like them you too turned apostate and like them you remained faithful to your religion, the religion of extremism. (527)

Amanat goes even to the extent of threatening to expose the “Sordid double life public” (551) of Zia and his accomplice Shakta Muni if the duo do not give up the death business of arms trade. Amanat goes on:

I suffer, as you are well aware, from a hyperactive imagination and keep thinking the worst: that you are lying crippled or dead somewhere. Some of your arms-trade clients must be involved in genocides and ethnic cleansing. And even those who aren’t would not have any compunction bumping off people. Has one of them done you in? I want to go to the police but I’m afraid of overreacting. Prove me wrong and surprise me. Show up tomorrow. Better still, tonight. (552)

Rather than sticking to the divisive and communalist religious world-view, Amanat exhorts Zia to adopt and imbibe the rich Indian multi-religious-cultural-ethos sustained and promoted by the Ashoka, Buddha, and the rich Akbar:

What you had tapped into was a continuum: your hand didn’t merely stretch out to the visionary Akbar, who tried to bring the different peoples of India (with their rigid loyalties to their religions) together in a new faith called Din-e-Illahi or the Religion of God, but extended all the way back to the Prophet, to Jesus, to Emperor Ashok, who forswore violence after the carnage of Kalinga, and then to the Buddha. They are lodged in your DNA. You are heir to a shared history. Which is why there can be no longer be us and them for you, no dividing line. (552)

And finally the best delivery, the most vital pearl of wisdom that comes from Amanat, recoded in his book, The Arsonist, that Zia needs to learn and assimilate: “There’s only one God and Her name is life. She is the only one working of worship. All else is irrelevant”. (550)
Search for singularity, self-exploration and self-promotion through the pursuit of art and creativity (mostly rapturous, and subversive, reactionary) is a project of the modernity. (Amanat does not assume his position and role according to the dictates of traditional social structures of his society). The universe of his mind is shaped and supported by the insights drawn upon the writings of the great thinkers and visionaries including Gandhi, Buddha, Kabir, Ashok, Akbar, Sartre, Mquez, etc. (evidenced from his letters addressed to Zia).

Amanat’s constructive critique of Zia’s ways of engaging with the world and in trying to effect change into it through the means of religious extremism, intolerance and violence, exhibits his liberal outlooks and critical self-reflexivity – a central ethos resulting from the ideology of modernity and modernization. The universe of his mind is not shaped and supported by the wisdom of traditional social structures and institution.

If modernity – a secular orientation to life and celebration of rationality – empowers and enable man to break the hold of traditional beliefs including religion, it also ushers numerous discontents and disenchantments in life and society. Amanat as a champion of modernity and enlightenment, no doubt, exhibits sanity and wisdom through the critique of Zia’s obsession with and allegiance to religious militancy, he himself seems to be quite unaware of his own personality – drawbacks and pathologies that he is suffering from. Adherence to ultra-individualism and calculative rationality fail to enable him to organize his life, family and to secure long-lasting happiness. His morbid character, ghoulish mindset and weak subjectivity do not embolden him to intervene in the world for the sake of the better. Comparing himself to Zia, Amanat says: You are disciplined and organized, you have a game plan. And you don’t give up. You are the one person I know who will deliver without any thought for yourself or your safety. (551)

Amanat consequently suffering from melancholy and alienation – by products of modernity and modernization – cannot enter into a stable and fulfilling relationship with his actress wife, Sagari.

He simmers with an unfounded suspicion for his wife’s indulgence into an extra-marital relationship. Her popularity and success in her profession (an actress in hollywood) hurts his ‘husband-ego’ ad makes him feel jealous. He has become a prisoner of a very weird, false and sick self doubting her faithfulness and character integrity.

The actors, directors, producers, cameraman, the crews of the film she was shooting, her driver, secretary, I was certain she was making out with each of them.
If one were to predicate my wife’s sexual appetite on my crazed imaginings, it would take a regiment of two a day to satisfy her. Was I not aware of how absurd I was being? O yes, I was. But does that help when you are under the influence of hydra-headed monster called jealously? Of course I knew that Sagari was not fickle and loved me enough not to want anybody but me. Oh God, I knew she was innocent, and yet there was nothing I could do to stanch my doubts and suspicions. I may have been operating on a totally fabricated premise but you cannot fault my logic: if she was a nympho, I would out-nympho her. I’m vastly overstating matters, but what difference does it make whether you carry on with one, five or fifty women once you’ve let down the one woman who loves you? (350)

He exhibits a height of perversity in human relationships: ‘if she was a nympho, I would out – nympho her’ (350), “I chose Sagari as my victim” (351) and ‘the forgiving she was, the more I messed around” (351). Instead of fostering the character-traits such as reliability and commitment, he declares: “I’, inclined to believe now that honesty is an ailing currency that only the petty-minded would trade in” (352). He has grossly been wrong and unfair to her. The wayward and moribund marital relationship finally meets its end with a divorce. The modern self, subjectivity and ‘identity’ is an invention of new configuration practices, objects and places, in which very thin layer of morality and ‘warmth’ in human relations grow. Even the very personal relations turn into something ‘thingy’ and become unsustainable without the mediation of commodities. Very aptly comments Gandhi on the barbarism of modern civilization: “We notice that the mind is restless bird; the more it gets the more it wants. The more we indulge our passions, the more unbridled they become”. (1998: 55).

The escapade of modernity is equally conspicuous in the arena of Art and Literature. The search for singularity, installing the tradition of novelty and ideology of rupture are the key concerns of the modernist writings. Technique, stylization, exhibition have preference over social concern, value vision and mobilization. The subject (and its mood) takes lead over an object and ahistoricity over historicity. The above trends and many more lead to a decline in the ‘aura’ of art and literature. Amanat and his writings (for example his book, The Arsonist) exhibit the insidious effect of ultra-liberalism and late modernity “In the guise of writing and updated, post-modernist, swinging biography of a saint, Amanat had written the story of a Satan”. (174) This book, The Arsonist, is an offensive and transgressive portrait of an India medieval saint, poet and mystic, Kabir (here as an old weaver), the one who vehemently castigated and critiqued the pseudo-religiousity-exhibitionist-concerns of the both the communities (the Hindus and Muslims).
Amanat in his book displays an excessive fascination with the sex life of Kabir and the latter’s Seven disciples (as apprentices) have fun by making mockery of him.

Later in the late evening, his disciples discuss with Kabir “in great detail (about) his exploit with the Sherani”: I held Sherani’s breast in my hands. They were full and heavy as papaya and I thought God was finally in my palms” (171).

Afterwards, the younger writer narrates the communal riot that breaks out as the two religious communities for a claim for the dead body of the saint. And suddenly the weaver sits up and makes an appeal to the people: and asks: “Can’t a man even die in peace?” (172).

I stand in the marketplace,
A torch in my hand.
Whosoever will set fire to his house,
Come, join me. (172)

The weaver explains: fire purifies, my friends it is our chance to start afresh to alter the course of our lives.” (173) Invoking the Vedantic Advait philosophy that ‘only the Brahman (God) is truth and all else is illusion and the Geeta’s great injunction of non-attachment, the saint furthers his talk:

We are never fully God’s because we are always bound to the world and its ways; to our children, wives, work, pleasures, old habits that don’t die; to our pride and sacrifices. Once we are homeless, once we have no past, once we are true orphans, then our only home is God. (174)

The ascetic concludes his address to his disciple, Inayat, with the highest and supreme principle for living worthy and meaningful life.

You were about to kill each other for the sake of a god who you claim is either a Muslim or a Hindu. But Inayat, there is only one God and Her name is Life. She is the only one worthy of worship. All else is irrelevant. (174)

The above recount should make it clear that Amanat is very confounding as it simultaneously subverts and asserts Kabir and his wisdom. He dubs his book as a ‘spiritual thriller’ (174) and is aimed at sabotage everything that Zia dies and believe.

But behind all that rowdy exuberance and dark humour was a sustained and highly sophisticated campaign to confuse and reader and cast doubts on the goodness of God, and on everything Zia believed constituted the relationship between God and man (174).

However, whatever reason and justification may come forward from Amanat or from his creator Kiran Nagarkar, for that matter for the confabulated and pornographic
representation of Kabir in the novel, it (the Kabir section) cannot help arousing a strong sense of appall and offence in any sensitive and sensible reader. Self-conscious act of parody of the saint (Kabir) will continue to outrage and evoke a strong sense of condemnation and repulsion among all those who have solidarity with Kabir’s world-view and his Mission. It would not be an excess to remark that Amanat’s allegiance to a liquid-modernist take and intake has rendered him morally impoverished and spiritually bankrupt.

Concluding Remark:

Kiran Nagarkar’s novel God’s Little Soldier responds and shows concern towards the contemporary historico-cultural situation created by an alarming rise in religious fundamentalism and resultant extremism. His professed aim is to counter and critique extremist religious ideologies and world views – transformation of benign religious faiths and their visions into the corresponding doctrines of hatred, bigotries, atrocities and divide – by the rational questioning of values and beliefs enshrined in the secular-modernist way of life; though the latter is not free from its stultifying and corrosive effect reflected in unmindful pursuit of narcissistic, utilitarian individualism bereft of any moral purpose and social concern. As it should be clear by now that the two lead characters of the text – Zia Khan and Amanat and their respective identities – represent the two conflicting world-views and opposite ways of being in and dealing with the world. Zia with his obsessive extremist identity (reflecting’s lift from: who am I’ to ‘what I can do in with world?’ and its indexes – (misogamy), modernity, rival religions, science and pleasure, love of punishment, bullying and narrow minded bossy interference in every aspect of life” (Dawkins 2006: 326) and crazy religious belief, with a fixed sense of transcendental purpose is hell bent to shape and change the world in the light of this ruthless communalist and fanatic world views. As a product of organized religion, Zia stands completely robbed of authentic religion which promotes questions and reflection, a strong sense of solidarity, peace, inclusion, social justice and reduces differentiation. His super ordinate religious identity (excluding all other identities) and a strong sense of being a saviour of religion sabotage the mainstream religious vision which gives a sense of purpose and freedom from the vacuity of life. He changes his faith without ever abandoning extremism and politicization of cultural differences. His religious journey from Islam to Christianity and
finally to Hinduism does not induce and inculcate in him any sense of spiritual regeneration, emotional growth and love for peace, justice and humanism. He connects and misappropriates religion into an ideological instrument, making it devoid of all faith (faith and ideology) contents and concerns.

The novelist constructs the character and agency of Amanat as a bulwark against Zia’s allegiance to promote freedom for and even from religion as envisioned and promoted by modernity and secularization.

He [Amanat] insists that secularization ought to be seen as a process through which religion loses its importance in defining our existence, politics and ways of engagement with the world. He celebrates modernity. In modernity he finds what he desires: the rationale for secularization. (Pathak 1998: 103)

Amanat as a liberal does not give a stuff to religious happenings and its accompanying fixed self-image and transcendental purpose. He is subscriber to individualistic and a relativistic system, and his free sexual moorings do not arouse any sense of guilt or sin. He carries no intention to belittle his worldly pleasures and enjoyments by subscribing to a transcendental realm to regulate his life.

As it should be clear, and no other sensible person can afford to deny the gains of modernity and secularism, however, they have their own deleterious effects and disenchantments. As shown above, despite Amanat’s disaffection with religions and its dogmatic claims he fails to be a captivating human person. He is suffering from multiple pathologies of modern life including a lack of moral vision, spiritual vacuity, incapacity to enter into fulfilling human relationship and an obsession with seeking self-gratification and consumerism. His precarious identity and sense of self does not capacitate him to submit to any long-term higher goal and social commitment, sinking into the mixes of the liquid modernity, commodity fetishism, hedonism, promiscuity and sacrilege.

The above critical reading of Amanat representing modernity and attendant secularism should not imply that it absolves religion from promoting extremism and violence and thereby in certain situations and circumstances undermines and belies the very cause of the novel purported to be a diagnosis and critique of the threats arising out of warped religious orthodoxies and militancy. The unmindful resentment of hyper-religious leaders and their reluctance to examine their faith pose a big threat to people’s life and existence.

“The danger is greatest when individuals and ideologies embrace four tendencies: (1) opposition to compromise with those
who see things differently; (2) acceptance of religious ends as justification for any means; (3) willingness to assume the role of defender of God’s honour by punishing all those who show disrespect; and (4) a drive to obtain heavenly rewards without regard for the earthly consequences of behavior. (Kressel 2008: 231)

Zia Khan’s obsessive defence and promotion of his rigid and intolerant religion suffers from all the sour tendencies. His aunt, Zubeida Khala’s xenophobic and zealotry indoctrination of Zia’s vulnerable childhood psyche, and his later excessive exposure of religious scriptures and the so-called spiritual Gurus in all the three religions have impeded his normal mental growth and a capacity to think flexibly. His skewed social formation has rendered him incapable of respecting the values of tolerance, respecting difference, diversity and freedom. His excessive stress on his superordinate category of religion has turned him incorrigible and psychologically inefficacious irrevocably.

An individual is perhaps best protected against succumbing to the extremism when he has multiple identities. Thus, when a person values his national identity, occupational identity, linguistic identity, familial identity, and personal identity as well as the religious identity, the likelihood that he will permit the religious self to ride roughshod over the others is minimized. When, however, all the other identities are subordinated to the religious self, the risk is multiplied. (Kressel 2008: 250)

The above reflection in the context of Zia, however, should not lead to the conclusion for scrapping of religion altogether. The problem is not religion but its self-proclaimed “protectors” and their religious extremism. Likewise, unanchored ‘reason’ alone will not enable to meet the existential challenges of life. Striking a balance between the two—retaining modernity’s criticality and religion’s holistic attitude and value orientation—will make a better credo of life.

Religion gives spirit to public life and provides a beacon for moral order. At the same time it needs the temper of rationality and fair play that Enlightenment values give to civil society. Thus religious violence cannot end until some accommodation can be forged between the two—some assertion of moderation in religion’s passion, and some acknowledgement of religion in elevating the spiritual and moral values of public life. (Juergensmeyer 2001: 243)