

Book Review: Minds Wide Shut: How the New Fundamentalisms Divide Us by Gary Saul Morson & Morton Schapiro

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Morson, Gary Saul, and Morton Schapiro. *Minds Wide Shut: How the New Fundamentalisms Divide Us*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021. xix + 307 pages. Hardcover \$29.95; Kindle \$29.95.

Gary Saul Morson and Morton Schapiro are professors at Northwestern University in such disparate fields as *Slavic languages and literatures* and *Economics*. The book is a seamless fusion of their learning, observation, analysis, and wisdom. They are experienced collaborators and we are their beneficiaries. Yes, this work emphatically belongs in Social Sciences—all-in, not half-out half-in. Yes, this is serious scholarship—although without a formal bibliography. It offers informative footnotes proximate to contents to which they refer—no need to riffle back and forth. And it has a supportive Index. The title states the problem, that fundamentalism is abounding, and that this is imperiling democracy. To hypothesize, fundamentalism and democracy are antithetical. This *is* testable. Is it falsifiable? It could be. Investigations are possible, are ethical, and are demonstrated in this book.

Fundamentalism finds shelter and protection in democracy, but not the reverse. Fundamentalism is easy to nurture. Democracy is difficult. Democracy requires ability to learn from experience and from opposing views. Its adherents have to endure complex questions that lack simple answers. Fundamentalism has no such requirements, and its habits are contagious from one field of fundamentalism to others. It stigmatizes democrats as “compromisers,” worse than outright opponents. Morson and Schapiro assert that “what we need most is to understand and revitalize the dialogic spirit” (p. xvii). They offer their book as a contribution to that effort. They themselves demonstrate disciplinary border crossings (as does Pi Gamma Mu, *the international social sciences honor society* and this *Review*).

Another contribution of their book is an ethical alternative to experimenting on humans. It is aesthetically pleasing at the same time that it justifies integrity with reading selections and

assignments. That is the technique of using great literature from the realist genre. Morson and Schapiro have professional standing and publication to legitimate doing so. We need not be scandalized by allusions to works by Jane Austen, Anton Chekhov, Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoevsky, George Eliot, Arthur Koestler, George Orwell, Leo Tolstoy, Anthony Trollope. They are cited, as appropriate, and indexed, but their presence might explain the absence of a bibliography in this book.

Thus, two methods of scrutiny and presentation are synergized for this exploration of doctrines and rhetoric impervious to outside thought. One method is systematic comparative analysis. That is the laboratory the social sciences are permitted—ethically proscribed as we are from using humans as objects for experimentation. Another method is extracting from great literature of the realist genre the adjectives, characterizations, and narrative purposely banned from the data. The affect would be covered in the interpretive and descriptive commentary. On the (invisible) analytical table, headings would be arrayed on the horizontal top axis. From *Minds Wide Shut*, captions would be #1 Certainty, #2 Perspicuity, #3 Foundational Text or Revelation—the Morson and Schapiro criteria for fundamentalisms. When visualizing such a table, an additional column could show outcomes researchers report for praxis within the respective fundamentalisms. Purges of original practitioners or revisionists and internecine schisms could be objectively noted. Listed down the vertical axis of the table would be cases, the four Morson and Schapiro choices—namely, Politics, Economics, Religion, Literature—with additional disciplinary fields as options.

Literary analogies are employed throughout *Minds Wide Shut*. These inclusions embrace thinking, feeling, seduction, revenge, torment, escape, affect. All rendered fictional by right of disclaimer of intention and proclamation of coincidence. *Darkness at Noon* by Arthur Koestler,

was such a realist-fiction novel. It contained Rubashov a character subsequently admitted to have been based on an original Bolshevik leader Nikolai Bukharin who was purged under Stalin for past utterances which had been appropriate to make when Lenin still lived.

This reveals the dangers of fundamentalism in politics, how it eventuates or degrades into the politics of hate, and how inimical that is to democracy. Democracy hinges on people thinking. Political fundamentalism pictures a world with goodness and truth all on one side—theirs. The “other” is completely wrong. Fundamentalism lacks in-between space for give-and-take, negotiation, persuasion. Morson and Schapiro remind us of Lyndon Johnson’s favorite saying from the Bible (Isaiah 1:18), “Come let us reason together,” and how readily division and hatred switch reasoning into a struggle to annihilate the “other.” In democracy, contenders who lose, concede. After Leaders or incumbents lose, they should have no grounds for complaint if the sanctions they used when they were ascendant are applied to them. In democracy, there always is another day. In politics of hatred, i.e., political fundamentalism, the sanctions tend to *slide* toward annihilation, termination with extreme prejudice, purge.

A cautionary take-away from *Minds Wide Shut* is the *slide*, applicable to any fundamentalism: the *slide* does not end well. It ends badly for all concerned. Lies, manipulation, intimidation, force, infringement of others’ wills all do that. Calling out these actions risks rudeness and subjectivity. Instead, great literature of the realist genre is available, gratifying to read, humane, legal. Co-opting it needs no permit or alibi.

Apropos fundamentalism in Economics, Morson and Schapiro side with George Soros in urging moderation lest the market economy be forced too far. Now that the command economy has failed for all to see, less hubris and more common sense are advice against a *slide* toward any laissez-faire extreme. Any excess, even of moderation, can distress societies unless people share

other values that allow for collective purposes and make sense of self-sacrifice. Human fallibility and occasional irrationality preclude a hard science of human behavior. Economic policy-makers and humanistically-oriented social scientists are advised to be literate in each other's métiers. The realist genre in great fiction can help.

Defending politics and democracy is difficult although preferable to the alternatives. The same applies to other fields vulnerable to fundamentalism. Moderation is not easy, and thinking is strenuous. However, minds wide shut hurt more.

The book *Minds Wide Shut* by Morson and Schapiro is solemnly and enthusiastically recommended.

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