

EXCERPTS from TODAY'S FANATIC, TOMORROW'S SAINT

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By fanaticism we usually mean two things. One is that someone is dedicated in the extreme to their cause, belief, or agenda, willing to live and die and maybe kill for it, as John Brown was. The other is that the cause, belief or agenda is not ours, and in 1859 John Brown's beliefs were not those of most Americans. No one calls himself or herself a fanatic. It's what you call people who are weird or threatening, extremists in the defence of something other than your own worldview. . . .

. . . I am not so sure about John Brown's means, or that his actions were necessary to start a war that was already brewing, but I am sure that slavery needed to be abolished, and that his general ends were good. The really interesting thing is that in 1839 to be against slavery in the US was an disruptive, extreme position, often seen as an attack on property rights rather than a defence of human rights. Half a century later we held those truths to be self-evident that no one should own anyone else. . . .

Lincoln called John Brown a "misguided fanatic." Thoreau wrote [a defence of him](#) in which he remarked, "The only government that I recognise – and it matters not how few are at the head of it, or how small its army – is that power that establishes justice in the land." . . .

Fanatic is a troublesome word . . . since my hero is your fanatic, and yesterday's fanatic is so often tomorrow's saint. . . .