

As I am up to my ears (and, apparently, clichés) in preparing [a presentation at the Jefferson Educational Society honoring one of our founders, the Rev. Charles Brock](#), this will be, I am almost certain, the shortest **Book Note** ever. Last week's essay about Eric Hoffer's *The True Believer* generated a number of replies – almost all of them complimentary, some of them quite taken by Hoffer's insights, and one a bit annoyed with me.

The annoyed reader took exception to my characterizing former President Donald Trump as a “fanatic.”

Is he?

Well, for the record, I did not declare – a declaration being a short, direct statement of fact – that former President Trump is a “fanatic.” I simply asked, “Is it possible former President Trump is the fanatic bringing” other people's prophecies to a conclusion?

Granted, I might be splitting a very fine hair, but my sentence is interrogative and not declarative. I asked a question; I did not state a fact. Setting grammar aside (I suspect to the relief of many deciding whether they want to continue reading this brief **Book Note**) the reader's reaction assumed (I am quite aware of the internet meme spelling out what “assume” can mean – making an “ass-of-u-and-me”) that I used the word as an insult.

What is it about the word “fanatic” that is insulting?

After all, the noun “fan” – “a person who has a strong interest in or admiration for a particular person or thing” is a late 19th century American derivative from the word fanatic. [1] Numerous examples abound – such as, “I am a fan of the Cleveland Guardians;” she is a fan of Mexican food; he is a fan of heavy metal music (there is no accounting for taste); and “she used to be a fan of his but being no fan of clanging music favors him no more.” Favor, used here as a verb, has a more interesting, albeit obsolete, history than most now know, but we'll leave it unexamined.

Still, if fan is derived from fanatic, what is it about “fanatic” that insults? Well, back to **Hamlet**, depending upon one's point of view, quite a bit.

To answer the question, I first turned to *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* I have been lugging around for 50 years. (There is no explaining some people's behavior!) With the aid of a magnifying glass, its tiny type reveals that its original meaning in 1533 was “of an action or speech: Such as might result from possession by a deity or demon; frantic; furious.” By

1647, its meaning had evolved to “Of persons, their actions or attributes, etc.; characterized, influenced, or prompted by excessive or mistaken enthusiasm, esp. in religious matters.” Earlier, in 1525 it meant a “Mad person – a religious maniac.” In the later 17th century, it meant “a fanatic person; a visionary; an unreasoning enthusiast.” By the 18th century it meant “a fanatical devotee of ...” [2] As we’ve seen, by the 19th century, having crossed the Atlantic, in America it meant one who enthusiastically favored a person or thing, i.e., was a fanatical devotee of ...,” such as my inexplicable enthusiasm for Cleveland sports teams.

Back to “fanatic” – from its Latin origin *fanaticus*, it can also mean: – “an insane person who is mad, enthusiastic, and inspired by a god” and has come to mean “a person of zeal, of great enthusiasm, which enthusiasm might be both furious and excessive.” [3]

But, as he did about many things, Winston Churchill said it best, “A fanatic is someone who can’t change his mind and won’t change the subject.” [4]

Regarding whether the word “fanatic” is an insult to former President Trump, about whose enthusiasms other than for himself I am unaware, as the column title of Len Kholos, late editor of the now gone **Erie Daily Times**, used to read, “If the shoe fits ...”



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End Notes

1. “fan” at **Dictionary** available [here](#) accessed May 11, 2024.
 2. “fanatic,” **The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary** (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1971), 959.
 3. “fanatic (n)” at **Online Etymology Dictionary** available [here](#) accessed May 11, 2024.
 4. Ibid.
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