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## Fundamentalism: Putting it into Context and Finding a Response

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In recent times the word “fundamentalism” crops up quite a lot in news reports. We hear about “Islamic fundamentalism” and “Hindu Fundamentalism,” usually in the context of violence against some other group. We do not usually think of it as a feature of Catholicism but since fundamentalism comes from the mentality of the believer, rather than from the particular religion itself, there is the possibility of a “Catholic fundamentalism” similar to that found in other religions. In this article I want to ask what is meant by “fundamentalism,” what are its characteristics and how we are to respond to it in a Catholic context.

The term “Fundamentalism” itself was first used by a group of American Evangelical Protestants who wanted to concentrate on what they saw as the fundamentals of Christianity. It is now used of any group who move away from the mainline interpretation of their faith and focus on certain aspects of it in a narrow and literalist way. It is important to point out that fundamentalism is to be found in all religions. Its characteristics are that it is selective, divisive, literalist and it has a negative concept of God.

## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF FUNDAMENTALISM

Fundamentalism is *selective* in that it focuses on certain tenets of religion and absolutizes them. For instance, some biblical fundamentalists are so concerned with denying evolution, that this becomes the test of authentic religion and everything else becomes secondary.

Fundamentalism is *divisive* in that it always defines the group over against everyone else. The members of the group are saved, or righteous or simply right and everyone outside the group is damned, or sinful or simply wrong. Fundamentalists feel threatened by dialogue, or by the idea that there might be truth in other religions.

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Fundamentalism is *literalist* in its approach to the sacred texts of the religion in question. This, combined with the selectivity mentioned above, means that certain texts are taken out of context and applied in an absolute way.

What all fundamentalists have in common is a *negative image* of God. It is usually a simplistic notion of God, which is attractive to people looking for emotional security and intellectual certainty. There is an unhealthy element of fear in their response to God. A religion of fear can easily give rise to hatred of those who are perceived as a threat. Those who think differently are a threat, because they threaten the shaky foundations upon which the worldview of the fundamentalist is based. A particularly toxic combination is that of nationalism with religious fundamentalism. This produces fanatics, racists and terrorists.

### THE SPECTRUM OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

One way of understanding fundamentalism is to see it in the context of the spectrum of religious experience. In every religion there is a range of religious experience, because believers bring their own particular outlook or mindset to bear on what is given to them in their religious formation. Believers are influenced by their family, their teachers and particular groups they may have joined or been attracted to. So, even though every religion has an objective content, the way it is *experienced* is coloured by these subjective factors. So, I think we may say that there are different types of believer. I will use a model of *five* types, which I think is useful, because it includes the main aspects found in all developed religions.

Ultimately, religion is about God. The five types of believer correspond to five images of God or ways of perceiving God. I think we can outline five main approaches to God as follows: (1) God is angry, (2) God is holy, (3) God is mysterious, (4) God is just and (5) God is love. There is a progression from the first of these approaches to the last. They may be seen as forming a spectrum. Let us look at them in turn.

### GOD IS ANGRY: THE FUNDAMENTALIST

The idea that God is angry, that God has to be placated, produces a religion of fear. This is where fundamentalism fits on the spectrum. I have placed the approach of the fundamentalist first because it is at the opposite end of the spectrum to the response of the contemplative, who perceives God as love. Love and fear are opposites.

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The response of the fundamentalist is not the most basic or original response to the mystery of God. In what may be termed “natural religion,” which is the perception of a mysterious presence in nature and in human life without the benefit of revelation, the Divinity is usually perceived as benign and the response is one of awe and reverence. There are examples of fearful gods, as in the religion of the Aztecs, but these are best seen as aberrations. So, the idea of an angry God is inadequate even from the point of view of natural religion.

### GOD IS HOLY: THE WORSHIPPER

The perception that God is holy is the most basic religious experience. It is the experience of Moses when confronted with the burning bush (Exodus 3: 1-6). The response to this *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans* is worship. This may be said to engage the whole person, but it engages the heart more than the head. Reflection comes later. The urge to worship seems to have been a universal human phenomenon up to the eighteenth century, when atheism made its appearance in Western European circles. Even in the secularised West, however, some sense of awe in the presence of a greater reality persists and people have found other objects of worship instead of God.

The believer for whom the sense of God as holy remains foremost is likely to give liturgy an important place in their lives. They may even devote their lives to prayer and worship and become priests, monks or nuns.

### GOD IS MYSTERY: THE RELIGIOUS THINKER

Following on from the basic religious experience is the attempt to make sense of that experience: *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding, as St Anselm put it. As well as being holy, God is the great mystery in the intellectual sense. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are strong on doctrinal content. A big emphasis is placed on the message. In Christianity this is the message about Jesus Christ. In Catholicism in particular, we have arrived at a high degree of precision on what we believe. This is to be found in the Bible, the Church councils, catechisms and papal documents. This doctrinal aspect is fundamental, because the moral teaching and the system of worship flow from it.

The believer whose main focus is intellectual will be mainly interested on what religion teaches. This person is motivated by the message. Such a person may become a teacher, a missionary, a theologian or a philosopher.

GOD IS JUST: THE MORAL ACTIVIST

God, who is holy and mysterious, is also perceived in most religions to be just. The message has practical implications. Again, Christianity is strong on the moral demands of following Jesus. In fact, it is seen as a test of one's sincerity. Another group of people, while accepting the importance of the doctrinal message, are more interested in the moral implications. These are people who are likely to go into the caring professions. They may get involved in groups that help the poor or they may go into politics in order to better society.

GOD IS LOVE: THE CONTEMPLATIVE

For the contemplative God is love. It may even be said that God is the great Lover. I use the term "contemplative" here to refer to the mature believer who has a unified vision of life, who sees God in all things and all things in God. Perhaps one can only arrive at this outlook having worked through the others. The contemplative is the person whose religious awareness and understanding have matured. The contemplative has arrived at a unified consciousness, in contrast to the dualistic mentality of the fundamentalist. For many people it is something arrived at in the second half of life.

I am not using the term "contemplative" to refer to a particular life-style or vocation. The contemplative could be a person in any walk of life: married, single, religious, farmer, homemaker, doctor, nurse, shopkeeper, politician, etc. One could use the term "mystic" to mean the same thing, but unfortunately that term tends to be associated in people's minds with the esoteric and the extraordinary, whereas in fact it is very down-to-earth and ordinary. Contemplatives are to be found in all religions. They are to the fore in ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue, because they find that they are encountering people with the same outlook.

INTEGRATING THE DIFFERENT APPROACHES

The three approaches to God that I have placed in the middle of the spectrum of faith, those of the worshipper, the religious thinker and the moral activist, are all valid *expressions* of faith. However, any one of them can become distorted if it is not *integrated* with the others. Each may be said to have inherent dangers. For instance, if faith and religion are seen exclusively as having to do with worship, the result can be a religion of external observances with no awareness of moral implications. Liturgy can easily become a hobby. Prayer can become a form of self-absorption. Worship and prayer should challenge people to act justly towards their fellow human beings.

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Similarly, a purely speculative approach to faith can make religion an academic exercise with little relevance for people's lives. The question about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin may never actually have been discussed in Scholastic circles, but it illustrates what can happen when theology gets separated from the living faith of the believing community.

Moral activism is the approach that seems least prone to distortion, but in the life of an individual it needs to be part of a balanced approach to life. A person who is single-mindedly devoted to a cause can easily experience burn-out.

The three approaches of the worshipper, the religious thinker and the moral activist need each other. Any one of them without the other two becomes unbalanced. Nevertheless, in the life of an individual the emphasis can be on one or another. They can *all* be integrated into the contemplative approach. God is mysterious, just and holy. Ultimately God is love. This overarching awareness includes the other three. The greatest liturgists, theologians and social activists have also been contemplatives or mystics. Examples that come to mind would include St Gregory the Great, St Teresa of Avila and Jean Vanier.

### UNDERSTANDING THE FUNDAMENTALIST MENTALITY

Where does this leave the believers in the first category that I have described above? The fundamentalist is best understood as a person with an *immature faith*, just as the contemplative can be seen as having arrived at a mature and integrated faith. Fundamentalism is a stage that many believers pass through. In that case it is not a problem. The problem arises when people get stuck at that stage and do not grow. This can happen with young people if they get involved in a group which reinforces this mentality.

*Protestant* fundamentalism tends to focus on certain texts of the Bible which are interpreted in a literal and rigid way. If they can be helped to see that the Bible is not actually saying what they think it is saying, they can be helped to grow into a better understanding. The Bible contains different types of literature. It is the word of God in human words. In other words, the divine message comes through the cultural, historical and linguistic conditioning of the human authors. These factors need to be taken into consideration in interpreting the message for us today. Particular texts need to be understood in the context of the book they come from and of the Bible as a whole. A useful key to interpreting any text or idea we take from the Bible is to ask the question: "How does this fit into the message of the God of love revealed in Jesus?"

*Catholic* fundamentalism is very like its Protestant counterpart. It also uses the Bible, but it is more likely to focus on certain

dogmas or on messages that come from private revelations. Like the Protestant variety, it is selective. Like the biblical texts, the dogmas have to be set in the context of the teaching of the Church as a whole. Private revelations, even when they are genuine, are conditioned in the same way as the biblical revelation. They are filtered through the human recipients and conditioned by their culture and outlook. They also need to be interpreted. The same hermeneutical key may be applied: “How does this fit into the message of the God of love revealed in Jesus?”

One of the strange manifestations of Catholic fundamentalism in recent times has been those who see themselves as *more* Catholic than the Pope. All the recent popes have had to suffer from these groups. They are usually described as *traditionalists*. St Paul VI had to deal with liturgical traditionalists. St John Paul II’s critics were mostly those who objected to his reaching out to people of other faiths, as he did on the World Days of Prayer for Peace held in Assisi in 1986 and 2002. One group went so far as to “excommunicate” Pope Benedict XVI for, as they saw it, failing to stamp out heresy.<sup>1</sup> The problem with all these so-called traditionalists is that they have a static notion of tradition. They see it as something fixed, rather than as the living, growing, developing faith of the Church.

#### HOW CAN WE HELP THE FUNDAMENTALISTS?

The approach of the fundamentalist to God is basically one of *fear*. This is not a totally bad place to begin. It is possible to move beyond it. It is natural to have a fear of the unknown. To begin with, God is unknown. It is good to fear to offend. It is not the best motivation, but it is a start. A recurring theme of the wisdom books of the Bible is that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Sirach 1: 14, Proverbs 1: 7). This fear, however, has more to do with respect, reverence and obedience than fear in the sense of being frightened.

There may be *psychological reasons* why people are attracted to fundamentalism. It offers security and certainty. It is essentially irrational and comes from a deep sense of insecurity. This explains the often visceral hatred that fundamentalists display towards their opponents. It also means that it cannot be overcome by intellectual argument alone. The First Letter of John tells us that fear is *cast out* by perfect love (1 John 4: 18). It is only by experiencing love that people can be freed from fear. People need to be given a positive experience of Christian community. This should include helping

1 The Ukrainian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church, which broke away from the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in 2009, issued an excommunication against Pope Benedict in 2011. Cf. Wikipedia.

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other people. Getting involved in some form of Christian service is a good way of experiencing the fact that faith expresses itself in love.

Good liturgy is also very important, because it works at an experiential level and because it is the surest guide to the content of faith, in line with the adage, *lex orandi, lex credendi*, the law of worship is the law of belief. *Catholic fundamentalists* may need to be weaned off the sentimental devotions based on dubious private revelations that reinforce a religion of fear. Good theology is also needed and will help, especially with young people, if they are open to learning.

Individual fundamentalists can be helped if they come in contact with the right people. The real problem is when they have become part of a group that constantly reinforces their negative attitudes. They need to be given an alternative, such as involvement in their parish or in a Church group that promotes positive attitudes. Generally speaking, Catholic spirituality is very wholesome. If young people can become immersed in the mainstream faith of the holy people of God, they will grow in awareness of the God of love revealed in Jesus.

**Politics.** Our hope in this time of crisis is that the Catholic community can join with other people of good will to work on behalf of those who need bread, who want politics to be nourishing, to be about substance, to serve the common good. After all, that is what catholic social teaching has always imagined about politics – that it be the arena where men and women come together to seek the best interests of each and all of us.

– KRISTIN E. HEYER, JAMES F. KEENAN, ANDREA VICINI, eds.  
*Building Bridges in Sarajevo* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books) p. 120.