

FUNDAMENTALISM

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1. Fundamentalism is again making headlines in the press, on radio and on television, although it is almost always non-Christian. One often hears nowadays about Moslem Fundamentalism, mostly Shiite inspired and backed by Iranian money; in the past it has often been supported (although obviously not for religious reasons) also by the former Soviet republics. It is considered to be responsible for a greater part of terrorism, and has lately escalated into suicide attacks, especially in Israel, but also in other countries. Often one hears also about Jewish Fundamentalism, with whom ultra-nationalist settlers striving to found new settlements or enhance the older ones in the Israel administered territories of Cis-jordan and Gaza, are connected. In these two cases one could, however, question the pertinency of the word Fundamentalism, and ask whether other more appropriate words ought to be used.

1.1 Christian Fundamentalists are numerous in Protestant Churches and groups in the South of the United States (the so-called Bible Belt) and in the Churches issuing from their missions, especially in Latin America, Africa and India; one of their most commendable sides is indeed their missionary zeal. But they also have their record of intolerance: one is reminded of the so-called Monkey Trial in Dayton, Tennessee in 1925, where a teacher was accused and eventually dismissed for having taught doctrines which went against the message of the Bible: that monkeys were the ancestors of humankind. Even in our times one hears about teachers and professors in the States on whom pressure is exercised in order that they should not teach what is called evolutionism, but rather what is defined as creationism.

1.2 Also in the Roman-Catholic Church there is a small fundamentalist movement, founded by the late Msgr. Lefèvre, quite active and vocal, and which has become notorious in Italy because a very loquacious MP belongs to it.

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1.3 One of the main characteristics of Protestant Fundamentalism is its anti-scientific bias and especially its rejection of Darwinism, all this with the otherwise laudable intention of defending the Bible and its truth against what is deemed to be an attack by "liberal" forces, especially in theology. It is also anti-ecumenical and shuns interconfessional meetings. But also politically it appears in the States as eminently conservative, opposing e. g. the institution of a National Health Service ("to turn to Washington instead of turning to God"), sometimes racial integration; anti-semitism, one of its former characteristics, has however been abandoned in the last decades by most groups and American Fundamentalism has developed into a staunch supporter of the State of Israel (e.g. in the selfappointed International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem), albeit in its politically most right-wing expressions and demands.

2. However, in Christian theology Fundamentalism is certainly not a unitarian phenomenon and therefore very complex: e. g. it is not the prerogative of one Church or one group, it runs across almost all Christian confessions and denominations. Nor is it necessarily aggressive, and this applies to most of these movements. Similar is the situation in Islam and in Judaism (and this is why I do not like the term to be applied to Moslem terrorists and Jewish settlers). In other words, it is possible to have fundamentalist beliefs, without trying to impose them on others by threat or force; only discussion is resorted to in these cases. Nor should Fundamentalism be reduced to an opposition of ignorance against culture, i. e. of uncouth rural masses against bourgeois, middle class learned city people, or of the poor against the well-to-do, or even worse, in the United States of the South (for a long time a depressed area after the Civil War) against the North. Fundamentalist Reformed groups exist in the Netherlands and in South Africa, and in Switzerland and similar Presbyterian Free Churches in Scotland and are formed by usually well-to-do people. Things are therefore not as simple as that.

2.1 Fundamentalism can be the reaction of ignorant people and of the poor against certain aspects of natural sciences and of culture in general, which they feel as threatening their simple faith, their "old time Religion", which was "good enough for Moses — is good enough for me". But this is not always the case: the systematic elaboration of Fundamentalist doctrines took place in that major institution of Christian learning which is Princeton Theological Seminary, under the leadership, among others,

of professor B.B. Warfield (1851-1921), during the second half of the 19th century; it therefore often referred to as "Princeton Theology"; it was further strengthened by a series of publications called *The Fundamentals — A Testimony of the Truth*, which appeared in the United States between 1910 and 1915. But it was embraced *also* (and the italics are important) by ignorant, uncouth people, and often adhered to until this day to by freelance Evangelists not belonging to any particular Church or organization except their own; they took advantage of the frequent frustrations of the poor and the unlearned, especially in the South of the United States; and sometimes used them for their own purposes, as did Elmer Gantry, to recall a character described by Theodore Dreiser.

2.2 As expression of Evangelical conservative Protestantism, Fundamentalism formally acts as a bulwark (against what it calls modernistic diversions) of the traditional doctrines of the Reformation, especially Calvinism; to them it refers constantly. In Roman Catholicism the emphasis is another: a great stress is put on traditional values, i. e. those existing prior to the Vatican II Council, and on rejection of Biblical criticism; but here Fundamentalism is not dangerous, as it caters to small although vocal minorities, which are easily overruled by the centralized authority of the Church.

2.3 But in Protestantism the reference to the traditional reformatorial element is hardly historically sustainable: Fundamentalism descends not really of the Reformation, although it pays lip service to elements of its exegesis and its doctrine, but of Pietism and of Revivalism and shows many of the typical elements of both of them: stress on personal conversion, of believers having to be born again, of quantifiable religious experiences. Scripture is deemed to be inerrant and infallible, and this explains its opposition towards natural sciences, Darwinism, modern physics and astronomy and contemporary philosophy, which are seen as a threat to these beliefs. The fact that Charles Darwin started his expedition on H.M.S. "Beagle" sponsored by an ultra-conservative group (whose aim it was to prove the scientific truth of the Bible but came to opposite conclusions) is here easily, perhaps too easily, forgotten.

2.4 Essential elements in fundamentalistically oriented Churches and groups are: faith in the Holy Trinity, Divinity of Jesus Christ, Virgin

Birth, Atonement for our sins through His Blood, all humanity being naturally sinful, Final Judgement at the end of times.

2.5 But here some difficulties appear. While all "orthodox" traditional Christian confessions and denominations believe in the Holy Trinity (a prerequisite, i. a., for becoming a member of the World Council of Churches), it is among them easily admitted that in the Bible there is very little or even no mention of the Trinity, which is rather a doctrinal compromise reached in the fourth century under the Emperors Constantine I and Theodosius I, who wanted a unified Church for the Roman Empire. Nor can anyone who reads the New Testament affirm that the doctrine of Virgin Birth is central, being it limited to the infancy Gospels; and few people would nowadays interpret this saying literally, i. e. in an obstetrical-gynaecological sense; nor would one accept literally the doctrine of the Atonement through the Blood, knowing that in the Old and in the New Testament Blood stands always for "Life", i. e. it is through Christ sacrificing His Life, and through His resurrection, that the battle against death as the wage of sin was won and we are saved!

3. This is not the place to launch a detailed analysis of Fundamentalism. Many authors, and especially James Barr (he himself born and raised in a fundamentalist surrounding, and therefore directly familiar with it) have been dealing with the subject; nor is it expedient to repeat here what others have said, probably better. It could be in any case a good subject for a PhD dissertation.

3.1 So let us ask: is there anything wrong with Fundamentalism, and, if there is, what?

3.2 Some elements ought to be accepted beyond any reasonable doubt: the scientific world of the Bible is not only a pre-Copernican, but pre-Ptolemaic. A geocentric universe is imagined like a three story building (underworld - world - heaven), where one goes down or up according to the circumstances; the earth is seen like a flat, round plate, with extremities, and resting upon pillars or columns. All this has been called in the past a mythical image of the universe, but I prefer calling it rather a pre-scientific vision, based only on direct observation. The creation of humanity happened some 5 757 years ago, according to the chronology of "P" for those who accept the Documentary Hypothesis or a similar proposal; there is no trace of modern medicine and psychiatry,

but diseases are often attributed to demonic influences or to curses. Hares and badgers are classified among the animals which "chew the cud" (Lev 11,5 f.). These beliefs were all people could produce when they were first formulated, and more than consider them wrong nowadays, they be called obsolete. But it was the only way the inspired authors of the Biblical books could express themselves, so that one rightly speaks about the Incarnation of the Word of God. But Incarnation takes place always within time and space.

3.3 This does not exclude that the Bible can propose some modern concepts. The main one is certainly the secularization of nature. Gone are the pleasant and merry nymphs and fauns, the friendly spirits, but also the malevolent demons; no gods can be anymore detected in springs, in groves, in mountains, in natural phenomena. Nature is set free for scientific investigation. But it is easy to notice that such an investigation never took place; this simply because times were not ready as yet for such an approach. But also outside the Bible world something alike happened with Hellenistic astronomy: it had discovered a Solar system quite similar to the Copernican, but it was of no consequence: time was not ripe.

3.4 The idea that in the Bible all scientific theories and facts should be foretold is therefore absurd. But there is something even more serious: Fundamentalism is clearly a new form of an ancient heresy, one of those doctrines which the early Church rightly rejected: Docetism. Only that the object has changed: instead of referring to the person of Christ, it deals with Holy Scripture.

3.5 Docetism, a doctrine which the ancient Christian authors consider derived from Gnosticism, declared that the human nature of Christ was only an illusion, that He *looked* like a human being, but in reality He *was* only God. There were therefore not two natures in Christ, but only one, the divine, the human element being something like an optical illusion (in Greek δοκεῖν is "to look like", "to seem"). Ignace of Antioch at the beginning of the second century wrote against those who proclaimed that Jesus Christ went only in appearance through birth, persecution and crucifixion, resurrection, cp. already I John 4,2 ff., with its insistence on the fact that Jesus came "in the flesh".

3.6 The same thing seems to happen in Fundamentalism, only that it is applied to Scripture. The double nature of Scripture: divine and human,

the former due to inspiration, the latter to human authorship, is herewith denied and only the divinity stressed. The fact that this happens in order to glorify Scripture is irrelevant: the heresy remains. Its dire consequences ought to be clear: not only is a misleading description of Scripture given, but any form of dialogue with the world, with the aim of proclaiming the Gospel to it, is made impossible.

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