

FUNDAMENTALISM AND PREJUDICE

By THOMAS E. CLARKE

IF I WERE A fundamentalist, I would doubtless resent being called one. I would probably refer to myself as a conservative evangelical, or better still, by the grace of God a faithful Christian. And I would surely reject any imputation of a special connection between my following of the gospel and prejudice. Why, I might retort, should the liberals' convictions—if they have any apart from the ideology of liberalism itself—be considered unprejudiced and mine prejudiced? To the indignant ears of the fundamentalist, then, the title of this essay might sound like a harsh embodiment of prejudice.

Since I am—by the grace of God—not a fundamentalist (though I must confess to occasional tendencies in that direction), I am open to the suggestion of a special link between fundamentalism and prejudice, and will discuss that link in what follows. But I also have a great deal of sympathy with many of those people who, in our secularized western world, find themselves trapped in the peculiar biases of this outlook. Hence I want to deal with this weakness as fairly and compassionately as possible, and with as little projection of my own unacknowledged prejudices as I can manage. I feel invited to this posture by Jesus's admonition to look first for the beam in my own eye before offering to remove the mote from my neighbour's. I also want to be guided by the *praesupponendum* of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius—who incidentally showed some fundamentalist leanings—which suggests an open and nonviolent response to apparent deviations from orthodoxy.

My attention to the historical phenomenon of fundamentalism will be aimed primarily at establishing a paradigm for a more widespread spiritual hazard inherent in any serious commitment to truth. Second, I believe that the fundamentalist flaw or 'inordinate attachment' can be better understood when placed in polarity with the corresponding flaw attached to the *bête noire* of fundamentalists,

namely liberalism or modernism. Finally, I believe that the respective missions of God's Word and God's Spirit, in which all believers participate, offer light and power to all who walk the narrow ridge between fundamentalism and liberalism.

The historical phenomenon of fundamentalism

'Fundamentalism' is a term coined about 1920 in the United States.¹ It labelled a tendency and trend among some theologians and believers in that time towards accenting the fundamentals of faith, particularly the bible as the inerrant word of God. The famous Scopes trial, in which a Tennessee teacher, defended by the liberal Clarence Darrow and opposed by the eloquent statesman, William Jennings Bryan, was convicted of contradicting the biblical doctrine of creation by teaching the theory of evolution, has become a mythic symbol for subsequent fundamentalist-modernist clashes. Though the term seems to be less used in Great Britain and elsewhere, the mentality which it expresses is certainly represented there, too, especially under the title of conservative evangelicalism. Nor is fundamentalism a peculiarly Protestant, or even distinctively Christian temptation. Certain groups of Roman Catholics tend to attribute to ancient—and not so ancient—dogmas of the Church an absolutely inerrant status equivalent to that of the bible. They also tend to relate to Catholics who do not share their biases in much the same way as Protestants regard other Protestants. More broadly still, fundamentalism has become a descriptive term for Islamic and Marxist groups, as well as devotees of some of the 'new religions', who passionately profess literal fidelity to the primordial vision of Mahomet, Karl Marx, Mao Tse-Tung or whoever.

It is notoriously difficult and perhaps impossible to define fundamentalism, not least because it is a thread interwoven religiously and psychologically and sociologically with many others. In perusing the literature one is constantly called to sort out, for example, revivalism, pietism, enthusiasm, conservatism, evangelicalism. The adversary of fundamentalism is likewise variously named, as modernism, secular humanism, progressivism, evolutionism, naturalism, rationalism. One is also hard-put to situate the precise point of conflict between fundamentalism and its foes. In the 1960s, Richard Hofstadter focused on anti-intellectualism as a primary trait, but Harvey Cox has recently insisted that the anti-science, anti-philosophy image of such groups as Jerry Falwell's is a

stereotype. Even the anti-modernist character of fundamentalism seems to need qualification, in view of the extensive use by fundamentalist preachers of the slick modern media of communications and entertainment (Cox cautions, however, that fundamentalists may be leaving themselves open to being seduced by the media).

How, for purposes of this article, shall we describe fundamentalism? James Barr offers a plausible and practical description: (1) the attribution to the bible of an absolute inerrancy; (2) hostility to modern theology and to the critical interpretation of the bible; (3) the assurance that those who do not share these beliefs are not true Christians.²

It is the third of these characteristics which provides us with an opportunity to elucidate the other term of our title, 'prejudice'. I use it here not merely in the sense of an intellectual short-circuiting by which judgments are formed not on the basis of evidence and sound analysis but on the basis of some (usually hidden) bias. Prejudice here is rather understood, as commonly in the social sciences, as a hostile or disparaging posture towards groups which do not share one's particular heritage, whether this heritage be ideological, ethnic, sexual or class-based. Stereotyping of 'the others' and projection on to them of the unacknowledged 'shadow' present in one's own group is a common trait in social prejudice. In the case of fundamentalists, what is found contemptible or unfaithful in non-fundamentalists is the lack of commitment to Jesus Christ as represented in the inspired and inerrant biblical word of God. The primary targets of this prejudice are labelled as liberals, modernists, secular humanists, and these are perceived as betraying the gospel by conforming to the culture of modernity, and as distorting the biblical message by making idols of the rationalistic tools of historical criticism of the bible.

The fundamentalist flaw

Does this brief sketch of historical fundamentalism provide a base for describing a spiritual mindset which can tempt others besides members of fundamentalist sects? I hope that it does. I perceive fundamentalism in this broader sense to be the spiritual aberration which deals with the risks inherent in faith by yielding to a distinctive set of 'inordinate attachments'. Christian faith is indeed a perilous journey. While it offers a transcendent security through the absolute promise of the ever-faithful God of Jesus

Christ, and while it includes a whole host of supportive mediations of that promise—community, the sacraments, the biblical word of God, prayer and so forth—it is also a call to live in risk. Hope, as trust, becomes the pivotal virtue, and the central idolatry consists in creating some finite representation of the invisible God which can rescue us from dread and anxiety.

The fundamentalist is not alone in seeking escape from the seeming abyss of insecurity, in clinging to some substitute for faith and trust. What distinguishes this inordinate attachment from others is its choice of a religious, not a secular idol, and its going right to the centre of the available pantheon, the biblical word of God. How can anyone find fault with the attachment which the psalmist, especially in psalm 119, celebrates over and over again as *the* act of the devout believer, namely the pondering of God's word, which is the infallible light for our path, the safe refuge from the treacherous foe?

The trouble is that the word of God to which the fundamentalist becomes inordinately attached is not the Word of God. At its best and brightest it remains a mediation. It belongs to the great circle of the creatures, crying out warningly to Augustine, 'We are not he, but he made us'. The basic condition for finding in the scriptures a holy way to God is that we do not let them seduce us into treating them as God. The scriptures themselves abhor such homage. They are like the angel of the book of Revelation (19,10; 22,9) who, when the seer wanted to kneel in worship before it, said: 'Don't do that: I am a servant just like you . . . It is God that you must worship'. James Barr very perceptively notes the paradox that the fundamentalist, so absolutely dedicated to the biblical word, violates one of the most fundamental of all words, the one which was at the heart of the Reformation: justification by faith.³ The role of the law for Paul's adversaries, the Judaizers, is taken in fundamentalism by the biblical word, which thus becomes an enslaving yoke, not a finite vehicle of the freedom of God's children (Gal 5,1).

Spiritual fundamentalism then, is verified to the extent that any primordial word—of the bible, of the official Church, of a charismatic founder—becomes opaque to the point of ceasing to mediate our trusting union with the God who, in promising us ultimate security, calls us to a radical penultimate insecurity. Fundamentalism falls within the range of the idolatrous quest for a security that is both tangible and absolute. What makes it an especially

insidious temptation is that it takes on the guise of piety and total dedication to the word of God.

From this core of idolatry, the path of fundamentalism to its distinctive social prejudice is intelligible. 'If anyone preaches a version of the Good News different from the one we have already preached to you, whether it be ourselves or an angel from heaven, he is to be condemned' (Gal 1,8). It is ironic that this fierce word of Paul, hurled at the Judaizers precisely to keep them from enslaving the early Church in idolatry to religious forms, should inspire fundamentalists to denounce or disparage other Christians who differ from them, not merely by interpreting particular biblical passages differently, but also by rendering biblical interpretation a more complex process, with less assured outcomes, than the fundamentalists are willing to concede. Psychological projection draws its vehemence from the unacknowledged darkness in the projecting group. In the case of fundamentalist projection, the shadow is the repressed doubt and anxiety, the radical insecurity which has only been covered over, not dispelled, by clutching at the bible as a security blanket. And so the distinctive dynamic of fundamentalism, which makes deliverance from it all the more difficult, is the reciprocal flow of energy between disparagement of the liberal neighbour and an absolutized clinging to the inerrant biblical word.

One of the most distressing things about prejudice and projection is that they tend to provoke prejudice and projection from their targets. A certain forensic violence then begins to characterize the field of ecumenical relationships. Healthy conflict yields to sterile polemic, or to what is worse, the contemptuous ignoring of the adversary as unworthy of serious attention. As one who is more prone to liberalism than to fundamentalism, I have to acknowledge that this dynamic seems to obtain in both parties to the quarrel.

At first blush, liberalism would seem almost to be defined as excluding prejudice. It certainly contains an attractive openness to doubt, a willingness to let the relative be relative. In the post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church this openness has gained a widespread, though not uncontroverted, influence. No small part of the new air of freedom which came into the life of the Church when good Pope John XXIII opened that window, lies in our greater ability to live with doubt, even touching the most important aspects of belief, morality and Church discipline.

And yet! Liberalism as an abstraction is one thing, and liberalism in its concrete embodiments is another. Liberals are no less prone to 'inordinate attachments' and to the resulting prejudices than are fundamentalists. In a way, the spiritual snares of liberalism are the more insidious for being less blatant. The liberal does not differ from the fundamentalist in being free from anxiety or from the absolutizing tendency. The thirst for security and the reluctance for risk occur differently for the liberal but they occur. If the figure of the Pharisee in the gospel and the Judaizer in the Pauline letters model fundamentalism for us, we might choose Pilate, as he appears in the fourth Gospel, as model of the liberal 'inordinate attachment'. 'What is truth?' he asked, and did not wait to hear the answer. The peculiarly liberal form of idolatry is to canonize the endless quest for truth, to absolutize the value of doubt and to find safe shelter in keeping an open mind. To exaggerate a bit, we might say that for the liberal mentality, considered as a fixation, anything goes except the firm denial that anything goes. The liberal conviction is—again to exaggerate—that all conviction is suspect. The inordinate fear of fundamentalist bigotry generates in the liberal a counter-bias, more subtle than the prejudice of its fundamentalist target. I admire Harvey Cox who was willing to go and talk at length with Jerry Falwell, ride with him in his car, share in worship at his Church and learn by experience what was actually being taught at Falwell's college in Virginia.

The tragedy then, consists in the fact that fundamentalists and liberals each have something valuable to say to each other, but prejudice and projection from both sides keep the message from getting through. It is here that the basic Christian disciple suggested by the mote-and-beam metaphor of the gospel and by Ignatius's *praesupponendum* needs to find a place. And so, to liberals like myself I would say, 'If you meet a fundamentalist on the road, don't scorn him (or her). Instead, pause to listen. If the listening becomes tedious and even oppressive, let the Spirit redeem that oppressive situation by drawing you to examine the purity and freedom of your own stance'.

The narrow ridge

It is not my purpose to provide a detailed strategy for dealing with fundamentalism or liberal prejudice. Instead I want to suggest a trinitarian paradigm which points towards our call to integrate what is valid in each posture. In the missions of God's Word and

God's Spirit we have, respectively, qualities which are imaged in the positive side of fundamentalism and liberalism.⁴

God's Word is spoken into our darkness firmly, irrevocably, once for all. Karl Rahner beautifully portrays that, with the Incarnation, God's commitment to humankind has been made absolute beyond all recall. There no longer exists the objective possibility, which did exist prior to God's speaking his very Word into our flesh, that human infidelity to the covenant will bring God to renounce the covenant. John of the Cross, in a similar vein, in deploring the yearning of many religious people for new and dramatic signs from God, affirms that God, having spoken the limitless Word to us in Jesus Christ, now has nothing more to say to us. Christians, quite rightly then, live with an absolute reliance on this divine promise, which finds its own sacrament in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

This once-for-all, absolutely reliable aspect of God's covenant fidelity is the mystery proclaimed by what is best in fundamentalism. In the face of modernism's sceptical and even despairing 'What is truth?', fundamentalism reminds us that Truth has taken human flesh, that '... the Son of God, Christ Jesus ... was never Yes and No: with him it was always Yes' (2 Cor 1,19), and that our human response to the gift of divine Truth must be a firm, unwavering Amen. 'Remember it is God himself who assures us all, and you, of our standing in Christ, and has anointed us, marking us with his seal and giving us the pledge, the Spirit, that we carry in our hearts' (vv 20-22).

But it is not only God's unwavering Word who has been sent into our midst, calling for unwavering response. In contrast, God's Spirit is not spoken but breathed forth, continuously beyond our ability to grasp or define. The Spirit is breath and wind and fire. The Spirit of Truth reminds us that the Word of Truth never becomes human property. If, as G. K. Chesterton wrote, we are to cultivate open minds so that we may eventually close them on the truth, it is also true that a mind fixated on one truth will miss the next, and the next—and even lose its hold on the present truth—because it has not accepted the gift of openness to ultimate Truth which the Spirit breathes forth.

This capacity to remain open, even within the firm commitment of our Amen to God's unalterable Word, is bestowed by the Spirit as a Spirit of freedom. This is the aspect of the mystery which liberalism at its best proclaims. Let God be God. This Lutheran

maxim bids us trust God to keep his Word, but also requires that we let him be the God of surprise, fulfilling the promise in ways that we cannot anticipate or fully fathom.

Ultimately then, the perennial fundamentalist-modernist conflict, while finding no definite resolution within history, reminds us that God's fidelity, in which we are to grow, is compounded of both constancy and surprise, the firm and irrevocable Word, but also the unfathomable Spirit.

'With humans it is not possible, but with God all things are possible' (Mt 19,26). How can our minds be at once closed on the truth already given, yet open to the truth still to be given? We need to be formed—firmed—by the Word of God—and at the same time made open and docile by the Spirit of God. Our ability to reconcile and transcend the fundamentalist-liberal conflict present within ourselves is ultimately not a theological manoeuvre or a spiritual tactic, but simply the trinitarian gift, lovingly offered and trustingly received.

NOTES

¹ The following works have been helpful in the preparation of this article: J. Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1977); H. Cox, *Religion in the Secular City* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1984); A. Dulles, 'Fundamentalism', *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 6, 223f.; G. Fackre, *The religious Right and Christian faith* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1982); S. Marrow, *The words of Jesus in our gospels*, (New York, Paulist, 1979).

² J. Barr, *op. cit.*, p 1.

³ J. Barr, *op. cit.*, p 321.

⁴ In chapter 6 of *Playing in the gospel* (Kansas City MO: Sheed & Ward, 1986), I have reflected on the theme of fidelity as constituted by constancy and surprise, and as viewed from this trinitarian perspective.