ON THE RISE AGAIN

Neo-Fundamentalism in Australian Catholicism

(Part Three)

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In two previous articles in Compass (Compass 2004/2, 2004/3), I looked at a growing theological-religious-biblical phenomenon within Australian Catholicism—fundamentalism. While fundamentalism is not new to the Catholic Church, in recent decades, and particularly since the Second Vatican Council, it has shown signs of renewed vigor. The move for theological and liturgical renewal has been perceived by some as something akin to undermining Catholic orthodoxy. In earlier articles I identified the nature of this form of Catholic neo-fundamentalism, suggested the theological and anthropological underpinnings for its attraction, and discussed the history of its development, especially recognizing its roots within nineteenth century North American Protestantism and its reactions against the Enlightenment. In this final article I offer a response of a more pastoral nature, which might help inform the agenda for Catholic pastoral life and education. Catholic neo-fundamentalism presents us with a challenge to renew our methods of theological education; it even suggests for us what might be the content of such education.

The Fundamentalist Phenomenon

My interest in these articles is to describe the Catholic expression of theological, biblical and devotional fundamentalism, and what it might suggest to pastoral and educational leaders. However we have also noted that its popularity will not wane, at least in the short term, as it attracts people of intellect and develops a political agenda. This agenda is clear in the growing association between the religious and political right. Such alliance is obvious on the United States’ political scene and more clearly with the Reagan and Bush administrations. Nor is it unique to the United States, as we have seen in the recent Federal Australian elections and the formation of political parties and candidates with a clear moral evangelical platform. We have also noted that the ease of association of fundamentalism on the inter-religious scene, and particularly with Islam, in the late twentieth century clearly indicates that this is not a local theological or religious phenomenon identified with one nation or religious tradition.

This worldwide phenomenon impinges on Catholicism, and the Australian Catholic community in particular. It is also receiving serious scholarly attention. The first book-length monograph on the subject of religious fundamentalism was written by Gabriel Herbert in 1957. Since then the most significant contributions from a contemporary theological and biblical perspective include the works of Barr, Ammerman, Lawrence and Boone. In my second article I drew upon the fruits of the research contained in the five-year Fundamentalism Project of the University of Chicago (1991-1995). Directed by Martin Marty, this Project might well represent a definitive highpoint in the study of fundamentalism in the late twentieth century. Each study sought to understand the fundamentalist phenomenon from different points of view. Overall, the scholarly literature over the past 50 years, from Hebert to the Chicago Project, with some of the more helpful works listed below, reinforce
the view that fundamentalism is set to occupy a central place for theological and religious phenomenological researchers. It must also occupy the agenda of Catholic educators and pastoral leaders in this country. It is to this agenda that I now turn.


In its 1993 statement The Interpretation of the Bible in the life of the Church, the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) focused on the essential issues of fundamentalism. While what is described can be applied to Protestant fundamentalism, the document itself is addressed specifically to the Catholic community. Given this context, it must be assumed that what is said about biblical fundamentalism in general also applies to its expression within the Catholic community. I draw on the PBC’s analysis on fundamentalism and allow it to shape what follows.

The document affirmed the modern approaches adopted by Catholic scholars to the Bible, and the benefits derived from the critical methods of biblical interpretation. In its section dealing with fundamentalism it isolated the essential limitations and theological fallacies associated with fundamentalism. This statement is a reminder of those issues central to the study of fundamentalism isolated in an earlier article. However, the nature of the document as a voice from an authoritative agency of the Catholic Church makes its observations particularly pertinent. Through its analysis of fundamentalism, and the way this can be applied to its Catholic expression, the Commission also presents a pastoral strategy from which Catholic educators might draw in developing a future educational curriculum and method.

The document defines the basis of fundamentalism from a principle of inerrancy, the principle that:

The Bible, being the word of God, inspired and free from error, should be read and interpreted literally in all its details. But by ‘literal interpretation’ it understands a naively literalist interpretation, one, that is to say, which excludes every effort at understanding the Bible that takes account of its historical origins and development. It is opposed, therefore, to the use of the historical-critical method, as indeed to the use of any other scientific method for the interpretation of Scripture.

This statement is central. The PBC recognises the importance of the various methods that scholars employ to understand the Bible, and also the limitations of the Bible in terms of its location within time and culture. It is a collection of writings, albeit sacred and formative for the Christian community, culturally and historically conditioned by the experiences of their writers and audience. This is the value of the ‘historical-critical’ method, which seeks to acknowledge the cultural and historical context of the Bible and its impact on biblical interpretation.

The PBC’s statement affirms that those who hold a fundamentalist position are inspired by an attempt to uphold the importance and inerrancy of truths which are derived from the Bible. However, the statement also acknowledges that this opinion comes from a rigid, doctrinal position that rejects a critical reading of the Bible in the light of contemporary methods. Underpinning this approach is a rejection of the historical character of the Bible, written in Hebrew and Greek by authors human and limited. Catholic fundamentalists naively presume the Bible is the product of God’s verbal dictation to the biblical author, without any historical conditioning. They deny
the presence of a variety of literary forms in the Bible and the attempt by people over time to express themselves through story and image. This denial results in a literalist reading of the Bible, with an emphasis on historical accuracy while ‘failing to take the necessary account of the possibility of symbolic or figurative meaning.’ All this reflects a critical position adopted by Catholic fundamentalists—a denial of the ‘closeness of the divine and the human’ (PBC). This rejection of the possibility of divine intimacy is a key issue that must be addressed in future adult educational curricula by Catholic educators and pastoral theologians.

The PBC document specifically looks at the way a fundamentalist reading of the Gospels confuses the final stage of Gospel writing with the historical events upon which the Gospels are based. More centrally, this neglects the way in which Christian communities sought to understand the relevance of Jesus for their own time. It is a failure to grasp what the PBC describes as ‘a witness to the apostolic origin of the Christian faith and its direct expression.’ Implicit in this is a rejection of the development or growth of this apostolic witness throughout history. In other words, the fundamentalist reading of the Gospels stems from an ‘a-ecclesial’ attitude—a reading that is individualistic, uninformed by the insights of the Church community throughout history, and a devaluing of doctrinal or teaching development honoured in the Second Vatican Council. While fundamentalists profess fidelity to the Church, their approach to the Gospels and the ‘Scripture alone’ principle indicate a rejection of the Church’s historical appreciation of the Gospels. At the heart of this rejection lies a particular privatised and static ecclesiology that perceives the time of the Church before this present age as golden and unblemished. The PBC explicitly calls fundamentalism ‘anti-church,’ the very antithesis of what Catholics who are fundamentalists believe themselves to be.

In the final part of the PBC’s analysis of fundamentalism, issues of a more anthropological nature are considered. Fundamentalism purports to offer definitive answers to life’s problems, but, according to the PBC, its interpretations are ‘illusory’ and it ‘invites people to a kind of intellectual suicide.’

From another perspective, the PBC’s analysis of fundamentalism and the false, ungrounded hope it purports to offer, suggests to Catholic educators and theologians an important aspect for consideration. This has to do with an authentic Christian anthropology grounded in the struggles of human beings and the issues they face. It concerns the necessity of engaging with life’s issues in a way that acknowledges their perplexities and ambiguities. There are no easy, black-and-white solutions to these deep concerns. Christians are able to bring to bear on these issues the wisdom and fruit of reason from previous generations of disciples, in a process that is ongoing, contemplative and deeply faithful. But it is not easy. A holistic anthropology affirms the value of this struggling journey that is profoundly spiritual and physical. In other words, rather than living with what the PBC describes as ‘false certitude,’ Christians are encouraged to engage the world.

The PBC’s study of fundamentalism focuses on four key areas. These provide the educational and pastoral agenda for the Catholic community as it responds to the renewed growth of neo-fundamentalism in the Australian Catholic Church. These areas concern spirituality, theology, ecclesiology and anthropology.

1. Spirituality

Many spiritual writers in this country have recognised that, despite obsessive materialism, greed and xenophobia amongst Australians, there exists a desire for God and largeness of spirit. These desires reveal themselves in the many extraordinary acts of kindness performed by ordinary Australians. Such acts demonstrate another side frequently unnoticed or
articulated...that many Australians are obviously led by values of a deeply spiritual nature. They seek a simpler form of living, conscious of their use of the world’s resources, and they seek to lead lives of integrity, justice and concern for others. In theological discourse, they live guided by the spirit. In other words, there exists a deep religious and theological sensibility that permeates the lives of human beings in this country. This is the obverse response to our apparent cultural secularity and agnosticism.

The groaning of this religious spirit cannot be stifled within a culture that appears banal and rootless. Australians seek something more than what appears to be. That which is superficial and material simply does not quench the deep spiritual yearning within human beings. Fundamentalism, at another level, demonstrates the desire amongst Catholics to seek meaningful answers to life’s questions. Though the answers which fundamentalism offers are misplaced, they exemplify the need to provide ways for Catholics to engage our theological, devotional and biblical heritage that speaks to life’s concerns. This thirst for a genuine spirituality has guided Catholics to seek courses, programs and communities that can genuinely satisfy. Programs of adult faith education will continue to be increasingly important in the future, especially as the numbers of ordained continue to decrease and the future leadership of the Catholic Church rests more squarely on the shoulders of lay people, especially women. The development of theologically, biblically and spiritually nurturing programs and courses to meet the future needs of the Australian Catholic Church will continue to be a challenge. It is a challenge that will become more pressing.

2. Theology

From a theological perspective, adult faith education courses and programs can also help explore a Catholic theology of sacramentality and incarnation. These aspects of Catholic teaching affirm that God’s presence permeates our world and seeks communion with human beings. The incarnation, the ‘word becoming flesh,’ also underscores divine intimacy with humanity. Both aspects of Catholic theology speak against the fundamentalist denial of the closeness of the divine and human, as identified by the PBC.

As noted in the first article in Compass (Compass 2004/2), the fundamentalism of the Protestant evangelical revivalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth century was focused on the Bible and its interpretation. In their effort to reject the critique created by newer methods of biblical interpretation that were gaining favour, fundamentalists sought to return to what were judged as the fundamentals and truths of Christian faith. The touchstone of this truth was the Bible and how it was interpreted. The Bible was considered the central symbol of this theological movement and its definition of religious orthodoxy. As we noted Catholics, too, had their religious symbol against which theological truth or falsehood could be judged. This symbol could be variously described as papal or Episcopal authority, devotional life and its various expressions, or the celebration of the Eucharist. When the role, function and nature of these and other aspects of Catholic life became renewed in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, a unique expression of Catholic fundamentalism was born. Catholic fundamentalism looked for the same kind of authoritative clarity and definition that the Bible provided for the Protestant Tradition.

Some Catholics are attracted to fundamentalism because of their difficulties with modern, critical, theological and biblical scholarship. This skepticism is reinforced by an anti-intellectual attitude they pick up from some Catholic leaders, cynical of recent scholarship, who give homilies derived from a literalist interpretation of the Bible, and preach in a way that does not address the real-life issues and experiences of their congregation.

Several years ago, the North American
Catholic biblical scholar, Sandra Schneiders wrote:

Modern critical scholarship seems often to be so complicated on the one hand, and so spiritually empty and dry on the other, that the non-professional student of Scripture is driven either to conclude that the Bible, after all, was not meant for ordinary Christians, or else that God must have made the biblical message plain and the scholars are complicating it for purposes of blunting its demanding message. 3

These words continue to be relevant. A theology which explores divine revelation and the way people come to faith offers an alternative view held by fundamentalists. In considering the Biblical Word as absolute and identical with the Word of God, fundamentalists tend to confine God to only one place. For them, God does not speak to the hearts of men and women apart from the pages of the Bible. This attitude, which has been called "bibliolatria" - the actual worship of the pages of a book - presumes that a physical object (paper and ink) is what is actually sacred. It is God's Word. This position is in tension with Catholic teaching on divine revelation: The Word of God must be broken open for the hearer. It is never automatic or magic. Certainly the biblical Word is one of the privileged and treasured places where people have discovered God addressing them, and as Vatican II's document Dei Verbum, makes clear, it is not the only place.

Some Catholics who miss religious sustenance in Church life look for it in other ways. They return to a more traditional style of devotional and liturgical life. They read literature critical of contemporary Catholic theology and biblical scholarship, are encouraged in an antagonistic attitude critical of Vatican II and a spirituality fed on a devotional and biblical literalism. Whatever one might think of the fundamentalist attitude that reinforces this spirit, it does suggest the elements for a renewed adult educational agenda. It encourages us to continue to expose Catholics to the best insights of authentic scholarship on ecclesiology, christology and Bible. It must do this in a way that is more embracing of "ordinary" Catholics whose only exposure to teaching is usually in the Liturgy of the Word at Sunday Mass. An imaginative and total program of adult faith education needs to be devised, one that is as serious and comprehensive as are our programs of faith education for children in Catholic schools.

3. Ecclesiology

Fundamentalism can appear to offer security and a sense of community to people who are experiencing isolation, loneliness and personal abandonment caused often through the sheer size of some of our Australian parishes. Precisely because of their relative small size, Catholic devotional sects are able to offer community to people at a time when they are lonely. The experience of Catholic fundamentalism therefore raises the theological and organizational questions about our ecclesiology. Theologically we must continue to ask ourselves "What does it mean to be church today?" Organizationally, we need to ask "How can we better express what it means to be church today?" The growth in Catholic fundamentalism clearly demonstrates the need to reflect seriously on our diocesan structures and parish shapes. The current strategy in Australian dioceses in seeking to address the shortage of ordained priests is the amalgamation of parishes. This can occur at the cost of people feeling a sense of ecclesial abandonment. If this happens, then those Catholics who feel at a loss within their present situation cannot hope to have their needs addressed by an anonymity reinforced within large, impersonal parishes. The further challenge of preserving a sense of small, face-to-face, neighborhood Church communities while responding to the need for ordained ministers is not an easy one. There are no simple answers to the ecclesiological issues that currently confront Australian Catholicism. Yet in the midst of seeking answers, fundamentalism will have its
attraction for some Catholics.

A focus on ecclesiology in adult education will have other important implications. It helps Catholics understand the nature of the Church as a community of disciples seeking to express their discipleship and faith in a particular time and place, while dependent on the lived tradition of the past. This is an important response when a contrary attitude arises from the fundamentalist ecclesial perspective identified above by the PBC. As we have noted, fundamentalists view God’s revelation as immediate to the believer through a literalist reading of the Bible. There is no development in the understanding of this revelation, no latitude for subjective assimilation nor any place for an ecclesial community gradually deepening its understanding of God’s revelation and the apostolic witness in history and for different cultures. Such an attitude cuts across a Catholic position that emphasises the place of tradition in theological reflection and understanding. It glosses over two thousand years of faithful living by those who have sought to understand the Word of God in the light of their own historically and culturally conditioned experiences. Logically, Catholic fundamentalists would consider that these people have virtually nothing to say to us today. The comment of Catholic theologian Catherine Mary Hilkerlert is relevant to this issue: ‘If the Spirit resides in the community of the baptized, then the word of God can be discovered only gradually as the community wrestles with its own lived tradition, including the scriptures it calls sacred.’

4. Anthropology

One of the unique features common to all forms of fundamentalism, neither specifically Catholic nor Christian, and identified in an earlier article, is its combative nature. The manner in which Catholics aggrieved by contemporary scholarship seek to assert their point is baffling, sometimes to the point of lacking civility, if not charity. This is evident when the protest comes in the form of public confrontation or disruption by whatever means, and, more significantly, an unwillingness to engage in respectful dialogue or conversation, especially with an authentically Catholic appreciation of the Bible. Confrontational aggression and transparent aversion to dialogue reinforce one of the clearest pastoral issues which the Catholic community must address in its ongoing educational agenda: an anti-intellectualism born out of fear. This fear is, in essence, concerned with what it means to be human today. From this point of view, it is anthropological in nature. It is directed against a contemporary Catholic scholarship judged to be inauthentic, even heretical. While this fear is in response to biblical or theological scholarship, its cause is rather social change that exacerbates personal instability, insecurity and dislocation. This is evident among those who see church structures as inadequate in dealing with social upheaval. Catholic fundamentalism and devotional nostalgia are embraced by those who seek an escape from personal or social suffering. In such times, the desire to shut out the world or put off decision-making is stronger than the search for the wisdom of authentic Catholic scholarship.

This leads to a final anthropological note. The most important pastoral response the Catholic community must make to those who are attracted to the various expressions of fundamentalism is one of recognition. It is the recognition of the very humanness of those who are attracted to the simple answers that Catholic fundamentalism seems to offer. As the North American Catholic Biblical scholar Eugene La Verdiere has reminded us, fundamentalists don’t see their fundamentalism as a problem but rather a solution to a number of problems. He suggested that the most authentic pastoral response was one based on love, was invitationary and emerged out of a conversion to the very Word to which we are sensitive. While his words concern biblical fundamentalism in particular, their relevance con-
cerns all forms of fundamentalism, especially the unique Catholic expressions discussed in these three articles:

The only viable response to this personal problem lies in our gradual purification as ministers of the Word. Insecurity, rigidity, and illusory power cannot be met by the same behaviour. The temptation to raise our voices or to ridicule is strong. Our best response to Fundamentalism, indeed the only genuinely Christian response, consists in a pastoral concern for which we have such a fine example in the life and work of Jesus. The answer to Fundamentalism is not a biblical argument but the strength of faith and the power of love, the dual wellspring of hope and the true Christian security.3

NOTES


REFERENCES