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# On the rise again: Neo-Fundamentalism in Australian Catholicism (Part One)

MICHAEL TRAINOR

IF THE RESPONSE in Australia to Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* is anything to go by, it is clear that interest in religion is very much alive. The reactions, media comment and reviews reflect a general interest in the movie's subject and a strong reaction amongst some Christians. These Christians considered the movie as an occasion for evangelization and an opportunity to present the truth about Christianity and, in particular, the nature of Christ revealed primarily through his suffering and death. The movie also caused others to articulate a theological or religious litmus test for the piety, fidelity or orthodoxy of other Christians who may not have been so sympathetic to the movie or its christological portrait. In one Catholic monthly, a reviewer who was less than complimentary about the movie and critical of the way it used the Gospels and stereotyped Jews, was berated for his unflattering comments. One letter to the paper's editor urged the reviewer to 'forget his learning, his scholarship, and his theology; go see [the movie] again and let Jesus and His mother (and ours) speak to his heart' (*Southern Cross*, Adelaide, April 2004, 24).

This comment is symptomatic of a developing trend in the Australian Catholic Church. This is the growing divide that exists between the insights of contemporary theological and biblical scholarship and the perceived faith needs of some neo-conservative Catholics. The comment indicates how authentic Catholic scholarship can be judged by some as inimical to true piety and devotion. Associated with this judgment is the perception by some people that contemporary Catholic theology undermines devotion and spirituality. Further, the published comment also presumes that Catholic scholars are not people of faith nor do they have any sense of an authentic spirituality or religious attachment to Jesus and the communion of saints, in which Mary is pre-eminent. They are regarded by some of their fellow Catholics as heretics intent on undermining the Faith.

A visitor from another planet observing the vitriolic scorn poured out on Catholic scholars by some of their co-religionists might think that this is an internal issue, unique to a particular religious or theological tradition. However, the acerbic criticism leveled at a reviewer in a Catholic paper is symptomatic of a wider phenomenon not unique to Catholicism, Christianity, or to a particular part of the world. It is reflective of a global trend. This is the growing attraction towards fundamentalism.

Almost twenty years ago, I wrote an article in *Compass* in which I analysed the phenomenon of fundamentalism and reflected on its manifestation, at the time, in Australian Catholicism. In the article I offered a brief overview of the history of fundamentalism, examined its specifically biblical character, and suggested pastoral responses. In the 1980s and in the wake

of Vatican II, fundamentalism was perceived primarily as a conservative evangelical Protestant phenomenon. While it was evident in Australian Catholicism in the form of biblical literalism, there was an optimistic view about its decline. The gradual embrace of modern biblical scholarship at the official level and the vitality of programs of biblical literacy and theology in many Australian dioceses meant that it would eventually die. Unfortunately, this optimism has been significantly tempered in recent decades, and reactions to Gibson's movie make it clear that we should not be overly optimistic.

Catholic theological and biblical scholarship, no matter how robust it has been in Australia in recent times, and supported by diocesan programs of adult faith education, has not removed the pastoral challenge created by fundamentalism. In fact this phenomenon seems to have received a new lease of life. And while fundamentalism is still noticeable in the ways that some Australian Catholics use (or avoid) the Bible, it is also obvious in forms concerned with doctrinal orthodoxy and expressions of spirituality. In this first decade of the third millennium, Australian Catholicism is experiencing a renewed surge in biblical fundamentalism and in its theological and devotional counterpart, what I call 'neo-traditionalism.' It is within the context of fundamentalism that neo-traditionalism can be understood.

In this and the next two issues of *Compass* I would like to offer a critical analysis of this increased attraction to fundamentalism amongst Catholics, especially since Vatican II. Again it needs to be reiterated that fundamentalism in this early third millennium is not simply a theological—biblical perspective unique to Protestantism or to certain 'fringe' or disenchanted Catholics, as it may be stereotyped. When Catholic writers and educators are confronted by their co-religionists, it might seem that this experience is local, personal and passing. Fundamentalism is a worldwide phenomenon, and has various dimensions of a theological and non-theological nature. Catholic fundamentalism and neo-traditionalism are indicators of deeper concerns. These are not only theological or biblical, but social, cultural and political.

In this present essay, I offer a brief overview of the history of fundamentalism from its specific Protestant origins. In a subsequent article, I shall discuss the tendency and nature of biblical fundamentalism amongst Catholics, with an eye on its theological and devotional expression. In a final piece, I will explore some of the pastoral implications and challenges posed by fundamentalism and neo-traditionalism to Catholic educators and leaders.

### **Origins: Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century**

The growth of Protestant fundamentalism from its origins in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century can be divided roughly into four periods: nineteenth and early twentieth century, mid-twentieth century, later twentieth century, and late twentieth and early twenty first century. These divisions parallel and contrast similar periods in the Catholic Church and are reflected in its official teaching and documents. These will be discussed later.

Fundamentalism was a Protestant movement that began in North America in reaction to late nineteenth century theological, biblical and philosophical developments in Europe. This reaction was further stimulated by the millenarian movement in the United States—a belief in the imminence of the Second Coming and Christ’s thousand-year reign (‘the millennium’). Earlier more literal approaches to biblical interpretation were seriously critiqued in Europe. Advances in science and astronomy had moved the focus of knowledge away from a biblical literalism that created and maintained a particular theistic world-view. The scientific world-view questioned the literal historical approach to reading the Bible. This questioning had been encouraged by the philosophical contribution of René Descartes (1596-1650) and his famous dictum ‘Cogito ergo sum’ (‘I think therefore I am’). Descartes’ passion to locate the indisputable centre of existence in thought elevated the importance and superiority of the intellect and the human individual. Descartes’ perspective influenced the way bible texts were read and influenced the world-view. The human person could adjudicate their truth and authenticity without the endorsement of external authorities. Science and a philosophy of personalism, with its emphasis on individual consciousness, self-determination and identity, were encouraged by Descartes’ cognitive centrism. They affirmed intellectual enquiry. The human person, not a literal interpretation of the Bible, was now the new centre of the universe.

This anthropocentrism and its accompanying intellectual renaissance provided a climate to question religious beliefs thought unalterable and untouchable. Biblical truth was particularly vulnerable and its stories closely scrutinized with the scientific paradigm. The use of scientific and historical critical methods of literary interpretation undermined literal approaches that had informed Bible readers from the earliest centuries. In this period, from the Enlightenment to the late nineteenth century, biblical texts once regarded as inerrant were now recognised as historically and culturally limited. If the Bible was limited and open to interrogation, what did that make the religious teachings biblically derived and upon which Protestantism was built? The definitive answer came in the form of Protestant fundamentalism and millenarianism.

The fundamentalist-millenarian movement was first articulated by a New York Baptist minister, James Inglis. The 1872 Niagra Bible Conference reinforced his ideas, which grew in popularity and attracted adherents around the US. Sponsored public meetings about the use and authority of the Bible gained momentum. In addition, the liberal European approaches to the Bible, concerns over the rising tide of Catholic migration to the US, and social unrest in the late nineteenth century, galvanised this fundamentalist approach. Its principal tenet concerned the Bible’s unquestionable authority. This biblical doctrine was the lynchpin for providing the kind of security and stability that people wanted in a climate of theological uncertainty and social upheaval.

A high-point in the articulation of the principles of the Protestant reaction against liberalism came in the formation of the American Bible League of 1902 and the publication of twelve pamphlets, *The Fundamentals 1912-1915: Testimony of Faith*. These pamphlets were widely distributed throughout North America to all clergy reminding them of their religious duty to

prevent the destruction of Christianity and militantly oppose Protestant liberalism. The pamphlets spelt the fundamentals of Protestantism: the need for personal salvation through Christ, the infallibility of Scripture, the imminent expectation of Christ's Second Coming, the centrality of the Virgin Birth of Jesus, atonement, resurrection, and the literalness of Jesus' miracle activity.<sup>1</sup> The declaration of biblical infallibility also reasserted the literal historical accuracy of the creation account as described in the Book of Genesis.

The first use of the term 'fundamentalism' can be attributed to Curtis Lee Laws, editor the Baptist Paper, The Watchman Examiner. In 1920, Laws described the reactions in a North Baptist Convention of a vocal group of lobbyists attacking the liberal biblical teachings of other members of the church. Laws drew on the language of The Fundamentals to describe the lobbyists as those who want

*...the re-enthronement of the fundamentals of our holy faith... We here and now move that a new word be adopted to describe the men among us who insist that the landmarks shall not be removed.... We suggest that those who still cling to the great fundamentals and who mean to do battle royal for the Fundamentals shall be called 'Fundamentalists'. 2*

In this account, Law's observation reveals the heart of fundamentalism and its two essential features:<sup>3</sup>

- Fundamentalism is a conservative ideological reaction to what is perceived as a threat from liberals to traditional beliefs.
- The moral and religious duty of fundamentalists is to 'do battle' with those who hold a contrary position.

These remain today. From this early twentieth century Baptist convention emerged a language to describe this particular Protestant reaction to liberalism. What also emerged was its public expression. Fundamentalism ceased being a private Protestant phenomenon. It now took on a more explicit, aggressive, confrontational public profile. At stake were truth and the survival of Christianity itself.

### **The Public Face of Fundamentalism (Post-1920s)**

The most public and intense debate about fundamentalism occurred a few years after the Baptist convention. On 21st March 1925, the legislature of Tennessee passed a law forbidding any publicly employed teacher to deny the literal truth of the Bible. The law was specifically directed against Darwin's theory of evolution:

*Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee, that it shall be unlawful for any teacher in any of the Universities, Normals and all other public schools of the State, which are supported in whole or in part by the public school funds of the State, to teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach that man has descended from a lower order of animals.*

John Scopes, a biology teacher and sympathetic to Darwin's evolutionary theory, decided to test the law's constitutionality. The trial, which began on July 10th in Dayton, Tennessee,

ended with the state supreme court upholding the constitutionality of the 1925 law. Scopes who had represented the American Civil Liberties Union was found guilty and fined \$100. Later, the verdict was quashed on a technicality because he had been fined excessively. Ironically, Scope's opponent, William Bryan, acting on behalf of the World's Fundamentalist Association collapsed and died within a few days after the completion of the trial. These events forced advocates of Protestant fundamentalism to adopt a more sectarian approach. They became more evangelistic and stressed more forcefully the personal aspect of salvation and biblical infallibility in all areas of knowledge and truth. They refused involvement with other churches, regarding the ecumenical movement as satanic in their campaign for more adherents.

### **Moderation (Post 1940s)**

In the 1940s and 1950s fundamentalism entered a third phase in its development. With the desire to moderate its earlier exaggerated expressions and become more attractive to a wider cross-section of conservative Protestants, fundamentalism was transformed. This new expression 'Revivalism' had its chief proponent in Billy Graham. His experience of militant fundamentalism had taught him the importance of a more moderate, evangelical face of Protestantism. Revivalism presented a new openness to biblical and religious truth and began ecumenical dialogue with other Christian churches. Revivalism replaced the militancy of an earlier form of fundamentalism with a more conciliatory, moderate and evangelistic tone. It spread throughout the United States and to other, mostly Western countries, including Australia. In recent decades, it has engaged in serious critical scholarship from a conservative standpoint. Bible Colleges and intellectually credible publications allow Revivalism to engage in serious dialogue with biblical and theological faculties in recognized tertiary institutions.

### **Return to the Origins (Post-1960s)**

While the trend to a more moderate expression of evangelicalism continues, there is also a reaction against this moderation and a desire to return to the more militant, introspective forms of Protestant fundamentalism. Less sectarian than its forebear, it seeks to campaign in more public and political ways for the values and truths of Christianity. Alignment with particular conservative political forces and public moral advocates enable Protestant neo-fundamentalists to wage a fresh battle. This time the battle is no longer within the Church. It is in the world. Political and public institutions are commandeered, co-opted and cooperated with in the battle for truth. In this new phase of spiritual warfare all allies, no matter their political or theological history, can be legitimately engaged as compatriots and comrades in arms. In a new theological alliance never before imagined or thought possible, traditional Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants gather arm-in-arm to counteract the decline of family values, morality, God's law and the truth of the Bible as proposed by feminists, opponents to religious truth, secularists and modernists. In this viewpoint, secularism has not contributed to social enhancement but decline. The new wave of Christian fundamentalism is set on purifying the modern world of all perceived evil.

This new phase in fundamentalism can be tied to events in the Middle East and the Six Days War in the late 1960s. While this war involved Jews and Arabs, it caused social historians to recognise that something new had developed. Religious fundamentalism was now no longer a uniquely Protestant or even Christian theological phenomenon. The war had proved that it had moved beyond Christianity to other religious traditions, Islam and Judaism. What happened in this period, in the later part of the twentieth century, remains. We continue to live in a new age of fundamentalism and religious extremism. Examples of this are seen in the discourse of international politics supporting recent military campaigns in the Middle East, the declarations by Christian evangelical preachers of the demonic nature of Islam and the confident boast made by a military leader that the Christian God was 'bigger' than the Islamic God.<sup>4</sup>

## Retrospect

In retrospect, fundamentalism grew out of a conservative Protestant reaction to the theological and biblical developments that occurred as a result of the Enlightenment and critical literary understanding. In the course of its development fundamentalism took on two forms: militant fundamentalism and revivalism. The first was an extreme and aggressive response to the modern biblical movement and theological liberalism; the second, a more conciliatory and intellectually credible approach that contrasted with the siege mentality of extreme fundamentalism. It might be possible to chart the various expressions of Protestant fundamentalism on an interpretative continuum. Militant fundamentalism and Revivalism represent the two ends of this spectrum:

Militant Fundamentalism <-- --> Fundamentalism <-- --> Conservative Evangelicalism <-- --> Revivalism.

In recent decades some fundamentalists have returned to an earlier militancy while adopting a more politically public profile. At the same time, there has been a significant development in the spread of religious fundamentalism. No longer a uniquely Christian phenomenon it has its counterpart in most world religions. The eras of Protestant fundamentalism briefly described above have their parallels within Catholicism. This will be taken up in a subsequent article.

## NOTES

1 G M Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1991), 117.

2 *Watchman-Examiner*, July 1, 1920: 834.

3 These two aspects, reactionary ideological conservatism and militancy, will be explored in greater detail in a subsequent essay.

4 M Patterson, 'The Rise of Global Fundamentalism,' *National Catholic Reporter*, May 7, 2004.

*Michael Trainor is a priest of the Archdiocese of Adelaide and teacher at the Adelaide College of Divinity, with the School of Theology of Flinders University.*