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Editorial

There is a growing consensus today that fundamentalist tendencies and fundamentalist movements are to be found in all the major religions of the world. Though the term “fundamentalism” was originally derived from American Protestantism, it is now widely used to designate certain tendencies and movements in different religions. Obviously, these tendencies and movements are not always exactly alike. Hence when we refer to them as “Fundamentalism” we mean “fundamentalist-like.”

Here I intend briefly to deal with fundamentalism in the Catholic Church. My contention is that the rise of fundamentalism during the last two centuries points to the failure of the Church to respond creatively to the challenges of the modern world. As Peter Berger observes: “In the wake of the Enlightenment and its multiple revolutions the initial response by the Church was militant and then defiant rejection.” This radical rejection of the modern world and all that it stands for is a withdrawal from that world and a refusal to engage it in conservation. According to Avery Dulles, “The Papal encyclicals from Gregory XVI (1831 – 46) to Pius XII (1939 – 58) continually deplore modern errors.”

Fundamentalism was originally a tendency, a movement, among conservative Protestants in America around 1900. It sought to prevent the spread of “liberalism” in American religion and secularisation in American culture and society. As Ronald L. Johnstone observes: The ultimate source of the term was the publication, beginning in 1910, of the conservative Christians’ (Evangelicals) manifesto in twelve volumes titled *The Fundamentals*. This publication was the capstone to a series of Bible conferences held by Christian conservatives throughout the country between 1876 and 1900, which Gasper views as “embryonic stirrings” of the fundamentalism movement. *The Fundamentals* included the basic (fundamental) Christian doctrines that many said one must accept and believe.

There are thus two aspects to fundamentalism. First, it is a radical rejection of modernity with its emphasis on freedom, individualism, secular rationality, pluralism and tolerance. Modernity sweeps away old worldviews, old beliefs and explanations of reality. For the champions of modernity, “Tradition is no longer binding; the status quo can be changed; the future is an open horizon” (Berger). All this is rejected by the fundamentalists. Secondly, they powerfully affirm basic Christian doctrines. They are convinced that it is necessary to hold on to old beliefs and principles in order to preserve their religion in today’s world.

In this editorial when I speak of fundamentalism in the Catholic Church, I refer to two interrelated tendencies: 1) The tendency to reject indiscriminately

all developments in the modern world without properly discerning if these developments are positive or negative. There is also the tendency to reject out of hand the work of modern theologians who seek to articulate the Christian faith in a way relevant and meaningful to people today. 2) The other tendency is to repeat past formulations of Christian doctrine without making any effort to interpret them and rearticulate them in the cultural context of our time. It is an implicit denial of the fact that all formulations of doctrine are time-bound and culturally conditioned. Hence, this too is a fundamentalist tendency.

There have been a wide variety of ways in which fundamentalist tendencies manifested themselves in the Church. It is not possible to deal with them here. I shall merely refer to three documents of the Magisterium in which these tendencies can be clearly seen. They are: 1. *Syllabus of Errors* (1864); 2. The encyclical letter *Pascendi* and a new *Syllabus of Errors* (1907); and 3. *Humani Generis* (1950). Common to these documents are an indiscriminate rejection of developments in the modern world and the condemnation of the work of theologians who seek to create creatively to these developments. They also reiterate doctrinal formulations of the past without taking into account their historicity. They blindly accept the “scholastic concept of supra-historical, unchanging truth” (J.C.Dwyer).

In order to counter these fundamentalist tendencies in the church we need to develop health attitude to the modern world. God is present and active in the world today. We need to make serious efforts to discern his presence and activity among us as Vatican II asserts: Motivated by this faith it labours to decipher authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this people has a part along with other men of our age (GS 11).

This is why the Council insisted on the Church’s task “of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (GS 4).

We also need to learn to stand in awe and wonder before the mystery of God. God is beyond our thoughts and our words. No human statement can encapsulate the mystery of God and God’s dealings with us. Besides, all language changes. This is also true of the language of the Church. Key terms used in doctrinal formulations acquire new meanings as time goes on. It is only by creative reinterpretation that we can make the doctrinal formulations of the past living and life-giving for people today.

* * *

We regret to inform our readers that because of developments beyond our control we are unable to publish in this issue of *Inanadeepa* several articles on fundamentalism originally planned for it. As a result we are publishing a number of articles which are not connected with fundamentalism.

Kurien Kunnumpuram SJ
Editor