

The Texts of the Convivium

FUNDAMENTALISM: RELIGIOUS INFANTILISM THAT DIES HARD

Will man's religiosity ever be able to grow up to a mature, adult stage? I often ask myself this question, not without a certain element of anguish in my soul.

What moves me to ask this question? Two visions: one of the past, and one of today's many new religious movements and many attitudes that continue to multiply at every latitude and longitude.

I will try to give a name to the phenomenon that most concerns me: in a word, I can call it fundamentalism. The concepts remain to be clarified, in stages.

The word derives from a series of texts published in the United States in 1909, entitled *The Fundamentals*. Without going into detail, a good general definition can be the following: fundamentalism is "the belief that the Bible is absolutely infallible, inasmuch as every word is the Word of God."

Limiting the discussion to the monotheistic religions, one can speak of fundamentalism not only in Christian terms, but equally, in reference to Jewish and Islamic orthodoxy.

Certainly, fundamentalism reacts against interpretations of Christianity that tend to rationalize it, reducing it to the limits of a positivistic and scientific modern mentality, to the small portion of the mystery of transcendence that can be comprehended by such a mentality, applying its own liberal examination.

Fundamentalism rebels, rightly, it seems to me, against the attempts to belittle and diminish Christianity. It appeals to divine transcendence and its genuine revelation. But how does it do so? It works without the slightest heed to the fact that divine revelation is necessarily, inevitably expressed through a human channel, which by definition is imperfect.

Why such a forgetfulness? The fact is that we close our eyes to what we do not want to see. And we do not want to see anything that threatens our safety, buoyed up by our irrepressible need for safety, which, then, is the sign of insecurity and immaturity.

The human being is shaped in his mother's womb, living and developing in a world unto itself with his mother. When he is born, he is detached from her, but remains dependent. Once he has learned to eat and walk by himself, his more ideal point of reference becomes the figure of his father. The parents' task is to start him off in life, where the new individual who grows proceeds in ever-greater autonomy.

The fact that he remains dependent on his father, and tied to his mother's apron strings, is the mark of an immaturity that can even extend for the entire course of the earthly existence of our child-to-the-bitter-end, until nature gradually pays his debt for each.

In the empirical life, the individual becomes autonomous more easily: someone else teaches something, and as long as the teaching continues, we depend on him. But once we have learned, we manage on our own. Actually, a good teacher will have the wisdom to train his pupil to do ever better by himself, starting with the beginning of his apprenticeship.

In religious experience, it is much more difficult to discern the role of man. Certainly, it always means a role of cooperation with divine initiative. Now, in the empirical human life we can do without the teacher, once we have learned. Instead, in religious lived experience, the relationship with divine initiative is permanent and absolutely necessary.

In the religious experience, we can sense the divine presence, or the need for it, so strongly that when such an experience is kindled, we forget what the actual or possible human contribution is.

Asking everything of the Divinity, expecting from It everything, maybe even immediately, without considering the role of the subject and the collaboration requested of him, resembles the attitude of the child who asks everything of his Mommy and Daddy, and expects them to provide everything infallibly.

The attitude of the child, the person who is poor in spirit, who abandons himself to divine grace with the full trust of a son, is certainly the best suited to prepare us to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, which will not be entered by the wise, the rich, or the Pharisee spoken of in the Gospels in his attitude of self-sufficiency, pride, and complacency. But it is also a grave error to confuse being childlike, as in the Gospels, with being childish, or infantile.

Simple but prudent, the religious man must take measure of his own strengths and become aware of his own limitations. Trust is misplaced when you think you have a direct line to God. Gratitude to God is ill-founded when you presume that God extends an immense roof over all the peoples of the earth, and rains His revelation only on the Jewish people, or the Christian Church, or on such and such a sect, or on the individual prophet, exclusively and fully: everywhere, all is pitch black, but here, there is perfect word for word revelation!

The roots of this kind of presumption can be found in human psychology in general, and in particular, in the psychology of the religious person of a certain level of evolution. This person needs to feel he is in the hands of a superior Being who protects him in every way possible. He is horrified by the prospect of having to deal with blind chance. He is horrified of waiting to be struck by it at any given moment. In his relationship with the Divine, he prefers dealing with an other, loftier Person, not necessarily meek and holy, maybe even capricious and irascible, but one with whom he can negotiate, and from whom he can obtain favors, by getting on His good side, offering gifts and adulation, like an astute courtier who knows how to deal with a mad tyrant whose psychology he has come to understand.

At worst, the immature religious person settles for being able to find, in the place of a divine Person, a universal divine Law: impersonal, yes, but one that at least recompenses human behaviors in such a way that man knows how to act in order to gain, infallibly, good things and fortune.

In short, the immature religious woman or man does not want to hear about chance or the evil that can come from pure chance without any justification. This would be true evil, the triumph of irrationality.

In this way, the old style religious person tries to find a reason for evil, excogitating explanations and even developing metaphysics and theologies to interpret evil, necessarily, as the retribution of negative or simply mistaken behavior, making it sufficient to change behavior in order to avoid unpleasant consequences.

An evil that has some reason of its own is almost a good. The same is said of an evil that crashes down on us precisely because we deserved it, and that in any case we can send away with a bit of good will. What this old style religious person cannot stand is irrational evil, evil evil, pure evil. Thus follow all the possible attempts to

diminish it, such as when one tells a terminally ill person that today he has good color, urging him to be patient, because his recovery is imminent, or when hurricanes are baptized with the most charming nicknames.

The atheist who feels devoid of support, faces all this after having measured the strength he feels he has, but which in no case will guarantee him a hundred percent victory, since chance is ever liable to strike, wrecking all he has when he least expects it.

But, finally, there is a third possible attitude, that of a mature Christian faith. The mature Christian person can look reality in the face without blinkers. Evil exists, no doubt about it!

To assure yourself of the reality of physical evil and pain, just move your finger close to the flame burning in your cozy fireplace, or stick it in an electrical outlet.

Physical pain is flanked by psychic pain: fear, anxiety, anguish, frustration, the terrible void felt by someone abandoned by a loved one, solitude... A further list would be very long and varied.

Finally, there is moral evil: our human wretchedness, our condition of sin, the many wrongs of which we can accuse ourselves, and all that can be revealed easily when we turn our attention to our own inner being, and here too, I can spare the particulars.

The reality of evil is so concrete and strong that the Divinity itself is crucified by it. Have we forgotten that Christianity is the religion of the Crucified God? Certainly, I am not speaking here of the Divinity in its absoluteness and unreachable transcendence, but of the manifestation of the Divine, of its presence in the cosmos and among us men, and also precisely in the inner depths of each of us. Here, sin offends, injures, and wounds the presence of God. Then, there is in the extreme case a sin that is called “mortal” precisely because it kills this presence of God.

What has happened to the omnipotence of God? I would say—excuse the play on words—that it is more likely a potential omnipotence, certainly not an omnipotence in act. Just look around and within to confirm that the Kingdom of God is hardly of this world, hardly accepted and triumphant in us. The Kingdom is truly similar to a mustard seed, which will one day be an enormous plant, yes, but for the moment is just at the beginning of its germination.

This *kénosis* (“emptying”), this weakness of the Crucified God, this relative impotence of His is something that religious immaturity cannot abide, and that only the mature religious person is willing to recognize and accept, to draw forth all its consequences with generosity and courage.

The first consequence is that God needs us humans. Our cooperation is indispensable for Him to redeem the world and accomplish its creation.

There is another important consequence that goes precisely in the anti-fundamentalist direction: in the relative weakness of His presence among us, in us, God cannot reveal Himself fully.

If I may be permitted a comparison drawn from the life of the cosmos, God is like the sun, and His manifestation, His revelation, is like the sun’s irradiation that illuminates and warms all around it. Now, the sun, in and of itself, irradiates a blazing light beyond all imagination, and an extremely powerful and irresistible heat.

However, how does the sun reach us? There is the great distance. There is the inclination of the earth, offering the sun more surface to heat in the winter and less in the summer, with the respective effect of a more dispersed or concentrated action on the earth’s surface. There are the moments of the day when the sun is more or less inclined, so that at dusk one can look at it without any eye discomfort. There are

clouds that come and go. Finally, there are window shutters that we can keep more or less open or closed, with the effect that our room will be more or less illuminated. During a winter sunset with the shutters closed, the sunlight will be very weak, though nothing invalidates the immense power of the sun's blazing in and of itself.

Similarly, God is omnipotent in the dimension of His absoluteness, but when He manifests Himself in the cosmos and inhabits the inner depths of man, He is as it were wrapped up—and even, in certain moments, almost suffocated—by the various clouds over the human psyche, with those breaches of sky that open up every now and then, perhaps suddenly and unforeseeably. Therefore, the light of divine revelation moves on with difficulty, and only by degrees, bit by bit as the human subject evolves and matures. Such a process of becoming aware happens over the course of the personal existence of each of us and, in a broader sphere, through the history of collective formations, peoples, spiritual and religious movements, cultures, and civilizations.

It seems to me that these are the essential reasons that the true growth of religious consciousness passes through a decisive rejection of fundamentalism. This tendency dies hard, because it is deeply rooted in human psychology. For this reason, fundamentalism's death throes will be fearsome, and, unfortunately, will never be its last.