

FUNDAMENTALISM

A misunderstanding of
religious experience

MICHAEL FALLON M.S.C.

PREFACE

The purpose of this small booklet is to examine fundamentalism in its relationship to the Bible. The first chapter aims to describe its essential nature and focuses upon the work of James Barr, Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford University. The second chapter is a critique of a book by Congregational Bishop John Spong entitled *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*. The third chapter concerns religious experience, for the key misunderstanding that accounts for the aberration of fundamentalism is in this area. The fourth and final chapter is devoted to some insights drawn from the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.

I take this occasion to express my gratitude to Jocelyn Kramer for her editorial assistance, and to Tony Doherty for arranging the publication. It will become obvious that my hope is to attract people who are at present influenced by fundamentalism to focus on the religious experience that introduced them to their love of the Bible and to take a step in faith into the traditional Christian community which provides a wiser and richer environment in which to enjoy the riches of sacred scripture and to grow in the knowledge and love of God.

Michael Fallon
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CHAPTER ONE

The essential character of fundamentalism

I shall attempt to explore the essential character of fundamentalism by examining the work of James Barr, Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford University. Barr is a careful writer and a responsible scholar. In his writings he asks serious questions that a fundamentalist should be willing to face, and he presents carefully evidence that exposes the fact that fundamentalism is based on certain assumptions that are not in any way based on the authority of the Bible (in spite of claims to the contrary), but rather on the traditions of fundamentalist ideology.

His first book on the subject was entitled simply *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM Press, 1977). He summarised some of the main points of this book in an article entitled “Religious Fundamentalism” which appeared in the *Current Affairs Bulletin* Sydney June 1982 and was published in *Annals Australia* in July 1982.

Fundamentalism is devoted to the understanding of fundamentalism as it occurs within conservative evangelical Protestantism (he makes a brief mention of Catholic fundamentalism on pages 105-108). While noting the “narrowness”, the “bigotry”, the “obscurantism” and the “sectarianism” that one sometimes finds in fundamentalists (page 5), Barr observes that these qualities can be found in other groups as well, and he avoids approaching fundamentalism as a psychological issue, claiming in his article “Religious Fundamentalism” that “fundamentalism is basically an intellectual and rational system”(Annals, page 18). In the same article he states:

“Fundamentalism is the imposition upon the Bible of a particular tradition of human religion, and the use of the Bible as an instrument of power to secure the success and influence of that form of religion”(Annals, page 15).

In other words, fundamentalism is an ideology, and if we wish to understand it, we must examine the dogmatic presuppositions upon which it rests. According to Barr there are a number of key elements that provide the culture in which fundamentalism grows: a strong sense of sin; the need for personal salvation; faith in Jesus as one’s personal Saviour; a conviction that most so-called Christians are only Christian in name and need to be born again; and a tendency to be conservative in opposing all sorts of modern ideas and modes of interpreting the Bible. “Liberalism” and “Modernism” are the great enemies, as well, of course, as “Roman Catholicism” which is accused of placing the Church where Scripture should be.

This is the culture. But the key defining principle of fundamentalism is the absolute centrality of the Bible, as well as its complete inerrancy and infallibility. Fundamentalists claim that Christian faith is based on the Bible (forgetting, among other things, that the first generation of Christians believed before the New Testament was written, and that the Bible is an expression of faith before being a help to inspiring it. See Barr, page 313)¹.

¹This point is made well in an article by Eugene LaVerdiere “Fundamentalism: a Pastoral Concern”, published in *The Bible Today*, January 1983, pages 5-11.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 and 2 Peter 1:20-21 claim that the sacred scriptures are “inspired by God”. Fundamentalists use the model of prophetic oracles (“Thus says the Lord”) to cover every book in the Bible, and conclude that every single word of the Bible comes directly from God. They conclude that it must be true under every aspect, and the truth must be absolute and obvious to a faithful reader. To bring human interpretation to the reading is to introduce human uncertainty, which, for the fundamentalist, takes away from the absolute truth which God has given us in the sacred scriptures. Their security rests on the assumption that if they read the text with “unnuanced naïveté”², God will infallibly communicate absolute truth to them. They do not need the mediation of history, or tradition, or theology, or the living experience of others to know that they are personally “saved”.

A living community or a fixed text?

As I understand it (and here I am going beyond Barr’s work), our basic values and attitudes (including religious faith) come from relationships. The security of faith has traditionally been found in belonging to the living tradition of faith in a community. As with all other aspects of life, this means that we are engaged in a process of trial and error, of remembering and forgetting, of sin and forgiveness: a process of constant correction and discovery, for each of us has to find his or her own way of loving, of responding creatively to grace. We are helped in this by the expression of faith that we find in the Bible. But we are helped also by the art and music and religious drama of former times and of our own time, by the traditions of communal prayer, by the reflections of the mystics, by the efforts of theologians to bring the light of faith to bear in seeking understanding, and above all by the influence of holy people.

The key problem with fundamentalism is that it focuses on individual salvation, claims to provide a security that is removed from the living tradition of the Church community, and looks for an “objective” assurance in a written, and so fixed, text. Hence the need for the text to stand apart from the necessary vagaries of living faith and have an “absolute” meaning that is attainable by the “saved” individual.

This involves an a priori tendency to ignore all interpretations of the biblical text that acknowledge the forms of oral tradition out of which most of it grew, or that pay any attention to the poetic or dramatic ways in which the text expresses its inspired insight. However, those familiar with fundamentalists know that, however reluctantly, they sometimes do acknowledge that a certain passage must be understood metaphorically. So the basic principle is not simply a so-called “literal” reading of the text. Rather it is that the text must be true from every point of view - a principle that is defended no matter how extraordinary the mental gymnastics that are required to do so.

Furthermore “true” for the fundamentalist does not mean a valid insight into reality but an accurate correspondence to external, empirical, reality. Everything in the Bible is understood

²This expression is borrowed from a fine article on fundamentalism by Sandra M. Schneiders “God’s Word for God’s People”, The Bible Today March 1984, 100-107.

by the fundamentalist to be a description of an event, however trivial or lacking in significance (Barr, pages 40 and 49). This view of truth, according to Barr, flows from an “obsolete scientific model”(Barr, page 94). It belongs to a static, non-historical grasp of what actually happens when people, including inspired people, think and write.

Error and inconsistencies in the Bible

Apart from some remarks on the Flood narrative as found in the Book of Genesis (page 94), and a few examples of contradictions found in the Bible when read honestly from a fundamentalist perspective (pages 309-310), Barr makes little attempt to demonstrate that we cannot avoid the need to interpret the sacred texts, and that, from some points of view they clearly contain error. His aim in *Fundamentalism* is primarily to examine what fundamentalism is, not to show that it is wrong.

Fundamentalism: a “closed system”

Fundamentalism would like to have an influence on biblical scholarship, but because of its uncritical method it manages to thrive only in the backwater of its own enclosed system (page 338). In this intellectual backwater, fundamentalism demands that its adherents do not listen to or enter into dialogue with those of a different opinion. Rather than read non-fundamentalist material, adherents are directed to read works that point out where the non-fundamentalists are in error (page 163). This helps shore up the unquestioned pre-suppositions on which it is based.

One reason for the attraction of fundamentalism is that it supports the conservative structure of secular society at a time when people are finding change hard to deal with (pages 99-110). Barr makes the point that fundamentalism is reactionary and regressive, rather than truly conservative, because it selects positions from the past that were held prior to the insights which caused these positions to be superseded (page 173). It is one thing to assume that the earth is flat before it has been discovered that it is round. It is quite another to maintain this point of view after it has been conclusively contradicted by the evidence. Fundamentalists are engaged in a constant rejection of the conclusions of scientific biblical scholarship. Either they are so blinded by their ideology that they simply cannot see, or they are engaged, wittingly or unwittingly, to a remarkable degree in intellectual dishonesty.

Fundamentalists, as mentioned above, are very sensitive to the reality of personal sin, but are so lacking in self-criticism as to appear unaware of the role of sin in their own intransigent positions, and in their treatment of those who do not share their views (page 178).

The need for sound biblical education

Barr stresses the urgent need to educate people to a true appreciation of Christ and of the Bible, lest both Christ and the Bible become irrelevant to those seeking meaning in today’s world, and become the possession of those who use them as a supposed guarantor of a stable

check-list of doctrines that provide a pseudo-security for those unwilling to explore either the inner world of religious experience or the outer world of changing events.

I conclude this short treatment of Barr's *Fundamentalism* with the following quotation:

“The real and fatal cost of fundamentalist doctrine and ideology, as a basis of life, is not its inner logical consistency, but rather its personal cost: it can be sustained as a viable way of life only at the cost of unchurched and rejecting, as persons, as thinkers or scholars, and as Christians, all those who question the validity of the conservative option.

The presence of the questioner breaks down the unnatural symbiosis of conflicting elements which makes up the total ideology of fundamentalism. We can thus understand why ‘liberals’ and other non-conservative persons have not only to be disbelieved, discredited and overcome in argument; they have, still more, to be eliminated from the scene altogether. The fundamentalist policy is not to listen to the non-conservative arguments and then reject them: it is that the non-conservative argument should not be heard at all. Fundamentalism as an ideological option is profoundly threatened by the presence of people who do not believe in it, who do not share it, who question it”(pages 314-315).

Escaping from Fundamentalism

Barr explains the aim of his second book *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (London: SCM Press 1984) in the following way:

“This is intended as a pastoral book. It seeks to offer help to those who have grown up in the world of fundamentalism or who have become committed to it, but who have in the end come to feel that it is a prison from which they must escape”(Preface, page vii).

He attempts to provide this assistance by demonstrating that the Bible itself points in a direction other than fundamentalism, and by showing that the world outside fundamentalism is not the way it is presented inside the fundamentalist sub-culture (Preface, page viii).

In his opening chapter he demonstrates clearly that 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and 2 Peter 1:20-21 - the two New Testament texts that assert inspiration, do not support the key fundamentalist pre-supposition of the absolute inerrancy of every statement in the Bible under every aspect (pages 1-7).

After drawing the readers attention to the obvious errors in Mark 2:25-26, Matthew 23:35 and Mark 1:1-3, Barr, in his third chapter, looks at the question of prophecy (pages 20-32³) and makes the point that besides misunderstanding the nature of prophecy, the fundamentalists can find no justification in the Bible for using the prophetic oracles as a paradigm for all the writings of the Old Testament. The Genesis creation accounts, for example, do not open with the words “Thus says the Lord” and nothing gives the fundamentalist the right to supply these words where they are lacking in the text.

His ninth chapter (pages 77-90) is devoted to listing a number of the inconsistencies that can be found in the Bible. Only a fixed ideological position that is resistant to evidence can maintain a fundamentalist position when faced with the facts presented in this chapter.

People capable of error can still be inspired

³See also his interesting treatment of prophetic prediction, pages 98-109.

Barr goes on to point out that there is no reason from within the Bible itself to presume that the authors were above the imperfections and sin that are the lot of humanity. He details some of Paul's own criticisms of the imperfection of the Jewish Torah. Furthermore, granted their willingness to focus on human sinfulness, why is it that fundamentalists find it so unthinkable that the Bible may be calling them to change their views, and is it right that the Bible be used to by-pass the demands of making a responsible, moral decision? (page 123).

Barr is a scholar and reading him requires considerable commitment. Those interested will find sound material in these works to establish the fallacy of the fundamentalist position, but, apart perhaps from the article on religious fundamentalism reproduced in *Annals* 1982, his writing is not popular and I wonder how accessible it is to the ordinary person who falls a ready victim of fundamentalist pressure and propaganda. It was to meet this need that Bishop Spong wrote his *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*. It is to this book that we shall now turn our attention.

CHAPTER TWO

Error and mis-reading the text

I approached John Shelby Spong's Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism (Harper San Francisco, 1991) with high expectations, having heard him speak on these matters so lucidly. From the language point of view I was not disappointed: his style is good and his language straightforward. Furthermore, in the light of the prevalence of intellectual dishonesty with which the fundamentalist position is maintained and propagated, especially in the United States where Bishop Spong exercises his ministry, it is refreshing to read a book which honestly faces the errors and contradictions found in the Bible and exposes them so simply and so lucidly. I would hope a fundamentalist might dare to read it, and readers who are seeking to free themselves from fundamentalism should find this book helpful.

Hurting the Bible along with fundamentalism

Much of the content of the book is excellent. However, while Bishop Spong certainly demonstrates that fundamentalism is an unacceptable intellectual option, he does so at the expense of the Bible which he is attempting to rescue.

He demonstrates that there are errors in the Bible and that these must be faced squarely and admitted honestly. He also demonstrates that, when read from a fundamentalist perspective, there are many contradictions within the Bible that cannot be argued away. This points to the need to read the scriptures from a broader and wiser perspective, and to recognise the various literary forms that are found in the works that make up the Bible. Recognising these literary forms (something fundamentalists are loath to do) necessarily involves the reader in interpretation, and this affects the way we understand the meaning of the text.

The Bishop cannot, within the limited scope of his book, be expected to draw out the rich truths expressed in the Bible, and so it would be unfair to accuse him of failing to do so. Furthermore, his pastoral commitment and statements made throughout the book make the reader conscious of the respect that Bishop Spong has for the Bible.

The key problem, however, as I see it, is that he often leaves the reader with the impression that the Bible itself is in error when the point he is making is that a consistent fundamentalist reading necessarily involves one in holding contradictory positions. That is to say, his way of exposing fundamentalism sometimes creates the impression that there is error in the Bible when it is a fundamentalist reading that is erroneous.

The result is that a reader might dismiss as erroneous, and therefore irrelevant, material that, if understood accurately according to the intention of the author and the understanding of those who have cherished the work over the centuries, could provide rich insights still to the modern reader. It is a pity the Bishop was not more careful to do what he demonstrates that the fundamentalists are failing to do: appreciate the literary form of the text.

Fundamentalist Christians

In his Preface and opening chapter Bishop Spong tells us that he is writing against those he calls “fundamentalist Christians”. He defines these as people who are “not happy when facts challenge their biblical understanding or when nuances in the texts are introduced or when they are forced to deal with either contradictions or changing insights”(page 3).

Prejudices in the Bible

In chapter two, he points out some of the nationalist and sexist prejudices of the authors of the Old Testament and some of the culture-bound and so out-dated views of the authors of the New Testament. Unfortunately, he does so in a way that could leave the reader with the impression that the texts to which he refers are so prejudiced and naïve, as to have little or no value for an intelligent, searching reader.

For example, he rejects Jesus’ teaching on hell as presented by the Gospel writers (pages 21-22). But when we look for his criterion, we find that it is the fact that he, Bishop Spong, does not believe that “eternal punishment in a fiery hell was an appropriate sentence to pronounce on sinners”. Of course, everyone must recognise that Jesus is speaking in traditional images of “Gehenna” and of “fire”. He is using poetic not explanatory language. Furthermore, any idea of God adding a punishment for sin from the outside, as it were, and this punishment being eternal separation from God, is, of course, unthinkable in the light of everything else that we learn about God in the New Testament. But we should be slow to just by-pass Jesus’ words without further thought. Could it not be that “hell” (separation from God) is the self-inflicted effect of obstinate and unrepented rejection of grace, and that Jesus is warning his contemporaries that what they do matters, and matters eternally?

Pre-scientific assumptions

In chapter three, Spong illustrates well the limitations of the pre-scientific assumptions found throughout the Bible, and especially our need to re-think traditional ideas about the “Fall” of Adam if redemption is to be understood in a meaningful way. He makes the following comment:

“The Bible becomes not a literal road map to reality but a historic narrative of the journey our religious forebears made in the eternal human quest to understand life, the world, themselves, and God. We walk in their company as fellow pilgrims. We affirm some of the values they affirmed”(page 33).

He might have added that in the scriptures we find insights into truth inspired by God and treasured as true by the community. Without this assertion, we might be tempted to put too much aside as dated, rather than search, amid the dated material, for what it is that is inspired in the sacred text.

Chapters four, five and six offer a brief, introductory, and quite satisfactory summary of Biblical scholarship concerning the formation of the Old and New Testaments. It is good to see this necessary information made available in an easily readable way. It should help anyone who is feeling trapped in fundamentalism and wanting to escape from it.

Unsatisfactory treatment of Paul

The chapters on Paul (chapters 7-8) are very disappointing. Bishop Spong fails, in my view, to get to what Paul is actually asserting. Certainly Paul has his prejudices, his false assumptions, his mistaken views. The Bishop is right to note some of these. But while recognising Paul's limits, we need to seek, more carefully than does the Bishop, for what it is that is inspired and therefore true in the text.

Spong claims that Paul "appears to many to belittle women, affirm slavery, and express some measure of antisemitic hostility"(page 93). I am sure the Bishop is right, for many do in fact read Paul in this way. But I am also confident that those who find such attitudes in Paul are failing to grasp Paul's meaning. The problem here is not Paul but those who mis-read him, including, it seems, the Bishop.

I have argued elsewhere⁴ that Paul shares the universal assumption of his day that in matters of authority, it is God's design, expressed in nature, that women obey men. Granted the social horizon within which he lived we can understand such an assumption. But everything that Paul says about women, if understood correctly, gives us confidence that he would be the first to espouse the just cause of liberating women, and so men, from a situation which was universally taken for granted at that time. The values which Paul inculcates necessarily work for liberation from everything that sets restrictions upon love.

The resurrection of Jesus led Paul to assume that history was quickly drawing to its fulfilment. This gave an urgency and a sharp focus to his message. We look in vain, in Paul's writings, for long-range tactics to alter social structures, including that of domestic slavery. The Bishop gives the impression that Paul weighed the pros and cons of slavery and came down in its favour. There is no evidence for this. In fact, the values he attempted to instil in those who had slaves and in the slaves themselves were such as to undermine the institution itself.

Finally, to suggest that Paul is in any way antisemitic is to show a total disregard for Paul's expressed attitudes.

In other words, while I do not doubt that many in fact hold the views about Paul listed by the bishop, I consider it important, if one wishes to rescue the Bible, to demonstrate that such views misrepresent Paul, and to do so from a careful analysis of the texts.

To glean from Paul's writings that he is an "insecure perfectionist" and that his "writings reveal the combination of intense levels of self-negativity covered by intensely cultivated images of superiority", seems to me to be a clear example of what scholars call "eisegesis": reading into the text one's own assumptions. At any rate, I, for one, do not find these qualities revealed in the texts.

Bishop Spong is too superficial in his treatment of Romans chapter thirteen (page 103). It is clearly true that this text has been abused and misused to support unjust political power. But is this the fault of the text or of those who choose to use the text for their own purposes,

⁴The Letters of Paul, Sydney: Parish Ministry Publications, 1989. See index under "woman".

without understanding what it was that Paul was asserting in it? This distinction is critical to biblical hermeneutics. The Bishop does not make it.

To claim that Paul was “not a good biblical scholar” (page 104) because he did not follow modern scientific methods, is like saying that Newton was not a good scientist because he did not understand the theory of relativity. The methods of study used by rabbis during Paul’s time are known to us⁵, and Paul seems to have been quite a master at using them. Chapter four of Romans is one exceptionally brilliant example, as is Romans chapters nine to eleven. The power and sweep of Paul’s intellect is stunning, as is his ability to shed new light on old texts with a view to attracting his opponents to open their minds and hearts to grace and to a new way of looking at life - the way he learned in Christ.

Bishop Spong is right in claiming that to treat the words of Paul as if they are from every point of view the inerrant Word of God, requires, among other things, “the abdication of the mind to cultural patterns long since abandoned”(page 104). What he should and does not make clear is the need for a careful application of the mind to discern amid the out-moded cultural patterns what it was that Paul was asserting as true. It is this that has been cherished as true, because inspired by God.

Truth is found not in ideas but in judgment. Only when a person asserts that a certain idea represents a valid insight into reality, can one speak of truth or error. All Paul’s ideas necessarily suffered from the limitations of all human ideas, then as now. But he was inspired by Christ, and he did come to insights about life that his contemporaries found important. These insights were expressed within the limitations of Paul’s personal and cultural worldview. But in all this he was asserting certain things as true. Find these assertions and you have found a “word from God” in the “word of Paul”. Find these assertions and you have found, so the Christian community keeps on finding, precious and divinely-inspired truth that can still guide us in our lives.

The problem of fundamentalism is not that it takes the literal truth of the Bible as inerrant, but that it fails to discern what that literal truth is, because, among other things, it fails to realise the need for literary and historical criticism.

Bishop Spong does not seem to have grasped the point Paul is making when he discusses what was a real problem for his contemporaries: the eating of meat offered to idols (page 105). Paul’s point is the necessity of approaching such questions from an attitude of love. Surely he is right in that!

The Bishop’s treatment of Paul as a frustrated homosexual (chapter eight), filled with “self-loathing” and “negative feeling towards his own body”(page 117) finds no basis, in my view, in Paul’s writing. He argues from Romans chapter seven, without seeming to realise that many scholars understand the “I” in that chapter as being, not Paul, but “Everyman”, and, moreover, “Everyman- without-Christ”. To assume that Paul is speaking of his own psychological state, even after conversion, provides an astonishingly insecure basis for the hypothesis Bishop Spong wishes to develop. He claims to have “let Paul speak for

⁵See the Encyclopedia Judaica, volume 8, under “Hermeneutics”.

himself”(page 113) but he has seriously failed to do exactly that, and has arranged texts to support his own speculation. There is nothing wrong with exploring a new hypothesis, but in this instance he fails to sustain it.

Fundamentalism: a modern phenomenon

In chapter nine, Bishop Spong presents a good account of the limited horizon of thought within which Mark wrote, but he makes a serious error when he states that we have to rescue the Bible from the “literalist framework that captured it some two thousand years ago”(page 133). He seems not to realise that fundamentalism is quite a modern phenomenon. Mark and his contemporaries did not have a “literalist framework” as defined by Spong.

The ancients did not make the distinctions of levels of knowing that we have learned to make. They thought holistically: in poetic images; in dramatic symbols. We, in the modern era, have learned to distinguish more clearly between, for example, the mode of truth expressed in factual statements and the mode of truth expressed in symbols. It is our mistake (not theirs) that some made the serious error of putting biblical statements in the wrong category. It is we (and not the ancients) who isolated biblical statements as “true” and so demanded that they be “factual”. It is we who fell into fundamentalism.

The development of the Torah, a comparison of the Greek Septuagint with the Hebrew texts of Qumran, an analysis of the Aramaic Targums and of the Rabbinical use of scripture (including Paul’s use of it), all illustrate that the ancients were anything but fundamentalists. They searched the scriptures as one might play with light using a prism, delighting in all the glimpses of truth that the sacred text illuminated for them. They imagined the text, they took in at a glance the word and the symbol and the holistic meanings that moved them to action.

The Gospels to be read as art

The only wholesome way to rescue the Bible from fundamentalism is not to stay at the level of “fact” and show how erroneous the Bible is when quoted at that level, but to recognise that reading a gospel is closer to experiencing a Shakespeare play, or contemplating a stained-glass window or an icon.

Mark presents us with what the mind and the heart of one who loved Jesus came to see and understand. Certainly we are dealing with the mind and heart of a first century person. The more we know about that the more we can treat the Gospel seriously as a first-century document. But this is only that we may listen more attentively to its music, and be moved to appreciate the truth expressed in the marvellous drama that is Mark’s Gospel. Bishop Spong does well in the relatively easy task of showing the folly of fundamentalism, but his method is dangerous because a reader might push aside as silly and untrue what is in fact a superb insight into reality when that reality is lived as profoundly and as beautifully as it was by Jesus.

Chapters ten, eleven and twelve provide the reader with a good introduction to Matthew Luke and John, their different aims illustrated by their different treatments of Jesus.

Jesus: the flowering of Jewish spirituality

In the chapter on Matthew (chapter 10) Bishop Spong sees it as a problem that Matthew “sometimes stretches the biblical text beyond its original meaning and not infrequently even beyond recognition”(page 147). I think the problem is not Matthew’s but the Bishop’s. When Matthew claims that a biblical text is fulfilled in Jesus he is in no way claiming that the original author had Jesus in mind when he wrote. Rather, Matthew is claiming that Jesus is the flowering of the spirituality of Judaism, and he uses a text to illustrate this truth.

Matthew, like Paul and every rabbi of the day, would have thought you rather foolish if you thought the meaning of a text was limited by the intention of its human author. Matthew believed that the Spirit of God breathed through the whole of the history and writings of the Jewish people. In the light of Jesus, and only in this light, he came to see meanings and values that before would have been invisible to everyone. But he believed that Jesus was not a new start; rather, he fulfilled the Old Testament and brought all their yearnings and religious experiences to a climax of revelation and religious communion. He spices his portrait of Jesus with Old Testament texts precisely to illustrate the truth that Jesus is the flowering of Old Testament spirituality.

It is true that, thanks to better scientific controls, we are able today to discern more carefully the original meaning of a text. This enables us to be more accurate in limiting the use of texts to “prove” a point of view. This is certainly an advance. But let us not forget the value in the broad sweep of thought and imagination that is obvious in the use of the sacred scriptures in ancient and right through till modern times. They were not fundamentalists latching on to text to prove an already assumed position. They used texts to illustrate an idea and to draw attention to new insights that they believed were consistent with tradition. Above all, as I have said, they wished to portray Jesus as the “fulfilment of the Torah”. It is clear from Bishop’s Spong’s book that he believes this is true, but he does a disservice to Matthew by claiming that he distorts the original meaning of the texts he uses.

Portraits of Jesus

Bishop Spong uses the alterations to Mark’s Gospel made by Matthew to indicate that it is “all but nonsensical to claim that somehow such contradictory differences can still be the literal, inerrant word of God”(page 153). I presume his point is that if Mark and Matthew are read as factual reports (and this is what fundamentalists claim), then the differences would indicate error. The error is that of fundamentalism, not of Mark or Matthew, for their gospels are intended as different “portraits” conveying different, but not contradictory, insights into the truth.

In his chapter on Luke (chapter eleven) Bishop Spong speaks of “glaring inconsistencies” between Matthew and Luke (page 169). Once again he must mean “glaring inconsistencies if read from the standpoint of fundamentalism”. To speak of glaring inconsistencies in the texts themselves is rather like speaking of glaring inconsistencies in Marlowe’s and Shakespeare’s treatment of English politics, or glaring inconsistencies in Debussy’s and Chopin’s treatment of moonlight, or Monet’s and Toulouse-Lautrec’s portrayal of a Parisian café.

The Gospels are not fiction. They are about the real Jesus and about what he really did and really said. But the aim of the Gospel writers was not to present the superficial “facts”. Each Gospel writer set out to present the meaning of the facts as grasped by those who came to love Jesus and who saw with their faith-enlightened minds and hearts the “real meaning” of what had happened among them. Each Gospel writer has a different, but not inconsistent, view, and they each use all the means available to them to convey their insight in an attractive and compelling way. The reader must approach them as he would approach art, looking for the love-insights of the Gospel writer and the early Christian community.

In chapter thirteen Bishop Spong deals with the narratives concerning the birth and resurrection of Jesus, and shows convincingly that there must be a way of reading the infancy and resurrection narratives other than taking them as factual descriptions of events in Jesus’ life. It is understandable that Bishop Spong does not have the space to open up for the reader the wealth of theology contained in these artistic and inspired masterpieces, but when he writes that they involve “simple facts that are contradictory and irreconcilable”(page 212), he should have written “if, as mis-read by fundamentalists, these are expressions of simple facts, they are contradictory and irreconcilable”.

In conclusion: while Bishop Spong’s book is a welcome contribution to the important task of demonstrating the fact that fundamentalism is unacceptable as an intelligent way of reading or using the Bible, more careful work has to be done if we are to rescue the Bible.

CHAPTER THREE

Religious experience and the need for discernment

It seems to me that James Barr is correct in approaching fundamentalism from an ideological rather than a psychological point of view. It may be true that fundamentalism is especially attractive to insecure people who have trouble in trusting others and coping with change, but such people are found in every community, and there are fundamentalists who are psychologically balanced and rational and well adjusted. It is all too easy to caricature people and groups with psychological labels, and, being unfair, it often does little more than reveal the prejudices and fears of those who attach such labels too readily.

Furthermore, while recognising that not every fundamentalist is a person of good will with an honest, searching mind, it is surely reasonable to start from the generous assumption that this is the kind of person with whom we are dealing. It often is the case.

It seems to me that the best way to approach fundamentalism is to recognise that the distortion is due to misinformation and misunderstanding. The best protection against it, and the best cure for it, is to be clear about the issues involved and to express this clarity in language that is attractive to fundamentalists in that it affirms the validity of their genuine experiences and concerns, and at the same time corrects the distortions in their perspective in a way that respects their good intentions and their genuine desire to live truthfully and in response to grace. I would like to attempt this ambitious task in this and the following article.

I am assuming for the purposes of this present chapter that a fundamentalist is a person who has had a genuine experience of God that has profoundly changed his or her life, and that this experience has in some way been related to the Bible. The distortion we are calling fundamentalism has occurred because the person who has been moved in this way by God thinks of himself or herself as having a direct, un-mediated experience of God that is so obvious as not to need any discernment or interpretation. It is imagined as an experience that is so obvious that any explanation is unnecessary and distracting other than that God has spoken to him or her directly through his word found in the Bible. Since the experience is genuine, and the link with the word of God is so clear, the fundamentalist is threatened by any attempt to “interfere” with the scriptures or suggest that there could be any error in them. This is experienced as being a denial of what he or she knows to have been a genuine and often life-transforming and sacred encounter with God.

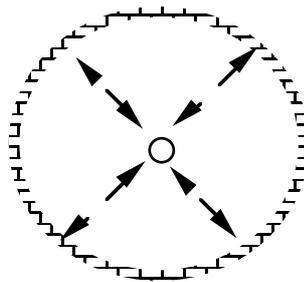
What is necessary, in my view, is to affirm the experience but to help a fundamentalist see that fundamentalism is a misunderstanding of what has actually occurred and that liberation from the fixed ideology of fundamentalism can release a person to a more open, a more free, a more humble and a more wonderful communion with God as well as to a more appropriate appreciation of the Bible. It is with this hope that I devote this article to an examination of religious experience.

My thesis is that we human beings do not have unmediated experience of God. I am not saying that God does not directly communicate with us. I am saying that it is not God who is

the direct object of our experience, but rather the response that God's self-communication evokes. God remains hidden, transcendent. It follows that every religious experience, including the encounter with God enjoyed via the words of the sacred scriptures, must involve us in a process of interpretation and discernment. Our interpretation can be more or less wise, our discernment can be more or less accurate, but we are fooling ourselves if we think that we can by-pass this process that is necessarily part of our human condition, even in reading the sacred writings which we call the Bible and cherish as God's word. Not to do this is indeed to make an idol out of the Bible and to run the danger of substituting a written text, however inspired, for the God who inspired it, thus distracting ourselves from the very one who has communicated to us through the words.

The nature of religious experience

According to some etymologists, the word "religion" comes from the Latin word ligo meaning to bind or to gather, and the prefix re meaning "again" or "back". Religion, according to this etymology, is that which "binds back". The accompanying diagram might help in illustrating this.



The outer circle represents our lives. The centre represents both the centre of our own person, our "heart" or real self, and the centre of whatever it is that we know or love, the "heart" of the world or another person's real self.

We all know what it means to be out of touch with our own centre or with the centre of the people and things around us. There is, perhaps, some connection with reality, but it is superficial, and distracted. We feel dissipated, dragged in many directions at once, lost and confused. This experience is expressed in the Greek word hamartia, the most common biblical word translated into English as "sin". Literally it means "missing the mark". None of us is a stranger to the experience of living on the surface, wanting to relate honestly to someone but not knowing how to do it, wanting to get in touch with our own feelings and desires and real self, but not managing to do so, "missing the mark".

There are, however, moments, precious moments, when we are in touch with our real selves and with the world around us in a way that "connects" with our profound yearnings. At such moments we are connected to God. Such experiences are religious.

A "religious experience" is any experience which effects this connection; any experience which binds us back to the centre; any experience which takes us back from being distracted and "missing the mark" and re-connects us to reality, and so to God. It may be the chance

smile of a child. It may be a significant encounter with someone we love. It may be a sudden awareness of how we are hurting someone. In the experience of fundamentalists it is often a profound sense of being connected with God that is associated with a text of scripture. We rightly call such experiences “religious” because they “connect” us, binding us back to reality in such a way that we experience a partial resolution in our quest to know and a partial communion with the Reality that is attracting us and promising to take us beyond our present limits.

Religious Experience and our basic attraction to love

Our longing for union with the real, our desire to be at home in the world, our wanting to be in communion, our reaching out for love, is our most basic desire. It comes from our centre and reaches out to that which gives meaning to all that is. In the words of Augustine: “You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you” (Confessions i,1).

It is satisfied partially whenever we come to know and be in love with anything or anyone. The source of this magnetic attraction is God. I suggest that all experiences that are commonly called “religious” consist in an engagement in one way or another of this primary longing, this primary attraction. The longing is experienced as being fulfilled in a significant way in what is commonly referred to as the sense of the presence of God. More commonly it is experienced as an aching emptiness when we focus on the sense of the absence of the one for whom we long but who remains beyond our direct experience.

We have no unmediated experience of God

As mentioned earlier, the transcendent God is not the direct object of unmediated experience. Religious experience, therefore, is not a direct unmediated experience of God. This apparently simple statement is of the utmost importance. Failure to recognise its truth continues to lead to the most serious religious aberrations, including the aberration of fundamentalism.

We do not immediately (without mediation) experience God because God remains transcendent and is not to be identified with any of the objects of our immediate experience. But we do experience God in that everything we immediately experience is held in existence by God and is an expression of the being of God in which it participates. In Paul’s words, God has been “understood and seen through the things he has made”(Romans 1:20). We should pause here to listen to some of the masters of our tradition speaking on this subject.

The beloved disciple, the author of the fourth gospel, declares: “No one has ever seen God”(John 1:18). In his first letter he states that those who “do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen”(1 John 4:20).

Augustine of Hippo (d.430) wrote:

“If you have understood, then this is not God. If you were able to understand, then you would understand something else instead of God. If you were able to understand

even partially, then you have deceived yourself with your own thoughts”(Augustine.
Sermo 52, vi, 16)

In similar vein, Anselm of Canterbury (d.1109):

“Where is the inaccessible light, or how can I approach the inaccessible light?...I have never seen you, Lord my God, I have never seen your face”(Proslogion, 1)

John of the Cross(d.1591), the great master of mystical prayer, makes the same point when he writes in his Spiritual Canticle:

“However elevated God’s communications and the experiences of His presence are, and however sublime a person’s knowledge of Him may be, these are not God essentially, nor are they comparable to Him, because, indeed, He is still hidden to the soul”⁶.

And now, statements from two modern theologians. Henri de Lubac writes⁷:

“God is not seen directly apart from a sign, but God can be seen everywhere, through the world, however obscurely”.

And Mascall:

“We cannot, at any rate in this life, know God under the aspect of his deity, but we can know him under the aspect of his creatorship in recognising his creatures for what they are”.⁸

“Catholic theology has been reluctant to admit, even in genuine mystical experience, any direct apprehension or immediate knowledge of the essence of God”.⁹

Finally, Jacques Maritain writes:

“The inviolable secret of the deity does not prevent this Divine Essence being known by us, not in itself, but because it communicates a created participation of itself to what is not itself. That word “participation” expresses in the ontological order the same thing expressed by the word “analogy” in the noetic order... The Divine Nature remains veiled, not revealed, to our metaphysical gaze”¹⁰.

The implications of this for our reading of the sacred scriptures are drawn out by John of the Cross when, speaking of the “Books of Divine Scripture”, he states in the Prologue to the Spiritual Canticle:

“The Holy Spirit , unable to express the fulness of His meaning in ordinary words, utters mysteries in strange figures and likenesses”(n.1).

We need to apply our heart and our intelligence to this symbolic language if we are to grasp the divine inspiration expressed in the words.

We do experience movements of thought and feeling within our hearts that engage our yearning for communion with the One for whom we long, the One whom we believe is their source; but it is our own thoughts and our own feelings which we directly experience, not immediately the God who communicates with us in and through them.

We do experience people and events around us that speak to us of God and engage our yearning for communion with God; but it is actual, limited people and events that we directly

⁶Spiritual Canticle, second redaction, Stanza 1, n.3, in the Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (ICS Pub. Washington DC, 1979).

⁷quoted in The Discovery of God, Henry Regnery Co, Chicago, 1967, page 93.

⁸He Who Is, DLT 1943, Libra Book 1966, page 74.

⁹He Who Is, page 192.

¹⁰Degrees of Knowledge, 1959, pages 230-131.

experience, not immediately the God who reveals himself to us in them and attracts us through them.

We do read the words written by the actual historical people who were moved to write under the inspiration of God's Spirit, but it is their limited words that we directly experience, not immediately the transcendent God who inspired them.

The inner movements and the outer realities engage our yearning for God because they disclose something of the truth, they reveal something of the beauty, and they participate in something of the goodness of God; but while they participate in God they are not to be identified with God.

"God" is the name we give to the One whom we want to know and whom we come to know in part whenever we know anything. "God" is the name we give to the One with whom we want to be-in-love, and whom we enjoy in part whenever we are in communion with anything. But God always transcends any knowledge or communion we have. What we come directly and immediately to know and love is a world that is made intelligible and lovable by God, and a self that yearns for union with and knowledge of this God, and since both the world and the self exist by participating in the being of God, it is God whom we come to know and love in all these experiences.

We might compare this to a still day in which we do not directly experience any movement of air. Yet we look at the poplar tree and notice that its small shiny leaves are quivering. We know that there is a movement of air though we do not directly feel it. In a similar way, we look into the eyes of a baby and experience something of the wonder of God. We hear someone say to us "I love you" and we experience through that a love that goes beyond the other person into the mystery we call God. We are attracted by inspired words and we are moved to the heart of our life and hear the call of God.

Religious experience is a matter of the "heart". Augustine makes this point in his commentary on Isaiah 46:8: "Return to your heart, you sinners"¹¹

"Return to the heart! Why are you running away from yourselves?
Why are you getting lost, outside yourselves, entering on deserted ways?
You are wandering aimlessly. Come back! To where?
To the Lord! It is quick! Return immediately to your heart!
Exiled from your own self you wander outside.
You fail to know yourself, you who want to know the source of your existence.
Come back! Return to the heart...
See there what you can learn about God, for the image of God is there.
In your interior person dwells Christ.
In your interior person you are being renewed after God's image."

Because God remains transcendent, our primary religious experience will be one of longing for what is absent. At times this will be experienced, in the words of the mystics, as a dark night of the soul. But because God is immanent, we sometimes experience what Ignatius of Loyola calls a "consolation without cause" that breaks in upon us.

¹¹Found in his *Tractatus in Joannem* XVII in *Corpus Christianorum* n.36, page 186.

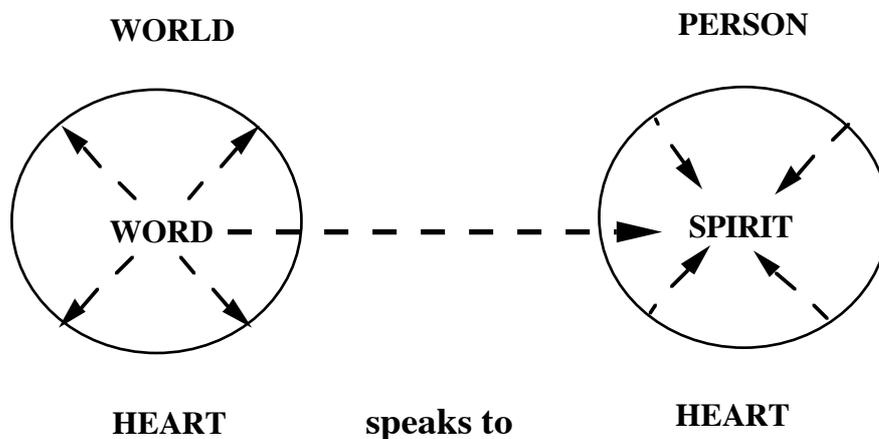
This wide range of religious experiences is affirmed by the sacred scriptures of all the major religions of the world in whatever way they conceive the ultimately Real to be¹²: by the Vedas and the Upanishads, the sayings of K'ung-fu-tzu (Confucius) and Lao Tzu and of Gautama the Buddha, the oracles of the Hebrew prophets, the New Testament and the Qu'ran. It is of this that the mystics of all cultures speak, as do the poets and artists of our world.

There are as many examples of religious experience as there are people who have longed for love. These experiences have found expression in inspired music and inspired painting and inspired poetry and inspired action: the ordinary inspired action of loving that every mother and father and aunt and uncle and teacher and nurse knows in his or her daily life. Every time we are genuinely in contact with religious experience, analyse it accurately and express our insights truthfully, we give expression, however imperfectly, to the reality of God.

“Inspiration” and “revelation”

We used a simple diagram at the beginning of this chapter to illustrate the fact that a religious experience is an experience that connects us to the heart. The following diagram is a refinement of the earlier one. It attempts to illustrate the two focal points of religious experience: the centre of the outer object that is being experienced, and the inner centre of the person experiencing.

The movement of God experienced in our heart (our “spirit”) is traditionally spoken of as divine “inspiration”: “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us”(Romans 5:5). When we speak or act under the inspiration of God our words and our actions become a “word” from God to others. When they speak or act under the inspiration of God their words and their actions become a “word” of God to us. “Revelation” happens when the inner “spirit” and the outer “word” come together, when “heart speaks to heart”.



¹²See John Hick *An Interpretation of Religion* [Macmillan, 1989].

Since God is and remains transcendent, we must be consistent in recognising that our experience of God is, as noted earlier, always and necessarily mediated. When we speak of “inspiration” and “revelation”, we need to remember that neither of these cut across or by-pass God’s transcendence; neither of them speak of unmediated experience of God.

God is free. We are in no position to place limits on what God might choose to do. But there are limits to what *we* can do, and one limit is that we are incapable of unmediated experience of the Transcendent. Therefore, we understand inspiration incorrectly if we imagine that mediation suddenly is moved aside, and that God speaks in unmediated fashion to the prophet who hands on this unmediated revelation to us. God remains transcendent, for everyone. The experience of God is mediated, to everyone.

Hence the traditional wisdom that tells us of the need for discernment: the need for an interpretation and understanding of experience that is wise. This is at the heart of our critique of fundamentalism: its ideology depends on the indefensible assumption that religious experiences and inspired words are somehow beyond the need for interpretation. The fact is that they are interpreting them within the framework of the unsubstantiated assumptions of their own ideology, but are unaware of it. Such a process is clearly dangerous.

There are criteria, however subtle, that can be used to check our impressions, and we would be foolish to so rely on our own judgment that we thought we could by-pass spiritual direction, or go it alone without keeping in touch with the spiritual wisdom of the past and a living community of faith in the present. After all, the God we are speaking of is moving everyone, not just us, and we have a lot to learn from the wisdom of others, living and dead.

The possibility of deceiving ourselves or of being mistaken in any given instance does not take away from the fact that we do experience movements which engage our deepest yearnings and draw us along on our journey towards communion with God.

When speaking of inspiration, Christians recognise the very special and sacred position held by the New Testament. The Gospel according to Mark, for example, is judged to be inspired, because it is judged that what the author has written was written in response to divine inspiration. The author was in touch with his subject and in touch with the movement of the Spirit of God when he wrote what he did, and he responded truthfully to that inspiration. However, it should be obvious that the Gospel is the “word of God” only in this mediated way. As a document it is still fully “according to Mark”. To discern its meaning therefore we must apply to it all the criteria we use in any literary criticism, open, however, to find there the inspiration of the Transcendent One who is the source of Mark’s inspiring words. The New Testament does not give us unmediated access to God.

God, being free, can reveal himself to people in whatever way he chooses. Since God is transcendent, the revelation remains mysterious. To reveal is to remove a veil. The veil hiding God is not over God but over us. When we do receive the mediated revelation of God, the veil is partly lifted. When this happens, we experience, however partially, in the people and world around us, and in the movements of our own mind and heart, some satisfaction of our

longing to know and to be in love. For then God, the source and goal of our being, the one from whom we come, in whom we exist, and for whom we long, is imperfectly, but really, revealed to us.

The necessary limitations of any religious knowledge

Some religious knowledge is personally generated through reflection on our own personal religious experience. Most religious knowledge, however, comes from our acceptance in trust of the communicated reflections of others. This is as we should expect it, for a vast amount of the knowledge we have in any field comes from others and is not based on our own investigations.

We do not accept other people's statements blindly, but we would be foolish to accept only what we had verified independently for ourselves. It is a matter of reasonable trust: based on the qualities and convincing witness of those whose word we accept; on the consistency between what we accept and what we know independently; and on our continual observation of what happens to us and to others as a result of such acceptance.

Because we do not have any direct, unmediated experience of God, we cannot know or love God in an unmediated way. As mentioned earlier, God is the one for whom we reach out in our questing, but we never experience attaining God in an unmediated way. We continue the quest because it is reinforced and validated whenever we know and are in communion with anything¹³. God remains beyond any achieved knowledge or communion.

It is because religious experience connects us to One who is longed for but not known, that it is an experience of "mystery"¹⁴. Nicholas of Cusa (d.1464) wrote:

"I know from experience how necessary it is to enter the darkness, to admit the co-existence of contraries which exceed my power of understanding, to look for truth where there seems only to be impossibility... The place, O my God, where we can see you unveiled is surrounded by the coming together of things contradictory; it is the wall of the paradise where you dwell, and we can enter it only by conquering reason, which stands guard at the gate."¹⁵

Everything we do come to know and love supports our trust that the desire that impels us, and that is essential to our whole being as we experience it, is in fact a desire for what is real. We can be confident therefore that what we call God exists, but we cannot expect to conceive God adequately or define the infinite.

¹³This is how I understand the words of Deuteronomy quoted by Jesus who tells us to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength [Mark 12:30]. He is telling us to commit all our energy to attending to our deepest longing, and to doing whatever is required to attain the treasure for whom our heart longs. We are to let nothing distract us from the divine call that is at the heart of our being.

¹⁴This is the *fascinans, tremendum* and *augustum* of Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the holy*. London, 1923. See also Lonergan in *A Second Collection* [1974]172-173; *Method in Theology* [1972]106. "An orientation to transcendent mystery is basic to systematic theology. It provides the primary and fundamental meaning of the name, God"[*Method*, 341].

¹⁵*De Visione Dei*, quoted by Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, Geoffrey Chapman, 1967, page 225.

If we forget this, we find ourselves calling God something that is less than God. It is right to associate God with the experiences that awaken our religious desire: the spring, the mountain, the grove, the person, the cult, the proposition expressing distilled wisdom, the sacred literature of the Bible. It is wrong to equate God with any of these.

The necessary limitations of any religious expression

Whatever way we give expression to religious experience, we must recognise its inherent limitations. We must also recognise the need to interpret such expressions and the difficulty we have of interpreting them faithfully, especially when they come from another age. A correct understanding of the meanings and values that inform our own culture is difficult enough. Interpretation of what another people of another culture were pointing towards by their rituals, and their symbols and their attempts at explanation, can be undertaken only with a deep sense of humility. Religious art and religious books, however sacred and however inspired, cannot substitute for the authentic journey of a present response to God who is calling everyone to him in the depths of their consciousness. The art and the words of a past age can inspire us, but they cannot substitute for our art and our words as we answer the new questions which human experience is for ever presenting.

Once it is recognised that the words of the Bible are not, in a direct and unmediated way, God's words to us, but rather are the words which God has inspired a human author to use to mediate divine revelation, we must recognise the necessary limitations of human language, and the need to apply our minds and hearts to understand it wisely and appreciate it profoundly. To deny this is to adopt fundamentalism. To accept it is to belong to the long tradition of faithful disciples, first of Moses and then of Jesus, who have treasured these human words of the Bible as being inspired. It is to commit oneself to a community of believers who help each other to plumb the depths of the wisdom expressed in this literature, to seek and find those truths which are there because the human authors gave faithful expression, within all the limits that necessarily belong to human language, to their religious encounter with God.

CHAPTER FOUR

Insights from the Second Vatican Council

A reader interested in the official Catholic teaching concerning interpretation of the sacred scriptures would do well to read the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (“*Dei Verbum*”) published by the Second Vatican Council on the 18th November 1965. It is a document of only fifteen pages, and can be found in *Vatican Council II: The conciliar and post conciliar documents* (Ed. Austin Flannery and pub. E.J.Dwyer, 1988, pages 750-765).

In this final chapter, I wish to draw from it only four points. The first is that reading the Bible is an invitation to religious experience. The second is that there is a necessary link between the Bible and the faith-community. The third is that the language of the Bible is human language and must be interpreted according to the ordinary norms of literary interpretation. The fourth is that the truth to be discovered within the sacred texts is that truth that was inspired by God, the truth that the inspired writer was asserting from his or her religious experience. This truth cannot be isolated from the living tradition of faith within which it was asserted and preserved.

1. An invitation to prayer

Speaking of the sacred scriptures, the Council states:

“God reveals himself... to invite and receive into his own company”(n.8)

“Growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on comes through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts... It comes from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience”(n.8)

“Sacred scripture must be read and interpreted in the spirit in which it was written”(n.12)

“In the sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children and talks with them... The Word of God [is] strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life”(n.21).

Fundamentalists need have no fear that in abandoning fundamentalism, they are abandoning the divine encounter which they have experienced in reading the Bible.

2. The Bible is the book of the faith-community

The Council states that:

“By means of the apostolic tradition the full canon of sacred books is known to the church...Holy Mother Church, relying on the faith of the apostolic age, accepts as sacred and canonical the books of the Old Testament and New Testament, whole and entire, with all their parts, on the ground that, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit... they have God as their author and have been handed on to the Church itself”(nn.2-3).

There is a necessary and unbreakable interaction between the developing community body of literature, whether of Judaism or of Christianity, and the community which treasured it, preserved it, and handed it on. The written word was “consecrated” by its acceptance within the faith-community, for it was the faith of this community which recognised it as indeed the

“word of God”. We would not have the Bible were it not for the believers who preserved it, so one simply cannot take the Bible outside the tradition of faith and fossilise some “objective” meaning that stands apart from the community and its faith.

It must also be remembered that not every document was accepted by the community just because it existed. Usage provided a filter that separated out for preservation material that engaged people’s faith experience. This is the basis for our confidence in the inspired nature of the documents that were finally accepted by the community in the official canon. The communities protected themselves against points of view which, while perhaps claiming to be inspired, were judged to be heretical when tested against the authentic religious experience of those people in the community who were judged to be especially holy.

The special place of the New Testament among the inspired writings of the Judeo-Christian tradition lies in the fact that it contains the faith-reflections of those who knew and followed Jesus. As one theologian puts it:

“Through the conviction of the normative character of the faith and preaching of the early Church, the Church has a means of recognising and declaring which writings are inspired and canonical - namely, those which, on the basis of its experience of the faith and its ever deepening reflection on that experience, it finds an accurate objectivization of the faith of the original church.”¹⁶

One important conclusion from this is that the Old Testament is best read in the light of the New, as the imperfect is to be read in the light of the one, Jesus, who is its perfection.

3. The words of the Bible are human words

In the same document on revelation the Council states that:

“the words of God expressed in human words are in every way like human language”(n.13).

It alerts us to what we need to do if we want to discover the inspired truth in a text:

“Seeing that, in sacred scripture, God speaks through people *in human fashion*, it follows that the interpreter of sacred scripture, if he is to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of words”(n.12).

To know something is not to know everything

“God speaks through people in human fashion”. If we assume that, in order to be inspired, an author had to know everything about everything, then we must recognise this as an arbitrary, unjustified and rather foolish assumption on our part. If God is going to inspire someone to communicate truth to others, God must necessarily choose a limited, imperfect human being, with limited and often incorrect assumptions, limited viewpoint, and erroneous ideas about many matters. To be inspired to say something true, it should be obvious that one does not have to have completely true knowledge about everything.

The “literal meaning” of the text

¹⁶M. Schmaus Dogma 1: God and Revelation (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968) page 183.

To know what God is saying through human words, we cannot by-pass their literal meaning. Since “meaning” is something found only in a mind, the “literal meaning” of a text is the meaning which it has for an *informed* mind that reads the text *intelligently*.

To find the literal meaning of a text we need to understand the kind of literature with which we are dealing (the “literary form” as it is often called). The literal meaning of a shopping list is fairly straightforward. The literal meaning of a poetic text, on the other hand, requires knowledge of the way images and symbols work.

When we want to say something we choose an appropriate way to do it. We may choose a story, or an eye-witness account, or a poem or a dramatic text. We may exaggerate to cause laughter; we may adorn to effect wonder. It depends on what it is we want to convey. Fundamentalism ignores this simple and obvious truth.

To grasp the “literal meaning” we need to try to understand what it was that the inspired authors were intending to say, and the meaning that was in the minds of those who understood correctly what they wrote. We need to explore also why the community preserved the text, and how the text was understood by those who kept on reading it in the synagogue or in the Christian assembly. We need to see how the text was understood by faithful and intelligent readers down through the centuries.

Not all these meanings will be simply identical, but they will surely provide a spectrum that will allow us to distinguish between a genuine understanding that can find support in the text and a misunderstanding that can be rejected as inconsistent with the intention of the author and of those who preserved the text for us.

If people state that the “literal meaning” of a text is the first thought that occurs to them when they read the text, independent of any of the above considerations, we can have no confidence that they are giving the literal meaning of the text at all. This does not work for any other piece of literature, why should it work for the Bible?

As mentioned in the previous chapter, I think it is best to start from the admittedly generous assumption that a fundamentalist is one who has been excited by discoveries that have come through the Bible, and who has learned to look to the Bible as an inspiring source of spiritual nourishment, but who is seriously uninformed (or misinformed) as to the nature of the text. The result is that far from being caught in the “literal meaning” of the text, it is precisely the “literal meaning” that is missed.

To find the “literal meaning” of a biblical text, we must also heed the following advice from the Council:

“Since sacred scripture must be read and interpreted with its divine authorship in mind, no less attention must be devoted to the context and unity of the whole of scripture, taking into account the tradition of the entire Church and the analogy of faith, if we are to derive their true meaning from the sacred texts”(n.12)

4. To find the truth in the scriptures we must seek for the author’s assertions

The Vatican Council states:

“Since all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, assert should be regarded as asserted by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of scripture, firmly, faithfully, and without error, teach *that truth* which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred scriptures”(Dei Verbum, n.11).

If we want to find out what the inspired author was communicating out of prayer, and so from inspiration; if we want to share the insight into God and into themselves that the original readers enjoyed and which accounts for the writing being treasured and copied and handed on to us by the believing community, we have to try to put aside our own assumptions and enter into the mind of the author to discover what the truth was that the author intended to convey. In the words of the Vatican Council we must look for what it is that the author is “*asserting*”.

The author may state many things, and some of them may well be wrong or very imperfectly understood. The author may well be unable in many areas to think outside the cultural horizon of his or her times. Our interest is not in these culturally limited and even mistaken ideas. It is in that precise judgment about life that the author makes under the inspiration of the Spirit of God.

We can be confident that this assertion is true, for God does not inspire error. This is the truth we are to look for, and only this truth. Of course in any and every other matter the author may well be mistaken. But the acceptance of the text by the believing community encourages us to believe that something very precious was communicated to them in and through the text, and that they preserved it as inspired because they kept on finding it to be inspiring and insightful and to disclose something of the presence and action of God in their lives. It is *this truth* that we wish to discover ourselves. We can trust that *this truth* is a valid insight into reality.

To do so we cannot just follow the first idea that occurs to us; we cannot treat the whole scripture as though it were a shopping list or a street directory; we cannot ignore the images and the poetry and the drama in it; we cannot reduce it like this as though God can only inspire unimaginative and factual prose. We need to look at the text, understand the meaning of the words as the author uses them, grasp the history of the images used and the medium the author is using to convey his or her inspired insights, and allow our mind and heart to be moved in prayer by the same Spirit who inspired the author. This is not a complicated process, but to by-pass it is to fall victim to fundamentalism.

The problem with fundamentalism is that it sets the Bible itself outside the living tradition, and then proceeds to “objectify” individual texts, taking them out of the process and context within which alone they have a place. A flower arrangement may well be “inspired”, but that does not mean that one can take a single flower or part thereof and isolate it from the rest and claim inspiration for it.

Biblical fundamentalism is but one symptom of the neglect of mysticism in recent Western Christianity. Rightly impressed with the results of the scientific method, some in the West have tended to look for assurance in their religious lives not in their relationship with a community of faith in which they find their mind and heart moved to live in ways that affirm

the living tradition of faith, but in something “objective” - the written text of the Bible understood as being from every point of view inerrant.

We must avoid the quick fix, the quick dogmatic solution, the quick scripture text that puts a full-stop to our inquiring mind and searching spirit. We must reject this in the name of reason and of faith. We must be wary of those who, unable to dispense with their masks, afraid of the journey of discovery, and unwilling to face up to the poverty of their findings, hide behind God’s name and use what they claim to be the “word of God” to attract others who are hungry for spiritual nourishment.

As intelligent people we must love God with our minds as well as with our hearts, and this demands of us that, if we wish to be informed by the writings which have been preserved as sacred by the Christian community, we must be willing to go to the trouble to discover their meaning, using all the historical and literary tools available.

The great enemy of fundamentalism is scientific study of the Bible that takes it seriously as an inspired human document, and attempts to find its meaning in its own historical and literary terms. This is the enemy because it involves discernment, and some uncertainty. This takes away the simple, rock-like security that the fundamentalist is seeking. This false security, however, must be discarded, for, as Jesus said, only “the truth will set you free”(John 8:32).