

John George HUBER

# An Ecumenical Reflection on Fundamentalism

by an Evangelical Catholic  
from Missouri

*This essay about the phenomenon of fundamentalism is an effort to think together with all the members of a community that is committed to the quest for Christian unity. That is the “ecumenical” dimension of the title selected.*

*When referring to myself as an “evangelical catholic”, I mean that I regard myself as part of the one, holy, catholic (universal) and apostolic Church confessed in the Nicene Creed, and I am also in continuity with those Christians who are evangelical, that is, committed to the proclamation of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ.*

*Although my confessional affiliation is Evangelical-Lutheran, I am using the term, “evangelical”, a designation preferred by Martin LUTHER. When I refer to Missouri as my place of origin, I am not contradicting the geographical reality of my birth and lifelong residence in California, in the United States of America (USA).*

*Missouri refers to my membership in an ecumenically conservative and partly isolated denomination in the United States of America (USA) known as the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod.*

*Prior to his affiliation with the larger Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Missouri Synod was also the church of Martin E. MARTY, who has pioneered the Fundamentalism Project.*

*In Volume I. of Fundamentalisms Observed, the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod is identified as experiencing “fundamentalist victories” in the sixties and seventies, similar to those of the Southern Baptist Convention. One small part of this essay suggests dropping*

*the fundamentalist category to describe the theological position of the Missouri Synod.*

*What follows is an effort to summarize some of the definitions of fundamentalism that appear in the volume edited by Martin E. MARTY and also in some other readings. Critical reflections will be offered. The concluding section will propose the categories of David J. BOSCH for understanding fundamentalism in an ecumenical context.*

## I. Fundamentalisms Observed

The table of contents of the first volume indicates the breadth of scope of the *Fundamentalism Project*. A sample of the topics include: North American Protestant Fundamentalism, Roman Catholic Traditionalism, Jewish Zionist Fundamentalism, Islamic Fundamentalism in South Asia, Organized Hinduisms, Fundamentalistic Movements in Theravada Buddhism, and Fundamentalism in Japan: Religious and Political.

Additional themes of the six-volume series deal with the effects of fundamentalism around the world, an account of the surprising rise of modern religious fundamentalisms, common features among fundamentalisms, and finally, public policy implications.

In the introduction to the first volume, the editors identify at least three dimensions of modern culture that are uncongenial to fundamentalists: a preference for secular relativity; the adoption of religious tolerance with accompanying tendencies toward relativism; and individualism.

Of special interest to us is the first chapter on North American Protestant Fundamentalism, authored by Nancy T. AMMERMAN.

She points out that fundamentalism re-emerged in the United States of America (USA) in the late twentieth century. The “Moral Majority” captured its public image and agenda. “In 1979 independent Baptist Pastor Jerry FALWELL declared that people who were concerned about the moral decline of America were waiting to be mobilized.”

There was a cordial relationship between religious conservatives and President Ronald REAGAN, and later, President George BUSH. “By 1981, Jerry FALWELL could declare that his mission was accomplished.”

This effort to engage in politics and work for social change was not the original approach of fundamentalism, and some contemporary members of the fundamentalist camp are not inclined to include the political and social agenda as part of their mission.

Some expected the Rapture in 1988. Others lobbied in the White House. All were defending beliefs that they regarded as “fundamental”. This chapter provides a helpful historical evaluation of the development of fundamentalism in the United States of America (USA).

What later became known as the “Fundamentals” was based on a series of essays issued between 1910 and 1915. Nancy T. AMMERMAN makes an important distinction between fundamentalist and conservative Christians, noting that this term, “conservative”, is a larger category, and fundamentalism is a subset.

She claims that both terms describe Christians who support “traditional” interpretations of such doctrines as the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, the reality of miracles (including the resurrection), and the eventual return of Jesus Christ to reign over the Earth. It is her additional reference to an “evangelical” category that prompts me to offer another set of categories under that overarching title.

## II. What is Fundamentalism? Theological Perspectives

Martin E. MARTY offers a critical appraisal of fundamentalism by identifying the “fundamental theological feature of modern fundamentalisms” as *oppositionalism*. Fundamentalists perceive that a foe from outside or a compromiser or traitor from within is fighting them, and they fight back.

Martin E. MARTY says that their agenda is set by what they feel demands their resistance, by what they must contend against. Typical of this spiritual warfare is a battle against evolution, the denial of a verbally inspired Bible, and modernity.

Martin E. MARTY’s coining of the term *oppositionalism* to define the essence of fundamentalism is very typical of his journalistic style. It is instructive to compare Martin E. MARTY’s *oppositionalism* with an insight of Terrence W. TILLEY in *Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity*.

Terrence W. TILLEY draws upon an argument of Wesley KORT, who said that the meanings of theological discourses are best understood *oppositionally*, that is, “each theology defines itself by distinguishing itself from others”.

Even “postmodern theologies”, Terrence W. TILLEY says, “explicitly define themselves in opposition to modernity and to other postmodern theologies.” Could we also see evidence of a kind of *oppositionalism* in the Reformation experience?



In the first article of the Augsburg Confession on the doctrine of God, there is not only an affirmation of what is unanimously held and taught, but the opponents like Manichaeans, Arians, Eunomians and Mohammedans (Muslims) are explicitly identified, following these words of opposition: “Therefore all the heresies which are contrary to this article are rejected.”

Furthermore, after Philip MELANCHTHON wrote the first twenty-one articles of this confessional document in an irenic spirit in order to build a bridge between Wittenberg and Rome, he concludes with a more polemical section.

It is entitled: *Articles about Matters in Dispute in which an Account is Given of the Abuses which have been Corrected*, and then it names the beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic church, which are opposed by those who sought reform.

### III. Ecumenicals and Evangelicals: A Growing Relationship?

In the concluding chapter of *Fundamentalisms Observed*, Martin E. MARTY and R. Scott APPLEBY concur that it is possible to use the inclusive word *fundamentalism* without “sufficient nuancing of that term”.

It is the article by David J. BOSCH that offers some helpful nuancing by placing the category of *fundamentalists* within one of seven different strands of *evangelicalism*. Here is how he defines the various evangelicals:

1. *Confessional evangelicals*, as heirs of the Reformation, emphasize *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and *sola Scriptura*. This is where we can place the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, since this denomination subscribes not only to the Evangelical-Lutheran Confessions, but also the Ecumenical Creeds, and has been a participant in various bilateral dialogues with other Christians.
2. *Pietist Evangelicals* are heirs of the Protestant protest against the “dead orthodoxy” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
3. *Fundamentalists*, such as Carl MCINTYRE and his supporters, picket meetings of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and even evangelical meetings.

4. *Pentecostals*, perhaps the fastest growing Christian group in the world.

5. *Conservative Evangelicals*, represented by Fuller Theological Seminary, the World Evangelical Fellowship, and the Lausanne Covenant of 1974.

6. *Ecumenical Evangelicals* adhere to evangelical principles, while staying within churches that are members of the WCC or cooperate with it.

7. *Radical Evangelicals*, including peace churches such as the Mennonites, focus on issues like peace, justice and justpeace.

A concluding word by Hans KÜNG and Jürgen MOLTMANN: “Individuals, groups and peoples will not be able to live in peace if those who have commandeered the “fundamentals” for themselves believe that they can deny others the right to exist, or if non-fundamentalists do all they can to exclude fundamentalists or in intellectual arrogance simply pass them by. There will be no peace without a readiness for understanding on both sides.”

### IV. Fundamentalism and Society

Some may assume that a fundamentalist could not possibly have a higher level of education, but James BARR points out that fundamentalism is “certainly not a preserve for the uneducated”. He indicates that a number of doctors, lawyers and experimental scientists are in this conservative camp, together with many students.

A most fascinating comment in this article is that, from a secular viewpoint, “all Christianity is absurd” and “more or less fundamentalistic in character”. This is an alarming judgment on the struggle by the various churches today to fulfill their mission mandate.

It raises this ecumenical and missiological question: What can the separated churches do and say together that would offer a persuasive apologetic to a skeptical world that regards our belief in Jesus Christ absurd and fundamentalistic?

The section of the article which contrasts a conservative Protestant perspective and a Roman Catholic approach to Biblical authority is helpful, but it is difficult to imagine writing about these issues without a reference to the classical Faith and Order Commission study on *Scripture, Tradition and Traditions* (Montreal, 1963).

Another relevant illustration is the ability of Roman Catholic biblical scholarship to remain conservatively faithful to its historic tradition, while its biblical theologians embrace the best of contemporary biblical scholarship. The late Raymond BROWN is an example of this.

One of the most intriguing statements is this: “it will be significant later when we consider why fundamentalists are so hostile to ecumenical movements and endeavors”. But this idea is not elaborated upon later.

The critique of ecumenism by fundamentalists is reminiscent of a parallel development within Eastern Orthodoxy. The Bulgarian and Georgian Orthodox churches, for example, have withdrawn their membership from the World Council of Churches (WCC).

Other Orthodox communions, especially those related to the Moscow Patriarchate, have expressed such serious criticism of the WCC that a joint Orthodox–WCC commission was formed during the Harare Assembly in 1998, in order to attempt to resolve the areas of difference.

Does this theological critique of WCC’s style of worship, for example, suggest that Eastern Orthodoxy be labeled fundamentalist? Does arranging a joint commission for resolving these kinds of tensions suggest that a similar arrangement could be made with fundamentalists? But, to paraphrase a familiar question: what if someone announced an ecumenical party, and no one came?

#### Suggested Reading

AMMERMAN Nancy T., *North American Protestant Fundamentalism*. In MARTY Martin E. –APPLEBY R. Scott (eds.), *Fundamentalisms Observed: A Study Conducted by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. Chicago – London, 1991.

BARR James, *Fundamentalism*. London, 1977.

BOSCH David J., *Ecumenicals and Evangelicals: A Growing Relationship?* *Ecumenical Review* 1988/3–4. 458–472.

Faith and Order Commission, *Scripture, Tradition and Traditions*. Montreal, 1963.

KÜNG Hans – MOLTSMANN Jürgen (eds.), *Fundamentalism as an Ecumenical Challenge*. Concilium 1992/1.

MARTY Martin E. – R. SCOTT Appleby (eds.), *Fundamentalisms Observed: A Study Conducted by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. Chicago – London, 1991.

TILLEY Terrence W., *Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity*. Maryknoll, 1995.

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Henrik Lindberg HANSEN

# Faith to Faith Relations in a World of Plurality

1. Jesus Christ showed us God and Himself as the Son of God. He spoke through parables and symbols. Inspired by Greek philosophy in the Hellenistic setting in which Christianity spread, theologians attempted to define what Jesus Christ had shown. They were children of a time where definitions were thought possible and therefore necessary.

This is in itself not a problem; the problem arises when we move from one episteme or *paradigm*<sup>1</sup> to another, as for example now, when we are moving away from the rationalistic foundationalistic approach to life. Then defining becomes an illusion, and we have to reinvent the process of explanation.

Although some would contest the idea that a philosophy of religion can be built on Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN, it is at least possible to examine faith through his insights.

His terminology and methodology give an effective picture to sustain us in a *plurality*<sup>2</sup> matrix of thought, where it is possible to approach the realm of the *other religious*<sup>3</sup> without trying to determine it.

This then becomes an attempt to adapt WITTGENSTEIN’s reckoning with the foundationalism of the philosophy of logic and knowledge into the realm of the religious and give some clue as to how this sets us free to engage in open dialogue with the other religious.

Our examples primarily are from or seen from the context of the Danish Christian matrix of thought, so our self-criticism should not be seen as aggressive nor our positive examples as self-glorifying.

1 As described by FOUCAULT. 1994.

2 The term *plurality* is preferred from both *pluralism* and *pluralist*, as the latter are negatively loaded terms that indicate the realisation of the plurality of reality as an ideology. An ideology (or an *ism*) indicates a choice, which is not present when realising reality as plural.

3 By the *other religious* is meant the *other person of another religious conviction*. The emphasis is primarily on the person, who is of another background also religiously.