

Fifth Plenary Assembly: Workshop Discussion Guide

RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM AND REVIVALISM

A Challenge in the Asia of the 1990s

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I. THE MEANING AND CAUSES OF FUNDAMENTALISM

by

Yvon Ambroise

1. INTRODUCTION

Ramakrishna Paramahansa once told this parable. There was someone who went to a man of God to learn about God. After sometime he came out convinced that God is in everything. One day as he was going in the street, there was a rogue elephant rushing through the streets and the mahout was trying his best to control it. Seeing this person, the mahout was shouting at the top of his voice, asking him to move out of the way as the elephant could harm him. But he said to himself that since the elephant is God, he would not move out of the way as God would not harm him. But all the same the elephant threw him away with its trunk and he got hurt. He went to his Guru and asked him to explain how he could get hurt, as he believed that God is in everything and hence also in the elephant. The Guru told him that the same God was also sitting as mahout on the elephant and was warning him to move away; and why did he not feel like listening to the God talking to him through the mahout?

This parable shows the characteristic of some persons who listen to God and his teaching in a selective way and maybe to suit their own vested interest. Religious fundamentalism is one such phenomenon where there is a selective interpretation of religion to suit the vested interests of a particular group seeking legitimation through religion. Today, religious fundamentalism is causing a lot of problems throughout Asia. The major religions in Asia — Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity — are not free from the resurgence of religious fundamentalism.

This discussion guide has been prepared for the workshops of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), convening in Bandung, Indonesia, July 17-27, 1990. The theme of the Plenary Assembly is: "The Emerging Challenges to the Church in Asia in the 1990s: A Call to Respond."

What we need to ask ourselves today are the following: Is it merely by chance or as a result of the historical forces operating in society that this phenomenon exists? If the situation has been caused by historical forces, what are these socio-economic, political, ideological and religio-cultural forces? Being a religio-cultural phenomenon, how is it linked with the socio-economic and political forces? The attempt to find an answer to these questions can help us to understand the true nature of the phenomenon, the inner hidden forces operating today, and some possible workable methods to face such a problem.

We have followed a critical analytical methodology that is both sociological and metapersonal. The perspective we have adopted is that of the perspective of the poor and the oppressed. Reflecting about several phenomena in Asia in this area of life, I have put forward a certain generalization, but always one substantiated by concrete examples from Asian countries.

2. SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL FORCES

2.1 The Interaction of Capitalism and Feudalism

Today all the Asian countries have adopted capitalism as their main economic model for developing their countries. Of course, there are several variations in the way capitalism is lived in Asia, but in general it is the accepted pattern.

Except for Thailand, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan, capitalism was brought to our Asian countries by colonial powers. It did not emerge historically. Thus capitalism came in as a by-product of colonialism and of the vested interest of the colonizers.

When the colonial powers wanted to introduce capitalism into Asian countries, it was in no way to develop the Asian countries but to develop the capitalism of their own countries, keeping these Asian countries as economic appendages to supply cheap raw material, to serve as a good market for their finished products and to earn profit out of them. Hence, the colonial powers maintained the feudal structure that was in existence already and superimposed on it a capitalism that was made to accommodate itself to feudalism as the dominant force in society. They did not allow capitalism to destroy the feudal structures; on the contrary, they protected them from capitalist attacks. Only when certain feudal structures and practices were going against their direct vested interests, would they interfere through politico-legal means to eliminate them.

To cite an example in India. The British dispossessed all the landlords

and made over by legal means the ownership of all land to themselves, i.e., the colonial power. Then they sublet or sold the same land to these landlords for cultivation, provided they would pay the taxes. Hence, the zamindhari or landlord system came back as advantageous to the colonial power but keeping the same feudal structure and run with a capitalist interest on cash crops and cheap raw material for industries.

We can give another example in the political sphere. Capitalism promotes democracy and brings about bureaucratic and judiciary measures. But the colonial rulers did not want to promote democracy fully, as it would challenge their very existence. Hence, they tried to control and suppress the process of democracy emerging in the Asian countries. They tried to give back the power to feudal lords, to exercise a type of democracy that would serve the colonial interest, since these landlords were already under their economic and political control.

Thus we see that capitalism and feudalism interacted in a totally different way under colonial powers in Asia than they did in Western countries. Here capitalism and feudalism were becoming accommodative to each other in their functioning under the colonial power. The advancement of capitalism and the spirit of freedom as a historical consciousness brought about the emergence of liberation movements and independence struggles to throw off the colonial yoke.

In the post-independent era every Asian country had the obligation of restructuring itself economically, socially, politically, ideologically and culturally. In this process all the Asian countries continued the same capitalist model in a more vigorous but an indigenous way. Capitalism started to take roots in Asian countries by the very efforts of Asians themselves.

In this attempt to reinforce capitalism the local rich and the bourgeoisie took the dominant role. This dominance took several shapes in Asian countries as well. In a country like India it was the local capital that was allowed to play the dominant role, with foreign capital playing an equitable or a small but significant role. In certain other countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, etc., the local capital played a very small and insignificant role and the multinationals came with very heavy investments. In certain countries like Singapore and Hongkong it was entirely the mercantile capital of the local bourgeoisie that was tapped. Thus there were several such modalities. But the role of the local elites and the rich in safeguarding and advancing capitalism was predominant.

In this process there was a major change in the political process in every Asian country. When the colonizers left the country, it was the

landed bourgeoisie (feudal power) who took over the political process and conducted the economic affairs to their advantage. This was resisted by the emerging industrial bourgeoisie who wanted large benefits for them to draw maximum profit. They wanted these to come in terms of political laws allowing them to operationalize all the ways and means of stabilizing capitalism and its concomitant profit motive.

This conflict took in some countries the form of right-wing dictatorship and military rulers, as in the case of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, etc., and in some countries — like India — an interim period of emergency. Thus the industrial bourgeoisie class has taken over the political power in all the Asian countries, with the feudal powers suffering a defeat.

Once this group had taken over, they made attempts to suppress the vestiges of feudalism that had been going on during the colonial and post-independent period. These interactions of capitalism suppressing feudalism threatened the traditional and feudal society with all its values and practices. This process was accelerated by the process of modernization which was freely introduced by the industrialists to erode this traditional society.

In a feudal type of society lord-and-servant relation, inequality, the master deciding for servant, the importance of community over individual, security in one's own blood and caste groups, personal relations, etc., are the values cherished. In a capitalistic society security for the individual, just wages, employer-employee relationship, equality, modernization, etc., predominate as desirable values. Further democratic institutions by way of bureaucracy and judiciary develop. Thus the emergence and the predominance of capitalism, with its process of modernization, threaten all the feudal values and institutions. Hence it also threatens the security of those groups whose main anchor has been a feudalism and its values.

This admixture of democracy with the feudal type of relations made the traditional political leaders autocratic and corrupt; and hence they do not know how to be democratic. Through a feudal style of operation they became popular and now they want to remain in power at any cost. But the emerging political process is upsetting their position as the growing political consciousness of people moves towards democratic values of justice, equality, respect for individual rights, etc. At this juncture this class of politicians does not know how to retain its traditional hold on the masses. Hence they now have recourse to religion and use it as a means of supporting them. As they need a feudal loyalty through religious means, there is no other alternative but to be fundamentalist, to make a

dire attempt to go back to the ancient practices of religion and assert them as the most desirable and sacred.

As for the new type of politicians who support capitalism, the industrial bourgeoisie want a certain stability of the political position which has tilted in their favor. Hence these capitalists fund those politicians who try to take refuge also in religion and make it a tool to maintain the status quo. They seek the path of fundamentalism that resists any social transformation except the one of maintaining the status quo, i.e., the present oppressive and unjust system.

We have at present in Asia a mixture, then, of capitalism, feudalism and socialism defended by politicians. But this contains several inbuilt contradictions and constraints and becomes difficult to manage. It is at this moment that in several Asian countries, like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Malaysia, South Korea, etc., the army steps in as a savior. But the army is not free from the same contradictions, corruptions and constraints, and soon it also disintegrates in moral authority. When the moral authority of all these regimes gets eroded, they take protection under religious fundamentalism for their legitimation. All these countries now talk of Islamization, or Buddhist fundamentalism, or Hinduization, or evangelism.

2.2 The Ideological Vacuum Unable to Unite the Nation

The post-independent era in every Asian country has been an era of building a nationalism in the minds of their people. Many national leaders advocated a secular ideology to build up this nationalism. In India it is the idea of a secular democratic nation that each Indian has to build by a process of industrialization. In Indonesia it is the principles of Pancasila. But these ideological stands did not penetrate to all the groups of people in the nation, as it has lacked social justice as an in-built phenomenon. Hence the affected and oppressed groups could not accept this ideology as workable as the years passed by.

There were also other ideological images put forward, like Gandhism in India, which was not allowed to work effectively, and hence remained an ineffective ideology. There was communism that came as another alternative in all the Asian countries. But due to the lack of religio-cultural roots in this ideology, and a growing historical failure of this ideology in several parts of the world, e.g., the recent upheavals in the Eastern Bloc in Europe, this does not seem a viable alternative. Hence all these create a politico-ideological vacuum in the understanding of nationalism.

This failure and the vacuum caused by the absence of a common ideology able to bring the nation together have led several groups to several separatist tendencies and to a secessionism based on ethnicity, religion and language factors, often intertwining among themselves. At this time of crisis and politico-ideological vacuum the religious fundamentalists have come up with a panacea to heal this situation. Thus religious fundamentalism becomes desirable as able to bring the majority together.

2.3 The Majoritization of Democracy

There is a new process taking place in several Asian countries, which we can call the "majoritization" of democracy. This process defines the nation as predominantly belonging to one ethnic group and/or one religious group, with its own values. This group can allow other ethnic and/or religious groups to survive only under them. Since other ethnic and/or religious group can put forth collective rights, these groups should accommodate themselves within the major dominant ethnic and/or religious group. In order to justify this, a reinterpretation of history is made to create a myth that it was this ethnic and/or religious group that was predominant in the nation down the long corridors of history.

This process which we term the majoritization of democracy (i.e., the mobilization of one ethnic and/or religious group to dominate legitimately all other ethnic and/or religious groups) is opposed to any pluralism, modernization, the co-existence of other ethnic and/or religious groups, foreign influence, etc. We see this process active in India in terms of the RSS claiming that only Hindus are Indians and all the rest must come under this umbrella and accept their domination. The same is true in Sri Lanka with the Sinhala Buddhist defining Sri Lanka as a predominantly Sinhala Buddhist society with Buddhist values of tolerance and harmony, which can allow other ethnic groups to survive under them. This happens also in Malaysia with the principle of "Bhumi Putras" (sons of the soil), i.e., the Malays who have citizenship as their right and others to be relegated to second and third-class places under them. Indonesia is picking up this trend. Singapore is openly biased towards the Chinese. The Islamic tradition in Pakistan and Bangladesh are very much the same.

In this process of the majoritization of democracy (i.e., the majority with a right to rule) the key factor becomes religion joined with ethnicity and/or language. Hence a religious fundamentalism becomes a dominant factor in this political process.

3. CONSTRAINTS FROM THE EVOLUTION OF DEVELOPMENT PRAXIS

What started as a social work of the Church, with charity marking its first beginning, then leading to the imparting of skills to improve human resources and productive investments to develop natural resources, has evolved into new forms. The process of development is no longer considered a package of benefits to be given to the poor to enable them to utilize them to develop themselves, but a process of empowerment through critical awareness and motivation to action. People are considered no longer mere beneficiaries or only victims of a system, but resources and potential agents for social transformation.

As the main method is to form groups of the poor and oppressed at the grassroots level and to organize them for collective action, and as the poor are also religious-minded in Asia, the mobilizing force cannot be devoid of religious thinking and praxis. These groups start to reread their religious scriptures and find in them the source of inspiration and motivation for liberative action. They reinterpret their religious practices and principles to enable them to support their struggle for a just society. Thus, there starts to emerge in all religions a liberative interpretation of religion, enabling them to move ahead as religious persons. This process has not taken on any gigantic proportion but is slowly gaining ground in several countries of Asia.

This new interpretation of religion and the bringing out of its liberative elements in favor of the poor directly attack the vested interests of the rich groups who have so far monopolized religion, its symbols and its practices, to suit their own vested interests. Further, these new interpretations picture the rich in a very negative way as oppressors. These interpretations also attack those religious leaders who side with the rich and refuse to consider the poor as the privileged people of God (the *anawim* of Yahweh).

In this context, the rich and the vested-interest religious leaders find their position very shaky and react violently by having recourse to religious fundamentalism as a way of going back to the old way of interpreting and practising religion, wherein they maintain their social importance and social power through religion.

4. LOSS OF CONTROL OF HISTORY BY THE ELITIST GROUP

History bears testimony to the fact that a small elite group always tries to take control of the power structures in a particular geographical area or in a nation and guides the course of action according to its interests. Thus they need a certain power to take hold of the process of history of

the group or that of the nation. This desire to have a hold on history often goes beyond one's nation. This is what today we call imperialism, and in earlier times, colonialism.

When the imperialist powers want to extend their socio-economic, political hegemony over other countries and to control their history, among several devices, they try to use religious fundamentalist sects and groups to spread the idea of the presence of these mighty powers as saviors and God-sent messengers of peace and goodness. Often this political battle is fought on the grounds of being a campaign against the anti-God, i.e., an anti-Communism. The United States is a clear example of this attempt in the Third World countries, of which the Philippines is the best example in Asia. To quote Fr. Thomas J Marti, M.M.: "The closest evidence we have indicating official U.S. promotion of fundamentalist groups is contained in a recommendation made by the Rockefeller Commission report on Latin America made in 1970. The report of the Presidential Commission stated: 'The Catholic Church has ceased to be an ally in whom the United States can have confidence.' Among recommended actions to counter the influence of the Catholic Church was an extensive campaign with the aim of propagating Protestant churches and conservative sects in Latin America." (Rev. Thomas J. Marti, M.M., *Fundamentalist Religion*, Socio-Pastoral Institute, Series D3-88, Manila, 1988, p.14. Consult also *Pro Mundi Vita*, Bulletin 100, 1985/1 p.20.)

Not only the imperialistic powers but even the local elites in every nation feel in recent times that they are not going to remain the perpetually-ruling elite guiding the history of the nations. There have been several mass uprisings of the common people who bring new groups into the power play. The recent historical upheavals taking place in Nepal, parts of India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Korea, and in so many other countries, bear evidence to this fact. In the face of this fear of a reversal of the power position the traditional elites who want to maintain the status quo have recourse to a fundamentalist interpretation of religion that can assure their permanence in power and their control over the historical process.

5. COMMUNAL INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

During the independence struggle of every nation in Asia there were intellectuals who were nationalists. Among them a special category, i.e., the historians, needs to be seen very critically. When there was a fundamental political struggle going on between colonial imperialism and the rising national movements, the intellectuals were in a dilemma. They were mostly employed in government-run or government-controlled institutions. They could not actively side with the ruled, and yet, except for a very few sycopants, they could not emotionally side with the rulers either.

The chief way out of the dilemma was a vicarious, or "backdoor," or false nationalism which took the form of regionalism and communalism, which could satisfy their nationalist urge and yet not be looked at suspiciously by colonial powers who encouraged anything that could create divisions among the local people. Thus among the historians, often nationalism found expression not in criticism of the colonial rule but in praise of the ancient rulers of the pre-colonial era. This led them to create a mythical past of the pre-colonial era, as if it were a golden era.

This kind of creating an idyllic past by the historians naturally suggested that the later invaders had been responsible for the decay of their country. Thus Islam and/or Christianity and/or Hinduism, everything that came later, became degenerating forces in their history. This kind of communalistic interpretation also has led to a religious fundamentalism in several countries, like India (Hindus vs. Muslims and Christians), Sri Lanka (Buddhists vs. Hindus, Christians and Muslims), Malaysia, and Indonesia.

These tendencies were reinforced by other historians who even divide historical periods on a communalistic basis; e.g., James Mill's *History of British India* divided Indian history into three periods: Hindu civilization, Muslim civilization and British civilization. Such a facile and false periodization easily lends itself to religious fundamentalism, whereby a selected set of old religious values was presumed to be the cause of the golden era, and hence have now to be upheld today at any cost.

6. RELIGIO-CULTURAL FORCES

6.1 Identification of Religion and Culture

There is a cultural renaissance that started in a small way after the period of decolonization in the Asian countries. In these days this process is now reaching an intensity. Culture is something very much linked with religion but still is not identifiable with religion. They mutually influence each other but each has a certain autonomy.

The fundamentalists undertake a simplistic and reductionist approach to religion and culture and identify both as the same. In that way they try to interpret the very culture of the people as favoring a fundamentalist purpose; thereby maintaining the status quo by both of these powerful forces of religion and culture which can be a strong mobilizing forces among the common people.

Thus in India the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak (RSS) creates the equation: "To be an Indian is to be a Hindu." All the rest, i.e., Muslims and

Christians, are not and cannot be citizens of India. If Indian culture is Hindu culture, the process of Hinduization is the normal one which brings back the caste ideology and the basic inequality of a person through the caste system. In Sri Lanka the same process is at work in terms of Buddhism; every Sinhalese has to be a Buddhist. Buddhist culture becomes Sri Lankan culture, and there is no place for other religions and ethnic groups. The same is true for many in countries where Islam is predominant, namely Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia. In these countries non-Muslims are relegated to a secondary place and second-class citizenship. In certain Islamic countries where other groups have a strong socio-economic base, they do not allow this attitude to be put into practice in all spheres of life, e.g., in Malaysia and parts of Indonesia.

6.2 The Process of Modernization

The introduction of capitalism in the Asian societies creates a process of industrialization and urbanization. This new process changes the rhythm of life and undermines the value system of feudal structures. This is what we call the process of modernization. This process is set in motion and is intensified by the support the State gives to capitalism.

The age preceding the process of modernization was one where the religious power and authority had a much greater influence over the lives of people and their destinies. The process of modernization, especially under the aspect of secularization, means precisely the diminution of this religious power and authority, with a corresponding increase of secular power over lives. The world now is moved more by banks, governments, multinationals, corporations, etc., than it is by religious powers. Thus the non-cleric today has more influence over lives than was the case even in the age when the clergy of the predominant religion were at the center.

Modernization transforms one's relationships to time, nature and other human beings from what they were in pre-modern times. This brings about a fragmentation of the cultural world, reflected for the first time in a diversity of understandings, meanings, values, ways of being and living, as well as their social and symbolic expressions. This brings about a cultural pluralism which relativizes certitudes, and makes critique, discernment and interpretation necessary. This process undermines the single former worldview, and with it the security and permanence that the pre-modern society seemed to offer.

The process of modernization has also brought about the new centrality of the "individual," considered as the subject of rights, decisions and actions, as having one's intelligibility and legitimation, without the traditional and necessary reference to or dependence on the group. All

these leads to the assertiveness of the individual, who now dares to question the religious authorities, as well as some of the beliefs and practices, as regard their rationality, credibility and legitimacy in these modern times.

All these concomitant factors of the modernization process have alarmed the religious authorities who feel threatened and shaken. Instead of revitalizing the religion by making it more meaningful and helpful for man to live his day-to-day life, with its constraints and contradictions, a good number of religious authorities become fanatical and fundamentalist in order to defend the old values and practices.

To sum up the effects of modernization in the society moving towards secularization, we can note the following (cf. *Sedos Bulletin*, Dec. 15th, 1988 p.88/164):

- The quantum of the sacred is decreasing and that of the secular increases;
- The apparent withdrawal of God;
- Religious influence declines in the public sector;
- Pluralism and privatization of beliefs and practices, and hence a process of selectivity;
- Variety of theologies and spiritualities;
- Loss of an overarching religion as a uniting factor;
- The religious power is but one interpreter of meaning;
- Search for new symbols, new presence of God.

We can see that a violent reaction to all these “negative” effects expresses itself in the form of religious fundamentalism and fanaticism in all Asian religions.

6.3 The Nature of Religion Itself

Religion offers a meaning system that answers the ultimate questions of life, gives a hope to look towards a future and helps people to manage their day-to-day lives in the midst of constraints and contradictions, by giving them a meaningful message. If these are to be the functions of religion whose several structures and practices are man-made through the centuries, each religion needs to restructure many of them to meet the new situations and problems. This demands a renewal that needs to take place in all of these religions, and a group of thinking persons who are rooted in the day-to-day experience of the common people can articulate the newly emerging needs and help the needed restructuring. This is what is not taking place in many of the Asian religions. Several changes are forced on religion from without, by outside forces; while the forces from

within, instead of taking these as signs of the times to transform a few structures and practices, get alarmed and become defensive. This defensiveness increasingly becomes irrational, having recourse to religious fundamentalism.

Because of the sacredness attached to the religious sphere, there are two important consequences that arise: first, there is a group of religious agents who consider themselves to belong to this sacred sphere; and secondly, there is a tendency to consider every man-made structure and practice as sacred and hence not changeable. These two factors interacting between themselves make the religious agents self-styled custodians of all these structures and practices. This is especially true of the practice of religion at an elitist level or in the more institutionalized type of religions. At the popular level there is always more flexibility and adaptation.

In the face of any renewal it needs to be brought out that the sense of security is weakened, and the role and even social position of these religious agents are shaken. When vested interests seek above all else to retain what they enjoyed, these religious agents search for other forces that can help them to retain their privileges. From what we described in the previous section, we see the same happening at the level of socio-economic and political leaders who also search for forces that would uphold their position. These two vested-interest groups — traditional vested-interest religious leaders and vested-interest socio-economic and political elitist groups — join hands with each other for mutual support. The religious vested-interest leaders supply a fundamentalist interpretation and emotional mobilization to the masses in order to lend support to the system for it to survive.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to analyse the social, economic, political, religio-cultural and historical forces that cause the emergence and the sustenance of religious fundamentalism. Today it has become a cancerous problem in all our Asian societies. Knowing the root causes of the problem is half-way to solving them. For lack of space we do not analyze the remedial measures for them. But it is easy to apply one's mind once we know the root causes.

Many of the hypotheses made are from a sociological and analytical approach, from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed. Hence, they are always debatable. This paper raises the debate so that others may contribute to an understanding in depth in our workshop.

II. SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE PHENOMENON OF FUNDAMENTALISM

by

John K. Locke

These are people who have no feel for the periphery of a problem, for light and shade and the nuances in between. That is the source of their energy and, in a queer way, their integrity. It is useful to realize this before one tries to produce a solution.¹

The above comment is made by Vishal Dubey, the experienced ISC officer, as he contemplates his assignment to bring peace and order to Chandigarh out of the chaos and mistrust generated by the creation of the two states of Punjab and Haryana. He highlights a problem which almost all countries and all cultures face: "Fundamentalism." He sounds a warning that all of us who must live with this phenomenon and try to bring the peace of Christ to our societies must heed. Another character in the same novel points to the source of the trouble:

There are governments called people's governments that are really built on the destruction of a people's whole foundation. Not only have they overthrown a tyranny but a religion and a philosophy as well, and tossed away an accumulation of racial experience. Revolutions have to take place when living conditions become intolerable, but even a revolution should not destroy a people's framework. It should stop short of that. Tear that down and you will have a bewildered society, people who've lost their moorings and don't know where they're going.²

Order vs. Chaos

It is this situation of bewilderment and confusion that begets the fundamentalist. A culture is a complex of symbols, myths and rituals which protect a people from what human nature fears most: chaos and confusion. A culture creates a protected area of meaning in the midst of vast meaninglessness, a small clearing in the jungle where one can feel at home and secure, an ordered society — where one may at times feel persecuted and marginalized — but whose rules and values one knows. One knows how the system works and learns how to manipulate it to provide for oneself and one's family a measure of security and the good things of life.

This is beautifully symbolized by the ancient and medieval walled city of Hindu India. In the center of the city was the palace of the King surrounded by the dwellings of the high castes. Other castes lived in concentric circles of descending order as one moved

toward the periphery. The low castes lived along the walls of the city with the outcastes outside the walls. The low caste people were forbidden to wear ornaments; they were forbidden music at their weddings and other ceremonies (though they were often the ones who played the music for the upper castes). The roofs of the houses of the upper castes were tile, those of the lower castes of straw. A circle, or sometimes three concentric circles, of protective deities placed at the eight points of the compass protected the city and its inhabitants. Beyond this lay the *ghanghor jangal*, the dense (and hence chaotic-disordered) and terrifying jungle.

Even highly structured and closed cultures no longer have such vivid physical constructs, and this fact may lead us to ignore the still valid anthropological principle behind the structure. Symbols, myths and rituals still give life and security to modern man and modern societies as much as they did to our ancestors.³

Symbols and Security

To an anthropologist a symbol is any reality which has power to make us think of, get us into contact with, another deeper and often rather mysterious reality. Symbols speak primarily to the heart and the imagination. This gives them their emotional power and they collect meanings around themselves often quite disparate or even contradictory. A rosary may be a symbol of my faith and devotion to Our Lady. It may also be a rather nostalgic symbol of the piety and devotion I learned as a child and which is missing from the practice of the faith today. If the rosary I have was a gift from my mother, it becomes a symbol of all that she meant to me and perhaps also of her painful death and the sense of loss it brought to me.

We all have our private symbols, but much more important to society are symbols we share with other members of our culture. Religious symbols such as the cross, the trishul, the crescent, the stupa. National symbols such as the flag, national monuments like Raj Ghat in Delhi. Ideas such as "the Nation," Freedom, Liberation, God become symbols. Language and its use is a symbol. The cultured and educated speak a "refined" language such as "BBC English" or Sanskrit, the uneducated speak the Vernacular or "vulgar tongue" (*prakrit, apabhramsa*). Most Indian languages have polite or honorific forms that are used when speaking to certain categories of people. A culture has a host of body use and body control symbols — what is considered acceptable in one culture is considered vulgar, uncouth or obscene in another culture. Dress codes symbolize one's place in the society as rich or poor, laborer or bureaucrat, secular or religious, young or old. Symbols permeate our life and with their power to reach into the very core of our being they give us a sense

of security and belonging. Any disruption in the world of our symbols produces anxiety and discomfort.

Myths And Meaning

A sense of security comes not just from the symbols of our culture but even more from the meaning they point to. Man needs a reason to exist, some satisfying explanation for why things exist. We need some sort of social organization which enables us to work together in some measure of harmony rather than chaos; and we need a vision or an overall view that gives us a sense of pride in our nation, our community. This meaning is provided by what the anthropologist calls the myths of society. Myth has a bad press today. It is usually equated with a legend or fairy tale. To an anthropologist it is any story which explains to a people the cosmos, the social reality and the relationships that should exist among people and between them and the transcendent. Like symbols myths speak primarily to the heart and reflect the values of society. Like symbols they exercise a tremendous power over our lives, giving us comfort and a sense of security. We ignore the power of the myth at the risk of disrupting the equilibrium of our own lives and those with whom we live and work.

Myths may or may not have solid foundations in historical realities. The key for identifying a myth is not whether or not it reflects historical reality but whether or not it conveys meaning, values and moral significance. The life of Mahatma Gandhi may be told merely as a series of historical events. The same events may be recounted, with absolute historical accuracy, to highlight the moral significance of who he was and what he did. He is seen as a person embodying the virtue of renunciation for others, sacrificing oneself for the freedom of the nation, zeal for the rights of others, upliftment of the downtrodden, etc. This is a myth and we live by myths, not by abstract theory.⁴

Ritual and Celebration of Meaning

Society also engages in repeated symbolic behavior called ritual. Ritual is not something confined to a religious context but any repeated stylized and symbolic use of bodily movement and gesture within a social context used to express and articulate meaning. Life is full of ambiguity; it has tensions and at least potential conflicts. I may have a dear friend whom I trust implicitly and cherish, but I know the relationship must be maintained and fostered. So we meet at regular intervals, send greetings at Christmas or on birthdays. My relationship with God is fragile, I can disrupt it through sin and infidelity. So I pray regularly expressing my oneness with him. Others have the same fear of drifting away from him; so we gather in community to pray, worship and encourage one another.

A nation is a fragile conglomerate of peoples. Hence every nation engages in national rituals to reinforce this unity: Independence Day celebrations, the King's Birthday, the birthday of the founder of the nation, feasts and festivals which have a national character and may be religious if the nation shares the same religious culture. On such occasions the major myths of the nation are recounted in speeches, in song and in drama.

A culture then is a complexus of symbols, myths and rituals which protect people from the dreadful insecurities of chaos. But culture is not static; it is a living entity ever changing and developing. The most conservative and static culture is still a restless, changing organism. In a stable society cultural changes take place gradually, with little disruption in the life and sense of security of the people. If a culture dramatically disintegrates, however, people experience a sense of meaninglessness and anxiety as they face that dreaded chaos.

At times we deliberately interfere with this cultural process by suspending the usual cultural structure of daily life for a definite purpose. At the beginning of every Mass we are reminded that we gather as brothers and sisters of the Lord and as sinners — not as rich an poor, learned and illiterate, teachers and taught, government officials and the “people.” Such a suspension of the structures of daily life threatens people and to offset the threat the key myth of our faith is told once again: the Mass enacts the suffering/death/and resurrection story of Jesus Christ. A simple example of the same process of the deliberate breakdown of structures is the office or school picnic. For a day all — from the general manager down to the youngest office clerk — go off for a day of fun and games to relate to each other just as people, in the hope that this period of shared *communitas* will make it easier for people to relate to each other in their ordinary structured life.⁵

The Disintegration of Meaning

A more threatening, but usually not fatal, breakdown of culture occurs within our lives when we face the death of a loved one. The structure of our world is shattered when we lose someone who was so much a part of our life. A temporary breakdown of culture is experienced by people who travel and are confronted by cultures alien to their own. They become confused and ill at ease as they find their cultural symbols and their way of acting produce results quite contrary to what they have grown to expect. Some adjust with ease, others experience a severe “culture shock” producing malaise and paralysis. They are unable to function.

This breakdown of culture is ambiguous. It may lead to paralysis and emotional poverty; it may lead to growth in a process of death, resurrection and new life. We see this portrayed beautifully in the life of Our Lord in the garden of Gethsemane as he faces physical suffering but much more the sense of abandonment by his people, his disciples and even his Father. In his darkness he turns in fear and trust to the Father, from whom he draws the strength to continue his mission.

Sometimes people experience a much more long-term disintegration of their culture which is totally unplanned and profoundly threatening. History gives us many examples of such disintegration resulting from foreign conquest or resulting from the sudden contact of a simple people with a dominating culture. (See for example what happened to the Irish when they were overrun by the English, or what has happened to the Adivasis in India when they were forced to submit to the dominant Hindu culture.) In the contemporary world this is not an isolated phenomenon but something that every nation is facing. The pace of change in the modern world is frantic. With improved communications and the spiraling development of technology, society is in a constant state of flux. The pace of change in the developing world is perhaps faster, but the peoples of all nations of the world are experiencing the numbness, chaos and meaninglessness which results from the disintegration of their culture.

When this happens some people withdraw into isolation and cultural poverty, deprived of any sense of hope or meaning (e.g., the American Indians). Others react in violence, striking out to destroy those who pose the threat. Most frequently people react in two other ways which lead us to the topic of our considerations here.

Finding Self-Worth Again

People may bind themselves together in new movements that seek to build a new cultural identity. In doing this they will receive inner strength by discovering their cultural roots, by returning to their mythology and drawing from it a new sense of identity in a changing and threatening world. From their roots they will receive nourishment for the new growth. In such a situation eschatological symbols become important, and prophetic leaders emerge to articulate the new visions and the new strategies for action. This is the process followed by Vatican II and this is what Pope Paul VI asked the members of each religious order to do as they attempted to renew their religious life.⁶

Fundamentalism and Belonging

Whenever there is a massive breakdown of culture, a certain per-

centage of the people take refuge in fundamentalism. Terrified by the chaos and meaningless which they experience encroaching upon their lives, they retreat into fundamentalist secular or religious cults or sects which give them a sense of belonging and self-worth. Such movements always romanticize an imagined former golden age and seek to restore that age with its symbols intact. In a South Asian context one might refer to this as the Kali Yug Syndrome — “We began with a golden age in the past when the gods walked amongst us and society was ordered. Since that time things have been going from bad to worse and they can only get worse.”

Psychologists describe the typical fundamentalists as “authoritarian personalities,” persons who feel threatened in a world of conspiring evil forces. They think in simplistic and stereotypical terms and are attracted to authoritarian and moralistic answers. They are people who have “no feel for light and shade ... and this is the source of their energy and, in a queer way, of their integrity.” This flight into the past, of course, solves nothing and at some stage these people must face the changed world out there. In the meantime they become a menace to society, but they also continue to suffer, and those who strive to bring about a reconciliation within society ensure the failure of their endeavors if they fail to address the pain.

Fundamentalism then is a reactionary emotional movement that develops within those cultures which are experiencing rapid disintegration. Uncritical and insensitive radical-liberal changes in the 1960s and 1970s, plus the rapid technological advances of the same period, created the conditions for a worldwide retreat into fundamentalism.

Perhaps the best example of this reaction can be found in Iran. Iran was a profoundly religious but isolated and very conservative society, when suddenly a surfeit of money introduced rapid technological changes. Thousands of young people were sent abroad, mostly to the West, for advanced studies to return as uncritical agents of rapid change. The oppressive regime of the Shah generated dissatisfaction at all levels of society, but the revolution was co-opted by the fundamentalists who offered to the terrified and confused populace a return to a stable and familiar society.

The totalitarian religious dictatorship of Khomeini's Iran offers us examples of two characteristics of such fundamentalist movements. First is the witch hunt, an attempt to discover the “deviants” and to seek opportunities for revenge upon the agents of change. All of their emotions were projected onto “The Great Satan,” the United States and its allies who became the symbols of the dreaded Westernization which had created chaos in their society. Secondly, those who arise as prophets within the

community to question the political/academic/religious status quo are seen as “polluting agents” and must be isolated or banished before they can contaminate others. Often this takes the form of mockery, social isolation, excommunication. In Iran it has taken a more violent form: the condemning to death of a fellow Muslim, the author Rushdie, for writing something that is at most a very indirect critique of the way Islam is lived and understood in certain quarters and which will not even be read or heard of by the people of Iran.

A less violent sort of fundamentalism can be seen in the United States which suffered a widespread disintegration of its culture as a result of the revolution of the youth in the 1960s but much more as a result of the disillusionment of the Vietnam War. The foundational mythology of the nation draws heavily on the story of the Exodus: America is the new promised land of peace, plenty and justice. America stands for peace, justice and freedom for all men. Suddenly a wide variety of people were using the myth of the “American Dream” to justify contradictory choices. The government claimed that Americans were in Vietnam to bring freedom, democracy and prosperity to a people threatened by “The Great Satan” — international, totalitarian, atheist communism. The youth and the “liberals” claimed that in fact Americans were doing just the opposite and that Americans were dying to support an autocratic and repressive government subservient to American “Imperial” interests.⁷ The greatest American national symbol, the flag, became an object of derision. The populace at large were bewildered and profoundly threatened. As they came to admit the failure of the war, they felt betrayed.

Religious Revivalism

Out of this confusion arose a “religious revival” fed by the ravings of unthinking fundamentalist TV preachers of questionable morality, who stressed the religious underpinnings of the “American Dream.” In the period of reconciliation Americans elected Ronald Reagan, “The Great Communicator,” who with the consummate skill of the actor spent eight years rearticulating and rebuilding the national mythology by word and example (e.g., the invasion of Grenada). The economic prosperity of his era resulted not from his policies but from the policies of the Federal Reserve Bank whose director he had not appointed and whose policies he disapproved of. He was unable to fulfill any of his other campaign promises and his administration was as corrupt and devious as that of Richard Nixon. Yet few voices were raised against him. He was experienced as the man who restored Americans’ faith in their nation. Richard Nixon was experienced as the man who had destroyed that faith. From this one can sense the power of the myth to grip people, and what happens when people feel that the myth is being abused or wrongly interpreted.

South Asia has also seen the rise of Fundamentalism over the past ten years. Shiite and other fundamentalist sects have made their presence felt in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Sinhalese fundamentalists in Sri Lanka have threatened every attempt of the government to reach a fair and just settlement with the Tamil minority. In India the majority Hindu community feels threatened by socio-economic changes and has projected their emotions onto the minority communities. Hindu fundamentalism is on the rise, and it is interesting to note the symbols and the myths which are being used to fire the imagination of the people. Every new shrine erected by the Fundamentalists includes an image of Hanuman, a deity whose popularity had long ago been eclipsed by the more popular objects of devotion. What does Hanuman symbolize? The symbol par excellence has become the Ram Janma Bhumi. Traffic comes to a standstill and shops and offices close when the Mahabharata and the Ramayana come on Doordarshan — the power of the symbol and the myth. This is what grips people; it makes no difference that a panel of India's most eminent historians have declared that there is no historical proof that the site is the birthplace of Ram or that there was ever a Hindu shrine on the site of the present mosque.

Modern education, exposure to the outside world, and perhaps more important, the influx of non-Bhutanese into the lower hills and tarai of Bhutan have threatened the establishment. Consequently Bhutan has embarked upon a program of government enforced "nativism," prescribing dress codes, limiting the ingress of foreigners (especially Indians and Nepalis), reinforcing the official status of Lamaistic Buddhism, phasing out Christian missionaries working in the country, curtailing the people's access to the international media and enacting laws which insure that people of Indian and Nepali origin do not acquire the rights of citizens.

Over the past months Nepal has experienced a political convulsion. Political-administrative changes are being introduced at a rapid rate. A new constitution which assures human rights, including religious freedom, has been promised. Many are advocating a secular state—a direct attack on the mythology of the nation as the world's "Only Hindu Kingdom," a Hindu nation by law, governed by a Hindu King who rules by the Hindu scriptures and who is the source of all rights and all power. At the moment no one dares to speak out in the name of the old order. The current leadership is wisely aware of the danger of a strong fundamentalist reaction and speaks of it almost daily. Whether they possess the wisdom and political skills to introduce change without destroying the fabric of society and producing a "bewildered society of people who have lost their moorings and don't know where they're going" remains to be seen.

Fundamentalism and the Catholic Church

A final case which might shed some light on the phenomenon of fundamentalism is the experience of the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II. It is worth noting that every Council of the Church which has truly tried to adapt the Church to changing times has produced a schism. The changes so threatened some people that they left the Church. From the time of the Council of Trent until Vatican II the Church operated from a mythology which supported a kind of defensive isolation, with highly visual and triumphalistic symbols of power, tradition and rock-hard stability. The Council returned to a much earlier mythology of mission to the world, a mythology of pilgrimage in which the visible symbols of power and social stability play a much smaller role. The Council saw the Church as the People of God, saved by the grace of Jesus Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit at work within the Church, but like all mankind, a people on a search, sinners groping in the dark, striving to make their faith relevant to the modern world. The old model offered a safe refuge from the ambiguities of the human condition; the new model called people to involve themselves in the threatening process of incarnating the Kingdom of God in the contemporary world. People became confused, benumbed and apathetic as they lost their feeling of roots, belonging and identity.

Like Vatican I which produced a schism known as the "Old Catholics," Vatican II has produced a schism under the leadership of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre. Lefebvre himself has theological difficulties with some of the documents of Vatican II. Most of his followers could not tell you what these theological misgivings are and they couldn't care less. What has attracted followers is his promotion of the Tridentine Latin Mass. Rapid liturgical change, often without proper catechesis, was for these people a profoundly threatening experience. Suddenly the old symbols and the old rituals were cast aside to be replaced by constant change and endless talk about the liturgy — a failure on the part of those introducing the changes to understand the power and function of symbol and ritual. Involvement of Catholic anthropologists and sociologists, who were appalled not by the changes but by the process, might have spared the Church much of the pain of the past thirty years.

In the sixties and seventies one seldom heard much from these threatened Catholics. The election of Pope John Paul II, whom they wrongly see as one of their own, brought the Catholic fundamentalists out of the woodwork.⁸ In a number of countries, mainly in the West, new groups have grown up to "defend" the faith. Composed mainly of lay people, they engage in witch hunts to find deviants from their interpretation of the faith and isolate them by reporting them to Rome and inviting

disciplinary action — be they lay people, theologians, or bishops. One seldom hears them speak of the Bible except to cite it as proof for ecclesiastical authority or their favorite moral concerns. For them the ultimate norm consists of official written statements of the Roman magisterium. Yet even here they are highly selective in their use of Roman documents, seizing upon anything that stresses centralized authority or traditional morality but ignoring the social encyclicals of Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II. If bishops speak out on social or economic issues, they are ignored or their utterances dismissed as interference in politics.⁹ They are one-issue-people. In the U.S. the one issue is abortion and when Cardinal Bernadin spoke of a “seamless robe” of issues, including not only abortion, but concern for the rights of women, the blacks, the poor, etc., they ridiculed him.

Catholic fundamentalist movements in these countries have crippled the rest of Catholicism by inhibiting its response to social problems, obscuring its former image of hope and outreach, and setting sectors of the Church against each other. Many prophets — progressive theologians and bishops — are intimidated and unwilling to risk their careers on behalf of the causes which annoy the fundamentalists: women’s rights in the Church, civil rights, support for Third World Churches and their struggles for liberation.

Responding to the Challenge

How does one fight fundamentalism? One doesn’t. A frontal attack on fundamentalists merely confirms their anxiety. One must begin from reflection on the shared experience of living in a threatening world of constant change. We have all experienced this. How has it affected us personally? How has it affected our local Catholic Church? What has been our personal response and that of our people? From such reflections one can move on to consider other fundamentalists in our society. What threatens them and how might we work with other people of good will to bring solace to them and peace to our communities and nations?

Perhaps we have something to share in the vision given to us by Vatican II of a return to roots to draw nourishment and build a new society. We share the national ethos with people of all religions; can we not join with them in the search? In South Asia, though, this will not be enough. We live in multireligious societies and in all countries of South Asia Christians are a small minority. Religion becomes a lightning rod for fundamentalism. Can we not share with other religious leaders our vision of a return to roots and help them to draw nourishment from their own roots?¹⁰

Footnotes:

1. Nayantara Sahgal, *Storm in Chandigarh* (Orient Paperbacks: Delhi, n.d), p. 7.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
3. The reflections in this paper draw heavily on three articles written by Gerald A. Arbuckle, S.M., Ph.D., published in *Human Development*: "Communicating Through Symbols" (Vol. VIII, No. 1, p. 7-12), "Appreciating the Power of Myths" (Vol. VIII, No. 4, p. 20-24), "Communicating Through Ritual" (Vol. IX, No. 2, p. 21-26). Fr. Arbuckle writes primarily for Christian educators and those who are trying to implement the teachings of Vatican II, but his insights are equally valid for an understanding of the phenomenon of fundamentalism.
4. Imagine the anthropologist's dismay at a term one finds occasionally today in writings on Sacred Scripture which refer to "de-mythologizing Scripture." If one were to do this, the Bible would become merely an object of historical study and not a book to live by.
5. When the symbols, myths or rituals of a culture are thus suspended, or when they break down, the anthropologist speaks of people passing into a phase of anti-structure or liminality. Anti-structure has two characteristics. First, it is always a threatening experience, and one can recall people who "hate" picnics, parlor games and other such exercises of anti-structure. They usually avoid them, saying that they are too busy or that such exercises are childish. Often they are too uncomfortable trying to function in a situation where the usual structures of society have been suspended. Second, a period of anti-structure or liminality is of its very nature limited. People cannot function without some structures. Structures can be changed and changed radically but must ultimately be replaced by new structures. The "Hippy Movement" of the 60s and early 70s was doomed to self-destruction because it was based on a premise of the removal of all structures. Some religious orders invited disintegration after Vatican II by understanding a call to change structures as a call to abolish all structures. Soon their members began to leave in large numbers, quite rightly feeling that "religious life has lost all meaning."
6. A study of what has happened to religious orders since Vatican II is an excellent illustration of the principles discussed here. Though all orders have suffered a trauma of adjustment, the adjustment has been successful where members have engaged in a renewal of spirit by returning to their roots. One could mention several truly charismatic individuals who have arisen within the orders to "re-found" them in the spirit of the Founder. Where change was introduced for the sake of change without this inner renewal, or where a few superficial changes were introduced without the agony of renewal, the order has suffered either greater turmoil, resulting in the loss of a larger percentage of its membership, or the malaise of stagnation.

The experience of the Philippine Church offers an example of the eschatological symbol. As in all Churches with a South European (i.e., especially Spanish or Portuguese) heritage, the suffering Christ was a powerful symbol. The figure on the crucifix was usually a graphic (sometimes gory) portrayal of the physical suffering of Christ. This expressed the lived experience of the local Church. Especially in the Philippines, it expressed the experience of a long period of colonial subjugation. After Vatican II and, perhaps more important, after the successful "People's Revolution," Filipinos began to speak more of the Risen and Glorious Christ and to relate to a crucifix with Christ portrayed as Risen and Glorious.

The Philippines also offers a beautiful example of the spontaneous generation of a powerful symbol. When Aquino was murdered on the tarmac of Manila Airport, he was wearing a yellow shirt. Overnight yellow became the color of the people's struggle,

a symbol so threatening to the establishment that the Marcos government forbade the wearing of yellow in all government offices.

7. Notice that throughout this period of turmoil none of the protagonists ever questioned the validity of the myth. The struggle was over the understanding and application of the myth.
8. It is important here to make a clear distinction between Fundamentalism and Conservatism. "Conservatism may be described broadly as a philosophy that values established, traditional ideas and practices, and seeks to preserve a given community's historical heritage — especially in times of cultural change. As such, true conservatism is an absolute necessity in the modern Catholic Church. Conservative regard for the biblical and doctrinal roots of the Catholic Church is a valuable safeguard against adoption of modern ideas and practices that are merely trendy. The chief gift of Catholic conservatives to the Church is, therefore, the defense and preservation of the Church's lived experience against purely rational or emotional changes." Patrick M. Arnold, S. J., "The Rise of Catholic Fundamentalism," *America*, Vol. CLVI No, 14, April 11, 1987, p. 297-302.

Pope John Paul II is not a fundamentalist. Further, it is impossible to label him "conservative" or "liberal." On questions of Church authority and discipline he is conservative, and it is this which the fundamentalist senses when he claims him as his own. What the fundamentalist, true to his type, cannot comprehend is the subtlety and complexity of the Pope's outlook. On questions of social justice and the Church's mission in the modern world he is far to the left of the general run of the hierarchy and laity of the Church of Western Europe and North America. Even his misgivings about Liberation Theology turn rather on questions of method and Church discipline (e.g., the involvement of priests and religious in the political process) and the preservation of two traditional values: Christ's refusal to turn to violence and the Church's mission to all — rich and poor alike.

9. This experience highlights another characteristic of fundamentalist movements: they tend to divide societies and turn members of the society on each other. Before 1960 Catholics in the United States experienced a strong sense of solidarity as a community, looked down upon by the dominant white Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture. Those who spoke out, did so to defend Catholicism or to engage in controversy with Protestants. Those who speak out today speak against Catholic theologians, Catholic bishops and contemporary Catholic movements. National rulers often understand the dynamics of this very well and foment trouble with their neighbors in times of internal turmoil to unite the people against a common enemy.
10. My own area of study has been Buddhism and I am struck by the failure of Buddhists of South and South East Asia to engage in the creative process of returning to their roots to adapt their faith to their changing societies. Buddhism with its dual emphasis on enlightenment and compassion (*karuna*) has the basis on which to build something akin to the Liberation Theology of Latin America. One finds attempts at Buddhist renewal but much of it has a fundamentalist flavor, attempting to defend it against modern trends or against the encroachments of Christianity and Islam. Two notable exceptions to this are the Santi Asoke (a monastic renewal movement) in Bangkok and the inter-faith center of the charismatic monk Buddhadasa in southern Thailand, both of which have had to face the wrath of the rather fundamentalist Buddhist establishment. Another exception is the brilliant journalist and lay writer Sulak Sivaraksa, whose writings are a creative attempt to bring Buddhist values to bear on the problems of modern Thai society. He too has suffered disfavor and imprisonment for his efforts.