

Seventh Plenary Assembly: Workshop Discussion Guide

**THE CALL TO A RENEWED CHURCH IN ASIA AND
THE CHALLENGES OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM**

by
JOHN LOCKE, S.J.

I. THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION AND UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS

At the outset one should be aware that the term "Fundamentalism," as it is used today, is a pejorative term and not used by any of the groups concerned. The term was first used in a Christian context by a group of American conservative Protestants. Disturbed by trends in biblical scholarship and liberal theological movements within Protestantism, a group met in Niagara, New York, in 1895, to draw up a list of "Fundamentals" which they affirmed. The fundamentals were: verbal inerrancy of Scripture, the divinity of Christ, his virgin birth, the doctrine of vicarious expiation, and the bodily resurrection at the Second Coming of Christ. These people then proudly referred to themselves as "Fundamentalists."

As time went on the term came to connote narrow-mindedness, an intolerance of all those outside their group, and a rejection of science, rational thought, and modern life. Hence, Christian Fundamentalists began to refer to themselves as "Evangelicals," a term they prefer to this day. Though no religious group today would describe themselves as "Fundamentalist," the term is widely used in the media, and has been extended to movements within all religious groups: Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, etc. It labels a phenomenon that is as global as the globalization process itself.

Perhaps, one could say that it is the opposite pole of globalization, a process which brings rapid and unsettling change into traditional societies. The rapid change bewilders people and produces a sense of confusion. It produces a breakdown of the cultural fabric and begets, as one possible response, the fundamentalist who advocates a return to the old stable way of life, and who becomes intolerant of others. Though the immediate causes

This discussion guide has been prepared for the workshops of the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), convening, January 3-12, 2000, at "BAAN PHU WAAN," the pastoral formation center of the Archdiocese of Bangkok, Sampran, Thailand, on the theme: "A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service."

of Fundamentalism differ from culture to culture, the anthropologist sees a common pattern.

1. CULTURE — A PROTECTED AREA OF MEANING

A culture is a complexus 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 clearly 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 outcasts 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 *ghan-ghor 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 people and modern societies, as much as they did to our ancestors.¹

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 myste-

¹ The reflections in this section 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.

rious 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 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.

A sense of security comes not just from the symbols of our culture, but even more from the meaning they point to, the values they embody. Men and women need a reason to exist, some satisfying explanation for why things exist. We need to know where we fit in an ordered cosmos that makes sense. 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 nations, zeal for the rights of others, upliftment of the downtrodden, etc. This is a myth and we live by myths, not by abstract theory.²

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 maybe 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.

2. THE BREAKDOWN OF PERSONAL AND COMMUNITY MEANING

At times we deliberately interfere with this cultural process by sus-

² 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.

pending the usual cultural structure of daily life for a definite purpose. At the beginning of every Mass we are all reminded that we gather as brothers and sisters of the Lord, and as sinners — not as rich and 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 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.³

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.

³ When the symbols, myths or rituals of a culture are thus suspended, or when they break down, the anthropologist speaks of the 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 "Hippie 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."

3. THE MODERN WORLD AND THE BREAKDOWN OF MEANING

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, which deliberately sets about to undermine the symbols of their culture. (See for example what happened to the Irish when they were overrun by the English; or what has happened to adivasis in India when they were overrun by the English, or what has happened to 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 spiralling development of technology, society is in a constant state of flux. The pace of change in the developing world is perhaps faster, but the people of all nations of the world are experiencing the numbness, chaos and meaninglessness, which result from the disintegration of their culture.

4. THE RECOVERY OF MEANING

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:

1. 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 rediscovering 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

⁴ 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 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 members of each religious order to do as they attempted to renew their religious life.⁴

2. Whenever there is a massive breakdown of culture, a certain percentage of the people take refuge in fundamentalism. Terrified by the chaos and meaninglessness 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." The fundamentalist wants a return to the golden age.

5. THE REFUGE OF FUNDAMENTALISM

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. 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 divisive influence in 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 world-wide retreat into fundamentalism. The information revolution of the 1990s, the Global Market, and the growing influence of such international organizations as the IMF, the World Bank and the various agencies of the United Nations, have served to further accelerate the rate of change. There was a time when the man or woman in the village lived in a secure world that had clear boundaries and was sufficiently explained by the village myths. The boundaries were first extended to encompass a whole nation, often made up of people of different traditions. Now there are no boundaries. The young draw their mythology from global TV, the middle-aged absorb the values of the global village, and the old are bewildered.

6. POLITICAL 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 coopted 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 took 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.⁵ 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.

⁵ 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.

7. FUNDAMENTALISM AND THE RELIGIOUS REVIVAL

Out of this confusion arose a "religious revival," fed by the ravings of unreflective 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 fulfil 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 America's 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.

The rise of religious fundamentalism is of concern to people all over Asia today. Christian fundamentalists, mainly evangelical and pentecostal groups, often engage in aggressive proselytizing among Christians and among followers of other religions. People of other religious traditions find this insulting, demeaning, and threatening. It disrupts the harmony that was once the dominant trait of so many Asian societies. It gives Christianity a bad name and is not justified by the tradition of the early Church which we find portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles. The Apostles set out to preach the Good News of the coming of God's Reign in Jesus Christ. They spoke against abuses in other traditions; they demeaned no religious tradition.

Jewish fundamentalists in Israel have put constant pressure on their government to take a hard line against Palestinian struggles for justice and dignity. Their extremist fringe has been responsible for murders and massacres, including the assassination of Prime Minister Ytzhak Rabin. Over the last several years there has been a rising fundamentalism among Hindus in India, a community traditionally known for tolerance and non-violence. Over a hundred incidents of murder and violence against Christians were recorded in the year 1998, more than in the entire fifty years of Indian Independence preceding 1997. The blasphemy law in Pakistan has evoked a sense of fear and security among the minorities. Mob violence in Indonesia has resulted in over 300 churches burned in recent years. One can cite examples of such incidents from almost every Asian country.

8. THE FUNDAMENTALIST THRUST AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Catholic Church itself is not immune to the virus. It is worth noting that every Council of the Church which has truly tried to adapt the Church to the changing times has produced a schism. The changes so threatened some people that they left the Church, or perhaps more accurately, they felt that the Church had left them. 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. Some 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 the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre. Lefebvre himself had 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-five 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.⁶ New groups have grown up to "defend" the faith. This began in the

⁶ 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

West, but is now spreading to Asia. The influence such groups exert on the central Church bureaucracy inhibits the free response of local Churches in other parts of the world to contemporary challenges. Composed mainly of lay people, these groups 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.⁷ They are one-issue-people. In the U.S. the one issue is abortion, and when Cardinal Joseph Bernadin spoke of a "seamless robe" of issues pertaining to the preservation of life, including, not only abortion, but concern for the rights of women,

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 defence 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, morality 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 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.

⁷ This experience highlights another characteristic of fundamentalist movements: they tend to divide societies, and to turn members of the society on each other. Before 1960 Catholics in the United States experienced a strong sense of solidarity, and 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 troubles with their neighbors in times of internal turmoil, to unite the people against a common enemy.

the blacks, the poor, the morality of the death penalty, etc., they ridiculed him.

Catholic fundamentalist movements 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 are unwilling to risk their careers on behalf of the causes which annoy the fundamentalists: women's rights in the Church, civil rights, environmental questions, the world economic order, support for Third World Churches and their struggles for liberation, and inculturation.

9. THE RISE OF SECTS AND THE FUNDAMENTALIST REFUGE

Another area of concern is the rise of sects, i.e., some Evangelical Christian movements, which attract people from the mainline Churches and, within the Catholic Church, the rise of various charismatic movements, which often have a fundamentalist flavor. Why are people of the mainline Churches, including the Catholic Church, attracted to such movements? What are they looking for?

A recent survey done in India revealed that there are four main reasons why people in India are attracted to the Pentecostal movement, namely, (1) they want to "experience God"; (2) they want to be familiar with and be nourished by God's Word through direct contact with the Bible; (3) they want to be actively involved in a warm, fraternal fellowship; and (4) they want a sustained interpersonal pastoral care that will keep them growing in the spiritual life.⁸ The people engaged in these movements were mostly urban, educated, middle-class people, and the fundamentalist tendency of such groups is again related to a sense of bewilderment and confusion:

The rise of pluralism and the explosion of knowledge in the modern world have severely shaken the plausibility of several traditional religious definitions and practices, leaving many disoriented and insecure. In the Catholic Church the problem has been exacerbated by the profound changes ushered in by the Second Vatican Council. Today, many Catholics are intellectually unsettled; they are not as sure as they used to be of the validity of their beliefs and practices.

⁸ See Paul Parathazham, "The Challenge of Neo-Pentecostalism," *Vidyajyoti*, Journal of Theological Reflection, Vol. 61, No. 5 (May 1997) pp. 307-320.

Neo-Pentecostalism may be seen as a product of this uncertainty. The exodus of believers from the mainline churches to the fundamentalist sects is in a sense a flight from uncertainty to certainty. By affirming unequivocally that all that is said in the Bible is literally true, and that the Bible has answers to all the problems of life, the Pentecostal sects successfully meet the modern people's need for certainty and security.

The Catholic Church and the other mainline Churches seem to have failed in this respect. Because of the fast pace of change within the Church and the world at large, many Catholics have lost their traditional moorings. The Church urgently needs to address the problem of how to help these Catholics to cope with their sense of uncertainty and disorientation, without yielding to the fundamentalist temptation of interpreting the Scriptures and tradition literally with sectarian certitude.⁹

The context of the survey was the fact that many Catholics had turned their backs on the Church to join the protestant or "born-again" Pentecostals, but the reasons are also valid for the attraction of the Catholic Charismatic movements in Asia.

10. FUNDAMENTALISM AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

In addition to a quest for security, it would seem that people are searching for a religious experience which their traditional parish is not providing. Addressing this pastoral problem has been a concern of bishops throughout the world and in Asia for some time.¹⁰ On the one hand, the bishops speak of a lingering suspicion of such movements within the Catholic Church; but, on the other hand, all the bishops' conferences which have considered the question challenge the Church to a true discernment. We must first listen to all spirits and then, as St. John says, "Put the spirits to a test to see if they belong to God." Charismatic movements are spreading everywhere in the Asian Church and producing great fruit. Let us not lose this fruit; let us not stifle the Spirit, but discern. In this process perhaps two important criteria to discern the authentic presence of the Spirit in these movements are:

⁹ Ibid., p. 319-320.

¹⁰ See the FABC Paper No. 79 on "Charisms, Movements, and Communities in the Church," which contains lengthy statements by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, the Indonesian Bishops' Conference, and the Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee (USA) on Hispanic Affairs. See also the FABC Paper No. 81, prepared by the Office of Theological Concerns on "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today," which treats at some length this question and an Asian response to it.

- a) Have they taken root in Asian cultures and traditions?
- b) Do they lead people to a concern for the poor and the marginalized and social transformation?

11. THE VALID CONCERNS OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

If one is to address the fundamentalist threat, one must first realize that many of the concerns expressed by the fundamentalists are valid concerns, and should also be our concerns. After all, the Gospel challenges all cultures—ancient cultures, yes, but also the current culture, and the values of this culture which are propagated by the mass media, the arts and popular entertainment. Many of the same values are embodied in the activities of international organizations, such as the World Bank, the IMF, family planning and development programs. Are such values as consumerism and unrestricted individualism Gospel values? Does the so-called free trade of the present global market, which seems to further widen the gap between the rich and poor, build up the Reign of God in our world? In the present age of rapid change and uncertainty, how does the Gospel provide us with the security necessary to exercise the freedom of the Children of God, and to join hands with people of other faiths and traditions to provide a better world?

At another level, the fundamentalist movement is a critique of "modernism," a philosophy of life which has substituted human values for Gospel values, a philosophy which substitutes a scientific, rational attitude for revelation. The fundamentalists contend that the Churches have surrendered rather than meet these issues. In an Asian context even such documents as the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" are sometimes seen as a Western imposition which does not have its roots in Asian traditions. Certainly, we must admit that the document is of Christian inspiration, and that we should engage in a constructive dialogue with people of other traditions in our own countries, to come to a formulation of Human Rights that is acceptable to all. We must also admit that before Vatican II the Catholic Church did not accept all of these propositions.¹¹

¹¹We need only to recall the "Syllabus of Errors," which, among others, condemned the following propositions:

"15, Every man is free to embrace and profess that religion which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true.

77. In the present day it is no longer expedient that the Catholic religion should be held as the only religion of the state, to the exclusion of all other forms of worship.

79. It has been wisely decided by law, in some Catholic countries, that persons coming to reside therein shall enjoy the public exercise of their own peculiar worship."

Finally, globalization, as an exchange of information, goods, services and relationships on a global scale, can be a good thing. The world is full of variety: of creative products, philosophies, religions and political or economic systems. Exchange produces enrichment; but it can also lead to a domination of one particular group over others, leading to the destruction of whole cultures and traditions. However, traditional societies and cultures are not unaware of this. They very fact of the rise of fundamentalism shows how aware people are of the dangers.

How can we assist people in our own Church and people of other religious traditions to meet the challenge of fundamentalism? 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 Asia we live in multireligious societies; and in all countries of Asia, except the Philippines, 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?

Published January, 2000

*
* FABC PAPERS is a project of the Federation of Asian Bish- *
* ops' Conferences (FABC), designed to bring the thinking of Asian *
* experts to a wider audience and to develop critical analysis of the *
* problems facing the Church in Asia from people on the scene. *
* The opinions expressed are those of the author(s) alone and do *
* not necessarily represent the official policies of the FABC or its *
* member Episcopal Conferences. Manuscripts are always welcome *
* and may be sent to: FABC, 16 Caine Road, Hong Kong. *
