

Fundamentalism isn't a conservative attitude

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Over a year ago, Father John Coleman, S.J., a sociologist at the Jesuit School of Theology, Berkeley, did a brief article on Catholic fundamentalism for *Commonweal* ("Who Are the Catholic Fundamentalists?" Jan. 27, 1989).

The essay evoked a wide response, surprising even the author. Many people — including a few bishops — wrote to express their gratitude for his having called attention to this troublesome pastoral development.

Father Coleman's fine article had been based in part on a lengthier piece by Gabriel Daly in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (December, 1985).

The phenomenon of Catholic fundamentalism, however, deserved even fuller

treatment, and it was almost inevitable that someone would try to pick up where John Coleman and Gabriel Daly had left off.

My colleague, Father Thomas F. O'Meara, O.P., has now done that in a 100-page paperback entitled, *Fundamentalism: A Catholic Perspective* (Paulist Press, \$5.95).

Fundamentalism, of both Protestant and Catholic varieties, Father O'Meara argues, is an attitude that demands — and finds — religious certitudes, whether in the Bible or the teachings of the church.

Furthermore, it views God as strict in his dealings with human beings, stingy in his conferral of salvation, and generally disgusted with the state of the world, from which he saves only an elite few.

Fundamentalists also have a very limited view of history. What they consider to be ancient and time-honored is usually the

product of the cultural period just prior to their own.

"What Catholic fundamentalists view as old and venerable," he writes, "what excites them in a world of dim sacristies and short liturgies, has little to do with most of the Catholic Church's history."

"The past in the imagination of Catholic fundamentalists is largely a product of the 19th century and the baroque ..." he later writes. "The liturgy and the theology of today have a stronger claim to antiquity than the fiddle-back vestments and the textbooks of the 1890s" (p.35).

Fundamentalism, therefore, is marked by elitism, the desire for certitude, anxiety before diversity and change, rigidity and compulsive behavior.

It has little in common with conservatism, although the two are often lumped together.



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

"To be conservative," Father O'Meara writes, "is to wish to retain the best elements of something with a past, to move slowly toward change."

"Fundamentalism," he concludes, "is not a conservative attitude, for it rejects every past but the one it rigidly honors" (p.51).

In chapter six, the book's most important section, Father O'Meara offers a positive critique of fundamentalism based on some of the most significant theological and doctrinal elements of the Catholic tradition.

He begins with the doctrines of creation and incarnation, which underscore the essential goodness of the world and of the God who created and redeemed it. The God of the Catholic tradition is not a God of anger and fear, but a God of love and mercy.

God's presence to the created order, contrary to the fundamentalist's view, is at the level of the ordinary. "Catholicism," he says, "is very slow to acknowledge the miraculous. In its view of grace, most of the time God works in people powerfully but invisibly" (p.82).

"We meet grace ... in the sacraments, in people, in the church and in daily life (whether we be accountants or Trappist monks)" (p.85).

And God is involved in the ordinary lives of all people, not just a select few Christians. "Catholic tradition holds that grace as the inviting, intimate presence of God on earth is not tied to the three 'B's': baptism, belief, belonging to the church. While faith in the gospel and membership in the church are the central ways of God's grace working in history overall, grace exists outside Christianity" (p.84).

In the end, fundamentalism makes more of religion (Bible, rituals, moral rules, ecclesiastical offices, doctrines) than it does of flesh-and-blood human beings.

Jesus, Father O'Meara reminds us, was not easily roused to anger, but he did become angry over the unhealthy masks of religion: its ritualism, its self-righteousness, its harshness, its legalism, its elitism, its fetishism, (investing things with divine power), and its compulsiveness (repeating the same actions over and over again to avoid feelings of unworthiness).

This book is not for someone looking for a list of ready answers to use against fundamentalists. They won't find them here.

It is less an attack on fundamentalism than an expression of appreciation for the wisdom of Catholicism.

A miracle of fire wins many followers for Jesus

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

At first light, every available space in the marketplace just beyond the temple of Jerusalem was already occupied by the merchants. Soon this entire area would be clogged with the flow of people winding their way through the maze of stalls en route to the temple.

It was the season of the harvest. Hebrews from as far away as Egypt came here to make a thanksgiving offering to the Lord for their crops.

"Going to make a killing today," Samuel said as he winked at the merchant in the stall next to him. "Soon everyone will be fighting to buy our wares."

"Does this mean you will charge them double for your useless trinkets?" Elias said sourly without even glancing up.

"Since when did you get so righteous? I'm not the only one who has turned a handsome profit over the years," Samuel said. "We are merely providing a service to fill a need."

"It doesn't make it right," Elias answered.

"Maybe it's time for you to get out," Samuel said before he turned away angrily.

What would he do? Elias had been a



merchant for as long as he could remember. His life depended on how much profit he could extract from his customers. Lately, none of it meant anything to him.

Around mid-morning, Elias heard someone shouting about a fire in a house nearby. He rushed to join the crowd watching the blaze on a nearby street.

When Elias looked up at the house, however, he saw something very odd. A fire appeared to be burning in the upper room of the house, but nothing was consumed by it. Instead, something that resembled tongues of fire was suspended over the heads of the people in the upper room.

Elias was still puzzled over this when people from the room came down to the street. Now an even stranger phenomena occurred. When they began speaking to the crowd, everyone could hear what was being said in their own language.

Finally, a man named Peter came forward to address them. "You have just seen a great miracle. It has happened so that you would believe the truth about Jesus Christ," he said. "Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah promised long ago by God. Even so, our own religious leaders did not accept him. Instead, they handed him over to the Roman authorities to be crucified. His dying on the cross was all part of God's plan."

Peter continued, "Jesus conquered death and sin by rising from the dead on the third day. We are witnesses to this fact. Before Jesus went back to his Father in heaven, he promised to send the Spirit to help us. Today you have seen this promise fulfilled."

It was Elias who voiced the feelings of everyone else. "What should we do now?" he asked.

"If you believe, you must turn away from sin," Peter told them. "Be baptized as a follower of Jesus Christ. Then your sins will be forgiven. And, you, too, will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide you in your life."

More than 3,000 people decided to become followers on that first Pentecost. Elias was among them.

Scripture reference: Acts, Chapter 2:1-42.

Meditation: "When the Spirit comes, who reveals the truth about God, he will lead you into all truth" (John, 16:13).

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