

# When Lightning Strikes

## Responding to the challenge of fundamentalism



Author: David Porter, Director of the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland.

### Introduction

The essential issue is not our claim to the truth, or not our claim that God has revealed himself in Christ, it is the issue of how we relate that claim to power as we negotiate relationships with one another. Also, what is the context in which that negotiation takes place? When we look at fundamentalism we become aware of the massive challenges that confront our neighbours from within their own faith context. The fundamental challenge for us as Christians, if we want to be meaningful dialogue partners with them, is that we need a truth recovery process about our own dysfunction in this area.

I was very struck this summer, at the 50th anniversary of India/Pakistan independence, that the documentaries that were rolled out by the BBC had a different tone to them, a different articulation of the problems to do with partition and the killings. Some of the analysis I had never seen publicly acknowledged in the British press or in public discussion before, particularly the deliberate run down of the garrison, the systematic demobilisation and the deliberate policy of allowing the British administration to claim immunity by saying 'what could we do because there weren't enough of us; had we intervened we would have been overwhelmed and only made things worse.'

Evidently it has taken 50 years for us to reconstruct our memories. If that is true of human communities politically, it is also true of the church. We have to re-visit the narratives that we tell about how we got here, and in every telling we will, by the very nature of living in a fallen world, uncover more sin. Of course, it is also true that we can do so in the confidence that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, that in the Gospel God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, and that in the mercy and grace of God there is freedom. This in turn gives us confidence to accept the invitation given to us by Paul to be involved in this ministry of reconciliation. As George Seagull, the Catholic theologian, points out, we are being invited to a Eucharistic path. Evangelicals are not very good at talking about a Eucharistic path and the need for liturgy as part of our mission, but we need to get over that. There is something profoundly Eucharistic in the truth that in the body of Christ, which was broken and shared for the salvation of the world, we too as the church become broken and shared. Even though this has been a reality for generations of those involved in mission, the challenge is that in re-narrating our memories there is a new level of being broken and shared out.

### Re-narrating identity

For us British the issue is that Christ invites us to re-narrate our identity. And the biggest issue of identity that the British church needs to re-narrate is its relationship with the state. We have allowed, through our imperial history, a missiological imperative to become captive to historical contingencies, namely the state and how it is conducted. We have listened to the unfaithful voices that tell us that there is something intrinsic in our culture that makes it more Christian than other cultures, rather than seeing that it is a gift of God which can be corrupted by these very voices. In our response to the fundamentalist threat, we need to work very hard and very sensitively to unpack this in a new way, a way that will bring new revelations about what went on in the past, and new acknowledgements by those who historically feel threatened.

Of course we all feel threatened, we feel we do not have the power, which is ironic considering most of us British belong to communities and groups that historically are the most powerful in the world and have been for generations. So we need to begin to re-narrate that. There is still much to be converted in our own midst and in our own negotiations with our historic fundamentalism, particularly in the area of the relationship between faith and politics, and our awareness of being both British and Christian. And if we do that, I think it will bring us into a more creative faith, perhaps sufficient even to equip us to be the voice of God. If we allow the gospel to challenge our identity we may then be able to challenge others.

Personally I believe that that is where an authentic biblical response to fundamentalism will begin. Someone has said that "Reconciliation occurs when my enemy tells me my story and I say 'yes that's my story'". And this leads to the thought that, "God is our greatest enemy". Is that not the gospel? God tells us the human story and we resist the gospel when we refuse to accept his narration of my story, of our story. We can be reconciled to God when we say, 'Yes, God, that is our story'. And the story that God tells us comes with this remarkable gift of grace and mercy. That is what makes it bearable to hear and accept. So if we are to tell our perceived enemy their story, we need to understand it. And if we are to be heard telling our story, we also need to listen to what our enemy has to say about our story. Hopefully, in that encounter, in that dialogue, we will open up new possibilities for the mercy and grace of God.

This is a profound, spiritual and theological and missional and political challenge to the church in Britain and it is one that we must engage with because the story is now no longer those who live over there, it is those who live right here, right next to us.

## **Fundamentalism**

What about fundamentalism, as such? When we come to this topic we need the gift to see ourselves as others see us, or as Jesus would say 'look at the beam in your own eye', because in the context of our modern society, we British are the original fundamentalists; it began with us.

## **Truth**

Fundamentalism is essentially about truth. In this it betrays its origin in the Christian church. The 'fundamentals' were promulgated by a series of pamphlets published between 1909 and 1920 by Presbyterians taking part in the debate at Princeton University in North America about theological liberalism. They were asking the question: What are the fundamentals of the faith that we must hold on to, what is the truth that we must defend? The term 'fundamentalist' itself began in the early 1920's to take on the connotation of those who held to a set of strong beliefs, or a strong set of beliefs, that were not open to alteration. So this whole debate about what it meant to be fundamentalist actually went to the heart of the missiological discussion of what it meant to be a biblically faithful church in the culture and intellectual context of the twentieth century. And, in many ways, Islamic fundamentalism is facing a similar problem. It is about what it means to be authentically Muslim, faithful to the faith in the context, culturally and intellectually, of the beginning of the twenty-first century. How do you hold on to a set of beliefs and truths at the heart of an ancient faith in a modern world in which those beliefs seem to be assailed from every side?

## **Separatism**

But the second issue that came to distinguish fundamentalism is that it became less concerned with truth and more about separatism, less concerned with the positive affirmation and holding on to truth, and more about how truth could be used, not so much to divide because there is a sense in which the truth of the Gospel always does divide, but to hold

other people apart and to hold ourselves apart from others. It then took on connotations of divisiveness, of intolerance, of anti-intellectualism, because it was about separating ourselves in our relationships, in our debates, in our human engagement, from all that would corrupt. And we could say that within the Christian tradition what was a legitimate concern for truth, because of an emphasis on separatism, became a dysfunction which produced some of the conflicts that Christian fundamentalism began to have in the wider society.

### **Protecting God?**

That leads to the third point which is that fundamentalism moves from a concern with truth to a concern with being separate. It moves to a more pro-active concern with protecting the truth and the temptation to protect God. Of course, our need to protect God is a biblical absurdity and our 'defence' rapidly becomes an immersion in conflict, one in which we are quite prepared to use ungodly rules and unbiblical means.

### **Revelation**

The fourth point is that as we separate from the world, and become antagonistic towards it, we begin to have distorted understandings of the revelation in which the truth is based in the first place. It becomes God revealing himself to us rather than revealing himself to the world. Instead of the truth of God possessing us, we possess it. Revelation loses its mystery and its magnificence and becomes the tool by which we then seek to bang others over the head. And, of course, this also represents a good deal of the history of evangelicals within the Christian church. In trying to distinguish themselves from the fundamentalists, evangelicals too began to use their claim to revelation in a corrupt way. Indeed they have spent most of the twentieth century chastising themselves and other Christians – who is orthodox, who is not, who is part of the family? – leading to the downward spiral of secondary separation whereby you cannot talk to me, not because I do not believe what you believe, but because I talk to those who do not believe what you believe. So, in a very real way, the most complete cycle of the manifestation of fundamentalism we have in our contemporary context is Christian. We can therefore learn best by looking at ourselves in order to explore the challenges and the processes that are happening for other people as they struggle to work out what it means to be faithful to truth in the context of the threats posed by modernity.

### **Politics**

The last two points probably go to the heart of what I think the real challenge to us is from fundamentalism, not just Christian but Islamic fundamentalism and also the political fundamentalism of the neo-conservatives. It is striking that the root of political Islamist fundamentalism and American neo-conservatism go back to a similar period in a particular place in North America and that is Chicago in the late 50's and early 60's. From the neo-con perspective we have Leo Strauss at the University of Chicago and his department of Political Philosophy. His complete disillusionment with the American experiment, in his view corrupted by capitalism and by heathenism, made him want to re-define it and create a new moral context in terms of democracy and freedom. At much the same time there was Sayyid Qutb from Egypt, who went back to Egypt having studied in the States grasping a vision of the underbelly of what was seen as the best of the West, and understanding its moral corruption. In reaction to that, he imbedded himself in a political fundamentalist response and began to articulate his vision to the Muslim Brotherhood, leading to the beginnings of the rise of Islamism.

## Coercion

So my fifth word to attach to the whole concept of fundamentalism is 'coercion'. It is about how we use power and politics to impose our system and our belief on others. And there is a warning there for us in the church because that is the reality that we do not like to face. Americans do not like using the word 'empire', but the United States is probably the first evangelical empire that has ever existed. The fundamental religious impulse of North America is evangelical. We have a President who reads his Bible and prays every day and has had a conversion experience of the grace of God in his life. And it still does not mean he does politics any better than any Catholic emperor of the past, or any European liberal Protestant leader of the past. The dynamic of power is still handled wrongly. Even within the British church we would like somehow get our hands on power, and we need to remember that we would not be any better at handling power than anyone else. Politics, in my simple definition, is the art of negotiating a relationship, and people, including Christians, are involved in politics all the time, negotiating relationships within families, churches, and work places. The church is negotiating relationships with the world around it. And there are two things that corrupt that negotiation of relationships, which make them dysfunctional and conflictual and that is the issue of identity anxiety and the issue of the misuse of power. The first happens when our sense of who we are is dependent on the other being conformed to our likeness. It is the opposite of being secure in who we are, so that encounter becomes the place of discovery and of celebration of the diversity that God has built into our world. When our identity confidence goes wrong, we want to exclude the other, to say that they do not belong. The second, as we have seen, is the issue of power, or how we control the relationship. This could be economically, through control of land or the market, or legally through control of the law, or in many other ways. In our experience of relationships how do we negotiate with others who have a different sense of identity and belonging to us? Do we use the power that is ours to impose who we are on them, or do we genuinely negotiate that relationship? That is the question that faces the church in relation to Islam, Hinduism and other faiths in our midst, as well as those who are of no faith but who make different moral choices to us. Do we negotiate the civic space in a way that acknowledges their right as human beings to be in that space with us, accepting that we cannot coerce them, that we are not going to win them to Christ by coercion.

## Exclusion

And the last word I would use to do with fundamentalism is 'exclusion'. This is when we say to other people that they do not belong, because they do not believe the same as we do, they do not behave as we do, and they do not make the same moral choices as we do, therefore they have no place in this space. We cannot as church and as Christians and as missions live in a world without others. We must exercise a certain amount of inclusion of everybody, and in that time-honoured Christian phrase 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you'. This is at the heart of how we negotiate our relationships in the public square. We are as much tempted to a fundamentalist response as others we now perceive as a threat in our midst. If we want to understand Islamic fundamentalism and secular fundamentalism and any other sort of fundamentalism, the place to start is understanding our own hearts. We are subject to those impulses and temptations as well, because that is actually the history of the church.

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