ON THE RISE AGAIN

Neo-Fundamentalism in Australian Catholicism
(Part Two)

MICHAEL TRAINOR

In a previous article (Compass 2004/2, pp. 9-13) I offered a brief overview of the history of fundamentalism from its specific Protestant origins. I suggested that there were four phases in the growth of Protestant fundamentalism: its origins (in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), public expression (in the post-1920s), moderation (in the post-1940s) and a return to its original intention (in the post-1960s). Towards the end of the essay, I concluded that Protestant fundamentalism cannot be expressed as a homogenous, clearly defined phenomenon. It would be more accurate to chart the fundamentalist phenomenon as a spectrum, with militant fundamentalism and revivalism at the extremes, and fundamentalism proper and conservative evangelicalism more centered.

What follows is a description of the eras of Catholic biblical understanding, the fundamentalist and, more recently, its neo-conservative reaction, and the range of expressions which can be detected. This present essay will investigate the nature of fundamentalism, especially biblical fundamentalism. This focus also needs to be read alongside Michael Fallon’s contribution in the last edition of Compass (2004/2, pp. 19-24). Michael reflected on biblical fundamentalism from the point of view of the necessity of using metaphors in speaking about God, the human dimension of religious experience, and the historically and culturally conditioned nature of the biblical text. He also emphasised the importance of reading the Bible from within the context of the community of faith out of which the text originated. Before we look at the nature of fundamentalism, I would like to survey the four phases of Catholic appreciation of the Bible, illustrated by the official Church documentation that accompanies each era.

Eras of Catholic Appreciation

Before 1900s (Literalism)

The period before the 1900s could be characterised as one of a fundamental rejection of the methods of biblical interpretation that were developed, particularly by Protestant German scholars, in Europe. The approach of this period was one of a literal interpretation of the Bible. It was used to support apologetic and theological arguments about Catholic Church life and practice. In this era, little appreciation was given to the cultural or historical context of the biblical text. The four gospels were considered as ‘lives of Jesus’ and harmonised to offer what was believed to be a more accurate historical picture. The acknowledgement of the uniqueness of each of the gospels and their christologies was less important than the apologetic motives and historical concerns that shaped gospel reading and interpretation. These interests are clearly reflected in Pope Leo XIII’s 1893 encyclical letter Providentissimus Deus, on biblical study:

...since the divine and infallible magisterium of the Church rests also on the authority of Holy Scripture, the first thing to be done is to vindicate the trustworthiness of the sacred records at least as human documents, from which can be clearly proved, as from primitive and authentic testimony, the divinity and the mission of Christ our Lord, the institution of a hierarchical Church, and the primacy of Peter and his successors. (Par. 35)
Though Leo was cautious about biblical methods of interpretation, and especially from non-Catholic scholars, his position regarding the possibilities of linguistic and exegetical studies was more nuanced, even open. This position anticipated a development which would be fully endorsed with the Second Vatican Council seventy years later.

Between 1900 and 1940s (Suspicion and Fear)

The second era in Catholic reaction to biblical appreciation can be described as one of suspicion, if not fear. This was taking place in the context of the growing popularity of a new scientific paradigm that was impacting widely upon European society. Pope Pius X’s 1907 Encyclical Pascendi Dominici Gregis failed to distinguish between the heresy of Modernism and its use of German Protestant exegetical methods. These methods, by implication, were regarded with suspicion. Catholic biblical scholars (like M.-J. Lagrange) were mistrusted and reported to Rome because of a fear that they had been tainted by Modernism. Pope Benedict’s Encyclical Spiritus Paraclitus of 1920 reinforced a negative attitude towards newer methods of exegetical method. In discussing the factual, historical truth of the Bible, Benedict condemned as ‘out of harmony with the Church’s teaching’

those... who hold that the historical portions of the Scripture do not rest on the absolute truth of the facts but merely upon what they are pleased to term their relative truth, namely, what people then commonly thought’ (Par. 6).

Between 1940s and 1980s

The third period represents a time of gradual but painful assimilation of modern methods of biblical interpretation by the Catholic Church. Exegetical methods by European and North American scholars became more acceptable in Catholic circles and received Papal endorsement from 1943 onwards. The key moments in the history of the official endorsement of contemporary biblical scholarship can be identified with Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI and John Paul II. Pius XII wrote in 1943 encouraging interpreters to be aware of the times and culture out of which the Bible emerged. His famous letter (Divino Afflante Spiritu—Under the influence of the Holy Spirit) was a groundbreaking statement which launched the renaissance of Catholic biblical scholarship. Paul VI continued the work of his predecessors. In his pontificate the Second Vatican Council endorsed the Constitution, Dei Verbum (The Word of God) in 1965. This document confirmed, among several things, the revelatory nature of the Word of God acting in history, the centrality of the Bible to the life of the Church and the importance of the Catholic Community in reclaiming the Bible in its faith and worship life. The year before the proclamation of Dei Verbum, the Pontifical Biblical Commission (established in 1902 by Leo XIII to assist the Teaching Office of the Catholic Church) issued an ‘Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels.’ The instruction encouraged the use of modern methods of biblical interpretation for understanding the Gospels.

From 1990s to the present

In 1993, the Pontifical Biblical Commission issued a further statement about the Bible, its role in the Catholic community and the methods of interpretation, The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church. This document might be considered a highpoint of official Church endorsement of biblical scholarship. Its optimistic spirit encouraged the use of contemporary methods of biblical interpretation, named some
of the limitations of these methods, praised the
work of women biblical scholars and seriously
critiqued a fundamentalist approach to reading
and interpreting the Bible. At an official, for-
amal level, Interpretation reversed the negative
portrayal of Catholic scholarship identified in
the second period above. It clearly articulated
the point to which Catholic biblical scholars had
arrived in their contribution to Church life and
the genuine dialogue in which they engage with
colleagues from other Christian traditions, re-
acting the growing ecumenical nature of bil-
lical scholarship.

Since the promulgation of Interpretation,
over the past decade the insights and contribu-
tions of Catholic biblical scholarship have been
seriously scrutinized and criticized at a more
popular level. Some Catholics have moved back
to a more fundamentalist and literal apprecia-
tion of the Bible. They have adopted a neo-trad-
tionalist, fundamentalist attitude to theo-
gians and biblical scholars reminiscent of the
reactionary espionage spirit typical of the sec-
ond period described above. The social con-
text in which this reaction occurs makes this
phenomenon even more serious. The need to
respond to the cultural and social concerns re-
lected upon in media and newspapers is ever
urgent, and the ability to 'read' or interpret the
cultural scripts reflected in current events non-
literally, but symbolically and theologically is
central. In this context, those who hold a naïve
literalism cannot engage the world. They are
left either to condemn it or retreat from it.

Defining Fundamentalism

The Oxford English Dictionary links fundamen-
talism primarily to religion and describes fun-
damentalism as 'the strict maintenance of tra-
ditional orthodox religious beliefs or doctrines.'
As mentioned in my previous article, religious
fundamentalism, broadly speaking, is a particu-
lar form of conservative Protestant Christian-
ity. It is a particular form of religion or, as
George Marsden has described it, a 'militantly
traditionalist religion' (Marsden 1991, 1) He
describes a fundamentalist as,

...an evangelical who is militant in opposition
to liberal theology in the churches or to changes
in cultural values or mores, such as those associated with 'secular
humanism'...[F]undamentalists are a subtype of evangelical
and militancy is crucial to their outlook. Fundamentalists are not just religious con-
servatives, they are conservatives who are will-
ing to take a stand and fight. (Marsden, loc. cit.)

What Marsden highlights in this description
are features about fundamentalism that are im-
portant to identify: The relationship of funda-
mentalism to evangelicalism, its opposition to
what seems changeable, and its uncompromis-
ing position expressed in militant action. While
Marsden is thinking specifically of Protestant-
ism, these phenomena, especially of militancy
and traditionalism, can be found amongst Aus-
tralian Catholics. The reason for this combat-
tive feature is that Catholic fundamentalists no
longer see themselves as victims to the corrup-
tion of modernity and the theological compro-
mise encouraged by the Second Vatican Coun-
cil. Rather, like their Protestant counterparts,
they perceive themselves as successful respond-
ents to the present situation. Their success is
guaranteed by a belligerence that enables them
to confront and actively fight back (Marty &
Appleby, ix). In the last decade, the University
of Chicago funded a study of the fundamental-
ist phenomenon. The study, the Chicago Funda-
amentalist Project, found that fundamentalists,
besides 'fighting back,' also fight 'for,' 'with,' 'against' and 'under.' Again, while these com-
ments are framed to reflect all expressions of
fundamentalism within Protestantism and other
religions, they have their Catholic expression.

Fundamentalists fight:

* for a worldview they inherited, believe in
  and seek to reinforce. This worldview is
  comprehensive. It is about strictly defined
  religion, morality, family life and public
  policy;
* with the use of certain clearly defined re-
  sources, using the past (either real or im-
  agined) selectively, classified in ways that
help them define the central truths for which they fight;
• against others who do not hold the same appreciation as they have. These others become outsiders and the enemy. They may hold diametrically opposed views, or they may exhibit more moderate positions, open to dialogue prepared to work towards a middle position. These moderates are, too, the enemy, because there is no moderation or compromise on what is judged as truth. In other words, fundamentalists have a black and white view about the world and truth.
• under God or a transcendent reference which ensures victory. When fundamentalist believe that God or Allah has called them to wage war on those they regard as the enemy the results, as history has shown, are devastating. In Australian Catholicism the transcendent referent is frequently one who is regarded as a seer or visionary. This person is able to give ‘true and faithful Catholics’ messages sometimes from Jesus, sometimes from Mary. In this atmosphere of searching for an undeniable source of truth untainted by human error and New Age thinking, private devotions become the substitute for Catholic teaching, and Marian apparitions fostered.

The suffering and tragedy that emerge from the actions of the extreme militant fundamentalists confront people with the reality to which religious idealism can lead. It is this idealism that shapes conduct, is believed to be revealed by God, and determines true community and personal identity. This truth is undifferentiated and uncompromising to one’s political and religious worldview (cf. Marty 1995, 816-820). In this view, truth has no aspect of relativity or historical development, conditioning or contingency. And while the uncompromising aggressive behaviour of fundamentalists might be seen as scandalous to others, to holders of this view it is perfectly consistent with their divinely allotted crusade for truth. Their actions and unyielding extremism differentiates them from true believers or outsiders, who are frequently demonized or mythologized against. Militant fundamentalists are convinced they are enacting an eschatological drama established by God that will influence the future history of the world. It is this conviction about the historical significance of their conduct that encourages them to look for the divinely pre-orchestrated blue-print which they find confirmed in sacred texts (Koran or Bible) or traditions explained by a teacher, designated leader, seer or visionary. In a Catholic context, the visionary has enormous power and influence.

The recognition of this historical and timely privilege to wage the divinely ordered war enables fundamentalists to develop a counter-culture orientation that establishes clear boundaries of community designation. These prescribed boundaries preserve the fundamentalist community from assault, contamination and corruption. It is this attitude which has led some within the Catholic community to break away from the mainstream and develop a ultra-traditionalist sectarian Catholicism, a living nostalgia of a past, pre-modern era.

Biblical Fundamentalism

When the term is associated with the Bible, fundamentalism applies to a way of reading and interpreting the Bible that guarantees an approach to religious practice apparently secure, certain and unalterable. In its classical sense, Protestant biblical fundamentalism has two characteristics. It is concerned with the literal presentation of what is believed to be taught in the Bible, and seeks to impose these teachings in an aggressive or militant fashion on religious teaching and ethical conduct. The antagonistic, almost violent, imposition of what are regarded as the truths derived from the Bible is designed to expose the non-biblical character of other religious affirmations which are judged to be inauthentic. Within Protestantism, the Bible is considered the only source of truth. It is, literally, the Word of God, inerrant, infallible and
culturally, historically and scientifically accurate. Catholic biblical fundamentalists hold similar views.

Biblical fundamentalism with its theological and devotional neo-traditionalist arm remain a pastoral and theological concern in Australian Catholicism. This is obvious in four ways: in biblical illiteracy, ignorance or distrust of the Bible; the aggression—sometimes vociferous—leveled at Catholic scholars by some who are (unwittingly or deliberately) uninformed about contemporary scholarship; the expressed nostalgia to return to an earlier era of Catholicism; and the subtle or unrecognized attraction that Protestant evangelicism holds for some Catholics.

**Biblical Illiteracy, Ignorance or Distrust**

Many Catholics still either avoid the Bible all together, or feel uncomfortable reading and reflecting on it, though they are being exposed to its proclamation in the Liturgy of the Word in the Eucharistic setting and the celebration of the Sacraments. This avoidance or reading difficulty arises from a lack of familiarity with the Bible developed over years (in the case of the reader) and centuries (in the case of the Catholic community), between the sixteenth century Reformation and a decade after the mid twentieth century with Vatican II. In this period, emphasis had been placed on official teaching exercised by the Bishops. The Protestant deference shown to biblical authority had its Catholic counterpart in the authority of the Church’s official teachers, the local Bishops teaching in communion with the Bishop of Rome. Vatican II restored the importance of the Bible in the life of the Catholic community, in its teaching, theological enterprise, and liturgical life. While we are still coming to terms with this biblical restoration almost fifty years later, there is a deepening desire amongst Catholics to be imbued with a biblical spirituality. This is a sign of hope, and contrasts sharply to the dearth of biblical education current in Australian Catholicism.

The challenge to press on in the spirit of Vatican II to implement a totally embracing biblically-inspired theological and catechetical renewal is revealed in other ways. When the Bible is drawn upon or spoken about for catechetical purposes or preaching, passages are sometimes regarded as literal accounts of what actually happened or are used for moral illustrations. This ‘illuminating’ or ‘proof-text’ approach popular in instructional or catechetical texts reinforces the view that the Bible is simply a resource book used to buttress what is already believed. In this context, the Bible is treated like a Catechism. It is a resource to supplement what is believed and a compendium to what is authoritatively taught.

**Aggression towards Contemporary Catholic scholarship**

Those involved in biblical and theological education seek to present the fruits of contemporary Catholic scholarship in a more accessible way. Sometimes, though, they are confronted by others who impugn their motives, qualifications, loyalty to the Bishop of Rome, or even their Catholic faith. This especially happens when the teaching environment is outside the tertiary institution or university, and in a parish or more public setting. The aggressor seeks to question vehemently the content of what is being taught, or the dialogical manner of engaging the learning community.

The content is challenged as being heretical and a rejection of Church authority or Catholic devotion or piety. The attack sometimes is couched in emotive terms, with particular references to certain aspects of Catholic liturgical or doctrinal life. Contemporary biblical and theological scholarship is held responsible for what is perceived to be wrong in the Catholic Church, especially since the Vatican II. It is fundamentally a resistance to change, renewal or reform. Scholarship, it is judged, is responsible for undermining Catholic faith and liturgical life, the development of a ‘new church,’ with its promotion of doctrinal ‘liberalism,’ a postmodern alliance with the new age movement, and the gradual decline in church membership.
This is seen to result in a distancing from traditional church teachings, a phenomenon typical of the present age.

**Nostalgia for Earlier Expressions of Catholicism**

In an attempt to reclaim support, Catholics inclined to fundamentalism use a language typical of an era prior to the Second Vatican Council. It is a subtle but effective strategy, and seeks to align orthodoxy with their interpretation of central tenants of Catholic doctrine concerned with the celebration of the eucharist, christology and mariology. The main focus of attack is frequently with liturgy, moral teaching and theological interpretations. What is clear is that the crusaders of this traditionalist position have rarely engaged in serious study in theology or Bible from an accredited theological faculty. Ironically, this results in an unwitting alignment with conventional Protestant fundamentalism. This second expression of theological and devotional fundamentalism comes from a desire to return to what is thought to be the idyllic golden age of the 1950s and earlier, when churches were full and Catholicism was perceived as an identifiable and distinct moral force in the landscape of Australian paganism.

**Attraction of Evangelicalism**

A fourth expression of Catholic fundamentalism is evident in what I call the attraction to evangelicalism and evangelism. The two are separate, though linked. Both words are related to the Greek word for 'Gospel' (evangelos). Frequently the terms are used interchangeably to describe a religious movement. In the attempt to become more socially influential, conservative Catholics have also aligned themselves with Protestant evangelicals and fundamentalists, and even with extremists from other religious, non-Christian groups. In an earlier era, such an alliance with these groups would have been regarded as a betrayal of perceived authentic Catholic faith. The evangelical alliance offers neo-conservative Catholics a broader community of believers in sympathy with the perception that Christian faith and morals are being destroyed through post-modernity. Resistance to these perceived atheistic threats to faith is the only hope for the world and the future of the Catholic Church. What results is a more defined form of sectarian Catholicism, unhappy with the world and unwilling to engage in any form of theological dialogue. Such conversation would appear to be a compromise and a failure to crusade for Catholic truth.

* * *

These four expressions of theological and biblical fundamentalism offer the Australian Catholic community a challenge that is unique in its history. Though some of these challenges may look old or tired, they are new in the public face of their aggression. They also raise the future theological, biblical and educational agenda and call for a pastoral strategy—at least the recognition of a strategy. This will be the focus of the next and final article on neo-fundamentalism in Australian Catholicism.

**REFERENCES**


Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993), *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. 33