

Coronavirus, Missionaries and Fundamentalism

by Harry Winter, O.M.I.

When the editor of *Ecumenical Trends* wrote in the March/April 2020 issue about the urgent need during the coronavirus for ecumenists to gather people (digitally if need be) and cultivate dialogue across lines of differences, he made me think of our relations with fundamentalists. This is one of the few times when those in our family or neighborhood who are fundamentalists will welcome our help or offer to help us.

Although I am writing about Christian fundamentalists, those of other religions will find much that applies to their fundamentalists also. It is certain that not only in the USA, but in almost every country, Islamic fundamentalism is growing. Right behind them are Buddhist and Hindu fundamentalism.

Thanks to the US Catholic Mission Association, we have a special opportunity and responsibility to reach fundamentalists from every religion. Could this be a time when the divisions among Christians can be lessened? By reaching out to fundamentalists, and by letting ourselves be ministered to by them, our divisions can be reduced and joint ministry even contemplated. Such welcoming is not easy, but the coronavirus is a special time when we can do so.

There is also reason to believe that in times of crisis, fundamentalists increase in number and influence. However, because the coronavirus is a crisis we have never faced before, there are indications that the fundamentalist segment of every religion is now in better contact with the other members of that religion.

In 1991, a truly monumental six volume study of fundamentalism began to appear, edited by Lutheran Martin Marty and Catholic R. Scott Appleby, and sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. I have summarized especially the first and fifth volumes in *Dividing or Strengthening? Five Ways of Christianity*, available on the Oblate website "Mission-Unity-Dialogue" Five Ways page, (www.harrywinter.org., pp. 105-21)

Let us not forget that within Christianity (and probably within other religions too), fundamentalism has several times saved our religion over its two thousand year history (see below). First we look at Roman Catholic fundamentalism and then Protestant fundamentalism.

Roman Catholic Fundamentalism: Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre (1905-91) led Catholic fundamentalists, after Vatican II, into schism, organizing the Society of St. Pius X and its touchstone, the Tridentine Mass. In 1988, the Vatican succeeded in ending the schism with part of the Society, which now became the Confraternity of St. Peter. These two groups give us a good indication of the strength of Catholic fundamentalism.

The website for the Pius X group gives a growth in the number of priests, from 600 to 650 worldwide, (2010-15). There are also positive growth statistics for seminarians, brothers and sisters (accessed April 17, 2020).

The website for the St. Peter group gives the growth in the number of priests as of Nov. 1, 2019: 320, which rises each year. However, the number of seminarians is steady from 2012-19 at about 140 (accessed April 17, 2020).

Pope Benedict requested every diocese to provide at least one Tridentine Mass each Sunday in the major cities of the diocese. James Martin, S.J., documented this in [America](#), June 16, 2008. Bishops tend to be surprised at the number of Catholics who attend these Masses.

Protestant Fundamentalism: To gauge the exact number of Protestant fundamentalists, one must distinguish between Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism. Franklin Graham, successor to his father Billy Graham, is an evangelical; Bob Jones, a fundamentalist. Jones forbade Billy Graham and his organization from ever visiting Bob Jones University.

There are evangelicals who at heart are fundamentalists. And there are fundamentalists who are at heart evangelicals. If the person you are dialoguing with first tells you the exact moment he/she accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior, then that person is evangelical, despite what they call themselves.

If that person first wants to know if you believe that every word of the Bible must be held as literally true, especially the seven days of creation, then that person is a fundamentalist, despite what they call themselves.

Are We in Contact Now? Until the coronavirus began, the anger of fundamentalists prevented much contact with other Christians. But as this threat to our very existence has grown, we can detect that our family members and neighbors who are fundamentalists are looking at us differently. They may need our help in buying groceries or going to the hospital. They may not be able to attend their own church, and want their fellow Christians to pray with them over the phone or internet.

Or they may see us suffering, and out of compassion offer to help us. Are we willing to accept their help? Now we can see the suffering Christ in our fundamentalist family member or friend, and they can see the suffering Christ in us.

It can be of value for us to remember that several times, Christianity was so threatened from the outside and inside that fundamentalists were the only ones left. From the fourth to the ninth century, the heresy of Arianism weakened Christianity from within. And from without, the Vikings from the west and Islam from the east reduced our numbers and leadership. Christopher Dawson describes the situation:

On Candlemas Day 880 the whole northern army of the German kingdom, led by Bruno the Duke of Saxony, two bishops and twelve counts, was destroyed by the Danes in a great battle in the snow and ice at Ebersdorf on the Luneberg Heath. . .

It is of these dark years that the chronicler of St. Vedast writes, "The Northmen cease not to slay and carry into captivity the Christian people, to destroy the churches, and to burn the towns. Everywhere there is nothing but dead bodies--clergy and laymen, nobles and common people, women and children. There is no road or place where the ground is not covered with corpses.

We live in distress and anguish before this spectacle of the destruction of the Christian people." . . .

Above all this age destroyed the hope of a pacific development of culture which had inspired the leaders of the Church and the missionary movement and reasserted the warlike character of Western society which it had inherited from its barbarian past. Henceforward the warrior ethos, the practice of private war and the blood feud were as prevalent in Christian society as among its pagan neighbors (Religion and the Rise of Western Culture, pp. 86-88)

One may also think of the prolonged attack on Christianity in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe: Christians in those countries too had to circle the wagons and retreat into the fortress of fundamentalist Christianity. Only slowly have they been able to come out and expand.

On the other hand, is it possible that when the coronavirus ends, the fundamentalists will be the only recognizable religious group? In the past, they have instinctively preserved the essentials, while their fellow religionists merged into them.

The Future: Abortion? As the USA approaches the November elections, the issue of abortion will affect all Christians, especially fundamentalists. Several of the state legislatures, mainly in the south, have already enacted laws which eliminate abortion even in those instances which the USA Catholic bishops have said they would tolerate: incest, rape, and the life (not the health) of the mother. Fundamentalists are especially prominent in these states.

Back in 1977-78, one of the most intriguing fundamentalist leaders, Francis Schaeffer, founder of the L'Abri Fellowship, held his nose and approached US bishops to see if they would promote his videos against abortion "How Then Shall We Live?." Fundamentalists seem to realize they must work with Catholics on the issue of abortion.

This places our bishops in a very delicate situation. If they tolerate abortion in the three instances above, where are the Catholic doctors, nurses and hospitals which will perform these abortions? If the abortions are to be safe and rare, must they also be legal?

Will fundamentalists tolerate any exceptions to completely forbidding abortions?

Perhaps it is now that we can form friendships and deepen our brotherhood/sisterhood especially with fundamentalists. Perhaps it is now that we should be on our knees, praying that the Holy Spirit will make use of the coronavirus to help us solve such intractable problems as abortion in our country.

Now is the time to help fundamentalists come out of their fortresses and at least see other Christians as their brothers and sisters. Can we adjust to working with each other to gain something for our Christian faith, even if we cannot achieve all we desire?