

## **Faith in a time of fundamentalism**

I was asked by this evening's organisers to talk about 'faith in a time of fundamentalism.' If I had a Latin mind, I would begin with a definition of 'fundamentalism'. That is the beauty of the Roman mind, the clarity of bright sunshine. But I am an Anglo-Saxon from the grey north, and we creep up on clarity slowly!

In England, if you speak of 'fundamentalism', it would nearly always refer to radical Islam. People immediately think of ISIS, or Al Qaeda, which means literally in Arabic, 'the Fundamental'! It defines itself as fundamentalist. But there has been an explosion of fundamentalism in all religions, beginning with Christian fundamentalism in America in the late nineteenth century. In India there is growing Hindu fundamentalism, with some people calling for the expulsion of all Christians from the country. In Myanmar Buddhist fundamentalism has led to the persecution of Rohingya Muslims. Fundamentalism is usually linked to a literal reading of some sacred scriptures; it is often associated with nationalism, violence and intolerance of people with other faiths or none.

Many people argue that this proves how dangerous religion is. Medieval intolerance has again raised its ugly head. The rational culture of the Enlightenment is faltering. But Jürgen Habermas, the German philosopher, has argued that fundamentalism is essentially modern.<sup>1</sup> He believes that it grew out of a reaction to European colonialism, ripping apart ancient cultures. I think its origins are even older, going back to a seventeenth century belief that science will one day answer all our questions. The only truth is scientific. We call this in English 'scientism.' Christian fundamentalism was a reaction to this scientific fundamentalism. In reply to the claims of some scientists to explain everything, Protestants in the south of the US said, 'All the answers are in the Bible. Get back to the fundamentals of the Word of God'. This was the origin of the word 'fundamentalist.'

But modernity is marked by many competing forms of fundamentalism. There is economic fundamentalism, the simplistic belief that the invisible hand of the market will solve all economic problems, a sort of religious cult centred in Chicago. The twentieth century was crucified by nationalistic fundamentalism, the blind belief in my country right or wrong. This led to the death of millions in two world wars. The ideological fundamentalism of communism led to the slaughter of hundreds of millions of in Russia, China and Cambodia.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/05/07/inenglish/1525683618\\_145760.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/05/07/inenglish/1525683618_145760.html)

Religious fundamentalism is not a return to the Middle Ages. It is thoroughly modern. It is part of our contemporary culture.

Fundamentalism is simplistic. It explains everything with reference to one simple way of seeing reality. This tendency to oversimplification is exacerbated by the modern social means of communication. Instant communication of abbreviated messages means that complex issues are reduced to slogans. The President of the United States conducts his political agenda with tweets. Father Adolfo Nicholas, the former Superior General of the Jesuits, believes that the greatest threat to our civilization is ‘the globalisation of superficiality’. ‘All great civilisations have wrestled with fundamental questions: what does it mean to be human? Wherein lies our happiness? Does our universe have an ultimate destiny or it will drift into meaningless extinction? Ceaseless communication, endless texting not to mention sexting, tend to suppress the exploration of such questions in depth<sup>2</sup>.’

Fundamentalism in all its forms thrives because the whole idea of truth, except in a narrowly scientific sense, seems to be evaporating. President Trump is always accusing people of ‘fake news’, but he seems to make up the truth each day. We live in a world of ‘truthiness’, which Stephen Colbert defined as ‘the expression of gut feelings or opinions as valid statements of fact.’ In twitter and blogs wild assertions are made without concern as to whether they are true or not. I once read in a blog that as Master of the Order, I had given permission to a Provincial to live with his mistress, a nun, in a railway carriage.

One consequence is the rise of populism all over Europe: you see that here in Italy, but also in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Germany with the Alt für Deutschland, even in Scandinavia. It was populism that fuelled the British vote to leave the European Union and which took Trump to the White House. Last June, Bernard-Henri Levy, the French philosopher, said: ‘We are in danger of the complete collapse of Europe. If Europe collapses the worst forms of populism will prevail, racism and anti-Semitism will come back and misery will follow. Same old story!... We are in a situation of slow motion catastrophe<sup>3</sup>.’

I have evoked a range of related terms: fundamentalism, populism, truthiness. If I were a social scientist I would take time to explore their precise relationship. But I am not, and we do not have the time to seek that conceptual clarity, so loved by the Romans! Let us focus on

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<sup>2</sup> Adolfo Nicholas SJ *Depth, Universality and Learned Ministry: Challenges to Jesuit Higher Education Today*. Mexico City, April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2010.

[http://www.sjweb.info/documents/ansj/100423\\_Mexico%20City\\_Higher%20Education%20Today\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.sjweb.info/documents/ansj/100423_Mexico%20City_Higher%20Education%20Today_ENG.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.alainelkanninterviews.com/bernard-henri-levy/>

the key question: How can we share our faith in this contemporary world, which is characterised by simplistic ideologies: Passionate convictions clash in the night!

First of all, our faith must engage with the hopes and fears of our contemporaries who are attracted by our fundamentalist culture. We must understand why they think and vote as they do. Unless we have a word which touches them. Often people from the left speak with contempt of people attracted by fundamentalism and populism, as if they were despicable. One of the reasons that Hillary Clinton lost the election was that she said that half of Trump's supporters were 'a basket of deplorables.' This confirmed their feeling that the elite regarded them as nobodies. Unless we address what moves them, our faith will be irrelevant. General De Gaulle's return to power was linked to a speech in Algeria in 1958, in which he said to a vast crowd: "Je vous ai compris!", 'I have understood you'. No one has ever discovered what he meant, but the crowd felt that here was someone who had heard them!

But we must also challenge the basic assumptions of our fundamentalist, populist culture. Otherwise we shall be equally irrelevant. So how can we both engage and challenge? That is the task of our faith in a time of fundamentalism!

Many of the people who are drawn to populist parties or fundamentalist sects are those who feel left behind. On their i-Phones they see glimpses of a world of wealth and privilege from which they are excluded. They have neither a voice nor a future. They are just statistics. People in the South of Italy voted for populist parties because they had lost all trust in the institutions of the state. In Britain, people in the old industrial heartlands of the north which used to be centres of manufacture and mining voted for Brexit. Many of them know that Brexit will not do them any good, but it does not matter. It is a vote of vast anger and frustration.

People in the mid-West of the United States voted for Trump for similar reasons. They are saying to us: We exist and we matter. We are human beings too! Young people in prison who feel written off may convert to radical forms of Islam for just the same reason. In my new faith I am someone. Mohammed Ali, world famous boxer, said: 'I am America. I am the part you won't recognize. But get used to me. Black, confident, cocky; my name, not yours; my religion, not yours; my goals, my own; get used to me.'

The first challenge for Christianity is to show that we have understood the pain of these people. God became the child of a poor carpenter in a backwater of the Roman Empire because everyone of us matters. Jesus says 'Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor

reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?’ (Matthew 6:26).

Gregory Boyle is an American Jesuit who works with the kids in drug gangs in Los Angeles. He presents God to them saying, ‘Behold the one who delights in you.’ His first task is to learn their names. Not their gang names, or nicknames, but the names their mothers call them. As he is driving through the city, he sees a kid whom he had met just once: ‘I roll down my window and catch his attention. “Hey, Lula.” You would have thought I had electrocuted him. His whole body spasms with delight to be known, to be called, to hear his name uttered out loud. For his entire trip through the crosswalk, Lula kept turning back and looking at me, smiling.’<sup>4</sup> So the Church must be among the most neglected, and show by our presence, by knowing their names, that they matter. We must do theology with them. *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*.

Secondly, the attraction of fundamentalism is precisely that it offers something that is fundamental. Al Qaeda! It is a foundation on which one can build a life and shape a future. Thousands of young Europeans, Americans and Australians, often converts, joined ISIS, because it offered a purpose to their life. It said, ‘You can be heroes and martyrs. Your life can be part of an extraordinary drama.’ It is a horrible death cult but its attraction is that it asked for everything. ‘Give your lives to us and you can make a difference!’

Christianity will only be attractive to those who feel worthless and invisible if we dare to ask for everything. If we ‘market’ Christianity as a harmless hobby which does not ask much, why bother? In 2010, Xavier Beauvois made a film called *Des hommes et des dieux*. It told the story of a small community of Trappist monks who lived an hour south of Algiers, in Algeria. In the 1990s they were caught up in the violence that swept through the country. This film caught the imagination of millions of people. I saw it in a cinema in Oxford with a friend who is an atheist or an agnostic on a good day! At the end of the film, there was complete silence. No wanted to break the spell by leaving. It told the story of how the monks debated whether to stay or go back to France for safety. They stayed and in 1996, they were martyred. It enraptured people because we see ordinary people deciding to risk everything! They make the choice for what is most fundamental. They make a radical choice to follow Jesus.

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<sup>4</sup> *Tattoos on the heart*, p.47

If we present the perilous adventure of Christianity, some people will be afraid and run away; others will come. No one will dismiss Christianity as boring! So, if we are to engage people in this time of cultural fundamentalism, the Church must show that the invisible people are seen, and that we dare to make a bold invitation to follow Christ. It is not a safe religion. It should have a health warning! Unless we do both these, our faith will appear to be irrelevant.

But unless we challenge the assumptions of this fundamentalist culture, we shall also be irrelevant. The first assumption that we must challenge is about what it means to have an identity. People who join a fundamentalist religious group or a populist party are often in search of a clear identity. They want to know who they are. Traditionally we found identity in our gender, our family, our village, and our religion. All these identities are weaker today. Gender identity is contested. The traditional family has largely broken down. Millions of people have migrated to cities in which they are not recognised. Secularism has subverted religious identity. What identity do we have left?

Maybe this is why people become so passionately identified with their football team. When all else is lost, it gives people a name, a song and a team. The Dominicans are very proud to have been involved in the foundation of two great football teams, Juventus and Newcastle United! If your identity is insecure, you will be drawn to a group that has a clear definition of who you are. It may be because of your faith or ethnicity or politics. Then you can say: 'This is who I am, not one of those infidels, or foreigners'!

Catholicism responds to this quest for identity subtly! Let me take you back to one of my favourite texts in Scripture, from the first letter of St John: 'Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.' (1 John 3:2). Notice how identity is now given. We are God's children now. We know who we are. But our identity is also unknown. It lies ahead. 'What we will be has not yet been revealed.' Identity is given and to be discovered.

We are Roman Catholics. This is our Creed! This is our community. These are our prayers and sacraments. We know who we are. This is attractive to people who long for clear identity. But also I do not know yet who I am. I will not until all the divisions between human beings are healed. In a world which is crucified by vast inequalities of wealth so that the rich and the poor seem to belong to different species, we cannot fully know who we are. In a world in which there is racial prejudice, and prejudice against women, including in the

Church, we cannot yet fully know who we are. There is a gospel song, sung by slaves in America: ‘Oh nobody knows who I am/ Till the judgement morning.’

If your identity is completely defined, then the stranger will be seen as a threat. What is this foreigner doing in my country? Why is this Muslim practising his religion in my Christian land? But for Christianity, it is with the stranger that I discover a new aspect of my identity. I discover with him or her that I am someone new. As long as I exclude that other person, then I cannot be fully myself. So Christianity says Yes, you do know who you are. But not fully! Identity always lies ahead, to be discovered. When I lived in France for a year as a student, I was liberated from my small British identity. When I travelled all over the world as Master of the Dominicans, my heart was enlarged. This is what Aquinas called *latitudo cordis*, the enlargement of the heart. To be fully human is *not* to know fully who you are.

The second challenge we must make is to the fear of difference. Through all of human history, people who are different have been feared, because of different looks, different language or different religion. But modernity is marked by a paradox. The social means of communication mean that we are in contact with strangers all over the globe. I look at my emails in the morning, and there may be messages from three continents. We live in the global village. But at the same time, there is a growing fear of difference.

Richard Sennett of New York University argues that Western society has become highly tribalised. He says that ‘tribalism couples solidarity with others like yourself to aggression against those who are different.’<sup>5</sup> The Internet enables us to bond with the likeminded. Jonathan Franzen, the American novelist, wrote: ‘Invisible Facebook and Google algorithms steer you towards content you agree with, and nonconforming voices stay silent for fear of being flamed, trolled or unfriended. The result is a silo in which, whatever side you’re on, you feel absolutely right to hate what you hate.’<sup>6</sup> This fear of difference fuels the rise of fundamentalism and of populist parties.

But difference is in the DNA of Catholicism. It is not a homogeneous, monolithic block like a vanilla ice cream. It is filled with difference in unity. Four gospels in one New Testament; Old and New Testaments in one Bible; Jesus, our saviour, embraces the biggest difference imaginable, human and divine, in one person. Think of all the glorious differences of spiritualities, Benedictine, Dominican, Franciscan and Jesuit, all jostling and competing and

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<sup>5</sup> Location 99

<sup>6</sup> ‘Is it too late to save the world?’ *The Guardian*, November 4, 2017

rubbing up against each other. The Dominicans and Jesuits disagreed so vehemently about the nature of grace that the Pope had to tell us to shut up. We were right of course! This spacious diversity is what Dante calls ‘la divina foresta spessa e viva.’ Catholicism is by its nature commodious and diverse. People think that we are all the same. But there are 24 churches within Catholicism, of which the Latin rite is just one, even if it is the biggest by far.

Faced with the rise of Protestantism, Catholicism did often succumb to the temptation to think that unity is uniformity. Pope Francis is encouraging us to have the courage to embrace the original tradition of our Church, the beauty of difference. This is why he wants initiatives to come from below and not from the centre. A delight in difference subverts the simplistic formulae of our fundamentalist culture.

Underlying both of these challenges to contemporary culture there is a last one I wish to mention, which is hard to evoke in a few sentences. Fundamentalism in all its forms tends to assume that profound truths can be stated in ways that are literal and univocal. Religious fundamentalists read their sacred scriptures, and all is clear and obvious. This is the Word of God. This was the claim for the truth of the Bible by some Protestant Reformers. It is also the claim of radical Muslim interpretations of the Qur’an. Jonathan Sachs, the former Chief Rabbi of Britain, loves to quote the rabbis who wrote: ‘One who translates a verse of scripture literally is a liar.’<sup>7</sup>

It is also implicit in narrowly scientific interpretations of reality which claim to give a complete description within the limits of a univocal language. This is what the English philosopher Mary Midgely called ‘nothingbuttery’: The human person is “nothing but” the human animal; law is “nothing but” relations of social power; sexual love is “nothing but” the urge to procreation; altruism is “nothing but” the dominant genetic strategy described by Maynard Smith; the Mona Lisa is “nothing but” a spread of pigments on a canvas, the Ninth Symphony is “nothing but” a sequence of pitched sounds of varying timbre<sup>8</sup>.

The great truths of our faith are explored with language that is metaphoric and poetic. When we talk of the divinity of Christ or the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, we reach for truths which are beyond our grasp. In Robert Browning’s words:

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<sup>7</sup> *No to the God of Violence*, p. 208

<sup>8</sup> Roger Scruton *The Soul of the World*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2014 p.39

A man's reach should exceed his grasp,  
Or what's a heaven for<sup>9</sup>?

Even an analytical theologian like St Thomas Aquinas, with a good Roman mind, wrote his best theology in poetry, for example for the Feast of Corpus Christi. Words are stretched beyond their literal meaning to point to the mystery which we glimpse but cannot fully articulate. In this world, he wrote, we are linked to God as to the unknown.

The greatest obstacle to our belief is not atheism or secularism. It is language which never takes off but remains boringly prosaic. This is what Flannery O'Connor called the language of 'wingless chickens.' Christians should see all great poets and film makers, novelists and painters, as our natural allies in the search for hints of the transcendent. It does not matter whether they are Christians or followers of other faiths or none. If they wrestle with the complexity of human experience, our wonderful and faulty attempts to love, we can learn from them. And if we are seen to learn from them, then, who knows? They may even be able to learn from us.

So faith in a time of fundamentalism has a double challenge. It must engage with the hopes and fears of those who are drawn to these simplistic ways of seeing the world. Often people are attracted to all sorts of fundamentalism and populism by a feeling of being unvalued, invisible. The Church must therefore be present in their lives, recognising their dignity as the children of God. In desperate times, when the future seems bleak, people long for a cause to which to give themselves. So we must be unafraid to challenge people with the perilous adventure of following Christ.

But we must also be critical of our fundamentalist culture, otherwise we shall be irrelevant. We must offer people both the security of a given identity, as members of the Church, but also the challenge of an open identity, still to be discovered with the stranger. We must be unafraid of difference, for where we differ we may learn from others and teach. And finally, the depths of our faith can only be shared if we recover its poetic dimension. Flat, univocal language gives us chickens without wings and not a glimpse of the Holy Spirit. Our faith lives at the edge of language.

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<sup>9</sup> 'Andrea del Sarto'

