FUNDAMENTALISM: POWER AND THE ABSOLUTE

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Introduction

Ministers and teachers of theology seem to be the ones who lead the Church into error, and the more these are paid, the longer vacations they have, the higher positions they obtain, the more unfaithful to God and his church they seem to become.³

And thus — as the same author underscores at another place — they betray a considerable body of truths "which are always true and which are everywhere recognized as true by rational minds".⁴

These historical quotations of the fundamentalist Charles Blanchard already show us important elements of classical evangelical fundamentalism in the USA around the turn of the century: it considers itself to have a scientific basis and to be in accord with unalterable, eternal truths and with the valid common sense of the general public.

I am supposed to give you a "conservative evangelical perspective" on fundamentalism. This does not come easily to me. I did indeed go through the "conservative evangelical position" in the course of my life: in 1975 I was converted from the Roman Catholic Church in a Pentecostal evangelical environment. But in the interval I have moved on to an ecumenical theology.

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2 The author spent two years in Guatemala and Nicaragua to do research on Pentecostalism, resulting in a Ph. D. thesis (under supervision of Dr. Konrad Raiser). At present he is pastor at Marl, Germany, and teaches Ecumenics at Bochum.
which does perhaps share one element or another with Pentecostal or charismatic theology and piety, but only a little with a "conservative evangelical perspective". In what follows I should nevertheless like to express a certain sympathy for what is commonly called fundamentalism by drawing cautious distinctions on the phenomenon. The focus of what I have to say will lie in systematic considerations relating to historical material. The underlying thesis is that in fundamentalism we have to do with a religious strategy to gain, or regain, perspectives for action in a crisis situation. This strategy

1) starts by identifying its supporters with the absolute;
2) makes an exclusive claim to truth and validity;
3) aims as far as possible to bring whatever differs from it wholly under its dominion (this is important for the drawing of fine distinctions); and
4) has to be distinguished from escapism.

Underlying this thesis is the observation that all religious fundamentalisms have a common substructure. In what follows I shall briefly illustrate what this structure is by an analysis of evangelical fundamentalism and exemplify it in charismatic fundamentalism. But I am pretty certain that this structure is to be found also in Catholic, Islamic or Hindu fundamentalism. In my view, different emphases in the contents can be traced back to different soteriological points of departure or situations — in sociological terms, to a different religious demand. My thesis implies that not everything which shocks liberal minds is fundamentalism; rather that the criterion of the claim to power and its transformation in practice helps us to distinguish a fundamentalism, which I think is theologically illegitimate, from an "escapism" — a retreat from the world, so to say — which may rather be conceived as theologically legitimate on the background of the apocalyptic tradition in the Bible. In the analysis of the evangelical tradition in the USA this difference will become apparent in differing ideas of history as expressed by premillennialism and dispensationalism.

I. Classical Fundamentalism in the USA

First of all I shall demonstrate the process by which fundamentalism

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5 By "crisis" I mean a situation in which the reproduction of a system, taken for granted in everyday-life, becomes questionable and the system no longer has at its disposal enough possibilities to make it meaningful and permit action to safeguard its own continued existence.

6 Here the term "power" embraces the implementation of one's own will in terms of its recognition by those who are dominated (i.e. "domination") and also by means of compulsion, cf. Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* [Economics and Society], Tübingen: Mohr, 1985, pp. 28, 122 and 544. Fundamentalist praxis includes both possibilities.