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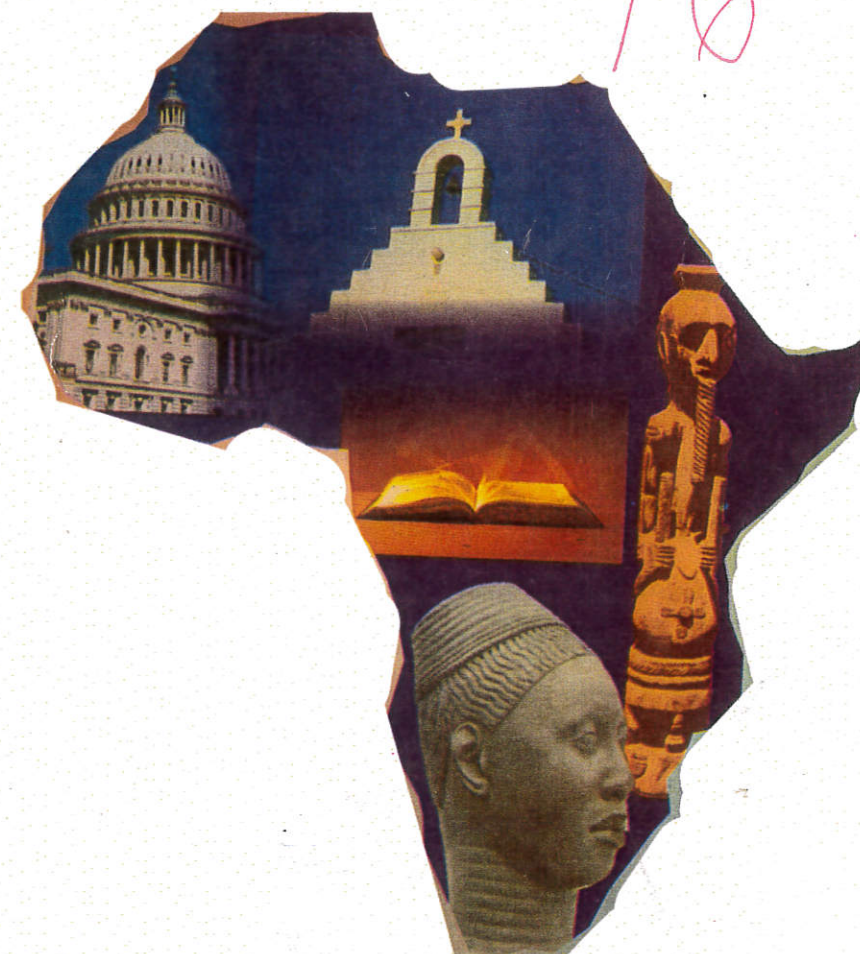
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ROMAN CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

Dr. Patrick U. Nwosu

Department of Religions,
University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.
fatherpat2003@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to appraise the Roman Catholic perspective on fundamentalism. The objective of the study hangs on the fact that the Roman Catholic Church sees fundamentalism as the most dangerous threat to religious freedom given the fact that there are myriad ways in which human beings conceive of the divine. The study adopted historical and analytical methods for data gathering and interpretation.

KEYWORDS: Roman Catholic Church, Fundamentalism, Religious Pluralism, Ecumenism

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 21st century, the most immediate danger faced by nations of the world, apart from global climate disruption is fundamentalism. The one definition for this crisis-ridden trend is 'enthusiasm without substance' (Cleary 1992:121). This contemporary crisis gives urgency to a re-examination of the various perspectives of the concept of fundamentalism. The challenge is urgent given the fact that some adherents of different religions in the world have torn themselves between awe and terror at what humanity, as agent of its cultures and religions, has inflicted upon itself in the name of God. This shows that the global community stands in desperate need of intercultural and interreligious dialogue that brings fundamentalism into conversation.

In the context of this contemporary crisis, the reality remains that adherents of different religions hold differing opinions of their faith tradition. They have different identities and different histories. There is no longer single absolute truth that is common among believers of a particular religion of the world today. Human beings in the present era no longer agree that their common experience has only one significance that can be essential dogma of their faith. From Christian perspective of the second Vatican Decree on Ecumenism:

... the heritage handed down by the apostles was received differently and in different forms, so that from the very beginnings of the church its development varied from region to region and also because of differing mentalities and ways of life. These reasons, plus external causes, as well as the lack of charity and mutual understanding, left the way open to diversity (Flannery 1980:464).

In other words, the Roman Catholic Church accepts that the world is characterized by diversity and divisions. There is great diversity of manifestations of truth that it is now unfashionable to expect any society to conform to a common command and value of any sacred or foundational texts like the Torah, the Qur'an or the Gospel. Knitter, who has surveyed the problem of fundamentalism in depth and proposed dialogue as a way forward, posits thus:

"The many" cannot be boiled down to the "the one". Yes, different things can be interrelated, connected, and brought into unifying relationships, but never to the point where you lose diversity. Diversity will always, as it were, bounce back, or grow back. It always has the last word- or better, the additional word- over unity. Diversity dominates unity, and we can be happy it does. For otherwise, life and its evolution not only would get dull but would wither away. Remove diversity and you remove vitality (2010: 175).

In the light of the foregoing, it can be deduced that the world hangs on the theory of "the one and many". This implies that the cause of the origin of an idea or concept and its actual utility and place in a system of purpose, lays worlds apart. Hence, any culture that thinks it possesses

one unifying truth that will embrace all the others may indeed possess truth that will be forced upon others.

While the issue of fundamentalism may be, in part, political and social, the religious element underlies bloodshed in the name of God. For example, the protagonists of "*Boko Haram*" in Nigeria and those who offer their lives as suicide bombers do so with the conviction that their efforts for the Islamic cause will earn them immediate entrance to heaven. Again, fundamentalists in any religion claim a divine sanction for their activities. Their emotions and beliefs are powerful, dangerous and difficult to situate.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Religion is the fertile and nurturing platform for fundamentalism. The concept and praxis claim that its authority emanates from the one and absolute source, the word of God. Fundamentalism as a theory in Christianity for instance, abstracts strict rules from the Bible in order to pursue exclusive religious system. This approach to history and the world is appealing to people in that "it explains the crisis in society in simple religious terms and argues that the situation in the society cannot be changed unless society recaptures its religious roots" in the one and only absolute reality (Perera 2000:90).

Fundamentalism, in praxis and theory is rooted in the Greek Philosophy of "the conflict of opposites". The scholars associated with the framework are Heraclitus (500 BC), Parmenides (510 BC) and Zeno (489 BC). Commenting on these scholars in the light of antidotes to dogmatism, Russell notes that:

almost all the hypotheses that have dominated modern world were first thought of by the Greeks; their imaginative inventiveness in abstract matters can hardly be too highly praised... they gave birth to theories which have had an independent life and growth and which, though at first somewhat infantile, have proved capable of surviving and developing throughout more than two thousand years (1971:57).

It was the Greek minds like Heraclitus, Parmenides and Zeno that laid the theoretical foundation for what is today known as fundamentalism, which tends, generally to be exclusive. The study highlights the foundational thoughts of only Heraclitus and Parmenides.

Heraclitus flourished about 500 BC and very little is known of his life. However, he was an aristocratic citizen of Ephesus. He was a

mystic of a peculiar kind. For him, the conflict of opposites is not a calamity but the necessary condition of all things. From this perspective, he argues that, "what is in opposition is in concert, and from what differs comes the most beautiful harmony" (qtd. in Stumpf 1970:15). In his treatment of the problem of strife and disorder, Heraclitus argues again and again that multiplicity finds its unity in the one, so that what appears to be disjointed events and contradictory forces are in reality intimately harmonized. For this reason, Russell explains that Heraclitus taught that:

Everything, like flame in a fire, is born by the death of something else. Mortals are immortals, and immortals are mortals, the one living the other's death and dying the other's life. There is unity in the world, but it is a unity formed by the combination of opposites. All things come out of the one, and the one out of all things; but the many have less reality than the one, which is God (1971:59).

The effort made by Heraclitus to resolve the problem of conflict of opposites rests on his assumption that nothing is ever lost but merely changes. For him, the eternal fire moves with measured pace following the direction of Reason; that change requires opposites and diverse things (qtd. in Stumpf 1970:15). Heraclitus came to the conclusion that all things are good in so far as they are derived and related to the absolute one. For him, the absolute one takes shape and appears in many forms. The idea of the absolute one influenced the fundamentalists' narrow and exclusive religious system that holds that "the Bible alone is the believer's guide to faith and life" (Hoppe 1997:167).

The Greeks were addicted to taking extreme positions. Heraclitus maintained that "the absolute one" emerges through multiplicity and changes; Parmenides retorted that nothing changes; that change is nothingness. Parmenides, a native of Elea, in the South of Italy, flourished in the first half of the fifth century B.C. (Russell 1971:66). He was inclined to mysticism and religion and invented metaphysics based on logic.

Parmenides considered the senses deceptive, and condemned the multiplicity of sensible things as mere illusion. For him, the only true being is "the one", which is infinite and indivisible. It is not, as in Heraclitus, a union of opposites, since there are no opposites (Ukah and Okoro 2011:53). The one cannot be divided, because the whole of it is present everywhere. Samuel Stumpf writing about Parmenides' stance

on reality says:

To think is to think about something and for this reason you cannot think of anything changing or coming into being. To think of change requires one to attempt to do the impossible; namely, to think of something in terms of what it is not. Being, or reality, is what it is and not something else. For this reason it is impossible to think of change in any clear way since the only thing one can think about is being, or what actually is. It follows, therefore, that being is absolute, and that being is not divisible, since all being is alike (Stumpf 1970:16).

Parmenides insists that reality in the world is fundamentally one as process, structure, substance or ground. For him, diversity or change is the confusion of appearance with reality and, therefore it is simply an illusion. What lay behind this distinction between appearance and reality was Parmenides' equally important distinction between opinion and truth. Appearance cannot produce more than opinion, whereas reality is the basis of truth. In this way, he enunciated the mindset which was to become a basic platform of fundamentalism from twentieth century till date.

WHAT IS FUNDAMENTALISM?

Fundamentalism comes from the *Latin* word "*fundare*", meaning to establish (Scanlon & Scanlon 1976:248). It is the practice of following very strictly the established rules and teachings of any religion. In Christian religion, fundamentalism is the belief that everything that is written in the Bible is absolute and completely without error. Fundamentalism, as a trend, is a twentieth century phenomenon and its most outstanding feature is its violent opposition to liberal and cultural changes associated with modernism. As noted by Hoppe, "fundamentalism opposes biblical criticism, the social gospel movement, and the secularization of social and political institutions" (Hoppe 1997:167).

In other words, fundamentalism began as an attempt to defend the teaching of biblical inerrancy against modern scientific and philosophical thought. For the fundamentalist, "divine revelation could not come by way of a book that contained any error. The Bible, therefore, must be inerrant" (Hoppe 1997:167). Consequently, fundamentalists oppose the teaching of evolution and the historical criticism of the Old and New Testaments. In recent times, as observed by Hoppe and Woodward, fundamentalists have turned their attention to

combating the secularization of political and social norms like the push for legal protection for homosexuals (1998:343).

The evolutionary trajectory of human existence which includes the genetic code and the chemical aspects of human mind have indeed made the world new for human beings. In this sense, evolutionary theory and the historical criticism of the Old and New Testaments continually open up a new frontier to human consciousness of the word of God. Scholars associated with these areas of learning, as human beings, face their career in expectation of arriving at new insight. John F. Haught notes that "this anticipation energizes them and gives meaning to their lives. But when it comes to explaining new discoveries, they are limited to fitting them into what they already know of nature's past patterns of occurrence" (Haught 2011: 63). New insights of the word of God are made to fit into an established understanding of things human and divine, otherwise there would be conflicts.

In the light of historical criticism of the Old Testament for instance, fundamentalists are disturbed that old time beliefs are questioned and challenged as a result of the influence of modernism. John H. Hayes puts it clearer, "until modern times, the popular belief was that, whoever may have written the actual words, the real author of the Bible was the Spirit of God, who had spoken through the various authors. This doctrine of divine inspiration implied infallibility, and so the Bible was regarded as in a very literal sense the word of God" (1952:10). Beginning with the Renaissance and particularly during the Enlightenment, people began to question many things, including the idea of a divinely dictated sacred book, and scholars called attention to significant conflicting perspectives and viewpoints within the Bible itself. A clear case is the mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. The mosaic authorship of the first five books of the Bible was a firm belief shared by Judaism and Christianity. However, the mosaic or single authorship of the Pentateuch came to be challenged in the 16th and 17th centuries (Acher 1964:84). The grounds that warranted this challenge includes the facts that:

- The Pentateuch contains anachronisms;
- There are multiple accounts of the same events;
- Disagreements between narratives are frequent;
- Some texts specify that God was known and worshipped by the name Yahweh, while elsewhere it is claimed that his name was revealed to Moses as Elohim (Ceresko 1992:52-53).

From the foregoing, some scholars including Julius Wellhausen worked out the four source theory also known as the JEDP in the 19th century. JEDP stand for Yahwistic, Elohist, Deuteronomical and Priestly Traditions. As noted earlier the paper does not intend to dwell on theological technicalities. Hence, suffice to state that the four source

theory was aimed at resolving the problems of contradictions inherent in the biblical text; and make sense of the history of Israel presented in the historical books of the Bible. In addition, it also attempted to understand the Old Testament books which were practically sealed books then. The historical criticism of the Old Testament, in the light of the above, presented the Pentateuch as a collection of different materials from various sources and by multiple writers. In other words, inconsistencies in contents and significant variations in diction and style militate against the traditional view of the unity of authorship. Hence, fundamentalists vehemently oppose any modernism motivated insight to the sacred scripture.

Fundamentalism is, generally, understood within Christian parlance, as an uncompromising conservative understanding of the moral and theological teachings of Christian religion as contained only in the Bible. In the light of the foregoing, Schmidt remarked that fundamentalism is a response to modernists' tendency to pluralism and multiple approaches to the absolute truth. According to him:

Fundamentalism is a response to aspects of modern life that adherents believe are incompatible with God's word. Evangelical conservatives are opposed to Christians who have deviated from the fundamentals of the faith, to humanists who contend that life can be lived without reference to God, and to evolution and other scientific theories that are at odds with the Bible (1988:223).

Schmidt, in his remark, eloquently and clearly noted that there are variations of fundamentalism. That is to say that even within the concept of fundamentalism, there is cultural and religious diversity. One section of biblical conservatives subscribe to the inerrancy of the Bible. That is to say that the Bible is without mistakes in any form, including those of doctrine and history. Another group takes a moderate position to say that the Bible is infallible in respect to only doctrine. They maintain that despite infallibility, that the Bible is culturally conditioned and therefore contains errors in the areas of history. Yet, both groups accept that the scripture was inspired by the Holy Spirit. To the issue of whose interpretation of God's inerrant word is authoritative, biblical conservatives submit that the Holy Spirit inspires those who believe in Jesus Christ to proper interpretation of the sacred scripture. Hence, some scholars like Marty and Appleby talked about "family resemblances" among fundamentalists (1991: ix). Marty and Appleby succinctly recognized in all the forms of fundamentalism what Ludwig

Wittgenstein (1889 - 1951) called "family resemblances."

Commenting on the submissions of Marty and Appleby within the context of activism, McTernan agrees that their observation "provides a valuable insight into the mindset of religious extremists in so far as it helps to identify several ideological characteristic that these religiously diverse groups hold in common" (2003:33). A concern over the elimination of God's role in society is always uppermost in the agendas of fundamentalists. Their goal is to reshape society in line with their ethical beliefs. In this regard, Lawrence points out that while fundamentalists are modern in their use of modern means of communications, they are not modernists (1989:2-3).

For them, the goal to reshape society which has been eroded by modernists trend is immediate. They reject ideas like relativism and individualism, which they see as threats to their religious identity. They are very selective in the parts of the sacred texts that they choose to read, and they are absolute about the truthfulness of their interpretation of sacred scripture. They project a clear-cut distinction between good and evil. Anyone who challenges their cause is always made a target. They give no room to compromise in their struggle to impose monolithic religious structures and norms of behavior on a larger scale (Marty and Appleby 1991: 373). As suggested by Marty and Appleby, fundamentalists carry out their struggle in the name of God or in the name of some transcendent value. In other words, they see their struggle as divinely inspired and commissioned, and so the truth content is not in doubt.

FUNDAMENTALISM AND ROMAN CATHOLICISM

Fundamentalism and Roman Catholicism are both terms applied to designate people who do not accept that religion should be reinterpreted to suit contemporary views. Both perspectives see religion as that which must be "presented in the same language in season and out" (Ellwood McGraw 1999:456). Change in moral values, practice or in religious language is resisted both in fundamentalism and Roman Catholicism. However, for fundamentalism, the modern world is evil, destructive, and ungodly. They work for a vision of life and religion believed to be ancient and original. Bevans buttressed this point when he notes that fundamentalists "fight with a particularly chosen repository of resources which one may think of as weapons" (2009:200). The resources which they use as weapons might be the Christian Bible, the Qur'an of Islam, or sacred scripture of any other religion. Fundamentalists fight against those who do not share their beliefs.

The Roman Catholic tradition perceives the modern world in a very different way from the fundamentalists' stance. Contrary to a position that distrust the modern world, the Roman Catholic perspective, while it does not give unreserved approval of the world, it recognizes that

human challenges and experiences, culture and trends in history, are the primary sources of theological reflection. Following this trend, Bevens writes: "Theology is not just a mining of the past, but a constant discovery of history's richness and relevance for this world today. In contrast to a belief that certain practices need to be restored that are 'traditional' or 'ancient' when often they are only a few centuries old, Catholicism has recourse to history" (2009:201). Thus, history is the bearer of divine revelation in Roman Catholicism.

On his own part, O'Meara underscores the point that, 'the Roman Catholic Church is old' and "Catholicism takes the long view" (1986:87). This 'long view' implies that there is actually very little that is really new and whatever that seems old is actually something worked out in a relatively recent past. History, in this sense, is the framework of mediation of a redemptive past in so far as it is the communication of the plan of redemption revealed in the past. In this regard, O'Meara affirms that 'history is the great enemy of every fundamentalism' (1986:87). Roman Catholicism's sense of history abhors any simplistic approach to sacred text. For her, the bible is not a solution book but a 'document that is the product of various authors in various periods of history, each book reflects the culture and beliefs of the time in which it was written or finally edited' (Bevens 2009:201).

Vatican II teaches that the Bible is free from any error in so far as it teaches 'firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put in the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.' (D.V. II). Therefore, the Catholic scholar interprets the Bible in line with the various methods which brings out its meaning. This is informed by the fact that, "the Biblical word comes from a real past. It comes only from the past, however, but at the same time from the eternity of God and it leads us into God's eternity, but again along the way through time, to which the past, the present and the future belong" (The Pontifical Biblical Commission 1994:18).

Roman Catholicism is not in any form sectarian, but all embracing, open and tolerant of varieties of theologies. There is space for Igbo theology as well as Zulu theology; a more meditative theology as well as more analytical scholastic outlook. At the end of Vatican II Council, it became clear that a theology that is Catholic needs to be in dialogue with theologies of other religions, while of course noting that all theologies are not the same. Thus, Irvin writes that, "behind this is a more fundamental belief in the openness of God to human history" (1998:3). Roman Catholicism believes in the presence of God's mercy and grace available both inside and outside the walls of church.

Ultimately, there are basic differences between Roman Catholicism and fundamentalism. While fundamentalists belief in a rigid God, Catholics glory in a God who, while utterly the other, has revealed the divine fullness in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. That is to say that

the ordinariness of God's grace is the basic theme of Roman Catholic theologizing. Again, Roman Catholicism beliefs that human nature is fundamentally good; so also the world and the whole of creation. In this light, Bevens elegantly submits that, 'human experience, therefore, is a worthy source of theological truth, when put into dialogue with the church's rich and long tradition' (Bevens 2009:202). In the Roman Catholic tradition, teaching authority of the church and theological debate are all essential structures that embody God's grace.

FUNDAMENTALIST TRENDS IN RELIGIONS

As noted earlier, fundamentalists hold the common trend that 'their scripture texts were dictated verbatim by a divine authority and as such are beyond interpretation (McTernan 2003:22). They insist that the words of their scripture as it is written must be obeyed. The study has also noted that they are always selective in their choices of passages of the Scriptures and they focus on texts that underscore their claim of absolute truth and superiority over others. They totally ignore passages that point to the universal nature of the human person and the reality of pluralism of truth.

The event of 9/11 clearly buttresses the above point. Far from being propelled by any sense of 'end-time phobia', the perpetrators of 9/11 principally saw themselves as God's anointed, charged with duty of inaugurating a new era of God's reign that would transform the world. In discussing the issue, McTernan strongly points out that, "to underestimate the power of religious conviction is seriously to underestimate the threat that religiously motivated terrorism presents" (McTernan 2003:22). There may be many factors that can give rise to fundamentalism but the factors cannot be in themselves sufficient and prime reason to waste human life in the name of religion. But religious convictions and ideology are powerful combustible foundations for killing in God's name.

Fundamentalists in all religions question the legitimacy of the secular society. The common complaint is the absence of values that they could own in a society that has excluded God. Hence, their common belief is to help God bring about a new social order with religion as the foundation. This trend could be inspired through the Hebrew Scriptures, the Quran or the Gospels. In this regard, McTernan says that, "today's violent activist... have numerous exemplars within their own faith traditions that provide the kind of religious sanction they need to justify their own use of violence" (McTernan 2003:22). The brand of fundamentalism that are dangerous in religions have undue concern for the shape of future society and they end up being deeply antagonistic, they are formed by absolute claims to the truth of their sacred texts. Claims of absolute truth turns out to be "a potential for bitter conflict" (Kepel 1994:192).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study has been to demonstrate that, despite the understanding that fundamentalism is a serious cause of conflict in the world; there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the Roman Catholic perspective could be the panacea for coexistence in a multicultural society. In this case, the study noted that the God of the bible, in the light of Roman Catholicism, is not an absolute being who suppresses all differences and all nuances. On the contrary, he is God, who created all the astonishing variety of truths in religions. In addition, the study argued that the placing of the Bible in the context of historical reality is one of the salient achievements of Vatican II council (1962-64). The study affirmed the Council's pronouncement that the teachings and practices of other faith traditions represent what is 'true' and 'holy' and reflect a ray of the truth that enlightens all peoples. In all, the exhortation relevant to the 21st century religious adherents is to prudently and respectfully, dialogue and collaborate with all the traditions. This will promote moral good embedded in the world. Against this perspective, the study also highlighted the trends of fundamentalism in religions and concludes with the submission of Stewart that, "history is replete with instruction, and suggestive of duty, it takes the experience of others and offers it to ourselves admonishing us to shun their faults and copy their virtues" (Stewart 1862: i).

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