

## Fundamentalism of Both Kinds in Light of the Via Media

By Lawrence D. Hart

The significance of the Anglican principle of the *via media*, the middle way, has, I confess, until recently been lost on me. I saw it as a refined expression for “compromise.” And, while I knew the ability to make appropriate compromises was a sign of health, I also knew being a real person means possessing inner values that are nonnegotiable. But the other day while reflecting on two disappointing worship experiences I had a particularly lucid moment in which I saw that the *via media* is not compromise, but rather the ability to consider unfamiliar and novel ideas, and to relate and synthesize the truth of those ideas.

My first experience occurred years ago while attending a worship service with my mother and sister. My mother had just been widowed for the third time, and my sister was struggling with the darkness of depression. The church was more than a little conservative, and the sermon that morning focused on how everyone could and should understand the Bible in the same way, how all Christians should be of “one mind.” Later my mother quipped, “Yes! And we know whose mind it would be too.” She was simply recognizing, having heard many similar sermons in her denomination, that what the preacher was really saying was that anyone who disagreed with his particular understanding of the littlest details of the Bible, or with the particular views of the partisan group to which he belonged, was bound for the flames of hell. What I thought that morning was, “There is nothing here. There is nothing here for the sick at heart, for the desperate struggler, or for anyone who “sits beside a pool of tears.” Nor is there anything for anyone seized by the incalculable goodness of life who wishes to celebrate on this day. Conservative fundamentalism is about the inconsequential and therefore simply cannot address the depth of our existence.

My second experience was, as I say, more recent. While in transition my wife and I had begun attending a parish because of its convenient location for us. Most Sundays the sermon attempted to debunk the readings appointed for the day. The priest is concerned, he says, with making people feel welcome who don’t and can’t believe all this Christian stuff. As I have been able to understand it, he is himself a Christian because he likes what the beauty of the Episcopal liturgy makes him feel, and thinks that Christianity is a good way of life. One Sunday as I sat listening to the sermon, it came to me that I felt the same way I had felt years before sitting with my mother and sister in that rigidly conservative church with its simplistic understanding of life and Scripture. There is nothing here I thought – nothing for the grieving, nothing for the joyful, nothing for those seeking ultimate meaning and fulfillment. When it came to the Lord’s Prayer we might as well of recited Hemmingway’s version: “Our *nada* who art in *nada*, *nada* be thy *nada*. . .

” Liberal fundamentalism is also about the inconsequential and therefore unable to speak to the depths of human experience.

A few days later I realized how much these two experiences were alike, and that there is a fundamentalism of both the religious right and the religious left. They each share a number of similarities. For example, fundamentalism of both types is predominantly what Douglas John Hall calls *professional* rather than *confessional* in nature. *Profession* is the public acknowledgement of what we think. Conservative fundamentalism replaces a living faith in Christ with rigid dogma and intellectual propositions about Jesus that one must profess or be damned for all time. But liberal fundamentalism is no less adamant in its claim to be the arbiter of ultimate truth. Only someone from the “enlightened” far left can see the real truth of things. Where the conservative relies on dubious and unthinking personal interpretations of Scripture in constructing a worldview, the liberal spins metaphysics out of his or her own head. For the latter, assumptions are correct not because of any reasonable epistemology, or commitment to Scripture, but because that is how he or she personally thinks and feels; or, would like for things to be. Conversely, *confessional* faith bears witness to what one has experienced and known of Christ. The Latin *confessio* was originally used to designate the burial place of a confessor or martyr; that is, one who had borne witness to the truth he or she had encountered even if doing so meant torture and death. As used here we *profess* what we think, but *confess* the reality we have encountered, discovered, and, in the Jungian sense, know as well as believe. It seems to me that confession, honestly expressing the reality I have discovered in Christ without denigrating any other faith traditions and having a willingness to listen and learn from them, is the *via media* between an exclusivism so dense that not even what is good can penetrate it and an inclusivism *so porous* it lacks integrity. I have an appreciation for something the editors of The Christian Century, a more theologically liberal magazine, wrote:

Tolerance of others is a virtue, but it is a complex one. . . . Embracing the virtue of tolerance should not lead us to think religions are all the same or that all religious beliefs are compatible. Tolerance should not preclude Christians from humbly and joyfully witnessing to the truth about God revealed to them in Jesus Christ. Christians are called to proclaim this distinct truth, while affirming the kind of religious tolerance that arises from their own belief – the kind voiced by the Apostle Peter when he said, “God shows no partiality, but in every nation [*ethnos/ethnei*] anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34b-35).

Honestly confessing what I have discovered on my pilgrimage, saying who I am, where I stand, and where I am going while respecting the right of every other human being to do the same is the path leading safely between adversarial professions.

A second shared characteristic of all fundamentalism is that it is fear based. Edwin Friedman, the highly respected rabbi, therapist and pioneer in systems theory, believed all debunking, a frequent characteristic of the far left, arises out of the individual's own internal anxiety. The religious right is afraid that if certain modern scholars are correct in any of their conclusions then the whole Christian faith will collapse like a house of cards or a line of dominos. Consequently, any thought that does not fit into their crystallized understanding is automatically and angrily rejected. Fundamentalism is essentially a reaction to events arising out of one's own inner emotional baggage rather than a wholesome and grateful response to the beauty, goodness and truth that has been graciously revealed to us. Fundamentalism is not about specific beliefs, but the manner in which those beliefs are held. The *via media* of the open mind and heart is the antidote to both types of fundamentalism.

The problem with both sorts of fundamentalism is deeper than any particular set of beliefs. The problem is that both engage in ideological thinking; and, are therefore subject to elements of pride and self-interest. To paraphrase John Carnell, "There is always a demagogue on hand to decide who is virtuous and who is not." When their particular beliefs are examined John Spong and James Dobson seem very different, but when one looks at the way in which each holds his beliefs they appear very similar. Years ago Rokeach discovered in his psychological research that "closed minded" and "open minded people" differ precisely in this regard; that is, a closed minded person may change his or her mind, for instance change political parties, but they will hold their new beliefs with the same dogmatism, negativity, and even hostility with which they held their old beliefs. However, The "open minded" person holds his or her beliefs with humility, with a genuine appreciation of other ways of believing, and with the understanding that while one must make committed choices in life it is always possible that one is, to one degree or another, mistaken.

Fundamentalism is intensely concerned with control. Usually this arises out of a fear that if not carefully managed one's world might careen into chaos. Consequently God must be managed, the Spirit restrained, and Christ the Lion tamed and domesticated. The right does this by reducing Christianity to a legalistic system and formulas that God is obligated to follow. In this way the fearful ambiguity and unpredictability of life are safely managed or removed all together. The theological left, horrified by what a deep unqualified yes to God and the Christ whom God sent might mean, find relief in denying, as I heard in one parish forum, that God is the creator or that Jesus Christ is Lord.

I have been writing about the fundamentalism of the right and left as two ideologies in Christendom; yet, it is at this point that I am forced to agree with Douglas Hall: "Those who say that Jesus is not in some special sense significant for their belief

have already stepped outside the Christian faith, for Christianity is what it is through the affirmation that Jesus of Nazareth, who has been called the ‘Christ’ is actually the Christ, namely he who brings the new state of things – not a statement of Christian conservatism but of one to whom many turn for their basis of interfaith dialogue.”

The right approaches the interpretation of Scripture from a rigidly literal perspective that deifies Scripture itself as totally inerrant; the left, is rigidly figurative in its understanding and sees Scripture as a misguided, mistaken, and erroneous set of documents whose only truth is in an emblematic meaning. Both views are obsessed with “factuality,” both are held with the same attitudes indicative of closed mindedness, and both are equally one-dimensional. They are, as the saying goes, reverse sides of one coin.

There is a great illustration of what I mean in Craig Evans’ book *Fabricating Jesus*. Evans explores the shift of the scholar Bart Ehrman from conservative to liberal fundamentalism. Ehrman became a believer as a teenager in a conservative setting. He enrolled in the fundamentalist Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, and then from there went to Wheaton College and Graduate School, eventually earning a Ph.D. at Princeton. Ehrman held rather rigid ideas about inspiration and the inerrancy of Scripture. Eventually everything unraveled for Ehrman as a result of reading Jesus’ comment in Mark 2:25-26 stating that David, when he was in need and hungry, entered the house of God when Abiathar was High Priest. However, I Samuel 21:1-10, actually says Ahimelech was the High Priest who assisted David, and that when Saul, who was pursuing David, heard about this he murdered Ahimelec. His son, Abithar, escaped and later succeeded his father as High Priest. Because Ahimelec and not his son was actually High Priest when David and his band of warriors ate the consecrated bread we technically have a mistake – a mistake either on the part of Jesus, or Mark, or someone who passed the story along. Ehrman says that once he admitted that mistake the floodgates opened. “For if there could be one little picayune mistake in Mark 2, maybe there could be mistakes in other places as well.” This is not the day Ehrman outgrew fundamentalism, it is the day he capitulated to it, and was consumed by it. Evans comments, “The historical reliability of the Gospels does not hinge on proof that no mistakes of any kind can be detected in them. Ehrman’s struggle with faith grows out of mistaken expectations of the nature and function of Scripture.” My point is that whether as a conservative youth or a liberal adult there is a sameness to Ehrman’s thinking and approach to Scripture that has an intense concern with a highly literal factuality as at least one of its chief characteristics.

The work of John Knox, the twentieth century theologian, indicates at least one way the *via media* might free us from both types of fundamentalism. Knox believed Scripture must be understood in terms of its great myths, as well as its objective reality. In a true biblical myth, he said, there are both “existential-expressive” and “objective-explanatory” elements. Although the two cannot be separated, “the “existential-expressive” is the use of imaginative language to express the deepest reality of life as we

feel and live it. Resorting to highly “poetic” language is the best we can do in trying to express the reality of event and experience. The “objective-explanatory” is “the actual objective act of God” which accounts for where the expressive narrative came from. A story, then, may contain certain imaginative elements but, nevertheless, be rooted in an objective reality that can only be described “metaphorically”. The opening chapters of Genesis are clearly in the language of poetry or myth; yet, Christians believe Genesis expresses the very real fact that God is the creative source of our existence and every blessing of beauty we experience. As Knox insightfully pointed out, “there is a difference between a story that imaginatively expresses the inner meaning of a known fact, and a story that invents the fact itself.” Knox is suggestive of how the *via media* might be useful in synthesizing the metaphorical and objective reality of biblical events and stories – relating spiritual practice and rigorous scholarship.

The *via media* offers the possibility of avoiding the pitfalls of the fundamentalism of both right and left, and in moving toward a progressive orthodoxy of intellectual honesty and spiritual depth characteristic of those times when “the mind descends into the heart.”