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A HEIDEGGERIAN ANALYSIS OF FUNDAMENTALISM: A BRIEF DISCUSSION

1. Introduction

In the past ten years there have been, it seems, clear signs of a turn to the right in matters political and religious. In some quarters this has been characterized as neo-conservatism – a generic term used to cover a host of attitudes and behaviours. Accompanying this shift but not identical to it, is a corresponding rise in fundamentalism. One need only point to the Islamic revolution in Iran or to the Moral Majority in the United States, both of which have tried to push the political agenda in a far more conservative direction. A whole spectrum of explanations and hypotheses – some more satisfying than others – have been advanced to account for this shift.

Take, for example, the rise of fundamentalism in the United States. According to one view, the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century proved so disruptive and alienating that conservative Christians felt duty bound to protect the old order. As the generally accepted premise of Christian culture gradually slipped away, conservative Christians became increasingly doctrinaire about the truly Christian life. Lacking a social consensus, personal commitment and right belief would now become the glue that would hold things together. Getting the facts right – the fundamental facts – was of paramount importance for a movement which believed that mainstream culture had abandoned its religious heritage.¹

Others trace fundamentalist origins to the revivalist movement of the nineteenth century. The contention here is that the revivalist movement had no competition, unlike Europe, where it shared the market with the

1. George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 204ff.

forces of Catholicism. The consequence was that revivalism's emphasis on a return to the Bible (*sola scriptura*) and leaving behind religious practices lacking scriptural warrant, easily dominated the religious ethos of the period.² In effect, the groundwork was laid for fundamentalism's subsequent focus on the letter of the Bible as the exclusive locus of God.

No doubt, psychological and sociological factors play an important role in the rise of fundamentalism. But I must confess that I have always felt some dissatisfaction with analyses of this kind. It seems to me, that the rise of fundamentalism, properly understood, is best conceived as an epochal fate – a *destiny of thought itself*. My argument – or better perhaps, hypothesis – stems largely from the insights of Martin Heidegger, the most influential philosopher that Germany has produced in the twentieth century. Heidegger argues that the history of thought is not so much a chronicle of human accomplishments as a destiny that befalls humanity at the hands of being itself. He is particularly critical of all forms of humanism and subjectivism which simply assume that human beings are the final measure of reality. Human subjectivity, he argues, cannot be understood without being placed in the broader context of being, since it is here, above all, that “human” thought is ultimately grounded and destined. Indeed if thought has a history, then its transcendental condition (i.e., being) must also be understood as historical in its nature. This means, in turn, that the history of human thought, correctly understood, is really tantamount to the history of being itself. To understand this, is, for Heidegger, to understand also that human thought is not the product of a self-empowered subject but an historic fate originally shaped by being. Of particular significance for us, is Heidegger's claim that our current destiny, that is, the manner and style of thinking now destined to be thought, is caught in the web of objectifying thinking. This, he claims, has reached its apex in the calculative thinking of scientific positivism whose very nature (i.e., destiny) is to make itself the exclusive arbiter of what counts as real. The upshot is that alternative forms of thinking are excluded altogether and thought's proper object (which Heidegger takes as being) is simply passed over and forgotten.

2. Donald G. Mathews, "The Great Awakening as an Organizing Process 1780–1830: An Hypothesis," *American Quarterly* XXI (1961): *Rise of Adventurism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth Century America*, Edwin S. Gaustad, ed., (New York: Harper and Row, (1974), pp. 119–54.

Here, of course, it is not my concern to explore in detail the analysis of being (*das Sein*) offered by Heidegger. I am concerned instead with how his discussion of thought as destiny illuminates the phenomenon of fundamentalism. More specifically, I intend to show that Heidegger's analysis clearly reveals both the ontological and epistemic matrix that enables and fosters the fundamentalist enterprise. He points, moreover, to some interesting possibilities for the future of fundamentalism. Before, however, I set out Heidegger's position in somewhat greater detail, I want to discuss, if only briefly, what I think are the two most basic features of the fundamentalist phenomenon.

2. Truth as Correspondence: Scripture Mirroring Reality

Perhaps the most basic characteristic of the fundamentalist viewpoint is that scripture is interpreted "as referential truth, a correspondence between the details of the text and some event or reality outside the text."³ This is crucial, since it is generally assumed – at least in the west – that God acts in history and that God's acts are real. Scripture, then, is not interpreted as a self-contained story that has its truth independent of fact. Moreover, should scripture be found wanting in relation to experience (i.e., fact), the onus is not on scripture but on the individual believer to return to his experience to find those truths he has apparently over-looked. This accords, too, with the fundamentalist viewpoint that the meaning of scripture is something fixed and determinate. Kathleen Boone writes:

By insisting on the sole authority of the biblical text, fundamentalists are bound to defend the determinacy of meaning . . . they argue that textual *meaning* has been determined, once for all, by the will of its author – in this case, God. The scriptures are therefore to be interpreted prayerfully, the reader asking the author for enlightenment. Textual *significance*, on the other hand, will come into play when the reader applies scriptural teaching to practical concerns in his or her own life or to worldly affairs.⁴

3. Vincent P. Branick, "The Attractiveness of Fundamentalism," *Fundamentalism Today: What Makes It So Attractive?*, Marla J. Selvidge, ed., (Elgin, Illinois: Brethren Press, 1984), p. 21.

4. Kathleen C. Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So: The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 20-21.

There is a strict insistence on fixed meaning for texts, since it is generally believed that without this norm there would be as many interpretations as there are readers of a text. God, it is assumed, precludes this problem by fixing a text's meaning thus avoiding the quandary of a plurality of interpretations. Here, too, it is easy to see that the fixity of a text's meaning is the logical condition of a related view that scripture acts as a timeless mirror that reflects the whole of reality. It also fits with the fundamentalist teaching on the inerrancy of scripture, since for something to be inerrant it must *a/ways* correspond to external events and circumstances.

3. The Criticism of Modernism and Tradition

A second characteristic of fundamentalism is a tendency to be critical of most aspects of modernity. The modern epoch is frequently described as the age of apostasy and secularization. Commenting upon American fundamentalism, George Marsden writes:

America seemed to many evangelicals to have lost its Christian and biblical moorings. World War I precipitated this sense of alarm, for the war sped up a revolution in morals that, despite the rearguard action of Prohibition legislation, replaced Victorian evangelical standards with the public morals of the jazz age.⁵

The same is true of the Islamic revolution in Iran. The Islamic *ulama* became increasingly fearful that the Shah's attempt to modernize Iran would also mean adopting the secular values of the west. There was no middle ground. Western technology was nothing less than the proverbial Trojan Horse which, if left on its own, would quickly destroy the Islamic way of life. Moreover, liberal democracy, founded on Lockian contractualism, was perceived as a threat to scripturally based laws whose sole justification was the Koranic God himself.

Coupled with its suspicion of modern culture, fundamentalism, particularly its American variety, is also critical of tradition. Like most revivalist movements, tradition is interpreted as a human construct that tends to obstruct the believer's access to the life and practices of the original

5. George M. Marsden, "Evangelical and Fundamental Christianity," *The Encyclopedia of Religion* Vol. 5, Mircea Eliade et al. eds., (New York : Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), p. 193.

believing community. What, then, is required, is a concerted effort to push away the intervening tradition and return again to the faith's founding insights as these are established in scripture. These, in turn, then become the normative principles for living a contemporary faith.

In American fundamentalism, the attack on tradition is also extended to "official" readings of scripture, particularly those said to be guaranteed by institutional authorities. For the fundamentalists, the Bible is a simple book open and accessible to all. Charles Hodge writes :

The Bible is a plain book. It is intelligible by the people. And they have the right and are bound to read and interpret it for themselves; so that their faith may rest on the testimony of the Scriptures, and not that of the Church.⁶

Here there are obvious echoes of the democratic spirit of the new world in America. The more hierarchical mind-set of continental Europe is given no hearing whatsoever.

Having described what I take to be the two basic features of fundamentalism, I will now return to a brief analysis of Heidegger's account of the history of thought as destiny. Again, my goal is to show that Heidegger's philosophy is capable of throwing considerable light on the ontological foundations of fundamentalist thinking.

3. Martin Heidegger and Thought as Destiny

Briefly put, Heidegger's thought is directed throughout by one leading theme: to re-awaken and help think anew the original meaning of being (*das Sein*). Heidegger claimed that the question of being had been repeatedly overlooked by the history of metaphysics. It, he said, had constantly interpreted being as an objectifiable entity as distinct from the being of beings. That is, it tended to interpret being as one object among others as opposed to the horizon of all beings in general. This brings us to a cardinal feature of Heidegger's philosophy: his critique of metaphysics.

6. Charles Hodge, "The Inspiration of Holy Scripture," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 29 (October 1857) p. 664. Quoted by Kathleen C. Boone in *The Bible Tells Them So: The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 17.

i) *The Critique of Metaphysics*

As we just noted, Heidegger argues that the history of metaphysics is characterized in general by a forgetfulness of being. According to Heidegger, a key source of the problem is humanity's attempt to ground itself in one supreme cause (*causa prima*) – a cause frequently identified with God. He refers, in fact, to the history of metaphysics as the history of "onto-theological thinking."⁷ Again, however, this attempt at grounding obscures the phenomenon of being, since being is not *a* being but the very being of beings. This eclipse, according to Heidegger, is accentuated further by the objectifying thinking of metaphysics most notably expressed in scientific positivism. Here his claim stems from his conviction that the history of metaphysics is marked throughout by humanity's attempt to force reality to conform to its cognitive framework. This framework, particularly since Descartes, has tended to place reality over and against the subject, the consequence being that reality is reduced to the subject's *objectification*. What counts as real, or better perhaps, knowledge, is that which falls in the subject-object schema. But once again the problem here is that being gets neglected in the pursuit of particular entities. Precisely for this reason, Heidegger proposes a "step back" (*Schritt zurück*) into the essence of metaphysics in which being is revealed as the transcendental basis of objectifying thinking (i.e., scientific positivism).⁸

In Heidegger's later thought, or after the so-called turn (*die Kehre*), the forgetfulness of being is increasingly interpreted from the standpoint of being itself. Heidegger argued that such a turn was necessitated by the very momentum of the *Seinsfrage*. According to Heidegger, his early work (*Being and Time* included) was still caught up in the objectifying thinking of metaphysics. It was still too restricted to humanity's conceptual framework. This, for Heidegger, was crucial, since he intended to show that being, not man, was the ultimate basis of human thought while also being the primary impulse of the history of thought in general. Consequently, after the turn, Heidegger argues that the history of metaphysics is tantamount to a *destiny* that befalls humanity at the hands of being itself. It is not to be construed as an error in human thought. Being covers *itself* up.

7. Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, (Tübingen : Max Niemayer, 1953), pp. 5-6.

8. Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, (Pfullingen : 1954), p. 184.

Heidegger traces the origin of this covering to Plato's conception of truth, an early form in which being was mediated to thought. Prior to Plato, Heidegger contends that truth was conceived as an uncovering of being itself (*aletheia*). With Plato, however, this changes significantly when truth is conceived as conformity to the "ideas." This, he says, inaugurated, in turn, or at least laid the basis, for a view of truth based on the notion of the correct correspondence between a thought and its object. This marks the beginning of humanism and the anthropocentric thinking that soon comes to characterize the history of metaphysics. For Heidegger, moreover, what began as an impulse in Plato becomes increasingly pronounced in Descartes, Hegel, and Nietzsche. In Descartes' philosophy, in particular, the thinking subject is elevated to an unprecedented status. By standing outside the world completely, it turns it into an object at its own self disposal. This, in turn, is accentuated further by Nietzsche's will to power which plays itself out in the managerial style of scientific positivism which is all but complete today.

ii) *The Epistemic and Ontological Foundations of Fundamentalism*

Of significance for us is that Heidegger's analysis of the destiny of thought also sheds light on the phenomenon of fundamentalism. It points, as it were, to the epistemic and ontological foundation of the fundamentalist viewpoint. Nowhere is this more evident than in the fundamentalist attitude toward scripture. Here one clearly discerns a notion of truth conceived as correspondence. What is assumed is a fixed correspondence between biblical facts and external events and realities. Pushed to an extreme, this takes the form of a biblical literalism that is all too typical of fundamentalist writings.⁹ To understand God is

9. James Barr takes a considerably different view. He argues that fundamentalists are far less literalistic than is usually believed and often appeal to symbolic interpretations of scripture. (James Barr, *Fundamentalism*, London : S.C.M. Press Ltd., 1977). Still, I tend to agree with Kathleen Boone's remarks that :

Although Barr's analysis is correct, as far as it goes, it trades on an equivocation all too common both in fundamentalism itself and in studies of the phenomenon. There are two senses of the word literalism. On the one hand, it can be taken to mean the disallowance of figurative or symbolic interpretation : horses are always horses, never tanks or warheads. On the other hand, *literal* also denotes the empirical or the ostensibly referential. One need not believe that actual fire and brimstone will spew from the mouths of actual horses, whether natural or supernatural, in order to believe that an empirically sensible invasion of death-dealing forces will actually take place at some point in the future.

See Kathleen Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So : The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism*, (Albany : State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 45.

to understand his Word, and this means coming to know the determinate meaning of scripture. But this presupposes the subject-object relationship, since a fixed meaning for scripture is only possible for the kind of subject who treats the text as a reified object, that is, something held at the reader's disposal in the subject-object schema.

This brings us to another point: The subject-object schema, at least, according to Heidegger, is only to be understood as a *modern* phenomenon. Commenting upon Heidegger, Heinrich Ott writes:

Only in modern times has man looked at the world objectively, surveying the universe as a detached observer. In antiquity and the middle ages there is no objectification, no world view in this sense. Only where man emerges out of the world as an isolated subject does the world become an isolated object. It was Descartes who first did this, and in this respect he is the father of all modern thought. Since his day it has been taken for granted that there is a subject-object pattern, both in science and popular thinking.¹⁰

Here again Heidegger sheds some interesting light on the fundamentalist phenomenon. While the fundamentalist viewpoint is allegedly anti-modern, its epistemic and ontological foundations are actually thoroughly modern. It, too, is caught in the objectifying destiny of being. This means as well that the call of fundamentalism to return to biblical roots is ironically mediated through the modern *tradition* of the subject-object relationship.

4. The Future of Fundamentalism: A Loosening from Within?

On the basis of our discussion thus far it would seem foolish to assume that any liberalization of the fundamentalist position is just around the corner. If Heidegger is right, there are formidable forces at the heart of being pushing in the opposite direction. But this, I think, is only one side of the story. Heidegger *also* states – albeit much less explicitly – that it is precisely when humanity is most caught up in the destiny of objectification that there also dawns a growing sense

10. Heinrich Ott, "Objectification and Existentialism," *Kerygma and Myth* Vol. 2, H.W. Bartsch, ed., (London : S.P.C.K., 1962), pp. 312–13.

of the insufficiency and danger of this view of reality. He writes in "The Question Concerning Technology":

The closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine and the more questioning we become.¹¹

In a move reminiscent of Hegel, Heidegger implies that humanity is impelled by being itself to *think beyond* the objectification of being. Questioning here is crucial, since questioning is to think, and to think is to *transcend* that about which one questions. Being, then, while covering itself up also "saves" by enabling thought to think beyond total objectification. For Heidegger, salvation takes the form of a non-objectifying thinking that is more in keeping with the dynamic character of being. Suffice it to say here that non-objectifying thinking is willing to relinquish the controlling interests of the subject and think outside the subject-object schema. It renounces, in effect, the self-empowered thinking of the Cartesian ego by opening itself up to the broader experience of being. Indeed Heidegger speaks of thinking as essentially a form of thanking in which humankind waits upon being for that which being destines.

For me, at least, the question naturally arises as to whether there is a corresponding movement beyond objectification within fundamentalism. If, after all, fundamentalism—itsself a form of being—is also that which being truly destines—it is legitimate to expect certain changes in the epistemic and ontological matrix of fundamentalism too. I, of course, am by no means a prophet; nonetheless I would like to suggest where two of these changes may come about.

i) *A Growing Respect for Scripture as Multivalent*

The first place where evidence might be found is in the fundamentalist's attitude toward scripture. As suggested earlier, the fundamentalist's reading of scripture has been shaped thus far by a view of truth based on correspondence. This position was shown as grounded in an historic movement of being that enabled fundamentalism to

11. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, tr. and intro. by William Lovitt, (New York: Garland Publishers, 1977), p. 35.

objectify scripture by assigning words fixed and determinate meanings. If, however, Heidegger is right, and there now exists a real possibility of moving beyond total objectification, there is, it seems, also the possibility of a renewed relation to scripture within fundamentalism. What becomes significant, or *could* become significant, is a greater emphasis on the biblical language as event. Released from the schema of the subject-object relationship, scripture would be freed from a calculating subject who seeks to discover a determinate meaning for each scriptural word. The focus instead would now become the word – event – or that which speaks *through* the various biblical texts. Scripture, then, would not be seen as a sum of determinate meanings but as a living witness to the Spirit of God which is never at our disposal (i.e., never fixed and determinate). This, too, could also mean that a literal view of scripture would eventually give way to one that is more symbolic. Instead of meaning being strictly univocal – or based on truth as simple correspondence – it could now be seen as multivalent in character. Harold Coward's remarks on the oral experience of scripture are especially suggestive in this respect:

Instead of a hermeneutics of reduction, based on the assumption that the text has only one correct meaning, the oral experience of scripture paves the way for a hermeneutics of unfolding *Entfaltung*, an opening up of the richness of the word in terms of its symbolic potentialities.¹²

ii) *A Growing Distinction Between God's Act and His Word*

A second place where one might look for a "loosening up" in fundamentalist ontology is a growing distinction between God's act and his word. By assuming that scripture is fixed and determinate, fundamentalism – perhaps inadvertently – restricts God's act to the literal word of the text. Scripture is exalted to such an extent that it soon becomes the exclusive locus of God. This accounts for the frequent criticism that fundamentalism is a kind of bibliolatry. If, however, fundamentalism can now think beyond the subject-object schema, due to a shift within being itself, it can also think the presence of God in terms much broader than the fixed meaning of scripture. God's act, too, would not be absorbed

12. Harold Coward, *Sacred Word and Sacred Text: Scripture in World Religions*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 182.

by his word. This, in turn, has the desirable effect of restoring God to his lordship. Edgar Towne writes:

The authority of an inerrant Bible tends to displace Jesus as head of the Church . . . There is a tendency to describe the authority of the Bible as an inerrant book in a way that eclipses the living divine self-revelation that is claimed as the basis of the Bible itself . . . There is an obvious tension here between an experienced event of revelation and the written expression derivative from that event . . . Fundamentalist theology tends to insist on the denial of this difference.¹³

Conclusion

In sum, then, Heidegger's account of the destiny of being clearly reveals the epistemic and ontological basis of fundamentalist thinking. It suggests that fundamentalism is a destined kind of thinking, the scope of which is nothing less than global. For some, of course, such an explanation will seem far too speculative and philosophical. Critics, however, would be well advised to ask themselves if their own assumptions aren't wrapped up in the very destiny that Heidegger thinks so clearly. One last thought: could a "loosening" from within the fundamentalist viewpoint push fundamentalism in an increasingly liberal direction? If this is so, we may soon be the witnesses of a rapprochement between traditionally bitter opponents.

13. Edgar Towne, "Fundamentalism's Theological Challenge to the Churches," *Fundamentalism Today: What Makes It So Attractive?*, Marla J. Selvidge, ed., (Elgin, Illinois: Brethren Press, 1984), p. 33.