

FUNDAMENTALISM

The Only Way to Redeem Religious Ethics?

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1. Introduction

Both modernism and Post-modernism have challenged religion and religious ethics. Modernism – which is a continuation of the Enlightenment and humanism – made the human, who is rational, autonomous and self-determining, the centre and measure of everything. Modernism's emphasis on the power of reason and an all-powerful scientific knowledge pushed religion and religious ethics into the periphery, making it something inferior and superfluous. Post-modernity with its rejection of any system, structure, order and control and with its conception of everything as provisional has challenged again the validity of religious ethics which often speak about norms and values which are perennial and which have universal validity.¹ The Post-modernist era is sometimes described as Post-religious and Post-moral. Liberalism and neo-liberalism promoted by modernism and post-modernism defend unlimited individual liberty, emancipation of the individual from beliefs which are not rationally proved, and liberation from religious and political authorities.²

Globalization, often described as an economic system, is also a social, political and cultural phenomenon and influences every aspect of human life. It is an “interlocking mosaic of structures that are transforming human relationships at an almost unimaginable speed.”³ “Globalization is

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¹Stanislaus Swamikannu, “Postmodernism,” in *ACPI Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 2, Johnson J. Puthenpurackal, ed., Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2010, 1061-1066.

²Girma Mohammed, “Fundamentalism versus Liberalism: Towards a Hermeneutical Turn to Ethics,” in *Overcoming Fundamentalism*, Heidi Hadsell and Christoph Stückelberger, eds., Geneva: Globethics.net, 2009, 37.

³Bernard Adeney-Risakotta, “Globalization and Religion from an Indonesian Perspective,” in *Overcoming Fundamentalism*, 90.

the ‘mother of all megatrends,’ in the sense that it has become a catchall designation for the accelerating global integration of economics, politics, culture, communications, spirituality, and virtually everything else that matters.”⁴ Though it has its own merits, Globalization has been criticized for its monolithic approach to cultures and has its share in challenging the foundations of religion and religious ethics. Many see globalization as a fundamentalist religion of consumerism and a new form of idolatry,⁵ though others may disagree with such a view. As a cultural phenomenon, globalization has connected different cultures and brought about greater communication and exchange among them. At the same time, many cultures in Asia, Africa and Latin America – the so called third world – find globalization as a threat to their very existence. That is why many indigenous groups and nationalist movements especially in Asia try to present globalization as a Western or Christian attempt in disguise to conquer them again and destroy them. Consequently, even if there may be openness to the economic possibilities offered by globalization, there is resistance from different cultures. Moreover, many are sceptical about the economic and market agenda of globalization.

Does it mean that religion and religious ethics have become insignificant in the post-modern world of globalization? In the new preface to his book, *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism*, reprinted after September 11, 2001, Karen Armstrong says:

In the middle of the twentieth century, it was generally assumed by pundits and commentators that secularism was the coming ideology and that religion would never again become a force in international affairs. But the fundamentalists have reversed this trend and gradually, in both the United States and the Muslim world, religion has become a force that every government has been forced to take seriously.⁶

That is, fundamentalism has resulted in the revival of religions. But, the question remains whether it is the only way of reviving religion and religious ethics or whether it is the right way of reviving them.

Fundamentalism can be seen not only in religions, but also in politics, economics, ideologies, etc., and can take different forms. It is characterized

⁴John L. Allen, Jr., *The Future Church: How Ten Trends are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church*, New York: Doubleday, 2009, 260.

⁵For example, David R. Loy, “The Religion of the Market,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65 (1997), 275-290.

⁶Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism*, New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 2000 (reprinted 2001), vii-viii.

by “extreme positions, rigidity and inability for dialogue.”⁷ Intolerance to religions and religious symbols in many countries is, for example, a kind of secular fundamentalism. However, we shall limit our discussion here to religious fundamentalism in general and in particular to fundamentalist tendencies in Christianity. Many Christian groups seem to think that fundamentalism is the only way of reviving Christianity and a life based on Christian ethical principles. We shall critically evaluate this concept in the light of the central message of Jesus, namely, the Kingdom of God.

2. Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism can be defined “as a religious or political movement or attitude with a strict adherence to a set of basic principles, based on a literal, not adapted interpretation, especially as a return to former principles. Separation, exclusion and extremism are characteristics of fundamentalism.”⁸ The resurgence and strengthening of religious fundamentalism in the recent decades can be seen as a reaction to the threats to the very existence of religion and religious ethics, mainly raised by the cultural shift of modernity.⁹ The rage at the invasion of the structures and systems which the fundamentalists consider essential sometimes lead to a militant reaction and they consider it legitimate, because only through the use of force the structures and systems can be protected. This is also a survival strategy coming out of fear of annihilation by the opposing forces. The surest means of survival is thought to be a selective return to and a revival of certain doctrines and practices of the past, the authority of which are blindly accepted.¹⁰

Contrary to the popular use of the word, many do not share the view of limiting the meaning of the word ‘fundamentalism’ to extremism. In general, fundamentalism stands for a literal understanding of the scripture. It may welcome some aspects of the scientific and technological

⁷Peter Pavlovic, “Fundamentalism or Tolerance: What Is the Public Role of Religion in Modern Society?” in *Overcoming Fundamentalism*, 55-56.

⁸Christoph Stückelberger, “Introduction,” in *Overcoming Fundamentalism*, 11.

⁹Richard Antoun, *Understanding Fundamentalism*, Oxford: Altamira Press, 2001, as cited in John D’Mello, “Fundamentalism,” in *ACPI Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 1, 555.

¹⁰See John D’Mello, “Fundamentalism,” 555-556; Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God*, xv. Although the context of the new preface is the terrorist attack by the Islamic fundamentalists on Sept 11, 2001, Armstrong does not use the term fundamentalism to refer only to violent expressions of fundamentalism as in the case of terrorism.

developments, but often argues for the restoration of a traditional ethics and lifestyle. Any change in life-style will be presented as the deterioration of values, without a critical evaluation of the particular context. The concept of sin and morality are rather limited to individual, sexual, familial and reproductive issues. The most typical characteristic of the fundamentalist ethics is that it considers every other value system as unethical, sinful and hence as inferior to its ethical perception. Thus, it develops an exclusivist and elitist approach that divides the society into two, namely those who belong to them and those who are against them. Intolerance to any other ethical perception, rigid application of norms without any regard for the particular context and judging any other ethical approach as immoral or unacceptable are inherent in the fundamentalist approach. They claim – implicitly or explicitly – an ethical superiority and consider themselves closer to God and all others away from God.

3. The Christian Fundamentalism

Although the popular use of the word “fundamentalism” today denotes any kind of religious fundamentalism and particularly Islamic extremist movements, it evolved as a Christian movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mainly within American Protestantism among the conservative evangelical Christians. It was in fact a reaction to modernism and it affirmed a “fundamental” set of Christian beliefs. The word “fundamentalism” was coined by Curtis Lee Laws in 1920. At the Northern Baptist Convention (1920), he defined the fundamentalist as one who was ready to regain territory which had been lost to Antichrist and “to do battle royal for the fundamentals of the faith.”¹¹

Though Christian fundamentalism developed in the Protestant circles, soon it found adherents in other denominations. An increasing number of Christians, under the aegis of some movements or organisations, found the fundamentalist approach an effective way of guarding against the attacks from modernism and secularism. Although now and then there were organised and violent actions by some extreme fundamentalist groups (for example, attacks on abortion), generally Christian fundamentalist groups did not take resort to violence. Instead, they attempted to define Christian life on the basis of a fundamental set of doctrines and practices. Thus, Christian fundamentalists have been active in politics, and they are often called the “right wing”.

¹¹Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God*, 174.

The Catholic Church was also influenced by the ideals of Christian fundamentalism. “Across the Western world, Catholicism has gone from being a culture-shaping majority to perceiving itself as an embattled cultural minority, and is responding as embattled minorities always do: With a ‘politics of identity’ based on reaffirming traditional beliefs and practices, sharpening the borders between itself and the surrounding culture.”¹² In *The Future Church: How Ten Trends are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church*, John Allen, Jr. discusses the fundamentalist/conservative trends under the title “Evangelical Catholicism” and points out as indications of these trends the attempts to revive traditional liturgies, to affirm the Catholic identity of the universities, hospitals and charitable organizations run by the Church, scrutiny over the priests and nuns for alleged deviations, growing importance given to the teaching authority of the hierarchy, etc.¹³ In the Catholic circles, the authority of the “hierarchical organization, the objectivity of the dogma and the control of (mostly female¹⁴) sexuality”¹⁵ will be emphasized. Every attempt will be done to resist the disruptive changes brought about by modernity, to recreate stable institutions, to fight back and re-establish a social order congruent with the conservative mores of the religious vision. According to this view, the state must be subservient to God.¹⁶ It is pointed out that many thriving organizations in the Church have fundamentalist elements in them and they stand for “full engagement in the ‘cultural wars’ relating to abortion and homosexuality, confrontation with the ‘progressive’ liberal values spread by the media”¹⁷ and so on.

Although the Christian/Catholic fundamentalism today may have its own particular rationale and emphases, it is not something altogether new. At least since the attainment of the position as the state religion and especially with the acquisition of the political power as well, claims of

¹²John L. Allen, Jr., *The Future Church*, 55.

¹³John L. Allen, Jr., *The Future Church*, 54-94.

¹⁴Courtney W. Howland describes how fundamentalism in different religions violates the rights of women. See her article, “The Challenge of Religious Fundamentalism to the Liberty and Equality Rights of Women: An Analysis under the United Nations Charter” in *Does Human Rights Need God?* Elizabeth M. Bucar and Barbara Barnett, eds., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005, 156-201.

¹⁵Guillermo Hansen, “Tolerance, Democracy and Fundamentalism(s): Challenges in Time of Systemic Bifurcation,” in *Overcoming Fundamentalism*, 185.

¹⁶Guillermo Hansen, “Tolerance, Democracy and Fundamentalism(s),” 185-186.

¹⁷Guillermo Hansen, “Tolerance, Democracy and Fundamentalism(s),” 186-188.

superiority, attempts to conquer others even through the use of force, etc. can be noticed in Christianity. The crusades and later colonization, the protestant revolution, etc., further established these tendencies. Enlightenment, the loss of political power, modernism, secularization and post-modernism undermined the claims of superiority of Christianity and threaten even the very existence of Christianity. On the one hand, fundamentalist tendencies may be said to be a survival mechanism of Christianity. On the other hand, they raise the question whether they are the remnants of the continuing influence of the concept of the Church as a temporal power, the superiority of which is to be asserted and affirmed. In other words, we may doubt whether the underlying vision is that of identifying the Kingdom of God with the earthly kingdom. It is pointed out that Christian fundamentalism is one of the reasons for the lack of peace within Christianity today. “Though contemporary Christian fundamentalism may not use major physical violence, it promotes violence and discrimination between Christian denominations, sects, genders, societies, other faiths, ideologies and races.”¹⁸ Often an approach of antipathy is adopted towards other faiths and even Christian denominations. Some Christian fundamentalists continue to present other religions as works of the devil. Now and then we hear about violent reactions from other religions due to Christian preachers who speak about other religions in such a derogatory manner. Similarly, patriarchy is taken for granted as part of the fidelity to tradition. These tendencies are supported and promoted by the fundamentalist groups, as authenticity to the tradition and as means of guarding against liberalist attacks on their tradition. However, it is clear that such tendencies find increasing support and encouragement because they are considered to be helpful in reviving Christian life. This invites us to reflect on whether these fundamentalist tendencies are actually helpful in redeeming Christianity.

One way of verifying whether the revival of the Christian life based on fundamentalist ideals is helpful or not is to keep in mind the vision of the Kingdom of God as revealed in the preaching and in the person of Jesus Christ. The central message of Jesus is the Kingdom of God. During the twentieth century theologians have tried to re-discover the real vision of the “Kingdom of God” and to understand the meaning of the Christian

¹⁸James Daniel Chellappa, “Christianity and Violence: A Look at the Church as ‘Oppressed’ and as ‘Oppressor’” in *Violence and Its Victims: A Challenge to Philosophizing in the Indian Context*, ed. Ivo Coelho, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2010, 260.

community and Christian ethics in the light of this vision. Daniel Harrington points out that modern biblical research has restored the Kingdom of God as the horizon and goal of Christian ethics.¹⁹ Hence, reviving Christian life means understanding the profound meaning of the Kingdom of God and shaping the Christian life accordingly. This also implies that in order to evaluate the current trends and to go forward in the right direction, we need to re-discover the values of the Kingdom of God. Real fidelity to the tradition means fidelity to the vision of the Kingdom.

4. Kingdom of God: Jesus’ Central Message

Jesus began his public ministry announcing the advent of the Kingdom: “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). The word “kingdom” may give the impression that his mission is that of establishing a territory or state just like other states, where temporal power and authority matter. Only if we understand the meaning and implications of the “Kingdom of God” shall we really understand the mission announced and commenced by Jesus.

4.1. Kingdom of God and the Brotherhood/Sisterhood of All Humans

We do not see any precise definition of the Kingdom of God in the gospels. Rather, its meaning is presented in symbolic actions like miracles, healings, forgiving the sinners, table fellowship, exorcism, etc. Moreover, the “Kingdom” is described in the parables, similes and metaphors. The parables question the present reality and open up the possibility of seeing reality in a new and different way. They call for a transformation of the present state of affairs. For example, the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) speaks about the merciful Father and asks us to be merciful like Him; the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) rejects all kinds of discrimination, racism and prejudices and strongly establishes the fraternity and sorority of humanity by pointing out that everyone who is in need is one’s neighbour; the parables of the Treasure and the Costly Pearl depict God’s gracious gift that transforms life (Matthew 13:44-46).²⁰ The best biblical description of the Kingdom of God is given by St. Paul: “For the Kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). It is clear that for Paul, Kingdom of God is a state of life where righteousness, peace and joy prevail.

¹⁹Daniel Harrington, “Kingdom of God” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, ed. Judith A. Dwyer, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1994, 512.

²⁰John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, New York: Orbis Books, 1995, 72-77.

Kingdom of God is, primarily, the good news about God who loves us unconditionally. This love is revealed in Jesus Christ to lead all human beings and ultimately all of creation to participate in God's own life and love. Jesus demands his disciples to love as he loved (John 13:34). Jesus' love is characterised by an unconditional submission for the humanity and by the forgiveness he offered to the one who betrayed him, to the one who denied him and to those who persecuted him. His love includes everyone and is totally unconditional and compassionate. The three parables in Luke 15 reveal that God's only basis for dealing with us is compassionate love. Jesus' table fellowship with the outcastes (e.g., Matthew 9:10-13) reveals the compassionate God who desires to embrace all human beings in one great community of brothers and sisters. John Fuellenbach summarises the message of the actions and parables of Jesus as follows:

The real content of Jesus' message of the Kingdom consists, therefore, in his image of God: God loves every human being with unconditional love. Jesus teaches us three important lessons: God always loves us, God always forgives us, and God is always present with us. Conversion to the Kingdom message of Jesus means, first of all, a conversion to the image of God that Jesus came to proclaim...²¹

If God is the Father of all, it means that all are children of God and hence brothers and sisters. All belong to the same family. No one is a stranger; no one is an outcaste; no one is inferior to me; everyone is a brother or sister of mine. Believing in a loving and compassionate God expresses the readiness to have this love and compassion in our relationship with others. "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36) is the motto of the Kingdom. In short, it can be said that the Kingdom of God is a call to be in relationship with God and with others, a relationship of love. A call to repentance and conversion is integral to the invitation to the Kingdom. This is the invitation to participate in the vision of God, to acknowledge God as Father and to accept everyone as a brother or sister. This conversion reorients our way of seeing, thinking, feeling, judging and acting. Conversion is a profound transformation of the whole person. Conversion is possible only because God loves us. The change in awareness, attitude, and conduct which we undergo through conversion is our response to accepting the offer of divine love.²²

²¹John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 177.

²²Richard M. Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality*, New York: Paulist Press, 1989, 176.

4.2. Kingdom of God as Righteousness, Peace and Joy

The three basic values of the Kingdom given in Romans 14:17 are Righteousness, Peace and Joy in the Holy Spirit. *Righteousness* in the biblical sense means Right Relations or Life-Giving Relationships. It has four dimensions, namely, relation to God, to neighbours both as individual and as part of society, and to creation as a whole. Justice demands to treat everyone with love and respect. Old Testament prophets often declared that even worship without justice is hollow and displeasing to God (Isaiah 1:11-17). Jesus’ attack on all sorts of discrimination, namely, social, religious, moral, racial, sexual, etc. makes it clear that he stood, for a relationship of fraternity and sorority. For him God’s Kingdom transcended all barriers and reached out to all by creating relationships that were life-giving and embraced each one with compassionate love.

God’s Kingdom is present only where the relationship between humanity (and all things) is renewed in the pattern of the relationship that reigns in God. The Kingdom is ultimately relationship. It is the relationship which exists in God between Father and Son. The Kingdom is the extension of this relationship into creation.²³ Freedom, fellowship and justice are basic to the Kingdom and they are interrelated:

When the revelation of God’s love (the Kingdom) meets its appropriate response in man’s trusting acceptance of this love (repentance), there begins a mighty movement of personal and societal liberation which sweeps through human history. The movement brings *freedom* in as much as it liberates each individual from the inadequacies and obsessions that shackle him. It fosters *fellowship*, because it empowers free individuals to exercise their concern for each other in genuine community. And it leads on to *justice*, because it impels every true community to adopt the just societal structures which alone makes freedom and fellowship possible.²⁴

Jesus’ special concern and preferential option for the poor is to be understood in this background. However, for him, the “poor” were not merely the economically poor. He extended his care and love especially to those who were socially marginalised, psychologically and emotionally broken and depressed and to the sinners. His compassionate love reached to them breaking borders, ignoring the social structures, surpassing many

²³John Fuellenbach, *The Kingdom of God*, 162.

²⁴George Soares-Prabhu, “The Kingdom of God: Jesus’ Vision of a New Society” in *Theology of Liberation: An Indian Biblical Perspective*, George Soares-Prabhu, Pune: JDV, 2001, 238-239.

existing codes of morality construed by those in authority. That is, reaching out to the ‘vulnerable’ in the society was a special mark of the life and preaching of Jesus.

During his earthly existence, Jesus did share spontaneously the lot and the joys of many excluded persons. Both Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom and his personality expressed his Father’s confidence in all men and women, how vulnerable they may be. An ethics based on the kingdom’s values will challenge the faith that Christians place in the most fragile.²⁵

The Kingdom is all-inclusive; it extends God’s love to every woman, child and man, especially to the most vulnerable. So, any attempt to divide people, to consider others as away from God’s love, will be diametrically opposed to the vision of the Kingdom. To accept the Kingdom or reject it will be the freedom of every person, but to consider people as sinners and less suitable for the Kingdom and to build up castles of the elected and the ‘righteous’ means to follow the self-righteousness of the Pharisees.

Jesus’ commitment to justice and opposition to discrimination of any kind can be seen from his strong criticism against the Pharisees and Scribes who had practically divided the society into “saints and sinners” or those who were dear to God and those who were hated by him. We may be surprised at the sharpness in the words of Jesus, who was “meek and humble,” when he criticises the Pharisees. Never did he compromise with their self-righteousness, claim of moral superiority and arrogance towards others. Denying charity, the basic law of the Kingdom, on grounds of external observances was, according to him, a mockery of the law. For him everyone was a precious child of God, the Father; no one was an “untouchable” for him, but was a brother or sister. Any kind of discrimination or division in the society even on religious grounds was, according to him, against the will of God. He fought against the unjust structures of discrimination in the name of religion, and sharply criticised those who tried to form an elite group, claiming moral superiority.

In the biblical sense, *Peace* is not merely the absence of war; it is rather a state of right relationship with God and fellow human beings resulting from reconciliation and harmony. Peace is the fruit of justice.

²⁵Vincent Leclercq, *Blessed Are the Vulnerable: Reaching out to Those with Aids*, New London: Twenty-third Publications, 2010, 64-65. Leclercq beautifully develops the vision of the Kingdom, the care and concern it demands to the vulnerable, and especially to the HIV/AIDS victims, who can be considered to be persons most vulnerable in our times.

Only the society which guarantees fraternity and sorority of all, is entitled to peace. Human history is replete with examples to show that any discrimination and any attempt to deny fraternal love and justice to others leads to the disruption of relationships between persons, nations, societies and cultures and thus to the destruction of peace.

Joy refers to the fullness of life and love. Kingdom of God is abundance of joy and love. That is, it demands to give every human being and every creature the opportunity to have the fullness of life, the beginning of which is the acknowledgement of each one’s rights. Right relationships and peace naturally leads to the experience of joy.

4.3. The Centrality of Love

Kingdom ethics in nutshell is expressed in the Great Commandment of love of God and love of one’s neighbour (Mark 12:28-34; Matthew 22:34-40; Luke 10:25-28). The Jewish scholars always tried to discern what the greatest commandment was and at the time of Jesus, probably they had the idea that the greatest commandment is love of God and love of neighbour. This is clear from the scribe’s response to Jesus – he is not amazed as if he is hearing an entirely new teaching, but he is just acknowledging that what Jesus says is right. But the newness of Jesus’ teaching lies in the new implications Jesus gives to this commandment. He revealed the essential interior bond between the two commandments and showed that the whole law can be reduced to this great commandment. He also interprets the love for the neighbour as the love for the nearest person in an absolutely universal sense. Love of God means fulfilling in faith and obedience all that God requires for entering into his Kingdom. It implies prayer, religious acts and forgiveness of one another. Authentic love of God is found in the loving concern for others. Lack of concern for others is a serious violation of the great commandment.²⁶ John 13-15 depicts the characteristic of the love which is commanded by Jesus. In John 13, in his washing of the feet of the disciples, Jesus teaches that love is mutual self-giving, which breaks down the traditional structures marked by superiority and inferiority. Love is built up on a relationship of equality. This is reaffirmed when Jesus calls the disciples his friends (John 15:12-17). Jesus demands to love as he loved, as he loved laying down his life for us (John 15:12-13). “To love as Jesus loved is to choose the other’s life over our own if the choice comes to that. No one ever remains a “stranger” or an “enemy”

²⁶David Bohr, *Catholic Moral Tradition*, Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1999, 50-51.

for one who lives by the love which Jesus commanded.”²⁷ This generous and unconditional love that surpasses all laws is the corner stone of the New Testament morality. It cannot be limited to a system or a few stipulations of the law, but goes beyond all systems, expressing itself in new ways and modes as self-giving out of generosity and dedication for the other.

4.4. Love and Sharing

Love naturally leads to sharing. “Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17). Similarly, love without sharing is dead (1 John 3:16-18). It is clear from the lifestyle of the primitive Christian community. When they believed in Jesus Christ and when they decided to accept the law of love of the Kingdom, they shared among themselves whatever they had (Acts 2:43-46, 4:32-35). In many of the parables, Kingdom of God is compared to a great banquet. In a banquet, everyone shares whatever is prepared. The norm of greatness in the Kingdom is not power and position. Service is the standard of greatness (Matthew 20:24-28; Mark 9:33-37). Jesus has taught it through his own action (John 13:1-17). Paul affirms this principle when he asks us to “count others better than” ourselves (Philippians 2:1-8). From the very beginning, the Christian community had a concern for the poor, the marginalised and the slaves. An emphasis on a strong community life rooted in love, sharing and justice was integral to its self-understanding. The Kingdom of God is not an earthly kingdom, nor is it a purely spiritual or other-worldly reality which has nothing to do with the present life. Although the Kingdom of God is not about a political or social structure that is to be realised here, it has implications for social life – sharing one’s wealth with the poor, forgiving one’s enemies, etc. “Without providing the blueprint for the just society, it does contain the principles that serious Christians take as guides in contributing to the socio-political entities in which they participate.”²⁸ In short, in its fullness, the Kingdom will not be realised here on earth, but through a commitment for a society where everyone lives in right relationship as a child of God and as a brother/sister to everyone else, we facilitate its coming in fullness.²⁹ “As the saving action of God, its (*kingdom*) outreach and

²⁷Richard M. Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 180.

²⁸Daniel Harrington, “Kingdom of God,” 512.

²⁹In fact, the theological attempts to explain the tension between the “already” and “not yet” dimension of the Kingdom and the reality of the Kingdom as a gratuitous gift as well as something facilitated by the humans may not appear to succeed fully.

extension is comprehensive and it integrates within it all the dimensions of human existence such as socio-economic, political, cultural, ecological as well as ethical and spiritual.”³⁰ That is, the vision of the Kingdom had concrete social implications. In fact, people joined the Christian community because of these values of the Kingdom of God actualised in the Christian community. This is evident also from the fact that the Christian community did not have any political or temporal power for the first three centuries, instead it was a persecuted community.³¹

4.5. What Shall We Do to Actualise the Kingdom of God?

One of the dimensions of the Kingdom theology difficult to be interpreted is the “already” and “not yet” nature of the Kingdom and our role in the present to bring about the full actualization of the Kingdom. On the one hand, according to the New Testament, the Kingdom of God is first and foremost eschatological – “it pertains to the last day when God breaks into human history and brings about a new heaven and a new earth.”³² On the other hand, according to Christian faith, the Kingdom has been made present in Jesus Christ. Hence, “the terms ‘inauguration’ and ‘anticipation’ seem more appropriate than ‘realization’ for talking about the present dimension of the kingdom.”³³ Then, naturally the question arises: Do we have any active role in bringing about the Kingdom, or are we just passive receptors? Harrington comments:

The future Kingdom of God provides the horizon and goal for Christian action in the present. But it remains God’s prerogative to bring it in its fullness. We do not bring it or build it up... In the present the teachings of Jesus and the biblical writers provide the values and actions that are appropriate responses to Jesus’ death and resurrection as well as fitting preparations for God’s kingdom in its fullness.³⁴

³⁰George Keerankeri, “‘Thy Kingdom Come!’: The Kingdom of God as Gift and Responsibility,” *Jeevadhara* 37 (1990) 135.

³¹Evidently, this does not mean that people joined the Christian community on account of social values alone. They acknowledged Jesus as the Saviour and committed their life for him. But, it is also pointed out that it is the Christian community that lived in fraternity, sharing and unconditional acceptance of all, including the marginalized that became pivotal to the conversion of many. Or, shall we say that people experienced the presence of Jesus the Saviour actualized in such a community that lived in love, sharing and unconditional acceptance of everyone?

³²Daniel Harrington, “Kingdom of God,” 512.

³³Daniel Harrington, “Kingdom of God,” 512.

³⁴Daniel Harrington, “Kingdom of God,” 512.

The Church and the Kingdom of God are not identical, yet not unrelated. The Church is the sign of the Kingdom. The Church can and should witness to the Kingdom and herald its coming, but cannot claim monopoly over the Kingdom or force its coming. As Harrington says, “In describing what Christians and/or the Church do with respect to God’s kingdom, some modern theologians speak of “serving the kingdom” or “cooperating with the kingdom” or “spreading the kingdom.” These are acceptable provided the biblical insistence on God’s role is preserved and the temptation to Pelagianism is resisted.”³⁵

Hope in the fulfilment of the Kingdom and committed action for its coming are to be combined with trust in God’s action and an active patience. Many Kingdom parables show that the Kingdom grows gradually and that we need to wait in patience. The Kingdom is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field, the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs (Matthew 13:31-32). It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened (Matthew 13:33). Evil may be present in the Kingdom till the ‘harvest’, but we need to be patient (Matthew 13:24-30). That is, we need to work for the Kingdom of God, a society that lives in love, justice, sharing, equality and fraternity, a society where the dignity, rights and freedom of every person is respected. However, such a perfect society will take place only in heaven; until then we need to work for the values of the Kingdom of God and do everything possible to promote such a society, but with tolerance and patience.

³⁵Daniel Harrington, “Kingdom of God,” 513. Pelagianism, named after Pelagius (A.D. 354-420/440), is the (erroneous) doctrine that original sin did not taint the human nature and human ability to choose between good and evil. According to this, the humans have full control and responsibility and hence are sinners or virtuous by choice. Jesus’ only achievement, according to this theory, was ‘setting a good example’ as against the ‘bad example of Adam’. Augustine’s refutation of Pelagianism led to the condemnation of Pelagius, and the Christian tradition, in general emphasised the weakness of the human will due to the original sin and the redemption brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Though Pelagianism was rejected, its resurgence can be seen in the Christian history in different forms. For example, the controversy over ‘work’ or ‘grace’ during the Protestant revolution had some shades of the resurgence of the age-old theological debate. Attempts to give importance to human achievement over the gratuitous nature of God’s gift or to achieve heaven through self-efforts and self-righteousness ignoring the graciousness of God can be called as Pelagian tendencies.

To ignore fraternity and harmonious relationships for the sake of observances will be detrimental to the basic message of the Kingdom, because communion of all human beings is the basic demand of the Kingdom:

The Kingdom aims at transforming human relationships; it grows gradually as people slowly learn to love, forgive and serve one another. Jesus sums up the whole Law, focussing it on the commandment of love (Matthew 22:34-40; Luke 10:25-28)... The Kingdom’s nature, therefore, is one of communion among all human beings – with one another and with God.”³⁶

In the same chapter (Romans 14) in which Paul delineates the values of the Kingdom he also asks not to judge others, to tolerate the differences in practices with respect and fellowship:

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God (Romans 14: 5-6).

Does it mean that anything and everything is acceptable? Doesn’t it amount to a tolerance that borders with indiscriminate acceptance and indifference? That does not seem to be the attitude of Paul. He is more concerned about respecting everyone, extending the Kingdom to everyone, instead of judging others on the basis of external observances and, claiming moral superiority and building barriers that separate people for the sake of unnecessary and unimportant customs. Fraternity, fellowship and harmony should not be sacrificed.

It is noteworthy how Amaladoss underscores the importance of non-violent action for the realization of the Kingdom:

Thinking of God’s promise, some people prefer to focus on the Exodus than on the life of Jesus. They speak of God’s intervention and the establishment of an earthly kingdom... Jesus, not only gives us a new vision of God’s kingdom as community, but also outlines a way in which we have to struggle for it. This is the way of non-violence. Jesus was a revolutionary... But he did not fight for an earthly kingdom. Rather he was asking for a transformation of

³⁶John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 15. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html

human relationships. He showed that this can be achieved, not by violent action, but by humble, self-giving love, that is ready to die rather than inflict death on others. A non-violent action does not destroy, but provokes people to think and to change. It calls for conversion; it promotes forgiveness and reconciliation. It builds community.³⁷

Non-violence should not be limited to the avoidance of physical violence alone. Discrimination, intolerance, claim of moral superiority, unwillingness to extend fraternity to everyone, etc are forms of violence. However, tolerance should not become indifference. In the West, tolerance is often presented in opposition to fundamentalism, as an approach in which everything is possible and everything is of equal value. But, in fact it is a degenerated tolerance that equals to indifference. The end product is that the Western society is increasingly characterized by laxity, value relativism and opportunism. Tolerance becomes a creative value only when it goes hand-in-hand with respect.³⁸ Following the same line of thinking, Joseph I. Fernando argues for an ethic of recognition:

An ethics of recognition means recognition of the other – persons, races, communities, cultures, nations, languages, traditions, ideologies and so on which are different from one’s own... Racism, genocide, fascism, exploitation, discrimination and so on are the antithesis of an ethics of recognition. In its most fundamental form an ethics of recognition is the recognition of the human person who has his own intrinsic dignity, worth and value.³⁹

That is, tolerance, respect for the other (who is unique and may be different) and recognition go together. Tolerance, as an active virtue demands the recognition of the worth of every person, even when he/she is different. According to the vision of the Kingdom, the worth of every person ultimately rests on the fact that he/she is a child of God, and hence one’s own brother/sister. Any attempt of segregation and discrimination is the denial of the recognition that the other is a brother/sister and, therefore, is against the message of the Kingdom of God.

Here it may be pertinent to reflect on the deeper levels of meaning of the commandment, “Love your enemies” (which we have referred to

³⁷Michael Amaladoss, *Beyond Dialogue: Pilgrims to the Absolute*, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2008, 122-123.

³⁸See Peter Pavlovic, “Fundamentalism or Tolerance,” 55-68.

³⁹Joseph I. Fernando, “Religious Fundamentalism and an Ethics of Recognition,” in *Overcoming Fundamentalism*, 83.

above). Based on John Riches’ work, *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism*,⁴⁰ George Keerankeri points out that although the word ‘enemies’ may primarily refer to the Romans and Hellenizers, who were connected with the forces which negatively affected the Jews loyal to their traditions, it could also include groups within the Jewish community, excluded by the law-abiding Pharisees and Sadducees. God is a forgiving Father. He is not the one who is associated only with the righteous; He does not dissociate himself with the ‘wicked’ or take revenge on them. “The Kingdom of God consequently represents the working of this radical love of God in people by forgiving and transforming and reconciling them with one another and in this way building an inclusive community of love, forgiveness and brotherhood/sisterhood.”⁴¹ Considering others as enemies or excluding them from one’s love on the basis of the differences or perceptions of virtuous life will be against God’s all-inclusive love, which is the basic value of the Kingdom.

5. Conclusion

Modernism, post-modernism, secularization and many elements in globalization have raised serious challenges to the very existence of religions and religious ethics. This has led to a division in the world between liberals and fundamentalists. Liberalism promoted and aided by the economic and market interests and political system is found as insurmountable by many who adhere to religious beliefs. Sometimes this helplessness and feeling of being threatened lead into violent reactions like terrorism and thus harm the peaceful existence of the human society. Even in other cases, this bifurcation has affected the peace, harmony, mutual trust and fellowship among religions, cultures and different social groups.

Similarly, this experience of being threatened has resulted in internal divisions in many religions, that is, between fundamentalist and liberal approaches. This can be noticed in Christianity as well; the Catholic Church is not an exception to this. Being threatened by secularisation, fundamentalist tendencies have become significant in the Church. Conservatism, traditionalism, overemphasis on hierarchical structures, control over the interpretation of the scripture and doctrines, strict observance of an ethical code, claim of ethical superiority, elitism and lack

⁴⁰John Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980.

⁴¹George Keerankeri, “Jesus and Violence in His Kingdom Ministry,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 74 (2010), 818-819.

of openness to other religions are some of the signs of the strengthening of the fundamentalist tendencies in Christianity. To a great extent, fundamentalist tendencies in Christianity today are different from the period of conquest and forced conversions, because the main scope is not the conquest of new territories or new 'souls' but protecting those who are already members, reviving their faith and guarding them off the invasion of the forces that destroy the faith.

The Kingdom of God, the central message of Jesus, is not a territorial Kingdom, but consists in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood and sisterhood of all human beings. The whole humanity is conceived as a single family that lives in love, sharing, righteousness, peace, harmony and mutual respect. The Kingdom of God was inaugurated with the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, but its full realization is yet to come. We need to re-discover again and again the real meaning of the Kingdom of God. There have been attempts to import the characteristics of an earthly kingdom to the vision of the Kingdom of God, but sooner or later the Christian community have discerned that such attempts have been detrimental to the realization of the Kingdom of God. Fundamentalist tendencies, though may be coming from an earnest desire to serve the Kingdom of God and facilitate its full realization and may give an impression of apparent success, are in fact diametrically opposed to the vision of the Kingdom. Ideological visions and practices based on exclusion, discrimination, elitism, claims of superiority, self-righteousness, controlling power of the law and overpowering structures will not in fact facilitate the real revival of Christian life or the realization of the Kingdom of God. Only an all-inclusive fraternity, love, justice, compassion, dialogue, openness to others and respect for others shall result in the real revival of Christian life and the realization of the Kingdom.

Perhaps, the Christian community has yet to reconcile with the idea that it is not a temporal power that has to assert its authority through conquests and the rule of law, but a community that believes in the fatherhood of God and the fraternity and sorority of all without boundaries. This appears to be true regarding the internal life of the Christian community as well as with regard to its relationship with the wider society.