

“The Sources of  
Fundamentalism and Liberalism  
Considered Historically and Psychologically”

[13 September–23 November 1949]  
[Chester, Pa.]

*This essay for Davis's Christian Theology for Today focuses primarily on religious liberalism and its ability to accommodate scientific discoveries. King makes substantial use of The History of Fundamentalism, by a former Crozer professor, Stewart G. Cole. King's interpretation of the two movements is for the most part uncritical of liberalism and scornful of fundamentalism: "Unlike liberalism, fundamentalism is essentially a reactionary protest, [fighting] to preserve the old faith in a changing milieu." Davis circled the word "Psychologically" in the title and commented: "You do not do justice to this. Think of what the psychological factors are which lie back of these two movements." King received a B + on the paper.*

As we look through the arena of contemporary history we are immediately struck by the salient changes which have taken place in modern society. Any serious observer can notice, with a deal of facility, the changes in the social, economic, and scientific realms of modern life. Whether these changes have been for the best or for the worse, it is not mine to discuss at this point, but the fact remains that they have come

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about. Notice how different the structure of Western society is today from what it was three generations ago. In the course of its development western civilization has shifted from a colonial naivete of the frontier to the far-reaching machination of nationalism and from an agrarian pattern of occupation to the industrial one.<sup>1</sup> Certainly these momentous transformations have made modern man more material minded. Moreover, these great transformations have brought about a highly urbanized society which has caused amusements and fellowship to pass largely out of the home and the church into the hands of commercial agencies.

Also notice the continual rise of the scientific spirit in modern culture. Ever since the days of the Renaissance men have continually subpoenaed ideas and theories to appear before the judgment seat of the scientific method. As Bacon would say, "they are taught to weigh and consider." Modern man is forever standing before the store-house {of nature} with his inevitable interrogative, what? As the new scientific method began to develop many of its discoveries were found to be contradictory to the old ways of thinking which had been basic for religious belief. Newtonian science reduced Providence to the reign of the natural law; Copernicus eliminated man from the center of the universe and posited a heliocentric theory of the universe. In his theory of organic evolution Darwin placed supernatural man within the natural order.<sup>2</sup> In philosophy positivism emerged in Comte. This scientific spirit invaded the whole of modern life. It seems that the renaissance deviated man's thinking from a theocentric world-view to an antropocentric cosmology.<sup>3</sup> Modern man turned away from metaphysical speculation and decided to worship at the shrine of empiricism.

The question immediately arises, why these pro-paedeutic concerns in a paper which deals with the

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1. Stewart G. Cole, *The History of Fundamentalism* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1931), p. xi: "How different the structure of American society is today from what it was two generations ago is obvious to every student. In the course of its development western civilization has shifted from a colonial naiveté of the frontier to the far-reaching machinations of nationalism and from an agrarian pattern of occupation to the industrial one, with a consequent revolution in human desire, ideal and behavior."

2. Davis circled "supernatural" and wrote a question mark above the word.

3. Davis suggested "directed" rather than "deviated."

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sources of fundamentalism and liberalism? The answer of this question lies in the fact that liberalism and fundamentalism grew out of these changing conditions. Whenever man finds himself amid a changing society, his thinking goes in one of two directions. Either he attempts to adjust his thinking to the changing conditions or he attempts to hold to old dogmatic ideas amid the new. Fundamentalism chose the latter while liberalism chose the former. In other words, the changing cultural conditions described above gave rise to both liberalism and fundamentalism; these conditions caused one group to seek adjustment and the other to revolt. Let us turn first to a discussion of liberalism.

As implied above liberalism is a progressive movement which came into being in an attempt to adjust religion to all new truth. Just as the Scholastics attempted to wed theology to the dominant thought pattern of their day, viz., Aristotelian philosophy, the modern liberal attempts to wed theology to the dominant thought pattern of his day, viz., science. The liberal doesn't mind changing old world views to fit the scientific world view. As Dr. Aubrey succinctly stated, "the Christian liberal attempts to incarnate in history the meaning of God's will, as Christ Himself did, by keeping faith relevant to man's expanding knowledge and his common struggles."\*

It is of greatest importance to state at the outset that liberalism is a method not a creed. "Liberals are united not by a set of dogma agreed upon but by a common spirit, a common purpose, and a freedom for all."† To be sure, the beliefs of the liberal are individual and, in any case, they are subject to constant revision. His certainties about religion are not found in a set of dogma but in vital experience.<sup>4</sup> So from this we can see that it is impossible to set forth a definite date for the beginning of liberalism, we can only state its method.

The liberal method is first historical. Its historical study is directed at recapturing the human experiences out of which the classic doctrines arose. He re-

\* {E. E. Aubrey, "Our Liberal Heritage," The Chronicle, October, 1944.}

† T. G. Soares, Three Typical Beliefs, p. 111.

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4. Theodore Gerald Soares, *Three Typical Beliefs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), p. 71: "But the beliefs of the liberal are individual; no congress has ever been commissioned to formulate them; and, in any case, they are subject to constant revision. Yet the liberal believes that he can have real religion without static certainty. His spiritual certainties are not in formulated dogmas but in vital experiences."

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\* H. E. Fosdick, Modern Use of the Bible, p. 55.

alizes that before the doctrine was formulated there was an experience, and that the experience is more lasting than the expression of the experience.\* From this it is quite evident that the liberal stresses the primacy of experience. The liberal starts with experience and constantly returns to experience to test his findings. For an instance, the authority of the Golden Rule is not that Jesus proclaimed it. On the contrary, its authority lies in the fact that it has received *raison d'être* in the experiences of life. Of course, that Jesus uttered it, and more because he lived it, enhances our moral estimate of him.<sup>5</sup>

† Soares, op. cit., p. 72.

The liberal would insist that he can never speak in terms of the absolute. He is humble enough to see that he is locked up in the prison of relativity. Moreover, he sees that we do not have an infallible science therefore truth must be discovered from age to age.† The liberal does not discard old beliefs neither does he discard the Bible. On the contrary, he seeks the truth that is in them. With supreme reverence he joyously cherishes the religious heritage of the past. Only he feels free to bring it to all critical examination of the modern historical method.<sup>6</sup> Thus he attempts to make the spiritual discoveries of the Christian traditions available for modern use.‡ The liberal does not see the Bible as the only source of truth, but he finds truth in numerous other realms of life. He would insist that truth is not a one-act drama that appeared once and for all on the Biblical stage, but it is a drama of many acts continually appearing as the curtains of history continue to open. He sees the light of God shining through history as the blossom shines through the bud; God is working through history.

‡ Cf. the title of H. E. Fosdick's the Modern Use of the Bible.

The liberal does not agree with the orthodox views of human nature. For him there never was a fall of man.<sup>7</sup> Rather than a fall of man he speaks of an upward (evolutionary) movement of man. The liberal

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5. Soares, *Three Typical Beliefs*, p. 74: "The authority of the Golden Rule is not that Jesus proclaimed it. It makes its own inherent appeal of social sympathy and demand for social justice. That Jesus uttered it, and more that he lived it, enhances our moral estimate of Jesus."

6. Soares, *Three Typical Beliefs*, p. 72: "We do not have an infallible science but must discover truth from age to age. . . . The liberal does not lightly discard old beliefs. He treats them with reverence. He seeks the truth that is in them. He joyously cherishes the religious heritage of the past. Only he feels free to bring it all to the critical examination of the new day."

7. Soares, *Three Typical Beliefs*, pp. 83-84: "The liberal completely repudiates the orthodox views of human nature. . . . There never was a fall of man."

23 Nov sees value in human nature. He cannot sing with sincerity the hymn:  
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Would he devote the sacred head  
for such a worm as I?<sup>8</sup>

“Each human personality,” says Soares, “is the object of divine love and holds in himself the possibility of a son of God.”\* This is essentially the liberal view toward man.

\* Soares, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

From this brief discussion it seems quite obvious that Liberal theology resulted from man's attempt to answer new problems of cultural and social change. It was an attempt to bring religion up intellectually. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the nineteenth century theologian, has been called the precursor of the liberal movement. When Schleiermacher stressed the primacy of experience over any external authority he was sounding a note that would ring aloud in the twentieth century.

Unlike liberalism, fundamentalism is essentially a reactionary protest, fighting to preserve the old faith in a changing milieu.<sup>9</sup> In a sense we may say that fundamentalism is as old as the Reformation, but as an organized movement it is of recent origin.<sup>10</sup> We may date the beginning of the fundamentalist movement in 1909 with the publication of The Fundamentals.† This work was published in twelve volumes with the aim of re-establishing the “treasured faith.”<sup>11</sup> This volume could well be called the “fundamentalist manifesto.”

† S. G. Coe, History of Fundamentalism, p. 52.

These men argued that there could be no compromise on the unchanging fundamentals of the Christian faith. To gain support for their stand, the fundamentalist claimed that they were reaffirming the faith as Luther, Calvin, Knox, and Wesley held it. Of course, in that claim they were undoubtedly correct. It was the Protestant Reformation which enunciated the doctrines which are now called “fundamentalist.”<sup>12</sup>

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8. Soares, *Three Typical Beliefs*, p. 105: “The liberal finds value in man. He dissents from the old creeds that belittled man. He cannot sing the hymn: ‘Would he devote that sacred head / For such a worm as I?’”

9. Davis deleted the *r* in “frighting.”

10. Soares, *Three Typical Beliefs*, p. 37: “Fundamentalism is as old as the Reformation, though the name is of recent origin.”

11. Cole, *History of Fundamentalism*, p. 52.

12. Soares, *Three Typical Beliefs*, pp. 37–38: “Asserting that there could be no compromise on the unchanging fundamentals of the Christian faith, they adopted as a rallying cry the name

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The use of the critical method in approaching the Bible is to the fundamentalist downright heresy. He sees the Bible as the infallible word of God, from the dotting of an "i" to the crossing of a "T". He finds it to be a unity and a coherence of parts; "the New Testament is in the old contained, and the Old Testament is in the new explained."<sup>13</sup> Upon this first proposition (the infallibility of the Bible) all other fundamentalist views depend. They argue that if the Bible is true—that is, so divinely inspired as to be free from error—then all other truths follow inevitably, because they are based upon what the Bible actually says in language clear and unmistakable.

When the fundamentalist comes to the nature of man he finds all of his answers in the Bible. The story of man in the garden of Eden gives a conclusive answer. Man was created by a direct act of God.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, he was created in the image of God, but through the workings of the devil man {was} lead into disobedience. Then began all human ills: hardship and labor, the agony of childbirth, hatred, sorrow, suffering, and death.<sup>15</sup> The fundamentalist is quite aware of the fact that scholars regard the garden of Eden and the serpent Satan and the hell of fire as myths analogous to those found in other oriental religions. He knows also that his beliefs are the center of ridicule by many. But this does not shake his faith—rather it convinces him more of the existence of the devil.<sup>16</sup> The critics, says the fundamentalist, would never indulge in such skeptical thinking if the devil hadn't influenced them. The fundamentalist is con-

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'fundamentalist.' They claimed that they were reaffirming the faith as Luther held it, and Calvin, and Knox, and Robinson, and Bunyan, and Wesley, and the great missionaries and evangelists, and most of the theologians until very recent times. And in that claim they were undoubtedly correct. The great Protestant creeds enunciated the doctrines which are now called 'fundamentalist.'

13. Soares, *Three Typical Beliefs*, p. 41: "When the fundamentalist studies the Bible, he sees in it a unity, a coherence of its parts, the complementary nature of the two Testaments, 'the New is in the Old contained, the Old is by the New explained.'"

14. Soares, *Three Typical Beliefs*, p. 51: "Man was so created by a direct act of God."

15. Soares, *Three Typical Beliefs*, p. 54: "Then began all human ills: hardship and labor, the agony of childbirth, the subjection of woman, anger, hatred, malice and all uncharitableness, sorrow, suffering, and death."

16. Soares, *Three Typical Beliefs*, pp. 53–54: "The fundamentalist knows that scholars regard the Garden of Eden and the serpent Satan and the hell of fire as myths analogous to those in other oriental religions. He knows also that the belief in these ideas has waned markedly in recent years and that they are made the subject of humor. But this does not shake his confidence—rather he feels that these very facts attest the existence of the devil, whose supreme success in leading men astray is that they have been brought to doubt his existence."

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vinced that this skepticism of scholars and cheap humor of the laity can by no means prevent the revelation of God.\*<sup>17</sup>

\* Soares, op. cit., p. 54.

Others doctrines such as a supernatural plan of salvation, the Trinity, the substitutionary theory of the atonement, and the second coming of Christ are all quite prominent in fundamentalist thinking. Such are the views of the fundamentalist and they reveal that he is oppose to theological adaptation to social and cultural change. He sees a progressive scientific age as a retrogressive spiritual age. Amid change all around he was {is} willing to preserve certain ancient ideas even though they are contrary to science.

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17. Soares, *Three Typical Beliefs*, p. 54: "The skepticism of scholars and the cheap humor of the laity cannot annul the revelation of God, who has warned us that this evil being is our enemy, from whom we can be saved only by divine power."