doi:10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00169.x

The Problem with Fundamentalism

James P. Danaher

Abstract

We believe that the God who spoke the universe into existence actually became a human being and dwelt among us. Furthermore, he left us a rich text full of his teachings. Sadly, however, the Jesuit revelation is easily negated by a fundamentalist theory about how to read the biblical text. This paper argues that the whole of Scripture must be read from the perspective of the Gospel lest we make the Jesus revelation into merely one prophetic revelation among many.

Keywords

Fundamentalism, Jesus, Bible, Scripture, revelation.

What we have come to realize over the last several centuries is that the mind is not a *tabula rasa*. That is, the mind does not simply record the world as it is given. Rather we bring something to our experience of the world. Furthermore, what we bring to our experience is more than some innate hardware that allows us to process what is given. In addition to such hardware, we bring a host of cultural and historical concepts that cause us to conceptualize our experience in particular ways. Even our own unique experience causes us to understand our future experiences in ways that differ from one another. Thus, reality, as human beings experience it, is as much a human creation as it is a given.

Of course, we experience reality holistically, and it is very hard to separate out and distinguish what is given from what we bring to that givenness. In fact, many people do not even try and continue to understand reality as simply given. Such a belief in the total givenness of reality is what lies at the base of religious fundamentalism. The Christian fundamentalist believes, not simply that the Bible is divine revelation, but that it is a divine revelation into a *tabula rasa* or a mind that simply records what is given as given. The problem with this view is not only that it is unrealistic but it also undermines what is most essential to the Christian faith.

© The author 2007. Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden MA 02148, USA

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00169.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Most Christians believe that Jesus was both human and divine and therefore the Jesus revelation is a greater revelation of the divine than those of Mohammed, Buddha, or Confucius. Strangely, however, many of those same Christians compromise the Jesus revelation with their naive realism. Their realism causes them to suppose that we have the ability to know reality as it is given. For the fundamentalist, the human understanding into which a divine revelation is given does not filter or affect what is given. Thus, they see the Biblical revelation as simply a given rather than a divine revelation that has been filtered through a human understanding. As a consequence, the fundamentalist sees the Scripture, in its entirety, as the revelation of who God objectively and ultimately is.

This is not only unrealistic given the finite nature of human understanding and the infinite and transcendent nature of God, but, more importantly, it reduces the Jesus revelation to one revelation among many. If the entirety of Scripture represents an objective revelation of God's nature, then the Jesus revelation is no different than the revelations offered through Moses and David. As a consequence, when there are contradictions between those revelations, it is easy to resolve the contradiction by claiming that Moses and David are revealing certain aspects of God's nature, while Jesus is revealing other aspects. This allows them to avoid following Jesus by following a certain theory about reality and consequently a theory about how to read the Bible.

Very often when I mention something that Jesus said which conflicts with what those who consider themselves his followers find comfortable, they are quick to point out other parts of Scripture that contradict what Jesus said. They argue, "Yes, Jesus said that we should love our enemies (Matt. 5:44), but sometimes God wants us to kill our enemies (e.g., Joshua 6:20–21)." Since the whole of Scripture is taken to be an objective revelation concerning God's nature, the Jesus revelation only reveals one aspect of that nature. Thus, they do with their theory about reality what others do by pointing to Mohammed, Buddha, or Confucius.

In order to avoid reducing the Jesus revelation to merely one divine revelation among many, it would seem that the better way to read the Bible is by understanding it, not as a revelation of God's objective nature, but as the divine revelation of who human beings perceive God to be. As such, since Christians maintain that Jesus is both human and divine, his understanding or perspective of the divine revelation should be like no other. This seems to be a much more *Christian* way to read the Bible. Furthermore, it seems much more realistic. If the only reality we can ever know is a perspectival reality, it makes sense that such would be the reality that God would reveal to us.

God certainly knows the limits of our understanding. He knows that from that limited understanding we are incapable of taking in the full breath of his infinite and transcendent nature. Thus, the

© The author 2007
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00169.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

revelation he offers us is not an objective revelation that would be far beyond our comprehension. Rather, what God provides is a divine revelation of how we human beings conceive of God from our limited human perspective. As such, the Bible is the revelation of God speaking into an all-too-human understanding that misconceives much of what is being communicated. Throughout the misconceptions and occasional insightful glimpses that constitute the Scripture, God patiently works amidst our limited understanding. In the fullness of time, however, God becomes a human being in order to offer us the ultimate revelation of both how we should conceive of God and ourselves in relationship to God.

Such a reading of Scripture both elevates the Jesus revelation and is much more compatible with what we now know to be the reality of the human condition, but it also has the advantage of giving us some place to go. One of the more serious problems for the fundamentalist Christian and their naive realism is that it leaves them little room for the kind of change that is required if we are to truly follow Jesus and be made evermore into his likeness. If we believe that God has not only given us his revelation but also an innate ability to understand that revelation correctly, there is simply no place for us to go. There is no real possibility for transformation because we have a correct understanding from the beginning. With such a view, we believe that we know from the beginning what it means to be like Jesus. Such a view undermines the transformation process that is at the base of the Christian life. The truth is that the revelation we receive from God is greatly shaped by our own very limited understanding. Our concepts are initially the product of human language communities and cultures, and certainly other than divine. In time, however, if we stay in open relationship with him, our understanding can be changed. We can, in time, take on more and more of the Jesus perspective, but only if we understand that there is something wrong with our initial perspective.

James P. Danaher, Ph.D.
Professor of Philosophy
Head, Department of Philosophy
Nyack College
Nyack, NY 10960
Email: James.Danaher@nyack.edu

© The author 2007
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2007.00169.x Published online by Cambridge University Press