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FUNDAMENTALISM VERSUS LIBERALISM: TOWARDS A HERMENEUTICAL TURN TO ETHICS

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Introduction

I have had a couple of opportunities to attend international academic seminars on "fundamentalism'" one as it relates to ethics (in its diversity) and the other as it is implied in the church and theology. It is intriguing, at least from an African point of view, that "fundamentalism", as opposed to liberalism, is portrayed as the sole challenge, if not threat, in the West. What is evident is that liberalism is rarely put under serious scrutiny or silently endorsed, it certainly is not considered as a challenge. Understandably, this might partially be triggered by the anxiety that is triggered by the recent rise of various forms of extremisms. However, raising a few questions is of utmost importance with regards to this mode of conceptualisation. First, is historical fundamentalism as inherently dangerous as it is portrayed in (post)modern media [and even academia]? Second, is there room to conceptualize the debate in a different way, using cultural currents and traditional values other than the Western ones? Third, even more importantly, would there be a possibility to

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formulate a conceptual matrix that overcomes both cultural and conceptual rifts and yet adequately account for the questions that are raised by both wings? Certainly, this essay does not have any interest in defending one wing over against the other. However, it aims at pondering the aforementioned two questions. The first part will make an attempt to trace the historical roots of the debate and then put the discourse into "the" Western and "the" African perspectives. This helps to see how the issue is perceived in these two culturally diverse parts of the world. As relativist or even divisive as this approach may sound, I contend it will serve as an antidote to the claimed universalism of any of the wings. In addition it gives an opportunity to the local cultures to make their voices heard on the issue at stake. In the second part I will try to come up with my own alternative for the two poles. It is helpful to go beyond them and search for a conceptual framework that goes beyond differences in cultures, traditions and experiences regarding the fundamentalism versus liberalism debate.

1. Liberalism versus Fundamentalism: Two Different Conceptions

1.1 The Origins and "the" Western Conception

Words are disguises, as the cliché goes. They can mean different things to different people. It might therefore be helpful to briefly define and trace the origin of the terms before discussing further. First, let us start with liberalism. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy rightly suggests that liberalism could be different things in different countries – such as Britain, France, the USA and Australia – as well as in fields of research such as in political tradition, political philosophy, general philosophical theory and in religion. Admittedly, its wide threads and flexible uses in several domains do not seem to help to come up with a clear

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definition. However, it might be helpful if we go on with describing generic features and assumptions which underlie the whole notion of liberalism albeit in diverse fashions. For one thing, individual liberty is at the heart of liberalism. Second, liberalism takes the emancipation of the individual from beliefs and prejudices which do not yield to rational veracity very seriously. Third, as a reaction to ideological and religious absolutism, liberalism became a way of escaping from religious and political authorities (priests and kings).

Second, let's have a look at fundamentalism.[1] Grant Wacker, a professor of history of religion at Duke University, suggests distinguishing between "historic Fundamentalism" and "generic fundamentalism". Historic fundamentalism refers to the phenomenon that is closely linked to the historical and cultural context of Protestantism in 1920s in America through which the term "fundamentalism" appeared on the social and academic scene. On the other hand, generic fundamentalism, Wacker maintains, refers to a global religious impulse, particularly evident in the twentieth century, which seeks to recover and publicly institutionalize aspects of the past precisely because modern life has obscured it. [2] In other words, it sees the secular (liberal) state as an inherent threat, for its sole interest lies in education, economy and democratisation at the expense of the spiritual dimension of life. Such a move, for the fundamentalists, has religious, social, and also very acute ethical implications. From the religious standpoint, sacred scriptures which used to be regarded as having authority over everyday life have come

[1] The term at the inception was not used with a negative connotation, precisely because its meaning had to do with preserving religious, cultural and traditional fundamentals against the sweeping tide of modern move. The apparent change of the meaning of the term seems to have been occurred [from neutral or even constructive to pejorative] as several religious radicalism(s) unfold themselves. As the result, many groups described as fundamentalist often strongly object to this term because of the negative undertones it carries, or because it implies a similarity between themselves and other groups, which they find disagreeable.
[2] Grant Wacker, *The Rise of Fundamentalism* (*http://www.nhc.rtp.nc.us*).

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under attack. Introduction of different schools of criticism – such as literary, form, reduction – are seen as indicating many things but not of stripping the authority of sacred books away. From the social perspective, overarching governing norms and values of the believing society are conceived to be under fire. Ethically, communal warmth, long cherished traditions, and as a result, shared codes of discipline have increasingly been watered down. Hence, both historic and generic fundamentalism(s) are reactions to the apparently new trajectory of religious, social and ethical dynamics.

Now, what are the main assumptions and motivations behind these seemingly unbridgeable divergences? What are the major questions that they pose to one another? The chief concern of liberalism is human liberty be this in political, religious or ethical form. Humanness therefore is defined in terms of freedom. Fundamentalism, on the other hand, is anxious to preserve supposedly enduring traditions, values and sources of authority whether that of a religious or other kind. Liberals are troubled by the presumed tyranny of universalistic conceptions of fundamentalism on individual rights and liberties, whereas fundamentalists, conversely, are wary of looming social fragmentation and ever-advancing ethical relativism.

Both schools have got some salient points which have to be accounted for. Liberalism is right on target in its claim that human identity cannot be fully grasped apart from individual liberty. Fundamentalism, on the other hand, should be given a credit for their search for guiding normative principles, religious and social warmth as well as communal ties. This is precisely because both human liberty and a search for the unifying principle are universal quests. Now, where did things go wrong?

The main deficiency with both views is a tendency to pick one aspect of humanness and one portion of history and to absolutise it. Reductionism plays a pivotal role in both wings. A need for individual liberty, for

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instance, is one of the very essential aspects of humanness, but, it has also to be stressed, it is far from being everything. Let me give one semi-hypothetical example. Consider this, as an Ethiopian who is living in the Western part of the world, I obviously have got better private space, reliable protection under the law and probably a better life setting compared to Ethiopia. In other words, I'm living in an "individually fulfilling" atmosphere. The situation back in Ethiopia is in considerable contradiction with what I "individually" need. People recently got killed by the forces of the ruling regime in the streets; elites are dragged behind the bars for demanding democracy. Freedom of expression in Ethiopia is far from being realised. However, to my surprise, my nostalgic experience with Ethiopia persists despite all sorts of problems that could threaten my individual freedom. My inner part always whispers that I lack something in the Western hemisphere that I used to enjoy back home: communal warmth and noise - remember utter silence is synonym to death in Africa, and deeper awareness of the supernatural realm as the governing principle of human life.

Interestingly, however, such a search seems to be even beyond nostalgic experience. In other words, my experience in the Western hemisphere indicates that the fear of silence is not unique to me as an Ethiopian. Even the people who are brought up in the most individualistic atmosphere are not completely immune. The unique thing with the West however is that technology seems to be offering artificial and impersonal alternatives – through electronic devices – to deal with the horror of silence. Most of the people walk, work and even read with their ears plugged by earphones. Yet it is still highly questionable if it is a sufficient alternative to listening to something deeper, personal and even superhuman. Second, fundamentalism is not open to new possibilities and developments in society as history unfolds, whereas liberalism is highly conditioned by a particular history and context, to the extent of turning a blind eye to universally enduring principles. Both wings then

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lack depth in relation to the ultimate reality, conception of humanness and understanding of time and history. Such a lack of depth gives fundamentalism an oppressive face whereas it makes liberalism a cause of societal fragmentation and parentless-ness, to use the word of Roger Lundin of Wheaton College.

1.2. An African Perspective on the Debate

The fundamentalism versus liberalism controversy is never foreign to Africa. In fact it is the drive to maintain the traditional status quo (in the fundamentalists' zone) and the passion for liberty of local cultures (not of individuals as such) which underlie the debate. However, the debate takes quite a different shape in Africa. Hence, there seems to be a good reason to give a brief analysis in order to put fundamentalism versus liberalism debate into the conceptual frame of the global south.

1.2.1. The nature of Debate

The trend of the debate seems to be taking a shape of tension rather than polarity in Africa. For instance, John Pobee identifies two worlds in the African life: the realms of traditional value and modern technology.[3] Desmond Tutu's observation seems to be even sharper when he explains the struggle as "a split in African soul".[4] Two observations can be made from the foregoing remarks. For one, unlike in the West, the split of fundamentalism and liberalism is not only an ideological division between two schools, or two different parties, but is also something that occurs within individuals as they try to keep the seemingly irreconcilable edges together. For another, their trust on either side is quite superficial as it lacks a comprehensive conceptual framework to filter what is

[3] John S. Pobee (1978). The Church in West Africa. In *The Church in Africa: Papers Presented at the Symposium at Milligan College, March 31-April 3*. Charles R. Taber ed., pp. 139-159. CA: William Carey Library, 1978, p. 158.
[4] Desmond M. Tutu, "Whither African Theology?" *Christianity in Independent Africa,* eds. Edward Fashole-Luke, et al., (New York: Academic Press, 1978), p. 366.

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at stake in the polarities. Peter Lwaminda's illustration is captivating when he says that the tension resembles a "frog with two legs on the dry land and two in water, ready to jump in the opposite direction from whatever danger was coming"[5]

1.2.2. Its Expression

Both fundamentalism and liberalism express themselves in quite different ways from those in the West. Let's take an example from the church setting. Some (missionary churches) try to maintain the enduring traditions, practices and ecclesiastical dogma even at the expense of local cultures and beliefs. On the other hand, others (indigenous churches) tend to integrate the local beliefs and tradition as a very crucial aspect of Christianity even at the expense of some central Christian doctrines. It all depends on the perspective of the beholder to determine who is fundamentalist and who is liberal. This is precisely because, from the indigenous perspective, the former category falls into the liberalism spectrum, for they have very little or no regard for local values and beliefs. From the missionary churches point of view, indigenous churches could be labelled as liberals for mixing Christianity with local practices at the expense of presumed timeless ecclesiastical traditions. The same applies for fundamentalism depending on the issues at stake.

1.2.3. The Issues

The issues attached to the fundamentalism versus liberalism debate seem to be affecting the independent and missionary churches differently in Africa. For instance, the quest for women's ordination was not a demand that emerged from the public ethos in the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus of Ethiopia, not at least at this stage. If it were the quest of Ethiopian Christians it should have come from the Ethiopian Ortho-

[5] Peter. Lwaminda, "The Teaching of Theology and Philosophy within the Realities of Africa", *Doing Philosophy and Theology in the African Context,* eds. Luke G. Mlilo CMM and Mthanael Y. Soede (IKO: London, 2003), p. 9.

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dox Church, not only because it claims more than a half of the Ethiopian population, but also, compared to Mekane Yesus Church where there already were a significant number of women evangelists, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is a context where women's ordination is apparently unimaginable. The same seems to be true with the introduction of the debate over same sex marriage and gay ordination in some African churches. They are issues which have come from the top down to the grassroots (imported by the local headquarters from partner churches abroad). The non-missionary churches are quite different though. For one, they have far less chance, if at all, of borrowing controversies which are less pertinent to the African context from overseas, than the missionary churches. For another, they try to deal with challenges that are immediately emerging from the grassroots. Their pressing concerns are issues pertaining to healing, the place of ancestors, polygamy, gender equality, church discipline, ethnicity, and social and economic justice.

This does not however mean that the issues are always treated in a credible manner. There are instances where the churches, in the name of accounting for indigenous beliefs, are exposed to bizarre practices. Belief in the evil eye and the attempt to give two names to a new born child at the time of baptism to protect it against a demonic attack, and some biblically incongruent exorcism practices in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church stand out as good examples. However, this should not discredit their attempts to address the issues that pose themselves as real challenges for believers.

Two things have to be added here. First, some of the state of affairs in the African context do not always easily fit into liberalism versus fundamentalism frames. This is because there are issues which seemingly pertain to both sides in a given tradition. For example, indigenous people appear to be fundamentalist in their appeal to indigenous values

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and practices, whereas their philosophical conceptions might, at times, fall into the liberal category.

2. The Concept of Meaning as a Way to go Beyond the Poles

Needless to say, the notion of meaning is one of the concepts that is extremely intriguing and highly contested, in the fields of both natural science and the humanities. Some argue that the concept of meaning has a rigid tie with the linguistic domain, and therefore, any search of meaning beyond the linguistic mechanism itself is entirely meaningless. In a broader sense, any strand of thinking that reduces the spectacularly diverse and yet coherent design and purpose of created reality to a mechanical cause can fall into this category.[6] Others, on the contrary, take a broader view of the notion of meaning admitting that it has got wider and deeper inferences than simply being confined to the linguistic sphere. They however add that it does not transcend the subjective creation of human thought and imagination. The searching subject, they reason, is completely conditioned by the cultural and social upbringing as well as by a sense of solidarity and what is perceived to be good for the particular community in which the subject in question is living, to employ a Rortian term.[7] The claim of the objectivity of meaning is anything, but pure myth.

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[6] David Armstrong, one of the best known naturalists, propagates such a view not directly in relation to hermeneutics per se, but by the way he interprets the created reality and societal foundations. He therefore argues that natural science is "the first philosophy" in a sense that it is the only field that fully accounts for reality. Interestingly enough, reality according to Armstrong consists of nothing, but a single all embracing spacio-temporal system. See his article "Naturalism, Materialism and First Philosophy" in *Contemporary Materialism: A Reader*, eds. Paul Moser and J.D. Trout, Routledge.

[7] For more sophisticated argument on this strand of thinking see *Richard Rorty's Solidarity or Objectivity: Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

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As someone who is captivated by the notion of meaning, I have tried to formulate the notion of meaning in a substantially different way elsewhere.[8] The concept of meaning seems to have three different layers: deep existential, abstract philosophical and concrete practical. A careful identification and plausible use of these levels, I contend, would be a useful tool not only to deal with the challenges of fundamentalism and liberalism, but also in terms of avoiding reductionism in its diverse forms. Let's have a brief look at each of them before extracting its implication to ethics.

2.1. Deeper Existential Level

This is a level in which humankind tries to interpret and define itself by asking extremely acute questions in life. Such questions incorporate the problem of origin or *arche* (where did I come from?), purpose (why am I here?) and the question of *telos* (where am I going?). The interpenetration of the past, present and future in humanness is abundantly clear in these questions. Moreover, they exhibit what Wessel Stoker calls "the fundamental lack in human existence"[9] a determining factor in terms of triggering such questions. Responding to these questions therefore is not an option, but is naturally inescapable. Henk Geertsema, a Dutch philosopher, seems to be hitting it right on the nail when he prudently writes:

> Questions of meaning, of good and evil, of origin and destination, that are traditionally part of religion and the worldview, are more typical to the way we relate to the world as the whole than the method of science. It is part of our human nature that we have to answer these questions. They pose themselves to us and

[8] I developed this idea in my masters thesis at the Free University of Amsterdam (2005).
[9] Wessel Stoker, *Is the Quest for Meaning the Quest for God?: A Religious Ascription of Meaning in Relation to Secular Ascription of Meaning* (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 1996), p. 5.

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we have to respond. Being human we can't avoid interpreting the world and our place in it and accept responsibility for our interpretation.[10]

No research, to my mind, has demonstrated this in as dramatic a fashion as that of Ernest Becker, who previously was a self-confessed atheist anthropologist and psychiatrist who converted to Christianity shortly before his death because of the impact of his own research. Becker made an extensive study of people who are on the verge of death and their search for meaning at a critical time. Becker then points out, in his book *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, that the human being is a tragically paradoxical creature. In other words, on the one hand, "unlike other animals", Becker writes, "he has an awareness of himself as a unique individual […] on the other; he is the only animal in nature who knows he will die".[11] The birth of meaning therefore has to do with the awareness of man's unique significance, whereas the death has to do with a sense of fragility as humankind faces death. It has to be noted therefore that both spectrums – celebration of unique significance on one hand and sense of fragility on the other – are undeniably universal experiences. Such a paradoxical experience makes this level extremely noteworthy, for it is at this level that the human being seeks for an anchorage in life. It is at this stage that religious commitment provides people not only with a sense of security, but also with a basic orientation of interpreting reality.

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[10] Henk Geertsema, "Dooyeweerd's Transcendental Critique: Transforming it Hermeneutically", *Contemporary Reflection on the Philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd: A Supplement to the Collected Work of Herman Dooyeweerd,* eds. D. F. M. Strauss and Michelle Botting, (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampster: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), p. 62.

[11] Earnest Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning: An Interdisciplinary Perspective of the Problem of Man* (New York: Free Press, 1971), p. 141.

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2.2. Abstract Philosophical Level

The abstract philosophical or theoretical level, unlike the existential level which tries to tie the human subject with the ultimate reality, starts off from the human capability to theoretically analyse what is given. Therefore, the main question that this level strives to answer is: what possibilities and limitations in terms of interpreting reality do I have? This is the reason why scholarship in the field of hermeneutics is increasingly characterizing philosophical hermeneutics as a reflection on interpretation, a theory of what happens when we understand anything. Meaning at this level begins with natural human ability. Admittedly this level (compared to the existential level) is less passionate, substantially moderate and academically sensitive, for it is at this level which "understanding" itself will be the subject of careful scrutiny and adjudication. In other words, this level helps us to substantiate unnecessary zeal, directness and unconstructive fundamentalism.

2.3. Concrete Practical Level

The concrete practical level is a phase in which the concept of meaning is dealt with as it relates to individual things or entities such as language, culture, ethics, values, literature, artwork in daily practical life. The main question at this level would be: how do the possibilities and limitations affect the way I relate to an entity or a thing in question? Let's briefly turn to Herman Dooyeweerd's theory of "naïve experience" to shed some light on the notion of meaning on the practical level.[12] According to Dooyeweerd, naïve experience (or concrete experience as he sometimes calls it) – as a purely pre-theoretical practice – plays a great role in terms of interpreting the individual things and entities in a concrete daily life. But why is naïve experience so crucial for Dooyeweerd? Naïve experience, Dooyeweerd explains, is so basic precisely

[12] It has to be noted that the term "naïve experience" in this context is not used in a pejorative sense. Its nuance rather has to do with the way of understanding everyday experience unaided by any theoretical framework whatsoever.

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"because it experiences reality in the indivisible meaning-coherence of its modal aspects, common sense intuitively repudiates any attempt to divide its experiential world into theoretically abstracted independent spheres […]. In unsophisticated non-theoretical attitude, we experience reality in indivisible coherence of cosmic time".[13]

The genius of Dooyeweerd's analysis lies in the fact that he explores naïve or concrete experience as the primary medium by which reality introduces itself to us, and therefore it has to be accounted for. Inasmuch as theoretical thought is something to rely on, precisely because it is the only way that we experience things and values as concrete wholes without breaking them down into pieces, his analysis of naïve experience exposes the weakness of a line of thought that reduces the wide and complex array of human experience to a single theoretical or scientific enterprise.

However, one could wonder if concrete experience is always pre-theoretical or completely detached from the above two levels. This might have to do with Dooyeweerd's attitude towards what he calls "primitive society" of which a number of scholars – including his fellow Reformed philosophers such as Sander Griffioen – are quite critical. For instance, Dooyeweerd observes, primitive societies do not have a deepened notion of criminal law except on the basis of the factual consequences of an action in question. Hence, the principle of retribution hinges rigidly on the modal substrata without being deepened into the anticipatory principle of accountability for guilt. In the same manner, the legal subjectivity of man and the validity of norms, were characterized by quite closed social intercourse and limited members of the tribe. This is because the primitive communal order was an undifferentiated whole whose modal functions were yet to be articulated and distinguished.

As sublime as the main line of his argument might appear, Dooyeweerd's claim here is pretty problematic at its best, and outrageous at its

[13] TCTT II, p. 29

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worst. For one thing, the implied association of the second level with modern formal education readily insinuates that "fundamentalism" has to do with being "uncivilized". However, empirical evidence might show that this is far from being the case. A difference in the way that "primitive societies" and "civilized societies" practise abstract thought should be mentioned - just to make use of the opposite of his gross generalization – if such a polarization does make any sense after all. On the contrary, however, it is a crude fact that the societies which are labelled "primitive" have their own theoretical frames through which they filter and adjudicate practices, values and norms even if their theories are enveloped into their tales, narratives, arts and, even at times, rumours. Hence, even uneducated societies can use the theoretical level although the method of theorization might differ from culture to culture.

What does the above analysis of meaning offer with regards to overcoming polarization? A number of scholars, leaders (religious and secular) and activists have taken one side over against the other, which left (and is still leaving) its own mark in our society. However, there are some who do not want to take one side over against the other and try to strike a balance in between. Richard Bernstein's book Beyond Objectivism and Relativism (1983) is one of the best examples of this category. The salient feature of this work is that it aims at making both spectrums obsolete. How? In dealing with such issues, Bernstein suggests, we need to look for what he calls "the hermeneutical circle" – a philosophical conception that focuses on the interpretive process as a dialogue between part and the whole – to bring an end to the apparently unbridgeable poles. This method, Bernstein opts to maintain, not only takes history, tradition and prejudices quite seriously, but it also accounts for the fact that humankind is a dialogical being who always is engaged in conversation as a process of understanding.[14] In other words, there are both

[14] Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983) p. 137.

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objective (in the form of institutions, values, practices) and subjective (openness of the interpreting subject to listen and share) dimensions to his theory. Bernstein is aware of both universalistic tyranny (which functions behind distorted forms of fundamentalism), on one hand, and the so-called Cartesian Anxiety (the fear of sliding into relativism and fragmentation of which liberalism is presumed to be the main cause). He therefore suggests practical reason as a remedy for both problems in a promise that it could mediate between the two poles.

Admittedly, Bernstein's repudiation of elevating one pole over against the other is feasible, as both are irreducibly essential, but yet not complete by themselves. His call to apply "the hermeneutical circle" is very significant with regards to enhancing a comprehensive understanding of what is at stake and promoting dialogue. However, the question still remains whether Bernstein has really gone "beyond objectivism and subjectivism" as the title of his book suggests. Intriguingly enough, Geertsema points out that Bernstein finds the common concern of *telos* in the works of prominent philosophers such as Hannah Arendt, Gadamer and Habermas. Nevertheless, Geertsema laments Bernstein's failure to account for the place of *telos* as deeply embedded in human projects such as ethics and politics. Moreover, he remains unconvinced that practical reason as a solution in Bernstein's project would offer a sufficient answer to the question of human finitude and universal need of anchorage.[15]

Geertsema then comes with much deeper and conceptually sensible alternative. He starts off by defining the human being as *Homo Respondens* (a responding species). In other words, he contends, it is only the human being that has awareness of normativity, a distinct sense of self, knowledge of the quality of things, potential to respond to the Creator

[15] Henk Geerstema, "Homo Respondens: On the Historical Nature of Human Reason," *Philosophia Reformata. 58, p. 120-52.*

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and a sense of call to fellowship with Him.[16] Answering therefore is not an option precisely because, according to Geertsema, the whole creation is characterized as answering to God's promise-command to be. Human beings, compared to the rest of creation, have got an even further dimension: answering with responsibility. Answering therefore is normative to human beings.[17]

This line of thinking makes the liberal tendency towards an individualistic ethic effectively obsolete. In other words, it bases its argument on what we previously called the deeper existential level. The question of *telos*, in a way, is dealt with when Geertsema portrays human beings – even the whole creation, for that matter – as answering to the Creator's promise-command to be. The responding aspect therefore signifies the hermeneutical act as deeply embedded in the essence of humanness. This signifies that the liberal tendency of individualism, and the fearsome inner silence, is incoherent with the normative design of humanness.

Elsewhere Geertsema depicts the whole of creation as a book – a book with an Author. Not only that, he adds, creation as a book cannot be fully grasped without paying due attention to the authorial intention though the book has its own voice which declares its Author[18] This takes us to the second level of meaning – understanding possibility and limitations in theorizing. Fundamentalism arguably has (or better, claims to have) an awareness of normativity. Its consistent appeal to abiding ethical, traditional and societal norms and quest for universal application might imply such an awareness. However, it is extremely weak in acknowledging possibility as well as limitation. In other words, creation as a book is not fixed and static. It is ever-moving and dynamic. Discovering new possibilities is a part of the creational dynamic in both the areas

[16] Ibid., p. 129.
[17] Ibid., pp. 146-150.
[18] Henk Geertsema, "Higher Education as Service to the King," *Critique and Challenge of Christian Higher Education* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1987), p. 65.

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natural science and the humanities. Fundamentalism seems to be struggling to let the dynamism and new possibilities go. It instead tries to prevent a possible change and its aftermath, by imposing a fixed value and tradition on others. As a result, un-scrutinized zeal, instead of thorough articulation, seems to be taking the upper hand. Human liberty in that way is under great jeopardy. Instead of trying to avert the force of historical change, the goal should be a search for a reliable conceptual matrix through which the changes can be channelled and adjudicated.

The fear of change in the camp of fundamentalism has visibly affected the way they relate to culture, society and otherness at the practical level. The fact that the very term "fundamentalism" has become increasingly associated with violence, killings and intimidation, exhibits the consequence of ignoring the level of theoretical articulation and making unjustifiable transposition to the practical application. This is because the second level would not only facilitate mutual dialogue and understanding, but it could also serve as a check to filter needless zeal from creating a seemingly unbridgeable rift between human societies. On the other hand, liberalism seems to have no less a negative reputation as it is associated with ethical permissiveness, societal fragmentation and extreme individualism. Both seem to have one common grave problem: ignoring the authorial intention behind created reality, to use Geertsema's metaphor of the book. This is because the authorial intention does not make individuals and community on a hierarchical basis. They both seem to be placing their own impulses at the centre in the process of understanding reality. Looking for a governing universal principle is plausible. However, the purpose should be serving the Author rather than maintaining the interest of certain religious or political traditions. On the other hand, searching for human liberty is one of the basic things, but realization of human liberty must go deeper to the extent of using the liberty of others, and ultimately, that of the Author.

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Concluding Remarks

We started off with three crucial questions: about the way fundamentalism is handled in media and academia, the cultural divergences in the conception of the sides in the debate and the possibility of overcoming both cultural and conceptual rifts. I have tried to demonstrate that both fundamentalism and liberalism have raised and wrestled with vital questions without which it is hard to understand both the human subject and its endeavour. Grooming one wing with saint-like status while condemning the other to a devilish grade is very unlikely to do good for human society. This is precisely because finding a common rhythm and living a covenantal life is as decisive as realizing human liberty for human good. Polarization appears to be struggling to eradicate one tyranny of universalism with another. The grave consequence of such a move, as we saw, is the reduction of a wide array of human nature to one single aspect. Namely, sacrificing the communal meta-narrative on the altar of individual liberty or vice versa. The example of the African understanding of the fundamentalism versus liberalism debate opens another window to see things differently, depending on one's cultural context. However, there still is a danger of propagating cultural closure [as opposed to openness] and hostility towards otherness, when full-blown localism is applied.

It is then that the third question becomes very important. We laid the foundation that hermeneutics, as a search for meaning, has got three levels: deeper existential, abstract theoretical and concrete practical. In order to understand (get the inner logic of) the created reality, we stressed, these three levels have to function in a credible manner. The question of liberalism, according to this conceptual framework, not only seems to be bypassing the first level but also it is most likely that the second level is also hijacked by the individual category. It is apparent that it failed to offer the much needed harmony and tolerance in society

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even if it emphasizes one of the important aspect of humanness (individual liberty). Fundamentalism on the other hand seems to be going the opposite route by rigidly acknowledging the existential orientation and universal principle. However, the diverse assortment of human society including the possibility and limitation of understanding seems to be under fire.

This essay suggests that the best possible orientation with regards to formulating an ethical matrix is conceiving of oneself as a responding creation. Response always presupposes a call – a call for covenant. It is this covenant that gives a credible frame to theorization that acknowledges both possibility and limitation. Far from being neutral, theorization aims at realizing the covenant. It is therefore this covenant that makes harmony possible and enables us to overcome the challenges of fundamentalism and liberalism. This is precisely because in the context of covenant it is not only that the past, present and future are completely fused, but also freedom and responsibility are accounted for without making a hierarchy between community and the individual.

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