

Get UNSTUCK from FUNDAMENTALISM

A Spiritual Journey

By Robert Parson Crosby

Reviewed by the author's Otterbein College classmate (1950), Dr. James B. Recob, Emeritus Professor of Religion, Otterbein College.

This is a book which the author says he wrote on the last of several trips to Italy, which has become his home away from home. But this is no travelogue. It is, rather, a narrative detailing a personal odyssey, a pilgrimage made by the author from a childhood rooted in fundamentalism to the present, which finds him located somewhere beyond Christianity but shy of atheism.

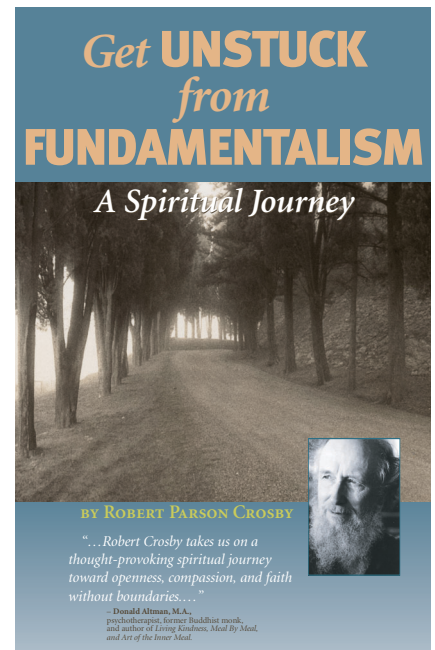
Crosby's approach is ecumenical, in the widest sense of the word. He still embraces some Christian ideas but blends them with Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim thought, together with healthy doses of psychology and philosophy.

All are homogenized into a syncretistic whole consistent with the affirmation, "The Truth is One," a key Hindu concept.

This 179 page book is divided into three parts: Life and Faith Simply Put, Christian Fundamentalism: a Distraction from Essence, and The Spiritual Road beyond Literalism. Part one, Life and Faith Simply Put, begins with a statement of Crosby's personal ideas about human existence and meaning. He makes a sharp distinction between the "real self," the "core," the "jewel" which "I am" and the "ego," which is the sum total of "conditioned secondhand learning." The "ego" is not the authentic self, but is the product of a lifetime of learning, with special emphasis on childhood training. For the "real self" to emerge one must "get unstuck" from secondhand learning. Fundamentalism, in particular, is representative of secondhand learning which has been imposed on the real self. It is critically important, therefore, for a person, like the author, to get "unstuck from fundamentalism."

While secondhand learning prepares us "to live as decent citizens in our culture," the product of a person's secondhand learning—his or her ego—is a "pretend self." The real self is "within." To demonstrate that Jesus concurs with this conclusion Crosby quotes part of Luke 17:21, "the Kingdom of God is within." While this may illustrate his point, his truncated quotation does violence to Jesus' meaning. Luke tells us that Jesus said to the quarrelsome Pharisees who had asked when the Kingdom of God would come, "The Kingdom of God is within YOU (plural)"—this might also be translated "the Kingdom of God is among you" or "in your midst" (which might even mean that the Kingdom is already here!). Far from being a distinctly individualistic, interior entity, the Kingdom is social, its location is in the corporate body of humankind—including even the Pharisees! In any event, the plural YOU at the end of this quotation rules out a purely individualistic understanding of Jesus' spirituality.

Part two of the book, titled "Christian Fundamentalism: a Distraction from Essence" seeks, first of all, to place fundamentalism within its historical context. The author includes a restatement of the "Five



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Fundamentals” of Protestant Fundamentalism and correctly identifies biblical literalism (predicated upon the inspired, infallible Word of God) as central to fundamentalist thought.

What is most problematic with fundamentalism is its literalistic interpretation of the Bible. Crosby asks the question, “Was Jesus a literalist?” He thinks not, it appears. “Jesus, like other spiritual leaders (Moses, Amos, the Buddha, Mohammed, Zoroaster) goes beyond the rigid doctrines (like literalism?) and challenges the establishment.” One cannot help noting that Jesus is, for Crosby, just one spiritual leader among many—but he was not a literalist.

Crosby examines some of the hot button current issues for fundamentalists: the Iraq war, school prayer, abortion, gay marriage and inter-racial marriage and concludes that “America is in a crisis about values.” His solution? “All of us have a huge stake in identifying our commonalities and finding compromise.” This is a commendable idea, but when have fundamentalists ever compromised on issues they believe to be vital?

Part three, “The Spiritual Road beyond Literalism” marks a significant departure from the line of thought in Parts one and two. Here he writes about a host of ideas and concerns, including graceful aging, striving for authenticity, the meaning of life and of death, the meaning of work, creation, salvation, going to church and Mary Magdalene, with frequent references to the felicity of wine. If this sounds a bit like a hodge-podge—it is.

In his “afterward” Crosby makes the following redeeming statement: “Bigotry and prejudice have been with us since the beginning of time. They are not our natural endowments but rather are viewpoints that are taught to us by others when we are very young. But, as with all secondhand learning, they can be ‘un-taught,’ and we can be freed from the narrowness of those early life experiences.”

And so, the author is freed from the narrowness of his own childhood fundamentalism. He is “unstuck” from fundamentalism, and he hopes his readers either already are, or will be, similarly “unstuck.”

This is not an academic work about fundamentalism. If the reader expects this he or she will be disappointed. But if you, the reader, enjoy first-hand accounts about personal spiritual pilgrimages, about personal growth and development, this may be for you a satisfying read.