

FUNDAMENTALISM

The word "Fundamentalism" first became common in the 19th century, referring to the protestant groups in America who believed in the literal truth of the Bible, "fundamental" because they claimed that they were returning the bedrock of Christianity, back to its fundamentals. The trouble was that the different groups took different passages as being key and so were unable to agree with one another.

I think we need to be aware that when we use the word in a critical manner, we may be being a bit "fundamentalist" ourselves. There can be nothing wrong in holding firmly to beliefs, provided that they do not require you to harm others for not sharing them. If that is the case, then I think they may need to be carefully examined to see whether your interpretation is in line with the spirit of the one who first taught them, and if they are, then the teachings themselves need most careful examination since all the major religions in the world today started as religions of compassion, love of your neighbour and of yourself. This is as true of Judaism, Islam, Buddhism as it is of Christianity. In all traditions and in all countries, we have first condensed the original teaching into a set of rules and then, in all too many cases, imposing the rules while losing the spirit of the original teaching.

Repeatedly each Faith has become aware of the drift and has tried to reform itself (not always easily, in Christianity the last major attempt at reform was what we now call the Reformation - and that led to one of the most vicious and lengthy wars ever fought in Europe). We have however continued to devise new dogmas and then to try and find our way back to the original inspiration.

Though there cannot be anything wrong in trying to focus on the important features of Jesus' teaching, I think there is a danger in basing one's life on a reading of an ancient text, without also trying to understand the intentions of the person who first spoke, or wrote, the words. For example, all the stories of Jesus in the Gospels reflect the loving and generous nature of his message and yet some interpretations suggest very tightly defined limits to those who can be "saved".

I believe that, in the words of William Penn, an early Quaker whose name was given to Pennsylvania, that: "The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious and devout souls are everywhere of one religion."