

Fundamentalism

All the major religions in the world started as religions of compassion, of love of your neighbour as of yourself. This is as true of Judaism, Islam and Buddhism as it is of Christianity. But in a very human way 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, imposed the rules while losing the spirit of the original teaching. Repeatedly each Faith has become aware of this drift and has tried to reform itself, not always an easy matter, in Christianity for example 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 and which resulted in several polarised versions of Christianity.

The word "Fundamentalism" was first used to refer to the protestant groups in America who believed in the literal truth of the Bible and thus to have returned to the bedrock of Christianity. Unfortunately different groups took different passages as being key and so were unable to agree with one another on precisely what the "fundamentals" were. I am aware that when I use the word in a critical manner, I am being a bit "fundamentalist" myself, though there is of course nothing wrong in holding firmly to beliefs, provided that they do not require you to harm others for not sharing them. In such a case, they need to be carefully examined to see whether our interpretation reflects the spirit of the one who first taught them, and if they do not, then the teachings themselves need the most careful examination.

Though for Christians 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 particular 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 like the words of William Penn, an early Quaker whose name was given to Pennsylvania: "The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious and devout souls are everywhere of one religion."