

There Is Nothing Fun or Mental About Fundamentalism

I begin today with a poem:

If you can start the day without caffeine,
If you can get along without pep pills,
If you maintain good cheer through each season of the year
and don't bore friends with all your aches and ills,

If you can eat the same food every day
yet never turn it down or be ungrateful,
If you can always say that you'll eat it anyway
and cheerfully demolish every plateful,

If you can understand when all your loved ones
are too preoccupied to pay attention,
or they take it out on you whenever something goes askew
though it's not your fault or cause for their dissension.

If you can take their blame or criticism
yet never feel resentment or offense,
If you overlook friends' lack of optimism
and don't correct their want of commonsense,

If you can treat a poor friend or a rich one
with equality of honour and respect,
never trying to disguise with deception, fraud or lies
the truthfulness and frankness they expect,

If you can sleep without the aid of drugs
and don't resort with charlatans or quacks,
If you can conquer tension without medics' intervention
or need alcoholic liquor to relax,

If you can say that, deep within your heart,

you sustain no prejudice or bigotry
against colour, race or creed; If you never feel the need
to involve in politics or mutiny,

If you can show goodwill to all your fellows,
If you can love your friends without reserve,
If you always kindly treat any strangers you may meet
and never show alarm or lose your nerve,

If you can go all week, hearing rubbish people speak
and never show the depth of your disdain
but look into their eyes as though you think they're wise,
even when you know they've hardly any brain,

If you can do all this, go pick your bone!
You're as good as any dog I've ever known.

(Hugh Wyles, October 18th. 2007.)

The fact is that we are not the family dog. As humans not only to we have highly defined preferences but also our lives are mostly marked by fear.

I'm calling the theme I have undertaken this year "living in the gap between 'the no-longer' and 'the not-yet.'" Ways of life and living, cherished beliefs and institutions, new knowledge and information, these matters are either changing so dramatically or coming at us so rapidly that we are overwhelmed. This reality shapes the real religion of our culture, consumerism.

Most of us don't like change and humans will either go to great lengths to make sure it doesn't happen, work hard to turn the hands of the clock back to an idealized former time or simply deny the reality of what is.

The talks I'm designing for these times together are my effort to speak to this reality.

In terms of our psycho-spiritual work the biggest “no-longer” we have to face into has to do with the changing understanding of whatever we mean when we use the word “god.” God is not a being who lives out yonder in the sky. Indeed, God is not a being at all. Rather, God is Being Itself.

Theistic religions are a reaction formation to the human anxiety rising out of the very thing that makes us human - consciousness; specifically the awareness that we are finite - a nice way of saying that we are going to die.

The gap in which we live is a shift of epic proportions.

As fear and frightening circumstances increase so do both political and religious fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is on the increase all over the globe. I am going to confine myself to the rise of Fundamentalism in the Christian religion, particularly over the last hundred plus years.

Last week I introduced you to two men who have blazed the trail for Christian fundamentalism to develop - James Ussher who came up with the chronology that says the earth was created in 4004 B.C. And, Cyrus Scofield who developed a study Bible that became the best selling Bible of all time in which he articulated a theory that said we were in the next to last era of history and that soon God would establish his (sic) 1,000 year rule on earth and the seat of this rule would be in Jerusalem. This is one of the reasons many Evangelical Christians were so excited to see Jerusalem declared as the capital of Israel recently. The power of Evangelical Christians can also be seen in our country having a Secretary of Education who wants to insure that “creationism” or “intelligent design” - both code words for denying evolution - are taught in public schools.

I will be showing that Fundamentalism in all religions is fear-based. It is also destructive to the values of peace, love and joy because it is inherently and inevitably violent. Fundamentalism is growing because people have not done and are not doing the personal work they need to do to grow up, to be adults in the world, take personal responsibility for how the world is and do their part to make the world a better, safer and less violent place. I won't elaborate on this now but even the evangelical code word for salvation, “being born again,” smacks of keeping people in a child-like and dependent state.

I want to give you a personal biographical piece on fear. Fear, more specifically fear of the dark, is what opened the door and led me to the path I have followed all of my life up until this very moment. It was not until many years later and a lot of time spent in therapy, both receiving it and learning how to do it, that I gained an understanding about the origins of my fear, the fear I had as a young child.

My grandmother, my father's mother and a woman I've openly said was one of the meanest people God ever created, taught me when I was four that "wonderful" prayer many children learn -

Now I lay me down to sleep.
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

This taught me that death might come when I was sleeping. This didn't make nighttime or sleeping anything to look forward to. It also taught me that I had a soul that if the Lord didn't take upon my death, something else might happen to it.

The church is the institution that told me what that "something else" might be: burning in the fires of hell for ever. I did or tried to do everything that church said I needed to do to be saved from this fate but nothing seemed to work to put my nighttime fears to rest. Indeed, religion only intensified them.

I was taught by this church that Jesus was coming back and you never knew when. His task when he did return was to separate the sheep from the goats. The more I reflected on the self-definition that very church helped me to establish, the clearer it became that I did not fit into the sheep category. I was definitely goat material.

When I asked when Jesus was likely to return so I could at least get ready, I was told that no one knew but that he would return like a thief in the night.

I slept in a bedroom on the second floor of our house where, outside the window, there was a tree limb that, when the wind was blowing, would brush up against the

window screen. Many a night I lay there in terror convinced, “this is it. I’m done for.”

By the time I was twelve or thirteen I had read every book I could get my hands on about “peace of mind.” I knew other children weren’t, or didn’t seem to be, as afraid of the dark or have the other fears I had. Why was that? What did they know that I didn’t know? I wanted to find out.

All religions, especially the Christian religion, has done an enormous amount of damage to people out of fearful and guilt-inducing teachings and tactics. The Christian religion over the ages has done tremendous damage and horrible things out of an effort to eradicate religions they thought were wrong or to impose their religion on others. What it did, even in my time, to the psyche’s of those who participated in this is likely incalculable.

For example, one of the things the Southern Baptist Church of my youth was renown for was what was called foreign missions. Millions of dollars were raised to send missionaries to places like “the heart of darkest Africa” in an effort to persuade lost heathens to accept Jesus while at the same time ignoring or embracing a culture where Jim Crow laws imposed virtual slavery on the “colored people,” as they were called, who lived in those same communities. There was a lynching of a black man that took place a few miles from my home in 1951.

If I had a thirteen year old boy come to me for counseling today and he said what he did for fun or with his free time was read books on “peace of mind,” I would think something is not right with this picture.

Yet in many ways I am grateful for that background because it did lead me to be here doing what I so love and am meant to do.

I would summarize what I have learned in my search for peace of mind like this:

People who are in their minds are never at peace.

And, people who are at peace are never in their minds.

What religion-gone-wrong gives people are ideas, doctrines, beliefs.

What the teachings of Jesus, in contrast to teachings about Jesus, offers people is a relationship.

Conflict and conservatism have always been part of religions all over the world from the beginning of human consciousness. Certainly this is true for the Jewish and, then, the Christian movements. In the days of Jesus there were divisions in Judaism. You've likely heard of the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Zealots, those who withdrew during the early Jesus movement called the Essenes and so forth. And even though people began to take Christian, and Jewish, writings literally as early as the middle of the second century, we did not have a formal movement called Fundamentalism until the early 1900's.

How and why did that come to be?

As I have indicated, rigidity has been a part of every religion from the beginning of human consciousness. It is the way the survival brain works.

If you look in the Oxford English Dictionary you will find, in looking up "fundamentalism," that it comes from the word "fundament" - a word borrowed from French and Latin that means the "foundation or base of a wall." It can also mean "the ground, basis, or principle on which anything is founded." The word "fundamental" in the OED means "going to the root of the matter." The word "fundamentalism" is defined, as a primary definition, this way: "The strict maintenance of traditional orthodox religious beliefs or doctrines; especially belief in the inerrancy of Scripture and literal acceptance of the creeds as fundamentals of Protestant Christianity."

By the way, when I styled this current theme I've undertaken as living in the gap between the "no-longer" and the "not-yet," I had and have no idea how wide the gap is or how deep it gets. Hope you stick with me for the ride. I have long believed, wherever it came from, that spiritual teaching that goes: "When you come to the edge of all you know and step off into the unknown, you must believe that one of two things will happen: You will be given something solid to step onto - or, you will be taught to fly."

It is going to take us a while to build us a foundation to understand fundamentalism.

Although the word “fundamentalism” is now applied to rigid religious beliefs that go back for thousands of years, the fact is that it did not find application to Christian religious beliefs until sometime in the early 1900’s in this country.

At that time there were a lot of social, cultural, educational, religious, ethnic and other changes taking place in this country. Charles Darwin’s work was becoming known, scholarly work done about the Bible was making its way from Germany into the academic community in the United States, there was an influx of Roman Catholic immigrants from Ireland and Southern Europe, there was a new emphasis on building a just society for working people. These changes were seen, especially by religious leaders, as secular and humanistic and, thus, anti-Christian. New movements were also arising in the country - the Christian Science Movement and Mormonism which these religious leaders saw as “cults” and regarded with fear, even disgust.

Who were these leaders? Well, just like today, the ones with the biggest megaphones got the most attention. In this case they were the Protestant clergy associated with, at that time, the ultra conservative Princeton Theological Seminary. These were deeply devout but not very learned men.

There were theologians who taught at places like Union Theological Seminary in New York, Harvard Divinity School, Yale Divinity School and other places who busied themselves with incorporating these new academic insights into their teachings. The reputation they gained for this was being labeled as “religious liberals who were no longer bound by Christian core principles.”

In response the conservatives became even more aggressive in defending their position, especially about the literal nature of the Bible. (We’ll get to that later.) In their minds they were engaged in a fight for God against these infidels. They were going to fight these enemies of “the truth.”

The weapon they would use for this was the publication of a series of tracts, or pamphlets, that were designed to spell out in clear detail the fundamental and

irreducible core beliefs of what they called “Orthodox Christianity.” For some reason this caught the attention of some conservative, wealthy oil executives in California who gave a huge amount of money to this effort. For years 300,000 of these tracts were mailed each week to church workers in America and around the world. Later, the company for which these oil executives worked financed the publication of these tracts into permanent books to maximize their impact. This was a massive propaganda operation. It worked.

Those who supported this movement were called, because these books were about the “fundamentals” of the Christian faith, “Fundamentalists.” Those who opposed this movement were called “modernists.” At that time in American history the “Fundamentalists” made up the majority of leadership in the Protestant churches in America. They also opposed voting rights for women, women’s emancipation, they defended segregation and capital punishment. The term “fundamentalist” was actually coined by a Baptist editor, Curtis Lee Laws, in 1920 to refer to those Christians who were, in his words, “ready to do battle royal for the fundamentals.”

The battle between the Fundamentalists and the Modernists raged for the first three decades of the 20th century. The Modernists won in the major metropolitan areas and most places of higher education. The Fundamentalists won most rural and small town America, especially in the South. The more sophisticated of the Fundamentalists, hoping to escape being identified as “closed-minded ignorant people,” began to refer to themselves as “Evangelicals.” So it is that “Evangelical Christianity” has thrived teaching “fundamental Christian truth” which is unencumbered by either the intellectual revolution of the last 500 years or the rise in critical biblical scholarship that we have seen emerge in the last 200 years.

I don’t know about you but my personal experience has been that I cannot have an open, honest conversation with a Fundamentalist. My usual experience is that if I am asked why I hold a position that I do and try to quote someone like Jim Finley or John Shelby Spong, I will find what I offer belittled and/or marginalized with remarks like, “You know, he is not really a Christian” or “You can’t trust him, he’s a member of the Jesus Seminar.”

Fundamentalism always has an enemy. In any religion. In Christianity today the enemy is the person who is labeled “homosexual.”

At any rate, these tracts that were printed and circulated between 1909 and 1915, in time were reduced to five and they came to be called “The Fundamentals” and those who adhered to them were called “The Fundamentalists.” The five Fundamentals are:

The Bible is the literal, inerrant Word of God.

Jesus was literally born of a virgin.

Substitutionary atonement is the meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross. (The word “atone” is a contraction of the words “at one.”)

The miracles in the New Testament are real. They literally happened.

Jesus rose physically from the grave, ascended literally into the sky and will return someday in the “second coming.”

The reason I want you to know this history is that every fight within American Christianity comes from these roots. New learnings come to light. They challenge previously, and preciously, held positions. All the conflicts in American Christianity today: evolution versus intelligent design; birth control, abortion and women’s equality; homosexuality and the Bible, they all finally come down to a battle between expanding knowledge and holding to these five core principles.

One of the things I hope to do as we go forward is to expose these so-called “fundamentals” as the frauds and dangerous and damaging teachings they are.

I will begin to deal with each of these so-called “fundamentals” as we go forward. We will likely spend more than one week on each because they need all sorts of amplification regarding not only their historical development but also some of the consequences they have had upon cultures across time. Even then this will be just a cursory tour as volumes of books have been written in an effort both to prove and to disprove each of them.

In beginning in dealing with the first of the “fundamentals,” biblical literalism, let’s start here:

Remember what we talked about last week. At the beginning of the 20th century an edition of the Bible had been published that contained the very conservative

theology of Cyrus Scofield. People were being taught that the Bible could and should be taken literally. Consequently, anything published in the Bible was also taken that way. Also, in this edition of the Bible, and it was the King James translation, was published the chronology of James Ussher. Ussher had concluded that the earth was created in 4004 B.C.

Scofield did not invent biblical literalism. People, as I've indicated already, had been taking the Christian writings literally since the middle of the second century. It is just when scholarship about the writings in the Bible came to light did the literalists feel threatened and a need to defend their position. When Scofield published his comments in the Bible along with Usher's chronology, people were already conditioned to take the Bible literally. Consequently, they were conditioned to take anything published in the Bible literally as well.

I want to read to you from the first pages of this Bible. It begins "The first book of Moses, called 'Genesis.'" Scholars have long known that Moses did not write Genesis. Indeed, Genesis is a compilation from several Jewish sources and the first 8 chapters of Genesis were likely written no more than six to eight hundred years before the birth of Jesus.

You will note that what comes first is Scofield's interpretation of what the book is about. At the bottom are the notes that make this a "study Bible." A column between the actual text contains references to other places in the entire Bible. This is why this is referred to as a "cross reference" Bible. Also note, except for the dictionary, also considered an authoritative writing, no other book is published in columns like the Bible - at least many editions of the Bible.

I want to read you the words of Scofield's that one encountered upon opening the Bible to this selection: (This is an edited version as I'm leaving some things out.)

"Genesis is the book of beginnings. It records not only the beginning of the heavens and earth, and of plant, animal, and human life, but also of all human institutions and relationships. Typically, it speaks of the new birth, the new creation, where all was chaos and ruin.

“With Genesis begins also that progressive self-revelation of God which culminated in Christ.

“The problem of sin as affecting man’s condition in the earth, and his relation to God, and the divine solution of that problem are here in essence. Of the eight great covenants which condition human life and the divine redemption, four, the Edenic, Adamic, Noahic, and Abrahamic Covenants, are in this book; and these are the fundamental covenants to which the other four, the Mosaic, Palestinian, Davidic, and New Covenants, are related chiefly as adding detail or development.

“Genesis enters into the very structure of the New Testament, in which it is quoted above sixty times in seventeen books. In a profound sense, therefore, the roots of all subsequent revelation are planted deep in Genesis, and whoever would truly comprehend that revelation must begin here.

“The inspiration of Genesis and its character as a divine revelation are authenticated by the testimony of history, and by the testimony of Christ.

“The events recorded in Genesis cover a period of 2,315 years.”

And, in the center column immediately below this is the date - B. C. 4004

The title I have given this talk today is “There is Nothing ‘Fun’ or ‘Mental’ About Fundamentalism.”

I have never met a happy Fundamentalist. I’ve met a lot of angry ones. I’ve met many who were more than happy to tell me how wrong I was. But, never any I’d like to be stranded on an island with.

The people I have been attracted to on my own journey are those who seem to embody and express those traits of the spirit I keep mentioning in here - peace, love and joy. This is one of the reasons I made having a moral obligation to be happy one of my own principles of life and living.

The assertion that there is nothing “mental” in Fundamentalism is seen in this very passage from the Scofield Bible I read to you. No true biblical scholar would

embrace any aspect of this today. I didn't just say no one embraces this today. Many do. Indeed, their number is increasing.

I can understand this as being true at the beginning of the 20th century and before. Though I would argue that "literalism" meant something very different in the 2nd and 3rd centuries than it means now.

Going forward I hope to show that the Christian writings are Jewish liturgical interpretations of the meaning of Jesus. The early followers of Jesus, the Jewish mystic, did not argue theology or doctrine with each other. They talked about how to live with each other. Doctrine did not become a concern in the life of the church until the fourth century when Christianity became an established part of the religious life of the Roman empire. It was in the wake of Christian "orthodoxy" that there came religious wars, religious persecution, heresy trials and the burning of heretics at the stake. When any group claims that they have "the truth," then it must be defended at all costs and, then, forced upon others.

I think it has been a tremendous failing of Christian education in the majority of churches that up-to-date scholarship about the Bible and related matters has not been taught.

I hope that as we go forward what I have to teach will contribute to your own growth and growing in peace, love, joy - and, patience. That you will come to know and understand that you are not a miserable sinner but a beloved child of the energy that brought all of the cosmos into being and who continues to creatively evolve. We don't need to be rescued but called into wholeness.

There's a Hasidic tale about a famous rabbi who was on his way to teach in a village that was very interested in his ideas. This was going to be a very big event, and each Jew in the community made great preparations, pondering what question he or she might ask the wise man.

The rabbi finally arrived and, after the initial welcome, he was taken into a large room where people gathered to ask their questions. There was tremendous anticipation and excitement all around.

The rabbi walked silently around the room and then began to hum a Hasidic tune. Before long, everyone started humming along with his soft voice. As people became comfortable with his song, the rabbi started to dance. He danced everywhere in the room, and, one by one, every person danced with him. Soon everyone in the whole community was dancing wildly together. Each person's soul was healed by the dance, and everyone experienced a personal transformation.

Later in the night, the rabbi gradually slowed the dance and eventually brought it to a stop. He looked into everyone's eyes and said gently, "I trust that I have answered all of your questions."

I trust that I have answered all your questions.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.