

Multiple Perspectives in Religion

Oasis Conversation, May 2, 2012.

I am delighted to engage in this conversation today with Adib Abdushomad, particularly because of the friendship we share and our common concern to promote the benefits of our faiths for the common good.

Because the Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, are all so-called 'religions of the book' – that is, the foundational texts, The Torah, the Bible and the Qu'ran inform the life of each of these faiths, I thought that I might begin my contribution to the conversation by giving a brief overview of one thread within Christianity in which there are multiple perspectives with regard to how texts may be interpreted.

This has always been an issue, but, let us start early in the Twentieth Century. German theologians, in particular, had been asking some serious questions about the Bible as a text. Could it be read as history? (Did creation happen in six days, for example, as we read in Genesis?). How might discrepancies between the four Gospels, which record the life of Jesus, be accounted for? How to make sense of literature like the Book of Revelation, which is full of apocalyptic images and seeming predictions? And so on.

One of the consequences of the work of these scholars for ordinary people, particularly Protestants, has been uncertainty. For many ordinary people, trust in the text, and ultimately in the legitimacy of faith itself, were undermined by a need for specialized knowledge. A simple surface reading of the text to understand its meaning could no longer be trusted.

Would God want this situation where the tools for understanding the text had become available only to the scholars – that only the scholars had the capacity to interpret the meaning of the text? This was tantamount to a return to the situation prior to the Reformation and the invention of the printing press, when hand copied copies of the Bible could only be accessed by the priests. Ordinary folk could be kept in the dark by the self-interest of the church. The Reformation, that gave rise to the Protestants, at the time of the invention of the printing press, affirmed the **equality** of all believers and **accessibility** to the Bible and to God.

A reaction to this situation took place in the USA early in the twentieth century. Purporting to defend orthodox Christianity, a number of Protestant scholars contributed to a collection of essays called *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*. This group believed that the uncertainty the German scholars had created, with the resulting drift of people away from the church, could only be redressed by recovering the authority of the Bible as divinely inspired and without error. The Bible should be read and taken at face value. God would bring understanding of the text to the reader.

This well meaning movement back to the basics, back to the fundamentals of the faith, become known as Fundamentalism. The "ism" indicates that this reaction to the scholarship that asked questions about the origins, context and structure of the text itself, had become an ideology – by nature, a *reactive* ideology – a reaction against any system, thought or person outside the boundaries set up by "The Fundamentals". Theirs is a closed system. Only those who submit to its rigid conditions may belong.

As a result, the Protestant church became divided into so-called Evangelicals, who tended to read and interpret the Bible literally at face value, and so-called Liberals, who understood the Bible openly, and particularly as metaphor, embracing the insights of the biblical and secular scholars.

I mention this history to bring two issues to the initial conversation.

One – what is the place and purpose of scholarship with respect to faith, and in particular, how we interpret our Scriptures that claim a divine inspiration?

Two - what are the consequences and potentialities of the two approaches – closed and open?