

Religion NOW

A Paper for Post-Modern Religion

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Issue 1

PRACTICING SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLES

Why do we act the way we do? What motivates us to follow a particular occupation, belong to a certain religion, or join a specific club? Are we victims of destiny? Are we pawns in some cosmic game? Are we random events in a chaotic universe?

Do we do what we do for love? Power? Fear? Vengeance?

Here's an exercise to help search out our motivations:

- 1) Take a piece of paper and write the words work, play, love, God, relationships, money and power.
- 2) Write your top three priorities for each word.
- 3) Ask yourself about each priority:
"Why do I do it?" "How do I do it?" "How committed to it am I?" "Would I like to do more of this or less?"
- 4) Now ask yourself, "What else is going on with this?" "Do I have a hidden agenda or vested interest in this that I don't show to others and sometimes don't admit to myself?" You will probably uncover some startling answers.

The purpose of an exercise like this is to discover thoughts, concerns, feelings and emotions that are below the surface of our daily awareness. These thoughts and feelings can affect our actions and health. They can be the source of unexplained hesitation or anxiety that recurs without warning.

As we become increasingly willing to live on a spiritual plane, our motives in many areas gradually change. In the past when we were charitable to others, for example, it was usually with the expectation of receiving something in return.

We frequently give to others in order to look good and win their approval. We offer gifts as a way to gain control, or buy favours. We are givers out of a sense of obligation, or because we need to get off the hook.

When we grow spiritually we become free of self-centredness and self-seeking. We find we want to - indeed, we must - be honest, above board, and pure in motive in all our affairs.

People in every culture are taught almost from infancy the difference between right and wrong. We learn that it is "right" to be honest, courteous, and kind, and it is "wrong" to lie, steal, or be hurtful to others. As children, our primary motivation in acting rightly is the avoidance of punishment. Later on we're generally motivated by conscience as well as the customs of society.

As we grow spiritually our awarenesses expand and intensify. We see more clearly how our actions and occasional compromises affect our lives and the lives of others. Consequently, we understand right and

(Spiritual Principles, continued)

wrong in an entirely new way. We practice honesty, patience, and tolerance, for example, because they work in our lives.

Because of our new understanding and more highly developed motives, we do what is right in order to feel better about ourselves, to enable us to feel comfortable with ourselves, and because our spiritual growth depends on it.

HEALTH AND PRAYER

Our belief system, our feeling of being connected to others and all living things, and our concept of God impacts on our health. At the core of most religions is prayer, when we communicate with a higher power.

The Value of Prayer

- * A chance to pause from the treadmill of life.
- * An opportunity to search inward, meditate, communicate with something greater than ourselves and to listen.
- * To focus on the higher ideals of love, peace, trust and hope.

Mother Teresa once said that the most significant ailment in the world today is spiritual deprivation - a feeling of being unworthy of love, feeling unable to give or receive love and feeling there is a wall separating us from ourselves and others.

FAITH and HEALING

Spiritual healers from traditional societies of India, Indonesia, Rarotonga and New Zealand believe that a sick person must

first

be healed spiritually. They use prayers, chants, incantations and laying on of hands to help a spiritual recovery.

Prayers for the sick are common in Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Even if it does not alter the course of the illness, prayer comforts and reverses despair.

In an early 1980's study at the San Francisco General Hospital, coronary care patients who were involved in prayer sessions had fewer complications.

Spirituality, A Cosmic Feeling

"The most important functions of art and science is to awaken the cosmic religious feeling and keep it alive", declared the scientist, Albert Einstein.

There is no need to be concerned about a conflict between science and the spiritual life. People have turned to the spiritual in many ways since the beginning of humanity. Some are tribal and primitive, some are very emotional, some focused on ideas and philosophy, some centred on tradition. It appears there is in the centre of our humanness a spiritual compass. When we disown that orientation we lose some of our humanness.

Life is an exploration into meaning. Whatever we see or hear, whatever happens in our lives may carry a spiritual message. Some will say, "God is telling me something". Others, whose understanding of God takes another form, will say, "There is a spiritual message in this if I can read it."

As the centre of our humanness is restored, we are more alive and life takes on a greater meaning.

We don't have to white-knuckle our way through life. Think about spiritual solutions.

BIBLE'S FIRST & GREATEST AUTHOR

Over 3000 years ago a Jewish writer wrote a series of stories about the tribes in Southern Palestine. A master storyteller, this writer wrote in a vivid and concrete style, portraying the characters in the the stories as real people. The earliest descriptions of God were given by this writer.

In a recent book, entitled, "The Book of J", by the Hebrew scholar, Harold Bloom, and translated by David Rosenberg, Bloom asserts with credibility that J was a woman, a writer of the stature of Homer, Shakespeare, and Tolstoy.

The writer J was a genius with unmatched powers of irony and characterization, as shown in the unforgettable and very human portraits of Abram and Sarai, Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Joseph, Tamar, and Moses - and, above all, God, or Yahweh.

In the account this writer used the Hebrew word for God, which we would write as "Yahweh," and which in Hebrew would be YHWH (or, as it is sometimes written, JHVH. The German spelling is Jahweh. The word Jehovah is a misspelling). For this reason the account is called the "J" document.

J wrote the oldest strand in the Pentateuch, probably composed in Jerusalem in the tenth century B.C.E. ("before the common era," or "before Christ," as Christians traditionally say).

Composed of the first five books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch was first called the Law of Moses from a mistaken idea that Moses was its author. In the Greek period it was named the Pentateuch from "penta" meaning five and "teuch" meaning roll or book. Because of its length it was a work which had to be divided into five

scrolls. The Greeks gave to each of the five scrolls the names now used for them: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

The Book of Joshua is closely associated with the above books and together they form the Hebrew Hexateuch.

One clue scholars use in discovering the original writers of the Pentateuch is the clue of style. The later strands in Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers are all revisions or censorings of J, and their authors are known as E, or the Elohist, for "Elohim", the plural name used for Yahweh (J in turn always uses "Elohim" as a name for divine beings in general, and never as the name of God); D, named for the author or authors of Deuteronomy; P, named for the Priestly Author or School that wrote nearly all of Leviticus; R, named for the Redactor, who performed the final revision of the Pentateuch after the Hebrews returned from the Babylonian exile.

Thanks to scholars painstakingly translating these strands of writing of J, E, D, P, and the editorial work of R, we have a better understanding of the many conflicting ideas in these books of the Old Testament. From the time of J to that of the priestly writers, people's ideas about God advanced steadily from a crude, materialistic stage to ever more spiritual conceptions. Many stages in Hebrew religious progress are reflected on the pages of the Pentateuch.

Characteristic of J's writing is her shrewd assessment of humans and all creation. There is no "Fall" for J because for J there is nothing fallen about nature, earthly or human. she makes no split between body and soul, between nature and

(O.T. writer J, cont.)

mind. J invented the idea of monism, the understanding that there is only one ultimate substance or principle, whether mind, matter, or some third thing that is the basis of both.

Adam, for example, in J's description, was not a clay vessel with the breath of Yahweh coursing through it, but a being who has within him the wind of life. Her Adam cannot be divided into clay body and divine soul.

It was J who played out the lovely fable of the creation of woman. Hers is an unique story as there do not seem to be any other such stories from the ancient Middle East.

The comic J has Yahweh reflect that it is not good for man to live alone, and resolves to make a partner to stand beside his creature. Her term used in Hebrew means "equal to him" or "alongside him," The word "helpmate" is a much later English translation quite incorrectly applied here.

The deep sleep into which Yahweh puts Adam is J's profound metaphor for the mystery of love. Bloom says, "Adam's heavy sleep is not natural, its function being anesthetic, and J slyly hints that man's love for woman is essentially narcissistic, related to the greater mystery of birth. In some sense, what Adam experiences is the only male instance of giving birth. Adam's rib is shaped or built by Yahweh, in one of J's curious wordplays, since the word for "rib" is a structural term inevitably employed in the account of any building operation. But we should stand back here and contrast Yahweh as an artificer of the woman with

Yahweh as the much more childlike and haphazard creator of the man. It is not just that J has given six times the space to woman's creation as to man's; it is the difference between making a mud pie and building a much more elaborate and fairer structure. . . . the woman is created from a living being, and not from clay. Presumably she is animate, and Yahweh need not inspirit her nostrils. Surely J's ironic point is that the second time around, Yahweh has learned better how the job ought to be done."

J's account begins with the creation of Adam and passes through Eden to Cain and on to Noah and the flood. Then come the great cycles of Abram, Sarai, Isaac and Rebecca, of Jacob and Rachel, of Joseph, of Moses, Pharoah and the exodus, and of the wandering in the wilderness until the blessing of Balaam and the death of Moses.

Revisionists have destroyed much of what appears to have been J's concept of Yahweh. The idea that life in living organisms is caused and sustained by a vital principle that is distinct from all physical and chemical forces and that life is, in part, self-determining and self-evolving is always the mark of J's Yahweh. Yahweh and superego are versions of oneself, claims J's accounts.

Separating J's Yahweh from the varnished images of later redactors and translators shows us a person in a far more radical sense even than Jesus of the New Testament.

J lived three thousand years ago, and what is left of her original writings in the Pentateuch shows her to have been a dramatic ironist, interested in her story and in her personalities, rather than a historian or theologian. She did not write as a biblical author as there was no Bible at all until some six centuries after J, and the Bible as

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(O.T. writer J, cont.)

we know it, whether as text or interpretation, came into being after yet another six centuries, among the canon-making rabbis of the second century c.e.

J was a prose poet. Her stories are told in scenes as if the author were there when they were happening. She was not concerned with a conventional storyteller's prose, the gathering of points of view, but with the ability of the poet, the witness who uses words to portray an exact picture.

She was able in a superb way to tell the story of her people and their God, from her own perspective and with her own manner, partly serious, partly comic, with irony. She has become an universal author, and has served moral, spiritual, and institutional purposes beyond even her ironic capacity to imagine.

J's God is subjected to nobody, not even to God. He is an imp who declines to overdetermine anyone or anything, declares Bloom.

"J is not writing a moral tale but a children's story that ends unhappily," states Bloom. J is showing how things got to be the way things are and the way they are not good, whether for snakes, women, or men. She points out we have been created mortal, living beings with clay feet and life's wind moving through us. There was no thought of immortality at that time.

J's Yahweh is present wherever and whenever he chooses to be present, and he will be that he will be. Unconditioned and unpredictable, he is the most imaginative of Gods. Much of that nature has been hidden by the overlaying revisions of the later writers, editors and translators.

("The Book of J", by Harold Bloom, translated by David Rosenberg, Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., New York. Distributed in Canada by Random House of Canada Ltd, Toronto. Year 1991. 340 pages.)

LIFE OF LOVE IS GODLY

"Life is being in actuality and love is the moving power of life", stated the theologian, Dr. Paul Tillich. A fellow theologian, Dr. Nels Ferre, declared, "God is the spirit of love and truth".

The basic ideals of a godly life are not unrealistic objectives of a passe, whimsical philosophy, depicting "pie in the sky", but a knowledge that God as love is made known in kind and co-operative community.

The power of evil lies in the absence of good and the living of love. The mind that is not making use of good thoughts is prone to incubate notions that are harmful and destructive.

The philosopher, Schleiermacher, remarked that religion is the sum total of all the higher feelings, and like sacred music should uninterruptedly accompany the whole of a person's active life.

The famous American preacher of a generation ago, Harry Emerson Fosdick, said, "Religion is like music - it is not in need of defense, but of rendition".

Religion at its fullest is more than feeling; it is the centre and unity and uplifting stimulus of ones whole personality.

If God is ultimate love then the children of God will find as they learn and practice genuine love they will be aroused to lead loving, enthusiastic, happy, significant lives.