

DEALING WITH IDEOLOGIES

We are a society addicted to ideologies. It is wise to be aware of them, for many of them can be dangerous theories. We should keep a close eye on our opinions lest they lead us to transgress against our fellows, and lest we abdicate our responsibilities as thinking beings.

Whether in politics, religion, social sciences, or education, ideologies must be recognized for what they are - theorizing, speculation, thinking, and must be carefully scrutinized, especially when the theory or system of theories is idealistic, abstract, unrealistic or farfetched.

The aim of the ideologist is to manipulate, affect or force the majority into acceptance of their idea. They invariably have all-inclusive answers to questions and usually insist on rigid definitions. They will oppose criticism and encourage passivity from their hearers. They stress belief over knowledge, emotion over thought.

Ideologies have certain identification marks that identify them. You can be fairly sure you are facing an ideology when:

1. It makes everything sound simple. Simplicity is seductive, which is why views of this kind so often meet with unanimous agreement. Fantasy can often smoothly pass itself off as reason.

We humans base our institutions on principles which we proclaim vigorously and use as ideological pedestals on which any

stance looks good. These positions advertise theories and dogmas. Usually they are presented as clear common sense points of view.

Some religious groups hold ideologies based upon literal interpretations of scriptures. Their simplistic explanations and doctrines are food for the gullible.

2. It has all the answers. A convinced ideologist has plausible pat answers to criticism, and is adept at glossing over any weak spots in their arguments. They maintain their point of view is the absolute truth, and they discourage the search for evidence on which this truth is supposed to be based.

3. It shouts down criticism. Some ideologists feel that their views are so transcendently right that freedom of speech must be suspended out of respect for their rightness. They worship sacrosanct icons, and reject as unacceptable facts or opinions that run counter to their beliefs.

The ideologist takes the position, "We stand for the right; we will not question it; we cannot back

(IDEOLOGY, cont'd)

down if our idea of right clashes with those of others; we have a duty to impose what we think is right on others; we must protect our stand by crushing opposition and not count the cost; we will make practice fit our principles because right must prevail."

4. It strains credulity. People with reformist attitudes often use hair-raising statements to whip the apathetic public into line with their causes. Mussolini said of the public, "If only we can give them faith that mountains can be moved, they will accept the illusion that mountains are moveable, and thus an illusion may become reality."

5. It reaches for justification. Ideologists will go to great lengths to give an air of legitimacy and fairness to their causes. We tend to justify our mistreatment of our aboriginal people by saying they are happier and better off on their wretched little reserves and under our domination.

Religion sometimes takes the position that the end justifies the means. Some religious persons want to "save" others and the world, and will misquote and misinterpret scriptures to justify their position.

6. It speaks for "them and us". Corporate, or group thinking often dwell on grievances coming from real or supposed ill-treatment by another group. Today in our community we have arguments between the unemployed and the working, the poor and the wealthy, the older and the younger. It is quite common to hear remarks about what "they" are doing to us.

The habit of monitoring ideologies and theories, especially your own, will help us all to create a just society. Can we stand for our opinions of what is right, recognizing others have theirs, and see that both sets of opinions are simply opinions in their own settings and we will mingle and let our opinions mingle and compete with one another, though we will remain above the opinions?

Theories should be guides, not dogmas; negotiable principles, not non-negotiable ones. Like in medicine we must deal with the problem rather than the symptoms. We must do our own thinking, come to our own conclusions, and try as far as possible to distinguish truth from falsity.

The ultimate illusion is the conceit that you are free from illusion.

WHEN NOT TO WASH ONES HANDS

Now that I've reached the stage in life of having grandchildren who come to visit our home I notice we're back to the admonition to them to wash their hands after play and before eating. It is learning time again for the simple hygiene of cleanliness.

But, I am reminded that for us adults there are times when we should not wash our hands. The term "washing the hands" has become part of our speech since Pontius Pilate allowed the conviction of Jesus and symbolically washed his hands of the matter with a basin of water.

Since that time the term to wash ones hands of a matter is a synonym for avoiding responsibility. We can avoid making a decision in an important issue and sidestep the

"Religion NOW" is published in limited edition for family and friends by the Rev. Ross E. Readhead, B.A., B.D., Certificate in Corrections, McMaster University. Address mail to (Edited comments@religionnow.ca)

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confrontation. This not the time to wash ones hands.

When we adopt Pilate's attitude we betray the past, history. We do not need to be reminded of the many before us who took their stand and accepted responsibility to see that good was done. Achievements have come about among us because of the labours of the passionate few.

Let it be noted as well that when we act as Pilate did, we betray the future. When we refuse to become involved in today's problems and difficulties we weaken the heritage of our community. What are we doing for our children? What will we leave them with? The accomplishments of our civilization must not be jeopardized by inaction by those of us who would stand back and hope all turns out well.

Participatory democracy, social action, calls for each of us to contribute as able and to live up to our ideals. It is a matter of giving our hands to the task.

MANAGING THE WORLD

In the power struggles going on around us and in our world today the individual often feels powerless and marginalized. Sometimes the power lies in the hands of selfish, even unscrupulous persons. Therefore, it is with surprise one finds the advice of St. Paul to the Christians of his day that "the saints will manage the world."

Although the apostle was focusing his thought on the management of congregational

disputes and misunderstandings, the church was quite aware of its community and world-wide responsibilities. They had a sense that the world can be managed and good people can best do it.

By saints, Paul meant those who are kind, pious and humble. He realized that it was not those with dominance who ultimately control things, but the majority of persons who practice the virtue of meekness and goodwill.

Who can estimate how greatly the lives of noble characters have permeated human experience and influenced even the counsels of nations?

Our physical world is a puzzling place. It seems to be ambiguous; to have more than one meaning. We have to transcend it and to transform it. The good people see that our world is spiritual as well as physical. So they each become creative artists, contributing as they are capable and able to making the world and life better. They realize that life is a ministry and all can contribute to the realm of God.

Let none of us decompensate our sense of value, our worthwhileness in the total. If we can manage ourselves then we can help others to manage their lives and so the goodness spreads.

"If we cease to judge this world, we may find ourselves, very quickly, in one which is infinitely worse," states Margaret Atwood. Once we look down on others, cease to share with them, seek to control them, then anarchy and depression set in. Who better than the saints, the good, to manage the world?

A negative attitude is not just a state of mind, it can cause real harm

HUMAN RIGHTS and JUSTICE

The following are excerpts from the book, "A History of God," by Karen Armstrong, Ballantine Books, 1993, chapter 11, "Does God Have a Future?"

"The God of Jews, Christians and Muslims got off to an unfortunate start, since the tribal deity Yahweh was murderously partial to his own people. Latter-day crusaders who return to this primitive ethos are elevating the values of the tribe to an unacceptably high status and substituting man-made ideals for the transcendent reality which should challenge our prejudices. They are also denying a crucial monotheistic theme. Ever since the prophets of Israel reformed the old pagan cult of Yahweh, the God of monotheism has promoted the ideal of compassion.

....The prophets insisted that cult and worship were useless unless society as a whole adopted a more just and compassionate ethos. These insights were developed by Jesus, Paul and the Rabbis, who all shared the same Jewish ideals and suggested major changes in Judaism in order to implement them.

....The God of historical monotheism demands mercy not sacrifice, compassion rather than decorous liturgy.

....There has often been a distinction between people who practice a cultic form of religion and those who have cultivated a sense of the God of compassion. The prophets fulminated against their contemporaries who thought that temple worship was sufficient. Jesus and St. Paul both made it clear that external observance was useless if it was not accompanied by charity: it was little better than sounding

brass or a tinkling cymbal.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS HELP PRISONERS SURVIVE

The Correctional Service of Canada has completed a first time ever survey concerning attitudes among Canadian penitentiary prisoners. The survey was limited to male prisoners. More than half the respondents said their religious beliefs helped them survive in the institution.

One in 5 had been beaten or threatened while 7% had been assaulted with a weapon. Almost one half said they did not feel safe from an assault by other prisoners. Eight per cent reported having been assaulted by CSC staff members in the 6 months preceding the survey. Three per cent had been sexually assaulted. Another 6% had been pressured to provide sexual services.

One in 3 prisoners reported being double-bunked in a cell meant for one occupant. Twelve per cent said they lived in fear of their cellmate.

About 80% surveyed had served time previously in provincial institutions.

Twenty-nine per cent had spent an aggregate of 10 or more years in prison.

Sixteen per cent were housed in protective custody.

Three out of 5 prisoners had not been granted parole despite being eligible.

Almost 40% said they had used drugs since arriving in their current institution. Drug use was most prevalent in medium-security prisons.

Seventy-two per cent were smokers.