

A Paper for Post-Modern Religion

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GOD TRENDS

We have not been born into an atheistic, though an oft-times doubting world, but into a world of religious faith. The great questions of life and destiny are not new. They have not been postponed in order that we might solve them. We must remember that the hypothesis of the existence of God has already undergone a long and severe test.

Trained as we are today to think and reason by the scientific method, using the rules or principles of science, systematic and exact, we can be led to try and prove the existence of God by syllogisms and cold intellectualistic assent.

However, there is a great deal of evidence to demonstrate the reality of God. With the heart a person believes and may not feel the need of faith bolstered up with logic. Personal experience is the strongest argument for the existence of God in our lives, but it can be interestingly enhanced by knowledge of the experience and reasoning of others.

One of the reasons why religion seems irrelevant today is that many no longer have the sense that we are surrounded by the unseen. Our scientific culture educates us to focus our attention on the physical and material world in front of us. This method of looking at the world has achieved great results. One of its consequences, however, is that we have, as it were, edited out the sense of the spiritual or the holy

which pervades the lives of people at every level. In the South Sea Islands they call this mysterious force mana. Others experience it as a presence or spirit. The Latins experienced numina (spirits) in sacred groves. Arabs felt that the landscape was populated by the jinn. People have always wanted to get in touch with reality. When they personalized the unseen forces and made them gods, associated with the wind, sun, sea, and stars but possessing human characteristics, they were expressing their sense of affinity with the unseen and with the world around them.

People like to worship gods made in their own image, but when they do so the gods become insufficient. The pagan gods of classical antiquity had no concern with ethics, which is why the Greek moralists, from Socrates and Plato onwards, viewed the activities of Mount Olympus with disdain, and stretched out to abstract concepts of Goodness and Justice. They were preceded by the monotheistic Jews whose teaching was that the will of God could only be fulfilled by a virtuous and neighbourly life - making provision for the poor, establishing a just society in which everyone could live with the dignity of believing they were children of God.

GOD TRENDS, cont'd

The Old Testament is the record of an evolving religious consciousness without equal in the literature of the world. God (Yahweh), from being a savage, tutelary deity whose only interest appeared to be in gaining victory of one semitic tribe in its battles with other semitic tribes, emerges as an inspirational force of ethical and spiritual power.

The book of Genesis begins with J's authorship describing humans as body (physical being), plus spirit (spiritual being), equaling a total which she called soul. The Judaistic concept of humankind as living souls remained. In J's view God is present wherever and whenever God chooses to be present; God will be that God will be.

Later rabbinical editing created God with male gender, stern and judgmental. Where J spoke as a poet, the later writers wrote as philosophers, lawmakers and priests.

Parallel to the Hebrew conception of God was that of Islam. Suspicious of theological speculation, Islamic teaching spoke more of God as the unknowable reality that can't be proven by human reasoning but is nonetheless real. They emphasized God was experienced as a moral imperative. They named God, al-Lah, and saw God in a more impersonal way than the Hebrew Yahweh. Al-Lah lacks the pathos and passion of the biblical God. Islam declares we can only glimpse something of God in the "signs" of nature, and so transcendent is God that we can only talk about God in "parables." The Koran (Islamic scriptures), therefore, urges Muslims to see the world as an epiphany, to see through

the fragmentary world to the full power of original being, to the transcendent reality that infuses all things.

Now we know the age of the TODAY earth is between 4 and 5 billion years. Humankind have existed just a small portion of this time. Instead of seeing ourselves as the centre of the universe, we are aware now that our tiny planet is insignificant in size and in the scope of the universe. Suddenly the ancient myth of creation, together with all the biblical stories that assume its worldview, have no geological or astrophysical meaning. God, thought once to be intimately near to us is now increasingly perceived in distant, impersonal terms. The traumas of nature, ie storms, hurricanes, floods, etc, are explained apart from any divine reference. The God living just above the sky who would intervene in the life of this world to effect a cure, or save us, is no longer a certain deity to those who embrace the knowledge available in this century. Some think God has simply been lost in the new insights of this century.

However, a year ago the Maclean's magazine reported a major new poll on religion in Canada. 78% of Canadians define themselves as Christians. Their beliefs appear to be quite traditional.

Though traditional Christianity has been based upon proofs for the existence of God, starting with Bishop John Robinson in 1963, in his book, "Honest to God," the emphasis has been turned around and God is being defined as ultimate reality. Robinson built upon the theologian, Dr. Paul Tillich's description of God as "the ground of our being."

In the New Testament in The First Letter of John, the apostle describes God as love and states,

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"if we love each other God does actually live within us, and his love grows in us towards perfection." (1 John 4:12). Our sense of the sacredness of love derives from the fact that in this relationship as nowhere else there is disclosed and laid bare the divine Ground of all our being.

As the theologian, Dr. Paul Tillich puts it: "Our period has decided for a 'secular' world. That was a great and much-needed decision....It gave consecration and holiness to our daily life and work. Yet it excluded those deep things for which religion stands: the feeling for the inexhaustible mystery of life, the grip of an ultimate meaning of existence, and the invincible power of an unconditional devotion. These things cannot be excluded. If we try to expel them in their divine images, they re-emerge in daemonic images. Now, in the old age of our secular world, we have seen the most horrible manifestations of these daemonic images; we have looked more deeply into the mystery of evil than most generations before us; we have seen the unconditional devotion of millions to a satanic image; we feel our period's sickness unto death". ("The Shaking of the Foundations," p.181).

The experience of living is experience of God; the experience of God in us, the Eternal in the temporal, the Absolutely Worth While that lifts us above ourselves, and transfigures our particular acts and purposes. We must learn to estimate the whole of life, and live the whole of it with reference to the holy and the sacred. In every duty, in every impulse to the good, in every approving voice of conscience, in everything that tends upward in

any department of our nature, we must realize we are face to face with the realm of God.

(Information sources re the above:

"Maclean's Magazine", April 12, 1993.

"A History of God," by Karen Armstrong, Ballantyne Books, New York, 1993.

"Honest to God," by John A.T. Robinson, SCM Press Ltd, 1963.

"The Bible")

CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT MYTH

A recent book by Roberto Calasso, entitled, "The Ruin of Kasch", focuses on modern history since the French Revolution. His concern is our loss of respect for the cosmos. He tells us that at some point we lost touch with the gods. By the time the French Revolution had run its course, there was no longer a cosmos distinct from ourselves. We had become our own god, our own point of reference. Along the way we suppressed our religious, sacrificial relationship to the outside, the non-human. In the end the restraints of sacrifice and ritual have been displaced into the blind, secular experiments of politics, mass technology and mass killing.

Calasso points out how we have lost our sense of sacrifice, of giving up, and our awareness that we must always give something back to God or to nature. With the spectres of Hitler and Stalin and the modern world, "the first consequence of the eclipse of sacrifice will be that the world will be used without restraint, without limit, without any part being devoted to something else."

WHEN PEOPLE ARE LOVING, BRAVE, TRUTHFUL, CHARITABLE, GOD IS PRESENT.

- Harold Kushner

HUMAN ARROGANCE

"We will first destroy all of the larger animals, either for meat or because they compete with us for space, together with those which may be intolerant of our activities because of their specific natural specializations," declares John A. Livingston, naturalist. "Extinction of nonhuman species, without replacement, will continue at an accelerating rate, until the only nonhuman living beings remaining will be those who are willing to share their squalor with us - rats, gutter curs, and parasites and micro-organisms which thrive in times of environmental dislocation."

The ancients when they killed an animal for food enacted a religious ceremony that the animal might be replaced in nature's realm. Today we hunt for sport, often indiscriminately. We cut down trees and do not replant for each one destroyed. Hectares of arable land are covered with parking lots and housing developments without thought of the need of the land for food. World famine is a reality, blithely ignored. Even in Canada, where our land mass is the second largest in the world and we have a relatively sparse population, we have only a hectare or so of food land per person. Ontario cannot feed its own population but depends heavily on imports. Our arrogance towards nature is sinful.

Our responsibility is to protect our environment.

AN UNRENEWABLE RESOURCE - VIRTUE

Two out of three Canadians told Alberta sociologist, Reg Bibby, that our values are declining. Queen's University philosopher, Ted Bond, recently stated, "Our society

is sick, really sick. It's in need of radical reconstruction."

Bond believes one of the reasons for this is "the general attack on the notion that there is such a thing as truth and goodness.... God has been bumped off and that leaves us in a state of anomie (disorientation, lawlessness) where no values are worth pursuing."

Bond proposes that educators once again start teaching virtues like goodwill and friendship as indispensable to our life together. "What we need is serious secular teaching," says Bond. "Most of the teaching of morals is done under the auspices of some religion, but that's not going to help because most people aren't religious anymore."

Another reason the virtues are becoming popular once more is the collapse of "values". Since the 70's educators have been wary of imposing their ideas and so have taught school children to articulate their own values instead. Values change where virtues do not.

ETHICS ARE GOOD BUSINESS

"Ethical behaviour is not only the right thing to do but it also makes good business sense." - Johanne Totla, Workplace Equality, Bank of Montreal.

"Ethical conduct creates goodwill and trust. This can be the edge a business or other organization needs to succeed in our increasingly competitive world." - David Selley, Canadian Centre for Ethics & Corporate Policy.

"Making decisions and operating an enterprise without any moral or social consequences leads to more outside regulation and increasing lack of trust." - James Gillies