

Religion NOW

A Paper for Post-Modern Religion

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THE AGE OF THE AWAKE IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

*The collective beliefs
that make up
attitudes are often
sheer mythology*

Neo-conservatism has been successful among us today in forcing many to believe in broad concepts, slogans and generalizations, which add up to a licence for greed and social irresponsibility. Not least of these is that our economy must be controlled by the marketplace. So far all the marketplace has done is cause us to be subject to the whims of the stock markets and to be down-graded to the lowest common denominator of working conditions as found in the second-world countries.

Neo-conservative ideologues hold out the guarantee of divine knowledge and the promise of the kingdom to come. Their experiment in market leadership is bringing a shrinking in our economic values and a lowering of our standard of living. Its success is in making the rich wealthier and the poor poorer.

This influence tends to move people away from being active contributors to a caring society towards individual self-interest. Consider the following excerpt from the novel, "The Lawyer's Tale," by D. Kincaid, Berkley Books, New York, 1992, page 136:

The story tells of a wealthy and influential lawyer who used his power to have his wife who was stricken with cancer placed ahead of a line of others for treatment in an American hospital. Feeling guilty the man mentioned it to his daughter who scolded him and replied, "this is an example of the free market working at its best. What you call 'clout' is just one of the rewards, the perks for what you contribute to society. Instead of the government deciding those rewards, the market itself determines them. If society didn't value your contribution highly, you wouldn't have 'clout'. A poor labourer can't get his wife into the TNF program because what he contributes to society doesn't

command that kind of reward in the marketplace. It doesn't make him a bad man or our society a bad society. It just means his contribution, valued in a free market, is not considered as significant as yours. And, Dad, if you're going to have this system, with all its obvious benefits, you can't quarrel with the marketplace. It's the only objective test. You passed. A hundred thousand others didn't. Don't fight it. Be proud, you've earned it."

John Ralston Saul in his latest

(Self-interest, cont'd)

book, "Reflections of a Siamese Twin," Viking Press, 1997, states on page 490: "There will always be, in any elite, a percentage driven only by self-interest. Now it seems that that relatively small percentage has infected the thinking of the elite in general, no matter how intelligent many individuals may be or how devoted to their particular role. Much of the problem lies in the conversion of our public sector from an ethic, centred on the strengthening of the public good to an abstract managerial religion.

That in turn has facilitated the massive penetration of the public sector by business interests."

Saul speaks "of a new, strong mythological simplicity - the economy." He goes on to say, "Suddenly people with responsibilities are saying *globalization*, the way they used to say *homeland* and *heaven*. The marketplace is evoked with the tones of racial purity. They sing the praises of competition - of their forceful ability to compete - the way they once sang those of their old nationalist military vocabulary. Glory and courage are their stock-in-trade. Each of them is tougher and smarter than the other. Heads of government now cheer on traders the way they once cheered on generals. The practical impact is just as mixed. At least it is a less bloody form of self-indulgence. But it is still built on mythological simplicity, not on the complexities of reality, that is, of society." (Ibid, page 225).

John Ibbitson, in his new book, "Promised Land," concludes, "Unquestionably, however, the Common Sense Revolution has affected the civil discourse of Canada's most populous province. A society that governed itself by seeking to accommodate conflicting interests has been transformed into one where interests hurl themselves against each other until the more powerful prevails. Such

a confrontational method has made possible enormous changes that, in many cases, were arguably long overdue. It has left the citizenry raw and bruised and surly towards one another. And there is no end in sight to the prevailing public distemper." (Page 285).

The most pernicious thing about self-centredness is that it is insatiable. Even when ones incessant demands have been temporarily met, one is still afraid they don't have enough. There can be no rhyme or reason to ones wants and needs.

When we are selfish we close off the channels of exchange with others. We ignore the needy on welfare by conceiving them as victims of their own laziness, or their low status because of lack of education and knowledge.

Not only do those of who have grab and hold all the wealth and attention they can get, but they more easily deny others the possibility of sharing with us in the benefits.

Canada has been a country which has offered great equality of opportunity for all. It has possessed a political tradition that was neither entirely libertarian nor entirely socialist, but rested on an indispensable partnership between government and the private sector, and on direct action by the state to protect the weak from the strong, the disadvantaged from the well-heeled.

If Jesus stood today amid our contemporary life, with the outlook on the condition of all humanity which observation, travel, television, and the media would spread before him, and with the same heart of divine humanity beating in him, would he not create a new discipleship to meet the new needs in a new harvest-time of history?

WHAT CAN WE KNOW?

All around us is mystery, and there is so little that we entirely understand. We cannot explain the simplest of actions, such as how one can crook their finger. Somehow great solar systems are held together. Light baffles us, and so do the many crosscurrents of our minds. When we learn one fact, it opens a dozen more. If we could spend our energy on something meaningful, we should feel refreshed.

"The more faithfully you listen to the voice within you, the better you will hear what is sounding outside. And only he who listens can speak," once declared Dag Hammarskjold. As we develop a deeper and more reliable knowledge of ourselves, we have flashes of understanding, the light of insight, blips of feeling, that tell us truths. Ancient scriptures called it "a still, small voice."

We are challenged at every turn of the road to know ourselves, and thereby can begin to understand the physical and spiritual world around us.

United Church members have been issued a challenge by their moderator, the Right Rev. William Phipps to better understand their faith. People shouldn't "park their brains" when they come to church, he said recently. He declared he is not afraid of new ideas in the theology and ethics, and church members shouldn't be either.

Phipps sparked controversy last fall in saying he's skeptical about the existence of heaven and hell and that Jesus likely didn't literally rise from the dead. Nor does he define Jesus as God.

Phipps says his comments struck a chord with people.

"There's no doubt Canadians have a spiritual hunger," he says. "I think,

for whatever reason, what I said tapped into that hunger."

Phipps says most people in the United Church want leadership which will discuss current theology, explore religious and ethical issues and challenge members to look at their faith.

Christianity leads a person to listen to themselves. One's path of expanding life includes objective self study. One examines the drift of their life. They listen daily to the changing world about them. They begin to see it as it really is, to hear the voice of God speaking through. Drifting ceases as they discover a place in the creative flow of history.

Nothing is more important in religion than the humble honest struggle to the path of right, the determination, regardless of all consequences, "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

This is where a developed conscience is so important. Conscience is to the soul what sight or taste is to the body. It is the Moral Sense, the way of the spirit, the means of perception of spiritual things.

We are living in a world of spiritual forces. This is completely in line with the realities of a dynamic universe. Truthful representation of life may be found in a painting rather than a photograph, in three dimensions rather than in two, in the dynamics rather than in the statics of the world.

There is at the basis of the universe a moral reality with which we may put ourselves in harmony. You can't change the moral quality of the universe; you can only adjust

(Be In Harmony With Moral Purpose)

yourself to them and be saved, or deny them and be damned. Being in harmony with the divine is like riding the tide, being pulled along.

St. John in his First Letter declared, "God is love," and went on to say, "It is true that no human being has ever had a direct vision of God. Yet if we love each other God does actually live within us, and his love grows in us towards perfection." (1 John 4:8,12).

Religious experience is important for us, a necessity of life. Religion meets our eradicable need, our unending search to know and experience the reality of life. It is possible for us to look out on a world and miss the spiritual significance of the times. To see the spiritual compulsion to a more humane order of life demands an increasing ability to know ourselves, to acquire understanding, and become worthy of the enlightenment we have received.

It is so easy to spend life in the passive voice, being ministered to by others. One of the great wastes in the world is imagination thwarted by ignorance and selfishness when it might be channelled into action.

A Prayer for Travellers

Help me to find my way
 On the journey I am taking.
 Help me to make the right choices
 In my visiting and caring.
 May I be sensitive to their needs
 and desires,
 And listen.
 May I be alive to all I am seeing
 and enjoying.
 Giving and receiving
 Travel so rich in returns
 A golden experience.

The poem, "A Prayer for Travellers" was composed and written by Hope Holmsted of Unionville, Ontario, and given to Dr. Murray Young, Cayuga.

The Peril of Conformity

The following excerpt is from the novel, "The Lost World," by Michael Crichton, Ballantine Books, New York, 1995, page 7:

"What makes you think human beings are sentient and aware? There's no evidence for it. Human beings never think for themselves, they find it too uncomfortable. For the most part, members of our species simply repeat what they are told - and become upset if they are exposed to any different view. The characteristic human trait is not awareness but conformity, and the characteristic result is religious warfare. Other animals fight for territory or food; but, uniquely in the animal kingdom, human beings fight for their 'beliefs.' The reason is that beliefs guide behaviour, which has evolutionary importance among human beings. But at a time when our behaviour may well lead us to extinction, I see no reason to assume we have any awareness at all. We are stubborn, self-destructive conformists. Any other view of our species is just a self-congratulatory delusion."

"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 comments@religionnow.ca