

ARE YOU RELIGIOUS OR JUST SUPERSTITIOUS?

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Reading: “In the Midst of Darkness” – M. K. Gandhi

“I do dimly perceive that whilst everything around me is ever changing, ever dying, there is underlying all that change a living power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves, and re-creates. That informing power or spirit is God. And since nothing else that I see merely through the senses can or will persist, He alone is.

And is the power benevolent or malevolent? I see it as purely benevolent. For I can see that in the midst of death life persists, in the midst of untruth truth persists, in midst of darkness light persists. Hence I gather that God is Life, Truth, Light. He is Love. He is the Supreme Good.”¹

In the thrall of warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan, in the pale of violence throughout human history, I often think about the place of religion in human relationships. I have thought about the contributions that religion makes to hatred, violence and war. There are times when I think that maybe the earth needs a respite from religion. We should give religion a holiday and sit down and deal with others as human beings – not as Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, or Jews. I know, of course, that will never happen. Indeed, many people will argue they cannot remove their human identity from their religious identity. Indeed, they may be right. But I also think that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was on to something when he wrote about “religion-less Christianity.” He suggested that perhaps pouring ourselves out for the

¹ M. K. Gandhi, *My Religion* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1955).

world; rather than defending religious, denominational, and theological identity better serves grace.

These ruminations are only reinforced when I read about Christian clergy who are eager to prove that the current conflict is proof of Biblical prophecy concerning the apocalypse. I have no doubt that the Bible speaks intelligently about human behavior, the conflicts inherent in human communities, even the warfare that breaks out amongst God's people. But to suggest that documents over 2,000 years old can portend events in the 21st century begs any sense of Biblical literacy and human intelligence. I wish that clergy would spend less time trying to explain or defend Holy Scripture and spend more time defending human dignity and freedom. That, I believe, would be more faithful to scripture than these inane apocalyptic interpretations.

My purpose this morning is not to engage in right wing Christian bashing. Indeed, I would hope that they had sufficient faith in Jesus that they could walk calmly through any valley of death. May their beliefs be so well anchored that they are able to respect the religious traditions of others and not need to malign, distort, or utter mendacious statements about other religious perspectives. I would remind them that distortion, exaggeration, and even lying have always been the tools of Satan; and pray they beware

his manipulation of their fears and prejudices that disguise themselves as faith.

Indeed, I honor those who have a strong, deep, and abiding faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ that calls for sacrificial love in a world wounded by poverty and hatred. I claim that tradition as the foundation of my own personal faith. But I will not substitute the integrity of religious faith for superstition. And when people use the Bible like an Ouija board, or an 8 ball, or Tarot cards they have reduced religious integrity for superstition.

It reminds me of the three ministers who were talking over lunch. They were discussing how much of the weekly donations was appropriate to keep and how much to give to the Lord. The first minister said, “I just draw a line on the floor, put one foot on both sides and throw the money into the air. Whatever lands on the right side of the line is God’s, and whatever lands on the left is mine.”

The second minister noted that he uses a similar method. “But I use a small coffee table when I throw the money in the air. Whatever lands on the table goes to the Lord and whatever lands on the floor is mine.”

They both contemplated each other’s answer and finally turned to the third minister who was sitting there without saying anything. “Well,” asked the first minister, “how do you do it?”

He answered, “Like the two of you, I also throw the money up in the air. But I figure whatever the Lord wants he’ll grab and whatever lands the floor is mine.”²

At the root of all superstition is an unreasonable hope or expectation that is characterized by magic or chance. Superstition is from the Latin, *superstitio*, meaning, “standing over a thing in amazement or awe.” Its older English definitions include, “unreasonable awe or fear of something unknown...and religious belief or practice founded on fear or ignorance. (*Oxford English Dictionary*) More contemporary definitions of superstition include, “an unfounded belief that some action or circumstance completely unrelated to a course of events can influence its outcome; fear of the mysterious or unknown; a belief, practice, or rite unreasoningly upheld by faith in magic, chance, or dogma.” (*Illustrated Encyclopedic Dictionary*) Edmund Burke once declared, “Superstition is the religion of feeble minds.” I would suggest if not a feeble mind, an uninformed one.

For example, at his anchorage off Jamaica in 1504, Christopher Columbus faced a dangerous situation with supplies of food running low. The Jamaican Indians refused to sell him any more. Consulting his almanac, he noticed that a lunar eclipse was due within a few days. On the day

² “Martha’s Religious Humor Page,” <http://www.metanois.org/jokes2.htm>. Downloaded 8/5/2006.

predicted he summoned the leaders of the Jamaicans and told them that during the night he would blot out the moon unless they resumed trading. The Jamaicans laughed at him. But when the lunar eclipse began, they rushed back in a state of great terror. Columbus said he would restore the moon if they would bring him food. They accepted the offer. The moon was fully restored and the Jamaicans hurried to bring the food supplies they had withheld.

Columbus capitalized on the fear of what was unknown to those primitive people, a lunar eclipse. He perpetrated a belief that a natural event would be interfered with by his “supernatural” powers. On the strength of their fear and ignorance he appeared to manipulate the natural order.

What is common to all forms of superstition is that they are rooted in the fear of the unknown; they are without reason, burden of proof or foundation. They are expressed in beliefs, practices, and ritual. They appeal to magic, chance, or dogma to sustain these beliefs, practices, and rituals.

Ancient cartographers had the habit of drawing a dragon on lands and waters that were not explored or otherwise known. Beside the caricature they wrote, “Dragons be here.” They associated the mysterious and unknown with power, death, and destruction. Likewise, in the cartography of the human soul we are tempted to believe in dragons or secret powers on

the boundaries of our lives that we have not explored. For example, we stand before the gaping hole of the grave and mark it with “Dragons be here.” We very much hope that some mysterious force will interfere with the natural course of life and save us from dragon’s fire, or hellfire, or non-existence.

Superstition is hope gone desperate. Superstition seeks some supernatural intervention from the realities of disease, old age, and death. The talisman of desperate hope can include the rabbit’s foot, horseshoe, crystal, cross, and Bible. Superstition’s icons have been named Isis, Moses, Athena, Zeus, Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Buddha, Mohammed, Krishna, and Sun Myung Moon. Their names, statuary, prayer shawls, and beads have all been invoked to stem the tide of moral choices and consequences, physical and mental disease, natural catastrophes, mortality, and all of the limitations and finitude of the human condition.

I am reminded of the little boy whose bedroom was in the attic of the house. A fierce thunderstorm began outside with lightning flashing and thunder booming. All of this frightened the little boy to tears. He called out to his mother, who assured him that God would take care of him. The little boy replied, “Fine, you come up here and stay with God. I want to come down and sleep with daddy.”

What then is the distinction between superstition and religion?

Returning to the Latin, *religio* means, “to yoke or bond together.” Religion is the bond between the Sacred and the human; the bond between good and evil; the bond between life and death; the bond between hope and despair. Jesus offered a clear and practical example of authentic religion in the 25th chapter of Matthew. Jesus said that those who were truly his disciples were those who yoked hunger with food, thirst with a cup of water, imprisonment and sickness with visitation and company, and nakedness with clothing.

Authentic religion is always at the crossroads of life’s meaning and experience. Authentic religion is always at the intersection of ordinary life and mystery. As such it is always in tension, seeking to hold the balance between the known and unknown. The balance is never perfect as reason, knowledge, and experience constantly shift, even from one side of the scale to the other. And sometimes religion loses its balance because experience overloads our language and we cannot find the words to articulate the wonder of life and the dread of death.

People think that they come to church to have a religious experience. Or they think that the church is supposed to give them a religious experience. Seldom have I ever had a religious experience in church. Most of my religious experiences have happened in my relationships with people

or nature. My religious experiences have happened in hospitals, jails, dinner tables, concerts, classrooms, gardens, rivers, and hiking trails.

For example, I stood beside my grandfather during the last two hours of his life. And one point I put my head on his chest so that I could feel his warmth one last time. I wanted to hear his heart beat before it went forever silent. This was a religious experience because I stood in the tension of his life and death, experience and memory, touch and love. He was the most important man in my life and love compelled me to be with him in his death.

Here is another example. One summer Mimi and I started taking ballroom dancing. We were learning the waltz, the foxtrot, the tango and others. It was the kind of experience that helped build our relationship, like adding a new room onto the house. We were doing something that was uniquely ours. We were building a new memory. The children could not participate. We were learning something new, challenging our minds and our bodies. It was romantic and required a huge sense of humor. And in the tensions of rhythm, lead signals, miscues, and various steps there emerged a greater harmony achieved in our relationship.

Now before I move on I do not mean to say that one cannot have a religious experience in church. I certainly have had some of those. I recall the wedding of Sandra and Eric. Before their wedding Eric had suffered an

automobile accident that paralyzed his legs, confining him to a wheel chair. For the wedding he rented the kind of wheel chair that would straighten and allow him to stand. At the end of the ceremony he lowered the chair, put Sandra on his lap and wheeled her down the aisle. It was the most joyful recessional I ever witnessed. What was joined together was more than husband and wife – it was hope in the midst of tragedy, courage in the presence of limitation, and sheer determination in the face of adversity. A year or so later I have the privilege and pleasure to dedicate their baby, Jessica. Living in the tension of disability and hope Eric and Sandra and Jessica live credible religious lives.

We come to church primarily to name our religious or spiritual experience. That is to say, church helps put words to our experiences. The problem is that we too often think the words can be a substitute for the experience. We come to church to celebrate the experience of the Sacred in our lives through readings, music, preaching, and fellowship. Religious education is meant to inform our sacred journeys. Church may be a travel guide. And church can always be that place where we test our experience with the experience of others, and compare it with the tradition of our parents in the faith. We come to church to see how sacred literature compares and contrasts with our experience. We come to church to hold our

religious experience up to the light of reason and not be afraid to doubt.

Church must also be that safe place we can go when religious experience is silent and dark. And through it all, church must be a safe place to live in all of these tensions.

When the church fails these tasks we easily stumble into superstition. The church fails our religious experience when it denies the responsibility to bring reason to our experience. The church fails reality when it insists on narrowly defined experience through dogma. And the church fails us when it allows us to be smug and even militant about our religious experience. I say again, the church must be a sanctuary for tension.

Certainly, my hope is that when you leave church Sunday after Sunday your eyes are open to sacred movement. Your ears are keen to the rustle of the Spirit. Your noses are sniffing the air for holy mischief. Your tongue is whet for ultimate flavor. Your skin prickles with celestial touch. Your heart is alert for divine encounter with every person and every situation you meet this week especially when they bring tension in your life. Your will is resolved to stand in the tension of joy and sorrow, hope and despair, laughter and tears, moral choice and calamity. Your mind is determined to bring knowledge and insight to all that you experience.

Perhaps the problem of faith and violence is the failure of religion to keep the tension. Fear and superstition are always eroding the veraciousness of religion. The challenge to religious communities is to stand in the tension and bring the world back to balance.

Go from this place and stand in the tension.

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