

Theological Reflections

Humans looked to religion early on to cope with natural forces and human events. In later times, beliefs became more elaborate and there were increasing quests to envision an afterlife with complete happiness, something seldom felt in this life. In monotheist religions that Americans are familiar with, the Supreme Being used human beings to communicate truths (revelation) inaccessible to human reason.

In the same way that scientists examine natural phenomena, theologians examine Sacred Scripture to describe what they see. New information, new instruments and more detailed examination bring scientists to different models that are more useful. Theologians do the same thing, discarding old models and inventing new ones. Theologians will have to step up to the plate and redefine old truths, put some old truths in the deep freeze and invent new ones to appeal to people today. Unconsciously, this has been going on since Day One.

Replacing Original Sin

If the churches are to survive, theologians will have to replace Original Sin with another theory for Jesus' appearance on earth. When Saint Augustine invented the concept, it fit in with the times. People hardly considered themselves as individuals but defined their personality with family and tribe. If someone killed a family member, killing the murderer and his entire family was perfectly acceptable in most cultures. The Jewish concept "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" marked a limitation on revenge. If a family member committed a heinous crime, the shame endured for generations.

Jesus atoning for Adam and Eve's Original Sin made sense in those days. The Mass and Protestant theology takes Original Sin without question even though Jewish theology never has had original sin or anything like it with a different name.

The Original Sin concept is reminiscent of the Nazis and other totalitarians who would punish the entire family for a crime that one of its members committed. Adam and Eve committed some transgression and all of their descendents have to pay for it too. To forgive this transgression, God, for

whatever reason of his or her own, sent Jesus to die on a cross to allow human beings to enter Heaven.

Probably starting with the enlightenment, Original Sin started making less sense. For some centuries now, people are prosecuted for what they did and not what a distant ancestor did. Since God is merciful, why could he or she just forgive what happened and not bother with crucifixion?

I advocate that the theologians get to work replacing Original Sin with another theory to explain the Incarnation. For example, God loves his or her creation and loves mankind. For some reason, God does not make clear why suffering and injustice exists in her creation but does show that she understands by becoming human and suffering injustice first hand. Another theory came from St. Athanasius who said, "God became human so that humans could become divine."

The Jews Rejected Jesus – A Spurious Charge

I have read or heard the phrase that the Jews rejected Christ once too often. Now it is time to set the record straight. Inexplicably, the Romans who carried out the crucifixion are not guilty of anything. Italy is wholeheartedly accepted in the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance, the European Union, the United Nations and everywhere else. In the Original Sin theory, a few Jews and Romans did what they were supposed to do – fulfill God's will by executing Jesus - but some Christians unfairly lay eternal guilt on all Jews. Jesus' mother, foster father, the Apostles and virtually all his followers were Jews or Jewish sympathizers whom the Nazis would have rounded up in a heartbeat. The Acts refers to Jewish sympathizers as "God-fearers", people who liked the idea of a Supreme Being but did not care for circumcision and kosher food. Jesus' contacts with non-Jews were rare. During the first century, few people accepted Jesus. By 50 A.D., the Christians numbered only about 2,500. By 100 A.D., they only numbered about 10,000. Although Jesus played loose with the regulations, such as curing people on the Sabbath, his instructions to his followers included no wholesale abandonment of Jewish law and customs. In fact he said, "Don't assume that I came to destroy the [Jewish] Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For I assure you: Until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or one stroke of a letter will pass from the law until all things are accomplished" (Matthew 5:17-18).

Roman authorities considered the Christians as a Jewish sect and could rarely if ever distinguish between the two groups.

It was Paul who said the old (Jewish) law did not apply to Gentiles (non-Jews). This totally contradicts Jesus, who according to Paul, meant to exempt the Gentiles but forgot to mention it to anybody. Going by Jesus rather than Paul, Christians would eat kosher food, celebrate Passover, Rosh Hashanah, Hanukah and other holidays as well as Christmas, Easter, All Saints Day, Ash Wednesday and everything else. Mass and church services would be on Saturday. The religious day would start at sundown, not midnight.

I ask the Christian writers to permanently drop this careless unfair practice blaming the Jews for not accepting Jesus when, in fact for many years, they were about the only ones who did.

Homosexuals

Call off the war on homosexuals. Most Americans realize that homosexuality is something that you are born with and not an orientation achieved by choice or effort. Most are willing to welcome or tolerate them at work, at church, in non-profit organizations. One Congressman and Houston's mayor are acknowledged homosexuals. However, most Americans are against same sex marriage. At this time in our culture, many heterosexuals are abandoning marriage through divorce or not getting married in the first place. It is the homosexuals as a group who are affirming marriage.

Perhaps the first step is recognizing civil unions that would allow health and pension benefits and power of attorney for a partner who is in a hospital.

A second step is examining the scriptural background for condemning homosexual activity. Religion can offer a humanitarian code of conduct, as seen in the golden rule and the Sermon on the Mount. At the same time, religion can incorporate social prejudice and ignorance and enforce social or political institutions long after their original purpose no longer exists.

Jewish scribes formulated homosexual prohibitions, found in Leviticus, during the Babylonian Captivity when there was no hope of a return to Palestine. To maintain their religion, culture and language, they called for stringent cohesion rejecting all unnecessary contact with the dominant

culture. Jewish people maintained this cohesion eating different food (kosher) making social interaction difficult. Leviticus prohibited homosexuality to prevent familiarity with non-Jews. There was also the idea from Genesis to be fruitful and multiply. In those days, people thought that homosexuality was something that you choose to do. If you engaged in homosexual acts, you were not starting a family.

The Jews eventually returned to Palestine and were eventually forcibly exiled by the Romans. The kosher food custom stays on long past its original purpose. Small minorities in any culture have to make big efforts not to be assimilated. There have to be better ways to maintain an identity than maintaining kosher food customs.

I advocate that homosexual activity between consenting adults not be considered sinful. These prohibitions existed in the Old Testament that also advocated slavery. I understand that this recommendation may be too much to accept for most Americans. Since there are more pressing issues, climate change, poverty, the bloated military budget and economic depression among others, I recommend allowing civil unions and then putting the entire issue on a back burner.

When the world's population was tiny, "be fruitful and multiply" was smart policy. Even those who have never had a course in economics recognize benefits from labor specialization and economies of scale. Now that there are 7 billion people, the "be fruitful and multiply" admonition is counterproductive and dangerous for our continuation as a species.

Hell

The universe's Creator did not go through all that trouble, become a human being and announce the idea of eternal love to also create an eternal torture chamber.

The purgatory concept, where there is eventually pardon or reprieve, allows a merciful God. Jesus spoke about a loving father. The picture of God in the Psalms and Gospels presents total compassion, which is inconsistent with everlasting damnation. Some object to Hell's abolition because this would quash free will. An examination of (human) criminal law as practiced in Texas and nearly everywhere else would remedy this concern. Every criminal trial has two parts, the verdict and the sentence. Did the defendant

commit first-degree murder? If the verdict is not guilty, then the defendant walks free. If the verdict is guilty, the judge and jury have to determine appropriate punishment such as life in prison, 25 years or lethal injection.

It is probably the same way that divine justice works. God determines guilt (keeping free will and responsibility for your actions). Then, he decides an appropriate punishment. For mass murders like Hitler, Stalin and Mao Se Tung, this will mean a long time in purgatory. For the more ordinary criminal, purgatory time will be much less. There are many quotations in the Gospels which, in English translation, indicate eternal punishment for the worst offenders. However, Hans Kung, a famous Catholic theologian, maintains that eternal in Hebrew does not always mean the same thing in Greek and modern languages ("this goes on eternally" means "endlessly," "an indefinitely long time"). The Last Judgment is named that because the decision is final and decisive for eternity. The torment does not last forever. Even St. Paul says that all will obtain mercy, "For God has given up all to sin so that he could have mercy on all alike" (Romans 11:32). In the Psalms, we learn, "His mercy endures forever."

Inerrancy and Infallibility

The "inerrancy of Scripture" is something to be reworked if it is to mean anything. People who defend and protest the death penalty and other important issues both cite the Bible to support their cause. Biblical texts are contradictory. Even the twelve apostles' names vary among the four Gospels. The Eucharist means one thing to Catholics (transubstantiation), another to Lutherans (consubstantiation) and still something else to most Protestants (purely symbolic). Like most things in life, we decide what we like and then justify our decision to make it sound reasonable if someone should ask. The Biblical texts are like inkblots in that different people can walk away with different views. Washing your hands publically as Pilate did was a Jewish custom, something that Pilate would never do. The entire Christmas story is a fantasy. There never was a census as described in the Gospels. There was a contrived effort to get Jesus to Bethlehem to fulfill ancient prophecies, even if it meant dragging him in by his heels. Jewish practices and customs are distorted in the Gospels. For example, people could cure on the Sabbath but could not charge for their services. Admit that there are mistakes and inconsistencies and then, move on.

What we have in the Gospels are contradictory evidence meant to convey a sublime message and not historical documents.

Also, the Catholic Church's infallibility is something to be revised if it is to mean anything. What it means now is that the Church can make mortal errors in endorsing persecuting Jews, forced conversions, slavery, witch burnings, atrocities committed by the Crusaders and the Inquisition but get it absolutely right on doctrine. The Catholic Church will have to recognize that it makes mistakes, sometimes big ones.

Abortion

Jim Wallis, Sojourners magazine editor, looks for common ground on abortion, appealed to Democrats to stop letting Republicans make this a wedge issue. Democrats could make proposals that would reduce the more than one million abortions performed in the United States to half of that or lower. He advocated, "...a campaign [that] could emphasize changing adoption law, health and child care; improving poor and working women's incomes; and supporting reasonable restrictions on abortions, like parental notification for minors (with necessary legal protections against parental abuse)." I add on parenting classes to the list.

A simple observation is that Democrats do not care about children before they are born and Republicans do not care for children after they are born. Making sure that mothers have prenatal care, proper nutrition and the family has time to raise their children is all important. With fewer families with health insurance and parents working two or more jobs, the pressure for an abortion is high. For all the Bush administration's efforts or rhetoric, the number of abortions per year has risen. Most women obtaining abortions are married with children who cannot afford another child. An unlikely alliance with pro-lifers, pro-choicers and other child advocacy groups can encourage measures that will make every child a wanted child.

Love Your Neighbor

Some 75% of Americans have the idea that Bible teaches that "God helps those who help themselves." In fact, this ant-Christian motto comes from Benjamin Franklin. When asked what was necessary to enter heaven, Jesus did not talk about tax cuts for the rich or trickle - down economics but told the rich to sell their possessions and give them to the poor.

The US Census Bureau shows that the largest number living in extreme poverty since they started measuring such things in 1959 is right now. There are over 45 million Americans on food stamps. About half a million children may be currently homeless.

Americans feature themselves as the most generous people in the world. In different polls, a majority identified the largest federal expenditure as foreign aid, which in fact receives about 1% of the total outlays. For the industrialized nations, the US is fourth from the bottom in generosity. The US Census Bureau shows that the largest number living in extreme poverty since they started measuring such things in 1959 is right now.

Over three billion people live on less than \$2.50 per day. According to UNICEF, 26,000 to 30,000 children die every day due to poverty. About 1.1 billion people in developing countries die have inadequate access to water and 2.6 billion people lack basic sanitation.

Christians as a group are not generous and have turned their backs on Jesus' main teaching to love everyone as much as you love yourself. They can work on projects, soup kitchens, human rights and other good works but allow oppressive conditions to exist everywhere in the world.

In the age old discussion, good works trump faith, "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. The second most important is similar: Love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. All the other commandments and all the demands of the prophets stem from these two laws and are fulfilled if you obey them. Keep only those and you will find that you are obeying all the others. Luke 22:37-40.

Drop the Apocalypse (Revelations)

It is probably about 1,700 years too late to declare the Apocalypse (Revelations) as non-canonical. Perhaps as the astronomers have done for Pluto, declare this book as no longer helpful.

I am thinking that in the early centuries A.D. that bishops had committees that examined candidates for sacred scripture and make choices which to recommend and which to drop from consideration. Had I served on such a theoretical committee, I would have voted for rejecting this macabre

gruesome story that completely contradicts the gospel message. No longer do we have Jesus telling us to love our enemies but Jesus leading a vengeful army. Since the book is metaphorical, one solution is to declare that the book describes the Second World War and Allied victory. Weren't the Nazis evil enough to fulfill the predictions described? A second solution is to declare that the book describes the current struggle to deal with climate change, a threat far more subtle than ever posed by the Axis powers.

Contradictions abound in the Bible. God is supposed to be perfect, all-knowing and loving. In the Old Testament, he is a vicious person commanding genocide in the Promised Land and demanding child sacrifice among other things. In the New Testament and the Psalms, he is all-goodness and mercy. Then in the Apocalypse, he is vicious again. Is this bi-polar behavior for a perfect being? Please make up your mind which behavior to throw in with. The best bet is to declare the book as no longer helpful.

Mysticism

Churches are modeled on an omnipotent sky god that traditional Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, Jews and perhaps Muslims can be comfortable with. Since Christian membership has been dwindling for many decades, it is time to look at other approaches that go beyond the sky god. Thinking about the Supreme Being the way that mystics do will give a wider dimension but it will take some work to get there.

Father Reginald Marie Garrigou-Lagrange (1877 – 1964) was a Catholic theologian who thought that the mystical life was entirely normal for people on the path to holiness. What keeps people from being mystics? A partial answer is that the sky god is easily understood. A Deity with no limitations and whose attributes cannot be defined is much harder to grasp.

Using a pantheistic Supreme Being model yields different behavior than the sky god. Since reality subsides in the Supreme Being, all life is sacred. This message presented in the Bible, the Koran and other sacred scriptures affirm this thought.

Increased church attendance alone will only have a marginal effect on human behavior. In 1963, I heard a priest say that people could go to church on Sunday and go to Hell for what they do on Monday. Many Nazis

and Holocaust perpetrators were regular church goers. God-fearing Southern Christians could lynch black people on Sunday and not be bothered at all. European colonial powers would routinely massacre innocent men, women and children and not give this a second thought. In the First Crusade, Catholic soldiers killed every Muslim and Jewish person in Jerusalem. The Pope never issued a reprimand or an excommunication for this atrocity.

The Twelve Step programs, a movement with religious overtones, need a least one more step to be complete. The churches need one more commandment. The Twelve Step programs must be flexible enough to accomplish this. After all, Alcoholics Anonymous started with six steps. Six more steps came later. It is not enough to be free from drugs or alcohol. We must develop concern for human beings, animals and plants outside our immediate circle. The churches started with Ten Commandments. This is reflected in proposed Step 13 and the 11 commandment:

We developed a social and environmental conscience.

You shall develop a social and environmental conscience.

Adopting Step 13 in Twelve Step programs and the eleventh commandment churches would require the highest ethical and environmental standards for our society and the world. It would mean seeking non-violent solutions first, seeking an end to violence in families, neighborhoods, prisons and nations.

Step 13 and the 11th commandment imply war abolition something advocated by distinguished warriors, not just Quakers, hippies and left-wing college professors. See these thoughts from Henry Stimson, US War Department Secretary, 1940-1945:

“We must never forget, that under modern conditions of life, science, and technology. All war has been greatly brutalized, and that no one who joins in it, even in self-defense, can escape becoming also in a measure brutalized. Modern war cannot be limited in its destructive method and the inevitable debasement of all participants... A fair scrutiny of the last two World Wars makes clear the steady intensification of the weapons and methods employed by both, the aggressors and the victors. In order to defeat the Japanese aggression, we were forced, as

Admiral Nimitz has stated, to employ a technique of unrestricted warfare, not unlike that which 25 years ago was the proximate cause of our entry into World War I. In the use of strategic air power the Allies took the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians in Germany and Japan.... We as well as our enemies have contributed to the proof that the central moral problem is war and not its methods, and that a continuance of war will in all probability end with the destruction of our civilization."

With or without a formal adoption for Step 13 and the 11th commandment, I am hoping that the self help people like Wayne Dyer and John Bradshaw include a wider agenda in their books and speeches. Now, their focus is narrow including only your family, neighbors, colleagues and friends. Except for Deepak Chopra, widely known self help gurus do not advocate steps to peace, such as nuclear weapons abolition.

In all my time in school, there was never any reference to social obligations. At Saint Thomas High School in Houston, Texas in 1960, I learned that robbing or cheating a person out of more than one day's wages was a mortal sin. There was no reference to corporate responsibility. Tobacco companies and their public relations firms attempted, for decades, to convince the public that smoking was harmless. Detroit automobile manufacturers fought tooth and nail against passing the Automobile Safety Act in 1965. Manufacturers use toxins in carpeting, paint, cosmetics, makeup, soaps, lotions and sunscreens. Food processing includes 15,000 chemicals that do not have to put on the label. When Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring*, chemical companies contracted public relations to present her as a nutcase. In American history class, textbooks treated the holocaust of American Indians as routine as if they were talking about natural phenomena such as sun spots. There was not a specific book or event that made me see a wider responsibility for me or my country. Looking back, I realize when the first Earth Day occurred in 1970 that I had felt this way for a while.

Jane Goodall, in her book *Reason for Hope: A Spiritual Journey*, cited that a major obstacle to social improvement is the thought that any one person's actions will not change anything. People are discouraged from the start. Actually, a few people can change the world. The famous sociologist Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful,

committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

How can anyone develop a mystical life?

To connect with anything beyond the everyday hustle, you have to have a long pause. This means a shorter workweek and longer vacations like in west Europe. In one of Steven Covey’s books, he asks when you are headed to the hospice or to the hospital for the last time if we are going think to ourselves, “I should have spent more time at the office.” It is good to go away to a pretty place like the Kerrville Texas area. Since that cannot happen very often, I recommend making a major effort to make our cities more attractive through more green space, park development and landscaping. Since Harris County and Houston are attracting more people, possibly two million more by 2035, the voters and local governments are in the position to insist on energy efficient architectural codes and land conservancies for developers. Preserve what habitat is left and enhance our few open spaces into something special.

For a step at deep spirituality, take some extended time off for a long retreat. I proposed to the monks at Benedictine Abbey in Atchison, Kansas to offer long retreats to help recruitment for the abbey or to instill a deep life for those who have no intention to join the religious life. This would most easily fit young or retired people.

The idea has had a long gestation period. I was a freshman at Benedictine College in Atchison for the 1962-1963 school year. I joined the Basilian Fathers who taught me at St. Thomas High School in Houston. I entered St. Basil’s Novitiate, a rural setting, near Pontiac, Michigan in August 1963. The novitiate year is a combination of a retreat and boot camp. I used boot camp term for a reason. The novitiate year, the preparation period before taking vows, is not for the faint hearted. There is neither foxhole digging nor military exercises. However, it was a disciplined 16-hour day with meditation, prayer, manual labor, scripture study, Latin and some recreation.

Within 2 to 3 weeks, I felt a deep spirituality that is difficult to express today. All the theological teaching that I had in grade school, high school

and Benedictine College seemed superficial. Why is it that they did not tell us about the real thing?

Back in the 1960s, they called this aesthetic theology. Now they call it spirituality. I left the Basilians in May 1966 and with a short career, never developed this any further.

I do not think you can get this going at a retreat house in the big city. You need a connection with nature.

One of the things that I look forward to, when I visit the abbey, is going on the River Road where I can see the bluffs in their fall colors. Also, the scenery on highway 45 between Weston and the Atchison turn are something to behold. I plan my visits for late October to see Kansas City and Atchison at their peak beauty period. When I am lucky, I see the brilliant fall colors.

Benedictine Abbey in north Atchison and the sister's convent in south Atchison would be great places to stay for Christian men and women. The atmosphere probably would not be an easy fit for Muslims and Jews.

However, there are non-denominational retreat centers where everyone would be comfortable.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Since evidence for life after death is scant, we can only hope for the best, remembering a sentence from the funeral Mass, "Life is changed, not taken away." If you go to church or do not go to church, do the right thing. Follow the Golden Rule. The Rotary Club defines the Golden Rule in their Four Way Test:

Of all the things we say and do:

1. Is it the TRUTH?
2. Is it FAIR to all concerned?
3. Will it build GOODWILL and BETTER FRIENDSHIPS?
4. Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

I add the Fifth Way: Is it environmentally sustainable?

The old admonition, "Pray as if everything depends on God. Work as if everything depends on you," is the best way to go.