

IS GOD NECESSARY?

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Does God Matter?

I should like to begin this morning with a story about Lawrence Olivier, the late well-known British actor. He was once invited to participate in the Sunday morning worship of a small English country church, near where he happened to be vacationing. Trained in the most advanced techniques of fine speech, he chose to read the 23rd Psalm, “The Lord is My Shepherd, I shall not want” and recited it so expertly that when he was finished, the entire congregation murmured in appreciation.

He was followed by a frail and elderly man who stepped to the pulpit, and in a feeble voice, repeated the very same Psalm which happened to be one of the assigned readings for that particular Sunday. And when he concluded, there wasn't a dry eye in the sanctuary. Everyone had been profoundly moved.

After the service, Olivier's manager asked him to explain the reason for the difference in the congregation's reaction. And the seasoned actor replied, “I'll tell you the difference. While I know the words of the 23rd Psalm, that old man over there, he knows the Shepherd.”

The question I want to pose this morning is this, how to do we get to know the Shepherd? How do we find Him – or Her? It's not easy. In a recent book entitled, “The God I Believe In”

fourteen well-known personalities – clergymen, philosophers, writers and scientists – are interviewed about their idea of God. The responses are engrossing, but ultimately frustrating. There is no meeting of minds. There is no consensus. What emerges are fourteen different conceptions or interpretations of the Deity. I suppose this was to be expected. After all, every person must come to an idea of God out of his or her own experience, understanding, wisdom and need.

I think a more useful and satisfying approach in our quest for knowing the Shepherd is to ask, not what is our definition or conception of God – but rather, what difference would that notion or belief make in our lives? What important ideas would flow from it? Let me suggest a number.

In the first place, to assert that there is a God is to find a rational basis for respecting human personality. There are over six billion of us on the face of the earth. What makes each of us important? Why can't we be used for the greater glory of the State? Why are we more than merely cogs or wheels in a gigantic machine? What renders us more than faceless numbers? A salient reason is that each of us is created in God's image and that each of us to some degree partakes of His divinity or spirit.

The assertion that we are all created in the image of God means that we are all invested with cosmic importance, that every human being, no matter how successful, or

seemingly insignificant, no matter whether he lives in a palace or on skid row, is worthy in the eyes of God and must be so regarded by his fellows.

There is a story that Alexander the Great once found Diogenes carefully examining a parcel of human bones. He asked the philosopher what he was looking for. "I am looking," replied, Diogenes, "for that which I cannot find – the difference between your father's bones and those of his slaves."

It is in this spirit of individual importance that the Talmud teaches: "Whoever destroys one human soul, the Torah regards him as if he had destroyed the whole world, and he who sustains one human soul, the Torah regards him as if he had saved the entire world." Respect for personality and individuality flows from the belief that we are created in God's image.

Of the billions of persons on earth, no two faces are identical, no two sets of fingerprints. In the Talmud, one of the Rabbis expressed this idea cogently. "When a man makes coins, he mints them from a die or mould and they appear exactly the same. Yet God, as it were, fashioned us from a human mould and created each person different from his neighbour." What follows is that we must not allow ourselves to be smothered by conformity. Each of us has his or her own singular contribution to make.

And we can carry this idea one step further and suggest that faith in God is the only real basis for universal brotherhood. Why should I love my neighbour? It may be that I dislike him intensely. Indeed I have nothing in common with him. This may be especially true when he

speaks a different language, practices strange customs and habits, or is of a different colour. The fact that he is a human being is not enough. After all I may be physically stronger, or in a superior social, economic or intellectual position. But, how can I refute the assertion that we are all children of one universal deity?

This is the truth the prophet Malachi had in mind when he cried out, “Have we not all One Father, has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously brother against brother?” It is noteworthy that the great injunction from Leviticus, “And you shall love your neighbour as yourself” is followed by the words, “I am the Lord.” Because there is a God, our relations with one another can be transformed from hostility and indifference to concern and affection.

In the third place, I think a belief in God can furnish us with some of the necessary inspiration, courage and help that we need as human beings. Pascal, the 17th century French philosopher wrote, “When I consider the brief span of my life, swallowed up in eternity past and in eternity to come, lost in the immensity of space of which I know nothing and which knows nothing of me, I am terrified.” Who has not experienced this feeling of insignificance? Who can contemplate the evils of today and the possible horrors of tomorrow without being afraid? We are short-lived, weak human beings. We are subject to sickness, tribulation, despair and eventual death. We need something to sustain us. We need the conviction that we are not

alone in the world. Call it a crutch if you like; there is no shame in that word. We need the quiet resolve that will help us to bear life's troubles, perhaps even to transcend them.

In the fourth place, when we proclaim God's existence we escape the error of worshipping that which is secondary or unworthy, an idol that our own hands have created. Man is an incorrigibly credulous creature. If he does not assert loyalty to God than he may well end up giving it to some limited, partial truth. It may be that God will become a charismatic fellow human being, or a political system, or the quest for power, or material possessions, or a passionate hobby, or the desire for constant pleasure. When these become substitutes for God, then both our sense of values and our lives have become distorted.

The prophet Jeremiah warned against such idolatry. "Thus says the Lord: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom; let not the mighty man glory in his might; let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, the Lord who exercises mercy, justice and righteousness in the earth."

Finally, in the years that I have left, I know that belief in God should be translated into ethical and moral behaviour.

A young man who was depressed by the evil, the suffering, the misery of the world complained to his teacher: "Why did God ever make such a world? Why, I could make a better world than this myself." His teacher answered quietly: "That is exactly why God put you here – to make it a better world. Now go ahead and do your part."

In this answer, we come upon a subtle truth that is frequently overlooked. We always talk of our dependence upon God. We seem to forget that God also depends on us. There are so many things He cannot do without us. “Man,” taught the ancient sages, is “a partner with the Holy One, in the work of creation.”

God cannot make a peaceful world unless we help Him by rooting out the hatred from our hearts, the prejudice from our minds, the injustice from our society.

God cannot make a peaceful home unless husband and wife work with Him by bringing to it a spirit of sharing, mutual respect, a binding loyalty, constancy, and compassion.

God heals the sick, but not without the surgeon’s hands, the doctor’s medicine, the nurse’s vigilance, the encouragement of loved ones and friends.

God helps the poor with the charity we give, cheers the lonely with the visits we make, comforts the bereaved with the words we speak, guides our children with the examples we set, ennobles our lives with the good deeds we perform.

The question to be asked of those who seek God is not whether they believe in a noun that cannot be known but whether they believe in the gerunds of Godliness: healing the sick, feeding the hungry, supporting the fallen, pursuing peace, loving the neighbour. The imperatives of Godliness call the seeker to imitate the ways of Godliness.

May I recapitulate: The nature of God must remain a mystery. But to assert the existence of a Supreme Being or spiritual force is to provide a rational basis for respecting human personality. It is to furnish us with the hope and courage we need as weak and fallible beings. It is to free us from worshipping that which is unworthy and inferior, and to provide us for a reasoned basis for moral behaviour. Such a workable approach to our understanding of God has a paramount role to play in the home, in the workplace, in the community – in creating a more decent and humane society.