

# Seeking Enlightenment

*Note: The title was giving me more trouble than anything else, but shortly after Ann was wondering again where my journey was taking me, I remembered an email subject line I used almost a year ago.*

I used to see myself as an agnostic for lack of a more descriptive term. Although I didn't understand religion myself, I had long respected those who had a religious faith from which they derived strength of character. That divided me from the atheist who despised religion so much that he wanted to drive it from public sight and hearing. I was also wary of those who wanted to force their religion on everyone else by the authority of their own beliefs. My opinions of these two groups have not changed a bit since then.

But, as my understanding has improved, I've come to see that the latter group should also include those secular humanists who want to force their views on others. Although they profess to be non-religious, they have adopted many religious concepts and have simply replaced god with man as their ultimate authority.

Despite being non-religious, I developed a degree of faith. This prayer is a concise expression of my faith: *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.* Although it has religious origins, it states a basic truth: *I acknowledge that I can't have or do everything I want, but that I should strive to do what I can.*

In the last two years I've had a growing realization that the antagonism between the progressive and conservative movements in America is rooted in religion. By this, I mean that it is actually a fight *between* two religions, although the progressive side will certainly deny it. In order to improve my own understanding, I've examined my beliefs in the context of my largely Christian heritage. Here is my personal Truth.

*What is life?* Living things use the resources of our universe to pursue a complex purpose: they grow, they modify their environment, they reproduce. Although they exist in this universe, they must be more than just matter because no law of physics can cause non-living things to behave in the way they do. Thus, a living thing must include two parts: a body and a spirit. A body can exist without a spirit, but it will no longer be alive. What a spirit without a body is like, I can hardly imagine. The realm of the pure spirit may be a very different place where space, time, matter, cause, and effect have no relevance.

*What is free will?* In order for life to exist it must overcome the predictability of physics. Somehow at the microscopic level, the spirit must act on the body to achieve what is impossible for non-living things: pursue a complex purpose. This is the essence of life. When sentience is added to life, this essence becomes much stronger with an ability to direct our thoughts and make conscious choices.

*Does God exist?* The spirit is the active portion of our nature. It has shaped our bodies to its own purpose. In effect, it is our creator, and we are made in its image. Although we can achieve greater understanding of our biology and our world, our spirit has defied equivalent definition and comprehension. Whether this other realm is perceived as a single sentient god or an assortment of invisible psychic forces can only be determined through conjecture or faith. Regardless, I believe there is one absolute, underlying Truth. After all, reality is what it is whether we can see it or not.

*Do good and evil exist?* Good and evil can only exist if we are able to choose between them. We have more choices than other living things, so good and evil have become important to us. Good is what promotes the activity of the spirit and evil is what restricts it. *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you* and *Love thy neighbor as thyself*, are simple rules for doing good and avoiding evil. That which impedes or destroys life, such as enslavement or murder, is evil. Although we have empathy and conscience to remind us when we stray and help guide us, life is by necessity pragmatic which leads to many gray areas. For example, we must destroy life, be it animal or vegetable, to eat and survive. We kill in self-defense which is different than murder. Nevertheless, wanton destruction of life is unnecessary and thus evil.

*What is the Truth?* Many have attempted to find it. Some have been closer to the mark than others. Others have used it as a weapon for power and wealth. We may never fully know or understand the underlying Truth, but we can each discover our own personal Truth based on our limited knowledge. The concept of good and evil is a useful tool for doing so.

*Is man inherently good or evil?* Emotions of empathy, compassion, and conscience make it possible for man to be good. However, we go through life with an angel whispering in one ear and a demon in the other. Since it appears that some men are good, some are bad, and others can go either way, the answer to the question is an unsatisfying “yes, no, maybe.” What each of us is born with, what we experience, and what we learn determines which path we follow. Christianity teaches that salvation is God’s gift bestowed individually by His choice. It also teaches that sinners can be saved: that what you become is more important than what you have been. This is well in keeping with a “yes, no, maybe” reality.

*Is it our nature to be ruled or to rule ourselves?* This was clearly in the thoughts of our Founding Fathers, and they chose the latter. I concur. We should be more concerned with our own actions than those of others. However, when my individual rights conflict with another’s, the dispute needs to be resolved. Laws can do this fairly as long as they apply equally. Laws do this best if we can understand and avoid breaking them in the first place. Because of empathy, compassion, and conscience, most of us can do this successfully. It is better to be self-governing than to be ruled, because being ruled by another becomes enslavement and destroys free will, the essence of life. Nevertheless, a tolerable government must take all three possibilities into account: Freedom for men of good character, laws for men of wavering character, and incarceration for men of unredeemable character.

The history of Christianity illustrates a growing understanding of this. The Old Testament provides rules under authority of God which must be obeyed or there will be consequences. Adam and Eve learned this in the Garden of Eden. There was a choice between good or bad which had a clear consequence just like any law of physics. Unfortunately, later came the Pharisees who believed that although adherence to the letter of the law was very important, the intent of the law could be ignored simply by finding an appropriate loophole. In response to this self-serving perspective, the New Testament provides an example, Jesus Christ, who is good and willing to sacrifice himself for others. He exists to be voluntarily emulated rather than simply obeyed. He leads by example rather than by force.

There are deeper ramifications because of a strong human desire for salvation which is defined here as the fulfillment of one's spirit or the discovering of one's purpose. I believe my salvation to be an individual journey based on my own personal Truth. In reality, that is all I truly know and have under my direct control. Others espouse a collective salvation which can only be achieved if all accept the same Truth. Free will and the diversity among living things shows collective salvation to be unnatural, and so force is usually necessary to put it in place.

So, how does the Christian Truth compare to my own personal Truth? Quite well I'd say. Some other religions also compare well, but there are certainly those that don't.

Atheists point to things like the Inquisition, the Crusades, and the Holocaust to show that Christianity is flawed. But these are all corruptions of Christianity intended to support the utopian dreams of men. The Bible promises an eternal paradise on earth, but says that it will be accomplished by the will of God and that some will be saved and some will not.

Any attempt by man to create another Eden on earth based on collective salvation is sure to fail. The ends will NOT justify the means. The quest must be pursued individually using the free will given to us by our creator.

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