

Is Religion a Help or a Hindrance in Finding God?

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THE OLD expression 'sackcloth and ashes' used to express graphically the gloominess associated usually with repentance. The latter was like a rite of passage. Wrong-doing had to be followed by some kind of punishment, before order could be restored in a miscreant's life. Repentance thus came to be tinged with fear and menace.

Yet it's debatable if this grim way of thinking about repentance really captures what the New Testament means by the notion. The Gospels are indeed full of calls for repentance and stories of repentance (or *metanoia*, to use the technical Greek term found in the New Testament), but they don't quite seem to have the dismal, self-flagellating aura about them that tends to characterize the traditional idea of repentance. To take one easily identifiable example, the story of the two sons in St Matthew's Gospel (21:28-32): here the 'repentance' of the son who first refused and then decided to go to work in his father's vineyard is more a question of someone having 'second thoughts' about an initial attitude, and then deciding to take a new tack. The most famous example of 'repentance' in the Gospels is probably that of the Prodigal Son, whose 'repentance' was based on lucid reasoning and the hope of a better life.

To judge by these examples, repentance in the New Testament would appear to have more to do with spiritual and mental flexibility or elasticity than with mental anguish or self-laceration. It is interesting to reflect that a frequently cited observation by Albert Camus on materialism overlaps somewhat – perhaps surprisingly, given that Camus was no supporter of Christianity – with the Gospel recommendation

to repent or to be open to having 'second thoughts'. In *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, he noted:

The most loathsome materialism is not the kind people usually think of, but the sort that attempts to let dead ideas pass for living realities, diverting into sterile myths the stubborn and lucid attention we give to what we have within us that must forever die.

Those, however, who are portrayed in the Gospels as finding repentance less appealing, such as the chief priests and the elders of the people, reveal a corresponding spiritual and mental rigidity or atrophy. They seem to have assumed that, as insiders, they had a monopoly on religious truth and insight, and thus no need to rethink anything. Whereas those in a different category, such as tax-collectors and prostitutes (and most societies will have their own preferred outcasts), were taken to be outsiders who, in religious terms, could not really be taken seriously.

Yet ironically, in the view of the Gospels it was the outsiders who proved more open to new thinking and hence to new thinking about God, as announced initially by Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist, and subsequently by Jesus himself.

What this general pattern in the Gospels appears to underline is that, even though religion can of course show us a way to God, it can also, unfortunately and paradoxically, sometimes prevent us from truly seeing the reality of God. Religion can actually on occasion block our way to God, rather than opening it up. That's one of the great lessons of the New Testament, and it's a lesson that never grows old or old-fashioned, but always remains up to date and topical.

THE PEOPLE WHO TOOK RELIGION SERIOUSLY

It's worth mentioning in this context that Jesus' opponents in the New Testament weren't, say, atheists, or materialists, or people who thought religion was meaningless. They were, rather, the very people who took religion seriously, but somehow weren't able to see the wood for the trees. They weren't able to see that the point of religion is to point to God, and hence that God must finally always be more important than even religion itself. And it was, of course, the clash between

two interpretations of religion, that finally led to Jesus' crucifixion, with his enemies accusing him of blasphemy, which is precisely a *religious* crime.

NO NEED TO BE ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN

We might, then, well ask ourselves: In the light of the sad truth that even religion itself can sometimes become corrupting, what should or can anyone do to avoid falling into the same traps as Jesus' adversaries? How can we be sure that we are on the right road to God? In reflecting on this question, we can find, I think, another lesson that the Gospels teach, which is perhaps more consoling than the first. This first, we recall, was that religion can sometimes, ironically, blind us to the true reality of God. But a second lesson of the gospels is that we don't really need to be absolutely certain about whether we are on the right path to God or not. Indeed if we were totally certain, repentance – or having 'second thoughts' – would be unnecessary, if not impossible. And the New Testament surely suggests that repentance is both possible and always necessary.

The conviction that they had achieved complete certainty was precisely the error or mistake the chief priests and the elders of the people made. And it is a trap that all who take their religion seriously can easily fall into.

But the New Testament's message of repentance offers a kind of antidote or remedy to this danger in that it encourages a willingness – as in the case of the son who changed his mind towards his father – to rethink our relationship to God, if we want to reach the true God. To that extent, the gospel invites us, not so much to keep our options open in any selfish sense of always having an eye to the main chance, but to keep our minds open so that we'll at least always allow for the possibility of a rethink and a change of heart in our relationship to God right to the end of our lives.