

PRAIRIE SOCIETY Sep. 10, 1989

DOES RELIGION HAVE ANY REDEEMING VALUE?

A.

1. Let's light the chalice for Jesus today. (It's probably been done before, but I can't recall when.)

2. When I was a little kid, my parents sent me to a Lutheran Sunday school for some years. I still can't quite figure out why they did it. My father was an atheist who NEVER went to church, and my mother was an atheist who sometimes went to church. It probably had to do with their coming from Norway and Sweden. In Norway, being part of the Lutheran church is part of being Norwegian, whatever one's beliefs. And they wanted to become Americans, so they sent us to Sunday school. I guess that my father felt, at the time, that for all its faults, Christianity had some redeeming value.

3. One of the songs that we sang at the Lutheran Sunday school was "Jesus loves me." Let's start with that today. (Verses 1, 2, and maybe 3)

What do you ^{kids} think of the words? (Kids first....)

...The words are sort of sappy. But they are a fairly good way of introducing kids to Christianity. The words express 3 central things about Christianity:

1) It is a kind of wish-fulfilling fantasy. Somebody loves you; someone big and powerful loves you.

2) Christians are a bit obsessed with sin and death. Even little kids are sinners.

3) And Christianity is a book religion. You know that things are true because the Bible says it's so.

4. I'm sure I'm not the only one who went to a Christian Sunday school.... Who else? And I'm not the only one who has a Bible. How many of you have a Bible in your homes? (How many ever read it?....)

5. I looked for some of the even sappier songs we sang in the Lutheran Sunday school but failed to find them. For our second song I settled on the "Best and the Brightest." Let's sing verses 1, 2, and 7. Verse 7 tells us that Christianity can sometimes bless the division of society into the rich and the poor, so let's sing it with feeling.

Children can go downstairs at the conclusion of the song.

This song tells us that the Christian God is a Creator God. He created the universe, and he created you, & I, and we should be grateful to him. He also created the rich man in his castle, and the song says we should be grateful for that too. (Christians today are often embarrassed by that verse)

(2)

B. 1. My series this fall is in part a response to a program last year by Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. They clearly don't think that religion, particularly Christianity, has any redeeming value. I'm a member of the FFRF, I said at the time for the same reason that other people are members of Christian churches: fire insurance. Remember the fate of Michael Servetus. But I basically disagree with Annie Laurie and Dan. During the course of their service I recalled the lines of Walt Whitman, "Great are the myths I too believe in them...." in a fashion.

2. My own feelings were nicely expressed in some Satanic dialogues by the late Walter Kauffmann, a philosopher who wrote some nice things about Nietzsche and Hegel. I've asked Rick to take the role of Satan, Al the role of the Christian, and Dick the role of the atheist. I've omitted the first dialogue with a theologian and cut some of the dialogue with the Christian.

C. 1. I agree with Satan here, and Walter Kauffmann. This atheist, by TOTALLY rejecting religion, by willingly being ignorant of it, is cutting off, or inhibiting, part of his humanity. He is a kind of incomplete human-being, and one wouldn't want to spend eternity with him and his ilk as companions.

PART of religion ought to be of interest to us --- all religions probably have something that ought to interest us, even Christianity. But which parts? I find it a bit difficult to put my feelings about this into words, and I'll be interested in what you have to say. But I don't think the aspects of Christianity that most concern Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker are the really interesting ~~parts~~ aspects of Christianity. I think they have been led off the track of what's really interesting in religion by some red herrings laid by Christian fundamentalists.

2. First, Christianity has been somewhat unusual among the great world religions by making strong cognitive claims, claims about the natural world, divinities, and human history. God created the world, and God has been an actor in human history. God exists, and one can prove it, QED. Most sophisticated Christians aren't any more interested in these claims than we are. The Creation Science people are a noisy minority. The Pope has convened meetings of scientists to discuss the Big Bang theory of the origins of the universe. Most leading Protestant and Catholic theologians have abandoned proofs of the existence of God, and Paul Tillich

objected to such phrases as 'God exists' or 'God is a Being'....because he felt they made God into an OBJECT, something finite, a being alongside other beings. (Bellah, p. 255)

You won't find them attributing gender to God, and they can use feminine pronouns for God quite readily. (...even in the pages of the AJS...)

3. Second, and I'm not so sure about this, the moral content of Christianity and other religions isn't one of the reasons for their relevance to us. The EFRF has been rather successful in attacking the moral content of Biblical religion, although Biblical religion has been far more concerned about morality than most other religions. Religions such as those of Ancient Greece, or modern Zen Buddhism, haven't been especially concerned with moral relations among human beings. I don't have some doubts about this point, and maybe we can discuss it again next week.

4. What is probably of most interest is the mythic aspect of religion. Not ALL myths, but some of them. Many myths have been used in a largely instrumental way, justifying certain social arrangements. Esau sold Isaac his birthright for a mess of pottage, and therefore some ethnic group had rights to desirable land in Palestine. Other myths are more innocent, explaining and justifying rituals. We explain the Menorah ritual of Hannukah by events during a siege in the Maccabean wars. Those are for children.

But many other myths are different. They DON'T tell us how to behave. That's why Plato objected to the Greek myths. They exhibit paradoxes, imagining certain impossible situations in order to show that they ARE impossible, to allow us to go on living with an insoluble paradox. (from Levi-Strauss, Daedalus p. 103)

Some myths express the ineffable. They enable us to make a bridge between our fantasy worlds, an important and consequential part of our lives, and the world of reality, and they do it in a way that we can share with others --- even myths that are not our own myths. *

D. This fall I want to deal mostly with some of those aspects of Christianity, which are usually underplayed at Prairie. I'm often frustrated at Christmas, because I never get the Jesus story or enough carols. (Some of you may be frustrated with this series on Christianity, because you're coming to Prairie precisely to get away from all that Christian stuff. But be patient, it won't last long; that's the virtue of our lay ministry system.)

* E.g. Jesus' parables (even the Apostles couldn't understand)
Eden (many interpretations - Elaine Pagels ADAM, EVE & THE SERPENT)
Abraham & Isaac (central to Islam, & to Søren Kierkegaard)

E. As part of our programs this fall, I would like to have readings from Scriptures as part of the services. Please volunteer your favorite readings. You can define the 'Scriptures' very broadly --- not only the Bible, but the Bhagavad Gita, Book of Mormon, Friedrich Nietzsche, or D. H. Lawrence. We can use the practice of some other U-U societies where the readings don't have to be all that relevant to the rest of the service. If you don't volunteer readings, I will be calling on people with some readings I have in mind.

F. Upcoming services:

Sep. 17 Can a U-U be a Christian? This was suggested by Cinda Lamar's service in August. Come prepared next week to share your views on the topic.

Sep 24 St. Paul and power. about 1 Corinthians, and Paul's Epistle to the Romans if we have time. The Christian congregation at Corinth in the first century was like Prairie in some respects, and Paul's advice to them might resonate for us. Even if we don't have anyone who can speak in tongues..... although I could use some volunteers.

Oct. 1 Bible stores --- good, bad, and awful. Come prepared to share your views on the topic.

G. Give Me That Old Time Religion. We have 2 versions in our song book, the original on the bottom of p. 49 and the Pete Seeger version at the end of the book. We can sing what the majority prefers.....