

# Personal Religion

People think that religion to be any good has to be true. Not at all. Religion is about belief, and beliefs are *never* true! They *always* miss the mark and for good reason. To hit the bullseye is final, and if you ever hit it then that's the end! It's over, completed, finished. But religion is never finished. It is about believing *in* something, hoping *for* something, and wanting to *have* something. If you were to reach the truth, the actual, where belief is no longer necessary, then that's the end of all believing, all hoping, and all wanting!

As long as there are humans there will be religion because to be human is to search, to struggle, and to strive. People have thought that the purpose of religion is to get rid of the human, get past it, go beyond it, and exchange it for something better. And there's the rub—what *they* think is “better”! Their substitutes for the human are such things as “eternal bliss” and “nirvana.” The singular characteristic of these “states” is that they would rid us of the very things that make life worth living. They would rid humanity of humanity. In heaven it's hard to be yourself!

All you need to do to discover what life would be like without religion is to imagine what it would be like if you could no longer believe. To believe is to anticipate. To believe is to reach out to the new, the fresh, and the untried. To stop believing is to stop growing and to stop discovering. When that happens you degenerate, atrophy. When you reach the point of complete satisfaction, when nothing is missing and nothing is wanted, *then* you are at your rope's end! Then your existence becomes pointless and unnecessary. When you stop wishing you stop believing because there is nothing to believe *in*.

## Personal Religion

Belief is impossible without desire, and desire is impossible without lacking something. To believe in something is to want something you don't have. Excess and satiation, these are the enemies of belief. The person who has everything and who lacks nothing is the skeptic, the scoffer, the infidel. A satiated person is a vacuous person because the person who is full to the brim has nothing to look forward to. Such a person is bereft of desire, and where there is no desire there is hopelessness, dependency, and despair.

Religion is about reaching out further. To put one's religion into effect one must go beyond the ordinary, the everyday, and the routine. To actualize one's belief one must discover something never before discovered. One must remove the wrappings, explore the mysteries, and penetrate deep into the core until one attains the center, the heart, the marrow, the very essence, the reality of things!

The truly religious life is never compartmentalized. The true believer makes no distinction between the sacred and the secular. To the true believer the secular *is* the sacred! People who really believe don't take time out from their daily pursuits to "practice" their religion. Their daily pursuits *are* their religion. The true believer never stops believing and therefore never stops pursuing the objects of belief.

And too, all claims to the contrary set aside, religion is *necessarily* man-made. If a religion were made by a non-human it would serve no human purpose. Only we humans know what it's like to be human. Religions are created by people for people and therefore address what people want and need.

Your belief is centered in yourself. Whatever your "confessions"—your formalized recitations of belief—you never believe in an all-powerful God.

## Personal Religion

You can't believe in such a being because an absolute being has no potential. Your belief of necessity is in what is growing, increasing. Your professed "faith in God" (if you so profess) is code for your belief in your *own* self and in your *own* potential. Your statements of belief are your affirmations that in you is the potential to become more than you have been. To believe in yourself is to believe that you are infinitely, eternally expandable.

When you pray to God you are only praying to yourself. Your pleas to God are your attempts to shore yourself up, to give yourself the courage to rise up to meet the challenges and face the obstacles that stand in your way.

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When Joseph Smith, the American prophet, proclaimed in 1844 that "God...is a man" (in the *King Follett Discourse*), he introduced a new perspective of religion, and from that new perspective came what we know today as "personal religion."

Religion today addresses the individual person (as opposed to people collectively). In former times the "word of God" was directed to all the people as a group as opposed to any one person individually. A mandate to believe in God meant that all people's religion was supposed to be the same. One size, by royal command, had to fit all. Everybody was supposed to believe what the king or the monarch believed, and if you believed otherwise you could not only be burnt at the stake for heresy you could be decapitated for treason.

Joseph Smith's new perspective changed all of that. His reasoning was simple: God is real, God is a man, and therefore men (human beings) are real! God is a person (an individual), and therefore

## Personal Religion

each individual person is a god (or goddess). A person is a god because in each individual person is something real that is both divine and everlasting.

Joseph Smith spoke of human beings as self-existent entities. Human intelligence is not made. "God never had the power to create the spirit of man at all," he exclaimed. The intelligence, the essence, the "spirit" of every individual person was never made. It was "in the beginning with God," it existed before "the foundation of the world," and will continue to exist forever.

Joseph Smith, of course, was not the first person to think that humans are real. Many examples of classical Greek and Roman art can be viewed as assuming human reality. In the works of famous writers like Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Mozart, and Beethoven (to name a few) the reality of human experience is implicit. Many of Joseph Smith's contemporaries like Emerson, Dickinson, Melville, and Whitman also made claims as to the reality of what humans experience and of their ability to experience it.

Joseph Smith was far from alone in his thinking, but he was alone when it came to putting the idea of human reality into a religious context. People had for centuries believed religion to be something ethereal, otherworldly. The American prophet brought it down to earth.

That the God-is-a-person/person-is-a-god idea would have its birth on the American frontier isn't coincidental, because, as is commonly recognized, frontier American life was naturally conducive to an individualistic perspective. People on the frontier had to be self-reliant (as Emerson noted) because on the frontier there was no one to turn to except to oneself for survival. That doesn't mean that frontier people weren't often religious in a conven-

## Personal Religion

tional sense. They often were, but mixed in with that religion was a healthy dose of self-sufficiency. That the two, like oil and water, don't really mix didn't matter because hearty pioneers failed to notice. They weren't sophisticated in that way.

But Joseph Smith was. He could see that self-reliance and reliance on an all-powerful "father" is impossible. It can't be both ways at once. And because for God as an absolute to rub shoulders with humans as non-absolutes is contradictory, Joseph made an obvious (and highly daring) leap and said that God is a (self-reliant) person!

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Joseph Smith's declaration that God is a person was both earth shattering and highly significant because he had hit on to something that was much bigger than he at the time realized. What he had done was to turn religion into an *art* as opposed to a *science*!

People had for centuries (especially since the beginning of Christianity) thought that religion was supposed to be somehow rational (like science is supposed to be). They thought that if not man then God had the answer to every religious question and that those answers are both rational and understandable (at least to God).

The idea that God is a person implies the opposite: religion isn't a science; it is an art. Religion isn't about what God knows; it is about what people believe, and because beliefs are never rational, to attempt to convey them, one doesn't *explain* them, one *expresses* them. Religious evocations aren't statements of reasoning (Thomas Aquinas to the contrary); they are expressions of belief. A catechism of religious doctrines is never representative

## Personal Religion

of what a religion is. To get one's belief across one creates an expression that metaphorically (symbolically) stands for what the person believes (e.g., the Michelangelo frescos in the Sistine Chapel).

By saying that God is a person, Joseph Smith brought an end to the interminable arguments, disagreements, and conflicts that had plagued religion for centuries. What is essential to religion is not rationality or coherency, but rather bona fide, honest, unpretentious, human expression of belief. In other words, religion isn't true because it is doctrinally correct; it is true because it expresses how a person really feels about what the person believes in a manner that is introspectively honest rather than propagandistic and in which the technical aspects (embodiments) of the expression arise out of and are integral to the expression itself.

A look back at art history tells us that in certain select instances the religious art of whatever country, region, or age has been highly expressive. From Japanese, Chinese, South Pacific, Indian, Russian, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Jewish, Greek, Roman, Islamic, medieval Christian, Renaissance Christian, Reformation and Counter-Reformation Christian, Enlightenment Christian, frontier American, and modern religious art come a plethora of genuine religious expressions of belief, all of which tell us not what is in the heavens but what is on the earth in people's hearts!

Religion as a set of "doctrinal truths" has been encumbered with interminable controversies that have over the centuries led first to division and exclusivity and then to hate, envy, and war. Religion as a means of human expression, on the other hand, is neither controversial nor exclusive. Religious expression brings people together rather than driving them apart. *What* a person believes is never

## Personal Religion

true in an absolute sense. No one has ever or ever will be able to verify that what one declares to be true coincides with some absolute, forever-existing, immutable truth. Contrastingly, *why* a person believes, which is expressed by the coupling of belief with an unpretentious, non-contrived intellectual and emotional outpouring, is unequivocally true.

To believe and then to express that belief gets to the heart of why people who live in an uncertain, precarious, and highly challenging world believe as they do. A person's honest expression of belief is the justification of belief. That the belief itself is self-contradictory and groundless doesn't matter. Beliefs are not facts; they are hopes, wishes, desires. They aren't supposed to add up to anything "real" because they are only beliefs—possibilities. The expression of one's beliefs is the evidence that confirms their sacredness regardless of how strange or unlikely they may appear to others.

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Personal religion is experiential religion. It is belief that arises out of one's personal experiences. We only know what we experience, and therefore, all knowledge comes from experience. Further, all knowledge is personal knowledge because all experience is personal.

Communication is an attempt to convey what one person knows and feels to another person. And yet, no matter how well meaning a communication might be and no matter what the means of carrying it out are, it always falls short. No person ever knows or feels what another person knows or feels because no two people experience the same

## Personal Religion

things, and no person can convey to another what the person has experienced.

There is no such thing as “hard-wired” or “disc-to-disc” communication. Communication is not a means of transferring knowledge from one person to another. It is instead an expression. When we communicate we express ourselves to others. To express something we enlist both our intellectual and emotional capacities. We do not, however, as a result of our expressions convey what we think or what we feel to another person. We express ourselves because of an inward desire to get ourselves across. Despite that desire, however, the other person always walks away without knowing or feeling what we thought or what we felt.

People have failed to catch the full significance of the limitations of communication—that one cannot convey, one can only express. As a result of this limitation there is really no such thing as “scientific knowledge.” One scientist does not convey to another what the scientist knows, and as a result every scientist has a differing view of what a given scientific theory is, what it means, and what evidence supports it.

People have thought that because God is all-powerful he is able to communicate in ways that are beyond human capabilities. People have thought that God can convey knowledge even if people can't. And yet, where could one find greater disagreement or more bitter disputes than in the controversies concerning the meaning of the “word of God”!

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The distinction between God and humans is an illusion. There is no such distinction. God is a



## Personal Religion

person; a person is a god. Or in other words, the divine is human, and the human is divine. Existence is not a duality. There are not two states or realms of existence. There is only one, and what people experience is existence as it is and as it will always be.

Critics have said that to believe that God is a person is to lower the divine down to the human. Others see it the other way: to believe that God is a person is to raise the person up to the divine. While no belief can be proven, and no belief is true in some ultimate, absolute sense, some beliefs *are* more enticing, more compelling, more inviting, and more *fun* than others!

If the people of the past saw the world as evil and consequently hoped for a new world that would not be evil, the people of the present have seen things differently. If religious belief historically has centered on the depravity of human beings and their mortal, fleeting existence, modern personal religion turns the coin over. Rather than believing that death is God's punishment, justified because humanity's first parents were the world's first sinners, many believers today believe that death is a necessary occurrence in a cyclical existence that provides for eternal renewal. Rather than looking back to a cast-in-concrete, people-are-sinners past, people today are looking forward to a never-ending, infinite, always-fluid future.

Today, we see circularity at every turn. Our blood circulates round and round, the earth revolves on its axis, the seasons make their annual returns, the planets move in orbit around the sun, the sun moves around the center of the galaxy, the leaves come out in the springtime and fly away in the fall, and the babe that is born in humble circumstances will in time die in as equally humble

## Personal Religion

circumstances. Existence is not a line. We do not come from nothing, and we won't upon leaving this world reach some final end. There is no "last" or final judgment, because there is no end. Recurring, ongoing "sinners" need recurring, ongoing "judgments"!

We don't see our lives as being finished or summed up when we die. We are as unfinished when we die as we were when we were born. There is nothing absolute or final about our existence. Existence is circular, like a spiral that either ascends or descends depending on one's perspective.

Existence isn't one; it is many. If one babe is born then an infinite number will be born. If there is one world there will be an endless number of worlds. To the idea that from a single explosion came a single universe that is slowly winding down into a single frozen oblivious state that is void of all difference and devoid of all living things, people today put their fist to the table and say, NO!

We are not born once but an infinite number of times. We don't face one challenge but an infinite number of them. We don't cry or laugh once; we will continue to cry and continue to laugh on and on ad infinitum. Life is not absolute. There is no absolute beginning to life and no absolute end. We don't live one life; we live an infinite number of lives. We are not one person; we are a new person every day and in every life. Each life is different; each life is unique; and each life is a challenge.

And yet to counteract our limitless diversity there is something constant in every person that holds the person together. When we look out at and experience a manifold world we somehow tie it together. In the world we discover an infinite number of meanings, and yet none is left astray. We bring them all together in a way that they have

## Personal Religion

meaning to us. We are a new person at every passing moment, and yet there is something in us that makes us the same person. Underlying the persistent change that makes us new and fresh is an equally persistent constancy that makes us mean something to ourselves. We will live an infinite number of lives in an infinite number of settings and corporeal manifestations. And yet in all that variety we will still be ourselves. Something remains constant. In the person's heart of hearts the person says: I am who I am!

The beliefs of personal religion are simple and straightforward: People are divine, and their expressive capacities are proof of that divinity. A prophetic person is a true prophet not because what the person says is true, but because the person's expressions are divine. We are all prophets because we are all poets. There is a poet in every one of us. We are all poets because we are all expressive. We spend our lives expressing ourselves. Expression is the plenum that fills the void of existence. If we were to take away our expressive capacities we would take away what is both human and divine in us. If we take away expression we take away life itself. Our ability to express ourselves is both human and divine. Because we express ourselves we are human; because we express ourselves we are divine!