

The Search For Peace Of Mind

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As this is being written, Dr. Joshua Loth Liebman's book, *Peace of Mind*, is going into its nineteenth printing with a total sale of 654,500 copies. That makes it a best-seller. Our insane asylums are crowded, statistics on suicide are mounting — and now we have this phenomenal sale of Liebman's book as a further proof of America's worry and anxiety. But if it's true that Americans as a group are turning into morbid worriers, it's equally true that Rabbi Liebman has opened up the wrong escape hatch. Many of our worries are caused by a lack of trust in God. "Cast your anxiety on the Lord," says the Bible, "and He will bear thee up." That's still true, of course. God is our loving Father and Jesus is our brother. God knows everything and can do everything. He can make everything come out all right for us in the end, if only we'll do as He tells us and keep our trust in Him. So why should we be bothered sitting up nights worrying when we can as safely go to bed and let God do our worrying for us? Rabbi Liebman recognizes all this in a general sort of way. Being Jewish, of course, he fails to see, much less to mention, the mistake of his co-religionists in rejecting the Christ-Messiah. And he doesn't once tap the riches of Christ's revelation with its consoling message of love. The fact is that the holy Name of Jesus doesn't once occur in his whole book — although he does mention Lao Tse, Confucius, and Dr. Sigmund Freud — a fact which might indicate that the Rabbi was prejudiced against Christianity from the start.

Fuzzy Logic Throughout

Where the Rabbi falls flat on his face, however, is in his treatment of sin and conscience with all its related aspects. His thought on the point is a little fuzzy, but as nearly as we can straighten it out, it comes to this: he speaks of a "true conscience" and a "false conscience." When your conscience praises you and makes you feel good, it's a true conscience. But when it scolds you, it's false. Then he goes on to damn St. Paul and St. Augustine as morbid thinkers. "Religion," he says, "is to blame for this morbid, guilt-ridden attitude." It was religion that created man's conscience, he imagines, and that introduced concepts of guilt and sin, etc. From this unwarranted assumption he makes a swift leap to his foregone conclusion: just ignore conscience when-ever it gives you the devil. With Dr. Liebman, there is no such thing as a bad thought. Only actions are bad. (This is known as the "whited sepulcher" philosophy. "Keep outwardly respectable." Jesus compared believers in such a philosophy to whitewashed coffins — nice to look at from the outside but full of dead men's bones inside.) If you ask what makes things good or bad, you won't find it stated in so many words, but you'll finally conclude that "the bad" is merely anything that is anti-social. Everything else is good or indifferent. As a matter of plain fact, the book is very loosely written and quite a distressing affair for one accustomed to thinking in an orderly way. For instance: "When religion was born," he says, "man was just emerging from barbarian infancy. The primary needs were the acquisition of high ideals of monogamy, family fidelity, brotherly compassion, and social righteousness in a world still incapable of distinguishing clearly between right and wrong."

By What Authority?

In that single paragraph, Dr. Liebman speaks of "primary needs" without explaining why they are necessary. He speaks of certain ideals as "high" without telling us by what standard they are high. He speaks of "right and wrong" with not a word as to how he or anyone can tell the difference between right and wrong, or by what authority anyone at all can draw a line between good and evil. One thing is certain. We're never going to arrive at peace of mind by dodging plain facts. One could as easily find a way out through addiction to sleeping tablets. Those, too, help one ignore facts. But they keep one in a fool's paradise and bring one ultimately to disaster. To face the facts: We are human beings created by and dependent upon the Almighty God. That is a relationship that can't be destroyed, however we may try to forget it or "kid" ourselves otherwise. We depend more on Him than any wife on her husband, or any baby on its mother. He created us, He sustains us in existence at every moment, and if we are to be happy, we must have Him here and hereafter.

Now to examine the terms of the relationship: Who is God? — And what are we?

God is eternal, changeless, and morally perfect. He is the essence and the pattern of all goodness, truth, and beauty.

And He has made us like Himself, in that we have a spiritual, a deathless soul — as a part of our nature, and He wants us to imitate Him as far as we are able in goodness, truth and beauty.

God is changeless, and our human nature is changeless in that every human being is at base a thinking animal.

The fact that we are human beings, rather than cows or muskrats, lays on us the obligation of behaving like human beings: of recognizing always the truth that we are children of God and that immorality is opposed to His will in our regard.

How do we know what is immoral? What is the rule separating good from evil in our minds? It is not an invention of religion, or the result of a gradual evolution, as Rabbi Liebman seems to contend.

The Natural Law

The fundamentals of God's law, the code of good and evil, are written on the human heart from birth. Every man coming into this world, regardless of colour or creed, knows the broad outlines by intuition. These are then sharpened and pointed up by religion, which did not invent the refinements, but which tells us that in times past God revealed His will to Moses and the Prophets, more especially through His own Son, Jesus Christ, God Himself. It is a part of the mission of religion to protect this revelation and convey it through the ages from one generation to another. These laws, revealing God's will to us and based as they are on human nature, are utterly changeless. They are beyond our power. We may conform to them or we may fail to conform. The one thing we cannot do is to rewrite or change them. As for conscience — there is nothing so mysterious about it. Conscience is nothing more than common sense, the rational man sitting in judgment on a particular action. I consider murdering a man. My common sense warns me not so much that murder is an anti-social action, as that it is a heinous sin — one that cries to heaven for vengeance. By murdering this man I shall inflict an irreparable injury on society. Worse, I shall sin against God and incur everlasting damnation. If I succeed in repressing that temptation, my common-sense congratulates me on having done a wise thing. Dr. Liebman would call this a "good conscience." But if, flying in the face of common sense, I go ahead and commit murder, my conscience will never let me forget that I have done a monstrous thing and that if I die unrepentant, I shall surely go to hell. This, Dr. Liebman would call a "bad conscience," since it's disturbing my peace of mind.

The Duty of Conscience

But conscience here is like a nerve flashing distress signals from an infected finger to the brain. It's a good nerve that does its duty and transmits pain at the proper time; and it would be a bad nerve indeed that would go to sleep on the job and let me die of blood poisoning. The murderer is in a dangerous position, spiritually. He has a bad infection in his soul. His conscience keeps him anxious and restless until he does something about it. He knows that he can regain that precious peace of mind by repenting of his sin, by making a good confession, by doing penance. Dr. Liebman's solution would be to snip the nerve — quash the conscience, as far as that is possible: hardly a scientific solution! A principal shortcoming of his whole book is his ignoring of original sin. He never speaks of it, and yet it's at the heart of the matter. God never intended that we should have so much trouble keeping His law. He envisioned a world in which there would be neither sin nor conscience-trouble. After all, looking around us, we see that His other creatures have no trouble doing His will. The earth spins on its axis every day and circles the sun once a year; the leaves come and go on the trees at the appropriate seasons; the laws of chemistry and physics operate without exception — saving those rare occasions (miracles) when He interferes.

Whistling in the Dark

And yet with us human beings it's different. We see the good and we know we should do it, and we don't! And we see evil and we know we should avoid it, and we don't! Divorce statistics soar, and suicide, abortion, murder, juvenile delinquency... We read reassuring explanations of people telling us, marriage was never meant to be permanent, suicide is really an act of bravery, youth is "expressing" itself — and we're not reassured. There's something inside us saying that these people are only whistling in the dark and it's all wrong. We sense the struggle in our own soul. The answer lies in the first sin committed by a human being on this earth — the sin of Adam and Eve. Had they kept God's command there would have been no sin, no conscience-trouble. But their sin not only lost God's friendship for mankind. That was the worst of it, of course, but besides that it darkened our mind so that evil appears attractive and good seems dull. It crippled our will so that we find it harder to do good than evil. And, to use an everyday expression, it threw a spanner into the workings of our nature, so that our appetites are forever tugging and pulling against our common sense, and threatening to make fools of us. We're always tending toward excess - toward drunkenness, gluttony, pride, money-grabbing, and lust.

A Matter of Historical Fact

Religion gives us that explanation of the evil in the world. Religion didn't just invent the story. Religion hands it down as a matter of historical fact, a part of God's revelation. And so the irreligious go on in their fruitless search for a panacea, trying first one thing and then another. "Maybe science has the answer." And yet Nazi Germany was the most technological country in the world. "Perhaps if we raise the age of compulsory education..." — and our juvenile delinquency curve has never swung higher. Gadgets — "A bathtub in every home... flush-toilets... a telephone in every family..." — It hasn't helped. "Surely the U.N. will turn the trick." — But has it?

And now we have this totally inadequate solution offered by Rabbi Liebman of just squelching conscience and forgetting all about the evil effects of sin. That's over-simplification with a vengeance! No — a correct view of the matter is one of moderate pessimism. We are not perfect. Every one of us bears the infection of original sin. Science, education, gadgets — they may be helpful, each of them in its place, but not one of them will be able to turn the trick entirely. Peace of

mind, and not only personal peace but universal world peace, can come only through religion, through the recognition of God's place in our life and the faithful observance of His commands. He has given us the means of acquiring happiness and a way of retrieving it when we have lost it — through prayer and the sacraments. To consolidate that happiness we can only keep sedulously at work rooting up little by little the traces of original sin in our soul — selfishness, bad temper, lust, and all the rest of it. As for conscience — it's our living witness to God's truth in the moral order. Far be it from us to tamper with it or try any means of throttling it. Without it, we'll go to hell. But as long as we follow its dictates and enjoy its praise, we'll have real peace of mind and heart: the possession of God in this life and the hope of a blessed eternity with Him in the next.
