

Feeding the Hungry Soul

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One of my favorite past-times is to browse through bookstores, not in search of anything particular--just grazing among the newly published titles, looking to see what has intrigued an author enough that a book resulted, and what manuscripts had been considered commercial enough that a publisher invested in their promise. I am always amazed and astounded at the number of new titles which are on the shelves whenever I find time for one of my periodic bibliographic explorations.

Now, I must confess that this particular form of exercise is more dangerous than it may appear at first glance. No matter how strong my resolve or how buttressed my sales resistance, almost always I leave the book store with one or two volumes tucked under my arm, my mind rehearsing the speech which will justify these purchases and explain why these particular books deserve a place on bookshelves which are already over-full and groaning under the weight they carry. And almost always Beverly offers her ritual frown of mock disapproval, and then finds a way to make room for the new acquisitions on the over-loaded shelves.

There is an unexpected side-effect to this habitual prowling through book stores. After a while, one can begin to recognize the trends of thought and concern which move across our cultural horizons. There is always that flurry of books geared to some event or happening--election years are full of books praising and denouncing candidates and explaining and refuting the platforms and programs of various parties and groups. A catastrophe like the Oklahoma bombing, or the unexplained loss of an airliner will produce a minor flurry of books on terrorist groups or the unsafe way in which Airlines run their business. But every now and then it is possible to see among the titles of new books a genuine trend appear, establish itself, and grow over time. And after a while it is possible to begin to extrapolate from this evidence some tentative conclusions about what is of concern, perhaps even troubling to the American people.

One such trend has been building for the past few years and probably has not yet reached its peak. Several years ago, I began to notice that titles which would normally be segregated to the "religion" ghetto of the book store were beginning to elbow their way in among newly published works. There was a spate of books on Jesus and on new insights from studies of the gospels and of the Dead Sea Scrolls--books which purported to sift the actual words of Jesus from the accretions of the New Testament, books which defined him in terms of the Judaism of the first century of the common era, books which explored the so-called missing years and traced Jesus to India, books which tried to prove that his crucifixion had not been fatal and that he had escaped to Marseilles. There was a spate of books on angels--their nature, their derivation, their function in the world; books in which

people described their own encounters with angels. Someone published a biography of God. Bill Moyers published one of several new books on Genesis. There were books on the care of the soul, on discovering the sacred in the common and the ordinary. There were collections of writings by obscure religious figures like Hildegard of Bingen. There were books of prayers and meditations. Clearly something was happening in that public which buys and reads books. Religion had suddenly moved from its corner, back at the rear of the store, there beside the New Age materials and had been welcomed into the bibliographic main-stream.

In time a secondary group of books began to appear. Their function was to explain the appearance of the first kinds of books. Sociologists and anthropologists began to explore this modern version of the great awakening. With titles like "A Generation of Seekers" and "One Nation Under God" and "With God on Our Side" books began to appear explaining and exploring the spiritual hunger which was driving contemporary Americans. Here, at the end of the twentieth century, on the verge of a new millennium, Americans had discovered a spiritual emptiness which these books were attempting explain, perhaps even to fill.

As is true of almost everything in the last half of this century, this resurgence of interest in spiritual or religious matters is tied to the demographics of the so-called "baby boomers." That huge cohort of people born between 1946 and roughly 1961 has begun to enter the middle years of life. They have lived through decades of enormous and unprecedented change and upheaval. They have seen the fulfillment of many of their dreams and expectations, the frustration of other hopes and ambitions and many find themselves asking, "Is this it; is this all that there is to life?" In this, they may be no different from any other group of people making their way through the world, but there are so many of them that the concerns which come to focus in their lives tend to define issues for the entire culture.

Needless to say, I am too chronologically challenged to be counted among the Boomers, but their struggle to discover a deeper dimension in life fascinates and intrigues me. They have discovered over time, what many of us have discovered--that the promise of the consumer society is essentially false, that no matter what we acquire, what possessions we amass, what positions we attain, there remains a yearning at the core of our beings which nothing in the material world seems able to satisfy. After we have acquired our ideal home--or something close to it--and filled it with all the bright, glittering things that a consumer culture has to offer; after we have struggled for security and recognition; after we have been able to guarantee our families the riches the society defines as necessary to the good life; after we have realized all the promises and accepted all the disappointments, there comes that moment when many of us discover that we have indentured ourselves to the things we own, the promises we have given, the compromises we have made. Our freedom and sometimes even our integrity have been sacrificed, and we discover an emptiness at the core of our beings. We find ourselves wondering if this is all there is to life. Is there meaning beyond acquiring and serving what we have acquired. And then begins the effort to feed the empty soul--the effort which is witnessed to by that literary trend so evident in the book stores these days.

What I find most interesting about the current rediscovery of the sacred, the contemporary search for a spiritual quality to life, is the frequent assumption that meaning is a commodity which can be purchased if only the right source of supply can be found. All the evidence suggests that people who have had little connection with organized religion in their lives are beginning to seek out churches of all kinds in response to the emptiness which they feel. But they bring to the church the attitudes of consumers. They want to know what product the church offers, what the quality of that product is and how much it will cost. Spirituality is often treated not as something that grows organically out of life but as a prepackaged item--rather like a breakfast cereal. All the various brands are composed of the same essential ingredients and which one you buy is largely a matter of taste--some are sweeter than others; some have more sodium; some are fat-free--but in essence the only difference between them is a matter of individual taste and, perhaps, cost.

As I suggested earlier, the attitudes of the "Boomer" generation tend to become normative for our culture simply because there are so many in that cohort. It is not surprising, therefore, that churches have begun to respond to this consumer approach to the quest for spirituality. Increasingly, experts are urging churches to think of themselves in marketing terms. The question is not "What is the truth, the insight, the conviction we are called to proclaim or the tradition we are committed to serve?" Rather, we are told, the focus for religious institutions which want to be successful in capitalizing on the spiritual hunger of this generation must center around "What is it that people want, and how can we give it to them." Oz Mandingo, in a book called *THE AMERICAN HOUR*, characterized the difference in these two questions when he suggested that what has happened is that churches used to look for an audience which would be receptive to their message; now they look for a message that will grab and hold the audience. And there is a universe of difference between those two approaches.

In Unitarian Universalist circles, this shift from proclamation of a central message to responding to consumer demand is often dressed up under the rubric of "embracing diversity." The underlying, unexamined assumption is that basically religion is more like a cultural artifact, than it is a defining truth. Therefore the critical task of religion is to discover what people want and find a way to fill that want. If people think that their spiritual needs are best met with gospel music, give them gospel music; if they think that religion is best expressed through the King James Version of the Bible, then give them the Bible readings; if they think that their spiritual needs are best served by eastern meditation practices, then do eastern meditation; if what they want is Jewish rituals, then schedule a Seder and observe Yom Kippur. After all, it is all religion, isn't it? And after all, the validation of any religious practice is largely a matter of personal satisfaction. Religions are in the business of satisfying wants, not of proclaiming truth. The content does not matter nearly as much as how people feel. Satisfied customers, not transformed lives and a transformed society are the gauge of success in religion as in the other sectors of the consumer culture.

The irony, of course, is that in the end a consumer approach to spiritual matters proves to

be destructive of religious institutions and unable to satisfy the longing to which it responds. The empty spirit is the psychic equivalent of a black hole. The black hole, astronomers tell us, is a point in space where gravity has become so dense that everything in the vicinity is drawn inexorably into it and nothing, not even light, can escape. It is impossible to fill a black whole. The entire universe would not be sufficient to satisfy its appetite. By the same token, there is nothing in the outside world, nothing that can be bought or packaged or sold which can satisfy the hungry soul. And religious institutions which seek to make religion a commodity end up as part of the entertainment industry.

Ultimately, the yearning which we experience when we come to the dead-end of our efforts to acquire and consume and possess results from a recognition that in all the business of our lives, somewhere along the way we lost ourselves. What we need to recover is neither God, nor ritual nor form. What we need to find, if we would be whole, is our lost selves. What we need to discover is who we truly are. We need to find ourselves and the job of religion is to help us confront our own brokenness and our own emptiness and our own sense of deep alienation and begin to build integrity in our lives. And it does that, not by trying to find some satisfying experience it can sell us, but by asking hard questions. The job of religion is to ask us what it is in this world that matters so much to us that we cannot live without it, cannot be whole without it. The job of religion is to call us to integrity in a world full of deception and illusion. And it does that by modeling a fierce and unshakeable integrity of its own--one which is not afraid to embrace a defining truth. In short, religion, if it is to be effective in feeding the hungry soul, is not something one is "in to," from time to time. Rather, it offers a constant standard against which life and integrity may be measured.

It is undoubtedly true that there are many different kinds of religion which seek in a variety of ways to call people to integrity, to wholeness, to holiness. It is also true that different people respond to different messages. But effective religion is focused on the message, not on the customer. It seeks to offer a standard, a defining truth in terms of which a life may be lived with rich meaning and deep purpose. It does not spend its energies prepackaging religious experience for sale on the open market. Effective religion is not a commodity; it is a way of life and it demands of us an open-ended commitment.

What I am trying to say with all of this is that nourishment for the empty soul is not for sale and it will end up costing you everything. The great mystics and seers of the ages have known that spiritual fulfillment comes as a result of discovering that which is so important, so vital, so compelling that it cannot be denied and giving oneself without reservation. It is in this kind of surrender to defining truth which restores a sense of self and integrity, which fills the emptiness at the core of our being.

However, I would not be true to my own faith or the tradition I represent if I were to leave you with the sense that all faiths are equal, that surrender to a defining faith requires that we leave all critical judgments aside. That is the truly frightening aspect of the current religious quest. If consumerism threatens to trivialize religion in our time, the desperate inchoate need to identify with a strong core of faith threatens to turn the religious impulse into demonic paths.

I would argue that some religions are better than others, that some faiths are too dangerous to be embraced, that being concerned about the long-term, broad consequences of the assumptions of faith is part of our responsibility as human beings, and an essential element in building a life of integrity. Sophia Fahs spoke of the differences that matter in religion when she wrote:

Some beliefs are like walled gardens. They encourage exclusiveness, and the feeling of being especially privileged. Other beliefs are expansive and lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies.

Some beliefs are divisive, separating the saved from the unsaved, friends from enemies. Other beliefs are bonds in a universal community where sincere differences beautify the pattern. Some beliefs are like blinders...Other beliefs are like gateways...Some beliefs weaken a person's self hood. They blight the growth of resourcefulness. Other beliefs nurture self confidence and enrich the feeling of personal worth. Some beliefs are rigid, like the body of death, impotent in a changing world. Other beliefs are pliable, like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life.

My informal, unscientific survey of the book stores confirms what other people are saying--there is a deep and profound spiritual hunger abroad in the land. My observations suggest that the drive to feed the empty soul will be with us for some time, as we weigh the significance of the failure of consumerism to satisfy. My guess is that the search for spiritual sustenance will take many forms--some of them trivial, some of them frighteningly demonic, some of them powerfully creative and transforming. I am convinced that the key to a true spiritual renewal is to be found in those expressions of faith which root us once more in this natural world, which help us to see ourselves as unique and precious expressions of that same eternal force and drive which shaped the stars and gathered the galaxies, that eternal same force and drive which set the earth spinning around the sun, that same eternal force and drive which called forth and sustains life on this planet. I am convinced that the key to a creative spiritual renewal will be found in those expressions of faith which call us to community--to peace with ourselves and with all living things, which call us to the broadest understanding of responsibility and relationship, which embrace novelty and invite us to constant renewal. And I am convinced that the key to spiritual renewal is a religious community which is driven not by the market but by a strong sense of commitment to a core of central values open to the future and affirming the other while retaining a strong sense of self.

My life has been spent in search of that kind of spiritual renewal. I know, at a level deeper than fact, that our lives--yours and mine--do in truth have significance beyond the ability of any language to express. I know that the yearning deep within each of us is nothing less than the universe itself struggling to self conscious awareness, the universe itself reaching for purpose and direction. I know that we are called to larger community and greater purpose, and despite all the distractions of our daily lives, that call will not be silenced. It is deep calling to deep and I am convinced that the only appropriate response to that persistent call is a religious commitment to a faith which remains strong, and, in

the words of Sophia Fahs, "pliable, like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life." That is the faith which this place is called to embody, the kind of faith, which truly feeds the hungry soul.