

## PURIM 1997

As many of you know, during this past winter I began writing what I hope will become a small book. Its title is "The Never Ending Road -- Chronicles of a Search for God." The work focuses on the process of seeking a conception of God that is both useful to one's life and intellectually honest -- and the emphasis is placed on the latter. I will attempt to show that the consequence of such a search is a lifetime of evolution, during which one set of religious views is replaced by other, more sophisticated conceptions. No conception ever seems to hit the spot, because humans are incapable of determining absolute truth about matters of ultimate reality. Hence the title, "The Never Ending Road." Jay suggested that, since this work is written in the spirit of Thomas Merton's "Seven Storey Mountain," and since it is being written by someone of my stature and experience, I call it "The Third Story Walkup." But without faulting his assessment of the author, I rejected his title and kept my own.

In the process of writing this work, I became moved by the value of approaching spirituality almost as a Freudian

approaches psychology. I am now convinced that those who wish to undertake the task described above must go back to their own roots as individuals, and analyze their own religious influences and thoughts. What did religion mean to you as a child? As an adolescent? As a young adult? And why? During each of these time periods, what pissed you off most about the religions you rejected? And what religious concepts did you hold nearest to your heart? What caused you to change religious views -- or should I say, what inspired you to change your religious views?

If there is one thing that I would request of you today it is to go through the exercise of asking and answering these and similar questions for your own life. If you don't, and if you attempt to seek religious truth as an adult, it will be akin to designing a house without understanding its foundation.

Let me first describe an approach that you may wish to take in beginning such an exercise of self-examination. Then, I will discuss some constraints that tend to push us away from attempting these types of exercises. Finally, I would like to touch briefly on my own attempt at self-examination -- without,

of course, spoiling for you the suspense of reading whatever results from this writing project that I have started.

A search for one's religious roots should include the study of at least four topics. I am suggesting that for each, we must examine not only our recent past, but also earlier periods, beginning with childhood.

The first item of the analysis is the identification of those religious issues about which we, as individuals, have most passionately grappled. Have they included God? Immortality? Miracles? Or issues like whether we should affirm the world around us or look instead to a transcendent world? Those issues that have consumed you in the past did so for a reason --they spoke to your unique concerns as an individual. Many of these concerns inevitably remain. So these same issues are likely to be fruitful avenues to inspire a current interest in religion, if you let them.

The second facet of the analysis is the identification of those religious symbols and conceptions that we as individuals have found compelling. You know what I mean -- our articles of

faith. I suspect that if you closely analyze these articles of faith, you will find numerous concerns that you yourself raised about each such article. But in each case, you found a way to shrug off the concern -- and continued to keep the faith.

Let's look at some examples of the way people commonly shrug off the deepest religious challenges to the sacred cows of our society. Consider how many times you have heard these examples recited glibly, so as to suggest that the speaker is not at all troubled by the question posed.

Traditional Jews or Christians are often posed with the challenge to their God that is known as the problem of evil. It goes like this: "How can an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God, who created this world in accordance with His will, permit earthquakes to kill tens of thousands, and Hitler and Stalin to kill tens of millions?" So which is your favorite glib response: "God works in mysterious ways"? Or do you prefer the following: "God created people with free will, and evil is a necessary byproduct. As for earthquakes, they merely point out that any world that develops intellectual and moral virtues is necessarily a bit of an obstacle course." Thus, rather than

causing the faithful to question the traditional conception of God, the problem of evil is supposed to reinforce our faith in God's superior, albeit hidden, wisdom as a creator.

Atheists have their own sacred cows. And they are forced to defend them when theists question how such a wondrous realm as this one could have evolved solely from chemicals and physical forces that lack intelligence. Here's the response, "sure we can't explain how all this could come from a random, non-intelligent process. But since theists can't explain why there's a God, we don't have to offer any explanation. Let's just say some things are inexplicable, and leave it at that."

In short, every religious symbol or concept, when subjected to scrutiny, gives rise to profound and disturbing critiques. But when the concept is a sacred cow, there is always a rationalization that can be used to resolve any concern. Our task, as seekers of religious truth, is to avoid these glib responses and subject all of our past and present sacred cows to the most relentless questioning. In other words, confront our positive biases.

A third topic of the analysis is the flip side of the second. Just as we have positive biases -- the sacred cows to which we assign the benefit of every doubt -- we also have negative ones. A third object of study, then, are the religious symbols and concepts that have really annoyed us the most. The ones where we say "how can people really believe this crap?" The beliefs by which we are actually offended.

Reflect on these beliefs, and you might be surprised how many times all you have done is created strawmen. None of the great religions -- or central components of the great religions -- is really stupid or offensive. But all can be made that way if they are stripped of their complexity and viewed in terms of strawmen.

Consider, for example, the way that those Jews who are insecure about their religion but afraid to examine it critically often view Christianity in contrast to their own beloved Judaism. Judaism, they believe, should be understood on the basis of its spirit -- ethical monotheism. Judaism is also seen as relatively open and libertine, a faith that embraces Reform practitioners as well as the Orthodox, in one big tent.

But Christianity is viewed in terms of the miracles it affirms and the more fundamentalist interpretations that have been offered in response to these miracles. So the insecure Jew might ask "Do Christians really believe that Christ walked on water and rose from the grave? And that only those who do believe these things will go to heaven?" This is a strawman -- for many Christians reject these views and yet remain Christian. Obviously, there is much more to the religion than its fundamentalism -- but how many Jews who are insecure about their own religion have taken the time to understand the unique and beautiful spirit behind Christianity.

Similarly, insecure Christians do the same number about Judaism. To them, Judaism is a religion of rules -- rules about what we can and can't eat, what we can and can't wear, and what we can and can't do on Friday evenings and Saturdays. Why, they ask, would the Jews not have grabbed the chance to accept the loving teachings of Christ and the universalism of His Church? The only explanation is that they are a stubborn, insular people who are afraid to leave their ghettos and explore new faiths. This is the explanation if one views Judaism as a strawman, and

not as a great religion with a unique spirit that neither Christianity nor Islam has been able to fully replicate.

Stripping away at the strawmen that we have created about religions is every bit as important as recognizing the biases that we have created in favor of certain religious concepts. Those who have thought little about religion -- such as many atheists -- may have been inspired more by the strawmen they have created than by any religious principles whose beauty has overwhelmed them.

The final topic to be analyzed is the study of past epiphanies and other momentous religious experiences. We must understand what experiences have led us to reach new spiritual heights. And what experiences have caused us to firmly reject our earlier views. The value of such analysis should be obvious -- by understanding what has inspired us in the past, we can identify fruitful avenues for future inspiration.

Upon reflection, I think you will find that many of the same things that have caused your epiphanies have resulted in similar experiences by others. I am referring to such events as

the time you first left home as a young adult and relaxed the influences of your family. Or the time, if you have been so fortunate, that you made a pilgrimage to a place in the old world, like Jerusalem, that has inspired your ancestors' religiosity. Or perhaps you have been inspired by a seminar you took, or a book written by someone whom you regard as a master of wisdom. But whatever the event, I think you will find one constant -- that your own mind, as you approached the event in question, was unusually open to growing spiritually. And this is the hardest thing for an adult in our society to digest -- that we must be open to ideas that radically alter our world view, if we hope to spiritually evolve in any significant way. It is difficult to be so open minded, while at the same time balancing our responsibilities to provide for our families, perform our vocational duties, and find ways to relax. No, it's not difficult to take a weekend off -- or even a week -- but such epiphanies may require a more gradual and profound preparation than a yuppy vacation in Tibet.

There you have it -- four topics that must be addressed in our psychoanalysis of our spiritual pasts. But to identify these tasks, and to take the time to perform them, are two very

different things. There are, in fact, multiple factors that combine to diminish the appeal of approaching such an exercise of self-examination. One such factor is organized religion itself.

To devote oneself to the exercise that I have sketched out requires a sizable commitment to religious truth. This is the Socratic commitment -- the need to follow the truth, wherever it leads, and damn the consequences. Admittedly, we will never figure out the absolute truth about the nature of God and other profound metaphysical issues. But we can at least seek more and more compelling perspectives that satisfy our sense of integrity while permitting us to delve for still deeper insights about these difficult matters.

Organized religion presents a barrier that limits our abilities to search. Some religions are more flexible than others -- and Judaism appears to be as flexible as any. Still, each such religion presents a fairly coherent set of views as the "ideal" to which members of the faith should adhere. And to follow Socrates's commitment to the truth is to say that there is no ideal, other than what the dictates of reason indicate at a particular point in time.

To properly consider this matter, pretend that you are an elderly Jewish person and you need a good meal. What do you do? You go to a Chinese restaurant. There you find items on the menu representing soups, vegetables, meats, deserts, and beverages. Now pretend that each of these areas represents a fundamental religious issue. The choice of soups represents a choice among ethical systems. The choice of vegetables represents a choice among conceptions of God. The choice of meats represents a choice among views of immortality. Etc. etc. To be a searcher of truth is to approach this menu unconstrained. Maybe you'll side with the Jews on your response to the choice of ethical systems -- or soups, and side with the Buddhists on your conception of God -- your veggies. But to be any adherent of an organized religion, you must be willing to pick from one of those pre-selected options that Chinese restaurants always present -- you know, for \$8.50 you can have the hot and sour, one of three chosen vegetables, Peking Duck, ice cream, and a Beverage. Who would want to be so constrained? Why not pick and choose for yourself, right?

But we all know the attractions of an organized religion. It not only allows us to join a community devoted to the spirit, but it allows our children a much needed sense of identity. So kissing off organized religion altogether is not a great option. The problem is simply that one will rarely find in organized religion an environment so amenable to the kind of exercise I sketched out. Religions will purport not to discourage this kind of searching. But they rarely will provide support for it -- since presumably the result will be that the searchers will choose to disagree with the faith on one more critical issues. Somehow, then, the search requires that a person embrace religion as a pastime -- indeed, as a lifelong passion -- but do so outside of the framework of conventional religious channels. What a pain.

A second factor that operates to diminish the appeal of a self-conscious religious search for truth is the era and place in which we live. Hundreds and 1000s of years ago, religious issues presented themselves as centrally important. Now, in our society, religion has faded to become at best an add-on for most educated people. There are a slew of concerns, from family, to

vocation, -- hell, even the stock market -- that assume larger significance in their lives.

To our ancestors, whose science was primitive, this was a world of mystery, which can best be perceived with awe. And this sense of awe is precisely what is necessary for the beginnings of religiosity. Similarly, our ancestors lived in an age when death was always present. In such a world, the mind turns to questions of immortality, and for instruction on how to face death with honor. Once again, religions presented the answers to these concerns. Further, in much of pre-modern society, religion became associated with the joys of education, because religious institutions possessed a monopoly over the field of education. Finally, our ancestors commonly lived in relatively static societies. The human-made aspects of the world -- the economy, the technology -- rarely changed from one generation to the next.

Now, much has changed. Technological growth is dizzying. Death is real -- and when a loved one has passed it can become a temporary obsession -- but for the most part it can be put on the back burner. Secular educational institutions have taught

us that people do not need religion to be moral and intellectual beings. We need only teach our children the self-evident truths of enlightened civil society and they will become cultured adults regardless of their faith or lack thereof. And as to the awesome, mysterious flavor of life, we now have the alternative of trying to create verifiable scientific conclusions about biology, chemistry, and even ultimate questions of physics. By sitting and speculating about life, we simply subject ourselves to ridicule. This is now viewed as soft-headed, non-constructive thinking.

So, in embarking on the type of search that I am describing, we do so without many of the impulses that moved our ancestors to confront religion head on. We do so, in other words, not only in spite of organized religion, but also in spite of the attractions of losing ourselves in modern secular society. We do so because something, deep in our hearts as individuals, cries out for the need to confront religion. This voice is deeply personal, and the search must be deeply personal. For the extravert, the loneliness of the search might be overwhelming. But even for the introvert who is used to

lonely projects, the frustrations of the one I have described cannot be underestimated.

Despite these frustrations, many people do undertake the type of truth-seeking religious search that I have described, and continue on this search throughout their lives. These people have at least one thing in common: the visceral sense that there is something about modern secular society that is deeply inadequate. Something profoundly missing. And that by studying matters of ultimate metaphysical and ethical significance, one may hopefully find at least some of the missing pieces.

But I suspect that for each individual who is hooked on the search, there is something else that also fuels it. Something behind the need to locate one or more missing puzzle pieces. Rather, each searcher can point to a spark that religion has touched off in their own lives to suggest that it, in particular, it is a fruitful area to explore. In my own life, it is clear that this spark, this magnet that drew me in, is the concept of God. To be more specific, it is the need to identify

and worship a subtle, non-mythical God that a modern, educated adult can embrace.

When I was growing up, I hated the notion of God because I saw in it not something created for the sake of truth, but rather something created as a myth for the sake of social control. To me, people created God in our image, to serve as the foundation of the ethical system set forth in the Bible. God was merely the sum total of what we as people wished would rule over us to usher in a world of total justice. And this wishful thinking could not possibly survive the periodic genocides and natural disasters that have befallen our species during the 20th century. Unless, of course, we decide to lie to ourselves and reason that, in matters as speculative as religion, we can believe whatever suits our emotional needs.

But I realize now that what I viewed as passionate atheism was not the rejection of God, but the rejection of a particular conception of God -- the one taught to Jewish kids in Hebrew school, which is surely similar to the one Christian kids learn on Sundays. Indeed, by continuing to fixate on God, I was reflecting what to me was a deep need for Him. I had simply

refused to give up the notion that one living being -- however different He was than the old God -- was responsible for this world. Eventually, I came to believe that this is true -- that it is most sensible to attribute the world to a single great intelligence. And I also came to view creation largely as the supra-conscious expression by this cosmic mind of an infinite number of worlds, some of which are far from perfect by our standards. Why believe in such a creator, you may ask? I will not bore you tonight with the arguments, except to say that I came to have more trouble believing that all this sprang from a complete lack of mental power and that, at this point in time, human beings are the crown jewels of creation.

Once I came to adopt a belief in God, my life took on more meaning. I sensed that the only moral response to such a creator is to learn as much as possible about His or its true nature and ultimately, to give a heartfelt thanks. And I don't just mean, saying "thanks, bud." But living one's life in large part as if to say "I will say thanks to you in my choice of a career, in my choice of a spouse, in my dealings with other people, and in my dealings with nature." Anything less would be ungracious.

What allowed me to embrace God was a many-stepped process. First, I went to college and studied philosophy, which encourages opening one's mind to new ideas about metaphysics and to question the notion that science is the only path to enlightenment. Second, I went to Israel and spent time with Orthodox rabbis who warmly welcomed me and other spiritual searchers into their lives. This permitted me to view traditional Judaism beyond the strawmen that I had created and in a light where the belief in the traditional God can be examined with compassion. Finally, I discovered an old wise man -- indeed, a dead old wise man -- Spinoza. He taught me that a person can believe in God and receive the benefits of that belief that I discussed above, while at the same time rejecting the old mythology that offended me so deeply as a child. What Spinoza taught was so heretical that Jews were prohibited by the rabbis from being within six feet of his body. And yet what was Spinoza than an ethical monotheist, deeply committed to the study of his ancestral Judaism, who modern scholars have described as "God intoxicated." Quite simply, as I have discussed in past years, Spinoza affirmed what every atheist had said about the old God, while providing an alternative vehicle

to worship and love the creator of this world, despite what little we know about him.

Fortunately, many religions have evolved to the point where heretics like Spinoza can find a place in some "liberal" or "reform" wing of the faith. So those of us who are compelled to conduct the type of search that I have described will find numerous religious organizations prepared to accept us. We need not fear being shunned by the fact that we can accept some elements of the traditional dogma, but not others. Just as there are few societal impulses to encourage us to embark on such a search, there really is nothing coercing us from embarking on the search either.

As I reflect on my own journey, I have been struck by two facts, one sobering and the other uplifting. First, I sadly acknowledge my fixation on trying to develop the best, most philosophically refined conception of God, rather than on simply relaxing and allowing myself to encounter Him as intimately as possible in a lifelong dialogue. In other words, I have been studying God like a scientist more than relating to Him as a living deity. I suppose that this bias is a vestige of my

childhood atheism, which constantly forces me to view God and religion generally with a healthy degree of skepticism.

Second, by attempting to confront religion comparatively --by opening myself to different religions in an eclectic way -- I have become much more tolerant of other religions. I think that this religious tolerance is an inevitable, and wonderful, byproduct of the search I have been describing. This is because to conduct such a search requires exposing oneself to different points of view and to examining these viewpoints as charitably as possible. But just as importantly, the search teaches our inability to learn ultimate truth on these issues. Some perspectives may be more subtle, profound and satisfying than others, but none allow us to stop and declare victory.

In conclusion, I hope that as many of you as possible can take the time to conduct the type of self-examination that I discussed at the beginning of this talk. I suspect that if you do so, you will be moved by the value of re-opening your mind to accept more of those epiphanies that seem so common for adolescents and young adults and so rare for those of us who watched the original Star Trek before it was syndicated.