

BIBLICAL RELIGION:
Philosophical Reflections

by

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This text is a 1996 expanded revision of Chapter Three "Cherbonnier's Interpretation of Biblical Religion" of the 1973 New York University doctoral dissertation *The Significance of the Religious Thought of Edmond La B. Cherbonnier for A Basic Objective for Religious Education*.

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¹The order of topics generally follows Cherbonnier's 6-page outline "Metaphysics of the Historical Religions." Reflections on issues not contained in his outline and chapter revisions include the entire concluding section with sermons.

²For generations "man" has been used by scholars as a non-sexist, synonymous category for "humanity," "the human race," "mankind," "humankind," "human beings," "mortals," "women and men," etc. In this text "man" is employed in the same spirit.

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BIBLICAL RELIGION AS AN ALTERNATIVE

An Orientation to the Biblical View of Reality

With the assumption that reality is found exclusively in the vast, complex, and wondrous natural order, biblical religion interprets God as a personal agent, a Someone instead of a something or a philosophic abstraction. Contrary to the "super-natural" or "non-physical" dimension of mystical religion,³ biblical religion is grounded in the physical (i.e., all that constitutes the visible and invisible) with a Creator God who acts.

Metaphysical positions that view total reality within the natural order are versions of "naturalism." When a personal God is included, "theistic naturalism" further designates the interpretation. The basic tenets of theistic naturalism (which appears to be the basic biblical position) are: (1) the created order [the universe, nature (in the broadest sense), whatever constitutes the visible and invisible] is the sum total of reality; (2) there is no supernatural, non-natural, non-physical realm beyond or within nature; (3) physical reality may consist of many different types or levels of natural realities; (4) if human beings have the adequate instruments, records, and methods, most phenomena can be understood in terms of natural processes; and (5) the Sovereign Creator is "compatible" (a deliberately imprecise category) with his creation. Broadly conceived, naturalism uses scientific methods, empirical evidence (including historical information), and reason to understand nature. Schools of thought emerge in naturalism as well as in all other metaphysical positions; thus, we encounter "mechanistic naturalism," "dialectical materialism," and "humanistic naturalism" as non-theistic versions.⁴

An Orientation to the Perennial⁵/Mystical View of Ultimate Reality

³See D.V. Steere, "Mysticism," in Halverson and Cohen, *A Handbook of Christian Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), pp. 236-38; and J. R. Price, "Mysticism," in Musser and Price, *A New Handbook of Christian Theology* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1992), pp. 318-20.

⁴See the chapter "Naturalism" in Titus, Smith, and Nolan, *Living Issues In Philosophy*, 9th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995), pp. 248ff.

⁵Other than works cited in footnotes below, essays on "Perennial Philosophy" may be found in: A. Huxley, "Introduction" in *The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita* (New York: Mentor, 1954); N. Smart, "Perennial Philosophy" in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. A. Richardson and J. Bowden (Philadel-

With the assumption that ultimate reality is the non-physical (wholly other than whatever constitutes the visible and invisible of the created order), perennial/mystical worldviews interpret ultimate reality as non-personal, analogically personal, or suprapersonal "Oneness," "Pure Spirituality," "Godness Beyond God," "Undifferentiated Unity" and similar categories. The most philosophic forms of Asian religions choose such abstractions, while some expressions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have incorporated mystical traits. With Cherbonnier, we propose that the inclusion of such mystical presuppositions misinterprets religions based on the Bible.

One of the main challenges in the comparison of any two philosophical systems is to distinguish incompatible interpretations of common issues. Most systems are concerned with similar topics, such as the nature of reality (metaphysics), the nature of knowledge (epistemology), and the nature of value (axiology). It is in approaching such issues and giving them a definitive interpretation that each philosophy assumes its own ground rules and framework.

phia: Westminster, 1983), pp. 439ff.

In the case of classical mysticism (or synonymously "perennial philosophy"), the approach is based on a fundamental premise: the unchanging, most universal is the most real. On this cornerstone, mystical/perennial philosophers typically adopt a type of hierarchical structure in which every component of reality is grouped in ascending levels, until only one major category remains: being/non-being.⁶ Beyond the natural order is pure, non-physical Otherness, the most inclusive reality, an unchanging, Undifferentiated Unity. The changing natural world is less real, even unreal, and less significant than Being itself; the Platonic "Forms" serve as a type of blueprint for the vast multiplicity of objects and ideas that populate the everyday human world. It is possible to say, however, that things of the natural order are only an illusion. What is really real is being (or non-being) - the *One* or *Oneness*, the *Absolute*, *Pure Spirituality*, the *Non-physical*: unconscious, unchanging, immobile Reality "beyond" the actuality of the universe. Its nature is described only by negative characteristics: it cannot be in ontological relation to any object external to itself; it is *Wholly Other*⁷ than the visible or invisible of the created order. Its sole function is to be; it is without cause, dependence, or purpose. From this perspective are drawn all forms of perennial philosophy. According to Cherbonnier, its influence on philosophical and religious thought has been overwhelming. From the age of Athenian philosophy until the present day, this paradigm or worldview has colored and shaped an enormous number of attitudes toward the nature of reality, including much Christian theology. In Huxley's words:

PHILOSOPHIA PERENNIS - the phrase was coined by Leibniz; but the thing--the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being--the thing is immemorial and universal. Rudiments of Perennial Philosophy may be found among

⁶"Being" and "Non-Being" are often used synonymously, paradoxically, and with great imprecision by mystical/perennial philosophers. At times, "being" seems to refer to fundamental reality in the created order and "non-being" to the ultimate reality beyond being. At other times, both categories refer to the Oneness "beyond" the created order. The inconsistent uses are not profound; they are merely inconsistent uses!

⁷The terms italicized in this and the preceding sentence *One*, *Oneness*, *Absolute*, *Pure Spirituality*, the *Non-Physical*, and *Wholly Other* are synonymous and are used interchangeably throughout the text. Also equivalents are "Undifferentiated Unity," "Godness Beyond God," "Non-Being," and others, as identified with "Oneness."

the traditional lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions.⁸

The confusion inherent in comparing perennial philosophy with an incompatible approach is caused by the virtual monopoly enjoyed by perennial philosophy. It is almost a Tradition to regard perennial views as the norm, to use them as a measuring stick to be placed against rival claims, to accept them as being true without considering other possibilities, to trivialize other worldviews as unsophisticated, indeed to "do" all theology and religious studies within a mystical context. To conclude in this manner, however, is to run the risk of being totally partisan. There is no patented solution to the question of reality. Perennial philosophy offers some powerful arguments to support its position, but it is possible to offer equally logical and persuasive arguments from an entirely different perspective. It falls then to critical philosophers to uphold their responsibility, to weigh the ideas presented to them on their own merits and not to prejudge any issue. To make this possible, it is our purpose here to clarify an alternative approach to the question of reality, to outline a second philosophical-religious system in contrast to mystical ones. *This we refer to as "biblical philosophy" or "biblical religion." ("Abrahamic religion" or "Hebraic religion" are also possibilities.)*

⁸Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1946), p. 1.

THE METHOD

The Bible as Philosophy

Like perennial philosophy, the biblical approach is concerned with understanding the truth about reality. However, whereas perennialism rests on the foundation of its hierarchy and its conclusion that existence is either a duality or non-physical, the biblical system draws on the worldview inherent in the Bible. We consider biblical writings as containing by implication as valid and logical a philosophy as the works of the Greek thinkers.⁹ This in itself is a radical concept, radical in the sense that it requires an evaluation of the biblical text not only as it speaks to human religious or emotional sensitivity, but also as having something to say to human reason. Already the temptation is to restrict the Bible as a philosophical work by placing it into the category of a "purely religious" (emotional, poetic) document; the almost immediate reaction is to consider the Bible as grounded in unreasonable faith, a work of mindless hearts and naive faith. Consequently, mystical authors become champions of the function of the mind. This is the first prejudice to overcome. The Bible is one of the great religious texts in history; as such, its presuppositions and many of its conclusions must find acceptance or rejection on the basis of human faith, *but reasonable, informed faith*. To restrict the Bible to a single (emotional) approach is to ignore a vast portion of its philosophical significance. It is our contention that, regarding core beliefs, the Bible contains a very rational and consistent thought system which is equal or even superior to any other philosophy or worldview. In words commenting upon the viability of a unique biblical philosophy, Cherbonnier has written:

...the way to preserve the uniqueness of the Bible is not to deny its reasonableness. Such a denial merely absolves Christianity's competitors of the responsibility for philosophically substantiating their own gods as against the God of the Bible. The way to preserve the uniqueness of the Bible is precisely to demonstrate its superior reasonableness. Not, however, by urging that it agrees with Plato or Aristotle, but by showing that at points of divergence between their conceptions of the divine and the Lord of Hosts, it is the latter who holds the philosophical advantage.¹⁰

⁹Cherbonnier. "Is There A Biblical Metaphysic," *Theology Today*, XV, No. 4 (1959), pp. 454-456.

¹⁰Cherbonnier, "Jerusalem and Athens," *Anglican Theological Review*, XXXVI (October, 1954), pp. 252f.

Biblical philosophy concerns not only the nature of God as the focal point of reality, but essential, core interpretations of human freedom, the finite world, knowledge, and the whole network of morality as a consequence for living. What biblical philosophers ask is that their ideas be given fair trial, that their views be considered with the same seriousness as the assertions made by perennial thinkers. If this can be done, much of the confusion between the two systems can be eliminated, and the result will be that critics will have not one alternative, but a choice of two, upon one of which they can base a faith.

A Common Origin

Both the mystical and biblical views share a common origin. They each stand in the finite world looking toward the mystery of ultimate reality. If those elements in both systems that can be labeled as unquestionable, individual revelations of truth (such as ecstatic and revelatory moments) are removed, then it can be stated that both approaches share human reason as a vital ingredient. The statements they make, therefore, must be judged on the criteria of their logic and consistency. In its broadest application, this can be done by asking the simple questions, "Does that make sense?", "Is this presupposition persuasive?" or "If I accept this as being true, what follows from it?" A good example of this process is the initial question of logical priority. In either system, the embryonic stage of development originates in the conviction that the perceived world does not represent all of reality. It makes sense to both the perennial and biblical thinker that some truth is found distinct from the observable world. Both approaches begin, therefore, with a given set of variables: the nature of the world and human existence within the limitations of time and space.

It is from this basis that perennial thought accepts the principle of a duality. Its hierarchy begins with the assumption that the multiple objects of this world are at best only the clay models of higher reality beyond, that their design and existence depend on the non-physical. From this line of reasoning, the pyramid of reality is constructed until it derives the nature of being, beyond the pyramid, as ultimate reality. This implies that there can be only one true reality and that all else was simply illusion, somehow "less real," or at least less significant. The finite realm, therefore, was cut off from the non-physical Real by definition; it is impossible for any second reality to co-exist equally with the Real since it (the Real) must contain all of reality in one perfect unity.

With this a type of perspective in mind, one can begin again with the condition of the world as only a given set of variables, something to be observed, and consider the result if a different approach were taken. What, for example, would be the result of assuming that the hierarchy did

not exist, that the tangible objects of the natural world were really real, and not illusory or less real, that whatever serves as ultimate reality was not the receptacle of existence but its personal architect? What if a "theistic naturalism" is the case? These questions begin to mark the differences between perennial and biblical thought.¹¹

THE NATURE OF GOD

The movement of perennial logic leads to the One: a Oneness of Pure Spirituality, an Undifferentiated Unity. Its impassive and perfect nature appears to be the definitive statement on the nature of ultimate reality. It is the necessary extension of considering the nature of reality as a derivative of the maxim "the most inclusive (universal) is the most real.."

It means that Oneness is all of being; it is an abstraction, a state of perfection, of abstract Otherness. In the face of this conclusion, biblical philosophy offers an entirely different question: "What if ultimate reality is a being, not pure being itself, not Pure Spirituality, but an awesome, majestic, mysterious, immortal agent - a unique, sovereign, personal *Someone Who Acts?*"

The consequences of following this suggestion are entirely different from classical mysticism. They introduce the strange subject of reality as existing within the dominion of an "anthropomorphic" being. The term "strange" applies here because serious suggestions of anthropomorphism seem naive and archaic; to consider reality in the hands of a "human-like" god is the proper subject matter for historians, not philosophers. It seems that by committing ourselves to this idea, we have started up a blind alley or perhaps a yellow brick road toward a very mortal Wizard of Oz! However, given our assumptions, the discipline of logic and consistency make it a necessity to do so; in accepting the biblical text as the source for the system, biblical philosophers must also accept that the Bible speaks of God as a wondrous, anthropomorphic being. Clarifying terms, Cherbonnier notes:

By anthropomorphism I mean any theology that conceives of God in terms of those characteristics which are distinctively human: the capacity for discriminating judgment, the exercise of responsible decision and choice, the ability to carry out long-range purposes.

¹¹See also T. Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared With Greek* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960); E. Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1957); E. Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages Upon the Christian Church* (Hendrickson, 1996); W. H. V. Reade, *A Christian Challenge To Philosophy* (London: SPCK, 1951); C. Tresmontant, *A Study of Hebrew Thought* (New York: Desclee, 1960); G. E. Wright, *The Old Testament and Theology* (New York, Harper and Row, 1969).

Such a God is appropriately (and literally) described in the language of personal pronouns and transitive verbs, such as "possess," "love," "judge," "promise," "forgive," and the like.¹²

In the same vein, Kirkpatrick has written:

...God can be partially but truly understood straightforwardly ['literally'] as an Agent whose intentional action brings other agents and non-agents into being, sustains them, affects them in their situations, and redeems them. (I say 'partially' because because there may be many things about God that are not capable of being 'literally' understood, including some aspects of *how* God acts. But I also say 'truly' because there is a real, literal, basic sense in which God *is* an Agent, and not just symbolized metaphorically as

¹²Cherbonnier, "The Logic of Biblical Anthropomorphism," *Harvard Theological Review*, LV (1962), p. 187.

one.)¹³

When the Bible was in its formative stage, the religion of Israel could be considered in competition with all the traditions and cults then existing in the Near East. In general, these rival faiths each contained a pantheon of divine beings who were thought to be in control of the forces and events occurring in the natural world. The prayers made to the gods, therefore, were often prayers to do something, to make something happen. It was a worship that depended upon results. In some cases, it was believed that these results could be forced from the god by way of magic; in other instances, the faithful offered up sacrifices in order to induce the divinity to grant their special request. These gods were individual beings; they were gods of action. They had the power to affect the conditions of the natural world and the freedom to either accept or reject the appeals of their followers. In this sense, they were personalities; they were anthropomorphic. One can conclude that what made the early gods of the Mediterranean world "human-like" was their ability to act. Like human beings, they were conscious and active; they were superior in knowledge and ability, but similar in their modes of conduct. Zeus and Osiris were free agents in the same fashion humanity is thought of being free, with the important powers of creation and immortality reserved only for them.

A Unique Being

¹³F. Kirkpatrick, *Together Bound: God, History, and the Religious Community* (New York: Oxford, 1994), p. 61.

How did the Lord of Israel differ from the pantheons that were contemporary to the Hebrews in Canaan? The mystical answer is immediate: the Hebrew God was "wholly other." It is to the credit of the biblical sages that they perceived the essential differences between God and mortals, that they considered God as the one, absolute deity. In fact, there are references to this idea within the Bible that point in the direction of perennialist opinion: "For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst" (Hosea 11:9). Perennial philosophy attempts to make the Hebrew God at least complementary to the mystic's hierarchy of reality. However, the God of Israel was never considered ontologically "wholly other." Like Zeus, he¹⁴ was a God of action; he had a personality that was grounded in the belief that he was a free agent. What separated the "Holy One" from other gods was not that he was somehow far removed from human beings or that he was somehow far removed from the world, but that he was capable of sovereign success. The condemnation leveled against the idols of neighboring peoples by the Hebrew leaders was not founded on their anthropomorphic qualities, but that they were powerless, that they could not fulfill their promises, that they were not to be trusted, that they were not anthropomorphic enough because they had fewer abilities than mortals. Cherbonnier notes:

In this sense of the term, the God of the Bible is quite as anthropomorphic as any in the Greek and Roman pantheon. Logically, He has more in common with these Olympian deities than with Plato's "Being" or Aristotle's "Unmoved Mover." The difference between Yahweh and Zeus is not logical or formal, but factual and "existential." The prophets do not charge the pagan deities with being anthropomorphic, but with being insufficiently anthropomorphic. At their best, they are counterfeit persons. At their worst, they are frankly impersonal.¹⁵

It is in this sense that the Bible indicts them: "They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see; they have ears, but do not hear;

¹⁴"As symbols of God reflecting their cultures, words such as 'Father' and 'He' were used in holy writings and in prayers by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Male symbols conveyed a personal God in language acceptable to those peoples. 'It' or 'She' would have failed to communicate their experiences of God. The intention was never to equate God with a mortal male or a 'man in the sky.'" -- from Titus, Smith, and Nolan, *Living Issues in Philosophy* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995), pp. 385f.

In this text we shall use the masculine designation, because to do otherwise tends to be a distraction from the discussion.

¹⁵Cherbonnier, "The Logic of Biblical Anthropomorphism," p. 187.

noses, but do not smell." (Ps. 115: 5,6). It is not that God does not share the same qualities, but that he is supremely a being of action who can exercise his power in the world and make things happen. The Bible, therefore, is boldly anthropomorphic. Even the passage cited from Hosea that seems to imply a feeling for the "other worldliness" of God through the analogy of a man whose wife has "played the harlot," is ascribing to the Lord a very personal and very human emotion.

There are, therefore, two distinct images of ultimate reality. In perennial systems, it is an unconscious, immobile state of spiritual perfection often enfolding all of existence in one huge cosmic dream. In the biblical system the tangible elements of the finite world are not less real, insignificant, or illusory. All reality is under the sovereignty of an active, creative, and free agent who imparts reality to both humanity and the world by giving them life. An essential difference can be described as a passive state compared to an active one. Whereas the perennial universe is only real in the dormant mind of Being, the biblical world is in a constant state of motion and change; existing from the Word of God, it has direction and purpose.

The Anthropomorphic Challenge

It would appear to some that the biblical view is much more attractive, but less sophisticated. In fact, the reason that considerations of any anthropomorphic being have often been ignored is its seeming naivete; to many philosophers it seems absurd to speak of such a Supreme Being. That prejudice, however, begins to break down when placed in the light of objective criticism.

Assuming that the biblical image of God is valid, what convincing objections can be raised to refute his nature on logical grounds? Generally, such objections have been offered only as blanket denials, asserting that such a being is impossible. There has been a curious lack of serious discussion of its validity. As Cherbonnier notes:

There is no *a priori* reason why this metaphysical hypothesis should not receive the same consideration as any other. The present writer, however, has made a careful search for a single rational refutation of it. His findings are exhausted by a catalogue of phrases like "subjective," "projection," "wishful thinking," "narrow," "crude anthropomorphism," "primitive superstition," "beneath a philosopher's dignity," "a fog of absurd notions," and other similar epithets, none of which contributes a great deal to testing the Biblical answer to the metaphysician's question.¹⁶

¹⁶Cherbonnier, "Is There A Biblical Metaphysic?", p. 459.

If logical arguments are raised against it, they center on a main premise: that a single, creative, personal agent as the force behind reality lacks the power to be in charge of the universe; he is too human, too Oz-like, to be divine. This, of course, is based on the assumption that what is finite and what is divine are totally separated, that some disabling gulf exists between the two realms.

In answering this type of objection, however, biblical religion can match perennialism on the grounds of logic. For example, a valid criticism of the anthropomorphic gods is that they can be controlled; like the gods of ancient times they can be manipulated by magic or sacrifice. Such gods forfeit claims to divinity, because their real authority is in the hands of human beings. In meeting this criticism, biblical religion first answers that the indictment is true, insofar as it applies to the early pantheons of the Near East. Indeed, it was the same conviction that allowed the Hebrew thinkers to reject the other gods as poor imitations of God. They could be controlled, but Yahweh could not. To make this interpretation clear, one can consider a very essential component to early Hebraic thought: the importance of names.

In the centuries after the Exodus and before the birth of Christ, it was a common belief among the different racial groups around Mesopotamia that a person's name had special significance.¹⁷ Great care was given to the selection of a name for a newborn baby, and the blessing passed on by the father to his children often involved invoking their names. In this way, having the name of a god or spirit in one's possession was to have some sort of power over him. By calling on his name, one could force him to respond. Divine names, therefore, had a certain magic attached to them.

¹⁷Raymond Abba, "Name," in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick (New York-Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), Vol. 3, pp. 500 ff.

The one exception to this practice was the religion of the Hebrews. Although other peoples used the names of their gods freely, the religious leaders of Israel strongly maintained the mystery of their God. The famous encounter between Moses and God at the burning bush embodies this concept for Hebrew thought. When Moses asked God for his name, the answer he received was intentionally evasive; God did not pronounce his name to Moses, for to have done so would seem to have given Moses some power over him. In Exodus 3:13-14 God identifies himself as "YHWH" (much later conveyed as "Yahweh"). Often translated "I Am Who I Am," the name has received attention from modern scholars and is better represented as "It Is He Who Creates What Comes Into Existence" or similar *active* translations.¹⁸

In the annotation for Exodus 3:14 of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible one reads: "Actually, YHWH is a third person form and may mean 'He causes to be.' The name does not indicate God's eternal being but God's action and presence in historical affairs."¹⁹ "He who brings into being whatever comes into being" is another rendition faithful to the living God of the Hebrew experience.²⁰ Elsewhere one reads "'I will be what tomorrow demands,' that is, God emphasizes that he is capable of responding to human need."²¹ Anderson comments succinctly:

It is tempting, at first glance, to suppose that the narrator refers to God's changeless being - that is, he is the God who eternally is, who is not affected by the flux and flow of time. The ancient Greeks, who struggled philosophically with the problem of the changing and the changeless, would have favored such a view. But in Israel's faith the emphasis is upon *divine activity*, not passive, eternal being. Just as a person discloses himself to another through through his words and deeds, so God reveals himself by what he does. The Hebrew verb has a dynamic meaning that cannot adequately be rendered by our verb "to be"; in fact, often it is best translated "it came to pass" or "it will come to pass." The late Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, maintained that in the present instance the verb has the dynamic meaning. "I will be present" - that is, God is the one who is actively present with his people, even as he had promised Moses "I will be with you" (3:12). Other scholars construe

¹⁸See W. F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 148.

¹⁹*The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1991), p. 72.

²⁰"Yahweh" in Gedes MacGregor, *Dictionary of Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Paragon, 1989), p. 671.

²¹*The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), p. 405.

the enigmatic expression in 3:14 to mean, "I cause to be what is [or, what happens" - that is, natural phenomena and historical events have their origin in the will of the God who is Creator and Lord.²²

Clearly, "Yahweh" was not intended as the unchanging, suprapersonal, Pure Spirituality of classical mysticism/perennial philosophy. To impose a perennial/mystical context upon any interpretation of Yahweh is to visit an alien and misleading perspective upon the God of Abraham and Jesus.

The God of Israel was not in the hands of his followers or any other human beings. The biblical conviction is that the Sovereign of the Universe cannot be manipulated. He can respond favorably to an appeal if he chooses to do so, but he can also react in an unexpected fashion. Unlike magic, where results are guaranteed by the correct use of a formula, God is always uncertain; he is unpredictable. What is known about God must be knowledge after the fact, when the results of his action are visible, but nothing can be stated with certainty in advance. The mystery of God is preserved and biblical philosophy maintains this mystery as an assurance that God cannot be mistaken for a Zeus or an Odin.

God Is Personal

An essential difference between the mystical One and the biblical God is the difference between what is unconscious and passive, and an agent who is conscious and active. It can be stated as well that biblical philosophy considers God to be *personal*. This is a direct corollary to his nature as an anthropomorphic being. It means that he deals in the personal, that he has the ability to form judgments and act on them, to exercise a mental process in confronting decisions. In short, God is human-like in character. God is *Someone*, not *something*.

It is necessary to differentiate the term "personal" from some of its associated meanings. It is tempting to say that God is not personal in the same sense that people are personal, but that he is extra-personal, "supra-personal." The use of this qualification by perennial thinkers is an attempt to maintain some ontological division between the natural world and God's nature. The difficulty is that this already admits to the divine anthropomorphic condition; it simply implies that God is more human than mortals. If carried to an extreme, this type of qualification process becomes absurd; it accepts the central fact of God's personality but is confused by the question of degrees. It is possible to say, however, that the influence of perennial philosophy encourages this kind of process,

²²Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1966), p. 39.

gradually transforming the personal nature of God until it bears no relationship to the world of humanity. To resist this process, biblical philosophy can call perennial thinkers to account for making God "subpersonal." If Deity has no emotions, no reason, no consciousness, then he must be unthinking, less than human, and more closely analogous in nature to a rock or piece of wood; he must be "subpersonal." The burden of proof rests on the critic to disprove the possibility of God's being truly personal. Supporting the biblical position are two statements by Cherbonnier and another by Dilley that clarify the position that God is a personal being:

The most appropriate word for such a God is the word "Person." Do not the doctrines of the "imago dei" and of the Incarnation proclaim from the housetops that "veritas" is not "esse," but rather a Person ("I am the truth")?²³

Is God "wholly other" than man? If so, then only negatives may be applied to him. Or is he the most all-embracing essence? If so, we must call him "Being-itself," the "Absolute." Or is he a God who speaks? In that case, the truest words which can be applied to him, by analogy, derive from the only other realm of our experience in which we encounter true speech. Truer than anything else which might be said about a God who speaks, and certainly truer than saying nothing at all, is the frankly anthropomorphic conception of God as a free agent, a self, a Person.²⁴

The categories which come to the fore in this interpretation of God's nature are person and the various qualities essential to personality, namely metaphysical separation from other persons (yes, God is a being alongside other beings, although their creator), mind, emotions, and the ability to act. God is literally related to his creation, affecting and being affected by it, is literally involved in space and time, literally suffers and literally intervenes in the historical order to bring about the accomplishment of his purposes so far as he can. God is a free, personal being with various super powers. ... God has all the essentials which constitute personality.²⁵

²³Cherbonnier, "Biblical Metaphysics and Christian Philosophy," *Theology Today*, IX (1952), p. 368.

²⁴Cherbonnier, "The Theology of the Word of God," *The Journal of Religion*, XXXIII, No. 1 (1953), p. 25.

²⁵Frank B. Dilley, "Is Myth Indispensable?", *The Monist*, L (1966), p. 589.

A Clarification of God's Nature

In mystical traditions, the divine was always a contradiction. Because it was the "ground of being," its truth was diffused into every aspect of existence; it was diluted into equal portions of any contradictory situation. Consequently, the images of *yin* and *yang*, the light and dark, and, the good and evil, are especially powerful in perennial systems. It means that what human beings perceive as contradiction is only illusion, elements of the dream which ultimately become part of the greater Oneness.

It is impossible, therefore, for mere women and men to understand the nature of ultimate reality through reason. They must simply accept the condition of the finite world and hope to receive enlightenment. If that expectation is fulfilled, then the mystic solves the mystery by becoming one with God; indeed, in the moment of ecstasy, he *is* God. The sole purpose of the divine, therefore, is to exist, to keep the dream going and to permit enlightenment. The Sacred Ultimate of perennial thought is inactive; it cannot move by definition; it cannot enter into relationship or contact with anything external to itself; it cannot violate its infinite and immutable nature as the "ground of being." "God," then, is a passive mystery that keeps the illusion in motion until the mystic has time to discover its secret.

With this interpretation in mind, one can conclude that the negative injunctions found in perennial philosophy are reversed in the biblical. Although the mystical One cannot *do* things, the biblical God has complete mobility. As in the biblical text, he is a God of active verbs -- *i.e.*, he judges, speaks, acts, and feels. As Cherbonnier states:

As Creator, he exercises his dominion with an authority which is difficult to ascribe to a nonpersonal deity; as Judge of the nations, he can cause the mighty to tremble at the day of reckoning. As free, purposive agent he is forever doing some new and unpredictable thing.²⁶

The natural world is God's creation, his conscious act. It has its own reality conferred by the Creator. Because it is a product of God's will, it stands in a direct relationship to Him. There is a reciprocal activity passing between the finite and God. It is the function of God not just to exist, but to be active in the care and management of his creation. His anthropomorphic qualities, therefore, take on new meaning when seen in the perspective of a single, active agent.

²⁶Cherbonnier, "The Word of God," in *The Empirical Theology of Henry Nelsen Wieman*, ed. Robert W. Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 269.

If God exists as the Bible portrays him, and if the finite world is his creation, then, his actions can be defined on a functional basis. For example, although reason is a hinderance to the mystic, it is essential to the biblical philosopher. Whereas the silent Oneness or Pure Spirituality can say nothing to the human condition, God can speak directly to his situation. The Bible, then, becomes a partial record of his words and actions. Reason for mankind is preserved, because it is not directed toward the non-personal from which there can be no response. In the biblical sense, the words of God pass directly to the natural world as the reaction of God to human events. This does not imply that every word spoken by God is clearly understood or accepted, nor are we advocating a biblical literalism, but it does mean that at the very least there is the possibility for trustworthy communication between the world of humanity and the person of God.

A God of Moral Judgment and Historical Intervention

The contradictions inherent in and acceptable to perennial philosophy are rejected by biblical standards, because God can judge. Like women and men, he can make qualitative decisions; he can place a value on something. Whereas in *yin* and *yang* opposite forces ultimately co-exist on equal terms, the Bible makes a distinction between that which is good and that which is bad. To make this kind of statement runs the risk of calling up visions of "Christian" morality, which some people see as nothing more than an arbitrary code of ethical prohibitions. The Bible, however, goes much deeper; it means that in the chaotic condition of human life, where individuals appear to be at the mercy of constant change, there is some central core of unchanging values. In a strict sense, this would be impossible under a perennial system in which murder and compassion may be accorded equal ultimate value within the encompassing One. Ethical codes, therefore, are more of an amendment to the perennial approach, while a sense of the moral is inherent in biblical religion; morality is a consistent extension of interpreting God as a being capable of making value judgments. The necessity for recognizing this attribute of God is part of seeing his full personhood.

The questions remain: How is it possible to assume that God's judgments are correct? Is it not an arbitrary decision on the part of biblical religion to elevate a moral God over an immoral God? If God is anthropomorphic, can he be evil rather than good? These appear to be pointless questions, but they are important within the framework of logic and consistency. In the mystical system no real distinction can be drawn between ultimate good and evil. That the biblical God communicates, however, removes man from the unstable state where one god is as good as another. The mystery of God is preserved in the biblical approach; nothing

can be known about him in advance, through human meditations or ponderings, only after the fact, a *posteriori*.

Within biblical categories, then, humanity has empirical evidence for the nature of God. This "evidence," however, is not absolute; it is not a way to know fully and hence to control God, but only a method by which man can come to understand the intentions of God. The Bible records (within myths, legends, and providentially interpreted history) words and deeds God has done in the world. From this information man begins to draw conclusions about the workings of God. The Lord of Creation does not disclose all of himself or set down magic formulas by which he can be conjured; he continues to affect the course of history, to cause things to happen to fulfill his purpose (without overriding human freedom).

In perennial thought everything has a particular kind of static certainty. One knows that the world is an illusion; one knows that mankind is trapped in the endless cycles of time and change; and one knows that, because Oneness is constant, things will continue as they have been *ad infinitum*. Man, therefore, has no real freedom in mystical religion. He cannot alter the course of events; he cannot enter into communication with the divine except in a moment of ecstasy when, losing his individuality, he merges with Pure Spirituality, the Absolute. The patterns in perennialism are fixed. What is known is known in the beginning *a priori*, without regard to empirical events.

In sharp contrast, the hallmark of biblical religion is that God confers significant degrees of freedom upon human beings. The movement of God's hand through history is not heavy; it does not manipulate or control human events like pieces on a chess board (hence God's acts are often difficult to detect and subject to outside criticisms). This is true because of human freedom. Biblical texts, especially those of the prophets, are full of the conflicts between God and man. It is possible for human beings to choose a course of action that is directly contrary to the will of God. History, therefore, is a chronicle of the interaction between two sources of personal decision: God and human beings. Both are active and free agents; that God allows man to operate with significant autonomy means that his relationship to the world is not grounded in an impersonal process, but in the personal. History becomes much more difficult to predict; no decision is automatic or predetermined. Implied is that the course of events is left open, that things can happen to alter developing situations. Moreover, it means that mankind has a unique partnership with God in working out the future; and this is a partnership of two distinct personalities. This partnership and personal interchange contrasts sharply, as Cherbonnier explains, with theologies that praise human or divine self-sufficiency:

The Bible, by contrast, regards self-sufficient isolation as destructive and the desire for it as one of the means by which sin perpetuates itself. The pursuit of salvation in terms of independence or "unrelatedness" is something to be delivered from. Salvation consists precisely in a special quality of relation between men and between man and God. The structure of human freedom, which entails a relation beyond the self, is thus neither destroyed nor "transcended," but fulfilled. Even God himself, as triune, finds his own beatitude, not in self-sufficiency, but in love.²⁷

There is no way for a human being to "become" or, losing individuality, to be absorbed into God. Nevertheless, the movement between the finite and the divine is an active interchange, a dialogue, an activity that is either complementary or in opposition. In the end, any attempt to understand the intention of God is placed in the field of the personal. It is an attempt to understand motivation, to discover what God is trying to do. This is difficult, because God refuses to make all decisions for mankind. By leaving room for freedom, he also leaves room for confusion, doubt, rejection, and misunderstanding. These are the necessary consequences of a free and open relationship between any two persons. Consequently, there are moments when everything seems perfectly clear, and other times when things appear confusing or unacceptable. Ultimately, biblical religion asserts that God is known only through his acts.

It is not sufficient to isolate a few events from the biblical narratives and hold them up as final proofs. Seeing the destruction of Jericho as proof of God's alleged blind anger is like citing a single instance when a person lies and then concluding that the person is essentially a chronic liar; a single instance remains an example and not a conclusion. In this context, it is important to interpret the biblical God as Someone; his words and actions are interpreted as aspects of a vastly complex life. That the Bible alludes to the emotions of God underscores his "personhood." It means that the personal, anthropomorphic God has feeling as well as reason.

God's actions and words indicate that his nature is directed consistently toward the betterment of mankind. He does not glorify strife, demand human sacrifice, or condemn people for being less than perfect. He has given freedom to humanity; he allows individuals and peoples to reject him; retaining his sovereignty, he offers them fellowship. It is difficult to avoid making long pronouncements on God's nature or essence; such an understanding of God is ultimately a personal matter and, consequently, there are many different views of his essential nature. What can be

²⁷Cherbonnier, *Hardness of Heart* (New York: Doubleday, 1955), p. 127.

generally stated for biblical religion is twofold: First, coming to understand God is a discovery; it is an individual exploration into the narrative of the Bible, a journey to meet the Word beneath the words.

Mystical versus Biblical

In establishing the perfection of ultimate reality, a perennial philosophy may speak of it as being Unknowable. It is common to both biblical and mystical approaches to speak of God as a mystery. In perennial philosophy, however, the One is a mystery because it is far removed from the natural world; it is otherworldly, out of reach for mankind. However, it is not a perfect mystery; like some buried treasure, Oneness remains silently in its realm until discovered by the mystic. When this occurs, the mystery and the mystic dissolve into a single state of unitive knowledge; the perennial "God" falls into the hands of the seeker. In sharp contrast to this position, biblical religion understands the mystery of God as by choice, not condition. Through his personhood, God exercises freedom to hold something back from humanity; he does not choose to reveal everything at one time. This implies that the initiative rests with God; there is no way that he can be found out by human scrutiny, unless he freely decides to reveal Himself. The mystery, therefore, remains, so long as God intends it. Commenting on this issue, Cherbonnier states:

For the Bible, mystery is correlative with freedom. Though free to withhold himself, God can also make Himself known. The mystery resides in the fact that what He will say or do remains absolutely unpredictable. The small voice that spoke to Elijah continues to confound human expectations.²⁸

The perennial Wholly Other is thought of as a complete unity; it is therefore unlimited by definition. The essential point, however, is that the One must remain inactive. If it attempts to enter into any action, it admits the existence of something outside itself and forfeits its definition of perfection. The biblical God is unlimited not in ontological definition, but in action. As sovereign Lord, there is nothing he cannot do, including the act of creation. This means that God shares reality with those things he creates, but preserves his ability to act on them.

Another contrast between perennial and biblical systems centers on the term "Infinite." In a broad sense, this category can encompass most of the characteristics already discussed; but used in a more specific way, it means "timeless" or "without change." This definition fits in neatly with the perennial philosophy; any concept of time implies change, temporality,

²⁸Cherbonnier, "The Logic of Biblical Anthropomorphism," p. 204.

and is, therefore, a direct contradiction to the One. The influence of perennial thinking can be clearly seen in reference to God as eternal and unchanging. The perspective of the biblical narrative, however, is different. It is true that passages do refer to God's immortality, that he can outlive his creatures, but they also carry another important quality beyond a question of life-span. For the biblical thinker, to be alive is to change, and to be active is to affect that change; God does this. What is "changeless" about God is his devotion and love. God can be trusted; unlike the gods of Olympus, he is steadfast and reliable. Supporting this contention, Cherbonnier stated:

Where the deities of paganism are fluid, fickle, schizophrenic, Yahweh is steadfast, constant of purpose, a definite, determinate personality. It has been said that of all the graphic portraits in the Bible, the most vivid and concrete is that of God himself.²⁹

This kind of trust is impossible, then, for both the fickle Olympian gods and for the static, lifeless Absolute.

In an effort to elevate Oneness beyond the reach of the finite, the mystic may refer to it as "transcendent." This implies that Pure Spirituality is outside the context of space and time; it exists in an entirely different realm of its own. It also means that Oneness is somehow diffused throughout existence. By being transcendent, it can defy the natural laws of matter and space and filter into every element of the lower realm; therefore, mysticism speaks of God as being everywhere at once. This admixture of transcendence and pantheism is contradicted by the biblical use of the term. God is considered transcendent in terms of his sovereignty and authority. He is not, however, alien to the conditions of space and time. God can move within their perimeters, but he is never restricted by them as are mortals. Unlike the diffused character of Pure Spirituality, God is "immanent" in the world through history. He does not somehow inhabit all the finite world, but exercises his influence over it as its designer and caretaker. This makes his relationship to the world much less a matter of cold necessity and more of a free, personal involvement. Cherbonnier summarizes this point by noting:

The God of the Bible is neither transcendent nor immanent in the mystical sense. Being anthropomorphic, He is quite compatible with spatio-temporal existence. If he can be called "transcendent" at all, it is only in the sense that he is sovereign over his entire creation. Having conferred existence upon all things, He can also take it away. Having granted freedom to men, He can also overrule them. He is Lord

²⁹Cherbonnier, "A. J. Heschel and the Philosophy of the Bible," *Commentary*, XXVII (1959), p. 25.

and Master.³⁰

³⁰Cherbonnier, "The Logic of Biblical Anthropomorphism," p. 201.

The Trinity³¹

A developed trinitarian doctrine does not appear in the Bible. *Trinity* was first used by Theophilus of Antioch about 180 AD. The doctrine of the Trinity has been worded in many ways, some excluded as inadequate by historic Church Councils. Each rendition tries to systematize the diverse references to God, Jesus, and the Spirit found in the New Testament. Some accepted interpretations influenced by ancient Greek (perennial/mystical) philosophy are theologically complex and puzzling. In language harmonious with biblical thought, one might reflect on the Trinity in this way: God is Father (loving creator of the universe), Son (revealer of New Covenant Life), and, Holy Spirit (provider of strength, comfort, healing and inspiration). This reflection deliberately leaves unresolved the likeness between Jesus and the Son.

Summary of the Biblical God's Nature

Taking all of these factors into consideration, it should be possible to gain an insight into the kind of God that biblical religion upholds. On the traditions and chronicles of the Bible, it draws out those elements of thought, both explicit and implicit, as they pertain to the nature and function of God. In doing so, the biblical worldview makes a radical departure from the various versions of perennial philosophy.

Although not a crude projection of a mere mortal, God is self-disclosed and experienced in clearly anthropomorphic ways. He is the awesome, majestic, mysterious, immortal Someone: the unique, personal, sovereign creative intelligence who fashions reality and reveals his purpose for humanity through chosen agents and events. A criticism of mystical views of the biblical God is that they contort the nature of God to fit their own, preconceived context, one radically different from the Bible's. Their notion that the biblical vision is intellectually naive and must be enhanced by some form of classical mysticism is sheer prejudice.

By following the original vision of ultimate reality found among the early narratives of the Bible, biblical thinkers have discovered an essential truth about God in the form of personal freedom. They propose that God must be a free and conscious agent. The state of existence, therefore, is not split into a duality with one realm distant and abstract and the lower world illusory - or somehow a "lesser" order of reality - and trapped into an endless cycle. Rather it is the active relationship between the Creator and his creatures, between two kinds of personalities,

³¹Two sermons on The Trinity are on pages 40-45 of this text.

and between Creator and the rest of his creation. Therefore, the nature and purpose of God are to be discovered in history. It is a working out of an intention in the world of humanity. In this process, nothing is set down as an inevitable absolute for human beings; they are free to act on their own, to accept or reject the will of God and to interpret their destiny as they see it. What is certain, however, is that God remains steadfast and constant. He will not betray any trust that is placed in him. What he offers women and men is a chance to make changes within time and space, to leave the endpoint of human history open for development. To this end, he reveals himself to mankind without overwhelming people; he supplies them with encouragement and direction. Ultimately, the result of this effort lies not just with God or humankind, but with both working together to make God's vision come to fruition.

STATUS OF THE EVERYDAY WORLD

Finite Reality

In perennial philosophy, the existence of the finite world is inexplicable. It is a direct contradiction to the supposed unity and perfection of the higher realm. It is impossible for mystical systems to supply any reason or purpose for the existence of the finite realm; to justify this lower realm, it is seen as an illusion, a dream, a reflection, or a least real emanation of the Oneness. In each of these cases, perennial philosophy implicitly denies significant reality to the natural world. The thrust of its logic has given the perfect state of Pure Spirituality a monopoly on reality and abandoned the rest of existence to a type of existential limbo. Creation may thus be seen as flawed, even as sin - alienation from real reality.

Recognizing God as an active agent, biblical religion asserts that the finite world is real. Though it is measured by time and remains impermanent, while it exists it is as real as God Himself. It has reality by virtue of its formation as an act of God. With the intention to create, God designed the human environment. By the power of his action, God gave that intention substance, reality, form, and goodness. Creation, therefore, is no contradiction to the existence of God. Cherbonnier notes:

Throughout the Bible there rung a single criterion of both truth and goodness, equally applicable "on earth as it is in heaven." This is the philosophical significance of the concept of God as Creator. It contradicts the tragic notion that the relation of God to the world is properly expressed as that of the infinite to the finite, the absolute to the relative, or the timeless to the temporal. Whereas tragedy regards this present world as the negation of the "divine," the Bible asserts that there is no necessary incompatibility between it and the very nature of God himself.³²

To make this point more clear, the attitude held by each system toward the nature of life in the finite world can be contrasted. In the perennial view, human existence is either a diminished state or an unfortunate evil.

Humans are trapped by their environment, held down by their physical bodies. For many mystics, to attain enlightenment, one must minimize or sever all contact with finite existence. Human beings must suppress all urges to encounter the movements and issues around them. In this way, they

³²Cherbonnier, "Biblical Faith and the Idea of Tragedy," in *The Tragic Vision and the Christian Faith*, ed. Nathan A. Scott (New York: Association, 1957), p. 40.

affirm the illusion or insignificance of the world and open themselves up to the only true reality, the spiritual state of the One. This approach is the necessary extension of perennial duality that makes it impossible to accept the common reality of the finite and the infinite.

The recognition of the world as a product of God's intention, inherent in the biblical system, generates an almost complete reversal of the perennial attitude. Rather than escaping from the world, human existence is a natural part of it. Moreover, humanity has a direct stake in the events that affect the environment, because they mark the passage of history toward its fulfillment. If those events impede the intention of God, then that fulfillment is set back, but if man can act to help God work out his intention, then the time when history will reach fruition is brought closer. The primary quality of this state is cooperation; both God and man share a common interest in the condition of human life. The universe is not split into two halves, but remains a single reality in which the divine and the finite share a mutual concern and interaction.

Creation

The justification of biblical religion in maintaining its approach to the relationship between God and man is inherent in the biblical view of creation. The importance of creation as a philosophical concept should not be underestimated. It marks a significant difference between the perennial and biblical systems. As Cherbonnier explains:

For the Bible, the relation of God to the world is that of Creator to creation. That is, he is related to the world as an agent is related to his act. Because his act is free, you can never deduce it from the "essence" of the agent (which is possibly one reason why this solution has not occurred to the Platonist). But once the act is given, it is perfectly reasonable to account for it as an expression of the agent's will. The famous problem of "the one and the many" is thus only a problem for a metaphysic from which free agents are excluded. In the Biblical metaphysic, for which free agents are central, the Creator is related to his creation by an act of will.³³

Classical mysticism makes a pronounced distinction between the Absolute and the everyday world. The relationship is indirect; the finite realm is a "subset," an included element, in the larger context of ultimate reality. Consequently, there is no conscious, purposeful connection between the two realms. The natural world is more of an afterthought, an accidental happening. In the biblical system, on the other hand, there is

³³Cherbonnier, "Is There A Biblical Metaphysic?", pp. 462f.

a direct relationship between the status of the everyday world and the intentions of God. This idea is embodied in the Hebrew concept of a God who is involved in history. Unlike the cyclical patterns of time in perennialism, the Hebrew notion of time is linear; it moves from a point of origin, the creation, to some goal: the Kingdom of God. This means that creation is the introduction of God into history; it is, in a real sense, the beginning of history. Mankind, therefore, is not trapped by time; even though he is a finite creature, man has the ability to act, to cause things to happen, and by his actions to change events, to alter the course of history. The differences between God and humanity become more a question of degree rather than a rigid barrier between two mutually exclusive realms. God and the finite are compatible; their relationship is properly seen as that of the Creator to his good work. Consequently, there is an implicit understanding in biblical religion of the interdependence of reality that is lacking in the duality of perennial thought. Regarding this point, Cherbonnier states:

In the Bible, God certainly is conceived as "a being besides other beings." To the complaint that this implies that God is related, and therefore conditioned, the answer is that of course God is related. The doctrine of creation can mean very little if it does not at least mean that the world and man are distinct from the Creator. And from cover to cover the Bible testifies that God is indeed conditioned, in the sense of "influenced," by what man does--never of necessity, of course, but voluntarily.³⁴

The Order of Existence

³⁴Cherbonnier, "Biblical Metaphysics and Christian Philosophy," p. 363.

Once these two views of the relationship between the finite and the infinite have been clarified, then it becomes possible to draw other comparisons between the two systems. For example, there is the question of order. What orders the universe?³⁵ What holds it in balance and measures the passage of time? These are valid philosophical questions that each system must answer. The answers given are dependent on the nature of the philosophy as a whole; the criteria of consistency and logic play a significant role in maintaining perspective. In mystical religion it is possible to diagram the order of existence by reference to the hierarchy. Each element of reality is linked to its position by necessity; it includes some other elements and is, in turn, included by others. This is order by definition. It implies that reality is arranged into categories; the blocks are set one upon another until the whole structure of the universe is complete. Consequently, to remove one of these blocks or to alter it changes the entire nature of reality. The ultimate part of existence, the Wholly Other, is the key part of this system. It must remain true to its definition; it must remain static, for any change in its condition would send vibrations all the way down the hierarchy. Perennial philosophy, therefore, must be very careful in handling the nature of the One; it must affirm the One's absolute status, but maintained in a kind of suspended animation. In this way, the larger body of its philosophy remains consistent and answers questions concerning order by reference to the hierarchy.

The biblical approach is much more fluid. The nature of God as an active agent, and his relationship to the finite world as the Creator, makes the question of order a matter of *intention*, not definition. In speaking of God's character, biblical religion insists upon anthropomorphic qualities: God speaks, acts, judges, etc. Ultimate reality, then, is conscious. It lies in the mind of God, and what gives the diverse elements of reality their order and position is his plan. He wills order. Like an architect, God places those objects he has designed into balance; he

³⁵Different from both mystical and biblical views, atheistic evolutionary naturalism dismisses the notion of order. As reported on page A20 in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, XLII, Number 36 (May 17, 1996), "Mr. Dawkins, the evolutionary biologist at Oxford, takes this tack (against religion) in *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (BasicBooks, 1995). Evolution, he believes, is a digital river of DNA, a program embedded in the world, which exists without having been designed. And it can explain everything. . . . 'The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. . . . DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.'" Nonetheless, Dawkins' convictions about the bottom line ("no design," etc.) is compatible with some mystical tenets.

arranges them, and he does so with two very important conditions: reality and human freedom. The order of the universe is maintained by the natural laws that govern its function as a tangible, real substance. It is not illusory, insignificant, or "less real;" it is only finite. Time, therefore, is the thread of order laid down by God to shape the reality of the finite. Decidedly open-ended, the finite world orders itself through its exercise of freedom. As Cherbonnier notes:

Biblical categories are "unique" and "distinctive," not as compared to the "naive" language of ordinary men, but in contrast to the esoteric tendencies of most other philosophies. If freedom were established at the center of metaphysics, then the key words at the heart of the biblical thinking, words as close to everyday living as they are foreign to most metaphysics would become decisive for philosophy itself.³⁶

In biblical terms, when man is given "dominion" over the earth, he is given his freedom to act within the limits of time and space. Consequently, man shares in the responsibility of ordering existence by his actions in the world. Human beings are God's guests and stewards of their surroundings. Nonetheless, the patterns can be broken. If God's intention is the framework upon which reality is placed, then human freedom is its regulator. The unity and order of existence are dynamic; it is active. Reality, therefore, is not seen as a static arrangement of blocks in a hierarchy, but as something that is growing, something in motion, in process.

The Nature of History

A good working model to use in clarifying the biblical view is the notion of history. That God's intention is the primary ordering factor in existence implies that God wills the reality of the finite; he supplies it with both form and meaning. If God is capable of doing this, he must necessarily be a free agent, *i.e.*, anthropomorphic. In biblical religion, this interpretation is underscored by the nature of human life. In his capacity as the Creator, God imparts freedom to humanity. He makes man "in his image." In essence, this means that women and men have the same mode of action, though to a lesser degree, as does God. Consequently, human freedom is a corollary to God's freedom. Cherbonnier states, regarding this issue:

If the events of human history are at all meaningful, they must be performed by free agents. Conversely, if there is no such thing as

³⁶Cherbonnier, "Jerusalem and Athens," P. 270.

the freedom to act voluntarily and responsibly according to chosen purposes, then life is indeed a shadow play, and the entire biblical metaphysic a delusion. In addition to the reality and metaphysical importance of this world, then, the biblical metaphysic also assumes the freedom of God and man.³⁷

When the two forces work in conjunction, when God and man share the same intention, then events are altered. When God and man are drawn into a unity of purpose and action, history is brought closer to realization. History, therefore, has a goal. It is not cyclical, but linear. This shifts from the emphasis found in perennial philosophy. It implies that the true quality of life, the goal of living, is not to sever the ties which join man to his environment, but to improve them. The impassive, mystical state of indifference is replaced with a concern for the nature and character of an active participation in the events of the world. Man becomes part of history; he moves it in a definite direction. This can either be in a positive direction, toward communion with God, or in a negative direction, impeding that fellowship. Consequently, matters of daily life and questions of what constitutes moral conduct become extremely important in biblical religion, because they have a direct bearing on the history of the world. The lines of communication drawn between the divine and the finite are of the utmost importance; the manner in which men conduct their lives is crucial.

³⁷Cherbonnier, "Mystical vs. Biblical Symbolism," *The Christian Scholar*, XXXIX (March, 1956) p. 37.

HUMAN NATURE

Humanity In The Bible³⁸

There are certain inherent understandings about human nature in the biblical view: (1) each person is a unique individual - he has the power to act under his own initiative; (2) as a whole, mankind is a good creation of God, firmly tied to the finite world, but with the important qualifications of dominion and stewardship, a freedom to move within the limits of time and space, and to affect the course of history; (3) the real criteria for the exercise of that freedom is its correspondence to the will and intention of God - there are right and wrong modes of conduct. In substance, these considerations make one aspect about mankind central to biblical religion: by design, human beings are in relation. They are in relation to their environment, to God, to their neighbors, and to the larger human community. This is a natural consequence of each person's status as a personal being. Women and men enter into contact with events, objects, and characters surrounding them. Moreover, as noted by Wright, "The central fact about the place of man in creation according to the Old Testament is the dignity and honor accorded him by God."³⁹ Elsewhere it has been noted:

[In the Bible] the individual is in a special relationship to the Creator. Human uniqueness lies not chiefly in our reason or in our relationship to nature. Instead, each person is a worthwhile, unique individual created by God. ...Human beings are regarded...as made "in the image of God"; that is, the Creator has endowed us with unique attributes of a free agent capable of love, characteristics analogous to God's own self-expression.⁴⁰

The Human Soul

It is important to distinguish between the classical mysticism and biblical religion's contrasting value of human activity. A key premise is that mystical religion encourages an escape from (or downplay of) this world, while the biblical recognizes a vibrant involvement with it. A significant factor that supports this motif relates to the concept of the human soul.

³⁸A sermon on persons as unique children of God is found beginning on page 46.

³⁹G. Ernest Wright, "The Faith of Israel," *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1952), I, p. 367.

⁴⁰H. H. Titus, M. S. Smith and R. T. Nolan, *Living Issues in Philosophy*, 9th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995), pp. 30f.

The image of the soul projected by perennial philosophy is of a "divine spark" trapped within the human body. In this sense, everyone carries within himself a share of ultimate reality, of the Wholly Other. Thus, one can refer to the "God within," or in the extreme, "I am God." An implication, however, is that there is no real human claim on the soul; it is strictly a trace of the Absolute, which at death automatically escapes the body and eventually returns to its point of origin. In human nature, there is a "higher self," the soul or spirit, which aspires to the perfection of Pure Spirituality; there is also the "lower" state that is associated with all physical needs and desires. Perennialism, therefore, is consistent in its approach to human nature, because ultimately it divides individuals into two realms, one part that is a trace of the "wholly other" and another part that is finite. The primary motivation is to pull these two realms even further apart, to minimize, deny or renounce the body and the finite, so that the One can retrieve that small "portion" of itself which is trapped in the natural world.

The biblical image of the human soul is distinctly different: it is God's gift. God has made man as inherently good, in God's own image, *i.e.*, with the ability to act, to make decisions, and enter into relation. The logical extension of this interpretation is that the human soul, through an act of God's grace, remains uniquely human, though not necessarily mortal. According to biblical religion, "The soul is not an entity with a separate nature from the flesh and possessing or capable of a life of its own. Rather it is the life animating the flesh."⁴¹ By way of elaboration, others have noted:

Nephesh means primarily "breath." ... (It) is often used also with the meaning "living being," human or otherwise. In Gen. 2:7 the first man became a living *nephesh* when Yahweh's breath (a different word) was breathed into his nostrils. ... Frequently the best translation of the ... word is "person." ... Clearly the word "soul" in the Bible has a much broader meaning than in current use now.⁴²

One might also say that a human being is a "breather."

Man is a living soul. This sentence, which corresponds easily to Gen. 2:7, says three things: It says first of all that man became a living soul and now is a living soul. It does not say that man has

⁴¹James Hastings, ed., *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Scribner's, 1963), p. 932.

⁴²Millar Burrows, *An Outline of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), pp. 135ff.

a living soul. Soul is the nature of man, not his possession. ... The second thing that the sentence says is that man is a soul. Were man only flesh made from the dust he would be only body. Were man only spirit without body, he would be formless.⁴³

The third implication, according to Kohler, is that man has a body, for "Form is essential to the soul."⁴⁴

The famous verse in Genesis (2:7) does not say, as is often supposed, that man consists of body and soul; it says that Yahweh shaped man, earth from the ground, and then proceeded to animate the inert figure with living breath blown into his nostrils, so that man became a living *being*, which is all that *nephesh* here means. ... the important thing here is the conception of man as body, not as soul or spirit. The Hebrew idea of human personality is an

⁴³L. Kohler, *Old Testament Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), p. 142.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

animated body, not an incarnated soul.⁴⁵

The soul, therefore, is a functioning, integrated aspect of human nature and of behavior. It represents that part of human consciousness which moves toward fellowship with God. This is not, however, a union of like parts, of the fragment returning to the whole, but rather two individual identities joining together in positive relation, in communion. The soul can then be spoken of as being active, not as the prisoner of the body, but as its animating conscience. It enters into human activity, directing that action by offering up possibilities which correspond to the will of God.

Human Freedom and Grace

An essential feature of human nature is freedom. It is the ability to form judgments and then to act accordingly. As Cherbonnier states:

... all human endeavor presupposes freedom, including the enterprise of philosophy itself. For the philosopher depends upon the distinction of true from false--that is, on the freedom to distinguish true from false. Take away freedom and you thereby preclude all thinking.⁴⁶

Acting from this position of freedom puts man either with or against God's intentions.

Obviously, the biblical interpretation seems much less certain than the perennial. It appears that the idea of a divine spark makes an individual's union with God much more likely. Two points of clarification follow: first, union is not dependent on any condition of human nature; at death, the divine spark inevitably returns to Pure Spirituality (in some versions, after a series of reincarnations), like a drop of water merging into an ocean. Second, the method by which that union is achieved is a type of spiritual suicide; the mystic, recognizing the duality of human nature, represses the natural tendencies of the body to enter into relation with the finite. Thereby the divine within his own being can leave him and return to Oneness; that divinity, however, is unconscious by definition--it has nothing to do with a personal, human nature. Ultimately, no part of the human being ever comes into relation, communion, with Oneness, because

⁴⁵H. W. Robinson, "The Psychology and Metaphysics of 'Thus Saith Yahweh'," *Zeitschrift fur die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* XLI (1923), p. 2 of a mimeographed edition provided by Theodor M. Mauch, Th.D.

⁴⁶Cherbonnier, "Jerusalem and Athens," p. 265.

Pure Spirituality cannot be related to anything external to itself; it is Wholly Other. As noted elsewhere about this biblical motif:

In Judaism and Christianity we have the capacity to act under our own initiative; we have the freedom to move within the limits of time and space. We can alter the paths of history, but not God's ultimate sovereignty or the final outcome of the historical process. ...because we have the freedom to make choices, we can choose to disobey and rebel against the Creator; a choice of false gods is one cause of an individual's separation from the true God.⁴⁷

The Bible does not address the limitations on some individuals' freedom to choose - due to psychological conditioning, chemically caused inhibitions, and physiological constructions (e.g., the "wiring" of their brains). Degrees of freedom to choose is a discovery remaining imprecise, but significant. It may be fair to assume that each person is free to make significant choices, unless compelling evidence to the contrary is provided. However, though undeveloped as a doctrine in the Bible, the New Testament especially recognizes that, for whatever reasons, individuals need God's *grace* to live in harmony with the Creator's purposes. In Cherbonnier's words, which do not include "grace,"

The gift of a transformed heart frees men at last to come into their own; to inherit the high destiny originally prepared for them; to exult with a joyous company in the glorious liberty of the sons of God.⁴⁸

Instead of *grace*, Cherbonnier uses *agape* as the transforming agent. The writer of this text is also reluctant to use "grace" too often, because the term seems to be used in several fuzzy, even sloppy, ways. Not incompatible with Cherbonnier's comments on *agape*, an English theologian offers these helpful comments:

We begin by repudiating all notions of grace which think of it as a something given by God to work mechanically, after the manner of a medicine given by a doctor to be taken three times a day after meals. We think of God's grace after the analogy of that help which one (individual) can give to another in personal relationships, help which does not set aside or supersede a man's own freedom but enables him to be more truly himself and more fully free: the sort of help which leads him to say with gratitude, "I could never have been what I am but for X."⁴⁹

⁴⁷Titus, Smith, and Nolan, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁴⁸Cherbonnier, *Hardness of Heart*, p. 188.

⁴⁹"Christian Doctrine - Lecture Summaries," p. 54. [possibly by an English theologian, a Bishop Wand, while a visiting professor at the Berkeley Divinity School, New Haven, in the mid-1950s. The writer has had a copy of the unpublished, 58 page, mimeographed document since his 1959-60 academic year of study at Berkeley.]

We propose here that biblically speaking, grace is synonymous with love. Because of human limitations, individuals are unable to establish truly personal, faithful relationships with God solely by their own efforts. God's active love, his grace, is extended to mortals that they might become more aligned with God's purpose. Coupled with human willingness and initiatives, grace enables women and men to process toward a fuller communion with God and each other. This is not unlike a quite limited infant being loved by a parent, who reaches out to the child with affectionate support and nurture. Such parental love, like God's grace, neither coerces nor controls nor bargains with the child; instead, freely given, it enables, strengthens, and empowers. The recipient of such love/grace remains free to respond or not.

Human Destiny

In contrast to the perennial, the (later) biblical view of human destiny (of personal survival after death) makes the eventual fellowship between God and man a possibility, but only a possibility. It is not automatic and cannot be brought about through the exercise of mystical disciplines or practices; there is no formula or method that can *make* it happen. A person's relationship with God is grounded in the individual's choice of a course of life. It can be in direct opposition to God or toward harmony with him; the nature of a person's decision determines his destiny. If man's soul or spirit enters into fuller communion with God, it does so with two important qualifications: first, it does so not according to necessity, but by the quality of human nature--man can decide his own course of action; second, the soul retains the personal essence of the person himself--it is not an unconscious element in human nature, but is a vital, active part of the human character. The spiritual reunion between God and man is not the vision of the piece returning to the whole, but of "persons" coming into a relationship. Biblical philosophy, therefore, allows human beings to be mortal, to have a range of action, alternatives and options. Among these choices is the ability to come into an everlasting, mutual relation with God, a concept that is logically impossible for mystical religion. One commentary on this topic follows:

Beliefs about life after death as it relates to human nature are found in two forms in the Hebraic traditions. First, the ancient Hebrew view as a community rather than as achieving an individual, personal life beyond the grave. Because there is not detachable soul, death brings about the individual's demise. The ongoing people of God, including a person's legacy of children and deeds, continues. In a rather undeveloped form, some Hebrew people held to a vague notion that the dead lingered on in a region outside or under the earth, not in God's presence. Not particularly attractive terms designate this spot: "Ditch," "Pit," "Realm of Death," and "Sheol." Preventing a

future of total extinction and giving sharp focus to *this* life, such a secondary religious tenet does suggest the continuance of a component, however minor, of human nature. The precise nature of this element was simply not of concern. Just before the New Testament period, Hebrew civilization pictured a different life after death, which included a restored communion with God. As was the case in earlier times, philosophical speculations about the nature of existence in the life hereafter were secondary.⁵⁰

The second general form of Hebraic views of life after death posits that by acts of God, deserving⁵¹ persons may be resurrected or transfigured to everlasting life. Transformed persons may continue their self-aware life in the greater presence of God. Notions of purgatory, hell, and hell-as-annihilation along with ideas of continued life at the moment of death or at a final judgment are among the speculations dotting the biblical literature and communities.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 400.

⁵¹Over the centuries many adherents of biblical religion have proposed many contrasting and conflicting standards for qualifying as a person "deserving" life after death in the presence of God.

RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

Understanding God's Purpose

The patterns set in motion by biblical religion make the question of religious knowledge of the utmost importance. In essence, man has been brought into a state of potential. Everything has been primed in advance: he can collaborate with God, to match his actions with God's intention. It is possible to feel the momentum of this idea building; in the biblical outlook individuals can make the decision to let their wills act in unison with that of God, they can stand ready to live in accordance with the whole purpose of history. But how do they do so? How does they know if their actions are correct? How do they know what God's intentions are?

In trying to answer these questions, the biblical approach begins with a word of caution: no one is ever able to know God completely. No mortal can "become God" in the same sense as can the mystic. No one can claim, "I am God." At best, a human being can only gather information about God, collect insights into the workings of God in history, and on this basis construct what he believes to be a close approximation to God's will. But there is always room for error. Man is a finite being; he can make honest mistakes, he can misjudge. There are, however, two things working in his favor: God's steadfast nature and desire to have that fellowship brought about. There is no method that guarantees perfect religious knowledge; man must act on trust. Consequently, the first step to such knowledge is the sincere desire and decision to understand God, no matter how imperfect that understanding may be.

Rational and Emotional Understanding

The quality of knowledge of God is both rational and emotional. It is a full response on the part of man to the character and person of God. The mystic must reject reason as a reliable approach to religious knowledge. He asserts that his personal revelation into the mysteries of ultimate reality transcend rational modes of thought; they cannot be described or explained. Enlightenment, therefore, remains a singular experience.

In biblical religion, however, there is room for a rational approach to God, because man cannot know God except through the information he gathers. Nothing can be known about God in advance. In discussing this issue, Cherbonnier explains:

Knowledge of such a God, like knowledge of any other person, would depend upon what he said and did. It would thus satisfy the requirement (that) it would be radically empirical, even experimental. For knowledge of a person's words and deeds is obtained, not by

abstract deduction, but altogether "*a posteriori*."⁵²

God is personal, a Someone, not a something; he is anthropomorphic. And, just as with mortals, his personality is evident in action. It is pieced together by the observer on the basis of what he does. To clarify this point further, one might imagine that two strangers are brought into a room. One person has no knowledge of the other; he can only observe his actions and guess about his nature. The second, however, knows a great deal about the first. He has been fully briefed on his habits, background, beliefs, and personality. Such is the case with man and God in biblical philosophy. God has an intention; the complete nature of that intention is unknown, since God chooses to not be fully known; but there are clues. One can assume that God has placed trust in mankind by virtue of his creating persons with the freedom to act.

⁵²Cherbonnier, "The Word of God," p. 272.

Any conclusions one can make about God are products of observation and intuition. They are based on knowledge after the fact (*a posteriori*). Consequently, human reason becomes an important device in helping humans sift through the evidence to understand God. Moreover, the biblical narratives are a long chronicle of God's activities in history; the Bible pays so much attention to history because it is the record of God's acts in this world that give humanity some clues about his nature. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Bible is essentially an historical document.⁵³ By piecing together the actions of God in time, one can begin to interpret his intentions. The relationship, therefore, between history as a series of events and knowledge about God is a significant aspect of biblical philosophy. Cherbonnier makes this point very explicit when he states:

Knowledge of persons, of course, can never be attained by the methods of science and philosophy alone. In fact, if the person chooses to "clam up," it can be attained by no method at all. It is always dependent upon his own initiative. And this is all that is meant by revelation; one free agent voluntarily discloses something of himself to another by his words and deeds; that is, through particular, historical events. To say that the Bible is the revelation of God is simply to say that it records the words and mighty acts by which he made himself known to a particular people at times and places of his own choosing.⁵⁴

Drawing Judgment

⁵³This is not to propose that every word in the Bible reports an historical event. Truth-bearing myth and legend are among the literary forms in the Bible.

⁵⁴Cherbonnier, "Is There A Biblical Metaphysic?", p. 465.

The biblical view admittedly uses human reason as the groundwork for gaining religious knowledge. It also accepts knowledge based on informed faith. Because human understanding of God is incomplete, man cannot make finalized assertions about his character or intention. After the process of observing God's actions in history, however, certain key ideas and patterns appear. God acts with consistency; he does not betray mankind or work to negate human freedom. He does not take back what he has given, even if it appears to be misused.⁵⁵ From this evidence, persons can make tentative judgments about God. Like a jury, individuals must come to terms with God; they must make a decision. It is impossible to know with absolute objectivity what occurred, although there are witnesses and testimony and information. To preserve human freedom, God never acts in overwhelming ways that compel belief. Moreover, because God is personal, there is always a dynamic quality that prevents one from saying, "Yes, I know him completely." In making a decision, therefore, one enters into what can be called (informed) faith. It is a difference between "I think" and "I believe." That distinction is often subtle and refined. It is certainly difficult; but in allowing room for both, biblical religion maintains the position that the essence of human life is in relation: relation to oneself, to others, and to God.

In using the image of a jury, the importance of decision-making is brought into focus as a part of religious knowledge. In the biblical view, it is impossible for a person touched by God's acts to abstain from the balloting. Abstention is judgment by default. Although biblical religion is open to questions of interpretation, it asserts that religious knowledge can only be gained through active, conscious effort. It is possible, of course, for people to ignore God's disclosures willingly, to block them out or let them remain dormant. Hence, the biblical references to those "who have ears but do not hear, and eyes but do not see."

Knowledge Means Action

There is a strong emphasis in biblical thought to actualize what is potential, to act on what has been seen or heard. A connection therefore exists between the information available in religious knowledge and how that information is used in practice. The two must be taken together. The nature of understanding God's intention is so constructed that it forces people into action; some response, even a negative one, is required by

⁵⁵Dr. Cherbonnier once said in a class that God's greatest gift to humanity is the capacity to sin; that is, God has endowed mortals with the freedom to choose, and God will never override human freedom, even if it is employed in utter opposition to God's will. Thus, the Hitlers make their demonic choices alongside the Schweitzers.

understanding God's role in history. Unlike the perennial system, where spiritual disciplines precede unitive knowledge, biblical religion calls for the one unified movement of knowledge and action. It makes the search for truth practical. Whatever one understands to be God's intention, one must try to fulfill that purpose in one's own life. The recognition of God's purpose, therefore, involves mankind. Instead of forcing human beings out of the finite world, God's purpose increases their interaction with it.

The Word

The unique image of God found in biblical religion has a direct bearing on the idea of religious knowledge. As previously noted, biblical religious knowledge is a *posteriori*. However, in accepting God as Someone, biblical philosophy allows one important factor: communication. The evidence left by God in history is intentional. It directs mankind toward fulfilling the larger purpose which God wills.

God is able, then, to interject his Word directly into the flow of time; he is not silent or impassive. The figure of the prophets is therefore built around the Word of God. They are the agents through which God discloses directly to people. Communication passes from God to chosen persons, and from them to others. This implies that there is a system of checks and balances that prevents individuals from acting out of ignorance, and it makes it even more difficult to avoid an encounter with God. The image of the Hebrew prophet is of one who stands over and against the idolatrous movement of history, one who declares that human freedom has been misused, that the wrong choice has been made. Biblical religion recognizes that wrong judgments can be corrected, and that God can intercede to help people shift direction.

Interpreting the Word

Although God manifests himself in both actions and words that do not fully reveal God's complex nature, they do provide a clear indication of his purpose. There are elements in perennial philosophy that assert that the knowledge of God can be broken down into two categories: God as he is revealed, and God as he is in himself. Biblical philosophy rejects this notion. It is another way of dividing reality into two realms, to propose one god-figure for this world, and maintain the reality of God for the higher realm. This shifts God's nature to fit the definitions imposed by the perennial concept of the Absolute. It does, however, raise an issue which is pertinent to religious knowledge. If it is accepted that one-to-one contact between man and God is not likely, then any communication is secondary. This implies that religious knowledge is primarily a matter of interpretation. For example, if two men are watching a third person go

through some action, they might each "see" the action differently. It is possible, then, for knowledge of God to be distorted through this process.

Biblical religion posits that there is a constant truth in which God operates; human interpretation of that truth may vary, but the real truth remains unchanged. The same claim can be made by perennial philosophers. The difference, however, is that while truth can be discovered by the mystic, it always remains external to the finite world. The static truth of perennial philosophy may go misunderstood, since it has no power to speak for itself; the only source of real information is the mystic who claims to have experienced it. But if two mystics disagree, the whole process becomes even more subjective and impossible to resolve.

It is much more probable that the biblical God's truth will be revealed to man, because the lines of communication are already established. It can be stated that the goal of the biblical philosopher is to clarify and help mature that process, to sort through the evidence, both in word and act, and then to bring human interpretation into harmony with the will of God.

CONSEQUENCES FOR LIVING

Human Responsibility

Fundamental human nature in the biblical view is such that each person is in relation, that everyone lives in a real and changing world, that everyone has a significant capacity to make genuine decisions, and that individuals are responsible for their actions. No one is the impotent victim of time; each can make a range of choices and act on them without God's control. Decision implies standards by which choices are made along with responsibility and accountability, hence ethics⁵⁶ or morality. The values inherent in biblical morality is set against the backdrop of history: because individuals are created as free agents, they have power - with grace - to influence the conditions of the natural world; they can move history. But history is not endless or unconscious; it is the product of God's will, an intentional act with a definite purpose. Cherbonnier explains the significance of the biblical conception of time:

The Bible has simply never heard that time, as distinct from many of the things that happen "in" time, is something to be redeemed "from." When it speaks of ultimate fulfillment, it uses definitely temporal terms: "Life everlasting," "world without end." The phrase "eternally" means, in the original Greek, not a timeless state, but

⁵⁶"Ethics" and "morality" (and their variations) are used interchangeably in this text.

"the life of the age to come."⁵⁷

Consequently, it is the responsibility of human beings as caretakers of history to discover what God intends for humanity and to mold human action to match that purpose. Morality as an abstraction, then, involves a judgment on how well that responsibility has been met. Biblical religion holds that individuals and communities of people can be held accountable for their chosen behaviors. Biblically speaking, the moral person is open to the truth, hears the truth, comes to grips with it, and then acts consistently to "do the truth."

Many faithful individuals and communities have turned to the words of the Bible for moral solutions, the consequences for truly living their faith. However, numerous value-laden issues facing post-biblical humanity are not even known to the biblical writers - for example, *ought to do* and *ought not to do* problems resulting from modern science and technology. Moreover, consistency on ethical issues among biblical authors is simply not available. As one scholar notes:

Biblical ethics is unyieldingly diverse. The Bible contains many books, and more traditions, each addressed in a specific cultural and social context to a particular community facing concrete questions of moral conduct and character. Biblical ethics does not provide an autonomous and timeless and coherent set of rules; it provides an account of the work and will of the one God, and it evokes the creative and faithful response of those who would be God's people. The one God of scripture assures the unity of biblical ethics, but there is no *simple* (italics ours) unitive understanding even of that one God or of that one God's will. To force biblical ethics into a

⁵⁷Cherbonnier, *Hardness of Heart*, p. 80.

timeless, systematic unity is to impoverish it.⁵⁸

Integrating Life Forces

The word "religion" appears nowhere in the Hebrew Scriptures. There is no such word in biblical Hebrew. In the New Testament the Greek word often translated "religion" is used only about a dozen times and refers rather narrowly to patterns of worship, duties to God, or to allegiance to the Faith. Why is there little or no "religion" in the Bible? One biblical scholar has commented:

The infrequent use of "religion" in the Bible is due to the fact that the concept of "religion" is itself alien to the core of biblical thought. The basic meaning of faith to the Hebrew is the concrete response of the whole [person] to God's call and obedience to [God's] command, not intellectual acceptance of a body of truth or even correct observance of [ritual] practice.⁵⁹

Each moment of daily living in a covenant relationship with the sovereign of creation was the plan for the Hebrew people. Their commitments to God and to each other included every involvement at home, at work, and in the community, all unified by private prayer or corporate worship.

⁵⁸A. D. Verhey, "Biblical Ethics," *The Oxford Companion To The Bible*, ed. by B. M. Metzger and M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford, 1993), p. 202.

⁵⁹F. D. Gealy, "Religion," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. R-Z, p. 32.

Thus, one of the key elements of biblical philosophy is the importance of action, verbal and physical. It is the framework for gathering knowledge of God, understanding his actions in the world, and hearing his word. The same condition is true for persons; it is a pattern of integrated life that is vital to the biblical approach. Nothing is splintered or held apart.⁶⁰ Knowledge, action, and morality work together in human existence; they each play a role in bringing man to fellowship with God. What defines morality for biblical religion, therefore, is not so much the isolated codes on any given action, but how well one balances off the variables in life and keeps them working in harmony in particular circumstances. To clarify this, one can say that for a person to hear the word of God and then not to act is immoral. It cannot be justified purely on the basis of abstract acceptance, because such a justification is incomplete. The weight of biblical morality requires that each person and community make the transition from the theoretical to the practical, that religious knowledge be brought to bear on everyday life, and that everyone give it the strength and vitality of their own actions. This is what is meant by an integration of life forces, and it is a consistent theme in biblical religion to keep concerns of God and humanity grounded firmly in the reality of this world.

Man in Relation

A cardinal virtue in biblical philosophy is that each person ought to maintain the trust of God and of his fellow men. The fabric of biblical morality is strongly tied to the ideal of truth. The gift of freedom was an act of trust by God, and this is indicative of the repeated references to him as a God of love and compassion. In essence, it implies that the biblical view is a blend of the practical and the emotional. It does not require that anyone deny his passions, as the perennial mystic must, or that he minimize or sever all his contacts with other persons. On the contrary, biblical religion adheres to the ideal of community in which each person not only fulfills his individual responsibility, but acts to help others meet their own demands. At the very least, the biblical view requires people to be conscious of the condition of those around them, and to take into account the others' needs; everyone is always a person in relation to others as well as to God.

Community, then, is built on the principle that reality is personal; that each living thing is joined to the next not by a hierarchy, but by personal mutual relations, by equal regard. Each person is a member of the world community. No one can be justifiably excluded, and it is the responsibility of those within the community to make certain that everyone

⁶⁰A sermon on this theme is found beginning on page 49.

is given the opportunity to be included. The idea of fellowship, therefore, is an integral part of the biblical world view. Ultimately, the Bible calls everyone to respond with love (*agape*) toward their fellows and toward God. As noted by Cherbonnier:

For the Bible, creation is good because of who created it. The watershed which separates this view from pessimistic philosophies and religions reflects the difference between their respective gods. When knowledge, conceived in terms of immediate or demonstrable certainty, is deified, the derogation of the world follows. For the Bible, on the contrary, knowledge, though a very great good, is not an end in itself, and indeed is only made perfect when devoted to the right end, the service of "agape." Without love, it runs amuck.⁶¹

The Problem of Sin

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 83.

The idea of such a caring community is the ideal. Having confronted his personal duty, one must also be aware that what is called evil and sin continues to exist in the world. In the Bible sin is idolatry, the choice of a false god (e.g., power, wealth, a nation, oneself, Zeus) and the values and relationships that flow from such an allegiance. Idolatrous choices betray God and his intentions for humanity. One might conclude that all instances of sin involve a betrayal of God and probably of other persons. The contract that binds people together and mankind with God is founded in trust; when anyone chooses to disregard that contract he acts against both humankind and God; he becomes idolatrous.⁶² This is a general premise of biblical religion. Cherbonnier is careful to note the uniqueness of the biblical concept of sin:

It is sometimes imagined that the idea of sin is peculiar to the Bible. Actually, nearly every philosophy and religion has its own definition of sin. They differ in their respective conceptions of what "constitutes" sin--hybris, as tragedy would have it, or misplaced allegiance, as the Bible maintains.⁶³

In its broad sense, then, sin is breaking the bond of trust between the reality of men and of God. It seems strange to think that such an action could tempt the "good man" - i.e., the person who maintains the ideal of truth. It is not, however, the action itself that is tempting, but the removal of responsibility. It is more comfortable for a man to feel no obligation to anyone at any time; the burden of morality makes us feel involved, concerned, responsible. This idea of involvement and responsibility is a major thrust of biblical religion. A real temptation is to put aside the trust of men and God and set up a private universe in which there are no responsibilities. It is a comfort short-lived, for it demands the price of losing personal relations. If a man breaks his ties with others, if he loses their trust, he sacrifices the personal relation that bound them together. Biblical religion contends that this process of destroying relations is responsible for sin and temptation. It means that an act of sin is inhuman because it denies its perpetrator the right to fulfill God's will. The logic of biblical thought underscores this concept by relating it to the ideas concerning human nature and religious knowledge.

The Aim of Biblical Philosophy

The ultimate aim of biblical philosophy is to increase the flow of personal affection among human beings. It relies on the ideals of friend-

⁶²Cherbonnier, "Idolatry," in *A Handbook of Christian Theology*, pp. 176-183.

⁶³Cherbonnier, "Biblical Faith and the Idea of Tragedy," p. 51.

ship, mutual trust, and common incentive to weld men into a community. In contrast to mystical systems, the biblical approach not only allows the finite world its reality, but also considers this world to be a joy, filled with opportunity. This life is the ultimate gift of God; it is not only to be taken seriously, but also enjoyed. Whereas the mystic has the inclination to refuse pleasure, the biblical view aims at refining pleasure to match God's intention as life's architect. As noted by Cherbonnier:

The Bible ... is never content to side-step an obstacle. It will settle for nothing less than complete victory. Its God wants, not the annihilation of unruly passions, but their conversion, for the greatest powers for evil may also be transformed into even greater forces for good.⁶⁴

A theme of biblical thought, then, is external. It moves across the lines of communication among people in relation, and it attempts to cement them together, to strengthen human contact and understanding. Ultimately, this is designed not only to benefit the community of men, but to draw the individual, free human being into relationship with God, to make the human and the divine enter a time of harmony and development. The end of history, therefore, has always been looked forward to as the beginning of a new age, a time when word and action become synonymous and mutual trust is commonplace. This, too, is an ideal, but it favors biblical philosophy with a feeling of hope and expectancy that is distinctive among world religious traditions.

⁶⁴Cherbonnier, *Hardness of Heart*, p. 82.

SERMONS ON BIBLICAL THEMES

You are at a reunion of friends; in the course of reminiscing, one of them says, "Describe your parents for me." How would you answer? Would you report their physical appearances? Would you offer a detailed biography? Would your language be complex? Or, would you try to convey some of their outstanding qualities more poetically than technically?

You are at home; a child asks, "What is God like?" How would you answer? Today we celebrate a way in which the Christian Church talks about God, and how the child's question may be answered. "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" - the Trinity - does not describe the Creator's ingredients or appearance. Instead, poetic language helps us to understand the historic biblical communities' experiences of God.

To be sure, classical, medieval theologies befuddle the modern mind. While some scholars understand their intricacies, so-called orthodox expressions of the Trinity, such as implied in the Nicene Creed, make little sense today. Those ancient minds were very different from Jesus and from you and me. Nonetheless, the question remains: "What is God like?"

Some people believe that God created the universe, set the laws of nature in place, and then went away; there is no point to prayer, because god isn't around to listen; moreover, the Bible is totally a human invention, because the Creator never revealed anything to anyone. The most one can say about God is to liken the Creator to a disinterested architect.

Still others believe that God is spiritual inwardness - silent, unknowable, beyond being "Someone" - like a sacred mist dwelling within each of us.

Science fiction sometimes depicts the Creator as pure energy. Characters in the film "Star Wars" frequently offered a prayer of sorts, "May the Force be with you!"

For many individuals, past and present, God is the Grand Puppeteer pulling the strings of all women, men, and children. This god directly controls all events in the universe, including all human behavior.

Many other responsible persons propose that God, all gods, are fanciful human inventions; God is like a child's imaginary friend.

Quite differently, the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim experiences of God share the experience and conviction that in some profound, mysterious, and holy way, the Creator of the universe and giver of life is Someone like a wonderful, caring parent. In ancient times the word "Father" - used

poetically - was valuable; this image remains cherished by Christians all over our planet; however, today the word "Mother" might convey God's parenting likeness, too. Either "Father" or "Mother" can point with reverence to an aspect of our experience of the Divine Majesty.

A few years ago in Kansas City a dog wandered onto a baseball field; he loped around and eventually sat on third base. The fans began to yell a variety of commands at him, but the dog didn't move; finally he had to be carried away. Later a sportswriter commented that the dog was confused by the many overwhelming voices, none dominant enough for him to hear and obey.

There are many voices shouting at you and me to accept them as our own lord and master. The New Testament proclaims that God, awesomely active in Jesus the Christ, is THE Voice to respond to. Christ is the very Word of God made mortal flesh in Jesus, a Voice understandable by all humanity, the only perfect Image of the Father, the One who shows us that God loves personally and dynamically, the co-eternal Son. More ambiguous metaphor, to be sure, yet words of power and meaning!

A nephew bathed and soothed the deteriorating body of his sick uncle, all but abandoned by other family members. "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars," remarked a relative. "Neither would I," the nephew replied. Many of us have experienced occasions when, if we had known ahead what we would be called upon to do, we would have run in the opposite direction, certain that we were not capable of helping. Yet, if we are at all willing and open, we discover a quiet, new strength to serve. That refreshing power is God's Holy Spirit energizing us individually and as the church to minister, even in situations from which, left to ourselves, we would shy away.

In our liturgy of healing today, we are assured of God's Holy Spirit, enabling us to cope with our emotional, spiritual, and physical struggles and infirmities; through our heartfelt, prayerful affirmation of who we are - beloved children of God - the Giver of life continually restores us to inner wholeness.

When I was ordained a deacon (nearly 30 years ago) the processional hymn was the one we sang this morning. "I bind unto myself today the strong Name of the Trinity...." Although the music as we have it is about a hundred years old, the words are attributed to the 4th and 5th century Saint Patrick of Ireland, one of the holiest and most significant saints (I say, without bias). Legend has it that the hymn was designed to protect St. Patrick and his monks from their enemies, both human and demonic. Although it is long and not simply sung, its verses profess the majesty and glory of God's self-disclosure, especially in Christ. For any occasion of

Christian worship - baptism, confirmation, ordination, Trinity or any other Sunday, indeed, in every moment of our daily lives, what could be more appropriately proclaimed by each of us?

Likewise, our other hymns and prayers, the readings from Scripture, our entire Liturgy is in praise of and thanksgiving to God as Holy Trinity - not limited to the Nicene or any other Creeds' phrasings, or to my understanding or yours. You and I do not worship today or any other day a particular doctrine, an absent Creator, spiritual inwardness, forces, a puppeteer, or an imaginary friend! Instead, "with Angels and Archangels and with the faithful of every generation, we lift our voices with all creation as we sing: Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might...."

If I were to describe my parents or any other person I love, I would not use precise, quantitative language. I would choose terms of endearment to point to my experience of their love in my life. The expression "Trinity" points to God's graceful love in our lives as Creator, Word, and Spirit - an imprecise term of profound, cosmic endearment; yet more than a term - the confession of our experience of and true faith in the "Father, who with the Son and the Holy Spirit live and reign, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."

On a worldwide basis from the most ancient to contemporary peoples a search for "something else" has been commonplace. A sense of a "Sacred" surpassing human experience has led generations to seek a relationship with whatever or whomever is holy, worthy of reverence, wondrous, and spiritually distinct from human initiatives.

For some individuals the Sacred is regarded as purely imaginary, indicative of immature men and women unable to cope with the realities of an accidental universe. Others confine their vision of the Sacred to the many godlike heroes we create among the rich and famous, or to excessive pursuits of achievements, or to undue reverence for golf, baseball, and the like. All very different from the Christian experience of the Sacred!

In anticipation of Trinity Sunday I've been on the lookout for public references to the Sacred or God! In a newspaper I read about a Middle Eastern sect that believes God is basically kind, but inactive; this good God simply doesn't do anything. Consequently, the sect's rituals aim to pacify a very active, evil Satan and his angel. Very different from the active God we worship here!

I also read of another "god" which brought back a 1970s memory of a weeping college student. She was going through a difficult time personally and had met a character known as "Brother Julius." She told me how wonderful he seemed, that he professed to be "god." She asked what I thought; should she join his group where life would be so much easier? I suggested that she check out his claim. "How?" she asked. I told her to invite him to my next class and that he and I would converse in biblical Hebrew; certainly that would be a first step in checking out his credentials as God. As I anticipated, he did not show up. She was spared his deceit, and we persuaded her to meet with a college counselor to work through her problems. [Incidentally, my Hebrew is limited to "Shalom" - but the bluff worked!] As the Hartford Courant reported this week about Julius, "A dedicated corps of 200 devoted followers has dwindled to perhaps 50 or fewer. Many who have quit tell stories of sexual and financial exploitation, and say Brother Julius is acting in an increasingly bizarre and abusive way." Very different from the God we worship here!

This past week I heard on a news broadcast that the Supreme Court continues to allow the pledge of allegiance to include the words "under God." The national motto "In God We Trust" is on our currency. On our dollar bills we find the Great Seal of the United States including the eye of a watchful God; nearby Latin words note "He has favored our undertakings." I'm not sure which God we are supposed to be under, trust or has favored our undertakings. A long lasting belief of several of our nation's

Founding Fathers is that the Creator permits the universe to function without God's care or participation in any way. Deists, as they're called, view the Bible only as a human invention and prayer only as a psychological venting. Any meaning of "God" in the Pledge or on our money is designed to be sweeping and vague. Very incomplete compared to the God of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus to whom we sang "Holy, Holy, Holy!"

Also, I thought about the God proposed by philosophers: the First Cause, perfect Being, the Grand Designer. I remembered the gods of Greece and Rome: poorly behaving, undependable, and admittedly concocted by human imaginations. I reflected on those psychotherapists who feel that god is no more or less than our inner feelings. I considered again the venerable Hindu tradition of the Sacred experienced as nonpersonal spirituality; I thought of Hinduism's 330 million mythological gods, which one respectful Hindu calls "educational toys" pointing to pure Spirit. My mind turned to the sophisticated Buddhist tradition concerned with liberation from attachments instead of a relationship with a personal God. All very different from the Sacred Someone to whom we sang "Holy God we praise thy name!"

I recalled the words of Professor John Mbiti, an African, Anglican priest, who proposes that the God described in the Bible is none other than the God who is already known in the framework of traditional African religion. In addition, I reflected respectfully on the Great Spirit of Native Americans, people who remind us about the proper use of God's creation. Similar to the God we worship here!

Clearly, the vast majority of human beings share a common desire for the Sacred, the Holy, the Mysterious Other. However, we differ profoundly about who or what the Sacred is. We also disagree significantly as to what constitutes genuine experiences of the Sacred. We vary further on the daily consequences and implications of dissimilar Sacredness. In my world religions courses so many students want all religions to be the same, all gods indistinguishable, all basic religious experiences alike, with all impacting life compatibly. To be sure, when we listen to informed spokespersons of the great global traditions, we hear clearly the collective human need for the Sacred; however, we do not hear the same convictions and experiences.

The Semitic Christians of the first century were concerned, not with what the Sacred is, but with what God has done, is doing, and will continue to do in human history. With Abraham, Moses, and Jesus they knew and trusted the one God whose acts include the Father creating and loving, the Son revealing divine purposes and embracing us in the New Covenant, and the Holy Spirit comforting, healing, strengthening, and inspiring. Later speculations about God's substance and inner life led to imperfect, needlessly complex formulations; it is a relief that we worship God, not doctrines about God! With no arrogant judgments about the faithful of

other religions, you and I affirm our trust in the Sacred, Who is the everlasting Trinity, in whose image we are all made.

The month of June is very special in my life. In the Name of the Holy Trinity I was baptized (in 1937), confirmed (too young, in 1949), made a deacon (in 1963) and ordained a priest (in 1965). The most important of these events is my baptism which defines most profoundly who I am. 56 years ago I was bound to the strong name of the Trinity, and I choose to remain so bound. My life continues to be fashioned by these past sacramental occasions, nurtured by the ongoing sharing of consecrated bread and wine. I believe firmly that no other gods, ultimate realities or religious experiences are meaningful, graceful, beneficial or trustworthy.

You and I with our new diocesan bishop-elect are joined together in our confession of a true faith in the Holy Trinity, in our common baptism, in our eucharistic celebrations, and in our mission to invite all people to this life. On Trinity Sundays and always we join Christians across the centuries singing, "Glory to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; we will praise you and highly exalt you for ever." Amen.

Did you ever have anyone ask you, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" That's an awful question which seems to imply that you're a nobody until you've grown up. It suggests that you're only a "somebody" when you have a job, preferably one with status.

There's another problem with this inquiry. Disappointing answers are often given. When I was in the early years of elementary school, I wanted to be the man who cranked the gates up and down at railroad crossings! I'm sure that my parents would have preferred more prestigious inclinations. Even during high school, when I was gravitating toward ordained ministry, I was warned that I'd only be able to afford to eat spaghetti for the rest of my life (which incidentally was not a drawback for me). At about the same time another adult remarked condescendingly that although I'd never be financially successful, I'd have an easy life without businesslike competition.

When adults gather as strangers at social events, what is it they want to know right after names are exchanged? Yes, what we do! Sometimes that is a useful way to begin a conversation. However, too often people want to know whether you're anyone worth talking to, whether you're "anybody."

Personally, I dread those moments. With my composite career, what should I answer? I'm certainly not ashamed of what I've done, but most people try to relate to me according to their values and their impressions of what I do. When I have answered "teacher," they want to know what kind. If I say "college professor," I'm likely to become more worth talking to. If pressed further, I respond "in state higher education institutions." At that, some elitists think less of me.

Do I say "writer" and most likely disappoint - even alienate - them that most of my books are college philosophy texts instead of a great novel? Should I announce "priest" and conjure up images ranging from St. Francis to Pat Robertson - neither of whom I want to be identified with. Should I mention serving as an honorary canon of Christ Church Cathedral and, except for knowledgeable Episcopalians, create a polite yet puzzled pause; in any case, in their eyes I'm probably more worthwhile than when I ministered to a small, rural congregation. Or, should I say "President of The Litchfield Institute," which no one recognizes but sounds a bit classy?

These days I am tempted to announce, "I'm retired." Does this information make me less worthwhile? To some, it will imply that I'm not productive enough to justify my existence. Must you and I be fundamentally known and valued according to what we do? Are we to be entombed in our jobs? Last month in an issue of the Hartford Courant's "Business Weekly" a

feature article on older workers and retirees included these words: "...self-esteem, status, identity and recognition...also are tied into a job. It's hard to lose all that [when you retire]." A sad commentary!

Over the years I've been associated with many educators for whom there is no life beyond their jobs. Although many students do benefit from their constant availability, such educators seem addicted to their work. The community praises such workaholics for their so-called selfless dedication, and yet these addicts are entombed in partial realities, twilight zones removed from true human fulfillment. Furthermore, they are often neglectful of themselves, their families, and their friends.

In today's Collect we prayed "O God, whose blessed Son came into the world that he might...make us children of God and heirs of eternal life..." And, in the Gospel we heard "...he is God not of the dead, but of the living..."

As a younger person, I thought that the older I grew, the more I would become concerned with life after death, hopefully my own resurrection; in preparation, during my mature years I would behave better and become more pious. Actually, as my age becomes more and more actuarially ominous, I seem to behave no better; piety continues to elude me, and my own eventual resurrection has become one of my quieter hopes. I'm not worrying about "getting into heaven" - or elsewhere. When I die, I trust the Creator totally to provide - in love, mercy and justice - whatever is best for me.

In the meantime, I am interested in living the LIFE God has given us here and now! Moreover, by "life" I do not mean one centered on my vocational tasks or accomplishments, but the living out who I am, who we are, by our common Baptism. Each of us is graced with the fundamental identity of being a unique child of God - each different genetically and psychologically, each of us with a distinctive history. You and I are so much more than our jobs, whether we serve as presidents, priests, laborers, or homemakers. Indeed, we are more than a random development in God's evolving universe. You and I are intended to be first and foremost children of God, adopted by the Creator, and baptized in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit! As such, we have received the Creator's legacy, the Word of God in Christ; and, that Word, God's purpose for us, is not buried in our jobs, or for that matter in our possessions, in our everyday responsibilities, or in our struggles. Our Baptism is an image and a power that challenges the workplace's sense of reality. Instead, our identity as Christian persons is the life-giving context for our occupations, our belongings, our obligations - even our races, ethnic heritages and genders.

Christ has made us children of God and heirs of eternal life now; we don't have to wait for life after death! Today's resurrected life is one saved from superficial identities based on our various doings and their imagined merits; our justification, our significance, is accomplished by the wider vision of faithful journeying within our baptismal covenant, the liberation from the bondage of lesser - sometimes deadly - measures of who we are.

Our need for this healing resurrection is rooted in human nature; the reality of this resurrection is revealed in the Christian experience of ongoing, genuine life! By the Holy Communion about to be celebrated, you and I are nurtured in the most profound source and meaning of authentic life: the Holy Baptism we share, the baptismal identity that affirms us, justifies us, declares our worthiness, and calls us all to ministry. (For some of us the laying-on-of hands for healing is another sacred event upholding our well-being.) From the fellowship and grace present in the Liturgy at this hour, we receive power to live a daily resurrected life as children of God, all baptized in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to the one, true God of the living!
Amen.

In the United States, and no doubt elsewhere, religion has become one of many distinct, optional activities. There are occasions when we want "religion" to provide a divine approval of what we're doing at the moment: at weddings and funerals, for graduations and dedications of buildings and the like. Some individuals hope that religion will solve their problems easily. Others look for an aura of unworldliness. Many others simply want to "get something out of" religion, perhaps to feel good for a while.

Actually, the word "religion" appears nowhere in Jesus' Bible! There is no such word in biblical Hebrew. In the New Testament the Greek word often translated "religion" is used only about a dozen times and refers rather narrowly to patterns of worship, duties to God, or to our allegiance to the Christian faith. Why is there little or no "religion" in the Bible? One biblical scholar has an explanation for us:

The infrequent use of "religion" in the Bible is due to the fact that the concept of "religion" is itself alien to the core of biblical thought. The basic meaning of faith to the Hebrew is the concrete response of the whole [person] to God's call and obedience to [God's] command, not intellectual acceptance of a body of truth or even correct observance of [ritual] practice.

(See "Religion" in the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible.)

Each moment of daily living in a covenant relationship with the Sovereign of creation was the plan for the Hebrew people. Their commitments to God and to each other included every involvement at home, at work, and in the community, all unified by private prayer or corporate worship. Typically and regrettably, the more bureaucratic participants over-regulated the Jewish community with too many rules and procedures.

Reflecting the ultimate beliefs of his heritage, the faith of Jesus was not a distinct activity of any sort; in that sense he did not have what is commonly called a religion. Moreover, his life was not unworldly, and he did not minister with the intention of just making people feel good for a while. Jesus' legacy is neither a compartmentalized religion nor an over-regulated life. His primary mandate affecting the totality of everyone's life was and is: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." For Christ, for you and me, everything depends on this "Summary of the Law."

Why, then, according to today's Gospel reading, did Jesus seem to violate the unified life of the covenant community? If the Chosen People

were to live in complete fellowship with the Lord of Creation, on what basis could Jesus say, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's?" Doesn't everything belong to God? Should any tribute whatsoever be paid to the non-believing Roman emperor ruling the Holy Land?

The question whether it is lawful for a faithful Jew to pay taxes to the emperor was an attempt by two opposing Jewish groups (the Pharisees and Herodians) to cause problems for Jesus. Because of regional circumstances, any specific reply would result in serious difficulties. However, his answer was a surprising evasion of the trap. Jesus did not try to spell out what is the emperor's and what is God's. Instead, he issued a challenge to the commitments and responses to various worldly claims on everyone's life. He left it to each person's conscience to determine what is God's and what is the state's.

Another implication of this Reading is frequently overlooked. A perfectionist would claim that Jesus, you, and I should always make the ideal choice, as if we were living entirely in God's community. We ought always to refuse to pay tribute to any secular official, especially to a pagan sovereign, and take the consequences. However, in Jesus' world, and our own, faithful people are not citizens of ideal communities truly "under God." We are most likely to live with conflicting loyalties: to the secular state as well as to God. In the particular incident of this Gospel Reading, not intended as a model for all circumstances, Jesus compromised skillfully. The imperfect setting in which he found himself, one not fully "under God," called for a less than ideal, evasive response. We learn from Christ's reply that following the will of God entails more than simplistic obedience to regulations of the Torah or clear-cut, ready idealism. Rather, in the words of a biblical theologian, "Discipleship is not attachment to an ideal, but walking in the light and being led by the Spirit."

(See Childs, Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments, p. 693.)

The Bible consistently implies that we should purge from our lives any distinct activity called "religion!" The issues for the people of the Old and New Testaments include all matters of human living. Regarding the specific concerns of today's Gospel, Christ challenges us to discern between the necessary obligations to our secular government and faithful relationships with God. In addition, you and I are reminded that Christian discipleship is neither a safe haven nor a clear-cut system of rigid, moral solutions. Instead, we are individuals and communities living simultaneously in the City of God and in the City of Man, often with conflicting commitments in ambiguous situations. The Good News of Christ includes the freedom, responsibility, challenge and grace for each of us to make

conscientious choices, as we walk boldly in the light, led gracefully by the Spirit. Amen.