

## Anxiety, Reaction, Faith

The talks I'm offering in here this year are designed to help us come to terms with what it means to live in an era when some things that people have believed to be the absolute truth about the way things are are passing away.

We've just spent a couple of years or so going through the teachings of Jesus as found in The Gospel of Thomas. This kind of study is of crucial importance for so many reasons. I don't mean this as critically as it sounds but many people who say that they "believe in Jesus" could not tell you virtually anything about him that is based on solid biblical and historical research. Most people get their knowledge of religion from superficial cultural sources.

For some of you what you hear from me in the weeks and months ahead may be disturbing, even upsetting. Because it will go counter to much that you may have been taught by the church in your past or assumed because of cultural absorption to be true. You may disagree with some of what you hear or find it discomfoting. That's okay. Jesus, standing firmly within the Jewish prophetic tradition, tended to make people uncomfortable before offering them solace.

In my teaching I want continually to ask you to explore and examine how you are practically and concretely doing with the issues of peace, love and joy in your life. If our primary goal and purpose in life is spiritual growth, which I believe it is, how are we doing in the specific relationships we have - with ourselves, with others, with the earth - regarding these matters?

I began to add to these three marks of living in "the spirit" the quality of "patience." "Patience" means taking a big, deep breath before we react to something; not being so quick to pass judgment.

Some people mistakenly think that patience is a personality trait. As in: "I'm just not a very patient person." Patience is not a personality trait - it is a skill. Patience is an enormously important, even transformative, spiritual practice.

The way all of us are trained to think, regardless of the tribe in which we have been raised, is by labeling things, events, especially people into "good or bad," "right or

wrong,” “safe or unsafe.” Patience, which Jesus meant when he said, “Don’t judge.” is a way to live with less fear, it is a way to contact that in is us which allows us to decide whether we want to contribute to divisiveness or to unity, to war or to peace.

Though I want you and I believe you can trust me on the matters I teach, if there is something you question or find challenging, check it out. But, be sure the sources you use are just as up-to-date and reliable as the ones you hope your doctor is using when she or he is about to do heart surgery or some other procedure on you.

I ended my last talk by saying that what we believe about “God” - whatever we mean when we use that word - matters. And, what we know and believe about Jesus matters as well. In the talks going forward my hope is that our awareness and experience of both of these matters not only grows in us at the knowledge and information levels but at the understanding and wisdom levels as well.

The biggest “no longer” and “not yet” space in which we live is the death of a theistic god. Or, an understanding that God is a being off out there somewhere who periodically invades this planet to do supernatural things - like impregnating young Jewish girls, dictating certain writings as sacred, stopping the sun in the sky, making hurricanes hit some places and not others, and making some children die premature deaths because God wants them more in heaven with him - this is always a male God - and at the same time is pleased to send others to burn eternally in hell.

This theistic God who does these supernatural things does many things that by our standards are immoral. This God, for example, hammers the Egyptians with plague after plague, one of which involved murdering the first born child of every Egyptian family. Then, when the Egyptian ruler changed his mind about letting the Israelites go free and sent his army after them, this God created a circumstance that, though it let the Israelites cross through the Red Sea, caused every Egyptian pursuing them to drown. Why would the Egyptians ever worship such a God?

By the way, that reference I made to having the sun stop in the sky is found in the book of Joshua. (Here the painting by John Martin, 1816, about this event is shown.) The belief at that time was that the sun rotated around the earth. The

Israelites and the Amorites were engaged in a battle and Joshua the leader of the army held up his arms and halted the sun from setting thus giving the Israelites more daylight in which they could slaughter more Amorites. It is hard to claim or practice that every human life is of infinite value if tribal values are allowed to trump love then or now.

By the way when those two trouble makers, Copernicus and Galileo, concluded that, no, the sun did not rotate around the earth but the earth rotated around the sun - which gave a huge shock to the cultural narcissism of the time - it was this very story from the book of Joshua that the church used to force Galileo to recant from his “unscriptural” assertion or die. Galileo remained under house arrest the rest of his life. Almost everyone outside the church embraced Galileo’s truth and the truths that came from it.

It was not until 1991 that the church, that is, the Roman Catholic church, finally admitted publicly that Galileo was right and that the church had been wrong in condemning him. 1991! The first landing on the moon was in 1969. I think this is a profoundly accurate and telling metaphor for how out of it and behind the times organized religion can be.

What many people meet in organized religion is a trivial God. A petty, angry, warlike God. Not the God of Jesus. We must work to avoid theological truth decay. I have loved, since first I found it, a prayer that was written by Willard Sperry who once was the Dean of the Harvard Divinity School. Listen to it:

“Give to us, O Lord, a right discernment between that which comes first in our faith and that which follows after. And when we would make much of that which cannot matter much to thee, recall us to the heart of our Christian profession, Jesus our Lord. Amen.”

This is, if we hear it, an arresting phrase: When we make much of that which cannot matter much to thee. My soul, how making much of what could matter less to God distracts religious organizations from what should be their true purpose and function. The most recent distraction has been over the issue of people with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual being welcome at all levels in the endeavor that claims to represent Jesus and his message.

The truth that Copernicus and Galileo revealed was something discovered. They didn't stop the sun from rotating around the earth. They revealed it. The way what we came to call the "solar system," and this was only the beginning, had always been true. It's revelation, however, was a profound shock to the world into which this truth became apparent.

There have been at least two other similar massive shocks.

One of these was that introduced by Sigmund Freud when he put forth the reality and power of the unconscious. There is much more to us than meets the eye and the ability to see who we really are is a difficult and life-long task.

The other shock to our collective conscious and unconscious system is one we will be dealing with throughout this year and for the rest of our time today. That is the shock of the evolving nature of the energy system in which we live and move and have our being. What egocentric humans have a hard time believing is that this energy system is beyond our ability to comprehend, that it is out of our control - meaning we are not God - that it can, in the blink of an eye, disrupt all our best laid plans. These, by the way, are all ways of describing what Jesus referred to as the realm of God, the rule of God.

Let's start with this: No religion and what are considered the "sacred writings" or any religion dropped down out of the sky upon the people who embrace that religion or its scriptures. All religions are what we know as "human constructs." Religion, in whatever form, is a socially constructed concept and it uses the symbol system, including words and images, drawn from the culture in which it arises.

This isn't a class in the history of religions but it needs to be said that the religions of people in India and the Orient, the religion of First Nations people and the religions that eventually evolved into the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity took different paths in their development. I'm focusing on how and why theistic religion developed.

One of the exciting things taking place in evolutionary theology is the belief that evolving human consciousness is, because everything is connected and everything

belongs, evolving human consciousness is creation itself becoming aware of itself. Human consciousness, however, is a two-edged sword.

Becoming conscious is a major trauma for the human animal. It is this consciousness that marks the human animal as being different from any other form of life. This difference fills us with an unbearable sense of dread.

If everyone of us were to speak the truth to each other, the one thing that we would say as true about us is how frightened we are. One cannot be human without being filled with chronic anxiety. It sounds depressing, I know, but surely it is true.

My dog never contemplates the end or obsesses over the fact that some day he will die. He doesn't need coffee to get started in the morning or alcohol to take the edge off at night. He's never contemplated suicide. Among the canine family there is no opioid epidemic. He has not amassed a stockpile of weapons to defend himself. Nor, have any of his relatives gone on a killing rampage at a public school or a house of worship. He has not exterminated six million of his breed because of their fur color or because he believed them to be genetically impure. These behaviors are things done consciously only by humans.

Further, these behaviors arise solely out of the human perceived need for security and survival, for esteem and affection, for power and control, and the desire to change some situation. It is indeed the paradox that tops them all: the very thing that makes us human is the thing that causes us to be so frightened. Namely, the awareness that we are finite.

There are three people I want to introduce you to today. The first a social anthropologist who won the Pulitzer Prize for his monumental work, "The Denial of Death." His name is Ernest Becker. I would say that this may be one of the ten most important books I have ever read and I highly recommend it to you - though you are about to get a somewhat brief summary of it.

In the process of denying the fact that we are going to die, humans have developed a number of "world views," or "biases" if you will, that promise us immortality.

These myths are called "immortality stories."

The first and simplest kind of immortality story is that we will figure out a way to avoid death and just keep on living in this body forever. Every culture, it seems, has such a story. Ancient Egypt had such myths. I can remember decades ago taking my family on a road trip and we went to Florida and visited what was alleged to be the Fountain of Youth discovered by Ponce de Leon. Even now people are putting faith and hope into genetic engineering and nanotechnology.

One thing that all of those who have sought some way of staying alive have in common is that they are now dead.

A second kind of immortality story is that of resurrection. This myth goes this way: “Yes, I have a body. Yes, my body is going to die. But, I can rise up and live again.” This belief started in Judaism and is shared by Christians and Muslims alike.

Though this seems to have fallen into disrepute today, there has been in our time a belief in cryogenics. That is a belief in a process that, when you die, you can have yourself frozen and when technology has advanced enough, you can be thawed out and repaired and revived.

Yet another immortality story, and this is the one that is likely held by the majority of people in the West is the belief that we have a soul which, when the body expires, departs the body and moves on to another realm. Your soul leaves your body, hangs around for a bit - this is held by many Buddhists - and then, either satisfied or not with the size of the crowd at your funeral, heads off up (wherever that is) and goes toward heaven. If you are conservative, it takes a right turn. If you are liberal, it goes left.

In some versions of Buddhism your spirit hangs around in a space called the bardo. One of the best-selling novels of last year was “Lincoln in the Bardo.” After a period of time your life is evaluated and there is one of three outcomes: you return to Source, you have to come back to earth and do it over, or you move on to the next level. Coming back to do it over is called reincarnation. Unless, you are a hillbilly and, then, it is called “reintarnation.”

The way you are evaluated according to the Tibetan Book of the Dead is that your heart is put on one side of a balance beam scale and a bird's feather is put on the other. If your heart is light as a feather, which is the origin of that phrase, you go to the next level.

By the way, you have noticed that the idea of zombies has recently exploded in the entertainment field. The body climbs back out of the grave and goes about eating brains. What a metaphor for our time.

In a future talk in here will deal with the soul immortality notion.

Yet another immortality story is that of leaving a legacy through which you live on in the world. You are currently sitting in Fondren Hall in the Jones Building. Both the Fondren family and the Jones family, big names in charitable giving in Houston, were members of St. Paul's. Indeed, Jesse Jones, along with two of his friends gave \$800,000 in 1929 for the construction of the cathedral across the plaza.

Ernest Becker makes much of this method of a way people live on in the world. People try to become heroes. This is what Hitler attempted to do with the Third Reich which was to have ruled for a thousand years. However, remember what Woody Allen said, "I don't want to live on in the hearts of my countrymen. I want to live on in my apartment."

Whatever a person believes, regardless of the period of history or the culture or the form the belief takes, no one believes what they believe on the strength of any "evidence" as we think of "evidence" with the dualistic mind. Whatever we believe we believe, say the social anthropologists and psychologists, because we are afraid of death.

Whenever it was in the span of evolution that the creature known as "human" came on the scene with the ability to be aware of its own finitude, along with that came also the ability to be anxious. No one can live with chronic, unrelieved angst and survive. They had to find a way to cope, to survive. There were many ways developed and designed to do this and one of the major ones for some groups of people was the creation of various theistic religious forms.

If, by definition, I am that which is other and separate from myself, how can I relate to that over against which I am defined, that which is other than I am? The historians and cultural anthropologists show that our ancient ancestors related to that other as if it too had a sense of personal consciousness. That is to say, since the world is teeming with life, that life must possess the same self-consciousness as these human did.

It was an easy step to conclude that these many other selves governed the vital forces apparent in all of life. If that was so, then humans needed to work out a way to live in relationship to these powerful beings in ways that gained their approval. “Since I have no control over the wind or rain, the sun and the dark, and yet these aspects of my world affect me and my survival dramatically, I should work out a way to appease them.”

In a future talk when we get to what Fundamentalists call “divine revelation,” I’ll elaborate more on the human creation of a theistic understanding of God. There was/is a divine revelation. It’s called “the big bang.” A theistic understanding of God was created by frightened, self-aware humans as a way to help them cope with the anxieties of self-consciousness. I can’t find the origin of this but someone once said that if horses had gods, they would look like horses. The theistic understanding of God looks like a human. Even now I will hear someone refer to the need to “talk to the man upstairs.”

I want to repeat this. The theistic understanding of God is a human creation. Theism is NOT the same as God. Humans can’t define God. We can only, hopefully, experience the Sacred and, I promise you, in that experience, there is no fear.

Our spiritual and psychological work is to do what is necessary for us to grow from dualistic to non-dual mind. As we do that, we will experience living life less fearfully and will have less need to be defensive. We can put more energy into our own growth and less into trying to either make other people wrong or trying to change them.



The tradition in which you and I live is called the Judeo-Christian tradition. It doesn't matter whether you are Buddhist, atheist, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, or "non-of-the-above," if you grew up in and live in the Western world, you have been profoundly impacted by this orientation. Though I have said this before, it bears repeating: most people, even those who strongly defend their various religious opinions, think they know the Jesus story. The evidence, however, clearly shows that they do not.

The second person I want to introduce you to is Cyrus Scofield. He is a person who has likely had more influence over your notion about the American version of the Christian religion than you may be aware of.

Although he was born in Michigan, he grew up in Lebanon, Tennessee. You should read about this man's early life in the article about him on Wikipedia. He was a scoundrel in his youth.

He converted to evangelical Christianity and after serving as an associate of the famed Dwight L. Moody, eventually became minister of the First Congregational Church of Dallas, Texas. Now it is called the Scofield Memorial Church.

Why is this guy important for us?

Well, for one reason he is the pioneer of what became the Fundamentalist movement in the United States and then to other parts of the Christian movement all over the world. He was enormously successful in this. How, you might ask, did he do this?

He did it by publishing, actually Oxford University Press published it, the Scofield Study Bible in 1909. This became the most popular and best selling Bible among Christians who by this time had been taught that the Bible carried as much, if not more, authority for Protestant Christians as the Pope did for Roman Catholics. Indeed, it is not going too far to say that for many Christians the Bible became their "paper pope."

This Bible was used as a teaching tool. For one thing, it was cross-referenced. This means that in a center column running down the middle of every page were

references that pointed to other passages in the Bible. Many of these references pointed back to passages in what Christians called “the Old Testament” in an effort to show that the Christian writings were predicted in the writings of the Old. Even more, at the bottom of every page were references to a theology that was called “dispensational premillennialism.” (I know you woke up wondering about this just this morning.)

I won’t go into too much detail about this but it is important for you to know about because this kind of thinking has been the foundation for evangelical Christianity for over a hundred years now.

You know what the word “dispense” means. Picture God as a giant dispensing machine dispensing periods of history. Each period is marked by a predictable cycle.

God reveals himself and his truth to humanity in a new way.

Humanity is held responsible to conform to that revelation.

Humanity rebels and fails the test.

God judges humanity and introduces a new period of probation under a new administration.

Scofield believed that between creation and the final judgment there are seven distinct eras of God’s dealing with man and that these eras are a framework around which the message of the Bible could be explained. It was largely through the influence of Scofield’s notes that dispensational premillennialism became influential among fundamentalist Christians in the United States, and these notes became a significant source for popular religious writers such as Hal Lindsey author of “The Late, Great Planet Earth” and popular televangelist.

In case you are interested, we are in the sixth dispensation at the moment and the word “premillennialism” means that there will be a thousand year reign of Jesus in Jerusalem before God destroys all the sinners forever. Although the millennial period doesn’t sound like a party to me if you read about it.

It may seem hard for you to believe but when I was in seminary there were men, no women, who could almost come to blows over which of three positions they

took about this - either “premillennial,” “post-millennial” and “a-millennial.” I took what I thought was a novel position which I called “pan-millennial.” Everything is going to pan out okay.

As we get further into the details of Fundamentalism we’ll talk more about these matters. What they reveal, in short, is a vengeful and hateful God.

The third person I want to introduce you to, one who has also had a profound influence on the shape of Christianity and its commitment to ignorance on many fronts, is James Ussher.

If you ever wonder how anyone who has access to the information that is available to them through a device such as a “smart phone,” could believe in something like “intelligent design” or “creationism,” if you wonder how people with university educations, some of whom have been elected or appointed to some of the highest positions in the country could and do believe in such; if you are curious about why a state such as Texas requires teachings of creation in public education textbooks to offer “theories” other than evolution to be taught; if you have ever wondered about these or any of the other ignorant things that exist in the education system to be the case; this is the guy to credit.

A Catholic priest in Ireland, actually the archbishop of all of Ireland at that time, James Ussher, came up with a chronology that holds it that the earth, indeed, the entire cosmos, though it wasn’t called that at the time, was created in the year 4004 B.C.

Ussher concluded that the first day of creation fell on October 23, 4004 BC. Others, including Johannes Kepler, key figure in discoveries regarding planetary motion, and Isaac Newton, another polymath known primarily for his association with the law of gravity, had come up with their own time tables that suggested dates close to those of Ussher. This dating makes the earth barely less than 6,000 years old.

So how did Ussher’s chronology gain not only such widespread popularity and was taken as being “the truth?”

The answer is that Scofield included it in his study Bible. By the time this Bible was first published, biblical literalism was becoming a litmus test of what it meant to be a Christian. Not only is the date 4004 B.C. included on the first page of the book of Genesis but also there is a note that states that “the book of Genesis covers a period of 2,315 year” and Ussher is cited as the authority. Even to this very day in spite of things like astrophysics and carbon dating, we have people taking the creation story as a literal fact and the story of Noah and the flood as also factual.

This particular edition of the Bible has been the most popular among fundamentalists in the English speaking world and has contributed to the various “end of the world” predictions that still abound today. This was the Bible that was used by most church going people in area of the country where I grew up. I was given one as a child. It is the Bible my parents used.

As I was going from one developmental stage to another, I asked my father if he believed the story about Jonah and the whale, actually it is simply referred to as “a big fish,” was true. He said, “If the Bible said that Jonah has swallowed the whale, I would believe it.” I hope you realize that is nuts. Many times I heard in my childhood the biblical literalist's mantra: “The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.”

The mentality and other dangerous and damaging beliefs endorsed by the kind of thinking found in the Scofield Bible still abounds today. Fundamentalism is growing in this country and around the world. It is the kind of thinking that gave birth to the Creation Museum in Kentucky. And just a few miles away "The Ark Experience."

At any rate, because Ussher’s chronology was published in the Scofield Bible, it, too, was taken as the literal truth.

What we believe about the Bible, what we believe about God, what we believe about Jesus matters. There is a huge difference between believing in an interventionist God and Intimacy with the Sacred.

We are living five hundred years after the Protestant Reformation of 1517. Christianity is once again in crisis. In failing to adapt to advances in our thinking

and spiritual perspectives, it has clung to outdated concepts and has tenaciously defended dogmas formed before major advances in human thought had occurred. Much of what many Christians claim must be believed to be Christian have become simply unbelievable. In these talks I want to invite you to reflect on and reshape your faith at far deeper levels than we have been led to go. Especially, in the areas of peace, love, joy - and patience.

This is important because what we believe, really believe, shapes how we live.

I end with a quote from Rumi

Don't you know yet?

It is your light that lights the world.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.