



THE ESSENCE OF RELIGION

Scarcely anyone thought about “religion” the way we think of it today before a few hundred years ago. Attention was brought to this fact by the late Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000), an historian and professor of comparative religion, and a Christian. Smith found that, before the Enlightenment and, especially, the Reformation, even Christians did not have a sense of having “a religion” as we now understand the term. Rather, the concept of “Christianity” as it is now understood, grew out of the realization that there were other ways of being religious than the Christian way.

By the 19th Century, Cantwell wrote, the Western enterprise of identifying and classifying “religions” around the world was in full swing, even though, at the time, most other cultures did not even have an equivalent word for the English “religion.” At about this same time, another scholar and philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) wrote what is widely considered his most important work, The Essence of Christianity (1841). It was followed in 1845 by the publication of a series of lectures entitled The Essence of Religion.

Some excerpts from Feuerbach’s The Essence of Religion: (and keep in mind that “religion” as Feuerbach knew it, was European Christianity) (taken from http://www.autodidactproject.org/other/feuerbach_lectures_2.html)

“for to theology, I say, only what it holds sacred is true, whereas to philosophy, only what it holds true is sacred. Theology is grounded on a particular principle, a particular book, which, it believes, contains all truths, or at least those that are necessary and salutary to man; consequently it is of necessity narrow-minded, exclusive, intolerant, bigoted. Philosophy and science, on the other hand, are not based on any particular book, but find the truth only in nature and history as a whole; they are grounded on reason, which is in essence universal—not on faith, which is in essence particular.”

“... as Spinoza put it, that religion aims solely at the advantage and welfare of man, while philosophy aims at the truth.”

“The essence of religion, I declared, is precisely what philosophy regards as mere form.”

“the difference between religion and philosophy is ineradicable, for philosophy is a matter of thought, of reason, while religion is a matter of emotion and imagination.”

“The early philosophers, or some of them at least, postulated immortality, but only the immortality of the thinking part of us, of man’s spirit as opposed to his body. ... But this is an abstract, derived immortality, not what is meant by immortality in religion. Rejecting this philosophical immortality, Christianity professed the survival of the whole, real man body and soul, for this is the only kind of survival that means anything to feeling and imagination, and precisely because it is a bodily survival. What is true of this particular doctrine is true of religion in general. God himself is a sensuous being, an object of vision; not of physical vision to be sure, but of spiritual, that is, imaginative vision. Thus we can reduce the difference between philosophy and religion to the simple statement that religion is sensuous and aesthetic, while philosophy is nonsensuous and abstract.”

“The body—to stay with our example—the body, which is stressed in religious as opposed to philosophical immortality, is a mere product of the imagination and of emotion, a “spiritual” body, that is, to all intents and purposes no body at all. Accordingly religion is a recognition, an affirmation of sensuousness against sensuousness.”

“I resolutely attacked both the abstract inhumanity of philosophy and the fictitious, illusory humanity of religion. It was only then that, fully aware of what I was doing, I replaced the abstract, merely cogitated cosmic being known as God by the reality of the world, or nature; that I replaced the rational being deprived of his senses, which philosophy has extracted out of man, by the real, sensuous man endowed with reason.”

(continued from page 1)

"The simple underlying idea is: the personality is determined not only in a bodily or sensuous, but also in an intellectual sense; a man has a limited vocation, position, task in the great community of mankind, in history; and with this limitation eternal life is not compatible. He endures only in his works, in the influence which he has exerted within his sphere, his historical task. Moral, ethical. immortality means nothing else."

"Intellectual, ethical, or moral immortality is solely the immortality a man gains through his works. A man's soul is what he passionately loves, what he does with passion. Men's souls are as diverse, as particular as men themselves. Accordingly, immortality in the old sense of eternal boundless being is consonant only with a vague, indeterminate soul that does not exist in reality but is merely a human abstraction and fantasy."

"Here I show that those who believe in immortality impute their own ideas to primitive peoples: that these peoples actually do not believe in another life, but only in this life, that for them the life of the dead is merely a life in the realm of memory, and that the living dead are merely personified images of the dead in the minds of the living. I show further that if you insist on a personal or individual immortality, you can only take the view prevailing among primitive peoples, for whom a man after death is in every respect the same as before death, endowed with the same passions, occupations, and needs, because a man is inseparable from these."

Feuerbach also said that immortality is among many "wishes that [people] do not really wish to fulfill," that what people fear is not death but painful, premature, and unnatural death. People do not think much of eternal life because of its "absurdity."

**YOUR GENEROUS DONATIONS
TO THE NTCOF ARE NEEDED,
APPRECIATED,
AND TAX-DEDUCTIBLE!!**

**COMING NEXT MONTH:
"HERITAGE OF FREETHOUGHT"**

**>>> Sunday, June 3rd, 2012 <<<
SHERATON GRAND DFW AIRPORT
SE CORNER OF 114 AND ESTERS**

**All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar (yes, website has now been updated thanks to Sarah and Rusty Nejd!) , or through our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at: - www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought -
JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!**

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Golden Corral Buffet and Grill in Grapevine, located just across from the Grapevine Mills Mall, at 2605 E. Grapevine Mills Circle, phone (972) 874-7900. To reach Golden Corral from the Sheraton, cross over the freeway and make a left onto John W. Carpenter Freeway (114) going west. Then take the first exit RIGHT onto International Parkway (121), then Grapevine Mills Parkway exit. Turn LEFT on Stars and Stripes Way, continuing on to E. Grapevine Mills Circle.

Freethought Salon: Get together to discuss today's service topic or other conundrums of interest to Freethinkers. Most Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton Vineyard in Grapevine; see the meetup site!

Game Night: The regular game night crew meets nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

Secular Singles: Freethinkers have met their life-partners with whom they have begun families through the Secular Singles group. Check the meetup site for the next date, time and location!

"We establish no religion in this country, we command no worship, we mandate no belief, nor will we ever. Church and state are, and must remain, separate."

- Ronald Reagan, Speech to Temple Hillel and Community Leaders in Valley Stream, October 26, 1984



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