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God and the American People, 1949.

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GOD AND THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Comments on a nation-wide poll conducted by the  
Ladies Home Journal on the religious beliefs of  
the American people.

by

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An interesting survey was made recently in a prominent American magazine on the theme, "God and the American People". Three questions were propounded and answers were elicited from a cross-section of the American people from coast to coast. These replies were studied and finally analyzed by three theologians, a Protestant, a Catholic, and a Jew. The questions asked were the following, or rather, the questions asked were intended to elicit information upon the following subjects: What do Americans believe? How fervent are their beliefs? Do they live according to their beliefs?

Now, polls are rather discredited today for valid reasons. But inasmuch as the purpose of this poll was not to indicate such concrete things as who will be elected the President of the United States, the incident of error of a few percent does not matter much. The answers do give a very interesting reflection of the total pattern of the American people on these vital subjects. There is, of course, among the American people a great religious tradition. Many of those who first came to these shores from the old world came at the behest of some tremendous religious conviction which they could not practice in the old world. They were persecuted for their religious beliefs, and came to the wilderness of the new world in order that they might practice their beliefs unmolested and free in the new world, so that at the very beginnings of this nation there was already a tremendous religious substratum, if you will, invested from the beginning in the making of this country. These pilgrims and immigrants brought over with them the Bible, and the Bible influenced tremendously the character of the institutions of the early Americans. In fact, the political freedom which was finally beaten out upon the anvil of history in this country - this political freedom was a by-product of the struggle for religious freedom which the numerous denominational groups who came to this country struggled to achieve.



The basic democratic conception which underlies the Declaration of Independence and the struggles of the American revolutionary fathers have their origin in tremendous religious convictions. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by and created among these . . . ." These self-evident truths the founding fathers derived from religious convictions - that all men were created equal. And at the very conclusion of that Declaration, which was a challenge to tyranny and which meant if they lost, death to everyone and them, these signers of the Declaration wrote with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence: "With a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor." They relied in this great struggle on the protection of Divine Providence. The religious character of the American people remains strong in spite of the separation of church and state which was first to take place here.

This separation of church and state was made necessary by the numerous religious sects which were seeking equality of treatment and security for themselves in the new world, and they were opposed to any one single established church which might come ultimately to oppose and persecute them. And while there were established churches in 9 out of the 13 colonies in the beginning, the idea of an established church began to fade out, and by the time of the Revolution, it was pretty well dead, and the very first amendment to the Constitution reads: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." This is the first time in some 1400 years that a free church was established in a free society.

But this separation should not give one the impression that the American people was not a religious people. Most of the colleges founded in this country were founded by religious denominations, and the religious tone has pervaded until today. In the state of Ohio particularly there were quite a number of such colleges and universities established by the many denominations.



And so the American people has always regarded itself as a God-fearing people, and today we look upon ourselves as the champions of God-fearing democracy against God-hating communism. And this survey - "God and the American People" - seems to bear out this fact.

To the first question addressed to these people who were polled: Do you believe in God, 95% answered in the affirmative; 2% answered, I do not know; 1%, no answer; and only 2% answered no. And in these replies there was no appreciable difference between men or women, or between educational levels among those questioned. 76% described themselves as church members; 41% said that they attended church regularly. To the question, Do you ever pray, 90% replied yes; 56% said they prayed frequently. To the question, have you thought about God or religion during the preceding 24 hours, 74% replied yes. To the question, how much comfort and support do you yourself get from religion, 81% responded, from a lot to a fair amount.

Now, to me these figures are rather surprising - pleasantly surprising. I did not know that 95% of the American people believed in God and that 90% prayed. Those questions are rather vague and the replies to them may not be as revealing as we should like to have them, but I question very seriously this matter of 76% of the American people are church members. Now in the census published in the Almanac of the religious affiliations, for example, the Jewish religious census gave as of 1937, 4,770,000 Jews as members of the Jewish religion or belonged to the Jewish religion. Now, I know that 4,770,000 were Jews in the United States in 1937, but they were not members of synagogues or temples - that is fantastic. And I think that is also true of the Christian church. 41% said that they attended church regularly. That figure, too, bothers me a good deal. Take Cleveland, for example. There are 1,000,000 people in Cleveland, and of these,



let us say 500,000 or 600,000 are adults. If 40% attended church regularly, it would mean some 240,000 Clevelanders go to church. I have not seen them. In fact, the churches of Cleveland would not be large enough to hold them. And if you apply the same figure to the Jews in Cleveland, it would mean that 24,000 Jews went to synagogue or temple every Friday, Saturday, or Sunday. If that were true, the Messiah would come - right away. So that while I am not an expert on statistics and would not, of course, question the validity of a poll on such matters, I reserve judgment on these matters.

But the figures do suggest an important thing - that the American people is religiously inclined. The disposition and the pattern of American life is a religious pattern, and that there is a great religious potentiation in the United States. That is true also of the Jewish people although many of them may not be affiliated with synagogues and may not be attending public worship. Nevertheless, the sparkle is there - the link has not been broken, and around the High Holy Days the attendance multiplies ten-fold. Evidently this is a response to a religious need which, however weak, is nevertheless there.

Then the surveyors proceeded to find out, what do Americans believe. "Please tell me in your own words what you believe about God." 29% expressed their thoughts about God in terms of God as a supreme power. About 26% spoke of God as caring for men, one who answers prayers. Some 17% thought of God as the Creator; 7% thought of Him as a spirit. Now, there can be no quarrel with these answers. When all is said and done, the best theological minds cannot go very much beyond these answers. In the actual knowledge of God, the philosopher is not very well in advance of the average layman, for God defies definition. The unknowable cannot be confined on known terms.

When Moses asks of God, by what name shall I be known, what really are the attributes of God; how shall I explain God to the people? And the answer is



that God is: "I am that I am." God exists - God is. That is about all we can really say of Him. Maimonides said that God can at best be spoken of in negative attributes, and not positive. Solomon ibn Gabirol, in his beautiful poem, speaks of God "to whom there are no attributes and of whom there can be no descriptions". In mystic Judaism God is spoken of as the "ever-lasting, endless, unending One". And so, when the layman gives as a definition his answer to the question, tell me in your own words what you believe about God, I believe that they are as near to truth as any philosopher or theologian.

Do you think of God as your judge who observes your actions? 71% replied yes. This, too, of course, as it should be. The basic thought of religion is that we are ultimately accountable for our actions. A God who is unconcerned in the destiny of the individual is no God for the individual. What are the main reasons why you believe in God? One-third replied that they were so taught; one-third based their belief in God on rational evidence; about another third said that they arrived at their belief through testimony from within. Here again, I believe these three reasons are all valid. Mankind knows of the existence of God first, through tradition - through the accumulated wisdom of the race which should be highly regarded - and secondly, through the intelligent study, quest and search, and thirdly, through personal experience - through the light which is the basis of the faith of the mystic.

An interesting question propounded: Do you believe in personal survival in life after death? 73% replied yes; 15% looked upon death as final extinction; 12% - no opinion.

What is your main reason for going to church? 32% said the need or desire for some kind of inspiration; 18% said, in obedience to conviction or duty; others said habit, to hear a sermon, to set a good example, to hear music, to see people. I am inclined to believe all these are good reasons, some better than others.



What leads you on to prayer? One-half of those questioned said that prayer was a plea a petition for some kind of spiritual protection, guidance, comfort. 13% said they prayed because they wished to give thanks on occasions when they felt they should express their thankfulness. 12% said they prayed for others, and 5% said they prayed for forgiveness. Now, the writer of this article in the Ladies Home Journal feels that there is something wrong with some of these answers. While most people think of God as the Creator and Judge, few seem to think of Him as Redeemer. There is not sufficient realization by Americans of their own inadequacies - their sinfulness - the need for God's love. He detects a spiritual self-sufficiency bordering on pride which, of course, in the eyes of religion, is sin. I am not able to go along with the writer in his evaluation. I am inclined to believe that the writer is overly-impressed with the Christian conception of Original Sin under the fear of which man should labor; the original sin, of course, being the sin of Adam, the curse of disobedience which was automatically inherited by all descendants.

Now in Judaism there is no Original Sin, and therefore, in Judaism man was not expected to feel himself weighted down with the load of this Original Sin from which he should seek redemption. In the conception of Judaism men are born imperfect and their destiny is to seek perfection and become morally strong. Spiritual self-debasement is not spiritually necessary or wholesome. We need God not because we are sinful but because we are His children. We need His guidance, help and comfort. We are not unworthy. We are what God made us, whose inner life is an eternal struggle, and we need God's help in this upward climbing to higher levels, but not as self-flagellating sinners, but as free men, seeking a greater, fuller freedom, and life more radiant. If we sin, we pray for forgiveness, but it is not redemption from sin which is the chief purpose of life, but the fulfillment of God's positive commandments to live , to do justice, to be helpful members of society - that is the chief purpose of life.



The answers from these people seem to indicate that they, too, feel that their religion has more to do with positive adjustment to an unfolding moral life than with some theological dogma about the sinfulness and the unworthiness of the individual. These people were asked: Would you say that you honestly endeavor to lead a good life? 91% said yes. How much of the time are you aware of endeavoring to lead a good life? 44% said they were conscious of it all the time. 26% said they were aware of it often. 21% said occasionally aware of endeavoring to lead a good life. What is the good life? Some said, observing the ten commandments, being good to family and neighbors. How close do you come to achieving this standard of conduct? 18% said they were totally successful; 28% said, three-quarters of the way; 32% said half of the way. Asked if they themselves expected to go to heaven, three-quarters said they did. 52% said they believed in Hell, but only 5% thought they themselves would go there.

On the basis of these replies, the writer feels that there is too strong a sense of self-righteousness among the American people. They think too well of themselves. Well, that may be so, but I think the indictment is a bit too severe. It is all part of the basic American self-confidence. It is part of the pattern of making the whole world safe for democracy, of getting better and better every day. It is part of the success of a pioneering people. It is part of a still-advancing civilization to whose people everything is possible because marvelous things have been made possible by them. It is not the result of arrogance. I do not think the American people are arrogant or have a sense of self-sufficiency. They just have a little too high an estimate of their virtues. As they get older they will learn more.

Why do you try to lead a good life? One-third said, in order to have inner satisfaction; 19% said, in order to influence other people; 15% said because they believed in after-life; 14% said, out of a sense of duty; 12%, because of the teachings of religion; 10%, because they were brought up that way. Here again the



author is critical of these answers. If you look closer at the answers, you see that a large number gave peace of mind as the reason for endeavoring to lead a good life, but that, too, is religion. The reward of the religious way of life is the inner satisfaction and the peace of mind. "It is a tree of life to them that lay hold of it, and its supporters are happy. Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace." Here, again, I believe that the writer's view is vitiated by an artificial unworldliness. He seems to resent the fact that people try to lead the good life because they get an inner satisfaction out of it.

Name the principal source from which you derived your ideas of right and wrong. 56% said, from parents; 29% said, from the teachings of religion. And here again the writer is critical of this answer. But the ethical concepts which these people derived from their parents ultimately were also derived from religion. The author says that three-quarters of the American people do not consciously connect religion with their adult judgment of right and wrong. Of course, it is in childhood and in youth where the basic religious training can be inculcated in a human being. "Train the child in the way that he should go, and even when he lives an old age, he will not depart from it." That is the time to make the furrows deep and lasting. The great Elihar ben Abenzer is quoted as saying: "He who teaches a child, what is he to be likened to. He is to be likened to a man who writes on a clean, fresh paper. And he who teaches an old man, to what is he to be likened to - to ~~whom~~ one who writes on a blotted and smeared paper."

Would you say that your religious beliefs have any effect on your ideas on politics and business: 39% said yes, and 54% said no. And that is rather startling. I am inclined to believe that the question is altogether too vague. What undoubtedly many had in mind was, does your sectarian religious affiliation influence your politics or your business. And many of them actually replied in



the negative.

The real test came on the question about love they neighbor as thyself which the writer assumes was first propounded by Jesus. Actually Jesus quoted that from the 19th chapter of the Book of Leviticus. How far do you think it is possible to go in following this teaching and still get ahead in the world? More than one-half said, all the way in practicing this ideal. And to the question, if you yourself followed this all the way, what would you do differently - how would it change your life, one-half replied that it would not change their life at all. They are following this dictum. And questions similar to these were put which led the author to conclude that the American people have altogether too high an opinion of their own virtue. Let me read a paragraph or two from the article:

Two more questions on love concluded the survey. The first, relating the Christian ethic to society in the widest sense, asked: "Can you think of some problems of the day that would be solved if everybody in the world lived according to the rule of love of fellow man?" To this, 81 per cent said they could, and proceeded to name them. By far the greatest number, 46 per cent, spoke of "war", "United Nations", "World peace", and other ways of defining international problems. A bloc of 12 per cent said flatly that all problems would be solved; 10 per cent made vague statements about "jealousy, greed, selfishness in general"; 8 per cent cited race problems, and 3 per cent specified "labor problems".

The final and most searching question of all asked each individual to look within himself and state honestly whether he thought he really obeyed the law of love under certain special conditions. The conditions and the responses follow:

	YES	NO	NO OPINION
When your fellow man is a business competitor	78%	10%	12%
When your fellow man is a member of a different race	80	12	8
When your fellow man belongs to a different religion from yours	90	5	5
When your fellow man is an enemy <del>abroad</del> of your country	25	63	12
When your fellow man is a member of a political party that you think is dangerous	27	57	16



From this table some notable facts emerge. For example, only one American in four even thinks he observes the law of love when political or national enmity is involved. The majority frankly renounce it.

The most striking element in the returns on this question, therefore, is not ~~that~~ that most of the American people put national and political allegiance above religious conviction. The remarkable point is that as many as one quarter think that they practice the highest, transcendent form of love - love of one's enemy.

These figures are dramatically incompatible with the facts of American behavior as revealed on every level of national existence today. The Christian meaning of love is qualified by the phrase "as thyself" which pre-supposes an unselfish concern for the interests of one's neighbor without regard for one's own interests. Such a standard of conduct is obviously not even approximated, for example, in business competition, where each man necessarily places his own interests above all others, no matter how scrupulously he may adhere to the relative demands of honesty and "fair play". And it is openly repudiated in such other aspects of American life as labor conflict, anti-Semitism, and the inequality and discrimination to which racial minorities like the Negroes, Mexicans and Nisei are subjected.

It is evident therefore that a profound gulf lies between America's avowed ethical standards and the observable realities of national life.

I think with that conclusion we may agree, but this simply indicates that there is a tragic incompatibility between profession and performance. This is not specifically an American situation. I think, however, the test of whether one loves one's enemies is really a test which to Judaism, at least, has no moral importance. To love one's enemies is a psychological impossibility. We are not admonished to love them, but not to hate them. But it is true and has always been true that there has always been a gap between what we believe - and sincerely believe - and what we practice. The ancient prophets of Israel who called the attention of the people who were thronging the Temple of the Lord that this was not religion - religion is the doing of justice and loving of mercy and defending the cause of God, seeking the ways of peace and brotherhood. And that religious



people who regard themselves as religious frequently forget. The unhappiness of the writer seems to be due to the fact that the American people do not realize how difficult are the great spiritual ideals of mankind and are not sufficiently sad and contrite about it. He says, "In classical Christianity love represents the ultimate of perfection beside which all man's fitful of goodwill are merely feeble ."

Now the ethics of Judaism never put such impossible ideals before human beings. "This commandment which I command thee this day shall be upon the gate posts of thy house....." This moral commandment is very near to you. And I think the American people are taking a more Old Testament view of morality than that which the author would like them to take. Man should never be satisfied with his moral status. The important thing to remember is to put our religious convictions into action. If 95% of the American people believe in God, and 90% pray to God, then they will transform that faith in God, the God of justice, into everyday living. There would be less of broken homes, less of conflict, of segregation and intolerance, but it is good to know that there is this deposit of spiritual attitude in endeavoring to achieve the great moral goals.