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King's House
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Fear and its many Faces- Exploring the Roots of Religious Fear

Three Sessions:

1. Fear and its many faces
 2. Healthy and Unhealthy Religious Fears
 3. Ten Principles Inviting us to live in less fear of God
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"We have nothing to fear, except fear itself"

Session One – FEAR AND ITS MANY FACES

I. Introduction

- Apologia – Some background to these lectures
- The leitmotif within scriptural theophanies: "Do not be afraid!"
- The Opening monologue in "A River Runs Through it": You will live longer if you are afraid!
- "The Gift of Fear"
- Some archetypal myths

II. Defining fear and naming it various faces

● Some dictionary definitions

- A distressing emotion aroused by impending danger, evil, pain, etc., whether the threat is real or imagined; the feeling or condition of being afraid. *Synonyms:* foreboding, apprehension, consternation, dismay, dread, terror, fright, panic, horror, trepidation, qualm. *Antonyms:* courage, security, calm, intrepidity.
- Concern or anxiety; solicitude
- Reverential awe, especially toward God: *the fear of God*. *Synonyms:* awe, respect, reverence, veneration.
- Fear is the passion of our nature which excites us to provide for our security, on the approach of evil. Karl Rogers

- **Breaking this down phenomenologically** – Fear is huge, inchoate, interpenetrating mixture ...

- Fear for one's own life, physical safety, and health - of diminishment and death
- Fear for one's emotional and psychological safety
- Fear for one's moral safety
- Fear for one's religious identity
- Fear of loneliness and isolation
- Fear of being "insubstantial", of being insignificant, left out, forgotten, unable to stand out as special, "vaporized" in over-vast and indifferent universe, fear of not leaving a mark – fear as biblical "anxiety"
- Fear of being "contingent" (small, vulnerable, and somehow "guilty"), before eternal and omnipotent reality – which might not always be benign
- Fear of our own powers as somehow challenging the divine
- Fear of our own complexity as somehow violating the sacred especially through our sexuality
- Fear of intimacy
- Fear of pleasure and enjoyment
- Fear for the life and safety of one's loved ones
- Fear of disappointing others – "The Drama of the Gifted Child"
- Fear of violating others or the world – fear as reverence/"chastity"
- Fear of having one's shortcomings and weaknesses exposed – of humiliation
- Fear of experiencing injustice and arbitrariness – of not getting one's due and/or being singled out for mistreatment
- Fear of punishment for wrongdoing, for not measuring up
- Fear of failure, of not measuring-up
- Fear of the unknown, the stranger, the other.
- Fear of the loss of one's comfort
- Fear as a neurosis
- Fear as a phobia

III. Healthy and Unhealthy Fear

- A perplexity of complexity
- Religious fears take their roots inside this cauldron

IV. Overly-simplistic notions of religious fear

- Religious fear is an extremely complex phenomenon – a mixture of health and pathology, healthy fear and neurosis
- We have too simplistic a notion of religious fear – as expressed in these two caricatures:
 - "Religion ruined by concept of God and has left me riddled with fear. I was raised on hellfire, taught a God who has a recording book in the sky, records sins, punishes. I was never good enough." (E.g., the visions of some visionaries of souls going into hell like snowflakes!)
 - "I am a recovering Christian" – given a guilt-neurosis by my church
- Both are too simplistic – contain some truth, but not enough of it
 - Religious fear is infinitely more complex
 - E.g., Antoine Vergote – Anger at institutionalized religion

Session Two: Healthy and Unhealthy Religious Fears

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"

What are our religious fears?

1. *Fear of God's Holiness* - God's magnitude as dwarfing our contingency
 - Human contingency, raw naked powerlessness and vulnerability before magnitude.
 - Isaiah 5 – Vision of God's holiness – otherness – magnitude
 - Experience of our finitude, contingency, is frightening
 - We have no substance! We try to create it for ourselves
 - Deep anxiety – biblically, Jesus, don't be anxious!
 2. *Fear of violating a non-negotiable innate moral order– Fear rooted in our inchoate sense of the law of karma*
 - The air we breathe out is the air we will re-inhale – there is deep, nonnegotiable moral structure to reality, and we intuit that – unless we are psychopaths we have moral fears – we know we cannot get away with something.
 - E.g., Billy Crystal – City Slickers – "I would know!"
 - Guilt-neurosis – is actually partially a healthy fear – makes us acknowledge gift!
 3. Fear experienced as God's Inbreaking into our comfort, amusements, and distractions – The Ignatian idea of fear as a "wake-up" call.
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4. *Fear of God's punishment - Fear of disapproval, of not measuring-up, fear rooted in "meritology"*
 - Fear of eternal punishment/hellfire – but much more complex
 - Fear of not measuring up – not being accepted and loved, of not meriting love.
 - Fear as inhibition based on lack of blessing - Analogy to a calf being born with constriction
 - Complex phenomenon as described by Robert Bly – *The Sibling Society*
 5. *Fear of God's character* - Fear that God is arbitrary and lacks intelligence
 - My Aunt's anxiety – I would let him in!
 - Fear that God gives us only one chance – fear of lack of forgiveness
 - Therese of Lisieux – If you think I cannot handle that about you, then you don't know me
 6. *Fear that God lacks the strength to stand up to hard scrutiny*
 - Our internalization of the bias of the Enlightenment

7. *Fear as based on lack of intimacy with God – Treating God as a visiting dignitary*
 - King David – 2 Samuel - no fear of God and no fear of death and no fear of life – “I am his King on earth”
 - Ernie – Tonight I am tired and have nothing to say!
 - Mystics – “boldness” with God.

 8. *Fear of the God of our imagination and the God of religion – Fear of an idol we have ourselves created*
 - God made humanity in his own image and likeness and we have never stopped returning the favor!
 - Nicholas Lash - We fear a Superman or refuse ultimately to believe in him.
 - Anthropomorphism – projected violence and arbitrariness onto God and now fear or own projection – e.g., the wrath of God

 9. *Fear of God as a pathology – Fear as a neurosis*
 - Pathologies most often come out in two areas of our lives: sex and religion
 - E.g., Scrupulosity
 - Fear of our own grandiosity
 - God as the “father-figure” who refuses permission for enjoyment

 10. Fear as “inhibition”, as based upon lack of blessing and up the experience of being cursed.
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Part Three: Ten Principles inviting us to live in less fear of God

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. 1 John 4, 18

- An hermeneutical key – The cross of Christ as revealing the God of Love
 - Image – Moment of Jesus’ death the curtain veil was torn from top to bottom
 - Image of the rainbow – God is light, but light is unseen, unless a prism breaks it apart – we see inside light
 - Cross – moral prism – opens the inside of God – God is love unconditionally!
1. God’s insight, understanding, compassion, and forgiveness surpass our own.
 2. God’ is a “prodigal” God
 3. God is a God of complete non-violence, non-coercion, non-threat – God is an invitational God
 4. God respects nature, our human make-up, and our innate propensities.
 5. God is a blessing parent, not a threatened one.
 6. God does not demand certain prior moral conditions to “dine” with us. God’s presence is forgiveness.
 7. God is completely trustworthy, faithful, and safe-surrender.

8. God is a “jealous” God who desires our salvation and the salvation of our loved ones more than we do.
 9. God is the author of all that is good.
 10. God can, and does, descend into hell to help us.
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- **A “recessional hymn” – A Poem – Vigil – by Jane Tyson Clement (1917-2000)**
- **Fear – Unworthy of Christianity:** *Everything inside of our Christian faith invites us to move towards God in intimacy rather than in fear. Indeed in virtually every instance in scripture where God appears within ordinary life, either through an angel, a special phenomenon, or through an appearance of the resurrected Christ, the first words are invariably: “Do not be afraid!” The soothing of fear, not its intensification, is the normal criterion that the voice we are hearing is coming from the divine and from love.*
- **Fear – Unworthy of Christianity:** *Fear and antagonism do nothing to draw respect to Christianity and our churches and to the extent that we let them be associated with Christianity, we risk defacing Christianity in the world’s eyes Why all this fear, if we believe that Christianity is the deepest of all truth and believe that Christ will be with us to the end of time? As Marilynne Robinson puts it: “Christianity is too great a narrative to be reduced to serving any parochial interest or to be underwritten by any lesser tale. Reverence should forbid in particular its being subordinated to tribalism, resentment, or fear. ... Making God a tribal deity, our local Baal, is embarrassing and disgraceful.”*
- **A tragic irony within our fears:** *Not least among our fears is our fear of the secularized world and how we feel this has put us on a slippery slope in terms of our Christian heritage and our moral values. Inside our fear of secularism lies a great irony: We are afraid of secularism because we have, in fact, internalized the great prejudice against Christianity, namely, the belief that faith and Christianity cannot withstand the scrutiny of an intellectually sophisticated culture. And that fear lies at the root of an anti-intellectualism that is very prominent inside many religious and church circles today.*
- **On our unconscious and unhealthy fears of God:** *Fear that God is not as understanding and compassionate as we are. Fear that God is not as big-hearted as we are. Fear that God does not read the heart and cannot tell the difference between wound and coldness, immaturity and sin. Fear that God gives us only one chance and cannot bear any missteps and infidelities. Fear that God doesn’t respect our humanity, that God created us in one way but wants us to live in another way in order to be saved. Fear that God is threatened by our achievements, like a petty tyrant. Fear that God is threatened by our doubts and questions, like an insecure leader. Fear that God cannot stand up to the intellectual and cultural scrutiny of our world but somehow needs to be segregated and protected like an over-pious novice. Fear that God is less interested in our lives than we are and less solicitous for our salvation and that of our loved ones than we are. And, not least, fear that God is as helpless before our moral helplessness as we are.*
- **On anger at institutionalized religion:** *“Most anger directed at God and organized religions is ultimately directed at our own fathers. We are generally as comfortable with organized religion as we are with our own fathers.” Antoine Vergote*
- **On God as fashioned in our image and likeness:** *Nicholas Lash, in an essay on God and belief, suggests that the God that atheists reject is very often simply an idol of our imaginations: We need do no more than notice that most of our contemporaries still find it “obvious” that atheism is not only possible, but*

widespread and that, both intellectually and ethically, it has much to commend it. This might be plausible if being an atheist were a matter of not believing that there exists "a person without a body" who is "eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything" and is "the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the universe." If, however, by "God" we mean the mystery, announced in Christ, breathing all things out of nothing into peace, then all things have to do with God in every move and fragment of their being, whether they notice this and suppose it to be so or not. Atheism, if it means deciding not to have anything to do with God, is thus self-contradictory and, if successful, self-destructive".

- Perhaps God is mature enough to not ask for, or want, our conscious attention most of the time. Perhaps God wants us to enjoy our time here, to enjoy the experience of love and friendship, of family and friends, of eating and drinking, and of (at least occasionally) seeing our favorite teams win a championship. Perhaps God wants us, in the famed-words of Yogi Berra, to sometimes just to sit back and enjoy the game! Perhaps God is like a blessing old grandparent; perhaps we pray in an inchoate way when we healthily enjoy the gift of this life; and perhaps there are less-conscious ways in which we can be aware of God.
- God is not a God of punishment, but a God of forgiveness. God is not a God who records our sins, but a God who washes them away. God is not a God who demands perfection from us, but a God who asks for a contrite heart when we can't measure up. God is not a God who gives us only one chance, but a God who gives us infinite chances. God is not a God who waits for us to come to our senses after we have fallen, but a God who comes searching for us, full of understanding and care. God is not a God who is calculating and parsimonious in his gifts, but a prodigal God who sows seeds everywhere without regard for waste or worthiness. God not a God who is powerless before evil and death, but a God who can raise dead bodies to life and redeem what is evil and hopeless. God is not a God who is arbitrary and fickle, but a God who is utterly reliable in his promise and goodness. God is not a God who is dumb and unable to deal with our complexity, but a God who fashioned the depth of the universe and the deepest recesses of the human psyche. Ultimately, God is not a God who cannot protect us, but is a God in whose hands and in whose promise we are far safer than when we rely upon ourselves.
- Jesus assures us that God's heart aches for the salvation of everyone and Jesus prayed in tears for those "other sheep who are not of this fold",
- Does God play favorites? Yes, but not between and among different persons, but between and among different states inside our own souls.
- **Prayer isn't meant to be a simple acquiescence to God's will.** It's meant to be acquiescence, yes, but a mature acquiescence, come to at the end of a long struggle. We see this in the prayer of the great figures in scripture: Abraham, Moses, Jesus, the apostles. Abraham argues with God and initially talks him out of destroying Sodom; Moses at first resists his call, protesting that his brother is better suited for the job; the apostles excuse themselves for a long time before finally putting their lives on the line; and Jesus gives himself over in the Garden of Gethsemane only after first begging his Father for a reprieve. As Rabbi Heschel puts it, from Abraham through Jesus we see how the great figures of our faith are not in the habit of easily saying: "Thy will be done!" but often, for a while at least, counter God's invitation with: "Thy will be changed!"