



## ***UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY***

A monthly forum on the third *Saturday* of each month from 6:30 to 7:30 or 8 P.M. following Evening Prayer at 6  
 Forums usually with Canon Richard T. Nolan  
*retired philosophy & religion professor, editor of [www.philosophy-religion.org](http://www.philosophy-religion.org)*  
 Saturday, December 15, 2007

*TOPIC:*

### ***Open Forum on Beliefs and Ethics***

*Is there a question you have been wanting to ask  
 about beliefs and practices of the Episcopal Church and/or other religious heritages?  
 [There is no such thing as a stupid question! Everyone's inquiry is respected.]  
 led by Canon Richard T. Nolan*

### ***A Prayer To Be Said In Unison***

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who has committed to your holy Church the care and nurture of all the faithful; Enlighten with your wisdom those who teach and those who learn, that, rejoicing in the knowledge of your truth, they may worship and serve you from generation to generation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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### ***Question Received Via E-Mail***

Can we all agree that we have an unchanging God and His unchanging moral code?

- (a) How did views of God change as manifested in scripture?
- (b) How about women and marriage?
- (c) How "unchanging" were these moral codes?

### **FROM THE HARPER'S BIBLE DICTIONARY: "GOD"**

In the Old Testament, the word 'God' most often translates the Hebrew *EI* (or the plural form, *Elohim*), the general Semitic term for deity which is probably derived from a root denoting power or strength.

Although Israel's faith apparently emerged from a polytheistic environment as a strong henotheism (i.e., worship of only one among a plurality of deities) and evolved into a highly developed ethical monotheism, the frequently used plural form should not be understood as a residue from an earlier period. The form is the plural of majesty (magnitude) and a sign of honor paid to the Deity.

In the New Testament, the word 'God' translates the Greek *theos*, also a general term for deity and used in the Septuagint to translate *El* and *Elohim*. Since much has been written drawing sharp contrasts between 'the God of the ot' and 'the God of the nt,' it may be well to comment that in most respects there is a remarkable consistency in the portrayal of God throughout the Bible. Certainly, there is no solid ground for contrasting a God of wrath (ot) with a God of mercy (nt), for mercy and judgment are among the characteristics of God in both Testaments.

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 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 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.<sup>(11)</sup>

*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. Perhaps the name YHWH is as close as the ancient Hebrew mind came to abstract thinking.*

(11) Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1966), p. 39. See also the Abridged Fourth Edition (1998), pp. 56-9.

### WE HAVE AN UNCHANGING GOD, BIBLICALLY SPEAKING, IN TERMS OF GOD'S DEPENDABILITY.

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#### FROM THE *HARPER'S BIBLE DICTIONARY*: "WOMEN"

women, a topic in the Bible that can be approached in several ways. We can look at the legal status of women and the roles and functions of women in society, and we can look at portrayals of human and divine women.

**The Legal Status of Women in the Patriarchal Period:** The biblical world was undoubtedly androcentric (focused or centered on men) and dominant actions were undertaken by men. Two separate social systems are portrayed in the Bible. The first, most probably older system is the extended family of the patriarchal period, which was patrilineal (system of social organization in which descent is traced through the male line) and patrifocal (focused or centered on the father). The male head of the family had absolute rights of disposition over his children. A woman left her father's dominion to enter the dominion of the head of the family into which she was marrying. The most important social bond created by marriage was that between the father-in-law and the new daughter-in-law. In the event of the husband's death, the woman stayed in the new family, either as the mother of children, or being passed to another son in the institution of levirate marriage (Gen. 38:7-11; Deut. 25:5-10). In such a system, women had no direct access to power or decision making.

As the stories of the matriarchs of Israel show, the women of this period made their mark either by directly influencing their husbands (Sarah, Gen. 16:5; 21:10) or by trickery (Rebekah, Gen. 27; Rachel,

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Gen. 31). Although most women may have thrived, the system of patriarchal disposition lent itself to such abuses as the offer of Lot's daughters to the men of Sodom (Gen. 19:8) and of the women in Gibeah (Judg. 19:24), and the sacrifice of the daughter of Jephthah (Judg. 11).

**Women in Classical Israel:** Apart from the royal family, classical Israel consisted of nuclear rather than extended families. This change, heralded in Gen. 2:24, did not mean 'emancipation' for women, who were still considered under the dominion of their husbands (Gen. 3:16). It should be noted, however, that in the family hierarchy, the sons of the family were not considered higher than the mother, and a son who rebelled against father or mother would be stoned (Deut. 21:18-21). Yet according to the formal laws of Israel women were clearly subordinate, although there does seem to have been a considerable diminution in the rights of the head of household to dispose of family members as compared with their rights during the patriarchal period.

Women owed sexual exclusivity to their present or future husbands. A woman was expected to be a virgin when she married. If she was seduced into premarital sex, the seducer had to pay the bride-price to her father, who could then decide whether to grant her to him in marriage (Exod. 22:16-17); if she was raped, the attacker had to pay the bride-price, was given the girl in marriage, and could not divorce her (Deut. 22:28-29). A man could accuse his bride of not being a virgin: if the allegation was 'proved' by the lack of blood upon the bedclothes, the girl could be stoned for behaving wantonly while in her father's house (Deut. 22:13-21). Adultery, defined as sex by a married woman with a man not her husband, was punishable by death (Lev. 20:10; cf. John 8:3-7). A man could accuse his wife of adultery and thus cause her to undergo a solemn oath procedure attesting her innocence (Num. 5:11-31).

Divorce was the prerogative of the husband. It was somewhat regulated by Deuteronomy, which provided for a bill of divorce so that women could remarry (24:1), and which did not allow men to divorce wives that they had had to marry after rape (Deut. 22:28-29), or wives that they had unsuccessfully accused of not having been virgins (22:13-21). Although one cannot imagine that it would be pleasant to be married in perpetuity to a man by whom one has been raped or falsely accused, the purpose of these laws was clearly to prevent men from freely divorcing unloved wives in a socioeconomic system in which single divorced women would be at a disadvantage.

Women did not normally hold property, and the male head of the household could annul the vows of his women if he did so on the day he heard of them (Num. 30:5-8). The inferior status of women is indicated in economic terms by the valuation for the purpose of vows of women at thirty shekels and of men at fifty (Lev. 27:3-4). Women were to be isolated during the ritual impurity of their menstrual period (Lev. 15:19-24) and after childbirth (Lev. 12:1-8), when the period of impurity was double if the child was female.

Biblical narratives indicate, however, that the position of women vis-à-vis their husbands was not as weak as the laws envision. The Shunnamite woman was able to entertain Elijah without the prior consent of her husband (2 Kings 4:8-17), and Abigail could commandeer large amounts of her husband's supplies and bring them to David (1 Sam. 25). The biblical laws probably indicate the ideal male-female relations envisioned by their male formulators rather than reflect the social situation as it actually existed.

**Nondomestic Roles:** Certain women are shown in nondomestic roles, acting on the stage of history. There were two prominent royal women, Jezebel (1 Kings 18-19; 2 Kings 9:30-37) and Athaliah (2 Kings 11). Although these were considered villainesses since they were on the wrong side, they were strong and determined women; and Jezebel, in particular, was a woman of dignity and devotion. The 'wise woman' of Tekoa came and convinced David by a parable, much in the manner of Nathan (2 Sam. 14). The 'wise woman' of Abel (2 Sam. 20:16-22) negotiated for her town in warfare; the fact that Joab approached the city walls to speak to her and that she could convince the town to deliver Sheba may indicate that 'wise woman' was a title of some town official rather than a descriptive adjective. Deborah was a political

leader who also coordinated a war and was recognized as a leader both before and after the war (Judg. 4-5). Miriam was acknowledged as the leader of the women, who led the women in the victory song (Exod. 15:20-21). Although her powers could not be compared to those of Moses (Num. 12), she was remembered as one of the triumvirate of Exodus leaders (Mic. 6:4).

Both Deborah and Miriam were remembered as prophetesses and this seems to have been an acceptable, if rare, occupation of women. There was no surprise expressed that the prophet whom Josiah consulted on the occasion of the finding of a scroll of the law was the woman Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20); the fact that she was a woman is passed in silence, probably an indication that women could be accepted and expected in this role. During the restoration period there is a mention of Nehemiah's opponent Noadiah the prophetess; again, her sex is treated as irrelevant (Neh. 6:14). Women did not have to choose between marriage and prophecy, for Huldah was clearly married, and Deborah may have been. Women also played some role in worship, particularly as singers (2 Chron. 35:25; Neh. 7:67).

**The Image of Women:** The image of the ideal wife is conveyed in Proverbs 31: she is strong, competent, able to succeed economically, but family-centered, always acting for the provision of her household. She is not sensual, but the woman of Song of Songs (where there is no mention of marriage) is portrayed in a non-condemnatory way as frankly erotic. Jael is portrayed as fierce (Judg. 4:17-21), although normally the ferocity of women is discounted (Isa. 19:16; Jer. 51:30). Above all, women are depicted (and perhaps feared) for being articulate: Abigail convinces David of appropriate action (1 Sam. 25), as does the wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam. 14:2-10); the wise woman of Abel convinces her city to follow her counsel (2 Sam. 20:16-20), Tamar attempts unsuccessfully to thwart a rape by logical arguments (2 Sam. 13), and both Samson's wife and Delilah talk him into revealing his secrets by nagging and verbal manipulation (Judg. 14:15-17; 16:4-17).

**The Nonhuman Female:** There is considerable dispute as to whether a goddess was worshiped in ancient Israel. In the Bible itself, however, there is no indication of a goddess. The most important nonhuman female image is the personification of the land and of the collectivity of the nation as 'Lady Israel,' which is found throughout the Prophets. The relationship of God to Israel can be depicted as a close marital bond by this image, first expressed by Hosea, and the 'holy family' of Israel becomes God, 'Lady Israel,' and the people (see, e.g., Jer. 31). Furthermore, Israel's lack of faithfulness toward God can be expressed as the waywardness and adultery of a faithless wife (e.g., in Hosea). Sexual imagery becomes a vehicle for the expression of the passionate relationship between God and Israel. At the same time, in the condemnation of the wayward Israel in Ezekiel 16 one might detect misogynistic attitudes that are not proper to express directly: the Bible contains no openly misogynistic statements about the nature of ordinary women.

Another important nonhuman female image is 'wisdom' in the book of Proverbs (e.g., 8-9). Wisdom is often found associated with goddesses in pagan cultures. There are several reasons for this. The intellectual's passion for learning is comparable to sexual passion and may even partially supplant it, so that 'Lady knowledge' becomes pursued like a human woman. In addition, the woman caretaker seems all-knowing to the very young child, and this may have influenced the portrayal of knowledge as female. In the Bible, wisdom is seen as a creature rather than as a goddess, but as a companion to God.

Whether or not there were goddesses in the popular imagination, there is no doubt that they had no place in the prophetic mentality. Instead, the image of God undergoes a 'feminization' from the early 'man of war' of Exodus 15, and emphasis is placed on the nurturing, more motherly aspects of God (e.g., Hos. 11:1-4; Jer. 31:20; Isa. 46:3-4).

**Women in the NT:** While there are indications that patriarchal rules were continued among Christians (e.g., 1 Tim. 2:11-12; but cf. Eph. 5:22-24, where submission of wives is under the rubric that all are to be subject to one another in Christ, v. 21, including husbands, v. 25, who are to imitate Christ's self-sacrificing love toward their wives), there are also indications that the role of women was influenced by the non-Jewish environment of early Christianity. Thus, in the discussion of divorce in Mark 10:2-12, it is assumed a wife can divorce her husband (v. 12) as was the case in Roman society. The frequent mention of women among the followers of Jesus (e.g., Luke 8:1-3; 23:55-56; 24:10), and the prominence of such women in the early church as Prisca (Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19), the deaconess Phoebe (Rom. 16:1), and Mary (Rom. 16:6), among others, indicates they played an important role in the early church. Paul's refusal to let women speak in the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 14:34-36) was thus not universal, despite his claim to the contrary (1 Cor. 14:33b), and his statement that in Christ the religious distinction between the sexes had been eliminated (Gal. 3:28) was observed in other churches (e.g., Phil. 4:3).

**New Approaches:** Part of the feminist approach to the Bible has been to deal with the stories of women in two particular ways: 'depatriarchalizing' and 'remembering.' 'Depatriarchalizing' is the attempt to read the Hebrew text without the prism of intervening interpretations; when this is done it is clear that the biblical text is not so 'patriarchal' or misogynistic as we would otherwise have believed. An example is the new reading of Eve. It is clear in the biblical text that at the creation, woman was not intended to be subordinate to man, for the Hebrew word *ezer*, normally translated 'helper' (Gen. 2:18), is frequently used of God (e.g., Pss. 30:10; 54:4) and does not imply subordination. Eve is portrayed as the spokesperson for the couple, and during her talk with the serpent she presents theological arguments. She is never portrayed as wanton, or as tempting or tempted sexually, nor does the biblical author single her out for greater blame than her partner. This approach also concentrates on such passages as the Song of Songs, in which there is a clear lack of any patriarchal or condemnatory attitude toward women, thus indicating that the Hebrew Bible was not a monolithically patriarchal document.

'Remembering,' the retelling the stories of patriarchal abuse of women as a hagiography (writing about the lives of Christian saints. Hagiography tended to praise saints in lofty, ornate terms. Because of this bias, the accuracy of these writings as historical records is questionable.) and martyrology, provides not only documentation of patriarchy, but a sacred history to be remembered and thus overcome. Such female 'victims' as Hagar, Jephthah's daughter, the concubine from Gibeah, and Tamar the daughter of David are remembered in this way. *See also* Marriage.

Excerpt from "ETHICS" - *THE OXFORD COMPANION TO THE BIBLE*

Biblical ethics is inalienably religious. Reflection on issues of moral conduct and character in scripture is always qualified by religious convictions and commitments. To abstract biblical ethics from its religious context is to distort it.

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 and way 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 unitive understanding even of that one God or of that one God's will. To force biblical ethics into a timeless, systematic unity is to impoverish it.

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 Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church Lake Worth, Florida Proper 25A - The Eve of Pentecost 23 [October 22, 2005] Canon Richard T. Nolan

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LOVE GOD, NEIGHBOR, AND ONESELF?  
ARE THE THREE LOVES IDENTICAL?**

The *Summary of the Law*, which we heard in tonight's Reading (see below), is one of my favorite scriptural passages. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." This declaration by Jesus is the moral absolute for all Christians, an absolute principle rooted in the Old Testament.

By asserting "on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets," Jesus provides an indisputable, liberating moral context for understanding all other commandments, rules, and ethical values. In so doing, he freed us from unswerving conformity to lesser, inflexible, imprisoning moral codes and regulations that too often inhibit, or even prevent, love of God, neighbor, and self.

For over two thousand years, his disciples (including ourselves) have been left with the daunting challenge of applying his *Summary of the Law* to concrete issues in particular, often unique, circumstances. Though guided by moral wisdom of the ages, faithful Christians at all times and in all places have differed sharply on the application of love to living issues - such as abortion, assisted death, war, capital punishment, divorce, human sexuality, our stewardship of the environment, economic justice, family structures and values, and so on. Because of our legitimate differences on so many ethical matters, within classical Anglican Christianity we agree to differ on various dilemmas of doctrine and morality. Nonetheless, in spite of our often profound dissimilarities, we *are* generally able to judge disapprovingly those behaviors that obviously exploit human beings together with actions that are intentionally unjust, clearly idolatrous, blatantly inconsiderate, consciously harmful to body and spirit, and the like.

Yet, what *basically* does it mean to *love* God, neighbor, and oneself? Are the three loves identical? We rely on learned commentators to help us respond to this question. What I offer tonight is drawn from these experts, not just from my own ponderings.

Concerning love of God, the Hebrew people were commanded to love God, and Jesus repeats this mandate in his own *Summary* - an adaptation of the classical Old Testament wording "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Our love for God, understood in the context of the covenant established at Mount Sinai, is *not* primarily a matter of intimate affection and certainly *not* a mystical yearning for a vague transcendence. Our love for God is expressed by trusting Someone, namely *Yahweh* (a significant name for the biblical God), by showing profound reverence for God, and by being loyal to the Lord God alone. To love God is to live from moment to moment with grace-filled hearts and minds and by making the multitude of daily decisions God delegates to us. To love God is to live with enthusiasm for justice; with gratitude, awe, and penitence; and with sincere prayer and worship.

Interestingly, worship is the supreme act of our love for God. To worship (from "worthship") God is to acknowledge the Creator's supreme worth; it is to "ascribe to the Lord the glory due his Name" (Psalm 2, v. 2). In the Bible, prayer (and sacrifice) is understood as the foremost *service* rendered to God as king. "...worship is the only adequate preparation of the Church for its work and witness in the world as the Body of Christ. ... [Worship] is an end in itself; in it man achieves his chief end of glorifying God. There is no greater human activity than that of giving unto the Lord the glory due unto His name. Hence, for Christians the obligation of worship is absolute... It is the act not of isolated individuals but of the whole Church. ...private worship is based on corporate worship, the worship of the Church, ... a family activity." [from Raymond Abba, *Principles of Christian Worship* (1957), Ch. 1] Accordingly, *Services* of corporate worship are the most significant and fundamental expression through which human beings can love and serve God. Without corporate worship, our love for God is significantly diminished.

With regard to love for our neighbor, from Christ we learn that each of us is under an obligation to promote in personal ways the interests and significance of those with whom we come in contact, whether at home or at work. Mutual caring, unselfishness, humility, equal regard, and generosity of spirit, all accompanied by God's strengthening Grace, are qualities of genuine love in all human associations. One might say that the Christian life is the loving concern for the wellbeing of people under the inspiration of, and allegiance to, Jesus and the ideals he personifies. Obviously, the intensity and responsibilities of neighborly love will vary, according to the actual relationship we have with neighbors, such as our significant other(s), family, friends, colleagues, and other assorted bonds.

Concerning loving oneself, the hardest task of all for many individuals hammered by underserved religious and cultural guilt, Christian discipleship is *not* about self-loathing, self-negation, asceticism, or an avoidance of all pleasure. Following Christ includes a trust in the God whose Word he exemplifies and embodies - while we live to the extent we can in accordance with the *Summary*. Loving God, neighbor and self rejects self-indulgence, self-centeredness, self-preoccupation and conforming fully to the expectations of one's culture. In particular circumstances, however, discipleship might involve self-denial, suffering or even death as one remains faithful. Nevertheless, the love of self affirms one's self-acceptance as a unique child of God, a positive self-regard, and equal regard in fellowship with others.

It is safe to say that we human beings love God, our neighbors, and our selves in different ways; the three loves are not identical. Moreover, our love is imperfect and impaired to one degree or another. At our best, strengthened by God's spirit, and by each other, we are a "work in progress." We are all, as some would say, in the process of becoming more fully human as the Creator intends us to be. By gathering here to worship, the process is nurtured, so that our lives are more truly lived within the Spirit of Christ's liberating *Summary of the Law*.

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**Matthew 22:34-46**

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. "