



Thinking for yourself

Hawk or dove—the moral wrestle with issues of the day can be spiritually inspired.

HOW DO YOU RECONCILE the “turn the other cheek” mandate in the Bible with the need to defend and find justice? Since the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the ensuing global diplomatic and military efforts to protect and defend against future attacks, many individuals watching their governments react have struggled with their own inner conflict about what constitutes a moral response. *The Sentinel* asked Ron Ballard, a full-time Christian Science healer and teacher living in Ashland, Oregon, to talk about how spiritual thinkers can find their way in decisionmaking. Ballard, whose early professional career was in political campaign management, explained that by trusting in God—divine intelligence—people can think for themselves and have confidence in the answers they find.

Is there a Christian Science view of war?

I don't believe there is a set Christian Science view or policy about war. Christian Science helps you gain deeper spiritual insight about the issues that confront humanity. There is a passage in Ephesians that I think lifts the issue of conflict away from people, cultures, and nations into recognition that what we—all of humanity—are warring against are the issues of evil. It says, “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (6:12).

You can find some very militaristic viewpoints or statements in the Bible. How do you listen for a real directional message from Scripture?

First you have to establish a sense of spiritual and intellectual integrity—and in that, first and foremost, is balance. You have to be willing to seek not only those ideas that support your predispositions, but also those ideas that will challenge and expand them. I think all essential spiritual principles of humanity could be considered to hinge on this concept from Proverbs: “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths” (3:5, 6). To

me, that says, “Turn from your own prejudices and look for Truth; don't put your plans first, and then ask God to cooperate in carrying them out.”

“The law of God destroys the evils of thought.”

Does that mean you could be inspired either to turn the other cheek or to go ahead and bomb? That you could legitimately come to any number of conclusions about how to respond to a situation like the attacks of September 11?

You could come to a number of conclusions. We need balance in our thinking process. In the Bible Jesus said, “Neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you” (Matt. 7:6). And that stands in interesting context side-by-side with his command: “Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt. 5:39).

This context brings a sense of intellectual honesty to your point of view—you get beyond the sense of personal outlook and really try to weigh the issues with both wisdom and compassion.

Many of our readers have written to us about the need to pray for all the children of God—including the Taliban, as well as Osama bin Laden. How do we reconcile conflicting human emotions and do that?

I think a statement like that, when it is plumbed to its depth, can actually be the basis of healing. Obviously, when an individual comments that even Osama bin Laden needs to be seen as the child of God, that's coming from a spiritual place in that individual's thinking, a yearning for a more spiritual perception. It can tie in with the fundamental point of Christian healing—that we need to see in others God's own likeness. Jesus did that, and it resulted in healing. It doesn't condone the sin; it rebukes it.

The prophet Elisha, when surrounded with the forces of destruction, prayed, “Open his eyes [his servant's], that he may see” (II Kings 6:17). That's a prayer that resonates throughout *all* of humanity, and what Elisha and his servant saw was not just the forces of destruction, but, more important, the forces of God's protection and care. And that wasn't just an intellectual exercise. It resolved the issue of conflict between the Syrians and the Israelites.

So it's not excusing the horror of the sin?

Right. Once we get beyond the feelings of hatred and anger and

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revenge, what's at the heart of people wanting to see justice being done is that they want to see the evil destroyed. And the activity of God's law does exactly that.

So this process of forgiveness, in the common sense of the word, may be simply one of turning the other cheek, but in a deeper sense of the word, it's a recognition that the law of God does more than simply overlook this. It pursues, punishes, and destroys the evils of thought.

In that context, then, if a person feels that it is morally right to militarily pursue the Osama bin Ladens of the world—possibly to kill them—does that mean they have to believe these people are evil and beyond redemption?

No, I don't think so at all. This process of intellectual and spiritual integrity is one that broadens thought to a lot of possibilities. In the Bible, Jehoshaphat struggled with the issue of war and battle. He had a multitude of foot soldiers to do battle with the invaders. And yet he struggled with the idea of what needed to be done. Even though he could have overrun the intruders, through prayer he ended up with an assurance from God that "Ye shall not need to fight in this battle: set yourselves, stand ye still, and see the salvation of the Lord with you" (II Chron. 20:17). They didn't need to do anything in terms of their own battle.

The intruding forces turned on one another—an unlikely scenario in terms of mere human reasoning, but when you go to a more open spiritual outlook, you may find that things happen in such struggles that could really never be planned or outlined through mere human reasoning.

If, through prayer, you come to the conclusion that it's best to do physical battle, with tanks and bombs and so forth, how do you

reconcile that with God's commandment: "Thou shalt not kill?"

We need to recognize that the results of our prayer may be different individually from what they are collectively. One of the aspects of receiving God's word is not only knowing what that word is, but also, from a human standpoint, being able to receive and understand it. The Christ has always been present to those able to receive it. Our ability to receive a divine message varies with the circumstance and our preparedness to put it into practice. It's not to say that at some point, we're not going to be able to fully embrace a divine con-

"Prayer has an effect on the collective experience."

cept, but sometimes along the way we may recognize that we've got more growing to do in order to put something into practice.

But aren't we given the Ten Commandments as absolute law?

Yes, we are given the law as an absolute. That's certainly what we should be striving for. Whether we are capable of accepting that law and putting it fully into practice, of course, is problematic. It's what the human experience is about.

I think there's every clear indication, as you look at the development in the Bible from the Old Testament to the New Testament, that we're certainly not dealing here with a God of war. The Ten Commandments eventually lead to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, which bring out a clear sense that God is not a God of evil. That God is not a God of war. But we also recognize that in human experience not everyone buys into that concept, and, hence, you've got to do what is nearest right under the circumstance. And, doing that, you can still be faithful to your spiritual convictions.

But does that mean there can be varying degrees of morality in viewing war?

I think there are absolutes. Rather than say there is a place both for the hawk and the dove in this process, I would like to say that what is really needed is the spirit of trust in God. I would like to come into my prayer, if I were a dove or a hawk, and say, "You know, maybe there is something different that I need to be open to."

As an individual struggles with the issue of war, and prays, what effect can it have on a nation's decisions about war?

Since we're not dealing with a God of war, obviously, the manifestation of that is going to be individuals resolving their conflicts or difficulties in a peaceful manner. However, in our effort to reach that stage collectively, there may need to be a lot of collective spiritual development going on. Through prayer, even in conflict, there would be a lot less carnage and mayhem than would normally be the case. Prayer is always, I think, going to have an effect on our collective experience.

Even in this current conflict, I'd offer the possibility that the rather rapid and unexpected retreat of the Taliban is an indication that a certain minimal effort—certainly compared to what it could be—can have results.

The skeptic might think you're just confusing the success of war with the effect of prayer.

Right. I can't imagine that—not only in this country but throughout the world—after the events of September 11 there was not an immediate effort of prayer to help resolve this situation. The attack was obviously an extraordinary example of taking of innocent life, and most people, I think, throughout the world, recognize that we certainly didn't want to expand that effort into taking more innocent lives. No one wants to see that result out of war.

But, given the examples in our history of what can occur with the use of military technology, there is, evidence that the fallout of this particular conflict, so far, has been minimal. Granted, it's a difficult thing if you happen to be the Afghan whose son or daughter or mother or father was hit with what is called "collateral damage." But if you're looking at it from a collective standpoint, I think you could easily make an argument that, given what could have occurred or happened, the use of intelligence—and I'm using that in both a human and spiritual sense—has minimized the fallout.

When we see progress in civilization, can we call it spiritual even if it's not widely labeled or recognized as an outcome of spiritual reasoning?

The concept of prayer could be seen as a religious or spiritual issue, but I think it could also be seen as an intellectual issue. Prayer is a matter of lifting our standards of intelligence, and in that lifting it means that we're seeking some higher standard of thought. Whether we call it "spirituality," whether we say it's the result of prayer, whether we say it is the result of a higher standard of thought—I think it's still basically the same process. We're seeking the higher dimension of our thinking process—prayer and spirituality are just fundamental constituents of one's being.

Are there examples of this inner struggle in your own life?

I certainly struggled a great deal being a college student during the Vietnam War and finding my own position on that conflict. The college campus culture very much suspected—if not downright rejected—the rationales and reasons for that conflict. I also grew up in a deeply patriotic family that fostered in me a sense of responsibility and respect for efforts to maintain the freedoms of our country. So I had to work through those conflicting attitudes.

And when I came up with a low lottery number that meant, in all probability, I would be drafted, it became all the more imperative for me to take some stance. And one thing I considered was how I could contribute to that effort. It was one of the things that prompted my deeper interest in the practice of Christian Science as a career track—to become a full-time Christian Science practitioner.

I did consider conscientious objection quite deeply. What I objected to in the issues of war or conflict was the kinds of tribal mentalities that often hold out the prospect that "We're right and you're wrong."

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And, as I got more involved in some of these ideas that I've been sharing today in terms of letting go of my own understanding and trusting God, I recognized that, for one, there is a validity to a divine sense of warfare, which both Jehoshaphat and David used, which was "The battle is not mine but the Lord's." God does do battle with evil—not by recognizing or acknowledging evil, but simply by virtue of God's allness. I very much wanted to be part of that conflict.

What did happen?

I applied for the military chaplain's program and was not accepted. That propelled me to take steps into the full-time Christian Science healing practice. Then I enlisted, took my physical, and the draft board decided that since I was a Christian Science practitioner, I was a minister of religion and therefore not draftable.

And you weren't trying to persuade them to do that?

Not at all. I was trying to persuade them the other way.

What did you do for the duration of the war?

I took probably a greater interest in it than I had up to that point. In college, after dinner everyone sat around the evening news and watched this thing take place. But after the draft issue was resolved, I became a lot more interested in the Vietnamese culture. I became more knowledgeable about the way the State Department makes decisions. In doing that, I tried to structure my prayers to be of greater support. I felt that if I was not going to be physically present, I was going to be mentally present.

In your spiritual healing practice, what inner struggles about the current conflict have you seen?

I think the biggest question I've heard on people's minds is the obvious one—where was God in this experience? And in my work with clients that have been affected in a variety of ways—some with family members working in the World Trade Center towers, others not so directly affected—I've seen very clear evidence of God's love and support. There is support not only in caring for their needs, but also in the assurance of God's constant love in people's lives.

And what has their struggle been like at the next step, in how to take a moral stand on what to do about the situation?

Still, the point is that God needs to be with us in the decision-making process about where we go from here. God isn't just supportive and caring in terms of tragedy, but a support in the intelligence and inspiration needed in knowing how to respond and proceed. More than just spiritual platitudes of "turning the other cheek" or "loving all God's children," and more than just a human reaction of anger or revenge, what we need to do in our response is to seek divine intelligence. ✨