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## Guilt and Fear

Brendan McGrath, O.S.B., S.T.D.

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I think it was Aristotle who said that philosophy begins with wonder — wonder both in the sense of the feeling of marvel and awe experienced in the contemplation of the magnificent complexity of reality, and in the sense of asking how and why all this comes to be. Analogously, is it not true — as many anthropologists maintain — that religion begins with fear, fear which arises from the feeling of helplessness in the face of the stupendous, mysterious, and often apparently malevolent forces which surround us? Primitive or natural religion does not usually assume that these mysterious forces, perhaps especially when they are personified as gods and goddesses, are necessarily benevolent toward us. Rather, they are more often thought of as capricious, indifferent, or downright inimical. Plato, in the tenth book of the *Laws*, identifies three kinds of what he calls “atheists.” The first are those who simply deny the existence of the gods, with whom we need not concern ourselves very much because their position is so palpably absurd. The second class is those who admit the existence of the gods, but say that they are not at all concerned with human affairs. These, too, are of little importance, because it is so clearly evident that the gods *are* interested in what happens to us. The third and worst kind of Plato’s atheists are those who admit not only the existence of the gods and that they do concern themselves with human affairs, but also that they can be bribed.

In effect, then, Plato would characterize many, if not most, practitioners of religions of all sorts and levels as “atheists.” For is it not true that all too often, at least in practice, religion largely amounts to a matter of assuaging our fear of the unknown by placating — with gifts of one sort or another — the power or powers behind the terrifying forces beyond our control? And it really makes little difference

whether we call this power or these powers “God,” or “the gods,” or anything else.

Biblical religion is, I believe it is safe to say, a unique phenomenon in the history of human experience. Among the characteristics which go to make up this uniqueness, three seem to stand out in the present context. The first finds expression in the 50th Psalm:

Do I eat the flesh of strong bulls,  
or is the blood of goats my drink?  
Offer to God praise as your sacrifice  
and fulfill your vows to the Most High;  
Then call upon me in time of distress;  
I will rescue you, and you shall glorify me. — Ps 50:13-15

In a word, religion and morality are the two sides of one coin. Religion is not merely a matter of rituals and ceremonies, but of doing right and loving goodness and walking humbly with one’s God (cf. Micah 6, 8). This is a principle insisted upon on practically every page of the Bible.

The second characteristic of biblical religion to be noted here is simply the frequently repeated admonition, in both Testaments, to “fear not.” Franklin Roosevelt told us in the dark days of the great depression that the only thing we had to fear was fear itself, a kind of slogan which, like so many campaign slogans, turns out on analysis to be almost completely devoid of meaning. It suggests comparison with the notion of believing in faith, which some recommend.

The third characteristic of biblical religion is the most basic of all. It is the notion of a God Who is love. This is not something that had to wait for the New Testament to be revealed, as is suggested by those who tend to contrast the totally fictitious “wrathful God” of the Old Testament with the loving Jesus of the New. To do this means that one convicts oneself of never having read or understood the eleventh chapter of Hosea, the simple statement that God chose Israel because He loved it (Deuteronomy 6,8) and for no other reason, or what God says in Jeremiah 31, 3, “With age-old love I have loved you,” or the countless other changes rung on this same theme from one end of the Old Testament to the other. The one word that comes closest to defining what God is (any real definition is utterly impossible because God is, in the terminology of the classical philosophers, *ens simplicissim*) is *hesed*. This untranslatable word, closely akin to the New Testament *agape*, particularly when it is predicated of God, signifies that love which is totally disinterested, love which is extended to another for no reason other than the goodness of the one who extends it. Exhortations such as, “Cheer up! God loves you,” which we see these days on bumper stickers, buttons or banners, are based on really profound theological fact.

Since, therefore, God is the Almighty Who loves us with ag old love, it is easy to see why the admonition to abandon fear makes sense. But there is another side to the matter of fear. The fear of which we have been speaking so far is, basically, what philosophers call servile or even craven fear. It is the fear of a slave faced with the often-times capricious demands of a master who holds the power of life and death over him, a slave who has no acknowledged rights, a slave who must live in constant dread of a master who is free to do anything he pleases with his human property.

But this is not the only kind of fear. There is also the fear which is called filial or reverential. This is the fear of which St. Paul speaks, "You did not receive a spirit of slavery leading you back into fear but a spirit of adoption through which we cry out, 'Abba!' (that is, 'Father!')" (Romans 8, 15). It is the fear of which the Bible speaks when it tells us, repeatedly and in various ways, that "the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord." It amounts to the fear of offending one to whom we are indebted, one who has been good to us — pre-eminently God, of course. It begets two things: sorrow for having offended and a consciousness of guilt. This sorrow is not to be confused with mere remorse, which is self-centered; it is sorrow, regret, self-reproach which do not exclude the element of hope, because it stems from the firm conviction that God's mercy (*hesed*) is above all His works.

### Manifestations of Fear

The various manifestations of this "fear of the Lord" — self-reproach, regret, trepidation at the prospect of divine punishment — are all salutary in themselves, because we have to do here with the righteousness of God as well as His loving kindness. When one has really offended God, that person certainly ought to contemplate with fear and trembling the prospect of God's justice, for it is the same God Who promises a shower of blessings on those who obey His law Who also threatens condign punishment for those who disregard or despise that same law.

Aside from the foregoing largely theological considerations, there is a great deal more which can be said on the subject of guilt and fear. For one thing, in addition to all the threats and dangers with which humans have been faced from the beginning, we have succeeded in providing ourselves with new dangers of various kinds — mostly what we might call by-products or spin-offs of our technological "progress," chief among which are the very real possibility of the total destruction of our planet as a viable environment, either through nuclear annihilation or the slow death of pollution. That such prospects should strike fear in the bravest of us is certainly eminently reasonable and proper.

There is still another side to the whole matter of guilt and fear arising from the fact that both of these can and do at times take on a morbid or pathological character. From time immemorial, moral theologians and spiritual directors have been all too well aware of the condition called scrupulosity, wherein one imagines guilt where there is none or grossly exaggerates some slight guilt which may be real, and have worked out various means of properly dealing with such troubled souls. Or there is the opposite aberrancy, whereby one may have no consciousness of guilt at all, even though he may be living a thoroughly dissolute life. Such individuals are sometimes said to be amoral, morally blind, or burdened with a dead conscience. If the services of a spiritual guide are solicited in such a case — which is obviously unlikely, given the nature of the situation — his task will be much more difficult than it is with one who is merely scrupulous.

The art of effective spiritual direction is the subject of a vast literature, at least some of which — that produced by the acknowledged masters of the art, like St. Francis de Sales or St. Alphonsus — remains eminently useful.

It has only been fairly recently, however, that spiritual directors and the ascetical and moral theologians on whom they depend have begun to come to the recognition of the existence of a vast store of knowledge which has been accumulated, thanks to the assured conclusions of contemporary research and experience in psychology and psychotherapy. This is certainly not to say, of course, that every conclusion and recommendation of every investigator in the field is to be eagerly adopted and put into practice, seeing that, as is generally admitted by those well versed in the matter, we have only just begun to fathom the mysterious depths of the workings of the human psyche. Nevertheless, it seems increasingly evident that we have here a potentially fruitful field for cooperation and mutual assistance between spiritual directors and psychiatrists and clinical psychologists, but only with the proviso that each will respect the competence of the other and resist all temptation to invade the other's domain. Ideally, of course, we would wish for gifted spiritual directors who are also thoroughly competent psychotherapists, but given the enormous complexity of both disciplines, it is likely that the realization of that ideal will be very rare indeed.