**The Easter Experience,**

**The Belief Gene,**

**EQUALS the Why/What/How/Who of Religious Experience**

*AN INTERACTIVE MEDITATION*

for

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A Meditation you say?

What is a “meditation”? **Simply put…This Meditation is an invitation to “test yourself quantitatively”, to reconsider, to reflect, and to reconstitute your assumptions about what IS the role of what is conventionally referred to as the religious experience For, By, and TO you:**

* Is your religious experience because of the feeling of “faith” or “belief” or is it because of a very different behavior driven instead by “values” or choices and not emotions? Or is it just “genetic” because some folks have the gene and some do not?
* IF it is because of a feeling of “faith” or “belief”, then your religious experience is most probably primarily a feeling, an emotion, a reaction, a filling of a need for something (often provoked by or stimulated by some element of fear or loss or trauma…whether conscious or not)
* IF it is instead merely a behavior, an action or reaction to some set of “values” or deeply held motivations (whether implicit or explicit), then religious experience is just THAT = One of Many Experiences about which you have significant rational choice.
* IF it is simply because of genetic material driven by whatever random or inherited combination of genes that you have, then is it merely something you can’t avoid?

The real question that persists and seems most elusive is: What IS “religious” behavior and experience and “Why” is it.

This meditation will proceed by examining the religious experience of what is known to Christians as “Easter” from three perspectives:

1. “Societal and Cultural”…Using Joseph Campbell’s work on “myth” and its role in societal development with reference to all three monotheistic Western religious traditions
2. “Scientific”…Considering some of the attempts at

“Quantification” of Religious Experience (primarily by William James, Karl Jung, and geneticist Dean Hamer’s 2005 book “The God Gene: How Religion is Hardwired into Our Genes” and his commentators)

1. “Behavioral”…Using the Change Strategies International adapted work on Personal Motivation and “Why We Do What We Do” and pursuant pragmatic applications to religious experience (with sidebar references to its relevance for terrorist behavior…and Frank Sinatra’s 1965 movie “The Manchurian Candidate”)

**COMMON REFERENCE POINT FOR THIS MEDITATION**

**IS/= THE WESTERN RELIGIOUS CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE KNOWN AS “EASTER”….**

“Easter” is commonly considered that period of time during which Christians pause to reflect on the Key Sacrificial Act of the Origin and Founder of their faith: Jesus Christ.

Depending on one’s individual Christian upbringing and evolving adult behaviors and habits, Easter can be an experience that starts with a truly fun and funny pageantry-filled “Fat Tuesday” Party (known to many as Mardi Gras) and last 40 days of “sacrifice” and “remembrance” (called Lent) and concludes with a magnificent, emotionally charged Holy Week that can include dramatic and often bloody processions, extended worship experiences (lasting for some traditions as long as 3 days), and incredibly compelling music (often including incense and always crowded with lots of symbols and special religious “robing”).

For others, Easter is merely going to “church” on Easter Sunday (a floating lunar-determined annual Gregorian Calendar Sunday date), getting new clothes, consuming the heavily commercialized “symbols” of renewal that manifest themselves in bunnies and “peeps” candy and “Easter Egg Hunts” (including the civil religion expression on The US White House Lawn each year!).

*THE SOCIETAL/CULTURAL POV…..*

Joseph Campbell in his lifelong work on “myth” as possibly best reflected in his “The Man of a Thousand Faces” simply establishes that literally every culture since the beginning of history has “created” a seasonal (often annual and lunar) tradition of pausing to reflect and “thank” their “gods” for their status…plus to “self-improve” in some way. His PBS interviews with Bill Moyers near the end of his life summarize his findings rather elegantly…and is well worth watching several times to challenge one’s assumptions about “beliefs” in general!

Anthropologists constantly farm this field of cultural behavior as evidence of “universal tendencies” of all cultures. Any one annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion is crowded with current research on the cultural origins and rhythms of religious behavior…with a medusa of creative explanations of “why man insists on behaving this way”.

The Greeks and the Romans created entire pantheons of gods and myths in order to supply “meaning”, understanding, and explanations for/to their lives. Many of the early theatrical events took on the characteristics of what is today called “religious” ritual.

Roman Emperors and the various “caesars” all took advantage of this clearly widespread behavior in their constant expansion of the Roman Coliseum in Rome in order to keep the masses entertained and controlled. The various applications of “religious” meaning to the acts and ugliness justified in that horrid human sacrifice arena are one of the best examples of civil religion in recorded western history.

All three monotheistic religions have operationalized a “stop, look, and listen” experience driven by the lunar calendar. The Jewish traditions all pause for Passover. The Christian traditions all pause for Easter. The Muslim traditions all pause for Ramadan. Throughout recorded religious history, all three of these “one-god” traditions have practiced this pagan pausing in a multitude of ranges of application…and self-justification depending on the degree to which they were “in control” of their chosen societies or “victimized” by those same societies. Plus these “pauses” have been used for a wide gamut of purposes both political and religious.

Simply put, there is ample evidence that man has found a way to assure that there is at least an annual or a seasonal pause to “start over” and somehow either palliate the unknown or call on that same unknown for favors…and often this also includes some form of individual recommitment to either ritual or rules unique to those traditions.

Clearly, what is most compelling for THIS Meditation here today is that such pauses consistently and predictably happen and perpetuated regardless of geography or era of recorded time. Mankind just seems compelled to pause and reflect…and to use that “pause” in every conceivable range of ways to say in some way “I am right and probably even ‘more right’ that those around me!

*The “Scientific” POV….*

DesCartes got the Western World started on this “science and religion” thing very cleverly when he introduced the ideas of dualism and separated “god” from every day life. Galileo gets a lot of credit for his courage and cleverness (which is why the study of the “evolution” of the mechanical representations of the universe evolving from the earth at the center to the sun at the center is so fascinating!), but the real issues began to get exciting when measurement advanced in the 19th century to the point of attempts to quantify literally everything.

Freud and Jung often get much credit for the challenging of religious assumptions in the 20th century, but it was the work of William James published in his “The Varieties of Religious Experience” that set the rhythm, the tone, and direction of what today is the academic discipline known as psychology. The most fascinating dimension of that compelling work is how it came to be: William James was simply trying to “measure” the degree to which psychic experiences (today known as the “paranormal”) could be replicated. Having devoted literally decades to this venture in the late 19th century, James published his findings and invited the academic world (starting at Harvard) to open their minds to a different way of considering the religious experience.

The evolution of the treatment of the measurement of human behavior that William James fertilized took a wide variety of twists and turns in the first half of the 20th century. Most notably and perhaps most dangerously in terms of sustaining implications for our society today were the eugenics movement combined with the emergence of psychological tests in order to identify “good, better, best”. Most people are not aware that the original IQ test was developed in the US as the country geared up to enter WWI; it was a tool designed to divide the “useful” from the “less useful”…and it had clear religious corollaries in terms of measurement of those that “can believe” vs. those that are “hard-hearted” (but that is a separate subject). Additionally, it was the US eugenics movement that fertilized Hitler’s brain to create much of what became the Nazi Aryan Race theories…with its accompanying “measurements” of superiority that lead to such horrific consequences as “rational” justification of The Holocaust”.

Hitler’s brilliant operationalization of this “measurement mentality” gave rise first to the concept of propaganda in order to “move” large crowds in the direction of his ideas. As the first movement leader in history to have access to technology as a behavioral weapon, he literally moved an entire population and culture into a civil religion complete with its own rituals and pageantry plus its own music (Wagner). Hitler’s success was so compelling (and unsettling) that it lead directly to the creation of the field of social psychology. Why? Simple: the rest of the West needed a way to rationally explain this “religious” movement that was actually a brutal political conversion process.

On a side note, during this same era the Harvard Psychology Professor that created “Wonder Woman” also wrote extensively on the emotions of “normal” people and his work gave rise to one of today’s most popular and persistent pop-psychology behavioral measurement models called the DISC (which has morphed into Meyer’s Briggs work, all of those quickie tests of personality that sprout annually from various Texas outlets, and its most recent manifestation: StrengthFinders). ALL of these tools have been used by various religionists to motivate folks to their position and to solicit funds for “big events” akin to “Easter” (all for the purpose of personal change and conversion of others to the “right”).

Perhaps the most compelling recent addition to this field of trying to “predict” religious behavior and how to get folks to follow an idea is Hamer’s work on “The God Gene”. What is most interesting about Hamer’s assertion is how he derived the idea of a “god gene”: it was totally and cleverly, deductively quantitative (derivative of the work of psychologists trying to explain “transcendant” behavior). Critics of this “rushed to publication” thesis based on very limited and non-replicated research have argued most strongly that what Hamer calls genetic is merely a meme.

Whether or not Hamer’s work is an invitation to a “new”, more compelling explanation of religious behavior, of religious rhythms, or religious tendencies is actually irrelevant to this “Meditation on Easter”. What IS relevant is that the “scientific” and the “behavioral” world still is pressing so aggressively to “explain” consistent “religious” expressions of “faith” and/or “belief” simply continue to persist. The only difference these arguments bring is an assertion of more robust measurement. But still the question of what IS “religiosity” and religious experience goes unanswered!

*The Behavioral POV….*

*Or….can behavior really be changed?*

The Korean Conflict in the 1950s changed everything.

Although it is not widely known, one of the most alarming outcomes of that “war” was the shocking discovery by American military leaders that most of the American POWs chose to stay in communism and not come home after the truce was signed. This stunning development generated millions of dollars of research into “what happened to our American boys” and gave rise to the pop-psychology term “brain washing”.

Perhaps the best popularized version of this “brain washing” term was the 1965 Frank Sinatra film “The Manchurian Candidate”. A chilling representation of what “might could” happen, this film actually reflects that best research that has occurred on how “learned” behavior can be “RE-Learned” through “brain washing”. The scientific basis of this excellent depiction of modification of human behavior was the work of Kurt Lewin.

Two key results came from this comprehensive research are relevant to this question of “The Easter Experience”:

* Lewin’s work on universal motivation
* Ensuing work on separating “faith-driven” necessities and “religious feeling” necessities from the concept of religious behavior as merely REACTION based on one’s deeply held “values” and NOT simply an attempt to “fix something broken”.

Lewin’s work gave academic credence and replicatability to the existence of common CORE “values” held by all humans on earth regardless of age, culture, or gender. Variously, there have been adaptations of his work into 6 factor models and 8 factor models (depending on the mathematics used)…but the key is that Lewin established that everyone on the planet is motivated at their core by the same things…and that how those Core Motivators Evolve is LEARNED BEHAVIOR.

One of those 8 Core Motivators actually measures the individual’s tendency toward religiosity (regardless of type of ritual or belief or whether it is Western or Eastern religious behavior). Most simply, everyone on the planet starts out with a “potential” for religiosity and the way each of us ends up manifesting that tendency is determined more by what we LEARN (“nurture”) than what we “come with” (“nature”).

*HENCE, WHAT DOES ALL THIS GIVE US TO “MEDITATE” ABOUT?*

* *First, WHERE does our tendency to religiosity really come from? Maybe it is NOT just “Lord I Believe; Please Accept My Unbelief”???*
* *Second, is the individual’s tendency to religiosity manipulatable and “learnable”? If so, then Easter is a mere manifestation of human creativity based on the evolution of culturally learned behaviors and maybe not something related to any given god?*
* *Third, What are the Implications of this set of “meditations” for “Mormons in the Middle”?*

**This “Meditation” will provide a Replicatable Model for Answering these questions and Activating those answers in each attendee’s approach to the Study of The Mormon Heritages and Experiences!**