

Care For One Another, But No Coddling

In tough times, do those of us who handled our finances responsibly have a moral obligation to bail out those who didn't? Are we our brother's keeper economically?

"Of course not" is my answer to the first question, and my answer to the second question is "Of course." That different to me are the connotations of two questions which presumably are intended to be the same, the second using a biblical phrase to illumine the first. So I must deal with them separately - a hard reply to the first question, a soft to the second.

THE FIRST QUESTION: "In tough times, do those of us who handled our finances responsibly have a moral obligation to bail out those who didn't?"

1.....Irresponsible people should *suffer the consequences* of their irresponsibility. Justice demands that in a moral universe; and in "a nation of laws and not of men," the immoral should not be free of the cost of immorality, nor should the moral pay their cost.

2.....We are "in tough times" partly because the financially irresponsible-immoral, in their boom-minded "irrational exuberance," believed that somehow they would *escape suffering* if the bears drove out the bulls. Eleven years ago, the senior pastor of Times Square Church predicted "a financial holocaust" because most Americans had come to believe that "Morals do not count." (David Wilkerson, "America's Last Call: On the Brink of a Financial Holocaust," 1998. "There will be sellers only - no buyers.")

3.....*The Federal government* has been unwittingly complicit in the financial irresponsibility of individuals, lending institutions, and corporations. "Gains are private, losses are public."

4....."Those of us who handled our finances responsibly" have (1) no "moral obligation to bail out those of us who didn't," and (2) *no choice* in the matter: the Federal government is using our money to bail them out.

THE SECOND QUESTION: "Are we our brother's keeper economically?"

1....."Keeper" - the word in the King James Version of Genesis 4:9 - now suggests a zoo or a prison. The New Living Translation is better: "Am I my brother's guardian?" The Contemporary English Version is even better: "Am I supposed to look after my brother?" Today's English Version is best: "*Am I supposed to take care of my brother?*" Instead of taking care of his brother Abel, Cain does the extreme opposite: he kills him. And when God confronts Cain for the murder and Cain retaliates with his question, God leaves the question hanging - for us all to answer. Of course the implied answer is "Of course you were to care for your brother! Care for one another is something I put into you human beings!"

2....."Be kind: everyone is carrying a heavy load." That common saying is especially true "in tough times." In this global depression, scores of millions are unemployed; and those whose identities were in their work have lost their identity as well as their income. Yes, we should *care for the helpless and hopeless* by all means possible, at the local and global levels and all levels in between.

3.....As a pastor, I was keenly aware of our personal and social responsibility to care for those *unable to care for themselves* because of limitations, including mental inability to manage their finances. / Then there are the oppressed and refugees. / And there are the millions of manual laborers whose work has fled overseas or just died - many of them lacking the capacity for retraining to non-manual labor.

3.....There is a time for justice, letting the financially irresponsible suffer. But there is a time for *mercy*. In school, some of us had to memorize this from Shakespeare: "The quality of mercy is not strained....It blesseth him that gives and him that takes....It is an attribute to God himself, / And earthly power dost then show likest God's / When mercy seasons justice."



Comments

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I absolutely agree with 2), even if I'd use different terms to describe the same.

The paradox, as I see it, arises from how the notion of self-centerdness is applied. Materialistic self-centerdness can be quite detrimental; spiritual self-centerdness, on the other hand is a different, at least to me.

As to 3), there are actually many first causes all the time, that arise constantly from quantum uncertainties, so there are many people who would point to quantum mechanics as a proof for God's continued involvement in the world. This, however, does not add to or change the notion of cause-and-effect (but I wouldn't object to this if I didn't find anything that could be added to it).

Also, christian symbolism has actually helped me a lot in at least one occasion in my life, in the sense of "where would I be without Jesus, what would I have done without him", but this is a statement of fact, not a statement of belief in the conventional religious sense.

I actually take the notion of 'purpose in life' for granted. Before, it was to be an agent of progress, now it's still the same, but I view progress differently, I had a narrower view of progress which was limited to scientific progress only.

POSTED BY: CACXO | MARCH 11, 2009 8:58 AM

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TO CACXO:

Thanks for clarifications.

1

You say "My principle spiritual experience...came from Jung, and that's essentially Buddhist." You may know that Jung was a PK, a Christian "preacher's kid." And you are correct that Jung's eastern sense of Self was blended with the western sense of God.

2

You say you prefer eastern "because it's more self-centered than the western notion of God. There's more empowerment and free will." Don't you think that "more empowerment and free will" fits better the west's high-drive and individual initiative? It's a paradox: the more one submits to the will of God (the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), the greater one's freedom as well as joy and peace. And another paradox: the more "self-centered" one is, the less chance of finding fulfillment, peace, and joy on one's journey and at its end.

3

Yes, cause/effect is of limited explicative value, even "a first cause, such as a big bang." For us Christians, the Origin is not some impersonal cause/effect but the personal Creator (as the Bible's first verse puts it) of "the heavens and the earth." As for one's personal life as a "cause," having a purpose, a simple and powerful way so to view one's life is in Rick Warren's "The Purpose-Driven Life."

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | MARCH 10, 2009 10:23 AM

[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

TO IVRI5768:

Thank you for your kind concern & suggestion.

I'll check on your suggestion, but am convinced that my sight is getting up-to-date attention.

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | MARCH 10, 2009 9:09 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

I forgot to say what I meant by enlightenment. I mean this in the Zen context of 'before enlightenment I chopped wood and carried water, after enlightenment I chopped wood and carried water'. Things don't change much, but you see more to the world than before.

The trouble with enlightenment is that without a spiritual or religious framework (that you know by heart but never really knew what it meant) people can easily go insane if they see the spirit, and lots of people do. There is no fundamental difference in perception between clinically paranoid people and enlightened people. The difference is that mad people seek objective explanations to what they see, and conclude vast conspiracies where there is only spiritual connections. And those connections are so vast that fear alone drives them mad, with or without constructing themselves a dysfunctional world-view.

In other words, without some prior knowledge of spirituality I could have easily gone nuts (hence, valuing my troubles so highly).

Now, if I had been a church-goer from childhood because my parents had dragged me there I'd now be christian.

My prior spiritual knowledge happened came from Jung, and that's essentially Buddhist. This is not to say that I am believer and Buddhist, rather my experiences happen to confirm some eastern notions; just like I'm not a believer in Newton, apples fall whether you believe it or not.

Not all religion and religious symbolism would be equally good in saving people from the other side of the world, in the sense that the other side is real, and needs consistent 'spiritology' just as bridges need consistent physics, or they'll fall under heavy weight.

The reason I would still go with eastern terminology is because it's more self-centered than the western notion of God. There's empowerment and free-will.

Jung defines free will as doing on his own accord what the (Jungian) Self wants of him, and he is wrong because he is unwittingly equating the Self with God, i.e. deep down he is very western and separating himself from the Self. It is the exact opposite; you are still going to wish to do what the Self seemed to have wanted from you when the time comes, whether you saw it or not or knew beforehand. The Self is, in a way, present knowledge of yourself in the future and in the past.

It is actually cause-and-effect that is the source of no-free-will. If everything is a cause of something else, then there is no free will, just a first cause, such as the big bang. Manifestations of the Self, on the other hand, are completely acausal, and outside and identifiable cause-effect relations.

So, the really interesting question to me is "why doesn't the notion cause-effect describe the universe adequately" (in terms what the actual world-physics/neuron-based-cognition interplay might be).

POSTED BY: CACXO | MARCH 10, 2009 6:51 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Dear Dr. Elliot,

On a separate note, I was sorry to learn that your eyesight is declining, and must ask what you will consider a ridiculous question, viz, have you investigated every possible form of treatment? If there is nothing available to help you in conventional medicine, have you looked at Huxley's "Better Sight without Glasses?" Notwithstanding the title, which I hope is correct, it has helped a lot of people, whose vision was quite past the help of glasses. I know two such people.

Sincerely,
Ivir

POSTED BY: IVRI5768 | MARCH 10, 2009 12:59 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Put simply, I am actually very much vindicated by events, for some things in my life, but at the end of the day I cannot help but notice that those events haven't made things better.

As to hope, I haven't really thought about this now that you mention it. Looking back, it used to be based in (the inevitability of scientific and social) progress, still is, I guess, to a lesser degree.

POSTED BY: CACXO | MARCH 9, 2009 9:27 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Dr. Elliot, I guess what I wrote sounded worse than it actually is, but thanks for your reply. I never really thought that life is fair or unfair, life just is. Nor do I normally complain or talk about things like that.

I picked those specific examples to illustrate that sometimes life is actually very fair and God (if he exist) seems to be very much on your side, on a magnitude that might make you wish you had never been troubled in the first place, for the sake of others.

I could have just as well picked examples where I had unwittingly done wrong to people, and it had come back to me with a vengeance, equally acausally, but those are level events.

I was speculating if it isn't better to seek normal human justice, rather than just move forward and leave it all behind, lest God does actually take your side!(assuming that God, if he exists, and cosmic justice, are one and the same).

Lots of the times it is actually impossible to seek normal justice because some things are simply outside its scope, now and forever; you can't sue the world for having countries and being imperfect, that would be ridiculous.

So what it comes down to, is that it might be better that people righted the world for better, generally speaking, because where and when they don't, cosmic justice may be in action, and if such a thing exists it has no ..well.. proportionality, for lack of a better word.

(This is all a kind of reasoning that is very singly and particularly angled, I don't usually take such angles to things)

POSTED BY: CACXO | MARCH 9, 2009 8:52 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

TO CACXO:

Thank you for unburdening your heart as to the unfair treatment you've gotten. "Life is unfair" is the first sentence of a self-help book that - as you might guess - sold very well: the thought of life's unfairness hits all of us humans at least occasionally. It hit me today as I woke up (as I do some days) able to write (my work) & read only with difficulty: my eyesight is declining.

But while we can't keep the bird of unfairness from flying overhead, we can keep it from building a nest in our hair: we are in charge of what we give our attention to. The glass is partly full, never empty except when we give up hope.

In another comment, you might say where your hope is if you have any. Mine is in God: the mystery of goodness & life is more than a match for the mystery of evil & death. And by God, I mean the God of the Bible, which invites me to "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he wil direct your paths." (Proverbs 3:5). My Christian faith reinforces this conviction: "The Love that made the worlds" (as Dante put it) came to the world as Jesus, who died for us but didn't stay dead, and invites us by repentance & faith to participate in his life & the community of his followers (the church) now & after death.

Jesus' life was one of self-giving, & to share in his life includes attention to others' needs as well as one's own. The rightness of being good news to others is confirmed in the resulting quiet joy, peace, & self-deliverance. As for justice, my father was a Christian judge who sought to render justice & believed in ultimate justice, God's fairness to all.

Just one more thought: God is with you. As my mother was dying, the last words she heard were these I was reciting to her from Psalm 23: "Yes, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Thou art with me." Perhaps my words will only irritate you. But the best I could think to do, after reading your cry of unfairness, was to tell you where my hope is.

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | MARCH 9, 2009 6:04 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Well, it would certainly be poetic justice if those fatcats on Wall Street got to find out first hand what they thought it sufficient... or, as said politically by people they *paid,* even excessive for the poor to live on.

They've certainly built a strange place for our children to dwell, when those who lose billions remain richer than those who never had a chip to bring to their gambling table... take millions of homes and still end up getting taxpayer bailouts.

But this circumstance was orchestrated beforehand.

Justice would be those who used their wealth to advocate against the poor to have to live as they saw fit for others to live.

Maybe the 'system' can't be done without (Again because this was set up by conservatives voted in on 'moral virtue,' but allowed to legalize *usury* ...not to mention cut education and then blame people for trusting advertising promises and constant advocacy of 'investing in home equity' when said uninformed people can't do the *math,* never mind 'treasonously' question the Invisible hand Of The Market.'

The quality of Mercy is *not* strained.
These guys are definitely straining it.

No one said their parachutes had to be *gilded,* even if we need the financial system they made to avoid a calamity of their orchestration.

Equating the fatcats with those the government and churches told to *believe* them.

Well, all those 'fiscal conservative' common folk who didn't know they were being sold a bill of goods,They'll see better Mercy than they gave when they were flush with a false sense of power.

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | MARCH 9, 2009 5:01 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

What justice? Personal justice? Cosmic justice? Human-social justice in a court of law?
They are not really the same, nor do they necessarily go together.

I'll give you an example; I happened to have some really terrible time in Denmark, a few years ago. I do in fact believe that a proper compensation for my troubles would be in the order of a few million euros. That, I did not pursue in a court of law, against the offending organization.

At the same time, though, the whole bomb-in-prophet's-head scandal took place and danish economy lost millions.

Mercy, would be to help the guilty party to place millions of euros in my hands. Lack of mercy, would be to leave cosmic justice on its course, seek no different kind of justice, and leave the offending organization to continue poring money in a black hole, in a foolish hope for a return of its investment (which, I have no doubt, it continues to do at present).

Suffering, it is said, is the short path to enlightenment, so it's is not like I didn't get anything out of it personally. But it's not like I believe I owe any gratitude for enlightenment, to those whose rot got me there.

Last time I was that pissed-off was when I found out that US emigration laws have separated me from 'home'. 'Home' was where my parents live, that's what the word meant to me at the time. My parents are now American citizens, I am not, because apparently people over 21 are not part of their family (unless they are willing to wait for a few decades).

So, guess what happened soon afterwards. W. got elected, WTC fell, and so on.

Me, I went to Denmark and eventually recovered my sympathy for some things American.

BTW, by upbringing I'm very much pro-western and specifically pro-english-speaking-culture; but that took a dive when I got experience it close-by.

Anyway, the point of that self-centered acausal dot-connecting of events is that if you are willing to find justice of some kind, you can do so without lifting a finger.

Whether you should be looking at things this way, or if it is helpful to be looking for that kind of justice is another matter altogether.

POSTED BY: CACXO | MARCH 9, 2009 7:37 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Yes. Absolutely. For those who were irresponsible, suffer the consequences. And of course, care for one another.

We also have to keep in mind that many good responsible people ran into problems. Either by being fired or by not being able to work for sickness or family problems, all too quickly everything spiraled down and people got caught.

Also, the breach between rich & poor is still way too wide. We are not going forward until the people who are at the bottom of the pyramid can have a decent life. How are we supposed to progress when the poor have no access to any help whatsoever and others have so much?

POSTED BY: BIOS | MARCH 6, 2009 12:24 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Very good response Dr. Elliott.
Kudos.

I especially like this:

"Those of us who handled our finances responsibly" have (1) no "moral obligation to bail out those of us who didn't," and (2) no choice in the matter: the Federal government is using our money to bail them out."

POSTED BY: GLADERUNNER | MARCH 4, 2009 1:43 PM
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