

The Way She is: A Dialogue
Upbeat
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Hey man, what's wrong?

Well...like, I met this girl –

Oh! So that's it! This guy's really hung up...

Well not really, it's not the girl I'm hung up on. It's just the way she is...what she believes, I mean. Man, am I ever mixed up!

What do you mean?

Well, you see. I met this girl. She's really cool. It's just that she's really hung up on her Church. She goes there all the time, sings in the Choir, reads these books, has these friends...and now she's dragging me into it!

Sounds weird to me. How'd you ever get stuck with such a weirdo like that? It's not really your thing man.

That's the whole problem! She's not a phony at all. She's real. And the stuff she digs doesn't seem all that ridiculous....

Wait a minute, buddy! You don't mean to tell me...

I don't mean to tell you anything...except that I'm confused and don't really know what to do or what to make of it.

Let me tell you. It all started a couple of weeks ago. I met her at this party...she really seemed normal! I went to see her a couple of times. And then one day we got on this God thing. She asked me what I thought, so I began by saying that the whole Christian bit is phony. That the Church is full of hypocrites. That the beliefs there are a bunch of myths. That even the churchmen are finally beginning to admit it. That there are not real "absolutes" at all about anything and that everyone just has to see his own thing and do it...stuff like that.

So what does she say? She says that she agrees that there are hypocrites in the Church – Including herself she says! And that it is true that there is mass confusion on the Christian scene these days. But then she goes on to say that still everyone lives by some "ideal," and that hers is Christ and the life of the Church – knowing full well, she adds, that of all things which Christ condemned, hypocrisy was the worst of all. But, she says, she finds the Christian view as the best one going....

Apparently she met some students who took her to this conference and she heard some priests and other people talk, and really got taken....

What brand of Christian is this girl anyway? They come in all shapes and sizes, you know!

She's an Orthodox. Like Russian Orthodox or Greek....

You mean the guys with the beards, like the one in the newspapers a couple of years ago kissing the Pope?

Yeah...Except she says that most of her priest friends don't have beards and look rather normal without flowing robes. And that's just it! She's pretty normal herself...attractively normal. Except for this thing.

So like I was saying: She tells me that everyone lives by some ideal. I tell her that it's not true. Many people just live. But they never really think about it much. They just live.

So she says – and you've got to admit that she's got a point here – that this in itself is a “way of life” containing an “ideal.” Not to think too much and just to bounce around living from day to day becomes a “philosophy” and even a “morality” when you begin to describe it. And especially if you begin preaching that this is the way that people really ought to live.

And on top of that, she adds that whenever you start saying “better” or “worst”, you already imply somehow of judging “good” and “bad” – or else you couldn't even say a thing about “doing” their “best” or “their worst!”

I don't know pal. It looks to me like you've really picked yourself a winner. You can't be serious!

That's the trouble. She's really caught me off guard. I haven't been the same since. And then she took me to church a few times....

Now this is too much! You! In Church! Are you sure you're all right?

No. I'm not sure at all. Not at all. Let me tell you more.

After we spent that whole afternoon and evening talking about “morality” and “ideals” and “good” and “bad” and how – she claims – that everyone has some “rule,” even the criminal who makes his the opposite of the accepted one...or the relativist whose hard fast absolute rule is that there should be none at all....

Now that's really brilliant! You've really been turned around on that one....

Let me finish this. She believes that all kinds of “morality” exist only because there is the truth and the good, otherwise life wouldn't make any sense at all. And she sees this perfect good and the perfect truth in God – The God of the Christian Church, that is, of her Church....

Sounds to me like a fanatic....

I would rather say “fantastically enthusiastic,” because she really hasn’t been pushing me or trying to hustle me on her thing or claiming that she and her crowd are the most holy...in fact we even talked about this and she said that freedom is the most important part of faith and life and truth. She referred to this Russian writer Dostoevsky...and to Christ Himself.

You mean that guy who wrote the movie about those brothers, or something...the one with Yul Brynner that was on the late show last week?

Right, that’s the one. And that’s the book too: The Brothers Karamazov....I read part of it....

But you were saying that you actually went to church with this girl....

Yes. I went. It was “way out” at first....

At first! Don’t tell me...

Don’t get excited. I went a number of times. At first it was really different. Although some of the things were really quite typical: Reading the Bible, singing, preaching, holy communion....

But it was the atmosphere that was different. Like another world. There were icons and incense, candles and vestments, and everything was sung or chanted....

Incense and chanting! Sounds to me like some robed and bearded “baba yaga meeting” or something! I don’t know....

The priest didn’t have a beard, I told you...but that doesn’t matter one way or the other. The point is that after the initial shock wears off, the whole thing becomes simple, even beautiful and clear...

Incredible!

The singing, for example, in plain English about God and Christ and the Holy Spirit, about forgiveness of sins, and love of mankind, and peace and joy....

Yes. It actually is. Especially after I read more about it from the Bible and the New Testament myself....

You read the Bible! All I can say is this really must be some girl...having you reading the “holy writ!”

She is some girl. But the Bible...

Don’t tell me about the Bible. I know enough about it. It’s been shoved at me enough when I was a kid in Sunday School...and we read from it in English Class in high school,

remember! "The Bible as living literature," they called it. Living! I'll say it was living, really living! -- murder, adultery, incest, theft, massacres, lies...and half the time – and more – God Himself is in the middle of it, giving the orders and pulling the strings....and then sweet Jesus comes and preaches love and they say, "God is love." Plainly contradictory, not to say ridiculous! What does your new-found friend have to say about that? Undoubtedly something...these types always find something to say!

And don't forget the fact that there are really no Christians who follow Jesus' real teaching anyway....

Yes. But it's very hard to understand...

They always say something...and it's always "very hard to understand!" And you yourself just said it was so simple....Hard or simple! Make up your mind! Anyway, it's plainly impossible, and illogical, and contradictory and even immoral. What a mess!

I agree with the mess, man. But the trouble is that when you somehow get inside it all, it seems to work itself out. And she is so convincing...

She, again...give me the scoop. How did she twist out of this one? I'm interested.

Well, what she said was something like this – maybe not quite exactly, because we talked a long time and I can't remember everything and I'm not too clear myself on this – but it was something like this:

The Bible is a book about real life. Therefore, it tells about sinners. But the real point is that it is a book about God's holiness and faithfulness to the world and the people He created even when the whole thing got messed up. And the people who wrote the Bible were really touched by the fact that God remained loyal to them and to His world in spite of everything.

God was forced, so to speak, to deal with a mess: to deal with corrupted types. He was forced to come to men in terms that they could understand. And in ways that were such, so that they wouldn't miss the point of who He was and what He was trying to do. This accounts, for example, for God using His power and even "Fighting for Israel" in the crudest way. For how else could He keep His Presence alive in such a world? And with this in mind, we have to be very careful when we look back and judge, particularly since we belong to a world which is the product of twenty centuries of Christian influence. That is, we are products of a culture modeled by the teachings of Jesus Who was, after all, the end result of everything which God was working towards in the Old Testament part of the Bible History.

So, says my new-found friend, as you call her, the Old Testament was a preparation for the perfection to come in Jesus. And it was worked out only with tremendous patience and suffering and accommodation – mostly God's by the way, and that of the men faithful to Him like Elijah and Moses and the Prophets, not to mention Jesus Himself!

The “Evolution” in moral consciousness and understanding has to take place in history, not because of God, but because of men.

And in addition to this, she told me something even more strange, something I had never thought of before....

Strange indeed! But let's have it.

She told me about this talk she heard at one of the conferences she was at about how the Old Testament is a sort of “shadow” of the New Testament “reality.” And that the grossly physical and external things in the Old Testament are really to be appreciated as “types” or “crude examples” of the real things, the perfect things, which come in the New Testament when Christ is present.

For example, the victorious wars of the people of Israel typify the perfect victory over every possible sin and evil – and death itself, -- called in the New Testament as the “last enemy” – by Jesus and those who are “in” Him, by the Holy Spirit.

Or, as another example, the bloody sacrifices of animals in the Old Testament Temple by the priests typify the one, final, perfect sacrifice of Jesus Himself on the Cross. In this sense Jesus is called both the High Priest and the Sacrificial Lamb. And this accounts for the offering of Bread and Wine in the Christian Churches as the new sacrifice, the new means, the most perfect means of communion and peace with God.

Or, to give one more example, this way of viewing the Old Testament would see the old, external law of God being the type and shadow of the new law of the Holy Spirit, written, as the Apostle Paul said, not on Tables of stone, but on human hearts in those who belong to Jesus.

The shadow had to come first, then the reality. The physical aspect and then the spiritual. The imperfect and then the perfect. And all this is actually worked out in history, and finds its perfect fulfillment in Jesus Christ and the New Testament Church – which, by the way, is itself a shadow of an even more perfect reality, the real final reality to come at the end of the world in the Kingdom of God.

It's amazing, but every part of the Old Testament can be understood in this sense as a shadow of something more real: The Exodus, the Passover, the Law, and the Temple, the priesthood...even the battles and the blood.

It's amazing all right. I'm dumbfounded and not too convinced. In fact, I'm not convinced at all. It just sounds to me like a very clever way of explaining everything away, and of making what is really gross and plainly immoral and contradictory look like a well-developed plan. But, no wonder I haven't seen you around lately. You must have been cooped up with your books, or seated at the feet of your master, or is it guru.

Don't be funny. If there weren't a real problem here, I wouldn't be this hung up. The point is that the further I get involved, the less I'm convinced that the thing is all cleverly devised by men. It seems to fit together too well, and over too long a time with too many

mere mortal men involved, to have been a constructed scheme on the merely human level. Well anyway, you're right, I have been reading lately. But not all that much. I read mostly the New Testament – and that Dostoevsky thing – and with a little help from a friend, I have found it as interesting as it is upsetting.

It still sounds to me to be too schemed up on this “shadow” and “reality” thing. But anyway, even if you admit something like that, what about all the other really weird, incredible things like the wild visions of some of those guys, and the miracles – walking on the water, and making the sun stand still, and creating the world in six days. And the most ridiculous of all, the whole bit about the devil who comes and goes and talks and gets inside people....

We got into that too. I said the very same thing. And do you know what she said?

Whatever it was, I'll bet you fell for it.

She said a lot of things, actually. But the two things that have bothered me most of all are these: First she said that in reading the Bible you have to begin now with Jesus and the New Testament – the plain and simple parts, the parables, the teachings about love and mercy and forgiveness and joy and peace, the things that relate most simply. And then, from there, you can penetrate the harder parts. And even then there is no guarantee of clear understanding. But the thing is this: Why should you reject what is obvious and true and convincing because of what is more obscure? In life this would mean denying everything that you do know on the basis of what you don't, which would really be rather strange.

And the second thing was this: That experience in the faith, in the life of the Church, in prayer and sacraments and church celebration and in actually trying to live the whole thing, actually brings insight into the whole. She called it a real experience of the Holy Spirit, much of which is not reducible to clearly formulated reasons and expressions.

Sounds like a typical cop-out to me. You mystically and dumbly accept what you don't understand! Or else you get touched by some magic wand and see things which no one else can see – like in some fairy tale – and you can't even tell anyone about it because they'll never understand.

No. That's not really it. Although even here there's a point. For example, trying to explain or describe an elephant to someone who has never seen even a picture of one would be quite a job! You can't even imagine what kind of image they would get from your words.

But here it is more than that. You mentioned the devil. So did she. She used it as her main point. She said that no one can really understand the devil, or the influence of evil spirits, until he tries really to be good, to follow Christ and to have the Holy Spirit. Then the power of the Devil becomes undeniable, not as a doctrine or an “article of faith,” but as an experience of life. A Christian is not called “to believe in the devil” as he put it. He is called to gain the Holy Spirit. And in this struggle, the existence of the evil spirit is clearly proven by experience. The trouble is that the myths about the devil, such as the

image of the red-suited, pitch-fork, carrying gentleman which render the devil ridiculous, and which lead the so-called “reasonable” people to deny his reality. In fact obscure his real reality as the deceiver and the power of darkness. Once she even said that she thinks that the pitiful myths about the devil and the denial of his existence are the greatest victories of the devil himself. The enemy can have no greater advantage than when his strength is underestimated, laughed at, or even flatly denied as even existing at all. So maybe the ridicule of the evil spirit, and the rejection of his reality is his greatest victory in fact.

But one thing is for sure. Just try to follow even a little bit what Christ has taught, and you will see for yourself the fantastic opposition that will come even from within you. This is the experience mainly that she refers to. It has nothing to do with magic wands.

The experience of Jesus Himself is “exhibit A.” The opposition to Him was really irrational, even incredible. And His opponents were not stupid. They were even religious in an external sense. It was the irrational blindness toward perfection which we all know when we try to purify ourselves and to do what we know is right. Blindness is the term. Being in darkness. Not wanting to see. Coolly and calmly perpetrating evil...like Hitler who killed six million Jews and then went home and kissed his wife! It’s really the evil that we see and know that is incredible. And without the devil as an acting force, blinding and deceiving, it is more incredible and unbelievable than ever!

Wow, you really know the answers, don’t you! Or your girl friend does! Still, it sounds just too proud and self-satisfied and all knowing to me as an innocent bystander. Is the girl ever wrong? Or does she see everything in her crystal ball, or, excuse me, in her “Christian experience?”

No, she doesn’t know all the answers at all. Especially not from her “Christian experience” as you put it. In fact, that very experience brings more and more questions all the time. And the answers are not always magically coming. They have to be worked out in life. In fact, right now she is in an awful situation just because of her faith.

Do you really mean it? She’s like one of us after all! She actually has a problem like a mere mortal!

Yes. And a big one. A few days ago her brother received his draft notice and will be taken into the army. The whole question of resisting evil by evil, of retaliation and violence and war is not an easy question, especially for someone who is so given to the teachings of Christ.