

Wrestling with God

Genesis 32:22-31

There's an old joke I remember from my youth growing up as a preacher's kid, with no choice in regard to going to church.

A mother yells up to her son, "Time to get up, you've got to get ready for church!" The son rolls over in bed and responds, "I don't want to go to church."

"Son, you know you have to go to church. You do that every Sunday. Now get up and get ready."

He lies there unwilling to move. "I don't want to go to church. The service is boring, the people don't like me, and the sermons hardly make any sense. It's a waste of my time. I'd rather sleep in."

"Now, listen, don't be ridiculous. You say the same thing every Sunday. Get up and get dressed. You have to go to church!"

"But why? Why do I always have to go to church?"

"Because, son, you're the minister!"

That pretty much sums up life in a parsonage, whether it's the preacher or the kids!

There was a time, though, when it seemed everyone I knew went to church on Sunday if they were Christian, or to the synagogue on Friday and Saturday, as did my Jewish friends (in my childhood, I wasn't aware of all the other faiths present in our culture). I thought my Catholic friends had it made once they introduced Saturday services, because they could play all night and get to sleep in on Sunday morning. That seemed like a very appealing accommodation back when I was in high school.

Times have changed, of course, and the days of universal religious obligation have passed into history. Since the 1970s, Catholic and Protestant churches (particularly mainline) have been far less demanding upon members, yet still experience steady decline; more recently, the same is true for conservative, evangelical congregations. The old steadfast, white European, religious traditions are losing their once vaulted place in American culture. Everywhere across the religious spectrum, traditional

organized religion has been taking a hit with fewer people in attendance, less devotion to standard religious dogma, rituals, and practices, and a larger number of Americans no longer claiming any religious affiliation—choosing to be numbered among the growing segment researchers call, “Nones” (which is not meant as a reference to Catholics with bad habits).

The religious decline is one of the noteworthy hallmarks of the 21st century, articulated in the title of a recently published book: *The End of White Christian America*.¹ The author, Robert Jones, who directs the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) and writes a regular column in *The Atlantic*, identifies several factors as underlying causes for this phenomenon. One is increasing secularism and pluralism in society (where Christianity is viewed as one of many religions); another is the decreasing population among the white majority due to birth rates and demographic changes; another is logistics in terms of interfering work schedules and other activities; still another is the decreasing moral authority and respect for traditional religious institutions and their leaders. Yet, against this backdrop is a steady, if not increasing, interest in spirituality and alternative religious experiences, which allow people to address their spiritual needs in unconventional, nontraditional ways, either individually or as part of a nondenominational community.

Jones also highlights two specific and critical challenges which have altered the conventional mores of White Christian America, e.g., race and sexual orientation/gender identity. Those who have embraced both integration of the races and the range of sexual identities have either had to leave organized religion altogether or find a church which reinterprets or

¹ Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, Simon & Schuster, 2016.

refuses to abide by the traditional assumptions and mores of Christianity (e.g. Noank Baptist).

This isn't altogether new, since a century earlier, a similar disruption in the traditional church emerged over evolution and scientific inquiry as a whole undermining the dogmatic claims assumed in the traditional notions still subscribed to in Creationism. In 1920, Fundamentalism had its origins in America as an ideological rival to the Modernist mindset of the culture and of mainstream Christianity. Appeals to a rigid literal interpretation of the Bible were made to counter what was perceived to be a degradation of Scriptural authority and, by implication, God's place in the life of the average person. Over the past forty years in particular, fundamentalists (through the Moral Majority and other similar organizations), and their conservative allies, Evangelicals, have risen to prominence in the public square, in an effort to maintain the centrality and authority of the Bible in Christianity and in American culture, even when the literal word was in conflict with the laws of nature and scientific discovery and knowledge widely embraced in the academic and cultural mainstream. This tension continues to exist as part of the culture wars in our country and even factors into Presidential politics.

I'm not going to take the time to parse this out at this point. What is important to know, though, is how this need for certainty through biblical literalism was not an ancient one. The nature of biblical storytelling in Judaism was largely for effect and symbolism, not for the sake of historical accuracy or consistency. In fact, impressions of God in Judaism were usually left imprecise, so as not to imply human power to define, name, and control the divine Creator. This is why religious Jews even today refuse to utter the name of God and reference the divine in other ways. This mystery

associated with God defied consistency or definition, leaving things open-ended and yet-to-be-determined, with Israel constantly wrestling with God over what was the divine will, symbolized in this story of Jacob, who was renamed Israel, or “one who strives or contends with God.”

I’ve always liked this story about Jacob because it makes sense to me—not that I’m a fan of Wrestlemania, but because it reflects the Jewish perception of God and of Jewish self-understanding. Namely, that a relationship with God is spiritually dynamic (even if it’s conveyed in anthropomorphic imagery and terms), portrayed as a wrestling match for moral grounding. In other words, a spiritual engagement with God is like a wrestling match, with the constant push and pull of discernment—of reason and experience wrestling it out with inspiration, creativity, and inherited teachings and wisdom. When you frame it in this way, it’s apparent that nothing moral or spiritual is self-evident without some wiggle room (and need) for question and debate. This is why Jewish religious culture fosters debate and discussion. It’s necessary for clear discernment and appropriate judgments in life. Every claim can be countered with a rival claim, and every experience can be transformed by a subsequent experience. Within that, words, images, and stories possess multiple shades of meaning, with no absolute and authoritative understanding and direct application from an ancient context to the modern world. This is one of the reasons the Jewish community has always placed such a high value on education—one must overcome ignorance and be aware of what is already known and there’s always more to learn. I, for one, can live with that.

At the same time, the Jewish self-understanding through Jacob/Israel portrays the paradox of human existence. Jacob, as we know, was not a paragon of virtue. As a biblical character, he was not particularly noble or

honorable. The name, Jacob, meant “supplanter” or in some cases, “trickster” or as his birth would indicate, “a heel”—a well-deserved reference to Jacob’s treatment and manipulation of his brother, Esau, which provoked their rivalry. Throughout the chapters of Genesis, Jacob comes across as manipulative at times, faithless at others; he was smart, determined, somewhat mercurial in his emotions, gritty, competitive—a real survivor. He would fight to the end to get his way in order not to be controlled by a rival. He was the embodiment of so many human paradoxes—good, yet bad; strong, yet weak; ingenious, yet short-sighted; heroic, but selfish; wise, but foolish—a man of belief and unbelief. For the storytellers, he personified the nature of the people who would eventually be called by his new name, Israel, who would likewise represent all those paradoxes throughout their history.

However, as this story suggests, despite this negative characterization of Jacob, he still found a way to procure a blessing, even against the power and presence of God. It was not a blessing upon a righteous and perfect man by any means, but instead on one who had a standoff with God—the imperfect man—the one of moral paradox—the complex and flawed one, whose will to survive against all odds would fight against every obstacle and adversary (including God) that threatened his survival.

As I see it, this story is more than a characterization of Jews or Israel as a whole; it speaks to the nature of humankind and our existential struggle throughout history. People of faith have reflected this paradox, which is why a common critique leveled at religious people is one of hypocrisy—we fail to live up to our ideals and are undone by our imperfections. Yes, this is true; but then, that’s true of everyone. Like Jacob, all humans wrestle with everything that threatens their survival—

disease, disasters, enemies—yes, but also personal misgivings, past mistakes, addictions, incorrect assumptions, prejudices, rival beliefs, values, and perspectives, perhaps even human despair.

But hope comes to us when the things that inspire fear or despair or remain unknown and mysterious to us, or that are wrongheaded altogether, get challenged and addressed with perseverance, just like Jacob refused to give in. Individually and collectively, hope comes when we muster the resources, strength, skill, and ability to fight back at what appears to be our fate, using our smarts, our collective will, and our shared resources to change the course of nature and life. We advance through time with courage overcoming obstacles, setbacks, and the evils of each era with our intelligence and will, through our discoveries and knowledge, through our resistance to give in, wrestling with our desire to overcome what's known and unknown in life and survive.

Often, in the midst of the struggle, that's when we realize that what has seemed evil to us at one time has actually been for our good—it brings out the best in us as we strive to overcome its threat upon life. What seems like an enemy too great to be overcome in the darkest moments, in time may be viewed as a provocation by God, who is not trying to defeat and destroy us with formidable challenges and punishments, but rather calling out the best in us to fight for life. Like Jacob, like Israel, our entanglement with an adversary, as tough as it can be at times, is precisely what brings us closer to what is eternal and ultimately meaningful, even without realizing it. We fight with God for life throughout the darkest periods of our existence in order to prevail and stand in the light of day. Through that wrestling we become blessed by our Creator who, oddly enough, was our contender all along.

Honestly, I don't blame people for giving up on religion if they feel that it is only trying to idolize the past and condemn the present. Nor is religion much good if it reduces spirituality to a mere list of "do's" and "don'ts." This story, among many, remind us that faith points us toward a spiritual engagement that is dynamic and far more complex and challenging than a mere list of moral platitudes and virtues. Religion, at its best, is an honest and rigorous engagement with life itself, provoked and guided by the divine spirit. The divine/human relationship is a difficult, complex one—one that is often wrestled through to a standoff. Like Jacob, like Israel, we strive with God on a journey that takes us on some very rough roads over the course of life—stony at times, rarely smooth—uneasy, conflicted, sometimes painful, at times, very costly. On occasion, God breaks our leg and at times we curse our Creator. But always, always it is a shared destiny with God.

The final takeaway reminds us of this. Jacob was never abandoned or alone throughout the night; Israel was never abandoned even in exile. Likewise, the human race is never destroyed despite our failures, imperfection, and apocalyptic fears (such as we might have today). Somehow, in some way, God struggles with us throughout the night of our growing despair, but then keeps us going—move and countermove, setback and advances—calling out the best in us to keep the fight going, even when we think we've got nothing left in us, just so that we will survive to begin another day. When the morning eventually comes, we realize like Jacob, it is not the devil with whom we have been battling—all along it has been the God who has tested us with life. "The one who strives with God" survives against all odds.

This is why I don't give up on faith, or the vessel that carries it through time, i.e., organized religion. I recognize the imperfections, but that is part of who we are as humans. Even though I'm rooted in ancient stories and a biblical belief and perspective, I welcome the advancement of knowledge and scientific discovery which challenge ancient worldviews and presumptions and enables the human race to continue, generation after generation, century upon century, to challenge and reformulate the wisdom of life passed down to us.

Let me close with another way to articulate the wrestling match of human progress and spirituality. Not too long ago, I came across a poem by Victoria Safford, who expresses well the wrestling match we have with God and with life itself as truth-seekers and spiritually-minded folks. It's called "The Gates of Hope":²

Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope—
Not the prudent gates of Optimism,
Which are somewhat narrower.
Not the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense;
Nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness,
Which creak on shrill and angry hinges
(People cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through);
Nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of
"Everything is gonna' be all right."
But a different, sometimes lonely place,
The place of truth-telling,
About your own soul first and its condition.
The place of resistance and defiance,
The piece of ground from which you see the world
Both as it is and as it could be,
As it will be;
The place from which you glimpse not only struggle,
But the joy of the struggle.
And we stand there, beckoning and calling,
Telling people what we are seeing,
Asking people what they see.

²Victoria Safford, "The Gates of Hope," Stanford University, 2015.

That's the struggle of life—symbolized as a wrestling match with God in the story of Jacob, and lived out in our daily experiences and journeys as human beings—one that leads us through the darkest times battling to gain the upper hand until we arrive upon the light of day.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
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