

Think for Yourself

There are many, "savvy" people these days who would love to do your thinking for you, if you let them. Many Americans have succumbed to the relatively new and incredibly strong temptation to turn on the television and blindly allow others on the tube to interpret reality or life's circumstances for them. First it was the TV dinner or frozen food industry that offered to do the cooking for us. Then it was childcare providers offering to do our parenting, all day and all night if needed, as long as we had enough money to pay. And now the American media has correctly sensed the ultimate service, giving very busy people just enough information on any given subject to make them appear smart and knowledgeable in the eyes of friends and business associates who are doing the same thing. After all, why think on our own, if someone else can do it for you?



Not many people today are asking you to read a book on history, philosophy, political science, or theology in order to deliberate and come to your own conclusions about world events. We delude ourselves by saying there is not enough time to do that kind of work anyway. Arguments or debates today are grossly one-sided with little listening taking place. Those holding opposing views are portrayed as simply wrong, not worth anyone's time.

But God weeps when we let others do our thinking for us, or when we fail to listen to others and respect their points of view. In fact, Christ came to Earth to give us the opportunity to believe and have confidence that we can come to our own conclusions by doing our own thinking. All we have to do is take time to do it and have faith.

Jesus was the ultimate teacher. He taught by asking questions so that his listeners would come to their own conclusions. Jesus, of course, believed in an ultimate truth, and he wanted his followers to find it. But he wanted them to pursue it on their own and in the community of others doing the same kind of searching; iron sharpening iron, discerning if what he was saying was true or not.

For example, Jesus displayed his teaching technique in one of the most compelling passages in all of Scripture: "When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his



Jesus speaks with his disciples at Caesarea Philippi

disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' 'Well,' they replied, 'some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.' Then he asked them, 'But who do you say I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, 'You are blessed, Simon, son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being.'" (Matthew 18:13-17). Jesus commended his disciple, Peter, for figuring this out on his own by allowing God to open his mind.

In my work among Muslims, I have discovered that independent thinking is one of Islam's greatest struggles. My Sufi Muslim friends in Chicago abhor fundamentalist Suni or Shiite practices. Sufi Muslims try to know God individually and with their hearts; they are the most independent thinkers of all Muslims. They are in constant search of God's spirit and presence. Sufis believe that fundamentalist Muslims frequently close their minds and hearts, often blindly following religious leaders who are very rigid and even violent in their views. Islam in general allows for very little criticism, historical, textual or literary; whatever Allah says in the Quran, the Muslim must follow without question, according to the vast majority of Islamic scholars. This point of view has been a most unfortunate part of Muslim history and makes them struggle with how to adapt to modernity.

A good friend of mine, Swailem Hennein, an Egyptian-American, taught public health for many years at the University of Illinois in Chicago. He told me how difficult it was to encourage many of his Muslim students to think on their own in his classes and draw their own conclusions. He said it would take at least a year for many of his Muslim students to begin to develop critical, independent thinking skills. But once they did, many of these students came alive with the joy of thinking on their own, being freer.

This week has been particularly sad for many Muslims worldwide, as the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq has begun its destruction in northern Iraq. Most painful is reading about the Imams and Sheiks on both sides, with the Shiites in Baghdad and the ISIS in northern Iraq, each calling from the pulpits in their mosques for war against and destruction of the other. Young men are blindly taking up arms, screaming at the tops of their lungs for revenge and blood from the other Muslims. They are being obedient followers of their religious leaders.

But, as I have said before, there are many more moderate Muslim voices emerging throughout the world, asking Muslims to do more critical thinking on their own. I just learned from my Presbyterian friends in Egypt that Al-Azhar University in Cairo has appointed a more opened-minded person as its new president, Usama al-Abd, a very educated Sufi. Al-Azhar University is the center of Suni



Al-Azhar University

theology in the Arab world. It is the oldest existing university in the world, having begun in 970 A.D. Its teachers and graduates have a huge influence on Sunni thought and theology. In the last few months, this new president posted a lecture on YouTube expressing his appreciation of Jesus and his Sermon on the Mount. He wants Muslims worldwide to be much more aware of Jesus' teachings in the Bible. Incredible! This describes the new state of Islam worldwide. As many Muslims are becoming more rigid these days, an equal number of Muslims are becoming more open-minded. Great change and theological debate among Muslims is occurring everywhere.

As I said before, we followers of Jesus in America must be very careful we do not stumble into the same temptation as millions of other Americans, allowing the media to do our thinking for us. Rigidity and blind obedience is just around the corner for those who choose to let others do their thinking for them, for liberal and conservative alike. Just turn the TV set off. There is nothing that says you must listen to it or any other electronic commentary. Walk away. But in doing so, I recommend you choose to walk towards Jesus, too - in silence, community and prayer. Ask him to be your new interpreter of reality. Allow him to be your teacher and mentor for life. He knows far more than the talking heads on TV. If we talk to him, he promises to talk to us, and teach us about good and evil, right and wrong in this world.

Jesus came to Earth to not only set us free from the captivity of sin, but also from the clutches of the law. Being obedient is not enough. God wants us to love him, joyfully follow him, enjoy his grace and mercy, and to think for ourselves.