

The Guide Promise – Truth to God or Self

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Isaiah 65 vv 1-9 p751, Galatians 3 vv 23-28 p1170, Luke 8 vv 26-39 p1038

We've heard a lot in the news this week about the decision by the Guide Association to change its promise. At the moment guides say, "I promise that I will do my best to love my God, to serve the Queen and my country, to help other people and to keep the Guide Law." Until 1994 the promise was "to do my best to do my duty to God, to serve the Queen, and to help other people and to keep the Guide Law". That was more like the promise we made as scouts and perhaps more sensible. *Love* is a very slippery word in that it means so many different things to different people: from what you might write on a Valentine's Day card, through close friendship, marriage and other family relationships, to the eternal contemplation of God in heaven, the Beatific Vision – not to mention loving your neighbour as yourself here on earth! Duty was much clearer and less susceptible of sentimentality. Perhaps also to replace *duty to God* with *love my God* implies a greater subjectivity in religion. *I worship the God I choose to worship*, rather than, *I worship God because He is*.

Be that as it may, the new promise replaces country with community. Why? And it replaces *to love my God* or *to do my duty to God* with *to be true to myself and develop my beliefs*. The whole promise now reads, "I promise that I will do my best, To be true to myself and develop my beliefs, To serve the Queen and my community, To help other people and, To keep the Guide law."

Many of us are disappointed that a major youth organisation has decided to drop belief in God from its constitution. On the one hand, we feel it is good for the many youngsters who join uniformed organisations to receive some kind of religious education and support for their beliefs from these organisations. On the other hand, we are concerned that this is another milestone on the road to a secular society, to Britain becoming a country in which the Christian faith has no place in the public realm, but is merely a lifestyle choice which some mildly eccentric people choose to practise in the privacy of their own homes or at least within their own communities – or ghettos as we used to call them.

I agree that it is regrettable but I do not think we can be altogether surprised. The majority of British people still call themselves Christians, but they don't do much about it. We are hardly any longer the *Church militant here in earth*. If people want to call themselves Christians and claim to think that Britain ought to be a Christian nation, they need to take part regularly and frequently in public worship and the other activities of the Church and to speak up for Christian values in political and social arenas and to act like Christians in their every day lives. It's no good going to boot fairs on Sundays, leaving state schools to provide your children with Religious Education, doing nothing to support Christian values in public life and then complaining that we no longer live in a Christian country. [I was pleased to hear that a group of local Christians are going to set up a stall at Sunday boot fairs bearing witness to the Christian Gospel. I suggested that, if it is successful, perhaps a group of secularists could set up stalls in churches to sell junk to the spiritually blind.] Even if perhaps not in the traditional words we ought to say more often the traditional prayer *that all who*

profess and call themselves Christians may be led into the way of truth and hold the faith in unity of spirit, in the bond of peace, and in righteousness of life.

However, the Guide Association is probably being realistic in modern Britain. We used to have even more specifically Christian organisations than the Scouts and Guides – Boys’ and Girls’ Brigades, the Church Lads’ Brigade and the Girls’ Friendly Society. Boy’s and Girls’ Brigades are much diminished from what they were, even though they still flourish in some places, but I’m not sure that the Church Lads and the Girls’ Friendly even still exist. They didn’t enjoy sufficient support even from Christian families. So far the Scouts have retained *duty to God*, but it is no longer a specifically Christian promise. People of any religion can make the promise. This of course raises a lot of questions such as *Do all religions worship the same God? Are all forms of worship and all sorts of belief equally acceptable to God? Is there anything special about God’s revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ?* [If Jesus really is the Way, the Truth and the Life any religious belief which is incompatible with His Life, Death and Resurrection must be to that extent false.] And *Why is a young man who believes that God wants to see western civilisation destroyed with bombs and bullets a better scout than an atheist who spends all his spare time doing good deeds for other people?* To assert that intolerance is the only thing we cannot tolerate is ultimately absurd. The Scouts are consulting on a form of the scout promise which atheists could make with a clear conscience. We have to ask whether a mass youth organisation which insisted on a clear Christian commitment on the part of all its members could survive long in modern Britain? If not we have to ask ourselves whether it would be better to have smaller youth organisations which specifically support and encourage young people in the Christian faith or to have much larger organisations like the Scouts and Guides in which religion plays a diminishing and vanishing part, but which still do a great deal of good for young people? Actually, I think there is a place for both, but, with limited resources, it is hard enough to run one youth organisation in a community, without trying to find volunteers for more than one – a uniformed organisation for youngsters who respond well to organised activities, a less formal youth club for the slightly more rebellious and a group specifically provided to offer Christian nurture, perhaps! Incidentally, the Guides claim to be dropping God in order to make guiding more welcoming to girls and women without religious belief – apparently about 20% of the population. What would happen if the 80% of people who do claim to hold religious beliefs decided not to support an organisation which leaves out God? But we won’t and we shouldn’t. We cannot serve the world, we cannot convert the world, if we isolate ourselves from the world.

So the introduction takes up the first two thirds of the sermon! What really worries me about the change in the guide promise is the move from God to self. The first step was taken in 1994 when *duty to God* (without qualification) became *to love my God*. My! Me! Subtly the emphasis shifts from the One Who Is, the almighty Creator of Heaven and Earth, the Redeemer and Sanctifier of all Creation, to me and to how I feel, to how I feel about God! The new promise *to be true to myself and to develop my beliefs* is the next logical step. Myself. My beliefs. The way I feel. What matters to me. The pre1994 promise accepts God as the given. Indeed God is the only given. He is the Giver of everything else. God doesn’t depend upon me. I depend upon Him. It isn’t that I love my God. It is that God loves me and I, through His grace, respond to Him with my love.

The cult of self, egocentrism, solipsism if you like, permeates human society. It is the creed of consumerism. I, me, myself. What I want. What fulfils me. What matters to me. Who I am. What I think. How I feel. Self-centredness segues into selfishness. Ultimately there is no difference. Self-centredness is selfishness. Covetousness is idolatry and self is the idol it honours. If I say, *my body is a temple*, I say that I am the god dwelling in my temple. My own personal spirituality!

And of course this is the opposite of Christian faith. Jesus says this (Mark 8³⁴⁻³⁷) *Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it. For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?*

If we put ourselves first, even if we put our own personal spirituality first, we hurt other people and we hurt ourselves. It is because we are selfish that we want to be rich and powerful, that we care too much about our appearance or our health, that we want more things, that we want to be happy, that we want to be personally fulfilled. It is because we are selfish that we fail to love our neighbours as ourselves. St James puts it in colourful language. *From whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts?...Yet ye have not, because ye ask not, Ye ask and receive not because ye ask amiss that ye may consume it upon your lusts.* (James 4^{1f}) James means that we behave badly because we don't have what we want, but, if we wanted what we ought to want, we would ask God for it and receive it and there would be no need for us to behave badly. Seeking our own, looking after number one first, pollutes our relationships. Egocentrism leads us into all kinds of sin in the way we behave towards other people and towards God. Self-centredness wrecks our relationship with God. And it is self-defeating. Selfishness never brought happiness. Self-centredness is never fulfilling either materially or spiritually. Self-centredness makes you discontented with your life and blames you for what is wrong with you. It makes you your own life's work. So if you don't turn out right or, rather, when you don't turn out right, it's your own fault! You are your own handiwork. So if you are dissatisfied with you, ultimately you are the person to blame, a vicious circle of misery which people endeavour to break by acquiring possessions, through exploitative relationships, by developing a personal spirituality or through drink or drugs. Self-centredness is self-defeating. Let go and let God. What you have to do if you want to be a fulfilled person is paradoxical. It is to yield your life to God through Jesus. It is to deny yourself. It is to stop struggling to pick yourself up by your own bootstraps and to relax in Christ's embrace. Paradoxically the route to self-fulfilment is not *To be true to myself and develop my beliefs*, not even *to love my God*, but *to do my best to do my duty to God*. It is odd. It is counterintuitive, but to concentrate on being true to yourself and developing your own beliefs, philosophy, spirituality, life style – call it what you will – is the road to perdition. Not only will you miss out on what ultimately matters – eternal life in Christ – but you will also miss out on the things of this life, the things the worldly you thinks matter, but can never quite attain. The new guide promise is of the spirit of the age, the zeitgeist, but it has got it completely wrong. Listen instead to Jesus: *Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.* (Matthew 6³³.)