

GARDEN VARIETY RELIGION?

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Consider the complexities that conventional religion has brought into the world.

It has explained how the world was born; how the animals began; where humans came from; and how we should behave. And what happens to us if we don't.

It has provided a guide for the structure of society.

It has provided employment for priests, seers, practitioners, philosophers, and critics for millennia; a critical contribution since unemployment among critics is a very serious condition for society to find itself in.

It has provided a reference point for pagans and atheists. Where would the fun be in paganism if we didn't have something to be pagan against? A poor atheist would suffer a complete loss of identity.

And it has defined peoples from other peoples, the them and us, and brought them into conflict with other them and occasionally, them into conflict with us. In God Tracks, Chapter IV we looked into the telescope toward human destiny. We saw an Omega of a worldwide Civilization of high moral character and cooperation to elevate one and all spurred by the worldwide brain concept. Considering the ongoing conflicts between civilizations, we wonder if we were looking through that telescope the wrong way around. That picture of the future sometimes looks very small and far away. More on this in a future talk currently baking in the oven.

But today I want to talk about tomatoes.

You laugh. What's the matter? Having trouble with the transition from the intricacies of a world mixture of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc. etc. and tomatoes? Let me make a humble effort to help.

In the beginning, there was Southern States. They offered many species from which I could chose and bring home to my world. After careful consideration, and possibly, a little inspiration I chose Early Girl's and Bonnies, two plants each, and another of cherry tomatoes.

I left with visions of what was to be and went on about my life in a way that I hoped would bring that vision to reality. I cleared and planted in the best way I knew how.

Now I was fully aware that Tomatoism had many aspects. Some of which I had a high respect for and some less so. Please recognize that I am a putterer, not a gardener. But I have known gardeners, enthusiastic in this faith, that swear up and down that certain lines of Tomatoes are the only true line worthy of one's time. For me, I do see the difference

between Beefsteak, cherry, and the always green ones, but beyond that the subtleties have always eluded me. Thus I avoid intense discussions with those who appreciate those subtleties.

History tells us that, at one time, tomatoes meant death to those who might eat them. Luckily, the prophets who spread that bit of falsehood for centuries were found lacking – bad science. Could you imagine the warning label on Campbell’s red and white soup cans if that belief were still around? Can you further imagine the thoughts going through the mind of the first tomato atheist to challenge that belief? When his snack proved not to be fatal, was there a resounding, “I told you so!!!” On the other hand, he may not have been a tomato atheist at all. His intent might have been to end his life with this pretty red sphere. Socrates and Cleopatra both accomplished their final objective – however, this world-changing first tomato suicide was successful in failure. He survived and became a faith founder to boot.

Today, we believe tomatoes have healing powers. Their chemical makeup is such that the destructive free ions in our system that may instigate cancer are disabled by tomatoism. But there seems to be a sexist attitude about this because men and prostate cancer are the focus, whereas women seem to walk a few steps behind on the path to tomato health. It’s not that these women are hooded or masked or anything, but they do seem to retreat into the background while the priest and scribes of tomatoism get into the symptoms and procedures revolving around this subject.

But misuse of tomatoes is not unknown. The tomato, as an article of war, has been demonstrated among governments, at political gatherings, and during the performing arts. Politicians prefer to not recognize doubt, resistance to, or outright opposition to their overstatements, empty promises, or “I know what’s best for you” posture. However, if that posture becomes one of twisting, turning, and ducking to avoid “the mark of the flying tomato,” there is no mistaking that someone sees life a little differently. And tomatoing can be infectious. Maybe this is not a misuse of the power of the tomato after all. The message is clear although the marks might be a bit smeary.

Tomatoes were once called “Love Apples”. I never understood why. However, I do love to walk out of the woods, hand in hand with Shirley, in the evening to pick a few for dinner. And, like all faiths, practices grow into traditions.

Tomatoes are one of the many wonders of this world as are each of these religions. If we UU’s could only see the commonalties of Tomatoism and, say, Buddhism, wouldn’t we be better equipped to aid the world in seeing the commonalties between Western Christianity and Islam, Confucianism and Hinduism, and so on? By emphasizing the commonalties, does that not lay the groundwork for defusing the strife between the civilizations?

And like these religions, tomatoes have built hope, promises of a better life, as they did earlier in the last century in our very communities around the Northern Neck. People flocked to the idea of tomatoism, invested their time and fortunes toward this better

future. Maybe other religions have met their promises, maybe not. Today, abandoned tomato canneries dot our local landscape like the mosques of Spain and the empty cathedrals of Sweden, supplanted by competition from abroad and within.

Yet memories of the former glories are strong and deep. Whether we dwell on the specifics of Mother canning tomatoes in the kitchen or the great cannery fire of 1934 adjacent to the Ottoman ferry. Warm memories that enliven our lives. Personal memories that don't really make the history books but are a sort of religion in itself.

However, there are other memories, recollections of controversy. Small things initially but, on further reflection, people believed them not small at all. Issues that go to the very roots of our upbringing. Some were taught to say... to – may - to – and the others were taught to say ... to - mah – to. For us to have been proclaimed wrong in this is an attack on our parents, for they must also have been wrong. And it was inconceivable to us that our all-knowing parents could have been wrong. And to propose such were fighting words. We would not stand for such an insult to our heritage! By quickly canvassing our surroundings we confirmed the accuracy of our perception that... to – may – to... is indeed correct. While the “others”, the... to - mah - to... faction of tomatoism had done it's own canvassing and came to the same conclusion, remarkably not that we were correct but the others were correct. Together, we and the “others,” learned the geographical boundaries of “may” vs. “mah” and then each was able to identify the them and the us's.

Suddenly we found there were a few “others” among us. Since living among “others” who would insult our heritage is intolerable, action was necessary – and that action could have been messy ... and could even have invited intervention by a United Grocers peacekeeping force. The result, we all would have had occupied gardens. However, this didn't really happen because friends, the Potatoists, [put potato with hat and eyes on top of lectern] distant from tomatoism but trusted just the same, helped us see our passion for this passion fruit was a bond far stronger than the May-Mah gulf. After all, the Potatoists had just been through the same battle not many years before. The cultural gap was understood and bridged.

Suppose the Christians and the Muslims had picked opposite sides in this tomato skirmish within tomatoism. The local mess might have turned into a worldwide mess. Why would the Christians or the Muslims think they knew better than tomatoists how to resolve... to-may-to vs. to-mah-to? Both factions of Tomatoists would likely end up, side by side, pitching bushelsful at the intruders. When are we really smart enough to intervene? Hot spots among co-religionists should raise danger flags to outsiders. Have you ever poured gasoline on glowing embers to get a fire going? Scorched your eyebrows, didn't you? Outsiders lacking knowledge on how to deal with these hot spots run a similar risk. Only now there are nuclear weapons in some of those fire pits.

One of the loveliest parts of Tomatoism is the ability to share; in fact, the compulsion to share. It is a rare Tomatoist who can absorb all the benefits at the rate they are bestowed upon him. The phrase, drinking from a fire hose, comes to mind. As the harvest season

progresses, casual benevolence matures into true missionary zeal. This is a sensitive time for the growth of Tomatoism as the stress in the eyes and minds of the Tomatoist missionary makes potential converts question if that level of exaltation is truly healthy. However, no record of out and out martyrdom has been recorded in pursuit of Tomatoist goals, a point that gives credibility to the continued growth of the faith and keeps it from being radicalized. Tomatoists don't judge martyrdom as universally bad, it just isn't a Tomatoist thing -- a tough challenge for the bridge builders between faiths.

Tomatoism seems to be a frugal faith. A small investment produces large results. In fact, the frugality of its practitioners is undoubtedly partly responsible for the missionary zeal at harvest peak. Tomatoists abhor waste. Please understand that that does not mean all Tomatoists abhor waste, only that nearly all Tomatoists abhor waste. Of the millions of followers of Tomatoism world wide, only a few garner media attention. Maybe you have seen the clips and sound bits of the trucks filled with tomatoes rolling into Bunyol, a small village near Valencia in Spain on the last Wednesday of August each year. The event is called Tomatina. The trucks are dumped in the streets of the village and both villagers and visitors, stripped to the waist, initiate an annual tomato fight that reddens the town and folks alike with the juices of this lovely fruit. True Tomatoists feel betrayed by this misrepresentation of tomato enthusiasts for they know the truth about their faith – many of the world know only the CNN version filmed in Bunyol or the resulting photos in the glossy magazines. Tomatoism is calm, quiet, sharing, and appreciative of the magic of growth and life, with more than a small element of beauty. Doesn't make good TV. But then what religion does, except around the non-representative radical fringe?

One of the most valuable aspects of Tomatoism is the lack of battle for survival. Unlike some other faiths, it seems there are few outside influences dead set on its destruction. Some followers have a better appreciation of this than others as Tomatoism is not an exclusive faith but one that tolerates, even encourages, pluralism. In addition to tomatoes, I've tried sunflowers and corn – oh what a battle raged over those two!

Sunflowerists [put ratty old sunflower on top of lectern] have to be down and dirty, trench warfare. For what seemed months, the unknown others would attack each night, dig new trenches and foxholes, and leave the struggling sunflowers lying nearby, roots up. There was no option but to gather the wounded, stand them up once again, fill the trenches and foxholes and hope for the best. No direct counterattack was possible because the enemy was never seen. Mining the battleground with chemical weapons didn't seem to help. The carnage reached as many as 30 plants per morning, roots up, and eventually, not suddenly, the marauding horde seemed to move on to harass other targets of which I'm not aware. What is there about Sunflowerism that draws such antagonism with such devotion? It's hard to tell unless you know more about it's enemy. Success in Sunflowerism must require intensive understanding of the anti-Sunflower faction.

Corn Followers apparently have a different problem. Corn must be a very communal, gregarious faith drawing together massive colonies that ensure survival of the majority. Small congregations are vulnerable to extinction. Unlike Sunflowerism with it's

unknown enemy attacking the faith at it's very roots, Corn Followers have a more crafty opposition that preys on the success of the adherents. The Corners, if that's what they should be called, do well, build wealth, and appear to approach a level of success. But then, before their true goals are achieved and they reach parity with other civilizations, predatory elements move in and keep the Corners from reaching those goals. [put stripped corn cobs on top of lectern] This suppression causes great frustration among the helpless as the goals, though in sight, are thwarted by the more powerful, the more diligent, the less scrupulous that share the same region. This theft and oppression is tolerable, to an extent, in larger communities where the loss is less important – the large school of fish theory. However, for individual Corners, devastating loss means total loss of faith. This weakness, this helplessness, this inability to defend encourages progressively more destructive predators until corn genocide results. Tribe squirrel climbs the stalks. Tribe raccoon topples the stalks. Tribe deer barges through the stalks, and a tribe groundhog detaches all that is down to prevent revival. This teaming up to exact a toll of unearned benefits resulting in the destruction of the benefactor does not bode well for the future of either the benefactor or the four or more tribes of beneficiaries. But the focus on living for the present, obscures their vision of the past or future. We supply corn for the creatures in the winter. As far as what could have been, other Corners may have the same vision, but that vision failed to cross the bridge to those who could most benefit. Hmm-mm, is that a place UU's could help?

Tomatoists don't find conflicts in being also Corn Followers and/or Sunflowerists. For some, Tomatoism is a refuge from the trials of their co-religions. Such tolerance of pluralism among the Tomatoists is extremely important. For through that tolerance, it can see more closely the gains, the struggles, and the losses of other faiths. It can appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of each. Thankfully it doesn't necessarily feel the need to convert everyone to Tomatoism -- parish the thought!!! What it can do is to be an intermediary, a communicator. Successful bridgebuilders must understand the conditions of both shores in ways the shoreline dwellers, the devotees, may be unable to do.

Maybe progress toward this coming together of the world's people is not so far fetched. With a few UU's building bridges. We're not just a garden variety religion, you know.