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“Reaching for the Wrong Spirit”

Introduction

Our society is baffled by the current drug scene. In spite of an intense “War on Drugs,” the human misery wrought by drug abuse has not subsided. This is most vividly exemplified by the abuse of cocaine. Cocaine traffic in the United States alone amounts to some 5 billion dollars. Thousands of lives have been violently terminated in conflicts between government agencies and the supplier and in fights among warring factions of those engaged in drug supplying and distribution. Millions of lives have been devastated both by cocaine (or crack) abuse as well as by the result of bullets, bombs, and knives.

Of course many other drugs, including alcohol, are being abused. We hear of drugs like Ecstasy, ICE, PCP, Angel dust, Morphine, Heroin, Nicotine, Caffeine – to mention a few. Prior to the cocaine abuse epidemic, morphine and related compounds as well as hallucinogens dominated the American drug scene. A complex interplay of psychosocial, political, economic, and biological factors are responsible for the present recreational drug use and abuse situation. All these drugs are consumed, it would seem, in order to achieve a pleasurable altered state of consciousness.

Drive for the Transcendent

One element in the non-medical or social use of drugs which is rarely considered today is the religious dimension. While this aspect is more apparent in the use of the hallucinogens, there is, I believe, an underlying and largely unrecognized search for some kind of transcendent experience in the recreational use of drugs. Some recognize in such seeking a desire to “see” God or experience the Divine. Others may use drugs to enhance their normal perception of the world. A complex interplay of psychosocial, political, economic, and biological factors are responsible for the present recreational drug use and abuse situation. All these drugs are consumed, it would seem, in order to achieve a pleasurable altered state of consciousness.

The very desire to alter one’s mood or state of consciousness by drugs betrays a recognition that the present condition is somehow deficient or unbearable. The song “Is That All There Is?” (made popular in the late 60’s and early 70’s by Peggy Lee) expresses a built-in desire and hunger for something more than what humans experience in their daily lives. After recalling several of life’s joys – the excitement of a house fire, the fun spectacle of a circus, the ecstasy of a first love – and then the subsequent let down, the singer laments in a refrain:

If that’s all there is, my friend, then let’s keep dancing; let’s get out the booze and have a ball if that’s all there is.

But there is more – infinitely more. There is a deep drive for God and an urge for some kind of relationship with the Supreme and transcendent Being. The existence of religions throughout the world and in all recorded ages and the increased current interest in meditation, especially in the contemplative techniques of Eastern Religions, are witnesses that humans recognize, however dimly, that there is more to what meets the eye or ear. However named, the supreme reality which stands behind the tangible world has been the object, knowingly, of human restlessness. St. Augustine stated the matter beautifully and concisely as he addressed God in his famous Confessions: “Father You have made us for Thee and our hearts know no rest until they rest in Thee” (Confessions 1:1).

In the natural human quest for a transcendent Being, there is an implicit desire to “see” the source of all being as creator and first cause reflected in creation. The Book of Wisdom berates the savants of the day who studied the heavens and earth and could not perceive these wonders as the handiwork of God.

For all men are by nature foolish who were in ignorance of God, and who from the good things seen did not succeed in knowing him who is, and from studying the works did not discern the artisan . . . For from the greatness and beauty of created things their original author, by analogy, is seen (Wisdom 13:1,5).

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In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul makes a similar assertion:

Since the creation of the world, in visible realities, God’s eternal power and divinity have become visible, recognized through the things He has made. Therefore, these men [the unbelievers] are inexcusable (Romans 1:20).

It is one experience to see and relish the beauty of nature—to admire the awesomeness of thunderous waves crashing on a rocky shore, to behold the breathtaking scene of the snowcapped Matterhorn or Mount Everest—and to seek for more of the same. It is another experience to become aware of the Creator, of the God who stands behind these earthly beauties and is also revealed in the smile of a child or the loving response of a person to another’s need. It is still another thirst to long to behold God face-to-face, to share by the intimacy of a Divine loving embrace the inner life of God.

The awareness of God’s presence is not merely an uninvolved awareness; it is an awareness of love. God’s presence is a loving presence. The individual loves God, and God loves the person. This can be experienced in a very intense manner. Because this is a loving relationship, there is associated with it a sense of union or unity. Love unites; hate separates. In this loving relationship with God, the person experiences great joy and a deep peace.

Drugs and Divinity

The point is that certain drugs such as the hallucinogens, cocaine and opium (and various similar substances) can produce psychological experiences in human beings—visions, ecstasy, and calmness—which reflect an underlying drive or quest for God. These drugs-induced experiences in themselves, however, are not an authentically human peak experience or a vision or taste of the Divine as reflected in earthly beauties, nor are they the ecstasy or peace resulting from the faith-based recognition of God’s loving presence. Rather they are a chemically-induced altered state of consciousness which vaguely simulates the joy or peace resulting from an authentic human act responding to God’s presence.

In brief, one can say that the use of these drugs involves fundamental confusions: hallucinations are mistaken for reality; pleasure is mistaken for joy; and analgesia is mistaken for peace.

Dealing with Drug Abuse

Does all this answer the question of the root causes of drug abuse? Does it suggest a way in which the drug abuse problem could be met? Surely the problem of drug abuse is not solved by a simple moralizing but by a recognition that what human beings really thirst for is God. It is not so much the drug experience as such which bespeaks the yearning for God, rather, it is the ennui of life, the sadness, and the disillusionment which the person seeks to anesthetize with some sort of intoxicant which point to a yearning for God.

The use of cocaine and other psychoactive drugs cannot quench that thirst nor are they the right path to follow; their road is a dead end. It is one set of experiences to search for the mysterious Being who is both veiled and revealed by nature, and it is yet another reality to seek the God Who is revealed in the Scriptures and Who, through grace, is increasingly manifested in the person’s inner self. Only by God’s free gift can the human person finally attain to eternal union with the Beloved. The alternate and only real and perduring solution to the drug problem is that the drug abuser undertake in earnest an authentic quest for God. That quest must follow generously and with fidelity the path that Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, has indicated: “Blessed are the single-hearted for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). To seek God in some drug-induced altered state of consciousness is “reaching for the wrong spirit.”

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