
Impressum

James Hilton: The Virtue of Moderation

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Source: James Hilton (1933): "Lost Horizons" (a novel)

Quotes selected by Klaus Bung, 2024

Additional notes by Klaus Bung

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

In 1933, James Hilton described an imaginary community of villagers in a remote country, ruled by an order of monks, who by nature did not believe in any form of excess. The rulers were moderately strict, their subjects moderately obedient, the men moderately lecherous, and the women moderately chaste. If somebody is stupid, then it is good if he is only moderately active, and laziness is even beneficial, because his stupidity is less likely to lead him to actions by which he harms himself or other. Nobody thought there was any point in publicising or enforcing political correctness. Politically they were "moderately correct", and often "moderately incorrect". This belief in the virtue of moderation seemed to them a recipe for human happiness. But will God be happy? See below.

The pages that follow contain eight verbatim quotes from Hilton's novel about the principle of moderation - and culminate in a non-Hilton modern application: "Thy will be done (in moderation, of course)."

Doing the will of God literally (i.e. without moderation), as it is written in the "Holy Scriptures" of assorted religions, is a particularly pernicious occupation and can lead to reprehensible activities:

- the well-known atrocities of ISIS ("Islamic State") in the Middle East and in Nigeria
- the theft of Palestinian land and the systematic murder (genocide) of its indigenous inhabitants (aka "Philistines") by the so-called "Israelis", which is explicitly demanded by their god in their bible. (Footnote 1)
- the stoning of adulterers, blasphemers and homosexuals, which is ordered in the Bible (Footnote 2)
- the stoning of alleged blasphemers in Pakistan
- and other stupid and unlawful acts from time to time committed, with naïve enthusiasm, by members of religious sects, in the conviction that it is the will of God, e.g. beating their children to drive out a demon
- the crime of preparing for, and attempting, infanticide. Abraham was praised for this in the Jewish Bible, and his crime was commended as an ideal for Jews, Christians and Muslims (Footnote 3)

James Hilton: The virtue of moderation

QUOTES FROM HIS NOVEL "LOST HORIZON" (1933)

1. Chang answered rather slowly and in scarcely more than a whisper: "If I were to put it into a very few words, my dear sir, I should say that our prevalent belief is in moderation. We inculcate the virtue of avoiding excess of all kinds - even including, if you will pardon the paradox, excess of virtue itself. In the valley which you have seen, and in which there are several thousand inhabitants living under the control of our order, we have found that the principle makes for a considerable degree of happiness. We rule with moderate strictness, and in return we are satisfied with moderate obedience. And I think I can claim that our people are moderately sober, moderately chaste, and moderately honest."
2. ... our community has various faiths and usages, but we are most of us moderately heretical about them.
3. There were also, it appeared, a Taoist and a Confucian temple further along the valley. "The jewel has facets," said the Chinese, "and it is possible that many religions are moderately true."

"I agree with that," said Barnard heartily. "I never did believe in sectarian jealousies. Chang, you're a philosopher, I must remember that remark of yours. 'Many religions are moderately true.' You fellows up on the mountain must be a lot of wise guys to have thought that out. You're right, too, I'm dead certain of it."

"But we," responded Chang dreamily, "are only moderately certain."
4. Chang, I believe, explained to you our principle of moderation, and one of the things in which we are always moderate is activity. I myself, for instance, have been able to learn ten languages; the ten might have been twenty had I worked immoderately. But I did not. And it is the same in other directions; you will find us neither profligate nor ascetic. Until we reach an age when care is advisable, we gladly accept the pleasures of the table, while - for the benefit of our younger colleagues - the women of the valley have happily applied the principle of moderation to their own chastity.
5. ... even the fixed rules of our community are only moderately fixed.

6. [A foreign visitor to this happy country, immoderate, of course, objects:]
I'm strongly **opposed** to that idea of **moderation** that we hear so much about. You can call it broad-mindedness if you like, but in my opinion it leads to the worst kind of laxity. The whole trouble with the people here is their so-called broad-mindedness, and I intend to fight it with all my powers."
7. ... it is our custom at Shangri-La to be **moderately truthful**, and I can assure you that my statements about the porters were almost correct.
8. "You find it easy to separate the two? Is it possible that you are **falling in love** with Lo-Tsen?"

Conway was somewhat taken aback, though he hoped he did not show it. "What makes you ask that?"

"Because, my dear sir, it would be quite suitable if you were to do so - always, of course, **in moderation**. Lo-Tsen would not respond with any degree of passion - that is more than you could expect - but the experience would be very delightful, I assure you. And I speak with some authority, for I was in love with her myself when I was much younger."

"Were you indeed? And did she respond then?"

"Only by the most charming appreciation of the compliment I paid her, and by a friendship which has grown more precious with the years."

The following precept is **not** by James Hilton:

I pray every Sunday: "Thy will be done
(in moderation, of course)".
God is satisfied with that:
He has a sense of humour, aka "grace and mercy".

In the German chorale "Was mein Gott will, das g'scheh allzeit" (used in Bach's St Matthew Passion), we find the line "und züchtigt mit Maßen" (he punishes with moderation).

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| Was mein Gott will, gescheh allzeit, sein Will, der ist der beste. Zu helfen dem er ist bereit, der an ihn glaubet feste. Er hilft aus Not, der treue Gott, und züchtigt mit Maßen Wer Gott vertraut, fest auf ihn baut, den will er nicht verlassen. | I should always do what my God wishes, what he wills is best for me. He is ready to help those who firmly believe in him. He is sure to rescue us when we are in trouble, and when he punishes, he punishes with moderation. If you trust in God, and firmly rely on him, he will not let you down. |
| | English prose translation by Klaus Bung |

FOOTNOTES

Footnote 1. Relevant literature:

Amnesty International (2024) - Israel's genocide against Palestinians in Gaza - 296 pp. Published by Amnesty International Ltd, Peter Benenson House, 1 Easton Street, London WC1X-0DW, UK. Index: MDE 15/8668/2024. Retrieved in December 2024 from: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/amnesty-international-concludes-israel-is-committing-genocide-against-palestinians-in-gaza/>

Masalha, Nur (2014): "The Zionist Bible - Biblical Precedent, Colonialism and the Erasure of Memory." Routledge, London, 356 pp

Pappé, Ilan (2006): "The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine." Oneworld Publications, Oxford, 384 pp

Ethnic cleansing recommended in the Bible

1. 23 then the Lord will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations larger and stronger than you. 24 **Every place where you set your foot will be yours**: Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the Euphrates River to the Mediterranean Sea. 25 No one will be able to stand against you. The Lord your God, as he promised you, will put the **terror and fear of you** on the whole land, wherever you go. (Deuteronomy 11:23-25)

Comment: "from the river to the sea" (Euphrates to the sea!)

2. 10 When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace. 11 If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to **forced labor** and shall work for you. 12 If they refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, lay siege to that city. 13 When the Lord your God delivers it into your hand, **put to the sword all the men** in it. 14 As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves. And you may use the plunder the Lord your God gives you from your enemies. 15 This is how you are to treat all the cities that are at a distance from you and do not belong to the nations nearby. 16 However, in the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, **do not leave alive anything that breathes**. 17 **Completely destroy them** ... (Deuteronomy 20:10-17)

Footnote 2

The stoning of adulterers, blasphemers and homosexuals is ordered in the Bible, but, mercifully, no longer applied in Judaism and Christianity. The virtue of moderation has prevailed.

The following quotes are taken from the NIV translation of the Bible (New International Version).

Adultery: stoning

23 If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, 24 you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and **stone them to death** - the young woman because she was in a town and did not scream for help, and the man because he violated another man's wife. You must purge the evil from among you.
(Deuteronomy 22:23-24)

Adultery: Jesus demonstrates the virtue of moderation

3 The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group, 4 and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5 In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"

6 They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

8 Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9 At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.

10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

11 "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."
(John 8:3-11)

Heretics (Worshipping "false gods"):

2 If a man or woman living among you in one of the towns the Lord gives you is found doing evil in the eyes of the Lord your

God in violation of his covenant, 3 and contrary to my command has **worshiped other gods**, bowing down to them or to the sun or the moon or the stars in the sky, 4 and this has been brought to your attention, then you must investigate it thoroughly. If it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done in Israel, 5 take the man or woman who has done this evil deed to your city gate and **stone that person to death**.

(Deuteronomy 17:2-5)

Blasphemers

10 Now the son of an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father went out among the Israelites, and a fight broke out in the camp between him and an Israelite. 11 The son of the Israelite woman **blasphemed the Name with a curse**; so they brought him to Moses. (His mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri the Danite.) 12 They put him in custody until the will of the Lord should be made clear to them.

13 Then the Lord said to Moses: 14 "Take the blasphemer outside the camp. All those who heard him are to lay their hands on his head, and **the entire assembly is to stone him**. 15 Say to the Israelites: 'Anyone who curses their God will be held responsible; 16 anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord is to be put to death. The entire assembly must stone them. Whether foreigner or native-born, when they blaspheme the Name they are to be put to death.

(Leviticus 24:10-16)

Homosexuals

13 If **a man has sexual relations with a man** as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be **put to death**; their blood will be on their own heads.

(Leviticus chapter 20:13)

Footnote 3

Abraham's intended infanticide (readiness to commit child-abuse because he thought it was ordered by God) is praised in the Holy Bible and in the Holy Qur'an. If a general orders a soldier to commit a crime, the soldier is obliged (by law) to disobey. If he carries out the order, he commits a crime. If God gives an order, then, according to Jewish, Christian and Muslim teaching, a human being must carry out the order, even if it is a crime in terms of secular law. Abraham is therefore praised and celebrated for his readiness to become a child-abuser.

THE STORY CAN BE FOUND IN THE BIBLE (GENESIS 22)

1 Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. 2 Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love - Isaac - and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." 3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 5 He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." 6 Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, 7 Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" 8 Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. 9 When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. 11 But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. 12 "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." 13 Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. (NIV translation)

AND IN THE QUR'AN, SURAH AS-SAAFFAT 37

99 He [Abraham] said, 'I will go to my Lord: He is sure to guide me. 100 Lord, grant me a righteous son,' 101 so We gave him the good news that he would have a patient son. 102 When the boy was old enough to work with his father, Abraham said, 'My son, I have seen myself sacrificing you in a dream. What do you think?' He said, 'Father, do as you are commanded and, God willing, you will find me steadfast.' 103 When they had both submitted to God, and he had laid his son down on the side of his face, 104 We called out to him, 'Abraham, 105 you have fulfilled the dream.' This is how We reward those who do good -- 106 it was a test to prove [their true characters] -- 107 We ransomed his son with a momentous sacrifice, 108 and We let him be praised by succeeding generations: 109 'Peace be upon Abraham!' 110 This is how We reward those who do good: 111 truly he was one of Our faithful servants. (Surah As-Saaffat 37:99-110. Translation: Abel Haleem: Qur'an: A new translation by M A S Abdel Haleem (Oxford University Press)

**THE SAME PASSAGE AS TRANSLATED BY EDIP YÜKSEL,
SURAH 37:99-110**

He said, "I am going to my Lord; He will guide me." "My Lord, grant me from among the righteous." So We gave him good news of a compassionate child. When he grew enough to work with him, he said, "My son, I am seeing in a dream that I am sacrificing you. What do you think?" He said, "O my father, do what you are commanded to do. You will find me, God willing, patient." So when they both had peacefully surrendered, and he put his forehead down. We called him: "O Abraham," "You have acknowledged the vision." It was such that We rewarded the righteous.* Surely, this was an exacting test. We ransomed him with a great animal sacrifice. We kept his history for those who came later. Peace be upon Abraham. It is thus that We reward the righteous.

COMMENTARY BY EDIP YÜKSEL

037:105-107 Killing a human being without justification is a sin for humans, not for God. God creates, kills and revives without justification. Angels of God are not subject to the test like us; and they carry out God commandments, including taking the lives of children.

In verses 37:101-113, Abraham told his son that he saw in his sleep (manam) that he was sacrificing him. The Quran does not state that God ordered him to do that. He fulfills his dream (not his literal interpretation of it though) by intending and attempting to sacrifice his son. So, God stops him from going further all the way. Though it was not God who ordered him to sacrifice his son, Abraham's perfect submission to his literal interpretation of his vision proved his sincerity. God saved Abraham from completing his misinterpretation of his dream. Abraham was wrong in literally interpreting his dream since the dream was a metaphor, a dramatic metaphor reminding him to make God his only priority by mentally giving up from being preoccupied with his dearest possession. Though his literal understanding was wrong, he demonstrated his perfect submission to God. He fulfilled the real meaning of the dream. God rewarded his intention, not his knowledge of interpretation. (For sleep and dream, see: See 25:47; 8:43; 12:6; 30:23; 39:42; 78:9).

The ethical issue involving this dream has been extensively discussed since Socrates. In Plato's Euthyphro, Socrates asked a profound question, "is it right because God says so, or does God say so because it is right?" Because or therefore? The question assumes that God is different from the concept of goodness, while according to the Quran God is the Truth, the Wise, the Noble, and the Justice. The correct answer might be affirmative for both parts of the question. Sartre pulled our attention to a different epistemological problem with the story. He questioned the authenticity or reliability of the source. How could Abraham be sure that the voice was of divine origin, rather than of the devil? That is a legitimate question. If there is an Omnipotent and Omniscient God, and if that God wishes to communicate His will to humans without any doubt, He should be able to do so. Society will and should judge a person based on the principle of justice. Had Abraham lived today and had he managed to sacrifice his son, according to God's law, as a society we should hold him responsible for the murder. However, we should remember that the ultimate judge is God on the Day of Judgment. See 7:28.

Genesis 21:1-24; 22:1-19 tell the story of the sacrifice. Though the Quran does not give the identity of the child, Muslim scholars, perhaps because of a bias for the ancestor of the Arabs, to that coveted position have assigned Ishmael, Abraham's son from Hagar. The Old Testament, though, spells out Isaac, Abraham's son from Sara, the

ancestor of the Children of Israel. However, the story contains some problems. According to the Bible, when Abraham attempted to sacrifice his son, his only son was Ishmael who was 13, while his second son Isaac was not even born yet (Genesis 16:16; 17:24; 21:5). This information contradicts the anonymous author of the Hebrews 11:17. How can Abraham sacrifice his "only son" Isaac, when the younger Isaac was never Abraham's "only son"? Biblical scholars try to get around this problem by claiming that Ishmael was an illegitimate child. Though Genesis 16:3 specifically considers Hagar to be Abraham's wife, the following verses refer to her as a mistress (Genesis 16:4-9). While Genesis 22:2 does not even consider the older Ishmael to be Abraham's son, New Testament's Galatians 4:22 writes about Abraham's two sons. Regardless of the relationship between Abraham and Hagar, blaming or demeaning a child because of his being born from a slave is an unjust discrimination. Even if the Biblical slander on Abraham's extramarital affair was true, holding an innocent child responsible for the sins of his parents is unjust both according to the Old Testament, Ezekiel 18:20, and the Quran 6:64.

(Source: Yüksel, Edip (et al) (eds) (2007): "Quran: A Reformist Translation". Brainbow Press, London, 521 pp)

Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his beloved son is commemorated every year during the Christian Easter Night service.

His unquestioning obedience (submission to the will of God) is celebrated by Muslims every year at Eid al-Adha.

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