

Editorial

ROLE OF RELIGION IN SOCIETY

That we are social beings and that we live, move, and have our being in a community are truisms that need to be reaffirmed today as we live in a highly individualised techno-commercial world. We are not just individuals who are complete in themselves and separate from others and who later for various reasons engage in a variety of relations with other human beings. That we belong to a community is fundamental to our being human so much so that we are products and projects of nurture as much as we are products and projects of nature. Society is constitutive of being and becoming a human person.

Religious beliefs have existed since the existence of *Homo sapiens* in communities. Religion or, at least, religious inquiry, is something that virtually all human communities have in common. In all corners of the world and in all eras of history, people have wondered about the meaning of life, how to make the best of it, what happens afterwards, and if there is anyone or anything *out there*. Anthropologists are yet to discover a society and civilization that did not have a religious dimension. *Homo sapiens* are also *homo credens*. Human beings are also capable of believing, which is as important as reasoning for human survival, growth and development. We live by beliefs, though we seek the truth. There are in our lives many more truths that are simply believed in than are acquired by way of scientific or personal verification.

Homo sapiens asked fundamental questions: Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? and What is there after this life? The answers given to these questions shaped the respective streams of life, then as well as now. Wisdom of the Vedas and the Upanishads, teachings of the Buddha and the Tirthankaras, the paths of Confucius and Lao-Tze, the preaching of Moses and prophets, life and message of Jesus and the tradition of Muhammad are examples of this human quest that shaped millions of people for millennia. These fundamental questions are answered often in relation to belief in

God: "To believe in a God means to understand the question about the meaning of life. To believe in a God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter. To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning."¹

Religion, however, represents certain perplexing ambiguities in the contemporary globalizing and globalized world driven by market values. Science and technology, economics and commerce dominate many aspects of our lives to such an extent that we are tempted to relegate all forms of knowledge other than those of the sciences and technology to the realm of fantasy and to reject and deny all the projects that do not have an economic and commercial value as unnecessary and ornamental. In such a climate, it is tempting to treat religion, religious beliefs, practices, and values as products of fiction, attributing to them only an emotional value, as part of a history about which we cannot be proud of. Religion often finds itself in conflicts with science, politics, economics, art and other secular aspects of culture. The presence of religion is often treated as a negative influence on the society and a threat to peace and harmony because of the inter- and intra-religious conflicts and wars.

Early in the twentieth century, many scholars saw an evolutionary relationship of magic, religion, philosophy, and science, where the older ones were considered primitive and were replaced by more rational and useful ways. As Bertrand Russell observed, "Religion is something left over from the infancy of our intelligence; it will fade away as we adopt reason and science as our guidelines."² Many in the Western democratic academia, since the Enlightenment, has argued and fought for the secularization of the public domain and tried to restrict religion into the private sphere. Modernity, secularism and liberal democracy preferred to keep religion in the private sphere, maintaining a divide between state and religious institutions. While many in the academia remain hostile and indifferent to religion, the evolutionary relationship of magic,

¹Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961, 74.

²<<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/b/bertrandru141329.html> retrieved June 19, 2010>

religion, philosophy, and science is generally discredited by the contemporary scholarship. People seem to realize that “The use of the word ‘science’ for ‘everything that can be meaningfully said’ constitutes an ‘overrating of science’.”³ Though we live in a scientific and technological age, “We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched.”⁴

Science and technology do not have the monopoly of life. The artistic heritage as well as intellectual and philosophical contributions has always owed much to religious thought and symbolism. At a time when the convictions of millions of believers do so much to shape the geopolitics and the survival of humanity on the planet, it is not wise to discount them as misguided delusions. Listening to great experiences and insights of religious traditions of humanity is a source of knowledge and to ignore it would be an unacceptable policing by academia, economics, and politics.

The promise of science as a force for good has been challenged as it has shifted from a beneficial human enterprise to an instrument that works against people and the environment. Even when we enjoy the fruits of science and technology, we are increasingly alarmed by their destructive power. The secular humanist world was often merely a cover story for the technocratic corporate world. The development slogan has to address the cry for justice by the millions. The world characterized by the uncertainties and insecurities of globalization needs to regain its human and social face and it is impossible without the support of religious traditions. Along with the re-emergence of religion, though counterbalances the excesses of materialism and technocratic corporate world, believers are baffled by the emergence of fundamentalism with divisive and narrow identities that subvert fundamental human rights and support terrorist acts and war. Religion, like science,

³Wittgenstein, *Nachlass*, The Bergen Electronic Version, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, MS 134, 145.

⁴Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden, London: Routledge, 1922, 6.52.

is a fire. Both are vital for human life, enhancing the quality of life, but can also provoke hatred and destruction. Humanity cannot choose between science and religion or displace either of them. We need both science and religion “to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace.”⁵ As religion is part of our natural history, religion has come to stay as long as we live and make sense of our life here on earth.

Following a religion relates to a fundamental way of living. Religion is something fundamental for believers not because it is scientifically tested and verified, but by virtue of the place it occupies in human lives. Religion and life are inseparable, for believers; it shows the basic character and spirit of their living. The world of religious persons is different from those who have no faith. They see religious significance in the very existence of their lives. It is the religious point of view that gives them the ultimate meaning of life. For believers, religion is the way of making sense of their lives. Religious life is not merely a practice of certain techniques to develop certain dispositions, but practices to join in and to go on responsibly and creatively following a religion. To believe, I need understanding, though the understanding is characterised by faith and love rather than evidence and logic. As in other aspects of our lives, both reason and passion are involved in making an ongoing commitment to this fundamental way of living, i.e., being a religious person. Religion is a fundamental human way of living in the world in relation to fellow human beings and God; it also shows who we are and how we ought to live. Societies even when follow liberal democracy and commit themselves to the promotion of fundamental human rights need not be anti-religious or a-religious; with dialogue and fellowship in religious experience (FIRE) we shall cultivate an attitude of respecting all religions and make use of religions as agents promoting harmony of life in the local, national and global communities.

⁵The Earth Charter <<http://www.earthcharter.org>>

The present issue of the *Journal of Dharma*, “Religion and Society,” includes the fruits of the research of seven scholars and artists who presented papers in a conference held under the auspices of *Journal of Dharma*. “Two Identity Builders in Amity and Enmity: Religion and Politics” by Vincent Kundukulam explains the rationale of the inevitable alliance between politics and religion, exposes the important models of politics and religion co-existing in the current world and examines the potential of religion to withstand the attempts of politics to overwhelm religion. The paper also envisages that the emerging cold war between secular and religious nationalisms will not result in disastrous casualties.

“Reconsidering Public Theology: Involvement of Hong Kong Protestant Christianity in the Occupy Central Movement” by Wai-Luen Kwok investigates the ‘Occupy Central Movement’ in Hong Kong, from its very beginning, and the influence of Protestant Christianity. According to the author, the Occupy Central Movement shows that public theology in Hong Kong needs to move away from focusing on political mobilisation and counter mobilisation. Rather, pursuing theological reflection on the concepts of justice, peace and welfare of the society that can help Hong Kong Protestant Christians regain a sense of public shared values to meet the challenge of the upcoming political crisis.

The third paper by Z. Kamaruddin, R. Abdullah, and I. Ramzy looks into domestic violence which is one of the most widespread crimes in the contemporary society, irrespective of race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and culture. The causes and reasons for domestic violence have been discussed quite extensively in the paper “Managing Domestic Violence: Islamic Religious Perspective.” The analysis of domestic violence in Malaysia shows that confusion in interpreting the religious text with cultural affiliation contributes to domestic violence rather than the spirit of the religion itself. The authors propose a contextual reading of texts to remedy such confusion, especially regarding Quranic verse 4:34.

Davis Panadan investigates a controversial point in the interface of law, religion and society unique to Indian situation

in “Constitutionality of Personal Laws and Movement towards Uniform Civil Code in India.” The paper, dealing with the constitutionality of Personal Laws, raises the question whether Personal Laws come under the purview of Indian Constitution or whether Personal Laws are constitutionally valid, and concludes with certain practical suggestions towards the formation of a Uniform Civil Code.

“Sacred Symbols and Practices across the Religious-Secular Divide” by Aparna Vincent challenges the polarity between religious and secular in the context of the discussion of the sacred. The idea of solemn in modern societies is neither restricted to the obviously religious nor to those cases where religion and politics mix but is also found in outwardly nonreligious or secular contexts, thus, prompting the readers to take a relook at the so-called ‘Religious-Secular Divide’.

S. P. Vagishwari continues the discussion and investigation on the interface between sacred and secular in the final article, “Dharma as a Binary Identity.” History is replete with instances of how religion, an institutionalized aspect of Dharma, was constantly articulated as representing authority, power, status and hierarchy. Dharma often was projected as a tool for realization of the above by various institutions, be they political, social, cultural or economic, and Dharma provided legitimacy and justified their identities. The paper juxtaposes this articulation in the context of Ancient and Medieval India, spanning a period approximately from third century BCE to tenth century CE and argues that the different trajectories that flowed between Dharma and various other secular institutions constantly witnessed divergence as well as assimilation at various points of time.

Wishing you critical and creative thoughts on the interface between Religion and Society, may I present this issue of the *Journal of Dharma* for your reading and reflection, enjoyment and enlightenment.

Jose Nandhikkara, Editor-in-Chief