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THE MEETING OF RELIGIONS IN THE MODERN WORLD: OPPORTUNITIES & DANGERS

For thousands of years the several cultures of mankind and the religions belonging to them went their ways in relative isolation. To be sure, there was always some coming and going, and we are constantly surprised to discover how even in the most remote times of antiquity the migrations of peoples and the adventurous voyages of traders led to the dissemination of ideas far beyond their native regions. But in general it would be true to say that mankind was divided into fairly homogenous cultural and religious blocks, each concentrated in a particular region of the earth's surface. Some historians have been so impressed with these divisions that they have maintained that (at least, until very recently) there has been no unitary world history but rather a collection of histories, each of them self-contained and carrying within itself the springs of its own development, flowering and eventual decline. A notable advocate of this point of view was Oswald Spengler, and it is interesting to note how he regards each culture as determined in all its aspects by certain basic world-conceptions that are essentially religious in character. More recently, Arnold Toynbee has also argued the case for viewing the past of mankind as a plurality of histories, each relatively independent. His scheme is even more elaborate than Spengler's, and recognizes more than a score of cultures or civilizations.

Both Spengler and Toynbee were forced to acknowledge that there is some osmosis among the compartments which they had set up, and religion is seen as the medium which relates the different cultures. Spengler recognizes the role of Christianity in both Western culture and the Magian culture of the Near East, though he does indeed claim that the differences between Western and Eastern Christianity are so profound as to constitute them quite distinct religions. Toynbee entertains the possi-

bility that Minoan religion spilled over into Classical culture where it survived in the mystery cults and, more generally, he believes that a religion is not inexorably tied to the fate of the culture in which it has arisen. Thus one must not exaggerate the past isolation of cultures and religions. Two of the greatest religions of the world have in fact almost disappeared in their original cultural settings and have established themselves in what were once for them alien cultures. Buddhism virtually died out in India, but took roots and flourished in China, Japan, Ceylon and South East Asia; admittedly, it underwent such major transformations as to become almost two religions, the tendentiously named Mahayana and Hinayana. Christianity began as a Jewish sect but its future lay with the Gentile peoples; though here again the transformations were so great that one can recognize some force in Spengler's claim that Christianity has become two religions, the world-affirming Christianity of the West and the world-negating Christianity of the East.

The spread of Christianity and Buddhism into remote cultural regions was due to missionary effort, but one can also find in the past instances of religions influencing one another apart altogether from any missionary activity. The European Renaissance was accompanied by a great renewal of interest in Graeco-Roman philosophy, especially Stoicism, and this unquestionably affected not only the general culture of Europe at that time but the expression given to Christianity. At the time of the Enlightenment there was a cult of everything Chinese, and the residual Christianity of the West, which had assumed the form of a rationalistic deism, found its pure prototype in the religion of Confucius, where practical wisdom is unencumbered by anything beyond a bare minimum of theology and is unembarrassed by any "primitive" appeal to numinous experience.

These contacts and reciprocal influences of earlier times are worth recalling if only to remind us that there never was a complete isolation of religions. Nevertheless, the general structure of separate religious and cultural blocks remained, until very recently indeed. The earlier contacts cannot be compared to what is happening now. For the first time, we do have a unitary world history. Not the missionary efforts of religions or the intellectual influences of philosophies have brought this about, but **something** quite impersonal—the impact of modern technology. From the West, it has reached out into all the world. No tribe of human beings, however remote in the forests of Brazil or the uplands of **New Guinea**, can escape being drawn into the common stream of the new unitary history or can opt out of the planning which

envisages the total planet Earth. Peoples, languages, dress, eating habits—yes, even religions—are being intermingled all the world over. Planet Earth has become, in the often quoted expression of Marshall McLuhan, a large village. Instant communication and vastly increased mobility have thrown us all together in a way that could never have been even visualized in former times. Yet this unity, which has, so to speak, simply happened to us, is an external one and belongs only to the surface of life. We are very far from a unity of hearts and minds. In some ways, unfortunately, the external unity brought about by the fact that all human life is now being lived within a global technological framework is provoking disunity at deeper levels, for Western technology seems to be inseparable from an acquisitive mentality, even a spirit of concupiscence, and since the planet's resources for satisfying the ever rising level of demand are limited, acquisitiveness leads to competition and then to aggression. There exists in fact a technology-acquisitiveness-aggression syndrome, and no one has yet found out how to break it. We hear much about using technology for the benefits of mankind as if it were in itself quite neutral and could be turned either to good or bad uses. But this fails to probe the question of what technology is already doing to the spirit of man, to his systems of values and beliefs, to interpersonal relations, to the capacity for contemplation and adoration. The Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse writes: "Technology is not neutral. The technological society is a system of domination which operates already in the concept and construction of techniques."¹

Of course, no one nowadays can afford to be antitechnological. The very survival of the vast numbers of people now living on the planet depends upon the smooth functioning of the gigantic technological apparatus that we have brought into existence. We can no longer do without it. But what is important is to recognize the ambiguity of what we have created. Far too many people are filled with an uncritical or even superstitious admiration for technology and its achievements. To be sure, the environmental crisis has given pause to the demand for unrestricted economic growth. We are far more aware today of the complexities of the situation than we were a generation ago. These complexities are of many kinds, and involve weighing different interests and different values against each other. Not least, they involve moral issues, especially those concerned with

1. H. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (London: Sphere Books, 1968), p. 14.

the more equal distribution of wealth. Such issues take us into a sphere where questions cannot be settled by techniques. But these questions too are global in their scope. Thus the fact that technology has imposed upon all of us an external framework of unity is demanding that we develop to match it and to deepen it a unity that is personal, social, moral, spiritual. Sometimes the issue is expressed in terms of a contrast between the standard of living and the quality of life. But these two are not simply to be contrasted. They are linked in subtle ways that include elements both of contrast and affinity. There can be no quality of life worth commending unless there is a reasonable standard of living to protect people from the dehumanizing ravages of deprivation, squalor, malnutrition, disease and the like. But equally—and this is what we are so slow to learn, or perhaps do not want to learn—the quality of life is a much richer concept than the standard of living. It is also much more elusive. The quality of life, because it is quality and not quantity, cannot be measured in terms of production and consumption. It has to do not with material productivity but with spiritual creativity.

It is in this all-important area that the world religions have their unique contribution to make. Whatever the differences among religions (and there are great differences) they would seem to have at least this in common, that they all stress that there is a dimension to life beyond the physical and material, and that this dimension is the pearl of great price. To lay hold on it is to enter the fulness of life; to let it slip is to be condemned to a truncated, stunted form of existence. This dimension is the holy. For some religions, the holy is concretized as a personal God. For other religions, the holy is differently understood and represented. But for all, the holy is that which has most reality and most worth.

The task common to all religions today is to commend the holy, to open to contemporary mankind this dimension which is in danger of being closed off in a world where only techniques are understood. The holy is in God, in nature, in personal relationships, in the inner depths of mystical experience. The holy is everywhere, even in our noisy mad bustling cities, but we are blind to it. "Everyday experience has within it the dimension of the holy—if we can but perceive it."² The religious person sees the same world as the secular person, but he sees it differently, for he sees it in the light of the holy. This is what makes all things new, this is what confers that sense of serenity which is characteristic of the religions and likewise the sense of compassion for

2. J. G. Davies, *Every Day God* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1973); p. 87.

all beings. The vision is purified from the blinding effects of concupiscence and everywhere new potentialities are seen. The truly religious vision is never complacent, but it does have the serenity of hope, warmth, love, patience, faith in the possibility of renewal and transformation. Let me quote a Buddhist writing to express what I am trying to say: "Here in this very chamber all the magnificent heavenly palaces and all the pure lands of all the Buddhas are manifested. This world of ours seems quite impure, replete with all kinds of woes and sorrows, wretched and full of terrors. To those, however, who have true faith, this same world appears with all the features of a pure land...Beings, because of their sins, cannot see the pureness of this Buddha-land of ours. Really this land of ours is ever pure. The impurities are in your own mind."³ As the nations today scramble and jostle for oil or metals or whatever the latest desirable commodity happens to be, do we not need the vision of planet Earth as the pure land filled with the infinite compassion of the Buddha—an Earth transformed from the one that we see through the distorting glass of greed and rivalry, but Earth as it really is, Earth with her potentialities fulfilled and manifesting the holiness of divine creative love?

The religions start with the disadvantage that although they have been preaching love and compassion and justice for thousands of years, it is not they that have brought about the unity (however superficial and even spurious that unity may be) of mankind but a technology which has already predisposed the contemporary mind against religion by its assumption that all problems can be solved by the magic of techniques. This is believed even about the spiritual problems of man himself. I would repeat that one cannot today be antitechnological, and would readily admit that many problems, including those that bear on man's mental and spiritual life, are to some extent at least susceptible of technical solutions, and that all the skills and objective knowledge that have accumulated need to be harnessed in such great causes as peace and justice. But the determination of goals, the decision about what is most real and most valuable, the direction of technology itself—these are not problems to be solved by techniques. The quarrel is not with technology as such, but with the mentality that it produces; though (and this is one of the frustrating ambiguities of our life today) it has to be seriously asked whether there can be largescale technology without the pollution of the

3. Quoted by E. Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 157.

human mind by the total reliance on technique, by concupiscence, by aggression—in short, by that whole unhappy syndrome which we have already noted. We have become alert to the pollution of the environment, but a far more serious problem is the pollution of man's own mind and inner life. I believe that only religion has the spiritual dynamic needed for a radical change in human nature and human attitudes, but the nagging question remains whether we come too late. Technology and secularism are already in possession of the field, it is they that have imprinted their mark on the first phase of the merging unitary world history, and it has become a matter of infinite difficulty to open up the dimension of the holy.

Yet one must not tamely suppose that the drift into secularism, positivism and downright materialism is irreversible. The sociologist Peter Berger agrees with the analysis given above that the rise of the modern mentality has constituted a 'profound impoverishment' of the human spirit, but he says: "How long such a shrinkage in the scope of human experience can remain plausible is debatable."⁴ There is something like a pendulum in human history, a built-in corrective mechanism, and when men have moved too far in one direction and begin to experience the troubles that come about through the distortion of life, then they begin to move back. Although it has happened only among a minority, the searching for a deeper spiritual life among young people in recent years is significant. It has its dangers. Perhaps most serious is the danger of superficiality and even of triviality. American students who are suddenly seized with a craze for Eastern religion are rarely prepared to wrestle with the profound and subtle ideas on which these religions are founded, and the proper study of which could occupy years of effort. Again, we are up against a characteristic of modern life which has sprung from the technological culture—namely, transience, the desire for the novel, the need to be constantly stimulated. All this militates against that very serenity which is of the essence of religion. In the extreme case, religion itself can become another sensation, along with sex, drugs and the like.

Corruptio optimi pessima.

The danger is real, but nevertheless I believe there are grounds for real hope in the current search for religious experience. If a

4. P. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 94.

relation to the holy is essential to human wholeness, then people will not permit themselves to be permanently deprived of it. The quest is there, and it affords to the religions an opportunity of bringing it about that the emerging global unity will be not merely external but profoundly spiritual.

But are the religions ready to respond? When there are such great differences among them, how can they promote unity? About all that they have in common, we have seen, is a concern for the holy, and the holy itself is conceived in many different ways. The religions are today meeting and intermingling as never before. Will the result not be increased confusion?

Let me say how I see the situation. Religious truth is a dialectical matter. I use the word "dialectical" here in a broad sense. I mean that in religion no matter what has been said, something else remains to be said; that whatever has been asserted needs to be corrected by a new assertion; that the way to truth is not through "consensus" but through conversation and even controversy. These points seem to follow necessarily from the fact that religion is concerned with the infinite. There can be no end to the exploration of the infinite, and in that exploration one inevitably encounters paradox.

This means that one does not hold out to the modern searcher a consensus theology distilled from the living religions. The unity of the religions does not lie in any such abstraction. It is a unity that lies ahead, a unity that is coming to be as the religions encounter each other and correct each other and deepen each other. Never has the last word been said, never has any individual or group grasped in its fulness the truth of the holy. But each can help the other to notice that which has hitherto escaped notice.

I do not mean either that different religions have, as it were, different parts of the total truth. It is true that one can construct a typology of religions based on their varying insights and emphases, but it is also true that a corresponding typology can be constructed *within* each religion, for no religion is homogeneous but contains many variations. It is not that every religion has part of the truth of the holy, but that every religion has potentially the whole truth of the holy, that is to say, is moving into that truth. Religions are not static but growing. Hence in that conversation and dialogue by which they correct and enrich one another, they do so by helping one another to develop the potentialities already there, rather than through a syncretistic mingling of material.

Let me illustrate the point from Christianity. As a Christian, I believe that the truth of the holy, so far as this can be communicated to finite human minds, is adequately expressed in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Logos. But at no time has the Church (and still less, individuals within the Church) fully grasped this truth, or been fully grasped by it. It is a truth growing and deepening. One very fruitful way of learning more of that truth is the encounter with the non-Christian religion, in which the same Logos has found expression, though in a different way, perhaps even, at first sight, in a seemingly alien way. But even that which seems alien may cause me to notice in the Christian tradition elements which had hitherto been hidden but which now become clear to me as part of the growing truth. And likewise one hopes that the impact of Christianity on the non-Christian leads to a fuller understanding of that potentially whole truth which is embodied in his tradition.

Today in this large village which is planet Earth, there is a unique opportunity to bring to mankind the great resources of the religions, resources that are able to speak to every condition and type of human being. But the time is short.