

Editorial

RELIGION, A COUNTER CULTURE

Homo sapiens is *homo religious*; rational human beings are also capable of believing, which is as important as reasoning for human survival, growth and development. Though we seek the truth, we live also by belief. There are in our lives many more truths than are acquired by way of scientific personal verification. Answers to the fundamental questions like Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? and What is there after this life? are often related with 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

Religious beliefs have existed almost since the existence of *Homo sapiens*. Religion, or at least religious inquiry, is something that virtually all humans 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*. The wisdom of Vedas and Upanishads, the preaching of Tirthankara and Buddha, the writings of Confucius and Lao-Tze, and the sacred writings of Israel are examples of this human quest. They also appear in the poetry of Homer and in the tragedies of Euripides and Sophocles, and the philosophical writings of Plato and Aristotle. The answers given to these questions shaped the respective streams of life, then as well as now.

Religion, in the contemporary world, is often represented as a counter culture, in contrast to a culture which is secular, scientific, and pragmatic. The celebration of human reason and technological developments in the modern era is expected to lead to the demise of cultures based on religious beliefs. Science dominates many aspects of our lives through technological progress to such an extent that people are tempted to relegate all forms of knowledge other than those of the empirical sciences to the realm of fantasy. In such a climate, it is tempting to treat religious and moral values as products of fiction, attributing to them only an emotional value.

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

Early in the 20th century, many scholars saw an evolutionary relationship of magic, religion, philosophy, and science, where the older ones were considered as primitive and replaced by more coherent and rational and sophisticated 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 While many intellectuals remain hostile to religion, the evolutionary relationship of magic, religion, philosophy, and science is generally discredited in 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 does not have monopoly of truth. 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 billions 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 restriction on our listening and responding.

The re-emergence of religion into the public space is a cultural shock to many, who, like Russell, believed that science will eventually overturn and displace the influence of religious myths and beliefs. “The re-emergence of religious discourse,” writes Sara Maitland, “seems to have caught many of us on the hop: baffled, irritated and uncomprehending. For over 250 years, Western democratic thinking has argued, and even fought for, the secularization of the public domain and the political arena... By the second half of the last century, indeed, one might have thought the battle

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

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

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

was won... What I see instead is a faltering, a loss of faith, in the whole Enlightenment project."⁵

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 also to address the cry for justice. The world needs to regain its human face and it is impossible without the support of a divine realm.

The reasons for this religious comeback are manifold. It expresses both renewed individual quests for meaning in a secularized, materialistic world and a more collective search for identity in a world characterized by the uncertainties and insecurities of globalization and diversity.

While some have welcomed the re-emergence of religion as a necessary counterbalance to the excesses of materialism and technocratic corporate world, others have warned that this religious revival would subvert universal values, sow divisive and narrow identities, and trigger a broader backlash. In some instances, the re-emergence of religion also reflects in part the failure of the states, especially in the developing world, to provide and guarantee fundamental human rights for the majority of their populations. The 'theologization' of state power has also caused divisions and exploitation of the poor and the marginalised. Rulers join with the priests and particular religious interpretations to shore up their power and to suppress dissenting voices in the name of religion. When religion is merged with the state, human rights suffer. India is a country where religious diversity and religious tolerance are established in both law and custom. Since the 1960s, however, there has been the steady growth of militant ideologies. The religious fundamentalism and religion-based political parties challenge Indian heritage and culture. The re-emergence of true religious spirit should promote peace and harmony.

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 their lives. Religion and life are inseparable, for believers; it shows the basic character and spirit of their living. The world of the religious persons is different

⁵Sara Maitland, "In Place of Enlightenment," *Index on Censorship*, April 2004, 8.

from those who have no faith. They see religious significance in the very existence of their life in the world. 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. Religious beliefs are, by nature, not available for empirical verification. That does not mean that they are not significant. Though faith seeks understanding (*fides querens intellectum*), in religion a believer typically believes in order to understand (*credo ut intellegam*) the truths about God. Religion is a way of life lived by believers and not a problem to be solved either by science or by philosophy. Religion, philosophy, and science are joint ventures of nature and nurture. As Pope John Paul II remarked in the opening words of his celebrated encyclical, *fides et ratio*, “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.”⁶

Religion, like science, 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.”⁷ 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. *Journal of Dharma* dedicates this issue on “Re-Emergence of Religion” for furthering the Fellowship In Religious Experience (FIRE) and harmony of life.

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⁶John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Rome: 1998.

⁷The Earth Charter, <http://www.earthcharter.org>