

## **RELIGION THAT LEADS TO WAR RELIGION THAT LEADS TO PEACE**

**The Need to Adopt a Better Method of Teaching Religion  
if Peace is to Replace War**

**Antony Fernando\***

As a general rule, all human beings by the very fact of their birth inherit a language they call their mother tongue and a religion they treat as their mother-religion. Language and religion are two distinct realities, but they have many aspects in common. An individual's first language and first religion are always those of the parents. They are learnt from early childhood almost from the time of breast-feeding. Parents are the first teachers of both.

In the earliest days when humanity consisted of tribes, each tribe had its own language and its own religion. The language made it possible for members to be in communication with each other in day-to-day requirements such as food, clothing and shelter. Religion made them think and act in unison in matters that are less within an individual's comprehension and control such as life and death, evil and suffering. Religion gave them a common code of conduct to follow. It also provided them with rites and rituals for celebrating events of personal or community importance. However, different human beings by the very fact of their birth inherit a language they call their mother tongue and a religion they treat as their mother-religion. Language and religion are two distinct realities, but they have many aspects in common. An individual's first language and first religion are always those of the parents. They are learnt from early childhood almost from the time of breast-feeding. Parents are first teachers of both.

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Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Their widespread nature is such that they are generally assumed to be multi-cultural and multi national.

But in reality, major religions are not so multi-cultural or multi-national as they are generally assumed to be. They would have been so, if there was in the world only one Hinduism, one Buddhism, one Christianity, or one Islam. But in actual fact what we have today are many Hinduisms, many Buddhisms, many Islams, and many Christianities. The Buddhism of Sri Lanka is very different from that of Tibet, and the Buddhism of Tibet from that of Japan. In Christianity, Roman Catholicism is different from Presbyterianism and Presbyterianism from the Greek Orthodox Church. Through this division into diverse branches and denominations, major religions, like the tribal religions of the past, are linked to communities that are culturally and politically distinct. As much as in the past, just as language, religion is inherited at birth and from the parents.

Because of this link with the culture of a particular race or nation, like all racial and national communities, religious communities are institutionally distinct. Each is a separate institution with a government of its own and a fixed membership of its own. Every religious institution has a team of officials endowed with authority to work for its preservation and propagation. In Christianity, they are bishops, priests and ministers. Members are recognizable by the exclusivity of the beliefs they profess and the rites they perform.

But what is still more characteristic of religions today is the system of teaching religion they adhere to. All religions follow a very special system of teaching religion, which they consider indispensable for their preservation and propagation. In Christianity this system is referred to as 'Theology'. There is no religious institution today that is not dependent on its theology for its continued survival.

The theological system of teaching religion has been so much revered up to now, that to question its suitability for the modern world is bound to appear as a sacrilege. But, granted the problems that humanity is facing today, it becomes incumbent on us teachers of religion, and particularly on those of us who are teachers of Christianity to subject this manner of teaching religion to re-examination and ask if actually it is the

best way and also the only way possible. The reason for the obligation is clear. It is becoming more and more obvious everyday that religions are what is at the root of most communal conflicts today and the bloody wars they end up with.

All that I want to do here is to present my personal conviction that what the world is yearning for today is quite another method of teaching religion. But when I do so, it is in no way my intention to throw blame on those who have been following or are, at present, following the theological system. The force of tradition is so great that it is only natural if even well-intentioned teachers see nothing wrong with the present system and feel it should always go on.

As a teacher of Christianity myself, that is how I too thought at first. But certain strange circumstances in my life opened my eyes to the need for a better way and also to the possibility of devising a better way. I was for quite sometime a teacher of religion in an RC Major Seminary in Sri Lanka. Prior to starting my teaching work, I had acquired the necessary qualifications for it. I had a doctorate in Theology and a Higher Diploma in Religious Education. As I was expected also to teach Buddhism the predominant religion of my country, I had studied Buddhism in a state university of Sri Lanka and acquired a Ph.D. in it. But the moment of awakening to the need of a better method of teaching religion came when, after nearly twenty years of work at the Seminary, I was called upon by the university in which I had studied Buddhism to take charge of its newly started Department of Christianity.

The students there were, quite understandably, largely Buddhist. But what took me by surprise was the strange injunction that the Vice Chancellor gave me when I accepted the assignment. It was about what I had to teach. My work, he said, was to teach Christianity but in no way Theology. Theology, in his view, upheld that Christianity was the only true and right religion. Theology could be taught only to Christians and to those who want to become converts to Christianity. What I had to teach therefore was Christianity as just one of the world's religions or, as he further clarified, Christianity as one of humanity's paths to spirituality.

I, no doubt, found this demand of my Buddhist Vice Chancellor rather disturbing. My theological studies had trained me to present

Christianity as the only right religion, but in no way as just another of the world's religions. But after quiet reflection I realized that the demand of the Vice Chancellor was not so unjustifiable as it initially appeared. Theology had one specific aim, which was to convince members of any institution that the religion they followed was the only true and right one and also to show them how to practice it in the way considered orthodox.

As in all religions, in Christianity too, each denominational institution had its own Theology and its own version of orthodoxy. Roman Catholic Theology, for example, is different from the Presbyterian. And what is considered orthodox in Roman Catholicism is not necessarily so in Presbyterianism. And so if, as the *World Christian Encyclopedia* by Barrett (1) says, there are 20,780 independent Christian denominations today, we have to conclude that there are as many theologies and also as many versions of orthodoxy.

It was here that I began to ask myself if what Jesus taught and wanted taught was theology. For the answer I had no other place to turn to than the Bible. Relying on the guidance of the Spirit and with as open a mind as possible, I began examining the Bible. The Bible is a book which, as the sacred scriptures of any religion, could be approached from two totally different perspectives. It could be approached with the assumption at the back of one's head that religion is an institution and that the institution upheld by it is that of one's own. It could also be approached with the conviction that religion proper is not an institution, but a form of spirituality or, in other words, a way of living in accordance with one's inner spirit. Due to my acquaintance with other religions, especially Buddhism, I chose to look at it from the latter perspective.

The central teaching of the Bible is that of the 'Kingdom of God'. But that Kingdom-concept too was interpretable in two different ways. In the community within which the Bible came into existence, there were a large number who assumed that the Kingdom was an earthly institution. The boundaries of the Kingdom were the boundaries of the Jewish race. The goal of the Kingdom was to safeguard the race as a culturally distinct and politically autonomous community.

But the more enlightened individuals of the race, and very particularly those called the Prophets upheld that the Kingdom was

nothing other the reign of God in the hearts of individuals. Condemning the institutional interpretation which led to the belief that the Kingdom was reserved to the descendents of the ancestor Abraham, the prophet John the Baptist declared "God can make children for Abraham from these stones here" (Mt 3:9).

Jesus too fought hard against the institutional interpretation of the Kingdom and considered it his mission to tell his people that the Kingdom was a matter of right priorities in life and that it had nothing to do with membership in a particular race, nation or institution. Individuals in whose heart God reigned were children of God and sharers of the Eternal Divine Life. Religion for Jesus was realism and a mature way of living. Those who sought their security from the strength of the race or nation were not mature or realistic. There was more to life than just material well being, which an economically or politically strong organization could provide. True greatness was personal and came from the fulfilment of one's obligations in a responsible and selfless manner. One of the primary obligations of human beings is to work for the welfare of the needy and the desolate around them.

That is why Jesus proclaimed in one of his parables that membership in the Kingdom belonged to those to whom God could say:

Come, enter and possess the Kingdom that has been prepared for you since the world was made. For when I was hungry, you gave me food; when thirsty, you gave me drink; When I was a stranger, you took me home; when naked, you clothed me; when I was ill, you came to my help; and when in prison you visited me (Mt 25:40).

From such teachings of Jesus it became clear that what made people eligible for admission into the Kingdom was not the race, the nation or the Church they belonged to, but just their good-heartedness and particularly kind-heartedness. But, of course, kind-heartedness is not a trait easy for anybody to acquire. Any ordinary person who was in action kind-hearted became automatically an extra-ordinary person. Thus if good-heartedness is the only prerequisite for entry into the Kingdom, then the conversion considered essential for it is not a change from one institution to another but just from one's lower self to the higher self.

My search into the Bible made it clear that I could teach Christianity safely and usefully even to students who had no intention whatsoever of converting themselves to a Christian institution. All that I had to do was to go beyond Theology to what Jesus taught. To teach what Jesus taught is to teach Christianity as a form of spirituality. But I must confess that I did not feel sufficiently equipped to teach Christianity in that form. First, I had never come across a book on Christian Spirituality meant for use by non-Christians. Second, with the type of theological training I had, building up a syllabus for it that could fit a three-year graduate course was almost inconceivable. I did not know what to take as the academic content of such a lengthy course.

Just as all other religions, what Christianity put forward as its official teaching was only a collection of beliefs. And, in the way they were commonly explained, those beliefs had little to do with day-to-day life in its sensibly perceptible form. All beliefs dealt with either non-human beings living above or below the earth such as God, angels and devils or of happenings that come after an individual's present existence such as hell, heaven or resurrection.

But still I had nothing else to take hold on to present in an acceptable way what Christian spirituality is except those beliefs. I was in the dark. In my view, religion as believed was different from religion as lived. The two were even poles apart. I, of course, suspected that the problem would get solved if there was a way to build a bridge between beliefs and spirituality, but I was at a loss as to how this could be done and didn't know where or whom to turn to.

It was at this time that I came across a little book, written rather strangely by a Buddhist but which contained the answer to the dilemma I was in. This booklet titled "Two Kinds of Language" was written by the late Bhikkhu Buddhadasa of Thailand whom I consider the greatest Buddhist spiritualologist of recent times. In it he showed that the religious beliefs of Buddhism were expressed in two languages one of which he called "Dharma language" and the other "everyday language". The first is what we could consider as spiritual language and the other that of institutional theology. Using these two languages he has given in his booklet the meaning of all the basic tenets of Buddhism. To show in brief what he has done let me quote his explanation of just two basic doctrines

of Buddhism, that on Nirvana or ultimate liberation and that on *samsara* or rebirth after death.

There are two languages in religion, Dhamma language, and everyday language. Everyday language is based on physical things and on experiences accessible to the ordinary man. By contrast, Dhamma language has to do with the mental world, with the intangible non-physical world. Consequently, it is only people who have seen Dhamma, the truth, that can speak the Dhamma language, the language of the mental world lying beyond the physical...

We shall now consider some examples of what I mean. Let us take the word "Nirvana (Nibbana)". In the everyday language of the ordinary man, Nirvana is a place or city. This is because preachers often speak of "Nirvana, the city of immortality" or "This wonder-city of Nirvana". People hearing this ... take it as a place abounding in all sorts of good things, a place where every good wish is fulfilled. In Dhamma language, Nirvana refers to the complete extinction of every kind of defilement and unsatisfactory condition.... If defilements have been eradicated completely, it is permanent Nirvana. It is a state which can come about here and now.

Now to the belief in rebirth. Rebirth after death as some kind of lower animal is the everyday meaning of rebirth into the realm of beasts. In Dhamma language it has a different meaning. At any moment when one is stupid, just like a dumb animal, then at that moment one is born to the realm of beasts. It happens right here and now. One may be born as a beast many times over in a single day. So, in Dhamma language birth as a beast means stupidity. (2)

The lesson that this booklet taught me was invaluable. It showed me that even though beliefs were expressed through images of supra-earthly beings and after-death happenings what they want to convey is how a person can live his/her present day-to-day life at a spiritual and immortal level. To put it differently, it is only in its content that beliefs deal with things above the earth. In its intent, they are all about life on earth but at a deeper level. Basing myself on that valuable lesson, I began looking for the spiritual meaning of all the beliefs in Christianity. Beliefs in Christianity deal with matters such as revelation, salvation, one God, Jesus

Christ son of God, the Holy Spirit, Three persons in one God, Church, Sacraments, hell, heaven, and resurrection of the dead. Taking the Bible as my guide, I began searching for the insights into life and right living which were hidden beneath those pictorially expressed beliefs.

To give a rough idea of how I did that let me show the way I presented the Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus. Of the numerous tenets that constitute this belief two basic ones are that on his virgin-birth and that on his resurrection. Let us take the belief in the virgin-birth first.

If the virgin-birth of Jesus is to be understood in the way intended by the Gospels, then it is implied that virgin-birth is not a prerogative exclusive to Jesus, but one which he has in common with all those who arrive at the stature of life at which they can be called "Children of God". That fact is unambiguously affirmed by the author of the fourth Gospel when he described the appearance of Jesus on earth.

He (i.e. Jesus) entered his own realm (i.e. the Jewish community) and his own would not receive him. But to all who did receive him, to those who have yielded him their allegiance, he gave the right to become children of God, not born of any human stock, or by the fleshly desire of a human father, but the offspring of God himself (Jn 1: 10-13).

It is a little unfortunate that those who insist that Jesus is the only one to be born of a virgin do not pay much attention to Biblical texts such as this. From this text it is clear that all those who give allegiance to Jesus are themselves "not born of human stock or by the fleshly desire of a human father". They too are an "off-spring of God himself". If so, "virgin-birth" is a privilege that all true followers of Jesus can claim for themselves.

Let us now take the belief in the resurrection of Jesus. All Christians profess their faith in the resurrection when they recite the Apostles' Creed and say:

I believe in Jesus Christ who suffered under Pontious Pilate was crucified, died and was buried.

He descended into hell,

The third day he rose from the dead.



He ascended into heaven and sitteth there at the right hand of the Father.

From thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

According to that pictorial language of the Creed, Jesus rose from the dead physically on the third day after his death and burial. But when taken in its spiritual dimension, to say that Jesus rose from the dead is to say that Jesus is alive today. Jesus is alive today because he was always alive. His was a life of the Spirit. Such a life has a supra-corporeal vitality that is unassailable by physical death. We must not forget that according to the Gospel of John, it was when Jesus was still living that he told Martha and Mary, "I am the resurrection and the life" (Jo 11:25) If so, he was a resurrected being even before his death.

What is more, if Christians are to profess their faith in the resurrection of Jesus in the correct way, and in the way that Jesus wanted it done, they must be ready to accept that the resurrected life is a level of life that they too are capable of experiencing already in this life. For in the thought of Jesus, the resurrected life is not a prerogative exclusive to him but one that all human beings who accept his teaching can enjoy here and now. This is clear from what he said:

In very truth I tell you: Anyone who gives heed to what I say and puts his trust in him who sent me has hold of eternal life, and does not come for judgement, but has already passed from death to life. In truth, in very truth I tell you, a time is coming, indeed it is already here, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and all who hear shall come to life (Jo 5:24-25).

If that is so, resurrection is not an after-death experience to be awaited, but an adult level of life to be pursued now. To be resurrected is to have "already passed from death to life". The "time" for rising from the dead is "already here".

It was in the same way that I presented all the doctrines of Christianity. When taken at their depth, all the beliefs of Christianity show what higher life of the Spirit is that one can enjoy already while alive. It is that life which is called "eternal life" and is endowed with immortality.

What I taught my students who were largely Buddhist, I brought out subsequently in a book. The book was printed in Sri Lanka in 1998 and is titled "*Christian Path to Mental Maturity*" and subtitled "*How to be Christian in an adult way in today's world of multi-religious traditions and secular trends*". The book was well received by Buddhists and even by those of other religions such as Hindus and Muslims. The Head of one university Department of Islam after reading it said, "This is the first time I understood what Christianity was about". But what has taken me by surprise is that what I said about Christianity in a way intelligible to non-Christians has been well received by Christians, particularly of the West. Not even three years after publication it was published in Dutch; a French translation has been put on an internet website in France; and the English version on internet websites in Holland, France and Belgium..

If I have referred to myself and my work it is in no way to offer myself as a model. In matters such as this no one can be a model. Each teacher of religion has to act according to the guidance of the Spirit in the particular circumstances in which he or she is called to work. If I referred to the path I followed, it is simply because I felt that my appeal for a re-orientation in religious education would not make sense to anybody if I failed to show at least one concrete instance when the need was sharply felt. My conclusion that teaching Theology and teaching what Jesus taught are two different things is not an idea that any traditional teacher could accept easily.

What is more, in any religion teachers will be reluctant to concede that as a system of teaching religion, Theology is too compartmentalized to bring adequate relief to the problems that humanity is facing today. There are at least three weaknesses to it. First, Theology does not help individuals to become mentally mature. It does not encourage believers to think, judge, and act on their own. Its insistence on conformity to tradition is such that, in all religious traditions today, believers only say what they are told to say and do only what they are told to do. The second is that Theology makes believers uphold that their institution is the only way to salvation. It is not surprising if believers whose minds are so moulded disregard other religious traditions and even despise them. Finally, because of its failure to take religion as a form of spirituality, Theology cannot appreciate other religions as forms of spirituality. As a result people of one

religious tradition don't see the need of being in communication with those of other religions. Had they seen the need, they would have presented their own religious message in a way that others too could understand, appreciate and benefit from.

That is of course not to say that religions of the institutional form or systems of Theology that protect religion in that form are to be done away with. It is even foolish to think that they will ever disappear. From the beginning of time, races and nations have made use of religion as a tool to elaborate their cultures and ensure the distinct identity of their community. And so religions linked to such races and nations will last as long as the races and nations themselves. We should also not hesitate to grant that, when they operate within their legitimate limits, institutionalized religions fulfill a vital sociological function. For purposes of unity and stability Islam, for example, is today indispensable for Saudi Arabia, Buddhism for Tibet, Hinduism for India and Christianity for most countries of Europe.

But when religion is taken in its more proper sense, its goal is different and also more universal. Religion proper is what makes people more mentally mature and also what facilitates people of different cultures to live together in peace and harmony. The obligation to look for a method of teaching religion which is conducive to the achievement of such sublime goals is not exclusive to Christianity. All religions will benefit from a method that can make their members more mentally mature and also make their spiritual message appreciable by others. But it is not for us teachers of Christianity to tell those of other religions what to do. But we can rest assured that if we are honest and humble enough to rectify our mistakes of the past, others will follow suit. The initiative taken will also be to our own benefit. Our own Christianity will cease to appear as a threat to others. What people of other religions resent is not Christianity as such, but the institution-protective versions we present of it.

Finally it must be said that to pioneer the new path to be taken is not easy. The force of tradition is so strong that teachers of Christianity whether they be Bishops, priests, ministers, monks, nuns, or lay catechists who venture on the new path will have to face many obstacles. They will not be able to escape misunderstandings, misinterpretations and even a strong opposition from those who abide by tradition than by reason. But if we are honest to ourselves, we have no alternative but to take Jesus as our

supreme model and teach what he taught and wanted taught. Teachers of Christianity who have the courage to follow in the footsteps of their master will have the joy of realizing that they are paving the way to a new world, -- a world in which human beings will be more mentally mature and also a world in which war will be replaced by peace.

**Reference:**

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