

Javan Al Brynaichi
England

RELIGION IN THE CRITICAL DECADES

1. The Challenge

That the next few decades are critical to the survival and wellbeing of our race is becoming increasingly obvious. Those of us who are held in the compulsive understanding of religious conviction will regard spiritual awareness as vital: Our race must rise in spirit, or fall to death.

First consider the problems that close in on us, which may form the first basis of agreement between all who become aware, whether we regard ourselves as theistic or atheistic, pragmatic or idealistic.

1. Our economy, to employ the term perversely, is unsustainable. Our industrial methods depend on raw materials that are being exhausted.
2. Our ecology, viewed as our interaction with the biosphere that sustains us and to which we are integral though cancerous, is unsustainable. Our life-world is dying, and we are the poison.
3. Our polity remains in the age of warring states. The proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weaponry continues to threaten massive, perhaps global destruction, out of any one of a number of regions of conflict. There is a proliferation of key decision makers with the capability of starting such conflict. The simple scenario models of the cold war no longer simulate the risk management problems our statesmen face. Biological warfare depends on the use of controllable agents of a virulence limited in area and persistence, but is it not possible that an accident during development could release on the world an uncontrollable strain?
4. Our society is unsustainable. Our population essays exponential growth against an ecology of limited resources and an economy of limited employment. Repression and the police organisation

for it are considered as axiomatic principles of statecraft. The moral failure of Marxism in no way alters the basic facts of economic exploitation and class division. The military failure of Naziism in no way alters the basic facts of proliferating conflict between nations and peoples, though these conflicts often cut across the nation state territorial system sanctioned by our international law.

The problems we face are not quadrivial: They are not soluble by the application of the classical scholastic and professional disciplines to discrete problem areas. That we are threatened with major discontinuities is becoming increasingly clear, but not the imminence thereof: Will we be faced with an overwhelming crisis within three hundred years? Thirty years? Three Years? In the face of complex, interactive problems, integral solutions that solve several or all problems simultaneously will be more viable and effective than sets of partial solutions. Such integral solutions may require neither monolithic culture, leviathan bureaucracy nor a world scale state and police organisation. Any apparent solution which does require one or more of these conditions may fail catastrophically. Living solutions are required, born of like attracting like to work together in harmony. The deeper challenge is to orchestrate these into a living whole.

The beauty of the moral challenge presented is that we are not yet forced to act in simple self interest or react pragmatically to a developing crisis. We may elect to accept the challenge out of a sense of religious or moral duty, or in a spirit of generosity. For those of us who can and do accept the challenge, it is a good time to be alive. There are immense resources which may be brought to bear, chiefly the large numbers of educated and aware people who will seek and find some way of cotribution. Modern transport, telecommunications and media techniques can enable cooperation and communication to take effect in an interweaving of many complementary international networks of people, the fabric of which, so woven, may lift humanity out of the mire.

2. Religion and Spirituality-Rationalism

In the search for solutions many religious and spiritual people may share my sense that we are not going to solve these problems by rational human endeavour alone. Rational process and its

instruments, theory, prescription, doctrine and ideology are necessary, as are the more esoteric arts of mastering these methods. Often they take on a cancerous life of their own, with the destructive potential of a computer virus in a real time system. Is creative mastery and the inspiration to rise above our methodologies found in the depths of our being, or beyond?

As we explore our subject we encounter certain great divides which present conceptual challenges to our ability to communicate, cooperate and to coexist. We will not find unanimous agreement on the necessity for these, though I personally believe we can substitute 'exist' or 'survive' for 'coexist' in the above. We have a choice: coexistence or noexistence. We are at a divide beyond which lie the shadowlands of reason, where the rationalist may hear grammatically and syntactically sound language devoid of meaning. It is obvious, however, that religion and spirituality are resurgent phenomena of importance in the world. These phenomena may be:

1. Psychological and sociological pathologies, which at best drain energy and resources into uselessness, and at worst may serve to trigger globally destructive conflict;
2. Psychological and sociological therapies, with a necessary effect somewhat analogous to dreaming;
3. Comprehensions of reality beyond the rationally observable world. The importance of these matters warrants the enquiry of the atheist and the agnostic.

I came to a compulsive awareness that I was theistic in outlook through contemplation of these problems. Observing and working with groups of intelligent people attempting to formulate sound theoretical solutions, necessarily partial solutions, to some of the discrete problems we face can effect a religious conversion where no evangelist would have succeeded. It seems intuitively obvious to some of us that something needs to work at a deeper level than can be fully expressed by human language or fully apprehended by human reason.

Religion may be an infection of the mind and heart. It may be contacted by inspired teaching, noble and beautiful example,

and by contemplation. It is not a disease as such, though it can lead swiftly to death. It can bring great comfort to those in suffering. It is a strange attractor, drawing the pattern of one's life into tracks of striking simplicity or complexity. It may cause one to soar to patent sainthood, yet it can lead man down paths of darkness such that none might know he went only in the service of light. Fully contacted, it is immensely strong.

It is in its depths a compulsive awareness arising from contemplation of the mystery of being. That compulsive awareness may be theistic or atheistic in the manner of the Buddhist and Advaita Hindu traditions. The compulsion lies in this: If one comes to doubt one's sense of the mystery of being after one's contact or illumination, one must thereafter doubt one's self to the full depths of one's being, and so doubt all others. This does not preclude recognition that the understanding of another may be very different.

It is a living fire, leaping from man to man across generations, devouring its victims as fuel for its light. Man dies: The light lives as if the essence of de Chardin's Noosphere. These shadowlands are a hellish place for a cool rationalist.

3. The Division of Religion

The sceptic may ask whether religion and spirituality can play any positive role in the great affairs of man. Indeed, the phenomena of the different major religions, and of sects and doctrinal differences within these religions which continue to develop, can be taken by the rationalist as a good *prima facie* argument against religion as a comprehension of reality and for the view that it is a pathological phenomenon. The rationalist may even assert that the tendency of man to look for non rational solutions to his problems is one of the major challenges facing humanity.

Contemplate the mystery of being. To be awake to that mystery which is beyond our rational powers to compass is to be fully alive, to possess the highest faculty of an evolved being. As man matures and ages, this sense of mystery, which is a youthful quality, often attenuates. This sense is closely related to youthful impressionability, the ability to learn new ways of thought, and to transform our structuring and organisation of knowledge. Further,

deeper than the level of mind, is that impressionability which responds to leadership of a moral character which develops rather than merely influences the pupil; It is the capacity to learn to become like ones master or exemplar. When these qualities attenuate, the capacity of man to evolve his being during life have attenuated. The most evolved of beings loses his individual capacity to evolve. This loss afflicts the man of religion who settles into dogmatic patterns of thought as much as the atheist who accepts mechanistically systematised patterns of thought. Great progress in science has depended on the insight to question the systematised thought patterns of the day.

Great developments in the religious and spiritual life of man have been led by men and women of great integrity and character, working under a compulsive sense of duty. But what have they discovered or developed? Given the great disparities between the theological and metaphysical systems of our religious and sectarian traditions, can there be any transcendent reality capable of some comprehension by religious thought, or have we merely explored the depths of our own being?

Khuda, the Irani word for God, is close to Khud, the word for self. What mystery is greater than the mystery in man? How can God come to discover his own nature, masculine and feminine, better than through man? The spirit of process theology was alive in the Sufi traditions a thousand years before Darwin's ecclesiastical correspondents.

If there is some reality beyond our apparently known world, some reality accessible only to mystical process, does it possess any quality other than reflectivity? If so, does each soul reflect in isolation or does this reflective ether carry and resolve the infinite vibrations of sentient and suffering life? Do the generations of man in our religious traditions generate discrete vortices or images in this hypothetical ether which draw in like souls, or do they discover aspects of a greater unity? Does the mystic find communion only with some such image, or with some Allfather, Allthing, Blake's Nobodaddy? Do the Draculs of profane imagination take on some living reality in this reflective ocean that capture weak and impressionable souls who come into their vortices? What is the

difference between such profanity and religious aspiration, where the captive soul incensed by Noor, Hebrew fire or Arab light; seeks union with or annihilation in the Beloved?

If religion and spirituality can play any positive role in the great affairs of man beyond the secular ones of culture and human organisation, a necessary base condition must be some such reflective medium capable of bearing, sustaining, transmitting and perhaps ultimately resolving our impressions. We need to orbit some Solaris.

4. Is There a Superior Religion ?

This is a theoretically important question in natural theology. It is a very difficult question for someone infected by religion, as he can only address it with patterns of thought and organised knowledge peculiar to his religion. In those theologies which are exclusivist and imperative, this question is of fundamental importance to the individual destiny of man. Religions spawn theological schools of thought. If there is one true religion, or one superior religion, it does not follow that any theological school of thought arising thereunder has comprehended it in its essence. Theology is the tool of man, and possibly the devil. Theologians analyse and divide, and communities are so divided. Prophets, Avatars and Mystics inspire, attract, unite.

There may be a superior religion, but would anyone but God know of it? Is the purpose of life expressible partly as an examination in theology? Does one graduate to a test of spirit and vocation only after having passed the theological test of selecting the right religion, and the right sect within the right religion? This is undeniably true according to certain schools of interpretation in certain religions but can this afford its adherents any comfort? It seems to me that an exclusivist Christianity is the sternest creed. If Christ died for us on the cross, to save our souls, because God so loved the world, what does this demand of the Christian? Can there be any salvation for the Christian when all other souls are damned to burn, unless he himself comes fully to Christ by real, literal sacrifice of himself in evangelical ministry among the unbelievers? This may be true. Teilhard de Chardin has powerfully suggested the image of Christ as the fully evolved man. Survival of evolved planetary biosystems may indeed depend upon the evolution of a master life form capable of self sacrifice. Children often

disappoint their parents, and noble families decay. The mastery of martyrdom, which conquers death and which replicates its image in the minds and hearts of the inspired, may be the most potent form of reproduction, exemplifying de Chardin's idea of sublimated sexuality.

It is a question of great practical importance for someone who awakes to spiritual awareness, who seeks a path and perhaps a guide to follow. A purely unstructured spirituality that seeks no information from the corpus of recorded experience and teaching is likely to prove somewhat solipsistic. Spiritual awareness is generally triggered by inspired teaching or example, and this provides an axis of attraction that will seem as sound as the sense of awareness so elicited. In any case it must be beyond the capacity of any man to study all the teachings of all religions, and know of all the examples of all the lives lived according to these teachings. Therefore we can not judge. We can only pray to catch a wholesome infection. Understand, then, the offence given when we refuse to contract such an infection from someone. It is to do with a sense of wholesomeness or holiness.

In presenting their teachings some religious teachers claim an inclusive comprehensiveness for their religion. If their religion is the better comprehension of reality then this is no doubt true in relation to the sincere religious endeavour of others, who may be progressing but at a lower level of awareness. The metaphysical cartographies of these religions and teachers none the less present images of apparently very different worlds. In the history of mathematics there are times when the development of an equation or structure has subsumed several more particular equations or structures into its generality, as a matter of rigorous demonstration. The metaphysicians of the inclusivist religious schools do not demonstrate their inclusivist claims with such comprehensive subsuming rigour.

In secular affairs the question is of no practical importance. We have our differences in religion before us as a test for the religious and the sceptic alike, and with these differences we must live and die.

5. Is There Unity in Religion ?

From a sceptical viewpoint, there is a unity of religious experience at the phenomenological level. The religious experience of man has been immensely creative in culture and in social organisation. The societies of religion have been the amongst the largest and most stable of human organisations. A plurality of empires have flourished and declined within the geographical domains of religious civilisation. The pathological effects of religion are well known, but religious conflict is more often a tribal or national conflict emerging under an old religious banner. Conflict between religions per se does arise, for example the crusades or jihad, but it is usually bound up with political and economic factors. The worst such effects associated with religion are those of persecution and oppression, sometimes taken to genocidal lengths. This phenomenon may be associated with war, as for example the Reconquista of Spain under Ferdinand and Isabella. More often, however, it manifests as a form of policing activity within a jurisdiction supposedly at peace. This also manifested under secular totalitarian regimes and has more to do with the psychology of man in political power than with religion. Generally, the social pathology of religion is a corruption of religious ideals, not a fulfilment. If, however, religion is to play a greater role in the affairs of man, the dangers of conflict and oppression associated with religion must also increase.

Those who are religious, who believe in the unseen, can believe at the deepest level in the working out of some unifying process or purpose in the apparently known world and in that reality of which the apparently known world is a part. Our concern is to what extent we can work to harmonise the religious affairs of man so that where common ideals exist they may be given full expression. This need not follow from a pluralist conviction. The infection of religion is caught from someone of inspired teaching or example, and if any one religion or sect is seen to contribute disproportionately to progress in the affairs of man, this must serve to command respect and to lead people into its fold. Since the challenge facing us is one of coexistence, survival, a spirit of generosity, service and cooperation is necessary both to meet the secular challenge and to further our respective faiths. Conversion by force never won a heart, nor ever inspired one to die for faith. However lacking

in the gift of inspiration we may be, we serve our faiths better by giving our blood, not seeking to shed the blood of others. Therefore the man of exclusive conviction may honourably enter the arena of cooperation, perhaps with more decision and purpose than one who is inclusivist or pluralist by conviction.

In seeking cooperation to promote common ideals, there can be no place for compromising ideals. The only sound basis for cooperation is on the basis of ideals genuinely held in common. What may work pragmatically in a power broking market such as a parliament will not serve to hold men together across religious, ethnic, national and economic divides. At the level of the unity of man, only the common ideals of man can serve as a bond. These common ideals are revealed in the lives of people, and can be imparted by re-counting and further example. The ideals are thus caused to flower in the minds of men. Any attempt at prescription, or constructing a unifying theology and metaphysics, will at best be sectarian and more probably sterile. The best teachers use metaphysical representation as an impressionist tool for suggesting man's relation to the mystery of being, and not as a definitive cartography of reality. Those who hold to a plural or inclusive view of religion are probably best able to do this as they have conviction on their side.

6. The Moral Challenge

If there is one true religion, and if there is one true sect in that religion, then the only special virtue its members can claim is that of having chosen or been born into it. This virtue is not obvious to the members of all other sects, religions and persuasions. All patent virtues are manifestly distributed amongst the followers of all religions and amongst those who do not express religion or spirituality. From the nature of the problems facing us, the struggle for ascendancy between faiths and ideologies must be played out by competing in the arena of cooperation, eschewing conflict save where duty admits of no other course. This was ever the teaching of religion, which must come to be practiced. In the course of such competitive cooperation, we may discover a greater harmony, a unity of man of living religion.

The nature of the moral challenge is ultimately personal. However disastrous the flood of world events, and whatever destruction is released upon the world in the name of religion or otherwise in times to come, it remains for each man and woman to respond as best they can and make whatever positive contribution they can make. In an absolute sense, it is not the survival of our race and living planet that matters: It is a matter of conscience and consciousness. It matters how we relate to the mystery of being, and to all that is and in particular to all that which lives and knows joy and suffering. It matters that we take responsibility for ourselves and all that we can influence, that we accept dharma, duty.

This does not amount to a simple pluralism. If the Hindu first equated religion with a sense of duty, it may be that duty has found a more consummate expression in another religion. If the nature of God is love, then the purpose of man is love, and it may be that religion teaches this better than all others. One of the names of God in Islam is Haqq, Truth. It may be that in times to come all men come to regard one path as the better path to truth; Yet may they cherish and cultivate the other religions for their cultural wealth and their expression of truth, and to honour the memory of those who lived their lives in those paths to truth. If such a time is to come, man must coexist with man, with his living planet, and be at peace with the Mystery of Being.