

8. RELIGION, THE RELIGIONS

There are various faiths in the world. As many faiths, as many paths. But everyone thinks his faith alone to be the right one, that his own watch alone is going right! But then, however wrong the other watches may be, the sun is going aright! One has to correct all watches by that. (Ramakrishna Paramahansa)

Intimately bound up with religion, then, is the concept of the “sacred”. But, what *is* the sacred? According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr:

Perhaps the most direct way of approaching the meaning of the sacred is to relate it to the Immutable, to that Reality which is both the Unmoved Mover and the Eternal. That Reality which is immutable and eternal is the Sacred as such, and the manifestation of this Reality in the stream of becoming and the matrix of time is that which possesses the quality of sacredness.

Religion has its source in myth; its basic language is symbolism. The contemporary world, with its eminently utilitarian mentality, often attempts to interpret myths literally, as a language of concrete, tangible facts of this world—the only language presumed to make sense. From this perspective, myths and symbolism are nothing more than “fables” for gullible peoples. ... However, “in societies where myth is still alive, the natives carefully distinguish between myths—‘true stories’—and fables or tales, which they call ‘made-up stories’.”

Myth profoundly conditions our worldview in one way or another. Whether we like it or not, myth is unavoidable. According to Wolfgang Smith, “atheists and iconoclasts have myths of their own. Not only the wise, but fools also live ultimately by myth.”

Religion addresses itself to the commonality of men, such as they are in society, and it must adapt to their natures and circumstances. This is why it often adopts a sentimental, at times even naive tone. Its function is to channel the actions of human beings towards the transcendent. This is why it is self-limiting, just as a river can only flow when contained within its banks.

Religious institutions ought to bear such things in mind; they are themselves composed of people who in great part fulfill these characteristics. However, to the degree to which their inevitable opacities permit a little of the original light through, they can be considered to be justified. Exoteric institutionalized religion (accessible to everyone) tries to ensure that the majority behave in a more or less correct manner, and can be granted a glimpse of the Spirit.

In every religion there are two parts: one outward and one inward. The outward is directed to everyone, while the inward is only for those who aspire to advance on the spiritual path. The outward part offers a more or less simplified spiritual vision of the world (mythology, dogmas, etc.); it also deals with morals, individual and social duties, rituals, festivals, religious forms, and the like. The inward part deals with what is called mysticism, spirituality, the inward path.

Esoterism is not something “secret” that is withheld from the majority, but rather a path that is open to whoever seeks to be worthy of it.

John Smith, the Platonist:

If He should speak in the language of eternity, who could understand him, or interpret his meaning? Or if he should have declared his truth to us only in a way of the purest abstraction that human souls are capable of, how should then the more rude and illiterate sort of men have been able to apprehend it? Truth is content, when it comes into the world, to wear our mantles, to learn our language, to conform itself as it were to our dress and fashions.

The history of religions has witnessed the tension, which has at times developed into battles, between the “letter” and the “spirit”: “For the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life”, said St Paul. Religion has to secure its doctrines and teachings, otherwise they would dissolve and soon disappear; however, this solidification often ends being rigid and lifeless.

For ancient peoples, practically every activity was a ritual. Eating, sleeping, hunting, cultivating the earth, playing, having sexual relations... everything was performed in conformity with the archetypal models that their gods or ancestors had revealed to them. The *Shatapatha Brahmana*, which expounds Vedic ritual, says: “We must do as the Gods did in the beginning.” Through ritualization, actions acquire a vertical dimension that lifts them out of “profane” space and time.

Ramakrishna said:

To get a crop one must needs sow the grain with its husk. So rites and ceremonies are necessary for the growth and perpetuation of a religion. They are the receptacles that contain the kernel of truth, and consequently every man must perform them before he reaches the central truth. [...] The pearl oyster that contains the precious pearl is in itself of very little value, but it is essential for the growth of the pearl. The shell itself may prove to be of no use to the man who has got the pearl.

The foremost purpose of ritual is to lead to the remembrance of God. For the Shaykh Al-Alawi:

Remembrance is the mightiest rule of the religion. [...] The law was not enjoined upon us, neither were the rites of worship ordained but for the sake of establishing the remembrance of God.

Agustín Pániker writes:

Be *that* [religion] what each person imagines it to be, religion appears to be capable of the best and the worst. In its name, cultural genocide has taken place, as well as holy wars, bloody attacks, terrible tortures or animal sacrifices; under its auspices civilizations have been built along with sublime works of art, and incomparable fountains of wisdom. Religion involves violence and peace. For some, it is the most precious thing in their life. For others, the sooner we are rid of this scourge the better. Religions can support established hierarchies, but also incite rebellions.

Religions can become perverse businesses, but also sources of charity and aid to those in need.

For Ramakrishna:

Why do religions degenerate? The rain-water is pure but becomes soiled on earth according to the medium it passes through. If the roof and the pipes be dirty, the water discharged through them must also be dirty.

Very often, so-called “religious” conflicts arise between neighbors who may or may not share the same religion, language, etc. Belonging to a different religion exacerbates the differences, but being of the same religion does not mean that conflict is avoided. Religion has been used as a sign of identity, as a dividing line between “them” and “us”, and as such, as an excuse for war, often concealing darker motives. The 20th century has clearly shown that, either with or without religion, people massacre each other.

The visible problems of religion often veil its benefits. We know what a society is like where religion is present, but can we know how the world would be without religion? Is it not possible that, without a religion to channel them, human passions would be uncontrollable? Western profane societies are still indebted to their Christian past. This means that even today, the level of ethic is still acceptable. But, with the passing of generations this influence will continue to weaken and cause many barriers and scruples to collapse. It is easy to make an inventory of all the evils religion has wrought, but what would the balance be after 20 or 30 centuries of an atheistic civilization?

Evil is much more visible than good. The evils produced by religion have been critically enumerated in recent centuries; but how many have also benefitted from a religious life? For every scoundrel who has placed religion at the service of impious passions, are there not many more times that number who have been given a clear meaning for living, great peace of mind, and a noble, worthwhile, and virtuous life?

In a similar manner, could we not blame politics for thousands of ills? Has science not invented incredibly deadly weapons? Politics, science and religion are human activities with their lights and inevitable shadows. One cannot pretend to abolish these natural human activities—they would inevitably come back in other forms—in an attempt to avoid the problems they comprise; it is a question of practicing good politics, good science, good religion.

Castellio writes the following eloquent passage:

If you, illustrious Prince, had informed your subjects that you were coming to visit them at an unnamed time, and had requested them to be prepared in white garments to meet you at your coming, what would you do if on arrival you should find that, instead of robing themselves in white, they had spend their time in violent debate about your person—some insisting that you were in France, others that you were in Spain; some declaring that you would come on horseback, others that you would come by chariot; some holding that you would come with great pomp and others that you would come without any train or following? And what especially would you say if they debated not only with words, but with blows of fist and sword strokes, and if

some succeeded in killing and destroying others who differed from them? “He will come on horseback.” “No, he will not; it will be by chariot.” “You lie.” “I do not; you are the liar.” “Take that”—a blow of the fist. “Take that”—a sword-thrust through the body. Prince, what would you think of such citizens? Christ asked us to put on the white robes of a pure and holy life; but what occupies our thoughts? We dispute not only of the way to Christ, but of his relation to God the Father, of the Trinity, of predestination, of free will, of the nature of God, of the angels, of the condition of the soul after death—of a multitude of matters that are not essential to salvation; matters, moreover, which can never be known until our hearts are pure; for they are things which must be spiritually perceived.

In a conference held in Los Angeles in 1900, Swami Vivekananda observed:

Suppose Jesus of Nazareth was teaching, and a man came and told him, “What you teach is beautiful. I believe that it is the way to perfection, and I am ready to follow it; but I do not care to worship you as the only begotten Son of God.” What would be the answer of Jesus of Nazareth? “Very well, brother, follow the ideal and advance in your own way. I do not care whether you give me the credit for the teaching or not. I am not a shopkeeper. I do not trade in religion. I only teach truth, and truth is nobody’s property. Nobody can patent truth. Truth is God Himself. Go forward.” But what the disciples say nowadays is: “No matter whether you practise the teachings or not, do you give credit to the Man? If you credit the Master, you will be saved; if not, there is no salvation for you.” And thus the whole teaching of the Master is degenerated, and all the struggle and fight is for the personality of the Man.

Opposing itself to the modern world—but with a mentality already very affected by this same world—it (fundamentalism) promotes a society dominated by religion—understood in an almost exclusively social and very superficial way. Fundamentalism is, above all, a movement that is political, ethnic and nationalist in character. In an address to the U.N. Security Council, Scott Atran said:

The popular notion of a “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West is woefully misleading. Violent extremism represents not the resurgence of traditional cultures, but their collapse, as young people unmoored from millennial traditions flail about in search of a social identity that gives personal significance and glory.

According to the Quran, the existence of many religions is an explicit desire of God:

And for every nation there is a Messenger. [...] And messengers We have mentioned unto thee before and messengers We have not mentioned unto thee [...] For each we have appointed a divine law and a traced-out way. Had God willed, He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as ye are). So vie one with another in good works. Unto God ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ.

John Hick speaks of a Copernican revolution in Christian theology, comparing the current situation to the change from the Ptolomaic system to the Copernican one: the Earth—and our own religion—are no longer in the centre of the universe. Hick observes that, just as in the attempt to preserve the Ptolomaic system, where various epicycles were added to try to conform to the facts, the official Christian doctrine has progressively added secondary modifications regarding their considerations of other religions, which

serve only to delay the moment when they must accept the truth:

The Copernican revolution in astronomy consisted in a transformation in the way in which men understood the universe and their own location within it. It involved a shift from the dogma that the earth is the centre of the revolving universe to the realisation that it is the sun that is at the centre, with all the planets, including our own earth, moving around it. And the needed Copernican revolution in theology involves an equally radical transformation in our conception of the universe of faiths and the place of our own religion within it. It involves a shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre to the realisation that it is *God* who is at the centre, and that all the religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around him.

Like Ashoka, Swami Prabhavananda observes that what is important is not the doctrine, but the interior enrichment of the faithful of each religion:

“By their fruits ye shall know them”, said Jesus. And St Paul has enumerated these fruits as follows: “love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance”. Ashoka, the great Buddhist emperor of India and founder of a Buddhist canon, carved in stone these fruits: “compassion, liberality, truth, purity, gentleness, peace, joyousness, saintliness, self-control”.

The Supreme Truth has infinite aspects, and there are many ways of approaching it. Every form is precious insofar as it reflects the informal truth, but it will never be able to encompass it. In the realm of forms unity is impossible. The diverse religions only possess a unity in transcendence, in the “place” where all forms have been surpassed. This is the “place” towards which all religions point, yet none of them can claim it as their own. The unity of religions can only exist in the Absolute, which surpasses all limitation and description; in the Divinity of the negative or apophatic theology, to which no concept or image can be applied. In the world of forms, in the realm of the multiple and the relative, the different religions will never be one; they are complementary.

The goddess Isis (through the mouth of Apuleius): “My divinity is adored throughout the world, in diverse manners, in variable customs, and by many names.” The *Rig Veda*: “Truth is one; the sages call it by many different names.” And the *Bhagavad Gita*: “Multiple are the paths of men, but all arrive to Me in the end.”

The admission of the fact that all the major religions are valid has led some to defend a feeble and very blurry notion of unity: one that affirms that all religions say the same thing. This has given rise to “indifferentism” (it matters not which religion is followed, as long as it is not taken too seriously) and to “religion à la carte” (since all religions are equal, I will make my own religion by taking from each one what I like best). But it is forgotten that every religion is an organic unity and that its parts are not interchangeable, for they only have a meaning within a whole. Every religious tradition possesses a spiritual vision rooted in a specific symbolic world which cannot be mixed with others on pain of losing all its meaning.

How can we rationally explain, without admitting of any higher dimension, the

immense influence exerted by sacred texts and the founders of religions? An influence that, after being the principal reason for the creation of entire civilizations, continues after many centuries and even millennia. Which other persons and texts could have done something similar?

According to Huston Smith,

revelation has shaped human history more than any other force besides technology. Whether revelation issues from God or from the deepest unconscious of spiritual geniuses can be debated, but its signature is invariably power. The periodic incursions—explosions, we might call them—of this power in history are what created the world's great religions, and by extension, the civilizations they have bodied forth. Its dynamite is its news of another world. Revelation invariably tells us of a separate (though not removed) order of existence that simultaneously relativizes and exalts the one we normally know.

According to Freud, who dedicated much of his energy to studying this subject, God is an illusion arising from the childish need for a powerful father figure; religion can be compared to a neurosis: “Religion is an illusion and it derives its strength from the fact that it falls in with our instinctual desires.”

Freud's explanations have been heavily criticized. And there have been others. According to Mario Beauregard and Denyse O'Leary:

Early twentieth-century psychiatrists theorized that spirituality is driven by a desire for a father figure or an unconscious desire to avoid death. Those explanations were plausible attempts to explain spirituality, though, by their very nature, they were untestable. They also tended to be Eurocentric, assuming that developments in European Christianity or Judaism were representative of religion worldwide. Unfortunately, the progress of science, far from shedding light, has led to a host of less plausible explanations today. Today's explanations have degenerated into notions that sometimes border on the frivolous, such as the supposed evolutionary fitness of religious people, theotoxins (poisonous chemicals in the brain), brain damage, memes, a God gene, or a God spot in the brain.

Karen Armstrong:

We learned about God at about the same time as we were told about Santa Claus. But while our understanding of the Santa Claus phenomenon evolved and matured, our theology remained somewhat infantile. Not surprisingly, when we attained intellectual maturity, many of us rejected the God we had inherited and denied that he existed. [...] Religious leaders often spend more time enforcing doctrinal conformity than devising spiritual exercises that will make these officials' “beliefs” a living reality in the daily lives of the faithful. [...] This neatly demonstrates our modern understanding of religion as something we think rather than something we do.

Plutarch relates how in his time, the Egyptian religion had degenerated in outrageous ways, and “there is engendered a dangerous belief, which plunges the weak and innocent into sheer superstition, and in the case of the more cynical and bold, goes off into atheistic and brutish reasoning.”

We are at a pivotal moment where, on the one hand, a new spiritual vision appears to be struggling to emerge, and on the other, the vast majority of people seem to think that all is well if the economy is strong.

Various ideas and movements are trying to fill the great void left by Christianity. But a religious tradition is not improvised or invented. The modern world (and not only the West) is being flooded with all kinds of pseudo-spiritualities, some of new origin, others that are more or less aberrant distortions or mutations of authentic traditions.

Authentic mysticism is based on practice, not theory. However, it requires a well-founded theory; a “map” that does not permit us to get lost, and such a map can only be offered by an authentic religious tradition. All authentic esoterism must be rooted—at least essentially—in a tradition: here the inventions and intuitions of individuals, as brilliant as they may be, are worth nothing.

Thus, it is not enough to “believe” in “God”. Angelus Silesius admonished: “Christ may be born a thousand times in Bethlehem, but if he be not born anew in your own heart you remain eternally forlorn.” And William Law:

A Christ not in us is the same as a Christ not ours. If we are only so far with Christ as to own and receive the history of His birth, person, and character, if this is all that we have of Him, we are as much without Him, as much left to ourselves, as little helped by Him as those evil spirits which cried out, “We know thee who thou art, the holy one of God”.