`IT ONLY ADDS'
by Geoffrey R Usher

Sixty years ago, when I was a primary school child in Adelaide, life was very different in many ways from what it is now. We did not have television. We did have trams - but not today's "light rail". Space travel was still the stuff of science fiction.

We can marvel over the scientific and technological changes which have taken place within my life-time. We can be prompted into speculating on what the world will be like in another 50-60 years from now. We can wonder whether artificial intelligence will ever become a reality, or whether the space-docking stations will ever evolve into settled space colonies.

These are moot questions. Just as I, in my childhood all those years ago, could not know what changes I would see in my life-time, so I cannot know what will come in the remainder of my life-time, let alone the life-times of my children, or beyond.

One thing we can know, however. If religion is to serve us in those future days and years; if it is to live up to its promise of establishing wholeness in the self and in the world: then it needs to be prepared so that it may meet what scientific and technological developments are to be born.

We will need to work on it. It will not be easy. New human achievement and expanded knowledge have always been a struggle for religion.

No matter the age, no matter the advancement: much of religion has been threatened by scientific discovery and technological innovation to the point where they have been viewed as a menace - a threat - to both theology and morality. That view has rarely resulted in good.

Karen Armstrong is a former Roman Catholic nun who turned to the academic life. Having rejected the Church, she called herself a "freelance monotheist". She became a leading British commentator on religious affairs. In her book The Battle for God she argued that fundamentalism is a phenomenon in all the world's faith traditions, and she took some time spinning out its various manifestations in Judaism, Islam and Christianity. She wrote that each expression of fundamentalism shares a common trait with others. That common trait is a fearful defence against the modern world, which is regarded as spiritually bankrupt, tainted by new science and technology.

Karen Armstrong wrote that fundamentalists - or extremists - have not really gone back to the root of their traditions, but
that they have actually misconstrued the purpose of science and blurred the distinction between myth and reality.

The irony is that every time something new is learned, we human beings are confronted with even more that we do not know. That is threatening. And, too often, that threat has caused some people to veer off into the desperation of violence.

Armstrong wrote The Battle for God well before 11 September 2001, well before the days when rescue workers in New York City sifted through ashes and dust, taking into their fingers the remains of heroes, office workers and terrorists, all in the same handful.

The effort to seek the ineffable - that which cannot be expressed in words - sometimes leads to a denial of all that has been learned about life and religion. It sometimes leads to the acceptance of the gods of an earlier humanity. It sometimes leads to the acceptance of gods who are judgemental, overly involved in the affairs of human beings, and too interested in either saving or destroying the souls of those who do or do not worship them.

When the effort to seek the ineffable has such results, it leads to human fragmentation and brokenness. It pits human beings against one another; it splinters us apart; it is a rent in our humanity that can only grow more severe as the modern world draws us closer together.

Something over a decade ago, Lee Barker was the Senior Minister of the Neighbourhood Unitarian Universalist Church of Pasadena, California. He wrote: When we are confronted with the achievements of the modern world, we don't always need to react with retreat, defensiveness, denial and possibly even violence. I'm thinking of Richard Feynman, a Nobel Prize winner in physics who got at it by writing about flowers. He said: "I have a friend who's an artist. ... He'll hold up a flower and say, 'Look how beautiful it is,' and I'll agree. And he says, 'You see, I as an artist can see how beautiful this is, but you as a scientist, oh, take all this apart and it becomes a dull thing.' And I think that he's kind of nutty. ... I can appreciate the aesthetic beauty of a flower. At the same time I see much more about the flower than he sees. I can imagine the cells in there, the complicated actions inside that also have a beauty. I mean it's not just beauty at this dimension of one centimetre, there is also beauty at a smaller dimension, the inner structure. ... All kinds of interesting observations showing that science knowledge only adds to the excitement and mystery and the awe of a flower. It only adds; I don't understand how it subtracts.
It only adds, it doesn't subtract: a scientific understanding adds to our experience of wonder; doubts add to the bedrock of truth; the modern world is the place where the fulfilment of all 'our heartfelt values will come to pass.

Julia grew up in in the 1950s in a Christian Science home where she learned that the only true reality is God; the earth's existence is meaningless; this flesh of ours is illusory; the only thing with true substance is the spirit and intention of God; God is in control of our bodies and our healing; all that human beings can do is to petition God to heal them when they are ill.

In Julia's home, prompted by the teaching that only God could offer healing, no medicines were allowed and no medical treatment was sought.

For Julia, a first bout of tonsillitis was both painful and prolonged. When a second episode flared, at the age of 17, she sneaked out of her home and got a shot of penicillin. She was healed 24 hours later. This confirmed the faith of her parents. "See, Julia," they said, "God is the true healer." But, more important, it proved to Julia the validity of that same faith. She agreed that this was God's instantaneous healing, which came through medicine. The modern world, she saw, was the fulfilment of church teaching, not a challenge to it. She found a home in a Unitarian Universalist Church; and she found a home in our insistence that truth is augmented by the modern, more scientific world.

Our liberal tradition is like any other faith tradition: it is not immune to the retreat from innovation. Our openness and tolerance and acceptance offer a spiritual haven for all seekers, including those who have latched on to answers like numerology, astrology, phrenology, angelology, particularly in recent decades.

I entered the ministry nearly 40 years, in 1976, so Lee Barker is pretty much my contemporary. I was struck by this paragraph in what he wrote:
Twenty-five years ago, a generation of liberal theological students vowed that we would take something new to the pulpits we filled. We vowed that we would bring spirit and passion to a ministry that we saw covered with the dry dust of reason and intellect. We wanted to lend the poetry of story and the heartbeat of personal experience to the ideas we brought to our parishioners. And, in many ways we have been successful, perhaps too successful. Now, in our movement, there are genuine strains that confuse feelings for spirituality. Strains that are so thirsty for the intimacies of personal relationships that those intimacies are thought to be the ultimate; that so desperately want the new, just world to be created that it is seen to be the
only concern of religion. These strains are narrow tracks which, too often, have taken no account of the human mind's great lessons and accomplishments.

That great 19th century Unitarian William Ellery Channing was criticised by the younger ministers of his time for being too heady, and not passionate enough; he was criticised for not being integrated enough into the modern, real world of human experience. He internalised those criticisms, took them as his failings, and wrote: "The age in which we live demands not only an enlightened but an earnest ministry. ... To suit such an age a minister must communicate religion - not only as a result of reasoning but as a matter of experience."

Our modern age is different from Channing's modern age. Today, feelings are much more dominant. The "intimacies of personal relationships ... are thought to be the ultimate". Perhaps we no longer need to guard against the detachment of science. Perhaps rather we need to guard against religious passions that have no anchor in science or reason.

Lee Barker suggested that we should turn Channing's sentiments on end. He wrote: "The age in which we live demands not only an earnest religion, but an enlightened religion. To suit such an age we must communicate religion - not only as a result of our passions and experience but as a result of our reasoning as well."

"It only adds", wrote Richard Feynman. "Science knowledge only adds to the excitement and the awe of a flower. It only adds. I don't understand how it subtracts."

Our world is in trouble. It will not get beyond this difficult, terrible time without learning the truth in what Feynman wrote. It only adds; it does not subtract. Our own precious liberal religious movement is susceptible to its own confusion and a touch of myopia. We will not be served in our quest for wholeness without keeping a broad connection between heart and mind, between passion and reason. It only adds.
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