

SERMON

“REASON AND RELIGION”

Not all religions are necessarily good – certainly they may be less than completely good. They may be bigoted, superstitious, reactionary, imperialist, cruel. Anyone who has any understanding of history will know that that has often been the case.

Of course, religions can be reasonable, open, merciful, progressive. Consider Hinduism and Buddhism. Mahatma Gandhi was an outstanding example of the many saintly people (if you will allow my use of that term with its Christian connotations) – the many saintly people who have represented the non-Christian religions.

There are various definitions of religion:

Any system of faith or worship

The outward manifestation of belief in a Supreme Being

Love and obedience towards God

Conformity to Biblical or other scriptural precepts

And so on. . .

Paul Tillich wrote:

Being religious means asking passionately the questions of the meaning of our existence and being willing to receive answers, even if the answers hurt.

Such an idea of religion makes religion universally human, but it certainly differs from what is usually called religion by the churches. It does not describe religion as a belief in a set of activities and institutions or a belief in one God or gods for the sake of relating oneself to such beings in thought, devotion and obedience. No one can deny that the religions which have appeared in history are religions in this sense. Nevertheless, religion in its inmost nature is much more than religion in this narrower sense. It is the state of being concerned about one's own being, and about *being* universally.

English historian Lancelot L. Whyte said:

Religion has become the means whereby the privileged few achieved and maintained a tyranny over the under-privileged many.

Images of an old English village: the Vicar and the Squire living in the best houses, owning the best properties and accepting as their right the respectful homage of the farm labourers – who were expected to go to church twice on Sunday and to accept whatever they were told by those in authority, whether secular or spiritual.

In American religious journal The Christian Register some years ago, L R Coll wrote that the great purpose of religion was to strengthen character and establish a belief in God.

Whenever people say that the purpose of religion is to “establish a belief in God”, it is likely that they think that their particular idea of God is what all people should believe.

However, people’s ideas about God vary so considerably – indeed, there are so many different conceptions of God even in the Bible itself – (Creator, Avenger, Destroyer, King, Friend, Father . . .) that it seems hardly surprising that many people are confused and uncertain about what to believe, and some simply give up trying to sort things out.

In spite of the confusion – in spite of some people’s opting out – in spite of the many foolish and irrational ideas that people have entertained – and still entertain – about God: all these notions testify to some deep-seated conviction that there is a power over and above – greater than – humankind.

I think that most reasonable men and women would hesitate to say that belief in God is purely an illusion. Even people who have doubts about the kinds of Gods that have been proclaimed by fanatical advocates still want to know whether there might be some power or reality behind all this – a Power or Reality of which some people seem to have been vividly aware, others to have been more dimly aware, and others not to have perceived at all.

One person may say, for example, that God is the all-wise, all-good, all-powerful, who will even interrupt the forces of nature, if necessary, to bring his own divine will to prevail.

Another person may say that God is the immanent spirit – a force living and speaking through nature and through humanity.

A third person may say that God is the personification of the cosmic force and that humankind is the measure of all things.

A fourth person may say that God is the term we apply to the spirit of humanity.

It is perfectly reasonable that thinking people should have different ways of expressing the truth as they see it – or of expressing truths as they see them – for birth, background and environment most often decide what religious teaching each person receives.

Much of traditional religion, especially in our Western Christian tradition, has grown so out of touch with human experience – with reality and truth as ordinary human beings understand them – as to become an obstacle to human spiritual progress.

Our Unitarian / Non-Conformist forebears emancipated themselves from the bondage of inherited dogmas, and established the religious freedom which we enjoy today.

As their heirs, we know that our view of religion is different from that of the mainstream or orthodox churches. One important difference is that we do not fear that religion – ie a liberal, open religion – will be threatened or endangered by the rejection of out-dated ideas. The fact that cherished ideas have been discarded has not altered the ideas which lie at the core of spiritual life.

Those ideas – at the core of spiritual life – hold good despite the encrustations of dogma. The problem is not in the central ideas of religion, nor in the rejection of old creeds; the problem lies in the encrustations, and the attempts to cling to them. Therein lies much of the alienation of ordinary people from organised religion and religious institutions.

When the voices of conservatives and fundamentalists in religion ring loudly, it can be difficult to discipline our minds to the kind of confident calmness which can maintain the same robust attitude towards both long-held and perhaps cherished beliefs and new ideas which may be guesses, delusions, wild speculations, or deep truths. It can be difficult to maintain a cool, calm, clear-sighted scrutiny of ideas both new and old. But it is worth aiming for that kind of steady approach in our religion.

People have been thinking about the spiritual dimension of life for many thousands of years. We have inherited systems of religious discipline of great power, and hard-won convictions that minister to human needs.

Those systems and those convictions merit careful study – including the ones we find difficult to accept in the light of our own cultural background and our own personal or social experience. No particular country or culture has a monopoly on religious discipline, or worthwhile convictions, or answers to the great mysteries and questions of life, or the truth.

What is needed is not so much the discovery of new truth, but rather the spirit of humble recognition and acceptance of those timeless and universal truths – truths which all people should have known but which only a few have followed.

Truth is timeless. Religion deals with a restless, changing world, but only in the light of the eternal. We often have to do some careful untangling, for the good and useful are mixed with much rubbish. Religious expression changes. The language in which the timeless truths have been expressed has dated, and we need to translate some expressions of truth (or truths) into modern idiom: - or to be more aware of the connotations of the language of past ages.

But the truth remains, available for us to discover: - and for us to rejoice in its discovery.

A primary obligation of the liberal spirit is to continue the search for truth, and to continue the effort to ensure that the truth can be recognised and understood in contemporary terms.

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If the liberal spirit is to be strong, it is more likely to be strong within an institution of liberal spirits, working together. It is the nature of spirit to become embodied, to be made manifest in some way; otherwise it is likely to become dissipated in a futile effervescence.

There are far too many liberals in religion who are not attached to – or part of – any institution. They are honorary members of all churches but practical supporters of none. What becomes of them? What becomes of their children?

Rev Lawrence Redfern was a distinguished Unitarian minister early last century. He described it a “a sad story in three chapters:- practising Unitarians in the first generation; lapsed Unitarians in the second generation; Nothingarians in the third. They are proud Unitarians still, but they are parasitic upon its tradition.”

While we may lament it, we need to understand that it is not a phenomenon peculiar to Unitarians. Anglicans, Catholics, Methodists, Jews . . . all can lament when succeeding generations seem to drift away from the religion of their forebears.

In 1868, when he became Principal of Manchester College, Oxford, James Martineau wrote to a friend: “Religion is largely a matter of human relationships. It is being good and doing good, not a blind assent to a creed based on ecclesiastical authority.”

Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote: “One can never repeat too often that reason, as it exists in man, is only our intellectual eye, and like that other eye in man, needs light to see clearly and far. It needs the light of Heaven.”

And Charles Lamb wrote: “He is not a reasonable person who, by chance, stumbles upon reason, but he who derives it from discernment and study.”

Thinking people identify reason with progress and everything that is most worthwhile; yet in many quarters the notion seems still to be accepted that in matters of religion reason has to take a back seat.

There is, of course, an essentially intuitive or mystic element in every religion. There are religious principles which cannot be tested by pure reason.

Consider that fundamental Christian principle: "God is Love." You can argue about it, but you cannot prove it by logic. Nor can you disprove it by logic. Whether you believe it or deny it, you must eventually fall back on something other than logic to present your case (although your argument should itself be presented in a logical way).

Some Unitarians regard with suspicion any teaching which requires a suspension of reason. Nevertheless, the history of religion indicates that there is an area of knowledge which is different from ordinary reasoning. Emerson called it intuition or the "Oversoul", and said that reason is a tool - the tool by which we fashion our intuition into truth which we can communicate to other people.

When St Paul tells us to prove all things, he is not suggesting that all things can be proved - or disproved - (ie shown to be true or false) by the unaided powers of reason. What is meant is that we should test all things; we should try them out in practice. The proof - the test - of the pudding is in the eating - the practical experience - not in theory or reason.

There are both rational and mystic elements in religion. We need to find the balance between the elements based on reason and the elements based on faith or intuition. And both kinds of elements need to be tested - proved - in the appropriate ways.

Among his other great works, Immanuel Kant wrote two profound books: "The Critique of Pure Reason" and "The Critique of Practical Reason".

In the first - Critique of Pure Reason - he set out to show that certain ideas such as the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the freedom of the will, are not provable by pure reason.

In the second - Critique of Practical Reason - he says that, whatever reason fails to accomplish, nevertheless the sight of the starry heavens at

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7

midnight and the fact of the conscience in the human heart prove that God exists and that the soul is immortal.

Unitarians have often been inclined to disregard the mystic elements in religion, in their determination to be reasonable. Some of our critics therefore say that our faith is merely another form of Rationalism and not truly a religion.

Certainly, Unitarianism is reasonable in the fullest meaning of the word. It imposes no dogma; it demands no acceptance of articles of faith. It conceives of the human mind as a faculty – some would say a God-given faculty – to be used and developed in each person's endeavour to find and to appreciate truth. It does not seek to formulate and fix creeds which might hinder people's spiritual growth by anchoring them in the past.

The 18th century American Quaker John Woolman said: "There is a principle placed in the human mind which is pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no religion nor excluded from any where the heart stands in perfect sincerity."

I want to finish by repeating the word of Paul Tillich with which I began:
: Being religious means asking passionately the questions of the meaning of our existence and being willing to receive answers, even if the answers hurt.

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Amen.

Geoffrey R Usher