

## BEYOND "RELIGION AND ..."

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"Religion and ..." -- you name it. Religion and world order, religion and human rights, religion and peace, religion and .... Perhaps this is a way of recognizing the importance of religion in achieving world order, human rights, peace, and so forth. On the other hand,. "Religion and ..." implies a need to separate the nourishing wheat from the useless chaff of religion.

"Religion and ..." programs and titles reflect the perception that religion will either help or hinder us in achieving a better world. Religion obviously contributes to conflict in the world in many contexts, and the truth claims of religious traditions have long divided the world's peoples. But might religion also offer ways of overcoming these divisions? Usually "Religion and ..." programs assume so.

It would seem, therefore, that "Religion and ..." programs think of religion as a potential resource for achieving whatever human goal is to be pursued. This is such an obvious observation that one may wonder what is to be achieved by making it. But I wish to suggest that thinking about religion in this way may make it more difficult to achieve the desired outcomes for which religion is identified as a resource, that is, this understanding may undermine the real contribution religious life can make in the creation of a more humane world.

### Religion as Source

We are so accustomed to thinking in utilitarian categories that we can hardly suppose there is any other way of understanding religion. May we not, however, conceive of religion as a source rather than a resource? What if we saw religious experience as shaping who we are, as already ordering the world? What if we understood our traditions and communities of faith as defining a world in which there is divine purpose as well as human problems and promise?

From this perspective, a world community that includes religious communities cannot be "ordered" apart from the meanings that these communities give to the "world." And if by religion we mean the teachings and activities of religious communities, then surely world order is not only a way of utilizing these communities to preserve peace and promote justice, but is also a means of protecting the fundamental rights of these communities to their way of life. To see religion in this way is at least to empathize with those for whom religious faith and life are one.

Of course, those who see the world as religious use different ideas, like God or karma or dharma, to describe the world in which they live. Moreover, the fact that there are many different religious traditions seems to justify the notion of religion as a resource, because obviously no one religion can provide the vision of order required by a world with many religious traditions. It would seem then that to obtain the support of religious people and institutions for a better world, we would be inclined to embrace only ideas and practical assistance from each religion that are acceptable to the others.

Such an approach to a more peaceful world order that protects human rights may seek to distill the essentials from each religious tradition and express these as the common wisdom of humanity and the basis for a better world. But distillation tends to leave a residue, the waste of the refining process. As the exploitation of natural resources has had a devastating impact on the nature from which they have been extracted, we should expect that extracting wisdom from religious traditions may harm the religious communities that have cherished this wisdom.

Consider what it may mean for a Christian when the teachings of Jesus about loving one's neighbor are lifted from the tradition, but the commandment to love God is left behind and thus rejected. Similarly, what might it mean for a Muslim to hear that others, who want to incorporate into their universal wisdom the Islamic notion that God is merciful, reject the teaching of God's judgment? For the Muslim, the teachings of divine mercy and judgment cannot be separated, for each informs and shapes the understanding of the other, and both express the divine will.

Native Americans have helped us see the exploitation of nature as a form of spiritual death. Can we also see that our use of religious traditions may lead people of faith to resist our well-intentioned efforts, in a desperate effort to preserve their way of life? Surely, if we are honest, we must admit that the use of religion as a resource is an attack on religious communities that embrace their religious faith as their source of life and not as a resource to be used for some other purpose.

I use the word "religion" here reluctantly, because those for whom religious experience is the source of their life and world do not speak about their experience and their faith in such an abstract and general way. For all, salvation comes through faith, but faith that takes a variety of forms. And these forms of faith cannot be expressed apart from specific beliefs and practices that form the life of religious communities in different places and times. For religious persons, their experience within their community of faith is saving and a source both of who they are and the world in which they are.

### Sharing Our Stories

If we see religion as a resource, we inevitably begin to look for ways to minimize or divert our attention from the differences among religious peoples. We begin to employ other abstract nouns to express the "unity within the diversity" among the religions of the world. We may speak of what is "absolute" or "fundamental" or "universal," as though we know what we mean by these words. In fact, these words merely point to what we can only express cogently within the particular religious vocabularies of our various communities. We may avoid words like God and dharma in an effort to remain neutral, but clearly the "neutral" language of philosophy or psychology or social science is not at all neutral.

Language about religion that isn't religious is largely antagonistic to religious faith. What if, to create our better world, we are sacrificing the religious worlds of others?

Who will cultivate the seeds of faith for the future? Who will tend our religious communities once we have stripped the meanings relevant for our purposes from their teachings and rituals? For most people, this call to self-criticism falls on deaf ears. The dangers we face are so horrendous, so obvious and so pressing, that no cost to religious life is too high a price to pay.

I believe there is an alternative. If we can begin to think about people and their communities of faith and practice, perhaps we will learn how to understand one another and work together for a better world.

The first step in this approach to understanding is to invite others to tell us about their religious life. They will share with us not only their ideas, but also their stories by which they order the world. We will then be talking not about religion but about life, not about religions but about our world, not simply about our beliefs but about our faith.

Those who share their stories derive meaning from the sharing, may become friends and allies through the sharing, and will discover that they have much in common despite their obvious differences. But what they share will be affirmed most meaningfully for their own people through changes in their own stories and in the teachings and practices derived from them.

Our religious insights are resources when we identify them from within a common story of faith, which is the source of our life together. The crux of the matter is in the shift in pronouns. To avoid looking at their religion as a resource, we look at the world through our stories of faith, which include various religious experiences and communities, to see how best to strengthen our life together. We are not discussing how religion -- meaning someone else's way of experiencing the world -- may be useful for our world. Rather we are seeking to discern together how our stories of faith and communities of religious experience may help us conceive of a world that will not only realize the wisdom of our traditions but nurture the many communities of faith that have preserved this wisdom.

This is the purpose of interfaith dialogue. The interfaith movement is an example of how the religious faith of persons from different traditions may be woven together as strands in a rope, each with its own integrity, but strengthened by being intertwined.

### Our Faith Communities

I have suggested that the "religion and ..." approach is flawed because it sees religion abstractly. Only a dialogue that encourages the sharing of stories and teachings of faith, with all their particularities, will enable us to conceive a common story that may embrace a more humane future. In this sharing we all come to the dialogue with stories of faith, whether we are religious or not.

We may put our faith in reason rather than religion, but then our story has its roots in the writings of the ancient Greeks and all those who have tried to apply their insights to the history of the West. In fact, it is bringing together the Western story of faith in reason with other stories, which we call religious, that may yield the next step forward, as it is the separation of the world into secular and sacred categories that so divides it. Only a story allowing both will heal the conflicts which now tear at our global community.

Does this challenge the notion that today, in order to solve our problems, we need a global ethic that represents the religious wisdom of the world? Yes, it does. If by a global ethic we mean a synthesis of the wisdom of the religious traditions, then I believe such a quest will rightly be perceived as undermining the peoples it claims to represent. It will seek to transcend these communities, thus making them irrelevant.

If, however, by a global ethic we mean the telling of a new compelling story through the old stories of our religious and cultural communities, then I believe there may be real hope. What might this mean? It

is happening today, for instance, as human rights affirmations are being taken into every culture and religious tradition, and as concern for nature and the earth becomes for all peoples a matter of life and death.

For example, when Vatican II affirmed human rights, the story of the Catholic Church changed. It has led to Catholic priests, sisters, and lay leaders being martyred for human rights. Their deaths have not only helped to bring pressure on governments to enforce human rights law, but have given new meaning to the death of Jesus and new life to the Christian story of sacrificial love that is saving.