

On Faith

For the past several hundred years the religious faith of the Western World has been that of Christianity. With the benefit of historical hind sight we can observe it dissolving in the acids of Astronomy, Geology, Evolution and Biblical Scholarship.

As it drifts into the warmer climes of modernity, the Christian religion is like an ice berg melting away in slow time.

Western humanity is losing the comfort that flowed from the certainties of that “faith which was once delivered to the Saints”.

For those who look to the Pulpit for comfort and hope, there is an uncertain sound. Some clergy believe in the virgin birth. Some don't. Some believe in a literal resurrection. Some don't. Some believe in everlasting damnation. Some don't. Some believe in a Second Coming. Some don't. Some believe that the bible is the inspired word of God. Some don't.

Believers look up and detect the tone of doubt. As a consequence in the words of Milton “The hungry sheep look up and are not fed” (1) and leave the pews hungering for the comfort of those certitudes and certainties that Christianity can no longer give. The sea of faith is ebbing away. For many, Matthew Arnold's poem “Dover Beach” encompasses their profound sense of loss and despair. As he puts it;

“The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world”.

Thus it is that he gives voice, to the soul searing cry of anguish and despair as the things of faith are sucked down the pebbled beach of life to be lost for ever in the ocean deeps of passing time. Religion has nothing to offer mankind any longer

It is here that the Dalai Lama steps in. He speaks as an old man in who has made his own religious pilgrimage; “The longer I live, and the more I reflect, the more convinced I become, that we have to find a way of thinking beyond religion altogether.” ... “The reality of the world today is that grounding ethics in religion is no longer adequate. The time has come to find a way of thinking about spirituality and ethics that is beyond religion” (2)

For Humanists this is a singularly interesting remark; it suggests that as the secular dimension grows, the word “Spiritual” ceases to be the sole possession of the religious, and by implication, the word “compassion” becomes the possession of the religious and non-religious alike.

The religious despair of many Christians in the West is not something which is shared by many of the religions of the East. Christianity is about hell and eternal damnation; about heaven and eternal life: about escaping hell and gaining heaven: It is about personal salvation. It is about a god who required the death of another human being before he could forgive me and others their sins which is moral obscenity in itself.

Whereas, for example, the Buddhism of the Dalai Lama is about the heart and the capacity of the human being for compassion. It is about humanity and being human. Here we enter into warmer seas; into a new spiritual climate, in the warmth of which we can slough off the freezing theological fears of that fundamentalism, which is associated with many kinds of religion.

A new Sea of Faith is flooding in; it is the “faith” of Humanism which places its faith in the most fragile of all places. It places it the human heart; it places it in humanity.

Given its failings, falterings and fallings: its holocausts, genocides and its unimaginable cruelty. Its greed, avarice and hate; such a placement fills many with incredulity

It leaves them gasping and astounded at this new “Faith’s” credulity. They are; staggered at its lack of rational, and dumfounded at its temerity. In the face of the awful nature of the human experience, it dares to place its faith not in religion but in Human spirituality.

Humanism’s faith in humanity is not entirely misplaced. The history of the human spirit tells us, that it will ever and again rise up and raise the battle standards of virtue and compassion to which, in depths of their hearts, most human beings aspire.

In the heart of every human being there is that inner ear which can hear the distant music of a better world; if we have listening ear we can hear the foot fall of the compassionate marching through the storm. With our spirit’s eye we can see the battle standards of the compassionate and the virtuous. Aye, we can hear their call for truth, justice love and compassion in our own time.

Is it not true that in the depths of most of our hearts we long for the days when increasingly “truth shall no longer be for ever on the scaffold and wrong forever on the throne.”⁽³⁾

Mathew Arnold was wrong when he suggested that we
“Hath neither joy, nor love, nor light
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain”

We have ourselves.

For as long as there are those among us who feel the allure of higher and better things there is hope. There is that everlasting hope which lies at the core of the human spirit which, no matter how often it is dragged through mire, crushed and trodden upon, will none the less rise up and call forth from human hearts those things which belong to this world’s highest.

And yet we must face the reality that it is the nature of things that the struggle between the “Mighty Opposites”(4) of Good and Evil will be everlasting if only because we will for ever need the one to define the other.

Just as the existence of light defines the shadow, so also the existence of shadow defines the light. Likewise: Peace defines War and War defines Peace; and so also the character of compassionate defines the character of the uncaring. The “Mighty Opposites” are the means by which the opposite is recognised and gives access to the implications and significance of both. They are rather like the black and white notes on the piano; if the experiential melodies of life; the tragic and the joyous, the awful the ecstatic, are to be heard, and impact with truth upon the human soul, both are required.

In life no purpose or meaning is discernible. Life is absurd. Yet in spite of the absurdity, we all live as if tomorrow matters. We all live as if humanity has a future. And in deed it does, for is it not impossible took into the eyes of a new born child and say life is not worth it?

In spite of the absurdity humans have faith in humanity because anything else is simply, unthinkable. Religion has nothing to do with it.

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Sources:-

- (1) Milton's; “Lycidas”
- (2) Dalai Lama's Book; “Beyond Religion”
- (3) James Russell Lowells Poem The Present Crisis.
- (4) MacNeileDixon; “The Human Situation”

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