Can We Get Beyond Religion?

Revelation, Faith, and the Dignity of Difference


The pernicious side of institutionalized religion is too often apparent across the world today. How can we expand our horizons so that our religion better reflects God’s expansive revelation and leads us to embody a dialogue of mutual respect?

How ironic it is that more than a century after religion was diagnosed as terminally ill (and rumored by some to be well and truly dead), its spectral image can be seen almost daily on television and in newspapers. And how paradoxical it is that the threatened demise of religion, not long ago so feared by traditional and devout believers, would now seem like blessed relief to millions (including many conventionally religious people) who have experienced its more malignant and pernicious reach in the twenty-first century. At a time when so many zealots (often caricatured as “religious” people of whatever faith or affiliation) claim “responsibility” for acts against humanity, how can any moderate person continue to defend, much less to espouse, religion?

It is now several years since the publication of a trio of very different yet oddly complementary books. In 1992 Francis Fukuyama argued (in The End of History) that the great ideological struggles between Communism and Capitalism were finally over, that liberal democracies would now sweep the world, and that the

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future might be boring but would at least be peaceful. Fewer than five years later, however, Samuel Huntingdon’s volatile *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* presaged impending disaster occasioned by the implacable opposition of Christianity in its Western incarnation and Islam in its extreme and militant shape. Almost simultaneously, an edited volume, *Religion: The Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, appeared. The first of those books paid no attention to religion, the second put a virulent strain of religion under the microscope, while the third identified a much healthier variant and its capacity for universal good. While there is now consensus about the renewed significance of religion in the postmodern world, a still unresolved question is whether and to what degree healthy, peaceful, and tolerant religious forms can survive in a world in which the pathological, militant, and intolerant seem sometimes to have moved to center stage.

**Institutionalized Religion**

It has often been said, and with more than a grain of truth, that religion has been responsible for more evil in the world than any other agency. Yet many of religion’s greatest critics have acknowledged that, properly embodied and articulated, it can be an unparalleled generator of the good and the best. In the contemporary world, when the dark side of institutionalized religion is apparent to everyone, what can be done to rehabilitate and portray that brighter profile? Is it possible, without becoming trite or superficial, to suggest how we ourselves—people with religious convictions, yet also acutely aware of the dangerous potential of religious zealotry, people who find “religious belonging” entirely compatible with social responsibility and individual integrity, people whose religious identity is also constitutive of our personal identity—might derive the very best from our own religious affiliation, yet at the same time be attentive and receptive to people of quite different convictions but of equal good will? Can we go further and appropriately affirm that religious faith is perfectly compatible with a considered and critical appraisal of one’s own religious tradition and historic practice and that dissent is not incompatible with active membership of a religious community? Or is that just wishful thinking, and is religion inevitably a divisive and destructive agent in human society, if not merely, as Karl Marx averred, “the sigh of the oppressed creature . . . the opium of the people”?

“Religion”—sometimes identified as “belief and thought” or more blandly as a system that makes meaning and maintains moral values—is identified by cultural anthropologists as one of the social institutions (defined as “standardized modes of co-activity”) that characterize every human society; others include kinship, economics, and politics. In this very general sense, religion is concerned with the numinous or the nonempirical, the “ultimate questions” of our origins and ends, as well as the virtues to be cultivated and vices to be avoided.
In every social institution, authority, power, and sanctions (both rewards and punishments) are critically important. While power can be understood as the sheer capacity to act, authority is understood as legitimate or legitimated power, and the “legitimator” invoked may be the Deity, Divine Right, Tradition, or Precedent. But legitimators may sometimes be, quite simply, those who hold and wield greater power—in the shape of force, suasion, or the capacity to create fear—than anyone else in the vicinity. Every religion has its legitimators (good, bad, or indifferent) and its appeals to authority as ways of organizing and controlling its adherents.

**Embedded Religion**

Wherever found, the social institutions may appear more or less institutionalized or more or less embedded. Institutionalized social institutions are identifiable as relatively discrete, separate, set apart, or freestanding. The intentional and constitutional separation of church and state (that is, of the social institutions of religion and politics) in the United States is an example of freestanding or institutionalized institutions. But in many cultures, the social institutions are not entirely separate or separable: they are embedded. Not that they are so intertwined as to create social chaos; but many human activities can be best understood in terms of both/and rather than either/or. Thus, marriage—undoubtedly a religious institution—is likewise and palpably an expression of both economic and political and kinship behavior. Marriage is embedded in the social fabric, rather than institutionalized as a relatively freestanding social institution.

In embedding rather than institutionalizing societies, “religion” is not separated but integrated with the rest of life and living—something that many people who consider themselves religious would argue must always be the case for all authentic religion. Nevertheless, there are many others (including some who are just as religiously committed) who subscribe to the opposite view: they argue that religion is essentially a private affair, particularly in a post-Enlightenment world. But in many cultures and communities, social institutions are embedded, and millions of people perceive this to be an entirely normal state of affairs. Perhaps people more familiar with institutionalized religion can see this fact as a challenge to seek a more integrated way of living. In other words, their own religious behaviors might become more embedded in the very ground of their daily lives, experiences, and encounters. They might even better appreciate that, as social and religious beings, their own lives ought to reach out, encounter, and relate to others’ lives, because religion is a social institution. Then, their respective religions might actively encourage relationship building and seek dialogue, rather than foster or even justify isolation or vilification.

Given the living nightmares generated by religious intolerance and the current hardening of religious attitudes into mutual suspicion and fear, misunderstanding
and intemperance, I want to consider a possible yet rather simple way forward. What if we were consciously to “de-institutionalize” our respective religions, the more effectively to embed them in our own and others’ daily lives? Would this not yield a harvest of peace, mutual enlightenment, and respect? This is, of course, what many people already endeavor to do, quietly and modestly. Yet many more seem not to have thought of it and remain dutifully pious but isolated and virtually ineffective Christians.

Belief and Behavior

Though conventionally associated with each other, religion, belief, and faith refer to very distinguishable concepts and realities. Not every adherent of a religion can be said to believe or to hold a set of beliefs; beliefs are not necessarily codified; and not every believer is a person of faith. Further, if the object of belief is a proposition, the object of faith is a person: one may believe that something is the case, but one has faith in someone. Religion, however (and this is also a criterion of true faith), is always manifested in some form of behavioral response. We recall the letter of James on this topic. The author says that people cannot legitimately claim to have faith unless they produce good works—the fruit or harvest of faith. The demons, he says, have faith, and they tremble! In short, “faith without good deeds is useless” (see Jas 2:16-19).

Before returning to this, a look at one of the many possible implications: if formal beliefs or belief are not actually constitutive of true religion, maybe we can identify a more fundamental characteristic that is, and one that will characterize a wide variety of people from very different religious traditions. Then, perhaps, we might learn to build on what we hold in common rather that to lacerate each other on the sharp rocks of our mutual differences.

There is a widely held but naïve opinion that, in order to qualify as a Catholic, a Jew, a Buddhist, a Jain, or a Zoroastrian, one must cling to certain specific beliefs, and that to dissent or deviate from them would be to put oneself beyond the religious pale. In an increasingly pluralistic world, people who subscribe to such a view will become imprisoned by their own thinking and condescending toward (if not intolerant of) those they suppose to hold different beliefs or none. At least some people of this persuasion also understand truth to be a commodity to be possessed. In such an all-or-nothing world where people play a zero-sum game, those who lack “truth” have only “falsehood.” We are familiar with some of the consequences of such a view—consequences brought about in God’s name, no less.

But religions are not absolutely discrete entities whose orthodoxy and separateness can be effectively policed and maintained—even though some central office be established or a guardian of doctrine appointed. Not only are religions not
empirically freestanding in this way, such policing would be quite impracticable. Given the sheer variety of individual persons and their very different ways of assimilating information and experience, there will be, within any religious system, a relatively wide variety of understandings and responses.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith provides a helpful corrective to an ethnocentric or specifically Christian bias and carefully articulates an important insight:

In the Christian tradition . . . there has been a sustained and central emphasis on formulating the faith in prose. Much more attention in the Western world has been paid to the evolving content of this particular form of expression, rather than to the fact of it, which has tended to be taken rather uncritically and un-self-consciously for granted. The peculiarity of the place given to belief, in Christian history, is a monumental matter whose importance and whose relative uniqueness must be appreciated. So characteristic has it been that unsuspecting Westerners have . . . been liable to ask about a religious group other than their own, “What do they believe?”, as though this were the primary question, and certainly were a legitimate one. (Smith 1964, 163)

It evidently comes as a shock to many people that a set of beliefs—standardized or not—may not be a necessary component of a religion. Robert Bellah broadens the discussion:

What I would call the ‘objectivist fallacy’—namely the confusion of belief and religion, found only in the religious traditions deeply influenced by Greek thought (Christianity and Islam) and almost completely missing in China and India—involves a fundamental misapprehension of the nature of religion, both the religion of the masses and of the cultural elite. . . . A great deal of influential religion like Zen Buddhism for example, denied the value of any beliefs at all, and Taoism showed the same tendency. (Bellah, 220, 222)

Religions are, above all, identifiable constellations of practices, with or without propositional or systematized beliefs. Although often referred to as systems of thought, feeling, and action common to a group, religions are quite often unformalized. Yet adherents of a religion, though rather informal in some of their practices, can be readily identified by characteristic and common behaviors, which are nonrandom but nevertheless not the automatic product of a set of beliefs. But there will always be some discrepancy between religious aspirations and actual behavior, since people can more easily articulate the values or virtues they espouse than they can consistently manifest them by their behavior. We all fail to live up to our best aspirations and intentions.

A rather curious but quasi-universal human tendency is to be unable to think that our thinking is wrong: socialization processes combine to persuade us that
we live in a more or less stable world of meaning; if anything, we tend to think of other people, rather than ourselves, as wrong. Certainly it would be impossible for us to negotiate the real world if everything were fluid and arbitrary, but there is a contrary danger: that our thinking becomes sclerotic or intransigent, prejudicial or resistant to other modes of thought. In a pluralistic world, such resistance can seriously inhibit communication. Moreover, to identify one's own way of thinking with absolute truth would be to commit a form of idolatry. Christians have a tendency to idolatry in this sense, though perhaps no more so than adherents of other religions, especially the monotheistic religions with their tendency to claim absolute truth. Again, Wilfred Cantwell Smith articulates the problem very well:

For Christians to think that Christianity is true, or final, or salvific, is a form of idolatry. For Christians to imagine that God has constructed Christianity, or the Church, or the like, rather than that [God] has inspired us to construct it, as [God] has inspired Muslims to construct what the world knows as Islam, or Hindus what is miscalled Hinduism, or inspired Bach to write the B Minor Mass—that is idolatry. (Smith 1987, 59)

Smith identifies this kind of idolatry as the error of looking at the windowpane itself, instead of through it to God; this is to worship a creature or a created artifact in mistake for the Creator. Any religion can become an idol in this sense. But the God who reveals is to be experienced or encountered beyond the window of any particular religion. Therefore, it is God's revelation that we need to identify, lest we idolize our religion or indeed our own image of God.

From Religion . . .

As a social institution, religion is part of culture. But cultures as such cannot speak, for they have no voice; only the people who form the communities that constitute a culture are capable of speech. Consequently it would be vain for us to look to religions themselves to be dialogue partners; we should seek actual people, specifically people of faith. Since faith is much more than beliefs, whether systematized or not, we must look above all—as John Paul II emphasized in his 1990 encyclical Redemptoris Missio (RM)—to the behavior of people as an index of their real convictions. He calls it the “dialogue of life”—the mutual witnessing, cooperation, and indeed practical action that can enrich both parties and which is a duty of every authentically religious person of faith (RM, nos. 56, 57).

Every religious system functions to call its adherents not simply to belief but to a way of life and not simply to behavior modification but to a relationship with the Other (God) and with God's creation in nature and in humanity. The way of life is intended to be consistent with the core religious values, often referred to as
the “golden rule” or its equivalent—which is to be found clearly in Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and so on. In varying forms, this rule explicitly concerns the way people embody or live out what they understand as the core teaching of their respective religious system. Orthodoxy (appropriate religious principles) should generate orthopraxy (appropriate behavior).

Yet problems arise whenever adherents attempt to internalize and apply what they understand to be The Great Truths, Revelation, or God’s Will. This is because between the Great Intelligence, the Immutable Truth, or the Will of God on the one hand, and the persons who attempt to understand or grasp it on the other, lies an enormous and effectively unbridgeable divide: on one side is the infinite, and on the other is the human person, so palpably finite.

. . . To Revelation

Vincent Donovan was a gifted distiller of theological ideas. Speaking not only of the Abrahamic religions but of the total range of human experience, he says simply and yet profoundly:

Revelation is what God wants us to know and to do, and faith is the authentic response to that revelation from the midst of our human lives. Religion is what we make of that revelation of what God wants us to know and to do. People of every culture receive revelation from God, either in the fleshy tablets of their hearts or from the Word of God, and they can respond to it in faith. And when they do, people of other faiths can recognize it as an authentic response to revelation—whether it be the humble worship of the one God of Africa, or the beautiful reverence for life of the American Indian and the Hindus, or the admirable and total submission to God of the Muslims, or the joy and hope of Christian peoples. But they can also take that authentic revelation of God and make it into something frightening—their own exclusive religion. Muslims have done it. Jews have done it. Other non-Christians have done it. And Christians have done it, too. (Donovan, 85)

Given our natural curiosity and desire to understand, control, and define, there will always be a tendency to reduce revelation to religion rather than to expand our own religion so that it better reflects God’s revelation. Religion seeks clear, bounded answers; it wants to quantify, reduce, set limits, and control. By contrast, revelation is God’s way of opening up for us unbounded possibilities; it expands our horizons and calls us beyond rules and law to love. Donovan shows that Jesus was “plagued with religious questions” by people caught within a legalistic mindset. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17); “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29); “How many times must I forgive?” (Matt 18:21); “What is the greatest commandment?” (Mark 12:28); “Who is the greatest?” (Matt 18:1): all these are
religious questions, seeking unambiguous answers—and Jesus answers none of them. Instead, in every single case, Jesus calls people to be imaginative rather than purely rational, loving rather than narrowly legalistic, and open rather than firmly closed. Donovan again:

Religion comes from inside us. Revelation comes from outside us. Religion stabilizes and reassures us. Revelation destabilizes and disturbs us. Revelation calls into question everything solid and taken for granted. Religion so often tries to use God as a means to a human end. It calls on God to bless every conceivable project. It makes God a projection of self rather than the God of biblical revelation. Religion is filled with answers to every question. The God of the Bible is a Divine questioner, not an answerer. (Donovan, 88)

Jesus turns people beyond the simple performance of deeds and toward persons, toward human need, toward possibilities and toward a God’s-eye view of reality and the world: a view shaped by compassion and love. Characterizing certain developments in institutional Christianity as (God’s) revelation in contrast to (humanity’s) religion, Donovan identifies the Last Supper and the commands to preach the Gospel and forgive sins as revelation, and the Roman Rite Mass, the restriction of preaching to the clergy, and the restriction of forgiveness to the sacrament of reconciliation as religion. And so on. He concludes that a church that reaches out, beyond its boundaries (not to proselytize but to encounter and to love), is a church of revelation. A church led by the Spirit, hungry for justice, trusting in God’s providence and seeking the God of Jesus is revelation. But a church that tends to speak for the Spirit is content with legalism, maintains control, or is complacent in its certainties would remain a religious institution rather than a sacrament of God’s revelation.

**The Dignity of Difference**

Every religious system faces the temptation to reduce the truth to its own perception or interpretation and then to condemn other religious perceptions or interpretations. Time and again, competing monotheisms have exposed the scandal of religions that compromise the very principles of truth and justice on which they stand. But when monotheisms peacefully coexist—as they have at various times in history—God is praised and each religion contributes to authentic human development. When they come into conflict—as they frequently have, to their shame—each tends to justify its own actions as godly, though the outcome is invariably scandalously ungodly.

Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of Great Britain, has given serious thought to this problem as it is becoming increasingly apparent in the contemporary world. He
would concur with Donovan that religion often excludes (Sacks, 46), but avers that monotheism is not only quite compatible with varieties of faith but does not require that all adherents or people of faith share an identical understanding of truth. In Donovan’s terms, he is suggesting that since God’s revelation is so much more than any religious system can grasp, multiple partial understandings of who God is and what God asks are quite compatible with human multiplicity and with the very different contexts in which humanity must inevitably try to grasp what it can of divine revelation. As do Cantwell Smith, Donovan, and John Paul II, so does Rabbi Sacks open for us a way forward. Here is just a taste of his thought:

[Universalism] is the attempt to impose a man-made unity on a divinely created diversity. Judaism is a particularist monotheism: it believes in one God but not in one religion, one truth. The God of Abraham is the God of all mankind, but the faith of Abraham is not the faith of all mankind. Biblical monotheism is not the idea that there is one God and therefore one truth, one faith, one way of life. On the contrary, it is the idea that unity creates diversity. God is universal; religions are particular. Religion is the translation of God into a particular language, and thus into the life of a community of faith. No single faith is or should be the faith of all humanity. Only such a narrative would lead us to see the presence of God in people of other faiths. We serve God, author of diversity, by respecting diversity. (Sacks, 50–56, passim)

_The Dignity of Difference_ calls everyone to a dialogue of mutual respect. Humanity is one, but we are all different. Human beings are all the same, yet each of us is unique. There is no universal language, though language itself is universal. And there is not, nor need there be, a single universal religion. To promote such a thing has always brought violence. Yet those who do not share my point of view, my perspective, or my religion, do not thereby cease to share my humanity. We are, each and all of us, made in God’s image. It is by encounter, mutual respect, and living the golden rule that we are all enriched by the God who reveals aspects of divinity in every human person. The dignity of difference is a notion for us to ponder and work with. When we truly understand it and learn its lessons, we will have moved beyond doctrinaire religion and intolerance of the other, beyond clinging to our beliefs or fighting with those of others, to a glimpse of God’s revelation which inspires and ignites our faith, and thereby enlightens and gives hope to us all.

References


