

THE TEMENOS ACADEMY

“Religion – The Ties That Bind”

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Source: Temenos Academy Review 9 (2006)
pp. 12-17

Published by The Temenos Academy

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Religion – The Ties That Bind*

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In an increasingly dangerous world there are many threats to our future security. One of them is the tension that exists between different religions. Another is the growing environmental crisis. I would like to suggest that these two threats are more related than we may realize.

When I was recently in the United States I visited the sites of two utterly tragic events: the literally unbelievable terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York and the appalling devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

In its own way, each of these events is understandably deeply troubling for us all, and perhaps especially so for people of faith around the world. For how could anyone be moved to commit such evil acts upon innocent people in the name of a religion? How could a loving God allow such terrible devastation to happen to innocent people?

I know only too well how one's faith can be challenged, having lost a much-beloved great uncle, Lord Mountbatten, in an IRA terrorist bomb attack in 1979. But I remember how it gradually dawned on me that thoughts of vengeance and hatred would merely prolong the terrible law of cause and effect and continue an unbroken cycle of violence. 'An eye for an eye,' said Mahatma Gandhi, 'and soon the whole world is blind.' I have also come to see that the universal truths of the great religions do teach us something of the unfathomable mysteries of our existence and of how to cope not only with human free will but also with the giant paradox of life itself—which confronts us with the eternal problem of how to reconcile so many bewildering opposites.

How then should we respond to these events? It was Martin Luther King—surely one of the great figures of modern times—who once described the force he felt at the centre of his own Christian life, and

* First published in January 2006 by the University of Maryland as the Inaugural Essay in the Series of Essays on the Alliance of Civilizations and Interfaith Reconciliation, edited by Suheil Bushrui and David Cadman.

felt in kinship with other religions: 'I am speaking of that force that all the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door that leads to ultimate reality.' Yet it seems that this supreme, unifying principle is obscured by our bitter modern divisions—and our increasingly horrific conflicts in an age of diminishing resources and of ever more destructive new weapons. Shared understanding is replaced by fear and anger. Around the world people retreat into hardened positions; into extremism and fundamentalism.

Some people portray the current tensions as a 'clash of civilizations' between Islam and 'the West' or, worse, between 'backwardness' and 'modernity'. I believe that this is a wrong-headed and dangerously simplistic view. Indeed, it is too easy to forget that many of the greatest scientific discoveries that underpin our 'modern' Western world were made by great Islamic scholars. In the Dark Ages, at a time when we Europeans were discarding much of the great works of ancient Greece and Rome, Islamic scholars, sometimes working together with their Jewish and Christian brothers, were preserving them and studying them—surely one of history's greatest rescue operations and one that secured the very foundations of modern Western culture.

At the same time, it is perhaps worth remembering that there are some things that trouble many people about Western modernity as it spreads around the world, homogenizing and pasteurizing everything in its path. Indeed, there is, I think, a growing and uneasy sense that our technology and consumption are getting out of hand; that we are failing in our duty to be respectful—even reverential—to our Earth and that we are fouling our own nest. There is a subconscious worry, for example, that the ferocity of Hurricane Katrina, and others of its kind, might have been fuelled at least in part by climate change, caused in part by our own modern lifestyles—and, more worryingly, that there might be even worse to come. Likewise, there is a sense that our standards of civility and culture are declining rapidly, to be replaced by a culture of mindless consumption and a shallow, tabloid frenzy that idolizes celebrity without any relation to the more profound ideas that have sustained previous civilizations. And is there not a nagging, uncomfortable feeling that the modern pursuit of ever greater quantities fails to fill the qualitative void at the centre of our lives? In America, as in other countries, I am sure there is a deep yearning for something more.

So, are we not beginning to see that by far the greatest danger to all of us, and to our descendants, lies in the modern tendency radically to over-simplify; to 'dumb down', to segregate and to exclude? Can we not see that immense care needs to be taken to ensure that the rich complexity of a religious tradition is not stripped down to a fanatical, literal shell that can be used to isolate and to attack others? For example, are we blind to the fact that the equally rich complexity of a traditional town, for instance, or a characterful neighbourhood is also stripped down and plundered mercilessly? And what are we left with? The corpse of soulless steel and glass buildings, or strip malls, or cloned housing developments, devoid of real character or community.

Whatever the case, in this fanatical desire for minimalism and in an obsession with being 'modern', we have stripped away the very thing that makes life worth living—the web of connections that link us to each other, to our Earth, and to the divine mysteries of life. We have traded away life itself in favour of an abstraction. Far from a 'clash of civilizations', I believe we are afflicted today with a 'clash of minimalisms' through the disembowelling of the rich complexities of organic traditions, within both the West and within Islam itself. To survive and prosper, we must heal this fragmented condition—and, in so doing, we must heal ourselves.

The word 'religion' means re-establishing the bond (the original sense of the Latin word *re-ligio*), the ligament between Man and God that Man lost at the Fall. Every religion is thus like a rope thrown down from Heaven for fallen Man to cling to, and that rope is an aspect of the Divine Word. Each of the religions recognizes that all is not right with the world. There is a fragmentation of our inner and outer environment. There is a dis-ease both internally and externally. We are not at one with ourselves; we are not at one with our environment. There is an absence of at-one-ment—atonement. This dis-ease is wreaking havoc on the planet and we are reaping a bitter harvest of what we have sown.

Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth-century evangelical divine from New England and a towering figure in American religious history, believed passionately in the harmony of the natural world. He believed that excellence, which was truth, together with beauty and goodness, had to do with right proportions—that is with a harmony in the deeper order of things. This was illustrated not only by simple harmonies of symmetrical proportions, but also in exceedingly com-

plex and harmonious relationships. It may be surprising for many to discover that Edwards's Christian understanding of the Universe resonates so closely with Islam's profound understanding of the harmony of Nature, as we see so beautifully evidenced in traditional Islamic art and architecture.

Until recently, by comparison with the forces of Nature, human actions were trivial. This is no longer the case. We can now decimate forests, poison rivers, pollute the air, destroy the ozone layer, and change the entire climate on such a scale that the balance and harmony of the natural world are chaotically disturbed. The English poet and priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins, in a poem of great beauty called 'God's Grandeur' wrote: 'And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; / And wears Man's smudge and shares Man's smell; the soil / Is bare now . . .'. Hopkins's poem opens evocatively with the words 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God.' The Torah, the Gospels, the Qur'an all testify to the same truth and the religions of India also see the divine spirit in creation.

And yet, somehow, because we see ourselves as especially modern and sophisticated, we now see nothing as sacred. Indeed, much of our education, particularly in the West, seems to have been designed to destroy what is so unique in humanity—the balance between our rational and intuitive selves. So what have we ended up with? A situation where we are no longer capable of using all our God-given senses. We can no longer sense what we are doing to our environment because we have lost that at-one-ment; that sense of the sacred.

So what is the sacred purpose of the Earth? Is it destined to be consumed in some great cosmic combustion? Is it to be milked for all it is worth while we have time? Are we to seek an escape from it into some other paradise or heaven? Or is it to be tilled like a garden? The recovery of this sacred purpose is surely captured in the Lord's Prayer—'Thy will be done in Earth as it is in Heaven.'

So is all this merely wishful thinking on the part of a diminishing bunch of 'old-fashioned' people who still cling on to the last remnants of outmoded superstition in an age of scientific rationalism? Maybe, but if you see the world—or intuitively *feel* it to be—as infinitely more complex, profound and mysterious than merely the apparent sum of its parts (all now given convenient scientific descriptions and 'deconstructed' labels), then it is not just wishful thinking and hoping for some romanticized afterlife, because we cannot bear the thought

of nothingness and meaninglessness. No—it is because Man is the measure of all things; the only being on Earth, as far as we can make out, that can encompass the material and the spiritual; that unique duality of being which has allowed certain immensely rare souls to become aware of those universal values, primarily love, compassion and forgiveness, which lie at the still heart and centre of everything and which are the *only* means of breaking the law of negative cause and effect.

As Martin Luther King also said, 'Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best of individual societies.' He saw, as many others are now beginning to see, that much is at stake—nothing less than the future of the Earth. So do we not have a duty to nurture and protect it in return for what it offers us? And what, then, is duty? When you think about it, how can you have the concept of duty without, above all, consideration for others; without courtesy and good manners? Without courtesy and consideration for others, how can we possibly show consideration and sensitivity to the Earth?

Understanding the deeper mysteries of our existence surely involves people of faith in a struggle between good and evil and in a radical change of heart and mind. Can we not learn, therefore, that so much discarded and derided tradition is *not* the enemy of modernity, but is its inevitable future precisely because of the balance that needs to be struck? The future lies, therefore, in regaining a new respect for the wisdom, the 'collective intelligence', embodied in centuries of human experience. Indeed, so much useful knowledge is found in the patient study by traditional cultures of the beautiful structures of Nature—in the ancient wisdom of traditional Indian and Chinese medicine, to take just one example.

I believe that there is a profound lesson here for our modern, technological world: that we must now learn to make it more humane, harmonious and integrated, by applying the best of timeless wisdom, together with the most appropriate of modern advancements. Surely, then, we can learn to work together across divided faiths, polarized political views and over-specialized professions to create that urgently needed, *integrated* approach to the way we treat our environment and ourselves? America, of course, is in a very special position to provide the leadership which the world needs to heal the fragmentation of modern existence and help us all to apply our combined energies to

what *must* be the greatest priority of all—ensuring that our children and grandchildren can inherit a world that is not spent, useless and wracked by chaotic forces beyond their control.

