

The Continuing Appeal of Religion

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2006

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What's Wrong with Religion?

Not every believer is a social conformist. His independence of mind, his resistance (to war, for example) or rebellion can outdo those of many atheists. Yet religion is tantamount to social acceptance, because its very principle separates a here below from a hereafter which created the here below and is necessarily superior to it. Religious thought (and therefore behaviour) is dualist: it is based on the division between body and soul, matter and spirit, and this divide can only favour the latter over the former. Whatever the believer does to change this world, for him there will always be another world of a higher order. History, life as we daily experience it here and now matter less than what is beyond, outside the everyday world. Therefore, when he fights inequality, exploitation and oppression, the religious person deals with realities that belong to a minor level of reality. He can only (and indeed he must) treat the history of mankind as a subplot within a much larger story that exceeds men and women, because that story relates to and depends upon something outside all men and women of all times. A Christian cannot give the same importance to the history of, say, the Spanish civil war and to the Gospel. He will say the two are "different", but what ultimately matters to him is the Gospel. The absolute relativizes everything else, or it would stop being absolute.

Thus, inequality, exploitation and oppression are attributed to individual, moral, natural deep-rooted causes: whatever change we can achieve has to start within every human heart. Very few Jews, Christians or Muslims take Adam and Eve's Fall at face value, but such a tale reinforces the belief that "something" draws each of us to evil-doing, dominating and exploiting our fellow creatures, and that mankind's meandering course is based on a fundamental flaw, which no evolution nor revolution could redress. Historical examples of massacres and horrors only confirm what the original myth symbolizes.

Lots of civilizations have imagined a primeval harmony that was lost because of some ill-fated desire or deed, but few went as far as the Bible in putting the blame on the tree of knowledge. It's because they tried to sort out good from evil that the first couple unleashed the doom that is bound to repeat itself until the end of time. The message is : we should never try to understand what is essential to us, and we must leave the essential to divine or earthly mediators between us and the non-understandable.

Consequently, even when religion fuels revolt, as it often does, it's always with the assumption that exploitation and oppression can be alleviated, but not suppressed. No Church could be the Church of the poor and exploited, because it is the Church of all, rich and poor.

Of course, history provides us with myriads of religious doctrines and practices that aimed at overall historical change, from Taoists in China to Renaissance Anabaptists. But they were always heretics, and the religious institution sided with the rich and powerful to slander and crush the rebellious. When peasant armies threatened the domination of the landed classes, the founder of Protestantism had no qualms about it and called for the outright suppression of their revolt. Religion may dissent (and often does), but it ultimately superposes divine Law (as in the Torah) and the laws enforced by political powers.

Those who found a religion do not seek to radically change the existing world, but to live in it in the light of another world. So they make do with their time. In the 17th century, hardly any religious creed questioned slavery, and among Christian groups, at the beginning of the 18th century, only a few Protestant dissenters (the Quakers, for example) denounced the slave trade.

Not many people nowadays publicly state to what extent the three monotheisms set a stigma on half the human species. Instead of being created (like Adam) in God's image, Eve more plainly derived from a man's rib, and soon was the prime culprit in the Fall: hence the obligation to (hard) work and (painful) motherhood. She came second in the process of creation, but ranked first in destruction. Here again, the point is not that people "believe" in this myth as they have no doubt about the existence of the pyramids, but that the myth structures a world vision that helps keep women in a minor role. If we think that fairy tales contribute to building up a conscious and unconscious collective mind that plays a big part in our lives, then we must admit that a tale as far reaching and widely known as that of Genesis plays a much larger part, even for those who've never opened a Bible. The Vatican's adamant hostility to birth control is a side effect of a two thousand year old process of downplaying women.

It's quite logical that God should be mercilessly vindictive and punish not just the guilty couple, but their entire descent down to you and me : to hammer into our heads that we come under an incurable evil human nature, it is necessary that no generation should get away from the curse, even two thousand years after the event. There's no better evidence of an inescapable original "fault" than an utterly collective punishment: when only Noah and his family are spared, human failure is proved by the mass drowning of thousands of innocents, babies included.

On such a cornerstone the three religions of the Book are built, and only a handful of heretical exegetists have questioned it. Even in the very patriarchal times when the Scriptures were composed, there were woman heads of State. But we hear of no woman catholic or orthodox priest, few female Protestant ministers, hardly any woman rabbi or imam.

The optimist will object that, at least in the West, sexism is on the wane. It all depends on what we choose to look at. In 2006, a "free abortion" woman campaigner of the early 1970s declared: "We fought for the right to be a woman without being a mother. And you can't say that today." True. Most of our contemporaries, in Berlin as in Los Angeles, including those who regard themselves as non-sexist, feel there is something missing in a woman that has no child, nor the desire to bear or raise one. And they would not react in the same way to a man with no wish of fatherhood. Judeo-Christianity is not the unique cause of that attitude, but it surely contributes to it, especially Catholicism with its cult of Mary that present the ideal woman both as a virgin and as a mother. The Pope was once accurately defined as the person who would like every woman to be pregnant without ever being penetrated by a penis.

Why Rationalism Won't Do

A characteristic of religious attitude is the privilege given to faith over rational thinking. The divine can be put into arguments, but is first meant to be believed in, and its presence felt more than understood. No theologian believes in God because he's read books about God : he reads and writes about God because he's a believer. So the critique of religion starts from the idea that there is no need for us to abdicate in front of the (inevitable) unknown and unknowable, separate them from our world and set them in another dimension that we'll never be able to explore. There is no need to dissociate reason from feeling.

However, social critique has often harboured the illusion that it could radicalize the confrontation between bourgeois and priests, reason and faith, democracy and religion, and take the use

of reason to the full logical conclusions which bourgeois thinkers would refuse to draw. In other words, the socialist (or communist) would be the only consistent rationalist.

Yet rationalism could only be a weapon in a democratic revolution. It does not consist in the (necessary) use of reason, but in the belief that all evil and misfortune arise from lack of knowledge or from faulty judgment. It opposes private thinking to authority: to overthrow oppression, we must start by dethroning the intellectual powers that be, and we have the means to do that: our own personal intellect, that everyone's been equally bestowed with. Mind comes first: hence the privilege given to education as the ultimate driving force of history.

As has been pointed out, the basic flaw of such a vision is to forget that any teacher must first be taught what he teaches. This logical flaw remains if the educational bias is understood as self education. The oppressed and exploited do not first understand they can change their situation, and then act upon the situation to change it. They only understand it as they try to act on it.

Rationalism may refute the "falseness" of religion, but it will never be able to understand the communal and social phenomenon that religion is.

Reason's call to the intellect forgets that the human condition is intellect and fantasy. The quest for the supernatural does not stem from an excessive but from a limited imagination built by millenniums of exploitation and oppression: the incapacity to be free on Earth incites humans to situate freedom out of this world. Dreams and desires are displaced persons. This is the stuff religion is made of.

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Retrieved on December 21, 2009 from libcom.org
This is a modified version of an essay published in French as the 7th *Lettre de Troploin*, June 2006, called *Le Présent d'une illusion*. The English title is inspired by Fredy Perlman's *The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism*, which first came out as an article in *The Fifth Estate* in 1983 and then as a Black & Red (Detroit, USA) pamphlet the following year.

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