The Gifts of Pluralism

A View of Our Desacralized Society and the World's Religions as a Whole System

From the awesome distance of 100,000 feet above the Earth, so to speak, many scholars see three families of faiths, though each scholar's survey is somewhat different. An overview is urgently needed because the disease of our desacralized age is not awe-struck but a sense of the Whole; instead, it is fragmented, secular culture worsens. Our desacralized age is not awe-struck with a sense of the Whole, instead, it is fragmented.

Families

1. MONOTHEISTIC
   - Judaism, Christianity, Islam
   - Self-righteousness
   - Perversion: Cohesion
   - Social Narcissism

2. ASIAN
   - Confucianism, Taoism, etc.
   - Perversion: Identity
   - Personal Mental
   - Environ-Crisis

3. PRIMAL
   - Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism
   - Perversion: Environment
   - Social Narcissism
   - Identity

Crisis

- Examples of secularism's crises
  - Disengaged citizenry (private over common weal)
  - Exploitation (disparity between rich and poor)
  - Violence around us, in entertainment; terrorism
  - Dividing the public; religion for partisan purposes
  - Loss of sense of vocation and direction
  - Prejudice (sexism, racism, homophobia)
  - Dependencies (handling others' feelings)
  - Addiction (substances, consumerism, power)
  - Corrupt food supply; antibiotic-resistant 'bugs'
  - Deforestation; dying oceanic life; climate change
  - Overpopulation; loss of diversity of species
  - Pollution (air, water, sound, light, toxic wastes)

CAVEATS

- There is no single, unified definition of religion, etc.
- Modernity can be anything from an ascetic certainty to a manos-on embrace of the river-of-time.
- The three families can be expanded, drawn from, and assimilated.

Awe is the Cure

How are we used

- Primal: Our family is the earth, our belief is that it is a process which includes us, not a product external to us to be used or disposed of. Our proper attitude toward nature is awe, not utility.
- Asian: We are more than our body. The body is a temple, a vessel for the soul which is more than us. We emphasize the link between inner awareness (personal consciousness) and outer awareness (interdependence; social independence).
- Monothestic: Prerogatives of the church, the king, wealth, power. Power can be used for the common good, but it's more common that it's not. The church, religion, etc.

Our task: apply them and find them one.
The three chief symptoms of this sickness are: our environmental crisis, the uncertainties of personhood, and a destructively partisan, exploitative society. The world’s religious offers healing through awe and wonder in the three realms of nature, selfhood, and community. The three families historically have emphasized respectively that our lives depend on finding the sacred in each of these arenas.

1. In Primal faiths we find ecological awe: nature is respected more than controlled; nature is a process which includes us, not a product external to us to be used or disposed of. Our proper attitude toward nature is wonder, not consumption. Our lives depend on nature.

2. In Asian religions we catch the awe of genuine personhood as our actions proceed spontaneously and responsibly from duty and compassion, without ultimate attachment to its results.

3. These faiths include Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Bahá’í; and some place Sikhism in this family as well, though it also has similarities to Asian faiths.

In Monotheistic traditions, the awesome work of God is manifest in history’s flow toward justice when peoples are governed less by profit and winning and more by the covenant of service. Our lives depend on community.

This gift from three different directions can bring us together to save the person, the society, and the planet. This interfaith promise is nothing less than the restoration of nature, the recovery of the whole self, and the life of a community of love.

Today traditions are encountering each other — by chance and by design. Perhaps we may finally stop saying, “We are all alike” as if we fear, instead of enjoy, our differences. Let us instead learn that religious pluralism is not a threat, but rather the gift of salvation.

Secularism is denial or neglect of the whole, the Holy. Whole, holistic, health, and holy derive from the same linguistic root. Secularism is cured by awe, by noticing, by beholding, the three arenas without the blinders of greed, isolation, and thirst for control. Another word for awe is authenticity, responding with a sense of wonder, unowned by partial claims.

We will perish without authenticity in the three realms of nature, personhood, and community. We are beginning to see that these three realms interpenetrate and compose each other, different dimensions of a single reality, largely hidden from previous generations. Yet our culture is still distracted and benumbed by particular and competing agendas instead of an authentic sense of reality as whole, Holy.

For example, those with corrupted personhood deny climate change to profit from certain industries perverting the governance and the holiness of the planet. Only with faithful attention can we recover the awe that leads to gratitude, and the gratitude that matures into service. The Tao Te Ching warns, “There where is no sense of awe, there will be disaster.” Avarice, exploitation, and the lust for power misdirect attention. But Rumi writes, “Awe is the salve that will heal our eyes.”

From the endangered environment, the violation of personhood, and the broken community bring Pluralism’s wisdom gifts that we may be:

- restored with nature, the self made whole, community in covenant, and the sacred found afresh.

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1 Including Mirela Eliade, Huston Smith, Roland Bainton, Robert Akinson, and Brian Carwana. Citations are provided below.

2 See Emphasis mine.

3 Other works could also be cited, such as Bainton’s work, where he discusses cosmic, personal, and social con- tention of God (p.175).

In Roland Bainton’s 1966/1966 Christianity in the West, he foyer “Judaism is a religion of history and as such it may be contrasted with religions of nature and religions of contemplation.” Religious of nature are God in the surrounding universe; for example, in the orderly course of the heavenly bodies, or more frequently in the recurring cycle of the yielding and resurgence of vegetation. This cycle is interpreted as the dying and arising of a god in whose experience the devotee may share through various ritual actions and may thus also become divine and immortal. For such a religion, the past is not important, for the calendar of the seasons is the same one year as the next. Rumi says, “A religion is a compound of memory and hope. It looks backward to what God has already done. The feasts of Judaism are the mighty acts among the children of men. Such a religion is a compound of memory and hope.”

In Huston Smith’s 2005 The Soul of Christianity, he says that “becoming God happens individually, communally, and cosmically” (p.334). Similarly, in 2011 in Human Evolution (p.175) he states: “The crux that underlies the meaning of ‘cosmos, society, and self’ is that in the three realms of human experience, the three categories of indigenous, Dharmic, and Abrahamic religions can be found afresh. This way of looking at religions of the world is presented in greater detail elsewhere, such as The Essential Guide to Religious Traditions and Spirituality for Health Care Pro-viders, edited by Steven Jeffers, Michael Nelson, Vern Bainton, Michael Brannigan, Radiology, 2013 (p12-16).

The detail of the Three Families of Faith chart is mine, working from texts found in places such as Eliade’s 1957/1959 The Sacred and the Profane, where he discusses cosmic, personal, and social con- tention of the spirit (p.266).