

The Abandonment of Religion

"Unless religion changes and adapts to the evolving world, it cannot do what it has the capacity to do: enkindle a zest for life." Ilia Delio

Humankind's awareness of spirituality is not a recent development. For example, archaeologists have found evidence of rituals surrounding burials more than 70,000 years ago. The rationale for building the Egyptian pyramids provides further evidence of a spiritual consciousness. Indigenous peoples have long respected the Great Spirit and their interrelationship with it. Planet Earth was revered as the Great Mother Goddess, birthing forth a prolific variety of life, nurturing and sustaining egalitarian and prodigious creativity. Yet formal religion has been around for only about 4,500 years, a miniscule fraction of the spiritual journey that began to unfold so long ago.

In the introductory chapters of his book, *Quantum Theology*, Diarmuid O'Murchu distinguishes theology, religion and spirituality. Theology is essentially a Christian concept, he writes, closely related to the notion of revelation, the belief there is a divine disclosure outlined in scripture. All the great religions have sacred texts, some (e.g. Muslims and Orthodox Jews) consider these texts to be God's own words to be accepted literally and at face value. Others, such as Christianity and Hinduism, consider the texts to be divinely inspired, but not to be taken literally. Consequently, the text needs ongoing reinterpretation and fresh application to changing cultural conditions.

Over centuries Christians had different understandings of theology. Until about 1000 C.E. theologians focused on the deeper meaning and implications of the Christian Gospels. Around the thirteenth century a new impetus, largely pioneered by St Thomas Aquinas, emerged that considered theology's task to be that of 'faith seeking understanding'. The Reformation in the sixteenth century led to the polarisation of theology and formation of criteria defining allegiance to one or another camp. In more recent times, theology has expanded its horizons with examination of liberation, feminist, and creation theologies and multifaith dialogues. The growing appreciation of the impact of quantum theory on our understanding of theology is establishing new frontiers.

However, O'Murchu writes, long before we humans ever invented the formal study of theology, people did theology. Long before they thought of God as a divine being, they exhibited a spiritual sensitivity. But the advent of the Agricultural Revolution (around 8000 B.C.E.) led to an insatiable desire to control the precarious elements of life, including the religious ones. We began to take over the planet and claim it as our own, dividing it into segments later known as continents and nation states. The desire for control and domination even led to humans seeking to conquer and control the Godhead itself, and did so by inventing religion! ¹

O'Murchu continues: Religion is one of the great anomalies of our evolution as a human species. It is the instrument with which we tried to gain supremacy over the Godhead itself, by anthropocentrising the divine power and moulding it into a system of duties and expectations of *our* making. In the name of religion we have invented a litany of gods, many made in our own image and likeness, and not a few serving projections of our own distorted will-to-power. Religion is the greatest idolatry of all time and, in many ways, the most dangerous also².

Spirituality is inherent in the human condition - and also planetary and cosmic growth - but as a human invention, religion is not. Theology, as that body of wisdom which seeks to explore ultimate meaning, has a great deal more in common with spirituality than with religion. In today's world many

¹ Quantum Theology, O'Murchu 12

² ibid 13

claim to be spiritual rather than religious, not belonging to any specific church or religion, but still grappling with spiritual questions and seeking to live out of a spiritual value system. It is apparent that religion as we know it today is failing us.

Rather than relying on these definitions, reframing these concepts in terms of our own experience might be helpful. Spirituality becomes our sense of who we are, perhaps revealed in how we express ourselves whether artistically, verbally, in my lifestyle, or otherwise. Theology should be the intellectual expression of my spirituality in a manner that makes sense to me, forming a coherent worldview. Then religion should be the bridge between theology and spiritual growth through rituals, formal statements and community activities. However, if the expression of religious practices is inconsistent with our own understanding of a coherent worldview, then it ceases to be meaningful, and religion is abandoned, to our great loss.

The task of theology, as its understanding of wisdom grows, is to be open to change and to challenge religion to adapt its beliefs accordingly. For example, it is questionable to have religious beliefs such as the Nicene Creed, which was determined at the Council of Nicaea in 325AD, based on a worldview prevalent in the times of Aristotle and Plato. Such a worldview does not withstand scrutiny today and, therefore, cannot be relied upon to support old beliefs. At the last supper, Jesus did not say "Here is a list of dogma you must believe", rather he said, "Love one another as I have loved you." How many of the beliefs and practices held by religions pass this test? We need new wineskins for new wine.

Religion's task is to foster an awareness and growth of our own innate spirituality, to help us attain higher states of consciousness. But this responsibility is ours, individually, it cannot be relegated to formal religion. What we require of religions are structures to support our movement into self-knowledge (and knowledge of Spirit within), mysticism or mystery, deep prayer, our intrinsic worth and ownership of our unique role in the evolution of consciousness.

Jesus modelled all of this and spoke of it too, but much of the essence of this is either ignored or not fully understood. In this respect, religion today fails us. While this growth is a personal responsibility, we rely on our communities to support us as we learn to act from centres of inner authenticity, rather than relying upon external authority for validation.

Imagine how the world could change if each of us accepted responsibility to become our true selves as envisaged by writers such as de Mello, Merton, Teilhard and many others? Is this what Jesus had in mind?

Suggested reading, by Diarmuid O'Murchu:

Quantum Theology, Spiritual Implications of the New Physics

Doing Theology in an Evolutionary Way

Video:

[Integral Spirituality for the 21st Century](#) (21 min)