

Religion: A Help Or A Hindrance?

At the time the Census was to be taken, back at the end of June 1981, there was quite a lot of discussion, even of controversy, about question 17 on the Census form, concerning Religion. While on the one hand people who have no Church associations or religious faith were being urged to be frank and say 'No Religion', it was also being urged, by others, that whether people were in connection with a Church or, not, were in doubt perhaps, or whatever, they should not hesitate to write in 'Christian', or the name of one of the denominations. Better this, it was said, than that they should aid and abet the drift toward a pagan Australia. For a while it became a bit of a battleground, and letters appeared in our newspapers about it. I kept and filed away one of those letters urging a frank and negative response to the question mainly because of its concluding paragraph which read, and I quote, as follows:

"Lack of religious belief is, of course, no barrier to a caring attitude for the world - indeed, it necessarily directs our concern wholly towards the welfare of human beings and the planet we inhabit."

What in effect, is being said here is that religion gets in the way of service to our fellow men and women. It absorbs time and energy and, yes, money, which would be better directed to the welfare of others. The implication is that people free of religious convictions and of responsibilities where a Church is concerned are much better placed to be of service to others. Well, is this so? This is the question I have chosen to examine with you tonight.

What we are looking at tonight is the argument or suggestion that freed of religious convictions, beliefs, commitments and obligations, a person is so much the better placed to devote himself or herself 'wholly towards the welfare of human beings and the planet we inhabit.' I recognise that on first hearing it that may sound plausible. My argument will be, however, that this is not so. Rather than get in the way of service to our fellow human beings, religion, or religious convictions, or an awareness of responsibilities which have their basis in religion, should, even if it doesn't always work out this way, more effectively channel our energies where the care and welfare of others is concerned.

Perhaps it's as well that we stop a moment and ask what religion is all about. There are times, it is true, when its point and purpose seems to be lost sight of, even in the

Church; and, as much as anything, it is because its purpose is misunderstood that it comes to be regarded by some, and spoken of, as an obstacle and hindrance rather than as an aid and helper where our service to others is concerned.

As best I can put the teaching in my own words, **religion exists for the purpose that people may draw closer to God and that they, in turn, may make it possible for Him to draw closer to them.** Amidst all the trappings of Church buildings, ritual, services of worship, ecclesiastical vestments, and all the rest, here is what lies at the heart of it all. I repeat the point: religion has as its purpose nothing other than that we should draw closer to God that by so doing His Presence may become more obvious and more real in our lives. The Bible has been given precisely for this purpose. Services of worship are held, again, precisely for this purpose. The Church, and organisations connected with the Church, has been established precisely for this purpose. And if it ceases to serve that purpose; if it ceases to bring people into the closer presence of God and make Him more real to them; it ceases to be a Church, for all that it may remain one in name.

Let's then have it quite clear in our minds why the Bible was given; why such things as the Ten Commandments are insisted upon; why it is seen as important that we should aim to grow in our understanding of Divine truth and teaching; why some of us spend time teaching in Sunday Schools or maintaining Church organisations. We believe these things are vital aids to what, as we've noted, religion is essentially about. The aim is to provide opportunities and to create an atmosphere and to give encouragement that children and adults may grow in their relationship with the Lord. Where it is not understood what the Church is all about, its demands upon us, its calls to worship, responsibilities within a Church organisation can seem wearisome and a burden and we might wonder, as do the critics of the Church, whether energies expended there might not be better channelled in other and, what might at least seem to be, more useful endeavours.

"It is provided by the Lord", wrote Swedenborg "that there is always a Church on earth, for through the Church there is conjunction of the Lord with mankind, and of Heaven with the world. (*New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine* 5). There is the tendency to dismiss the work of the Church as irrelevant and of no importance. Not only that, to suggest that it gets in the way where service to mankind and the welfare of others is concerned, syphoning off time and energies that would be better directed

to overseas aid programmes or in support of the many causes for the disadvantaged. But, and I emphasise the point, this is based on a wrong idea of what the Church and what religion is all about.

How, though, you might well by now be asking, does my relationship with the Lord, or my closer relationship with Him, which the Church seeks to foster and which, we've said, religion is all about, affect for the better (as is being argued here) my service to others?

The criticism, if we might go over it again, is that religion stands in the way and prevents a person giving him self or her self, whole heartedly, to the welfare of both other people and of the planet we inhabit. In fact, it is because religion is neglected; it is because people neglect the nurturing of their relationship with the Lord; it is because people don't feel beholden to religious values; that many of the unhappy circumstances that call for so much time and energy and aid exist.

I put it to you that our starting point where the majority of the world's problems are concerned is with ourselves. If we were to put our own lives in order, these problems just wouldn't be there. Far from there being less emphasis on religion, or on our relationship with God which, we've seen, religion is all about, there should be more. And mankind would be the better for it. A few weeks ago the ABC television programme "Four Corners" focussed on the terrible problems facing the West African country of Mali, through which the Niger river flows. And just one point mentioned in that programme helps to illustrate the point I'm getting at. Despite the awesome lack of food in the countryside, beautiful French bread, which uses a completely disproportionate amount of the grain available, is baked in the cities to meet the demands of the people there. It made one wonder how people could be so indifferent, uncaring and downright selfish with such horrendous problems only miles away. But the same story is repeated all over the world. There has been exploitation and over-grazing because, of course, man is greedy and selfish. We're all involved. Because of our likes and dislikes land is tied up very uneconomically producing food which pleases us. The same land could be much more productively used producing more basic, staple foods and dietary requirements.

Many of the conservation issues, such as commercial whaling, have their commencement in the selfishness or greed of countries or corporations, or, as is more accurate, with individuals which form pressure groups within different countries or control the corporations.

Once again, we come back to the individual and to the need for religion if individuals are to change and if there is to be less of the greed of selfishness which so demonstrably causes so many of the problems the world faces. We need all the different welfare agencies so that there can be realistic response to the problems which exist. And we can only applaud the tremendously important work they do. We think of all the work that has been done on behalf of refugees, alone. But they do not get to the root of the problem. They do not come to terms with the reason why there are refugees. It's not their job to do so. There is massive starvation because others of us are greedy and selfish. There are refugees because people struggle for power and want to dominate and control the lives of others and threaten the worst kinds of reprisals to those who are likely to be a danger to them.

This is where there has got to be change. And this is where religion comes in. Because religion is concerned with change in human nature at the deepest level. It is, I say again, not a matter of less religion or of religion getting in the way. We need more of it.

"Religion alone" wrote Swedenborg, "renews and regenerates man" (*Conjugial Love* 601). And that applies both to man individually and to man collectively. Here is where there is hope for a lastingly better world and for conditions and circumstances fairer to all. Insofar as we bring about change within ourselves using religion as the means we are helping the human family and making the world a better place.

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