Great Religions

Những Tôn Giáo Lớn (Great Religions)

Great Religions

Website

Times (Unicode) font

The Great Religions By Which Men Live

Floyd H. Ross and Tynette Hills

CONCLUSION

22. TOWARD RICHER LIVING

Having started an acquaintance with these different great religions of the world in the preceding chapters, you may be asking: "Out of all these religions, must I individually choose my religion? Must I decide whether to be a Buddhist, or a Hindu, or a Moslem, or a Confucian, or a follower of Judaism, or a Christian?" Perhaps, on the one hand, you have been happily surprised to find these other religions much finer than you had supposed. You may even have felt that you have discovered a few new and deep insights, which your own religion seems to have missed. On the other hand, you may have been worried over the possibility of accepting a belief that others would call "Buddhist" or "Confucian" lest you become a kind of outcast in your church or community. It’s a comfortable feeling to believe that one’s own culturally given religion is the best of all religions -- at least for oneself.

After all, you say, there are certain things that life gives us without our choosing. By accident of birth, each of us is white or brown, a blonde or a brunette, an American or a Frenchman, a male or a female. Other "givens" are sociologically determined for us -- our country’s mores and our family or national religion. By accident of birth, each of us is born into a culture that calls itself by some special name, such as Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, or Christian. Long before we have reached what is called the "age of discretion," when presumably we can make our own choices on the basis of reason and nationally interpreted experience, most of us have become so thoroughly saturated with culturally engendered values that few of us ever make a radical decision to break with our upbringing.

Most of us, however, have a deeper need in addition to our readiness to follow the past or to be like the people around us. Beneath our apparent activities and interests lies the seed of desire to discover for ourselves who we really are and what in life is important. No matter how many millions have asked these questions before us, and no matter how sure they have been of their answers, each one still has a private yearning to go exploring for himself. This is true of the infant who has just learned to crawl and who applies the "mouth test" to everything he touches. It is true of the young person who is trying to discover the meaning of life, love, and work. It is true of the older

person who has not lost his capacity for sustained wonder.

It is important that we keep alive within us this desire to search and question. There is more faith in honest doubt than in all the unexamined creeds of past and present. In this sense each of us must articulate his own religion -- that is, his own concept of what is of supreme worth in living, his own mode of expressing that concept, his own commitment in daily life to the values he believes to be basic. (The particular words he uses to describe these processes are relatively unimportant, as all liberal spirits in religion have everywhere recognized -- to the consternation of the cautious conservative or reactionary priest.)

Strange as it may seem, it is only when we discover the depths of personal experience that lie beneath the differences that we are able to appreciate why there are these differences. And what we find at the deeper levels shows us the universal elements. We discover that in deep ways all people are much alike -- even though each one is an original.

SPACE FOR LIVING CREATIVELY

One of the perpetual wonders in life is that there is always room for another person, another idea, and another explanation. Each of us has a chance to fill a place in our universe. We build a "life space" for ourselves first through our attitudes and then through our efforts and actions, with our neighbors and in our total world.

On the one hand, we may try to wrest a "life pace" for ourselves by taking an attitude of hostility toward others and by moving aggressively against those we think stand in our way. Or, on the other hand, we may shy away from the opportunities life offers and retreat into a private world bounded by fear and suspicion. In both cases we shall have settled for a small, restricting place in life.

But we have a third choice. We may greet each person and situation we face with confident, friendly, inquiring attitudes. In this way we absorb more and more of what people and situations offer. Thus we construct a constantly enlarging "life space." Life seems to offer its richest rewards to those who have developed the capacity to "stretch" their "life spaces" continuously. It is true that no person can wholly make his surroundings, but each person does build a personal environment of attitudes and feelings, which may significantly modify his surroundings.

WE CAN HELP EACH OTHER

Each of us to a degree constructs his own "life space." Yet like the warp and woof in a woven rug, our "life spaces" overlap or interpenetrate. As the English poet, John Donne, expressed it long ago: "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the Maine." In improving the quality of our own "life spaces," then, we cannot help improving the quality of others'.

Each of us can learn most from the other by following the principle of "the mote and the beam." By becoming aware of "the beam" in our own religious or irreligious eyes,

we are less inclined to concentrate on seeing "the mote" in the other fellow's eye. But to look for the worst in the other person's faith while concentrating on the best in one's own is fatal to human fellowship and larger community. Rather, we must look for the best while not ignoring the worst. From Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, many Westerners can come (and have come) to a new understanding of the importance of the search for the real self. To do this one need not forget the shortcomings of Hinduism as pointed out by a Hindu like Gandhi. Nor does one need to learn how to sit cross-legged and eat rice off banana palms while wearing a dhoti or a saree. Nor does one need to repudiate what one enjoys in his own tradition. This open-mindedness probably will not involve a change in one's religious affiliation, institutionally speaking, if one is fortunate enough to belong to a group that believes in permitting the widest measure of honest seeking to every member.

Indeed, it is quite possible that a person could learn just as much about the importance of self-knowledge through a deeper study of the ignored aspects of his own religious tradition as through the study of another religion. But in a world filled with people who have so little appreciation of the best that other cultures have to offer and so great a tendency to defend their own cultures or religions, there is a practical argument for trying to enter into the mood or spirit of other philosophies or religions. In this process many people have discovered that for the first time in their lives they have really experienced a widening of horizons and an extension of self-knowledge. They have also gained a deeper appreciation for their own religious tradition.

In this sense, any religion or any culture, thoughtfully studied, can become a kind of multiple mirror through which each of us learns to see himself more fully. Each of us is an individual, and yet each is a part of a larger community. In so far as we are individuals, we must go into the depths of our own experiences to find the meaning of life. No parent or teacher or great religious leader can do that for us, though the community may furnish us with clues and guides. Each of us has this inalienable right to a direct relationship to the universe. But each must attain it for himself.

The tragedy is that too many of us remain content, even in our adult years, with the answers or descriptions offered by someone else. We limit ourselves to what others say instead of re-exploring the basic questions for ourselves. Many of us cling to the values emphasized by some past leader without exploring their meanings in the present. Almost all of us have closed off certain areas of thought somewhere along the line.

There are doors to be opened, and each of us can help himself and others in this door-opening process. What other people are, what they say, and how they say it can all be helpful in the opening of doors. Knowledge of the past is worthwhile to the extent that it helps us open doors in the present.

TOWARD THE DISCOVERY OF ONE ONENESS

In the light of the approach to life, which we have been discussing in these chapters, certain types of attitudes, beliefs, and actions are ruled out. What attitudes are ruled out? Those reflecting an uncritical reliance on other peoples' experiences or words, whether from Orient or Occident; attitudes of fear and submissiveness, as well as attitudes of cocksureness or a "know-it-all" approach; attitudes of coercion or the feeling that there is "an only way" of going about the important experiment of finding life's meanings.

What types of beliefs are excluded? Beliefs that build walls around oneself or around one's tribe, shutting out an honest concern about why other people believe what they do; beliefs that persist because our underlying guilt feelings or anxieties are stirred thereby; beliefs that stress one's shortcomings at the expense of one's virtues or potentialities; beliefs that cramp one's spirit, stifle one's courage or morale.

Similarly, certain types of actions are ruled out. To use an "Inquisition" or to persecute in the name of religion is the very denial of man's humanity as well as proof of how stunted one's own faith is. In every religion childish attitudes and ceremonies can be found. But like childish attitudes held by young people or adults, they cannot be legislated or forced out of existence; they must be outgrown. Most people need sympathetic help in learning how to outgrow their blind spots, or in evaluating childish religious actions and attitudes.

There is a practical corollary to this that should affect the work of every society with a "missionary" dream. Attempts at conversion too often become forms of coercion. It is well to try to see the best in the other person's religion even while by example one is seeking to share his own faith. By example alone is one's personal religious faith given eloquent testimony in a way that respects the integrity of the other person's worth.

To permit each of us to grow to his fullest stature, we must move out of that kind of competitive atmosphere, which sees the diversity of religions as "a battle unto the death." Most Orientals have learned to resent "Occidentalization" in matters of religion; similarly most Occidentals would resent "Orientalization." All of us must become teachable citizens of One World. Our primary allegiance must be to that pattern of divinity as it emerges in all things human; our secondary allegiance can then safely be given to that culture, society, family-system or nation that has been as a friendly guide to us on the road to an affirmation of humanity's true oneness. "Divinity is round us -- never gone" -- this is the lesson we must be constantly learning.

- END -

-ooOoo-

Top of page | Contents | 01 | 02 | 03 | 04 | 05a | 05b | 05c | 06 | Vietnamese version

Sincere thanks to Venerable Thich Tam Quang for making this digital version available.

(Bình Anson, 05-2004)

[Vietnamese Index]

last updated: 26-05-2004

Nguồn: Giảng Sư (giangsu.io.vn) — văn bản trích từ kho sách cổ và kinh điển.