

## **16. HOW CAN RELIGIONS GO WRONG?**

Religions can go wrong because men can go wrong

Almost every religion claim that their origin was inspired by God. As such, could any religion go wrong? The fact is that religious organisations are formed by man, and it is man who formulates religious doctrines, develop worshiping rituals, and practise moral behaviours. Thus, it is obvious that every religion is liable to error.

Human beings are limited, deficient, and weak in many areas, and therefore it would not at all be surprising for man to make mistakes. Intellectually, his knowledge and understanding are limited, and he is bound to have inadequate theological and moral understanding. If we are honest and courageous, we must admit such shortcomings and be prepared to adjust and correct our faults to purify our religious beliefs and practices. We shall describe some errors in religious understanding to examine and practise how we can make amendments.

### **Scriptures and their (Mis)Interpretations**

Religious scriptures were written within their historical contexts, and this is an important consideration when interpreting the scriptures. However, some believers presume that scriptures should only be interpreted literally. In the case of the Bible, some Christians take the contents of the Bible as literally the words of God that could never be wrong in any way. As such, they read no more than the written words and grasp only their superficial meanings. Hampered by their fixated manner

of interpreting the scriptures, they fail to have a holistic appreciation of biblical texts.

Take a case of scientific controversy involving Galileo in the seventeenth century. He proposed the theory that the sun and not the earth was at the centre of the planetary system, and the earth and the other stars revolved around it. As this theory was against the view held by most people in his time, it caused a furore among the academics and the general public. The clergymen were also drawn into the dispute. At that time, biblical criticism was not well developed, and those who explained the scriptures clung to literal interpretation. Theologians in that era found in the Book of Joshua evidence for the geocentric belief, “Joshua spoke to the Lord in front of the Israelites, “Sun, stand still over Gibeon, and, moon, you also, over the Vale of Aijalon”. And the sun stood still, and the moon halted” (Jos 10:15). Even the Church authority felt obliged to uphold the “common knowledge” that the sun revolved around the earth. Without the tools of biblical criticism, they could not read the text differently and had “no choice” but to condemn Galileo’s theory and accuse him of spreading fallacies to deceive the people.

Subsequent development in scientific knowledge proved Galileo’s theory to be right after all. With overwhelming evidence, various parties, including theologians came to acknowledge the fact. However, Galileo’s eventual rehabilitation was officially announced by the Church only many years later in 1992. Had the scholars and people viewed the heliocentric theory with an open mind then, they would not be embarrassed by the truth established later.

Now we have better skills in biblical interpretation. We realise that, though biblical writings were inspired by God, they were written by men with specific socio-historical backgrounds. Therefore, to understand the meaning of any biblical text, one must know the context of its writing, including its literary form and genre, its social conditions such as its history, geography, and politics. The author's motive of writing and the life situations of the intended readers are factors to be considered as well.

Ardent followers of a religion are convinced of their beliefs. To uphold their "truth", they feel compelled to oppose and reject those who hold different views and condemn the "heretics". They are often dogmatic and would harshly condemn "trouble-makers" and "saboteurs". For instance, during the Middle Ages, some defenders of the Catholic faith resorted to suppression and prosecution to silence the dissenters. They thought that truth could be shoved down the throats of the "heretics". On the contrary, truth imposed is most likely resisted. When truth is expressed in love, it can be more adequately presented and listened to.

### **Religious Extremism**

All over the world, intense conflicts among religious groups are often instigated by extremists. For example, in 1993, 2006, and 2008 in Mumbai, India, three explosions occurred, claiming about two hundred lives in each of them. Why such repeated violent attacks? Looking back, in the few decades immediately after their independence, some people in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh had adopted a hostile attitude towards one another. Until today, they are still suspicious of each other,

and every now and then, instigate the opposing factions in each other's territories to stir up conflicts.

Ever since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the Hindus and Muslims in India had formed two interest groups. Some Muslims lamented that they were disadvantaged compared to the Hindus while some Hindus thought that the government had caved in too much by instituting policies favourable to the Muslims. Year after year, fighting between the two parties continue unabated. The religious and social unrests seriously threaten social stability in India.

By assuming an attitude of self-importance and hostility, the hardliners and fanatics often stir up mobs. In the end, all parties suffer. Overtime, we observe followers scheming to avenge the victims of "unjust killing" and venting their anger on the opposing side through vicious attacks with horrendous consequences.

Extremism are sometimes fuelled by political and religious leaders. For example, in Indonesia, several hundred Muslims set two Christian churches on fire and hurled stones at another one in February 2011. They did so to protest the "light sentencing" of a five-year jail term meted out to a Christian man who was accused of distributing flyers that were against Islam. Hard-line Muslim leaders were greatly displeased, saying that the accused had "blasphemed" Islam but was "let off lightly". They incited the crowd to attack Christian churches. Their sole objective was to consolidate their status and power. Leaders of authentic faith will not do that. Instead, they will guide the followers to avoid violence and promote understanding and reconciliation.

To overcome the vicious cycle of revenge among conflicting religious groups, the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation is necessary. The process of peace and reconciliation in South Africa can serve as an exemplar. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, white and black leaders of South Africa mediated by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and others, employed the principles of truth, justice, and reconciliation to unite the people. With international help, a great national reconciliation was realised albeit with immense difficulty.

With watchful vigilance and the promotion of dialogue and integration among diverging communities, we can hopefully prevent religious extremists from using religion as a tool for partition politics.

### **Manipulation of Religions**

Politicians know the influence of religions on believers. They often scheme to use religion to control the population. Some attempt to make religion the people's opium that numbs their thoughts so that the injustice, exploitation, and pain suffered by them would be overlooked, ignored or dismissed. The sociologist, Karl Marx, knew too well the horror of collusion between politicians and capitalists. He pointed out that often capitalists and politicians were happy to support certain aspects of religions – the preaching on mercy and compassion, and the building of churches for religious worship so that people find an outlet to numb the experiences of pain and suffering, including their economic hardships. People who were oppressed and exploited in society found solace in their hope for better conditions in the life after. Politicians and capitalists

collude to manipulate the minds of the workers so that they could continue to exploit them for profits.

If the teaching and practice of religious values such as “compassion and mercy” are confined to impelling people to do good works of giving alms to the poor and helping the needy, capitalists and politicians would be happy to see those religious applications upheld. However, if people apply these teaching to improve social conditions, to protest social injustices, and to fight against established structures, then it will be construed as destructive to social order. Believers who challenge existing policies and structures that protect the vested interests of corrupt officers and unscrupulous capitalists will be labelled as troublemakers.

Corrupt politicians often manipulate public institutions for selfish purpose. They suppress the intrinsic values of religions and distort them for their own ends. Enlightened men and women of good will can discern their craftiness and refuse to be their puppets. On the contrary, righteous politicians care for the common good. Religions will be allowed to function at their best, as channels of positive moral forces to uphold the common good of society.

### **Authentic Religions**

True faith leads to goodness, beauty, and holiness. With an adequate appreciation of religion, a person is devoted to God, lives up the moral teaching, and works for the common good. In these days when the mentality of profit-before-everything reigns and selfish desires wreak havoc, the true spirit of religion can strengthen the conscience of

our society and help to uphold the loftier values of compassion, justice, and peace.

As the “salt of the earth”, true believers have an antiseptic role that prevents society from moral decadence and excessive selfishness, and instead favours social justice by the balanced distribution of social resources. They can also be the “light of the world”, functioning as the guiding light that shines the way to social responsibility, mutual respect, and care for the poor, the weak, and the marginalised.

True believers develop clear civic consciousness and social responsibility. They transcend pre-occupation with material interests and seek spiritual values that fulfil the meaning of life, break the chains of egoism, and promote communal good of society. With the spirit of universal charity, different religious communities in society can learn to accommodate and accept one another. People from diverse backgrounds of races, religions, languages, and professions can respect and complement one another and help build an integrated and harmonious society together.

If leaders in a country are true believers – upholding the spirit of honouring God and loving mankind, they could better serve the people and promote public welfare. Such leaders strive to establish effective legislative and administrative structures to safeguard the rights and welfare of the people, promote education, enhance family values, invigorate the economy, improve communication, and protect the environment. In this way, the country will be prosperous and peaceful. The people will live and work in justice, peace, and harmony.