

Abrahamic Faiths: Contribution to Society and Relevance Today

Professor Neil Ormerod
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We live in a context which increasingly questions not only the validity of religious belief but also the value of the contribution of religion to our society and culture. For the cultural deniers of religion “religions poisons everything”, to use the phrase promoted by Christopher Hitchens. It is difficult to raise one’s head in a public debate as a believer without risking the danger of having it knocked off. Indeed the vehemence of anti-religious feeling out there is staggering and inexplicable to many of us as believers. My own experience of this has been in the cyber-world of online publishing. A relatively inoffensive article on a papal encyclical I had written for the ABC online journal, “Unleashed”, produced a torrent of abuse against belief in God, the role of religion in society and the pope himself. I was somewhat taken aback by this, but the anger evident in response to my article paled into insignificance in comparison to the fury of respondents to a later article in the same journal written by Archbishop Peter Jensen.

Yet, despite this, it is important to listen to the voices of our critics and acknowledge, and here I speak for my own Catholic tradition which has had such a prominent role in the history of western society, that far too often we have been on the wrong side of history. For example:

- At the beginning of the scientific revolution, a revolution which was to completely transform our lives and our self-understanding, the Catholic Church condemned Galileo for his challenging of accepted teaching on the cosmic order. This failing helped rationalise a history of hostility between religion and science, one we have never been allowed to forget.
- With the emerging political revolution which saw political power shift from aristocratic minorities to a form of government, “by the people, of the people and for the people”, the Catholic Church stood for the *ancien regime*, the divine right of kings, the distinction between those who rule and those who are to be ruled. It modelled its own governance on that of the absolute monarch ruling over his subjects. It has been more than slow to acknowledge the genuine value of participatory democracy.
- With the breakdown of Christendom and the emergence of multiple Christian denominations and religious pluralism within a given state’s boundaries, the Catholic Church condemned, just 150 years ago, the notion that there could be more than one religion within a state. It promoted the slogan, “error has no rights” and since other religions were viewed as erroneous they should have no rights within a religiously uniform state. It was only at Vatican II that the Church acknowledged such a thing as “religious freedom”, and it was a hard-fought battle to achieve that.

Of course it would be easy to multiply a litany of our failures, and our opponents regularly provide us with them, but there is something important that we might also learn from them that is relevant to our age. Part of our common tradition is a belief in divine forgiveness, a God who is slow to anger and rich in mercy and compassion, as the Psalmist tells us. In Islam key divine attributes are mercy and compassion, while in Christianity we have the parable of the prodigal son to recall. But we live in an unforgiving age, whether it be the moral indignation of road rage, the failings of our politicians, or more significantly in the various international disputes based on age-old grievances whose historic origins fail to address the plight of present suffering. At all these levels we need to develop a culture that recognises that the reality of moral fault can be met with the possibility of forgiveness, mercy and compassion, not just condemnation and punishment. But we cannot provide this gift, this vision of God, to our age if we do not model it ourselves, and in particular among ourselves.

Further, forgiveness must be based on an honest admission of fault. To this end we need to forsake our defensiveness about the damage our religious traditions have caused, and place our own trust in the mercy and compassion of God. In this regard to my mind one of the more significant religious events at the end of the 20th century was the prayer, “Confession of sins and asking for forgiveness”, offered by Pope John Paul II and members of the Roman Curia on 12 March 2000. Among the sins confessed were: sins committed in the service of truth, where zeal for the truth led to sins against charity; sins which have harmed Christian unity; sins against the People of Israel, particularly violence by Christians against them; sins of disrespect for the rights of peoples, their cultures and religions; sins against the dignity of women and human unity; and finally sins against the fundamental rights of the person, including sexual abuse of minors. John Paul called for a “purification of memory” and a genuine commitment “to the path of true conversion”. It is worth noting that Pope John Paul went ahead with this public confession despite objections from within the Curia that it would undermine the Church’s moral authority. If anything, it enhanced it!

Each of our religious traditions recognises that in our obligation to perfect our society through our moral and ethical teaching, as mentioned by Rabbi Lawrence, we do fail and will continue to do so, we fall short, and do harm where good deeds are needed. We need to open up the dialogue in our society around questions of forgiveness, compassion, mercy, reconciliation, reparation and conversion of heart that speak not of the idealism of our traditions, but their realism about the human condition. Without this dialogue morality is in danger of becoming little more than moral posturing, just punishment of being transformed into an instrument for revenge, while a confession of wrongdoing is viewed as a sign of weakness. Our moral failings are not the last word in the story of our lives; they can be taken up in a grander drama which speaks of the glory of divine compassion and forgiveness, of moral transformation and conversion.

I suppose the word I am looking for here is humility, a humility grounded in a moral realism about the human condition. It is too easy for both ourselves as religious people and our vocal opponents to mistake the reach of high ideals with actual achievement of them in practice. Humility is not a virtue we hear much about today, because it is the antithesis of our dominant culture of fame and celebrity. Five minutes listening to our leading “talk-back radio” figures with their cult-like followings should be enough to convince us how far we are as a society from recognising the value of humility. Yet humility is a virtue deeply embedded in our religious traditions. While we recognise our common bond in Abraham, our three Abrahamic faiths, there is an older and deeper bond in the parents of all humanity, Adam and Eve. The biblical scholars tell us (and I must admit to not being one) that the account in the

Book of Genesis on the creation of Adam from the dust of the ground contains a play on words. In Hebrew the word for ground is “*adamah*”, so Adam is made from *adamah*. He is a “man of the soil”, or an “earthling”, made from the earth and for the earth, as its steward. He has a “grounded” existence, grounded in the rhythms and cycles of the natural world, one element in our complex biosphere. We find the same play on words in our own word, “humility” which has the same root as humus, or soil,

This is not all, of course, because God has breathed a spirit of life within him as well. Through the breath of God’s spirit we share something of the divine spark, something which raises us above the mundane and the merely material. But it is significant that the temptation of the serpent in the garden is that “you shall be like gods”. A constant temptation in human existence is to forget its groundedness, to attempt to “play god”, with human life, with the natural world, even with the very structure of morality, as if it is just another human creation. Perhaps nowhere is this temptation more exposed than in our treatment of the natural world. We treat it as an endless resource to meet our needs without respecting the inherent limitations of the planet. Far from being earthlings bounded to the earth, we seem to live as if we are angels unconcerned about the well-being of our physical and biological environment. Indeed in the latest encyclical of Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, he spoke of the seamless garment of life ethics:

If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others.

While our Catholic tradition has been very strong on questions of life-ethics, from conception to death, it has been relatively slow on questions of concern for the environment. I would like to suggest that one contribution we have to make to our present society is a recovery of the virtue of humility, of our connection with the humus, the soil, that we are sons and daughters of the earth, stewards with a responsibility to care for the earth and respect its inherent limits. This requires a particular type of conversion, what Pope John Paul II called an “ecological conversion”:

It is necessary, therefore, to stimulate and sustain the "**ecological conversion**," which over these last decades has made humanity more sensitive when facing the catastrophe toward which it was moving. Man is no longer "minister" of the Creator. However, as an autonomous despot, he is understanding that he must finally stop before the abyss ... Therefore, not only is a "physical" ecology at stake ... but also a "human" ecology that will render the life of creatures more dignified, protecting the radical good of life in all its manifestations and preparing an environment for future generations that is closer to the plan of the Creator.

And with conversion goes a responsibility to confess our failings and to work to repair the damage done.

Of course there are many other contributions and other areas of relevance that could be identified as Rabbi Lawrence has done so ably. But I hope this response is something that adds to our conversation this afternoon. I mentioned earlier my experience with on-line publishing and the negative responses it draw. Buried in the negativity was a reply from someone who identified himself as a “former atheist” who had an experience that changed his life:

I write this as a former atheist who, against any intention or will, had a ‘numinous’ experience where I felt to be in the direct presence of God for an hour or so. Big deal you may say, just a delusion, but this is a surprisingly common event in human experience and is the key to accepting something beyond our present mundane existence.

This was clearly a life transforming experience for the contributor, a precious memory of divine presence. Yet the immediate response to this posting was as follows:

I had one of those experiences after 20 beers and half a bottle of scotch, very uplifting and full of numens.

I was saddened by this reaction, so disrespectful of this personal account, so limited in its vision of human existence, so unaware of the necessity of moral transformation and its difficulties. It is apposite reminder of the challenges and difficulties we face in seeking to promote a faith perspective within our society.

However the other thing that strikes me about this person’s account of his religious experience is that he spoke of no religious tradition or faith community. It is a reminder to us that God’s actions are free and his will sovereign. As bearers of our respective religious tradition, we are servants not masters, and we do not control how and where God may act. As we seek to make a contribution to our society, to reach out to our world, we need to know that God has gone there before us, and that we might meet him in the most unexpected places.

Thank you.