

# The Contribution of Religion to Society and Culture

Address at St. Peter's Cathedral Charlottetown, March 1, 2011

## Introduction

Twenty five years ago I travelled to England to visit a classmate, a priest whose Parish Church was in the country. From the airport in Manchester, I took a cab. Upon identifying the address of the Manse and seeing my Roman collar the cabby calmly and chronologically recounted a history of war. Wars, he claimed, are caused by organized religion. He offered these examples; the crusades, colonial wars and at that time in Northern Ireland, civil war and terrorism. He stood against any form of religion. "The world would be far better and peaceful without religion. Don't you agree?" he asked repeatedly. I didn't answer. I mean I couldn't answer because he never gave me a chance.

Besides, I was in no mood for debate as the fatigue from an overnight transatlantic flight was overtaking my all my senses.

Since then and coincidentally out of England authors such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins have had best sellers announcing a similar good riddance to religion; (*God is not Great* and *The God Delusion* respectively)

I am not commenting on, nor debating with any of those atheistic positions tonight. I do not agree with their worldview. Professor Terry Eagleton has written a brilliant refutation of their rationalistic stance in a little book, entitled *Reason Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale Press, 2009). Eagleton persuasively demonstrates that their critique and rejection of religion is based on a worthless caricature of the Christian religion.

Caricatures are like stereotypes; at best they can entertain us, and at worse can hurt us, sometimes

fatally. Here is an example of a caricature of hockey. 'Hockey is simply a bunch of goons and bullies looking to win an alleged sport by intimidation and violence'. You don't have to be Don Cherry to reject that worthless caricature of hockey. To acquire an honest appreciation of the game one should focus on the skills, poise and sportsmanship of Sidney Crosby or Wayne Gretksy. As one Church leader put it, **"Fairness dictates that religion be judged by its saints, not by its sinners. Anyone can put on a hockey jersey and stumble about the rink, but that reveals nothing about hockey. All that is revealed is the incompetence of the individual"**. (The Contribution of Religion: address to the Empire Club 2008.)

Because of my familiarity with the Christian religion my comments about the contribution of religion to society and culture shall be in terms of Christianity. But my hope is that the three contributions which I will present are recognizable in all the great religions.

Religion assumes a stance or a posture towards reality that is relational; that is to say, religion is about human relationships that have a beginning an end and a purpose. Human relations include a relationship with God who permeates reality while at the same time transcends it. I think it fair to say that for the great religions, humanity finds purpose, direction and flourishing in pursuing relationships of love and peace. The Hebrew Scriptures, the Koran, and the New Testament offer an account of humans relating to one another and to God. The Judeo Christian tradition maintains that the communication in word and deed of the transcendent God is historical; part and parcel of the human relationships on earth.

*Religion Offers an 'analog' Wisdom*

How are we to describe the context of human relating in our so called postmodern era? I am no

culture critic and I am not a sociologist. I am aware however that some have tagged us, as the people of the screen, the digital generation. How does religion contribute to society and to culture today?

One leading Church authority has suggested an interesting metaphor in this regard. He says that religion offers an analogue wisdom in a digital era. For example, the display on my watch is analogue. I like this way of telling time because each hand of the watch indicates the present moment by relating the present to the past and to the future. It gives me a concrete visual image of the immaterial concept of time, and shows each individual moment by placing it in its context, the context that gives it meaning.

Analogy is the notion that relatedness, connectedness and context are what truly matter. To apply this example of analogue wisdom to religion I shall quote Archbishop Thomas Collins:

"Religion reflects an analog vision of reality as it celebrates relationship; we are brothers and sisters, children of God. People of faith see the patterns of relationship that reveal the meaning of both the material world and of human life. The Purpose of our life on earth is found in the context of the divine providence that envelops us, and the future goal that directs us. Jesus summarizes the point of human existence by identifying the two great relationships that matter in life: love of God and love of neighbor.

We live in a web of relationships, and through faith see the pattern of connections that show the purpose of our brief journey through this world. Even the image of a journey, so common in religion, speaks of a context: we understand where we are in life by reflecting (often in a spirit of repentance) on where we have been so far on life's pathway, and (in a spirit of hope) on where we are going.

Religion offers analog wisdom - the wisdom that sees relationships- to a digital world, one in which we

*can so easily become lonely individuals, without purpose or direction, disconnected, rootless, and going nowhere faster and faster. We live in an increasingly dis-integrated society, in which the human bonds that unite and give life are fraying.*

*Two symbols of a world that has lost a sense of human context and personal encounter are the computer screen and the TV screen, both of which can be helpful instruments, but both of which suck up time like a vacuum cleaner, offering the illusion of community while often providing only an alienating experience of impersonal and abstract images."* (*"The Contribution of Religion" address*

*by Archbishop Thomas Collins to the Empire Club 2008)*

I will proceed tonight with this understanding of religion. In a pluralistic, secular society, religion offers an alternate way of looking at and dealing with reality. It offers an analogue wisdom. From this approach to reality, some would call it a worldview, religion contributes to culture and society in several ways.

Beauty and Religion

My first comment about the contribution of religion is about beauty. In literature, architecture, paintings, sculpture, music and even film we discover the exhilarating and inexhaustible depth of beauty in life.

Religion emphasizes the giftedness of beauty. Religion promotes beauty to enhance human flourishing. Religion encourages the response of awe and gratitude to the beauty of life and the arts.

I have always believed, thanks to my religious tradition that God is ultimate beauty, truth and goodness. Just as religious communities contribute acts of goodness and insights into truth, they endow society and enrich cultures with beauty.

My early childhood was suffused with Gregorian chant. I may not have understood the lyrics but the melody was inspiring and enchanting and even provided

this youngster with an appreciation of silence. The fact that it is no longer used in Catholic ceremonies does not detract from its beauty. In fact, if you remember a few years ago a group of monks in Spain, recorded several hymns in Gregorian Chant. It became an international best seller or as they say today it went viral. Did the medieval music meet some need in people's overstressed, hyperactive and noisy lives? Perhaps, but utility did not attract the masses. The beauty of the sound was worthwhile in itself. Please do not misunderstand me. Music does not have to be religious to enhance the community with beauty.

At the beginning of the New Year the TV news show Sixty Minutes featured Wynton Marsalis, a renowned jazz musician and virtuoso. The setting for the interview was Cuba where Mr. Marsalis and his musicians were promoting cultural exchange. At the press conference Mr. Marsalis refused to answer any political questions; understandable considering the embargo and strained relations with the USA. But Sixty Minutes did ask why

he passed on the opportunity to speak on the political issue. He said first of all his visit was about music not politics. Then, he made the connection with beauty. He said that music builds community and it builds the soul. He did not want to jeopardize the purpose of music. He was right. His jazz may not emerge from religion but the effect of its beauty is religious insofar as it builds relationships in the community and the human soul. My worldview, a religious worldview understands with an analogue wisdom. God bless Wynton Marsalis.

At the conclusion of the film, ***A River Runs through It***, a young man filled with grief at the tragic death of his brother asks his father, who is a Methodist minister, " Why? Why this tragic death?" The father, played by Tom Skerrit, also broken with his loss offers this simple consolation, "Because he was beautiful". The beauty of his existence is reason enough. Art on film can teach us about the transcendent quality of beauty that affects human relating.

I can't tell you how tons of white marble appear so fluid and so warm and so sorrowful, yet Michelangelo's Pieta transfixed thousands of people daily with its beauty. Total strangers relate to one another in relation to the sculptor and his art.

The most inspiring marble figures of Michelangelo for me are those that remain unfinished in a museum in Florence; supple bodies 1/3 finished, so life like, trying with all their might to liberate themselves from tons of marble. The block of marble that seems to be holding them in place is like a prison holding on to 2/3 of their being. These poor figures yearn to leap free from the enormous weight of the marble that hold them captive. It is a battle they will never win, unless a sculptor with the finesse and talent of Michelangelo were to begin chipping away; eliminating the huge pieces to create and to liberate these beautiful images. Michelangelo had to cut away at the marble to reveal his mind's design. Is this an analogy of how God shapes us according to his design? When one

beholds such beauty one is not so much learning facts as being moved internally towards greater beauty; that interior motion can be a religious experience insofar as we taste a fulfillment of human dignity and experience the gift of art.

The Bible still is recognized as one of the great works of literature. Northrup Frye the famous literary critic regretted that so many in the English speaking world were losing touch with the content of the Bible because the great works of literature depend greatly on the metaphors and myths of Sacred Scripture. We need think only of Shakespeare or Milton or the works of many French, Russian, Italian and Spanish writers. The contribution of religion to the written word is truly incalculable. Great literature, like music and sculpting builds community and the human soul.

Time limits what I am able to say about painting and architecture. The Sistine Chapel attracts huge crowds of international visitors. The cosmopolitan crowds always manifest reverence and excitement that

for the most part, is not devotional or prayerful. Rather, their reverence is expressed in awe and wonder at the beauty; at the human authorship as well. Like Wynton Marsalis' music the sight of this work builds community and it builds the soul. It is beautiful.

By the way, if you have seen the marvelous British television lecture series on art by Sister Wendy you will know immediately how the human imagination appreciates beauty regardless of the subject, secular or religious. As in all art, the subject does not have to be 'religious' to be appreciated by the religious imagination, for it can appreciate the beauty, recognize the gift, be moved towards communion in relationship to others and give thanks for a new moment of human fulfillment. Religion contributes, promotes and encourages beauty.

Finally, I must mention, however briefly the beauty of Church architecture in Europe the Middle East, the Americas and of course Prince Edward Island. There is beauty in **these** structures, as well as in the mosques,

synagogues and temples of the world's religions. Religious imagination recognizes the ferment in the community and the human heart before the beauty of such structures.

I have restricted these examples of literature, architecture, paintings, sculpture and music to the Christian world because that is what I know best. But I have travelled and have read enough to know that the Great Religions also have contributed mightily to the arts in every field. Christians can rejoice whenever they encounter beauty expressed by other religions. Beauty is both present in all religions and yet transcends the artistic efforts of all religion; it reaches into the human heart to form communion, to edify, to enrich and to stretch the creative elements of the human spirit and to raise awareness of the gift dimension of life, love and passion.

Here is a three point summary of my comments about beauty.

i)The heavens proclaim the glory of God and so do the artistic creations of those who reflect through their art the beauty that is found in the harmony of creation. In other words, art does not have to be explicitly religious since beauty itself reveals the source of beauty, God.

ii)Religion looks upon artistic expression that is filled with beauty as a gift experience. Those who appreciate art know that there is always "more" at work than what they see and what they describe. Often the artist, when asked what the meaning of her work is, will turn the question on the inquirer, not to be rude but out of a sincere sense of discovery to find out what else her work of beauty might reveal. The artist knows there is always "more than" what she created in her work of art. I would argue the "more than" in art is a reflection of the transcendent in our experience.

iii)Since the beauty of art always reveals "more than" itself and since this is an experience of the

gift dimension of life, then it should be no surprise that religion contributes to the community by encouraging and affirming a response of gratitude. When we behold beauty, we are beholden to it. Beauty evokes a feeling of thanksgiving in the human heart.

Operative in each these three traits of beauty are transcendence, gift and thanksgiving; in the religious language of Christianity, those words become God, grace and Eucharist

***"Religious communities live by analogy: they see connections between God and humanity, between the spiritual and the material, and between the human persons who form the wider community. They value relationships and context and harmonious order."***

(Archbishop Thomas Collins, Address Empire Club, 2008)

This concludes my first point: namely, religion contributes to society and culture through beauty.

Charitable Works and Religion

The second contribution of religion is found in charitable works.

Most Western governments recognize the charitable status of Churches for a reason. They expect religion to assist human need at the local level. Most Christians are aware of the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew in which feeding, clothing, and visiting the poor is a norm of behavior for all who claim to be Christian. This is because New Testament teaches that God abides with the poor. Assisting the needs of others especially the marginalized and the poor is to feed, to cloth and to visit Jesus, the Son of God, our salvation. In 1987 Sister Susan Moran began an inter-religious program in which Christian Churches and Synagogues would feed street people and provide them with overnight shelter during the winter months in Toronto. It is called the "Out of the Cold" program and it continues today in every major city in that province.

In the early nineties I was in a parish in St. Catharines Ontario. Since no provision was made for two of the seven nights in that city I asked parishioners to attend a workshop facilitated by the local United Church minister. Within a few weeks we were assigned Thursdays. We began with about 20 men and women of which perhaps 8 would sleep overnight. Within a few months, about 120 were coming to supper and about twenty five or thirty were sleeping overnight. The program continues to this day. Interestingly, many who came for the supper were teenagers. We learned not only did the food attract them but they were longing for company, conversation at suppertime. You can imagine when temperatures drop how many lives are saved and how many find comfort and some measure of human dignity. Little wonder they call Sister Susan Moran the Sister of Mercy. Actually she is a member of Our Ladies Missionaries.

Ministerial associations collaborate to provide visitation to the incarcerated, to establish food

kitchens and to assist people with heating during the winter. Many religions are organized by networking of local associations; for example, St. Vincent de Paul Society and the Knights of Columbus. Again I am mentioning only those with which I am familiar. Imagine now the efforts of all the Christian denominations and then those of other religions.

I am member of the Board of Directors of the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace. One of its duties is to coordinate emergency assistance for all the Catholic churches in Canada. When the earthquake hit Haiti last year, Development and Peace raised \$22 million an amount that was matched by government dollars. This is only one religion. Charity motivates all religions and each in its way contributes to those in need. Think back to the earthquake in Pakistan and the sunami in Indonesia. Religion makes a significant difference in the world by caring for those who are most needy.

The Catholic Church has beatified Mother Teresa which is a step in the process of making her a saint. We know the kind of work she did on the streets of Calcutta and how her message invited the world to do the same. Her motivation went beyond altruism. Her work and commitment baffles the rationalist. When seeing the skeletal dregs of humanity living in putrefaction and gasping for final breath she would embrace and care for them. Seeing this, one person is reported to have said to her, "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars". She replied "Neither would I". Religion offers a worldview that doesn't always fit with other world views. Her worldview reflected a religious outlook or as I have identified above, an analogue wisdom. She put it into a poem entitled "Anyway". For grammarians in the room, please grant her some literary license with regard to her use of adverbs.

*People can be unreasonable, illogical and self-centered. Love them anyway.*

*If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Do good anyway.*

*The good you do will be forgotten tomorrow.*

*Do good anyway.*

*Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.*

*Be honest and frank anyway.*

*People really need help but may attack you if you help them. Help people anyway.*

*Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you've got anyway.*

*Give thanks to the Lord for he is good.*

There is a motive, a perspective and values in this poem that reflect an analogue wisdom; a worldview, that makes a significant contribution in a postmodern society that is largely secular and rationalistic.

From this worldview there comes such moving and widespread charitable social action.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the work of religion in the institutions of education and health care. Jewish, Protestant and Catholic hospitals, although diminishing in numbers because of the rising costs of technology still maintain some excellent centers of research and health care. I have served with the Salvation Army when we merged Hotel Dieu and Grace Hospitals in the city of Windsor.

Similarly, many outstanding Universities were founded by Protestant, Catholic and Jewish communities. I am proud to be a graduate of St. Michael's University Toronto. TV host and recent visitor to PEI, Regis Philbin, a proud graduate of Notre Dame. Both Universities are founded by religious orders

In the field of education I wish to mention the herculean effort of the women in religious communities in education; the Sisters of Notre Dame and the Sisters

of St. Martha. Also involved in social work, the Martha's founded the Catholic Family Services on the Island.

Charitable works, the second contribution of religion is considerable.

I think it was St. Francis who said that charity without justice is confusion and justice without charity is cruelty. In his encyclical ***Caritas in Veritate, Charity in Truth***, Pope Benedict stresses the inseparability of charity and justice in social action. He calls 'love' the force that cries out for justice; the force that works to change the systemic and structural causes of poverty, ignorance and want.

### *Social Justice and Religion*

The third major contribution of religion to society and culture then, is the promotion of justice through pursuit of common good of society.

I would like to clarify this idea of pursuing the common good.

In 2010 the Catholic Bishops Conference in the United Kingdom published a Pastoral Letter for the faithful of their country entitled, "**Choosing the Common Good**". It is such a clear and articulate delineation of a call to justice that I shall quote it extensively.

*"The common good refers to what belongs to everyone by virtue of their common humanity. The simple definition of the common good is "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily (Catechism of the Catholic Church #906). Promoting the common good cannot be pursued by treating each individual separately and looking for the highest "total benefit" in some kind of utilitarian addition. Because we are interdependent the common good is more like a multiplication sum, where if any one number is zero then the total is always zero. If*

*anyone is left out and deprived of what is essential then the common good has been betrayed." (P.8)*

*The fulfillment which the common good seeks to serve is the flourishing of humanity, expressed in the phrase, "integral human development". Such development requires that people are rescued from every form of poverty, from hunger to illiteracy; it requires the opportunities for education, creating a vision of true partnership and solidarity between peoples; it calls for active participation in economic and political processes and it recognizes that every human person is a spiritual being with instincts for love and truth and aspirations for happiness. Development must always include this spiritual growth, with openness to God.*

*(p. 9)*

The UK Catholic Bishops wrote this letter as an important corrective to economic and political system in the UK which at the time was facing an election.

Pope Benedict supported their efforts during his visit to England, when he addressed the politicians, diplomats, academic and business leaders at Westminster Hall. He said:

*"The inadequacy of pragmatic, short-term solutions to complex social and ethical problems has been illustrated all too clearly by the recent global financial crisis. There is widespread agreement that the lack of a solid ethical foundation for economic activity has contributed to the grave difficulties now being experienced by millions of people throughout the world. Just as "every economic decision has a moral consequence" (CV #37) so too in the political field, the ethical dimension of policy has far-reaching consequences that no government can afford to ignore."*

*(Heart Speaks unto Heart, (Dartman, Todd, London,2010) P.51 )*

This is not a matter of separation of church and state. This is a matter of the common good; a worldview shared by sound reason that people of good will recognize when laws and regulations are contrary

to the common good or by omission do grave harm to the common good.

Of course, other Christian denominations and other religions may not pursue justice according to a social doctrine known as the 'common good'. Religious people may disagree on doctrinal issues but they have a long history of working together to address injustice.

Gandi, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, Nelson Mandela are stellar representatives of religion who helped change oppressive social, economic and political systems.

These social activists had tapped into the sort of energy, compassion and generosity that all people recognized and shared. They had touched the sense of justice and basic decency that is common to humanity.

Their sense of solidarity and understanding of the human person are the main ingredients in the concept of the common good.

Finally it would be misleading to suggest it is only charismatic leaders and martyrs who implement justice. Men and women of deep religious conviction organize themselves, often under the official sponsorship of their respective denomination to work for justice.

Christian churches maintain development agencies that earmark a percentage of their budget for education and advocacy of justice including human rights.

Kairos, an ecumenical advocacy agency of the United Church recently lost federal funding, as I understand it, on account of its advocacy of Palestinian rights.

Approximately 20% of the budget of the CCODP is allocated for advocacy issues in developing countries.

CIDSE is an international alliance of Catholic development agencies working together for Global Justice. From Europe and North America, and inspired by Christian values, they gather to promote global

justice and solidarity. CIDSE's members work on a wide range of priorities, with local partners in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Their priority issues are food, sustainable trade, climate justice and human rights.

### *Conclusion*

I have presented three ideas about the contribution of religion to culture and society.

1. Religion and beauty. Religion emphasizes the gift dimension of beauty; promotes beauty and the arts to enhance human flourishing; encourages a response of awe and gratitude for the beauty of life and art. The analogue wisdom of religion is comfortable with and understands that beauty brings people together, to build community and human spirit.
2. Through charitable works religion helps those who are invisible or silent due to poverty, ignorance,

physical or mental disability. Love is at the heart of relational or analogue wisdom connecting the dignity of every person with the transcendent. Religion promotes solidarity and integral human development by its charitable works in society.

3. Religion brings issues of justice and the common good to bear on the systems and structures of society. Religion contributes to social fabric by bringing to bear its understanding of charity, hope, justice, peace, truth and trust into the institutions that manage finances, family ecology, politics, communications, technology, scientific research, health care, education, and human rights.